

Determining Levels of Mental Skills of Netball Players at Tertiary Institutions in Zimbabwe: The Players' Voices

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90400081>

Received: 18 March 2025; Accepted: 22 March 2025; Published: 29 April 2025

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the mental skills of netball players through their own perspectives. Focus group discussions were used to gather data, providing valuable insights into players' views on mental skills training programmes. The results were explained within the framework of the Cognitive Behaviour Theory (CBT), which suggests that coaches can enhance self-efficacy and confidence by altering sources of increasing self-efficacy. The study found that competition in tertiary institutions' games motivate athletes to improve their performance, with some using techniques like goal setting. However, the results also revealed a lack of understanding about mental skills in netball among players. Some players believed that mental skills only apply in game situations, while others thought that mental skills training only helps with decision-making and focus. The study highlighted the need for clarification on how players understand the role of mental skills. While players acknowledged the importance of mental skills in improving agility and decision-making, they lacked detailed explanations. Overall, the study revealed gaps in netball players' knowledgeability about mental skills and their impact on performance enhancement. The study recommends future research that can provide a deeper understanding of the importance of MST in sports and inform the development of effective interventions to enhance athletic performance and wellbeing. Furthermore, an exploration of the role of technology in delivering MST programs to athletes may be considered.

Keywords: Mental skills training, mental skills, netball players, self-efficacy, CBT, athletes, goal setting

INTRODUCTION

Mental skills training

Mental skills training (MST) is a psychological intervention designed to enhance athletic performance by developing, improving and maintaining mental skills, thereby facilitating self-regulation and targeted behaviour (Henriksen et al., 2019; Zarkraisek & Blanton, 2017). Again, MST encompasses the utilization of strategies and techniques to cultivate mental skills, augment performance and foster a positive approach to competition among athletes (Zarkraisek & Blanton, 2017). Extant research in sports science and development has underscored the efficacy of mental skills interventions in enhancing the psychological components of competitive athletes, increasing physical activity, and promoting self-regulation (Brown & Fletcher, 2017; Buckworth et al., 2013; Henriksen et al., 2019; Vealey, 2007). However, mental skills are often overlooked by sporting practitioners, who tend to prioritize the development of physical, technical and tactical skills, which can significantly impact an athlete's performance irrespective of their physical and physiological abilities (Ward, 2011). Nevertheless, the possession of mental skills alone is insufficient to guarantee optimal performance; rather, athletes must successfully combine both physical and mental skills to achieve peak performance (Krane & Williams, 2010).

The philosophical underpinnings of mental skills training (MST) are crucial when developing programs for sporting athletes (Hacker, 2000; Harmison, 2006; Robins & Judge, 2009; Sly et al, 2020; Weinberg & Williams, 2006). Empirical evidence suggests that consistent training can facilitate exploration, control,

development and refinement of peak performance in athletes (Hacker, 2000; Harmison, 2006; Robins & Judge, 2009; Sly et al. 2020; Weinberg & Williams, 2006). However, Wells (2013) posits that achieving peak performance is a complex and elusive endeavour. A holistic approach to athletic development is essential wherein both physical and mental skills are considered equally important and are integrated simultaneously in training programs (Harmison, 2006). This perspective acknowledges that mental skills are trainable and can be developed in athletes who may be skeptical about their contribution to peak performance. Moreover, athletes should recognize that mental skills training is not solely reserved for those experiencing performance problems but rather is a valuable tool for any athlete seeking to enhance their performance (Henriksen et al., 2019; Weinberg & Williams, 2006). The prerequisite for effective MST is that athletes must be receptive to instruction and possess the ability to select and successfully utilize mental skills to augment their sporting performance

Principles of MST

The principles of MST should be systematically incorporated into methodologies of sporting performance studies to examine how athletes can optimize their participation outcomes (Gould et al., 2009). These researchers emphasize that psyching up athletes requires a nuanced approach considering individual differences, team efficacy, cohesion, goal setting, role clarity and support mechanisms. Mental skills preparation is a critical determinant of sporting success, although it is not the sole factor influencing performance outcomes (Gould et al., 2009; Henriksen et al., 2019). According to Gould et al. (2009), mental skills preparation is essential for preparing athletes for both practice and competition. These researchers highlight the importance of identifying one's optimal functioning zone to develop athletes' confidence, enabling them to focus on both process and performance goals. Furthermore, Gould et al. (2009) stress the need for athletes to develop and adhere to consistent competition and practice routines, with team preparation being equally important as individual preparation. This integrated approach acknowledges the complex interplay between individual and team factors in optimizing sporting performance.

The acquisition and development of mental skills are essential for athletes seeking to optimize their performance and achieve success in their respective sports (Chee, 2010; Henriksen et al., 2019). Mental skills are just as equally important as physical, technical and tactical aspects of athletic development. Mental skills training not only enhances skills such as concentration but also fosters personal characteristics like self-esteem and positive competitive skills and behaviour in athletes (Henriksen et al., 2019; Singh & Singh, 2014). Individual athletes must be mentally prepared to adjust their thoughts, feelings and physical sensations during competition to perform at their maximum level, particularly in high pressure situations (Farres, 2000; Henriksen et al., 2019). Mental skills training addresses the mental, emotional, social, and meta-cognitive factors that influence performance in sporting exercise and physical activity. Despite the importance of MST, research has shown that female athletes are underrepresented in sport research, with limited information available on their mental skills training programs, particularly in court-based team sports like netball (Costello, Bieuzen & Bleakly, 2014). This knowledge gap can be attributed to various limitations and barriers faced by female athletes in these sports. To date, no in-depth study has examined MST programs for female netball athletes, highlighting the need for further research in this area.

The development of mental skills in athletes is facilitated through the utilization of mental tools, techniques and strategies that enhance performance (Sharp et al., 2013). These mental skills can be conceptualized as qualities that emerge from the participation of mental tools which provide psychological assistance to athletes by motivating them, managing pressure, and maintaining optimal performance during competitions. The transfer of mental skills from practice sessions to competitive environments is a critical aspect of athletic development. Athletes must understand the rationale behind modifying their behaviour, emotions or thoughts during competition, and coaches must identify and rehearse specific actions with athletes to automate these behaviours. Team cohesion and cooperation are also essential aspects of athletic performance as athletes must recognize the importance of playing for each other and persevering throughout the game regardless of the score. Coaches should strive to enable athletes to reach their optimal performance states and maintain these states throughout the competition by employing strategies that foster sporting performance enhancement.

Ultimately, coaches must adopt a holistic approach to athletic development by incorporating philosophical and psychological practices that cultivate well-rounded athletes. By exploring, controlling and developing peak performance through evidence-based methods, coaches can optimize athlete development and achievement.

According to Thelwell et al. (2008), coaches and athletes must comprehend the concept of self-efficacy to achieve positive sporting psychological outcomes and performance. Self-efficacy plays a crucial role in enabling athletes to monitor their progression, self-regulate their emotional state and work towards short-term and long-term goals by effectively managing their thoughts, feelings and behaviours. In team sports, self-efficacy is essential for fostering team cohesion, conflict resolution and communication (Henriksen et al., 2019; Thelwell et al., 2008). Research suggests that sporting performance can be enhanced through self-talk (Theodorakis et al., 2012), and that self-awareness of self-talk can lead to more positive effects on performance (Hardy et al., 2009; Walter et al., 2020). Netball players who commit to goal setting and self-regulation can exponentially increase their learning of mental skills leading to improved team cohesion and communication (Asamoah & Grobbelaar, 2017). Team cohesion is a critical foundation for successful athletic teams (Barker et al.; Jones & Standage, 2006), enabling players to work towards common purpose and achieve team goals (Jones, 2010; Weinberg & Gould, 2011). Observations by Blumenstein et al. (2002) highlight the importance of integrating physical, technical, tactical and mental preparation techniques to achieve proficiency in sporting performance. Coaches should not assume that peak performance is automatically achieved but rather work with each other to develop MST programs that can be transferred to quality practice or competition results (Davenport, 2006).

Mental skills, their importance and contribution sporting performance

Goal setting, a component of MST has been found to be effective in enhancing players' commitment, effort, self-confidence, perseverance and motivation (Burton & Weiss, 2008). Athletes and coaches strive to achieve set goals, motivate behaviour change and promote performance gains, increased effort and intensity, persistence, self-reflection and problem-solving strategies. Effective improvement of both individual and group sporting performances is a primary objective (Moonie & Mutrie, 2000; Weinberg et al., 1993). Consequently, goal setting has become a popular and effective mental training strategy among athletes (Martin et al., 2009). Netball players require focus, concentration and emotional control to effectively execute skills. Mental skills preparation aims to enhance performance, monitor psychological states and achieve empirically founded intervention strategies. Considering individual athletes' unique characteristics is critical during training preparation. (Gardener & Moore, 2006; Ward, 2011). Research suggests that MST raises awareness of its importance among athletes (Sharp et al., 2013). Athletes educated in mental skills training demonstrate improved sporting performance and well-being (Weinberg & Williams, 2001). Consequently, those athletes who are aware of MST programs tend to utilize these skills during both practice and competition.

Cognitive behavioural theory

Cognitive Behavioural Theory (CBT) is a comprehensive framework that integrates psychological behaviour and cognitive thoughts to facilitate self-enhancing behaviours (Hofmann et al. 2010). Cognitive Behavioural Theory involves self-regulation strategies that include self-talk, visualization, breathing control and muscle relaxation to enhance performance (Gould & Damarjian, 2016). This theory can be applied to assess and correct individual athletes' behaviour considering their abilities, specific circumstances, and the sporting environment (Weinberg & Gould, 2015). Key to the CBT is the understanding of how cognitive-behavioural constructs influence human behaviour leading to positive change and enhanced performance through self-regulation (Gould & Damarjian, 2016). Cognitive-behavioural constructs are critical in explaining how changed human behaviour affects individuals and team members, providing insights into implementation strategies for performance enhancement in athletes (Weinberg & Gould, 2015). The current study utilized the CBT framework for its strength in integrating cognitive and behavioural aspects of individual athletes and teams. This framework provides a comprehensive approach to understanding and enhancing mental skills (Hardy et al., 2018). The study sought to integrate CBT with mental skills strategies to reconstruct athletic behavior change, leading to positive performances in netball (Hardy et al., 2018). Specifically, cognitive and

behavioural techniques such as goal setting and self-talk can be employed to develop targeted MST programs for netball players in selected tertiary institutions.

METHODOLOGY

A focus group discussion was employed as the data collection method for this study, providing a flexible and interactive platform for netball players to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences regarding MST programs. This approach allowed for the generation of collective views and insights into players' perceptions, attitudes and beliefs about sporting behaviours and mental skills. The focus groups were conducted from netball players who had been involved in the mental skills assessment from the tertiary institutions. To ensure validity and reliability of data, the focus group discussion was conducted in a conducive and non-threatening environment, encouraging participants to raise additional issues and concerns. The focus group discussion was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, enabling the researcher to capture the nuances and complexities of participants' responses. The transcription was then analyzed using thematic analysis allowing for the identification of patterns, themes and meanings within the data. Use of focus group discussions provided several methodological advantages, including the ability to gather rich, qualitative data, explore complex issues and themes and facilitate participant interaction and dialogue. This approach also enabled the researcher to elicit uncommon respondents' perceptions, attitudes and feelings providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Overall, the focus group discussion proved to be a valuable and effective method of collecting data offering unique and insightful perspective on the MST experiences of netball players.

FINDINGS

These will be discussed guided by the four themes that came from the focus group discussion

Knowledgeability in mental skills training

Findings of this study revealed a mix of accurate and inaccurate perceptions among netball players regarding the role and value of mental skills in enhancing their performance. One player's asserting that a netball player should know all the rules of the game is unfounded, as mental development in netball is a skill that requires deliberate practice and training (Weinberg & Gould, 2015). Some players demonstrated a limited understanding of mental skills believing that they only helped with decision-making, focus and emotional regulation during game situations. However mental skills can be applied in both practice and competition settings and their effectiveness is not limited to game situations (Barker et al. 2020; Gould & Damarjian, 2016). Other players correctly identified the benefits of mental skills such as improving agility, decision-making, alertness and focus. However, they failed to provide detailed explanations of how mental skills achieve these benefits, leaving the researcher with unanswered questions about players' knowledgeability of mental skills (Hardy et al., 2018). Some players' perceptions were overly simplistic or inaccurate, such as believing that mental skills can discourage players from playing well or they are only necessary for game situations. These misconceptions highlight the need for targeted education and training programs to enhance netball players' understanding of mental skills and their application in practice and competition settings (Weinberg & Gould, 2015). In contrast, some players demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of mental skills, recognizing their role in building confidence, sharpening individual skills and enhancing thinking capacity. These findings suggest that MST programs can be effective in promoting positive change and enhancing performance in netball players (Gould & Damarjian, 2016). Findings of this study highlight the need for further research and education on MST in netball, with focus on promoting a more comprehensive understanding of the role and value of mental skills in enhancing performance

Distractions from concentration and peer pressure criticism

When all players were asked whether they were seriously affected by some forms of distraction while playing netball, most players responded by saying that almost all noise tended to affect players, irrespective of where

it came. Players acknowledged that what was different is that different people are affected differently by these distractions. For some players, distractions depended on the nature of the game and mood generated in a game. These players pointed out that if the team was winning the game, they could appreciate more different forms of noise, including loud music, singing and individuals shouting on top of their voices. Nearly all the players seemed to agree that they were not properly told how to handle distractions by their coaches. It became clear that most coaches seem not to be attending to this important skill that is needed to increase sporting performance. This is why most players expressed the fact that they felt that the time spent on drills about handling distractions was normally very little. This is although distractions are a very important aspect of mental skills training (Balk & Englet, 2020, Barker et al., 2020)

Another player among the netball players responded by saying that they usually focused the time spent on the ball or the opponent rather than concentrating on any distractions.

Players agreed that this affected their stress levels and concentration on the game, especially when they were losing a game, and someone shouted a negative comment about the individual or their team. Another player admitted that she was always badly affected when the crowd reacted negatively to her missing the ball or failing to shoot accurately. It is clear from the results that while most players agree that they get affected by distractions, the effect is different to individual players. Secondly, it is important to note that while nearly all players accepted that disruptions affected them, there does not seem to be clear efforts to address it in mental skills training programmes of the different teams. Where there is an attempt to do this, it is weak and ineffectual (Balk & Englet, 2020). Players observed that comments from the opposing supporters distracted them because they almost always were rude and derogatory. The issue to note is how many coaches seem not to attend to this important weakness in the tertiary netball players. This is true when we consider another observation from another player who felt that sometimes these distractions were unfair as it is also not permissible for a spectator to scold a player using negativity of her actual physical structure appearance. That player admitted that at one time, she cried when a spectator scolded her saying she was ugly and too dark in complexion. The player said eventually she could not continue with the game and was substituted. The same player said that on reflection now, she felt that she should have continued with the game and instead pushed herself to play even better and responded physically to the ridiculing.

One player talked about umpires who deliberately distracted the attention of players of one team by continually making seemingly incorrect decisions. Players felt that this was one of the worst distractions of the game. Continuous incorrect decisions signalled by whistling were cited by some players. Another player mentioned the case of an opponent playing a very rough game as equally distracting. The player admitted that she once played a defender that she later feared, and it affected her performance in the said game. All this confirms that distracting and disruptive behaviour is common in netball. And yet, the same players admit that they have never received direct help from the coaches on how to deal with it.

The researcher heard from one player that her biggest and feared distraction was an injury to a key player. This player commented that this could destroy the whole game. The same player said she did not tolerate teammates with a negative attitude to a game or who dwelt too much on a mistake made by another player. The researcher heard of yet another case of distraction where the coach overloaded the players with activities during a practice session, leaving players with very little time to understand everything. This player said that she thought that one was supposed to spend more time on a mental skill until she was able to understand it. There were athletes in the study who pointed out that issues happening at home brought their own distractions to the play of netball players, leaving them unable to concentrate on their game. This included carrying into a game, not so good news about family misfortunes. These are important issues that affect the players' performances in sporting games. However, they seem not to be given enough attention to the training programmes.

These results seem to confirm the existence of both internal and external distractors to players' performance. The sporting environment seems to be the biggest contributor to distractions of players' games, eroding player concentration and focus on the game. Thus, it becomes important for the coach to make sure that all his/her

players are exposed to suitable mental skills training to avoid these distractions and be able to cope in any game situation. Mental practice is there to ensure that all the issues related to thought processes are taught and learnt by all players to increase their focus and concentration on the tasks that need to be delivered and to eventually for them to perform to their best potential in the sporting environment during practice or competitions.

One player linked emotions of the players to distractions of the players where thought processes become side-tracked during play. Players pointed out that when a netball team lacks team spirit, it will equally lack cohesion, and this can distract the players. Another player talked of favouritism or nepotism as a very distractive issue in tertiary games. The player said team selection was not genuinely done since the games are linked to students getting a chance for an outing and there was good food and monetary allowances involved. It is based on these observations that some players thought they had witnessed undeserved team selections that tended to distract and disrupt team cohesion. These are the exterior factors of distractive behaviour that are associated with team coaches. Such issues seem to be handled weakly in the mental skills training programmes of netball players.

Coach assistance, criticism and pressure on players

Coaches play a pivotal role in shaping the development and growth of athletes influencing sporting environment and integrating sports psychology to enhance performance (Weinberg & Gould, 2015). Findings of this study revealed that some coaches of tertiary netball teams in Zimbabwe are not adequately fulfilling their roles particularly in terms of providing MST. Players reported that some coaches' comments and behaviours can be detrimental to their performance and motivation. For instance, one player mentioned that her coach's comment about being 'too old' to play netball due to childbearing was discouraging and sexist (Brown & Fletcher, 2017). Such negative comments can erode players' confidence and focus, ultimately affecting their performance. In contrast, players appreciated coaches who provided positive guidance, encouragement and criticism one player noted that her coach's pre-game and post-game talks helped her gain focus, concentration, and confidence (Gould & Dumarjian, 2016). This highlights the importance of coach's communication skills in shaping players' mental states and performance. The study also revealed that some coaches are not taking their leadership role in sports psychology seriously, leaving players to find individual solutions to their mental skills challenges. Players emphasized the need for guidance and counselling from their coaches as well as positive criticism to improve their performance (Hardy et al., 2018). The findings suggest that the coaches' qualifications and training in sports psychology are crucial in providing MST. One player mentioned that her coach's lack of qualification in sports may have contributed to his inability to deal with her emotional and mental challenges (Weinberg & Gould, 2015). Overall, the study highlights the need for coaches to prioritize MST and provide supportive and encouraging environment for players. By so doing, coaches can enhance players' performance, motivation and total well-being (Brown & Fletcher, 2017).

Challenges faced by athletes in mental preparation

The final theme that emerged from the results was that of challenges faced by athletes in their mental skills preparations. During the discussions that were held with netball players, some of them claimed that there were times when they felt that they were ignorant of what they really needed to do to uplift their game and performance. Players said they normally shared their observations amongst themselves as players. However, they also noticed that at times, some players ignored comments that came from another player, even if it was coming from the captain. Players observed that in most cases the captain could be listened to if the coach was there, while other players easily dismissed her. All this shows that there are elements of mistrust and even subversion in some of the tertiary netball teams. This tends to undermine the credibility, confidence and cohesion of the teams. These are the sort of areas that need to be worked on in the new training programmes.

There were some players who felt that comments made by teammates could also affect one's mental skills preparations. Fear was also one issue that was noted as players mentioned that talking too much about other players and the coach may lead to a player losing her place in the team. Thus, many players said they would

rather not challenge views from the coach or from other players. Again, the players' sporting environment seems to be poisoned, resulting in poor personal relationships amongst players and with their coaches. Such a scenario will hardly be conducive to producing good sporting results. The implications do not look good for tertiary education netball teams under these kinds of situations.

A critical observation that came from one player was that tertiary netball students wanted to see a close link between the tertiary games and their academic tertiary work in playing netball. The players wondered why sports psychologists who taught sports were not sometimes involved in the tertiary games. Moreover, they noted that students who participated in these games normally lagged in their academic work such as assignments. Their concern was that colleges do not normally understand and appreciate that students on tertiary games needed time to work on their academic work, adding pressure on the netball players when they were involved in these games.

The study's results can be explained within the whole framework of the CBT theory. According to this theoretical framework, coaches can alter sources of increasing self-efficacy to enhance efficacy expectations, leading towards increased confidence and performance. Mental skills practices could modify cognitions such as self-efficacy (Feltz & Rensinger, 1990). When athletes have precise and appropriate sporting interventions, the future of the athletes and the sport can be said to be doomed. Research has concluded that the CBT theory positively affects both coach and athlete relationship, increases hope, goal striving and well-being, enables individuals to regulate negative cognitive thoughts while incorporating positive cognitions, decrease self-handicapping conditions and decrease performance interfering thoughts while increasing performance enhancing behaviours (Gyllenstein,; Palmer,; Nilsson, Regner & Frodi, 2010,; Kearns, Forbes & Gardiner 2007,; O'Broin & Palmer, 2009,; Rose, 2010,; Sly et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study emphasize that mental skills must be developed, learned and practiced by athletes to achieve higher success in sports. Results reveal that players require suitable MST programs implemented by properly qualified coaches and sports psychologists to increase performance. Results suggest that internal and external distractors, such as fear of injury and academic pressure can significantly impact athletes' performance. These findings propose that MST programs can be effective in promoting positive changes and enhancing performance in netball players. Therefore, it is essential for athletes to focus on changing their behaviour, emotions, self-efficacy, confidence or thoughts during play and self-regulate through corrective interventions. Findings of this study highlight the need for further research and education on MST in netball, with a focus on promoting a more comprehensive understanding of the role and value of mental skills in enhancing performance. The study recommends future research that can provide a deeper understanding of the importance of MST in sports and inform the development of effective interventions to enhance athletic performance and wellbeing. Furthermore, an exploration of the role of technology in delivering MST programs to athletes may be considered.

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