COMPETITOR:
JURNAL PENDIDIKAN KEPELATIHAN OLAHRAGA
e-ISSN: 2657-0734 & p-ISSN: 2085-5389 ‖ Volume 17, Number 1, 2025 ‖ P.453-459
DOI: 10.26858/cjpko.v17i1.72042

Knowledge and Application of Mental Skills among First-Year Sports Coaching Education Students: A Cross-Sectional Survey at Makassar State University

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the extent of mental skills exposure and understanding among first-year students enrolled in a Sports Coaching Education program, the majority of whom are athletes representing various regions in South Sulawesi. A descriptive research method with a cross-sectional survey design was used. The population consisted of 195 new students, with 171 valid responses obtained through an online questionnaire comprising both closed and open-ended questions. The data were analyzed using descriptive techniques and qualitative interpretation of open responses. Results show that while the students come from diverse sports backgrounds and levels of competitive experience, only a minority have received structured mental skills training. Most psychological guidance came informally from coaches, and upon further analysis, it was revealed that such guidance often involved physically intensive or disciplinary measures rather than scientifically grounded psychological techniques. Furthermore, a significant majority of the participants reported experiencing performance anxiety, loss of motivation, and diminished self-confidence before competitions, yet lacked the tools to manage these psychological challenges effectively. This study underscores the importance of introducing structured mental skills training early in athletes' careers and integrating sports psychology into coaching education programs. By doing so, future coaches will be better equipped to foster both performance and psychological well-being in athletes under their guidance.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received: 2025/02/21
Accepted: 2025/02/25
Published: 2025/02/28

KEYWORDS
Mental Skills Training;
Sports Coaching Education;
Performance Anxiety;
Sports Psychology Dissemination.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION
A. Conception and design of the study;
B. Acquisition of data;
C. Analysis and interpretation of data;
D. Manuscript preparation;
E. Obtaining funding

Cites this Article : Muflih Wahid Hamid[A-E]. (2025). Knowledge and Application of Mental Skills among First-Year Sports Coaching Education Students: A Cross-Sectional Survey at Makassar State University. **Competitor: Jurnal Pendidikan Kepelatihan Olahraga**. 17 (1), p.453-459

INTRODUCTION

Mental skills are critical determinants of athletic performance, complementing physical conditioning and technical proficiency to enable athletes to perform at their peak (Weinberg & Gould, 2019). Mastery of psychological techniques helps athletes regulate arousal, maintain focus, and execute complex motor skills under pressure.

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Among these, self-talk, mental imagery, goal setting, and energization–relaxation protocols have garnered robust empirical support as effective interventions for enhancing individual performance across sporting contexts (Vealey. Robin S, 2007).

Self-talk is a steady stream of thoughts and internal dialogue in our minds (Burton & Raedeke, 2008). It consists of motivational and instructional self-talk that serve distinct functions: the former elevates arousal and confidence (Hamid, 2023), while the latter directs attention to task-relevant cues (Hamid, 2023; HARDY et al., 2004). Van Raalte et al. (2016) demonstrated that athletes employing structured self-talk experienced up to a 25% reduction in pre-competition anxiety (Hamid, 2024), with concomitant improvements in accuracy and reaction time. Hamid et al. (2023) added that self-talk contributed to emotional regulation ability. More recently, Tod et al. (2011) found that swimmers using self-talk routines improved their time-trial performances by an average of 3.2%.

Along with self-talk, mental imagery is also proven to enhance athletes' performance. A study by (Di Corrado et al., 2020) compared mental imagery skills between competitive young athletes and non-athletes aged 8 to 13 years. The results indicated that athletes exhibited significantly higher mental imagery abilities, suggesting that such skills are associated with improved motor performance. The study concluded that incorporating mental imagery into training programs can enhance learning, performance, and psychological factors like self-efficacy and anxiety regulation. Paivio (Neuper et al., 2006) state that imagery engages both visual and kinesthetic representational systems, effectively simulating real-life motor execution without physical movement. A meta-analysis by (Thelwell et al., 2006) reported a mean performance gain of 14% in soccer players who incorporated mental imagery into their training regimens. A previous study, involving young table tennis players, included a lengthy 18-week imagery intervention phase, which contributed to significant performance improvements in the accuracy and technical quality of tennis shots, compared to a control group (Zhang et al., 1992).

The other mental skill is Goal Setting. According to (Locke & Latham, 2002), goal-setting theory suggests that specific and challenging goals foster greater effort and persistence than vague or easy targets. Empirical investigations corroborate these assertions: (Klein et al., 1999) found that basketball players who set weekly performance goals achieved a 12–17% improvement in free-throw accuracy over a season. More broadly, (Weinberg & Gould, 2019) conclude that integrated goal-setting programs yield consistent performance benefits across individual and team sports.

Optimal performance often requires dynamic regulation of arousal levels, wherein energization techniques (e.g., pep talks, activating imagery) prepare the athlete for action, and relaxation strategies (e.g., progressive muscle relaxation, controlled breathing) mitigate excessive tension (Jones, 1995). (Birrer et al., 2012) demonstrated that combined energization–relaxation protocols reduced post-competition stress by 18% and elevated positive mood states by 22% among track-and-field athletes.

Despite the well-documented benefits of these mental skills, the dissemination of applied sport psychology remains uneven, there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding

how such knowledge is disseminated among athletes, particularly those based in South Sulawesi Province. Conducting a survey, therefore, serves as a preliminary step to gain deeper insights into this issue. The most appropriate population for this study is found within the Faculty of Sports and Health Sciences, specifically in the Department of Sports Coaching Education, as the majority of its students are regional athletes from South Sulawesi. Specifically, first-year students in Sports Coaching Education programs will soon assume roles as both coaches and mentors.

METHODS

This study employed a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional survey design, aiming to explore the level of knowledge and application of mental skills among first-year students in the Sports Coaching Education Department, Faculty of Sports and Health Sciences, Universitas Negeri Makassar (UNM). The focus of the research is to assess the extent to which these students—most of whom are athletes who have competed at least at the village level—have been exposed to and have implemented mental skills before entering higher education.

The key variables in this study include: (1) knowledge of sports psychology and mental skills, and (2) the practical application of such skills, particularly goal setting, mental imagery, self-talk, and energization and relaxation techniques. These variables were defined operationally through a custom-designed questionnaire grounded in established sport psychology literature.

The population of the study comprised all first-year students enrolled in the Sports Coaching Education program, totalling 195 individuals. Based on the (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970) sample size determination table, the minimum required sample was calculated to be 127 respondents. A simple random sampling technique was employed to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

The main instrument utilized was a questionnaire featuring both closed- and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions were designed to measure general knowledge and reported behaviours, while the open-ended items aimed to explore students' personal experiences and reflections regarding their mental skill use. Before distribution, the instrument underwent a pilot test to ensure item clarity and content validity.

Data collection was conducted online, with the questionnaire being distributed electronically to each first-year student in the department. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents were provided with informed consent forms before completing the survey. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's ethics committee to ensure compliance with research standards.

Data analysis was performed using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics—including frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency—while qualitative responses from the open-ended questions were thematically analyzed to identify common patterns and insights regarding the application of mental skills among participants.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 171 first-year students from the Department of Sports Coaching Education, Faculty of Sports and Health Sciences at Universitas Negeri Makassar participated in this cross-sectional survey. Of these, 37 were female (21,7%), and the remaining 134 were male (72,3%), reflecting the gender distribution within the cohort. Participants predominantly originated from districts across South Sulawesi Province (83.6%), with a smaller proportion (16.4%) coming from outside the province. This geographical diversity highlights the program's regional reach and supports the relevance of evaluating mental skills knowledge within a broad cross-section of student-athletes in the province.

In terms of sporting background, the most frequently represented sports were volleyball (21.1%) and football (21.1%), followed by futsal (18.2%) and badminton (10.5%). These figures indicate a strong representation of team sports, which may have implications for the type of psychological demands athletes experience and the mental skills needed to navigate them.

The competitive experience among respondents was notably high, with the majority reporting participation in formal competitions ranging from local village-level events to international championships. Only 22.8% indicated that they had never engaged in any form of competitive sport. This confirms that most participants had been exposed to performance pressure and competitive environments—key contexts where psychological skills are critically relevant.

Regarding exposure to sports psychology and mental skills, 47.4% of participants stated that their knowledge and training came from their coaches during their junior athletic years. However, 31% reported never having received any form of mental skills training, and the remainder were uncertain whether their coaches had provided such instruction. A deeper analysis of the open-ended responses revealed that the "mental training" provided by coaches often consisted of physically demanding exercises, verbal aggression, or even corporal punishment, rather than evidence-based psychological interventions. This finding highlights a significant gap between scientifically supported mental skills training and current field practices.

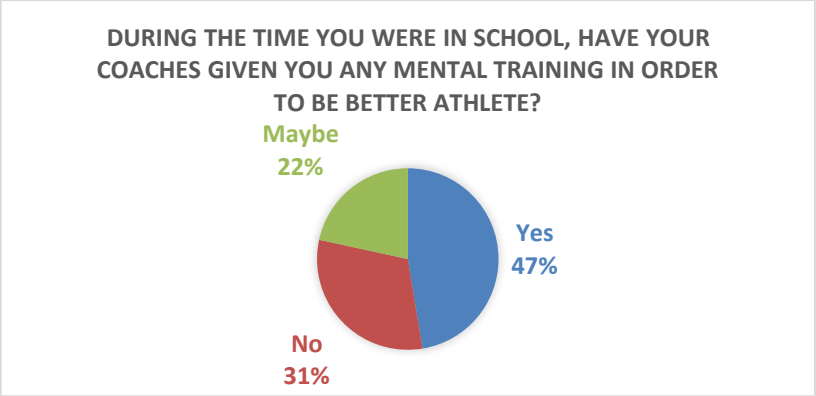

Figure 1.
Mental Training Report

This lack of structured mental skills instruction is particularly concerning given that only 14% of respondents reported rarely experiencing psychological issues such as anxiety, loss of motivation, or diminished self-confidence before competitions. Conversely, a substantial 86% acknowledged having struggled with such challenges. These results underscore the critical need for accessible and effective mental skills education and training for athletes at an early stage in their development.

Furthermore, when asked how they typically cope with these psychological challenges, most participants mentioned trying to "focus" or "stay confident," but lacked the use of structured techniques such as self-talk, imagery, relaxation, or energization methods. This suggests a lack of awareness and application of established psychological tools, reinforcing the urgency of integrating formal mental skills training into athlete development programs.

The data strongly support previous findings that mental skills such as goal-setting, imagery, self-talk, and arousal regulation play vital roles in enhancing performance and psychological well-being (Vealey. Robin S, 2007; Weinberg & Gould, 2019). However, the uneven dissemination and misunderstanding of these skills—especially in regions with limited sports psychology resources—point to the need for a systemic response. Coaches, as the primary figures in athlete development, must be empowered with the knowledge and skills to deliver mental training grounded in scientific principles.

In summary, while the athletic backgrounds of these students position them well for high performance, the findings indicate a need for foundational mental skills training. Addressing this educational gap is essential for supporting their performance potential and psychological resilience both as athletes and future coaches.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to explore the extent of mental skills exposure and understanding among first-year students in the Sports Coaching Education program at Universitas Negeri Makassar, the majority of whom are active or former regional athletes from South Sulawesi. The findings revealed several critical insights.

First, although the participants had a diverse range of sporting backgrounds and significant experience in competitive environments, there exists a substantial gap in their exposure to formal mental skills training. While many athletes reported receiving psychological guidance from their coaches, further investigation showed that such "training" often consisted of physical intensification, verbal commands, or punitive measures rather than scientifically grounded psychological techniques.

Second, despite the well-documented importance of mental skills such as goal-setting, imagery, self-talk, and arousal regulation in enhancing athletic performance and emotional regulation, the majority of respondents lacked both structured instruction and the ability to apply these techniques in practice. Moreover, a considerable proportion of athletes reported frequent experiences of anxiety, demotivation, and loss of self-confidence before competition, further underscoring the pressing need for formalized

mental training.

In essence, the study provides clear evidence that knowledge and implementation of psychological skills among early-stage coaching students—and by extension, the athletes they will train—remain limited and inconsistent. This highlights the urgent necessity of integrating sports psychology content systematically into both athlete development programs and coaching curricula.

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