

Developing Muslim Athletes' Mental Toughness Using Psycho-Religious Strategies

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Abstract: Adversities are intrinsic to competitive environments where peak performance is crucial, impacting athletes across diverse domains including sports. For Muslim athletes, unique challenges stemming from their religious identity necessitate specialized strategies to foster mental toughness. This literature review explores psycho-religious approaches to enhance mental toughness among Muslim athletes. Through an analysis of literature published between 2014 and 2024, we identify key factors such as a rigorous training environment, access to psychological support, and intrinsic motivation as pivotal in cultivating mental resilience. While existing research primarily emphasizes individual psychological skills (athlete-centered training program), integrating cultural and religious contexts—such as the Islamic concept of patience (*sabr*)—offers a more holistic approach for Muslim athletes. This integration not only enriches current practices but also underscores the importance of cultural competence as well as religious faith in optimizing athletic performance through the development of mental toughness. Future research should further explore and validate these strategies to better support Muslim athletes in achieving their competitive goals.

Keywords: mental toughness, religious approach, psychological strategies, Muslim athletes

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INTRODUCTION

"In a match, if technique is sufficient, then mentality will play a greater role on the field. Those who are mentally strong will not be affected by how hard the circumstances that are happening to them are." Agung Dwi Juniarsyah, an Indonesian national futsal player

Adversities and challenges are like daily meals for individuals who have to deal with competitions and show high performance (e.g. student and academic achievement, worker and job performance, athletes and championship, etc.). To

survive and thrive in such circumstances, one must develop a strong mental toughness. Mental toughness is *“a personal capacity to produce consistently high levels of subjective (e.g. personal goals and strivings) or objective performance (e.g. grade, race time, sales) despite everyday challenges and stressors as well as significant adversities”* (Gucciardi, Hanton, et al., 2015).

Mental toughness is proven to be a valuable core personal resource in coping with stress and being resilient. A person with strong mental toughness would show several personal characteristics such as: self-efficacy/ self-efficacy, buoyancy, success mindset, optimism, context knowledge, emotion regulation, and attention regulation. They believe in their ability to achieve goals, are able to regulate focus and emotion when performing tasks, keep striving for continued success, use knowledge and skills effectively to overcome difficulties, and can find a positive in negative situations (Gucciardi, Hanton, et al., 2015).

In sport area, mental toughness is crucial for athletes' success (Cowden, 2017). Mental toughness is a psychological characteristic that is mentioned to be the most determining factor for winning (Liew et al., 2019). Slightly different from general definition of mental toughness by Gucciardi et al. (2015), mental toughness in sport is *“the ability of an athlete to cope effectively with training and competition demands in an effort to remain resilient”* (Liew et al., 2019), highlighting the sources of difficulty are coming from the training as well as the competition.

Athletes are continuously under competitive conditions and have to maintain desired performance level. Not only facing physical difficulties (e.g. skill gap, fatigue, potential injury), they also must deal with mental difficulties (e.g. public or fans pressure, anxiety, provocation and unfairness during a match, game, or races). Mental toughness has roles in fostering adaptive responses to pressures or negative situations. When all factors of winning are relatively the same among sport participants (e.g. physical, tactical, technical skills), this psychological factor would determine who the winner will be. The facts are, in one hand, the higher the level of competition (e.g. national and international championship), the more mental toughness athletes must have. In other hand, the stronger mental toughness is on athletes, the better is their behavioral effort/ perseverance, their use of coping strategies, and their performance, the greater is their likelihood of winning, and the more likely they participate in higher levels of competitions (Cowden, 2017; Gucciardi et al., 2016; Liew et al., 2019). Therefore, developing mental toughness should be part of sport coaching, training, and counseling activities.

Despite of its importance, mental toughness is not a permanent quality and may change throughout the life of athletes. Rather than a trait which is relatively permanent, mental toughness is a state that can be high or low (Gucciardi, Hanton, et al., 2015). Mental toughness can be activated, adapted, or shaped by various personal factors, such as: motives, values, coping style, goals, and self-beliefs

(Gucciardi, Hanton, et al., 2015) and be influenced by social or contextual factors involving various individuals (e.g. coach, peers, opponents, role models, elite performers), life experiences (e.g. critical events, living environment in early formative years), and specific training (e.g. psychological skill training) (Cowden, 2017; Liew et al., 2019).

Due to that ever changing dynamic of mental toughness, our question is: how to develop and maintain it, especially on Muslim athletes? Being a Muslim brings along certain conditions and circumstances that may put athletes at a disadvantage in comparison to non-Muslim athletes. For example, despite of the promotion of good health and encouragement to engage in physical activity in Islam, female Muslims may face discrimination or neglect in sports due to socio-cultural barriers. Traditional views in certain countries still discourage career women and prefer women to stay at home and focus on childcare and family care (Sadeghi et al., 2018). Others may encounter difficulties due to the lack of flexibility in the Islamic dress code, which requires women to cover their bodies or wear a hijab (Sania, 2023) and the obligation to fast during the month of Ramadan, which restrains them from food consumption and liquid intake (Chamari et al., 2019).

To answer the question above, I conducted a literature review. The purpose of this review is to explore recent literatures regarding the issue of mental toughness on Muslim athletes and suggested strategies from psychology and religious perspectives. The results of this exploration can help to formulate a more integrative strategy which will be useful for sport counseling and coaching activities especially for Muslim athletes.

METHOD

This research used literature review as study methodology. Literature review is a written document containing synthesis of current knowledge to the research question in order to develop or establish a thesis. As a research method, it is an examination of of the scholarly literature about a topic by critically analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing research findings, theories, and practices by scholar and researchers related to an area of focus (Efron & David, 2019; Machi & McEvoy, 2022). This study reviews literatures, analyzes, and draws conclusions to produce a position on the state of the knowledge about the topic which is called *a thesis statement*. The basic outcome of a literature review is a comprehensive, critical, and accurate understanding of the current state of knowledge (Efron & David, 2019; Machi & McEvoy, 2022).

This recent study specifically used narrative literature review approach to critically review the relevant literature on the topic of mental toughness for Muslim athletes to understand what is currently known about the subject. It is a stand-alone literature review that is not followed by a research study, but may serve as a basis for future research (Efron & David, 2019)

The narrative review is conducted by following procedures as described by Machi and McEvoy (2022). First, we select and identify a research interest for inquiry as the preliminary study question. This inquiry results in a research topic which has clear and concise scope based on the identified definition. Second, we explore the literatures through Google Scholar with keywords such as "mental toughness on athletes" and "developing mental toughness on athletes". We limit the search to articles published between 2014 and 2024 in international journals. Third, after surveying and discovering relevant literatures, we read and review them critically and write a narration containing the answer for the research question.

RESULTS

Mental Toughness, A Brief Review

Mental toughness is a psychological resource that enable individuals to initiate and sustain effort toward attaining optimal levels of performance despite exposure to adversity. It is a key psychological attribute associated with various indicators of success in sport results and performance (Guszkowska & Wojcik, 2021) as well as mental and physical health of athletes (Cowden et al., 2020). Mental toughness is a mechanism that protects individuals against ill-being such as stress. Moreover, it is also a marker of self-actualization, optimal human functioning, character strengths, and self-growth.

Many studies have provided empirical evidence about the positive contribution of mental toughness. Mental toughness is a quality that correlated positively to resilience and negatively to stress (Cowden et al., 2016). In their longitudinal study involving young athletes, Madigan and Nicholls (2017) found that mental toughness predicted residual decreases in burnout and all of its symptoms (i.e. reduced sense of accomplishment, exhaustion, and devaluation) over time. Athletes with higher mental toughness also showed fewer mental health issues when exposed to high stress and other negative experiences (such as depressive symptoms, self-directed negative emotions, self-criticism) due to their capacity to self-forgive and be more self-compassionate (Cowden et al., 2018; Gerber et al., 2018; Mohebi & Zarei, 2019). Furthermore, mental toughness a stress buffer pathway to lower anxiety (Benjamin & John, 2021). Athletes with higher mental toughness also tend to have lower fear of failure and obsessive passion (Gucciardi, Jackson, et al., 2015).

How is the psychological dynamic of mental toughness? Sorensen et al. (2016) constructed mental toughness model using system approach as its conceptual framework. They organized the model into inputs, processes and outputs. The model includes a number of inputs i.e. personal resources and stressors (such as negative situations, challenges or adversities to everyday mundane activities and obligations), processes i.e. strength (the capacity to

perform and maintain various psychological functions under stress) and accommodation (the capacity to perform and maintain cognitive, conative and affective functions to accommodate intrinsic weaknesses or barriers), and outputs (surviving, striving, thriving) of mental toughness. The first input of mental toughness is personal resources. Personal resources include: (1) personality traits that enable individuals to thrive under stress while others find it much more difficult such as optimism, hardiness, adaptability, competitiveness, and goal orientated, (2) wisdom, the ability to draw lessons from experience, including one's own or others mistake, (3) social support, external source of information for understanding how to manage challenges from family, peers, coaches, role models, etc, and (4) morals and values, having clear moral code and faith in God.

Factors that Shapes Mental Toughness

Beattie et al. (2020) recommended three important ingredients for developing mental toughness: 1) pressurised training environment, 2) access to psychological resources or support, and 3) motivation to succeed in the sport.

In line with the idea above, learning from paralympians, Powell and Myers (2017) found that mental toughness is developed through formative experiences. Formative experience is necessary experiences that athlete requires to build mental toughness, involving: (1) *Challenge* when is accepted and positively interpreted as opportunity rather than threat; (2) *Setback* when is responded effectively despite of inevitable and potential damage it causes; (3) *Critical incidents* (injury, accident, illness) that is followed by recovery process and therefore, creates opportunity of growth and self-development; and (4) *Non-sporting pressures* such as funding and livelihood that are seen as a test of personal commitment. These factors contribute in developing tough mindset and perspective which subsequently strengthen dedication, patience, and hard work. Athletes cannot face all challenges, setbacks, unwanted incidents, and pressures by their own selves. Powell and Myers (2017) also emphasized the role of social support and coping resource. The most significant social support come from parent and family as well as social and training groups. Through transformational practice in parenting and coaching, parent/ family and coach help form supported environment (Murray et al., 2020) so that athletes have opportunity to build either sporting or non-sporting problem solving skill. Meanwhile, other athletes may serve as reference or become object of comparison for self-evaluation and reflection so that they can learn how to prepare for challenges etc.

Mahoney et al. (2014) used a framework based on self-determination theory to explore motivational antecedents of the development of mental toughness. To bridge mental toughness and self-determination theory, they build the concept of *striving* (efforts individuals expend to achieve a goal), *surviving* (effective overcoming adversities and stressors in the ongoing pursuit of goals), and *thriving* (growth through daily lived experiences). To strive, a person must

have mastery orientation, self-belief, work hard, and push the boundaries. To survive, a person must persist through obstacles, handle failure and pressure, have ability to hang on, to react positively, and cope with stress and pressure. To thrive, a person must have context intelligence, value challenge, take risk, join competition, maintain self-control, vitality, and well-being, and enjoy the pressure. To enhance mental toughness, a person must be supported by autonomy-supportive (not too controlling) environment because only in this context, one's psychological needs can be satisfied.

Approaches to Develop Mental Toughness

Mental toughness cannot be developed in an absence of adversity (Beattie et al., 2020). Some adversities are part of natural life events, while some others are designated to achieve certain purpose through intervention programs. *Athlete-centered training program* are primarily psychological (Stamatis et al., 2020), meaning it is teaching practical psychological and psychosocial skills. Basically, this is the early efforts to train mental toughness by focusing on developing psychological skills/ resources considered important for sport performance (Beattie et al., 2020).

Some other trainings involve high pressure situation. The main purpose is to enhance athletes' ability to achieve and maintain performance targets under pressure from a wide range of stressors. It may contain punishment and repeated exposure to threat (e.g letting team down, being dropped from team, additional training session, being excluded from training) following task failure or failed personal discipline in regular training environment (Beattie et al., 2020).

Mental toughness can also be developed through *couch-centered training program* (Beattie et al., 2020). From coaches' perspective, the coach plays big role in developing athletes's mental toughness. There are several factor that facilitates the process: having positive coach-athlete relationship, focusing on personal development, and stimulating training environment. In contrary, mental toughness would be negatively affected when the coach prioritise success over development, focus on weakness, or has low or unrealistic expectations to the athletes. One example is provided by Anthony et al. (2018) who developed a coach-targeted program based on behavioral coaching framework to increase mentally tough behavior.

Weinberg et al. (2016) interviewed several sport psychologists to explore various methods for mental toughness building. They suggested that coaches should be mindful in how they think and what they do. First, they should be mindful in thinking about the athletes. They have to be critical but encouraging about athletes' performance and achievement. When making a critic, they should focus on athletes' behavior and do it in acceptable matter to avoid resentment and animosity. Coaches also have to foster athletes' sense of autonomy and personal control in dealing with sporting and non-sporting problems. Building mental

toughness requires adversities, however there is aspects of the process that require coaches to be caring, nurturing, and supportive, and put athletes' well-being into consideration. They need to know their athletes (the strenghts and weakness, habits in responding to problems).

Secondly, couches also have to be mindful about what they do. To help build mental toughness, coaches need to create situations of challenge and failure. By confronting athletes with adversity, they would help athletes develop strategies to cope with difficult situation, especially during competition. However, in doing so, they have to teach athletes necessary mental skills such as imagery and physical relaxation, breathing, self-talk and positive body language, to ease the stressful situation (Weinberg et al., 2016).

In line with ideas previously mentioned, Cowden et al. (2020) suggested three approuces for developing mental toughness.

First, environmental and coaching-based approaches. Environment can operate as mentally toughening mechanism through manipulation that provides both challenging and supportive learning experience. Coaches may systematically create situation containing opportunities for athetes to learn from setbacks, engage in problem solving, and develop new skills and abilities such as self-reliance, coping skill, and effective response to setbacks or criticism. Thus, this approaches is also called autonomy-supportive framework which is in line with self-determination theory and fundamental psychological needs.

Second, psychological skill training. Psychological skills training is a series of traning directed to teach athletes certain psychological techniques which help ease stressful situation and improve mental health. These skills are goal-setting, self-awareness, visualization, relaxation, concentration, thought stopping, positive thinking, optimistic thinking, attention control, mindfulness, and general coping. *Third*, strengths-based approaches. It focuses on identifying and capitalizing strength of individual or team rather than overcoming weaknesses of deficits in performance. Individual or team start with realizing their strength and make greater use of it.

Strategies for developing mental toughness may combine two or three approuces together. For example, Madrigal (2019) found the use of environmental structuring by establishing a coach-athlete relationship characterized by recognizing individuals and caring behavior, while still demanding and challenging), enforcing a culture (standard, expectation, and consistence), and implementing pressure activities and training (with game like scenario, being down a player and executing punishment for mistakes). This environmental approach is accompanied with mental skills training (meditation).

Other experts have a different view and suggest a more culturally-informed approach. Eubank et al. (2017) argued that although the psychological perspective of mental toughness, which focuses more on the individual, is important and

useful, the role of environment, culture, and context should be given more attention and integrated into practice. They stated that an athlete is always located in a specific organization and sport culture with its own processes, systems, values, and beliefs. They always interact with the environment in which they operate, not only in the form of the training environment but also in their greater situation regarding the (sport) culture they live in. In this broader system or society, there are relations, obligations, and duties that surround each and every person. Some elements of culture (e.g. tradition, religion) may serve as guidance for individuals and shape the practices, ideas, strategies, and philosophies of groups and individuals in doing sport.

Developing culture-based approach is potential especially in non-Western countries where their societies are much influenced by collectivism. Gu & Xue (2022) found the role of mental toughness as mediating factor between sport group cohesion and athletes' engagement in Chinese team sport athletes. Social cohesion reflects the integration and coordination level of a small group and is an important factor affecting goal accomplishment. In non-Western context, social cohesion is the source of athletes' social support and affects team performance, effectiveness, confidence, positive affect, and exercise adherence. Cohesion is not only showed by commitment to task, but also involvement in interpersonal relationship, such as friendship and emotional support. Based on these findings, social cohesion should be integrated in mental toughness developing program.

Potential Undesirable Outcomes of Mental Toughness

Developing mental toughness should put athletes well-being in mind. Therefore, training and intervention focused on developing mental toughness should be accompanied by an awareness of the drawbacks of mental toughness. Possible negative or undesirable outcomes are pushing through pain, ignoring injury, and denying illness or fatigue in pursuit of a goal. Rather than benefitting athletes, overtraining, burnout, and injury may worsen physiological and psychological distress and cause underperformance. To maintain healthy mental toughness, the main focus should be recovery when the athletes are in pain and not reward athletes for pushing through pain, injury, and illness. There also should be a clear line separating physical pain associated with improving fitness and physical pain associated with damage due to overtraining and burnout (Cowden et al., 2020).

Another undesirable outcome is emotion suppression. Controlling unhelpful emotions such as anger, sadness, and disappointment can be beneficial for performance. However, for athletes hiding or suppressing this emotion and keeping the problem to themselves in order to meet unrealistic expectations will do more damage psychologically, especially following a tragic event or long-term difficulties. Rather than silence emotion, athletes would be better to learn emotion regulation (Cowden et al., 2020).

DISCUSSION

This article aims to answer the question: How can mental toughness be developed and maintained for Muslim athletes? After reviewing more than 20 articles published between 2014 and 2024, there were no articles found discussing this topic in the context of Muslim athletes. However, we found few hints from three articles: (1) religion plays role as the source of moral values and as related to faith to God (greater power) (Sorensen et al., 2016); cultural-informed approach in developing mental toughness in which religion is part of society where an athlete live in (Gu & Xue, 2022); and formative experiences in form of non-sporting pressures as a test of commitment (Powell & Myers, 2017). Based on these, we conclude that the role of religion is relatively underinvestigated and deserve more attention.

A systematic review conducted by Noh and Shahdan (2020) on the roles of religion/ spirituality in sport showed that religion and/or spirituality can help athletes in various ways. From religion/ spirituality, athletes get hope, security feeling, inner strength, comfort in times of adversity, and relief from anxiety. Athletes also usually pray look toward God's help before, during, and after competitions as it helps them to maintain performance and attain well-being. They rely on religion/ spirituality to deal with personal difficulties impacting their sporting career, to build cohesion with other players in team, and to encourage a moral life. Religious rituals such as praying could be part of psychological preparation before events because it serves as a method of coping with uncertainty as well as helps give meaning to the participation in sport (Noh & Shahdan, 2020).

Intrinsic religiosity (a sincere and genuine commitment to one's religious beliefs and practices) is also found to be beneficial in developing virtue of patience through meaning and cognitive reappraisal, while lowering fear of failure that causes anxiety (Schnitker et al., 2020). Religious and spiritual faith can also help build "spiritual fortitude", one's ability to draw on spiritual resources to transcend negative emotions in the face of stressors (especially traumatic ones). People with spiritual fortitude showed better mental health and well-being as indicated by having higher meaning in life, positive religious coping, and perceived posttraumatic growth (Zhang et al., 2021). Articles above don't mention the correlation between religiosity/spirituality and mental toughness in sporting context. However, based on the psychological benefits it brings for people' survivability, striving, and thriving in general and athletes in particular, we can draw a prediction that religion and spirituality are presumably connected to mental toughness.

To work with religious and spiritual athletes, Sarkar et al. (2015) suggested implementation of RRICC Model in order to recognize and appreciate athletes' values and beliefs. The RRICC model addresses the ethical principles of *respect*,

responsibility, integrity, competence, and concern. This guidelines is primarily for sport psychologists, but coaches, and other stakeholders working with athletes can also use it with few adjustment. For example, in designing athlete-centered program for developing mental toughness, it is encouraged to adopt a more holistic approach, not only psychologically and culturally, but also spiritually. This program can be designed to incorporate religious/ spiritual coping strategies. For Muslim athletes, it may include practices such as praying (*salah* and *dhikr*), supplication (*dua*), positive thinking (*husnudzan*), and being patient (*sabr*) in dealing with adversity (Qoriah, 2012).

From Islamic perspective, patience is being firm and resistant to the influences caused by religion to face or oppose the influences caused by ego. Patience is considered the most important characteristic of mentally tough people. Patience is part of faith, and Islam has certain ways to grow the mental strength of its adherents. In life, efforts to achieve goals are not always smooth, where every human being will definitely face many obstacles, both from the natural environment or society. To face these obstacles, humans need great strength (Qoriah, 2012). Islamic beliefs dictate that this power can only be obtained through faith in Allah as portrayed in this dhikr, "*Hasbunallah wa nikmal wakil*," which means "Sufficient for us is Allah, and [He is] the best Disposer of affairs."

Furthermore, according to Qoriah (2012), the mental strength of a Muslim is in accordance with the level of his faith. The higher the level of faith, the tougher the mentality. Faith influences the steadfastness of the soul and with this steadfastness of soul, a Muslim will: 1) be consistent in the truth (when guilty, willing to admit a mistake even if it is bitter and be fair to opponents), 2) not be fooled by material forces (dare to face difficulties, not retreat in the face of middle of the road, not afraid of people who are few or many, not afraid of opposing forces, and not controlled by material and worldly things), 3) sincere in words and deeds, and 4) free from fear and greed of worldly life.

CONCLUSION

This review underscores the critical role of mental toughness in optimizing performance among athletes, especially Muslim athletes who face unique challenges shaped by their religious identity. The synthesis of current literature reveals that a combination of rigorous training environments, psychological support systems, and intrinsic motivation are essential for developing mental toughness in adverse conditions. However, the literature predominantly focuses on individual psychological skills, overlooking the potential benefits of integrating cultural and religious dimensions, such as the Islamic concept of patience (*sabr*), into training programs.

Future studies should expand the scope to include diverse cultural perspectives and religious interpretations within Muslim sporting communities.

Empirical research should validate the effectiveness of psycho-religious interventions tailored to enhance mental toughness among Muslim athletes. Additionally, interdisciplinary collaborations between sports psychologists, cultural experts, and religious scholars can enrich intervention strategies and promote a more inclusive approach to mental resilience training. By addressing these recommendations, practitioners and researchers can better support Muslim athletes in overcoming challenges and achieving peak performance, contributing to a more inclusive and effective sports environment worldwide.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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