

The Development of Mental Toughness Among Collegiate Athletes: A Qualitative Exploration

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore the development of mental toughness among collegiate athletes using a qualitative phenomenological approach. Specifically, it examined the lived experiences of collegiate athletes, their coping strategies, and the support systems that contribute to the development of mental toughness and its influence on athletic performance. Eight (8) collegiate athletes from a state university in the Philippines were purposively selected to participate in the study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis generated four major themes: (1) Experiences Contributing to Mental Toughness, (2) Coping Mechanisms, (3) The Role of Coaches and Teammates, and (4) The Impact of Mental Toughness on Performance. The study investigated how athletes develop resilience, maintain focus under pressure, overcome failures, and benefit from the support and guidance of coaches and teammates. Findings revealed that mental toughness plays a significant role in enhancing overall athletic performance. Personal experiences, adaptive coping strategies, and strong support systems were identified as key factors in fostering mental toughness, enabling athletes to effectively manage challenges, sustain focus in high-pressure situations, and continuously improve their performance.

Keywords: Mental toughness, Collegiate athletes, Coping mechanism, Sports performance, Resilience

1. Introduction

The development of mental toughness among collegiate athletes explores the experiences of their personal challenges, training, and competition. Through their experiences, it fosters to understand the factors and coping strategies that contribute to the development of mental toughness throughout their athletic journey. Mental toughness is the ability to handle pressure, adversity, and stress by overcoming failures (Aditya et al., 2024). On developing mental toughness, it has an impact on the performance of athletes, as they can be able to overcome failure during gameplay. Several research studies highlighted the importance of teammates and coaches to the social interactions among athletes (Martin et al., 2017; Eckenrod et al., 2025). Moreover, Akbar et al. (2024) discussed that for many coaches, athletes, and sport psychologist, mental toughness's considered to be one of the most essential characteristics athletes must possess in order to be successful in sport.

However, there are many factors affecting the sports performance of a student-athletes (Martin et al., 2023). One of the factors is the mental toughness however, there is a lack of clear understanding regarding the exact effects (Gue & Xue, 2022). Several studies explored the college athletes base on their mental toughness in specific sports which included taekwondo, judo, archery, wushu, and tennis. But the mental toughness has been studied in only a few research studies which focus on different sports disciplines (Ajilchi et al., 2022). Furthermore, there have been hundreds of studies published on mental toughness, yet concerns remain about the conceptualization and measurement of mental toughness (Turkington et al., 2023).

The majority of research studies on mental toughness have focused their efforts on describing its attributes together with its factors which contribute to its development without studying how collegiate athletes acquire this mental skill throughout their academic journey (Santos, 2026). Furthermore, only a few studies have investigated how coaches and parents and teammates together with teaching methods affect college athletes' mental toughness development in various sports environments (Martin & Santos, 2019).

Therefore, this research aims to gain a deeper understanding of how mental toughness develops among collegiate athletes. It describes how these athletes view and deal with their mental toughness throughout different areas of their lives, whether in sports, academics, or their daily routines. Through this study, it seeks to identify how they execute being resilient, focused, and confident even when facing challenges and pressure.

Lastly, this study promotes insights and useful guidance for coaches, educators, and sports administrators that serves as a basis to enhance training programs and support systems to help athletes not only to perform better in their respective sports but also to develop the mental toughness needed to handle challenges more effectively in all aspects of their lives.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach in order to find and comprehend the meanings of the participants lived experiences and perceptions throughout the procedure. This study sought to investigate the development of mental toughness among collegiate athletes, and this research design is deemed appropriate for the study because the researchers are conducting a study that focuses on collegiate athletes' personal experiences and seeks detailed descriptions of their emotions and feelings based on their experiences developing mental toughness.

Participants

The study involved eight (8) collegiate athletes from a state university. They provided useful insights into the development of mental toughness based on established criteria, such as active collegiate players with competitive sports experience.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews with collegiate athletes were conducted to gather data on their lived experiences with mental toughness development. An interview guide with open-ended questions was utilized to facilitate in-depth talks. Before data collection began, participants provided informed consent and were given information about the study's goal and procedures. Interviews were held in a comfortable setting at the university and audio-recorded with participants' permission, complemented by field notes to verify data accuracy. The recorded interviews were verbatim transcribed and meticulously organized for analysis, allowing researchers to identify categories, trends, and emerging themes connected to mental toughness development.

Data Analysis

Data collection was analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Refining and naming themes
6. Writing the report.

Ethical Consideration

The researchers strictly adhere to the respondents' privacy and rights using a consent form. Prior to data collection began, all participants provided informed consent and were informed about the study's objectives and procedures. The usage of codes ensured that participants' identities and personal information remained anonymous. All collected data was used for academic purposes only and was securely stored to avoid unwanted

access. The researchers ensured that subjects were handled with dignity and that no harm or discomfort happened during the data collection process.

3. Result and Discussion

Experiences contribute to mental toughness

Theme 1: *Perseverance through Time Management*

Experiencing limited time, athletes continued to balance training, competition, and academic demands, which contributed to the development of their mental toughness:

"As an athlete, I initially struggled with balancing studying and playing. Despite on that, it helps me to become discipline and focused" – P1

"When I have a hard time balancing my personal responsibilities and my playing, especially when there are competitions. Still, I continue to go on a training for preparation in our competition" – P3

"Actually, only time management, the challenges of being lack of time in balancing academics and also the training in being athletes" - P4

The statements showed that time management is one of the challenges that athlete encounters. This was supported by Ator and Ortizo (2024) stated that affecting time management, including school and teacher demands, athletic commitments, personal priorities, and social relationships. These experiences developed the athlete's perseverance by being discipline and responsible to have an effective time management.

Theme 2: *Resilience Through Athletic Challenges*

Athletic challenges reflect the foundation for building mental toughness and personal growth:

"I have experienced many hardships as an athlete such as fatigue, defeat, and pressure in the game because of this I learned to be strong and not give up easily"

- P5

"For me as an athlete, one of the first things I think about is to try again even if I lose and not get tired."- P7

"If you combine studying while playing sports, it's very difficult. But it won't be difficult because I set goals." - P8

These response shows that they remain strong no matter how difficult the challenges they encountered. This was supported in the study of Fletcher (2015) and Pestano et al. (2025), highlighted that resilience in sport is developed through athletes' experiences in overcoming challenges, adapting to pressure, and persevering despite setbacks. Through these experiences, it gives encouragement to set a goal and ability to recover from the setbacks which it contributes to their mental toughness.

Theme 3: *Maintain focus under pressure*

Maintaining concentration and mental focus despite facing obstacles while under pressure:

"I'm just breathing and focusing more on the game itself and remembering everyone who trusts me." - P2

"When I feel pressured while playing, I take a deep breath and think to myself, I just calm myself down so I can focus on the game" - P5

These responses aim to maintain the focus under pressure is important aspect on developing their mental toughness, as it helps them to manage distractions and remain calm in the middle of the challenging situations, and remain committed to their goals and performance. Jacobs and Keegan (2022), highlighted that athletes perform effectively under pressure by maintaining focus, regulating emotions, and applying psychological strategies that help them stay composed during challenging situations.

Coping Mechanism

Theme 1: *Reflective Learning from Failure*

Athletes viewed failure as an opportunity to learn, improve, and strengthen their mental toughness:

"Of course, when failure comes in competition, I'm still motivated. Because the eagerness to recover is there, I turn the failure into a lesson." - P4

"I stay motivated after losing because I think it's just part of the game. I use losing as inspiration to improve." - P5

"I turn failure into learning because I know where I fell short, and that's what I target in practice." - P7

These responses show that athletes use failure as a learning experience rather than a reason to give up. This finding aligns with the study of Gucciardi et al. (2020), which suggests that mental toughness develops through overcoming challenges and reflecting on experiences. Such reflection helps athletes build resilience, confidence, and psychological skills that contribute to improved performance.

Theme 2: Persistence through Improvement

Athletes demonstrated persistence by using failure as motivation to improve their skills and performance:

"I turn failure into a lesson by looking at my mistakes and practicing so that I don't repeat them and learn from each mistake." - P5

"When I lose a game, I think about what I need to improve on, what I'm lacking, and that's what motivates me to train even more for the next competition." - P8

These responses show that athletes respond to failure by identifying areas for improvement and increasing their training effort, maintaining a growth-focused mindset instead of being discouraged by setbacks. This aligns with McKay et al. (2024), who stated that mental toughness develops through continued engagement in challenges and viewing setbacks as opportunities for improvement, which builds resilience and commitment.

Role of Coaches and Teammates

Theme 1: Guidance among Coaches and Teammates

Guidance among coaches and teammates provide encouragement, trust, and support from collegiate athletes to help them improve and handle challenges in sports:

"Pure emotional support from coaches and teammates gives motivation to us inside the game." -P4

"Support from teammates and coaches makes me feel stronger and more confident." -P5

"Our coach and seniors give me tips on what I should improve during games." -P6

These responses show that athletes value guidance from coaches and teammates because it helps them gain confidence and improve their performance. This aligns with da Silva et al. (2025), who emphasized that coaches and teammates play a key role in building mental toughness through feedback, motivation, and emotional support.

Theme 2: Assurance through Moral Support

The assurance provides emotional and moral support to athletes receive from coaches and teammates, as it gives them confidence and emotional stability, especially under pressure:

"Most of all, they always tell me not to be scared. They support me and say they will always be right behind me." P7

"The team is there to guide me and tell me what I need to do." - P8

These responses reassurance strengthens and confidence of collegiate athletes and helps them maintain a positive mindset even under pressure. This aligns with Siyahatas et al. (2025), who found that social support enhances athletes' stress management, self-efficacy, and coping skills during competition.

Theme 3: Encouragement as a Source of Motivation

The encouragement helps the collegiate athlete to improve their performance and stay motivated despite mistakes and challenge:

“They encourage me, give advice when they see mistakes in my game, and tell me what I need to improve.” - P1
“I already feel their support and encouragement even during practice through my coach and teammates.” -P2

These responses show that encouragement from coaches and teammates increases athletes’ motivation and confidence, helping them accept feedback and improve their weaknesses. This supports the development of mental toughness by maintaining motivation despite challenges. This is supported by Martin et al. (2016) and Santos et al. (2022), who found that supportive coaching behaviors enhance athletes’ confidence, motivation, and psychological resilience.

Impact of mental toughness to the performance

Theme 1: Concentration during performance

Concentration during performance to retain mental attention on the athletic situations that allows collegiate athletes to execute their performance effectively:

“Mental toughness is a big thing for me because there are times when I only help myself especially in the game and in strategy so mental toughness helps me to focus on my game on the court and I boost my confidence more when my mind is set on the game.” - P1

“Of course, when my mental toughness is good, I can focus on my performance to run fast and to do reaction time probably.” - P4

“Mental toughness has a big impact on my performance because it helps me stay calm, focused and not give up easily.” -P5

“Mental toughness has a big impact on me because it allows me to focus on the game.” -P7

These responses shows that concentration plays a vital role among collegiate athletes’ as it helps them to execute their performance in training and competitions effectively. Research by Gucciardi et al. (2020) affirms that concentration, focusing on the most relevant information for further processing, is regarded as a prerequisite for successful sporting performance.

Theme 2: Overcoming Anxiety

Overcoming anxiety reduces the collegiate athletes’ feelings of concern, uneasiness, and pressure while competing or training:

“I used to get anxious and rattled when I was new to volleyball but now my mental toughness has been shaped. It helps me focus on the game and not have anyone worry about it.” - P2

“I also realized that it is very essential that you should not be nervous in a fight and that you should have high mental toughness even if the opponents are bigger and more skilled, I still tell myself that I can do it.” -P6

“Because I was brave, I didn't get carried away by the camaraderie. As a result, I was able to perform better in the game.” -P7

These stated that no matter how heavy they felt before and during their sport performance they remain calm and motivated. This was supported in the study of Mojtahedi et al. (2023) as they stated that mental toughness is allied to positive attributes and could potentially be operationalized to improve both the retention and performance of combat sports athletes.

4. Conclusion

The findings proved that the development of mental toughness in collegiate athletes had a significant impact on their total athletic performance. Athletes strengthen their mental toughness through personal experiences, adaptive coping mechanisms, and support from coaches and teammates, allowing them to effectively manage obstacles and maintain their focus under pressure which contribute to the development and improvement of their athletic performance.

5. Recommendations

To address the development of mental toughness for the collegiate athletes, coaches should provide not only technical and physical training but also psychological guidance through regular mentoring, motivation, and mental skills training such. Additionally, sport coordinators should organize workshops and seminars on sports psychology to help athletes develop effective coping strategies when facing pressure, failure, and academic challenges. For future studies, future researchers are encouraged to conduct similar studies involving a larger number of participants and different sports disciplines to gain a broader understanding of how mental toughness develops among collegiate athletes and to validate the findings of this research.

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