

Beyond The Game: A Review on Silent Mental Struggle and Anxiety of Competitors

Anil Kumar N.^{1*}, Lisa Rachel Saji²

¹Associate Professor and Dean, Department of Bachelor of Physical Education, Christ College Irinjalakuda, Kerala India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Physical Education, Nirmala college Muvattupuzha Autonomous, Ernakulam, Kerala, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36348/sjbr.2025.v10i12.003>

| Received: 05.10.2025 | Accepted: 28.11.2025 | Published: 27.12.2025

*Corresponding author: Anil Kumar N.

Associate Professor and Dean, Department of Bachelor of Physical Education, Christ College Irinjalakuda, Kerala India

Abstract

Competitive sports demand not only physical excellence but also psychological resilience, yet the silent mental struggles and anxiety experienced by athletes remain largely underappreciated. Thus, the paper examines the domain of silent mental struggles and anxiety experienced by competitors across athletic and professional sports performance settings. While visible aspects of competition receive substantial attention from coaches, psychologists and support staff, the internal psychological battles that unfold away from the spotlight remain critically under-addressed. The conceptualization of "silent" struggle refers to the internalized, unexpressed cognitive and emotional distress that competitors frequently conceal due to fears of appearing weak, losing competitive standing, or disappointing teammates and mentors. Findings indicate that performance anxiety often operates through a dual pathway: facilitative anxiety, which can enhance focus and drive and debilitating anxiety, which impairs concentration, elevates perceived threat and triggers maladaptive coping mechanisms such as avoidance, perfectionistic paralysis or substance use. Psychoeducational interventions, cognitive restructuring techniques and peer-support models show promise, yet implementation remains inconsistent across levels of competition. Ultimately, the silent mental struggle is not merely a welfare concern but a performance imperative. Recognizing anxiety as a universal, manageable aspect of high-stakes engagement can transform how competitors, coaches and institutions approach mental preparation, resilience training and long-term athlete development.

Keywords: Performance Anxiety, Athlete Mental Health, Competitive Stress, Stigma in Sports.

Copyright © 2025 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

INTRODUCTION

Competition is usually marketed as a stage for strength, resilience and excellence, yet it simultaneously exposes people to intense scrutiny, public failure and chronic uncertainty. Athletes and other competitors must perform under lights that magnify every mistake while living in cultures that equate vulnerability with weakness and treat mental health struggles as excuses rather than injuries (Triguero Martín *et al.*, 2024). The roar of the crowd, the flash of victory and the gleam of medals often define public perception of competitive sports. Yet beneath this celebrated exterior lies a largely invisible reality, the silent mental struggle and pervasive anxiety experienced by countless competitors (Rice *et al.*, 2016; Schinke *et al.*, 2017). While athletic training regimens meticulously address physical conditioning, injury prevention and tactical skills, the psychological well-being of athletes remains an underappreciated frontier. Competitors at all levels face relentless pressure to perform, secure rankings, meet sponsorship expectations and validate their self-worth through outcomes. This

chronic stress frequently manifests as generalized anxiety, social anxiety, performance phobias and even clinical depression. However, cultural norms within sports cultures valorize toughness, emotional control, and stoicism, discouraging athletes from voicing their distress. Consequently, many suffer in silence, fearing that admitting vulnerability will be mistaken for weakness or jeopardize their positions. Thus, the paper examines the domain of silent mental struggles and anxiety experienced by competitors across athletic and professional sports performance settings.

The hidden prevalence of psychological distress

Psychological distress often remains invisible, silently affecting individuals who appear outwardly functional. Beneath composed exteriors, many endure persistent anxiety, low mood or emotional exhaustion without seeking help. Stigma, lack of awareness and cultural norms that equate suffering with weakness drive this hidden prevalence. In workplaces, schools and even competitive sports, people mask their struggles, fearing

judgment or professional repercussions. Consequently, distress goes unrecorded and untreated, escalating into more severe conditions. This silent epidemic underscores the urgent need for normalizing conversations around mental health, routine screening, and accessible support systems.

A landmark meta-analysis pooling data from thousands of current and former elite athletes found that between 19% and 34% of current competitors report symptoms of alcohol misuse, distress, sleep disturbance, or anxiety and depression. Among retired athletes, the prevalence of distress and anxiety/depression still ranged from roughly 16% to 26%, suggesting that the psychological consequences of high-level competition often persist beyond the end of a career (Gouttebargue *et al.*, 2019). Other reviews converge on similar conclusions: elite athletes show broadly comparable risks of anxiety and depressive disorders to non-athletes and in some subgroups such as women or athletes in aesthetic sports, risks of disordered eating and distress may even be higher (Runacres and Marshall, 2024; Bilgoe *et al.*, 2025). Among the former elite competitors, one in four retired athletes experience anxiety or depression, underlining that the “silent struggle” does not end with the final match or race (Montero *et al.*, 2024). Importantly, prevalence figures are likely conservative because they capture only those willing to self-report symptoms in research settings. Stigma, low mental-health literacy, and fear of career repercussions mean that many competitors under-report distress, normalizing sleep loss, irritability, and persistent worry as just “part of the grind.”

Inside the competitive mind: Core psychological challenges

The competitor's mind is often a battlefield of conflicting psychological pressures (Demir *et al.*, 2025). At the core of these struggles is competitive anxiety, which, despite its prevalence, often goes unaddressed because routine screening is not standard practice. This is frequently compounded by perfectionism, where an athlete's relentless pursuit of high standards can be a double-edged sword, significantly predicting higher levels of trait anxiety. Alongside this is the fear of failure, which can function either as a paralyzing threat or, if reframed appropriately, as a source of motivation. For many high-achieving athletes, these pressures foster imposter syndrome - an intense feeling of intellectual inauthenticity (Singh and Arora, 2023). Over time, the cumulative strain leads to athlete burnout, a negative psychological consequence of sport-related stressors that adversely impacts both mental and physical well-being.

- **Performance anxiety and the weight of expectation:** Pre-competition anxiety is one of the most pervasive experiences reported by athletes and other high-stakes performers (Anwari *et al.*, 2025). It encompasses worries about failure, evaluations by coaches and spectators, fear of letting others down,

and catastrophic expectations about what a poor performance might mean for one's career. Pre-competition state anxiety shows that as competition approaches, many athletes experience racing thoughts, somatic symptoms (such as rapid heart rate, muscle tension, and stomach discomfort) and intrusive doubts about their abilities. When anxiety becomes excessive or chronic, it disrupts concentration, decision-making and motor control, undermining performance in exactly the situations where competitors most need clarity and composure (Nieuwenhuys and Oudejans, 2012).

- **Depression, burnout and emotional exhaustion:** While anxiety often appears around competitions, depression and burnout tend to emerge more insidiously over longer periods of chronic pressure and disappointment. The symptoms of depression such as persistent low mood, loss of interest, sleep disturbance, and hopelessness are common among elite athletes, particularly in contexts of injury, deselection, or prolonged under-performance (Lundqvist *et al.*, 2024). Burnout in competitive settings typically combines emotional exhaustion, a sense of reduced accomplishment, and a growing detachment from the sport or activity that once felt meaningful (Bhowmik, 2019). For some, it manifests as irritability and cynicism; for others, as a blunted, “numb” approach to training and competition where nothing feels enjoyable or satisfying anymore.
- **Perfectionism and the fear of not being enough:** Perfectionism is both a driver of excellence and a risk factor for distress in competitive environments. Adaptive forms of perfectionism characterized by high but flexible standards can motivate deliberate practice and resilience; maladaptive perfectionism, in contrast, involves rigid standards, relentless self-criticism and a tendency to equate self-worth with flawless performance. In athletes and other competitors, maladaptive perfectionism has been linked to greater performance anxiety, more negative interpretations of mistakes, and increased vulnerability to depression and burnout (Stoeber *et al.*, 2007). The problem is not striving for excellence but the inability to tolerate imperfection in self or outcomes, coupled with environments that reward only winning and treat anything less as failure.

Early specialization and talent development stress

The modern push for elite performance has placed immense psychological pressure on young competitors through the pressures of early sports specialization and talent development. This practice, which often begins in early childhood, is rooted in the fallacy that it is a necessary pathway to collegiate or professional success, despite research showing it is rare among athletes who actually reach those levels (Pandya and Lang, 2021). Instead, it is strongly associated with mental health challenges, as the growing trend is linked to increased risks of injury and burnout, both of which

have significant mental health implications (Daley *et al.*, 2023). The high monotony of routines can lead to a lack of enjoyment and disengagement, while pressured athletes may internalize failures as shame, fostering maladaptive perfectionism (Soares and Carvalho, 2023).

The developmental burden of talent development stress is profound. Studies show early specializers are 70% more likely to experience serious injuries, and the cumulative strain results in an overall higher risk of sports abandonment (Benítez Fatou *et al.*, 2022). Consequently, current guidelines universally recommend delaying intense single-sport training until late adolescence to protect young athletes' well-being. Encouraging multi-sport participation fosters broader motor skills and more positive psychosocial outcomes, such as greater intrinsic motivation. Ultimately, the psychological cost of the "silent struggle" (e.g., social isolation and anxiety from excessive focus) is too high; a diversified approach is essential for building resilient competitors rather than burnt-out, unidimensional athletes.

Manifestations of silent struggle

The "silent struggle" in competitive sports is a multidimensional syndrome with profound manifestations across psychological and physiological domains. For competitors locked in elite performance, "silent struggle" is not a single feeling but a multidimensional syndrome. At the cognitive level, athletes often suffer from relentless rumination and sport-related worry that erodes concentration, decision-making and working memory. In training, this manifests as "mental fog" and an inability to focus (Patel, 2024). Emotionally, the struggle is marked by pervasive exhaustion, irritability and a reduced sense of accomplishment. As negative appraisal deepens, sport devaluation occurs, where the athlete develops a cynical attitude toward the very activities they once loved (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2017). Behaviourally, these internal shifts frequently trigger withdrawal from social connections, neglect of personal interests and sometimes an obsessive reliance on training to cope (Colangelo, 2021). Somatic symptoms such as muscle soreness, frequent illness, increased heart rate and chronic sleep disturbances are also highly common. Together, these hidden manifestations create a cycle of distress that often goes unspoken, further isolating the competitor and eroding long-term well-being.

- **Cognitive:** rumination, self-doubt, imposter phenomenon, concentration deficits
- **Emotional:** irritability, emotional exhaustion, dread, shame
- **Behavioural:** withdrawal, substance use, overtraining, sleep disturbance
- **Somatic:** tension headaches, gastrointestinal issues, fatigue
- **Identity foreclosure:** psychological distress and depression due to injury or retirement.

In short, these manifestations create a debilitating cycle, yet due to stigma and a culture of emotional toughness, this suffering often remains a hidden epidemic.

Consequences of unaddressed silent struggle

The consequences of unaddressed psychological distress extend far beyond the competitor's internal world. The first major impact is a tangible decline in performance and a significant increase in injury risk. Research indicates that an athlete's history of stressors has a low but significant correlation with sports injuries, concluding that inevitable life stressors can lead to negative consequences for athletes (Chyi *et al.*, 2024). This is compounded by the effects of athlete burnout, which has been shown to negatively predict sport performance for both a single competition and peak performance over a three-month period (Olsson *et al.*, 2025). The relationship between poor mental health and injury is bidirectional, as poor mental health has been found to increase the risk of sports injury, injury severity, and recovery time.

This cycle often culminates in burnout and dropout from sport, which are direct consequences of the psychological syndrome. Athlete burnout is defined by feelings of exhaustion, a reduced sense of accomplishment, and sport devaluation. Those experiencing burnout are at an increased risk of experiencing depression and are more likely to dropout from sport. The very fabric of athletic identity begins to erode, leading to sport abandonment. Perhaps the most alarming consequence is the escalation to clinical disorders and suicidal ideation. A comprehensive meta-analysis found that the time-point prevalence of anxiety and depression in former elite athletes is over twice that of the general population (Runacres and Marshall, 2024). In elite female athletes, clinically significant symptoms of anxiety, depression or disordered eating, which is substantially higher than prevalence rates in the general population was noticed. This distress is linked to suicide, which has been strongly associated with affective disorders and the high-pressure environment of professional sports can increase vulnerability, particularly during career transitions or post-retirement.

Finally, the silent struggle has a negative spillover into academic, family, and social life. For student-athletes, this distress is not confined to the field; athlete burnout has been shown to directly predict academic burnout, where the strain from sports undermines academic performance and mental health (Xu *et al.*, 2025). The impact also ripples through family systems, where a competitor's psychological state can increase caregiver burden, depression and anxiety among partners. Conversely, a lack of social support from close interpersonal relationships is strongly linked to worsening mental health, highlighting that the isolation

of silent struggle corrodes the very support systems athletes need most (Latessa, 2024).

Coping in silence: Maladaptive strategies and their consequences

When competitors feel unable to openly acknowledge their mental struggles or access appropriate care, they often turn to coping strategies that temporarily reduce distress but carry longer-term costs. These may include heavy alcohol use, disordered eating, overtraining or avoidance behaviours such as withdrawing from social support or procrastinating on training tasks. Such behaviours are not merely individual “bad habits”; they can be understood as attempts to self-manage anxiety, control body image or numb emotional pain in contexts where little space exists for vulnerability. Over time, maladaptive coping can worsen mental health outcomes, erode performance and increase the risk of physical injury and early retirement. Without recognition and support, the silent mental struggle can spiral into crises, including severe depression, self-harm, or suicidality, which have been tragically documented in several high-profile cases (Reardon, 2023).

The paradox of high-functioning outward appearance vs. internal distress in sports

The core paradox in elite sport is that an athlete’s greatest strength, their ability to endure and excel under pressure, often becomes the very mechanism that conceals their most profound suffering. This phenomenon, where high performance masks deteriorating internal distress, is widely recognized across sport psychology and clinical literature as the paradox of high-functioning distress. At the heart of this paradox is masking - a coping strategy where athletes outwardly project a composed, capable or even positive image while privately bearing the weight of anxiety, depression, burnout or emotional exhaustion. This behaviour is reinforced by the “high-functioning danger zone,” a state where relentless achievement serves as a survival strategy that prevents the individual from slowing down enough to feel underlying distress. For many high-performing athletes, the ability to remain composed under intense scrutiny and to over-function in the face of pressure is socially rewarded and often mistaken for resilience, even when the private cost is staggering. The psychological adaptations built around maintaining this outward control can become so embedded that they eventually feel indistinguishable from the athlete’s identity itself.

The clinical challenge is that strong performance actively sabotages recognition. When an athlete continues to win, meet training metrics and hold their team together, coaches, support staff and even the athlete themselves rationalize the warning signs. Chronic fatigue, emotional numbness and an inability to disconnect are dismissed as dedication rather than distress. This leads to a dangerous internal isolation: the athlete learns to dismiss their own struggle because their

performance externally signals that they are “fine”. This phenomenon is often referred to in research as “smiling depression” a state where a person presents a functional exterior while grappling with significant internal distress (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2019). The very systems designed to provide support may overlook the most at-risk individuals precisely because their output remains high. Consequently, the gap between who the athlete appears to be and who they internally are continues to widen. Behind the trophies and medals, the private experience becomes one of persistent vigilance, where rest feels like a threat and the absence of output removes a key regulatory structure. This disconnect not only corrodes long-term well-being but also deepens the “silent struggle” of competitors who suffer alone in plain sight.

CONCLUSION

The arena of competitive sport, often celebrated as a crucible of human excellence, simultaneously harbours an invisible epidemic of silent mental struggle and unspoken anxiety. Beneath the podium smiles, record-breaking performances and public accolades, countless competitors grapple with relentless psychological distress that remains largely hidden from coaches, teammates and even themselves. The issue has a multidimensional nature from cognitive rumination and emotional exhaustion to identity foreclosure and maladaptive perfectionism all of which erode well-being while outward functioning may appear uncompromised. The evidence consistently demonstrates that unaddressed silent struggle does not remain contained; it cascades into impaired performance, elevated injury risk, burnout, premature dropout, clinical disorders and tragically, suicidal ideation. Furthermore, the spillover effects into academic, family, and social domains underscore that the competitor’s distress is never solely their own, but it reverberates through entire support systems.

It should be noted that the very traits that drive athletic success such as discipline, emotional control, pain tolerance and relentless self-improvement are often become barriers to recognizing and seeking help for psychological suffering. The culture of toughness, reinforced by coaches, institutions and even spectators, stigmatizes vulnerability, leaving athletes trapped in a cycle of concealment. Current interventions, while promising, remain inconsistently implemented and routine mental health screening is far from standard practice across most sports organizations. Thus, winning beyond the game requires that the sports can move beyond performance metrics and medal counts to prioritize the holistic well-being of competitors. Early diversification, delayed specialization and identity development beyond sport must become protective strategies embedded in talent pathways. Ultimately, the silent struggle will remain silent no longer only when sports organizations commit to making psychological safety as non-negotiable as physical safety. The competitor who suffers in silence deserves to be seen, heard and supported, not just as an athlete, but as a whole

human being. Then only the industry can truly claim that sport develops not only champions, but resilient, thriving individuals long after the final whistle blows. In short, behind every medal, ranking or title lies a complex psychological.

REFERENCES

- Anwari, A.S.N., Isna, N.M., Prasetya, M.R.A., Widodo, A., Priambodo, A. 2025. Investigating the Effects of Pre-Competition Anxiety on Sport Psychological Performance in Young Athletes Performance. *Journal of Physical Education, Sport, Health and Recreation*. 14(2):354-361.
- Benítez Fatou, C., Martín Barrero, A., Camacho Lazarraga, P. 2022. Effect of early specialization in team sports. A systematic review. *SPORT TK-EuroAmerican Journal of Sport Sciences*. 11:25. <https://doi.org/10.6018/sportk.487131>.
- Bhattacharya, S., Hoedebecke, K., Sharma, N., Gokdemir, O., Singh, A. 2019. "Smiling depression" (an emerging threat): Let's Talk. *Indian Journal of Community Health*. 31(04):433-436.
- Bhowmik, C. 2019. Burnout in sports: A systematic review of causes, consequences, and preventive strategies. *International Journal of Engineering Technology Research & Management*. 03(03):81-88.
- Bilgoe, S., Kerkhoffs, G.M.M.J., Gouttebarga, V. 2025. A preliminary study on the prevalence of mental health symptoms in current and former elite kickboxers and their possible association with severe musculoskeletal injuries and concussions. *Discov Ment Health*. 5:181. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44192-025-00328-w>.
- Chyi, T., Lu, F.J.H., Hsieh, Y.C., Hsu, Y.W., Gill, D.L., Fang, B.B. 2024. Relationship Between Athletes' History of Stressors and Sport Injury: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Percept Mot Skills*. 131(1):192-218.
- Colangelo, J. 2021. Losing Focus? Feeling Grumpy? You Might be Overtraining. <https://www.triathlete.com/training/recovery/losing-focus-feeling-grumpy-you-might-be-overtraining/?scope=anon>. Accessed on 04.04.2025.
- Daley, M.M., Shoop, J., Christino, M.A. 2023. Mental Health in the Specialized Athlete. *Curr Rev Musculoskelet Med*. 16(9):410-418.
- Demir, G.T., Namlı, S., Çakır, E., Batu, B., Ateş, F., Yılmaz, E., Güvendi, B., Kocamaz Adaş, S., Çağın, M. 2025. The role of mental toughness, sport imagery and anxiety in athletic performance: structural equation modelling analysis. *BMC Psychol*. 13:869. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-03250-6>.
- Gouttebarga, V., Castaldelli-Maia, J.M., Gorczyński, P., Hainline, B., Hitchcock, M.E., Kerkhoffs, G.M., Rice, S.M., Reardon, C.L. 2019. Occurrence of mental health symptoms and disorders in current and former elite athletes: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Br J Sports Med*. 53(11):700-706.
- Gustafsson, H., DeFreese, J.D., Madigan, D.J. 2017. Athlete burnout: review and recommendations. *Current Opinion in Psychology*. 16:109-113.
- Latessa, M.J. 2024. *Overwhelmed by the Stress and Frustration to Perform to Expectations: Exploring this Phenomena within Student-Athletes*. Doctoral dissertation, Youngstown State University. OhioLINK Electronic Theses and Dissertations Center. http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=ysu1733999605122259. Accessed on 10.07.2025.
- Lundqvist, C., Schary, D.P., Jacobsson, J., Korhonen, L., Timpka, T. 2024. Aligning categories of mental health conditions with intervention types in high-performance sports: A narrative cornerstone review and classification framework. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*. 27(8):525-531.
- Montero, A., Baranoff, J., Adams, R., Drummond, M. 2024. Athletic retirement: factors contributing to sleep and mental health problems. *Front Psychol*. 15:1350925. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1350925.
- Nieuwenhuys, A. and Oudejans, R.R. 2012. Anxiety and perceptual-motor performance: toward an integrated model of concepts, mechanisms, and processes. *Psychol Res*. 76(6):747-759.
- Olsson, L.F., Glandorf, H.L., Black, J.F., Jeggo, R.E.K., Stanford, J.R., Drew, K.L., Madigan, D.J. 2025. A multi-sample examination of the relationship between athlete burnout and sport performance. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*. 76:102747.
- Pandya, N.K. and Lang, P. 2021. Pitfalls of Pediatric and Adolescent Sports Specialization. *Journal of the Pediatric Orthopaedic Society of North America*. 3(2):268.
- Patel, V. 2024. Beyond the Finish Line: A Novel, Integrative Approach to Athletic Overtraining Syndrome from a Sports Psychiatry Perspective. ACLP Consultation-Liaison Psychiatry- 2024. Promoting Whole Health Through Innovative and Integrative Approaches to C-L Psychiatry. <https://clp2024.eventscribe.net/fsPopup.asp?efp=SlhBV1BKRvgyMjQzNg&PosterID=681909&rnd=0.4201114&mode=posterInfo>. Accessed on 04.04.2025.
- Reardon, C.L. 2023. The Mental Health Crisis in Sports: The Perfect Storm of Contemporary Factors. *J. Athl. Train*. 58(9):677-680.
- Rice, S.M., Purcell, R., De Silva, S., Mawren, D., McGorry, P.D., Parker, A.G. 2016. The Mental Health of Elite Athletes: A Narrative Systematic Review. *Sports Med*. 46(9):1333-1353.
- Runacres, A. and Marshall, Z. 2024. Prevalence of anxiety and depression in former elite athletes: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine*. 10(4):e001867. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjsem-2023-001867>.

- Runacres, A. and Marshall, Z.A. 2024. Prevalence of anxiety and depression in former elite athletes: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMJ Open Sport Exerc Med.* 10(4):e001867. doi: 10.1136/bmjsem-2023-001867.
- Schinke, R. J., Stambulova, N.B., Si, G., Moore, Z. 2017. International society of sport psychology position stand: Athletes' mental health, performance, and development. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology.* 16(6):622-639.
- Singh, A. and Arora, M. 2023. Perceived Incompetence: A Study of the Impostor Phenomenon among Sport Performers. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology.* 11(1):310-326.
- Soares, A.L.A. and Carvalho, H.M. 2023. Burnout and dropout associated with talent development in youth sports. *Front Sports Act Living.* 5:1190453. doi: 10.3389/fspor.2023.1190453.
- Stoeber, J., Otto, K., Pescheck, E., Becker, C., Stoll, O. 2007. Perfectionism and competitive anxiety in athletes: Differentiating striving for perfection and negative reactions to imperfection. *Personality and Individual Differences.* 42(6):959-969.
- Triguero Martín, M., Manzano-Sánchez, D., Gómez-López, M., González-Hernández, J. 2024. Basic Psychological Needs in the Face of Achievement Vulnerability: A Study in Young Team Athletes. *Behav Sci (Basel).* 14(8):697. doi: 10.3390/bs14080697.
- Xu, G., Yang, X., Zhang, Q. and Li, C. 2025. The impact of athlete burnout on academic burnout among college athletes: a multiple mediation model based on emotion regulation and sleep. *Front. Psychol.* 16:1669344. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1669344.