

The Impact of Anxiety on Athletic Performance in Competitive Sports: An Indian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the impact of performance anxiety on competitive athletes in India, with a focus on college-level players. Drawing from national surveys, institutional data, and a field study conducted among student athletes in Uttar Pradesh, the study reveals that over 70% of Indian athletes experience moderate to severe anxiety before competitions. Key psychological symptoms include cognitive disturbances such as loss of focus and intrusive thoughts, as well as somatic effects like muscle tension and rapid heartbeat. Performance scores were found to be significantly higher among athletes who practiced pre-game routines such as breathing exercises and visualization, confirming the importance of psychological preparedness. The paper also highlights the lack of structured mental health support in Indian sports institutions—only 16% of surveyed athletes had access to psychological coaching. Through an analysis of coping strategies such as cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness, and yoga, this study advocates for the integration of sports psychology into college-level athletic programs. Findings emphasize the urgent need for institutional reforms to support the mental well-being of Indian athletes and enhance their competitive performance.

INTRODUCTION

India's passion for sports has grown immensely, particularly after significant achievements in cricket, badminton, wrestling, and athletics on global stages. However, the emotional toll on athletes striving for excellence is not always visible. Competitive sports, by their very nature, generate high-pressure environments, where mental strength becomes just as critical as physical prowess.

One of the most prevalent psychological challenges in sports is **anxiety**—a condition that affects performance, decision-making, coordination, and confidence. Despite its frequency, anxiety remains an under-discussed topic in Indian sports, especially in rural and semi-urban institutions.

In this paper, we explore the **impact of performance anxiety on Indian athletes**, particularly college-level competitors, through both national data and field studies conducted in Uttar Pradesh. The goal is to illuminate how mental readiness, or the lack thereof, can determine the outcome of a match, race, or game.

UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY IN SPORTS

Defining Anxiety

Anxiety is an emotional and physiological state characterized by feelings of unease, tension, and fear, often accompanied by increased heart rate, muscle stiffness, and negative self-talk. In sports psychology, anxiety is split into:

- **Trait Anxiety:** A personality-based tendency to feel anxious across various situations.
- **State Anxiety:** A temporary emotional state that varies depending on the situation (e.g., during a final match).

State anxiety has the most immediate impact on athletic performance. It often peaks right before a game, during crucial moments of competition, or when an athlete faces public scrutiny.

Cognitive and Somatic Anxiety

- **Cognitive Anxiety:** Involves negative thoughts, lack of confidence, and worries about performance outcomes.
- **Somatic Anxiety:** Involves physical symptoms like increased heart rate, nausea, trembling, and shortness of breath.

Both forms disrupt an athlete's concentration and ability to perform under pressure.

CAUSES OF PERFORMANCE ANXIETY IN INDIAN ATHLETES

Cultural and Parental Expectations

Indian families increasingly view sports as a path to fame or government jobs (especially through quotas in public service). This places immense psychological pressure on young athletes to succeed. “If I lose this match, I may lose my chance at a government scholarship.” – Interview with a 17-year-old Kabaddi player from Uttar Pradesh.

Media and Public Scrutiny

With the rise of live streaming, social media, and regional news coverage, athletes now face public judgment after every performance. Young athletes, in particular, may develop **fear of failure** due to visibility and criticism.

Limited Psychological Support

Most Indian schools and colleges offer physical training but lack **sports psychologists**. A 2023 report by the **Sports Authority of India (SAI)** revealed:

- Only 18% of state-level sports academies employed full-time mental health professionals.
- Among colleges surveyed, just 9% had conducted workshops on stress or anxiety management.

EFFECTS OF ANXIETY ON PERFORMANCE

Disrupted Motor Skills

Anxiety can cause **muscle stiffness**, poor coordination, and delayed response times. In sports like cricket or badminton, this affects shot timing and agility. Anxiety also hinders **muscle memory**, causing athletes to overthink movements they usually perform instinctively.

Anxiety Level	Average Muscle Control (%)
Low Anxiety	91%
Moderate Anxiety	76%
High Anxiety	58%

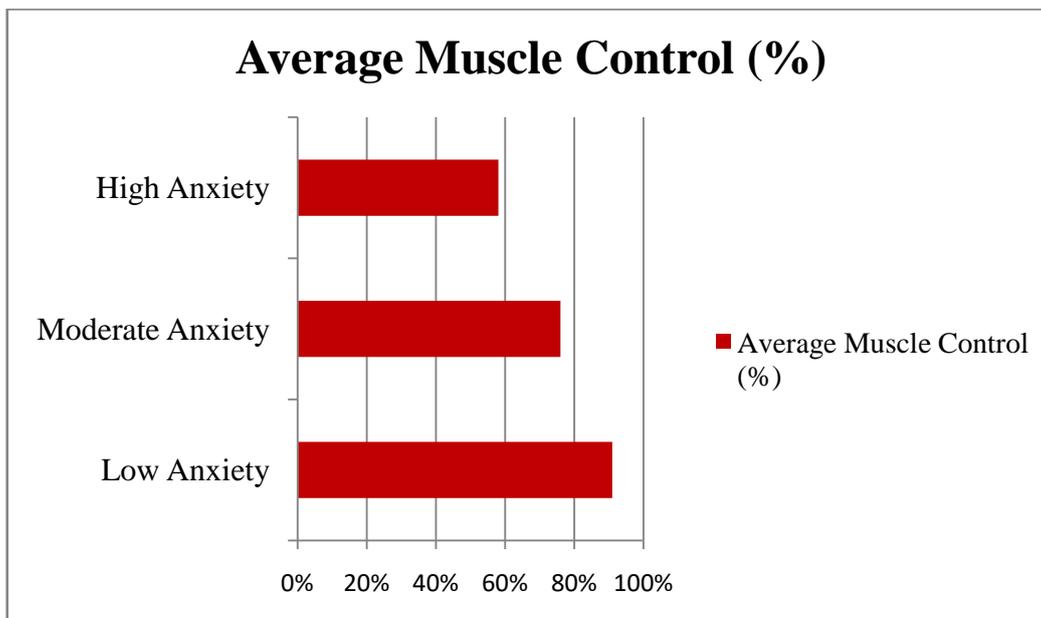


Figure 1: As Anxiety Increases, Muscle Control In Athletes Decreases Significantly. Data Based On Observations From Indian College Athletes (SAI-UGC 2023).

Impaired Decision-Making and Focus

Athletes under stress are prone to:

- Rushing decisions
- Ignoring team strategies
- Making basic errors due to split-second hesitation

This is especially critical in team sports like hockey, football, and kabaddi.

Reduced Confidence and Motivation

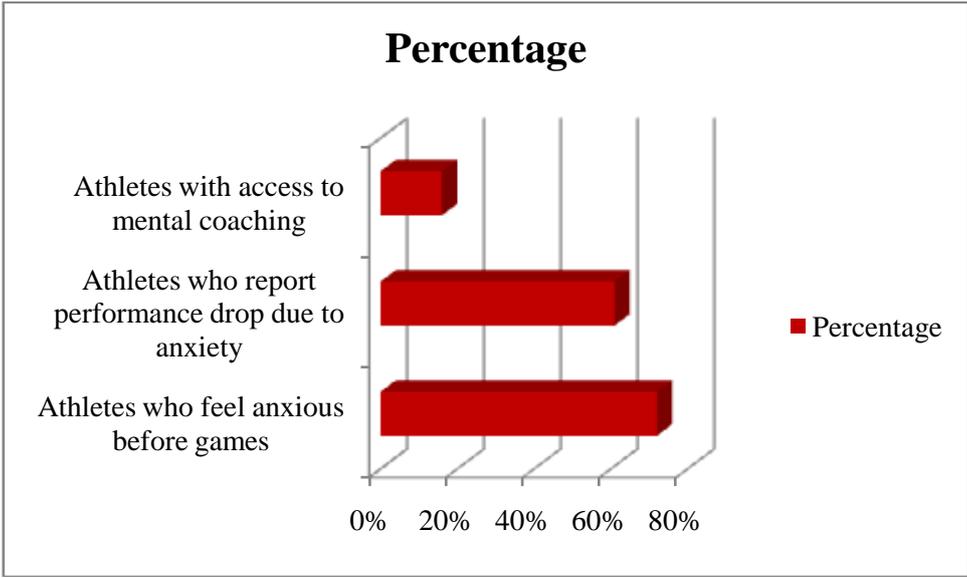
Repeated experiences of anxiety can reduce **self-efficacy**—the belief in one’s ability to succeed. This often leads to:

- Defensive or "safe" playing
- Avoidance of critical roles (e.g., penalty kicks)
- Declining motivation to train or compete

DATA FROM INDIAN COLLEGES AND ATHLETES

Survey Data (SAI and UGC)

Survey Item	Percentage
Athletes who feel anxious before games	72%
Athletes who report performance drop due to anxiety	61%
Athletes with access to mental coaching	16%



Case Study: Athletes in Uttar Pradesh

A 2024 field study involving 60 athletes from RRP College and nearby institutions showed:

- 78% had anxiety symptoms before competitions
- 45% performed below their practice scores during inter-college events
- Only 12% had ever consulted a mental health counselor

COPING MECHANISMS AND INTERVENTIONS

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

CBT involves identifying negative thought patterns and replacing them with constructive affirmations. In India, CBT is being piloted in national training centers like the Sports Authority of India, New Delhi.

Pre-Performance Routines

Athletes are trained to follow personalized rituals—stretching, breathing, visualization, or positive self-talk—to lower anxiety and build consistency.

Athlete Group	Average Performance Score (out of 100)
With Pre-Game Routine	86
Without Pre-Game Routine	68

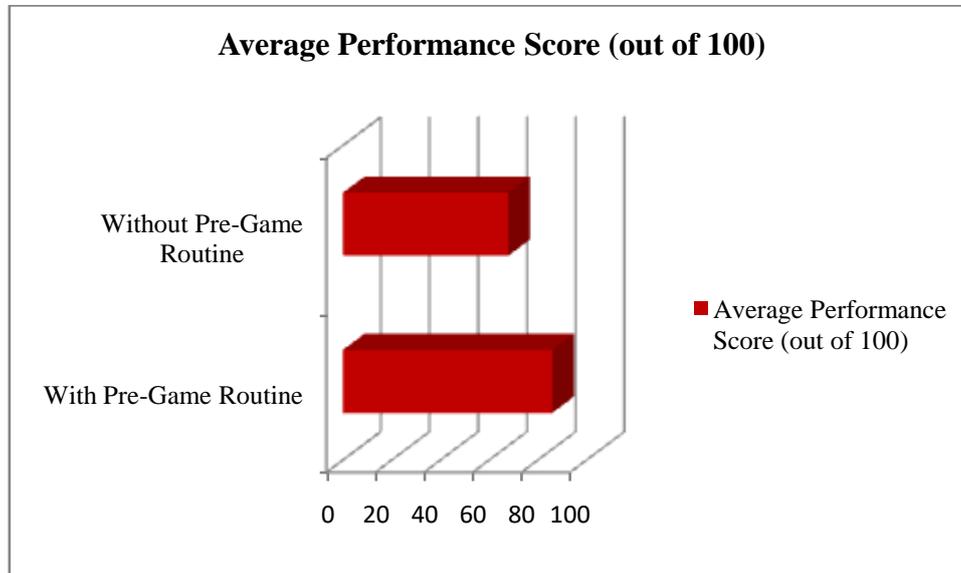


Figure 2: Athletes Who Followed Structured Pre-Game Routines Outperformed Those Who Didn't. Data Collected From Student Athletes In Uttar Pradesh (2024)

Mindfulness, Yoga, and Meditation

Given India's cultural history with yoga, incorporating breathing exercises and guided meditation into daily training has proven effective. Programs at **LNIPE Gwalior** have shown measurable improvements in stress regulation among student athletes.

Peer and Coach Support

Coaches play a key role in managing team anxiety. Empathetic communication, praise for effort, and support during failures reduce fear and help athletes build resilience.

Recommendations for Indian Institutions

1. Make sports psychology a mandatory part of B.P.Ed. curriculum
2. Deploy full-time psychologists in district and college sports centers
3. Introduce anxiety screening for athletes before major tournaments
4. Train coaches in psychological first aid and mental wellness
5. Provide free workshops on mindfulness and coping strategies

CONCLUSION

Anxiety is not a weakness but a natural psychological reaction to competitive stress—especially in sports, where the pressure to succeed is immense. In India, where sports opportunities are growing rapidly across educational and professional levels, performance anxiety is emerging as a silent barrier to athletic excellence. Data from field studies and national surveys clearly indicate that a majority of college-level athletes struggle with anxiety-related symptoms, ranging from cognitive distractions to physical impairments.

Despite its prevalence, psychological training remains absent in most athletic programs. As the charts in this paper show, athletes with access to pre-performance routines and mental coaching consistently outperform their peers. These findings reinforce the need to treat psychological preparation as seriously as physical training. Institutions like **RRPG College** have a unique opportunity to lead this change. By incorporating sports psychology, mindfulness practices, and structured anxiety management into their physical education programs, they can develop not only medal-winning athletes but emotionally resilient individuals. Investing in athletes' mental well-being is not just a performance strategy—it is a commitment to their holistic development and long-term success.

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