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Mental Preparedness of Athletes During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study on the Training of Thai National Team for the 19th Asian Games

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Abstract

This research aimed to study and establish the mental preparedness model of Thai athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic in preparation for the 19th Asian Games. This study employed a mixed methods approach, involving 409 participants (217 males and 192 females) selected through a lottery system, ensuring equitable representation across the 19 types of sports. Additionally, six participants were included for qualitative data gathering. The research designed a comprehensive questionnaire to collect data, which included the Sports Stress Management Skills in Thai Questionnaire, Questionnaire on Mental Readiness for Competition, 'Motivation to Participate in Sports Activities in Thai' Questionnaire, Self-Confidence Questionnaire, Mental Toughness Questionnaire in Thai, and the Mindfulness in Sports Questionnaire in Thai Version. Data was collected using a traditional questionnaire and an online questionnaire accessed via QR codes. Structural Equation Modeling was employed for data analysis. Qualitative data were gathered through interviews. The study's results revealed the development of a mental preparation model for Thai national team athletes during the COVID-19 outbreak. This model emphasizes the significance of mindfulness as a crucial factor directly influencing psychological readiness. Furthermore, mindfulness exerts an indirect influence through four intermediary variables: motivation, stress management skills, confidence, and mental toughness. Significantly, qualitative data highlighted adaptive mental resilience and mindfulness as key factors in fostering mental readiness among athletes, especially during challenging periods like the COVID-19 outbreak. These factors encompass effective stress management, balanced motivation, self-confidence, professional guidance, adaptive mindset, support systems, and long-term planning. This model integrates various elements of mental preparation, with mindfulness positioned as the central pillar.

Keywords: *Mental Preparedness, Mindfulness, COVID-19 Pandemic, Athletes, Asian Games.*

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019, commonly known as COVID-19, has led to a drastic shift in global social dynamics. The pandemic has profoundly impacted the world of sports, resulting in training disruptions and the cancellation of athletic competitions (Samuel et al., 2020). These changes have had significant psychological effects on athletes, exposing them to high emotional stress. Factors contributing to this stress include stringent quarantine measures (Taylor, 2019), uncertainty surrounding major events like the postponement of the Summer Olympics, and concerns over contractual status (Schinke et al., 2020; Lades et al., 2020). Additionally, many athletes have faced challenges in adapting their training routines due to the lack of appropriate equipment or space (Leguizamo et al., 2021). This situation has not only led to boredom for many confined at home but also increased the risk of psychological issues.

The current pandemic has posed both challenges and opportunities for sports psychologists, tasked with optimizing athletes' performance and well-being. Schinke et al. (2020) highlight that athletes are grappling with numerous challenges, including quarantine, social isolation, career interruptions, uncertainty in the selection

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process, and limited access to training facilities. These hurdles necessitate innovative approaches to leverage pandemic restrictions in favor of sporting success.

Athletes are confronting various stressors and anxiety sources due to the pandemic. Developing mental skills to enhance competition readiness is a critical objective of mental training, particularly in elite sports. Research by EI Moutaraji, Lotfi, & Talbi (2021) indicates that the coping strategies of elite athletes during the pandemic vary significantly based on the sport. Key factors include maintaining confidence and motivation, managing training difficulties under quarantine, and employing effective stress management techniques.

The study also reveals a significant correlation between coping strategies and competition level, particularly in goal setting and mental preparedness for developing mental toughness. The findings suggest a variance in self-confidence and self-control based on the type of sports training and competition level. Different control dimensions, including self-confidence (EI Moutaraji, Lotfi, & Talbi, 2021) and motivation to succeed (Matus, EMatus, & Molino, 2021), are crucial. Additionally, mindfulness as a coping strategy plays a pivotal role in managing challenges and stress (Antonova, Schlosser, Pandey, & Kumari, 2021).

The mental readiness of athletes, particularly in the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic, is a topic of paramount importance and curiosity for athletes, coaches, and sports psychologists. The pandemic has not only transformed the global sports landscape but has also brought unique stressors and uncertainties. This essay aims to explore the indicators of athletes' mental readiness during the COVID-19 situation, delving into the multifaceted aspects of psychological resilience, adaptability, and preparedness in the face of unprecedented challenges. This research aimed to investigate of athlete psychology in preparation for the 19th Asian Games. These aspects include stress management, mental readiness for competition, motivation in sports, self-confidence, mental toughness, and mindfulness in sports. Additionally, the study focused on the mental preparedness model of Thailand athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic for the 19th Asian Games.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is a mixed methods research.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE

Population

The study's population consists of 1,228 athletes currently training for the 19th Asian Games, spanning 40 different sports.

1) Quantitative Study

For the quantitative study, the sample group was selected as follows:

Sample Size Determination

The Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula calculated the sample size. This calculation was based on a population of 1,228 athletes and a margin of error set at 3 per cent (e = 0.03). The formula's application yielded a primary sample size.

Sample

409 participants from indoor sports and 314 from outdoor sports. The selection within each category (indoor and outdoor sports) was randomized through a lottery system, ensuring an equitable representation of the 19 types of sports within each category.

2) Qualitative Study

For the qualitative study, data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews. A total of six informants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria established by the researcher:

There were two informants from the Thai National Team Athletes.

Two informants were from the Thai National Team Coaches.

The Sports Psychologists for the Thai National Team comprised two informants.

All three groups were preparing for the 19th Asian Games and were expected by the Sport Authority of Thailand to have a likelihood of winning gold medals.

Research Tools

The researcher designed a comprehensive questionnaire to gather data from the sample group. This questionnaire is structured into several distinct parts:

1. General Information Questionnaire: Formulated based on a literature review, this section collects personal information such as gender, and the type of sport (categorized into outdoor and indoor sports).

2. the Sports Stress Management Skills in Thai Questionnaire by Pan-Uthai and Thienthong (2014), the original questionnaire comprised 28 questions across 7 dimensions. Post-analysis showed that three questions (items 5, 6, and 10) initially received low scores. However, these scores improved after the model was adjusted for consistency. The revised section consists of 25 items, spread across 7 domains, each containing 4 questions. These domains are: Coping with Adversity, Coachability, Concentration, Confidence and Achievement Motivation, Goal Setting and Mental Preparation, Peaking under Pressure, and Freedom from Worry. Responses are measured on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (almost never) to 4 (almost always). The questionnaire demonstrated a reliability score of 0.889. The model (after deleting cop11, cop3, and cop10) was $x^2 = 556.12$, *df* = 254, p = .001, CMIN/DF = 2.18, CFI = .910, TLI = .894, RMR = .039, RMSEA = .054 (90% CI: .048, .060), AIC = .698.12, ECVI = 1.71.

3. Questionnaire on Mental Readiness for Competition: Created by Patanamontri (2017), this questionnaire specifically targets Thai national team athletes. the original questionnaire comprised 20 questions across 4 dimensions. Post-analysis showed that six questions (items 1, 5, 9, 12, 13 and 14) initially received low scores. However, these scores improved after the model was adjusted for consistency. The revised section consists of 14 items. 4 dimensions include self-confidence, self-awareness and self-worth, and self-control. The response format is a 5-point scale. The questionnaire demonstrated a reliability score of 0.938. The model was $x^2 = 327.54$, *df* = 71, p = .001, CMIN/DF = 4.61, CFI = .912, TLI = .887, RMR = .034, RMSEA = .094 (90% CI: .084, .105), AIC = 395.53, ECVI = .972

4. The Motivation to Participate in Sports Activities in Thai Questionnaire, developed by Phithapornchaikul (2003), is a Thai questionnaire comprising 30 items that measure 8 dimensions. After analysis, it was noted that nine questions (items 1, 3, 12, 14, 15, 18, 22, 23, and 24) initially received low scores. These scores, however,

improved following adjustments made to the model for consistency. The revised section now consists of 21 items across 6 dimensions of motivation, including Achievement Motivation, Recognition, Teamwork, Fitness, Social Activities, Excitement and Fun, Expression, and Skills Development. The questionnaire has demonstrated an internal consistency reliability of 0.910. It employs a 5-point rating scale. The statistical fit of the model was as follows: $\chi^2 = 1814.87$, df = 377, p = .001, CMIN/DF = 4.81, CFI = .742, TLI = .701, RMR = .071, RMSEA = .097 with a 90% confidence interval of .092 to .101.

5. Self-Confidence Questionnaire: This questionnaire utilizes the Revised Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 in Thai version (CSAI-2R in Thai) to assess self-confidence, with a focus on situational anxiety. It contains 5 questions. The questionnaire has demonstrated an internal consistency reliability of 0.789. It employs a 5-point rating scale. The statistical fit of the model was as follows: $x^2 = 102.08$, *df* = 9, p = .001, CMIN/DF = 11.43, CFI = .860, TLI = .767, RMR = .056, RMSEA = .159 (90% CI: .132, .188)

6. Mental Toughness Questionnaire in Thai by Julavanichpong et al. (2010) This questionnaire comprises 36 items and 12 sub-scales, including Self-Efficacy, Mental Self-Concept, Potential, Perseverance, Task Focus, Task Familiarity, Personal Bests, Task Value, Goal Commitment, Positive comparisons, and Stress Minimization. After analysis, it was observed that the revised short version of the section consists of 12 items across a single dimension, designed to predict mental toughness in Thai athletes. The questionnaire has demonstrated a high internal consistency reliability of 0.971 and employs an 8-point rating scale. The statistical fit of the model was as follows: $\chi^2 = 1929.32$, df = 528, p = .001, CMIN/DF = 3.65, CFI = .870, TLI = .845, RMR = .073, and RMSEA = .081 with a 90% confidence interval of .077 to .085. Additional metrics include AIC = 2205.32 and ECVI = 5.41.

7. Mindfulness in Sports Questionnaire in Thai Version, developed by Singnoy et al. (2020), is designed to assess mindfulness in sports. It has demonstrated a reliability of 0.66. The scale comprises 15 questions, divided into three components: Awareness, Non-judgment, and Refocusing. These are evaluated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (very often). The statistical fit of the model is as follows: $\chi^2 = 306.82$, df = 87, p = .001, CMIN/DF = 3.52, CFI = .942, TLI = .930, RMR = .093, and RMSEA = .079, with a 90% confidence interval of .069 to .088. Additional metrics include AIC = 372.82 and ECVI = .916.

Data Collection

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research methodologies in a parallel database design, as suggested by Edmonds and Kennedy (2017). Ethical approval for this research (IRB1-007/2566) was received from Burapha University.

Quantitative Data Collection

1.1 Data Collection via Questionnaires: Data was gathered from 628 individuals using questionnaires distributed through sports association teams. The questionnaires were also sent directly to the athletes in QR code format for easy access and response. However, the data come back to research remains 409 data.

1.2 Data Verification: Upon collection, only filled questionnaires were selected for data accuracy verification. Data codes were set and checked to ensure compliance with the preliminary analysis agreement, using computer software packages in readiness for further data analysis.

Qualitative Data Collection

2.1 Semi-structured Interviews: The qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews, which allowed for open-ended questions and detailed explanations from informants. During these interviews, a voice recorder was utilized to capture responses accurately.

2.2 Data Analysis: Post-interview, the recordings were transcribed. The analysis involved identifying data characteristics and organizing them into subtopics aligned with the research questions. The findings were interpreted based on the emergent themes in the text. Finally, the compiled information was systematically presented in an essay format, aligned with the research objectives.

Synthesis Process

1. Synthesis of Quantitative and Qualitative Data: This step involves comprehensively synthesizing quantitative and qualitative data collected from the research. The aim is to amalgamate and summaries the findings, facilitating a comparison of similarities and differences observed in the outcomes of both research methods.

2. Comparison of Similarities and Differences: In this phase, the data derived from quantitative and qualitative research are juxtaposed to identify parallels and disparities. This comparison seeks to discern overlapping information and divergent trends, providing insights into the consistency and directionality of the data.

3. Summary and Discussion of Research Findings: The final step is a detailed summary and discussion of the research results, focusing on interpreting the findings in light of the research hypotheses. This stage involves a meticulous discussion of the outcomes, analyzing and explaining each result in relation to the hypothesized theories. The discussion will assess whether the findings are consistent with or diverge from the initial assumptions and will incorporate relevant theoretical frameworks and existing research to either support or refute the findings.

Data Analysis

This research employed a comprehensive statistical analysis program for data evaluation. The analysis approach varied between quantitative and qualitative research methods as follows:

Quantitative Data Analysis

1. Descriptive Statistics: This included using frequency distributions, averages, percentages, and standard deviations to describe and summaries the data.

2. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM): To evaluate the consistency of the proposed model with the empirical data, SEM was utilized. Specific criteria were employed to assess the model's fit and coherence with the collected data.

Qualitative Data Analysis

1. Interview transcription and analysis: The qualitative data, primarily derived from interviews, was meticulously transcribed. Following transcription, a detailed analysis was conducted to identify critical characteristics of the data. This involved categorizing the data into relevant subtopics aligned with the research questions.

2. Interpretation and presentation: The essence of the data was interpreted about the nature of the text. This interpretation involved writing detailed descriptions that accurately reflect the meanings and themes emerging from the data. Finally, all the analyzed information was cohesively presented in an essay format, directly addressing the research objectives.

RESULT

Part 1: General Information About the Sample and Related Variables.

Sample Characteristics

The sample group represented the Thai national team preparing for the 2018 Asian Games, consisting of 409 athletes (217 males and 192 females). This group included 219 athletes from individual sports such as skating, weightlifting, sailing, fencing, golf, e-sports, taekwondo, archery, tennis, skeet shooting, athletics, cycling, wrestling, and swimming. Additionally, 190 athletes from team sports were included, representing cricket, sepak takraw, women's football, dragon boat, volleyball, rowing, and rugby. The average age of the athletes was 19 years.

The relationship between the variables used in this study was consistent with empirical data, aiding in the investigation of athletes' mental readiness for sports competitions. Furthermore, there was a significant positive correlation at the 0. 01level between these variables. Notably, the highest correlation was observed with mental toughness, registering at 0.67. (shown in Table 2).

Table 2. The correlation coefficient among the latent variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
Mindfulness in sport	1					
2. Motivation in sport	.42**	1				
3. Self-confident	.04	.22**	1			
4. Coping strategy in sport	.46**	.51**	.25**	1		
5. Mental toughness in sport	.49**	.57**	.34**	.56**	1	
6. Mental readiness in sport	.45**	.54**	.37**	.60**	.67**	1

Note: **p< .01.

Variables including sports mindfulness, motivation, self-confidence, sports stress management skills, mental toughness, and mental readiness for sports competition are present for athletes. These variables demonstrate a pattern of consistent relationships among them.

Part 2: Testing the relationship of causal factors that affect athletes' mental readiness for sports competitions, particularly focusing on the mindset of athletes during sports competitions under the COVID- 19outbreak.

1) This research investigates the mental preparation model for mental readiness of athletes during the COVID-19 outbreak.

The global health crisis has dramatically transformed the landscape of sports, introducing new challenges in training and mental conditioning for Thai national team athletes participating in sports competitions amidst the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The first study aimed to assess the extent of influence on the psychological preparation of athletes gearing up for the Asian Games. Subsequently, the variable exerting the most significant influence was identified as the primary variable impacting other variables. Follow in Figure 1.

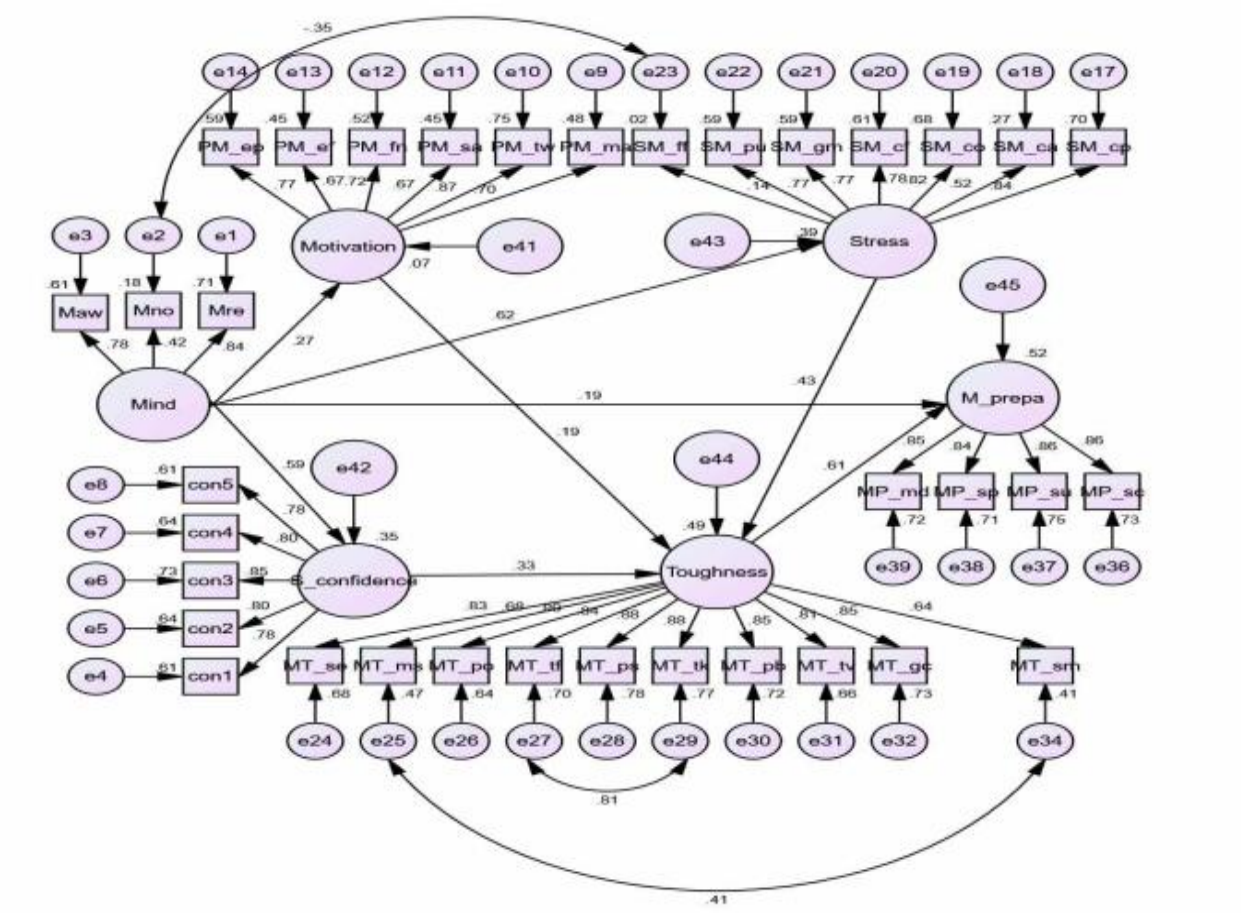

Figure 1. Shows the mental preparation model for the mental readiness of athletes during the COVID-19 outbreak.

The study's results revealed that after adjustment, the model yielded the following values: $\chi^2 = 1667.55$, df = 549, p = .001, Q = 3.03, RMR = .066, CFI = .897, TLI = .888, RMSEA = . 071(90% CI: .067, .075), AIC = 1829.55, and ECVI = 4.495.

In summary, a mental preparation model was developed for Thai national team athletes during the COVID- 19 outbreak. This model underscores the importance of mindfulness as a key factor directly affecting psychological readiness. Additionally, mindfulness exerts an indirect influence through four intermediary variables: motivation, stress management skills, confidence, and mental toughness. Notably, the most significant pathway in this model was the indirect influence of sports mindfulness through stress management skills, with a direct influence size of 0.62, and mental toughness, with a direct influence size of 0.43. This, in turn, directly impacts overall mental readiness, with an influence size of 0.61.

2) Qualitative data regarding the mental preparation model for mental readiness of athletes during the COVID-19 outbreak.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, a significant shift has occurred in how athletes, coaches, and sports psychologists prepare mentally for sport. Adaptive Mental Resilience and Mindfulness were 7 key themes that encompass several crucial elements:

1. Stress Management and Emotional Regulation: Athletes experience varying degrees of stress, with a notable increase during competitions. Effective stress management and emotional regulation, often achieved through techniques like mindfulness, meditation, and breathing control, are essential. This helps in reducing the intensity of emotional fluctuations and maintaining focus.

"Athletes often experience stress as a natural part of competition, which can have negative effects." (1st Sport Psychologist)

"Some athletes struggle to control their stress, which impacts their readiness and mental strength." (1st Sport Psychologist)

2. Balance of Motivation: While extrinsic factors like prize money drive many athletes, there's a need to cultivate intrinsic motivation, focusing on personal performance and growth. This balance helps in managing expectations and pressures related to competition outcomes.

"There is a tendency towards extrinsic motivation, such as prize money, rather than intrinsic motivation." (1st Sport Psychologist)

3. Self-Confidence and Control: Confidence levels vary among athletes, often influenced by the perceived strength of opponents and pressure situations. Developing self-confidence and self-control, especially in high-pressure scenarios, is vital. Athletes with better mental fitness and preparation, including veterans, generally exhibit stronger self-management skills.

"Many athletes possess self-confidence, but a small percentage experience a decrease in confidence when facing a seemingly superior opponent." (1st Sport Psychologist)

"Athletes with good self-control are more capable of enduring challenging situations and handling the pressure of competition effectively." (2nd Coach)

4. Consultation with Sports Psychologists: Regular interactions with sports psychologists enhance athletes' awareness of their mental states and provide them with tools to manage stress and expectations. However, there's a noted variance in athletes' willingness to engage fully in this aspect of training.

"Athletes who regularly meet with a sports psychologist tend to be more aware of their stress levels..." (2nd Sport Psychologist)

5. Mindset Adaptation and Mental Preparation: Athletes who actively engage in mental training and adapt their mindset to the challenges of the competition, including unpredictable scenarios like the COVID-19 pandemic, show better mental readiness. This involves accepting things beyond one's control, focusing on actionable aspects, and being present in the competition.

"During the competition, I felt that I needed to let my feelings be as they were and accept them..." (1st Athlete)

"However, athletes who are trained in competition mindfulness tend to have a better understanding of the competitive environment..." (2nd Sport Psychologist)

6. Autonomy and External Support: Athletes often train independently, but the support from coaches and sports psychologists, especially during uncertain times like quarantines, is crucial in discovering their highest potential and adapting their mental approach.

"Most athletes train independently, but sometimes they rely on sports psychologists..." (1st Coach)

"Sometimes, consulting with a sports psychologist is necessary to find solutions to my own thoughts." (1st Athlete)

7. Long-Term Preparation and Planning: Coaches emphasize the importance of long-term preparation and planning, starting with practicing mindfulness from the beginning of training sessions. This holistic approach ensures athletes are not only physically but also mentally prepared for competitions.

"Preparing athletes to be mentally ready from the start of their training involves emphasising the importance of managing stress and stiffness." (1st Coach)

Moreover, the critical theme of teleconferencing in the context of mental preparation and support for athletes:

1. Necessity for Continued Support

"Most of this training and monitoring is conducted remotely, a necessity due to travel difficulties." (1st Sport Psychologist)

2. Facilitating Access to Psychological Support. This quote suggests that regular meetings, likely remote sessions, help with stress awareness.

"Athletes who regularly meet with a sports psychologist tend to be more aware of their stress levels..." (2nd Sport Psychologist)

3. Effectiveness and Engagement Variability. This could imply challenges in engagement, possibly exacerbated in a remote setting.

"However, athletes may show reluctance in engaging with mental training." (1st Sport Psychologist)

4. Adaptation to Remote Interaction. The reference to training during quarantine periods implies a shift to remote methods like teleconferencing

"Most athletes train independently, but sometimes they rely on sports psychologists, especially during quarantine periods when competition schedules are uncertain or frequently postponed." (1st Coach)

These quotes underline the significance of teleconferencing in maintaining the mental health and preparation of athletes, especially under the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. They also hint at the challenges and adaptations required for effective remote communication between athletes, coaches, and sports psychologists. In summary, adaptive mental resilience and mindfulness, combining effective stress management, motivational balance, self-confidence, professional guidance, mindset adaptation, support systems, and long-term planning, emerge as the key factor for mental readiness among athletes, especially during challenging periods like the COVID- 19 outbreak

Part 2: The mix of the mental preparation model for the mental readiness of athletes during the COVID-19 outbreak.

The mixed data outlines a comprehensive mental preparation model developed for Thai national team athletes during the COVID-19 outbreak. This model emphasises the importance of mindfulness as a crucial factor in enhancing athletes' psychological readiness. It highlights how mindfulness directly influences psychological readiness and indirectly affects it through four intermediary variables: motivation, stress management skills, confidence, and mental toughness.

Specifically, the model indicates that the most significant pathway involves the indirect influence of sports mindfulness through stress management skills (with a direct influence size of 0.62) and mental toughness (with a direct influence size of 0.43). These pathways significantly impact the overall mental readiness of athletes, as indicated by a direct influence size of 0.61.

In response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, athletes, coaches, and sports psychologists have adapted their approaches to maintain mental resilience and competitive edge. Athletes have increased their focus on individual mental training techniques such as visualisation, meditation, and mindfulness. These techniques are crucial for maintaining focus, motivation, and mental well-being, especially under the stress of the pandemic. Regular virtual meetings with coaches and psychologists have become a norm for discussing goals, tracking progress, and addressing mental health concerns.

Coaches have developed remote training programs allowing athletes to continue their physical and mental training from home. Emphasis on emotional support and regular communication helps acknowledge and address the unique challenges athletes face during the pandemic. Coaches also encourage cognitive flexibility in training plans and focus on long-term goals to help athletes maintain motivation and a sense of purpose.

Sports psychologists play a critical role by providing tele-counseling, offering mental health support, and teaching resilience, mindfulness, and relaxation techniques. They assist athletes in adjusting their mindsets to adapt to changing circumstances, such as potential cancellations or postponements of games, thereby reducing the impact of uncertainty.

Overall, this integrated approach during the pandemic involves collaboration among athletes, coaches, and sports psychologists. It focuses on remote/online coaching, mindset adjustments, and maintaining long-term goals. Emphasizing mental flexibility, mindfulness, meditation, and visualization, this approach ensures that athletes stay mentally sharp and resilient. Coaches focus mainly on providing emotional support, while sports psychologists take the lead in comprehensive mental training. This holistic approach ensures that athletes are not only prepared physically but also mentally equipped to handle the challenges posed by the pandemic, thereby enhancing their overall performance and mental readiness for competitions.

This model integrates the various elements of mental preparation, emphasizing mindfulness as the central pillar. It acknowledges the multi-dimensional nature of mental readiness, involving motivation, stress management, confidence, and mental toughness. The model also recognizes the critical role of teleconferencing during the pandemic, facilitating continuous support and adaptation in training and psychological counseling. This holistic approach aims to equip Thai national team athletes with the mental resilience and skills necessary to navigate the unique challenges posed by the COVID-19 outbreak and excel in their sporting endeavors.

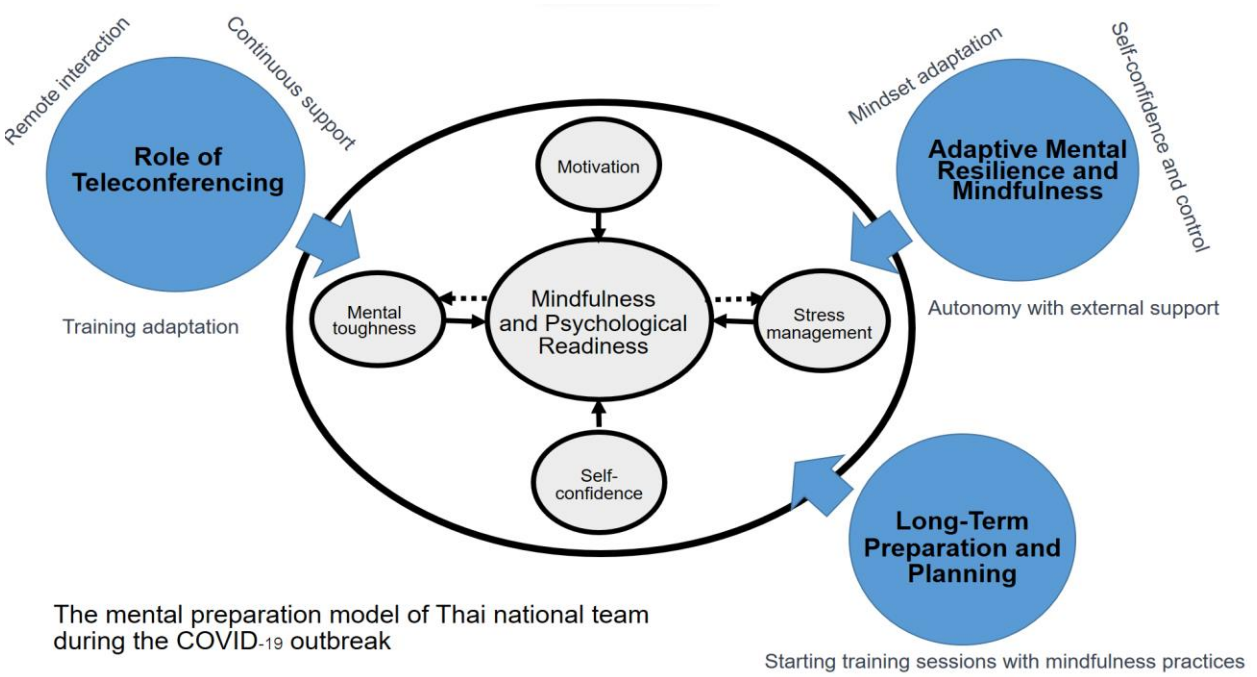

Figure 3. The mental preparedness of athletes' model for sporting events during the COVID-19 pandemic.

DISCUSSION

A study on the mental preparation model for Thai national team athletes during the COVID-19 outbreak adopts a mixed-method research approach in parallel (Parallel-Database Design). This approach consists of quantitative (Quantitative Research) and qualitative (Qualitative Research) methods, analyzing and synthesizing data to develop a collaborative and adaptive model. This model addresses challenges arising from the pandemic and sets a precedent for future crisis management in sports psychology.

The current pandemic poses challenges and opportunities for sports psychologists in helping athletes optimize their performance and enhance overall well-being. A study by Schinke and colleagues (2020) revealed that athletes are facing numerous challenges during this period, including quarantine, social isolation, career interruption, uncertainty in the selection process, limited access to training facilities, and compliance with pandemic-related restrictions, all of which pose significant obstacles to their sporting success.

As noted by Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton (2002), mentally prepared athletes display confidence in their skills and abilities, effectively handling stress and pressure. Weinberg and Gould (2015) emphasise that such athletes are better equipped to maintain focus and determination. Moran (2004) highlights the importance of focusing on tasks without being distracted by external factors. Gould, Dieffenbach, and Moffett (2002) point out that adaptability to situations and the ability to change strategies during competition demonstrate mental readiness. Orlick (2016) suggests that mentally prepared athletes tend to view competition as an opportunity to showcase their potential and learn and to recover after mistakes. Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) note that the ability to recover from mistakes or failures during competition indicates mental toughness, preventing small mistakes from impeding performance. These crucial factors enable athletes to perform at their highest level in competitive environments.

This study highlights the increasing importance of mindfulness in sports psychology, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mindfulness equips athletes with critical tools for stress management, focus, and adaptability, contributing to enhanced performance and well-being. It not only aids in managing pressure but

also indirectly boosts motivation, confidence, and mental resilience. The research underscores the effectiveness of mindfulness in athlete preparation, as demonstrated in past studies (Antonova et al., 2021; Yoo et al., 2020; Abdul, Rafeeque, and Sultana, 2016; Amy Gooding and Frank Gardner, 2009; and Hossein Samadi, 2019). Integrating mindfulness with training is shown to be essential for developing the mental strength and flexibility vital for success in competitive sports.

Nowadays, sports mindfulness is not just an optional skill but plays a pivotal role as the foundation upon which athletes build the physical and mental abilities required for excellence in sports. It helps regulate the autonomic nervous system, which controls functions such as heart rate (Sun, Hu, Pan, Liu & Huang, 2019) and the body's fight-or-flight response in sports. Athletes need precise control over this system to prevent it from inadvertently affecting their bodily functions. Studies by Kabat-Zinn (1994), Schmidt and Kupper (2012), and Ulmer, Stetson, and Salmon (2010) suggest that mindfulness allows athletes to be introspective without judging experiences as positive or negative. This management of the autonomic nervous system aids in stress management, anxiety reduction, and the minimization of panic, leading to the filtering out of distracting information (Good et al., 2016). This results in higher quality decision-making (Li et al., 2022) in the rapidly changing sports environment. Maintaining focus during a game is crucial for making split-second decisions with calmness and precision.

Moreover, mindfulness promotes stress management (Furrer, Moen & Firing, 2015), keeping athletes in the present moment. The passion and intrinsic motivation that mindfulness fosters enable athletes to pay attention to and notice what is happening in the moment, observing things with a fully accepting attitude (Amemiya & Sakairi, 2019). Additionally, increased confidence in sports helps prevent negative thoughts and worries from clouding athletes' self-belief (Oguntuase & Sun, 2022). Athletes who practice mindfulness exhibit higher confidence in their abilities, passion, and motivation for training. They demonstrate flexibility, self-confidence, and the ability to control emotions well, even in high-pressure situations. This development of mental strength enables athletes to remain resolute and calm in the face of adversity, helping them perform at their best when it matters most.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the shift to social distancing and the closure of training facilities has led athletes to rely heavily on virtual communication tools. This period emphasizes individual mental training, including techniques like visualization and meditation, to help athletes maintain focus and motivation amid disrupted schedules. Virtual tools enable regular interaction with coaches and psychologists, crucial for monitoring athletes' physical, skill, and mental development. The pandemic has necessitated adaptability in training methods, with athletes often engaging in bodyweight exercises and cardiovascular training due to restricted access to facilities. Tjønndal's (2020) study looked at the use of digital tools during the COVID-19 lockdown, including online training strategies, both live-streamed and pre-recorded videos using digital platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. The pandemic and social lockdowns have brought about significant changes and adaptations for athletes, coaches, and sports clubs. These virtual tools have been essential in maintaining community, reducing isolation, and ensuring continuous training and psychological support during this challenging time. Social distancing measures and competition cancellations have made the use of virtual communication tools a vital lifeline for athletes, helping them stay interconnected and maintain a competitive advantage.

Additionally, athletes have needed to be very disciplined in their training because there were many training gaps during this period. A study by Washif et al., (2022) found that during the COVID-19 lockdown, athletes utilized long-term endurance training (39%), interval training (35%), weight lifting (33%), plyometrics (30%), and remote

coaching. Furthermore, most athletes focused on maintaining or improving their fitness and general health while training alone. Common training activities during lockdown included bodyweight exercises and cardiovascular training, likely due to their accessibility. Long-distance training also posed challenges to motivation, especially with the absence of competition, which could lead to psychological problems. Such problems may become more severe due to the lack of "social comforts" and encouragement (Edwards, Dutton-Challis, Cottrell, et al., 2018) or the absence of interaction with team members (Jagim, Luedke, Fitzpatrick, et al., 2020).

The conclusion, the ongoing pandemic presents sports psychologists with a complex picture to navigate. Athletes must use a variety of coping strategies. This is influenced by the sport's nature and the competition level. To enhance mental readiness and flexibility Among these strategies, Mindfulness-based approaches have shown efficacy in helping athletes face and manage the challenges and stress caused by the pandemic. As the sports world continues to evolve in response to the pandemic, Sports psychologists, therefore, need to adapt training and support to meet the diverse needs of athletes in different disciplines and levels of competition.

The research advocates for incorporating mindfulness training into the routines of athletes from all disciplines, emphasizing its significant role in mental preparation, particularly under the heightened stress of the COVID-19 pandemic. Enhancing concentration, calmness, and stress management, mindfulness, alongside emotional support and safe spaces for athletes, is crucial for psychological readiness. The study also recommends comprehensive remote online training programs to sustain physical and mental preparedness during limited face-to-face training, ensuring continuous development and competitiveness with adequate resources for effective home training

Further research suggestions include studying the long-term effects of mindfulness training on athletes' performance, mental flexibility, and overall well-being to ascertain if regular mindfulness practices yield enduring benefits.

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