

The Psychology of Sports: Mindset and Performance

COMPREHENSION • VOCABULARY • DISCUSSION

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Reading Passage

Read the passage carefully. Each paragraph is labelled with a letter for easy reference.

A

Athletes often say that competitions are won “between the ears.” While physical training builds muscle, sports psychologists argue that mental habits decide whether those muscles are used effectively under pressure. At B2 level, it is helpful to think of an athlete’s mind as a toolbox that can be organised, sharpened, or even cluttered. Three well-researched tools—goal setting, self-talk, and emotional regulation—illustrate how mindset shapes performance from the local running track to the Olympic arena. Clear but flexible goals come first. Most coaches encourage their players to set outcome goals such as winning a match. However, outcome goals depend on opponents, referees, and even weather, so they can easily frustrate athletes when things go wrong. Modern sports psychology therefore adds process goals—small, controllable targets like keeping a steady breathing rhythm or focusing on foot placement. Because the athlete controls these details, process goals promote a sense of agency, which, research shows, lowers pre-game anxiety. Importantly, goals work best when they are written down, regularly reviewed, and adjusted after each training session. This flexible approach prevents the common trap of chasing a dream that no longer matches reality, such as returning from injury too quickly or refusing to adapt tactics against a stronger opponent. The second mental tool is self-talk—the running commentary in every competitor’s head. Positive self-talk is not blind optimism; rather, it is a set of realistic statements that guide attention. Sprinters, for instance, might repeat “push the blocks” to remember their powerful start, while basketball players could whisper “follow through” to improve shooting accuracy. Studies indicate that athletes who practise targeted self-talk increase both confidence and technical consistency. The effect is strongest when the phrases are brief, specific, and linked to muscle memory. Conversely, negative self-talk (“I always choke”) narrows focus to mistakes and magnifies pressure. During high-stakes moments, the brain’s working memory is already busy; filling it with doubts is like loading extra weight onto a runner’s back. Third, emotional regulation acts as the thermostat of performance. Pressure triggers the body’s fight-or-flight response: heart rate climbs, breathing quickens, and muscles tighten. While some arousal sharpens reflexes, too much leads to rushed decisions and sloppy technique. Elite performers therefore learn to recognise early signals of over-arousal and apply calming or energising strategies as needed. Breath-control exercises, for example, reduce cortisol levels within minutes, while listening to upbeat music can lift motivation during long tournaments. Crucially, regulation is not about suppressing feelings; it is about directing their energy. Tennis champion Naomi Osaka, who openly discusses mental health, sometimes takes brief pauses to reset her emotions, proving that even short routines can restore clarity. Although the three tools are powerful individually, their combined effect is greater. Imagine a marathon runner who sets a process goal of maintaining a 180-step-per-minute cadence, repeats “light and quick” every kilometre, and lowers her shoulders whenever tension builds. Each element supports the others: the goal provides direction, the self-talk reinforces technique, and the relaxation cue prevents energy waste. By integrating mental skills into daily practice rather than saving them for race day, athletes create automatic responses that withstand fatigue. This integration aligns with the concept of flow—a state where action and awareness merge, leading to peak performance and, frequently, personal best times. Mindset also influences how performers handle failure. Psychologist Carol Dweck distinguishes between a fixed mindset, which views talent as unchangeable, and a growth mindset, which treats setbacks as opportunities to learn. Athletes

with a growth mindset analyse losses to identify controllable factors—sleep, nutrition, or pacing—rather than blaming bad luck. Over time, this attitude builds resilience; such athletes bounce back faster, experience fewer slumps, and remain motivated throughout long seasons. Teams that adopt growth-oriented language in locker rooms likewise report stronger cohesion, because players support experimentation instead of fearing criticism. Finally, it is worth noting that mindset does not replace physical preparation; it complements it. No amount of self-talk can turn a casual cyclist into a Tour de France contender overnight. However, mental training can ensure that physical abilities are expressed fully when it counts most. Coaches therefore schedule regular “pressure drills” that simulate competition noise, strict time limits, or unpredictable refereeing calls. These drills teach athletes to apply their mental tools automatically, so that, on game day, focus remains on performance rather than on nerves. In short, successful athletes treat the mind as seriously as the body. By setting flexible goals, directing inner dialogue, and regulating emotions, they create a psychological environment where skill can flourish. Whether you are a weekend footballer or a future gold medallist, investing time in mindset training may be the decisive move that pushes you from participation to podium.

Vocabulary Glossary

Key words and phrases from the passage. Study them before attempting the exercise below.

WORD / PHRASE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE SENTENCE
toolbox	a collection of skills or methods you can use to do something well	<i>A good teacher has a large toolbox of ways to help students learn.</i>
agency	the feeling of being in control of what you do and how you do it	<i>Having a choice gives people a sense of agency in their lives.</i>
arousal	a state of being alert and ready to react, often with energy	<i>Before a race, athletes feel a lot of arousal and excitement.</i>
cadence	the rhythm or speed of a repeated action, like steps or sounds	<i>The cadence of the music helped the dancer move in time.</i>
resilience	the ability to quickly become strong, healthy, or successful again after something bad happens	<i>Her resilience helped her recover from the injury and play again.</i>
referee	a person who makes sure that players follow the rules in a sports game	<i>The referee blew the whistle to stop the game.</i>
slumps	times when performance or interest is much lower than usual	<i>The team had a few slumps during the season but finished strong.</i>
cohesion	a situation where people or things are connected and work well together	<i>The team's cohesion was key to winning the championship.</i>

Vocabulary Exercise — Fill in the Blank

Use one word or phrase from the glossary above to complete each sentence. Each item is used only once. Answers are on the final page.

1. A good leader needs a strong _____ to handle unexpected challenges.
2. Feeling a sense of _____ can help students become more confident in their studies.
3. The speaker's _____ increased as she approached the stage to give her talk.
4. The runner focused on her _____ to maintain a steady pace throughout the race.
5. After a loss, the team's _____ allowed them to return stronger in the next game.
6. The _____ made a tough call that changed the outcome of the match.

Comprehension Questions

These questions are different from the online practice test. Choose the best answer (A, B, C, or D). Answers and explanations are on the final page.

Question 1

What does the passage suggest is the role of process goals in sports performance?

- A. They help athletes avoid frustration by focusing on controllable actions.
- B. They guarantee athletes will win against stronger opponents.
- C. They replace the need for physical training entirely.
- D. They make athletes more dependent on their coaches.

Question 2

Why is positive self-talk described as beneficial for athletes?

- A. It guarantees victory in competitions.
- B. It helps athletes focus on relevant actions.
- C. It allows athletes to ignore their mistakes.
- D. It encourages athletes to compete without any pressure.

Question 3

How does the passage describe the effect of emotional regulation on sports performance?

- A. It eliminates all emotional responses during a game.
- B. It suppresses negative emotions only.
- C. It balances emotions to improve decision-making.
- D. It amplifies emotions for better energy.

Question 4

What is the significance of 'pressure drills' in training according to the passage?

- A. They replace regular practice sessions.
- B. They ensure athletes perform well without mental tools.
- C. They help athletes practice mental tools under realistic conditions.
- D. They focus only on improving physical strength.

Question 5

What does the passage imply about the relationship between mindset and physical training?

- A. Mindset completely replaces the need for physical training.
- B. Mindset and physical training are unrelated.
- C. Mindset enhances the effectiveness of physical training.
- D. Physical training is more important than mindset.

Discussion & Writing Prompts

Each prompt references a specific detail from the passage above. Use for classroom discussion or a short written response (150–200 words).

1. Paragraph 2 mentions process goals such as focusing on foot placement. What specific process goals could you set in your own life to improve performance in a hobby or skill?

2. In paragraph 4, emotional regulation techniques like breath-control exercises are discussed. How do you think such techniques could be applied outside of sports, such as in stressful work situations?

3. According to paragraph 5, teams with a growth mindset report stronger cohesion. Can you think of examples where a growth mindset has improved teamwork in your experience or studies?

Answer Key

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Q1 A

Q2 B

Q3 C

Q4 C

Q5 C

VOCABULARY EXERCISE

FIB1 toolbox

FIB2 agency

FIB3 arousal

FIB4 cadence

FIB5 resilience

FIB6 referee

Comprehension Question Explanations

Why the correct answer is right — and why each wrong option is incorrect.

1. What does the passage suggest is the role of process goals in sports performance?

✓ A — They help athletes avoid frustration by focusing on controllable actions.

Process goals focus on small, controllable actions which help to lower anxiety (paragraph 2).

✗ B — They guarantee athletes will win against stronger opponents.

Process goals do not guarantee wins; they help manage athlete focus.

✗ C — They replace the need for physical training entirely.

The passage states mindset complements physical preparation, not replaces it.

✗ D — They make athletes more dependent on their coaches.

Process goals give athletes a sense of agency, not dependency.

2. Why is positive self-talk described as beneficial for athletes?

✓ B — It helps athletes focus on relevant actions.

Positive self-talk guides attention to important actions, enhancing focus (paragraph 3).

✗ A — It guarantees victory in competitions.

Self-talk aids focus but does not guarantee victory.

✗ C — It allows athletes to ignore their mistakes.

Positive self-talk does not ignore mistakes but focuses on improvement.

✗ D — It encourages athletes to compete without any pressure.

It reduces pressure but does not eliminate it completely.

3. How does the passage describe the effect of emotional regulation on sports performance?

✓ C — It balances emotions to improve decision-making.

Emotional regulation directs emotions to maintain performance quality (paragraph 4).

✗ A — It eliminates all emotional responses during a game.

Regulation manages emotions, not eliminates them.

✗ B — It suppresses negative emotions only.

It is about directing, not suppressing emotions.

✗ D — It amplifies emotions for better energy.

It balances rather than amplifies emotions.

4. What is the significance of 'pressure drills' in training according to the passage?

✓ C — They help athletes practice mental tools under realistic conditions.

Pressure drills simulate real conditions to ensure athletes apply mental tools effectively (paragraph 6).

✗ A — They replace regular practice sessions.

Pressure drills complement regular practice, not replace it.

✗ B — They ensure athletes perform well without mental tools.

They help apply mental tools, not perform without them.

✗ D — They focus only on improving physical strength.

The focus is on mental readiness, not just physical strength.

5. What does the passage imply about the relationship between mindset and physical training?

✓ C — Mindset enhances the effectiveness of physical training.

Mindset complements physical training, enhancing performance (paragraph 6).

✗ A — Mindset completely replaces the need for physical training.

Mindset complements but does not replace physical training.

✗ B — Mindset and physical training are unrelated.

The passage highlights their interrelation, not separation.

✗ D — Physical training is more important than mindset.

Both are important; mindset helps physical abilities shine.

MORE B2 LEVEL READING PRACTICE

Letters Refugee Camp Family Story Hope — <https://www.esl-tests.com/reading/b2/letters-refugee-camp-family-story-hope>

Global Health Preparedness Lessons Recent Pandemics — <https://www.esl-tests.com/reading/b2/global-health-preparedness-lessons-recent-pandemics>

Climate Migration Communities Move — <https://www.esl-tests.com/reading/b2/climate-migration-communities-move>