

Between Performance and Pain: An Exploration on Athletes' Training for Competitive Sports

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ABSTRACT

Training performance of athletes is low. I explored athletes' training as shaped by interacting biological, psychological, and social factors. I used descriptive qualitative research design, and selected eight student-athletes purposively. Data were gathered through semi-structured interview and analyzed thematically. Ultimately, I learned that student-athletes' training performance is influenced by biological factors such as pain, fatigue, incomplete recovery, and injuries; psychological factors including pressure, frustration, and anxiety; and social factors such as support from coaches and teammates, team responsibilities, external expectations, and the need for adequate rest and recovery. Coaches may improve athletes' training performance through strength and conditioning, stress management and check-ins, and team-building and peer support to enhance endurance, mental well-being, and a sense of belonging. Future studies may use longitudinal and regression approaches to examine how biological, psychological, and social factors influence athletes' training performance.

Keywords: *Between performance and pain, athletes' training for competitive sports*

INTRODUCTION

Low training performance among athletes has increasingly been recognized as a significant global concern in the field of sports science and athletic development. Across professional, amateur, and student-athlete levels, inconsistencies in training output, reduced efficiency during practice sessions, and fluctuating performance standards have been widely

documented in contemporary literature. Recent studies emphasized that maintaining optimal training performance remains a persistent challenge despite advancements in sports technology, monitoring systems, and athlete management frameworks (Smith & Johnson, 2023; Lee et al., 2024).

Low training performance among athletes has also been documented as a pressing concern within organized sports systems. In China, research has highlighted inconsistencies in athlete training outputs within structured national programs, indicating gaps between expected and actual performance standards (Wang & Li, 2023). Similarly, in South Africa, studies have reported observable declines in training efficiency among athletes across various competitive levels, raising concerns within institutional sports development programs (Nkosi & Moyo, 2024). In Germany, despite having advanced sports infrastructures, scholars have noted variability in athlete training performance, particularly in high-performance and youth development settings (Schmidt & Bauer, 2023).

Within the Philippine context, low training performance among athletes has emerged as a notable issue, particularly in school-based and collegiate sports programs. Empirical studies have documented patterns of inconsistent training engagement and sub-optimal performance levels among Filipino athletes, reflecting broader concerns within the national sports framework (Garcia & Reyes, 2023; Santos et al., 2024). This situation is increasingly recognized in academic and athletic institutions, where maintaining consistent training standards remains a challenge. The persistence of this issue underscores the need for greater scholarly focus on athlete training performance within the Philippine setting.

The consequences of low training performance among athletes are significant and multifaceted. It can lead to decreased competitive readiness, reduced overall athletic achievement, and diminished opportunities for athletes to reach higher levels of competition. Additionally, prolonged low performance may affect athletes' psychological well-being, including decreased confidence and motivation, as well as strained relationships within teams and coaching environments. At an institutional level, it may result in weakened program outcomes and reduced success in competitions, ultimately impacting the reputation and effectiveness of sports organizations (Anderson et al., 2023; Müller & Hoffmann, 2024). It is for this reason that I conducted this study.

Theoretical Lens

In doing this study, I was guided by Biopsychosocial Model by George Engel (1977), which explains health and human functioning as the result of the interaction between biological, psychological, and social factors rather than relying only on biological explanations. It emphasizes that well-being and illness are shaped by the combined influence of physical conditions, thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and social environment, promoting a more holistic understanding of health.

Conceptual Paradigm

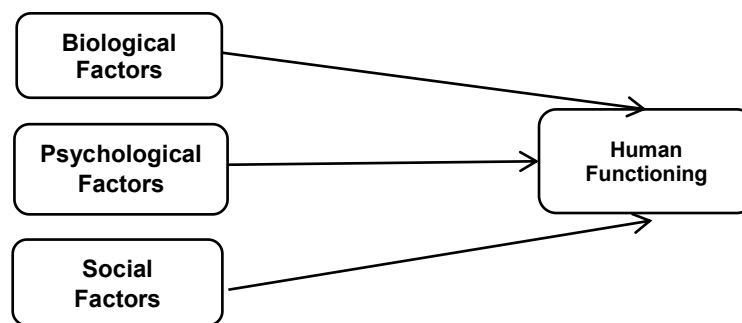


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

I employed a descriptive qualitative research design, which provides a clear description of participants' experiences in their natural context without focusing on theory development (Kim et al., 2023; Sandelowski, 2023). This design is commonly used to explore phenomena that are not yet fully understood, particularly in education, health, and sports, where participants' perspectives are essential (Colorafi & Evans, 2023; Doyle et al., 2023). The participants were eight college student-athletes enrolled in the School Year 2025–2026, aged 18 years old and above, and actively engaged in competitive team sports, including basketball, volleyball, and baseball players. They were selected through purposive sampling, a technique used in qualitative research to identify individuals with direct and relevant experience of the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

For data gathering, I employed semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions with follow-up inquiries to obtain detailed responses from participants. This technique is appropriate for exploring individuals' experiences, perceptions, and perspectives in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Data were analyzed through thematic analysis, which systematically identifies and interprets patterns or themes within qualitative data. This approach was suitable for examining the student-athletes' experiences related to training performance, recovery, psychological pressures, and social influences. Thematic analysis is advantageous because of its flexibility and its ability to generate rich and meaningful interpretations of participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

RESULT

Biological, Psychological, and Social factors that Shape the Training Performance of Athletes

To explore biological, psychological and social factors that shape the training performance of athletes, I conversed with students athletes' on this matter. One of them talked about the **Biological Factors**, saying:

So my body feel when why... my body feel during my recovery feels like...parang ginapama-ol gud ko Sir, pag like after naglayas ako ngayon. Tapos may training nanaman on the next day, parang ang sakit ng katawan ko. Parang naga stay talaga sya, parang hindi sya fully recovered kay ang pama-ol naa dyapon.

(So my body feels like... my body during recovery feels like I was beaten up, Sir. For example, after I go out or travel, and then we have training again the next day, my body really hurts. The pain seems to stay, and it feels like my body is not fully recovered because the soreness is still there.) (IDI-P1-p3)

A similar experience was expressed by Participant 8, who also described persistent pain after repeated competitions. The participant expressed:

During Palarong Pambansa, after five games and four days, a shortstop and pitcher my shoulder ached when I lifted it. My leg muscles when might and I was always tired even after a long sleep. I drag my feet and had a weak grief on a bat.

(During the Palarong Pambansa, after five games in four days, as a shortstop and pitcher, my shoulder ached whenever I lifted it. My leg muscles were sore, and I felt constantly tired even after a long sleep. I dragged my feet and had weak swings when hitting the ball.) (IDI-P8-p17)

Another common experience shared by participants was feeling very tired and lacking physical energy. This fatigue made it difficult for them to participate fully in training sessions. As one participant expressed:

Kung sobra dyud ang kapoy ug kasakit sa lawas like makawala sya gana mag training, usahan maka absent dyud sa training kay dili dyud sya kaya. Tapos usahay pud ginapilit dyud nako akoang sarili na mag training pero akong performance or lihok sa training kay lahi sya compare sa mga adlaw na okay akoang lawas.

(If my body is extremely tired and sore, I lose the motivation to train, and sometimes I have to miss training because I really can't handle it. Other times, I force myself to train, but my performance or movements during training are different compared to the days when my body feels okay.) IDI-P5-p11

In the same line of thought, another participant shared a concrete example, who also reported ongoing tiredness despite attempts to rest:

When my body feels very tired, I understand that I'm not fully recovered. I listen to the signals my body gives me if I, feel pain or weakness I know I need to slow down. I try to rest more and avoid over training. I also make sure to sleep well and eat healthy so my body can recover. IDI-P7-p15

As our conversation continued, one of the participants emphasized the importance of **Psychological Factors**, saying:

So ahh...that injury Sir, it was ahh...very mentally and emotionally challenging for me Sir. So I felt frustrated because I train hard to compete in that certain competition Sir. And suddenly but my focus was affected because of that injury and I also felt disappointed and actually about myself that I could not still perform at best po Sir.

(So, ahh... that injury, Sir, was very mentally and emotionally challenging for me. I felt frustrated because I had trained hard to compete in that particular competition. Suddenly, my focus was affected by the injury, and I also felt disappointed in myself for not being able to perform at my best.) IDI-P2-p6

A similar emotional reaction was reported by Participant 5, who expressed disappointment with their performance during the competition. The participant said:

Like kanang paghuman sa dula tapos napildi me, disappointed ko sa akong napakita na performance sa akong sarili. Ginaisip nako akong mga mali maong nakaresulta sya, dili ko makatulog ug tarong tapos dugay akong recover.

(Like after a game when we lose, I feel disappointed in my own performance. I keep thinking about my mistakes, which affects me; I can't sleep properly and my recovery takes longer.) IDI-P5-p11

In the same line of thought, Participant 8 described how emotional distress affected their willingness to perform recovery activities. The participant shared:

Ahh... noong quarter final game ng Palarong Pambansa, ako yung pitcher at tinamaan ng bater yung bola ko at home run at doon ako napahiya sobrang lungkot ko. Ahhm.. kaya hindi ako nag ice bat at nag stretch at makatulog. Pagdating ng umaga mas lalong mahigpit ang balikat ko at masakit kaya wala na itong lakas."

(Ahh... during the quarterfinal game of the Palarong Pambansa, I was the pitcher and the batter hit my pitch for a home run, and I felt really embarrassed and very sad. Ahhmm... that's why I didn't ice, stretch, or get proper sleep. By the next morning, my shoulder felt even tighter and more painful, and I had no strength left.) IDI-P8-p17

As our conversation continued, one of the participants emphasized the importance of **Social Factors**, saying:

Ahh expectations... sa akoang team or sa mga fans nakaapekto sya, sa akong kay feel nako kanang strong always, ug available ko always. Kay... kaya usahay ginatago nalang ang sakit or kakapoy para dili sila ma disaapoint sa akong.

(Ahh... the expectations from my team or the fans affect me because I feel like I always have to be strong and always available. Sometimes I end up hiding my pain or fatigue so that I don't disappoint them.) IDI-P5-p12

A related experience was described by Participant 2, who felt a strong sense of responsibility as a team leader. The participant remarked:

There are moments that I doubted myself, I question if I will return to my previous level of my performance, so the pressure to perform and achieve personal and team goals sometimes make me rush for my recovery. I felt due to resting while my teammates continue training aahmm... and that certain time po Sir. I feel... I feel like aahmm... nong time po na yon... is pag hindi po ako kasali sa training, I feel like parang kulang po yung performance ng team. As well as ako po yung... ahmm.. team captain ng team Sir, so feel ko po nag kulang ako sa kanila during that time po Sir.

(There were moments when I doubted myself and questioned whether I would return to my previous level of performance. The pressure to perform and achieve both personal and team goals sometimes made me rush my recovery. I felt that resting while my teammates continued training... at that particular time, I felt... I felt that when I was not part of the training, the team's performance seemed lacking. As the team captain, I felt that I was letting them down during that time.) IDI-P2-p6

Similarly, Participant 4 described receiving encouragement from their coach to prioritize recovery. The participant shared:

Recovery motivation can be greatly affected by interactions with my coaches, my teammates, and the support personnel. Prioritizing my recovery feels safer when coaches openly appreciate rest, inquire about my health and promote intelligent training rather than continue pushing. Recovery becomes a part of the team culture rather than a weakness, when encouraging teammates normalize ice baths, stretching, sleep and taking a letter session when necessary. However, it can put pressure on me to disregard my bodies needs if the atmosphere only promotes resilience and playing through fatigue. (IDI-P4-p10)

In the same line of thought, Participant 8 emphasized the importance of teammates' encouragement during the recovery process, saying:

Gusto kung makasama ang team ko sa mga bounding at ahmmm., pagsasanay pero may mga araw na need ko magpahinga. Naintindihan nman ako ng mga kasamahan ko, binalita nila kung ano ang mga nangyayari at minsan ay nagdadala pa sila ng pagkain at nalaman kung ang pag-aalaga sa sarili ay para ring sa pupunan.

(I want to be with my team during bonding and training, but there are days when I need to rest. My teammates understand me; they update me on what's happening, and sometimes they even bring food. I realized that taking care of myself is also for the benefit of the team.) IDI-P8-p18

Going back to our conversations, I mostly heard, many of my participants shared that after several days of training, they experience full-body soreness the following day, which makes it difficult for them to focus during daily training because of the intensity of the pain. They also expressed feeling pressured in their performance, especially when they are expected to lead, particularly as team captains, which has contributed to a loss of motivation as fatigue and pain continue to persist. I also heard that while one of them was answering, their voice trembled and their lips were shaking, suggesting emotional strain. I saw during the interviews, they appeared emotionally affected some were visibly sad, and I noticed in one participant's eyes that they were teary, as if about to cry; I could also sense through the gesture of their hands that they strongly wanted to return to their team or to the game. At times, one participant seemed to be crying, yet there were also moments of laughter, showing the complexity of their experiences. I felt, I experienced a sense of sympathy and concern as I realized how challenging the life of a student-athlete can be, especially when they are dealing with both physical exhaustion and emotional pressure. I realized that student-athletes need proper rest after continuous training, along with consistent motivation and strong support from their families, coaches, and teammates to help them cope, stay encouraged, and maintain confidence in their abilities.

DISCUSSIONS

In this section, I discussed the findings of my study. Likewise, I established the implication for practice and future direction.

Athletes' Training Performance: Physical Strain, Psychological Challenges and Social Pressures

In my study, I discovered that student-athletes frequently experience persistent physical strain characterized by fatigue, muscle soreness, injuries, and incomplete recovery, which collectively contribute to physical burnout and reduced performance capacity. My finding support Yang et al. (2023), who found that physiological stress such as fatigue and injury significantly impairs athletes' overall functioning and increases vulnerability to burnout

symptoms. Similarly, my study supports the finding of Gray et al. (2023), emphasizing that physical exhaustion among athletes disrupts recovery processes and negatively affects health and athletic sustainability.

My finding discovered that psychologically student-athletes often encounter pressure, anxiety, frustration, and emotional exhaustion as they strive to meet performance expectations in both academics and sports. This aligns with Contreras et al. (2023), who found that psychological stress is strongly associated with burnout and reduced well-being among student-athletes, while Metin et al. (2023) revealed that mental resilience and coping mechanisms play a crucial role in buffering the negative effects of sport-related stress.

Lastly, my finding opposes the claim of Murray et al. (2023) and Dannis (2023), indicating that although social support from coaches, teammates, and family is often viewed as a protective factor, it can simultaneously intensify expectations and obligations. Thus, it increases pressure and creates internal conflict between recovery and performance, which in turn influences student-athletes' motivation, stress levels, and overall engagement in sport.

Implication for Practice

As a researcher, I see opportunities for coaches, to improve biological factors that shape training performance of student-athletes. Coaches may employ strength and conditioning program to improved physical endurance and strength, contributing to more consistent training performance. For psychological strain among athletes, coaches may implement stress management sessions and one-on-one coaching or check-ins. At the same time, to enhance social influences on athletes' training performance, program implementation focusing on team-building and peer support systems may be promoted. These initiatives can strengthen team cohesion and unity, thereby fostering a higher sense of belonging among athletes.

Future Direction

Based on the findings, three quantitative research directions may further examine athletes' training experiences in competitive sports. First, a longitudinal survey study may explore the relationship between training load, recovery quality, and biological outcomes over time. Second, a predictive study may examine how psychological factors such as motivation, frustration, emotional exhaustion, and self-efficacy influence performance and recovery behaviors. Third, a structural model study may investigate how social factors, such as coach support, teammate encouragement, and performance pressure, predict athletes' well-being, resilience, and continued participation in sport.

Conclusion

This study revealed that the training performance of student-athletes is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors. Biologically, persistent pain, fatigue, incomplete recovery, and injuries negatively affect athletes' physical condition and overall performance. Psychologically, pressure, frustration, and anxiety influence motivation, confidence, and mental well-being. Socially, support from coaches and teammates positively contributes to performance, while team responsibilities, external expectations, and insufficient rest create additional challenges for student-athletes.

This study affirms the theory of the Biopsychosocial Model by George Engel, which explains that health and human functioning are shaped by the combined interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors. The findings demonstrate that athletes' training performance cannot be understood solely through physical aspects, as emotional experiences and social environments also significantly influence their well-being and performance. Therefore, a holistic approach that promotes physical recovery, psychological support, and positive social relationships is essential in enhancing the overall well-being and training performance of student-athletes.

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