



Evaluating Emotional Support Needs of Young Athletes: From Stress Response to Resilience

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Abstract. As India prepares its adolescent athletes for a demanding line-up of elite sports events—including the 2026 Youth Olympic Games (Dakar), the 2026 Asian Games (Aichi-Nagoya), the 2027 South Asian Games, and the 2028 Summer Olympics (Los Angeles)—emotional well-being emerges as a vital pillar of high-performance readiness. The intense physical, academic, and psychological demands placed on young athletes make it imperative to understand and support their emotional health. Emotional well-being is an important aspect of the all-around development of teenage athletes, yet it remains largely neglected in sports training. Although participation in athletics strengthens athletes in discipline, resilience, and concentration, there are cases where young athletes struggle psychologically. While mental health is increasingly emphasized in high-performance training environments, there is still limited understanding of what young athletes need to maintain their inner stability. The more this aspect is overlooked, the poorer the chances for achieving both high performance and happiness. The aim of this study was to conduct a detailed needs analysis of mental health support for adolescent athletes training at the National Institute of Sports (NIS), Patiala, India. The study also explored the athletes' life experiences and the availability and effectiveness of current mental health support systems through interviews. Findings suggest that young athletes, despite psychological advantages gained through sport, often suffer from distress, worry, and overtraining symptoms. A majority of participants expressed the need for various formal emotional health interventions, including professional counseling, stress management programs, and emotional coaching. This study stresses the importance of integrating psychological well-being into sports training. By highlighting significant mental health concerns and support needs, this research contributes to the ongoing conversation on athlete well-being. Ultimately, the knowledge gained promotes a holistic and sustainable approach to adolescent athletic development by informing policy suggestions, training reforms, and the inclusion of mental health resources within sports academies.

Keywords. Emotional Wellbeing, Sports Psychology, Mental Health, Adolescence.

1 Introduction

The emotional aspect of wellness is crucial for a teenager's athletic development, yet it is often overlooked. Participation in sports cultivates discipline, perseverance, and a

strong work ethic while simultaneously exposing young athletes to major physical, mental, and emotional challenges. The pressure to succeed, stress from competition, and the need to balance academics with demanding training schedules can harm their emotional well-being. To optimize the performance of young athletes, support systems focused on helping them manage these issues need to be developed.

Training young athletes in India is primarily undertaken through institutions like the National Institute of Sports (NIS). Even with the growing acceptance of the importance of mental health in sports, comprehensive programs focusing on emotional well-being are virtually non-existent. Many young athletes experience anxiety, exhaustion, and chronic self-doubt without credible psychological support. The existing literature in sports psychology, particularly the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the Mental Toughness Theory (Jones et al., 2002), emphasizes the importance of emotional resilience for developing robust athletes. However, there is limited understanding of the emotional support needs of adolescent athletes within the Indian context.

This research aims to narrow this gap by conducting a needs assessment of the emotional well-being of adolescent athletes at NIS, India. The study explores their experiences, emotional barriers, and the support necessary for mental health maintenance through an interview-based survey. The findings will help in formulating concrete, integrated developmental strategies, including mental health counselling, psychological skills training, and stress management programs.

By researching the emotional health of adolescent athletes, this study highlights the omission of essential psychological components in sports training. Meeting these emotional needs will not only enhance athletic performance but also safeguard the mental health and long-term wellness of youth athletes.

2 Literature Review

2.1 State of the Art for Sports context

2.1.1 Emotional Well-Being and Adolescent Athletes

Emotional and psychological development is crucial during adolescence. The adolescent period is full of challenges, and sports can either ease or intensify these challenges. Participation in competitive sports has been shown to improve emotional management and resilience (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). However, athletes also face the stress of meeting expectations, social pressures, and fear of failure (Nicholls et al., 2009). Excessive competition can result in emotional burnout, which significantly affects an athlete's well-being (Gould et al., 1996).

2.1.2 Theoretical Frameworks in Sports Psychology

- Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985): This theory emphasizes how emotional well-being influences intrinsic motivation and the psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Athletes with high or moderate autonomy tend to have better mental health outcomes.

- **Mental Toughness Theory** (Jones et al., 2002): Mental toughness is critical in coping with sports-related stress. Athletes with strong mental toughness handle pressure more effectively, whereas its absence leads to anxiety and burnout.
- **Sport Confidence Model** (Vealey, 1986): This model focuses on the role of self-confidence in sports performance and emotional regulation. High confidence enhances emotional stability and focus, while low confidence leads to stress and anxiety.

2.1.3 Emotional Challenges in Competitive Sports

Research has identified several emotional challenges for young athletes:

- **Performance Pressure and Anxiety:** Constant pressure to perform at high levels leads to anxiety and stress (Scanlan et al., 1991). External pressures from coaches, parents, and self-expectations exacerbate emotional distress.
- **Burnout and Mental Fatigue:** Prolonged exposure to stress, heavy training loads, and inadequate recovery increase the risk of mental exhaustion (Gould et al., 1996). Symptoms include emotional exhaustion, decreased motivation, and withdrawal from sports.
- **Balancing Sports and Academics:** Managing both sports and academic responsibilities creates time management challenges and additional stress (Gerber et al., 2018).

2.1.4 Emotional Challenges in Competitive Sports

Structured mental health support is vital:

- **Psychological Skills Training (PST):** Mindfulness, cognitive-behavioural techniques, and relaxation exercises help improve emotional resilience (Kremer et al., 2019).
- **Coaches and Peers:** Emotional support from coaches, mentors, and teammates enhances coping abilities and mental toughness (Rice et al., 2016).
- **Counselling and Mental Health Programs:** Access to sports psychologists and counselors can reduce anxiety and improve emotional well-being (Balk & Englert, 2020).

2.2 Gap in Research and Need for Further Studies

Although significant research exists on emotional well-being in athletes, very few studies address the professional emotional support frameworks for adolescent athletes in India. Most research focuses on Western contexts, emphasizing the need for region-specific studies on emotional health interventions for Indian athletes.

Sports participation promotes both emotional resilience and emotional strain. Thus, psychological care should be considered a fundamental requirement for young athletes. This study aims to identify emotional support needs and suggest methods to

integrate psychological care into the training programs at the National Institute of Sports, India.

3 Research Methodology

This investigation follows a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews focused on the emotional and psychological tendencies of adolescent athletes at the National Institute of Sports (NIS) in India. This approach offered broader insights into emotional responses and stress-busting strategies and support detailed by study participants.

3.1 Sample Selection

The sample incorporated 52 adolescent athletes with ages ranging from 14 to 17 years old for Interview and 43 for survey through the questionnaire. These include 24 girls and 28 boys engaged in various sports disciplines at NIS. A purposive sampling technique guaranteed proportionality across all gender, event, and training level so that differences that are gender based in emotional experiences could be investigated.

3.2 Data Collection Process

Every athlete was individually interviewed in a session that lasted between 10 to 12 minutes over a period of 11 days. This duration enabled rich discussion while also reducing the risk of participant fatigue. Privacy and confidentiality were scrupulously preserved; interviews were not videotaped, and replies were anonymized. Interviewers noted major emotional themes, paying special emphasis to gender-based viewpoints when relevant.

3.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze manually coded interview data, with a focus on identifying common themes as well as gender-specific emotional patterns. Recurring categories included performance pressure, emotional resilience, gender-related coping styles, and perceived support systems.

3.4 Interview Questions

A set of open-ended questions was designed to explore athletes' emotional experiences, coping mechanisms, and perceived needs for mental health support. Some key questions included.

A set of open-ended questions was designed to explore athletes' emotional experiences, coping mechanisms, and perceived needs for mental health support. Some key questions included:

1. Emotional Experiences & Challenges

- Can you describe how your emotions are affected by competitive sports?
- What are the biggest emotional challenges you face as an athlete?
- How do you handle pressure before and after competitions?

2.Coping Mechanisms & Support Systems

- What strategies do you use to manage stress, anxiety, or frustration?
- Do you feel comfortable discussing emotional challenges with coaches, teammates, or family?
- Have you ever received any formal mental health support or training? If yes, what was your experience?

3.Need for Emotional Well-being Support

- Do you think there is a need for structured emotional support programs in sports training? Why or why not?
- What kind of emotional or mental health support would help you perform better and feel healthier?
- How do you think emotional well-being training could be integrated into your sports routine?

Table 1: Interview Questions and Aspects covered

Interview Question	Aspect Covered in Results
Can you describe how your emotions are affected by competitive sports?	Emotional pressure, gender-based stressors, performance anxiety
What are the biggest emotional challenges you face as an athlete?	Performance pressure, societal expectations, gender-specific emotional stress
How do you handle pressure before and after competitions?	Coping mechanisms, emotional resilience, gendered coping strategies
What strategies do you use to manage stress, anxiety, or frustration?	Internalization vs. openness, gender differences in coping strategies
Do you feel comfortable discussing emotional challenges with coaches, teammates, or family?	Availability of informal support, emotional openness, stigma, communication barriers
Have you ever received any formal mental health support or training?	Gaps in structured support systems, gender-sensitive counseling needs
Interview Question	Aspect Covered in Results
Do you think there is a need for structured emotional support programs in sports training?	Recognition of need for structured support, both genders acknowledging value
What kind of emotional or mental health support would help you perform better and feel healthier?	Preference for gender-informed tools: girls — emotional check-ins, boys — resilience training
How do you think emotional well-being training could be integrated into your sports routine?	Support for integration into training, gender-specific preferences (e.g., validation vs. confidence building)

The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis, where responses were categorized into key themes such as performance pressure, emotional resilience, mental health support needs, and coping mechanisms. Since no recordings were made, data was manually coded from interview notes to identify recurring patterns and insights.

This approach enabled accurate capture of the gaps in emotional well-being of adolescent athletes at NIS, India. Specifically, this study seeks to identify gaps in emotional support needs so that mental health care frameworks can be designed around the training programs to systematically integrate such frameworks while maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure confidentiality, voluntary participation, and informed consent. Participants were briefed about the study's purpose and assured that their responses would remain anonymous. Participants below the age of 18 had parental consent, and all other participants were free to withdraw at any time without explanation.

4 Results and Observations

4.1 Qualitative Survey Insights

Review of the responses highlighted the emotions of adolescent athletes with particular focus on girls' and boys' differences.

1. Emotional Pressure and Gender-Based Stressors

- Girls (Females) indicated experiencing greater performance-related concerns, especially those related to beauty and imaging, alongside athletic achievements. They reported experiencing the pressure of being watched more so than boys in mixed activities and in public.
- Boys (Males) in general resorted to distraction or internalization as coping strategies, and to a lesser degree, voluntarily seeking emotional support which depicts some stigma around fragility.

2. Coping Mechanisms and Openness

- Girls tended to be more emotionally supportive as they involved peers and expressed their emotions more than boys, suggesting a need to be emotionally accepted.
- Boys tended to utilize distraction or internalization as coping techniques and were less likely to seek emotional help voluntarily, indicating probable stigma around emotional vulnerability.

3. Support System Availability

- Both groups appreciated the availability of informal support from coaches and peers, but girls tended to express stronger anger over the absence of women mental health practitioners or sensitive counselors.
- Boys were less vocal about specific support needed but agreed that structured emotional guidance might boost performance under pressure.

4. Need for Gender-Informed Emotional Health Tools

- Both male and female athletes highlighted the need for scientific tools to evaluate the mental wellbeing of the athletes.
- In addition to that, boys emphasized the need for capturing the emotion self-confidence and social stress while girls highlighted the capturing of emotional cycles.
- Boys recommended methods focusing on emotional regulation, resilience, and self-worth in competitive circumstances.

5. Integration of Emotional Health in Training

- Both groups supported adding emotional well-being into training frameworks.
- Girls were more inclined toward regular emotional check-ins and courses on controlling performance anxiety.
- Boys preferred skill-based emotional resilience training and confidence-building exercises. While still an uncharted aspect of sports preparation, emotional stability is absolutely paramount to the overall growth of youth athletes.

Even though participation in sports enhances self-discipline, toughness, and focus, teen athletes often are beset mentally by pressure for performance, competition, and external expectations. Although there is increasing awareness about mental health among sport, and particularly in top-level training environments, there is still a noteworthy absence of understanding of the specific emotional support needs of young competitors. Ensuring both sporting performance and long-term welfare hinges upon filling this shortfall.

4.2 Quantitative Analysis of Emotional Well-Being Factors

4.2.1 Hope and Optimism

- Mean rating: 4.60 / 5
- Median: 5
- Most common rating: 5 (chosen by 30 respondents)
- Distribution:
 - 3: 4 respondents
 - 4: 9 respondents
 - 5: 30 respondents

Interpretation: Athletes overwhelmingly consider hope and optimism crucial for emotional health.

4.2.2 Life Satisfaction

- Mean rating: 4.37 / 5
- Median: 5
- Distribution:

- 1: 1 respondent
- 2: 2 respondents
- 3: 3 respondents
- 4: 11 respondents
- 5: 26 respondents

Interpretation: While generally high, a few respondents showed lower satisfaction, indicating variance in emotional fulfillment.

4.2.3 Self-Concept

- Mean rating: 4.47 / 5
- Median: 5
- Distribution:
 - 1: 1 respondent
 - 3: 4 respondents
 - 4: 11 respondents
 - 5: 27 respondents

Interpretation: Most athletes have a clear sense of identity, though a small group might struggle with self-awareness or direction.

4.2.4 Self-Esteem

- Mean rating: 4.37 / 5
- Median: 5
- Most common rating: 5 (22 responses)
- Distribution:
 - 1: 1 respondent
 - 3: 3 respondents
 - 4: 17 respondents
 - 5: 22 respondents

Interpretation: Self-esteem is generally strong among respondents, with some mid-range concerns present.

4.2.5 Social Relationships

- Mean rating: 4.30 / 5
- Median: 5
- Distribution:
 - 2: 2 respondents
 - 3: 7 respondents
 - 4: 10 respondents
 - 5: 24 respondents

Interpretation: Social support is considered important, though a few respondents rate it lower, which could signal a gap in relational well-being.

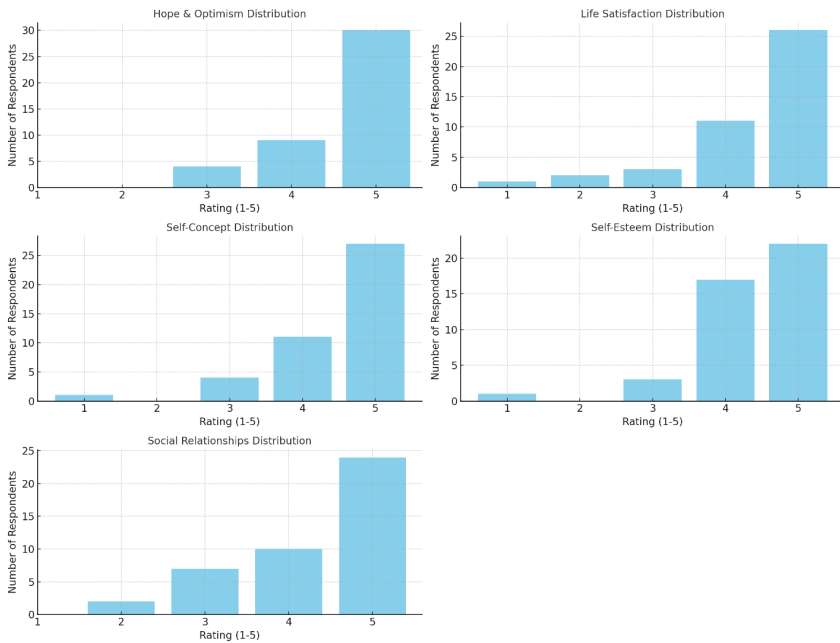


Figure 1: Distribution of Emotional Wellbeing Factors Among Adolescent Athletes

4.3 Interpretation of Emotional Well-Being Ratings

Figure 1 shows how young athletes rated five emotional aspects on a scale of 1 to 5. A rating of 5 means they feel it's extremely important.

- **Hope & Optimism:** Most athletes gave this a 5. They believe strongly in staying hopeful and positive about the future.
- **Life Satisfaction:** Many rated it highly, but few gave it lower scores. This shows some athletes may not always feel fulfilled or balanced.
- **Self-Concept:** The majority rated it 5. This means most athletes have a good understanding of who they are and feel confident in their identity.
- **Self-Esteem:** Ratings were mostly 4 or 5. While most feel confident, a few may still struggle with self-worth.

- Social Relationships: Also rated high by many, but not all. This suggests that while friendships and support matter, not everyone feels equally supported.

4.4 Quantitative Survey Insights

In addition to qualitative interviews, a quantitative survey was conducted with 52 adolescent athletes (28 boys, 24 girls) between the ages of 14 and 17, using a structured questionnaire aimed at understanding patterns of emotional distress, coping strategies, and perceived needs for mental health support. The survey contained a mix of multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and short-answer questions aligned with the key themes of the qualitative study.

1. Emotional Distress Levels

When asked to rate their emotional state over the past month on a scale of 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent):

- Only 19.2% rated their emotional well-being as ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’.
- 42.3% reported moderate well-being.
- A concerning 38.5% reported feeling emotionally low or stressed frequently, echoing the qualitative findings of performance anxiety and overtraining fatigue.

2. Key Stressors

The top stress factors identified were:

- Performance expectations (78.8%)
- Parental or coach pressure (65.4%)
- Balancing academics and sports (59.6%)

Girls reported body image and social judgment as additional stressors more frequently than boys, aligning with the gendered concerns expressed in interviews.

3. Coping Mechanisms

When asked about coping techniques:

- 47.1% of girls reported talking to peers or family.
- Only 21.4% of boys sought emotional support, with a preference for distraction (e.g., music, video games) or internalization.
- 63.5% of all respondents admitted they had no formal training in emotional regulation or stress management.

4. Attitudes Toward Support Systems

- 88.5% of respondents expressed a need for formal emotional health programs within their training curriculum.
- Girls emphasized the need for female counselors and emotion-tracking tools, while boys preferred resilience-based skill building and confidence development modules.
- Only 17.3% of athletes had previously interacted with a sports psychologist.

5. Preferred Emotional Support Interventions

When asked about ideal support tools:

- 58% of girls preferred regular emotional check-ins.
- 64% of boys leaned toward goal-oriented resilience training.
- Suggestions included anonymous feedback portals, guided breathing apps, and monthly well-being assessments.

These survey results quantitatively validate the themes derived from qualitative interviews. The gender-differentiated preferences and the overwhelming demand for formal emotional support structures highlight a substantial unmet need within current sports training models.

4.5 Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Responses

Interpretation - Quantitative Survey Insights



Figure 2: Word Cloud for Frequently Used Words in Emotional Wellbeing Survey

Narrative Summary of Themes

- Self-Focus: Most responses revolved around building personal strength, self-awareness, and confidence.
- Positive Mindset: Students repeatedly emphasized positivity and optimism as essential to emotional resilience.
- Goals and Life Satisfaction: There was a clear focus on setting personal goals and achieving fulfillment through purposeful actions.
- Social Support: Meaningful relationships and social interactions were recognized as key emotional anchors.
- Hope and Optimism: Seen as psychological motivators that help athletes persevere during emotional or performance-based challenges.

Table 2: Keyword and frequency of words in the survey

Keyword	Frequency	Theme / Interpretation
Self	110	Emphasis on self-awareness, self-esteem, and personal identity
Life	76	Focus on life satisfaction and meaning
Positive	65	Importance of a positive mindset and attitude
Hope	45	Aspiration, future orientation, and goal setting
Relationships	39	Value of social and emotional connections
Esteem	36	Concern with emotional strength and self-worth
Goals	33	Motivation and achievement of personal targets
Optimism	28	Emotional resilience and future confidence
Social	27	Significance of a supportive social environment
Being	26	Understanding one's emotional state and overall well-being

5 Conclusions

As shown in the study, emotional well-being is linked not only to the high-performance domain of sports training, but also to gender-related experiences and expectations. Both girls and boys face considerable emotional challenges, but girls seem to internalize social and performance stressors, while boys tend to experience emotional repression due to the social mandate to be stoic.

These findings underscore the necessity of gender-sensitive emotional support programs. Emotional well-being interventions must accommodate for these disparities by giving varied tools and support systems adapted to the distinct psychological needs of each gender. Implementing structured, inclusive emotional health modules—integrating counselling, resilience training, and regular mental wellness check-ins—can considerably boost physical performance and psychological resilience among adolescent athletes.

A gender-informed approach to emotional well-being in sports will assist in constructing a more fair, supportive, and sustainable athletic development framework in institutions like the National Institute of Sports.

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