

THE ROLE OF A SPORTS PSYCHOLOGIST IN PREPARING A FEMALE ATHLETE FOR THE PARALYMPIC GAMES

Marta Koszczyc, Marta Baranowska, Marek Rejman

Wroclaw University of Sport and Health Sciences, Wroclaw, Poland

ABSTRACT

Sport psychology is a field that is gaining importance in response to the growing demand for a comprehensive approach to athlete development. The conducted study focused on exploring the role of a sport psychologist in preparing a female athlete for the Paralympic Games. The research employed the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method along with a semi-structured interview technique. The qualitative analysis enabled the identification of key concepts and codes reflecting the psychologist's influence both within and beyond the domain of physical culture. The findings clearly confirmed the significant role of the sport psychologist in fostering the mental resilience of the athlete under study.

Keywords: the role of the sport psychologist, mental toughness, physical culture, relationships.

ARTICLE INFO

PolHypRes 2025 Vol. 91 Issue 2 pp. 83 – 100

ISSN: 1734-7009 **eISSN:** 2084-0535

DOI: 10.2478/phr-2025-0014

Pages: 18, figures: 0, tables: 2

page www of the periodical: www.phr.net.pl

Original article

Submission date: 12.02.2025 r.

Acceptance for print: 13.03.2025 r.

Publisher

Polish Hyperbaric Medicine and Technology Society

INTRODUCTION

THE ROLE OF A SPORTS PSYCHOLOGIST IN AND BEYOND THE TRAINING PROCESS

In contemporary times, high-level sports competition is exceptionally intense and balanced. In individual disciplines, victories are often determined by fractions of a second. Therefore, when athletes are similarly prepared physically, coaches seek additional ways to support them in achieving the desired outcome. According to Blecharz [1], if an athlete has mastered the ability to regulate emotions and maintain attentional focus during competition, they are capable of fully expressing their athletic potential and skills. Furthermore, “a long and successful career can only be achieved by an athlete who believes in their abilities, enjoys competition, and is convinced that their achievements depend on mental readiness to undertake daily training tasks” [2].

The individualized and specific scope of psychological intervention primarily focuses on enhancing the athlete's mental resilience. Mental resilience is a construct encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral traits, which may be innate or developed [1], and is considered the outcome of deliberate work on emotional regulation and control [3]. In this context, the role of the sports psychologist in preparing an athlete for success becomes particularly significant.

It is therefore unsurprising that sport psychology, as a scientific discipline, is experiencing dynamic growth and contributes meaningfully to the pursuit of sporting excellence. Beyond establishing theoretical and practical foundations for interventions aimed at strengthening mental resilience in specific competitive scenarios, sports psychologists also influence the overall functioning of athletes within society [1]. As Rutkowska [4] points out, “Systematic development of psychosocial competencies enables athletes to cope better with challenging situations not only in sport but also in other areas of life.”

Consequently, sports psychologists engage in supporting the personal development of athletes, especially in cultivating their sense of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness—key components of the sense of coherence [3]. They belong to the group of professionals who help athletes adopt the values inherent in sports competition and develop the capacity to effectively manage their emotions in difficult situations outside the sporting domain [3].

A sports psychologist is expected to possess appropriate professional qualifications and practical experience in applying specific diagnostic methods and tools, as well as the ability to collaborate effectively with other team specialists, such as physiologists, physicians, and biomechanists [1]. Although psychologists are usually invited to collaborate with a specific purpose—e.g., enhancing mental resilience—and in relation to a particular situation, such as preparation for the Olympic Games, this does not mean that their role is limited to instructing athletes in the use of certain techniques. The essence of such cooperation lies in establishing a meaningful relationship, appropriate approach, and sometimes a unique bond with the athlete. This relationship must be founded on mutual trust and should

take into account the athlete's individuality, including their specific psychological traits and personal perception of both sport-related and non-sport-related situations [1].

MENTAL TOUGHNESS AND ATHLETE PREPARATION FOR COMPETITION

The present study is situated within the domain of psychological support for elite swimmers in pursuit of success during participation in the Paralympic Games. It aims to explore and define the scope of the sports psychologist's involvement throughout the training cycle, specifically in preparing the athlete for the most critical competition of the season.

As previously noted, regardless of the training period or specific performance goals, the primary responsibility of the sports psychologist lies in enhancing the athlete's mental toughness. Within scientific literature, due to the complex and multidimensional nature of this construct, multiple conceptual frameworks of mental toughness have been developed. The theoretical foundation of this work draws on the models proposed by Loehr [5], Jones et al. [6], and Clough et al. [7]. Despite differences in structural design, these approaches share numerous core elements that support the cognitive and practical objectives outlined in this study.

Loehr [5] defines mental toughness as “the ability to consistently perform toward the upper range of one's talent and skill regardless of competitive circumstances.” Through his work with athletes, Loehr identified four components of sport-specific mental toughness: emotional flexibility, emotional responsiveness, emotional strength, and emotional resilience: emotional flexibility refers to the ability to adapt emotionally to changing conditions, emotional responsiveness involves the capacity to manage pressure effectively, emotional strength is characterized by the will to persist in difficult circumstances, emotional resilience denotes the capacity to quickly recover emotional balance following adversity (as cited in [8]).

Another key conceptualization employed in this study is that of Jones et al. [6], who conducted qualitative research through interviews with eight Olympic and World Champions, along with their coaching teams (including three coaches and four psychologists). The analysis led to the identification of four domains influencing the development of mental toughness: attitude/mindset, training, competition, and post-competition phases.

Within the attitude/mindset domain, psychological interventions focus on fostering belief and concentration. Belief is defined as the athlete's conviction in their personal agency and ability to overcome all obstacles. Concentration involves prioritizing goals and maintaining focus, supported by a firm belief in balancing personal life with sport commitments.

In the training domain, the emphasis lies on establishing long-term goals, exercising patience and self-control in pursuing them, and pushing one's limits. Additionally, it involves managing one's environment by focusing on controllable factors and disregarding what lies beyond the athlete's influence.

The third domain, competition, is centered on managing performance under pressure. Here, the athlete is trained to consciously regulate emotions, manage pre-competition stress, and rely on a deep belief in their self-efficacy to perform optimally, regardless of disruptive

circumstances during competition.

The post-competition domain, as outlined by Jones et al. [6], addresses the athlete's psychological functioning after competition, particularly in coping with the pressure of success or failure. Both outcomes require reflective analysis and integration of gained experience into further personal development and preparation for future competitions.

A broader understanding of mental toughness, especially outside of sport-specific contexts, is provided by Clough's 4C Model [7]. This framework distinguishes four key components: Control – defined as a sense of agency and belief in one's ability to influence outcomes. It comprises two subcomponents: control over one's life and control over emotions. Challenge – the ability to interpret difficult situations as opportunities for growth. It includes a willingness to take risks and to learn through experience. Confidence – refers to belief in one's own abilities to effectively handle demanding circumstances. The model differentiates between confidence in personal skills and interpersonal confidence. Commitment – described as the motivation to act and pursue specific goals, demonstrated by the orientation toward both short- and long-term objectives.

THE ROLE OF THE SPORTS PSYCHOLOGIST IN SWIMMER TRAINING

The existing body of scientific literature addressing the role of the sports psychologist in the preparation of competitive swimmers remains relatively limited. More commonly, psychological interventions have been explored in the context of other individual sports. In swimming, the psychologist's influence focuses on optimizing the training process, which is typically conducted without direct interaction with an opponent. This inherent "isolation" in swimming training often leads to challenges related to motivation and self-confidence.

Within the realm of competitive performance, the sports psychologist applies targeted relaxation and focus techniques to equip the athlete with competencies essential for technical, tactical, and emotional-volitional preparation before competition [1].

It is well established that in cultivating mental toughness, the psychologist's task is to guide the athlete through a developmental process aimed at shaping key personality traits that facilitate the overcoming of internal barriers [1,9]. Driska et al. [10] conducted a study to identify specific characteristics of mental toughness in swimmers, as well as the situational and environmental factors contributing to its development. Thirteen experienced swimming coaches completed questionnaires based on the Jones et al. [6] model of mental toughness. The findings confirmed that swimmers develop mental toughness through the four core domains: attitude/mindset, training, competition, and post-competition.

Further insights into the development of mental toughness in swimmers are provided by Pavlidou and Doganis [11], who implemented a structured Psychological Intervention Program aimed at improving swimming performance. Fourteen athletes participated in a 9-week program, during which they worked with psychologists on emotional regulation through targeted tasks and exercises focused on goal-setting, visualization, and concentration. Upon completion, the group demonstrated improved training effectiveness and

enhanced self-confidence. However, no significant changes were observed in their ability to manage anxiety-inducing situations.

The effectiveness of similar psychological interventions in swimming has also been demonstrated by Meggs and Chen [12]. Additionally, Bar-Eli and Blumenstein [13] found that techniques such as goal-setting, visualization, and relaxation significantly enhance concentration, contributing to competitive success in short-distance swimming events where reaction time and technical precision are critical.

The current state of knowledge in this field provides both scientific and practical justification for investigating the influence of the sports psychologist and the tools they employ to support emotional resilience in the context of preparing a female swimmer for participation in the Paralympic Games.

To guide the realization of the study's objective, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What is the scope of the sports psychologist's influence in the process of preparing the athlete for elite-level competition?
2. How does psychological support impact the development of the athlete's emotional resilience in the context of competitive sport?
3. In what ways do the psychologist's actions support the athlete's functioning outside of sport, and how do they influence her readiness to face demanding sporting challenges?
4. What tools and techniques are utilized by the sports psychologist to construct lasting mental toughness in the athlete?

RESEARCH METHODS

PARTICIPANT

The participant in this study is a female swimmer with a physical disability, competing at the highest level of international sport. Her long-standing involvement in the training process and her substantial achievements validate her as a credible source in evaluating the role of the sports psychologist in preparing for individual performance at the Paralympic Games. Detailed characteristics of the athlete are presented in Table 1.

Tab. 1

Participant Characteristics.	
Gender	Female
Age	27 years
Sport Discipline	Swimming
Competition Classification	S10 (100m butterfly, 400m freestyle)
Training Experience	19 years
Duration of Training with Current Coach	8 years
First Senior Medal	2011
Medals Achieved	14- European Championships (gold – 3, silver – 8, bronze – 3); 7- World Championships (gold – 2, silver – 4, bronze – 1); 3- Paralympic Games (silver – 1, bronze – 2)

Prior to participation, the athlete was thoroughly informed about the purpose, course, research procedures, potential benefits, and any possible risks associated with the study. She provided her informed, voluntary written consent. All research procedures complied with the provisions of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, as well as all relevant national and international regulations concerning the protection of research participants and the ethical conduct of scientific studies involving human subjects.

RESEARCH METHODS, TECHNIQUES, AND TOOLS

The method applied in this study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This qualitative approach is grounded in the assumption proposed by Taylor [14] that the human being is a "self-interpreting entity," voluntarily engaging in an objectified process of interpreting events, people, and objects encountered in lived experience. IPA draws on the philosophical foundations of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and Idiography.

Phenomenology is the study of phenomena—things that already exist and can be seen, touched, felt, or tasted—and of how individuals experience them [15].

Hermeneutics, derived from the Greek term meaning "to interpret" or "to explain," is the study of the meaning of written texts [16]. In line with this, the researcher using IPA must first understand the messages conveyed by the participant and then explore their thought processes. It is the participant who assigns meaning to their statements, while the researcher seeks to decode this meaning. This dynamic constitutes what is known as double hermeneutics or the double interpretative process [17].

Idiography refers to the study of specific individuals, cases, or groups, as opposed to general ideas or theories [18]. It focuses on detailed description and in-depth analysis of singular, unique phenomena or cases, and on understanding the interpretative perspectives of participants within their specific individual contexts [19].

The technique for collecting research material was the semi-structured interview, which enabled a flexible, real-time dialogue and allowed for the inclusion of follow-up (in-depth) questions when previously unanticipated topics emerged [20]. The research tool was a custom-designed interview guide consisting of 10 questions, developed specifically to explore the role of the sports psychologist in preparing a swimmer for

participation in the Paralympic Games.

ORGANIZATION AND COURSE OF THE STUDY

The interview was conducted in 2024, under conditions that were comfortable for both the researcher and the participant. During the 40-minute session, both core and follow-up questions were asked. The core questions had been prepared in advance as part of an interview protocol. They were designed with the intent to explore two key domains of interaction between the sports psychologist and the athlete: *"the sports psychologist and athletic performance (success)"* and *"the sports psychologist and non-sport-related aspects of the athlete's life."* In both domains, in line with the principles of double hermeneutics, conceptual coding was applied to extract information relevant to achieving the research objectives.

"A code is a designation or 'label' used to assign units of meaning to descriptive or inferential information gathered during a study. Codes are usually assigned to segments of a statement (...) words, phrases, sentences, or longer passages (...) either connected or unconnected to a specific context. Codes may take the form of a simple categorical label or a more complex metaphorical expression" [21].

In the domain *"the sports psychologist and athletic performance,"* pre-defined codes were adopted based on Loehr's [5] conceptualization of mental toughness: emotional flexibility, emotional reactivity, emotional strength, and emotional resilience. In the domain *"the sports psychologist and non-sport-related aspects of the athlete's life,"* Clough's 4C model [7] was used as a framework, with corresponding codes: control, challenge, confidence, and commitment.

In addition, interpretive codes were employed. According to Miles and Huberman [22], these involve categorizing data based on the researcher's intuition, as the coding process inherently includes an element of analytical interpretation.

Follow-up questions were asked when necessary to clarify the athlete's responses—particularly when the researcher identified emerging topics that could be relevant to the study's outcomes.

The analysis of the collected qualitative data was carried out according to a three-stage model, in which the processes cannot be strictly separated in chronological order: coding (the generation of concepts), identifying relationships between concepts, and data interpretation—that is, theorizing based on the material

obtained [21].

RESEARCH FINDINGS

THE ROLE OF THE SPORTS PSYCHOLOGIST IN ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE

1. CODE: EMOTIONAL FLEXIBILITY

Narrator: *"What types of exercises for coping with difficult situations did you learn during your sessions with the sports psychologist?"*

Respondent:

1. *"It looked like this—I was connected to a device that detected whether I was tense or stressed, and my task was to relax as much as possible. On the screen, containers appeared that I had to fill. When I was relaxed, the containers filled up, but if a stressful thought popped into my head, the 'paint' in the containers would drop down. I'm not sure how to explain it exactly, but that's roughly how it worked. And I think it was cool and useful because in stressful situations, when we're tense and anxious, it's good to know how to take control."*

2. *"There were also breathing exercises that I actually practiced every day. The closer it got to the competition, the more often I did them. I would count my inhales up to six, then hold my breath for six counts, and exhale for another six. I'd repeat this about ten times. It helped me focus on myself—to feel present, here and now, right before the start—and my thoughts wouldn't drift away."*

3. *"In addition, I would plan my races—so for each event, each distance, and each competition I had specific goals written down that I wanted to accomplish. It helped me focus my attention on what I wanted to do. And I think that was probably the most important thing—because if I know what I need to do, I immediately concentrate on that and stop thinking about what's going on around me. So I'd say this was one of the most effective tools for me."*

4. *"There was also an exercise called the alphabet—where for each letter I wrote down a positive statement, like 'I really want to race,' or 'I love competitions,' and so on. That got me into a fighting mindset before the race. And every time I had a bad day or couldn't get motivated or my thoughts started drifting, I would go over the alphabet again. I'd read it before the start, and I would immediately feel better."*

From the first statement, it can be inferred that the sports psychologist employed biofeedback techniques. The swimmer described how, during the session, emotionally intense moments were mirrored by a system that visually reflected her emotional responses on a computer screen.

The second response pertains to the use of breathing exercises to help concentrate on the immediate sports task. The respondent emphasized the positive role of these exercises, especially during competition periods, and their increasing importance (in frequency and impact) as the event approached.

In the third account, the athlete noted the value of psychological training in race planning. Her words

suggest that having a clearly structured plan for the moments preceding competition enabled her to direct attention inward, facilitating focus on the assigned task.

The fourth statement, referring to the "alphabet" exercise, indicates that a positive internal dialogue helped her align her emotional state with changing external conditions such as stress.

It appears that through the tools introduced by the sports psychologist—namely biofeedback, breathwork, visualization, and positive self-talk—the athlete developed a tangible ability to recognize and define the symptoms of challenging emotional states. As a result, she was able to respond to them in a way suited to the demands of the moment. This ability to consciously adapt behavior in response to emotional fluctuations illustrates the psychologist's effective influence in strengthening the athlete's emotional flexibility.

1. CODE: EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY

Narrator: *"Did you, and if so why, feel the need to speak with a sports psychologist after your races?"*

Respondent:

1. *"For example, at the Paralympic Games in Paris I finished fourth. Physically, I was extremely well prepared—I had completed training sessions more intensely than ever before and was swimming faster than I ever had. But at the start, something didn't go right. I believe it happened because I got too tense. I tried to control it somehow, but I was just having an off day and couldn't manage it. Thanks to my work with the sports psychologist, I've learned a lot and I think I understand what went wrong. I simply need to focus much more on what I do right before the start. The stress I experienced was too intense for me to handle. There were also competitions where I felt no stress at all, and that was just as bad—I felt sleepy. Now I know that stress is necessary, but it needs to be at an optimal level."*

2. *"That fourth-place finish at the Games was a heavy and, I would even say, traumatic experience for me, because it was my first major competition without a medal. Since 2011, I had always come back with a medal each year. But to get back to your question—the sports psychologist was incredibly important for me at that time. I practically spent the entire next 3–4 days with him after my unsuccessful performance."*

In the first part of her response, the athlete acknowledges that the reason for not achieving success was not due to insufficient physical preparation, but rather inadequate mental readiness. She admits that, despite prior psychological work focused on pressure management, she was unable to execute her emotional regulation strategies during the competition. Her comment about "having an off day" may reflect a degree of self-criticism and suggests that she does not place the blame for her failure on the sports psychologist.

This interpretation is reinforced in the second part of her statement, where the athlete emphasizes the critical support she received from the psychologist following her disappointing result at the Paralympic Games. The significance of the problems she faced—and the psychologist's commitment to helping resolve them—is underscored by the length of time he devoted to her (three to four days post-competition).

Emotional reactivity pertains to the athlete's ability to manage performance-related pressure. In this context, the respondent's statements indicate that the sports psychologist's role in helping her cope with the psychological aftermath of failure was both necessary and justified.

2. CODE: EMOTIONAL STRENGTH

Narrator: *"If so, why will your work with the sports psychologist continue after the Paralympic Games?"*

Respondent:

"The psychologist is the only person I can work on this with. Honestly, I believe that if I make it to the next Games—Los Angeles 2028—I'll be prepared well enough by then that the day I race will be the day I give everything I've got. I'll come out of the water satisfied, I'll swim a strong race, and I'll beat my toughest rivals. I believe that working with the psychologist will simply help me fulfill my goals and dreams."

The athlete's statement clearly indicates that the sports psychologist plays a pivotal role in her pursuit of athletic success. Her newly established goal is to compete at the 2028 Paralympic Games in Los Angeles. She considers it a given that the sports psychologist is the *only* individual with whom she can work on her emotional preparedness in the context of elite-level competition.

Her belief in the effectiveness of psychological support is strong—she trusts that it will enable her not only to reach her performance goals but also to achieve her personal dreams. Assuming that at the time of the interview the athlete was still experiencing a sense of unfulfillment in her sporting career, the continued collaboration with a psychologist appears to serve as a crucial factor in sustaining her competitive drive and commitment to long-term objectives.

In this context, the sports psychologist may be understood as functioning similarly to a coach—but in the domain of emotional strength. This form of psychological coaching appears to provide the respondent with the internal resources needed to endure challenges and persist in pursuit of her ambitions.

On a related note, the athlete's words also reveal a deep level of trust in her psychologist, underscoring the quality and importance of the professional relationship in fostering psychological resilience.

5. CODE: EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

Narrator: *"Do you believe that, thanks to your cooperation with a sports psychologist, you are now able to respond more quickly to changes in your emotional state during stressful situations and effectively return to emotional balance? If so, why?"*

Respondent:

"I am definitely much calmer now, because I still remember my race at the Rio 2016 Games, when I wasn't yet working with any psychologist. I was in the call room just before my main event, and the only thoughts I had were that I didn't want to swim anymore, that I was too stressed, that I wanted to run away, and that I didn't know what to do. And once I started working with a psychologist, those thoughts just disappeared. In the call room, I started thinking that I wanted to push off the wall with power, that I wanted to show what I'm capable of, that I needed to race. So, I believe it had a very significant impact on how I felt before competitions."

Before beginning her collaboration with the sports psychologist, the athlete recalls her performance at the 2016 Olympic Games as a moment marked by a high level of negative emotional arousal—ranging from intense stress and self-doubt to an overwhelming desire to withdraw.

However, following the initiation of psychological support, a shift occurred in the athlete's ability to maintain emotional balance in the face of external stressors, such as competitive pressure. The athlete began developing emotional resilience—the capacity to recover from emotional disruptions and regain composure when under pressure.

The psychological intervention notably transformed her pre-start emotional state, largely through a restructuring of internal dialogue. Where once she engaged in negative, self-defeating thoughts, she now focused on constructive, performance-oriented affirmations, which improved both her confidence and readiness to compete.

This transition exemplifies how the sports psychologist's involvement played a crucial role in enhancing the athlete's adaptive capacity to manage stress and recover from emotional dysregulation—core elements of emotional resilience in elite sport.

SPORTS PSYCHOLOGIST AND NON-SPORT-RELATED ASPECTS

1. CODE: CONTROL

Narrator: *"During your therapeutic sessions, did you also work on current problems outside the realm of sport? If so, why?"*

Respondent:

"Yes, and I believe it's important to regularly talk about issues that arise in the moment, because if there's a problem, it immediately distracts you from training and competitions. Especially in a season as important as the one I just had, it was crucial for me to give 100% in every training session. I didn't want to worry or be preoccupied with other problems, so whenever something came up, I tried to talk to the psychologist right away to work through it."

The definition of the code "control" pertains to the sense of influence and belief in one's own agency. The athlete explains that her conversations with the sports psychologist also included current personal challenges outside of sport, which nonetheless had a direct impact on both her personal and athletic life.

Her sense of control and agency is evident in the proactive steps she took to resolve emerging issues. Her behavior reflects a conscious engagement in managing difficult situations, a recognition of the importance of emotional regulation, and a genuine motivation to change internal mechanisms that might otherwise prevent her from achieving her goals.

These actions represent a pathway toward developing a stronger sense of self-efficacy and personal control. Moreover, in other parts of the athlete's testimony, one can also identify the role of the sports psychologist in shaping her capacity to influence her own life and regulate her emotions.

This is consistent with previous statements regarding emotional resilience, where the psychologist's intervention also contributed to strengthening the

athlete's self-belief and perception of her own ability to attain set objectives.

2. CODE: CHALLENGE

Narrator: *What other important topics did you discuss during your sessions?*

Respondent:

"For example, we often talked about interpersonal relationships. It's well known that during national team training camps, misunderstandings and conflicts with other swimmers would arise. I talked about this a lot with the psychologist to make sure it didn't affect me emotionally, because I'm a very sensitive person and I tend to take things too personally, which in turn negatively affected my training."

In this statement, the concept of challenge is understood as the athlete's ability to neutralize difficult group dynamics among fellow swimmers and resolve interpersonal conflicts in a way that promotes personal athletic development.

Conflicts and disagreements within the athlete group were particularly challenging for the respondent due to her high level of emotional sensitivity. Through her work with the sports psychologist, the athlete was able to redirect her cognitive and emotional responses to such off-field issues, treating them not as obstacles but as factors to be managed in service of her own self-improvement.

This process illustrates a constructive reframing of interpersonal difficulties as challenges that, when properly addressed, can support rather than hinder professional growth.

1. CODE: SELF-CONFIDENCE

Narrator: *How did working with a sports psychologist influence you in areas outside of your athletic career?*

Respondent:

"Well, I definitely became more open to people and developed ease in making contact and learning how to communicate. This used to be difficult for me because I had been quite a closed-off person."

The respondent's statement suggests that the sports psychologist played a key role in developing her self-confidence, particularly in the context of interpersonal communication and relationship-building.

Through psychological support, the athlete was able to overcome personal barriers related to social openness, which in turn enhanced her ability to initiate and maintain interpersonal interactions. This shift reflects an important extension of psychological intervention beyond sport, contributing to the general improvement of self-assurance in social contexts.

2. CODE: COMMITMENT

Narrator: *If you had to name one key skill you acquired through working with a sports psychologist that applies outside your athletic career, what would it be?*

Respondent:

"I think I definitely learned how to stay motivated and committed to achieving goals—not only athletic ones but also those outside of sport. When I set a goal for myself and I know I want to achieve it, I know I will. The exercises and

tasks I completed during my sessions with the psychologist also help me accomplish non-sport-related goals."

This statement highlights the role of the sports psychologist in enhancing the athlete's engagement and commitment to goal achievement, both within and beyond the athletic domain.

Notably, the athlete attributes the internalization of motivation and task persistence to the strategies developed through psychological sessions. The psychologist thus emerges not only as a support in sport but also as a catalyst for broader personal development, enabling the athlete to transfer learned motivational skills to everyday life.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to identify the areas of impact exerted by a sports psychologist in the process of preparing a competitive swimmer for participation in the Paralympic Games. This objective was pursued by addressing the following research questions:

1. What is the scope of a sports psychologist's influence in the process of preparing an athlete for competition at the highest level?
2. How does psychological support contribute to the development of the athlete's emotional resilience in the context of sports rivalry?
3. In what ways does the sports psychologist's work support the athlete's functioning beyond sport, and how does it influence her readiness to face demanding athletic challenges?
4. What tools and techniques are used by the sports psychologist to foster the athlete's long-term mental toughness?

The issue of psychological support for an elite swimmer in the pursuit of sporting success was examined through the lens of mental toughness in a Paralympic athlete. The scientific inquiry focused on selected cognitive, emotional, and behavioral traits and abilities subjected to the influence of the sports psychologist, aimed at enhancing the athlete's capacity to manage emotions in high-pressure situations—primarily within sport, but also in other areas of life.

The study was grounded in the theoretical frameworks of mental toughness factors formulated by Loehr [5] and Clough et al. [7]. To further objectify the interpretation of findings, Jones' model of mental toughness [6] was also incorporated. Thus, the foundation for the discussion concerning the psychologist's role in supporting the success of a high-level swimmer was the comparative analysis of athlete mental toughness components as defined by Loehr [5], Clough [7], and Jones et al. [6] (see Table 2).

Overview of Concepts Defining Mental Toughness.

DEFINITIONS OF MENTAL TOUGHNESS

LOEHR	CLOUGH	JONES
EMOTIONAL FLEXIBILITY – the ability to adapt emotionally to changing circumstances.	CONTROL – the extent to which an individual perceives having influence over their own life and the ability to take action to achieve their goals.	COMPETITION/PERFORMANCE – the ability to achieve high results despite the presence of various stress-inducing situations; it involves conscious emotional regulation, effective management of competitive pressure, and a strong belief in one's own efficacy.
EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY – the ability to manage pressure effectively.	CHALLENGE – the manner in which an individual copes with new experiences, demands, and unforeseen situations.	POST-COMPETITION – the active ability to cope with success and the pressure of failure.
EMOTIONAL STRENGTH – the will to persevere in the face of challenging situations.	SELF-CONFIDENCE – the belief in one's own abilities and competencies that enables effective coping with challenging situations.	ATTITUDE/MINDSET – a multidimensional construct encompassing the athlete's belief in their own agency and ability to overcome adversity (faith), the capacity to establish priorities and pursue intended goals (focus), and the ability to maintain emotional balance between sporting and personal life.
EMOTIONAL STRENGTH – the will to persevere in the face of challenging situations.	SELF-CONFIDENCE – the belief in one's own abilities and competencies that enables effective coping with challenging situations.	ATTITUDE/MINDSET – a multidimensional construct encompassing the athlete's belief in their own agency and ability to overcome adversity (faith), the capacity to establish priorities and pursue intended goals (focus), and the ability to maintain emotional balance between sporting and personal life.
EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE – the ability to quickly return to a state of emotional equilibrium following exposure to stress, adversity, or emotionally challenging situations.	COMMITMENT – the level of mental preparedness to exert effort toward achieving goals, regardless of encountered difficulties.	TRAINING – the process involving the setting of long-term goals, demonstrating patience and self-regulation during practice, and maintaining readiness to push beyond personal limits. It also encompasses the ability to manage and control environmental influences on all aspects of the training process.

The frameworks proposed by Loehr [5] and Jones et al. [6] predominantly address the athlete's mental toughness within the context of training and competitive sports (see Table 2). In contrast, Clough's [7] model extends the scope to encompass psychological interventions beyond the athletic domain, highlighting the psychologist's role in the athlete's overall life. Interpreting the research findings through these models enhances the credibility of the analysis.

In examining the interplay between "emotional flexibility," "control," and "competition," similarities emerge in managing and regulating emotions. The athlete's statements regarding "emotional flexibility" suggest that tools introduced by the sports psychologist—such as biofeedback, breathing exercises, visualization, and positive self-talk—enabled her to accurately perceive and define challenging emotional states and respond appropriately. This conscious adaptability is further reflected in discussions about "control," where the athlete demonstrates a sense of agency, engaging in specific actions to address current sports-related challenges, stimulated by the psychologist's interventions. Within Jones's [6] framework, particularly in the "competition" domain, the athlete's experiences indicate that working with the sports psychologist has empowered her to

consciously manage emotions during difficult situations, facilitating decisions that align with her objectives.

The psychologist's influence is evident in the athlete's evolving ability to flexibly respond to challenging situations, heightened emotional awareness, and control over mechanisms that previously hindered goal attainment. These interventions have fostered a development in the athlete's sense of agency and belief in her efficacy.

The convergence of "emotional reactivity," "challenge," and "post-competition" underscores the athlete's capacity to handle pressure. Post-competition discussions with the sports psychologist have equipped her to cope with the pressure of failure. In non-sport contexts, the psychologist utilized the "challenge" concept to guide the athlete in neutralizing difficult emotions and viewing challenging situations as opportunities for personal growth. Analyzing the "post-competition" aspect within Jones's [6] model reveals parallels with the other elements, particularly in managing pressure.

Further areas influenced by the sports psychologist include "emotional strength," "self-confidence," and "attitude/mindset," all relating to the athlete's belief in her abilities. The athlete expresses a strong conviction that collaboration with the sports

psychologist will enhance her performance. She emphasizes the significance of these sessions, viewing the psychologist as pivotal in achieving higher sports goals. In discussing non-sport areas, the athlete notes improvements in interpersonal relationships, attributing increased self-belief and confidence in social interactions to the psychological support received. Aligning these components with "attitude/mindset" in Jones's [6] model, the athlete's faith and focus in building agency towards achieving sports goals appear to be direct outcomes of the psychologist's interventions.

The subsequent areas—"emotional resilience," "commitment," and "training"—pertain to the athlete's patience, self-control, and dedication to goal pursuit. The athlete indicates that working with the psychologist has enhanced her ability to quickly regain emotional balance after stress-inducing events, such as competitions. This resilience has effectively motivated her to commit to future sports objectives. Notably, the psychologist's role as a positive motivator extends beyond sports, influencing the athlete's daily life. The common thread linking "emotional resilience" and "commitment" with "training" in Jones's [6] model is the psychologist's function in guiding the athlete to emotionally manage both sports and non-sports environments.

The environment in which an athlete operates plays a crucial role in developing mental toughness [23]. Within the sports environment, alongside the sports psychologist, the coach holds a significant position [1,3]. Driska et al. [10] highlight the coach's essential role in shaping athletes' mental toughness through training methods, enforcing training outcomes, and overcoming psychological barriers. While these authors acknowledge the athlete's role in developing mental toughness, it's important to recognize the athlete's agency in psychological training. In this study, the athlete's active participation in therapeutic methods during sessions with the sports psychologist underscores this agency.

This research focused on the sports psychologist's role in building mental toughness, confirming its significance. However, it doesn't negate the potential impact of the coach on the athlete's mental toughness development, warranting further investigation. Additionally, the study didn't encompass a broad range of environmental factors. Considering limitations, the case study approach, while restricting generalizability, is justified. Mental toughness, akin to other personality aspects, is highly individual, especially in elite sports. Gucciardi et al. [24] emphasize the complex, multidimensional nature of mental toughness, deeply rooted in individual athlete experiences. Thus, a case study effectively captures subtle psychological mechanisms and processes that might be overlooked in quantitative research.

The objectivity of this study is supported by the psychological intervention program, which employed methods and tools utilized by other researchers [11]. Furthermore, the athlete's feedback indicates that techniques like intrapersonal communication, positive self-talk, visualization, goal setting, and breathing exercises aided her concentration and coping in challenging situations. These findings suggest that established standards in sports psychological therapy are effective.

CONCLUSION

There is substantial evidence to suggest that the role of the psychologist in supporting the swimmer's preparation for participation in the Paralympic Games encompassed both sport-specific and non-sport aspects of her life. This dual focus created a cohesive and comprehensive system of psychological training tailored to the athlete's needs.

1. In the domain of sport, the psychologist's interventions centered on developing core emotional resilience competencies crucial for competitive performance. In the area of emotional flexibility, the athlete learned to consciously recognize and regulate difficult emotions, enhancing her adaptability under challenging competitive conditions. Work on emotional reactivity enabled her to manage the pressure of potential failure constructively, fostering a sense of personal accountability for her performance. Psychological support in building emotional strength helped restore her motivation and fighting spirit. Meanwhile, in the domain of emotional resilience, the psychologist's influence was evident in the athlete's growing ability to mobilize effort while maintaining emotional balance, thereby achieving optimal readiness for competition.

2. In the non-sport domain, conversations and psychological interventions aimed at enhancing a sense of control contributed to the athlete's increased perception of agency over her life and improved emotional regulation outside sports. Her conscious approach to embracing challenges facilitated distancing from negative emotions that might otherwise hinder her athletic development. Increased self-confidence translated into improved social functioning and relationship-building, reinforcing her belief in the efficacy of her actions. Finally, the psychologist's role as a source of motivation positively impacted her commitment to long-term goal pursuit. This holistic support system fostered psychological stability in both her personal and athletic spheres.

3. In their collaboration, the athlete and psychologist employed effective emotion regulation techniques such as biofeedback, breathing exercises, visualization, and positive self-talk. The selection of these tools was tailored to the athlete's individual needs and directly supported the development of her emotional competencies.

4. In conclusion, the support provided by the sport psychologist was grounded in a foundation of trust and focused on strengthening emotional mechanisms essential for functioning under conditions of competition and performance pressure. At the same time, the intervention extended into the broader context of the athlete's life beyond sport. Taken together, these efforts formed a unified and comprehensive emotional support system that not only addressed immediate psychological needs but was also directed toward the long-term enhancement of the athlete's emotional self-management skills. Such a holistic approach to sport psychology constituted a critical component of her preparation, facilitating the mental development necessary for achieving success at the highest levels of competition.

REFERENCES

1. Blecharz J. Psychologia we współczesnym sporcie - punkt wyjścia i możliwości rozwoju. *Przegl Psychol.* 2006;49(4):445–62.
2. Blecharz J. Motywacja jako podstawa sukcesu w sporcie. W: Krawczyński M, Nowicki D, (red.). *Psychologia sportu w treningu dzieci i młodzieży.* Warszawa: COS; 2004. p. 59–73.
3. Wójcik K. Odporność psychiczna jako determinanta osiągnięć sportowych w wybranych dyscyplinach olimpijskich [Rozprawa doktorska]. Warszawa: Akademia Wychowania Fizycznego im. J. Piłsudskiego w Warszawie; 2022.
4. Rutkowska K. Analiza wybranych zagadnień psychologii sportu osób z niepełnosprawnością. *Niepełnosprawność.* 2014;10(1):111–20.
5. Loehr JE. *Mental toughness training for sports: Achieving athletic excellence.* London: Penguin Books; 1986.
6. Jones G, Hanton S, Connaughton D. A framework of mental toughness in the world's best performers. *Sport Psychol.* 2007;21(2):243–64.
7. Clough P, Earle K, Sewell D. Mental toughness: the concept and its measurement. W: Cockerill I, (red.). *Solutions in sport psychology.* London: Thomson; 2002. p. 32–45.
8. Strycharczyk D, Clough P. *Odporność psychiczna.* Sopot: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne; 2018.
9. Budzis J, Wiecheć M, Śliwiński Z. Wpływ medytacji mindfulness na zmianę aktywności kory mózgowej u zawodnika trenującego pływanie – studium przypadku. *Fizjoterapia Polska.* 2024;24(5):334–45.
10. Driska AP, Kamphoff C, Armentrout SM. Elite Swimming Coaches' Perceptions of Mental Toughness. *Sport Psychol.* 2012;26(2):186–206.
11. Pavlidou M, Doganis G. The effects of a psychological intervention program in swimming. *J Excellence.* 2008;2:71–7.
12. Meggs J, Chen MA. Competitive Performance Effects of Psychological Skill Training for Youth Swimmers. *Percept Mot Skills.* 2019;126(5):886–903.
13. Bar-Eli M, Blumenstein B. Performance enhancement in swimming: The effect of mental training with biofeedback. *J Sci Med Sport.* 2004;7(4):454–64.
14. Taylor C. Self interpreting animals. W: *Philosophical Papers 1: Human Agency and Language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1985. p. 45–76.
15. Cambridge Dictionary. Phenomenology [Internet]. Dostęp: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/phenomenology> [cyt. 8.05.2025].
16. Cambridge Dictionary. Hermeneutic [Internet]. Dostęp: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hermeneutic> [cyt. 8.05.2025].
17. Smith JA, Osborn M. Interpretative phenomenological analysis. W: Smith JA, (red.). *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods.* London: Sage; 2008. p. 53–80.
18. Cambridge Dictionary. Idiographic [Internet]. Dostęp: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/idiographic> [cyt. 8.05.2025].
19. Pietkiewicz I, Smith JA. Praktyczny przewodnik interpretacyjnej analizy fenomenologicznej w badaniach jakościowych w psychologii. *Czasopismo Psychol.* 2012;18(2):361–9.
20. Rubacha K. *Metodologia badań nad edukacją.* Warszawa: Editions Spotkania; 2016.
21. Konecki KT. Analiza danych jakościowych: Procesy i procedury. *Przegl Socjol.* 2005;54(1–2):267–82.
22. Miles M, Huberman M. *Analiza danych jakościowych.* Białystok: Transhumana; 2000.
23. Thelwell R, Such B, Weston N, Such J, Greenless I. Developing mental toughness: Perceptions of elite female gymnasts. *Int J Sport Exerc Psychol.* 2010;8:170–84.
24. Gucciardi DF, Gordon S, Dimmock JA. Advancing mental toughness research and theory using personal construct psychology. *Int Rev Sport Exerc Psychol.* 2009;2(1):54–72.

dr hab. Marek Rejman, prof AWF

Zakład Pływania, Wydział Wychowania Fizycznego i Sportu
Akademia Wychowania Fizycznego we Wrocławiu. Ignacego Jana Paderewskiego 35 51-612 Wrocław
Tel: +48 71 347 3440, Fax: +48 71 347 3450
e-mail: marek.rejman@awf.wroc.pl