

Implementing psychological strategies to improve the performance of women's Sepaktakraw athletes from Central Java in high-intensity competitions

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ABSTRACT

High-intensity competition and a dense match schedule demand stable mental readiness, particularly among female athletes, who are more susceptible to competitive anxiety, social pressure and mental fatigue. If not treated systematically through the right psychological approach, this condition has the potential to reduce focus, emotional stability, and competitive performance. This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of implementing psychological strategies to improve the performance of Central Java Sepak Takraw putri athletes competing in two major competitions within five days: the Porprov and the POMNAS XIX qualifying rounds in 2025. The study employed an action research approach. The study population comprised female Sepak Takraw athletes from Central Java, with the sample consisting of athletes directly involved in the Porprov and POMNAS XIX 2025 qualification rounds. The data collection instruments included participatory observation, informal interviews, field notes and activity documentation. Data analysis was conducted descriptively and qualitatively by examining changes in mental state, focus on competition and team dynamics during the implementation of actions. The results showed a decrease in emotional stress and an increased focus on competing, as well as strengthened task cohesion between athletes. The success of the intervention is also reflected in the athletes' acquisition of two gold and one bronze medal at the POMNAS XIX 2025 event. In conclusion, the implementation of psychological strategies has been shown to effectively improve the mental stability and performance of Central Java women's Sepaktakraw athletes in high-intensity competitions. Subsequent research suggested that psychological assistance programmes should form an integral part of coaching athletes.

Keywords: psychological; intervention; competitive performance; female athletes; high-intensity

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INTRODUCTION

Mental readiness plays a crucial role in determining an athlete's performance, especially in dense, high-intensity competitions (Faizah, 2021; Maher, 2022; Morrison et al., 2024). As well as having optimal physical and technical abilities, athletes must be able to manage the psychological stress and emotions that arise during the game, as well as mental fatigue (Karim & Hambali, 2024; Kern & Armstrong, 2022; Ozcan, 2022; Vella & Liddle, 2020). This becomes even more complex when athletes have to compete in consecutive events over a short period, which can increase stress and anxiety and decrease concentration. This phenomenon is evident among female Sepak Takraw athletes from Central Java, who must compete in two major championships within a five-day period: the Provincial Sports Week qualification round (QR) and the National Student Sports Week (POMNAS XIX) 2025. Such hectic schedules require athletes to transition rapidly from one game to the next without adequate time for psychological recovery. This can trigger mental fatigue, emotional tension and decreased focus, with direct implications for competitive performance.

As a team sport, Sepak Takraw requires coordination, concentration, self-confidence and high emotional stability (Basyiruddin et al., 2024; Sulaimans, 2024). Therefore, managing the psychological aspects is crucial, particularly for female athletes, who, according to various studies, are more susceptible to competitive anxiety, social pressure, and burnout. In the context of high-intensity competition, there is an urgent need for structured psychological intervention to help athletes maintain mental stability and optimal performance. Previous studies have confirmed the importance of sports psychology in supporting athlete performance. Velykodna et al., (2023) emphasise that consecutive competitions can increase psychological burden and trigger mental fatigue if not balanced with effective coping strategies. Humer et al., (2023) also demonstrate that high competitive pressure is associated with increased anxiety and reduced focus during competitions.

Research Somo, (2024) reveals that female athletes are more susceptible to anxiety, social pressure and emotional exhaustion than male athletes. Meanwhile, Anne et al., (2022); Williams et al., (2024) found that unmanaged mental fatigue can lead to significant technical and tactical performance degradation. George-levi et al., (2022) added that appropriate psychological interventions can help athletes manage stress and maintain high-quality performance during periods of intense competition. Theoretically, athletes' mental readiness is influenced by their ability to regulate emotions, control anxiety, and cope with stress. Gawrych & Holka-pokorska, (2022) state that competitive stress can decrease self-confidence and increase the risk of burnout in female athletes. Therefore, psychological approaches such as relaxation techniques, emotional regulation, and motivational reinforcement are important.

Relaxation techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) and guided imagery have been shown to effectively lower anxiety levels and improve focus (Shidiq et al., 2024). Positive self-talk has also been reported to increase self-confidence and reduce pre-match anxiety (Oosthuizen, 2022). In the context of team sports, team cohesion and social support are important in helping athletes cope with competitive pressures and changing match situations (Davis et al., 2022). Together, these findings demonstrate that structured psychological intervention is a vital component of athlete coaching, particularly in high-intensity competitions.

Although many studies have addressed competitive stress, anxiety and psychological interventions in athletes, most of these studies are still in the experimental or correlational stage, or focus on one type of intervention and one competition event. This research takes a different approach by using an action research methodology in real competition situations and integrating various psychological techniques, such as grounding, progressive muscle relaxation (PMR), self-talk,

imagery and intensive mentoring. The study focuses on female Sepaktakraw athletes, a group that has been under-researched in Indonesia. Specifically, this study highlights the context of consecutive competitions within a short timeframe (QR Porprov–POMNAS XIX) and observes athletes' psychological changes directly during the competition transition period. There is a research gap in the lack of implementation studies in consecutive competitions, the limited focus on female Sepaktakraw athletes, and the lack of action research in multi-event contexts. Therefore, this study's novelty lies in applying integrated psychological strategies based on action research to enhance the mental stability, focus, and team cohesion of athletes competing in high-intensity events.

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of implementing psychological strategies in improving the performance of female Sepaktakraw athletes from Central Java competing in high-intensity competitions. It also aims to identify changes in athletes' psychological aspects, including stress levels, focus, emotional regulation and team cohesion, after psychological intervention. Finally, it aims to analyse the role of psychological strategies in helping athletes adapt mentally during successive competition transitions. Additionally, the study seeks to develop a practical and contextualised model of psychological support for athletes competing in demanding schedules.

METHOD

This study employs an action research approach based on the spiral model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart. This model comprises four main stages: planning, action, observation and reflection (Aida et al., 2025; Martins et al., 2024; Saepudin, 2023). This approach was chosen because it enables researchers to observe phenomena and intervene directly and adaptively in response to problems that arise in the field.

The participants in this study were six female Sepak Takraw athletes from Central Java who were officially registered to participate in the Provincial Sports Week (Porprov) qualification round and POMNAS XIX in 2025. As all six athletes are members of the Central Java women's Sepak Takraw team, the sampling technique used is total sampling. The participants are aged between 18 and 23 and have experience competing at provincial and national levels. The research was conducted in Surakarta (Solo), where the training centre and athletes' accommodation are located, as well as the game venue at the GOR of the University of Sebelas Maret (UNS), so that the context of the study reflects actual competition conditions.

The main instrument used in this study was the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2) (Vlachopoulos et al., 2025), which was used to measure cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety and confidence in athletes ahead of a game. The CSAI-2 comprises 27 items on a 4-point Likert scale and demonstrates good reliability (Cronbach's alpha: 0.79–0.90). Measurements were taken three times: before QR Porprov (pre-test), after QR Porprov (post-test 1) and before POMNAS XIX (post-test 2). Alongside quantitative instruments, this study employed structured observation guidelines, semi-structured interviews, and field notes to gather qualitative data on emotional changes, focus levels, coping strategies, communication, and team cohesion. Using this combination of instruments aims to provide a more comprehensive picture of the team's psychological state and dynamics during periods of high-intensity competition.

The research procedure follows an action research cycle integrated with the competition schedule. During the planning stage, the researchers identified mental fatigue, competitive pressure, emotional instability and weakened team cohesion as the main problems after QR Porprov. The action phase comprised three stages: the QR Porprov stage (emotional stabilisation through grounding and brief counselling); the five-day transition stage between competitions (intensive intervention in the

form of PMR, imagery, goal setting, emotional reflection and team-strengthening activities); and the POMNAS stage (strengthening competition readiness through self-talk, EFT tapping, grounding and individual counselling). Throughout the process, the researchers continuously observed changes in the athletes' emotions, focus, and communication. The reflection phase is conducted collaboratively between researchers, coaches and athletes to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions and formulate improvement strategies.

Descriptive statistics in the form of mean values and percentage changes were used to analyse quantitative data obtained from CSAI-2, in order to identify trends in decreased anxiety and increased self-confidence. Due to the small sample size, inferential analysis was not performed. Qualitative data from observations, interviews and field notes were analysed using Miles, Huberman and Saldaña's interactive models, which included the stages of data condensation, presentation and conclusion drawing and verification. Data validity was maintained through method triangulation, source triangulation and member checking (Asipi et al., 2022; Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024).

The study was limited by the relatively small number of subjects ($n = 6$), meaning the findings could not be generalised to other populations of athletes. Additionally, self-report instruments such as the CSAI-2 may be subject to respondent bias, and the researcher's dual role as coach and psychological companion may introduce observational bias. Nevertheless, such limitations have been minimised through data triangulation and collaborative reflection. Nevertheless, the findings of this study make a practical contribution to the development of models for the psychological support of athletes in high-intensity competitive situations.

RESULTS

The research results show that psychological interventions have a significant impact on athletes' mental health and performance. In the initial phase (the post-QR Porprov transition period), athletes exhibited significant emotional distress due to previous competition results and accumulated fatigue. This condition was confirmed through subjective complaints expressed by athletes, with dominant narratives of "tiredness," "lack of focus," "lack of enthusiasm," and physical complaints of "pain." The application of emotional container techniques and reflection at this stage helped athletes release the remaining emotional burdens, allowing their moods to stabilize for subsequent training gradually. The scores in Table 12 were obtained from the structured observations using the Psychological Assessment Rubric Scale (0–100) of the athletes' behaviour, emotional responses, focus and mental readiness before and after the psychological intervention.

Table 1. Result of psychological interventions

Indicators	Pretest	Posttest	Improvements
Coping with Adversity	55	65	+10
Coachability	66	69	+3
Concentration	47	62	+15
Confidence and Motivation	52	57	+5
Goal Setting and Mental Preparation	54	68	+14
Peaking Under Pressure	40	58	+18
Freedom from Worry	54	63	+9

The results showed that implementing psychological strategies significantly improves the mental state and performance of female Sepak Takraw athletes in Central Java during high-intensity competitions. In the initial phase, i.e. the post-Porprov QR period, athletes exhibited a fairly high

level of emotional stress due to the outcomes of previous matches, physical fatigue and the cumulative psychological strain. This was confirmed through the athletes' subjective complaints, which were dominated by expressions such as 'tired', 'lack of focus' and 'not excited', as well as physical complaints such as muscle pain and body tension.

Based on structured observations, indicators of coping with adversity and concentration were in the low-to-medium category, indicating that athletes still struggle to manage pressure and maintain focus. This is reflected in initial adversity coping scores of 55 and concentration scores of 47. This indicates that athletes have not fully recovered mentally from previous competitions. Applying the emotional container technique and holding emotional reflection sessions in this phase helps athletes release their emotional burden. Observations showed changes in facial expressions and a decrease in emotional complaints, as well as increased openness in expressing feelings. These changes lay the groundwork for emotional stabilisation and the athlete's entry into the next phase of training.

During the five-day transition period between competitions, interventions in the form of imagery and progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) positively impacted physiological readiness and competition focus. Athletes reported feeling calmer and having clearer minds, as well as better self-control when dealing with the stress of training. This is reflected in increased concentration scores (from 47 to 62) and improved goal setting and mental preparation (from 54 to 68). Furthermore, the 'peaking under pressure' indicator increased the most, rising from 40 to 58 (+18), suggesting that athletes are becoming increasingly capable of performing optimally in high-pressure situations.

Group play-based interventions, shared goal setting and group affirmations also contributed to strengthening team cohesion. Athletes who had previously been rivals when representing their respective regions at the QR Porprov began to communicate more fluently, support each other more and share common goals for POMNAS. This is reflected in increased coachability indicators (from 66 to 69) and confidence and motivation (from 52 to 57). The effectiveness of these interventions is evident in the pre-match phase of POMNAS. There was a significant change in athletes' verbal expression, with complaints and negative narratives being replaced by positive expressions such as 'happy', 'enjoying', and 'excited'. Follow-up interventions in the form of grounding, self-talk, and EFT tapping have been shown to effectively maintain positive emotional states and reduce situational anxiety before matches. Athletes demonstrate greater emotional stability, adherence to game strategies and consistent technique, both individually and in teams.

The freedom from worry indicator increased from 54 to 63 (+9), suggesting that the athlete is becoming less preoccupied with worry and able to focus on competing tasks. Meanwhile, the coping with adversity indicator increased from 55 to 65 (+10), suggesting that the athlete is becoming more resilient in the face of pressure, mistakes, and challenging situations during the game. This accumulation of mental and physical readiness is reflected in the final results of POMNAS XIX 2025, in which the women's sepaktakraw team from Central Java won two gold and one bronze medal. This achievement provides empirical evidence that psychological transformation from a depressed state to a combat-ready state significantly contributes to competitive performance.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that structured psychological assistance has a significant impact on the mental condition and performance of Central Javanese female Sepak Takraw athletes in facing consecutive competitions, consisting of QR Porprov and POMNAS XIX 2025. The competitive results, namely two gold medals and one bronze medal, indicate that the psychological intervention provided has improved athletes' mental stability and made a real contribution to their

performance on the field. This discussion will review the main findings of this study in more depth, linking them to relevant literature to provide a broader understanding of the relationship between psychological intervention and athlete performance in consecutive competition situations.

One of the key findings of this study was a significant decrease in emotional distress experienced by athletes during the transition between QR Porprov and POMNAS. In the initial phase, athletes experienced anxiety and mental fatigue due to the intense competition, reflected in complaints such as “lack of focus,” “lack of enthusiasm,” and “tiredness.” This condition is consistent with the literature, which shows that female athletes are often more susceptible to competitive stress, especially when competing under physically demanding conditions and tight schedules (Low et al., 2023).

Through psychological interventions such as grounding, progressive muscle relaxation (PMR), and the container technique, athletes experience significant emotional recovery. Grounding, which focuses on bringing athletes’ attention to the present moment and reducing anxiety, and PMR, which promotes physical relaxation, are effective in reducing stress and anxiety. The container technique, which focuses on managing emotions, helps athletes release the emotional burden they feel after initial competition, leaving them better prepared for subsequent training and competition. Relaxation techniques are effective in reducing mental fatigue and increasing competitive readiness (Fadia & Endang, 2025). The application of these techniques, in line with the concept of mental fatigue, demonstrates that it can reduce athletes’ focus and performance, especially during intense competition. The psychological support provided in this study successfully addressed this issue by enabling athletes to recover psychologically and physically and to return to optimal performance at POMNAS.

Another crucial aspect of this study was the improvement in athletes’ focus and concentration during the transition period and the POMNAS phase. As seen in the pretest and posttest data, there was a significant increase in the Concentration aspect, from 47 to 62, representing a 15% increase. This improvement indicates that the implemented psychological intervention positively affected athletes’ ability to maintain attention and focus on the field. The use of self-talk, imagery, and relaxation techniques such as PMR played a crucial role in improving athletes’ focus. Positive self-talk helped athletes transform negative thought patterns into positive affirmations, which increased self-confidence and competition readiness. For example, athletes who previously felt anxious before the match began to change those feelings into enthusiasm and optimism, reflected in their more positive verbal expressions, such as “happy”, “enjoy”, and “spirited”, when facing POMNAS (Scott et al., 2023). Imagery techniques have also been shown to be effective in helping athletes visualize success and upcoming game strategies, which increases their confidence and focus. Cognitive techniques such as cognitive reframing and positive self-talk are effective in managing anxiety and improving athletic performance (Sumampouw et al., 2022). By using these techniques, athletes can stay focused even under high competitive pressure, enabling them to perform optimally in the next match.

In consecutive competitions involving teams, maintaining unity and cohesion among team members is crucial. This study shows that during the transition period between the QR Porprov and POMNAS competitions, team cohesion increased significantly, reflected in improved communication and cooperation among athletes. Before the intervention, the athletes still struggled to adapt socially due to the status difference between their rivals in QR Porprov and their teammates in POMNAS. However, through games, goal-setting, and group affirmations, the athletes began to support one another and develop a shared sense of purpose. Furthermore, social support and group adaptation

during the competitive transition period can help athletes cope with stress and improve their performance (Feddersen et al., 2023). Strong team cohesion also boosted the athletes' fighting spirit and mental readiness for POMNAS. The team cohesion fostered by this intervention contributed to the team's competitive achievements, resulting in two gold and one bronze medals.

One important aspect of this study was the application of goal-setting techniques to help athletes maintain focus and direction during competition. Goal-setting proved effective in increasing athletes' motivation and self-efficacy, as reflected in a 14-point increase in scores on the Goal Setting and Mental Preparation aspects, from 54 to 68. This technique helps athletes set clear, measurable goals for both training and competition. Therefore, a strong positive relationship between goal-setting and athlete self-efficacy is evident (Fadia & Endang, 2025). By setting clear and realistic goals, athletes can feel more confident and motivated to achieve them. This provides a sense of accomplishment that boosts their confidence, which, in turn, impacts their performance on the field. Structured goals also help athletes stay focused on the process, not just the outcome, enabling them to handle pressure and stress more effectively.

The team's achievement of two gold and one bronze medals provides empirical evidence of the positive impact of psychological intervention on athlete performance. The importance of psychological support in helping female athletes cope with competitive pressure is evident (Pargent et al., 2023). With effective psychological intervention, athletes can reduce stress, improve focus, and maintain concentration in stressful competitive situations. Furthermore, the emotional regulation techniques used in this study are effective in maintaining athletes' mental stability, enabling them to perform optimally on the field. In this context, the Central Java Women's Sepak Takraw team's success at POMNAS is clear evidence that mental stability achieved through psychological support directly contributes to competitive outcomes.

Complementing these cognitive strategies, goal setting has also proven crucial in maintaining mental focus. A study of student sepak takraw athletes in Indonesia confirmed a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.638$) between goal setting and self-efficacy (Fadia & Endang, 2025). This means that structured targets significantly increase athletes' confidence in performing optimally under dual demands. Thus, the team's success in winning two gold and one bronze medal demonstrates that interventions not only affect psychological factors but also significantly enhance competitive performance.

CONCLUSION

This action research demonstrates that structured and responsive psychological support is effective in helping female Sepak Takraw athletes in Central Java cope with the pressure of consecutive competitions. Interventions such as containers, PMR, grounding, imagery, and goal setting played a crucial role in reducing emotional stress, increasing focus, and strengthening team cohesion. The interventions had a significant impact on competitive performance, resulting in two gold and one bronze medals. This type of support program is recommended as a standard part of athlete preparation, especially in high-density competition conditions.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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