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Exploring mental toughness among selected private university elite athletes in Manila: A qualitative study

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In any competitive sports, those who are considered legends are those who have been successful from the time they were chosen during the selection stage of their career. Most successful athletes were developed from universities and they became remarkable because of their hard work, dedication, and self-efficient values. Athletes who were recruited from various institutions and were invited to join a more prestigious university are believed to show more perseverance and special skill to be given a privilege as a recruit. They have been exposed to different levels of stress and pressure in preparation for competitions and to ultimately win championships and they are resilient and eager to bring out their best. The present study explored the mental toughness among selected elite athletes of National University. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an approach in a qualitative research wherein the researchers aim to dig deeper on how respondents are able to make clear understanding of oneself and their environment, was used. Findings showed that four categories represent the mental toughness of the elite athletes, namely: Living the dream, malleability of time, the path to elitism, and forward looking.

Keywords: Mental toughness, interpretative phenomenological analysis, qualitative research, elite athletes.

INTRODUCTION

Winning is an important goal of an athlete. It defines who he is and what he is capable of doing. Athletes from any sports have trained themselves to become better and stronger. Strength can be seen in their body structure and stamina to endure the hardest pressure or adversity. However, it is not only in the physical strength that creates an elite athlete but the psychological skill that enables him to concentrate, focus and being positive towards a goal. This concept is what sports psychologist call mental toughness. Mental toughness is the most utilized but there's limited understanding about it when applied in area of sports psychology (Allen et al., 2013).

Sports enthusiast and experts have recognized of mental toughness as a significant factor in sports arena. Loehr (1982) as cited in Sari (2014) highlights that half of the factor that contributed to the success of athletes is associated to psychological factors through mental toughness. Mental toughness has an imperative role for athletes' triumph as observed by coaches. Notwithstanding the overwhelming acceptance and advantages of mental toughness in building champions, studies with exceptional quality on mental toughness as a psychological construct are inadequate.

In any competitive sports those who have been

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considered legends have been successful from the time they were chosen during the selection stage of their career (Sabino, 2009 cited by Juan and Lopez, 2015). Some athletes started in universities and made names for themselves from hard work, dedication and self-efficacy that someday they will be successful. Athletes were recruited from different schools and were invited to join the University and use their talents not just for fame but also for entertainment. They have been exposed to stress and pressure for competitions and to win the gold. They are like the Spartans in the making, strong and mighty.

The optimization of skills in sports is due to many fitness factors. Recently, sports psychology has increased significance as an evolving discipline. Mental skills are the main and established factors for a high performance in competitions (Pashabadi et al., 2011). The need for an elite sport setting put players in a very stressful condition, both psychological and physical (Hanton et al., 2003). As such, the psychological characteristics along with mental skills like self-confidence and the coping mechanism, and the dynamics that is essentially part of the mental toughness construct are basically acknowledged to be one of the main foundations for athletes to face difficulty and are able to achieve success in the competition (Bhardwaj et al., 2014).

Written responses from 131 expert coaches and 160 elite athletes were analysed in a study of mental toughness (Fourie and Potgieter, 2001). The study revealed the twelve components of mental toughness: (1) motivation level; (2) coping skills; (3) cognitive skill; (4) discipline; (5) goal directedness; (6) competitiveness; (7) confidence; (8) maintenance possession of prerequisite physical and mental requirements; (9) team unity; (10) preparation skills; (11) psychological hardiness; and (12) ethics.

According to Bhardwaj et al. (2014), concentration in sports plays a very significant role in the performance of athletes, especially for athletes in the high-performance level because they have no room for error compared to other athletes. Elite athletes' minimal discrepancies on their physical ability can create an enormous impact on their performance outcome. When the athlete cannot concentrate, his stamina will be ineffective when put into play and a little distraction on his mental state can really put an end to their overall team performance.

Elite athletes have been looked up to as model and inspiration for those aspiring athletes. There is more than meets the eye regarding their eagerness, persistence and optimum skill level that conquers the weaker opponent in terms of their psychological fineness. Though the word mental toughness is commonly applied informally to put a better perspective on the success of the athletes, research proves that the correlation among mental toughness and their success of performance have been indefinite (Newland et al., 2013).

This study explored the mental toughness of selected

elite athletes of National University. The respondents of this study were 7 athletes who belong to the elite athlete category identified by the Athletics Department of National University. The respondents are from different field of sports such as basketball (male and female), volleyball (male and female), and table tennis (male and female). The selected sports have won championship games and the athletes are considered class A and significant in achieving the championship title.

RELATED LITERATURE

It has been an intriguing investigation for sports psychologist if the success of athlete's strength can precisely forecast the function of personality or psychological evaluation. An attribute of predicting an athlete's future performance is through the likelihood that they have this personality profile or index that makes them successful in the preferred sport (Lopez and Santelices, 2011). However, it is not only personality trait that defines success in performance. There are other factors that influence optimum performance such as motivation, self-efficacy, determination and focus. Psychological characteristics include mental toughness that an athlete should have in order to succeed.

The emergence of sports psychology has been a valid area of systematic study in the last two decades, with multiple studies on why individual levels of success are growing gradually. Variations in practice and competition success levels are the topics of research. Despite having the appropriate procedure, workouts, meals, and equipment, it was thought that one significant element that makes the player perform better under pressure is the psychological component. Athletes and trainers often pinpointed the key psychological factor that contributed to the impetus of the game that changes or clarified as a significant loss as a feature of game location's powerful force. Variations in a player's success, while studied scientifically, were associated to Mental Toughness (Kumar, 2016).

Mental toughness (MT) is a word that is commonly used to identify a group of psychological qualities that are considered to be important to high success (Jones et al., 2013).

In the past 10 years, researchers have spent a lot of time trying to describe and conceptualize mental toughness. As a result, recent developments in understanding this principle have been made. To advance this field of study even furthermore, it's necessary to look at how mental toughness fits into a nomological network of relationships that includes variables from well-known theories in the field of psychology. According to Gucciardi et al. (in press), despite daily difficulties and stressors, as well as major adversities, mental toughness is described as a person's ability to consistently produce high levels of subjective (such as, personal goal achievement) or

objective (such as, race times) results (Mahoney et al., 2014).

According to early studies on mental toughness, 82% of wrestling coaches consider mental toughness to be the most significant requirement for success in competitions. Sports mentors, players and the media usually describe the athletes' performance as mentally resilient, which supports this study. A thorough analysis of mental toughness information is outside the reach of this report, given the study's particular emphasis on the correlations between mental toughness and performance, related conceptual and measurement problems will, however, be considered (Newland et al., 2013).

Theoretical foundation, meaning and conceptualization, and measurement are all concerns that must be tackled when constructing a solid framework. With the socio-cognitive means involved in succeeding mental toughness, a method anchoring on social-cognitive theories has been suggested when researching possible issues of mental toughness (Newland et al., 2013).

To compete, they must have stamina, able to bounce back under pressure, the ability to withstand anxiety, the ability to stay completely concentrated, and the ability to regulate their thoughts. Although Allen et al. (2013) have found that mentally tough athletes, particularly those in the Olympics, have many attributes which comprise 13 subcomponents and four overall dimensions which includes mindset, training etc. However, when further investigated, Jones's et al. (2013) discovered that it is well suited for athletes from Southeast Asia. This would strengthen the idea that mental toughness can be examined in a cultural perspective like the Philippines. Golby and Wood (2016) argued that although several researchers have looked into describing mental toughness, others have looked into acceptable models. Positive Psychology model, specifically in sports psychology, has extensively studied the link on how mental toughness is applied. In athletic populations, MT tends to mimic these consequences. Self-reported MT has been shown to improve indicators of positive mental state, according to research (Rusk and Waters, 2013).

An earlier study showed that psychological skills training enhanced teenage swimmers' mental resilience, psychological growth, and performance (Sheard and Golby, 2010). The current research builds on this work by assessing the psychological effects of mental resilience in an arguably more disadvantaged athletic sample using similar techniques and constructive steps.

METHODOLOGY

Research design (IPA)

A qualitative research encompasses the exploration and understanding of the meaning of individuals or a group of individuals ascribe to a certain social situation or issue.

Questions that will lead to the emergence of the answers to the

research problem will be used for the gathering of data. The researchers' role then is to make interpretations based on the data gathered by the use of coding method (Creswell, 2007).

The present study will be adopting a phenomenological research design, a human science method and a kind of a qualitative design which will transcend an individual's experiences so as to give meaning and essence on his being and existence, particularly the processes and factors involved in certain phenomenon being studied. The present study will employ the subtype Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); an approach in a qualitative research wherein the researchers aim to "explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world" (Smith and Osborn, 2007, p. 53). IPA is interpretative because the researchers will illustrate how the participants interpret their life experiences. This is also phenomenological because it involves the participant's life-world, their personal experiences, and their personal perception of an object or event.

Setting and participants (demographic profile)

The respondents of this study were 7 athletes who belong to the elite athlete category identified by the Athletics Department of National University. The respondents are from the different field of sports such as basketball (male and female), volleyball (male and female), and table tennis (male and female). The selected sports have won championship games and the athletes are considered class A and significant in achieving the championship title.

Instruments

The instrument to be used is semi-structured questions for an open-ended interview which is conceptualized by the researcher. The questions will be tailored in order to gain answers that will explore the (1) reasons for joining sports; (2) How do elite athletes embrace change and risk; (3) What are the hardest issues they have faced before becoming an elite athlete; (4) How do they cope with pressure in their field of sports. The questions will be validated by at least 3 experts in Psychology. The Personal Data Sheet contained the following information: name of the respondent, the address, contact number, age, sex (male or female), course/year, and socio-economic status.

Data collection

In this research, the researcher used purposive sampling technique to select the respondents that has a specific characteristic in common, and selected the respondent with class A or elite category in sports. The Personal Data Sheet was given to participants, accomplished with the following information: Respondents No, Name, Address, Contact Number, Age, Gender (Male or Female), Course and year and socio-economic status.

After identifying the informants, they will be each given a consent form that will be signed by the informants before the conduct of the interview. The researcher will conduct the actual interview for the informants. The interview upon permission from the informants will be tape recorded for audit trail. The researcher' aim for the outcome of the interview is to gain enough statements that will show the different concept of mental toughness of the elite athletes (Figure 1).

Data analysis

The recorded interview was transcribed in an excel spread sheet

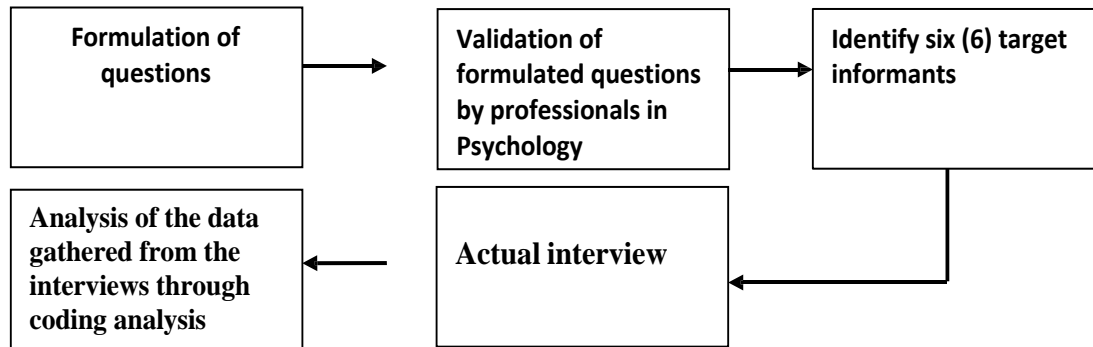


Figure 1. Data gathering procedure.

and perform the initial coding and also determined the sub domain with the consensus of the three researchers. After determining the sub domain, the researched consensually achieved the Main domain and frequency labels were assigned. Analytic memos (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) are a must-have method for improving the analytic process. These memos are a compilation of the researchers' hunches, interpretations, questions, and notes from the start to the end of the study, which will sit part of the data corpus and are checked regularly for inclusion into analysis.

Audit trail

A popular approach is to use reduction techniques and review of specific statements to tease out underlying patterns in order to get at the basic meaning of each individual's experience. The participants themselves must ensure that their opinions and remarks are not misunderstood.

To correct any inaccuracies, audit trail and member verification can be used to achieve this. A transparent overview of the steps taken from the start of a research project to the production and reporting of results is known as an audit trail. These documents detail everything that happened during a probe. Member verification involves presenting transcripts or summaries of interviews to participants so that they can review their responses.

RESULTS

Results (Table 1) included four main themes and eight categories. The first theme is Living the Dream with two categories namely: Family, "My father plays a significant role, why I became an athlete" and Hope for the Future, "I am playing because this will give me a better future". The second theme is Malleability of Time with two categories namely: Time Management, "Playing basketball is very time consuming, because you need to manage your time between playing and studies" and Discipline, "Discipline is very important, my parents always remind me to stay humble, to always remain who you are."

The third theme is The Path to Elitism with one category namely: Pressure "when I feel down, I always cry and sometimes give up, but after few years I started to turn all my fear, anxiety and the anger I received from my coach to motivation. I always condition myself that I

should always be open to listen to my coach". The fourth theme is Forward Looking with three categories namely: Positive Outlook, "I just stay positive; I pray and believe that everything will be okay. I always tell myself that I can do it no matter what happen"; Focus, "I need to focus more on my training, I need more focus not only on the training facilitated by our coach but also to focus on my own skills" and the last category is Value Driven, "Every day I am learning from my experience as a student athlete, I am learning new things that I can apply to my everyday life. Basketball is not only a game inside the court but the values you have acquired in the court can be applied outside."

DISCUSSION

The results of this qualitative research on the mental toughness among selected private university athletes showed that there are four (4) main themes and eight (8) categories of mental toughness of elite athletes. These themes and categories are identified using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Living the dream

Family

The first category is family. The family influences the elite athletes in their early beginnings and has provided a tremendous guide to pursue the career they want to embark. The family created an atmosphere for the athlete to believe in himself and discover their potentials in sports. They have been the source of inspiration and support.

"It's my father who influenced me." (A1)

"My dad is a former amateur player in MCAA. And my cousins are basketball players." (A3).

Table 1. Summary of domains, categories, sub-categories and frequencies

Themes	Categories
Living the dream	Family Hope for the future
Malleability of time	Time management Discipline
The path to elitism	Pressure
Forward looking	Positive outlook Focus Value driven

“I and my two other siblings, actually tried out for taekwondo, and I was the one who excelled. I also tried other sports, but this is already my mother’s forte.” (A5)

“Actually, the reason I continued with volleyball or being an athlete is because of my family.” (A7)

As cited by Bremer (2012), researchers have started to identify athlete families and explain the identity of this family system. Athlete families, for example, were once described as those whose families devote a considerable amount of money, time, and emotional energy to youth-sport activities. To some extent, the athletes are influenced by their parents or siblings who are deeply part of a wide range of sports involvements (Hellstedt, 2000).

Although children and young people can find their own passions in sports for themselves, they need the support of parents so that their participation and athletic success will be possible. As cited by Nunomura and Oliveira (2013). However, Children admire their parents' presence and interest in monitoring their athletic activities. However, in order for their children's experience in the sport sense to be positive, parents must be alert and mindful of the degree and manner of their involvement. According to the literature reviewed and the findings of the research, the degree and type of this involvement may be interpreted negatively by the infant, depending on the degree and form of involvement.

However, in the study of Knight et al. (2016), parental involvement in youth sports significantly influence the athletes in terms of parents as coaches, previous experiences as a sport parent, with know-how of sports and its direction, expectations, and the views for child's sport. Furthermore, their study shows that coaching their children is a choice because of their knowledge of the sports from sports involvement. I coached high school and junior high sports, so I think I know how to do it better

than most people who have volunteered, "one father who coached his children explained. Some parents, on the other hand, did not want to mentor their own children but found it difficult not to due to their sporting expertise and experience".

Hope for the future

The second category is hope for future. As cited by Peneyra and Jocano (2013), while sport is a means to alter the life trajectory of the athlete from vices to success, it also allows access to education and jobs. It is a means to secure money and material needs. However, this access is again articulated in terms of a wider network of responsibilities towards the family. The athlete therefore is a breadwinner, in some cases, the only breadwinner in the family. Participation in elite (fulltime) sports, with the concomitant monetary incentives, is therefore a means of fulfilling familial obligations. This can take the form of scholarships (which can help reduce the strains on family budgets and therefore facilitate the continuing education of the young athlete), allowances (if on the national team), prize money (for every medal won) and salaries (from coaching and related jobs).

“When I was playing, I somehow saw that I may also have a future in it.” (A1)

“At first, the goal was to make it to the PBA or the Pros. Then, of course, there’s Papa who also finished his studies for free, and I would like that to happen to me too so that they wouldn’t worry too much about it anymore.” (A3)

“I was informed about basketball and that they are giving opportunities to study for free, so I grabbed the opportunity so that I can study.” (A6).

"I got a lot of benefits like free scholarship, board and lodging... My family saved a lot because of it. That's why I'm striving." (A7)

However, in the study of Shulman and Bowen (2001) they not only emphasize the advantages of college athletics, but they also explore how athletic strengthening might deviate from the educational missions of institutions. Instead of using their resources to finance academic/research scholarships or services that will improve the educational career of athletes that are studying, schools around the country are investing financially on hiring less academically qualified student-athletes and extensive sport facilities.

Malleability of time

Time management

The first category is time management. As mentioned by Macquet and Skalej (2015), elite athletes are expected to seek education in addition to sports training in order to prepare for life after their experience in sport (such as, Cosh and Tully, 2014; Holt and Dunn, 2004; Wylleman and Lavalley, 2004). It is believed that time management has a significant impact on athletes' overall psychological state, mental recovery and physical aspect, inspiration, and perseverance in the face of hardship, injury rehabilitation, and results of the game (such as, Johnson and Podlog, 2014). Even though time management is a key factor, there has been little research into athletes' time management in sports training settings (Macquet, 2010).

"Training in the morning then studies in the afternoon. Other people tell me to manage it but it's so tiring. If the training is in the morning and the training is in the afternoon, our rest times are very limited. It is very difficult for us but we got into this so we'll be responsible with this so that we could finish our studies" (A2)

"I guess, basketball is really time consuming, but you really need to allot time for it. You should not think about it everyday, because once you only think of basketball, what if you have bad outcomes like bad practice or game, then you will have a bad day. So, I think you just need to allot time for everything." (A3)

"Time management and sacrifice because you are responsible for what you prioritize, which is school and sports. Set aside going out" (A5)

"What's difficult is that you really need to balance your time. Other students already ended their day but we're just starting ours. We really need to fit studying, homework, and projects in one day. It's really difficult, that's why you really need to learn how to multi-task" (A6)

"Sometimes, there will come a time when I find it difficult to manage my time. I sometimes find it hard. Sometimes you really need to finish one thing, but you need to stop doing another... I'm tempted to let go of one, but I make sure that I really need to push through... I need to balance the two because if I let go of one, it will really affect my career. That's why I motivate myself so that I can fix the changes happening to me" (A7)

Discipline

The second category is discipline. The concept of discipline that developed among Filipino athletes were equated with time management and structured routine, which are controlling factors essential to their sporting life, and apparently were either not present or not highlighted outside of their sport experience. It is also curiously apparent that discipline was acquired only through the experience of sport. The regimen of training, which includes time, structure and purpose requires strict adherence. Discipline for the Filipino athlete appears to be a controlling structure outside of the self and is also interestingly translated as an equivalent to the structure of time. Discipline in other words steered the athlete's life trajectory towards an idealized self (a disciplined person) characterized by control of one's daily schedule; obedience to parents, teachers, coach; focus on the tasks of the moment; and away from an otherwise aimless existence (Peneyra and Jocano, 2013).

However, the predominant sentiment of the athletes is that their participation in sports is linked to the personal goals of taking control of one's life (discipline) as well as a means of fulfilling family obligations (support for the family) (Peneyra and Jocano, 2013).

"First and foremost, my parents taught me to stay humble. I should be the same person as I was before, and never change how I treat others. Discipline really is a big deal" (A1)

Discipline was mostly associated with time; that is, keeping time and managing time. Sport involvement was the means for the athletes to comprehend the implications of keeping time and managing time so that they could fulfil their training requirements and still study or work at the same time. Discipline was also associated with following rules, having a focus and a regimented daily routine. Discipline kept athletes free from vices since there was no time left to indulge and vices may affect the athletes' performance (Peneyra and Jocano, 2013).

Path to elitism

Pressure

The first category is pressure. Allen et al. (2013) defined

mental toughness as a psychological quality that helps in coping with sport pressures and allows athletes to be consistently resolute in demonstrating psychological skills such as focus, motivation, confidence, and control as cited by Newland et al. (2013).

In general, mental toughness seems to be most evident in situations where adversity is present. Pressure-filled game situations may warrant more mental toughness from athletes than games that are considered routine and not as meaningful (Ibid).

According to Goldberg (2013), the ability to remain calm and composed under pressure, as well as the ability to concentrate on what's necessary and let go of everything else, are by far the two most crucial mental skills that make up the mental toughness umbrella. You will be totally lost as an athlete if you do not have these two vital mental skills. Championship athletes excel at concentration and the ability to stay focused in the face of adversity.

"Communication in the game. There's pressure in the game but we just take it as if we are fighting for the name of NU." (A1)

"In my first year in UAAP, during my first game, I told myself that I really need to adjust in my game, and I got nervous in my first game because it is my first time in UAAP. When I hear UAAP, there's really a huge impact on me." (A2)

"When it comes to pressure, you really need to strive in the game. Do not focus on the crowd but focus on your game. And you need to learn how to read the last game of your opponents." (A4)

"Yes, he admitted it to us that he is pressured but he did not show it to us because whatever action the leader takes, that's the same actions of his members. That's why when he shows us that he's not afraid, we're not afraid too because our coach is not afraid, why should we be afraid if he's the one handling us." (A5)

"I calm myself. It's so confusing so I talk to myself, like a monologue, I converse with myself especially if I'm nervous." (A6)

"I feel down. I immediately cry or I give up easily. But eventually, when I play with them, when my coach lectures me, I make it my motivation. I always tell myself to listen, I need to listen to what they are telling me and not their screams." (A7)

"When it comes to pressure, you really need to strive in the game. Do not focus on the crowd but focus on your game. And you need to learn how to read the last game of your opponents." (A4)

In spite of having the right technique, right exercises,

right meals and right equipment, it was felt that psychological factor is one important aspect which helps the player perform better under pressure situations. In sport, the demands that athletes face, as well as the focus and dedication needed to excel, make it critical in a way that their mental state is well-prepared (Lawless and Grobbelaar, 2015).

Concentration, focus, anxiety control, and energy management are all improved by visualization and imagery (Burton and Raedeke, 2008; Murphy and Martin, 2002), also exude trust, and the feeling of being in charge motivates people (Pigozzi, 2004; Mellalieu et al., 2006) it also serves as a barrier between one's mental processes (Zizzi et al., 2003); an athlete's ability to deal with competitive anxiety can be improved with proper relaxation and constructive self-talk, as well as an improvement in self-confidence and motivation (Shinke and Costa, 2001).

In the study of Bonal et al. (2020), a qualitative study on Talent Development Pathway for Elite Basketball Players in China, identified psychological factors dimension as one of the factors that shaped the careers of Chinese elite basketball players and what made them reach the highest level of sport. One of the most common and highlighted statements made by the interviewed players in their study was about motivation as a driving force in their sports careers. This element is consistent with non-elite, elite junior players, elite players, elite players, and super elite players, with athletes citing motivation as a key factor in overcoming challenges in both sports and non-sports during their careers.

Forward looking

Positive outlook

The first category is positive outlook. As cited by Juan and Lopez (2015), when an athlete's attention and focus rate decreases, so does his or her self-confidence, according to a research on mental toughness in athletes (Omar-fauzee et al., 2013). As a result, athletes must be able to harness energies that are negative (Golby et al., 2003) rehearsing a skill and routine or performance in mind, which are thought to help people relax (Horn, 2002). This positive view will assist athletes in controlling their anxiety.

An athlete will never perform at his best no matter how great his skills are if he is not able to manage his apprehensions, fears, worries, anger and frustration before every event (Athans and Sampson, 2013). Thus, benefits from having control over unproductive negative energy results in positive competition outcomes (Kuan and Roy, 2007).

"Yes, he admitted it to us that he is pressured but he did not show it to us because whatever action the leader takes, that's the same actions of his members. That's

why when he shows us that he's not afraid, we're not afraid too because our coach is not afraid, why should we be afraid if he's the one handling us." (A5)

"I keep quiet, and then I pray. If that does not work, I will tell myself that I can do it, no need to be nervous." (A6)

"And sometimes, if our coaches pressure us, it's okay. I just show them what is right." (A7)

The negative athletes will always make excuses, while the positive athletes will always work hard to perform better. The negative thought such as "Performing well is all about hard work and dedication, not mental stuff" will make good performers less focus on their psychological skills before competition (Highlen and Bennett, 1979).

Another challenge is that some of these athletes do not want to change their wrong belief or habits. Thus, if the behaviours they follow are positive, it will be beneficial for them, but if it was negative, it will de-motivated them to move forward (Omar-Fauzee et al., 2013).

In the study of Brown et al. (2018), they identified eight codes as variables of flourishing in elite sport performers and one of which is optimistic. This positive attitude was followed by feelings of being concentrated and in command by the athlete. "All year I never really had a negative thought, in my mind I always knew what I was going to do and how I was going to do it," the athlete said in response to a question about how he felt when he was flourishing.

Focus

The second category is focus. As mentioned by Juan and Lopez (2015), the observed low level of athletes' attention control infers that they are not able to maintain effective focus or concentration. The ability to remain focused during a competition is a skill that was identified by coaches as the most important mental skill needed in sport (Gould et al., 1999).

In Golby and Wood (2016), within sport, the pressure the athlete's experience, in addition to the focus and determination required to succeed mean it is paramount that the athlete is psychologically equipped (Coetzee et al., 2006). These findings support previous claims that mental toughness development is primarily driven by the principals of positive psychology; to enable the athlete to surpass the norm and experience optimum psychological functioning in both sport and everyday life (Golby et al., 2003).

"You need to balance it, do not focus on just one thing." (A3)

"You need to focus more. Focus on your training. You should not just focus on what your coach tells you, you

have your own skills to show and target." (A4).

Value Driven

The third category is value driven. Specifically, according to Coulter et al (2010), mental toughness encompasses one's collective beliefs (encompassing attitudes, values, behaviours, and emotions) which help in overcoming barriers to success.

According to Sheard and Golby (2010), "A hardened, disciplined mindset differentiates between the good and the great, especially at the highest level of competition. Being mentally tough reflects positive values: responsibility, self-belief, and positivity to challenge (as cited by Omar-Fauzee et al., 2014).

"You have a lot of experience throughout the year, every day. You learn new things that you can apply in your life. Basketball is not just what's inside the court. The values you learn can be applied outside." (A3)

"But stay humble, even if we are the champion; keep your feet on the ground" (A6).

"Show dedication and love, because if you say that you like the sport, it's not love. So, you can't do what your coaches are asking you to do." (A7)

Scope and limitations

The mental toughness among the selected elite athletes to be explored in the present study pertains to the conceptualization of mental toughness from the "experts" source – elite athletes. Its main purpose is to provide a platform to construct a tool of measurement or approaches in future works. This will include interventions and identify psychological characteristics during recruitment. Informants will be selected using purposive sampling from National University. The study will be limited to elite athletes in the areas of basketball, volleyball and table tennis. As already mentioned, there exists a dearth of studies that explored the elite athletes in the country particularly in the collegial level.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this Qualitative Research investigation on seven athletes who belong to the elite athlete category identified by the Athletics Department of National University revealed four main themes and eight categories of the mental toughness of Elite Athletes. The first theme is living the dream with two categories namely: Family and Hope for the Future. The second theme is malleability of time with two categories namely:

time management and discipline. The third theme is path to elitism with one category namely: Pressure. The fourth theme is forward looking with three categories namely: positive outlook and Focus. The last category is Value Driven. Athletes must learn to improve mental endurance in order to be as competitive as possible. Without mental endurance, elite athletes will not be able to compete at this level on a regular basis. Mental toughness is unquestionably important for athletes to produce the best possible outcomes in sports. Athletes must have the determination and encouragement to persevere in the face of difficulty and pressure in order to achieve success.

The literature of mental toughness among the selected elite athletes can be explored deeply through wider search for local studies and invites scholars or future researchers to conduct a similar study across age, gender, religion, urban area, culture for a wider scope of differentiation and discover other theories that can triangulate with the concept of mental toughness. Future research on the relationship between the coach and the athletes can be explored to identify the different influences that the coach in specific sports would contribute to mental toughness.

This paper provides the description and conceptualization of mental toughness, which has been sorely lacking in the field. This study's empirical rigor ensures that our definition of mental toughness is sound. With a strong grasp on mental toughness, researchers will now look at how to quantify it, how it develops over time, and how to prepare for it. Future studies should look at the relationship between personal characteristics (that is, the twelve mental toughness factors listed here), social support, and the essence of the pressure or adversity to better understand how mental toughness manifests in people's lives.

The researcher would like to emphasize and declare that the study is a phenomenological inquiry that explores the mental toughness of elite athletes of National University and that no statistical validation and psychological test results were provided.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interest.

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