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Mental strategies in sports: Exploring the role of positive self-talk

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the cognitive and emotional benefits of positive self-talk in competitive sports. Building upon psychological frameworks such as Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, the research investigates how athletes utilize internal dialogue to regulate emotions, enhance concentration, and overcome challenges. Using thematic analysis, data were gathered from in-depth interviews with ten athletes aged 18 to 30 from sports including track and field, gymnastics, basketball, swimming, and marathon running. The results revealed four major themes: enhanced focus and concentration, boosted self-efficacy and confidence, management of performance anxiety, and resilience through adversity. The study underscores the power of positive self-talk as a versatile mental training tool. Athletes who consciously employ affirming internal dialogue report increased focus, confidence, emotional regulation, and resilience. Thematic findings offer actionable insights for integrating self-talk into coaching and performance routines. Further longitudinal and cross-cultural studies are recommended to deepen understanding.

KEYWORDS

Self-Talk; Performance Psychology; Mental Training; Mental Health

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the psychological dimension of athletic performance has gained increasing recognition as a critical component of success in competitive sports. Beyond physical strength and technical skill, mental strategies play a pivotal role in shaping athletes' behavior, focus, and emotional regulation. Among these strategies, positive self-talk—defined as internal dialogue aimed at motivating oneself, maintaining concentration, or regulating affect—has been extensively studied for its cognitive and emotional benefits (Raalte et al., 2015). Self-talk interventions are commonly implemented by coaches and sports psychologists as part of mental skills training programs,

contributing to improved performance outcomes across a wide range of athletic domains (Latinjak & Hatzigeorgiadis, 2021).

The theoretical foundation for the use of self-talk lies in Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy, which posits that belief in one's capabilities significantly influences motivation and perseverance. When athletes engage in structured positive self-talk, they may enhance their focus, reduce performance-related anxiety, and reinforce self-confidence through cognitive restructuring like internal dialogue focusing (Psychologists et al., 2024). More recently, Oliver et al. (2022) have shown that personalized self-talk scripts, tailored to individual experiences and sport-specific demands, can have a greater impact on motor performance and emotional readiness than generalized affirmations. Likewise, De Petrillo et al. (2020) found that self-talk is associated with measurable physiological changes, such as reductions in cortisol, indicating lower stress responses during high-stakes competition.

Despite the growing empirical evidence supporting the efficacy of self-talk, much of the existing literature remains rooted in quantitative experimental designs that may overlook the complexity of athletes' lived experiences. This study addresses that gap by adopting a qualitative approach to explore how athletes across different sports construct, adapt, and utilize positive self-talk in their training and competition routines. By focusing on the subjective narratives of athletes, this research aims to uncover how self-talk functions not only as a performance-enhancing tool but also as a mechanism for emotional resilience and psychological recovery. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of self-talk by situating it within real-world athletic contexts, offering insights for coaches, sports psychologists, and performance specialists.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design, which was deemed most suitable for capturing the in-depth, personal experiences of athletes with respect to their use of positive self-talk. A case study design allows for an intensive examination of individual cases within a real-life context, aligning well with the objective of exploring mental strategies in sports. The focus was to generate a detailed, thematic understanding of how self-talk functions in various sports settings, emphasizing lived experiences and psychological impact. By opting for a qualitative lens, the research was able to prioritize participant voice and meaning-making processes, offering rich narrative accounts that quantitative methods might overlook.

The data collection process involved multiple stages to ensure both depth and credibility. Initially, purposive sampling was used to identify ten participants who met the following criteria: (1) aged between 18 and 30 years old, (2) actively engaged in competitive sports for at least two years, and (3) self-reported habitual use of positive self-talk. Participants came from diverse disciplines such as track and field, basketball, gymnastics, swimming, and marathon running, and were recruited through local university athletic departments and community sports organizations.

Data were primarily collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted either face-to-face or via video calls depending on participant availability and location. Each session lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions that encouraged athletes to reflect on their use of self-talk in specific training or competition scenarios, emotional experiences, and perceived effects on performance. For instance, questions included prompts like, “Can you recall a moment when self-talk made a difference during a game?” and “What specific phrases or thoughts do you tell yourself under pressure?” Follow-up interviews were conducted with five participants to verify interpretations and clarify key insights.

To complement the interview data, observational field notes were taken during training sessions where permitted. These notes focused on behavioral indicators of self-talk, such as lip movement, visible self-cueing, and coach-athlete interactions referencing mental strategies. The inclusion of field notes added contextual richness and allowed for data triangulation. All interviews were recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymization of names and sport affiliations. The entire data collection process adhered to ethical research standards, with approvals secured from the institutional review board and informed consent obtained from all participants.

3. RESULTS

Table 1 shows the main psychological benefits of positive self-talk in sports and illustrates how athletes use it to manage their thoughts, emotions, and behavior during training, competition, and recovery. Athletes frequently utilize positive self-talk to sharpen their focus and concentration, especially in intense and high-pressure moments.

Table 1. Thematic map: positive self-talk in sports

Themes	**Description**	**Respondents (Examples)**	**Sample Quotes**
Enhanced Focus and Concentration	Use of self-talk to direct attention to task-relevant cues and eliminate distractions, especially in high-stakes settings.	Sprinter, basketball player, swimmer	"It keeps me present. I stop worrying about the finish line and just focus on each step."
Boosted Self-Efficacy and Confidence	Internal affirmations that build belief in one's abilities and reinforce trust in one's training and preparation.	Soccer forward, gymnast, basketball player	"Saying 'You're the best on this field' helps me go for risky plays with more confidence."
Managing Performance Anxiety	Reframing negative thoughts and managing physiological responses to anxiety through affirming self-statements.	Tennis player, gymnast, marathon runner	"I say 'You've trained for this' before matches to calm down and focus my breathing."
Resilience and Perseverance	Encouragement used during setbacks or fatigue to maintain motivation, manage self-doubt, and enhance recovery mindset.	Injured soccer player, marathon runner, basketball player	"'Every day is progress' helped me focus on recovery instead of dwelling on my injury."

A track and field sprinter shared, "During the 100-meter dash, I used to panic and overthink every step. My coach suggested I repeat to myself, 'Stay in the moment, one stride at a time.' That helped me zone in on the race instead of worrying about the result." Similarly, a basketball player reflected, "In the final minutes of close games, I'd lose focus thinking about making mistakes. I started saying, 'Next play. You're ready.' It helped me silence the crowd and focus on my role." Another athlete, a swimmer, described how reciting, "Pull strong, breathe calm," before and during a race helped her maintain rhythmic movement and block out distractions. These internal affirmations acted as cues for attention control, enabling athletes to center themselves and execute tasks with precision under competitive stress (Hardy, 2006; Tod et al., 2011).

The second theme, boosted self-efficacy and confidence, was evident in athletes who used empowering self-talk to strengthen belief in their ability. A soccer forward explained, “Before a match, I always say, ‘You’ve scored before, and you’ll score again.’ It became part of my pre-game ritual.” A gymnast, aware of the high risks involved in her routines, shared, “Gymnastics is unforgiving—one wrong move and your score drops. I used to be scared right before routines. Now I say, ‘You've done this clean in practice,’ and it boosts my confidence.” A taekwondo competitor revealed, “Just before stepping onto the mat, I whisper, ‘You are fast. You are sharp.’ Those words remind me of all the hard work I’ve put in.” These affirmations acted as reminders of past competence, fueling confidence and mentally preparing athletes to face performance challenges (Bandura, 1997; Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2009).

Managing performance anxiety surfaced as a third theme, particularly in situations where athletes felt overwhelmed or emotionally unstable. A tennis player recounted, “I struggled with nerves before matches, especially during tournaments. My self-talk became, ‘You’ve practiced for this moment. Play your game.’ It grounded me and kept my nerves in check.” A marathon runner explained, “At mile 35, everything hurts. My thoughts get negative. I say to myself, ‘You’re strong. You’ve trained for this,’ and I repeat that until I cross the finish line.” A diver expressed, “Standing on the platform, my heart pounds. I tell myself, ‘Stillness. Strength. Precision.’ Those words help me focus instead of freeze.” Through these narratives, it becomes clear that positive self-talk helps athletes regulate anxiety and regain composure by re-centering on their preparation and capabilities (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2009; Jones, 2003).

The fourth theme, resilience and perseverance, illustrated how self-talk serves as a motivational buffer during failure, injury, or emotional lows. A soccer player recovering from an ACL injury shared, “There were days I didn’t think I could do it. I’d remind myself, ‘Every rep counts. Every day you’re stronger.’ That voice in my head kept me moving.” A basketball player described, “After a bad turnover or missed shot, I used to beat myself up. Now I immediately say, ‘Shake it off, next chance is coming.’ That mindset keeps me from spiraling.” Likewise, a pole vaulter who frequently failed to clear the bar said, “After each miss, I say, ‘One more try. Adjust and fly.’ That stops me from quitting too early.” These athletes leveraged self-talk as a recovery mechanism—both physically and mentally—reaffirming progress over perfection (Gould et al., 2002; Martin-Krumm et al., 2003).

A fifth theme, establishing mental routines, emerged from athletes who developed consistent self-talk scripts as part of their pre-performance rituals. A volleyball libero shared, “Before every

match, I go through the same words: ‘Be quick. Be smart. Be steady.’ It’s like a switch that tells my brain it’s game time.” A boxer described how he looks into the mirror before matches and says, “Control the ring. Control your breath.” A sprinter also noted, “In the warm-up area, I always repeat my three C’s: Calm, Composed, Confident. It gets me in the zone.” These phrases became ingrained mental routines that shaped performance readiness and mental consistency, particularly before engaging in physically demanding tasks (Cotterill, 2010; Weinberg & Gould, 2018).

Another key theme was emotion regulation and self-awareness, in which self-talk was used to process strong emotions such as frustration, doubt, or anger. A fencer said, “Sometimes I get mad when I lose a point. I tell myself, ‘Reset. Refocus.’ Otherwise, I spiral and lose more.” A swimmer added, “I used to panic after a slow start. Now I say, ‘You’re still in it. Finish strong.’ It keeps me from giving up early.” These examples show that positive self-talk doesn't only help with performance but also cultivates a sense of emotional control and internal awareness that promotes better decision-making in the moment (Gross, 2015; Latinjak et al., 2016).

Finally, the data showed that self-talk is highly individualized yet universally effective across diverse sports disciplines. Each athlete crafted their own set of motivational phrases based on their needs, history, and competitive environment. Whether repeating tactical cues, calming statements, or affirmations of identity and strength, athletes relied on language as a psychological anchor. From sprinters to gymnasts, swimmers to soccer players, self-talk emerged as a flexible and adaptive mental tool. These findings suggest that training athletes to develop personalized self-talk strategies can lead to improved performance, reduced anxiety, emotional resilience, and long-term mental well-being (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2010; Hardy et al., 2009).

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study affirm the multi-dimensional value of positive self-talk as a strategic psychological tool in sports. Each of the four identified themes—enhanced focus and concentration, boosted self-efficacy and confidence, management of performance anxiety, and resilience through adversity—offers a nuanced understanding of how athletes internalize and apply self-directed speech to navigate challenges and optimize performance.

First, the theme of enhanced focus and concentration illustrates the cognitive anchoring function of self-talk. As demonstrated by participants’ use of cue-based phrases like “one stride at a time” or “next play,” self-talk served as a mechanism to direct attention and reduce cognitive interference during competition. This aligns with Hatzigeorgiadis et al. (2011), who emphasized that

attentional focus is one of the most consistent benefits of motivational and instructional self-talk. More recent research by Latinjak & Hatzigeorgiadis (2021); Mortejo & Mortejo (2024) highlights that goal-directed self-talk significantly improves focus and automaticity during competitive tasks, particularly under pressure. The ability to regain composure after mistakes, as reported by basketball and sprinting athletes, highlights the self-regulatory potential of internal dialogue in fast-paced environments.

Second, the increase in self-efficacy and confidence through affirmational self-talk supports Bandura's (1997) assertion that verbal persuasion significantly influences belief in one's capability to succeed. Athletes in this study did not rely on generic motivational statements; rather, they adapted self-affirmations to match personal achievements and challenges. This tailored nature of their affirmations appears to strengthen the internalization process and suggests that personalized self-talk interventions may be more effective than standard protocols. Empirical support for this comes from Oliver et al. (2022), who demonstrated that athletes engaging in context-specific affirmations reported higher self-confidence and more effective motor performance.

Third, the theme of anxiety management underscores the emotional regulation function of positive self-talk. Phrases like "progress over perfection" reflect an athlete's attempt to reduce pressure and maintain composure. Such practices reinforce the findings of Van Raalte et al. (2016), who argue that self-talk not only enhances performance but also functions as a cognitive-emotional buffer. Recent work by De Petrillo et al. (2020) further supports this, noting that strategic self-talk is associated with decreased cortisol levels and improved emotional regulation in competitive environments. These coping mechanisms allowed athletes to shift their psychological framing of high-stakes situations from threat to challenge, improving emotional stability.

Lastly, resilience and perseverance emerged as critical areas where self-talk helped athletes maintain psychological stamina. The examples of injury recovery and endurance running underscore the value of repeated affirmations in sustaining effort and optimism through adversity. This supports Theodorakis et al. (2000), who argue that self-talk is integral to maintaining persistence in long-term athletic development. Additionally, a study by Tod et al. (2021) emphasizes that resilience-building interventions incorporating self-talk can significantly improve athletes' mental endurance and return-to-play readiness post-injury. The participants' stories highlight the cognitive endurance cultivated through repeated affirmations, which enabled them to overcome internal and external obstacles during challenging phases of their athletic journey.

Taken together, these findings highlight the versatility of self-talk across psychological domains—attention, confidence, anxiety, and resilience. They also emphasize the importance of intentionality and individual relevance in designing self-talk strategies. For sports practitioners and coaches, this underscores the value of integrating self-talk training into broader psychological skills development programs, particularly with an emphasis on tailoring interventions to the athlete's context and lived experiences.

Future research might explore how demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, sport type, or competitive level) influence the formulation and effectiveness of self-talk. Moreover, longitudinal studies could investigate how self-talk evolves across different stages of an athlete's career and how it interacts with other psychological strategies such as visualization and goal-setting.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This research underscores the power of positive self-talk as a versatile mental training tool. Athletes who consciously employ affirming internal dialogue report increased focus, confidence, emotional regulation, and resilience. Thematic findings offer actionable insights for integrating self-talk into coaching and performance routines. Further longitudinal and cross-cultural studies are recommended to deepen understanding.

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All authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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