

## AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF STRESS MANAGEMENT STYLES AMONG MEDAL-WINNING NATIONAL HANDBALL PLAYERS IN INDIA

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### Background of the Study

Sports psychology has gained prominence in India as athletes now face intense competitive and societal pressures. Traditionally, coaches focused on physical training, but “many teams around the world have been utilizing mental techniques in the improvement of players’ performance”[1]. In other words, sports psychologists recognize that stress management is integral to peak performance. For example, it has been noted that the primary interest of sport psychologists is to “provide and maintain an athlete’s mental health and well-being in the midst of the stresses of a competition,” thereby improving athletic performance[2][1]. Indian athletes are no exception: recent surveys report that a large majority (around 78%) of Indian sportspeople feel **moderate-to-high stress before major events**, often driven by fear of failure[3]. In high-visibility sports like handball, national-level medalists shoulder especially heavy burdens of expectation, given that India’s men’s and women’s teams have captured South Asian Games gold medals in recent years. In this context, effective stress management is critical both for sustaining performance under pressure and for safeguarding athlete well-being[4][1]. Sports psychologists emphasize techniques – from mental rehearsal to relaxation exercises – to help players “cope with stressful situations” and stabilize performance[5][1]. In India today, institutional support for athlete mental health is growing: for the first time the Indian Olympic Association’s Paris 2024 team included a sports psychologist and psychiatrist on its medical staff, underscoring that “the mental wellness of an athlete is extremely important”[6][7]. This study therefore examines how elite Indian handball players manage stress, with a view to improving coping strategies for medal-winning athletes.

### Literature Review

1. **Yadav, Jai S., “Coping Strategies of National-Level Women Handball Players”, *Journal of Tourism & Sports Management*, Vol. 1 (2023): 73–79.** This journal article explores the coping mechanisms of medal-winning and non-medal-winning women handball players at the national level in India. The study found that medalists more frequently used problem-focused coping strategies (like goal setting and action planning), whereas non-medalists tended to use emotion-focused strategies (like self-blame or disengagement). The author concludes that successful athletes are generally more proactive in managing stress.
2. **Singh, Amarjeet & Lakde, M.H., “Stress Level in Men vs. Women Handball Players”, *International Journal of Physical Education, Sports & Health* (2018).** This study examined stress levels among male and female university-level handball players. It concluded that female players reported significantly higher levels of stress compared to males. The findings suggest a need for gender-specific psychological

interventions in sports like handball, particularly at competitive levels.

3. **Kumar, Kunal et al., “Stress in Male and Female Handball Players: A Comparative Study”, International Journal of Behavioral Social and Movement Sciences (2013).**

The researchers conducted a comparative analysis of stress levels between male and female Indian university-level handball players. Their findings supported the trend that women experience higher psychological stress than men in competitive settings, reinforcing the importance of tailored stress management programs.

4. **George, Tins & Mohan, H., “Stress Among Handball vs. Basketball Players”, International Journal of Physical Education, Sports & Health, Vol. 9, No. 3 (2022): 358–361.**

This paper compares stress levels among handball and basketball players. It found that handball players—especially male players—exhibited higher levels of psychological stress. The authors suggest that the nature of handball (fast-paced and physically demanding) may contribute to this elevated stress.

5. **Thakkar, Anoushka, “Sports Psychology and Its Need in India”, Indian Journal of Mental Health, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2020): 143–150.**

Thakkar outlines the historical neglect of sports psychology in India and advocates for its integration into national training programs. The paper emphasizes how Indian athletes face intense performance pressure and societal expectations and how structured psychological support remains underdeveloped.

6. **Kalpana, D., “Stress Level of Indian Sportsmen – A Psychological Perspective”, International Journal of**

**Multidisciplinary Research and Studies (2024): 135–142.**

This study surveyed various Indian athletes and found that only about 35% used constructive stress coping mechanisms (e.g., mindfulness, counseling), while nearly 45% resorted to unhealthy behaviors. Additionally, 60% of athletes felt their coaches lacked awareness of mental health. The study highlights a disconnect between psychological needs and support in Indian sports environments.

7. **Si, Xingwei et al., “Meta-Analysis of Mindfulness Training for Athletes”, Frontiers in Psychology (2024).**

This meta-analysis reviewed multiple studies involving mindfulness-based interventions in athletes. The findings confirmed that mindfulness training significantly improves sports performance and reduces pre-competition anxiety. The paper recommends that psychological skills training, especially mindfulness, should be a standard component of athlete preparation.

8. **Indian Olympic Association, “Team India for Paris Olympics Includes Mental Health Experts”, Hindustan Times, July 17, 2024.**

This article reports a groundbreaking development: the inclusion of a sports psychologist and a psychiatrist in India's official Olympic delegation. This marks a shift in Indian sports administration, highlighting the growing acknowledgment of mental wellness as a key component of athlete performance.

9. **Sports Authority of India (SAI), “National Coaching Manual – Psychology Module”, 2020 Edition.**

The coaching manual provided by SAI includes a dedicated module on stress management. It introduces

psychological tools such as relaxation techniques, visualization, cognitive restructuring, and performance-enhancing self-talk. The manual underscores that psychological training should be integrated into regular coaching regimes.

10. **Schmidt, Glen & Stein, Gloria, "Stress and Coping in Athletes", *Journal of Sports Behavior*, Vol.16, No.2 (1993):108–118.**

Although dated, this journal article is foundational in sports psychology. It classifies stress-coping mechanisms in athletes into problem-focused and emotion-focused categories and argues that high-performing athletes tend to favor proactive, problem-solving strategies. It serves as a theoretical base for understanding coping behavior in sports contexts.

11. **Lazarus, Richard & Folkman, Susan, *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping* (Springer Publishing, 1984).**

This seminal book introduced the cognitive theory of stress and coping. The authors categorize coping into problem-focused (directly tackling the issue) and emotion-focused (managing emotional distress). Their framework remains widely used in sports psychology to analyze how athletes deal with performance pressure.

12. **Anshel, Mark H., *Sport Psychology: From Theory to Practice*, 5th ed. (Benjamin Cummings, 2012).**

This comprehensive textbook discusses mental training, stress management, and psychological skill development for athletes. Anshel stresses the importance of building resilience and developing a psychological toolkit for high-pressure situations, making it highly relevant for analyzing stress in competitive sports like handball.

## Research Methodology

This study employs a **doctrinal research** approach. Rather than collecting new empirical data, we systematically reviewed and analyzed existing legal, policy, academic, and coaching materials related to sports psychology and stress. Sources include peer-reviewed sports science journals, sports psychology textbooks, national coaching guidelines, and policy documents (e.g. sports federations' manuals and the National Sports Policy). The goal is to synthesize secondary sources to understand stress-coping patterns among medal-winning handball athletes.

Under doctrinal methodology, we treat each textual source as a "normative" authority: we extract statements and findings about stress management and coping, then analyze them in context. For example, we examined sports psychology journals for studies on athlete coping styles (such as Yadav's and Kumar's studies[9][10]) and coaching literature for recommended techniques (e.g. mindfulness training[13]). We also considered institutional policies insofar as they address mental health (recent Olympic team initiatives in India[6]). Throughout, we interpret these materials through the lens of Indian sports culture. This method allows us to form conclusions grounded in the existing body of scholarly and policy text, consistent with legal research tradition. No new interviews or surveys were conducted. Instead, conclusions derive from cross-referencing the collected literature. When possible, quotations and data from these sources are provided with citations in Bluebook format, to maintain transparency of the doctrinal analysis.

## Historical Context

The evolution of stress management in Indian sport can be viewed in three broad eras:

**Old Era (pre-1980s).** Prior to the 1970s, sports psychology was virtually unknown in India. Training focused almost exclusively on physical skills, and coaches rarely addressed

psychological preparation. As Thakkar notes, “until the 1960s, we see a scarce application of science to the area of sports in India,” and the notion of formal sports psychology was “in its infancy”[16]. The first stirrings of the field came in the early 1970s: the Indian Association of Sports Medicine (IASM) was formed in 1970, paving the way for systematic sports science[17]. At a 1977 national conference, delegates interested in athletes’ mental training established the Indian Association of Sports Psychology – India’s first group dedicated to this discipline[17]. However, these efforts were mostly academic and limited to small circles of physical educators and psychologists. For handball specifically, which was only introduced in India in the 1970s, there were no formal stress-management programs; players relied on traditional coaching and individual coping.

**Mid Era (1980s–2000s).** The 1980s saw rapid growth in sports science in India. The founding of the Sports Psychology Association of India (SPAI) in 1985 (reviving the earlier defunct group) marked a turning point[18]. SPAI began hosting conferences and inviting international experts; for instance, in the late 1980s it facilitated visits by leading sports psychologists from around the world[19]. The 1990s brought greater institutionalization: the Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports (NIS) in Patiala established a Faculty of Sports Science in 1983, which included training in sports psychology[20]. Over this mid-era, Indian coaches gradually incorporated mental skills training (such as relaxation and concentration drills) into athlete conditioning. The emphasis was still on physical preparation, but psychology gained a foothold. Within handball, top teams began to appreciate psychological readiness for big tournaments. By the late 1990s and 2000s, both the Indian men’s and women’s handball teams were competing in Asia and South Asia; their national champions (the “medal-winning players” at home) became known to use some visualization and team-building exercises, although formal studies from that time are scarce.

**Modern Era (2010s–present).** In the 2010s and 2020s, India has seen a pronounced shift toward prioritizing athlete mental health. Sports federations, the Indian Olympic Association, and the government now explicitly endorse sports psychology. For example, the inclusion of a full-time sports psychologist and a psychiatrist on India’s Olympic team for Paris 2024 represents a first in Indian sports history[6]. National sports bodies have started mandating psychological-support structures. Literature and news reports highlight that athletes will have access to mental health professionals before, during, and after events[7]. In parallel, research output on stress and coping has increased, including studies on Indian athletes’ stress levels[3]. In coaching education, stress management modules are now part of refresher courses (the Sports Authority of India’s coach curricula include “stress management” topics). Moreover, Indian handball players now participate in systematic mental-skills programs: the head coaches of the men’s and women’s national teams have backgrounds in sports science and employ visualization, goal-setting, and mindfulness exercises in training.

Despite this progress, challenges remain. A recent survey still found that only about a third of Indian athletes utilize healthy coping methods, and many perceive coaches as unprepared for mental health issues[14][15]. This suggests that even in the modern era, traditional attitudes linger. For handball medalists specifically, the culture is gradually shifting but has not yet reached parity with physical training emphasis. Nonetheless, the trajectory is clear: what was once a non-entity (psychological coaching in handball) has become an integrated part of elite sports development in India.

### Conclusion and Suggestions

This review indicates that **medal-winning handball players** in India face intense stressors but often cope effectively through adaptive strategies. Studies suggest that national-level medalists – especially women – preferentially

use problem-focused coping (e.g. strategic planning, active problem-solving) to manage stress[9]. In contrast, less successful players more often rely on emotion-focused or avoidant coping. Given that unmanaged stress can impair performance, the evidence supports encouraging top athletes to build and maintain constructive coping habits. For example, sports psychology literature endorses techniques such as goal-setting, progressive muscle relaxation, cognitive restructuring, and visualization to build resilience[5][13]. Mindfulness practices, in particular, have been shown in meta-analyses to reduce competition anxiety and improve focus[13]. Indian handball coaches should integrate such evidence-based methods into their training regimens.

Recommendations based on the doctrinal findings include:

- **Enhanced Psychological Support:** Sports federations (e.g. Handball Association of India) and training centers should establish dedicated sports psychology units. This could mean hiring mental skills coaches and integrating workshops on stress coping into athlete development programs[21]. The recent inclusion of psychologists in Olympic squads suggests this is feasible; it should be extended to national handball teams year-round. Coaches and support staff should be formally trained to recognize stress signs and to teach coping skills.
- **Promotion of Problem-Focused Coping:** Empirical findings (Yadav 2023) indicate that champions cope by solving problems, not by passive avoidance[9]. Training curricula should therefore emphasize problem-oriented stress management. This might include scenario-based drills where players practice decision-making under simulated pressure. Educational seminars can reinforce the idea that seeking social support, devising

strategies, and focusing on controllable factors are effective.

- **Gender-Sensitive Interventions:** Since women players often report higher stress levels than men[10][11], female athletes may need additional psychological resources. Women's medalists might benefit from support groups, mentoring, and leadership training to bolster confidence. At the same time, male players should be encouraged to express stress and adopt healthy coping, countering any "toughness" stigma.
- **Use of Mindfulness and Relaxation Techniques:** Institutions should incorporate practices like mindfulness meditation, deep-breathing exercises, and progressive muscle relaxation into regular routines. Such techniques have proven efficacy in sports contexts[13]. For example, short daily sessions of guided mindfulness could be offered to players, or at least taught by sports psychologists as part of pre-competition preparation.
- **Awareness and Destigmatization:** Many athletes refrain from seeking help due to stigma or lack of awareness. Awareness campaigns aimed at athletes, coaches, and families can highlight the normalcy of stress and the benefits of mental health support[21]. Involving past champions as spokespeople might reduce the perception that seeking help is a sign of weakness. Workshops for families can explain the pressures of elite competition, reducing societal pressure on athletes.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Finally, teams should implement simple monitoring of athlete stress levels (e.g. regular check-ins or psychometric questionnaires). This doctrinal review suggests *proactive* stress management can prevent burnout. Therefore, sports authorities could periodically survey

handball players' coping styles to identify those at risk. Any such data would further enrich this doctrinal understanding with real feedback.

In conclusion, stress management is a multifaceted challenge for India's elite handball athletes. While medal-winning players often adopt adaptive coping, systematic support is uneven. The literature implies that improving stress management among these athletes requires institutional commitment: embedding sports psychology into coaching, promoting problem-solving coping skills, and ensuring mental well-being are considered as important as physical training[5][21]. By doing so, Indian handball authorities can help their champions perform optimally under pressure and maintain their health beyond the playing field.

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