

The role of spirituality in pre-competition mental readiness among student-athletes

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ABSTRACT

Mental readiness is an essential psychological component that enables athletes to manage pressure and perform optimally in competitive situations. For student-athletes, these demands become more complex due to the dual responsibilities of academics and sports. Spirituality is believed to serve as an important psychological resource that helps reduce anxiety, regulate emotions and strengthen confidence before competition. This study aimed to explore how spiritual values shape student-athletes' mental readiness and how they balance spiritual practices with academic and training demands. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine student-athletes from various sports disciplines and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed four major themes: spiritual practice, inner peace, the meaning of competition and time management. Spirituality was found to function not only as religious worship but also as a psychological mechanism that supports emotional regulation, meaning-making and readiness to face competition. These results highlighted the importance of integrating spirituality into psychological training programs for student-athletes. It is recommended that future studies focus on developing and evaluating structured, spirituality-based interventions within varied athletic settings.

INTRODUCTION

Sports, in general, test not only physical skills but also mental strength (Ayranci & Aydin, 2025). Cowden (2017) stated that mental strength plays a crucial role in coping with challenges and competitive pressure, in addition to physical ability. Mental readiness is a psychological condition that enables athletes to perform optimally in high-pressure situations (Marquardt, 2018). In sport psychology, mental readiness is different from mental toughness. Mental readiness involves emotional regulation, self-confidence and communication skills that help athletes stay stable before and during competitions (Hermahayu & Faizah, 2023). Meanwhile, mental toughness reflects long-term resilience and the ability to recover from failure. Therefore, mental readiness is crucial for student-athletes who face greater psychological demands as they must balance academic responsibilities and athletic commitments (Kohs, 2015).

Student-athletes are individuals who pursue higher education while maintaining commitments as elite athletes (Terzis & Beasley, 2022). Meanwhile, according to Conde et al. (2021), a student-athlete refers to a university student or high school student, either enrolled full-time or part-time, who participates in athletic or sports activities, either individually or as a representative, and is affiliated with a sports federation, club, or athletic association. Student-athletes are defined as participants in

institution-based sports (NCAA/NAIA) who face unique academic-athletic stressors. Approximately 35,000 international student-athletes in the US experience homesickness, performance pressure, and reluctance to seek help (Rodriguez, 2017). This dual role often causes stress, anxiety, and reduced well-being (Ellul, 2024). Recent findings among NCAA student-athletes confirm that religiosity fosters patience and mental well-being, providing a spiritual narrative that directly supports dual academic-athletic demands (Upenieks, 2025). Similar patterns occur in Indonesia, where student-athletes face academic workloads that often overlap with competition schedules. The pressure arising from these dual roles makes student-athletes particularly vulnerable to experiencing pre-competition anxiety (Acharjee, 2025).

Zhu & Festijo (2025) stated that pre-competition anxiety is one of the psychological challenges commonly experienced by athletes, including the author. The pre-competition phase is therefore crucial because excessive anxiety or emotional pressure can disrupt performance (Otaqulov, 2024). Pre-competition anxiety (PCA) refers to a specific form of state anxiety experienced by athletes as the competition approaches, characterized by feelings of nervousness, fear, or worry. Excessive levels of PCA may lead to distraction, impaired decision-making, and a decline in athletic performance (Zhao et al., 2024). Exposure to information about opponents, fear or failure and uncertainty often increases pre-competition anxiety (Butayorov, 2024). The risk is even higher in individual sports where athletes bear responsibility alone (Guntoro et al., 2022). This is consistent with the findings indicating that high anxiety negatively affects performance, particularly among novice athletes (Bugaevsky, 2024).

Psychological training programs, such as Psychological Skills Training (PST), are widely used to improve mental readiness through relaxation, breathing control, imagery and self-talk (Julvanichpong et al., 2022). However, alternative psychological approaches, such as spirituality remains relatively under-explored. In response to these psychological challenges, athletes often engage in personal prayer, self-reflection, and surrender to God as strategies to reduce anxiety and cultivate calmness and confidence. Therefore, spirituality may function as an important psychological resource in enhancing athletes' mental readiness.

Spirituality is an important area of research in psychology (Susanti & Damayanti, 2025). (Nowak, 2020) describe spirituality as a transcendent experience involving meaning-making, connecting to a higher power and inner peace. Piedmont (2001) identified three spiritual dimensions, prayer fulfilment, universality and connectedness, that help individuals face difficult situations with calmness and positive meaning. In sports, these dimensions have the potential to reduce anxiety, strengthen motivation and prepare athletes mentally before competition.

Nevertheless, other psychological approaches, such as spirituality, may serve as valuable alternatives for helping athletes manage pre-competition pressure. A review study by Ong & Chua (2021) highlighted the effectiveness of psychological interventions in reducing competitive anxiety among athletes. However, they also emphasized the need for further research to understand how these interventions specifically influence anxiety symptoms. This opens an opportunity to examine spirituality as one of the strategies contributing to mental readiness among student-athletes before competition.

In Indonesia, religiosity has been proven to reduce anxiety and increase life satisfaction among athletes (Guntoro et al., 2022). Nevertheless, Qoriah (2018) argued that spirituality in sports is still rarely studied despite its relevance. Internationally, spiritual needs are increasingly recognized as part of psychological services for student-athletes (McKnight & Livingston, 2019). Given the limited research in Indonesia, especially regarding spirituality as a primary variable in mental

readiness, this study aims to (1) explore how spiritual values shape and strengthen student-athletes' mental readiness before competition, and (2) understand how they balance spiritual practice with academic and training responsibilities. The findings are expected to contribute to sport psychology and provide a foundation for developing spirituality-based interventions for student- athletes.

METHODS

This study applied a qualitative descriptive approach to explore student- athletes' spiritual experiences and their influence on mental readiness. Qualitative research enables researchers to investigate and understand the meanings individuals attribute to human and social phenomena (Creswell, 2009). Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews using a core set of guiding questions, while allowing interviewers flexibility to ask probing follow-up questions to obtain richer narratives (Stewart et al., 2012) . The interview guide was developed based on relevant literature on spirituality and mental readiness. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, examining and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing themes to accurately represent the core findings of the study.

The study used purposive sampling with nine (N=9) student-athletes aged 15 to 21 years who represented different sports disciplines as participants. All participants had prior experience competing in different championships at the regional and national levels.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Participant	Age	Gender	Sport	Championship experience
P1	16	Female	Sepak Takraw	National Student Sports Week
P2	16	Female	Athletics	(Popnas) Regional Sports Week
P3	16	Male	Volleyball	(Porwil/Pre-PON) Provincial Championship (Kejuprov)
P4	16	Female	Swimming	Governor's Cup
P5	15	Male	Taekwondo	National Championship
P6	20	Male	Basketball	(Kejurnas) FTSPFest UBH (University-level)
P7	21	Male	Taekwondo	National Championship
P8	21	Female	Karate	(Kejurnas) - also serves as a coach Porseni (University-level)
P9	21	Male	Swimming	National Student Sports Week (Pomnas) - also serves as a coach

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher analyzed interview data thematically and identified key themes: spiritual practice, inner peace, the meaning of competition, and time management. These themes emerged from direct quotations of participants that reflect how they integrate and manage various aspects of spirituality within their daily lives as student- athletes.

Theme 1: Spiritual Practices

Based on the thematic analysis, it was found that spiritual practice plays a very important role for athletes in preparing their mental state before competition. Various forms of spiritual practice carried out by the athletes included performing obligatory prayers (*shalat fardhu*), night prayers (*tahajud*), reciting prayers (*dhuha*), *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and reading the Qur'an. The athletes perceived these practices as a process of mental preparation before competing.

The athletes stated that before the competition, they usually performed religious practices, as expressed by P4 and P5:

"Yes, I usually perform tahajud first, then the dawn prayer."; "Worship. I perform tahajud prayer and read the Qur'an."

Another athlete, P7, also mentioned that he prayed before competing, which was consistent with the experience of P9:

"Before the competition, I always feel mixed emotions, like the fear of losing. But after praying, I feel more relieved and surrender the result to God."; "I usually perform tahajud prayer first, then recite dhikr before competing."

From these statements, it can be seen that spiritual practices, such as *tahajjud*, *prayer*, and *reading the Qur'an*, have become routines that help athletes calm their hearts and strengthen their confidence before competition.

Theme 2: Inner Peace

After engaging in spiritual practices, the athletes reported experiencing positive effects, particularly inner peace. This sense of tranquility became an essential aspect in shaping their mental readiness before competing. The athletes stated that after performing these practices, they felt more comfortable, calm, and free from mental burdens. This was expressed by participants P8 and P2:

"I feel calmer, more comfortable and confident to face my opponents."; "I feel calmer, more relaxed."

Similarly, participant P3 shared the same experience, while P1 added that the practice helped clear their mind:

"I feel calmer during the game and everything flows smoothly."; "It feels like my heart becomes peaceful and my mind feels unburdened."

These excerpts clearly illustrated the significant role of spirituality in the athletes' experiences. The calmness they described is not merely a fleeting emotional state; rather, it reflects a form of psychological readiness that enables them to face competitions with greater composure and focus.

Theme 3: Meaning of Competition

The athletes interpreted the competition not merely in terms of its final outcome, winning or losing, but as a valuable experience and a means of character development. This perspective is reflected in the statements of participants P2 and P1:

"For me, a competition is not about winning or losing; what matters is the experience."; "A competition is a valuable experience."

In addition, competitions were also perceived as opportunities for character learning, as expressed by participant P7:

“The meaning of every competition is perhaps a lesson. If I do not succeed, I learn to improve for the next attempt. On the other hand, a victory teaches me the value of patience, to be more humble and never feel completely satisfied.”

However, for other athletes, competitions were also viewed as opportunities to refine their technical skills and achieve personal growth, as expressed by participants P8 and P9:

“Because every valuable competition contributes to my experience and helps me improve my technique.”; “To surpass my previous personal best record and improve my best time.”

A competition is not merely about winning or losing. Most athletes perceived it as a valuable experience, a process of character learning and an opportunity for continuous growth. It also served as a space to remain humble, practiced patience, engaged in self-improvement and strived for better achievements than before.

Theme 4: Time Management

The athletes managed their time between training and academics through effective, structured, yet flexible time management. Some athletes benefited greatly from their school policies, which limited excessive homework and allowed a balanced schedule between academic and sports activities. This approach helped them avoid excessive academic stress and maintain focus on training, as expressed by participant P2:

“At SMA 4 Sumbar, teachers are not allowed to assign homework to students.”

However, many athletes also managed their time independently, as described by participant P3:

“By finishing my school assignments first during my free time... and then, once I’m done, I start my training.”

There were also athletes who prioritized academics, such as participant P6:

“For now, I try to prioritize my college assignments first... but I still make an effort to keep up with training and not skip it.”

Meanwhile, some athletes adopted a more flexible approach by adjusting their schedules based on their physical condition, as expressed by participant P9:

“Since training usually takes place in the afternoon, I do my assignments in the morning or midday, sometimes at night, too, if my body isn’t too tired.”

It can be seen that each athlete has their own way of maintaining balance between academics and training. Some are supported by school policies, others create personal strategies by completing assignments first, some prioritize academics and others adjust their schedules based on their physical condition. This indicates that time management is a crucial factor enabling athletes to balance and perform effectively in their dual capacities as students and competitors.

Spirituality emerges as an important factor supporting student-athletes’ mental readiness before competition. Religious practices, such as prayer, recitation, remembrance and supplication, serve not only as worship but also as emotional regulation strategies that reduce psychological tension

(Brandão, 2025). These results align with previous studies indicating that religious coping helps athletes manage competitive anxiety (Shahdan et al., 2022; Noh et al., 2024).

Religious coping contributes to calmness and adaptability, strengthening athletes' ability to face stress (Syafitri & Rahmah, 2021). This supports the idea that spirituality promotes inner peace and emotional stability, two essential components of mental preparedness (Hagan, 2021). However, the sense of inner peace following spiritual practices is not merely subjective but is also supported by a significant relationship between spirituality and athletes' resilience, which enables recovery from pre-competition stress through meaning-making and hope (Pawar et al., 2024). Piedmont (2001) theory strengthens these findings. Athletes' experiences in this study reflected prayer fulfilment (calmness during worship), connectedness (surrender to God) and universality (interpreting competition as a meaningful life experience). Thus, spirituality functions not only as a ritual practice but also as a transcendent psychological experience influencing mental readiness.

Spirituality also contributes to psychological well-being, which is associated with better sports performance (Nowak, 2020; Roychowdhury, 2019). Consistent with Guntoro et al. (2022), higher spirituality or religiosity correlates with lower anxiety and greater life satisfaction. This indicates that spirituality can help student-athletes remain calm and confident before competition.

An international study shows that psychological interventions have been proven to reduce athletes' anxiety, but further research is still needed. "This relationship is further evidenced internationally, where spiritual coping significantly buffers post-traumatic stress and enhances resilience among athletes facing competitive adversity, promoting sustained mental well-being (Okan et al., 2023). Ong & Chua (2021) noted that while various psychological interventions effectively reduce anxiety, the mechanisms of how different interventions, including spiritual practices, affect anxiety symptoms require deeper examination. Spiritual rituals, such as prayer, meditation and reflection, may help athletes transform anxiety into motivational energy, a concept consistent with (Orlick, 2017) emphasis on emotional control and focus.

Spirituality also supports emotional regulation, which is reflected in athletes' reports of feeling calmer after worship (Hermahayu & Faizah, 2023). Prayer and surrender reduce physiological tension, similar to the outcomes of psychological skills training, such as controlled breathing and visualization (Julvanichpong et al., 2022). Furthermore, spirituality contributes to meaning-making. Athletes interpret competition not merely as a win-loss event but as a meaningful life journey (Ellis & Weir, 2020; Ronkainen et al., 2018). This improves resilience and mental stability.

In addition to anxiety reduction, spirituality influences time management and discipline. Student-athletes must balance training, academics and spiritual practice (Santos & Sagas, 2022). Good time management is linked to academic and athletic success (Ator & Ortizo, 2024). These habits reflect self-management and spiritual discipline. Finally, spirituality is highly relevant within the religious context of Indonesia. Although understudied (Qoriah, 2018), spiritual needs are increasingly acknowledged internationally in student-athlete support programs (McKnight & Livingston, 2019). Therefore, spirituality has significant potential to be incorporated into psychological services for student-athletes.

This study has several limitations. First, the limited number of participants restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, some participants were reluctant to fully disclose their responses during the interview process, which limited the depth of the data obtained. In addition, this study was conducted within a specific cultural and contextual setting, which may result in different findings when applied to other contexts.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrated that spirituality plays a significant role in shaping student-athletes' mental readiness before competition. Religious practices, such as prayer, recitation, remembrance and spiritual reflection, function as emotional regulation strategies that help reduce anxiety, enhance calmness and strengthen confidence. These results aligned with previous research showing that religious coping contributes to emotional stability, psychological well-being and the ability to withstand competitive pressure. Beyond anxiety reduction, spirituality also facilitates meaning-making, allowing athletes to interpret competition not merely in terms of winning or losing, but as a meaningful life experience. This perspective enhances resilience and promotes a more positive mindset toward competitive challenges. For student-athletes, spirituality further supports the balance between academic, training and spiritual demands through better time management and self-discipline. Overall, the study highlighted spirituality as a relevant psychological resource, particularly within Indonesia's highly religious cultural context. Therefore, spirituality holds strong potential to be incorporated into psychological interventions aimed at improving student-athletes' mental readiness before competition. Future research is encouraged to explore structured spirituality-based interventions and examine their effectiveness across various sports disciplines.

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