

Be an athlete, student, and child: Potraying the mental toughness of student athletes in a religious-based middle school

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Abstract

Compared to student-athletes who attend special sports schools, student-athletes who participate in public or religious schools tend to face greater obstacles, especially in terms of mentoring and facilities. This phenomenological research focuses on portraying the mental toughness of student-athletes and the strategies of student-athletes in balancing their roles as athletes, students, and children while attending Middle School Muhammadiyah 12 GKB Gresik. Using semi-structured interviews with 4 student-athletes selected based on the uniqueness of their sport and their willingness to participate in the research, the researchers found that the student-athletes had good and mature mental toughness because they were able to survive and find solutions when they encountered obstacles and psychological pressures from training, competing, participating in learning at school, to taking time to interact with family members at home. However, the school still needs to provide psychological support in the form of increasing mental toughness through self-awareness training, imagery, and self-talk at least once a semester. The final results of this study can complement the limited field data on student-athletes in religious-based junior high schools in Indonesia, inspiring school management (Islamic junior high school) to consider accepting student-athletes.

Keywords: *mental toughness, student athletes, religious-based middle school, phenomenological approach, sports psychology.*



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Introduction

For a professional athlete to have the ability to deal with pressure, threats, and disturbances in various situations is a must (Connaughton & Hanton, 2009; Jones et al., 2002). In addition to supporting performance and achievement, this is also to avoid athletes feeling like failures and not believing in their abilities (Goldberg, 2016; Liew et al., 2019). In psychology, this ability is interpreted as mental toughness, which can be divided into three constructs: confidence, perseverance, and control, as the research (Sheard et al., 2009) all three are interrelated and form a single factor in mental toughness, especially in the field of sports. Referring to several studies such as (Goldberg, 2016; Kuan & Roy, 2007; Liew et al., 2019; Slimani et al., 2016), which straightforwardly states that mental toughness contributes positively to efforts to maintain athlete performance and performance while undergoing competition. So it is not surprising that currently, the development of mental toughness training models for athletes is very intensively promoted (Kaufman et al., 2018; Novan et al., 2020).

Then concerning the status of student athletes, for student athletes who do not take education in special institutions that are prepared for student athletes such as: Sentra Latihan Olahragawan Muda Potensial Nasional (SLOMPN), Sidoarjo Sports State Senior High School in East Java, Sriwijaya Sports State Senior High School in South Sumatra, Riau Sports State Senior High School, and Ragunan Sports State Senior High School in Jakarta, will certainly have their obstacles than student athletes who are in special sports education institutions, because of differences in curriculum, facilities, and values adopted, especially religious-based schools. In Indonesia itself, religious-based secondary schools generally emphasize the integration of the curriculum with the content of religious values in more depth, both in the aspect of understanding and daily practice through character habituation activities, so that when graduating, students excel in academics and character (Susilo et al., 2022; Umar et al., 2024; Zaenab et al., 2020). Therefore, when a religious-based secondary school decides to accept students who have superior characteristics, such as these student athletes, it will be a challenge to their academic performance at school.

This is the case at Middle School Muhammadiyah 12 GKB Gresik, which, starting in the new school year 2023-2024, opens opportunities for outstanding student athletes to attend school until graduation through the provision of educational scholarships (Rosidin, 2022). As many as 15 student athletes have been registered as seventh-grade students spread across several classes, where they are divided into some sports, including kickboxing, taekwondo, hockey, and muay thai. Furthermore, of the 4 student athletes who agreed to fill out the poll questionnaire about the importance of providing psychological-based assistance, such as increasing mental toughness, all agreed that it was needed by student athletes in addition to physical fitness assistance to support their performance as athletes, students, and children when they are at home. Referring to research on student athletes' mental toughness in Indonesia (Hardiansyah & Masturah, 2019; Murod & Jannah, 2021; Sopacua & Novanto, 2019), it was found that most of the research focused on student athletes at sport-specific schools and senior high schools only, while research on general and religious-based junior high schools was limited.

The researcher's interest grew to try to study more deeply the description of the mental toughness of Middle School Muhammadiyah 12 GKB Gresik student-athletes in balancing their roles as students, athletes, and children at home. The results of this study are expected to be able to provide positive recommendations for schools to provide better services and assistance for school athletes, including providing a mental toughness training model that follows the needs of student-athletes at Middle School Muhammadiyah 12 GKB Gresik in the future.

Method

To explore and obtain accurate and adequate data, researchers utilized data sources from semi-structured interviews with four research subjects, comprising several student athletes from

various sports at Middle School Muhammadiyah 12 GKB Gresik. Subject selection was conducted through the collection of data on student athletes at the school, where out of a total of 15 student athletes, only 4 were willing to participate in the study. We used scientific articles as supporting data. As for the data collection tools, we developed a semi-structured interview guide based on the theory of mental toughness dimensions, including self-confidence, perseverance, and control (Sheard et al., 2009), as shown in Table 1.

This research uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach; therefore, semi-structured interview techniques are the data collection method, while we use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as an analysis tool, which consists of four stages: 1. Reading and Re-reading, 2. Initial Noting, 3. Developing Emergent Themes, 4. Searching for connections to find relationships from significant themes. All of this is based on considering the ultimate goal and the object of research to be portrayed in several similar studies. In addition, the essence of phenomenological research is to look more closely and deeply at how individuals interpret their own experiences (Emizir, 2012). The reason for selecting these subjects is that they represent the diversity of sports practiced by student athletes, in addition to their willingness to participate in the research process, as evidenced by their completion of the research willingness form.

Tabel 1. Semi-structured Interview Guidelines for Mental Toughness

Topic	Questions
Self-Confidence	- How confident are you in your abilities during training and competitions? - How do you build your self-confidence?
Perseverance	- What motivates you to keep training and performing well? - What are your personal goals in sports?
Control	- How do you deal with stress, boredom, or fatigue? - What do you do when your emotions are unstable?
Balance of Roles and Environmental Support	- How do you balance your time as an athlete, student, and child? - What is your biggest challenge? - What role do parents, teachers, or coaches play in supporting you? - What kind of support do you need from the school?
Advice	- What advice would you give the school to better understand the needs of student-athletes?

Findings

Portrait of Mental Toughness of Student Athletes at Middle School Muhammadiyah 12 GKB Gresik

Our findings found that student athletes can be classified as having good and mature mental toughness as athletes, especially in the dimensions of confidence, perseverance (commitment), and control (self-management). It appears in the statements of each student athlete where they always think optimistically, can find solutions when there are pressures and problems they face, and desire to get better results.

1. Confidence

Athletes also believe that to continue to achieve and balance their role as students, every athlete must believe in their abilities, as stated by the subjects: "I will always think that I am capable of training hard for maximum results for the upcoming competition" (AYSP). "Just believe in myself that I can do it all at once, and I can train harder than yesterday, better than before" (RNAW). In addition to believing in one's abilities, routinely getting used to praying also makes a student-athlete able to continue to maintain enthusiasm in training and participating in competitions, as expressed by one of the subjects: "Being able to do that is because we pray for good things only, so we convince ourselves by praying" (ZKZ).

2. Perseverance/Commitment

Without a serious commitment, the hope to grow and achieve better achievements will be very difficult for student-athletes to achieve; therefore, the research subjects agreed that even though they have achieved provincial to national level achievements, they still have more targets that they want to achieve. This commitment can be seen from the statements of the subjects: “I have achieved many things during my time as a student-athlete, but I want to add to my achievements such as more gold medals that I want to win” (ZKZ) “I have not achieved higher competitions such as Pekan Olahraga Provinsi (PORPROV) and others and I will train and train until my achievements are achieved” (AYSP), “The thing that I have not achieved until now is getting the title of best individual Poomsae cadet athlete/pair poomsae cadet. And I will train even harder to get the title of best athlete” (RNAW).

3. Control /Self-management

In terms of facing challenges, student-athletes admit that the most common obstacles and challenges faced by athletes are injuries and boredom due to routine, both of which are still often faced by student-athletes, including when attending school at Middle School Muhammadiyah 12 GKB Gresik. However, specifically for the challenge of boredom, student-athletes already have ways to overcome it, such as taking a break to reflect on themselves, still forcing themselves to come to the training ground, and listening to/asking for motivation from coaches and parents.

Here are the statements of the subjects: “Usually I overcome it by reflecting on myself in my room, but sometimes I also confide in my parents and ask for motivation so that I can progress” (ATZ). “Usually I immediately rush to the training ground and vent all the unpleasant feelings, then go home and listen to lots of motivation” (AYSP). “Usually I will do other activities that can make me forget about the negative things, then I will daydream alone in my room not knowing what the benefits are but once there is another training I am fresh again” (RNAW), “There are no unpleasant conditions as a student-athlete, if there are we force ourselves to be better” (ZKZ).

Student Athlete Strategies in Balancing Their Roles as Athlete, Student, and Child at Middle School Muhammadiyah 12 GKB Gresik

To balance their three roles, student-athletes carry out several strategies as described by the researcher below:

a. Dividing the Activity Schedule

For AYPS and ATZ subjects, dividing the activity schedule at the beginning makes it easier for them to maximize their activities, whether it is participating in learning, routine training, doing schoolwork, or interacting with family members while at home.

b. Remembering the Initial Goal

In line with what was expressed by the RNAW subject, “The way to manage obstacles so as not to get caught up in difficulties is to remember the initial goal, why I entered a class that was given a different schedule from other athletes.”

c. Making Time for Family

As student-athletes since elementary school, parents and relatives generally understand the condition of the athletes, so they understand if student-athletes interact with them very little. Even so, student-athletes are also aware of their position to continue to try to make time when they are at home, either by confiding or helping with housework. The following is an excerpt from the statement of the subject RNAW “Taking time to chat/deep talk for a while when returning from training (sometimes)”.

and ZKZ “Communication with parents is going well and smoothly, like students in general, what is different from students, in general, is that there is an additional training schedule, and they also try to be able to divide their time well, so that they can communicate with parents or friends.”

d. Making Targets and Focusing on Targets

With activities that are not the same as junior high school students in general, student-athletes sometimes experience interference from their peers, so to overcome this, they firmly set achievement targets and self-commitments to be achieved each year. Without doing this, they will be easily distracted and lulled by the conditions around them, in line with the statement from the AYPs subject: “Not influenced by what other people say, always focus on training until the desired target is truly achieved.”

Discussion

Being a student athlete, especially in a religious-based junior high school, is certainly not easy; it takes confidence, commitment, and good self-management to live it in balance. Moreover, in the process of showing the best performance and achievement in every competition, technique and skill alone are not enough for an athlete, but also need to be supported by good psychological support to support athlete readiness (Jannah et al., 2022; Nisa & Jannah, 2021). Therefore, we argue that even though the school has provided relief for student athletes' study schedules during routine training and competition, psychological support in the form of adequate and structured mental toughness improvement training must still be provided to help student athletes achieve optimal performance. Given that most student athletes at Middle School Muhammadiyah 12 GKB are classified as hard sports (martial arts), in addition to continuing to adjust student athletes' self-management strategies when they are in emotionally unstable conditions.

By looking at the long experience of the subjects who have been student athletes since elementary school, it is not surprising that the mental toughness of the student athletes in this study is classified as good and mature so that they do not find it too difficult to balance their roles and find solutions to the problems they face while studying at Middle School Muhammadiyah 12 GKB Gresik. This condition is in line with the study (Hindiari & Wismanadi, 2022; Mahardika & Suropto, 2022), which explains that the experience of participating in competitions and the number of competitions that athletes have participated in greatly affect the level of readiness and achievement of athletes. Commensurate with the study (Ferdy Irawan & Limanto, 2021), which explains that mental maturity helps student athletes avoid excessive anxiety disorders when facing unfavorable or stable conditions.

However, this finding also shows a slight difference from the initial construct of mental toughness (Sheard et al., 2009) which identifies mental toughness in student subjects into only a few dimensions, thus not considering emotional aspects and problem-solving mechanisms at the level of adolescent school students (Liew et al., 2019) as our research subjects, who come from religious-based schools, student athletes are very much influenced by emotional conditions and the support of their closest people. Not to mention, the character values they get are also very different from student athletes in general, for example, the character of discipline is not only seen in the seriousness of the training process but also the obedience to worship on time and together, and refrain from unethical words/behavior as the teachings of the religion they profess (Ashidiqi, 2023).

In addition, some student-athletes may face greater emotional challenges when living away from their parents, such as living in a dormitory. The absence of parental presence in daily life can reduce the direct emotional support that is crucial for coping with stress, failure, or a decline in motivation among student athletes (Juwita & Wahyuni, 2016; Syaokani et al., 2020). In such circumstances, the role of school counselors, peers, and coaches becomes crucial in fostering emotional safety. Psychological support programs such as self-awareness training (Dewi & Jannah, 2023; Rachman et al., 2024; Ramadhani, 2023), imagery (I Nyoman Sukartidana, 2025; Wattimena, 2023) and self-talk (Maharani et al., 2024; M. Putra & Jannah, 2017), as well as regular counseling services, can be effective strategies to

help them build mental toughness despite limited interaction with their parents.

To complement these findings, further research through surveys on all student athletes of Middle School Muhammadiyah 12 GKB Gresik can be an option to be statistically analyzed to be considered in steps to understand in detail the psychological conditions of student athletes, as similar research (M. F. P. Putra et al., 2023). The final results in this study can certainly contribute to enriching field data on the mental toughness of student athletes in religious-based junior high schools, from previous studies on student athletes in public schools (Hardiansyah & Masturah, 2019; Pratiwi & Lutfi, 2019; Sopacua & Novanto, 2019; Syah & Jannah, 2021) as well as being an inspiration for the management of Islamic religious-based junior high schools in Indonesia when they have the opportunity to accept student athletes in their schools.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that student athletes in religious-based junior high schools demonstrate mature mental toughness, particularly in terms of self-confidence, perseverance, and self-control. These qualities enable them to cope with challenges related to training, academic demands, and their roles within their families. Despite the limited psychological support currently provided, their ability to adapt demonstrates strong internal motivation and high coping capacity.

To optimize the well-being and performance of student athletes, schools should integrate structured psychological interventions—such as self-awareness training, imagery, and self-talk into their support systems. This study provides practical implications for school counselors in religious settings and highlights the need for further research on the role of counseling services and religious values in shaping athletes' mental toughness.

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