



Research Article

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Psychological Well-Being of Elite Athletes: A Systematic Review of Prevalence, Challenges, And InterventionsDr. Sarungbam Sen Singh¹, Dr. Chongtham Khogendra Singh², Dr. Sapam Sanatombi Devi³¹Post-Doctoral Fellow (ICSSR), New Delhi, Department of Physical Education and Sports Science, Manipur University, Canchipur-India²Assistant Professor, Dhanamanjuri College of Teacher Education, DMCTE, Imphal-India³Assistant Professor, Department of Physical Education, National Sports University, Imphal-India**Article History**

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Abstract: This systematic review examines the psychological well-being of elite athletes, synthesizing findings from studies published between 2017 and 2024. The review highlights the dual nature of elite sport, which offers both benefits and significant mental health challenges. Key topics explored include the prevalence of mental health concerns, contributing factors such as performance pressure and injury, gender-specific stressors, and the impact of external factors like the COVID-19 pandemic. Effective interventions, including psychotherapy, resilience training, and organizational support, are discussed. The findings underscore the need for a holistic and multifaceted approach to supporting the mental health of elite athletes.

Keywords: Elite athletes, psychological well-being, mental health, interventions, stressors

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the intricate relationship between elite athleticism and psychological well-being, a relationship characterized by a compelling paradox. While elite sport often promises a plethora of physical and mental benefits, a burgeoning body of research reveals a significant counterpoint: the very demands that propel athletes to peak performance can simultaneously contribute to substantial mental health challenges.

This comprehensive review synthesizes findings from numerous studies to explore this duality, examining the prevalent risk factors, the often-overlooked protective factors, and the diverse interventions aimed at fostering the holistic psychological well-being of elite athletes. The psychological well-being of elite athletes in Manipur, with an emphasis on resilience, hedonic, and eudemonic happiness (Singh et al., 2024). Psychological well-being was significantly correlated with cohesion,

expressiveness, care, acceptance, independence, achievement orientation, cultural-moral-religious aspects, active recreational orientation, and organisation (Singh et al., 2024).

The analysis will delve into the multifaceted nature of this issue, considering prevalence rates, contributing factors, gender disparities, the influence of external events like the COVID-19 pandemic and effective strategies for promoting mental health within the demanding world of elite sport.

METHODOLOGY**Study Design**

This systematic review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines to ensure transparency and reproducibility. The review aimed to synthesize existing evidence on the psychological well-being of elite athletes, examining prevalence, contributing factors, and interventions.

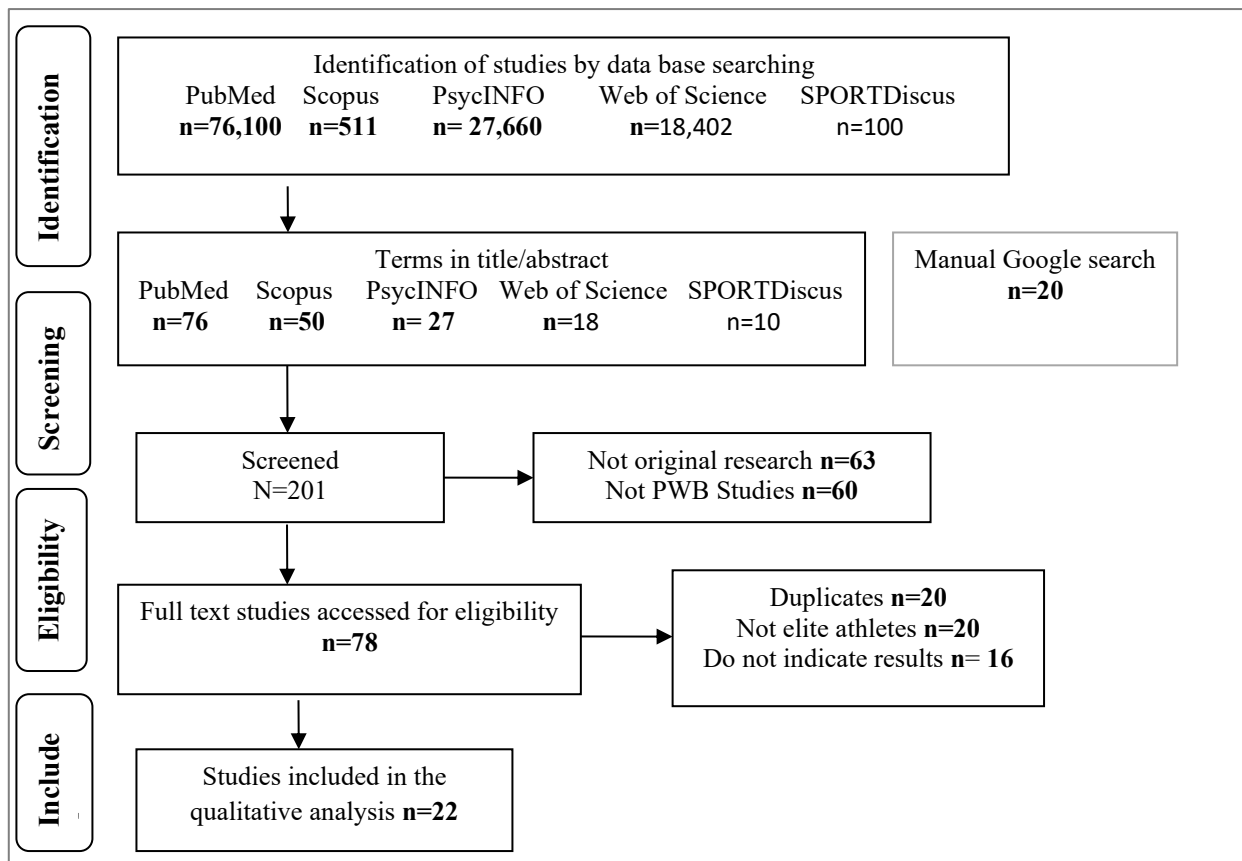


Figure 1: Flow diagram of studies identification and selection

Eligibility Criteria

The inclusion criteria for this review were as follows:

- **Population:** Elite athletes from any sport discipline and level.
- **Intervention:** Studies addressing psychological well-being, mental health challenges, or interventions targeting mental health.
- **Outcomes:** Measures of psychological well-being, mental health disorders, or coping mechanisms.
- **Study Types:** Peer-reviewed quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses.
- **Language:** Articles published in English.
- **Timeframe:** Studies published from 2017 to 2024 to include contemporary perspectives.

Exclusion criteria included studies focused exclusively on non-elite athletes, non-peer-reviewed articles, or those without specific mental health outcomes.

Information Sources

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple databases, including:

- PubMed
- Scopus
- PsycINFO
- Web of Science
- SPORTDiscus

Additional sources included reference lists of included articles and key journals related to sports psychology.

Search Strategy

The search strategy used a combination of keywords and Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms, including:

- “Elite athletes”
- “Psychological well-being”
- “Mental health”
- “Stressors”
- “Coping mechanisms”
- “Sports psychology”

Boolean operators (AND/OR) and database-specific filters were applied to refine the search results.

Study Selection

The identified articles were imported into reference management software, and duplicates were removed. Titles and abstracts were screened by two independent reviewers against the eligibility criteria. Full texts of potentially relevant studies were retrieved and assessed for inclusion. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer.

Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

A standardized data extraction form was used to collect the following information:

- Study details (authors, year, country, and design)

- Population characteristics
- Mental health outcomes and measures
- Key findings and conclusions

The quality of included studies was assessed using validated tools such as the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale for observational studies and the Joanna Briggs Institute Critical Appraisal Tool for qualitative research.

Data Synthesis

Due to the heterogeneity of study designs and outcomes, a narrative synthesis was conducted. Key themes were identified and categorized into prevalence rates, contributing factors, gender-specific challenges, environmental influences, and interventions. Quantitative data were summarized descriptively, and qualitative data were thematically analyzed.

Risk of Bias Assessment

The risk of bias in the included studies was assessed using appropriate tools such as the Cochrane Risk of Bias Tool for randomized controlled trials and the Risk of Bias in Non-randomized Studies of Interventions (ROBINS-I). Results were summarized to provide an overall assessment of study reliability.

Ethical Considerations

This review used secondary data from published studies; hence, ethical approval was not required.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The process of identifying and screening studies for the systematic review involved searching five major databases: PubMed, Scopus, PsycINFO, Web of Science, and SPORTDiscus. A total of 122,773 articles were retrieved, with PubMed contributing 76,100 articles, Scopus 511 articles, PsycINFO 27,660 articles, Web of Science 18,402 articles, and SPORTDiscus 100 articles. An additional 20 articles were identified through a manual Google search.

During the screening phase, filters were applied to the titles and abstracts, reducing the number of articles to 76 from PubMed, 50 from Scopus, 27 from PsycINFO, 18 from Web of Science, and 10 from SPORTDiscus. A total of 201 articles were then screened for full-text eligibility. Of these, 63 articles were excluded as they were not original research, and 60 were excluded for not focusing on psychological well-being (PWB).

In the eligibility phase, 78 full-text studies were assessed further. At this stage, 20 duplicates were removed, 20 studies were excluded as they did not involve elite athletes, and 16 were excluded as they did not provide specific results. Ultimately, 22 studies were included in the qualitative analysis for the systematic review. This rigorous process ensured the inclusion of only relevant and high-quality studies for the review.

Prevalence of Mental Health Concerns in Elite Athletes

Comparing Prevalence Rates to the General Population

Establishing a definitive prevalence rate for mental health concerns among elite athletes proves challenging due to inconsistencies across studies. Some research suggests prevalence rates comparable to the general population (Jovanovi et al., 2022; Nicholls et al., 2020). For example, Jovanovi et al. (2022) found similar levels of depressive and anxious symptomatology in elite Slovenian athletes compared to a control group. Similarly, Nicholls et al. (2020) reported that a majority of Super League rugby players exhibited normal or mild depressive and anxiety symptoms. However, other studies suggest potentially higher rates of mental health issues among elite athletes (Biggin et al., 2017). This discrepancy underscores the need for standardized assessment tools and methodologies to facilitate accurate comparisons across studies and populations. The lack of consistent diagnostic criteria and the inherent difficulties in self-reporting can contribute to variations in reported prevalence rates. Furthermore, the specific mental health conditions examined, the methodologies employed, and the characteristics of the sample populations (age, gender, sport type) all influence the results. The absence of universally accepted assessment tools specifically designed for athletes further complicates the interpretation and comparison of findings (Giles et al., 2020). This necessitates a cautious approach when interpreting prevalence data, emphasizing the need for more rigorous and standardized research methodologies.

Specific Mental Health Challenges Faced by Elite Athletes

Elite athletes confront a unique constellation of stressors that can profoundly impact their mental health, extending beyond the challenges faced by the general population. These stressors frequently interact and exacerbate one another, creating a complex interplay of factors that contribute to mental health concerns.

- **Performance Pressure:** The relentless pressure to achieve peak performance, often fuelled by intense competition, high expectations, and the pursuit of excellence, can lead to significant psychological strain. The constant evaluation, self-criticism, and fear of failure create a breeding ground for anxiety, depression, and burnout (Singh et al., 2024). The pressure to maintain a competitive edge and meet the demands of coaches, sponsors, and the public can be overwhelming, leading to chronic stress and a diminished sense of well-being. The pressure can be particularly acute in high-stakes competitions and during critical moments in an athlete's career.
- **Injury:** Injuries, whether acute or chronic, pose a significant threat to athletes' mental health. Physical injuries can disrupt training routines, limit participation, and lead to feelings of frustration, loss of identity, and fear of career termination (Singh et al., 2024). The rehabilitation process can be lengthy

and demanding, both physically and emotionally, potentially leading to depression and anxiety. Psychological injuries, such as those resulting from concussions, can also have profound and long-lasting effects on cognitive function, mood, and overall well-being. The interplay between physical and psychological injuries further complicates the recovery process and the management of mental health concerns.

- **Retirement Transition:** The transition from elite athletic competition to post-sport life represents a critical period of vulnerability for athletes. The abrupt cessation of structured training, competition and the associated social support network can lead to identity crises, feelings of loss, and difficulty adapting to a new life without the structure and purpose provided by sport (Kaski et al., 2022; Wylleman, 2019). The loss of athletic identity, a significant component of many athletes' self-concept, can be particularly challenging to navigate. The lack of preparation for this transition, often coupled with financial uncertainty and a need to re-establish a sense of purpose, can significantly impact mental health.
- **Social and Media Scrutiny:** Elite athletes often face intense public and media scrutiny, which can contribute to significant stress and anxiety (Singh et al., 2024). The constant media attention, particularly in high-profile sports, can lead to feelings of being under surveillance, pressure to maintain a positive public image, and vulnerability to criticism and negative feedback. The pressure to conform to societal expectations and the potential for public humiliation can have a profound impact on athletes' self-esteem and mental well-being. This is further exacerbated by the prevalence of social media, which provides a platform for both positive and negative commentary.
- **Eating Disorders:** Elite athletes, especially in sports that emphasize weight management and body composition, are at a significantly elevated risk of developing eating disorders (Kaski et al., 2022; Lundqvist et al., 2023). The pressure to achieve and maintain a certain body weight can lead to restrictive eating behaviours, excessive exercise, and body image dissatisfaction. These behaviours can have severe consequences for physical and mental health, potentially leading to serious medical complications and psychological distress. The cultural emphasis on thinness and the competitive nature of elite sport can exacerbate these risks.
- **Substance Abuse:** Some athletes may turn to substance abuse as a coping mechanism for the stress and pressure associated with elite sport (Jovanovi et al., 2022). The use of performance-enhancing drugs, alcohol, or other substances can have detrimental effects on both physical and mental health, leading to addiction, impaired judgment, and increased risks of injury. The pressure to perform, coupled with feelings of anxiety, depression, or

burnout, can make athletes more vulnerable to substance abuse. The social and cultural norms within some sports can also contribute to the normalization and acceptance of substance use.

The cumulative effect of these interconnected stressors underscores the need for a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to promoting the mental health of elite athletes. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic understanding of the athlete's environment, their individual vulnerabilities, and the specific demands of their sport.

Factors Influencing Psychological Well-being: Narrative Identities and Psychological Safety

The Role of Self-Narrative Profiles

The manner, in which athletes construct their self-narratives, or their personal stories about themselves, profoundly influences their psychological well-being (Houltberg et al., 2019). Houltberg et al. (2019) demonstrated that athletes' narrative identities can be categorized into distinct profiles, with significant implications for their mental health. Athletes with a performance-based narrative identity, characterized by high levels of perfectionism, fear of failure, and contingent self-worth (meaning their self-worth is dependent on their performance), exhibited the highest levels of psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and shame, and the lowest levels of life satisfaction (Houltberg et al., 2019). In contrast, athletes with a purpose-based narrative identity, characterized by a strong sense of purpose, global self-worth (meaning their self-worth is not solely dependent on their performance), and a positive self-view even after setbacks, reported the highest levels of psychological well-being (Houltberg et al., 2019). A third group, exhibiting a mixed narrative identity, showed intermediate levels of well-being. This research highlights the importance of fostering a sense of purpose and global self-worth in athletes, shifting the focus from solely performance-based validation to a broader understanding of self-value. Interventions aimed at reshaping athletes' self-narratives, promoting self-compassion, and cultivating a more balanced sense of self can significantly contribute to improved mental health.

The Importance of Psychological Safety

Creating a psychologically safe environment within sports organizations is paramount for athletes' mental health and well-being (Rice et al., 2022). Rice et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of assessing perceived psychological safety using validated tools such as the Sport Psychological Safety Inventory (SPSI). This involves fostering a culture where athletes feel empowered to express their concerns, seek help when needed, and admits mistakes without fear of judgment, retribution, or negative consequences (Rice et al., 2022). A psychologically safe environment encourages open communication, collaboration, and mutual support, creating a supportive network that can buffer the impact

of stressors and promote mental resilience. The development and validation of the SPSI represents a crucial step in providing objective measures of psychological safety within sporting contexts, facilitating the identification of areas needing improvement and allowing for targeted interventions to enhance the overall well-being of athletes. The three factors assessed by the SPSI – Mentally Healthy Environment, Mental Health Literacy, and Low Self-Stigma – provide a framework for understanding the key components of a psychologically safe environment. Promoting mental health literacy, reducing self-stigma associated with seeking help, and creating a supportive environment are essential components of fostering psychological safety within elite sports.

Gender-Specific Psychosocial Stressors and Mental Health

Unique Challenges Faced by Female Athletes

Female athletes often face a unique array of psychosocial stressors that disproportionately impact their mental health (Pascoe et al., 2022). Pascoe et al. (2022) highlight several gender-specific challenges, including exposure to violence (physical, sexual, or psychological), which can have profound and long-lasting effects on mental well-being. These experiences can lead to a range of psychological symptoms, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and difficulties in interpersonal relationships. Beyond violence, female athletes often encounter significant inequities in pay, opportunities for leadership positions, and representation in media, which can contribute to feelings of marginalization and decreased self-esteem (Pascoe et al., 2022). The added pressures of family planning and motherhood often faced by female athletes later in their careers, present further challenges to balancing athletic pursuits with personal life. The intersections of these stressors create a complex tapestry of challenges that require a nuanced and gender-sensitive approach to mental health support.

Addressing Gender-Specific Needs

Addressing the mental health needs of female athletes necessitates a gender-sensitive approach that acknowledges and actively addresses these unique challenges (Pascoe et al., 2022). Interventions must move beyond a generalized approach to mental health support, incorporating a deep understanding of the specific vulnerabilities and experiences of female athletes. This includes providing access to specialized resources, such as therapists with expertise in trauma-informed care and gender-specific issues, and creating safe spaces for open communication and support. Advocating for policy changes to address systemic inequalities, such as pay gaps and lack of representation, is crucial in creating a more equitable and supportive environment for female athletes. Promoting psychological safety, as discussed earlier, is particularly relevant in the context of gender-specific challenges, as female athletes may be hesitant to disclose their

experiences due to fear of judgment or retribution. Comprehensive interventions should encompass individual-level support, organizational-level changes, and societal-level advocacy to create a truly supportive and inclusive environment for female athletes.

The Impact of External Factors: COVID-19 Pandemic and Other Environmental Influences

The Pandemic's Effect on Elite Athletes' Mental Health

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to the mental health of elite athletes (Andrade et al., 2024; Kegelaers et al., 2021; Woodford & Bussey, 2021; Kumar et al., 2022). The sudden disruptions to training routines, competition cancellations, and enforced isolation profoundly affected athletes' mental well-being. Andrade et al.'s (2024) systematic review of elite soccer athletes revealed increased levels of anxiety and depression during the pandemic. The loss of routine, social interaction and the competitive aspect of their sport contributed to heightened psychological distress (Woodford & Bussey, 2021). Kumar et al. (2022) found a high percentage of elite athletes experiencing extreme stress during lockdown. These studies highlight the vulnerability of elite athletes to external stressors and the significant impact of disruptions to their training and competitive environments. The pandemic underscored the importance of proactive mental health strategies, including maintaining fitness, utilizing coping mechanisms, and accessing remote support services. The experience also highlighted the need for flexible and adaptable support systems that can respond effectively to unforeseen crises.

Other Environmental Factors

Beyond pandemics, numerous environmental factors within the athletic sphere influence athletes' mental health. The coaching style plays a crucial role in shaping athletes' experiences and well-being (Kegelaers et al., 2021). Supportive and empathetic coaching can foster a positive environment, promoting athletes' self-esteem and resilience. Conversely, overly demanding or critical coaching can contribute to stress, anxiety, and burnout. The team dynamics also significantly impact mental health (Kaski & Kinnunen, 2023). A cohesive and supportive team environment can provide a sense of belonging and social support, reducing feelings of isolation and increasing resilience. Conversely, a dysfunctional or unsupportive team climate can exacerbate stress and contribute to mental health concerns. The overall support system provided by the athletic organization also plays a vital role (Lundqvist et al., 2023). Access to adequate mental health services, nutritional support, and injury management are crucial in promoting athletes' overall well-being. The transition from junior to senior levels of competition represents a critical juncture, requiring additional support to navigate the increased demands and pressures associated with higher-level competition (Lundqvist et al., 2023). A holistic approach that considers these multifaceted

environmental influences is necessary to effectively support athletes' mental health.

Interventions and Support Strategies

Psychotherapy and Pharmacological Interventions

Psychotherapy offers a powerful intervention for addressing mental health concerns in athletes (Stillman et al., 2019). Stillman et al. (2019) highlight the effectiveness of various therapeutic modalities, including individual, couples/family, and group therapy, tailored to address athlete-specific issues. These therapies can help athletes develop coping skills, manage stress, process emotional challenges related to performance, injury, or retirement, and improve overall well-being. Pharmacological interventions may be necessary in some cases, particularly for severe mental health conditions (Reardon et al., 2020). Reardon et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of careful consideration of potential interactions between medication and performance-enhancing substances. The choice of medication and the integration of pharmacological and non-pharmacological interventions (such as psychotherapy) should be individualized based on the athlete's specific needs and circumstances, always under the guidance of qualified professionals. The collaboration between mental health professionals and sports medicine practitioners is essential to ensure optimal care and minimize potential risks.

Promoting Resilience and Coping Mechanisms

Building resilience and teaching effective coping mechanisms are fundamental components of mental health support for athletes (Jaiyeoba et al., 2023). Jaiyeoba et al. (2023) demonstrated the strong relationship between resilience and stress management in elite athletes. Interventions aimed at enhancing resilience can include mindfulness-based techniques, stress management training, and the development of strong social support networks (Woodford & Bussey, 2021). These interventions equip athletes with the skills to effectively manage stress, cope with setbacks, and bounce back from adversity. Mindfulness practices can help athletes cultivate self-awareness, emotional regulation, and a more balanced perspective. Stress management techniques can help athletes identify and manage stressors, develop coping strategies, and improve their ability to handle pressure. Strong social support networks provide a sense of belonging, reduce feelings of isolation, and provide crucial emotional support during challenging times. These strategies are not merely reactive measures but proactive tools that empower athletes to navigate the pressures of elite sport and maintain their mental well-being.

The Role of Coaches and Support Staff

Coaches and support staff play a pivotal role in promoting athletes' mental health (Baumann et al., 2024). Baumann et al. (2024) stress the importance of coaches' own mental health, noting that their well-being can significantly impact their athletes. Coaches should be

trained to recognize and respond to signs of distress in their athletes, creating a supportive and non-judgmental environment where athletes feel comfortable disclosing their concerns (Biggin et al., 2017). Open communication, active listening, and empathy are essential in building trust and fostering a positive coach-athlete relationship. Coaches should be educated on mental health issues, resources available, and appropriate referral pathways. This requires collaboration between coaches, sport psychologists, and other mental health professionals to ensure that athletes receive comprehensive and timely support. The integration of mental health support into the broader athlete support system is crucial in creating a holistic approach to well-being.

Specific Interventions for Particular Groups

The approach to mental health support must be tailored to the unique needs of diverse athlete populations. Interventions for female athletes should explicitly address gender-specific stressors, such as exposure to violence, gender inequities, and reproductive health concerns (Pascoe et al., 2022). This may involve specialized therapeutic approaches, such as trauma-informed care, and advocacy for systemic changes to address gender inequalities. For athletes in weight-sensitive sports, interventions must focus on preventing and treating eating disorders, promoting healthy body image, and challenging societal pressures related to body weight (Lundqvist et al., 2023). This requires a multidisciplinary approach involving sports dietitians, medical professionals, and mental health specialists. Support for athletes transitioning out of sport should focus on career planning, identity development, and preparing for life beyond athletic competition (Wylleman, 2019). This may involve career counselling, life skills training, and support in navigating the psychological challenges associated with retirement. A truly effective approach to mental health support must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of the athlete population.

Future Research Directions

Despite significant progress in understanding the psychological well-being of elite athletes, substantial research gaps remain. Further investigation is crucial to fully elucidate the complex interplay between elite athleticism and mental health.

- **Development of athlete-specific assessment tools:** The development and validation of standardized, reliable, and valid assessment tools specifically designed for athletes are essential for accurately assessing mental health concerns, tracking changes over time, and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions (Giles et al., 2020). These tools should be sensitive to the unique stressors and experiences of athletes and should account for factors such as sport type, gender, and cultural background.

- **Longitudinal studies:** Longitudinal studies are critical for understanding the long-term effects of sport-related stressors on athletes' mental health and the effectiveness of interventions over time (Zepp et al., 2022). These studies can provide valuable insights into the trajectories of mental health across an athlete's career, identifying periods of vulnerability and risk factors for developing mental health concerns.
- **Qualitative research:** Qualitative research methods, such as interviews and focus groups, can provide rich insights into athletes' lived experiences, perspectives, and coping strategies (Woodford & Bussey, 2021). This approach can help researchers understand the complexities of mental health challenges in the context of elite sport, providing valuable information for developing culturally sensitive and effective interventions.
- **Research on specific populations:** More research is needed to address the specific mental health needs of diverse athlete populations, including female athletes (Pascoe et al., 2022), athletes in weight-sensitive sports (Lundqvist et al., 2023), and athletes with disabilities (Amos & Tibbert, 2024). This research should examine the unique stressors and challenges faced by these groups and develop tailored interventions to address their specific needs.
- **Exploration of the role of organizational culture:** Further investigation into the impact of organizational culture and support systems on athletes' mental health is crucial (Rice et al., 2022). This research should examine how organizational practices, policies, and leadership styles contribute to or detract from a psychologically safe environment, promoting or hindering athletes' mental well-being.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while elite sport offers numerous rewards and opportunities, it also presents significant challenges to athletes' psychological well-being. A holistic and multifaceted approach is essential for promoting mental health within the demanding context of elite sport. This approach must consider individual factors, such as personality and coping styles, as well as systemic factors, such as organizational culture and societal pressures. By fostering psychological safety, providing access to comprehensive support services, and tailoring interventions to the specific needs of diverse athlete populations, we can create a more supportive and inclusive environment that allows athletes to thrive both on and off the field. This requires a collaborative effort among athletes, coaches, support staff, researchers, and policymakers to create a culture that prioritizes athletes' mental health and well-being.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the authorship or publication of this systematic

review. All efforts were made to ensure an unbiased and objective synthesis of the available literature.

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