

## Transition From Sub Elite to Elite: Psychological Factors Enabling Success Among Indian Athletes

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### ABSTRACT

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of sixteen high-performing Indian athletes. Through in-depth qualitative interactions, athletes reflected on their experiences of peak performance and the psychological factors supporting progression from sub-elite to elite levels within the Indian sporting context. Seven dimensions of peak performance emerged from the participant's account. The findings provide key insights into the psychological profiling of Indian athletes. Descriptive frequency, percentage analyses and chi-square were used to examine the relative prominence of these dimensions across competitive tiers. Competition tier-wise analysis revealed meaningful variations across competitive levels. The study offers a culturally grounded framework of Psychological Skill Characteristics (PSCs) and provides practical insights for coaches and sport psychologists to design stage-specific mental training interventions.

**Keywords:** *Psychological Skills and Characteristics, Sub Elite and Elite Indian Athletes, Phenomenology, Competition Tiers, Peak Performance, Mental Training Framework*

Athletic success at the highest level emerges from the intricate interplay of psychological Skills and Characteristics (PSCs). However, it is common to witness talented athletes struggle to replicate or surpass their best performances or experience burnout due to psychological challenges. Common challenges such as self-doubt, fear of failure (Sagar et al., 2009), burnout, anxiety (Rice et al., 2016), and heightened expectations from coaches (Solomon, 2010), fans, and themselves often hinder consistent excellence. Athletes with robust psychological foundations are better able to translate their physical potential into sustained success.

Extensive research emphasizes the pivotal role of PSCs in elite sports performance. Athletes equipped with superior PSCs are better prepared to manage competitive demands and deliver consistent peak performances. Substantial research in this direction has provided an enormous pool of data, resulting in identification of numerous PSCs associated with excellence. A meta-analysis of 25 studies revealed that 92 PSCs collectively contribute to excellence across 34 sports disciplines (Dohme et al., 2019), underscoring the indispensable role in distinguishing elite athletes.

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Sport psychology literature predominantly has been developed in western contexts (Quartioli et al., 2021), significantly advancing the understanding of peak performance by cataloguing a wide array of PSCs. A review of literature also marked absence of qualitative phenomenological investigations examining the psychological profiles of Indian athletes, indicating that research in this direction remains at a nascent stage.

Prior research has documented differences in the psychological characteristics of successful versus less successful athletes, as well as distinctions between elite and non-elite performers, predominantly within developed countries. However, there remains a notable gap in competitive tier-wise psychological profiling—such as Olympian, World Championship, international, and national levels—particularly within the Indian sporting context. Limited empirical attention has been given to understanding how psychological attributes evolve across these progressive performance tiers. Addressing this gap is essential for designing structured mental training interventions and informed talent development pathways.

Against this background, the present study aims to investigate the psychological profiles of elite Indian athletes that enable them to transcend barriers and achieve peak performance, thereby contributing to the enrichment of global sport psychology literature from an Indian contextual perspective. It further seeks to examine variations in psychological profiling across competitive levels and to develop a structured framework of core psychological attributes facilitating progression from sub elite to elite levels.

### **METHOD**

#### *Sample*

The study included 16 sub elite and elite athletes with a minimum of two years of consistent participation in national-level or higher competitions. Participants were recruited via snowball sampling from six individual sports: swimming (5), gymnastics (3, including 1 Olympian), weightlifting (3), shooting (2), karate (2), and athletics (1 Olympian sprinter).

The sample included 12 females and 4 males, between the ages of 15 to 32 years. All the athletes were competing professionally at the time of the interview. Among the participants, 2 were Olympians, 3 competed at the world level, 8 at the international level, and 3 at the national level. All athletes were distinguished winners in prestigious national and international and world competitions, possessing a minimum of five years of experience at elite levels—except for two participants who had 3 years of experience at the national level.

#### *Instrument*

A comprehensive, pilot-tested, open-ended questionnaire was developed to gather qualitative data. It comprised four sections: (1) an introduction outlining the researcher's details, the purpose of the study, and assurances of confidentiality; (2) an informed consent form to secure participant approval; (3) a section capturing demographic information and competitive history; and (4) a core section exploring performance related psychological insights. The core section included the key question as below:

a) Based on your experience, what psychological skills contribute to high performance in highly competitive national, international, or world sports competitions.

#### *Procedure*

Using a phenomenological approach, primary data were gathered from 16 Indian athletes across six individual sports. Participants were contacted individually via telephone to explain the study's purpose and relevance to sports psychology research. They were assured of

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anonymity, confidentiality, and informed about the collective analysis of their responses for psychological profiling of Indian athletes. Upon securing their consent, appointments were scheduled as per their convenience.

Each participant interaction took place in their preferred environment—typically stadiums or practice courts—before or after training sessions. Written consent was obtained prior to data collection to ensure ethical compliance. While some participants hesitated to provide written responses, they consented to verbal recordings upon request. The open-ended semi structured interviews were supplemented by field notes, and a few participants preferred direct transcription of their answers. These individual discussions lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. Participants shared insights covering training, pre-competition, and post-competition phases, emphasizing the importance of PSCs as a consistent mindset for peak performance.

### *Data Analysis*

Given the need to understand the lived experiences and culturally embedded meanings associated with psychological attributes among Indian athletes, we used a phenomenological approach. This enabled in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences of peak performance. We conducted thematic analysis of the qualitative data, transcribing interviews verbatim and engaging in repeated readings to achieve familiarization. We performed inductive coding and systematically identified meaningful patterns related to PSCs associated with peak performance. We analysed field notes and open-ended questionnaire responses concurrently to ensure triangulation and comprehensive interpretation.

Subsequently, descriptive methods (frequency counts and percentage analysis) were employed to examine the relative prominence of identified psychological indicators across competitive levels and to understand progression from sub elite to elite levels. To assess tier-wise associations between competition level and each dimension, we conducted chi-square tests of independence using athlete-level endorsement data. Effect sizes were calculated using Cramer's V to determine the magnitude of differences across competition tiers. Quantitative techniques enhanced clarity by identifying patterns and variations (Fakis et al., 2014; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Integrating quantitative methods also strengthened analytical rigor and depth in detecting relationships that might otherwise remain unnoticed (Schmitz & Finkelstein, 2010; Hochwald et al., 2023).

## **RESULTS**

The analysis yielded 217 meaningful responses. Using a phenomenological approach, we inductively coded the data and identified 17 indicators. We then grouped these indicators into seven broader dimensions based on thematic convergence and conceptual alignment. Each dimension represented a distinct psychological domain and included two to three conceptually related indicators. Together the seven dimensions captured a wide spectrum of PSCs contributing to sustained athletic excellence and provided a coherent structure for presenting the findings.

The results are presented in two sections. Section A presents thematic analysis of the data to illustrate how each dimension and indicator was grounded in the data, supported with direct quotations from participants. Section B showcases quantitative analysis determining the relative importance of each dimension and indicator, and competitive tier-wise profiling across Olympian, world, international and national levels.

### Section A: Dimension and Indicators of Peak Performance

The seven overarching dimension are: centering, self-reliance and coach support, sports engagement, self-mastery, psychological endurance, self-regulation, and competitive excellence. Table 1 summarizes the identified indicators and dimension from the study, representing the psychological profiles of Indian athletes, followed by their detailed description.

**Table 1 Dimensions and Indicators of Peak Performance**

Sl. No.	Dimensions and Indicators
<b>1</b>	<b>Dimension 1: Centering (3 indicators)</b>
i	One pointed focus on controllables
ii	Shunning uncontrollable distractions
iii	Being yourself
<b>2</b>	<b>Dimension 2: Self-Reliance and Coach Support (3 Indicators)</b>
i	Confidence
ii	Belief in skills and abilities
iii	Coach trust and support
<b>3</b>	<b>Dimension 3: Sports Engagement (2 indicators)</b>
i	Relaxed and happy mental state
ii	Motivation, enthusiasm and interest in sports
<b>4</b>	<b>Dimension 4: Self-Mastery (2 indicators)</b>
i	Self-discipline
ii	Adaptability, continuous improvement and rectification of mistakes
<b>5</b>	<b>Dimension 5: Psychological Endurance (3 indicators)</b>
i	Perseverance
ii	Resilience
iii	Dedication and consistency
<b>6</b>	<b>Dimension 6: Self-Regulation (2 indicators)</b>
i	Thought control
ii	Emotional control
<b>7</b>	<b>Dimension 7: Competitive Excellence (2 indicators)</b>
i	Inner urge to compete and ambition to win
ii	Belief in excellence

#### **1.Centering**

Centering emerged as a crucial dimension for optimal performance, comprising three key indicators—i) one pointed focus on controllables, ii) shunning uncontrollable and distractions and iii) being oneself.

**One Pointed Focus on Controllables.** Athletes viewed singular focus on self, self-performance, technique, personal strengths, and performance goals as controllables. They emphasized the importance of directing energy toward these factors, focusing on giving their best performance and repeating own records rather than worrying about a competitor’s prior achievements or performance. Participants from all six sports emphasised the importance of focussing on self. Comments such as “I have to focus fully on me and not focus on my opponent. I don’t have to look at my opponent” , “I focus on what I will do, what maximum I can do. I do not think of competitors, I have no fight with anyone. I focus on self”, “focus only on our performance, not on result, focus on our technique, skill and good practice”, “complete focus on myself, focussing on what is good for me”, “focus on strengths and strong points

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with a positive mind”, “don’t focus on opponent, focus on performance” “centre the mind around what should be done at that moment”, exemplified this mindset.

**Shunning Uncontrollable and Distractions.** What others say or do, result, medals, competitors, or the audience's reactions—were identified as uncontrollable that must be consciously ignored. This was characterised by athletes statements, such as, “Just give 100% performance, result will come automatically, not thinking about medals that time.” An Olympian highlighted this by commenting, “I don't look at anyone else's competition. I look at the competition from a distance. So, whenever there is a competition, I keep my back to the side.” Other participants said, “if we focus on result, fear will put more pressure on us”, “they have that edge where they just shut it off and just perform”, “concentration- ability to shut the outside environment and focus” exemplify this.

**Being Yourself.** A smaller number of participants stressed the value of staying true to oneself, having self-awareness and having realistic expectations, but this adds a meaningful unique perspective on individuality and sports performance. For example, the Olympian asserted “I am trying to practice being myself, so I will not follow blindly. If I just go and follow Usain Bolt blindly, I cannot win the race. Many people do that mistake, they follow many Idols”.

### 2. Self-Reliance and Coach Support

Self-reliance and coach support encompassed 3 indicators—i) confidence in self, ii) confidence in one’s abilities and iii) coach’s trust and support, emerging as vital for sustained performance.

Self-reliance was viewed as playing a pivotal role in sustained sports performance, and described as unwavering belief in themselves, trust in their abilities, and the reinforcement they receive from coaches. Athletes reiterated internalising confidence, they can enter competitions with clarity and conviction, enhancing their potential to perform at their peak, when it matters most.

**Confidence.** The participants from all six sports echoed the importance this attribute by statements like, “I just believe in myself. I'm just super confident.” Other participants added, “I should be acing this because I've trained for this, this whole opportunity, no matter how high pressure it is, you've trained for it”, “I can do well. I have to trust myself”, underscores the role of belief in self in peak performance.

**Belief in Skills and Abilities.** Trusting one’s training and practiced technique reinforces execution under pressure, allowing athletes to focus on performance and stay composed rather than doubt, even in challenging or unfamiliar competitive situations. This attribute was highlighted by athletes from different sports, relying on their well-practiced techniques or trusting their game plan even when facing strong opponents. Participants stated, “you have to believe in your training. it's not just believing in yourself. you should just tell yourself that, oh, I've trained for so long, so I should be doing this”, “I have to trust on skills and technique, and self, that when I have practiced.” The Olympian elaborated:

I have a mentality that sometimes I am scared that such a big competition such a big platform you will be famous in the best 8, but I try thinking that the performance I have to do there I have done it more than 100 times in practice.

**Coach Trust and Support.** Athletes who trust their coaches and receive consistent feedback and assurance benefit from enhanced belief in their capacity to succeed. The participants

emphasised this attribute, by comments such as, “when the coach tells you, yeah, you're doing this right, you're doing that wrong, and you perfect it, and then you go into the competition with a clear mindset”, “during practice what the coach says what is the mistake I focus on that and do it”, “I don't have anything in my mind, I just remember what my coach says to motivate me and perform” reiterates the value of this attribute.

### **3. Sports Engagement**

Sports Engagement composed of two indicators—i) a relaxed, happy mental state and ii) motivation, enthusiasm and interest in sports. Athletes underscored the importance of being fully engaged in the task at hand and believed staying relaxed, joyful, motivated and being present in the moment, makes the performance both enjoyable and intrinsically driven. Such immersion not only fosters consistency in effort but also helps athletes navigate challenges with a positive and composed mindset.

**Relaxed and Happy.** Participants viewed taking proactive steps to stay relaxed, keeping the mind empty, calm, cool and cheerful during high-pressure situations allows them to perform confidently, maintain clarity and reduce mental clutter. Participants pointed out: “I do not think anything that time, I keep the mind empty”, “listening to music- helps me shut my negative thoughts down and help me perform”, “listening to music helps to get an edge over other athletes”, “being realistic about expectations helps me calm my nerves and relax before any competition”, “keeping calm, cool, collective”, “listen to music and connect with nature to relax”, “manage anxiety to pump up my performance” as some of the ways to keep stress free and relaxed.

**Motivation, Enthusiasm and Interest in Sports.** Enjoying the process and finding fun in competition allows them to stay energized, reduce performance anxiety, and consistently deliver their best. Participants elaborated the role of motivation, enthusiasm, interest and enjoyment as: “one should have interest in the sports. Interest is the right word”, “I enjoy swim, I don't feel the pressure, I just love racing, I like racing during competition, it is thrilling than during training, when I am in the zone I completely enjoy, it is fun.” Another athlete quoted “When we play for India and hear the name of our country, it gives us a huge boost. It reminds me that I'm not playing alone—we're representing India, and we love playing for our country”.

### **4. Self-Mastery**

The factor of self- mastery included two indicators—i) self-discipline and, ii) adaptability, continuous improvement and rectification of mistakes. The participants highlighted the importance of these attributes for sustained success. Self-mastery of these qualities provides them with the structure and flexibility required to optimize performance and sustain improvement.

**Self-Discipline.** Self-discipline was emphasised through adhering to training schedules, technical discipline, rest, diet and every other aspect of daily life of an athlete. As one participant mentioned,

If the coach told me to move my arms like this, then I should come every day disciplined way to move like this. If I do like this, then I am not disciplined athlete. So if my coach told me to do one thing, then I should repeat doing the same thing technically. Following the instructions of the coaches. Yes, and come and do it same way again. Discipline is I am eating my food. So, what should be in my plate? This is correct. I am sleeping in time. If I am sleeping little

early, that is better for me. Then I should follow this. Then on the day of competition, I am sure that I am going to hit it.

**Adaptability, Continuous Improvement and Rectification of Mistakes.** Adaptability, continuous improvement and rectification of mistakes ensures athletes are able to maintain consistency while navigating changing environments and cultures. Participants believed rectifying mistakes enables them to fine-tune their performance and grow with each experience. Learning from mistakes allows them to make timely adjustments, and convert setbacks into stepping stones for success. The participants explained the importance of adaptability stating, “moving out of the comfort zone to adapt to different conditions amenities and infrastructure”, “highly competitive competitions happen in different conditions, it is important to adapt”, “quick adaptability to the new environment.” The importance of continuous improvement and rectification of mistakes was evident from these statements made by the participants: “believe in this that there is a room to improve always”, “effort to improve small things”, “think self as zero when practicing”, “learning from mistakes to get better version of the self.”

### ***5. Psychological -Endurance***

Psychological -Endurance consisted of 3 indicators— i) dedication and consistency, ii) perseverance to achieve goals and, iii) resilience. Participants asserted these attributes enables to remain steadfast and committed towards their goals, help overcome adversities and maintain peak performance across fluctuating circumstances. They stated these traits remain crucial for chasing long-term goals in highly demanding sports environments.

**Perseverance to Achieve Goals.** This attribute reflects patience, stubbornness, determination and an unwavering resolve to achieve goals, and was cited as “patience-willingness to trust the process and wait for your time to come.” Another participant expressed:

That was like step-by-step aim. It is not like from the day one I knew that there is Olympics and I want to go to Olympics. I was clear that I want that. So, I was stubborn. So, probably you could write stubborn, a sports person need to be a stubborn person. For example, myself, I have been running in the same time for last nine years. And I am still doing it.

**Resilience.** Athletes highlighted the transformative power of resilience, where adversity becomes a catalyst for growth and the ability to move forward despite setbacks. Resilience, ability to handle adversity and struggles, ups and down, was highlighted by participants in these words: “trauma pushes you through something challenging and helps you grow”, “overcome difficulties, manage struggles” not lingering with loss, move on, not being affected by one bad swim.” Another participant highlighted:

“The thing is when they think they are not reaching anywhere, first year, second year, third year, then morally they get down. They get demoralized. Like I keep on losing, keep on losing, Because I know that there is hope.”

**Dedication and Consistency.** Participants described staying consistent and dedicate in efforts leads to long-term success. They view these attributes empower them to handle the inevitable ups and downs of competitive sports. The participants highlighted the same stating: “to train hard in spite of ups and downs”, “stay dedicated”, “be consistent towards your goals”, “even if the body doesn't work, I have to train that day.”

## 6. *Self- Regulation*

The factor of self-regulation emerged from two key indicators— i) thought control and ii) emotional control. It reflects the athlete’s ability to manage internal responses and maintain composure under pressure. By regulating thoughts and emotions, athletes can effectively handle fear, anxiety, and negative thinking—key to staying focused and making sound decisions in high-stress situations. Participants believed this not only supports emotional stability but also plays a vital role in preventing burnout and sustaining overall mental well-being during competition.

**Thought Control.** Managing thoughts and reframing negativity emerged significant, with athletes describing strategies of replacing negative thoughts and emotions, such as “I can’t do this”—with affirmations like “I’ve trained for this moment”, and “when there is an injury, I feel nervous but I think positive. If I think negatively, I will feel negative, if I think positively, I will feel positive”, “thought control by meditation and thought control exercises to take care of mental health”, “shut my negative thoughts down to help me perform”, “I tell myself, don't be afraid. I have done it. It will be good.”

**Emotional Control.** This indicator highlights the pivotal role of emotional regulation in optimal sports performance. The participants described personal strategies they resort to regulate emotions: “when I am happy, I do well, when I am sad, my body becomes down”, “controlling overexcitement, else that can deteriorate the performance”, “cutting the noise, silencing the noise in the mind through breathing or any other technique”, “fear control and relaxation by deep breathing”, “before competition I feel fear, but that time I hold my breath and then exhale, I do 5 sets, after that I feel free, and enjoy my sport.”

## 7. *Competitive Excellence*

This dimension contained 2 indicators—i) inner urge to compete and winning and ii) belief in excellence. Self-excellence emerged as a powerful internal drive that fuels both the desire to compete and the commitment to strive for top performance in every situation. This mindset drives a continuous pursuit to give one’s best, regardless of the outcome.

**Inner Urge to Compete and Winning.** This attribute was described by a participant as, “my goal is always whatever I do, I want to be on the top. I just want to go and win there, I always win, I always beat the competitors”. Other athletes emphasised, “hunger to achieve something contributes to be more competitive”, “hunger to win medals, that thing helps you to work twice as hard.”

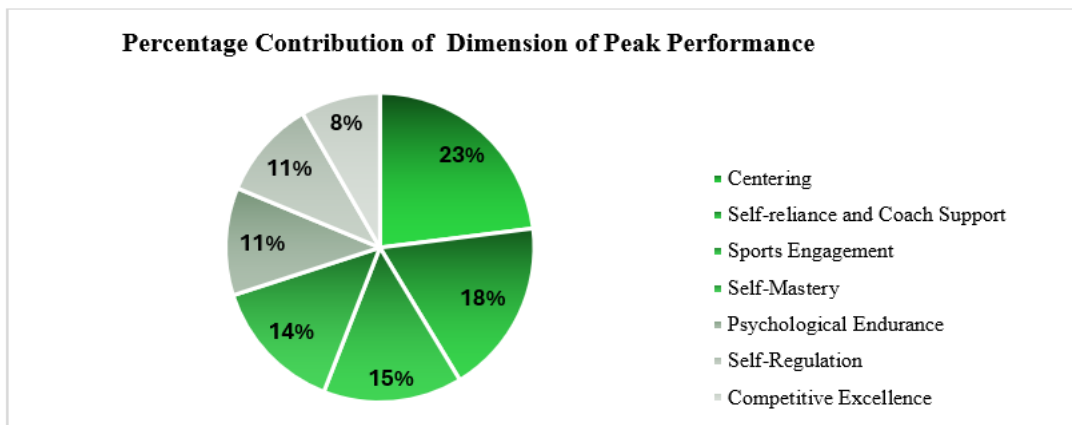
**Belief in Excellence.** Athletes emphasised the critical value of this attribute and quoted “give an exceptionally good performance always”, “finding your niche”, “when I have worked hard, whether I get a medal or not but I have to give my best performance”, “keep motivated by giving best performance always”, “giving 100% to task at hand, put efforts 100% with our whole intension”, “try your level best, up to the last.”

## Section B: Quantitative Analysis of Psychological Profiles Across Competitive Tiers

### 1. *Dimensions of Peak Performance*

The percentage contribution of each psychological dimension was calculated from the aggregated frequency count of its constituent indicators to determine the relative prominence. Figure 1. illustrates the proportional percentage of contribution of each dimension contributing to peak sports performance. Percentages were rounded to two decimal points.

Figure 1 Percentage Contribution of Dimensions of Peak Performance

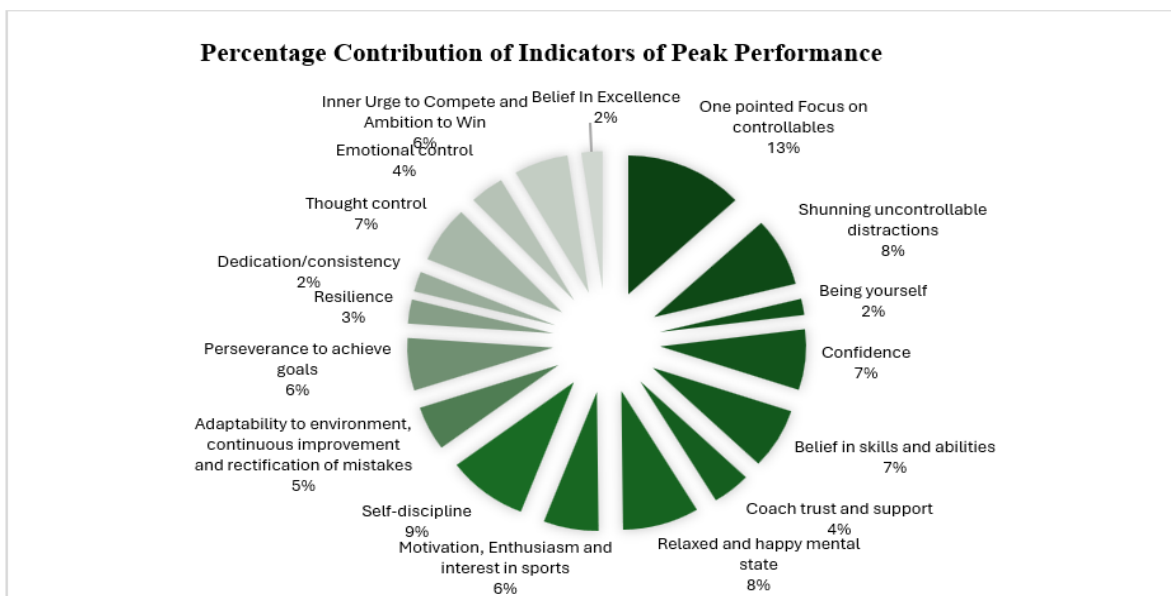


The analysis revealed that centering contributed the highest proportion (23%), followed by self-reliance and coach support (18%). Sports engagement (15%) and self-mastery (14%) showed comparable contributions. Psychological endurance and self-regulation accounted for 11% each, while competitive excellence demonstrated the lowest proportional contribution (8%).

## 2. Indicators of Peak Performance

Figure 2. illustrates the proportional distribution of the 17 psychological indicators contributing to peak sports performance. Percentages were rounded to two decimal points.

Figure 2 Percentage Contribution of Indicators of Peak Performance



The results indicate One-pointed focus on controllables emerged as the most frequently reported indicator (13%). This was followed by self-discipline (9%) and relaxed and happy mental state (8%).

Moderately represented indicators included shunning uncontrollable distractions (8%), confidence (7%), belief in skills and abilities (7%), thought control (7%), perseverance to

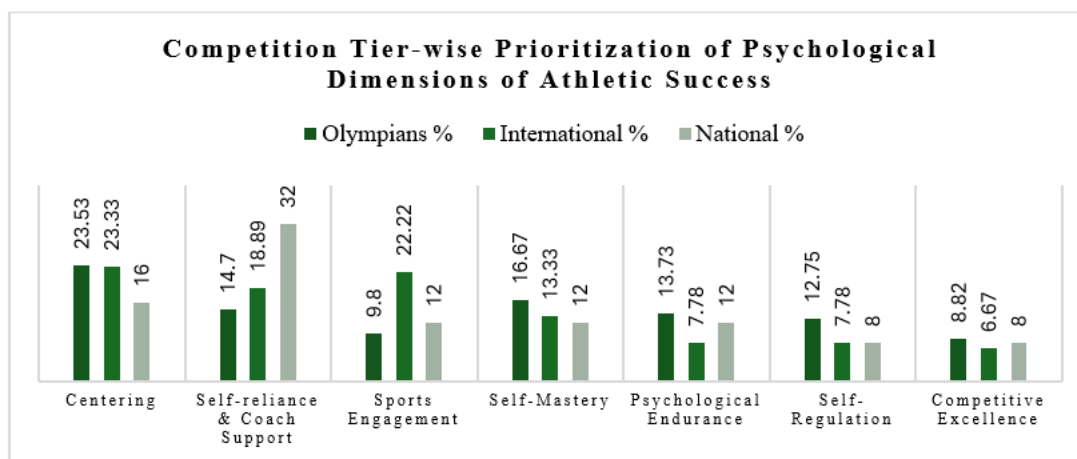
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achieve goals (6%), and motivation, enthusiasm, and interest in sports (6%). Lower percentages were observed for emotional control (4%), coach trust and support (4%), resilience (3%), dedication/consistency (2%), belief in excellence (2%), and being yourself (2%).

### 3. Competitive Tier-Wise Profiling

PSCs significance differs across competitive levels and evolve as athletes ascend their career ladder. Competitive tier-wise significance of each dimension is illustrated in Figure 3.

**Figure 3 Competition Tier Wise Prioritization of Psychological Dimensions of Athletic Success**



Tier-wise analysis of percentage distribution revealed clear variations in the prioritization of psychological dimensions across competitive levels. Among Olympians and World-level athletes, centering emerged as the most prominent dimension (23.53%), followed by self-mastery (16.67%), self-reliance and coach support (14.71%), and psychological endurance (13.73%). Self-regulation (12.75%) and sports engagement (9.80%) were moderately represented, while competitive excellence (8.82%) showed comparatively lower proportional representation.

For international-level athletes, centering (23.33%) and sports engagement (22.22%) were the most prominent dimensions, followed by self-reliance and coach support (18.89%). Self-mastery (13.33%) showed moderate representation, whereas psychological endurance (7.78%), self-regulation (7.78%), and competitive excellence (6.67%) were less prominently reported.

Among national-level athletes, overall percentages were more dispersed across dimensions. Self-reliance and coach support (32.00%) was most prominent, followed by centering (16.00%). Sports engagement (12.00%), self-mastery (12.00%), and psychological endurance (12.00%) showed similar proportional representation, while self-regulation (8.00%) and competitive excellence (8.00%) were least represented.

### 4. Chi-Square Analysis of Tier-wise Differences in PSC Dimensions

Chi-square analyses were conducted to examine associations between competition tier and each PSC dimension (see Table 2). No statistically significant associations were observed between competition tier and the seven dimensions (all  $p > .05$ ). However, Cramer's V values indicated small to moderate effect sizes for several dimensions across tiers. In particular, self-

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regulation demonstrated the largest effect, followed by psychological endurance and sports engagement, suggesting noticeable tier-wise variation in these dimensions. While these differences did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance, these findings should be interpreted cautiously. The magnitude of effects indicates observable patterns in how certain psychological characteristics are distributed across competition levels. The results therefore indicate emerging distributional patterns rather than definitive tier-based differences.

**Table 2 Chi-square Analysis of PSC Dimensions Across Competition Tiers**

Dimension	$\chi^2$	p	Cramer's V
Centering	0.00	1.000	.00
Self-Reliance and Coach Support	1.07	.586	.26
Sports Engagement	1.78	.411	.33
Self-Mastery	0.53	.768	.18
Psychological Endurance	1.94	.379	.35
Self-Regulation	3.50	.174	.47
Competitive Excellence	1.37	.505	.29

Note: df = 2 for all analyses.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the PSCs underlying peak performance among elite Indian athletes. The findings confirm the multidimensional nature of PSCs required for athletic excellence.

At the dimensional level, significance percentages indicate that centering and self-reliance & coach support form the core foundation of peak performance experiences. The prominence of centering—particularly one-pointed focus on controllables suggests that attentional regulation and process orientation are central to athletes lived peak states. This reflects an execution-focused orientation rather than outcome fixation.

Self-reliance & coach support emerging as the second strongest dimension reflects a dual structure: internal confidence development supported by structured external guidance. Sports engagement and self-mastery further reinforce this foundation. Psychological endurance and self-regulation appear to sustain performance consistency, while competitive excellence shows comparatively lower independent articulation, likely builds upon these foundational qualities.

At the indicator level, higher percentages were observed for: one-pointed focus on controllables, self-discipline, relaxed and happy mental state, shunning uncontrollable distractions, confidence and belief in skills, and thought control—are predominantly performance-process oriented and directly linked to execution. Moderately rated indicators included: motivation, enthusiasm and interest, inner urge to compete and ambition to win, adaptability and continuous improvement, perseverance, and coach trust and support—appear to function as sustaining mechanisms. Lower proportional emphasis was observed for: emotional control, being yourself, dedication/consistency, belief in excellence, and resilience—reflected as broader dispositional attributes that underpin long-term development but were less foregrounded in descriptions of peak performance states.

The prominence of attentional and regulatory processes is consistent with empirical findings. Research has shown that attentional focus and metacognitive regulation are central to elite

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performance execution (Brick, et al., 2015), and that self-regulation predicts competition preparation and confidence at higher levels (Jung et al., 2025; Rogowska & Tataruch (2024). Similarly, attention and sport confidence have been identified as strong performance predictors across sports contexts (Wang et al., 2022). Together, these studies align with the higher prioritization of execution-focused PSCs observed in the present findings.

Motivational and perseverance-related indicators are also consistent with literature emphasizing their role in sustained engagement and long-term expertise development. Intrinsic motivation enhances persistence in achievement contexts (Deci and Ryan, 2000), and perseverance-related attributes differentiate higher-achieving athletes (Larkin et. al., 2016). In contrast, resilience and related dispositional qualities have been conceptualized as developmental trait-like constructs Galli and Vealey (2008) shaped over time through adversity, rather than a moment-specific performance factor, supporting their lower immediate articulation in peak-state narratives.

Competition tier wise analysis discovered; the disposition of PSCs varied across competitive levels. Centering emerged as the dominant dimension among world-level and Olympic athletes, while sports engagement showed heightened prominence at the international level. National-level athletes reported relatively greater emphasis on self-reliance & coach support. A progressive pattern is evident across tiers. Higher-level athletes (Olympians and World-level) demonstrated stronger emphasis on internally regulated processes such as centering. International-level athletes showed a balance between engagement and regulatory dimensions, whereas national-level athletes appeared to rely relatively more on external support systems. This distribution suggests a gradual shift from externally anchored dimensions toward greater internal psychological regulation as competitive level increases.

The absence of statistical significance suggests that tier-wise differences cannot be confirmed with high statistical certainty in this sample. However, effect size estimates revealed meaningful variation, particularly for self-regulation, psychological endurance, and sports engagement. These patterns indicate that certain psychological characteristics may become more refined or differentially emphasized at higher competition levels, even if the sample size limits statistical detection. Thus, the findings should be interpreted as indicative of developmental tendencies rather than definitive categorical differences across tiers.

Together, the comparison of percentage prominence and effect size suggests that while certain dimensions (e.g., centering) are universally important, others—particularly self-regulation—serve as clearer markers of competitive progression. The findings suggest a gradual shift from externally supported structures toward stronger internal psychological regulation as competition level increases.

## CONCLUSION

This study contributes a culturally grounded PSC framework derived from lived experiences of elite Indian athletes. By integrating phenomenological insight with structured quantitative weighting, it offers a layered understanding of how psychological characteristics are organized and prioritized across tiers. Although tier-wise differences were not statistically significant, effect size patterns suggested developmental strengthening of self-regulation and psychological endurance at higher levels. The findings indicate a progression from externally supported regulation toward internally anchored psychological control as competitive level advances.

### ***Practical Implications***

The findings have practical implications for designing stage-specific mental training programs, emphasizing foundational attentional skills early in development while progressively strengthening regulatory and endurance-related capacities at higher competitive levels, tailored to the Indian sporting ecosystem. Mental training programs may progressively shift in emphasis across competitive stages: earlier phases can prioritize structured coach support and engagement-focused strategies, while advanced levels should deliberately cultivate attentional control, disciplined preparation, confidence, and internally regulated performance processes.

### ***Limitations***

The study focused primarily on individual sport athletes, which may limit applicability to team-sport contexts where collective dynamics play a stronger role. The cross-sectional design captures psychological profiles at a single point in time and does not account for their dynamic evolution across an athlete's career. Additionally, the sample comprised elite Indian athletes, which may limit the generalizability of findings to non-elite performers. While tier-wise variations were examined, the findings remain descriptive and do not establish causal relationships between psychological attributes and performance progression.

### ***Future Research Directions***

This study provides an empirical foundation for understanding PSCs essential for elite performance in Indian individual sports. Future research should expand samples across sports disciplines, include team-sport athletes, and incorporate perspectives of coaches and sport psychologists to enhance applicability. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how identified PSCs evolve across career transitions and performance milestones. Development and validation of indigenous assessment tools grounded in these PSCs would strengthen culturally aligned practice.

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## Transition From Sub Elite to Elite: Psychological Factors Enabling Success Among Indian Athletes

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### **Conflict of Interest**

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