



ISSN Print: 2664-7559  
ISSN Online: 2664-7567  
Impact Factor (RJIF): 8.19  
IJSHPE 2025; 7(2): 386-388  
[www.physicaleducationjournal.in](http://www.physicaleducationjournal.in)  
Received: 04-07-2025  
Accepted: 06-08-2025

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## From anxiety to achievement: Unlocking your full athletic potential

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.33545/26647559.2025.v7.i2f.273>

### Abstract

In competitive sports, success relies not only on physical ability and training but also on mental and emotional factors, including sports anxiety. This anxiety, characterized by fear of failure and performance pressure, can severely hinder an athlete's focus and performance. Symptoms may include elevated heart rates and negative thoughts, which, when extreme, diminish motor coordination. If unchecked, sports anxiety can lead to a debilitating cycle of underperformance and loss of self-confidence, adversely affecting overall well-being. However, recognizing and effectively managing anxiety can transform it into a motivational tool, enabling athletes to reach their fullest potential, as managing fear distinguishes exceptional from average athletes.

**Keywords:** Performance Anxiety, CBT, Mindfulness

### Introduction

In the high-stakes world of competitive sports, accomplishment is frequently viewed as the result of physical ability and intensive training. While ability and hard work are unquestionably necessary, the mental and emotional aspects of sports achievement are also critical. Sports anxiety is one of the most significant psychological challenges that athletes encounter, capable of undermining confidence, disrupting focus, and limiting performance. However, when properly understood and managed, worry can be turned into a motivator for achievement. Moving from anxiety to achievement is not only achievable, but also necessary for an athlete to realize their greatest potential.

Athletes who experience anxiety before or during competitions may perform worse (Judge LW et.al. 2016) [7]. Being physically aroused to a certain degree is beneficial and gets us ready for competition. Your capacity to compete, however, may be hampered by excessive physical signs of worry. It can be beneficial to worry a little bit about your performance during competition (Hardy L, Hutchinson A, 2007) [5]. On the other hand, pessimistic thinking and failure-oriented expectations can reinforce one another.

In a competitive sporting setting, "an individual will make cognitive appraisals of the perceived imbalance of the situational demands, resources, consequences, and the 'meaning' of consequences," according to sports psychologists (Ford et al., 2017, p. 206) [3].

Performance anxiety, sometimes referred to as "choking," is a psychological condition in which a person's capacity to perform at their peak when it counts most is hampered by extreme fear and self-doubt (Kunashni Parikh, 2023) [9]. Performance anxiety is caused by the intricate interplay between neurobiology and psychology. Seeing your opponent on the pitch, hearing the coach give a motivational speech, or contemplating the outcome can all set off a chain reaction of negative thoughts.

Performance anxiety refers to the anxiety that people experience in anticipation of and/or during important tasks, resulting in impaired performance" (Angelidis et al., 2019, p. 2) [2].

Our brain's emotional centre, the amygdala, goes into overdrive when we are overloaded with unpleasant ideas, causing "the fight-or-flight response." Cortisol, a stress hormone, is released as a result, flooding the brain with more negativity and fear. Focus, muscle memory, and easy-to-win opportunities are all lost.

Reducing the activity of the brain region associated with performance anxiety is the primary objective. An athlete may perform with confidence and manage their negative thoughts thanks to this. The best players are distinguished from the good players by this talent.

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Sports anxiety is a type of performance anxiety marked by extreme anxiousness, tension, or panic in competitive settings. It is frequently caused by a fear of failure, judgment, or failing to satisfy expectations, whether they be self-inflicted or imposed by coaches, teammates, or fans. Physical symptoms such as elevated heart rate, perspiration, and muscle tension are prevalent, as are psychological repercussions such as negative thinking, self-doubt, and poor decision-making.

While mild arousal can improve performance (a principle known as the Yerkes-Dodson Law), extreme worry reduces focus and motor coordination, significantly impairing performance.

Unchecked sports anxiety can impair an athlete's ability to perform optimally. For example, a sprinter may false-start owing to anxiety, while a basketball player may miss free shots under pressure despite consistent preparation. Repeated experiences with performance anxiety can diminish self-confidence, creating a vicious cycle of fear and underachievement.

Furthermore, prolonged anxiety can have a negative impact on overall well-being, causing burnout, a loss of drive, and even complete withdrawal from sports. As a result, addressing anxiety is critical not only for improving performance, but also for long-term mental health and athletic sustainability.

Anyone can suffer performance anxiety, which can impair confidence and concentration when doing important activities. Positive self-talk, visualization, and deep breathing are among strategies that can improve performance and assist control anxiety. Frequent application of these techniques increases resilience, empowering people to face difficulties with more poise and assurance.

### What Leads to Performance Anxiety in Sports?

Anxiety in sports performance can be caused by a number of things. Among these causes are:

1. **Social Anxiety:** Fear of social and performing situations is a symptom of social anxiety disorder (SAD). Speaking in front of an audience is the most prevalent phobia (Osoria *et al.*, 2011) <sup>[13]</sup>. However, anxiety can also result from other kinds of performances, such as athletic and musical ones. The most severe manifestation of this worry would be classified as SAD.
2. **Lack of experience:** Anxiety's negative impacts on performance are more likely to affect certain kinds of athletes. Compared to seasoned pros, amateur athletes are more prone to suffer from anxiety that impairs their performance during competition (Alder DB *et al.*, 2018) <sup>[1]</sup> (This makes sense because you haven't had much experience competing or controlling your "pumped up."
3. **Solo sports:** Compared to athletes who play team sports, athletes who compete in individual sports are also more prone to suffer from anxiety (Pluhar E *et al.*, 2019) <sup>[12]</sup>. Being a member of a team naturally relieves some of the pressure that comes with competing alone.
4. **Location of performance:** Research shows that anxiety levels are typically higher when your team plays at the opposition's stadium (sometimes referred to as an "away" game) than when they play at home.

### Five Performance Anxiety Symptoms

Performance anxiety symptoms Performance anxiety can manifest in a variety of ways in clients, such as the following (Forsyth & Eifert, 2016; Laguaita, 2021; Ford *et al.*, 2017; Marks, 2021) <sup>[4, 10, 3, 11]</sup>:

### Symptoms of emotion

A variety of emotional symptoms, such as fear, concern, uncertainty, humiliation, and self-doubt, can be experienced by clients who suffer from performance anxiety. They cause a great deal of distress and impair a person's capacity for concentration.

### Symptoms of cognition

Negative cognitive patterns, such as excessive self-criticism, irrational expectations, and an increased focus on failure, can result from performance anxiety. Such thinking lowers a person's self-confidence and feeds the cycle of fear.

### Physical signs and symptoms

Additionally, it may show itself as a number of bodily symptoms, including tense muscles, perspiration, dry mouth, shaking, and shortness of breath, elevated heart rate, and gastrointestinal problems. These can all exacerbate the cognitive and emotional difficulties.

### Symptoms of behaviour

Clients may exhibit behavioural changes, such as avoiding anxiety-inducing situations, retreating from social relationships, and exhibiting reduced performance, in reaction to the emotional, cognitive, and physical symptoms.

### Interpersonal repercussions

Friends, family, and coworker relationships can all be strained by performance anxiety. More social isolation and pressure may result from the afflicted person coming across as aloof and uncooperative.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness, relaxation techniques, and motivational interviewing are just a few of the psychological interventions used in sports psychology. These therapies are intended to improve athletes' mental toughness and performance by addressing the several ways that anxiety manifests in them (Herrero CP, 2021) <sup>[6]</sup>

### Strategies to Overcome Sports Anxiety

#### Mental Conditioning and Visualization

Athletes can learn to handle their anxiety through mental rehearsal and visualisation. By vividly visualising good performances, they train the brain to equate competition with confidence and control, lowering fear responses.

#### Breathing and Relaxation Techniques

Simple methods like gradual muscle relaxation, deep breathing, and mindfulness can help control the physical manifestations of worry. These techniques enhance concentration, foster serenity, and give one a sense of control again.

#### Cognitive Restructuring

Athletes can reframe their thinking by substituting constructive, optimistic self-talk for negative beliefs. "I'm prepared for this" or "Pressure is a privilege" are examples of statements that can turn dread into motivation.

#### Goal Setting and Focus on Process

Pressure is lessened and a growth attitude is promoted by reorienting attention from results (like winning) to manageable elements (like effort, form, or strategy). Setting and achieving clear goals helps athletes stay focused and grounded.

### Seeking Support

In order to help athletes control their anxiety, coaches, sports psychologists, and teammates are essential. Making mental health a priority and fostering a friendly environment can have a big impact.

### Cognitive-Behavioral Techniques

To treat athlete anxiety, cognitive-behavioral treatment, or CBT, is frequently employed. It entails recognising, disputing, and substituting more realistic and constructive mental patterns and beliefs for negative ones. CBT has proven successful in helping athletes manage their competitive anxiety and enhance their executive functioning (Toth R, et.al, 2023) <sup>[14]</sup>.

The path from anxiety to success involves self-awareness, growth, and resilience. Athletes who face and control their concerns not only improve as competitors but also develop into more resilient, focused, and self-assured people. This change frequently signifies a career turning point for an athlete, opening doors to performance levels previously believed to be unachievable. Michael Phelps and Serena Williams are just two of the top athletes who have publicly talked about their battles with anxiety and how managing it helped them succeed. Their experiences are potent reminders that mental health issues do not determine boundaries; rather, they offer chances for progress.

To overcome sports anxiety, practice relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and meditation, create a consistent pre-game routine that includes positive self-talk and visualization, and concentrate on controllable factors such as preparation and effort rather than outcomes. Talk to coaches and teammates to build a supportive network, and if your anxiety is severe or includes panic episodes, consult a sports psychologist for personalized techniques.

Anxiety is not a weakness in athletics; rather, it is a normal response to pressure and ambition. What distinguishes outstanding athletes is not their lack of fear, but their ability to manage it. Athletes can transition from worry to achievement by acknowledging, comprehending, and effectively managing sports anxiety, allowing them to realize their full athletic potential and reach heights they never thought possible.

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