



ISSN: 2456-0057

IJPNE 2018; 3(2): 2334-2336

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www.journalofsports.com

Received: 14-06-2018

Accepted: 22-07-2018

A comparative study of mental toughness among football players depending on play position: A study of inter-university level athletes

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Abstract

Mental toughness (MT) is widely recognized as a critical psychological trait influencing athletic performance, especially in high-pressure sports such as football. In football, which combines strategic intensity and physical rigor, the mental demands vary by play position. This paper aims to investigate whether mental toughness varies based on their positional roles forwards, midfielders, defenders, and goalkeepers. The study hypothesizes that goalkeepers and central defenders exhibit higher levels of mental toughness due to the cognitively demanding nature of their roles. Data were collected using the Sports Mental Toughness Questionnaire (SMTQ) across various positional groups. The results indicate statistically significant differences in mental toughness scores, suggesting positional roles influence psychological resilience in football. The paper concludes with implications for sports psychologists and coaches to tailor training programs aligned with positional psychological profiles.

Keywords: Mental toughness, football, positional play, inter-university athletes, sports psychology

Introduction

The dynamic nature of football demands not only physical and technical proficiency but also psychological resilience, commonly referred to as mental toughness (MT). In sports psychology, MT is often cited as a crucial determinant of success, especially in high-stakes, unpredictable environments. While numerous studies have examined MT in elite and sub-elite athletes, limited research has focused on how MT varies according to play position in football (Nicholls *et al.* 2012; Gucciardi *et al.* 2009) [6, 3]. This study seeks to fill that gap by analysing inter-university level football players' mental toughness across different field positions, namely goalkeepers, defenders, midfielders, and forwards.

Mental toughness, according to Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton, is defined as "having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to cope better than your opponents with the many demands that sport places on a performer" (209). The construct encompasses confidence, constancy, and control-traits that may be emphasized differently depending on a player's role on the field. For instance, a goalkeeper may require greater emotional control and composure under pressure compared to a winger whose mental resilience may be tested through persistent offensive engagement.

This paper endeavours to conduct a comparative study of mental toughness across different football positions at the inter-university level, addressing the following questions:

- Do different playing positions in football correlate with different levels of mental toughness?
- What psychological implications can be drawn for athletic training and player development?

Review of Literature

The academic exploration of mental toughness in sport has evolved from generalized psychological constructs to more sport-specific inquiries. Loehr was among the pioneers in applying MT to sport, defining it as a blend of confidence, motivation, and emotional control. Subsequent models, including those by Clough, Earle, and Sewell, proposed the "4Cs" model of control, commitment, challenge, and confidence, situating MT as a multidimensional trait (Clough *et al.* 2002) [2].

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Gucciardi *et al.* (2009),^[3] emphasized the importance of contextual and sport-specific definitions of MT, arguing that football's situational unpredictability necessitates diverse mental responses. Similarly, Nicholls *et al.* (2012)^[6] conducted an empirical study involving English footballers and found that central defenders and goalkeepers demonstrated significantly higher MT scores due to their leadership responsibilities and isolation, respectively.

The Sports Mental Toughness Questionnaire (SMTQ), developed by Sheard, Golby and Van Wersch (2009), has emerged as a reliable tool for assessing MT among athletes. The SMTQ divides MT into three subscales-confidence, constancy, and control-allowing nuanced insights into how athletes cope with competition stress, setbacks, and performance pressure. However, most existing literature has focused on professional or elite-level players, with little exploration of MT across different play positions at the inter-university level. This gap justifies the current study's objective to assess whether positional differences in football influence mental toughness among university athletes.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design utilizing the SMTQ as the primary data collection instrument. The research was conducted on male football players representing inter-university teams in India.

Participants

A total of 60 male participants aged 18–24 were selected through purposive sampling. The participants were categorized into four groups based on their playing positions:

- Goalkeepers (N=10).
- Defenders (N=15).
- Midfielders (N=20).
- Forwards (N=15).

Instrument

The Sports Mental Toughness Questionnaire (SMTQ), a 14-item self-report instrument, was administered. The SMTQ measures three subscales:

- Confidence (6 items).
- Constancy (4 items).
- Control (4 items).

Each item was rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 4 (very true). The internal consistency reliability of the SMTQ has been previously reported as acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$).

Procedure

Participants completed the SMTQ in a classroom setting after obtaining informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured. Data were analysed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and Tukey's post hoc test were employed to determine significant differences between positional groups.

Findings

The data analysis revealed the following mean scores for the total mental toughness and its subscales.

Position	Confidence	Constancy	Control	Total MT
Goalkeepers	3.65	3.43	3.51	3.53
Defenders	3.43	3.27	3.32	3.34
Midfielders	3.10	2.91	3.00	3.00
Forwards	3.22	3.03	3.08	3.11

A one-way ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference in overall MT across the four groups ($F=5.21$, $p<0.01$). Post hoc comparisons using Turkey's test revealed that goalkeepers had significantly higher MT scores than midfielders and forwards. Defenders also scored significantly higher than midfielders.

These findings support the hypothesis that mental toughness varies by play position. The higher MT in goalkeepers may be attributed to the solitary and high-pressure nature of their responsibilities. Defenders, often team leaders and organizers, also require resilience and composure. In contrast, midfielders and forwards, while requiring different psychological strengths like creativity and spontaneity, demonstrated comparatively lower MT in the context of the SMTQ's dimensions.

Conclusion

This study confirms that mental toughness among inter-university football players is influenced by positional roles. Goalkeepers and defenders consistently displayed higher MT levels, particularly in the domains of control and constancy. These results align with prior studies (Nicholls *et al.* 2012; Gucciardi *et al.* 2009)^[6, 3], reinforcing the notion that psychological demands vary by field position.

The practical implications are significant. Coaches and sports psychologists should tailor mental conditioning programs to suit positional demands. Goalkeepers may benefit from exercises enhancing focus and emotional regulation, while midfielders and forwards could gain from interventions targeting consistency and confidence under dynamic play conditions.

Limitations include the study's regional focus and the self-reported nature of the SMTQ, which may introduce bias. Future research could incorporate physiological measures of stress response and extend the sample to female players and different competitive levels. Ultimately, the findings underscore the importance of role-specific psychological training in optimizing athlete performance and well-being in team sports like football.

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