

## Level of mental toughness and its impact on the performance of Ethiopian football players

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### Abstract

The aim of the study was to determine the mental toughness level of Ethiopian male football players and its impact on their performance. Total 164 male players acted as subjects in this study (18 goalkeepers, 59 defenders, 47 midfielders and 40 attackers) of age ranged from 18 to 32, from Ethiopian premier league clubs. The subjects were randomly selected and were categorized by their playing position. To analyse mental toughness of the subjects mental toughness questionnaire (Dr. Alan Goldberg, 2004) was used. The statistical technique employed for this study was descriptive analysis and one way ANOVA at 0.05 level of significance to compare group of players across their playing position. The descriptive Statistical analysis indicates that in rebounding ability, handling pressure, concentration and motivation they were “below the solid skill” level of mental toughness, but in confidence male football players were “weak”. The ANOVA result indicated that there was no significant difference in mental toughness among the group of players across their playing position. Even though there was no significant difference among the group of players, there was a slight difference in their men value. The goalkeepers scored higher mean value than defenders, midfielders and attackers; defenders scored the second higher mean value than midfielders and attackers; midfielders scored the third higher mean value than attackers and from the whole group of players attackers were scored the least mean value. Though the overall mental toughness result indicated that Ethiopian male football players were mentally weak and this could be one of the possible impacts on their performance.

**Keywords:** Mental Toughness, football, players

### Introduction

Now a day’s sport psychologists (researchers and practitioners), coaches, sports commentators, sports fans, and athletes acknowledge the importance of mental toughness in sporting performance (Goldberg, 1998; Hodge, 1994) [5]. In early work on the issue, Loehr (1982) [15] emphasised that athletes and coaches felt that at least 50% of success is due to psychological factors that reflect mental toughness. Similarly, Gould *et al.* (1987) [6] reported that 82% of coaches rated mental toughness as the most important psychological attribute for success and emphasised that coaches feel that mental toughness is important in achieving success.

Evidences shows that football is one of the most significant current discussions in sports today and is one of the most successful sports in the world (Douglas 1989) [4]. The issue on the quality of the game and the players has been a controversial and much disputed subject within the field of these sports. Quality game needs quality players and mental toughness played a key role in order to achieve success in every game played (Bull & Shambrook, 2004) [1].

Football players and coaches spend hours each day training to improve speed, strength, and skill, but rarely do they train the mind. For this reason, football players would benefit by improving their mental game skills. Football players who lack mental toughness might have low self-confidence, lack of composure, pregame anxiety or tension, and many other mental game barriers to success in soccer. Without complete mental toughness, your performance can be tentative or inconsistent at best. Patrick & Jaki (2011) [11].

Practitioners sometimes have difficulties building effective mental training programs for individual athletes and teams. In spite of that, they also believe that mental training such as goal

setting, imagery, relaxation, and self-talk had helped them before, during and after competition and practice to improve performance, energy management, stress management, attention, self-confidence and motivation (Burton & Raedeke, 2008) [2]. Many of the sport psychology researches (e.g., Burton & Raedeke, 2008; Robazza, Pellizzari, & Hanin, 2004; Vealey, 2007) [22] over the last decades have investigated the cognitive and emotional factors associated with athletic achievements in an attempt to identify the personality characteristics of skilled athletes and the mental preparation strategies that they use to perform successfully.

Psychological characteristics are now commonly accepted as being major contributors to success within the area of sporting performance – in particular, motivational factors, self-confidence levels, and the ability to cope with and interpret anxiety-related symptoms as facilitative under pressure (cf. Hanton *et al.*, 2008; Hardy *et al.*, 1996; Mellalieu *et al.*, 2008) [8-10]. Another characteristic that is frequently used to describe why certain individuals have become “the best in the world” in their respective sports is that of “mental toughness” (Loehr, 1986; Williams, 1988) [14, 24].

### Rebound Ability

The best performers in sports and other performance areas are able to bounce back from adversity-setbacks and obstacles they face before and during performances. One of the most important psychological skills successful athletes and other performers possess is the ability to rebound from adversity-setbacks and obstacles encountered before and during the performance. Falling behind in a match, making a mistake that costs your team a goal, getting an unfair call from a referee, encountering a hostile crowd and experiencing inclement

weather are just a few examples of adversity which athletes must frequently overcome if they are to be successful (Keelan, 2013) [18].

**Handling Pressure**

According to Paccagnella, (2012) [17] pressure can be described as a feeling which is created by one’s reaction to performance within sporting situations, potentially influencing the mind. Even though pressure is a concept which is primarily created by our minds, it can have both positive and negative effects. Baric (2011) [19] stated that the feeling of pressure during competition can be caused by different factors, internal and external alike. Internal factors can be represented by some dispositional factors like personality traits, ego strengths, personal beliefs, self-confidence, and previous experience. External factors are, for example, the athlete-coach relationship or the relationships between team-mates, the level of competition, the importance of the game, the presence of audience, and public pressure.

**Concentration:**

Most athletes have discovered from personal experience that “concentration”, or the ability to focus effectively on the task at hand while ignoring distractions (Schmid and Peper, 1998) [20], is a vital prerequisite of successful performance in sport. Other research findings stated that concentration is the ability to remain focused on the task at hand, and maintain that focus over a period of time. Being able to remain fully focused especially when faced with adversity is consistently reported as an important mental toughness attribute (Jones; Hanton; Connaughton, 2002; 2007; Gucciardi; Gordon; Dimmock, 2008) [12, 13, 7]. In addition to elite athletes recognizing the importance of focus for mental toughness, coaches also consider it to be an important attribute (Weinberg; Butt; Culp, 2011) [23]. The central theme is that regardless of what is going on in the environment; mentally tough athletes have strong attentional control skills and are able to focus on the task at hand.

**Confidence**

Self-confidence is paramount to playing high-level soccer. If you have belief in your ability, you’re less likely to become anxious before big games or high-pressure situations such as overtime, penalty kicks, or try outs. In a game, if you wait to score, save a goal, or make a good pass before feeling confident, you’re prone to have very unstable confidence. You don’t want your confidence to be pushed around by immediate results (or mistakes) at the start of the game. What happens if you start the competition poorly with a couple mistakes? Your performance suffers if you react to the mistakes with self-doubt (Patrick & Jaki, 2011) [11]. Sport confidence (Vealey, 1986) [21] refers to the belief that an athlete possesses about his or her ability to be successful in sport in general (trait sport confidence) and in specific sport competitions (state sport confidence).

**Motivation**

It is a particularly relevant issue in the field of Sport Psychology. In elite sport, motivation is a key psychological trait that is needed to excel. Elite players need high levels of motivation to push themselves to their limits and to be able to deal with the pressures of training and playing constantly each

week. Motivation can be defined as being aroused to action, to directed purposeful behaviour, although this may not always be either efficient or effective (Davies, 1989) [3]. Motivation can be defined as the intensity and direction of effort (McCullagh, 2005) [16]. Intensity refers to the quantity of effort, while direction refers to what you are drawn too. Evidence suggests that enhanced motivation promotes learning, performance, enjoyment, and persistence in sport, among other benefits (McCullagh, 2005; Wilson, 2005) [16, 25]. Therefore, the aim of this study was to determine the mental toughness level of Ethiopian male football players and its impact on their performance.

**Methodology and Procedure**

A total of 164 male football players, comprising of 18 goalkeepers, 59 defenders, 47 midfielders and 40 attackers from Ethiopian premier league clubs were randomly selected for the study. The age of the subjects ranged between 18 to 32 years. The variable selected for the purpose of this study was Mental Toughness. The scores on Mental Toughness and its components (Rebound ability, Ability to handle pressure, Concentration, Confidence and Motivation) were obtained by using Mental Toughness questionnaire prepared by Dr. Alan Goldberg’s, (2004). To compare Mental Toughness among the group of players across their playing position one way ANOVA was applied at the significance level of 0.05. SPSS 20.0 was employed for statistical application.

**Results and Discussions**

To determine the mental toughness level of male football players the mean and standard deviation were described and to compare the group of players across their playing position on the mental toughness, one way ANOVA were applied. The findings are presented below.

**Table 1:** Mean value and standard deviation of overall MT of male players

MTQ Sub-Scales	N	Mean	St. Deviation	Std. Error
Rebounding Ability	164	4.52	1.303	.102
Handling Pressure	164	4.48	.936	.073
Concentration	164	4.10	1.269	.099
Self Confidence	164	3.60	.983	.077
Motivation	164	4.48	.747	.058
Overall Mental Toughness	164	21.18	3.229	.252

The mental toughness level of (n=164) male players statistically listed values in table 1 above by each of the five sub-scales of mental toughness specifically shows the following results. Based on the results their rebounding ability score was (Mean=4.52, SD=1.303), in handling pressure (Mean=4.48, SD=.936), in concentration (Mean=4.10, SD=1.269), confidence (Mean=3.60, SD=.983), and in motivation (Mean=4.48, SD=.747). According to these mean and standard deviation values of the overall mental toughness level of male players was (Mean=21.18, SD=.3.229).

The descriptive analysis result shows that the overall mental toughness of male player with regarded to the five subscales of MT indicated that in rebounding ability, handling pressure, concentration and motivation they were in “below the solid skill” category whereas in confidence they were categorized in “weak” category.

As figure 1 shows below the overall mental toughness of players by their playing position indicated that goalkeepers, defenders, mid-fielders and attackers were classified under “weak” category. Therefore the overall mental toughness mean value exhibited that male players were categorized in “mentally weak” category.

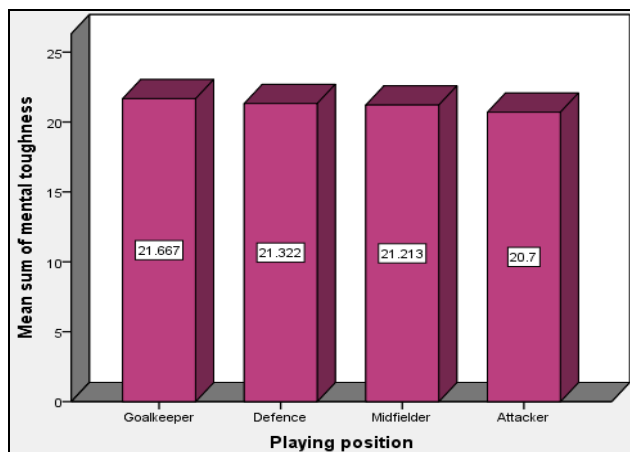


Fig 1: Overall mental toughness of male players by playing position

Table 2: ANOVA for overall mental toughness of male players by playing position

Playing Position	N	Mean	St. Deviation	F	Sig.
Goalkeeper	18	21.67	4.284	.466	.707
Defence	59	21.32	2.622		
Midfielder	47	21.21	3.210		
Attacker	40	20.70	3.582		
Overall MT	164	21.18	3.229		

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

As it is shown in table 2 ANOVA was employed to compare the overall mental toughness difference between groups of players using the mean and standard deviation values. The registered result exhibited that p-value (.707) > 0.05. This pointed that there was no any significant difference among goalkeepers, defenders, mid-fielders and attackers in their overall mental toughness.

As the obtained result from this analysis p-value shown that there was no significant difference among the group of players across their playing position. Even though all the players were classified under “mentally weak” category of MT and significant difference not found, their mean value shown that there was a slight difference between the groups. The goalkeepers scored higher mean value than defenders, midfielders and attackers; defenders scored the second higher mean value than midfielders and attackers; midfielders scored the third higher mean value than attackers and from the whole group of players attackers were scored the least mean value.

**Conclusion**

On the bases of analysis and results the following conclusion may be drawn.

Male football players in rebounding ability, handling pressure, concentration and motivation they were in “below the solid skill” whereas in confidence they were “weak” in this subscale of mental toughness. There was no any significant difference exhibited among the group of players across their

playing position but the goalkeepers scored higher mean value than the other players. Therefore, the overall mental toughness indicated that male football players were “mentally weak” and this could be one of the possible impacts on the performance of Ethiopian male football players.

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