

# Psychological Resilience under Competitive Pressure: Mental toughness, Competitive Anxiety, Self Confidence, and Adequate Performance among Kabaddi and Kho-Kho Athletes

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## ABSTRACT:

This study explores how rural high school Kabaddi and Kho-Kho athletes experience and manage psychological pressure during competition. The research was conducted with 57 athletes (23 Kabaddi players and 34 Kho-Kho players) from government and private schools in Vikarabad district and Kulkacherla mandal, Telangana, India. Most of these athletes come from rural farming families. All of them have learned about games and stress through village life, oral histories, and the guidance of elders. They did so while also receiving modern training in school.

The study examines four themes (Mental toughness, competitive anxiety, self-confidence, and adequate performance under pressure). Using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation, this study found that athletes have a unique type of resilience that they got from their village. This developed from many experiences. For example, agricultural labour, collective village life, oral stories, and the physical freedom of rural childhood were the reasons for it. Experiences of hardship, community support, and elders' narratives gave them confidence. Competitive anxiety is interpreted as a signal of readiness. Nothing but kind of a fuel for performance.

The study says that rural athletes have a type of psychological strength created by their culture. This kind of approach in modern sports psychology is being ignored nowadays. So, this research provides practical tips for coaches and physical education teachers. For recognising, respecting, and including these unique strengths in their training.

**KEYWORDS:** Psychological Resilience, Mental Toughness, Competitive Anxiety, Self-Confidence, Kabaddi, Kho-Kho; Rural Athletes, Oral Tradition, Qualitative Research.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Every athlete knows the feeling. The match is about to begin. The crowd is watching. The body feels tight, the stomach churns, and the mind races. What happens next, whether the athlete rises to the occasion or freezes, depends on something deeper than physical fitness or technical skill. It depends on psychological

resilience. With the ability to stay steady, focused, and effective when it matters most.

This study examined young athletes who had a village background. High school Kabaddi and Kho-Kho players from Vikarabad district in Telangana, India. These two games are living traditions and are passed down through generations. Villagers play these games in village fields and school grounds. That too during festivals. All the elders always speak about these games only. Kabaddi is a contact team sport. The raider must enter the opponent's court and say Kabaddi, Kabaddi. He can touch as many defenders as possible and return safely. And Kho-Kho is a chase-and-dodge game. The chasers sit in a line, and one will chase the opponent and touch them. Here, both games demand speed, quickness, and courage. So, it's about the ability to think and act under pressure.

This is the study of 57 rural athletes. For them, fitness came from daily activities. They wake early and do some work at home. Also, most of the villagers walk only. They play games in open spaces where minimal facilities won't be there. Their understanding of competition, stress, and courage is completely different. They have traditional knowledge. Stories were told by elders. Along with all these, learning new things from physical education helped them.

The purpose of this study is to understand, from the athletes' own words and experiences, how they develop and express psychological resilience under competitive pressure. Specifically, it explores four interconnected aspects: mental toughness, competitive anxiety, self-confidence, and the ability to perform adequately when it counts. The study asks: How do rural Kabaddi and Kho-Kho athletes experience pressure? Where does their mental strength come from? How do they manage nervousness? What role do village life, oral traditions, and community support play in their psychological preparation?

## 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE:

Mental toughness is one of the most discussed ideas in sport psychology. It is often described in many ways. Such as ability to remain determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure. Jones and colleagues (2002) defined it as a psychological edge that allows athletes to cope better than opponents with the demands of competition. Another thought was that a widely used model was the 4C model. Which means Challenge, commitment, control, and confidence.

Here the Challenge means seeing pressure as an opportunity, not as a threat. And commitment is nothing but focused on goals. For instance, when things became difficult. Control was different from the rest because it had two parts. Such as controlling emotions and controlling one's life and actions. Confidence means believing in his abilities. So, where does this mental toughness come from? Some researchers believe it is partly a personality trait. Many argue that it is developed by experience and training. But when we look at the Connaughton and colleagues (2008) we found that mental toughness develops over an athlete's career. In the early years, family and environment matter most. But in the later part coaches will help a lot. But in their mature years, psychological skills. For rural athletes, this view is important.

Competitive anxiety is the common nervousness where athletes feel during any competition. It is cognitive anxiety (worry about failure), and somatic anxiety (physical symptoms like a racing heart, and upset stomach). Research showed that athletes with mental toughness experienced lower competitive anxiety. Mojtahedi and colleagues (2023) studied combat athletes and found that mentally tough athletes reported less worry. Also, more confidence before competition. Similarly, study of Kabaddi athletes in Indonesia found a normal negative relationship between mental toughness and competitive anxiety. But anxiety is not always bad. Many athletes describe nervousness as a sign that they are ready.

Self-confidence is the belief in one's own ability for a success. It is one of the strongest psychological

predictors of sport performance. Fadilah and colleagues (2025) studied East Java Kabaddi athletes and found that confidence had the strongest positive effect on performance, exceeding the effects of anxiety and motivation. Confidence can come from many sources. For example, past success, preparation, encouragement from coaches and family, and a sense of belonging to a team. For rural athletes, confidence may also come from the physical competence developed through village life. For example we can see that they get it from running, climbing trees, and working in their fields.

Psychological resilience is somehow related to mental toughness. It refers to the ability to bounce back from adversity. And it helps in maintaining stress. Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) studied Olympic champions and proposed a model. In this, psychological factors like positive personality, motivation, confidence, focus, and perceived social support influence how athletes appraise stress. This is useful for understanding rural athletes. Because it highlights the role of social support. Village life may provide both. The supportive community and a cultural unity for interpreting hardship as normal.

So in this way, the study fills the several gaps. The sport psychology research focuses on mainstream sports like football, cricket, or athletics. But, kabaddi and Kho-Kho received far less attention, despite their popularity in South Asia and their deep cultural roots. There is very little research done on rural athletes. And almost none of it uses qualitative methods to explore their experiences.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

#### **3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN:**

This study was conducted with a qualitative approach. It is designed to explore the experiences of rural high school athletes. Especially in Kabaddi and Kho-Kho. Rather than testing with numbers, the study seeks to understand the context. The research is guided by an interpretive framework, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that athletes' own perspectives are the most valuable source of knowledge about their psychological lives. Fieldwork was conducted in Kulkacherla mandal of Vikarabad district, Telangana, India. This area is a rural. And agriculture was the main livelihood. Villages in this mandal play many games. Kabaddi and Kho-Kho are played in school grounds, during village festivals, and in informal evening gatherings. Many elders recall playing these games in their youth and speak of them with pride. So, following the interest of the villagers, the study was conducted. In this, several schools participated in the study. Within them some are government high schools and a few are private high schools. Government school's children are from farming families only. Private school had rural and semi-urban families.

#### **3.2 PARTICIPANTS:**

A total of 57 high school athletes participated in the study. Out of it, 23 Kabaddi players (18 male, 5 female). And 34 are the Kho-Kho players (22 male, 12 female). Ages are between 14 to 18 years. Most participants (52 out of 57) came from rural families. The remaining five came from semi-urban backgrounds. In terms of experience, 28 athletes had more than two years of school team training. They also had played in school competitions. These were considered experienced. And 29 athletes had less than one year of training or were preparing for their first school competition. Participants spoke Telugu. The researcher is also a Telugu, which helped in conducting in the athletes' mother tongue.

#### **3.3 DATA COLLECTION METHODS:**

**In-Depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 athletes (8 Kabaddi, 10 Kho-Kho). Each interview took 25 to 40 minutes. The interviews were conducted in the school grounds. Especially after training sessions, and sometimes in free periods. The interview guide covered these topics.

Such as mindset at the time of matches (before, during and after competition). And reasons of pressure. The source for the confidence. Asked about whether there was any influence of village side (elders' teachings). Their understanding of mental strength. The interviews were conversational rather than rigid.

**Focus Group Discussions:** Four group discussions were there. Each had 6-8 athletes. In between 2 groups were mixed (Kabaddi and Kho-Kho). The other two were sport-specific. Focus groups allowed athletes to compare experiences and ideas, and to build on each other's responses. They were especially useful for exploring shared cultural beliefs about pressure and courage.

**Participant Observation:** A few matches were observed in the study. Athletes' behaviour was observed. This included how they think before, during, and after the matches. Their interactions with teammates and also with coaches. Emotional expressions were considered.

All these observations help in understanding how resilience actually works.

### 3.4 DATA ANALYSIS:

All interviews were audio-recorded (with permission) and transcribed. Thematic analysis was used, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase process.

1. Familiarisation with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Coding was done manually. A second coder, an experienced physical education teacher not involved in the study. Independently coded 20% of the transcripts. Agreement was high (82%), and any disagreements were discussed and resolved.

### 3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS:

School has given permission for the research. The study's purpose was also explained. Privacy was protected and candidates' names also changed.

## 4. FINDINGS:

The analysis revealed several themes. Each captures a different aspect. Collected the experiences of the Kabaddi and Kho-Kho athletes. And also, tried to get the way how they managed competitive pressure.

**Theme 1:** Courage Grown in the Fields. Like Village Life is the Training Ground for Mental Toughness. When asked about mental strength, every athlete mentioned village life. Mostly, physical work and walks were helpful in dealing with those conditions as sources of toughness.

**Raju** (17, Kabaddi, government school, experienced) put it simply.

“I have worked in the fields since my childhood. Its quite common that waking up in the early morning. Until you finish the work, it will be there only, so you have to finish the task. So, I can relate when I'm on the Kabaddi court, and I never think it's a big problem.”

**Vikram** (16, Kho-Kho, government school) connected village running to match performance.

“In the village, we run everywhere most of the time without any reason. To the tea shop, to the fields (our own or work), to friends' houses for chit chat, for watching TV or any kind of news. There are no cars. So running is normal. In Kho-Kho, when I'm chasing someone, I don't think 'Oh, I'm running.' I just run. What I did was that always.”

All shared similar ideas. And expressed how confident they are (fitness). They have a strong belief system.

Aware of challenges in competition and they had already faced tough situations in their daily lives.

**Dr. Anjali**, a physical education teacher from the government school:

“These children are not soft (very strong). They walk three kilometres daily (reaching the school). They help parents before and after the school. So, the time they come to the ground, they are strong enough. Giving the game is only pending. Because already they have the strength.”

**Theme 2:** Oral Traditions and the Transmission of Coping Knowledge.

A key finding was how oral traditions influenced athletes' mental strategies. Many athletes remembered specific stories. And get advices from their grandparents, and village elders. These were not formal lessons. But real experiences of the society.

**Suresh** (18, Kabaddi, private school, experienced) remembered his grandfather's story:

“My grandfather told me about a match in his time. His team was losing. Everyone was tired. But the captain encouraged with a story. Informed that Kabaddi is not only about the score. It is about who can breathe through it. So, whoever can breathe, they will win. My grandfather shared his words like how they kept breathing, playing, and slowly they got the momentum. So on my weak times I always remember that. I tell myself, just breathe through it like how my grandfather did.”

**Anil** (15, Kho-Kho, government school) shared a proverb:

“The old people say, When you are running, don't look back. Watch ahead. If you look behind, you will fall a short. In Kho-Kho, when I'm being chased, I don't look back. I look forward. That's what we all learn from them.”

These oral teachings serve as helpful mental strategies. These ideas are shared as stories rather than techniques. All these make them feel more meaningful. The reason was they all came from loved and respected elders.

**Priya** (17, Kho-Kho, government school, female, experienced) spoke about her mother's advice:

“My mother never played Kho-Kho. But she said, When you are nervous, think of the people who are cheering for you. She further said, not the people who are watching to see you fail. I do that. Before a match, I think of my team, my family, my friends.”

**Theme 3:** “The Weight of the Team”. Collective Support and Pressure Sharing.

A common idea was the team provides important support for mental strength. Athletes mentioned that it is easier to handle pressure when they share it with others. This was true for Kabaddi players.

**Manoj** (16, Kabaddi, government school) moment before a match:

“Before the match, I feel nervous, and then I look at my teammates. They were too nervous. We are all nervous. That feeds me some strength to lead the team, it's okay. Then the whistle blows, and the nervousness becomes something else. It helps in saying let's go.” There we do it.

**Priya** (17, Kho-Kho, government school, female, experienced) contrasted individual and team pressure:

“I think too much when I am running alone. Like, what if I fall? What if I miss? But when I am with my team, I think only about the game. I always think of helping them. Defeat was very tough to bear. So, winning is a must.”

This collective dimension of resilience was less pronounced among Kho-Kho athletes, whose sport involves more individual decision-making.

**Theme 4:** Functional Interpretation of Competitive Anxiety

Many athletes see anxiety not just as a negative feeling, but as a positive one.

**Raju** (17, Kabaddi, government school, experienced) was blunt:

“Feeling nervous is a good thing for me. Because if I am relaxed, I don’t like to perform. But when nervousness is there, it’s like I’m charged up. Let’s say, like I move faster.”

**Kiran** (14, Kho-Kho, government school, novice) said:

“It will be so scary before the match. I used to think, what if I fail, I don’t know how to do it. Then my coach use to say, just play you can do it. But it’s hard for me.”

The difference between experienced and novice athletes was notable.

**Suresh** (18, Kabaddi, private school, experienced) explained:

“In the beginning, I was so afraid, always think about nervousness, I will definitely play badly. But later I understood that being nervous is a common fact. Everyone is nervous only in play. So, in this situation, I choose to let it move, and I could balance.”

**5. DISCUSSION:****5.1 VILLAGE LIFE AS A FOUNDATION FOR MENTAL TOUGHNESS:**

The findings suggest that rural athletes develop mental toughness. This was achieved not through formal psychological training. It has gone through the default qualities of villagers (Agricultural works, walks, physical activities in different occasions).

Living in rural areas requires toughness. This automatically builds a strong ability to handle tough situations. People even develop a physical understanding also (challenges). This meets with Connaughton et al.’s (2008) finding. This discussed how the early environment is critical to the development of mental toughness. But it extended that finding by showing the specific cultural and economic conditions (Farming, collective living, and limited resources shaping psychological strengths).

**5.2 ORAL TRADITIONS AS PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCES:**

Oral stories are very important. Everyone will share ideas. They recall stories from elders. Each one has a different perspective to understand the story. Motivations and messages are part of emotions. So, the group will definitely benefit from it. Here, modern techniques are taught in formal ways, so old knowledge definitely helps. And all these are emotionally connecting also. It works better than anything.

**5.3 COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE:**

Teamwork will give support to each other. It builds strength. Villages teach about unity. Almost everyone knows that working together will give better results. Eventually, it will lead to success. So, same idea is applicable in sports as well. No one handles the pressure alone. Unity contributes to the team with a positive result.

When coaches are working with rural athletes, this is very important. Prioritising team unity helps more. When we do this, athletes feel comfortable (no burden).

**5.4 INTEGRATING OLD AND NEW KNOWLEDGE:**

This is about understanding old and new knowledge. The study raises important questions. Rural-background athletes are very special because they carry traditional knowledge and techniques. This will add valuable mental strength to modern sports. But this is not recognised. This is not a rejection of modern sports psychology, but an addition to it.

## 6. PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS:

Some suggestions for physical education teachers and sports psychologists who work with athletes in rural areas.

- Ask about oral traditions
- Validate village-based strengths
- Build collective resilience
- Reframe anxiety as readiness
- Create space for integration

## 7. CONCLUSION:

This study explored how rural high school Kabaddi and Kho-Kho athletes experience and manage competitive pressure. It was run through interviews, focus groups, and observation. It found that these athletes possess a distinctive form of psychological resilience rooted in village life, oral traditions, collective support, and functional interpretation of anxiety. The idea of village resilience helps explain the strength found in communities. Village resilience is not something you learn in classrooms or from manuals. It develops from local experiences. And is developed from the stories shared by the elders. Where the common challenges of community life and the freedom experienced during rural childhood pass through. It is a valuable cultural resource that modern sports psychology often overlooks.

The study says that coaches, and researchers should acknowledge the skills already present in rural background athletes. That too, before applying modern techniques to them. We should explore the facts first. Whether they already have the ability or not. Then only new knowledge should be applied. By doing so, old knowledge and new knowledge can support each other. Then the result will also be better.

For the athletes, the research is saying that your strength comes from where you come from.

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