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IMPROVING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPARATION OF TAEKWONDO ATHLETES

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Abstract. This thesis examines evidence-based approaches to improving the psychological preparation of taekwondo athletes. Taekwondo competition combines rapid decision-making, direct confrontation, strict scoring conditions, weight-category pressure, and uncertainty about the opponent. These demands can increase competitive anxiety and disrupt attention, emotional control, tactical judgment, and confidence. The study uses a narrative comparative review of taekwondo-specific research and established sport-psychology literature. The evidence indicates that psychological preparation is most effective when it is integrated into regular technical and tactical practice rather than delivered as an isolated activity. A structured programme should combine goal setting, motivational and instructional self-talk, imagery, breathing and relaxation, pre-performance routines, competition simulation, and systematic reflection. The reviewed studies also show that ordinary training bouts may not reproduce the affective and cognitive demands of real competition. Therefore, coaches should design representative practice conditions and individualize mental-skills training according to each athlete's needs. The thesis concludes with a practical framework for incorporating psychological preparation into the taekwondo training process.

Keywords: taekwondo, psychological preparation, mental skills training, competitive anxiety, self-confidence, imagery, self-talk, pre-performance routine.

Introduction

Competitive taekwondo requires athletes to perceive an opponent's movement, select a response, execute a technically accurate action, and adapt to changes in distance and timing within a few seconds. These tasks occur under direct pressure from scoring, elimination, refereeing decisions, spectators, expectations, and the possibility of injury. Consequently, physical and technical readiness alone do not guarantee that an athlete will express his or her full capacity during competition. Psychological preparation is needed to stabilize attention, regulate arousal, preserve confidence, manage disruptive thoughts, and maintain tactical discipline under pressure. The psychological demands of taekwondo are closely connected with the characteristics of combat. An athlete cannot completely predict the opponent's actions, and even a short loss of concentration may determine the outcome of a bout. Competitive anxiety may narrow attention, increase unnecessary muscular tension, disturb timing, and provoke impulsive tactical decisions. Moderate activation can support readiness, but excessive or poorly interpreted activation may undermine performance. The objective is therefore not to eliminate emotion. It is to help the athlete recognize, interpret, and regulate emotional and cognitive responses so that they support purposeful action [1].

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Evidence from taekwondo research illustrates this problem. Maloney et al. compared highly skilled athletes in training and competition and found that training fights produced lower anxiety, arousal, and mental effort. Athletes also attacked less and displayed more predictable movement patterns in training. This means that routine sparring may prepare technical behavior without reproducing the psychological demands of competition. Lim and O'Sullivan, in a detailed case study of an Olympic taekwondo athlete, reported improvements in self-talk, emotional control, imagery, goal setting, negative-thought management, and anxiety management after a systematic mental-skills programme. Although a single case cannot establish universal effectiveness, it demonstrates how psychological techniques can be adapted to the individual athlete and integrated with opponent analysis and competitive routines. Psychological preparation should therefore be understood as a planned pedagogical process. It includes assessment, skill acquisition, repeated practice, competition-specific application, and evaluation. The purpose of this thesis is to synthesize relevant research and develop a practical approach to improving the psychological preparation of taekwondo athletes. The analysis focuses on the psychological demands of competition, the principal mental skills required by athletes, the role of representative training, and the conditions necessary for effective implementation [2].

Methodology

The thesis employed a narrative comparative review. Seven core sources were selected because they addressed taekwondo-specific psychological demands, mental-skills training, competition simulation, self-talk, imagery, confidence, anxiety regulation, or applied sport-psychology practice. The source set included empirical taekwondo studies, a taekwondo case intervention, meta-analytic evidence on self-talk, and established sport-psychology texts. The unit of analysis was the intervention or practical principle described in each source rather than individual athletes recruited for a new experiment. The literature was coded according to six categories: psychological problem addressed; technique used; timing and frequency of practice; integration with technical-tactical training; reported or proposed outcome; and methodological limitation. Findings were then compared to identify convergent recommendations and taekwondo-specific adaptations. Particular attention was given to whether a technique could be practised under realistic competitive constraints and whether the source supported individualization. Because the reviewed studies used different designs and outcome measures, no pooled statistical effect was calculated. Conclusions were based on thematic convergence, while single-case findings were interpreted cautiously [3].

Table 1.

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Analytical framework for the reviewed literature

Analytical category	Question applied to each source	Practical relevance
Demand	Which psychological difficulty is addressed?	Identifies the athlete's priority need
Technique	Which mental skill or training method is used?	Clarifies the content of preparation
Application	When and how is the skill practised?	Supports integration into weekly training
Transfer	Does practice represent competition pressure?	Links training behavior with competition
Evaluation	How is change observed or measured?	Allows programme adjustment

Results and Discussion

The literature consistently treats psychological preparation as a combination of related skills rather than a single technique. Goal setting gives direction to preparation and converts broad ambitions into controllable behaviors. In taekwondo, process goals may include maintaining an effective distance, initiating combinations at planned moments, returning immediately to guard, or following a tactical cue after a scoring interruption. Such goals are more useful during a bout than an exclusive focus on winning because the athlete can control execution but cannot fully control the opponent, referee, or final score. Self-talk is another central component. Motivational self-talk can reinforce confidence and persistence, whereas instructional self-talk can guide attention toward a short tactical cue. A meta-analysis by Hatzigeorgiadis et al. Supports the value of self-talk interventions across sport tasks, while also indicating that systematic practice matters. For taekwondo athletes, cue words must be brief enough to use under time pressure. Phrases such as 'distance,' 'first action,' 'reset,' or 'calm and ready' are more functional than long statements. Coaches should help athletes replace catastrophic interpretations with realistic, action-oriented language instead of demanding vague positive thinking [4].

Imagery allows athletes to rehearse competition without additional physical load or injury risk. Effective imagery should reproduce the sensory and emotional characteristics of performance: the size of the area, referee commands, electronic scoring signals, protective equipment, crowd noise, fatigue, tactical uncertainty, and responses to both successful and unsuccessful exchanges. The athlete should imagine coping effectively rather than imagining a perfect contest in which no difficulty occurs. Cumming and Ramsey emphasize that imagery interventions work best when their function and content match the intended performance outcome. In taekwondo, imagery can be connected with opponent analysis, counterattack options, recovery after conceding a point, and the final seconds of a close bout. Breathing regulation and relaxation provide a rapid means of managing excessive arousal. Slow diaphragmatic breathing with a controlled exhalation can be used before entering the competition area, during waiting periods, or between rounds. The technique should be rehearsed during training so that it becomes familiar and does not require excessive conscious

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attention. Relaxation must not lower activation so much that the athlete becomes passive. The desired state is calm readiness: enough activation for fast action combined with sufficient control for accurate perception and tactical judgment.

Representative psychological practice

A major finding of the comparative analysis is that psychological skills cannot be fully developed only through classroom explanation or quiet individual exercises. Maloney et al. (2018) showed that normal training fights did not reproduce the affective and cognitive demands of competition. This gap has practical consequences. An athlete may execute tactics successfully against familiar teammates and still experience attention disruption when facing an unknown opponent, an official referee, a visible score deficit, or an audience. Coaches should therefore introduce representative psychological constraints gradually. Competition simulation can include formal referee commands, electronic protectors, fixed waiting times, video review, unfamiliar opponents, public scoring, and meaningful performance consequences. The purpose is not to create constant stress. Excessive pressure in every session may increase fatigue and reduce learning. A more appropriate progression begins with mental skills in controlled practice, continues with pressure-added technical tasks, and culminates in selected simulation bouts. After each simulation, athletes should identify what they noticed, how they interpreted pressure, which regulation strategy they used, and what they will modify in the next attempt. Pre-performance routines connect separate psychological skills into a predictable sequence. A routine may cover the evening before competition, the weigh-in period, travel to the venue, warm-up, waiting area, entry onto the mat, and the first tactical intention. Lim and O'Sullivan (2016) demonstrated how self-talk, imagery, breathing, equipment preparation, and opponent analysis were organized into an individualized routine. The value of a routine lies in directing attention toward controllable actions. It should remain flexible enough to accommodate delays, schedule changes, or unexpected opponents [5].

Table 2.

Practical structure for psychological preparation in taekwondo

Phase	Primary objective	Methods	Evaluation
Assessment	Identify individual needs	Interview, observation, brief scales	Athlete profile and priority skills
Acquisition	Learn mental techniques	Goal setting, self-talk, imagery, breathing	Correct and independent use
Integration	Use skills during practice	Technical drills and tactical sparring	Consistency under moderate pressure
Simulation	Approach competition demands	Formal bouts, scoring, referees, time pressure	Behavior and reflection after bouts
Competition	Apply a stable routine	Cue words, breathing, imagery, attentional plan	Routine adherence and performance notes

Individualization and coaching practice

The same psychological programme should not be imposed on all athletes. One athlete may need anxiety regulation, another may struggle with attention

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after a referee interruption, and another may lose tactical discipline when behind on points. Initial assessment should combine the athlete's self-report with observation from training and competition. Short validated questionnaires can support this process, but scores should not replace discussion. Psychological skills should be selected according to the athlete's actual performance problem, language, experience, and willingness to practise. The coach-athlete relationship is also important. A coach who communicates excessive fear, anger, or uncertainty can intensify the athlete's anxiety. Instructions immediately before and during a bout should be concise, specific, and consistent with previously rehearsed cues. Psychological preparation becomes stronger when the coach models emotional control, provides feedback on controllable behaviors, and avoids defining the athlete's competence solely through victory or defeat. Weinberg and Gould emphasize that psychological skills develop through education and regular practice; they should not be introduced only when a crisis appears. Evaluation should occur throughout the programme. Useful indicators include adherence to the pre-performance routine, the athlete's ability to use a cue under pressure, attentional recovery after an error, emotional control between rounds, and tactical behavior during simulations. Competition outcome can be recorded but should not be treated as the only criterion because opponent quality, refereeing, and situational events also affect the result. A short post-competition review should identify which skills were used successfully, where disruption occurred, and what should be adjusted in the next training cycle.

Conclusion

Improving the psychological preparation of taekwondo athletes requires a systematic, individualized, and competition-relevant process. The reviewed evidence indicates that goal setting, self-talk, imagery, breathing regulation, emotional control, and pre-performance routines can support confidence, attention, and tactical discipline. However, knowing these techniques is insufficient. Athletes must practise them repeatedly and connect them with specific technical and tactical tasks. The comparison of training and competition also shows that ordinary sparring may not reproduce the psychological pressure of real contests. Selected sessions should therefore simulate the affective and cognitive demands of competition through realistic rules, scoring, opponents, refereeing, waiting conditions, and time pressure. These simulations should be introduced progressively and followed by structured reflection. Psychological preparation is most effective when coaches treat it as a normal part of athlete development, coordinate it with the wider training plan, and evaluate process indicators rather than relying only on wins and losses.

Practical Recommendations

• Assess each athlete's main psychological needs before selecting techniques.

• Integrate short mental-skills exercises into regular technical and tactical sessions.

• Use brief, individualized self-talk cues that direct attention toward controllable actions.

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• Practise imagery that includes pressure, errors, tactical adjustments, and successful coping.

• Develop a flexible pre-performance routine and rehearse it before important competitions.

• Use selected competition simulations to reproduce scoring, refereeing, waiting, and emotional demands.

• Review psychological performance after simulations and competitions using athlete and coach observations.

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