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ANALYSIS OF MENTAL TOUGHNESS OF LASKAR JEPARA FA U-15 SOCCER PLAYERS WHEN THE TEAM IS TRAILING IN SCORE DURING A MATCH

Bima Fathullah Maulana Rizqi¹, Purwono sidik Permono²

Universitas Negeri Semarang^{1,2}

Bimafathullahmaulana@students.unnes.ac.id¹, purwonosidik@mail.unnes.ac.id²

Abstract

This study analyzes the level of mental toughness shown by Laskar Jepara FA U-15 football players when their team is trailing in a match. Using 20 athletes selected based on competitive participation criteria, this study employed a descriptive quantitative design. Data were collected through a modified Mental Toughness Questionnaire (MTQ) distributed via Google Form. Descriptive statistics were used to show the distribution of total scores for the mental toughness categories. The results showed a score range of 18–90, with a mean of 73.55 (SD = 19.02). There are 2 players (10%) in the very low category, 1 player (5%) in the moderate category, 13 players (65%) in the high category, and 4 players (20%) in the very high category. The commitment dimension showed the highest score, while challenge was the lowest. These findings indicate that most players have sufficient mental toughness to manage emotions, maintain commitment, sustain confidence, and stay focused when their team is trailing. In training programs, it is very important to include psychological training programs such as self-talk, imagery, and relaxation to help players view being behind as a challenge for growth.

Keywords: Mental Toughness; Youth Football; Athlete Resilience; Psychological Skills Training (Self-Talk, Imagery, Relaxation)

INTRODUCTION

Football is a type of sport where two teams play, each with eleven players. The objective of the game of football is to score goals into the opponent's net according to the rules of the game. Football is not only viewed as a sports activity but also as a means of physical training, motor skills development, and the enhancement of social and mental aspects for its participants. In the context of physical education, soccer is a game that requires basic skills such as passing, dribbling, shooting, and controlling, which must be well-mastered by every player (Wicaksono et al., 2020).

In addition, football requires a combination of technical skills, physical condition, tactical understanding, and psychological readiness to face dynamic match situations. Success in the game is not only determined by individual ability but also by teamwork and making the right decisions on the field. This shows that football is a sport that requires the integration of various aspects to achieve optimal performance (Dahlan et al., 2020).

In football, it not only requires physical condition, technique, and tactics, but also strong mental readiness to face various pressures during the match. In the development of modern football, psychological factors have become one of the main determinants of an athlete's performance, especially in high-pressure match situations (Liew et al., 2019). Many matches are won by teams that not only have better technical skills but also possess the mental strength needed to endure, recover, and perform optimally under difficult conditions. ⁴ mental toughness is one of the important psychological components in this context often referred to as ⁸ mental toughness. Mental toughness is defined as an individual's ability to remain focused, confident, consistent, and capable of overcoming pressure, difficulties, and failures in achieving peak performance (Gucciardi, , Mahoney et al., 2021). According to the model proposed by (P Clough, Middleton, 2022) mental toughness consists of four main elements: control, commitment, challenge, and confidence. All these elements work together to form the psychological resilience of athletes in facing competitive situations.

When a football team is trailing in score, it can create psychological pressure, such as anxiety, frustration, and loss of confidence. Situations like this can also cause players to lose focus and make wrong decisions. Athletes ⁹ with high mental toughness tend to have a better ability to cope and maintain their performance in difficult situations, according to recent research (Hsieh et al., 2024).

⁹ Study by (McKay et al., 2024) shows that mental toughness plays a role in reducing the risk of choking under pressure, which is a condition of performance decline due to competitive pressure. In the initial observation at Laskar Jepara FA, one of the active age groups in this training is the U-15 team, which is at a crucial phase in the psychological development and competitive performance of the players. Pada kelompok usia ini, pemain mulai menghadapi tekanan pertandingan yang lebih tinggi, including situations when the team is trailing in score. Because the players are at a stage of psychological development that is not yet mature. Mental toughness is very important in the development of young athletes in the 13-15 age group. Players begin to face higher pressure, including in situations where they are trailing

in score. These conditions often affect confidence, focus, motivation, and teamwork among players on the field.

The phenomenon observed among the athletes of Laskar Jepara FA U-15 is the influence of pressure when the team is trailing behind the opponent. The biggest challenge is how important mental toughness is so that players do not easily give up and can still perform at their best even in difficult situations on the field. Therefore, this research was conducted to analyze the mental toughness of the U-15 Laskar Jepara FA players when the team is trailing in score, in order to understand how mental toughness plays a role in maintaining performance, fighting spirit, and the players' ability to bounce back from difficult situations during the match.

METHOD

Research Design

In this study, the research design used is descriptive quantitative. The quantitative approach is used to objectively measure the players' level of mental toughness through structured instruments. The descriptive method aims to describe the condition of the research variables as they are without applying any treatment to the research subjects (Creswell, 2019).

Sample

This method collects all Laskar Jepara FA athletes who have played in competitive matches over the past 3 years. In this study, the population consists of all teams aged 15 years. The sample obtained consisted of 20 athletes who were available and met the criteria for this study.

Sampling Procedure

Data were collected through an online survey using Google Forms. Prior to completing the questionnaire, respondents were provided with information regarding the purpose of the study and instructions for completing the survey. Respondents were asked to answer honestly based on their experiences during

matches. All responses were automatically recorded and exported for statistical analysis.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was the Mental Toughness Questionnaire (MTQ), which was adapted and modified to suit the context of 15-year-old soccer players. The MTQ was employed to measure the athletes' level of mental toughness in coping with match-related pressure, particularly when their team was trailing during a game. The use of the Mental Toughness Questionnaire (MTQ) as an instrument for measuring mental toughness has been widely adopted in sports research due to its strong psychometric properties and its relevance to athletic contexts. The MTQ has demonstrated satisfactory levels of reliability and validity in assessing key dimensions of mental toughness among athletes across various sports settings (Guntoro et al., 2025). The instrument consisted of 20 items divided into five dimensions: emotional control, performance control, commitment, challenge, and confidence. Responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was administered online through Google Forms.

Procedure

This study focused on a single variable, namely mental toughness when the team was trailing during a match. Participants completed the Mental Toughness Questionnaire (MTQ) independently through Google Forms. After the data collection process was completed, all responses were reviewed, coded, and analyzed. The data were then processed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26 and prepared for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to provide an overview of the overall level of mental toughness among Laskar Jepara Football Academy U-15 players.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the MTQ questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques and frequency distribution analysis. Each respondent's answer was first scored according to the MTQ scoring guidelines. Subsequently, the scores for all items were summed to obtain an overall mental toughness score for each participant. These total scores were then used to describe the level of mental toughness among the players and to classify respondents into the appropriate categories based on the established scoring criteria. The use of total MTQ scores to describe an individual's level of mental toughness has been widely applied in sports research, as the instrument has demonstrated strong validity and reliability in measuring the key dimensions of athletes' mental toughness. The MTQ is considered an effective tool for assessing psychological resilience, confidence, commitment, and ³an athlete's ability to cope with competitive pressure and challenges (Perry et al., 2021). The resulting scores were then used to determine the distribution of mental toughness levels among the athletes.

RESULT

Based on the data collected using the Mental Toughness Questionnaire (MTQ), this study successfully described the mental toughness profile of 20 soccer players from Laskar Jepara Football Academy U-15 when their team was trailing during a match. The results of the descriptive statistical analysis indicated a considerable variation in mental toughness scores among the participants, with the lowest score recorded at 18 and the highest score at 90. Among all participants included in the study, the mean mental toughness score was 73.55, ⁵with a standard deviation of 19.02. Overall, ⁴these findings indicate that the players demonstrated a high level of mental toughness when their team was trailing during a match. Based on the categorization results, 2 players (10%) were classified in ¹the very low category, 1 player (5%) in the moderate category, 13 players (65%) in the high category, and 4 players (20%) in the very high category. ⁶These findings indicate that the majority of players were classified in the high mental toughness category. Therefore, it can be concluded that most players demonstrated a strong ability to regulate their emotions, maintain

commitment, cope with challenges, preserve self-confidence, and remain focused on their performance when facing a score deficit during a match.

These findings indicate that ³mental toughness is an important psychological factor ³that contributes to soccer players' performance. A high level of mental toughness enables players to remain motivated, avoid giving up easily, and recover effectively when their team is trailing during a match. Consequently, strong mental resilience serves as a crucial asset for players in maintaining the quality of their performance and achieving team objectives.

Table 1. Result Descriptive Statistics

Variabel	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total Mental Toughness	20	18.00	90.00	73.55	19.01931
Emotional	20	4.00	20.00	15.65	4.42808
Performance	20	4.00	20.00	16.90	4.42362
Commitment	20	4.00	20.00	18.10	4.45917
Challenge	20	4.00	20.00	14.90	4.42362
Confidence	20	4.00	20.00	16.35	4.55695
Valid N (listwise)	20	-	-	-	-

Based on Table 1, the results indicate that the respondents demonstrated a relatively high level of mental toughness, with a mean score of 73.55. Among the five dimensions assessed, commitment emerged as the most dominant aspect, with a mean score of 18.10, whereas challenge was the lowest-scoring dimension, with a mean score of 14.90. These findings suggest that the players showed a strong tendency to remain dedicated to their goals and responsibilities despite experiencing a score deficit during competition. In contrast, their ability to perceive difficult situations as opportunities for growth and development was comparatively lower. Furthermore, the standard deviation values across all dimensions ranged from 4.4 to 4.6, indicating a relatively uniform distribution of responses among the

participants. This suggests that the players exhibited similar levels of mental toughness across the measured dimensions, with no substantial variation in their responses.

Table 2. Mental Toughness Category

Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Valid Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Very Low	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
Moderate	1	5.0	5.0	15.0
High	13	65.0	65.0	80.0
Very High	4	20.0	20.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	100.0

Based on the mental toughness categorization results, it was found that among the 20 players who participated in the study, 2 players (10%) were classified in the very low category, 1 player (5%) in the moderate category, 13 players (65%) in the high category, and 4 players (20%) in the very high category. These findings indicate that the high mental toughness category was the most dominant, accounting for 65% of the participants.

Substantively, these findings suggest that the players generally possess adequate abilities to regulate their emotions, maintain commitment, cope with pressure, preserve self-confidence, and sustain focus on their performance when the team is in an unfavorable situation. Therefore, mental toughness can be regarded as an important psychological attribute that contributes to supporting players' performance during competition.

Therefore, mental toughness can be regarded as a critical psychological resource that supports players' performance during competition. A high level of mental toughness enables athletes to remain composed under pressure, cope effectively with adverse situations, and make appropriate decisions when their team is trailing during a match. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that

mental toughness is positively associated with athletic performance and the ability to cope effectively with competitive pressure (Setiawan et al., 2020).

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Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the mental toughness level of Laskar Jepara Football Academy U-15 soccer players was classified as high when their team was trailing during a match, with a mean score of 73.55. Furthermore, the majority of respondents were categorized within the high mental toughness group. These findings suggest that most players possessed strong psychological resilience, enabling them to cope effectively with the challenges and pressures associated with unfavorable match situations. These findings indicate that the majority of players were able to regulate their emotions, maintain commitment, cope with pressure, preserve self-confidence, and sustain focus in unfavorable situations. The present findings are in line with those of (Meftahudin et al., 2025) who found that mental toughness plays a significant role in enabling athletes to maintain focus, self-confidence, and consistency in task execution when confronted with challenging situations during competition. From a theoretical perspective, these findings support the notion that mental toughness is a critical psychological component in the sport of soccer. Players are required to remain calm, avoid panic, and make appropriate decisions on the field when facing a score deficit. In such situations, mental toughness enables athletes to maintain emotional control, stay focused on tactical objectives, and continue performing effectively despite the pressure associated with unfavorable match conditions. Competitive pressure is less likely to negatively affect players' performance when they have a high level of mental toughness. Rather than being discouraged by adverse circumstances, mentally tough players are more likely to respond positively by increasing their effort, demonstrating resilience, and continuing to pursue team objectives despite experiencing a score deficit. The present findings are consistent with those reported by (McKay et al., 2024) who argued that the development of mental toughness enhances athletes' capacity to maintain focus, effectively regulate their responses to competitive pressure, and minimize performance deterioration when confronted with demanding situations during competition.

In this study, commitment emerged as the most prominent dimension, whereas challenge was the lowest-scoring dimension. These findings indicate that the players were highly committed to fulfilling their roles and responsibilities during matches, even when their team was trailing. However, the challenge dimension appears to require further development, as not all players were able to perceive a score deficit as an opportunity for growth and to demonstrate their best abilities. This suggests that while the players generally showed persistence and dedication, they may benefit from interventions aimed at fostering a more positive perception of adversity and competitive challenges.

These findings also indicate that adolescence, particularly the U-15 age group, represents a critical period for the development of mental toughness. Situations such as conceding a goal or falling behind on the scoreboard may lead young players to lose focus, experience a decline in self-confidence, and demonstrate reduced teamwork due to their stage of psychological development. Consequently, the findings highlight the importance of providing comprehensive mental skills training from an early age. Developing mental toughness during these formative years may help young athletes cope more effectively with competitive challenges and maintain optimal performance under pressure. The present findings are consistent with (Murray et al., 2021) who reported that the development of mental toughness in adolescent soccer players is significantly shaped by the quality of the developmental environment and the support provided by coaches during the athletes' formative years.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study suggest that coaches should not focus solely on technical, physical, and tactical aspects of training but should also integrate psychological skills training into their development programs. Psychological interventions such as self-talk, imagery, and relaxation techniques may help players manage competitive pressure more effectively during matches. By incorporating these strategies into regular training, players may become better equipped to cope with challenging situations and demonstrate greater resilience when their team is trailing. Consequently, the development of mental toughness can contribute to improved psychological readiness and more consistent performance

under adverse competitive conditions. The present findings are consistent with those of (Iskandar & Hidayat, 2025) who highlighted ² mental toughness as a critical psychological resource that enables athletes to sustain focus, motivation, and self-regulation when confronted with the pressures of competitive sport.

Moreover, the present findings support previous studies demonstrating a positive relationship between mental toughness and athletic performance. Evidence suggests that athletes with greater mental toughness are better able to sustain performance quality under pressure, cope effectively with competitive demands, and maintain optimal functioning in challenging situations. The present findings are consistent with those reported (YAZICI et al., 2021) who found that adolescent soccer players with higher mental toughness exhibited superior emotional regulation and were better able to sustain performance when confronted with competitive pressure. Such evidence ⁸ highlights the role of mental toughness as a key psychological resource that supports successful adaptation to demanding sporting environments. Consequently, the current study reinforces the importance of systematically developing mental toughness within youth soccer training and development programs.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research and discussion that have been conducted, ⁴ it can be concluded that the mental toughness level of the Laskar Jepara FA U-15 football players when the team is trailing in score is in the high category. This is indicated by an average score of 73.55, with most respondents falling into the high category.

The analysis further revealed that commitment was the most prominent dimension, whereas challenge obtained the lowest score among the five dimensions assessed. These findings suggest that although the players generally demonstrated ³ a high level of mental toughness, their ability to interpret adverse situations, such as trailing during a match, as opportunities for learning, growth, and self-improvement still requires further development

In conclusion, ² mental toughness plays a crucial role in enabling players to cope effectively with the demands and pressures of competition. Therefore, psychological training should be systematically integrated into athlete development programs to strengthen mental resilience and support the maintenance of optimal performance, especially in challenging and unfavorable match conditions.

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