



COMMENTARY ARTICLE

Informed Team Managers, Effective and Efficient Decision-Making: The Role of Psychology in the Management of Para-Sport Teams

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ABSTRACT: Athletes with disabilities navigate a landscape of unique challenges: limited infrastructure, scarce resources, financial uncertainty, and pervasive social barriers, all alongside the physical and mental demands of elite sport. These pressures can heighten vulnerability to burnout, anxiety, depression, and other psychological risks. Yet, narratives reveal remarkable resilience, determination, and adaptive coping strategies that emerge through lived experience. This paper highlights the critical role of managers, coaches, and technical staff in shaping environments that sustain mental health and performance. By leveraging emotional intelligence, participatory decision-making, ethical reasoning, and cognitive management during crises, leaders can foster cohesion, motivation, and psychological safety. We advocate embedding structured psychological-care protocols within managerial practices, supported by interdisciplinary collaboration with sport psychologists. Synthesizing empirical findings and first-hand accounts, this study presents actionable strategies for optimizing both competitive success and quality of life, emphasizing that holistic, informed management is pivotal to empowering elite athletes with disabilities while safeguarding their well-being.

Keywords: Informed-Managers, Decision-Making, Psychology, Sports Teams, Athlete, Disabilities

EDITOR'S NOTE

Asian sports teams are currently preparing for the forthcoming Asian Youth Games in Bahrain and the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh. For adolescent and youth athletes, sustaining physical fitness, maintaining psychological resilience, and high-level performing in competitions represent considerable challenges. So, it is imperative that team managers and coaches adhere to guidelines that not only safeguard athletes' mental health but also foster the enhancement of their athletic performance. In line with this perspective, the present article has been developed by two psychologists with extensive professional experience in working with young athletes.



Introduction

Over recent decades, sport for individuals with disabilities has attracted growing attention not only as a specialized domain within the sport sciences but also as a vital arena for personal transformation, improved quality of life, social identity, and self-efficacy. Above all, it inspires the broader public. Socially, athletes with disabilities are often confronted with pitying attitudes or negative stereotypes that can undermine their self-image and self-esteem; however, participation in national and international competitions provides opportunities to challenge such views by showcasing competence and offering positive role models to society.

The lived experiences of professional athletes with disabilities in Iran and across the world show that the path to elite performance is interwoven with intensified effort and with physical, psychological, and social challenges alongside the need to overcome barriers in personal life. Crucially, elite disability sport is not only a field of competition; it is also a platform for redefining ability and building an identity independent of physical limitations.

Narratives and interviews indicate that infrastructural constraints, a shortage of specialized equipment, limited access to standard facilities, and insufficient, sustained financial support are among the principal challenges in disability sport. Nevertheless, the accounts of athletes with disabilities do not merely list problems: they spotlight determination, resilience, mental toughness, and motivation forged through personal and social experience. These psychological attributes are not easily acquired and are not invariably stable; under the pressure and strain of competitive sport, they may fluctuate.

Researchers and professionals in mental health and sport psychology contend that high-level competitive sport may reduce mental well-being and increase symptoms of depression, anxiety, and burnout particularly among athletes with disabilities. As sport psychologists and mental skills coaches with years of experience providing counseling services to professional athletes as well as athletes with disabilities at high competitive levels, we have observed that these athletes, in addition to enduring physical pain (including pain associated with limb loss or impairment, mobility restrictions, sport-related injuries during training and competition, reduced physical capacity due to overtraining, and so forth), may also be exposed to various environmental stressors. Such stressors may include being cut or excluded from the team, non-renewal of contracts, lack of formal insurance and stable income, occupational and livelihood difficulties, experiencing defeat, consequences of unhealthy weight gain or loss, unfair officiating, repercussions of match-fixing or related misconduct in sport, discrimination within the team, unfulfilled promises by managers, family problems, emotional relationship breakdowns, incidents of violence or abuse in sport (including exploitation, verbal aggression, or online harassment), media pressure, and lack of support from certain managers and coaches during times of challenge, among others.

Experiencing these issues can precipitate mental-health outcomes and psychology-related challenges, including cognitive fatigue and burnout; mood disturbance; state or trait anxiety; depression; aggression; rumination; sleep disorders; psychological effects related to the use of medication; mental-health concerns around athletic retirement; and eating disorders and feeding-related conditions (avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder; anorexia nervosa; binge-eating disorder; bulimia nervosa). Potential acute or chronic psychopathology may also emerge, such as disruptive mood dysregulation disorder (DDMD); major

depressive disorder (MDD) and persistent depressive disorder (PDD); anxiety disorders (including specific phobias for example, fear of flying generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), and agoraphobia); obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD); trauma- and stressor-related disorders (reactive attachment disorder (RAD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), acute stress disorder (ASD), adjustment disorders); neurocognitive disorders (NCDs); and somatic symptom and related disorders (illness anxiety disorder, factitious disorder, and others).

Reports indicate that countries which have succeeded in effective policy-making and the creation of multilayered support networks including managers, technical staff, sport psychologists, and athletes trained in disability sport have both protected the mental health of athletes and achieved greater competitive success. Studying the particular conditions of athletes with disabilities alongside empirical findings can yield strategies that not only elevate performance but also improve quality of life, mental health, and the social status of these champions.

In addition to the individual efforts of athletes, the roles of technical staff, team managers, federation officials, and Chefs de Mission are vital in enhancing the mental health and psychological welfare of athletes with disabilities. Research demonstrates that supportive conduct, effective communication, and tension management in training and competition settings directly influence performance and motivation. Informed managers and trained coaches can build safe, motivating, and discrimination-free environments in which athletes feel valued, secure, and a strong sense of belonging.

Accordingly, embedding psychological-care protocols within the codes of conduct for managers, Chefs de Mission, federations, and technical staff as an inseparable component of athlete preparation is essential. From an interdisciplinary sport-psychology perspective, this paper offers a comprehensive picture of the lived realities of athletes with disabilities and proposes practical strategies for more effective support.

Key Considerations for Supervisors and Managers of Disability Sports Teams in Competitive Events

Professional mindset

A team manager by detecting cues, interpreting meaning, linking variables, and forecasting trajectories and likely outcomes can, with the support of sport psychologists, prepare themselves and others for decision-making under pressure through (pre-competition) psychoeducational sessions, crisis simulations, and rehearsals of likely scenarios. In crises, the mind defaults to familiar templates; prior simulation of comparable situations increases the speed and effectiveness of the response. Illustrative scenarios include: “injury to the star player or team captain,” “player conflicts”, “schedule changes”, “transportation delays and missed connections,” or “inadequate nutrition at the host venue.”

From Control to Coordination- “The Manager as a Cognitive Regulator within the Team”

The role of a manager during competition extends beyond controlling and commanding. Their core value lies in cognitive coordination: sensing the psychological state of the delegation and teams, intervening at tense moments, sustaining collective focus on the primary goal, and fostering team cohesion.

Cognitive Management under Crisis Conditions

Decision-making under pressure is influenced by psychological factors such as anxiety, cognitive bias, mental fatigue, and social pressure. Human judgment relies on two systems: (1) a fast, heuristic system efficient under urgency yet error-prone; and (2) a slow, analytic system deliberative but time and attention-intensive. Seasoned managers train to recognize when to deploy “prepared mental models” and “decision-making checklists” so as to minimize human error in critical moments.

Emotional intelligence (EQ) of managers in sport

EQ is foundational to self-management and, in turn, to guiding a team by cultivating empathy and interaction in a safe, low-conflict environment. Leveraging and developing EQ helps managers adapt under adversity and decide with greater confidence to obtain better outcomes.

***Self-awareness:** The most important element of EQ is self-awareness. Managers with emotional self-awareness by recognizing their emotions and their strengths and limitations across contexts are less likely to escalate tension (e.g., raising one’s voice or displaying inappropriate conduct) and are better able to cope with crises. Self-awareness functions as self-regulation; it calms operational staff and, especially before competition, steadies coaches and athletes so they can think and perform optimally.

Crisis and ethical decision-making

In international arenas, many decisions are not merely technical or operational; some are fundamentally ethical. For instance: Should an injured athlete be allowed to return to play? Here, values-based management matters. Consistent with ethical frameworks in psychology, the process involves recognizing the moral issue, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral action. Informed managers make decisions that protect athletes’ physical and psychological health and long-term futures while preserving national dignity.

Engaging a sport-psychology consultant

Because the mind influences all performance, professional managers worldwide consult domain specialists; psychology is one such domain. As a professional manager, maintain ongoing collaboration with competent, experienced sport psychologists (They are introduced through relevant legal authorities and are licensed by the Psychology and Counseling System Organization of that country and qualified to work professionally in sports by the Specialized Psychology Center of that sports organization), With strict confidentiality and ethical commitment, they can monitor team psychological status and mental readiness and also support managerial decision-making.

Participatory decision-making

A professional manager is not the sole decision-maker, They create a calm, safe space where relevant experts middle managers, technical staff, coaches, psychologists, medical staff, and athletes (or their designated representatives) can contribute and brainstorm. This participatory style reduces cognitive error,

strengthens belonging, and enhances motivational alignment toward the delegation's shared goals. Even in defeat, the team becomes more cohesive and developmentally stronger.

Managing external pressures

Hidden yet influential forces outside the team include media, federations, families, expectations, and public opinion. Given the particular psychological considerations for athletes with disabilities, the sensitivity is heightened. A professional manager observes the following:

- (a) Maintain personal and team composure.
- (b) Provide media-literacy skills training across the delegation as a preventive mental-health measure.
- (c) Preempt rumor formation by timely, accurate, and appropriate communication within teams during incidents.
- (d) Distinguish data from interpretation: Is the information accurate, or someone's inference?
- (e) Use a delay principle: the quicker a decision is made under intense pressure, the greater the likelihood of error.
- (f) Ensure intra-team transparency: if the team does not know why a decision was made, trust erodes.

The manager's mind and important decision-making

Foresighted managers build mental templates for critical moments and ask themselves:

- (a) If a coach or manager under pressure speaks or decides poorly, how will I help them recover?
- (b) If a key athlete with a disability is suddenly injured, what is my plan?
- (c) If unforeseeable external problems arise, what is my first step?
- (d) If two athletes conflict, which conflict-resolution model will I deploy?

***Having a mental checklist and fallback strategies is a reliable path from confusion to efficient, effective management.**

Decision Map

Designing a decision map (mental or visual map) of decision processes for high-pressure situations helps managers avoid hasty, emotion-driven choices. Before competition begins, draft a decision map for each domain (disciplinary, psychological, medical, etc.), specify who is responsible at each step, and define intervention thresholds and timing.

Reframing

Changing the angle of view on a crisis re-describing the problem in simple yet realistic terms—reduces stress and facilitates solution-finding. Under crisis, the mind can catastrophize. Reframing normalizes the issue, restores cognitive resources, and rebuilds confidence. In practice, restate the message without loaded words. Instead of “We no longer have a chance,” say “It just got harder, but a path may still exist.” Instead

of “That was our last hope,” say “It was one option, not all of them; we still have alternatives.” Whether written or spoken, reframing reduces tension for you and your team.

Emotional Management

Insert a brief pause to regulate heightened affect prior to key decisions. Elevated, unchecked emotion (anger, fear, stress, even excessive elation) impairs working memory and rational evaluation. In acute moments, take 60–90 seconds of deliberate silence to recentre attention (attention reset), practice deep breathing, and ask: “What are the aim and consequences of this decision?” Then decide.

Problem-solving: from “why” to “what/how”

In the wake of an event (minor or major) professional managers shift from assigning blame (“why”) to constructing solutions (“what” and “how”) and invite others to do the same. This prevents magnification of issues and protects individual and collective performance. For example: “What is the best next action right now?”, “What resources can compensate or stabilise the situation?”, “How exactly will we solve this?”

The role of creativity in crisis situations

A professional manager may use a brief, shared team mantra (aligned with team goals) to foster empathy, cohesion, and cognitive control during crises. Examples include: “Whatever happens, we are together,” “We are one team,” “We move forward together,” “We came together, we return together,” “Wins and losses are on me—focus on your job on the field,” “I will handle the outside noise—stay on task.” If, for any reason, words might inflame tension, silence can be the better tactic of a professional manager.

Conclusion

Success among elite athletes with disabilities emerges from a complex, systemic interaction among individual capabilities, technical and psychological support, and strategic management. Informed, effective management by coaches and team leaders is fundamental to building supportive structures and strengthening psychological resilience and optimal performance. Especially in high-stakes, multidimensional events such as the Paralympic Games, team managers and Chefs de Mission require comprehensive situational awareness, high emotional intelligence, and mental-management skills. These capacities enable timely identification and regulation of environmental, psychological, and social variables that shape performance and help prevent coordination breakdowns and motivational decline.

Crisis decision-making must rest on scientific frameworks and rehearsal through simulation to reduce cognitive biases and to increase the precision and speed of responses. Continuous collaboration among managers, sport psychologists, and technical staff creates targeted mental-support systems that guard against psychological harm. At a broader level, national and international sport authorities must recognise the importance of sustained investment in psychological, educational, and managerial infrastructures across delegations. Such an integrated, interdisciplinary approach underpins durable sporting success, athlete mental health, and the international standing of nations.

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