

# FEAR OF FAILURE AMONG STUDENT ATHLETES

## INTRODUCTION

Fear of failure is an extensive psychological phenomenon that significantly affects a person's life in different aspects, especially for student-athletes. According to Brown and Cummings (2020), fear of failure was defined as the expectation not to meet internal or external expectations; the latter often results in various avoidance behaviors and negatively impacts performance. For student-athletes, it can come in several ways, thus preventing the attainment of ideals relating to athletic performance, academic achievements, and mental health. These pressures are unique to student-athletes: they can be extremely intense when involving the rigor of their training schedules, competition, and responsibility in regard to academic pursuits, which heightens feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. Fear of failure can have profound psychological effects on student-athletes, contributing to heightened anxiety and stress levels. Studies have shown that athletes who experience significant fear of failure are more likely to report symptoms of anxiety, depression, and burnout (Gould & Whitley, 2009). This heightened psychological distress can create a vicious cycle: as fear increases, performance tends to decrease, which in turn reinforces the fear of future failure. The relationship between anxiety and performance is well-documented in sports psychology. According to the Inverted U Hypothesis, there is an optimal level of arousal that leads to peak performance. However, when fear of failure induces excessive anxiety, it can push arousal levels beyond this optimal point, resulting in impaired performance (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). This phenomenon is particularly concerning for student-athletes who may already be under significant stress due to academic demands.

Another significant factor that causes fear of failure in student-athletes is social comparison. The majority of the athletes do exhibit comparison with other peers, and this results in feelings of inadequacy. Research has shown that individuals with high social comparison orientation report more anxiety and fear once they perceive themselves to be lower compared to others (Gibbons & Bunk, 1999). This often places the student-athletes in highly competitive environments, and therefore, creates a pressure cooker atmosphere where fear of failure is amplified. Coaches' expectations toward the athletes often can be set higher than what is needed, which increases fear of failure if the athlete fails to meet those high expectations. Finally, the team's culture often creates competition between teammates in which the athlete feels that they have to prove themselves with every teammate. This type of environment often results in isolation, making individuals increase their fear of failure because they feel they are constantly being judged. To mitigate the negative effects of social comparison, it is essential for coaches and support staff to foster a culture of personal growth and mastery rather than purely competitive outcomes. Encouraging athletes to focus on their individual progress and celebrate personal achievements can help reduce the fear of failure and promote a healthier mindset.

Furthermore, fear of failure can significantly impact an athlete's motivation. According to Dweck's (2006) research on growth versus fixed mindsets, individuals with a fixed mindset may view failure as a reflection of their abilities, leading to decreased motivation and effort. In contrast, those with a growth mindset see failure as a learning opportunity. This distinction is crucial for student-athletes, as fostering a growth mindset can mitigate the debilitating effects of fear, encouraging them to embrace challenges rather than shy away from them.

Goal setting and self-confidence play significant roles in influencing the fear of failure among student athletes. Effective goal-setting strategies can help mitigate this fear by providing

clear objectives and a roadmap for achievement. When athletes set specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals, they create a framework that allows them to focus on progress rather than outcomes (Locke & Latham, 2002). This focus can reduce anxiety associated with failure, as athletes learn to view challenges as opportunities for growth (Dweck, 2006). Self-confidence is another crucial factor in managing fear of failure. Athletes with high self-confidence are more likely to take risks, embrace challenges, and persist in the face of setbacks (Vealey, 1986). This resilience can significantly lower their fear of failure, as confident athletes believe in their ability to overcome obstacles and succeed (Martens, 2004). Conversely, low self-confidence can amplify the fear of failure, leading to avoidance behaviors and decreased performance (Woodman & Hardy, 2001).

Gender differences can significantly influence the fear of failure among student athletes, affecting their performance and mental health. Research indicates that female athletes often report higher levels of fear of failure compared to their male counterparts. This disparity may stem from socialization processes, where women are frequently conditioned to be more risk-averse and sensitive to external evaluations (Miller & Silverman, 2005). Female athletes might experience heightened pressure to meet both societal and athletic expectations, leading to increased anxiety about potential failure (Holt & Dunn, 2004). In contrast, male athletes may be socialized to adopt a more competitive and resilient mindset, which can buffer the fear of failure. This difference in socialization affects how each gender perceives and reacts to challenges in sports settings. Furthermore, female athletes are often underrepresented in competitive sports, which can amplify feelings of inadequacy and fear of failure in high-stakes environments (Sage & Eitzen, 1989). Conversely, male athletes might benefit from more robust support systems that foster confidence and resilience, mitigating their fear.

The long-term ramifications of chronic fear of failure can be detrimental, potentially leading to burnout and withdrawal from sports altogether. Raedeke and Smith (2001) found that athletes who experience prolonged fear of failure are at a higher risk for burnout, which can result in decreased enjoyment of the sport, reduced motivation, and ultimately, dropping out of athletics entirely. Understanding how student-athletes cope with their fear of failure is critical. Research indicates that those who employ adaptive coping strategies, such as positive self-talk and visualization, are more likely to manage their anxiety effectively (Gould et al., 2010). Conversely, maladaptive coping strategies, such as avoidance or negative self-talk, can exacerbate feelings of fear and inadequacy. Developing effective coping mechanisms is essential for student-athletes to navigate the challenges they face and to reduce the impact of fear of failure on their performance.

Studying the fear of failure among student athletes is crucial for understanding its impact on their performance, mental health, and overall development. Fear of failure can lead to anxiety, decreased motivation, and avoidance behaviors, which can hinder athletic performance and academic achievement (Smith et al., 2017). This phenomenon is particularly relevant in high-pressure environments, where the expectation to excel can exacerbate stress and negatively affect self-esteem (Martens, 2004). Understanding the dynamics of fear of failure can help coaches and educators develop effective strategies to foster resilience and positive coping mechanisms. By addressing this fear, programs can promote a growth mindset, encouraging athletes to view setbacks as learning opportunities rather than insurmountable obstacles (Dweck, 2006). This shift in perspective not only enhances athletic performance but also supports the mental well-being of student athletes, enabling them to thrive in both sports and academics. Moreover, researching this area contributes to broader discussions on mental health in sports,

emphasizing the need for supportive environments that prioritize emotional well-being alongside physical training (Gould & Dieffenbach, 2002). By focusing on the fear of failure, stakeholders can implement interventions that enhance the overall experience of student athletes, leading to more sustainable participation in sports and improved life skills.

## **AIM**

To study out the fear of failure among student athletes.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The study was conducted among physical education students from Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady.

### **Materials**

1. Interview questionnaire (consists of 14 questions)
2. Blank sheet and pen
3. Mobile phone

## **PROCEDURE**

The interviewer prepared questions about fear of failure. There were total of 14 questions. The semi structured interview method was chosen. The interviewer established rapport with interviewees and asked permission to record their responses and later the interviewer noted responses in a sheet. The interviewer took nearly 10-15 minutes for each interviewee. The interviewer interviewed 8 students.

## RESULTS

Table 1

*Central themes and subthemes of fear of failure among student athletes*

| Sl. No | Central Themes        | Sub - themes  | Number of Participants reported |
|--------|-----------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| 1      | Impact on Performance | ● Fear reduced performance                              | 6                               |
|        |                       | ● Fear did not affect performance                       | 2                               |
|        |                       | ● Fear of comparison with others                        | 6                               |
| 2      | Coping mechanisms     | ● Positive thinking and self encouragement              | 3                               |
|        |                       | ● Mental preparation (music, meditation, visualization) | 2                               |
|        |                       | ● Seeking support from others                           | 3                               |

|   |  |   |        |
|---|--|---|--------|
| 3 | Pressure from coaches and teammates      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Pressure increased fear</li> <li>● Pressure did not affect performance</li> </ul>                  | 7<br>1 |
| 4 | Influence of team dynamics               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Teammates made fun after failure</li> <li>● Teammates support after failure</li> </ul>             | 6<br>2 |
| 5 | Role of experience and positive feedback | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Experience reduced fear of failure</li> <li>● Positive feedback reduced fear of failure</li> </ul> | 8<br>8 |

## DISCUSSION

The study aimed to find out the fear of failure among student athletes. Fear of failure is an extensive psychological phenomenon that significantly affects a person's life in different aspects, especially for student-athletes. Fear of failure was defined as the expectation not to meet internal or external expectations; the latter often results in various avoidance behaviors and negatively impacts performance. For student-athletes, it can come in several ways, thus preventing the attainment of ideals relating to athletic performance, academic achievements, and mental health.

These pressures are unique to student-athletes: they can be extremely intense when involving the rigor of their training schedules, competition, and responsibility in regard to academic pursuits, which heightens feelings of inadequacy and anxiety.

Table 1 shows the corresponding responses to the questions being asked to the interviewee. Five key themes emerged from the interviews: Impact of Fear of Failure on Performance, Coping Mechanisms for Fear of Failure, pressure from Coaches and Teammates, Influence of Team Dynamics on Fear of Failure, Role of Experience and Positive Feedback. By examining these themes, the researcher can better understand how athletes perceive and respond to fear of failure, and how this fear shapes their approach to sports competitions. This analysis aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the commonalities and differences in these athletes' experiences.

### **Theme 1 – Impact on performance**

Fear of failure is a common experience among athletes, and its impact on performance is well-documented. In this study, most participants reported that fear of failure had a negative effect on their performance during competitions. The fear of making mistakes, being judged by coaches and teammates, and facing public embarrassment can lead to hesitation, poor decision-making, and a lack of confidence, all of which ultimately hinder athletic performance. One of the most direct ways in which fear of failure impacts performance is by causing hesitation during critical moments in a game. Participant 3, for example, explained how fear of failure led him to avoid bowling in the final over of a cricket match. He was afraid that his actions might cause his team to lose, and this fear of responsibility paralyzed him. This hesitation is a clear manifestation of the cognitive and emotional interference caused by fear of failure. In

high-pressure situations, athletes may over think their actions, second-guess their abilities, and ultimately fail to act decisively. Participant 1 also highlighted the role of fear in decision-making, stating that "*The fear of failure impacted my decision-making during the competition; I couldn't make proper decisions.*" This suggests that fear of failure disrupts cognitive processes essential for optimal performance, such as quick decision-making and focus. For goalkeepers, like Participant 1, the ability to make fast, confident decisions is critical, and any hesitation or self-doubt can lead to failure in their role. The emotional toll of fear of failure also emerged as a significant factor in performance decline. Many participants described the intense pressure they felt from coaches, teammates, and spectators, which amplified their fear of failure. Participant 3 spoke about how the presence of a large audience during volleyball games made him tense, further exacerbating his fear of failure. This fear was compounded by the pressure from coaches, who would scold him if he made mistakes. In addition to the immediate impact of fear on performance, this emotional pressure can lead to long-term psychological effects, such as anxiety and low self-esteem. Athletes who repeatedly experience fear of failure may begin to internalize these feelings, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy where their fear of failure increases the likelihood of poor performance. This was evident in Participant 6's statement: "*Fear of failure reduced my performance during the competition.*" The repeated experience of failure can cause athletes to lose confidence in their abilities, further increasing their fear of failure in future competitions.

Interestingly, while fear of failure generally had a negative impact on performance, several participants also noted that it could sometimes increase their motivation and confidence. For instance, Participant 4 mentioned that fear of failure can actually boost confidence in certain situations: "*Fear of failure also increases my confidence. When we're about to lose, we give our*

*maximum effort, like fighting even when losing.*" This paradoxical relationship between fear of failure and confidence suggests that, for some athletes, fear can serve as a motivational tool, pushing them to perform at their best when the stakes are highest.

## **Theme 2 – Coping mechanisms**

The participants in this study employed both psychological and behavioral strategies to cope with the stress and anxiety associated with fear of failure. Several participants emphasized the importance of mental preparation in managing fear of failure. Participant 1 used music as a tool for mental preparation, stating, "*Before competitions, I listen to music in silence for mental preparation.*" This strategy helps him focus and calm his nerves before a game. Music can be a powerful coping mechanism for athletes, as it helps regulate emotions, reduce stress, and create a sense of control in high-pressure environments. Participant 5 relied on meditation to cope with fear of failure: "*I use meditation as a coping mechanism to reduce my fear of failure.*" Meditation is known to reduce anxiety and improve concentration, making it an effective strategy for athletes looking to calm their minds before a competition. By focusing on their breath and clearing their minds, athletes can reduce the cognitive noise caused by fear and anxiety, allowing them to perform with greater clarity and focus. Visualization is another common coping strategy among athletes. Participant 2 mentioned that he mentally prepares for games by imagining himself playing on the field: "*I mentally prepare by imagining myself playing on the field.*" Visualization allows athletes to mentally rehearse their performance, which can help reduce fear by increasing their familiarity with the competitive environment. By visualizing themselves succeeding, athletes can build confidence and reduce the likelihood of fear interfering with their performance. Social support emerged as a key coping mechanism for many participants. Several

athletes mentioned the importance of talking to loved ones, teammates, and coaches to help manage their fear of failure. Participant 2 stated that "*Good conversations with loved ones are my coping mechanism for this fear.*" Talking to family and friends can provide emotional support, reassurance, and a sense of perspective, which can help athletes manage the pressure they feel during competitions. Similarly, Participant 6 relied on encouragement from her mother to boost her confidence: "*The encouragement from my mother boosts my confidence.*" Parental support can be a powerful source of motivation for athletes, helping them to overcome self-doubt and fear of failure. This highlights the role of close relationships in helping athletes manage the psychological demands of competition. In addition to mental preparation, some participants relied on physical preparation and routine to cope with fear of failure. Participant 6 mentioned that she prepares mentally by doing maximum workouts: "*I prepare mentally by doing maximum workouts.*" For many athletes, physical preparation is closely tied to mental readiness. By training hard and ensuring that they are in peak physical condition, athletes can reduce their fear of failure by increasing their confidence in their abilities.

### **Theme 3 - Pressure from coaches and teammates**

The role of coaches and teammates emerged as a critical factor influencing fear of failure in athletes. Many participants reported that pressure from coaches and teammates contributed to their fear, particularly when they felt that their performance would be closely scrutinized or judged. Several participants highlighted how pressure from coaches increased their fear of failure. Participant 3 described how the fear of being scolded by his coach if he made a mistake amplified his anxiety: "*The pressure from coaches increased my fear; if I failed, they would scold me.*" This kind of coaching pressure can create a toxic environment for athletes, where fear of

making mistakes becomes more prominent than the desire to perform well. Instead of focusing on improving their skills, athletes may become preoccupied with avoiding failure to escape criticism. Similarly, Participant 7 mentioned that the lack of training and the high expectations from coaches increased her fear: "*The pressure from the coaches increased this fear. The lack of training camps also influenced our performance.*" This highlights how unbalanced expectations—such as high performance demands without sufficient preparation—can lead to heightened fear of failure.

#### **Theme 4 - Influence of team dynamics**

Team dynamics, especially in team sports, have a profound impact on athletes' experience of fear of failure. Positive team environments can act as a buffer against this fear, while negative dynamics, such as conflict or overly competitive atmospheres, can exacerbate it. Several participants highlighted the importance of trust and support within their teams in reducing fear of failure. Participant 1 mentioned how, as he progressed and became more senior within his team, the supportive nature of his teammates helped reduce his fear of failure: "*As I became a senior player, my teammates were more supportive, and that helped reduce my fear of failure.*" This indicates that a cohesive, trusting team environment can play a critical role in alleviating the pressure athletes feel. When athletes know that their teammates trust and support them, the fear of letting the team down diminishes, as they are less afraid of judgment or blame from their peers. Participant 8 also touched on how the confidence and encouragement of teammates helped them perform better under pressure. Knowing that teammates have faith in one's abilities can boost an athlete's self-assurance, acting as a psychological buffer against the fear of making mistakes. This suggests that building a supportive and encouraging team culture can be one of

the most effective ways to help athletes manage the fear of failure. On the other hand, participants who experienced conflict or lack of cohesion within their teams reported higher levels of fear of failure. Participant 5 explained that in situations where the team dynamic was more competitive and less supportive, the fear of being blamed for mistakes increased: "*When my teammates are more focused on winning and pointing out errors, it adds to the pressure and makes me more afraid of failing.*" This quote reflects how unsupportive or overly competitive team environments can heighten an athlete's fear of failure. Instead of feeling like part of a collective effort, athletes in such environments may feel isolated and under greater scrutiny.

### **Theme 5 - Role of experience and positive feedback**

As athletes gain more experience in their sport, they often develop better coping mechanisms for fear of failure. In addition, receiving positive feedback from coaches, teammates, and even spectators can help reduce this fear by boosting athletes' confidence and sense of competence. Many participants noted that with time and experience, their fear of failure diminished. Participant 1, for example, mentioned that his fear of failure was much greater when he was a younger player, but as he gained more experience, he became more confident in his abilities: "*The more I played, the less I feared failure. Experience helped me understand that mistakes are part of the game.*" This reflects the general finding that as athletes gain experience, they become more comfortable with the highs and lows of competition, and the fear of failure becomes less overwhelming. Experience allows athletes to build a stronger sense of self-efficacy—the belief in their own ability to succeed. This self-efficacy acts as a buffer against fear of failure, as experienced athletes have a greater understanding of their strengths and limitations. They are more likely to view failure as a learning opportunity rather than a reflection

of their abilities, which reduces the emotional intensity of fear. With experience comes the realization that failure is a natural and often necessary part of improvement. Participant 4 discussed how repeated exposure to failure helped him gain perspective: "*Over time, I realized that failure is part of the process. Each mistake teaches me something new.*" This suggests that experienced athletes are better able to contextualize failure, understanding that it does not define their overall ability or potential. This perspective allows athletes to approach competition with a growth mindset, where they view mistakes as opportunities for development rather than as threats to their self-worth.

Fear of failure among student athletes has highlighted the complex interplay of psychological, social, and experiential factors that shape their experiences. The five key themes—Impact of Fear of Failure on Performance, Coping Mechanisms for Fear of Failure, Pressure from Coaches and Teammates, Influence of Team Dynamics on Fear of Failure, and the Role of Experience and Positive Feedback—reveal the multifaceted nature of this fear. While fear of failure can negatively affect performance, effective coping mechanisms and a supportive team environment can mitigate its impact. Moreover, experienced athletes tend to handle fear better, often benefiting from constructive feedback. These insights suggest that fostering a positive, team-oriented atmosphere and providing consistent, encouraging feedback can help student athletes overcome their fear of failure, enhancing both their mental well-being and performance.

## **CONCLUSION**

The thematic analysis reveals the multifaceted impact of fear of failure on athletes' performance and well-being. Participants commonly reported that fear of failure negatively influenced their

performance by inducing hesitation, poor decision-making, and decreased confidence. Emotional pressure from coaches and teammates exacerbated this fear, creating a cycle of anxiety that hindered athletes' abilities to perform optimally. Conversely, some athletes found that fear could also serve as a motivational force, driving them to exert maximum effort in high-stakes situations. Coping mechanisms such as mental preparation, meditation, and visualization emerged as effective strategies for managing this fear, alongside the importance of social support from teammates and loved ones. Positive team dynamics were shown to buffer against fear, fostering an environment of trust that alleviated pressure. Additionally, the role of experience was crucial, as seasoned athletes demonstrated better coping abilities and a healthier perspective on failure. Positive feedback from coaches and peers further enhanced confidence, helping athletes navigate their fears. Ultimately, this analysis highlights the intricate relationship between fear of failure, performance, and coping strategies, suggesting that a supportive environment and personal growth can mitigate its negative effects. Recognizing these dynamics can aid in developing effective interventions to support athletes in managing their fear of failure.

## **INTERVIEWER'S REPORT**

### **NO.1**

Interviewer: KT

Interviewee: SS

Interviewer approached to interviewee. After the builds rapport, the interview is carried out. And responses are recorded in mobile phone and noted in blank sheet. The interviewee was cooperative. The interview had taken about 15 minutes.

### **NO.2**

Interviewer: KT

Interviewee: TT

Interviewer approached to interviewee. After the builds rapport, the interview is carried out. And responses are recorded in mobile phone and noted in blank sheet. The interviewee was cooperative. The interview had taken about 13 minutes.

### **NO.3**

Interviewer: KT

Interviewee: AJ

Interviewer approached to interviewee. After the builds rapport, the interview is carried out. And responses are recorded in mobile phone and noted in blank sheet. The interviewee was cooperative. The interview had taken about 14 minutes.

#### **NO.4**

Interviewer: KT

Interviewee: KK

Interviewer approached to interviewee. After the builds rapport, the interview is carried out. And responses are recorded in mobile phone and noted in blank sheet. The interviewee was cooperative. The interview had taken about 12 minutes.

#### **NO.5**

Interviewer: KT

Interviewee: DM

Interviewer approached to interviewee. After the builds rapport, the interview is carried out. And responses are recorded in mobile phone and noted in blank sheet. The interviewee was cooperative. The interview had taken about 15 minutes.

#### **NO.6**

Interviewer: KT

Interviewee: JS

Interviewer approached to interviewee. After the builds rapport, the interview is carried out. And responses are recorded in mobile phone and noted in blank sheet. The interviewee was cooperative. The interview had taken about 10 minutes.

**NO.7**

Interviewer: KT

Interviewee: SD

Interviewer approached to interviewee. After the builds rapport, the interview is carried out. And responses are recorded in mobile phone and noted in blank sheet. The interviewee was cooperative. The interview had taken about 11 minutes.

**NO.8**

Interviewer: KT

Interviewee: JL

Interviewer approached to interviewee. After the builds rapport, the interview is carried out. And responses are recorded in mobile phone and noted in blank sheet. The interviewee was cooperative. The interview had taken about 15 minutes.

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever felt fear of failure?
2. How does the fear of failure impact your performance during competitions?
3. Do you feel pressure from coaches or teammates that contributes to your fear of failing?
4. How do you cope with the fear of failure when preparing for a big game or event?
5. Have you ever avoided a competition due to fear of failing? If so, why?
6. How does your fear of failure influence your goal-setting as an athlete?
7. How do you perceive the consequences of failing in your sport?
8. Due to your mistake, the team will lose. How will that affect relationships with your teammates??
9. Do you seek support from coaches or mentors when dealing with fear of failure? How does that help?
10. How does the fear of failure impact your confidence as an athlete?
11. What thoughts go through your mind when you consider the possibility of failing?
12. How does fear of failure impact your motivation to train and improve?
13. How does comparing yourself to others affect your fear of failure?
14. Does receiving positive feedback help alleviate your fear of failure? Why or why not?

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