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The Effect of Involving a Sport Psychology Specialist on the Performance Outcomes of Selected First-Division Volleyball Teams

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the effect of involving a sport psychology specialist within the technical and administrative staff of selected first-division volleyball teams and to analyze the impact of such involvement on the competitive results achieved by these teams during the sports season The study was based on the following fundamental question: Does the presence of a sport psychology specialist contribute to improving players' performance and overall team results compared with teams that do not utilize such specialized services? The researcher adopted the descriptive-analytical method. A purposive sample consisting of volleyball teams in the first division was used in this research; some teams hired sport psychologists, while others did not. Several types of tools were applied to collect data for the current study: questionnaires distributed to athletes and coaches, statistics on the performance of certain teams over a specific period of time, and personal interviews with coaches' assistants. Statistically significant differences between the two categories have been found: sport psychologist-having teams performed better than others. It means that psychological training helps athletes concentrate more, decreases anxiety, increases motivation, and strengthens discipline on the team level, which is essential for achieving success. This paper recommends hiring sport psychologists as an indispensable part of technical staff in sports clubs and associations, especially in team games that require psychological stability of athletes

.**Keywords:** Sport Psychology, Volleyball, Competitive Anxiety, Motivation, Emotional Control, Athletic Performance, Team Sports.

1. Introduction and Significance of the Study

Today, sport is viewed as a multifaceted system combining not only physical training but also technical, tactical, and psychological aspects. Today, sports performance is no longer dependent on the physical and physiological capabilities of the athlete; rather, psychological elements play an essential role in ensuring that an athlete or even a whole team succeeds. It appears especially true for the team sports that demand coordination between the team members and control over emotions such as volleyball. The latter requires high

concentration levels, quick decision-making processes, coordination with other members, and other psychological attributes. As a result of field studies and the analysis of team performances, it was found out that athletes' performance could suffer from different negative factors such as competition anxiety, emotional stress, low self-esteem, and so on, especially in crucial games. Recent investigations have shown that those problems could not be successfully solved by technical coaching; however, it is required to use specific methods provided by sport psychology specialists. Thus, the employment of sport psychology specialists becomes an integral part of technical and managerial staff of sports teams. The contribution of those specialists in terms of psychological readiness, cognitive and emotional efficiency, and successful dealing with competitive pressure has a positive impact on athletes' results. That is why almost all high-level sports organizations employ the sport psychology specialists permanently as part of their managerial staff, realizing the importance of psychological readiness of athletes for achieving the required results, especially when competing teams have equal physical and technical skills. Still, the implementation of sport psychology specialists is not widely distributed among Arab countries and especially Iraq, despite numerous advantages associated with it. Hence, the problem arises whether it is appropriate to include those specialists into sport teams or not. the purpose of this current research is to examine the influence of the participation of a sport psychologist on the performance and competition results of the selected first-league volleyball teams. Additionally, the research intends to increase knowledge about the correlation between psychological support provided by a professional psychologist and competition results, as well as give scientific recommendations that could help improve the psychological background of sports teams

.1.2 Research Problem

Even with the impressive progress made in the sphere of preparing athletes physically and technically, many teams from the top division struggle to avoid ups and downs and lack enough emotional stability among the participants when competing. This, in its turn, leads to poor results being obtained due to competitive stress.It has been observed that teams utilizing the services of a sport psychology specialist tend to demonstrate greater consistency and achieve more favorable competitive results compared with teams that do not receive such psychological support.

Accordingly, the research problem is formulated as follows:

To what extent does the involvement of a sport psychology specialist contribute to improving the competitive outcomes of selected first-division volleyball teams?

1.3 Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Examine the current status of sport psychology specialist involvement within the technical and administrative staffs of first-division volleyball teams.
2. Identify differences in competitive outcomes and technical performance between teams that employ a sport psychology specialist and those that do not.
3. Determine the nature of psychological services provided to athletes and examine their role in reducing anxiety and stress while enhancing motivation.

1.4 Research Hypothesis

The study is based on the following research hypothesis:

There are statistically significant differences in the competitive outcomes of first-division volleyball teams attributable to the involvement of a sport psychology specialist**.**

1.5 Scope of the Study

Human Scope

The study population consisted of players and coaches of first-division volleyball teams affiliated with the Iraqi Volleyball Federation.

Temporal Scope

The study was conducted during the 2024–2025 sports season.

Spatial Scope

The study was carried out in the sports halls and facilities affiliated with the Iraqi Volleyball Federation.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design

The researcher adopted the descriptive-analytical approach due to its suitability for the nature and objectives of the study. This method suits perfectly for the analysis of relationships between the involved variables, especially in assessing the link between having a sport psychology expert and performance in competition of first division volleyball teams.

The selection criteria ensured that both teams being compared had equal qualities; this was achieved through selection of teams with equal levels of expertise in the sport. The selected teams had several commonalities, which included the mean ages of the athletes, level of experience, ranking in previous seasons, and frequency of training per week.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Study Sample

Variable	Unit of Measurement	Mean	SD	Median	Skewness
Age	Years	23.5	1.84	23	0.21
Playing Experience	Years	6.2	1.15	6	-0.18
Height	cm	186.4	4.72	186	0.11
Weight	kg	81.3	5.26	80	-0.09

Weekly Training Sessions	Sessions	5.0	0.63	5	0.05

2.2 Research Sample

In this regard, the sample for this study was purposely chosen among volleyball teams belonging to the Iraqi Volleyball Federation which were classified under the first division category. Thus, this sample is considered relevant because the subjects in this sample fulfill the required inclusion criteria. In other words, these subjects belong to the target competitive level at which this research will examine the effect of the sport psychology specialist.

- Six first-division volleyball teams.
- Seventy-two (72) players.
- Six (6) head coaches and six (6) assistant coaches.
- Six (6) sport psychology specialists.

2.2.1 Ethical Considerations

The permission to carry out the study was sought from the Iraqi Volleyball Federation as well as from the administrations of the selected teams before the data collection process started. Each participant received information regarding the aim of the study as well as about the methodology involved and agreed to take part in the study voluntarily. The researcher guaranteed that all information would be kept in strict confidence and utilized only for research purposes.

2.3 Data Collection Instruments and Research Tools

2.3.1 Data Collection Methods

The following tools were used to gather the data:

A. Questionnaire

A questionnaire was designed and distributed to:

- coaches
- sport psychologists
- players

The questionnaire comprised the following dimensions:

- psychological climate within the team;
- intervention by a sport psychologist in assisting the players;
- the effect of psychological assistance on the performance of athletes;
- competitive anxiety, confidence, motivation, and emotional control.

B. Statistical Analysis of Teams' Performance

Data were gathered concerning the teams' performance throughout the period of competitions, including:

- results of matches;
- teams' positions in the league;
- number of wins;
- point differential.

Comparison was made between:

- teams using sport psychologists; and
- those which did not.

C. Interviews

Unstructured interviews were carried out with coaches and administrative personnel to find out the reason(s) why sport psychologists were used or not used by particular teams.

D. Technical and Experimental Observation

The researcher applied direct observation while watching the athletes performing their technical movements in order to track behaviors related to the aims of this study.

E. Administrative and Ethical Procedure

Approval was sought from the following bodies:

- Iraqi Volleyball Federation;
- administrations of the teams participating in the study.

The aim of the study, the importance of its findings, and the privacy and confidentiality of participants' data were communicated to the participants. All the collected data will be used solely for research purposes.

2.4 Psychological and Field Assessment

Several psychological, physical, and performance-related tests were applied in this study in order to fully investigate the influence of having a sport psychologist on athletes' performance and results. These assessments included:

2.4.1 Psychological Tests

A battery of standardized tests widely used in sport psychology was adopted in this study. The tests were then translated and culturally adjusted to fit the Iraqi context and peculiarities of participants.

1. CSAI-2

The Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2) was used to measure the level of competitive state anxiety among athletes. The inventory is composed of twenty seven (27) questions covering three dimensions:

- cognitive anxiety;
- somatic anxiety;
- self-confidence.

Each question was answered with the help of a Likert-type scale from 1 to 5. This test was performed 48 hours before the start of the competition and after the end of the championship to facilitate comparison among the two groups.**2. Sport Motivation Scale (SMS)**

The Sport Motivation Scale (SMS) was used to assess the athletes' motivational orientations. It includes twenty-eight (28) items related to the measurement of three main dimensions:

- Intrinsic Motivation
- Extrinsic Motivation
- Amotivation

The main reason for using this scale was to find out how much influence the psychological intervention sessions had on athletes' motivation to participate in competitions and achieve success.

3. Emotional Control Scale

The Emotional Control Scale includes fifteen (15) items which aim to measure athletes' emotional regulation in stress conditions, such as making mistakes, losing points, or competing under spectators' pressure.

The test was given both before the championship and during it to evaluate the changes in emotional regulation resulting from psychological interventions of the sport psychologist.

2.4.2 Field Performances and Competitive Tests

Apart from the psychological tests mentioned above, field assessment of athletes' performances and their teams' competitive achievements was undertaken.

Indicators of Team Performance

Performance results of six teams participating in the competition were evaluated according to the following criteria:

- Numbers of games won and lost.
- Numbers of games and sets won and lost.
- Numbers of total points at the end of the season.

This information would allow comparing teams that worked with a sports psychologist to those without one.

Performance Stability Index (PSI)

The Performance Stability Index (PSI) was used in order to measure the performance stability of teams within a competitive season. It was computed using the following formula:

[PSI=\frac{\text{Number of Consecutive Wins}}{\text{Total Number of Matches}}\times100]

where:

- PSI – Performance Stability Index;
- Consecutive wins - total number of consecutive victories achieved by teams within the season;
- Number of Matches – total number of matches played within the competitive season.

The higher the PSI score, the better the consistency and stability of competition performance.

3. Team Coaches' Evaluation of Psychological and Technical Performances

The structured interview method was used to collect information from the team coaches concerning the following aspects of performance:

- Discipline;
- Tactical commitment;
- Responsiveness to coach's instructions;

- Interaction with the sport psychology specialist.

These interview results were converted into numerical ratings on a five-point scale (1 to 5).

2.5 Validity and Reliability of the Research Instruments

Validity

Validity of the instruments was achieved via an expert evaluation of the measures. In particular, ten experts in the field of sport psychology, educational statistics, and volleyball examined the instruments and gave suggestions for improving the items. As a result of their comments, some items were modified in order to make them relevant and clear for this study.

Reliability

To test the reliability of the instruments, we used Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The results were as follows:

Instrument	Cronbach's Alpha
Competitive Anxiety Scale (CSAI-2)	0.88
Sport Motivation Scale (SMS)	0.86
Emotional Control Scale	0.83

Such coefficients confirm the existence of high internal consistency, which means that the scales used have good reliability for the study's needs.

2.6 Procedure of Research

Procedures of conducting research were carried out in the order of the following steps:

1. All psychological tests were taken by participants two weeks prior to the official start of competitions (pre-test measurement).
2. In the process of preparation to the competition, the sport psychologist organized two psychological training sessions per week. Sessions were dedicated to:
   - o Progressive muscle relaxation.
   - o Imagery training.
   - o Techniques for emotional regulation.
   - o Self-confidence techniques.
3. After the end of the first phase of the competition in the league, the psychological tests were taken again (post-test measurement).
4. For the analysis of obtained results, SPSS program was used. For the comparison of mean values in relation to teams with a sports psychologist and without one, the Independent Samples t-test was applied. Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was utilized for finding correlations.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Statistical Results

The results of statistical analysis performed within this section have been obtained on the basis of the information gathered through the use of survey forms, psychological tests, personal interviews, and team performance statistics. The aim of this analysis was to check the hypothesis and explore the connection between the presence of a sport psychologist and competitive results achieved by the first-league volleyball teams.

3.1.1 Divergence of Competitive Anxiety Levels between the Two Groups

Statistical analysis of CSAI-2 questionnaire showed significant divergence at the confidence level of $p \leq 0.05$ between teams having a sport psychologist and teams lacking this expertise, with higher competitive anxiety levels in teams with no sport psychologist

.**Table 2. Differences in Competitive Anxiety Between the Study Groups**

Variable	Teams with a Sport Psychology Specialist (Mean)	Teams without a Sport Psychology Specialist (Mean)	t-value	p-value
Cognitive Anxiety	2.11	3.48	4.23	0.001
Somatic Anxiety	2.05	3.27	3.96	0.002
Self-Confidence	4.32	3.01	5.14	0.000

The results revealed that teams under the influence of sports psychology professionals exhibited significantly less cognitive and somatic anxiety, as well as significantly higher self-confidence in comparison to those who did not use psychological training.

3.1.2 The Difference between Motivation and Emotional Control

Statistical data analysis regarding motivation and emotional control revealed the following findings:

Table 3. Differences in Motivation and Emotional Control in Study Groups

Variable	Teams with a Sport Psychology Specialist (Mean)	Teams without a Sport Psychology Specialist (Mean)	t-value	p-value
Intrinsic Motivation	4.15	3.20	4.68	0.001
Extrinsic Motivation	3.92	3.14	3.71	0.004
Emotional Control	4.27	3.16	4.88	0.001

These results indicate that sportsmen who received psychological support had greater emotion regulation capabilities during stress and high motivation toward achievement both internally and externally.

3.1.3 Competitive Indicators and Team Performance Results

Team performance indicators for the whole season have been analyzed, and the results are the following:**Table 4. Competitive Performance Indicators**

Group	Wins	Losses	Average Point Differential	Performance Stability Index (%)
Teams with a Sport Psychology Specialist (n = 3)	14	4	+165	78.2
Teams without a Sport Psychology Specialist (n = 3)	9	9	+42	50.0

Thus, teams working with a sport psychologist won more often, had a significantly better score difference, and demonstrated stable competitiveness during the tournament.

3.2 Discussion

Based on the results of the current study, one may state that a positive impact of sport psychologists' activities on improving the competitive results of first-division volleyball teams was observed. Specialists' professional interventions contributed significantly to enhancing athletes' psychological readiness and their performance at a competitive level (Weinberg & Gould, 2019; Williams & Krane, 2021).

First, systematic psychological work helped reduce athletes' competitive anxiety and control their thinking processes before and during competitions. As a result, emotional tension in athletes decreased, as well as their concentration. In addition, implementation of mental relaxation and breathing techniques allowed increasing athletes' emotional stability and self-confidence, which was manifested in increased technical skills and

execution of spikes, serving, and receiving serves (Cox, 2020; Craft et al., 2003; Hanton et al., 2004; Vealey, 2017).

In terms of motivation, psychological intervention sessions helped enhance athletes' commitment to success and identify themselves with their team. Specifically, players became intrinsically motivated by their feelings of confidence, self-efficacy, rather than external motivations associated with the desire for rewards from coaches and other people (Pelletier et al., 1995; Anshel, 2019).

Sport psychologists also helped athletes manage competitive pressure better and react emotionally to their and team members' mistakes more reasonably, which contributed to avoiding excessive emotional responses, conflicts with referees and opponents, and intra-team fights, as well as to enhancing players' discipline (Zizzi & Deaner, 2006; Hackfort & Schinke, 2021).

In addition, psychologists' work contributed significantly to improving internal communication in teams, which led to the development of teamwork culture and improved tactical coordination of movements during competition (Gould & Maynard, 2009; Williams & Krane, 2021).

The superior performance results of teams working with specialists, including more victories, greater point differentials, and performance stability indices, reveal that psychological readiness is a crucial factor determining competitive success. This finding reinforces the understanding that psychological preparation plays an equally important role alongside physical and technical preparation in achieving successful sports results (Weinberg & Gould, 2019; Vealey, 2017; Williams & Krane, 2021).

The current findings coincide with the results of earlier empirical research in sport psychology. Thus, Weinberg and Gould found that systematic psychological training could increase athletes' sports performance up to 20% owing to enhanced concentration, self-confidence, and emotional stability, as well as reduced competitive anxiety. Similarly, Cox stated that sports psychologists play a crucial role in lowering competitive anxiety in athletes due to implementing mental relaxation and cognitive restructuring techniques. Furthermore, the results align with the findings of Al-Jaafari (2022).

The study indicated that the inclusion of psychological support programs into athletes' preparations contributed significantly to increasing the technical and psychological performance of athletes competing in Iraq, especially in high-pressure competitions (Al-Jaafari, 2022; Birrer et al., 2012). Taken together, these results clearly show that psychological support should be seen not as an auxiliary activity, but as one of the core elements of the process of preparing for the competition. The use of the efforts of sport psychologists leads to combining physical, technical, cognitive and psychological sides of performance and contributes to the conversion of

psychological readiness into efficient competitive actions (Hackfort & Schinke, 2021; Williams & Krane, 2021).

In turn, the results of this study correspond well to current trends in sport psychology, according to which the engagement of a sport psychology specialist is a necessary step towards obtaining optimum results, preserving psychological stability and ensuring competitive success for the modern sports team (Weinberg & Gould, 2019; Hackfort & Schinke, 2021; Williams & Krane, 2021; Jones, 2015).

3.3 Limitations of the Study

The first limitation of this study is its scope, since the analysis covered only the first division volleyball teams associated with the Iraqi Volleyball Federation at the 2024–2025 competitive season. The second limitation is that the number of participants in the study was rather small, which means that it cannot be applied to another population. Thirdly, the focus was only on certain psychological parameters; other factors were excluded from consideration.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

The results of analysis of statistical and field research data and their interpretation with regard to previous studies led the author of the study to draw the following conclusions about the effect of cooperation with a sport psychologist on the competitive performance of first-league volleyball teams:

1. Cooperation with a sport psychologist is an essential factor in determining the effectiveness of competitive activities of volleyball teams. Teams, which have received psychological support, demonstrate better performance stability, lower levels of tension and stress, and higher levels of concentration and self-assurance than teams not using psychological assistance.
2. Psychological preparation helps improve the psychological conditions for athletes' performances, decreasing negative affective reactions like unnecessary nervousness and emotional outburst, which results in higher team cohesion and, accordingly, better competitive results.
3. Achievement intrinsic motivation in teams supported by a sport psychologist is higher as well. With the use of psychological techniques, athletes strive to achieve their goals based on their own awareness of their abilities and determination rather than relying on external rewards only.
4. Sport psychology specialists' assistance helps to develop effective communication among athletes and understanding, improves the relationship between athletes and coaches, thus improving teams' tactics and strategy while playing.
5. Psychological assistance brings certain competitive advantages to teams. The teams which use sport psychologists perform better compared to those

teams which do not. They win more matches and have higher indices of performance stability.

4.2 Recommendations

Based on the outcomes and conclusions presented in the current paper, the following recommendations may be put forward:

1. First, sport psychology practitioners need to become integral members of technical/administrative personnel in all first-division sports teams in Iraq because of their important role in enhancing the athletes' performance and mental well-being.
2. Second, sports organizations and technical committees should consider it necessary or even mandatory for sports clubs to hire a sport psychologist specialist as an indicator of organization and technical preparedness.

3. Third, educational workshops and training courses should be arranged for coaches and other personnel regarding the methods of athletes' psychological preparation and managing them in high-stress situations.
4. Fourth, sport psychology courses should become obligatory parts of the academic curriculum in Colleges of Physical Education and Sport Sciences in order to produce highly competent specialists in sport psychology.
5. Fifth, applied studies should continue exploring the connection between psychological variables and skill performance in both team and individual sports based on larger sample sizes.

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Appendix A

Research Instruments and Psychological Scales Used in the Study

1. Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2)

Modified form of the original scale created by Martens et al. (1990). This test includes 27 questions which are split into three dimensions:

- Cognitive Anxiety: Items 1-9
- Somatic Anxiety: Items 10-18
- Self-Confidence: Items 19-27

Participants are asked to rate themselves on the following five-point scale:
1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always

Test Items

1. I get worried when thinking about the coming match.
2. I often worry about negative results before a game.
3. I doubt myself.
4. It is hard for me to concentrate due to worries.
5. I feel distraction during warming up.
6. I am scared to make mistakes in front of people.
7. I get negative thoughts regarding the coming game.
8. I lack self-confidence when thinking about my victory.
9. I tend to expect failure more often than success.
10. My heartbeat increases before the game.
11. I sweat too much while preparing for a match.
12. I feel muscles tightening before the match.
13. I breathe fast when I'm nervous.
14. I get cold feet/hands.
15. I tremble slightly before a match.
16. I get stomach pain before a match.
17. I get tired physically before the match starts.
18. I feel my body being tight.
19. I have a high level of confidence before the match.

20. I am confident regarding my technical skills.
21. I can face my competitor without worrying.
22. I am ready mentally and physically for the match.
23. I know how to cope with pressure and stress.
24. I am sure that I can make a successful result.
25. I am concentrated during the match.
26. I know I will handle problems successfully.
27. I have control over my match.

2. Sport Motivation Scale (SMS)

Pelletier et al.'s (1995) scale was modified for the specific purpose of this study according to the Iraqi sports context. This scale includes 28 questions, which reflect three variables:

- Autonomous Motivation – questions 1-12
- Controlled Motivation – questions 13-22
- Amotivation – questions 23-28

Respondents are asked to indicate their level of agreement with each item on a five-point Likert scale:

1 = No, not at all; 5 = Yes, completely

Scale Questions

1. Enjoying mastering technical skills
2. Sports participation due to enjoying a challenge for myself
3. Finding personal satisfaction while training
4. Playing sports due to continuous learning
5. Participating in sports for improved self-confidence
6. Feeling happiness from improving my technical skills
7. Enjoying the sports activity for showing off my abilities
8. Learning about training as an opportunity for self-expression
9. Enjoying collaborating with my teammates
10. Using sports as a tool for self-actualization
11. Taking part in sports activities because of having fun
12. Feeling happiness after achieving my athletic goals
13. Training hard due to expectations of my coach
14. Motivated to gain acknowledgment of my achievements
15. Competing in order to enhance my status
16. Training to receive more respect from my teammates
17. Participating in sports activities because spectators motivate me
18. Training in order to be better than others
19. Feeling motivated for the sake of award-winning
20. Playing sport as an obligation because my team needs me
21. Taking part in sports due to societal expectation
22. Training regularly in order to be perceived as successful
23. Trying to find the true motivation behind my participation
24. Not knowing the reason for my participation

25. Practicing sports sometimes without a definite goal
26. Having no interest in training
27. Feeling bored during the training process
28. Not seeing any use from competing

3. Emotional Control Scale

Emotional control scale was developed based on the model created by Zizzi and Deaner (2006) and adjusted to the local sports context. The scale includes 15 questions that are used to measure athletes' ability to regulate their emotions under stressful conditions of competitive environment.

Participants respond using a five-point Likert scale:

1 = Rarely applies; 5 = Completely Applies

Scale Items

1. I can manage my emotions when I make mistakes while playing.
2. I keep cool when being criticized by coaches and fellow players.
3. I stay calm when placed in a situation that makes me angry.
4. I react calmly to unfavorable refereeing decisions.
5. I don’t let negative emotions cloud my playing ability.
6. I can concentrate well regardless of external noise from the crowd.
7. I manage my emotions when there is pressure close to the end of the game.
8. I accept defeat gracefully and without emotional outbursts.
9. I can easily calm myself down when I make technical errors.
10. I control myself physically to avoid showing negative emotions.
11. I do not let my anger affect other members of my team.
12. I approach difficult situations calmly and confidently.
13. I can get back on track and concentrate immediately after making mistakes.
14. I am calm when provoked by my opponents.
15. I am emotionally stable in tough periods during competition.

Scores for Scales

- Points on each scale are obtained by summing participants’ scores on the items.
- High scores on the Self-Confidence, Sport Motivation, and Emotional Control scales represent more positive psychological attributes.
- High scores on the Competitive Anxiety Scale reflect high levels of competitive anxiety.
- Unstandardized scores were converted into standardized scores analyzed with SPSS Statistics Version 26.