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Mindfulness-Based Interventions and Endurance Performance Under Pressure : A Systematic Review

Angel Salsa Billa[1*], Amelia Agustina[1], Muchammad Rizky Awalludin[1] , Astia Dika[1], Azzahrah Shafira Iwana[1], Azzahrah Shafira Iwana[1], Dhani Achmad Ridlowi[1], Diah Ayu Tri Yulianti[1], Eli Dwi Yani[1], Etiya Mulya Ningsih[1], Reem Iafi Almutairi[2]

[1]Nursing department, University of Malang, Malang, Indonesia

[2]University of Hail

E-mail : angel.salsa2410216@students.um.ac.id,

ABSTRACT

Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) have gained attention for their potential to enhance athletic performance, particularly under pressure. These interventions are thought to improve psychological and physiological factors, including stress reduction, attention regulation, and endurance capacity, which are critical for maintaining performance in high-pressure situations. A systematic review was conducted following PRISMA guidelines to synthesize evidence on the impact of MBIs on endurance performance under pressure. Studies were identified through a comprehensive search of academic databases and evaluated using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Key findings indicate that MBIs significantly reduce anxiety and stress, enhance mental attributes such as focus and emotion regulation, and improve endurance performance metrics. Neurocognitive benefits, such as improved executive functions and reduced negative ruminations, were also reported. This review concludes that MBIs are promising tools for optimizing athletic performance. Future research should focus on standardizing interventions and exploring their long-term effects across diverse athletic contexts.

KEYWORD

Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs); Endurance Performance; Pressure

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INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, much research has focused on mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) as a promising approach to enhance athletic performance, particularly under conditions of psychological and physical pressure (Wang, Lei and Fan, 2023). Numerous studies have highlighted the potential of MBIs to positively influence both psychological and physiological aspects of performance, with evidence pointing to reductions in anxiety and stress, improvements in attention and emotion regulation, and enhancements in endurance capacity (Bühlmayer *et al.*, 2017). For example, interventions such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Peak Performance (MBPP) programs have been explored across various athletic contexts, yielding insights into their effectiveness in high-pressure environments (Noetel *et al.*, 2017).

Despite these advancements, it remains unclear why some athletes exhibit varying degrees of benefit from MBIs, and the mechanisms linking mindfulness practices to enhanced endurance performance under pressure are not fully understood (Nien *et al.*, 2020). While existing studies have provided valuable findings, gaps remain in understanding the direct pathways through which MBIs impact endurance performance, particularly in relation to neurocognitive and physiological adaptations (Birrer, Röthlin and Morgan, 2012). Additionally, the variability in study designs, intervention durations, and performance outcomes raises questions about the consistency and generalizability of these effects across diverse athletic populations (Sparks and Ring, 2022).

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of mindfulness-based interventions in enhancing endurance performance under pressure, with a focus on identifying the underlying psychological and physiological mechanisms (Si, Yang and Feng, 2024). This research aims to address existing gaps by synthesizing evidence from prior studies and exploring the consistency of observed outcomes across various intervention formats (Bühlmayer *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, the study will outline the implications of mindfulness training for athletes, coaches, and practitioners, emphasizing its potential as a tool for optimizing performance in high-pressure scenarios (Jones *et al.*, 2020).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This systematic review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure methodological rigor and transparency.

Study Design

The study was meticulously designed to explore the impact of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) on endurance performance under pressure. A comprehensive approach was taken, involving the development of inclusion and exclusion criteria, a systematic search strategy, and structured data extraction and quality assessment protocols. These measures were employed to ensure reliability, validity, and relevance in the findings.

Selection Criteria

Inclusion Criteria:

1. **Theme Relevance:** Studies must directly examine the relationship between MBIs and endurance performance under pressure.
2. **Intervention Types:** Studies involving recognized mindfulness interventions such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) or Mindfulness-Based Peak Performance (MBPP).
3. **Outcomes Measured:** Studies must evaluate psychological (e.g., anxiety reduction, emotion regulation) or physiological outcomes (e.g., cortisol levels, endurance metrics).
4. **Population:** Research involving athletes across various performance levels (e.g., collegiate, elite).
5. **Publication Standards:** Studies published in peer-reviewed journals with verified data.

Exclusion Criteria:

1. **Irrelevant Content:** Studies not addressing mindfulness or endurance performance under pressure.
2. **Invalid Data:** Studies with biased methodologies or unreliable findings.
3. **Outdated Research:** Articles not reflecting advancements in MBIs within the past decade.
4. **Restricted Access:** Publications not openly accessible.
5. **Non-specific Interventions:** Studies that combine MBIs with other unrelated interventions without isolating their effects.

Search Strategy

A systematic and comprehensive search was implemented, including:

1. **Keyword Identification:** Keywords such as "Mindfulness-Based Interventions," "Endurance Performance," "Athletic Performance," and "Stress Reduction" were identified.
2. **Search Query Construction:** Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) refined the search strategy for specificity.
3. **Database Searches:** Key academic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science, were explored.
4. **Abstract and Keyword Screening:** Titles, abstracts, and keywords were evaluated for alignment with the research objectives.
5. **PICO Framework Application:**
    - **Population:** Athletes engaging in endurance sports.
    - **Intervention:** Mindfulness-based training programs.
    - **Comparison:** Outcomes with and without mindfulness training.
    - **Outcome:** Impacts on stress, anxiety, focus, and endurance performance.

Selection of Studies

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The selection process was conducted by two independent reviewers. Titles and abstracts were screened, followed by a full-text review of eligible studies. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus or a third reviewer.

Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

1. **Data Extraction:**
   - Key variables included intervention type, duration, population, and measured outcomes.
   - A standardized form ensured consistency and thoroughness.
2. **Quality Assessment:**
   - Methodological rigor was evaluated using predefined criteria such as sample size, study design, and statistical analyses.
   - Studies were rated on quality and relevance to ensure reliability.
3. **Data Synthesis:**
   - Findings were synthesized into key themes, supported by quantitative and qualitative data.
   - Meta-analysis techniques were applied where possible.
4. **Transparency:**
   - All procedures were documented to ensure replicability and credibility.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) have been increasingly studied for their potential to enhance athletic performance, particularly under pressure. The evidence from various studies suggests that MBIs can positively impact both psychological and physiological aspects of performance, which may indirectly contribute to improved endurance performance under pressure.

Key Findings:

- **Reduction in Anxiety and Stress:** MBIs have been shown to reduce competitive anxiety and stress responses, which are critical factors affecting performance under pressure. For instance, a study involving elite Wushu athletes demonstrated that an 8-week MBI led to decreased competitive anxiety and lower cortisol levels, indicating reduced stress 1. Similarly, another study found that brief mindfulness training reduced cognitive and somatic anxiety in basketball players, although it did not significantly improve free-throw performance under pressure 2.
- **Improvement in Mental Attributes:** MBIs can enhance mental attributes such as attention, emotion regulation, and executive functions, which are essential for maintaining performance under pressure. An 8-week Mindfulness-Based Peak Performance (MBPP) program showed

improvements in these mental attributes, suggesting that mindfulness training can help athletes better manage stress and maintain focus during high-pressure situations 3.

- **Enhanced Endurance Performance:** Specific studies have directly linked mindfulness training to improved endurance performance. For example, a 5-week mindfulness training program for university athletes resulted in higher endurance performance and better executive function, as measured by a graded exercise test and Stroop task accuracy 4. Another study with collegiate rowers found that an 8-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course improved rowing performance, psychological well-being, and sleep quality, all of which are crucial for endurance athletes 5.
- **Neurocognitive Benefits:** Mindfulness training has been associated with changes in neurocognitive processes that support performance under pressure. For instance, a study involving archers found that an MBPP program improved shooting performance and cognitive functions, such as attention and executive function, while also reducing negative ruminations 6.

Summary Table:

Study	Intervention	Duration	Key Outcomes
3	MBPP	8 weeks	Improved mental attributes, expected better performance under pressure
2	Brief mindfulness	15 min	Reduced anxiety, no significant performance improvement
4	Mindfulness training	5 weeks	Enhanced endurance performance, executive functions
1	MBI	8 weeks	Reduced competitive anxiety, lower cortisol levels
5	MBSR	8 weeks	Improved rowing performance, well-being, sleep quality
6	MBPP	4 weeks	Improved shooting performance, cognitive functions, reduced ruminations

The evidence suggests that mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) significantly reduce competitive anxiety and stress, critical factors affecting endurance performance under pressure (Dana, Shahir and Ghorbani, 2022). For example, studies have demonstrated that MBIs like an 8-week program reduced cortisol levels and competitive anxiety in elite Wushu athletes. This underscores the value of MBIs in mitigating stress, which is known to impair physical and cognitive performance (Bühlmayer *et al.*, 2017). However, a contrasting perspective comes from research involving basketball players, where brief mindfulness training reduced anxiety but failed to improve free-throw performance. This raises questions about the duration and depth of mindfulness practices necessary to yield tangible performance outcomes, particularly in short-term interventions (Vella-Fondacaro and Romano-Smith, 2023).

MBIs also enhance key mental attributes such as attention, emotion regulation, and executive functions, enabling athletes to maintain focus under pressure (Ajilchi *et al.*, 2021). An 8-week MBPP program improved these attributes, suggesting that mindfulness training helps athletes manage stress more

effectively during high-pressure situations. On the other hand, the generalizability of these findings is debated, as such improvements are often context-specific and may depend on the sport's cognitive demands (Petterson and Olson, 2017). Critics argue that while mindfulness enhances focus, its effectiveness may diminish in highly dynamic or unpredictable sports requiring split-second decision-making.

The link between mindfulness training and improved endurance performance is particularly compelling, with studies reporting higher endurance metrics and better executive function following structured interventions (Bondár *et al.*, 2021). For instance, a 5-week mindfulness program yielded enhanced Stroop task accuracy and graded exercise test performance in university athletes. Yet, some researchers highlight methodological limitations, such as small sample sizes and reliance on self-reported data, which could inflate the perceived benefits. Additionally, the variability in intervention durations and designs complicates direct comparisons across studies.

Another significant benefit of MBIs lies in their impact on neurocognitive processes, as evidenced by improved shooting performance and cognitive functions in archers who participated in a 4-week MBPP program (Wang, Lei and Fan, 2023). The reduction in negative ruminations also highlights the psychological advantages of mindfulness under pressure (Röthlin *et al.*, 2020). However, opponents argue that these neurocognitive changes are not uniformly observed across all sports or populations, suggesting that certain athletes may not experience the same degree of benefit. This variability points to the need for tailored mindfulness programs to address individual needs (Di Fronso *et al.*, 2022).

Despite promising findings, the direct impact of MBIs on endurance performance under pressure requires further exploration (Mehrsafar *et al.*, 2019). While the reduction in anxiety, enhanced focus, and neurocognitive benefits collectively support better performance, the long-term sustainability of these benefits remains unclear (Sánchez-Sánchez *et al.*, 2023). Critics caution that the high variability in study outcomes, coupled with limited longitudinal data, necessitates caution in adopting MBIs as a universal solution for enhancing athletic performance (Gao *et al.*, 2022). Future research should focus on standardized protocols, larger sample sizes, and longitudinal designs to establish a more robust evidence base.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this review highlight that mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) can reduce anxiety and stress, improve mental attributes such as attention and emotion regulation, and enhance endurance performance under pressure through neurocognitive and physiological mechanisms. These results underscore the potential of MBIs as effective tools for optimizing athletic performance in high-pressure environments, particularly for endurance-focused sports. The novelty of this research lies in synthesizing evidence linking mindfulness training with both psychological and physiological adaptations critical to endurance performance, providing a comprehensive perspective on its multifaceted benefits. However, the variability in study designs, intervention durations, and inconsistent findings across different athletic contexts indicates the need for further research. Future studies should prioritize standardized intervention protocols, larger and more diverse participant samples, and longitudinal designs to explore the long-term effects and mechanisms underlying MBIs' impact on athletic performance.

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