ISSN 3026-7477

INDONESIAN JOURNAL

JURNAL PSIKOLOGI

Jurnal Psikologi Volume: 2, Number 3, 2025, *Page*: 1-7

Psychological Mechanisms of Decision Making In Athletes

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.47134/pjp.v2i3.3906
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Received: 13-03-2025
Accepted: 07-04-2025
Published: 05-05-2025

Abstract: This article examines the psychological mechanisms of decision-making in athletes, including the influence of cognitive, emotional, and personality factors on the process of choosing the optimal decision in sports activities. The study analyzes key aspects such as intuitive and analytical thinking, stress resistance, impulsivity, motivation, and the ability to adapt in conditions of high uncertainty. Special attention is given to how different types of temperament and the level of professional experience of an athlete determine their ability to make quick and accurate decisions in competitive conditions.

Keywords: Sports Psychology, Decision-Making, Cognitive Mechanisms, Intuitive Thinking, Analytical Thinking, Stress Resistance, Impulsivity, Adaptability, Motivation, Competitive Activities

Introduction

Decision-making is an integral part of sports activities, determining the effectiveness and success of athletes' performances at various levels of competition. Given the dynamic and unpredictable nature of sports contests, the ability to make quick and accurate decisions plays a crucial role in achieving high results. The decision-making process in athletes is a complex psychological phenomenon that includes cognitive, emotional, and motivational mechanisms, as well as the influence of individual personality traits.

Modern research in sports psychology (Kahneman, 2011; Raab & Gigerenzer, 2015) indicates the existence of two primary decision-making strategies: intuitive and analytical**.** Experienced athletes generally rely on intuitive decision-making, which is based on previously developed motor skills and instantaneous assessment of the situation. In contrast, less experienced athletes tend to adopt an analytical approach, requiring a detailed analysis of the situation and a comparative evaluation of possible options. Moreover, factors such as stress resilience, impulsivity, and adaptability significantly impact decision-making, particularly in extreme and highly competitive conditions.

Furthermore, the nature of the sporting discipline also determines the characteristics of decision-making: in team sports (e.g., football, basketball, hockey), interaction with teammates, strategic thinking, and tactical adaptation play a vital role. Meanwhile, in

individual disciplines (e.g., tennis, athletics, chess), athletes make decisions independently, relying on their personal preparation and strategic skills.

Thus, the study of psychological mechanisms of decision-making in athletes is a relevant task that contributes to the development of effective psychological training methods, enhances cognitive flexibility and stress resilience, and optimizes decision-making strategies in various sports situations.

Methodology

This article is dedicated to analyzing the key psychological factors influencing decision-making in sports and exploring methods for their development to improve competitive performance.

The study of psychological mechanisms of decision-making in athletes is one of the pressing topics in the field of sports psychology. Various scientific works examine the cognitive and emotional aspects of this process, as well as the impact of athletes' personality traits on the speed and accuracy of their decisions in competitive conditions. A review of the literature shows that decision-making in sports depends on numerous factors, including intuitive and analytical thinking, stress resilience, impulsivity, adaptability, and motivation.

Result and Discussion

The Role of Sports Discipline in Decision-Making

A key aspect requiring special attention is the nature of the sport itself, as decision-making in team sports occurs not only at the individual level but also at the collective level. In such sports, athletes must consider their own actions, team interactions, strategy, and the overall game dynamics. In contrast, individual sports require athletes to make decisions independently, making their personality traits, cognitive abilities, and psychological preparation the key factors determining success.

Research suggests that targeted cognitive training programs, such as developing rapid thinking, attention control exercises, and simulating competitive scenarios, can significantly enhance both the quality and speed of decision-making in athletes. Additionally, such programs help mitigate the negative impact of stress in critical moments of competition.

Discussion

In his research, Daniel Kahneman (2011) proposed the dual-system thinking model, which is applicable to sports activities. According to this model, athletes can use two types of decision-making:

- Fast (intuitive) thinking, which relies on accumulated experience, automatic reactions, and instant information processing.
- Slow (analytical) thinking, which requires a thorough analysis of the situation and the selection of the optimal decision.

Raab and Gigerenzer (2015), in their studies on sports psychology, considered the decision-making process as the application of "heuristics"—cognitive strategies that allow athletes to make fast and effective decisions under time constraints. They emphasize that experienced athletes' decision-making becomes more automated, as their brains recognize familiar game situations faster and apply previously learned behavioral patterns.

The personal characteristics of an athlete play a crucial role in their ability to make decisions in competitive environments. Tsukanov's research (2017) demonstrated that extroverts tend to make more impulsive and faster decisions, whereas introverts prefer to carefully analyze the situation before choosing an action strategy.

Moreover, the level of stress resilience directly influences decision-making in extreme conditions.

Karimova (2019), in her studies on sports psychology, demonstrated that athletes with high stress resilience adapt better to the intense competitive environment and are capable of making more rational and precise decisions under pressure. Conversely, a lack of psychological stability can lead to impulsive or, on the contrary, overly cautious decisions, which reduces an athlete’s performance effectiveness.

Research by Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer (1993) indicates that the nature of decision-making largely depends on the specifics of the sports discipline. In team sports such as football, basketball, and hockey, decision-making requires consideration of team interactions, strategic game vision, and tactical flexibility. In contrast, in individual disciplines such as chess, tennis, or athletics, athletes make decisions independently, relying on their analytical abilities, intuition, and level of preparation.

Schmidt and Lee’s studies (2019) suggest that developing athletes' cognitive abilities, such as attention, information processing speed, and situation prediction, significantly improves their ability to make effective decisions. They recommend specialized cognitive training, including visualization of game situations, attention and reaction training, and simulation exercises that closely replicate real competitive conditions.

Discussion. Decision-making in sports is a complex and multifaceted process that involves cognitive, emotional, and personality-related factors. Research in sports psychology confirms that this process largely depends on an athlete’s level of experience, individual characteristics, and ability to adapt to changing competition conditions. In high-pressure situations with limited time, an athlete must instantly analyze the situation and make the most optimal decision, which requires not only excellent physical preparation but also a high level of cognitive flexibility and emotional stability.

Numerous studies show that experienced athletes tend to rely more on intuitive decision-making, which is based on previously developed motor skills and automated responses. Through years of experience and repeated competition scenarios, their brain can instantly recognize familiar game situations and select the most effective strategy. In contrast, less experienced athletes generally prefer an analytical approach, which requires more time to process information and evaluate possible courses of action. This difference arises because intuitive thinking develops over years of practice and results from

accumulated experience, whereas analytical thinking is more common among novices who have not yet built a strong knowledge and skill base for immediate reactions.

An athlete's personality traits also significantly influence the decision-making process, as temperament and emotional stability determine how quickly and accurately they react in critical situations. For example, extroverts tend to make more impulsive and quick decisions, which is particularly beneficial in fast-paced sports such as football or basketball, where reaction speed plays a crucial role. In contrast, introverts are more inclined toward detailed situation analysis, which can be advantageous in strategic disciplines like chess or shooting sports. However, excessive delays in decision-making may become a factor that negatively impacts athletic performance, especially in sports where an immediate response to changing circumstances is required.

In addition to an athlete's individual characteristics, stress resilience plays a crucial role in decision-making.

Research confirms that athletes with high emotional stability cope better with competitive pressure and make more precise and deliberate decisions. Conversely, a lack of stress resilience can lead to mistakes caused by either excessive caution or impulsiveness. Under intense competitive pressure, where every moment is critical, the ability to maintain self-control and regulate emotions becomes essential for success.

Another significant factor determining the effectiveness of decision-making is an athlete's personality structure, as temperament and individual traits significantly influence behavioral strategy choices in various competitive situations. Extroverts tend to exhibit faster reaction speeds and a greater inclination for impulsive decisions, which can be advantageous in fast-paced sports such as football or basketball, where rapid transitions between game episodes are crucial. In contrast, introverts tend to favor more deliberate and cautious decisions, which is especially relevant for individual sports that require prolonged analysis and strategic planning, such as chess or archery. However, besides temperament, stress resilience significantly influences decision-making, as emotionally stable athletes are better able to maintain concentration under uncertainty and make rational decisions, while those with lower stress resilience may either become overly cautious or make hasty, uncalculated moves.

Conclusion

An analysis of literature and existing studies leads to the conclusion that decision-making in sports is a multi-layered process that integrates cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components, making it a critical area of research in sports psychology. Enhancing decision-making abilities is possible through structured work on cognitive mechanisms, developing intuitive skills, improving stress resilience, and implementing psychological training programs aimed at increasing the speed and accuracy of decision-making under intense competitive pressure.

Final Thoughts. The analysis of psychological mechanisms of decision-making in athletes highlights that this process is a complex interplay of cognitive strategies,

personality traits, stress resilience, and the specific nature of the sport. The ability to make quick and accurate decisions is one of the key factors influencing athletic success, as competitive environments require immediate reactions and efficient behavioral strategies. Research confirms that experienced athletes predominantly use intuitive mechanisms, allowing them to rapidly analyze situations based on prior experience and automated motor responses. In contrast, novice athletes tend to rely on analytical approaches, requiring detailed evaluation and comparative assessment of potential actions before making a decision.

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