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Implementing a Sport Psychology Framework for elite athletes in Zambia

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DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to the hard work of Zambian athletes and their dedicated coaches, whose perseverance and passion continue to inspire excellence in sport.

I also extend this dedication to the National Olympic Committee of Zambia, with the hope that this work contributes meaningfully to the development and success of our young athletes.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the research work presented in this paper titled “Implementing a Sport Psychology Framework for elite athletes in Zambia” is the result of my work, carried out under the supervision of Professor Mireia Lizandra.

In preparing the final version of this paper, I utilized ChatGPT to assist with editing and paraphrasing certain sections of the content.

This paper has not been submitted previously, either in part or full, to any other institution or university for any academic award.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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To my beloved wife and children, your unwavering love, encouragement, and patience were the bedrock of my motivation. Your sacrifices and understanding during the long hours I spent immersed in my work mean more to me than words can ever convey.

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To the faculty, thank you for imparting the knowledge and skills that formed the foundation of this research. To my work colleagues, I am immensely grateful for your patience and understanding as I balanced my professional duties with this demanding task.

Lastly, to the athletes, coaches everyone who contributed directly or indirectly to the successful completion of this research, thank you.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

APA - American Psychological Association

IOC - International Olympic Committee

NGO - Non-Governmental Organization

NOCZ - National Olympic Committee of Zambia

NOC - National Olympic Committee

SPSS - Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

UNDP - United Nations Development Programme

UNICEF - United Nations Children's Fund

WHO - World Health Organization

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated implementing a sports psychology framework to enhance mental preparedness and performance of elite athletes in Zambia. Despite international success, Zambian sports have historically emphasized physical training while neglecting mental health support, resulting in promising careers cut short due to inadequate psychological support.

The research employed a mixed-methods approach with surveys of 25 elite athletes (43.86%) of Zambian Olympic athletes from Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024 and 7 coaches (22% of Olympic coaches), plus semi-structured interviews with three key stakeholders. Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while interview data underwent thematic analysis using NVivo software.

Findings revealed that while athletes reported confidence managing performance pressure, 87.5% acknowledged limited mental health resources negatively affected performance. Psychological support is primarily delivered by coaches (47.1%) and team doctors (41.2%). The research identified five critical framework components: policy integration, coach education, strategic resource allocation, culturally appropriate delivery methods, and monitoring systems. High receptivity among athletes (95.8% willing to use mental health services) and coaches (100% willing to receive training) creates favourable conditions for implementation.

Recommendations include revising national sports policy, integrating the IOC Mental Health Toolkit into NOCZ planning, implementing club-level mental skills training, establishing tiered support systems with coaches as first-line providers, and developing comprehensive education programs.

Keywords: *Sports Psychology, Elite Athletes, Mental Preparation, Framework Implementation, Zambia, Olympic Committee, Coach Education, Cultural Factors, Psychological Support.*

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude a examiné la mise en œuvre d'un cadre de psychologie du sport pour améliorer la préparation mentale et la performance des athlètes d'élite en Zambie.

Malgré des succès internationaux, le sport Zambien a historiquement privilégié l'entraînement physique au détriment du soutien en santé mentale, entraînant ainsi l'interruption prématurée de carrières prometteuses en raison d'un accompagnement psychologique insuffisant.

La recherche a utilisé une approche mixte, comprenant des questionnaires auprès de 25 athlètes d'élite (43,86 % des athlètes Olympiques Zambiens de Tokyo 2020 et Paris 2024) et de 7 entraîneurs (22 % des entraîneurs olympiques), ainsi que des entretiens semi-structurés avec trois acteurs clés. Les données des questionnaires ont été analysées à l'aide de statistiques descriptives, tandis que les données des entretiens ont fait l'objet d'une analyse thématique utilisant le logiciel NVivo.

Les résultats ont révélé que, bien que les athlètes se déclarent confiants dans leur capacité à gérer la pression de la performance, 87,5 %, reconnaissent que les ressources limitées en santé mentale affectent négativement leur performance. Le soutien psychologique est principalement fourni par les entraîneurs (47,1 %) et les médecins d'équipe (41,2 %).

La recherche a mis en évidence cinq composantes cruciales pour ce cadre : l'intégration des politiques, la formation des entraîneurs, l'allocation stratégique des ressources, des méthodes de prestation adaptées au contexte culturel, et les systèmes de suivi.

La forte réceptivité des athlètes (95,8 % se déclarant prêts à utiliser les services) et des entraîneurs (100 % se déclarant prêts à recevoir une formation) crée des conditions favorables à la mise en œuvre.

Il est recommandé de procéder à une révision de la politique sportive nationale, d'intégrer le Référentiel du CIO pour la santé mentale dans la planification du CNOZ, de déployer une formation aux compétences mentales au niveau des clubs, de mettre en place des systèmes de soutien à plusieurs niveaux avec les entraîneurs en tant que premiers intervenants, et d'élaborer des programmes de formation approfondis.

Mots-clés : *Psychologie du sport, Athlètes d'élite, Préparation mentale, Mise en œuvre de cadre, Comité Olympique de la Zambie, Formation des entraîneurs, Facteurs culturels, Soutien psychologique.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Zambia is a landlocked republic country in Southern Africa, neighbouring the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia, and Angola. The capital city is Lusaka, in the south-central part of the country. It has a growing population mainly centered around the urban areas of Lusaka, Livingstone and the Copperbelt Province. It attained independence in 1964 from the British colony and has the English language as the main official language even though the country has 72 ethnical dialects.

Zambia has a rich sporting heritage, particularly in football, with notable achievements, including winning the Africa Cup of Nations in 2012 and consistent participation in various international competitions, including the Olympic and Commonwealth games. The country has also produced remarkable talents in athletics, boxing, and other sports. However, despite these achievements, sports in Zambia have faced significant challenges in maintaining and developing high performance programs, particularly in the crucial area of mental health support.

Sports development in Zambia has historically emphasized physical training and technical skills while overlooking crucial psychological support systems. This gap has resulted in numerous promising careers being cut short due to inadequate mental health frameworks. A particularly poignant example illustrates this systemic oversight: Zambia's 2014 Youth Olympic Games gold medallist in athletics, whose career declined rapidly after initial success due to lack of psychological support structures to manage fame, pressure, and career decisions. Despite attempts to return to competition after four years, the absence of mental health support systems prevented successful reintegration into elite sport.

This pattern highlights the critical need for comprehensive psychological support frameworks. Elite athletes face unique challenges, including performance pressure, stress management, resilience building, and career transitions, with research indicating that elite athletes experience psychological distress at rates comparable to the general population (Mannes et al., 2018; Jovanović et al., 2022). Despite the International Olympic Committee's approval of the Mental Health Toolkit for Elite Athletes in 2021, the National Olympic Committee of Zambia (NOCZ) has not implemented this resource within its strategic planning framework.

The implementation of a sports psychology framework becomes critical for Zambian athletes, particularly given increasing competitive demands and the need for comprehensive support beyond physical preparation. According to the American Psychological Association, sport psychology applies psychological knowledge and skills to address optimal performance and well-being of athletes, developmental and social aspects of sports participation, and systemic issues within sports organizations (APA, 2009).

Three key factors must guide framework development for Zambian athletes. First, mental toughness and effective coping strategies are essential components of athletic success (Beckford et al., 2016). Second, coaches and support staff play paramount roles, as their

relationships with athletes significantly impact both mental health and performance outcomes (Teques et al., 2019). Third, cultural considerations must be integrated into psychological support frameworks, as cultural factors significantly influence athletes' psychological experiences and receptivity to mental health support.

Recent research demonstrates increasing receptivity to sport psychology services among elite athletes in developing nations, indicating growing awareness of mental health's importance in sports performance (Neumann et al., 2023). This trend presents an opportune moment for NOCZ to establish Zambia's first comprehensive sports psychology framework. Therefore, this study aims to explore and develop a culturally appropriate, resource-efficient sports psychology framework within NOCZ structures to enhance long-term athlete development and preparation for major competitions.

1.1. Main Research Question

How can an effective sports psychology framework be developed and implemented to enhance the mental preparedness and performance of elite athletes in Zambia?

1.2 Sub-Research Questions

1. *What are the specific psychological challenges faced by elite Zambian athletes during preparation for and competing at major competitions?*
2. *What can be implemented from the IOC Toolkit within the Zambian sports environment?*
3. *What are the critical components of a sports psychology framework that can effectively address the needs of Zambian athletes within their unique cultural and athletic context?*
4. *What sustainable mechanisms can be developed to implement mental skills training programs within the National Olympic Committee of Zambia's (NOCZ) existing structures?*

1.3 General Research Objective

To develop and implement a comprehensive sports psychology framework that addresses the mental preparation needs of elite athletes in Zambia.

1.4 Secondary Objectives

1. To identify and assess the psychological challenges faced by elite Zambian athletes during preparation for and competing at major competitions.
2. To analyze how cultural factors influence the psychological needs and support preferences of Zambian elite athletes.
3. To determine the critical components of a sports psychology framework that can effectively address the needs of Zambian athletes within their unique cultural and athletic context.
4. To establish effective strategies for integrating coaches and support staff into a comprehensive psychological support system for elite athletes in Zambia.

5. To develop sustainable mechanisms for implementing mental skills training programs within the National Olympic Committee of Zambia's (NOCZ) existing structures.

Following this introduction, a review of the existing literature on the sports psychology framework and applicable strategies will be explored towards a recommendation for a framework and how it can be implemented in Zambia. Next, the methodology will be based on a qualitative research design that will be explained in detail and results outlined accordingly. The study will present a discussion and will provide a conclusion based on the analysis and interpretation of the data in relation to the findings. Finally, the study seeks to provide appropriate recommendations arising from the interpretation of the data in responding to the need for the implementation of a sport psychology framework for athletes in Zambia within the NOCZ.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review synthesizes global research and insights relevant to Zambia, focusing on the psychological needs of elite athletes and the frameworks that can be employed to support them.

2.1 Framework

Henriksen and Stambulova (2017) propose that sport psychology frameworks should be understood as dynamic, culture-specific systems that address both performance enhancement and personal development through coordinated psychological support services.

The conceptual understanding of frameworks has been further expanded by Fletcher and Arnold (2021), who emphasize the importance of organizational and cultural contexts in framework development and implementation. Their research demonstrates that successful frameworks must consider institutional capacity, resource availability, and cultural specificity to be effective.

2.1.1 Elite Athletes

The classification and understanding of elite athletes have evolved considerably in sports psychology literature. Swann et al. (2015) provide a comprehensive definition of elite athletes as individuals who compete at the highest level in their sport, typically representing their country in international competitions. Johnston et al. (2018) expand this definition by incorporating elements of training commitment and institutional support. Their research indicates that elite status encompasses athletes who have achieved national or international competitive success while demonstrating high levels of training commitment and receiving institutional support for their sporting endeavours.

Rice et al. (2016) further contribute to this understanding by documenting that elite athletes experience unique psychological challenges, including performance pressures, identity issues, and mental health concerns at rates comparable to or exceeding the general population.

2.1.2 Mental Preparation

The conceptualization and implementation of mental preparation strategies represent a crucial component in sports psychology. Williams and Krane (2020) define mental preparation as the systematic development of psychological skills and strategies that enable athletes to achieve optimal mental states for performance. Hardy et al. (2019) further contribute to this understanding by emphasizing the role of mental toughness in preparation, defining it as the capacity to deliver high levels of performance consistently despite varying degrees of situational demands.

2.1.3 Sport Psychology Framework

The development and implementation of sport psychology frameworks represent the practical application of theoretical understanding in athletic contexts. Fletcher and Sarkar (2021) propose that effective sport psychology frameworks must integrate both performance enhancement and mental health maintenance through cultural, social, and

organizational lenses. Their research identifies critical elements for successful framework implementation, including organizational culture, resource allocation, and continuous monitoring systems. Henriksen et al. (2019) specifically address framework implementation in developing nations, emphasizing the importance of cultural context, available resources, and existing support structures.

Schinke and Papaioannou (2020) further contribute to this understanding by highlighting the fundamental role of cultural considerations in both the delivery and reception of psychological support services. This holistic approach to framework development has been particularly influential in addressing the unique challenges faced by athletes in developing nations, where resources and support systems may be limited.

2.2 Empirical reviews

The empirical evidence regarding psychological support for elite athletes has grown substantially over the past decade, providing crucial insights into the practical implementation and effectiveness of sports psychology interventions. This section examines key empirical studies that have investigated psychological distress, mental preparation strategies, and support frameworks for elite athletes across various contexts.

2.2.1 Psychological Distress Among Elite Athletes

Research indicates that elite athletes experience psychological distress at rates comparable to the general population, with specific factors such as career transitions and performance pressures contributing to this phenomenon. Mannes et al. (2018) highlight the prevalence of psychological distress among retired elite athletes, suggesting that the transition out of competitive sports can be particularly challenging, leading to issues such as depression and anxiety (Mannes et al., 2018). Similarly, Cosh et al. (2013) discuss the identity crises faced by athletes during retirement, emphasizing the need for support systems that address these psychological challenges.

It is also important to note that the role of family dynamics cannot be overlooked. Teques et al. (2019) research elite athletes who are also fathers and highlight the complexities of balancing parental responsibilities with athletic commitments. The study reveals that while fatherhood can introduce challenges, it can also provide emotional grounding and motivation, suggesting that family support plays a critical role in an athlete's psychological resilience.

2.2.2 Coping Strategies and Mental Toughness

The ability to cope with stress and maintain mental toughness is essential for elite athletes, as it significantly influences performance outcomes. In Mental toughness, the term toughness refers to a collection of psychological characteristics that are central to optimal performance. Athletes, coaches, and sport psychologists have consistently implicated mental toughness as one of the most important psychological characteristics related to success in sports (Garry Kuan et al., 2019). Specifically, it is often used to describe a broad term that reflects the ability of an athlete to cope effectively with training and competition demands in an effort to remain resilient (Bull et al., 2005).

It has been observed that male sprinters who employed effective coping strategies demonstrated higher levels of mental toughness, which in turn positively affected their performance (Mannes et al., 2018). This finding aligns with Holland et al. (2010), who emphasize the importance of integrating psychological techniques into training regimens to enhance athletes' coping mechanisms (Cosh et al., 2013). Mental toughness is often defined as the psychological edge that enables athletes to cope better than their opponents with the demands of competition, particularly under pressure. Torma and Balogh (2022) highlight that competitive experience is a crucial factor in developing mental toughness among athletes, suggesting that exposure to high-pressure situations can enhance an athlete's ability to perform under stress (Jovanovic et al., 2022). This is particularly relevant in the context of Zambia, where athletes may face unique pressures due to limited resources and support systems.

Moreover, Malhotra's research indicates a significant relationship between mental toughness and mental health, suggesting that athletes with higher levels of mental toughness are less likely to experience anxiety and depression (Beckford et al., 2016). This relationship underscores the necessity of fostering mental toughness not only for performance enhancement but also for the overall psychological well-being of athletes. In addition, Benítez-Sillero et al. (2021) found that mental toughness can have a higher predictive power of performance outcomes than physical attributes, indicating that psychological factors play a critical role in competitive success (Holland et al., 2010). This finding suggests that Zambian athletes could benefit from structured mental skills training programs focusing on developing mental toughness, thereby improving their competitive performance.

Crust et al. (2014) provide examples of strategies that can enhance various components of mental toughness, such as goal setting, visualization, and self-talk (Ozdemir, 2019). These strategies can be integrated into training programs to help athletes manage stress and focus during competitions. Furthermore, Walker et al. emphasize the importance of hardiness, which is closely related to mental toughness, as it provides athletes with the courage and strategies to turn stressful circumstances into opportunities for enhanced performance (Teques et al., 2019).

Research by Guskowska and Wojcik (2021) supports the notion that mentally tough athletes perform better in both motor and cognitive tasks, suggesting that mental toughness is a critical factor in achieving optimal performance (Henriksen et al., 2019). This is particularly relevant for Zambian athletes, who may benefit from mental toughness training to enhance their performance in various sports disciplines.

Abou-Bakr and Mostafa's study on field hockey players demonstrates that mental toughness training can significantly improve both speed and accuracy in offensive skills, further emphasizing the practical benefits of such training (Rahayuni, 2019). This suggests that similar interventions could be beneficial for Zambian athletes across different sports.

The work of Brace et al. (2020) on ultra-marathon runners indicates that higher levels of mental toughness and self-efficacy are associated with better performance outcomes, reinforcing the idea that psychological skills training can enhance athletic performance (Neumann et al., 2023). This is particularly pertinent for elite athletes in Zambia, where

developing mental toughness could provide a competitive edge in both local and international competitions.

2.2.3 The Role of Coaches and Support Staff

Coaches play a pivotal role in the psychological development of athletes. Research indicates that the relationship between athletes and coaches can significantly impact athletes' mental health and performance. For instance, Teques et al. (2019) found that parental and coach support positively correlate with athletes' self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation. This suggests that coaches in Zambia should be trained not only in technical skills but also in psychological support strategies to foster a supportive environment for athletes. The consensus statement by Henriksen et al. (2019) emphasizes the need for a holistic approach to athlete mental health, advocating for collaboration between coaches, psychologists, and support staff to create a comprehensive support system (Henriksen et al., 2019). This collaborative approach is particularly relevant in Zambia, where resources may be limited, and leveraging existing personnel can enhance the support network for athletes.

2.2.4 Cultural Considerations in Sport Psychology

Cultural factors significantly influence the psychological experiences of athletes. Research by Rahayuni discusses the psychological demands faced by athletes in Indonesia, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive approaches to sport psychology (Rahayuni, 2019). Similarly, in Zambia, understanding the cultural context of athletes is essential for developing effective psychological interventions. This includes recognizing the societal pressures and expectations that may affect athletes' mental health. Furthermore, the study by Neumann et al. (2023) highlights the receptivity of athletes in developing nations to sport psychology services, indicating a growing awareness of the importance of mental health in sports (Neumann et al., 2023). This trend suggests that there is an opportunity to integrate sport psychology into the training and development of Zambian athletes, fostering a culture that prioritizes mental well-being alongside physical performance.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Methodology

The study proceeded through a systematic structured approach to collect primary data that was analysed to determine an effective implementation framework for the sports psychology framework and applicable strategies for the National Olympic Committee of Zambia. The objective was to explore the opportunities to apply sports psychology interventions in Zambian sports, particularly as they related to athletes' performance and well-being. Given the nature of the research topic, the study adopted a mixed-methods research design. While the qualitative component allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions, the quantitative component provided measurable data on attitudes, preferences, and current practices. This mixed-methods approach enabled the researcher to explore the understanding of challenges, attitudes, experiences, and motivation of the target sample through both statistical patterns and rich contextual insights.

3.1.1 Primary Data Collection

The primary data collection was done using survey questionnaires (quantitative) and structured interviews (qualitative). The data collection targeted local stakeholders including athletes, coaches, Sports Ministry administrators, and practitioners in the field of psychology, providing dip stick data on the appetite for launching a sports psychology framework within the NOC Zambia for the first time.

The survey questionnaires gathered quantitative data on athletes' and coaches' experiences, perceptions, and preferences regarding psychological support. These structured instruments used Likert scales, multiple-choice questions, and yes/no responses to enable statistical analysis of patterns across respondents.

The structured interviews collected qualitative data, gathering rich, in-depth information while allowing for a degree of flexibility to manage unexpected insights. These interviews provided an opportunity to ask participants follow-up questions based on their responses and enabled the researcher to probe deeper into key areas of interest for a realistic viewpoint. The interviews explored participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the implementation of a sports psychology framework, cultural considerations, resource requirements, and potential challenges.

3.1.2 Participant Selection and Sampling

Considering the nature of the study, the researcher targeted a sample size of between twenty-five to thirty for surveys and three to four interviewees. Participants were selected from the Sports Ministry, sports partners, and experts in Sports Psychology who had the requisite and relevant experience in athletes' performance, coaching, sports administration, and sports psychology. The selected participants had familiarity with challenges that athletes face and were keen to engage in open discussions that could drive positive impact on the sporting environment.

For the quantitative component, the study achieved a sample of 25 elite athletes (representing 43.86% of all Zambian athletes who competed in the Tokyo 2020 and Paris

2024 Olympic Games) and 7 coaches (representing 22% of coaches who participated in these Games). For the qualitative component, the study included interviews with three key stakeholders: a sports psychology expert based in South Africa, the CEO of the National Sports Council of Zambia, and a practicing psychologist with expertise in sports psychology based in Zambia.

To identify and avoid ambiguities in the use of either the survey questions or structured interview questions and ensure clarity, the researcher conducted a test pilot of both survey and structured interview questions. This test helped to determine whether the questions were bringing out the kind of responses suitable to the study. This step was important to ensure that the questions were both clear and contextual to the research paper.

3.1.3 Data Analysis

Primary data collected through surveys and interviews was analysed using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative survey data was examined using descriptive statistics in SPSS and Excel, while qualitative interview data was organized into patterns and thematic categories using NVivo software for systematic analysis. Both quantitative and qualitative findings were compared with existing literature and theoretical frameworks to assess the relevance and applicability of established sports psychology concepts to the Zambian context. The integration of both data sources provided comprehensive understanding of psychological support needs among Zambian athletes that neither method could achieve independently.

3.1.4 Reporting

The study provided the results, and a conclusion based on the analysis and interpretation. The study provided results and conclusions based on data analysis and interpretation of findings, addressing implications for sports psychology framework implementation within NOCZ. The final report synthesized findings into clear, evidence-based recommendations for Zambian sports sector stakeholders, providing practical implementation steps and guidance for NOCZ to adopt psychological support strategies for athlete development. The integrated quantitative and qualitative findings presented a comprehensive picture of current psychological support status and effective framework requirements in Zambian sports.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

4.1 Results

This chapter presents findings from mixed-methods data collection including surveys with 25 elite athletes and 7 coaches, plus interviews with sports psychology experts and administrators. The study investigated how an effective sports psychology framework can be developed and implemented to enhance mental preparedness and performance of elite athletes in Zambia. Interview transcripts were analyzed using NVivo software to identify key themes, patterns, and relationships. The chapter is organized into Results and Analysis sections, presenting empirical findings and their interpretation in relation to research questions and existing literature.

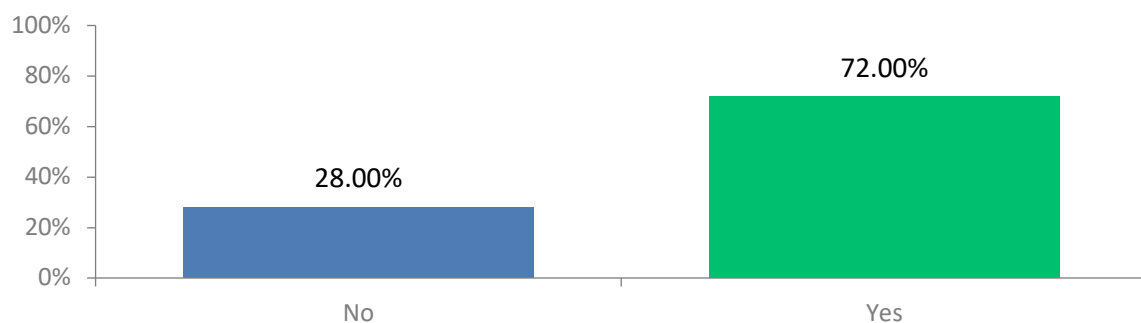
4.1.1 Athlete Survey Results

A total of 25 elite athletes participated in the survey, representing 43.86% of all athletes who competed in the Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024 Olympic Games for Zambia. Based on the demographic data available for these athletes, the gender distribution shows 21 were female (84.00%) and 4 male (16.00%) respondents.

4.1.1.1 Athletes' Experience with Psychological Support

The survey sought to understand athletes' experience with psychological support and their perceptions of its importance. Key findings include:

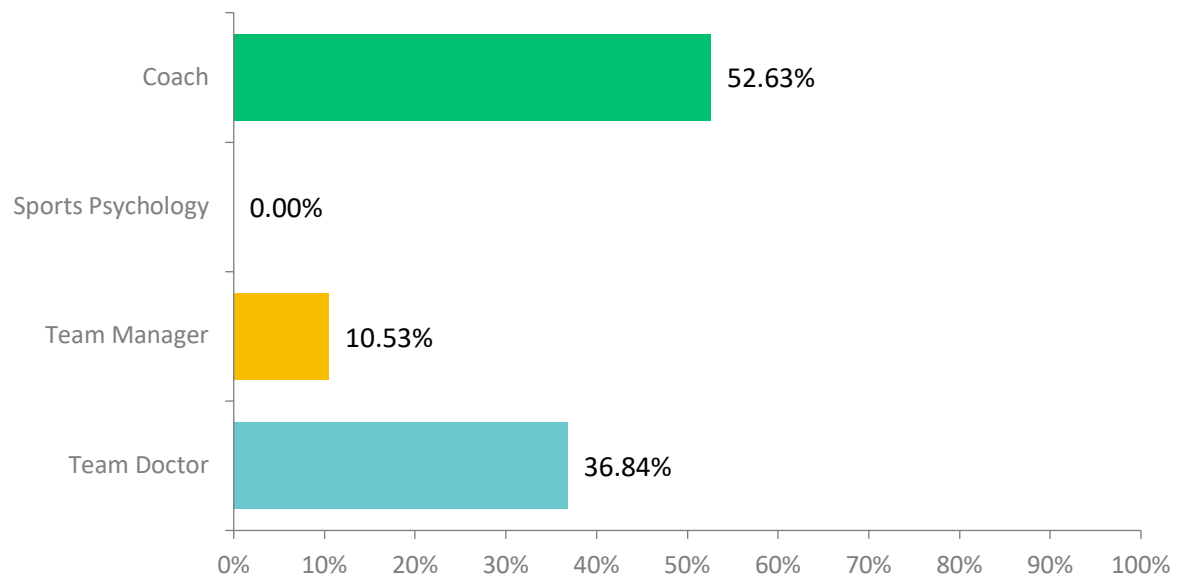
Figure 4.1: Q1: When asked if aware of any mental health support sessions offered to athletes



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

When asked whether they were aware of mental health support sessions offered to them, 72.0% of athletes responded "Yes," while 28.0% responded "No."

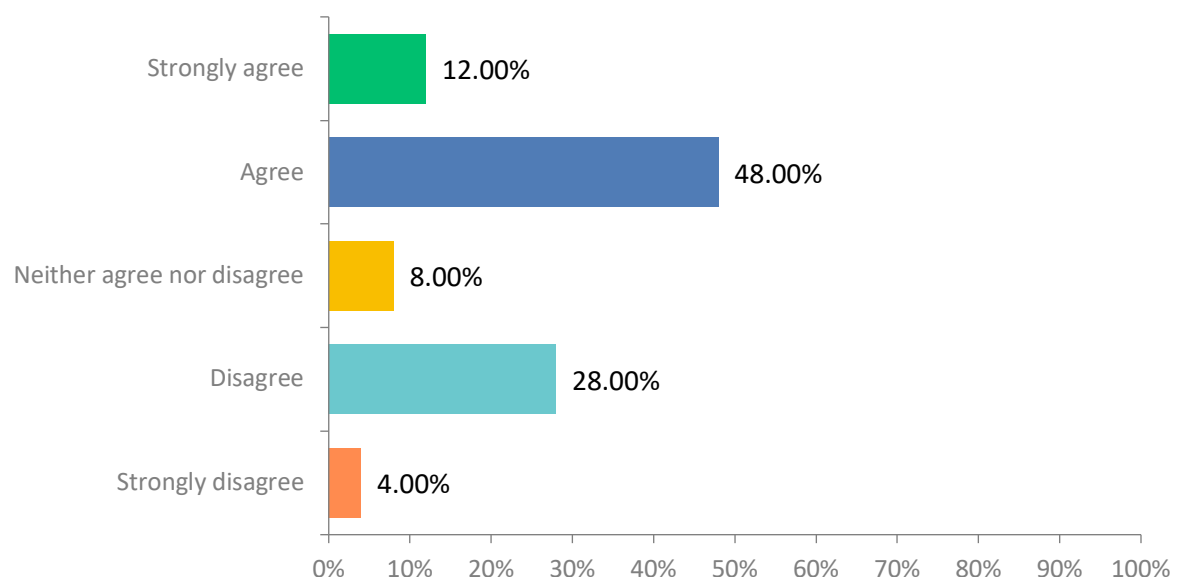
Figure 4.2: Q2: If you answered YES to the previous questions, who offered these mental health sessions?



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

Among those who answered “Yes,” to having Experience with Psychological Support the providers of these mental health sessions were identified as shown in figure 4.2 Coaches (52.63%, n=10), Team Doctors (36.84%, n=7) and Team Managers (10.53%, n=2).

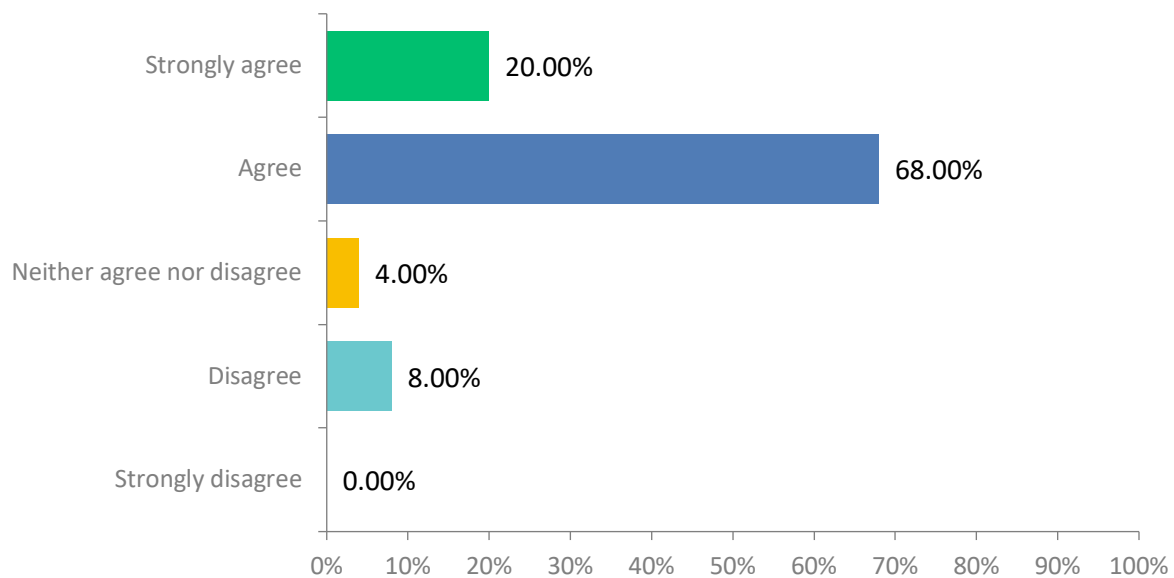
Figure 4.3: Q3: How much do you agree with the statement: I have access to adequate psychological support during training and competitions”?



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

In response to the statement “I have access to adequate psychological support during training and competitions,” athletes reported Strongly Agree (12.00%, n=3), Agree (48.00.0%, n=12), Neutral (8.00%, n=2), Disagree (28.00%, n=7) and Strongly Disagree (4.00%, n=1). This indicates that while 60.00% of athletes agreed or strongly agreed that they had adequate access to psychological support, a significant proportion (32.2%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

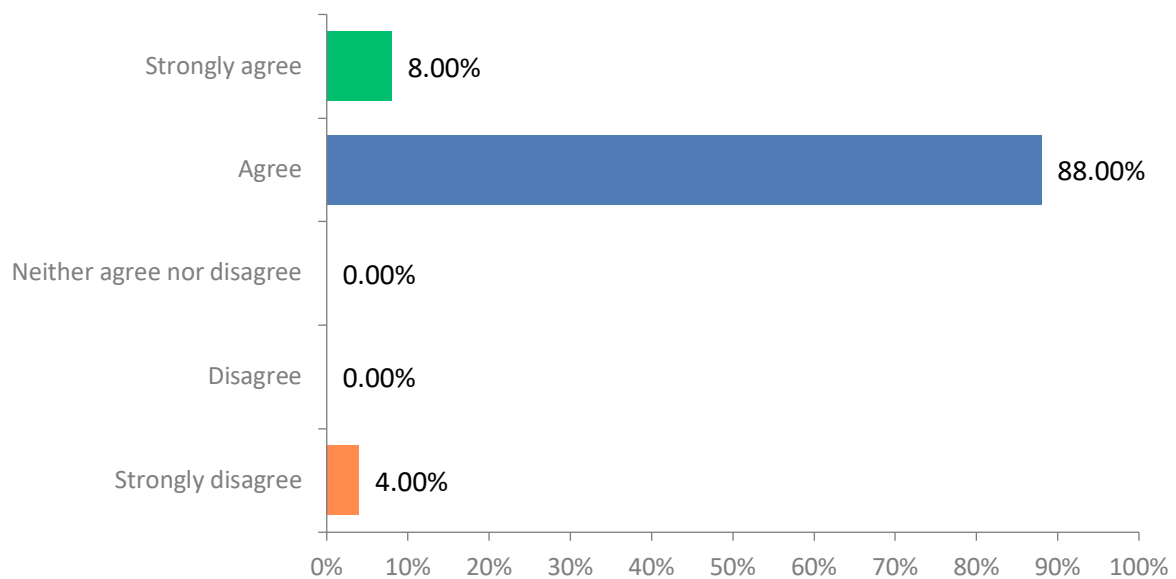
Figure 4.4: Q4: During my regular training program, mental health sessions are conducted to strengthen my decision-making capacity, such as goal setting, etc



Source: Author’s analysis, 2025

When asked whether mental health sessions were conducted during their regular training program to strengthen decision-making capacity (such as goal setting), athletes responded: Strongly Agree (20.00%, n=5), Agree (68.00%, n=17), Neutral (4.00%, n=1), Disagree (8.00%, n=2) and Strongly Disagree (0%, n=0). This shows that a significant majority (84.00%) of athletes in total reported receiving mental health training during their regular program.

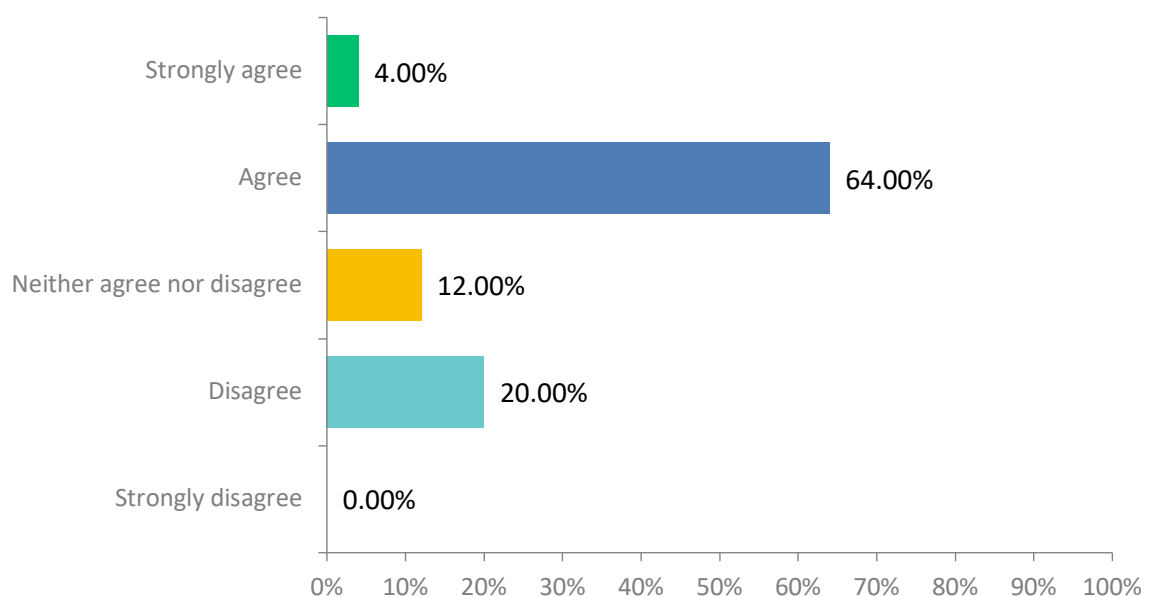
Figure 4.5: Q5: Mentally, I feel confident in managing performance pressure when competing in major games on my own.



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

In response to the statement “Mentally, I feel confident in managing performance pressure when competing in major games on my own,” athletes reported: Strongly Agree (8.00%, n=2), Agree (88.00%, n=22), Neutral (0%, n=0), Disagree (0%, n=0), Strongly Disagree (4%, n=1)

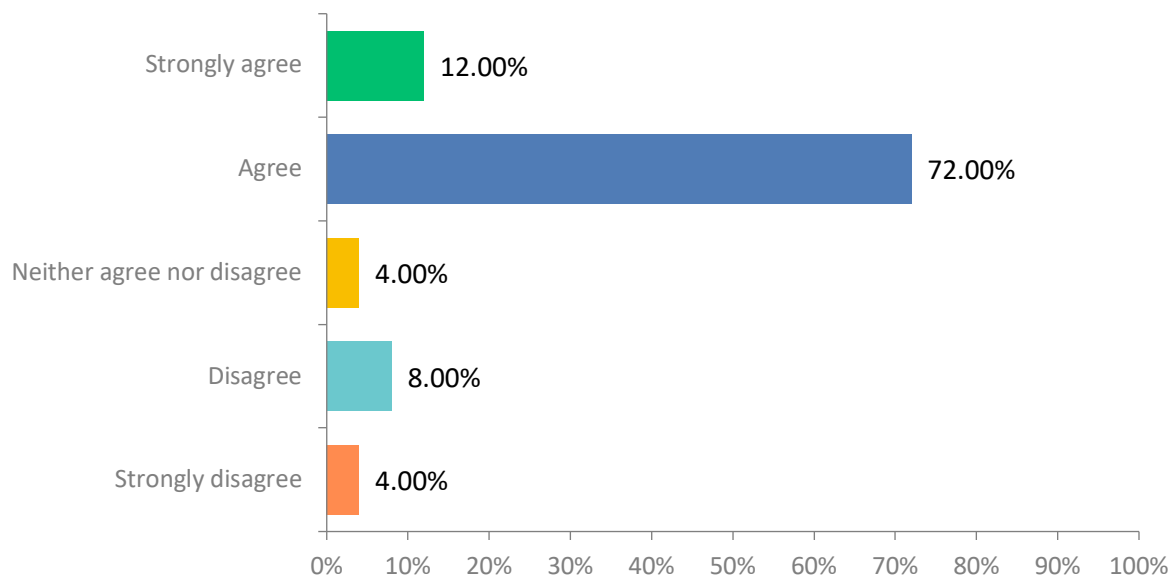
Figure 4.6: Q6: The cultural beliefs in Zambia make it easier for me as an athlete to discuss mental health challenges with my coaches.



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

When asked whether cultural beliefs in Zambia make it easier for them to discuss mental health challenges with their coaches, athletes responded: Strongly Agree (4.00%, n=1), Agree (64.00%, n=16), Neutral (12.00%, n=3), Disagree (20.00%, n=5) and Strongly Disagree (0.00%, n=0).

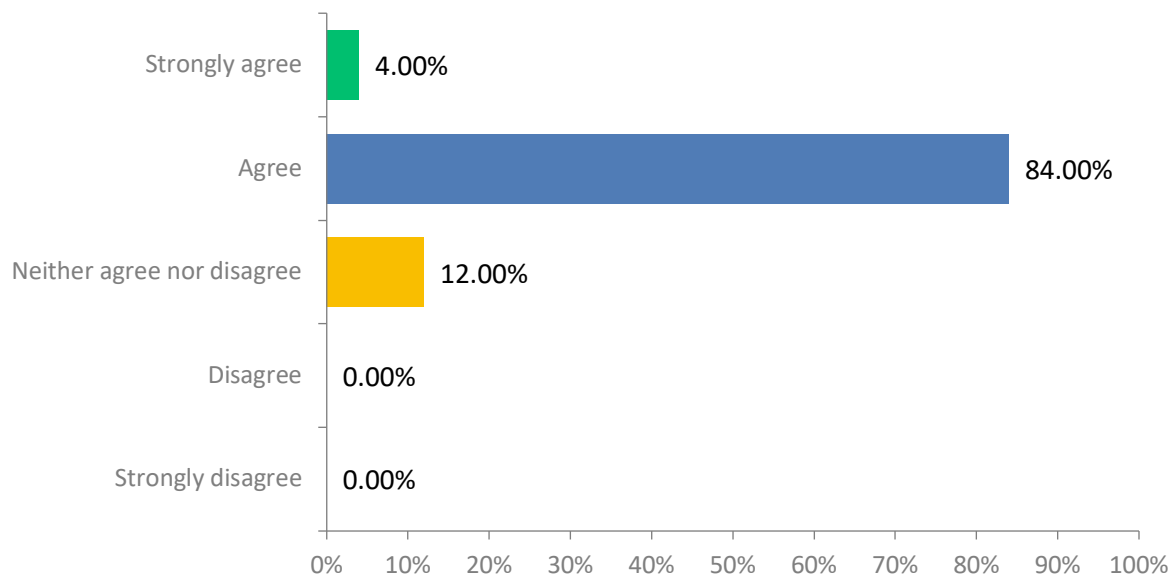
Figure 4.7: Q7: My family and the community expectations influence my mental well-being as an athlete in a good way.



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

Regarding the statement “My family and the community expectations influence my mental well-being as an athlete in a good way,” athletes reported: Strongly Agree (12.00%, n=3), Agree (72.00%, n=18), Neutral (4.00%, n=1), Disagree (8.00%, n=2) and Strongly Disagree (4%, n=1).

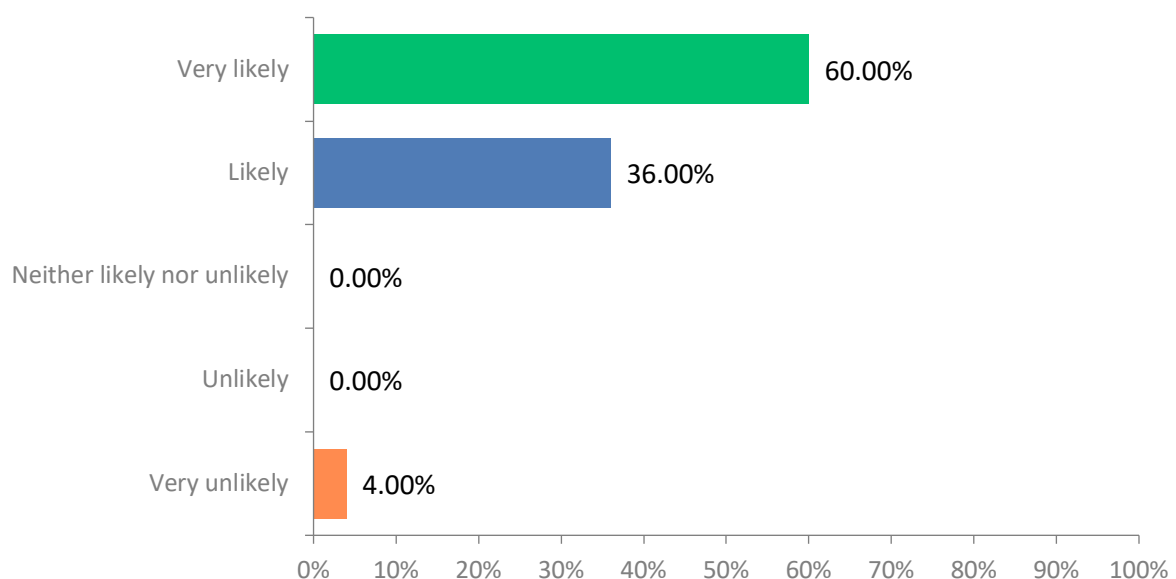
Figure 4.8: Q8: The lack of mental health resources and support services in an athlete program negatively impacts my performance as an athlete



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

When asked whether the lack of mental health resources and support services negatively impacts their performance, athletes responded: Strongly Agree (4.00%, n=1), Agree (48.00%, n=21), Neutral (12.00%, n=3), Disagree (0.00%, n=0), Strongly Disagree (0.00%, n=0).

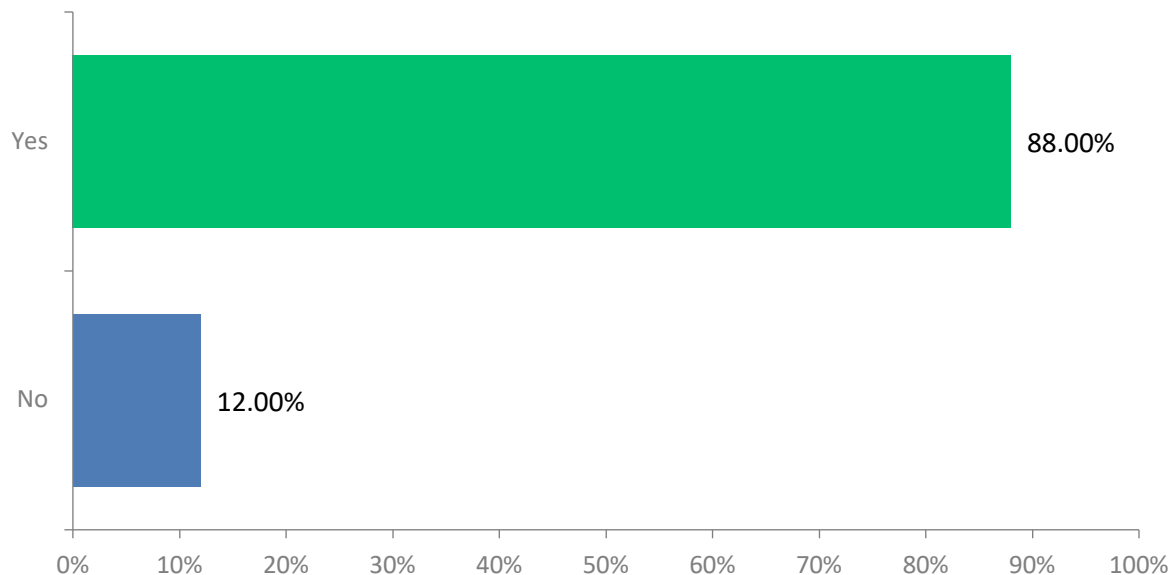
Figure 4.9: Q9: On a scale of 1 to 5, how likely would you use mental health support services if made available to you?



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

When asked about their likelihood of using mental health support services if made available, athletes reported: Very Likely (60.00%, n=15), Likely (36.00%, n=9), Neutral (0.00%, n=0), Unlikely (0.00%, n=0) and Very Unlikely (4.00%, n=1).

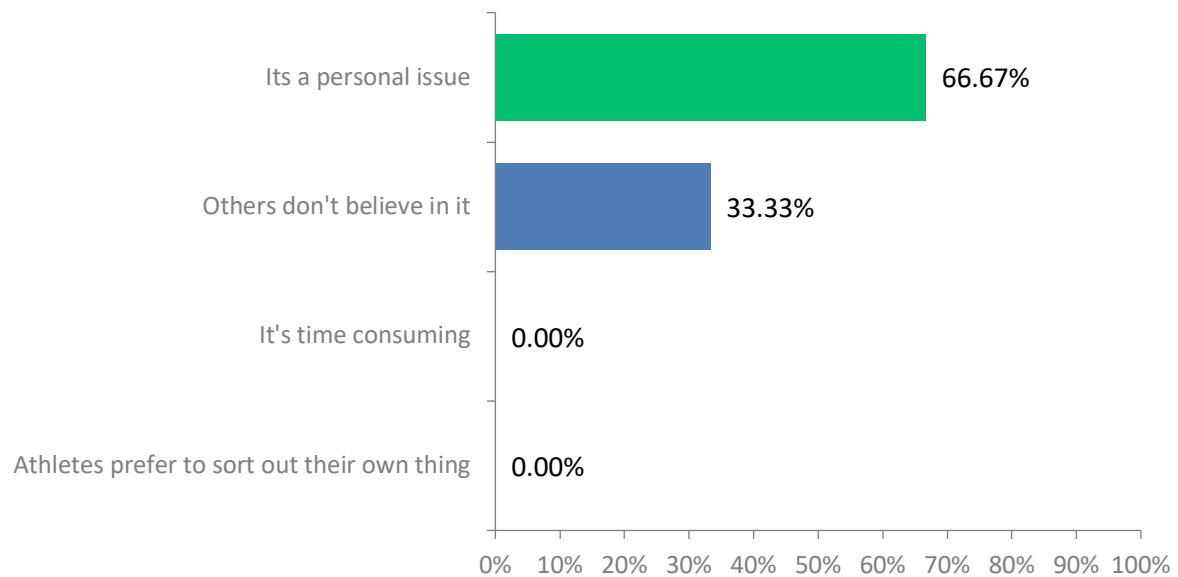
Figure 4.10: Preference for Structured Sports Psychology Program and why



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

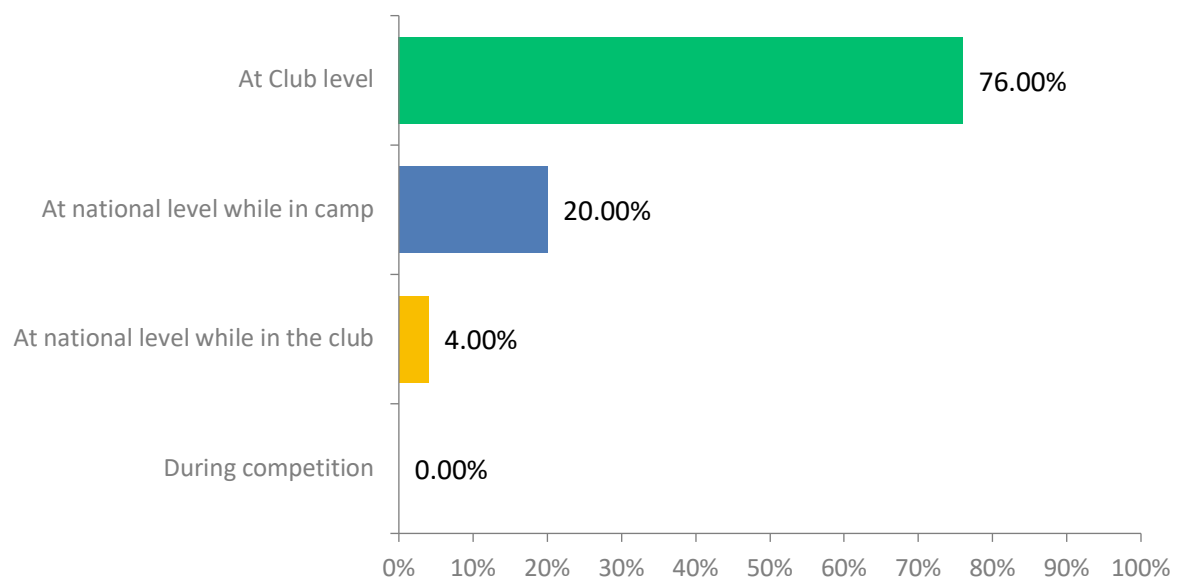
Among those who answered “Likely” or “Very Likely” to using mental health services, (88.00%, n=22) indicated they would prefer a sports psychology program to be included in competition preparation as a structured program tailored for Zambian athletes, while (12.00%, n=3) said they would not. Those who answered “No” indicated it was because they considered it a personal issue (66.67%, n=2) or because others don’t believe in it (33.33%, n=1) as indicated below:

Figure 4.11: Q11: If you answered NO, in question 9, would this be because of?



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

Figure 4.12: Q12: With the current Zambia setup of sports, at which stage of your athlete's career do you think psychological support should be offered to you and other athletes?



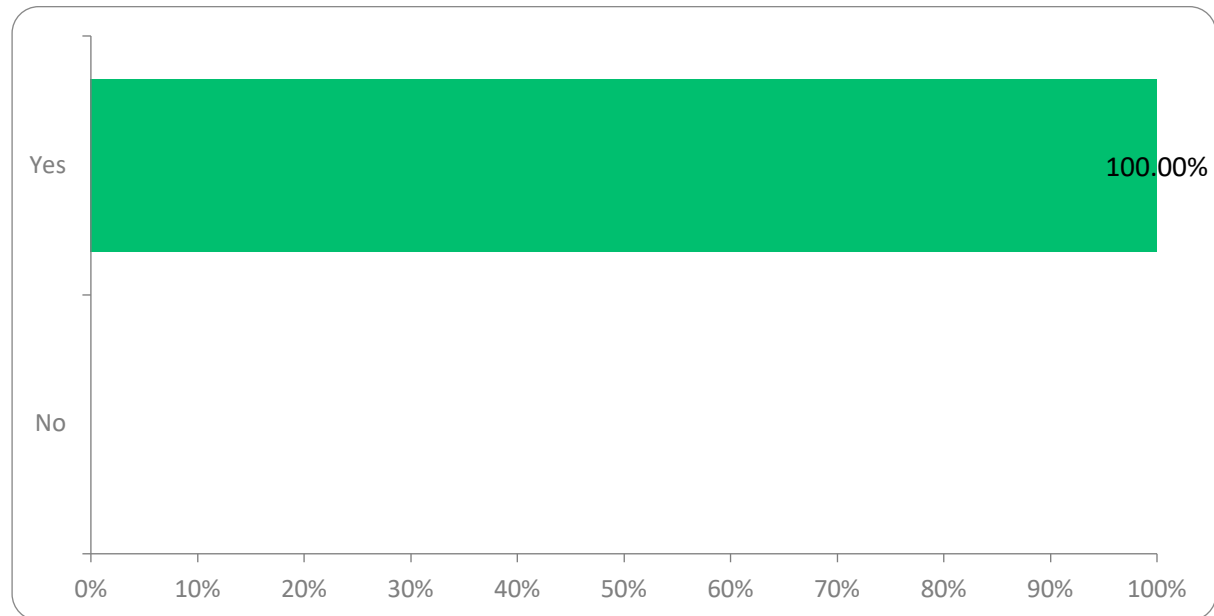
Source: Author's analysis, 2025

When asked at which stage of their athletic career psychological support should be offered, athletes responded: At club level (76.00%, n=19), At national level while in camp (20.00%, n=5), At national level while in the club (4.00%, n=1), During competition (0.00%, n=0).

4.1.2 Coach Survey Results

Seven coaches participated in the survey, representing 22% of coaches who participated in the Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024 Olympic Games. The following figures indicate the statistics relating to how the coaches responded to different questions relating to the study.

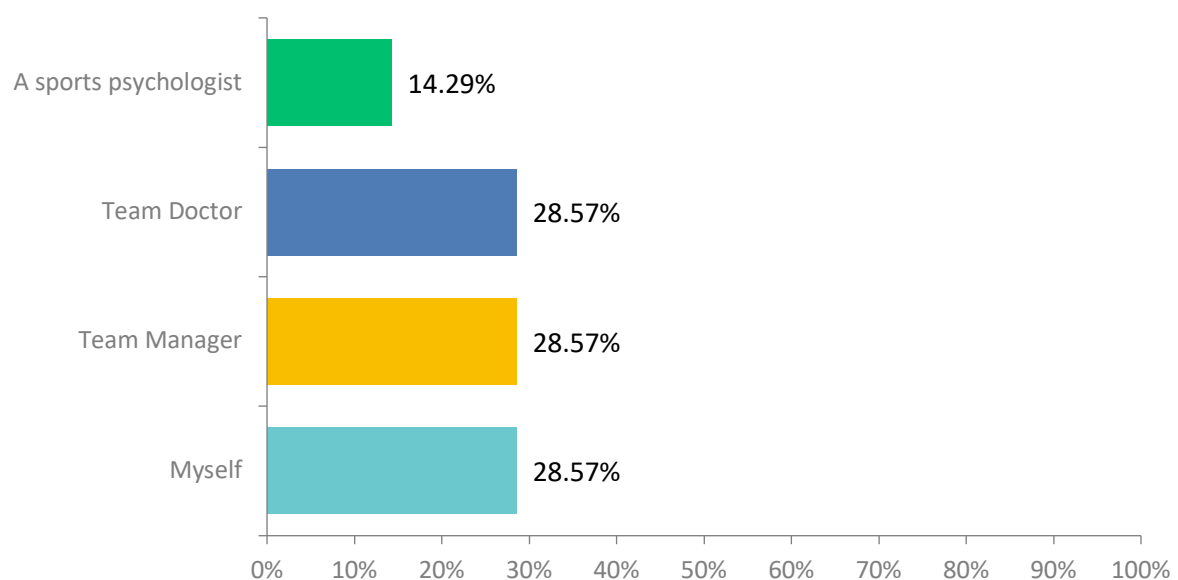
Figure 4.13: Q1: As a coach, have any of your athletes undertake a mental health support service?



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

All coaches (100.00%, n=7) reported that their athletes had undertaken mental health support services. The study went on to enquire more about who offered these sessions to those who said Yes. Below is how they responded.

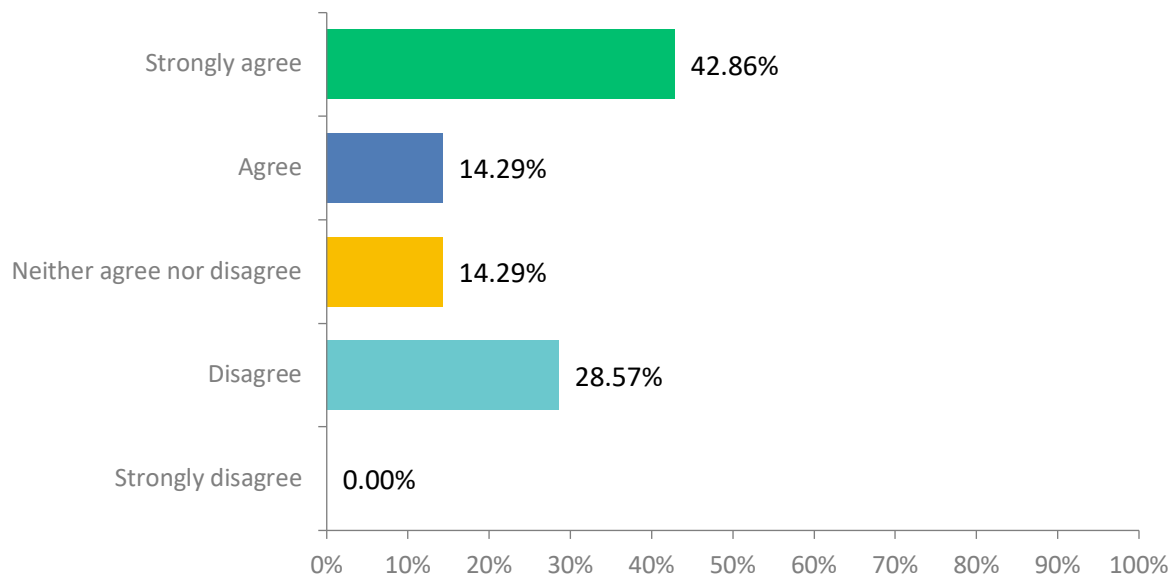
Figure 4.14: Q2: If you answer yes, who offered these sessions? Please circle the appropriate answer



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

According to the figure above, Mental health support services were equally provided by Team Doctors, Team Managers, and the coaches themselves at (28.57%, n=2) each, while sports psychologists provided services in (14.29%, n=1) of cases.

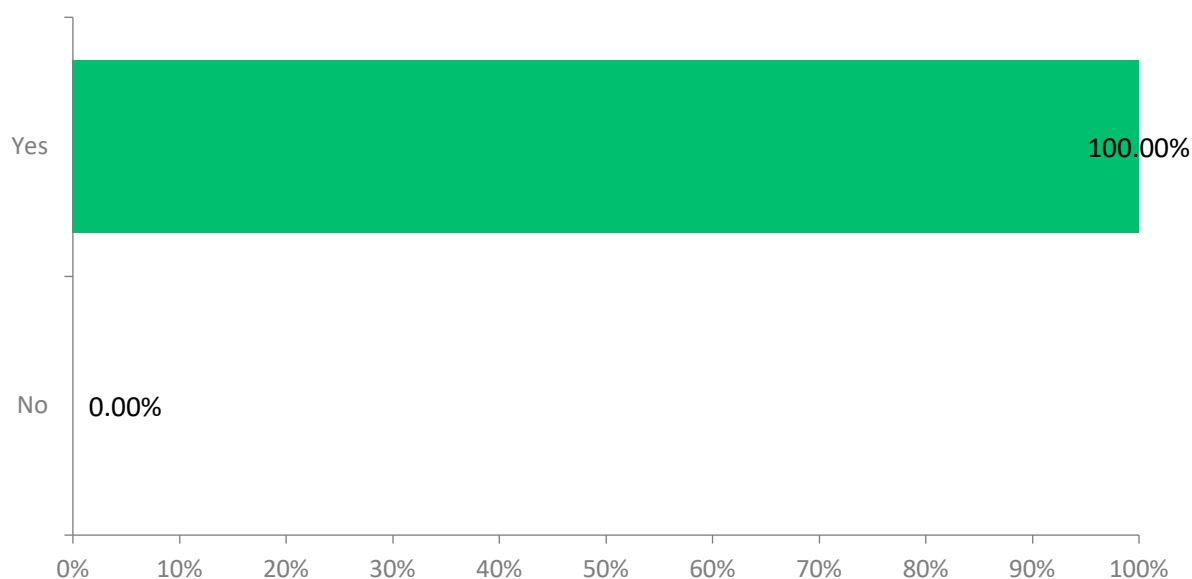
Figure 4.15: Q3: I am adequately trained to provide psychological support to athletes during their competition.



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

Regarding adequacy of training, (42.86%, n=3) of coaches strongly agreed they were adequately trained, while (14.29%, n=1) agreed, totalling (57.15%, n=4) who felt adequately trained. Additionally, 14.29% (n=1) remained neutral, (28.57%, n=2) disagreed, and no coaches (0.00%, n=0) strongly disagreed.

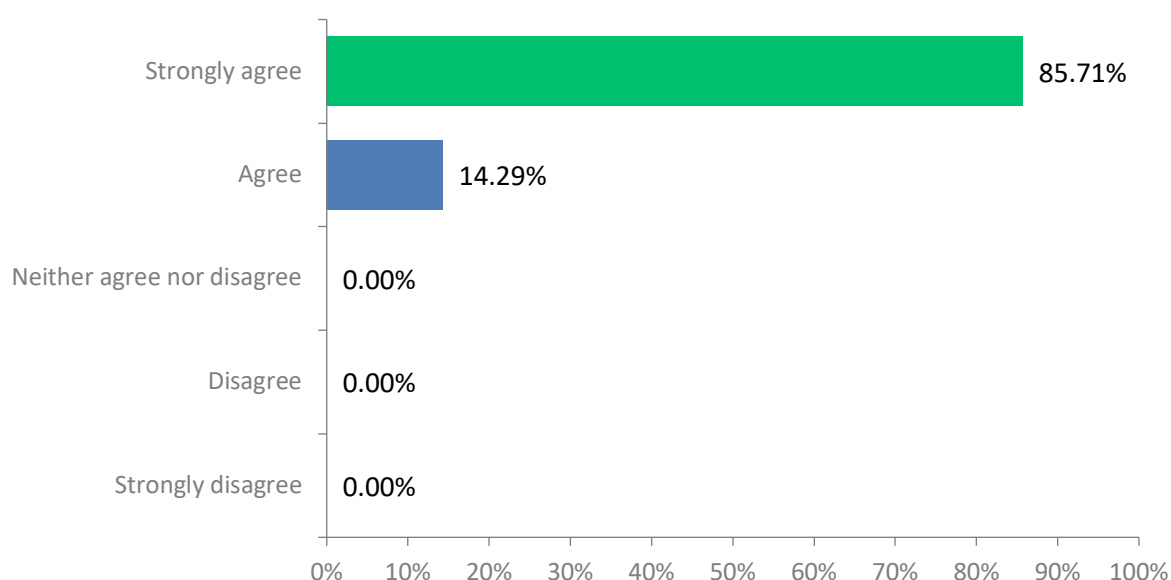
Figure 4.16: Q4: If you disagree with the previous question, do you think introductory awareness training classes /seminars should be offered to coaches managing elite athletes?



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

With respect to the question Q4. above on the figure 4.16, all coaches (100.00%, n=7) agreed that introductory awareness training classes/seminars should be offered to coaches managing elite athletes, with no coaches (0.00%, n=0) opposing this proposal.

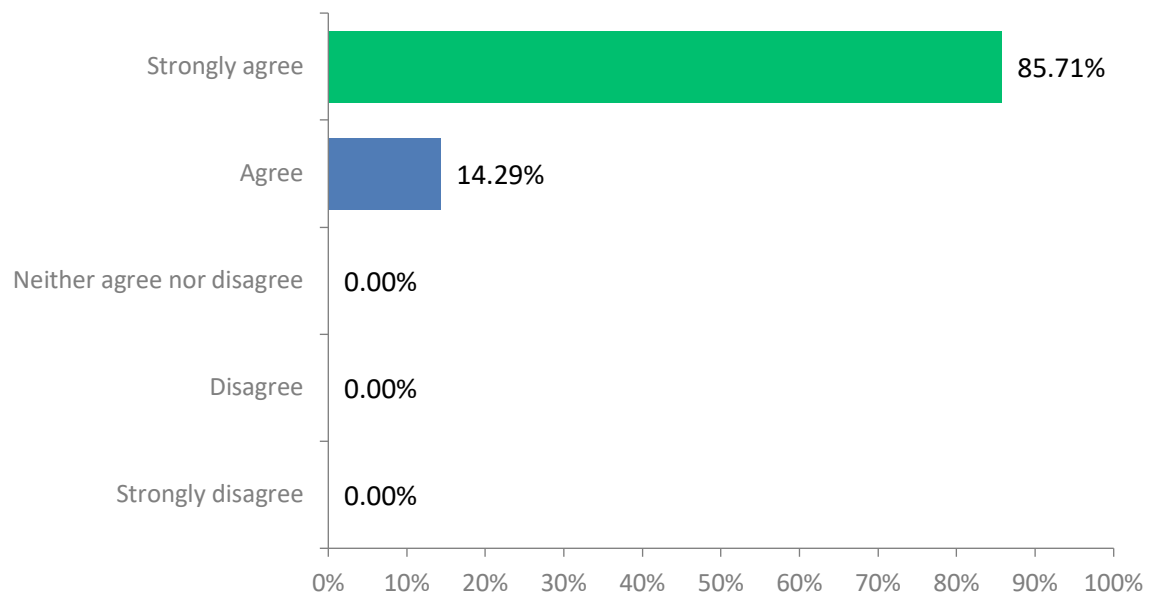
Figure 4.17: Q5: Mental skills training (e.g. stress management and resilience building) is a priority in my coaching strategy



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

The figure above indicates that most coaches strongly agreed (85.71%, n=6) that mental skills training is a priority in their coaching strategy, while (14.29%, n=1) agreed. No coaches (0.00%, n=0) remained neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed, indicating unanimous support for mental skills training as a priority.

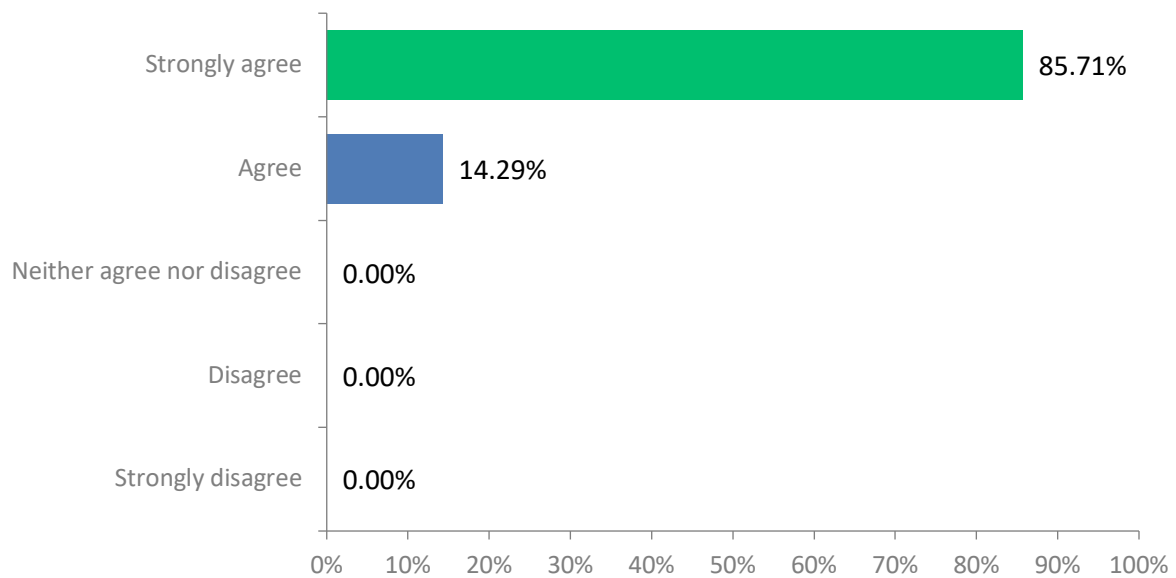
Figure 4.18: Q6: Cultural barriers in Zambia limit athletes' willingness to seek mental health assistance.



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

Most coaches strongly agreed (85.71%, n=6) that cultural barriers in Zambia limit athletes' willingness to seek mental health assistance, while (14.29%, n=1) agreed. No coaches (0.00%, n=0) remained neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed, demonstrating unanimous recognition of cultural barriers as a significant challenge.

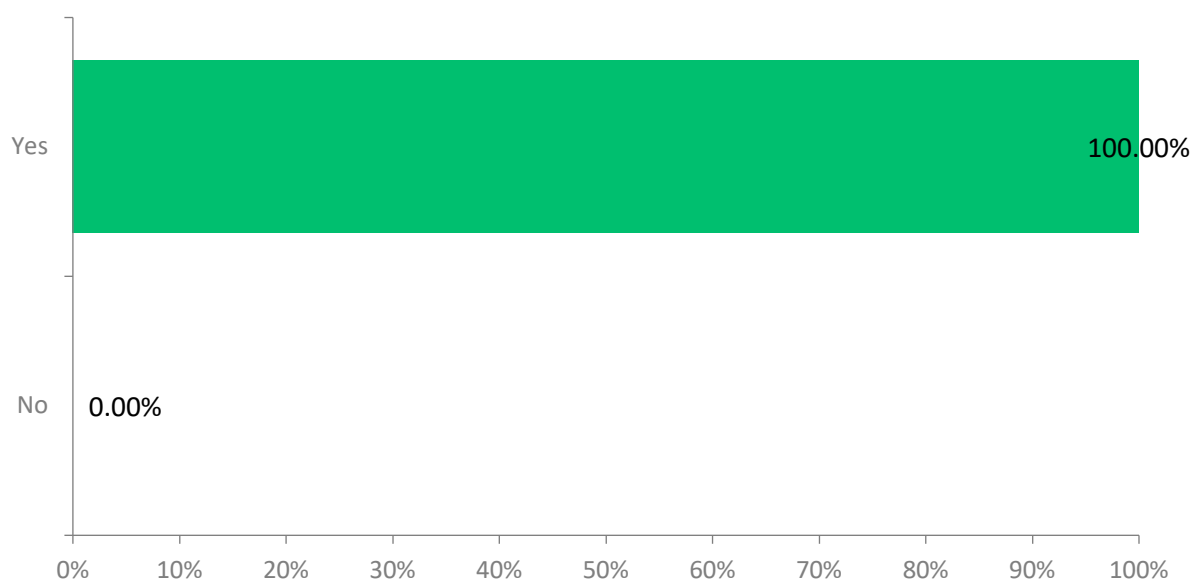
Figure 4.19: Q7: Collaboration with sports psychologists in the sports program would help improve athlete performance outcomes



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

Most coaches strongly agreed (85.71%, n=6) that collaboration with sports psychologists would help improve athlete performance outcomes, while (14.29%, n=1) agreed. No coaches (0.00%, n=0) remained neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed, indicating universal support for sports psychologist collaboration.

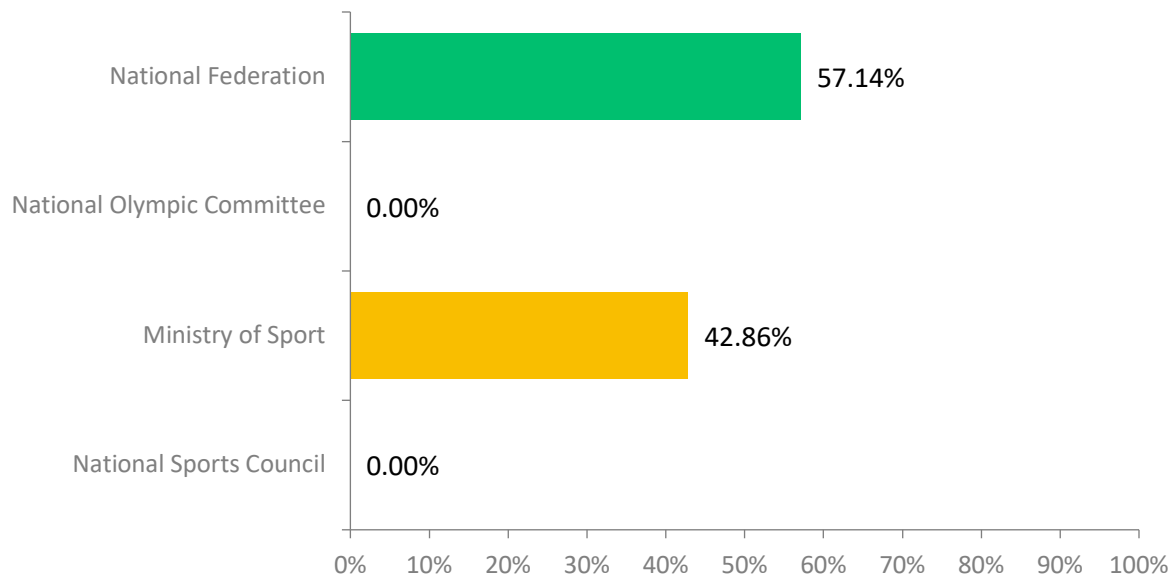
Figure 4.20: Q8: Is it essential to set a policy to guide athletes and officials on accessing mental health support within the sports ecosystem?



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

All coaches (100.00%, n=7) agreed that it is essential to set a policy to guide athletes and officials on accessing mental health support within the sports ecosystem, with no coaches (0.00%, n=0) opposing this need.

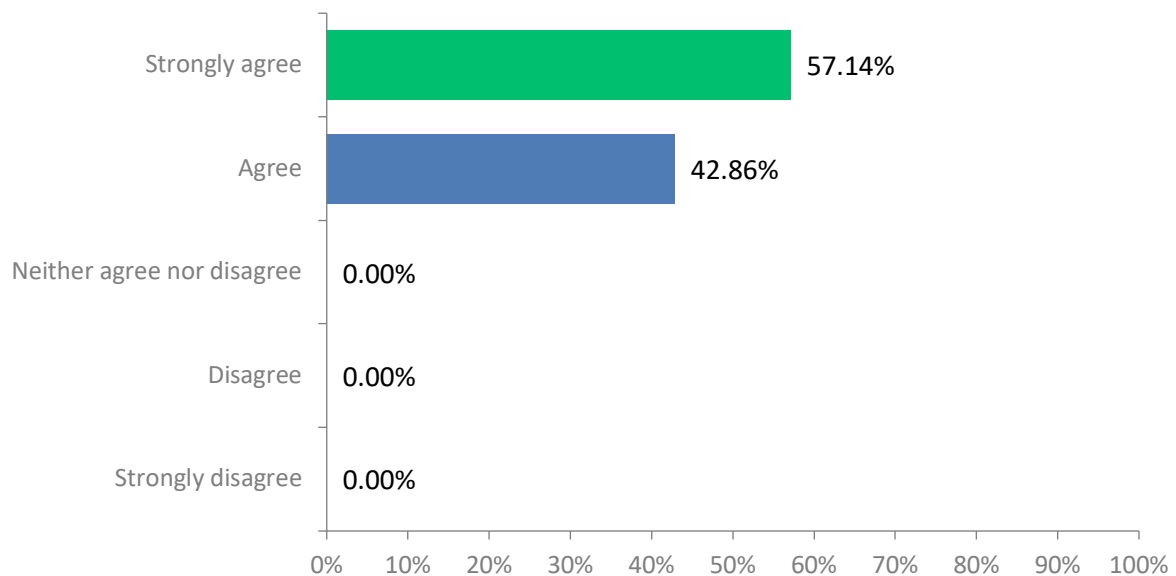
Figure 4.21: Q9: If you answer Yes, who do you suggest should set the policy framework?



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

In line with the above question, coaches identified National Federations as the preferred entity to set policy frameworks (57.14%, n=4), followed by the Ministry of Sport (42.86%, n=3). No coaches (0.00%, n=0) selected the National Olympic Committee or National Sports Council as appropriate policy-setting bodies.

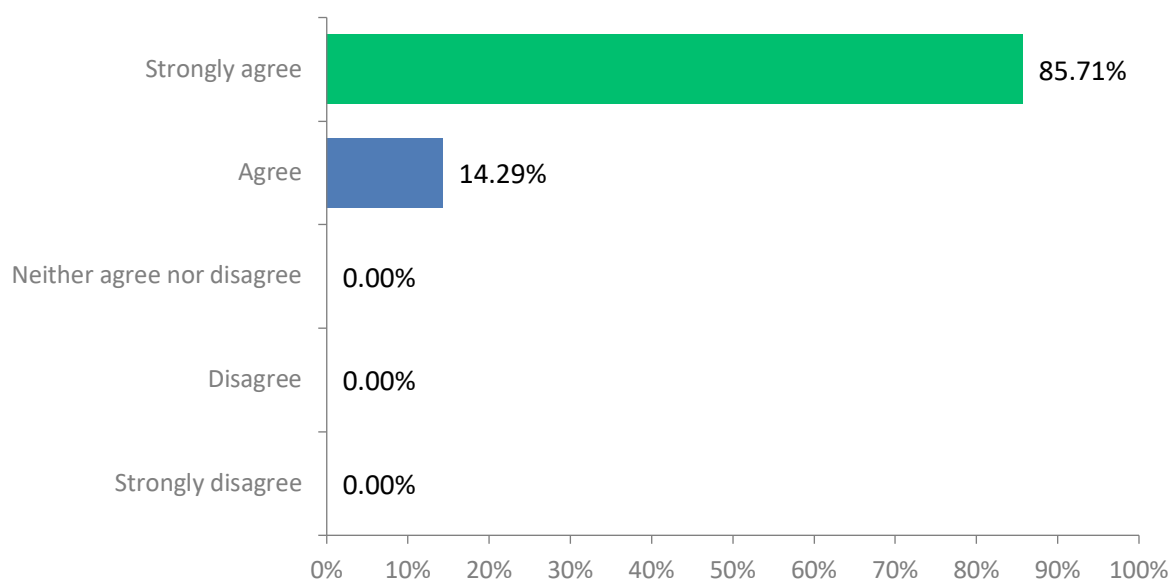
Figure 4.22: Q10: Limited resources (funding, personnel) hinder the implementation of mental health programs.



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

More than half of coaches strongly agreed (57.14%, n=4) that limited resources hinder mental health program implementation, while (42.86%, n=3) agreed. No coaches (0.00%, n=0) remained neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed, demonstrating a unanimous acknowledgment of resource constraints as a significant barrier.

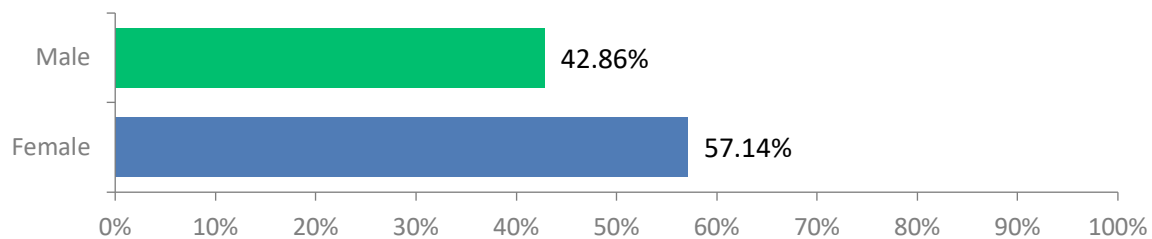
Figure 4.23: Q11: The National Olympic Committee of Zambia (NOCZ) should prioritize mental health support for athletes under its programs.



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

Most coaches strongly agreed (85.71%, n=6) that NOCZ should prioritize mental health support for athletes, while (14.29%, n=1) agreed. No coaches (0.00%, n=0) remained neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed, indicating unanimous support for NOCZ prioritizing mental health support.

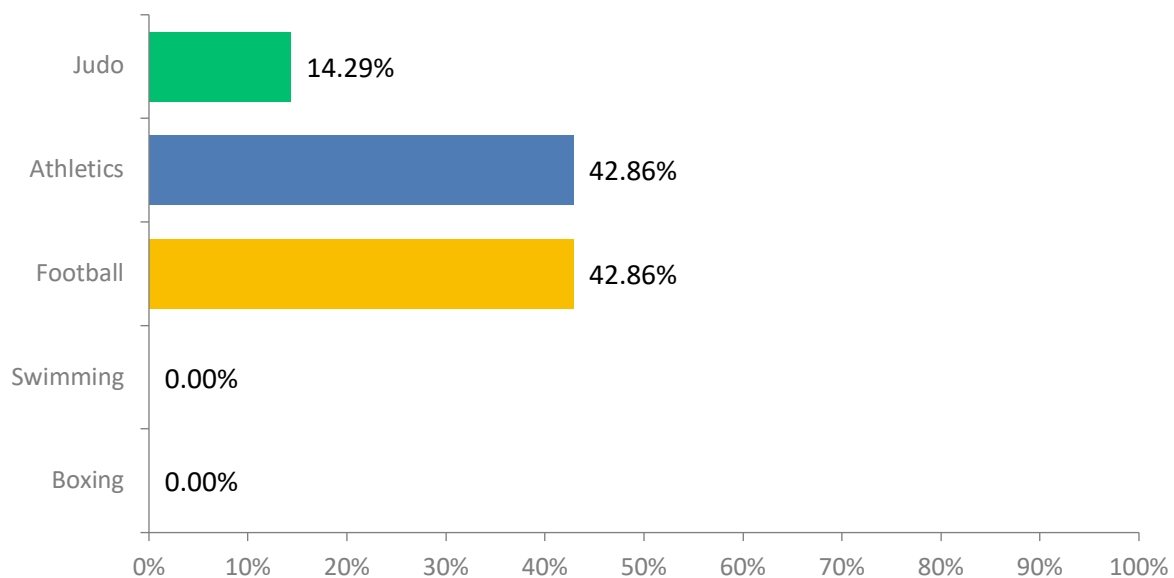
Figure 4.24: Q12: Indicate your gender



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

The demographic distribution showed (57.14%, n=4) female coaches and (42.86%, n=3) male coaches, indicating a slight majority of female coaches in the sample.

Figure 25: Q13: Indicate your Sport



Source: Author's analysis, 2025

Athletics and Football were equally represented with (42.86%, n=3) coaches each, while Judo represented (14.29%, n=1) of the sample. No coaches from Swimming or Boxing participated in the survey.

4.1.3 Semi-Structured Interview Results

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with sports psychologists and sports administrators. The interviews provide the opportunity to explore respondents' views in depth and are particularly effective in providing some insights into the expectations towards the implementation of the sports psychology framework.

These Interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis to identify key patterns and narratives relevant to the study's objectives. The interviews were analysed using NVivo software. Below is the summary of the results.

Table 4. 1: Thematic Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews

Theme	Codes	Representative Quotes
Policy & Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ System-wide approach ▪ Organizational functioning ▪ Athlete-centred policies ▪ Policy gaps ▪ Implementation guidelines ▪ Stakeholder inclusion 	<p>"To effectively support athletes, we must consider how the system or organization functions." (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>"Without a very sound structure in place in terms of safeguarding the welfare of the athletes, then their performance will definitely be affected." (Interviewee 3)</p> <p>"Let me start with the national sports policy itself...I don't think there is anything related to mental health for the athletes." (Interviewee 3)</p>
Education & Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mental skills training ▪ Coach upskilling ▪ Training methodology ▪ Knowledge sharing ▪ Workshop delivery ▪ Resource efficiency 	<p>"If sports psychologists aren't readily available, coaches can be upskilled to deliver basic psychological support." (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>"Upskilling coaches... has the potential to create the biggest impact with the least input." (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>"Universities...are delivering programmes on sports psychology. If all that knowledge...was shared with institutions like NOCZ...we can have stronger strategies." (Interviewee 3)</p>
Human & Financial Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Trained professionals ▪ Resource availability ▪ Investment constraints ▪ Government resources 	<p>"Ideally, there should be access to a trained professional, not necessarily full-time, but available regularly..." (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>"The government itself...they have the means of the resources..." (Interviewee 3)</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ NGO collaboration ▪ Personnel development 	<p>“...sports psychologists themselves...an area that needs growth...availability...” (Interviewee 3)</p>
Enabling Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stress management ▪ Organizational culture ▪ Coach-athlete relationship ▪ Safe communication spaces ▪ Holistic support ▪ Stakeholder engagement 	<p>“Athletes experience different levels and types of stress: performance, organizational, personal.” (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>Coaches are the most prominent figures in an athlete’s professional life.” (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>“Mental health...part of the safeguarding of the welfare of the athletes.” (Interviewee 3)</p> <p>“Athletes themselves are the prime stakeholders...” (Interviewee 3)</p>
Monitoring & Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assessment methods ▪ Feedback mechanisms ▪ Impact measurement ▪ Research needs ▪ Evidence-based approach ▪ Stakeholder ownership 	<p>“A coach might think they’re doing something helpful, but they can’t always be sure how it’s actually affecting the athlete.” (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>“Conduct some bit of research or study in terms of the status of mental health among our athletes.” (Interviewee 3)</p> <p>“...starting with the research by engaging different stakeholders...creates a sense of ownership of the research results.” (Interviewee 3)</p>

Source: Author’s analysis, 2025

The following were the five key thematic areas that emerged from the interviews, as can be seen in Table 4.1 above.

1. Policy and Structure

All interviewees emphasized the importance of establishing clear policies and structural frameworks for sports psychology support in Zambia. Key points included:

Interviewee 1: “To effectively support athletes, we must consider how the system or organization functions... A system-wide approach is best. Athletes operate within a system that includes coaches, physiotherapists, doctors, managers, etc.”

Interviewee 2: “If the environment is well-structured and supportive, it enables athletes to focus on performing at their best... But also consider influencing organizational factors, like working with federations to ensure proper athlete care, access to mental health professionals, and creating athlete-centered policies.”

Interviewee 3: “Without a very sound structure in place in terms of safeguarding the welfare of the athletes, then their performance will definitely be affected... Let me start with the national sports policy itself... I don’t think there is anything related to mental health for the athletes... It would have been prudent... to include mental health as a key issue... that cascades to the National Sports Council, NOCZ, and National Federations.”

Interviewee 3 specifically highlighted the absence of mental health provisions in the current national sports policy: “Even as we look at revising the sports policy, we can be able to include aspects on mental health... Policies must be inclusive in terms of stakeholders that we engage... The policy is informed by the results of the research that would have been conducted...”

2. Education and Training

All interviewees identified education and training as critical components of an effective sports psychology framework:

Interviewee 1: “Mental Skills Training is a critical component... If sports psychologists aren’t readily available, coaches can be upskilled to deliver basic psychological support... Training coaches in understanding their influence and relational power, developing athlete resilience, effective communication and empathy, trust-building and support strategies.”

Interviewee 2: “Mental Skills Training is a critical component... Helping athletes learn the psychological tools necessary to compete... If sports psychologists aren’t readily available, coaches can be upskilled to deliver basic psychological support...”

Interviewee 3: “We conduct numerous workshops for the athletes, but also for the sport administrators... It’s important that we also include... coaches in terms of how they can address issues to do with mental health... how they can come up with interventions for prevention of issues of mental illness...”

Interviewee 1 emphasized the efficiency of coach training: “Upskilling coaches... has the potential to create the biggest impact with the least input... Start with organization-wide training or workshops that raise awareness and offer psychoeducation.”

4.1.3.3 Human and Financial Resources

The interviewees acknowledged the resource challenges facing the implementation of sports psychology support in Zambia:

Interviewee 1: “Ideally, there should be access to a trained professional—not necessarily full-time, but available regularly... A well-being manager — someone who doesn’t need to be overly qualified but can simply provide a space for athletes...”

Interviewee 2: “Ideally, there should be access to a trained professional—not necessarily full-time, but available regularly... Even if it’s just two or three one- or two-hour workshops...”

Interviewee 3: “We have not done so much... in terms of deliberately including components or aspects of mental health... The government itself... they have the means of the resources... galvanizing resources that can be channeled towards coming up with a sound strategy and policy.”

Interviewee 3 also mentioned: “Sports NGOs... have the means in terms of delivering certain programmes... sports psychologists themselves... an area that needs growth... availability...”

4.1.3.4 Enabling Environment

The interviewees emphasized the importance of creating an environment conducive to psychological well-being:

Interviewee 1: “Athletes experience different levels and types of stress: performance, organizational, personal... Organizational stressors often have the greatest negative impact and are the most overlooked... The burden of being mentally prepared falls on the athlete. But the organization shares that responsibility...”

Interviewee 2: “It’s important to create a space where athletes can address personal concerns... Supporting athletes holistically contributes to long-term well-being and success... The organization shares that responsibility by creating a conducive and supportive environment.”

Interviewee 3: “Mental health... part of the safeguarding of the welfare of the athletes... We understand the pressures that athletes have... have to fend for themselves... affecting their performance in competition, but also during training.”

Interviewee 1 noted the central role of coaches: “Coaches are the most prominent figures in an athlete’s professional life... Athletes said they would feel more comfortable receiving psychological support from their coach...”

Interviewee 3 emphasized stakeholder engagement: “Stakeholders... should be engaged from the outset to create ownership... you are guaranteed... implementation... will receive levels of acceptance... Athletes themselves are the prime stakeholders...”

4.1.3.5 Monitoring and Evaluation

The interviewees recognized the need for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of any implemented framework:

Interviewee 1: “A coach might think they’re doing something helpful, but they can’t always be sure how it’s actually affecting the athlete... Introducing basic awareness of communication styles, feedback loops, coaching strategies...”

Interviewee 2: “Research can support the development of frameworks that address all these categories... Organizational stress is often the most impactful and frequently overlooked... We want athletes to be able to talk about what they’re experiencing without fear of being seen as weak.”

Interviewee 3: *“Conduct some bit of research or study in terms of the status of mental health among our athletes... I can’t point at any specific documents or study that deals with or addresses the issue of mental health... Gathering data on the pressure that athletes have that affect their mental capabilities...”*

Interviewee 3 highlighted the importance of evidence-based approaches: *“Starting with the research by engaging different stakeholders... creates a sense of ownership of the research results... Guidelines could be probably taking stock in terms of the welfare of the athletes in terms of mental health...”*

4.2 Analysis

This section analyses the findings presented in the results section, interpreting them in relation to the research questions and existing literature.

4.2.1 Analysis of Current Psychological Challenges Faced by Zambian Athletes

The survey results reveal significant insights into the psychological challenges experienced by elite Zambian athletes. While 96.00% (n=24) of athletes reported confidence in managing performance pressure independently, this finding must be interpreted alongside other indicators of psychological distress and support needs identified in the study.

The data indicates that 87.50% (n=21) of athletes acknowledged that the lack of mental health resources and support services negatively impacts their performance. This apparent contradiction between self-reported confidence and recognition of resource-related performance impacts suggests that athletes may possess basic coping mechanisms but lack access to comprehensive psychological support systems that could enhance their competitive performance. As Interviewee 1 noted, *“Athletes experience different levels and types of stress: performance, organizational, personal... Organizational stressors often have the greatest negative impact and are the most overlooked.”*

Athletes identified multiple sources of psychological stress, with 32.00% (n=8) reporting inadequate access to psychological support during training and competitions. The finding that 88.00% (n=22) of athletes expressed preference for structured sports psychology programs indicates significant unmet demand for formalized psychological support services. This aligns with Interviewee 3's observation that *“We understand the pressures that athletes have... have to fend for themselves... affecting their performance in competition, but also during training.”*

Cultural factors emerged as both facilitating and challenging elements in athletes' psychological experiences. While 68.00% (n=17) of athletes reported that Zambian cultural beliefs facilitate discussions about mental health challenges with coaches, 20.00% (n=5) disagreed with this statement, suggesting that cultural attitudes toward mental health remain heterogeneous within the athletic community.

Family and community expectations were generally perceived positively, with 84.00% (n=21) of athletes reporting that these influences contribute positively to their mental well-being. However, the presence of dissenting views (12.00%, n=3) indicates that external

pressures may create additional psychological challenges for some athletes, supporting Interviewee 1's categorization of different stress types affecting athlete performance.

4.2.2 Analysis of Cultural Factors Influencing Psychological Support

The study reveals complex cultural dynamics affecting psychological support implementation in Zambian athletics. Athletes' responses indicate that cultural factors can both facilitate and hinder psychological support access, depending on individual circumstances and community contexts.

The finding that 68.00% (n=17) of athletes believe cultural beliefs facilitate mental health discussions with coaches suggests that traditional Zambian values of community support and collective problem-solving can be leveraged to enhance psychological support delivery. This aligns with research indicating that culturally appropriate interventions achieve higher acceptance rates and better outcomes in developing nations.

However, coaches unanimously 100.00% (n=7) agreed that cultural barriers limit athletes' willingness to seek mental health assistance. This discrepancy between athlete and coach perceptions suggests that while athletes may be open to psychological support within existing relationships, systemic cultural barriers may prevent formal help-seeking behaviours. As Interviewee 2 emphasized, *"We want athletes to be able to talk about what they're experiencing without fear of being seen as weak."*

The coaches' perspective that cultural barriers significantly impact help-seeking behaviours reflects broader societal attitudes toward mental health in Zambia, where psychological distress may be stigmatized or attributed to spiritual rather than clinical factors. This finding emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to framework implementation.

The integration of cultural considerations into psychological support delivery emerges as a critical success factor. The data suggests that interventions should build upon existing cultural strengths while addressing barriers through education and awareness programs that normalize psychological support as part of athletic development rather than crisis intervention. This approach aligns with Interviewee 3's emphasis on *"Mental health... part of the safeguarding of the welfare of the athletes"* rather than crisis management.

4.2.3 Analysis of Critical Components for an Effective Sports Psychology Framework

The research identifies five critical components essential for effective sports psychology framework implementation in Zambia: policy integration, education and training, resource allocation, enabling environment creation, and monitoring systems, directly reflecting the thematic analysis from the qualitative interviews.

4.2.3.1 Policy Integration

The unanimous support from coaches, 100.00% (n=7) for establishing policies to guide mental health support access, indicates strong institutional readiness for framework implementation. The preference for National Federations 57.14% (n=4) and Ministry of Sport 42.86% (n=3) as policy-setting entities suggests a distributed governance approach that leverages existing sports administration structures. This finding supports Interviewee 3's observation that *"Let me start with the national sports policy itself... I don't think there*

is anything related to mental health for the athletes,” and the need for “policies must be inclusive in terms of stakeholders that we engage.”

4.2.3.2 Education and Training

Universal coach support 100.00% (n=7) for introductory awareness training demonstrates exceptional receptivity to professional development. The finding that only 57.15% (n=4) of coaches feel adequately trained to provide psychological support, combined with 100.00% (n=7) recognition of mental skills training as a coaching priority, creates optimal conditions for training program implementation. As Interviewee 1 noted, *“If sports psychologists aren't readily available, coaches can be upskilled to deliver basic psychological support” and that “Upskilling coaches... has the potential to create the biggest impact with the least input.”*

4.2.3.3 Resource Allocation

The unanimous coach recognition 100.00% (n=7) that limited resources hinder program implementation, combined with strong support 100.00% (n=7) for NOCZ prioritization of mental health support, indicates both barrier awareness and institutional commitment to resource mobilization. Interviewee 3 highlighted that *“The government itself... they have the means of the resources” while acknowledging that “sports psychologists themselves... an area that needs growth... availability.”*

4.2.3.4 Enabling Environment

Athletes' strong preference 76.00% (n=19) for psychological support at the club level suggests that framework implementation should prioritize grassroots delivery rather than centralized services. The finding that psychological support is currently provided primarily by coaches, 52.63% (n=10), team doctors, 36.84% (n=7), and team managers, 10.53% (n=2) indicates existing informal support networks that can be formalized and enhanced. This aligns with Interviewee 1's observation that *“Coaches are the most prominent figures in an athlete's professional life” and Interviewee 2's emphasis on creating “a space where athletes can address personal concerns.”*

4.2.3.5 Monitoring Systems

The qualitative data emphasizes the importance of evidence-based approaches and continuous evaluation mechanisms to ensure framework effectiveness and stakeholder accountability. As Interviewee 1 noted, *“A coach might think they're doing something helpful, but they can't always be sure how it's actually affecting the athlete,” while Interviewee 3 emphasized the need to “Conduct some bit of research or study in terms of the status of mental health among our athletes.”*

4.2.4 Analysis of Integration Strategies for Coaches and Support Staff

The research reveals that coaches represent the most promising avenue for psychological support integration in Zambian athletics. Athletes' identification of coaches as the primary source, 52.63% (n=10) of current mental health support, combined with coaches' unanimous support 100.00% (n=7) for collaboration with sports psychologists, creates optimal conditions for integrated support delivery. The finding that 85.71% (n=6) of coaches strongly prioritize mental skills training in their coaching strategies, despite only 57.15% (n=4) feeling adequately trained to provide psychological support, indicates high motivation for skill development paired with acknowledged competency gaps. This

combination suggests that coach education programs would encounter minimal resistance and high engagement. As Interviewee 1 emphasized, “Training coaches in understanding their influence and relational power, developing athlete resilience, effective communication and empathy, trust-building and support strategies” represents a practical approach to capacity building.

Athletes expressed preference 96.00% (n=24) for using mental health support services if made available, combined with their comfort in receiving support from existing relationships, supports a coach-integrated delivery model rather than external specialist services. This approach aligns with resource constraints identified by coaches and leverages existing trust relationships between athletes and coaches. Interviewee 1 noted that *“Athletes said they would feel more comfortable receiving psychological support from their coach.”*

The universal coach support 100.00% (n=7) for sports psychologist collaboration suggests that integration strategies should emphasize partnership rather than replacement models. Coaches appear willing to work within multidisciplinary teams while serving as primary delivery points for basic psychological support interventions. This aligns with Interviewee 1's system-wide approach: *“To effectively support athletes, we must consider how the system or organization functions... Athletes operate within a system that includes coaches, physiotherapists, doctors, managers, etc.”*

The qualitative findings emphasize that successful integration requires systematic coach education, clear role delineation between coaches and specialists, ongoing supervision mechanisms, and organizational support for expanded coaching responsibilities. As Interviewee 3 noted, *“Universities... are delivering programmes on sports psychology... If all that knowledge... was shared with institutions like NOCZ... we can have stronger strategies.”* The framework should position coaches as first-line psychological support providers while maintaining pathways to specialized services for complex cases requiring clinical intervention.

Furthermore, the emphasis on stakeholder engagement highlighted by Interviewee 3 - *“Stakeholders... should be engaged from the outset to create ownership... Athletes themselves are the prime stakeholders”* - underscores the importance of collaborative approaches that recognize coaches as key implementation partners rather than passive recipients of training programs.

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The discussion aims to contextualize the findings within the broader body of knowledge on sports psychology frameworks, with particular focus on their application in the Zambian context. This section is structured around the research objectives, examining how the findings contribute to understanding the psychological challenges faced by Zambian athletes, the influence of cultural factors, the critical components of an effective sports psychology framework, strategies for integrating coaches and support staff, and mechanisms for sustainable implementation.

5.1 Psychological Challenges Faced by Elite Zambian Athletes

The findings reveal a complex psychological landscape among elite Zambian athletes that both aligns with and diverges from international research on athlete mental health. While 96.00% (n=24) of athletes reported confidence in managing performance pressure independently, the simultaneous acknowledgment by 87.50% (n=21) that resource limitations negatively impact performance suggests what Rice et al. (2016) identified as the unique psychological challenges faced by elite athletes, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

This apparent contradiction between self-reported confidence and resource-related performance concerns reflects what Mannes et al. (2018) described as the prevalence of psychological distress among elite athletes at rates comparable to the general population. The Zambian context appears to compound these challenges through systemic resource limitations rather than individual psychological deficits. The finding that only 60.00% (n=15) of athletes feel they have adequate access to psychological support during training and competitions aligns with research by Henriksen et al. (2019) on the vulnerabilities of athletes in developing nations where support infrastructure remains underdeveloped.

The athletes' strong preference 88.00% (n=22) for structured sports psychology programs indicates sophisticated awareness of their psychological support needs, contradicting assumptions that athletes in developing contexts may be less receptive to psychological interventions. This finding supports Neumann et al. (2023) research, indicating growing receptivity to sport psychology services among elite athletes in developing nations, suggesting increasing awareness of mental health's importance in sports performance.

The identification of multiple stress sources, including organizational, performance, and personal pressures, aligns with the stress categorization proposed by Fletcher and Sarkar (2021) in their comprehensive framework for understanding elite athlete psychological experiences. However, the Zambian context appears to intensify organizational stressors through resource limitations and structural deficiencies that create additional psychological burdens beyond typical competitive pressures.

The research reveals that Zambian athletes experience psychological challenges that are both universal to elite sport and specific to their developmental context. While fundamental performance anxieties and competitive pressures mirror those documented in developed sporting contexts, the overlay of resource constraints and systemic support deficiencies creates a unique psychological profile that requires culturally and contextually appropriate interventions.

5.2 Cultural Factors Influencing Psychological Support Preferences

The study reveals a nuanced relationship between Zambian cultural contexts and psychological support preferences that challenges simplistic assumptions about cultural barriers to mental health services. The finding that 68.00% (n=17) of athletes believe cultural beliefs facilitate mental health discussions with coaches, while coaches unanimously (100.00%, n=7) identify cultural barriers as limiting help-seeking behaviours, illustrates the complexity of cultural influences on psychological support access.

This divergence between athlete and coach perspectives may reflect what Schinke and Papaioannou (2020) identified as the fundamental importance of cultural considerations in both delivery and reception of psychological support services. The athletes' comfort with discussing mental health within existing relationships suggests that Zambian cultural values of community support and collective problem-solving, when properly leveraged, can facilitate rather than impede psychological support delivery.

The coaches' unanimous recognition of cultural barriers aligns with broader research on mental health stigma in African contexts, where psychological distress may be attributed to spiritual or character weaknesses rather than treatable conditions. However, the finding that 84.00% (n=21) of athletes report positive influences from family and community expectations suggests that cultural factors operate as both facilitating and constraining forces, depending on how interventions are framed and delivered.

The qualitative findings emphasize the importance of culturally sensitive approaches that build upon existing cultural strengths while addressing systemic barriers through education and awareness programs. This approach aligns with Rahayuni (2019) research on the need for culturally sensitive approaches to sport psychology in developing nations, where traditional healing practices and community support systems can be integrated with evidence-based psychological interventions.

The preference for psychological support delivery through trusted relationships, particularly coaches, rather than external specialists, reflects cultural values that prioritize established social connections and community-based support systems. These findings challenge Western models of psychological service delivery that emphasize professional boundaries and specialized expertise, suggesting that effective frameworks in Zambian contexts must accommodate relational and community-oriented approaches to mental health support.

The research demonstrates that cultural factors in Zambian athletics operate as complex mediating variables that can either facilitate or constrain psychological support implementation, depending on how interventions are designed and delivered. Successful framework implementation requires sophisticated understanding of these cultural dynamics and deliberate strategies to leverage cultural strengths while addressing cultural barriers through appropriate education and awareness initiatives.

5.3 Critical Components of an Effective Sports Psychology Framework

The research identifies five critical components essential for effective sports psychology framework implementation in Zambia, each supported by both quantitative survey data and qualitative stakeholder insights. These components reflect and extend the theoretical

frameworks proposed by Fletcher and Arnold (2021) and Henriksen and Stambulova (2017), while addressing the specific contextual challenges identified in developing sporting contexts.

Policy Integration emerges as a foundational requirement, with unanimous coach support (100.00%, n=7) for policy development reflecting what Fletcher and Arnold (2021) identified as the importance of organizational and institutional contexts in framework implementation. The preference for distributed governance between National Federations (57.14%, n=4) and Ministry of Sport (42.86%, n=3) suggests an approach that leverages existing administrative structures while ensuring coordinated implementation across organizational levels. The qualitative findings emphasize that policy integration must be inclusive and evidence-based, aligning with international best practices for sports policy development.

Education and Training represents the component with strongest stakeholder support, with universal coach receptivity (100.00%, n=7) to professional development opportunities. This finding supports the efficiency argument proposed by Teques et al. (2019) regarding the critical role of coaches in athlete psychological development. The gap between coaches' recognition of mental skills training importance (100.00%, n=7) and their self-assessed competency (57.15%, n=4) creates optimal conditions for training program implementation. The qualitative emphasis on coach upskilling as having "the potential to create the biggest impact with the least input" aligns with resource-efficient approaches appropriate for developing contexts.

Resource Allocation challenges are universally acknowledged by coaches (100.00%, n=7), reflecting broader resource constraints in Zambian athletics while simultaneously demonstrating institutional commitment to mental health prioritization through NOCZ support (100.00%, n=7). This finding aligns with Henriksen et al. (2019) research on framework implementation in developing nations, where resource limitations require innovative approaches to service delivery that maximize impact within existing constraints.

Enabling Environment creation requires systematic attention to organizational culture and support structures, with athletes' preference for club-level support (76.00%, n=19) indicating that framework implementation should prioritize grassroots delivery. The identification of existing informal support networks through coaches (52.63%, n=10), team doctors (36.84%, n=7), and team managers (10.53%, n=2) provides foundation for formalized support system development. This approach aligns with Hardy et al. (2019) emphasis on systematic development of psychological skills and strategies within existing organizational structures.

Monitoring and Evaluation systems ensure accountability and continuous improvement, addressing what Williams and Krane (2020) identified as the importance of systematic evaluation in psychological intervention effectiveness. The qualitative emphasis on evidence-based approaches and stakeholder ownership reflects international best practices while addressing the need for local evidence generation in contexts where imported frameworks may require adaptation.

These components collectively form an integrated framework that addresses both performance enhancement and mental health maintenance through culturally appropriate and contextually sensitive approaches. The framework reflects the holistic approach advocated by Fletcher and Sarkar (2021) while accommodating the specific implementation challenges and opportunities identified in the Zambian sporting context.

5.4 Integration Strategies for Coaches and Support Staff

The research demonstrates that coaches represent the most viable and effective pathway for psychological support integration in Zambian athletics, a finding that both supports and extends existing literature on coach roles in athlete mental health support. The identification of coaches as primary current support providers (52.63%, n=10), combined with universal coach willingness (100.00%, n=7) to collaborate with sports psychologists, creates optimal conditions for integrated service delivery models.

This finding aligns with Teques et al. (2019) research demonstrating that coach-athlete relationships significantly impact both mental health and performance outcomes. However, the Zambian context appears to intensify coach importance due to resource constraints that limit access to specialized psychological services. The athletes' comfort with receiving support from coaches, combined with coaches' high motivation for skill development despite acknowledged competency gaps, supports what Henriksen et al. (2019) identified as the potential for non-specialist delivery of basic psychological interventions in resource-constrained contexts.

The integration strategy must address the apparent tension between coaches' recognition of mental skills training importance (100.00%, n=7) and their self-assessed preparation to provide psychological support (57.15%, n=4). This gap reflects what Beckford et al. (2016) identified as the need for systematic coach education in psychological support delivery. The universal coach support for training opportunities suggests that resistance to expanded roles would be minimal, provided that appropriate preparation and ongoing support are available.

The qualitative findings emphasize that successful integration requires systematic approaches that position coaches as first-line psychological support providers while maintaining clear pathways to specialized services for complex cases. This tiered approach aligns with international models of mental health service delivery while accommodating the resource realities of Zambian athletics. The emphasis on coach-psychologist collaboration rather than replacement models reflects what Cosh et al. (2013) identified as the importance of multidisciplinary approaches to athlete mental health support.

The integration strategy must also address the organizational and cultural factors that influence coach effectiveness in psychological support roles. The finding that athletes prefer psychological support at club level (76.00%, n=19) suggests that integration should occur within existing training environments rather than through separate or specialized settings. This approach leverages existing trust relationships while normalizing psychological support as part of routine athletic development rather than crisis intervention.

The research supports a coach-cantered integration model that emphasizes collaboration, systematic training, ongoing supervision, and clear role delineation. This approach maximizes the potential of existing human resources while building toward more comprehensive psychological support systems as resources and expertise develop over time.

5.5 Sustainable Implementation Mechanisms

The research identifies six essential mechanisms for sustainable framework implementation that address immediate requirements and long-term development needs within Zambian resource constraints. Institutional Integration through existing organizational structures, with preference for National Federations (57.14%) and Ministry of Sport (42.86%) as policy entities, requires embedding psychological support within current governance systems rather than creating parallel structures. Capacity Building through systematic coach education represents the most resource-efficient pathway, leveraging universal coach receptivity (100%) to training and prioritizing human resource development within existing personnel.

Partnership Development with educational institutions and NGOs provides access to expertise and resources unavailable within sporting organizations, maximizing available resources through strategic collaboration. Evidence-Based Monitoring systems ensure implementation remains responsive to stakeholder needs while demonstrating impact through ongoing data collection and evaluation mechanisms. Cultural Integration builds upon rather than conflicts with existing values, leveraging cultural factors that can facilitate psychological support when appropriately implemented. Resource Mobilization through diversified funding sources and efficiency strategies addresses sustainability constraints while advocating for increased resources and innovative service delivery approaches.

These mechanisms collectively emphasize gradual, evidence-based implementation building upon existing strengths while addressing gaps through strategic capacity development and partnerships, reflecting international best practices for resource-constrained contexts.

6. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents a concise summary of the research findings, draws conclusions based on the research objectives, offers practical recommendations for stakeholders, acknowledges the limitations of the study, and suggests directions for future research. The research aimed to address the central question: “How can an effective sports psychology framework be developed and implemented to enhance the mental preparedness and performance of elite athletes in Zambia?” By synthesizing the findings, this chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the key insights gained through the study and their implications for practice and future research.

6.1 Summary of Findings

This mixed-methods study investigated sports psychology framework implementation for elite Zambian athletes through surveys of 25 athletes and 7 coaches, plus stakeholder interviews. Key findings revealed that while 96% of athletes reported confidence in managing performance pressure, 87.5% acknowledged that limited mental health resources negatively affected performance. Currently, psychological support is delivered primarily by coaches (52.63%) and team doctors (36.84%), with 95.8% of athletes willing to use formal services if available.

Coaches demonstrated unanimous support for psychological support implementation and training opportunities, though only 57.15% felt adequately prepared to provide such support. Cultural factors emerged as complex mediators, with 68% of athletes reporting that Zambian beliefs facilitate mental health discussions with coaches, while coaches unanimously recognized cultural barriers to help-seeking.

Qualitative analysis identified five critical implementation themes: policy and structure, education and training, human and financial resources, enabling environment, and monitoring and evaluation. Stakeholders emphasized culturally appropriate, system-wide approaches leveraging existing relationships while building institutional capacity.

6.2 Conclusions

In reference to the results from the data, the research established the following conclusions based on the secondary research objectives.

Psychological Challenges of Elite Athletes: Elite Zambian athletes face psychological challenges despite claiming confidence in handling performance pressure. Current support systems rely on coaches and team doctors instead of specialized sports psychologists, leading to gaps in comprehensive mental training. Athletes recognize the importance of psychological preparation and show willingness to use improved support services. This highlights a need to enhance psychological services to improve performance and well-being in Zambian sports.

Cultural Influences on Psychological Support: Cultural factors play a crucial role in shaping the psychological experiences and support preferences of Zambian athletes. While attitudes toward mental health are improving for many, traditional barriers persist for some. Family and community support structures offer protective benefits, suggesting the value of culturally tailored interventions. Athletes prefer structured, culturally specific

programs, emphasizing that cultural context should be central, not peripheral in developing effective psychological support frameworks for optimal relevance and impact.

Key Components of a Support Framework: An effective sports psychology framework for Zambian athletes must incorporate five critical components: policy integration at national and organizational levels, coach education and training, strategic resource allocation, culturally appropriate delivery methods, and robust monitoring and evaluation systems. The absence of mental health provisions in the current national sports policy highlights the need for policy-level integration as a foundational step. Coach education emerges as a particularly promising component, offering a pragmatic approach to enhancing psychological support in resource-constrained environments. The framework must be holistic and must be embedded within existing systems rather than imposed as an external addition.

Integrating Coaches and Support Staff: Effective integration of coaches and support staff into a comprehensive psychological support system requires a tiered approach that positions coaches as first-line support providers while establishing clear pathways to specialized services for more complex issues. Coaches' central position in athletes' lives makes them ideal candidates for delivering basic psychological support, provided they receive appropriate training and supervision. This approach acknowledges the resource realities of Zambian sports while maximizing the potential impact of existing human resources.

Sustainable Implementation within NOCZ: Sustainable implementation of psychological support within NOCZ's existing structures requires a strategic approach that emphasizes integration with existing programs, capacity building of key stakeholders (particularly coaches. By embedding psychological support within existing training programs and competitive pathways, NOCZ can achieve broader reach with limited additional resources. The high levels of receptivity among athletes and coaches create a favourable environment for capacity-building initiatives.

6.3 Recommendations and Action

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed for implementing a comprehensive sports psychology framework for elite athletes in Zambia:

6.3.1 Policy and Structural Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Integrate Mental Health Provisions in the National Sports Policy

- **Responsible Person:** NOCZ President and Ministry of Sport
- **Timeline:** 6 months
- **Cost:** ZMW 80,000 (policy review and consultation process)
- **Action:** Establish working group including NOCZ, National Sports Council, and psychology professionals to draft policy amendments incorporating mental health support requirements

Recommendation 2: Integrate the IOC Mental Health Toolkit into NOCZ Strategic Planning

- **Responsible Person:** NOCZ Secretary General
- **Timeline:** 3 months
- **Cost:** No direct cost (adaptation using existing resources)
- **Action:** Roll out the IOC toolkit customised for team Zambia during the AYG, Launda 2025

Recommendation 3: Establish Sports Psychology Working Group

- **Responsible Person:** NOCZ President
- **Timeline:** 1 month
- **Cost:** ZMW 20,000 annually (meeting costs and honoraria)
- **Action:** Create multidisciplinary working group with representatives from NOCZ, federations, athletes, coaches, and psychology professionals

6.3.2 Education and Training Recommendations

Recommendation 4: Implement Comprehensive Coach Education Program

- **Responsible Person:** NOCZ Secretary General and Technical Director
- **Timeline:** 12 months for full implementation
- **Cost:** ZMW 100,000 annually
- **Action:** Develop and deliver 4-module coach education program covering basic psychological support, communication skills, and crisis recognition

Recommendation 5: Establish Mental Skills Training at Club Level

- **Responsible Person:** National Federation Presidents
- **Timeline:** 18 months
- **Cost:** ZMW 200,000 annually
- **Action:** Implement structured mental skills training programs at club level for athlete development pathway

Recommendation 6: Create Coach Mentorship Program

- **Responsible Person:** NOCZ Coaching Commission Chairperson
- **Timeline:** 6 months to establish

- **Cost:** No direct cost (utilizing volunteer expert coaches)
- **Action:** Pair experienced coaches with newly trained coaches for ongoing support and skill development

6.3.3 Resource Development and Support System Recommendations

Recommendation 7: Establish Tiered Psychological Support System

- **Responsible Person:** NOCZ Medical Commission Chairperson
- **Timeline:** 12 months
- **Cost:** ZMW 480,000 annually (Sports Psychology Coordinator salary)
- **Action:** Create three-tier system with coaches as first-line support, psychology professionals for specialized needs, and clinical referral pathways

Recommendation 8: Develop Partnership with Universities

- **Responsible Person:** NOCZ Research and Development Officer
- **Timeline:** 6 months
- **Cost:** No direct cost (mutual benefit partnership)
- **Action:** Formalize partnerships with University of Zambia and Copperbelt University psychology departments for training and research

Recommendation 9: Create Volunteer Psychology Support Program

- **Responsible Person:** NOCZ Secretary General
- **Timeline:** 3 months before major competitions
- **Cost:** No direct cost (volunteer basis with travel and accommodation)
- **Action:** Attach volunteer sports psychologist to Team Zambia for major competitions (Commonwealth Games, Olympics, African Games) to implement IOC toolkit and provide on-site support

6.3.4 Service Delivery and Implementation Recommendations

Recommendation 10: Integrate Mental Health Education into Athlete Development

- **Responsible Person:** NOCZ Athlete Development Manager
- **Timeline:** 9 months
- **Cost:** ZMW 60,000 (materials development)
- **Action:** Include mental health awareness and basic psychological skills in all athlete development programs

Recommendation 11: Establish Competition Psychology Protocols

- **Responsible Person:** NOCZ Team Managers
- **Timeline:** 6 months
- **Cost:** ZMW 30,000 (protocol development and training)
- **Action:** Develop standardized psychological preparation protocols for major competitions, including pre-competition mental skills sessions

Recommendation 12: Implement Psychology Training for Medical Staff

- **Responsible Person:** NOCZ Chief Medical Officer
- **Timeline:** 12 months
- **Cost:** ZMW 120,000
- **Action:** Provide sports psychology training for team doctors and physiotherapists to enhance their support capabilities

6.3.5 Monitoring and Sustainability Recommendations

Recommendation 13: Establish Monitoring and Evaluation System

- **Responsible Person:** NOCZ Monitoring and Evaluation Officer
- **Timeline:** 6 months to establish
- **Cost:** ZMW 140,000 annually
- **Action:** Implement regular assessment of athlete psychological well-being and framework effectiveness using standardized tools

Recommendation 14: Secure Dedicated Funding for Sports Psychology

- **Responsible Person:** NOCZ Finance Director
- **Timeline:** 12 months
- **Cost:** Target ZMW 500,000 annually through diversified funding
- **Action:** Develop resource mobilization strategy targeting government allocation, Olympic Solidarity, international partners, and private sector sponsorship

6.3.6 Cultural Integration and Awareness Recommendations

Recommendation 16: Develop Culturally Appropriate Support Materials

- **Responsible Person:** Cultural Consultant (contracted)
- **Timeline:** 24 months

- **Cost:** ZMW 100,000
- **Action:** Create educational materials in local languages that align with Zambian cultural values and communication styles

Recommendation 17: Conduct Stakeholder Awareness Campaign

- **Responsible Person:** NOCZ Communications Manager
- **Timeline:** 6 months
- **Cost:** ZMW 60,000
- **Action:** Implement awareness campaign targeting athletes, coaches, administrators, and families to normalize psychological support and reduce stigma

Table 6. 2: Priority Action Plan

PRIORITY ACTION PLAN

Recommendation	Action	Responsible Person	Timeline	Critical Success Factor	Cost
Integrate IOC Mental Health Toolkit into NOCZ Strategic Planning	Roll out the IOC toolkit customised for Team Zambia during the AYG, Luanda	NOCZ SG, Medical Commission, Technical Commission, Team Management	By December 2025	Feedback from the Games on toolkit implementation	No direct Cost
Establish Sports Psychology Working Group	Create multidisciplinary working group with representatives from NOCZ, federations, athletes, coaches, and psychology professionals	NOCZ President, NOCZ SG	By January 2026	Working Group put in place and hold initial meeting	ZMW 20,000 annually (meeting costs)
Incorporate Mental Health provisions in National Sports Policy	Establish working group to draft policy and mental	NOCZ President, Ministry of Sport, NOCZ SG,	By March 2026	Working Group constituted. Draft of policy and	ZMW 80,000 (consultation process)

	health support requirements	Medical Council, Psychology Association, Sports Council, psychology professionals		recommendation completed	
Implement a comprehensive Coach Education program	Develop and deliver a 4-module coach education program covering basic psychological support, communication skills, and crisis recognition	NOCZ SG, Technical Director, NOCZ Medical Commission, sports psychology professionals, Marketing	4 by 2 days workshops by August 2026 after developing content	Athlete & Coach feedback post Glasgow 2026 on effect of training	ZMW 100,000
Create Volunteer Psychology Support Program	Attach volunteer sports psychologist to Team Zambia AYG-Luanda, CWG, - Glasgow 2026 and YOG-Dakar	NOCZ President, NOCZ SG, Technical Commission, Medical Commission, sports psychology professionals	December 2025, August 2026, October 2026	Games report at end of each edition from the volunteer	No direct cost

6.4 Limitations of the Study

Study limitations include small sample size (25 athletes, 7 coaches), cross-sectional design, focus on elite rather than developing athletes, limited cultural perspectives beyond athletes and coaches, reliance on self-reported data without standardized clinical instruments, and geographical constraints to NOCZ-accessible participants.

6.5 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should prioritize comparative analyses across sports and regions, family and community perspectives, standardized psychological assessments, cost-effectiveness analyses, coach education effectiveness studies, technology-enhanced delivery research, cross-cultural African studies, and career-long impact evaluations.

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APPENDIX

Research instruments

Survey

SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR ATHLETES

Kindly take a few minutes of your time to respond to this short survey by selecting the answer that best suits your choice. This survey aims to fulfil academic research, so your responses will be completely anonymous. Your time spend to respond to this survey is much appreciated.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Sport Discipline: _____ Gender: M/F _____

QUESTIONS

1. Are you aware of any mental health support sessions offered to athletes in your sport? (Please circle one)
1=Yes 2= No
If you answered yes, who offered these sessions? (Please circle the appropriate answer(s))
1= Coach
2= Sports Psychologist
3=Team Manager
4=Team doctor
2. How much do you agree with the statement: “I have access to adequate psychological support during training and competitions”?
1 = Strongly Disagree,
2 = Disagree,
3 = Neutral,
4 = Agree,
5 = Strongly Agree
3. During my regular training program, mental health sessions are conducted to strengthen my decision-making capacity, such as goal setting, etc.
1 = Strongly Disagree,
2 = Disagree,
3 = Neutral,
4 = Agree,
5 = Strongly Agree
4. Mentally, I feel confident in managing performance pressure when competing in major games on my own.
1 = Strongly Disagree,
2 = Disagree,
3 = Neutral,
4 = Agree,
5 = Strongly Agree
5. The cultural beliefs in Zambia make it easier for me to discuss mental health challenges with my coaches.
1 = Strongly Disagree,
2 = Disagree,

- 3 = *Neutral*,
 4 = *Agree*,
 5 = *Strongly Agree*
6. Family or community expectations positively influence my mental well-being as an athlete.
 1 = *Strongly Disagree*,
 2 = *Disagree*,
 3 = *Neutral*,
 4 = *Agree*,
 5 = *Strongly Agree*
7. Lack of mental health resources and support services in an athlete program negatively impacts the athlete's performance.
 1 = *Strongly Disagree*,
 2 = *Disagree*,
 3 = *Neutral*,
 4 = *Agree*,
 5 = *Strongly Agree*
8. On a scale of 1 to 5, how likely would you use mental health support if made available to you?
 1 = *Very unlikely*
 2 = *Unlikely*
 3 = *Neutral*
 4 = *Likely*
 5 = *Very likely*
9. If you answered 'likely/very likely' in question 8, would you prefer that a sports psychology program, be included in the competition preparation sessions as a structured program tailored for competition to Zambian athletes?
 (Please circle one)
 1=Yes 2=No
 If you answered no, would this be because (*select all that apply*) of?
 1 = *It's a personal issue*,
 2 = *Others don't believe in such a program*,
 3=*It's time-consuming*
 4= *Athletes prefer sorting their own stuff*
10. With the current Zambia setup of sports, at which stage of an athlete's career do you think psychological support should be offered to them?
 (Please circle one)
 a) *At club level*
 b) *At national level while in camp*
 c) *At national level while in the club*
 d) *During the competition*

For Coaches

COACH SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Kindly take a few minutes of your time to respond to this short survey by selecting the answer that best suits your choice. This survey aims to fulfil academic research, so your responses will be completely anonymous. Your time spend to respond to this survey is much appreciated.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Sport Discipline: _____ Gender: M/F _____

QUESTIONS

1. As a coach, have you had any of your athletes undertake a mental health support service?
(Please circle one)
1=Yes 2=No
If you answered Yes, who offered the support to the athlete (*Please circle the appropriate answer(s)*)
1= A sports Psychologist
2= Team Doctor
3=Team Manager
4=Myself
2. I am adequately trained to provide psychological support to athletes during their competition.
1 = Strongly Disagree,
2 = Disagree,
3 = Neutral,
4 = Agree,
5 = Strongly Agree
3. If you disagreed with the previous question, do you think introductory awareness training/classes/seminars should be offered to coaches managing elite athletes?
(Please circle one)
1=Yes 2= No
4. Mental skills training (e.g., stress management and resilience building) is a priority in my coaching strategy.
1 = Strongly Disagree,
2 = Disagree,
3 = Neutral,
4 = Agree,
5 = Strongly Agree
5. Cultural barriers in Zambia limit athletes' willingness to seek mental health assistance.
1 = Strongly Disagree,
2 = Disagree,
3 = Neutral,
4 = Agree,
5 = Strongly Agree
6. Collaboration with sports psychologists in the sports program would help improve athlete performance outcomes.
1 = Strongly Disagree,
2 = Disagree,
3 = Neutral,
4 = Agree,

5 = Strongly Agree

7. Is it essential to set a policy to guide athletes and officials on accessing mental health support within the sports ecosystem?

(Please circle one)

1=Yes

2=No

If you answered Yes, who do you suggest should set the policy framework?

(Please circle the appropriate answer)

1= National Federation

2= National Olympic Committee

3= Ministry of Sport

4= National Sports Council

8. Limited resources (funding, personnel) hinder the implementation of mental health programs.

1 = Strongly Disagree,

2 = Disagree,

3 = Neutral,

4 = Agree,

5 = Strongly Agree

9. The National Olympic Committee of Zambia (NOCZ) should prioritize mental health support for athletes under its programs.

1 = Strongly Disagree,

2 = Disagree,

3 = Neutral,

4 = Agree,

5 = Strongly Agree

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS

Sports Council

1. As statutory custodian of sports federations, what role would the Council take to roll out mental health programmes for athletes within the federations?
2. How can existing athlete development programs be adapted to include mental health-supporting activities?
3. How would you support the formulation of policy guidelines towards the implementation of support services on mental health for the athletes?
4. If a mental health policy was formulated, how would you go about ensuring its implementation among the federations?
5. What partners would you consider collaborating with to ensure sports psychology has a place in the overall sports ecosystem?

Sports Psychologist (Field Expert)

1. This study's objective is to create a framework on which mental health support will be made available to the athletes. How can the researcher put such a framework in place?
2. What elements should be included in the sports psychology framework for the elite athletes in Zambia?
3. Considering opportunities to use best practices, what could be an ideal way to integrate mental health programme/management for athletes preparing for major sports competitions?
4. With a coach and Manager being most influential in an athlete training programme, should the coach or Team Manager be trained to support athletes' psychological needs? If so, what tools should they be provided to acquire the basic skills to help the athletes?
5. In the context of the Zambian sports environment, what three priorities of the framework do you suggest should be considered?

Ministry of Sport

1. What would be your stand as a Ministry on the need to implement a sports psychology framework that would mentally support athletes preparing to participate at major competitions such as the Olympic Games?
2. What policies do you think exist within the Ministry that you would use or update to support the implementation of such a framework?
3. For this programme to be successfully implemented, it will need both financial and human resources, how will the Ministry allocate such resources?
4. Lastly, what timeline would the ministry work with ensure such a framework is implemented?

Transcript: Semi-Structured Interview with EXPERT

I am a lecturer in Sport and Exercise Psychology at the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom. I'm also a Chartered Psychologist with the British Psychological Association and a Sport and Exercise Psychologist in training with the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences. So, I work primarily as an academic.

My research mainly focuses on understanding the interplay between performance and well-being, particularly within elite sport organizations. My PHD explored three different areas in this context. In my practice, I work with individuals and teams on the mental aspects of sport—helping them better manage the demands and challenges of competing, especially under pressure and at a high level. The goal is to develop the mental resources needed to help athletes reach their full potential. Thank you. I am going to ask you about five questions, and I would appreciate any comments or recommendations you can provide. You can perhaps answer each question, but I'll try to keep this simple for someone who may not necessarily be in your field.

So, I work for the National Olympic Committee (NOC) as the Secretary General. The first question I would like to ask is: This study's objective is to improve the quality of mental health support available to athletes. How can the researcher put such a framework in place?

I think it's important to recognize that athletes experience different levels and types of stress. These typically fall into three categories:

1. Performance stresses – These are related to the demands of their sport, such as competing, training, and performing under pressure.
2. Organizational stresses – These stems from being part of a sport organization, such as issues related to transport, funding, remuneration, access to proper training facilities, coaching quality, and overall support systems.
3. Personal stresses – Athletes are human beings with lives outside of sport. They deal with issues like family dynamics, interpersonal relationships, racism, discrimination, and other societal or contextual challenges.

When developing a framework to support athlete mental health and prevent burnout, it's crucial to address all three of these areas. Interestingly, research shows that organizational stressors often have the greatest negative impact. And they are also the most overlooked, as the focus tends to be on individual athletes rather than the systems they operate within.

To effectively support athletes, we must consider how the system or organization functions. If the environment is well-structured and supportive, it enables athletes to focus on performing at their best without being overwhelmed by unnecessary external stress.

As an NOC, we don't work with athletes directly but want to support those preparing for major competitions. In that case, I think focusing on performance support—such as mental skills training, pre-competition psychological preparation, and recovery strategies—is key. But also consider influencing organizational factors, like working with federations to ensure proper athlete care, access to mental health professionals, and creating athlete-centered policies.

Research can support the development of frameworks that address all these categories. While performance-related support is important, organizational stress is often the most impactful and frequently overlooked. Therefore, a strong mental health framework should not only focus on individual athletes but also on improving systems and environments around them.

Interviewer:

What elements should be included in the sport's psychological framework in the elite athletes?

Expert:

1. Mental Skills Training is a critical component. Organizations invest heavily in physical and technical training but often neglect psychological preparation. It's essential to recognize that psychological readiness is a trainable skill—just like fitness or technique. Helping athletes learn the psychological tools necessary to compete. We spend a lot of time—across all organizations—focusing on physical preparedness, fitness, flexibility, strength,

and technical skill, but we rarely place the same emphasis on developing the psychological skills of the athlete.

If sports psychologists aren't readily available, coaches can be upskilled to deliver basic psychological support. Coaches are central to athletes' daily lives, so empowering them to support resilience, stress management, and mental toughness can be extremely effective.

2. Well-being, it's important to create a space where athletes can address personal concerns. This helps them build a robust identity that isn't solely dependent on their performance. Supporting athletes holistically contributes to long-term well-being and success.

Interviewer:

What would be an ideal way to integrate a mental health program for athletes preparing for major competitions?

Expert:

A system-wide approach is best. Athletes operate within a system that includes coaches, physiotherapists, doctors, managers, etc. When the entire system acknowledges the importance of mental health and contributes to psychological readiness, the support becomes more sustainable and effective.

Start with organization-wide training or workshops that raise awareness and offer psychoeducation. Ideally, there should be access to a trained professional—not necessarily full-time, but available regularly, perhaps two to three times a month, with online follow-ups.

Too often, the burden of being mentally prepared falls on the athlete. But the organization shares that responsibility by creating a conducive and supportive environment.

Interviewer:

Should coaches and team managers be trained to support athletes' psychological needs? If so, what tools should they be given?

Expert:

Absolutely. Coaches and managers are highly influential. While a psychologist may meet an athlete once a month, a coach interacts with them daily and can reinforce psychological skills consistently. If a sport psychologist is not available, that could involve upskilling coaches. Coaches are the most prominent figures in an athlete's professional life. So, if we can train coaches to help athletes better manage stress and become more resilient, then we can work through the coach to deliver these skills.

Training coaches in:

- Understanding their influence and relational power
- Developing athlete resilience
- Effective communication and empathy
- Trust-building and support strategies

Can be more impactful than direct work with athletes alone. These are sometimes called "soft skills," but they are actually very powerful and difficult to master—what I prefer to call "essential skills."

Providing coaches with practical workshops, access to checklists, scenario-based role plays, and continuous mentorship can significantly elevate their ability to support athletes.

Interviewer:

Thank you. In the survey I ran with athletes, many said they would feel more comfortable receiving psychological support from their coach or a psychologist. So, I think your insight reinforces that direction.

The athletes are discussing who they might want to conduct this sort of session with them. Out of the five choices — the coach, sports psychologist, team manager, and team doctor — I received more responses in favor of the coach than the team doctor

It makes sense: the coach is someone they already know, someone they're comfortable with, someone they probably trust. That person has a lot of potential to positively impact them in the right way.

So, that would mean the coach needs to be upskilled. Obviously, we're not expecting them to go through a full degree program or anything like that. What sort of upskilling do you think would be good enough?

Expert:

Personally, I think even a small influence — just one or two workshops — would be enough to start. Just to begin building some psychoeducation and awareness around the psychological aspects of performance. Even if it's just two or three one- or two-hour workshops.

At the end of the day, I think that would be enough to get coaches thinking about how their actions, behaviours, and words impact their athletes and how those athletes perform. A coach might think they're doing something helpful, but they can't always be sure how it's actually affecting the athlete. So, introducing basic awareness of communication styles, feedback loops, coaching strategies, and the importance of the coach-athlete relationship could be done very simply at a surface level. Even just that, as a starting point, would make a difference.

Then, of course, you could scale it up to an 8- or 9-module course they could take. It wouldn't even need to be certified — but it would give them a solid understanding. I think it would depend on the resources available and how much time can be invested in upskilling coaches. But again, even just one or two sessions could already make a meaningful impact.

I was talking about Zambia. I said that in the country of Zambia, there are many Zambian players in the sports environment. What three priorities do you suggest should be included in creating the framework?

Expert:

I think, for me, the first priority is awareness -building awareness of the importance of mentally preparing athletes. This should be implemented across the entire sports system or organization.

The second priority would be upskilling coaches. As I mentioned earlier, I believe this has the potential to create the biggest impact with the least input.

The third priority would be creating structures where athletes can talk to someone or express their concerns in a safe, confidential environment. It's crucial that they feel confident that what they share won't be reported back to coaches or selectors. We want athletes to be able to talk about what they're experiencing without fear of being seen as weak or unprepared. Ideally, this would be facilitated by a well-being manager — someone who doesn't need to be overly qualified but can simply provide a space for athletes to voice their concerns and receive support.

For me, these would be the best foundational steps to start with.

Sample Letter of invitation for semi -structured Interviews

3rd March 2025

Roma, Lusaka,
Zambia.

Dear,

I hope you are doing well.

My name is Boniface Kambikambi, a student at the Executive Masters in Sport Organisation Management XVII, currently conducting research as part of my academic requirements. My research focuses on developing a framework for sports psychology (Mental Health) to support elite athletes in Zambia.

As you are aware, mental resilience, performance anxiety, and post-competition transitions are critical challenges that many elite athletes face. Unfortunately, structured psychological support in Zambian sports remains limited, leaving many athletes vulnerable to mental health struggles and performance setbacks. This research aims to bridge that gap by proposing a practical framework tailored to our local sporting environment.

Given your expertise in sports psychology, I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to discuss your insights on this topic. Your knowledge and experience would be invaluable in shaping a well-informed and effective framework. I would be grateful if you are available for a short interview at your convenience.

Please let me know a suitable time that I can meet with you for a brief interview.

Thank you for your time and consideration—I look forward to your response.

Best regards,

Boniface Kambikambi

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NOC Zambia