Implementing Mental Skills Training in College Golf to Promote Athletic Success

Tran, M. Chloe.

***Abstract*— Mental skills encapsulates the various mental processes that support and enhance performance during competition. Over the last few years, the importance of mental skills and success in competitive sports has increased. While the literature supporting the effects of mental skills training (MST) on sporting performance is abundant, the emphasis on MST in college sports domains specifically is lacking. The goal of this paper is to address the cruciality of MST in collegiate sports and promote MST implementation in sports prior to the professional competition stage. This point is particularly relevant when considering the breadth of college sports available across North America and their associated skill sets. Athletes who participate in sports that are categorized as being more mental-forward, such as golf, would largely benefit from formal MST at the collegiate level. MST implementation would not only improve competitive results of college sports programs but would also promote success in life after college for student-athletes.**

***Keywords*—** *Mental Skills Training, Mental Skills, College Golf, Varsity Sports, Performance*

I. IMPLEMENTING MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING IN COLLEGE GOLF TO PROMOTE ATHLETIC SUCCESS

Athletic domains are experiencing significant changes in the extent that the mental aspects of sports are gaining recognition as being more impactful to strong athletic performances compared to the physical aspects. Specifically, the awareness of mental skills and their impact on sporting successes in professional sports has increased substantially with the recent generations of professional athletes (Park & Jeon, 2023; Walsh & Du Plooy, 2023). Mental skills encapsulate the various mental processes that support and enhance performance during competition; for example, emotional management, focus and attention allocation, and dealing with pre-event nerves or anxiety are executed using mental processes (Diekfuss & Raisbeck, 2017; Walsh & Du Plooy, 2023). Mental skills training (MST) describes the specialized instruction, facilitation, and practice of these mental skills. Typically, this instruction is led by a specialist or professional in the sports psychology field (Di Fronso & Budnik-Przybylska, 2023).

Due to the increased awareness of MST's impacts, it has become largely implemented in professional sports settings. However, the implementation and use of MST has not stretched far beyond the professional sectors, and young athletes are facing challenges associated with mental skills resources available to them at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) varsity level. The lack of MST implementation in college sports is especially problematic for more mental-forward collegiate sports, such as golf (Diekfuss & Raisbeck, 2017). Golf is often referred to as a mental sport before it is physical, due to its high demand for a heavy mental load, long-lasting attentional focus, and emotional management (Diekfuss & Raisbeck, 2017; Finn, 2008). The goal of this paper is to address the importance of MST in college golf, in order to enhance the performance and enrich the lives of student-athletes both on and off the golf course.

II. THE OPPORTUNITY FOR MST

An athlete's journey to adopting mental skill sets that work for them and their individual playing styles or performances can be difficult and unfamiliar if not given proper guidance. The implementation of formal MST can help streamline this process more seamlessly (Thomas & Fogarty, 1997). Through MST, professional athletes are given safe spaces to explore their mental tendencies and past experiences. Field specialists and sports psychologists help professional athletes find what techniques work for them and their personal tendencies (Di Fronso & Budnik-Przybylska, 2023). These approaches in professional sports suggest that formal MST is necessary to support and facilitate successful performances, both physically and mentally.

Collegiate sports programs hold a responsibility to provide resources to help produce strong, high-performing athletes; however, the importance of MST is often overlooked for a variety of reasons often related to monetary and time constraints, and therefore not provided (Wrisberg et al., 2009). Currently, many college golf programs lack consistent mental skills support, which limits the potential successes of the current generation of collegiate golfers and college golf programs as a whole. Collegiate sports programs have an opportunity to be a catalyst for strong growth in the next generation of golfers by acknowledging the importance of mental skills in the sport and emphasizing its development.

III. MST IN ATHLETIC DOMAINS

A. The Rise of Mental Toughness in Professional Sport

Mental toughness and MST in sports have become equally, if not more, important than physical talent and skill in successful sporting performances. In previous generations of athletes, pure physical talent was a major separator between those who were successful and those who were not (Park & Jeon, 2023; Walsh & Du Plooy, 2023). With recent technological developments in athlete analysis methods, training aids, and facilities, athletes have experienced, and will continue to experience, an increase in the quality of their training and preparation (Frevel et al., 2022). These developments have directly translated to improving their

athletic performance. A majority of athletes are improving physically, thus increasing the standards and expectations for how difficult the competitive field will be in relation to physical skill across various sports (Park & Jeon, 2023). However, recent trends exhibit that athletes, who in the past would have dominated their sporting sectors due to their physical talent, are being outperformed by their counterparts who do not exhibit the same level of physical ability. The differentiating factor is the latter's use of mental skills and experience with MST (Park & Jeon, 2023). In response to the heightened competition, athletes should begin strengthening themselves mentally. Collegiate sports programs have an opportunity to promote MST, allowing athletes to improve their performance and produce better results in a changing competitive landscape.

IV. BENEFITS OF MST IMPLEMENTATION IN COLLEGE GOLF

A. Mental Energy Conservation

MST is critical in sports like golf, where in order to conserve energy, athletes experience necessary fluctuations in their attentional focus during competitions. The skills that are acquired through MST can be used to deal with these fluctuations in attentional focus. The literature suggests a relationship between a golfer's effective concentration and golf performance (Finn, 2008). Effective concentration can be defined as focusing solely on a particular task or goal while minimizing distractions. When considering the slow and intermittent nature of competitive golf, golfers are subjected to long periods of focus and thinking, therefore, the concept of effective concentration is largely influential. Collegiate golfers' arousal levels are adjusted to meet different tasking demands, and ideally, a golfer is able to intensify their focus depending on their point in a round in order to conserve mental energy (Diekfuss & Raisbeck, 2017; Finn, 2008). When executing a shot or their pre and post-shot routines, their focus will be heightened, thus burning the most mental energy. Contrastingly, their level of focus should be lowered in between shots, in order to conserve their mental energy (Diekfuss & Raisbeck, 2017). However, the inefficient burning of mental energy is commonly exhibited when golfers fixate and reflect on poor shots or decisions for too long (Davies et al., 2014; Wrisberg et al., 2009). A golfer's mental processes and physical performance are interconnected, with their mental processes often being a determinant of their physical success (Wang et al., 2021). Golfers who fixate on negative aspects like poor shots or decisions are unable to physically perform to their full potential (Davies et al., 2014; Wrisberg et al., 2009). If not taught how to compartmentalize these negative thoughts and allocate their focus and attention appropriately through MST, competitive golfers run the risk of burning attentional energy inefficiently, which affects their physical performance (Diekfuss & Raisbeck, 2017).

B. Exploring Individual Attentional Limitations

The implementation of MST will enable college golfers to cater their training and routines to their individual attentional limitations, which in turn aids them during competition. Naturally, humans hold limitations to their attentional abilities and capacities; however, the true threshold for one's attention is often unknown, and therefore overestimated (Chabris & Simons, 2010). One's ability to meaningfully attend to everything in their visual world is nearly impossible, and this is especially prevalent during task completion. In relation to attentional focus in golf, a golfer is often expected to meaningfully attend to many variables in order to execute a golf shot or swing; however, this expectation fails to recognize one's natural attentional limitations (Diekfuss & Raisbeck, 2017). Pre and post-shot routines consider various internal and external variables in order to promote proper shot execution (Davies et al., 2014). However, a golfer's ability to meaningfully attend to all of these variables is unlikely, and the effort to do so wastes mental energy. Given this variability, it is crucial for golfers to explore their attentional limits. With professional guidance and support through MST, college golfers will become more aware of, and in tune with, their individual attentional capacities (Thomas & Fogarty, 1997). This increased awareness of their attentional limitations can help them alter their training and their routines, both in practice and competition, in order to be more effective for them individually.

C. Emotion Regulation and Management

MST improves an athlete's emotion regulation, which positively contributes to an athlete's individual athletic performance. Learning to manage common feelings, such as nerves or anxiety, that may be heightened due to competition is a complex mental process (Diekfuss & Raisbeck, 2017). Furthermore, golfers can experience a wide range of emotions over the course of one round (Lundkvist et al., 2021). Specifically, fluctuations in their self-perceived emotions are common, which are positive or negative emotions provoked by external behaviours, decisions, or outcomes. While all competitive athletes experience these self-perceived emotions on some level, the relationship between an athlete's emotions and their performance is a unique case when considering its effects in golf. Given golf's slow pace, golfers may experience these self-perceived emotions more intensely and for a longer period of time compared to other athletes (Lundkvist et al., 2021). While positive self-perceived emotions can boost a golfer's confidence, negative self-perceived emotions can cause golfers to doubt themselves and increase their negative self-talk and self-doubt (Di Fronso & Budnik-Przybylska, 2023; Finn, 2008). This change in attitude and behaviour often translates into poor decision-making, performance, and outcomes, thus continuing the downward spiral. MST can help teach golfers how to compartmentalize these self-perceived emotions, which can help stop the downward spiral (Lundkvist et al., 2021). An athlete who can effectively manage and cope with these emotions will surpass the rest of the field in terms of success (Park & Jeon, 2023).

Competitive golfers are susceptible to performance anxiety, thus influencing their overall outcomes and successes. More specifically, the concept of "choking" due to increased pressure to perform well is largely prevalent among

competitive golfers (Finn, 2008). Despite quality and capable performances during "low-stakes situations" such as practices or training periods, the increased pressure and anxiety associated with competitions can undermine an athlete's sense of capability, confidence, and control (Finn, 2008). This discrepancy in performance between practices and competitions is widely experienced but can be controlled using MST. A study done by Hill et al. (2010) assessed the effect of MST that focused on developing mental toughness on choking susceptibility in athletes. The results of this study posited positive implications for MST's influence on choking under pressure, where increased mental toughness was linked to decreases in choking probability during competition. Furthermore, the intensity of the pressure that internal and external expectations impose on athletes varies based on the individual. While some athletes feel pressure negatively and perceive it as an overwhelming factor, other athletes thrive off of pressure and use it as a motivator (Thiessen et al., 2024). Therefore, helping athletes identify what their personal thresholds for pressure are and how to perceive pressure in a more positive light can help lessen the detrimental effects of performance anxiety.

D. Mental Toughness and Coping Behaviours

Important aspects of success in competitive sports are an athlete's mental toughness and ability to effectively cope with failures or challenges. Athletes with improved mental toughness have adopted a mindset that prioritizes determination and persistence over giving up (Griffith et al., 2024). Mental toughness plays a role in all aspects of competitive sports, whether it be during practice or competition; therefore, it is crucial that athletes build their mental toughness. This mindset can be developed through MST programs that target mental toughness and grit specifically. However, in order to adopt a mentally tough mindset, athletes must also utilize effective coping mechanisms. Athletes who rely on task-oriented coping (e.g. mental imagery, mindfulness, positive self-talk) are better able to develop mental toughness due to the positive effects that these coping mechanisms produce (Gaudreau & Blondin, 2004). In contrast, maladaptive methods like distraction-oriented coping (e.g. distancing, mental distraction) or disengagement-oriented coping (e.g. resignation, disengagement) often result in negative effects, thus hindering the ability to develop mental toughness.

A study done by Griffith et al. (2024) tested how effective MST was on improving mental toughness. The researchers invited Division 1 female athletes to participate in a six-week MST course related to several mental performance concepts, with mental toughness being one of them. Participants were administered surveys at three time points (pre-course, two weeks post-course, and four months post-course) to assess the athletes' individual mental toughness and coping skills over time. Griffith et al. (2024) hypothesized that the cohort's mental toughness and coping abilities would significantly improve after undergoing the MST course. The results indicated significant improvement in the cohort's mental toughness and coping skills immediately post-course compared to their pre-course scores, with these effects remaining significantly different four months post-course (Griffith et al., 2024). Additionally, a moderately positive correlation was derived when considering mental toughness and coping skills in a bidirectional manner.

E. Transition into a High-Performing Stage

Learning to accept and adapt to the uncontrollable nature of competitive sports is a hurdle many athletes struggle to overcome (Walsh & Du Plooy, 2023). The literature suggests that golf is an "open-skill sport", which describes a sport that is executed in an ever-changing and unpredictable environment (Finn, 2008). An open-skill sport requires its athletes to consistently adapt their routines, decisions, and gameplans to account for these uncontrollable environments. As an outdoor sport, golf is subject to various external factors that can affect the outcomes. For example, weather forecasts and course conditions are fully out of a player's control but hold large effects if not considered (Diekfuss & Raisbeck, 2017). Learning to prioritize what they can control, such as commitment to their decisions and pre-round preparation, rather than fixating on things like the weather or course conditions, can help golfers transition into the high-performance sector. With adequate MST, golfers learn to accept the limits to their control, and can make adjustments to their decisions and actions according to their environments.

MST can also help highlight the benefits of post-competition reflection. In the case of negative self-perceived emotions, reflecting on these scenarios following a round can be beneficial for the golfer to further explore their personal tendencies or feelings (Chow & Luzzeri, 2019). Through MST, coaches can help facilitate a reflection process that prompts productivity, growth, and future application. Being able to turn a negative experience into a learning opportunity helps to increase an athlete's self-awareness, self-correction, and self-regulation, which is an important step to becoming a high-performance athlete (Chow & Luzzeri, 2019).

F. Balancing Athletic and Academic Commitments

College athletes find themselves in a challenging situation in which they are expected to balance multiple moving parts of their lives. They must be able to balance rigorous athletic and academic demands, while continuing to tend to their social lives and carve out time for rest and recovery (Griffith et al., 2024; Parker et al., 2021). The concepts of mental toughness and coping strategies can be applied to this situation as well. MST can not only be used to educate college athletes on adaptive strategies to cope with stress in sporting contexts, but these strategies can be applied in more general contexts as well. Relying on more task-oriented coping strategies will help combat the additional stressors present in student-athletes' lives (Wrisberg et al., 2009). For example, implementing mindfulness techniques outside of sports can help student-athletes when feeling overwhelmed. A study done by Jensen et al. (2020) assessed the effects of MST on reaction behaviours during high-stress situations in military personnel. Results indicated a significant relationship between MST and performance during periods of heightened stress. While the researchers' chosen scope is not a college

sports setting, the results can be generalized more broadly: During periods of heightened stress, individuals better equipped with mental skills will cope and perform better compared to those who are ill-equipped (Jensen et al., 2020).

G. Burnout in Student-Athletes

MST can also help mitigate burnout in college athletes. Athlete burnout can be defined as psychological, emotional, and physical exhaustion due to stress, overworking or training, and constant performance pressure (Wilczyńska et al., 2022). Burnout often occurs when the psychological, physical, or emotional costs of the activity, which in this case is sports participation, surpass the perceived benefits. This phenomenon has become increasingly prevalent among athletes, resulting in it becoming a topic of discussion in sports psychology disciplines. The concept of athlete burnout also relates to maintaining a healthy academic-sport-life balance: Deviation from equilibrium imposes additional stress and overwhelming factors on a student-athlete's life (Parker et al., 2021; Wrisberg et al., 2009). Athlete burnout results in numerous adverse outcomes; for example, depressed or anxious moods and decreases in life satisfaction. Various studies have posited implications of psychological interventions on athlete burnout. MST can stand as a psychological intervention if it is implemented to address a challenge or problem in one's life, with hopes of improvement or development (Lange-Smith et al., 2023). Therefore, some studies have suggested MST as a meaningful psychological intervention to mitigate burnout.

In a more general sense, Malins et al. (2023) used a longitudinal design to investigate the causal effects of MST on burnout in healthcare professionals. Results indicated a significant improvement in burnout levels post-MST, with these improvements remaining consistent after both follow ups. While this study does not pertain to athletes specifically, its findings do convey the idea that MST can stand as a mitigator against burnout. Through a meta-analytic study, Wilczyńska et al. (2022) investigated the effect of psychological interventions targeting mindfulness and coping on burnout cases in youth athletes. The results suggest that mindfulness interventions, a form of MST, can play an influential role in limiting athlete burnout in young athletes.

H. MST Enhances the Management of Training and Travel

Compared to other sports, golf requires athletes to allocate more time to training and competition days, given how long the sport takes to play. On average, an NCAA golf team will participate in 24 days of competition, or nine 54-hole events, with each day including approximately six to ten hours of playing time (NCAA, 2018). This count does not include travel days, days required for practice rounds, or potential competitive dates for conference, regional, or national championships that typically occur outside of the regular season. The true amount of time required for competing as a college golfer is far more than what is listed in the NCAA guidelines. Thus, when considering the time-consuming nature of the sport, mastering the ability to time-manage and allocate the appropriate hours to their studies, training, and competition is especially important for college golfers (NCAA, 2018). Through MST, student-athletes will learn how to effectively deal with the school, social, or recovery-related aspects of their lives prior to competitions (Thompson et al., 2023). This will allow them to approach competitive events with clearer goals, higher focus, and more efficient attention allocation on the sporting task at hand.

I. Team Benefits of MST

MST can provide benefits for sports teams as well. A team constructed of well-developed individual athletes will perform and function better than a team constructed of athletes who lack mental skills (Wrisberg et al., 2009). Athletes who cannot effectively regulate their emotions on an individual level are often unable to be strong, supportive teammates (Torrence & Connelly, 2019). In contrast, athletes who can compartmentalize their personal feelings for the greater good of their teams are able to be more supportive of their teammates, exhibit sportsmanship, and communicate more effectively (Wrisberg et al., 2009). A more supportive team environment allows teams to thrive, both mentally and physically; therefore, this promotes stronger physical results (Torrence & Connelly, 2019). In addition to the physical improvements, these interpersonal developments that are acquired through MST help boost team morale and enhance team dynamics and culture (Diekfuss & Raisbeck, 2017; Wrisberg et al., 2009). While golf is an individual sport in practice, college golf is still structured as a team sport. Despite collegiate golfers competing as individual athletes on the course, their scores contribute to a larger team outcome. Thus, MST can still be used to improve team dynamics, culture, and performance in "individual team sports", like golf.

V. CONSTRAINTS AND COUNTERARGUMENTS OF MST IMPLEMENTATION

The concept of MST at the collegiate level is relatively new, therefore its implementation comes with challenges. Large barriers to implementing MST are the allocation of funding by the universities and the NCAA's regulations regarding training hours. Universities and their athletic departments prefer to allocate available funding to facilities or training staff that can be utilized more widely across the student-athlete community. Since MST should be individualistic and sport-specific, mental skills trainers are not seen as widely versatile or used in comparison to other potential investments (Feddersen et al., 2020). Universities would be required to allocate a substantial portion of their monetary resources to mental skills support, as well as the appropriate measures to maintain the MST. Moreover, the NCAA currently mandates a maximum of 20 hours of coach-initiated training per week by all teams at all division levels (NCAA, 1991). While the NCAA provides specifications around physical training guidelines, they do not highlight details about mental training of any type. As a result of this oversight, most coaches will prioritize physical training in their mandated hours (Feddersen et al., 2020). If a team were to adopt and integrate MST into their schedules consistently, coaches would have to sacrifice physical training hours in order to accommodate the likely time-consuming nature of MST.

A. Current State of MST in College Sports

The monetary and time restrictions are reasonable things to consider, especially given the importance of the quality in administration of MST and the required learning. A solution that many college programs have adopted to combat these restrictions is a group-delivery method for MST, in which teams participate in seminars that are led by general sports psychologists (Feddersen et al., 2020). While initial introductions to concepts or exercises may be sufficient using group-implemented MST, this practice assumes similarity across all athletes in terms of playing styles or preferences, and often fails to consider sports-specific training and mechanisms (Kozina et al., 2015).

Lange-Smith et al. (2023) investigated trends in efficacy of MST in sports performance using a meta-analytic approach. Overall, the researchers found that the majority of their sample studies deemed MST as a positive factor for sports performance enhancement. However, some studies in their review sample presented mixed or no evidence for performance enhancement. Lange-Smith et al. (2023) attributed these discrepancies to a lack of individualization, or rather the imposition of a "one size fits all" approach to MST. Similar to other psychological interventions, one form of MST may be beneficial to certain individuals, while simultaneously being maladaptive to others (Lange-Smith et al., 2023). To ensure optimal efficacy of MST, mental skills facilitators who work with athletes should tailor the MST to the athlete's styles of playing, learning, and regulation strategies.

For MST to be effective long-term, the delivery must eventually shift to individual sessions specific to the athlete, in order to acknowledge these individual athlete and sport differences. For example, there are golfers who prefer to focus on technical and systematic processes during competition, while others prefer to play using feel (Diekfuss & Raisbeck, 2017; Thomas & Fogarty, 1997). Since a golfer's playing style is largely influenced by individual preference and differing thought processes, this oversight is particularly harmful in "individual team sports" like golf (Diekfuss & Raisbeck, 2017). In relation to sport-specific mechanisms, it is important that those who are delivering the MST have an understanding of the particular sport, in order to provide specific mechanisms to aid with the specific sporting performance (Kozina et al., 2015).

B. Rebuttal

It is a program's responsibility to provide an environment that encourages athlete success and improvement in all areas of life. While programs continue to promote development in physical areas, such as employing quality training specialists for physical improvement, they are often unwilling to invest in the mental skills of their athletes (Wrisberg et al., 2009). Moreover, when considering the recent physical strengthening of competitive fields, mental skills must be categorized as equally, if not more, important than the physical aspects (Park & Jeon, 2023). Due to how long MST has been considered nonessential, the receptivity to and engagement in MST may be limited initially (Walsh & Du Plooy, 2023). Even if fewer teams utilize the MST, teams that do engage in it will see improvements in their performances. Engagement in MST would be especially beneficial in sports that require heightened mental skills and focus, such as golf (Diekfuss & Raisbeck, 2017; Thomas & Fogarty, 1997). A gradual implementation of MST for certain teams who participate in a mental-forward sport will also allow college sports programs to assess MST's effectiveness on a smaller scale prior to a program-wide implementation. This could help deal with potential skepticism towards MST that is rooted in monetary restrictions by lessening the high commitment to this large investment. The time and funding allocations to MST and mental resources would be worth the investment by college sports programs, seeing as it is a benefit to their athletes. Restructuring a program's money allocations to no longer solely prioritize physical training would not only allow MST investments to be more realistic and feasible, but would also further their athletes' potential successes, and the program's dominance as a whole.

VI. CONCLUSION

Given how important mental skills are to overall performance and success in golf, universities should prioritize MST for their college golf programs. Implementing MST provides athletes with skills that allow them to gain more control during competition, as well as mechanisms that help regulate emotions, nerves, and focus. In addition to individual sporting contexts, MST can help improve team dynamics and an athlete's wellbeing and skills in non-athletic settings as well. College athletic programs strive to produce successful athletes and teams; however, it is difficult to excel physically if they lack the appropriate mental skills. This notion is especially important in sports with high mental demands, such as golf. Successful collegiate golfers must hold strong mental skills, and without proper guidance and professional support, it can be challenging to accumulate these skills.

Increasing awareness of the benefits of sports-specialized and individualized MST in college sports can help push for MST implementations. More specifically, informing university sports programs and collegiate coaches about these positive effects and benefits of MST implementation can initiate the allocation of more funding and training hours to this specialized training (Walsh & Du Plooy, 2023). Student-athletes can also advocate for more top-down action from the NCAA. By providing clear guidelines about MST in training hour regulations, or implementing MST resources across various college sports programs, the NCAA has an opportunity to increase the accessibility and implementation of MST in North American collegiate sports. As a result of this, the NCAA can be a major contributing factor to the increased success in collegiate athletes at all division levels. Future research should be completed in order to derive the most efficient and cost-effective method for sports-specific and individualized MST delivery in "individual team sports", such as golf. Future generations of student-athletes will become more successful in the sports sector by mastering and balancing physical and mental skills, while also accumulating

skills that can be applied in their selected professional settings.

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