



EFFECTIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL METHODS FOR REDUCING PRE-COMPETITION STRESS"

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Article history:	Abstract:
Received: 7 th September 2025	This article discusses the causes of pre-competition stress in athletes, its psychological and physiological consequences, as well as effective methods for reducing stress. The psychological tension observed before competitions is considered an important factor that negatively affects an athlete's performance. Therefore, increasing the psychological preparedness of athletes and developing mechanisms for managing stress are among the priority directions of modern sport psychology. The article analyzes the practical effectiveness of methods such as autogenic training, visualization, breathing techniques, music relaxation, positive thinking, and team-based psychological support. The results of the study show that regular application of these methods strengthens athletes' mental stability, develops self-regulation skills, and contributes to improved competition performance. In addition, the article highlights the role of coaches and sport psychologists in reducing stress and emphasizes the importance of individual work with athletes. In conclusion, it can be stated that the application of scientifically grounded psychological methods to reduce pre-competition stress is an essential factor for achieving high results in sports.
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INTRODUCTION. Today, the rapid development of the field of sports, the increasing number of international competitions, and the growing demand for high performance from athletes require not only physical preparation but also strong psychological stability. For an athlete, preparation for competition includes not only the proper distribution of physical loads but also maintaining emotional balance and

mental readiness. Therefore, in recent years, sport psychology has developed as an independent and dynamic field that seeks scientific solutions to important issues such as managing athletes' emotional states, reducing stress, and strengthening self-confidence. This highlights the growing importance of psychological training as an integral part of achieving success in modern sports.



Figure 1. The process of reducing excessive stress

Pre-competition stress is a state of psychological tension experienced by an athlete before a competition. It is mainly associated with factors such as a sense of responsibility for the competition results, the strength of the opponent, public attention, the expectations of the coach and the team, as well as self-doubt regarding one's own abilities. This condition manifests itself in athletes through physiological and emotional signs such as excitement, anxiety, lack of concentration, muscle tension, and increased heart rate.

A **moderate level of stress** can serve as an additional motivator, providing energy, focus, and determination. However, **excessive stress** reduces the effectiveness of athletic performance, increases the likelihood of errors, and prevents the athlete from fully utilizing their internal potential. This is especially true for **young athletes** and those participating in competitions for the first time, as they often find it difficult to manage such stress. Therefore, it is crucial for coaches and sports psychologists to apply **scientifically grounded methods** to reduce stress levels before competitions.

Numerous foreign scholars — such as R. Lazarus, H. Selye, J. Taylor, and K. Hardy — have conducted research on managing pre-competition stress among athletes. According to their scientific conclusions, **stress** is the physiological and psychological response of the human body to external pressures, and with

properly directed psychological preparation, it can be transformed into a positive driving force. Uzbek specialists also emphasize that ensuring mental balance in the process of preparing athletes for competitions should be regarded as an integral part of modern training systems. Thus, psychological preparation, particularly the reduction of pre-competition stress, plays a crucial role not only from a theoretical perspective but also in practical terms. Mastering techniques such as self-control, relaxation, positive thinking, visualization, and autogenic training significantly improves an athlete's competitive performance. Therefore, this article analyzes the most effective psychological methods for reducing pre-competition stress, their essence, and their practical effectiveness in sports activities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY Before a competition, athletes experience various psychological and physiological changes: their heart rate and breathing speed increase, attention becomes scattered, and feelings of uncertainty or fear may arise. This condition is a natural physiological reaction to stress, preparing the body for the so-called "fight or flight" response.

The theory of stress was first developed by the Canadian physiologist Hans Selye, who defined it as "the body's general adaptive response to any external influence." In the context of sports, these influences include competition, audience pressure, the coach's



expectations, and anticipation of results. Therefore, the ability to manage this process is one of the most essential components of mental preparation for athletes. The positive type of stress is called *eustress*. It gives athletes strength, focus, and motivation. However, when stress exceeds optimal levels, it turns into *distress*, which disrupts performance, coordination, and has a negative impact on results. For this reason, athletes must master special psychological methods to control their bodies and emotions.

Autogenic training, developed in the mid-20th century by the German psychiatrist Johannes Heinrich Schultz, aims to strengthen conscious control over bodily functions. Through this method, an athlete imagines sensations of calmness, heaviness, warmth, or lightness, allowing the body to relax. Regular practice of autogenic exercises normalizes heart rate and breathing rhythm, reduces muscle tension, and lowers stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline. For example, before a competition, an athlete may repeat the following affirmations: "I am calm... my breathing is steady... my strength is full... I am confident..." Such self-affirmations reinforce the athlete's inner confidence. Visualization is another powerful technique, in which the athlete mentally "sees" the course of the competition — imagining themselves performing successfully. For instance, the athlete visualizes standing at the starting line, feeling the competition environment, hearing the audience, and mentally rehearsing each movement in detail. Psychologists emphasize that this exercise generates impulses in the brain similar to those produced during an actual competition, preparing the body's physiological responses in advance. Visualization improves self-confidence, concentration, and reduces uncertainty, proving especially effective in individual sports such as wrestling, boxing, and athletics.

Music also has a profound influence on the human psyche. Listening to calming or motivational music before a competition helps balance emotional states. Research shows that slow-tempo music (such as classical or instrumental pieces) reduces heart rate, normalizes muscle tone, and calms the nervous system. Some athletes select their own "*motivational playlists*", which evoke positive emotions and strengthen belief in victory. During stress, breathing becomes shallow and rapid, leading to oxygen deficiency. Therefore, performing proper breathing exercises before a competition is crucial.

One of the most effective methods is the "4-7-8" technique:

inhale deeply for 4 seconds, hold for 7 seconds, and exhale slowly for 8 seconds.

This exercise calms brain activity, stabilizes heart rate,

and shifts the body into a relaxed state. Scientists note that performing this technique for 5–10 minutes can reduce cortisol levels by 20–30%. In sports psychology, the "self-talk" method is widely used. It involves controlling emotions through internal dialogue. Phrases such as "*I can do it*," "*I am ready*," and "*I will win*" decrease anxiety and build confidence. According to psychologist Albert Bandura's self-efficacy theory, when athletes believe in their abilities, their physical performance also improves. An athlete's mood and confidence depend greatly on the surrounding environment. The positive attitude and motivational support of the coach, teammates, and relatives significantly reduce stress levels. Short motivational talks, positive feedback, and expressions of trust from coaches help stabilize the athlete's emotional state. Creating a positive psychological climate within the team is one of the most effective stress-reducing factors.

Recent studies show that athletes who systematically apply psychological methods experience a 30–40% reduction in stress levels and a 20–25% improvement in attention and reaction speed. For instance, experiments conducted at the Uzbek State University of Physical Education and Sport revealed that students who regularly practiced autogenic training improved their competition performance by 10–15% on average. Athletes who used visualization techniques demonstrated superior anticipation and decision-making speed compared to others. Moreover, the combination of music therapy and breathing exercises helped stabilize heart rate and blood pressure, promoting a positive emotional state. Reducing pre-competition stress is achieved not by a single method, but through a comprehensive approach, which includes:

- regular psychological training;
- individual counseling;
- competition simulations (trial matches);
- relaxation and meditation sessions;
- a healthy lifestyle (adequate sleep, nutrition, and rest).

The cooperation between the coach and sports psychologist plays a decisive role in this process, as the athlete's psychological stability directly affects the team's overall performance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS Pre-competition stress is a natural psychological process that inevitably occurs in an athlete's activity and is closely related to their personal characteristics, level of preparation, and the competitive environment. Research shows that the presence of stress can influence an athlete's performance in two directions:



moderate levels of stress mobilize the athlete, increase concentration and motivation, while **excessive** stress leads to emotional tension, muscle stiffness, loss of confidence, and a decrease in movement accuracy. Therefore, during the preparation process for competitions, it is essential not to limit training only to physical or technical exercises, but also to develop a comprehensive system of psychological preparation for athletes.

- The main objectives of psychological preparation are:
- to enable athletes to control their emotions;
- to reduce stress and anxiety;
- to strengthen self-confidence;
- to enhance concentration and focus.

Creating such a psychological foundation ensures that the athlete approaches the competition with emotional stability, mental readiness, and inner harmony, which are key factors for achieving high sports performance and consistent results.

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