



Enhancing Athletic Performance Through Counselling: a Social Work Perspective On University Athletes In Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of counselling, grounded in social work and informed by sport psychology, in enhancing the performance of university athletes in Nigeria. This paper adopts a narrative and conceptual review approach to examine the role of counselling, grounded in social work and informed by sport psychology. The study explores four key domains: psychological stress and coping, motivation and goal-setting, performance metrics, and the integration of social work interventions. Evidence indicates that counselling significantly mitigates anxiety, fosters resilience, and improves mental skills, contributing to better athletic outcomes. The findings also highlight contextual challenges unique to Nigerian universities, including limited access to psychological services, inadequate facilities, financial constraints, and cultural stigma surrounding mental health, which may moderate intervention effectiveness. The study recommends institutionalizing counselling services, implementing structured goal-setting programs, investing in athlete welfare, and promoting mental health awareness to optimize performance. By integrating psychological support with social work interventions, this study provides a holistic approach to sustaining athlete well-being and enhancing competitive performance, offering practical implications for sports administrators, policymakers, and practitioners in higher education contexts.

Keywords:

Counselling, Social Work, Sport Psychology, Athletic Performance, University Athletes

INTRODUCTION

Social work practice fundamentally incorporates counselling, which is the systematic assistance to people who encounter emotional, behavioral and social problems [1]. Counselling increases mental resilience, adaptive coping and well-being by way of empathetic dialogue, guidance and skill development. Such consequences are especially important in the case of student-athletes, whose stress levels and role demands are too high to manage just through informal support systems [2].

University athletes occupy dual roles, balancing academic responsibilities with intensive training and competitive demands. This twofold role subjects them to stressors like educational pressure, extreme workouts and showcasing anticipations that can jeopardize their psychological well-being and athletic results [3]. The research has demonstrated that stress, anxiety, and burnout rates reported by student-athletes are greater than those of non-athlete individuals, which indicates that this population is also psychologically susceptible [4].

Structured psychological treatments (such as counselling and mental skills training) have been shown to promote mental health and improve athletic performance in the world. As an example, goal-setting, cognitive restructuring, and relaxation training are sport psychology interventions that have been related to enhanced focus, resilience, and competitive readiness in collegiate athletes [5], [2]. These interventions do not just work against the ill-effects of stress; they give the athletes the means by which to maximize performance.

In Nigeria, research has shown that students at universities in the country face serious mental health issues, such as stress, anxiety, and depression, not even considering the athletic obligations [6]. Such results indicate that student-athletes are at risk of being compounded, as they have to endure the extra demands of training, competition, and social factors. Studies point to insufficient psychological care as the cause of decreased attention, lowered performance, and higher risks of being hurt [7].

The social support networks, such as peers, family, and coaches, tend to be the main coping strategy among Nigerian university athletes during high-stress situations [8]. The networks

are good, but they might not offer the evidence-based and structured support required to support more profound psychological needs. As a result, interest in the necessity of the formal counselling service that should be specially designed to meet the specific needs of student-athletes in Nigeria is increasing.

Psychological qualities include mindfulness, mental toughness and resilience also exhibit empirical phenomena that are important predictors of athletic performance and long-term performance [9], [8]. Such results support the idea that one cannot be simply trained to achieve good performance, but cognitive and emotional issues can equally contribute to the result, and they can be resolved through counselling and sport psychology programs.

In this light, the idea to introduce social work counselling in sports programs of Nigerian universities is an attractive chance to improve the results of athletics and assist in coping with the mental state. With the integration of evidence-based counselling strategies and the principles of sport psychology, universities could support student-athletes in a holistic way to overcome mental health issues and improve their performance. The paper will discuss the role of counselling interventions based on the social working practice guided by the sport psychology in maximizing the performance and well-being of the Nigerian university athletes.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION COUNSELLING

Counselling refers to a process that is organized and professional and aims at assisting an individual or a group of people to overcome personal, emotional, and social challenges. According to [1], counselling is a process where trained professionals systematically guide the clients through counseling so that they can be allowed to explore issues, interpret their experiences, and establish adaptive coping mechanisms. On the same note, the authors [10] define counselling as a goal-focused and participative activity that helps the individual to improve himself, solve problems, and adjust emotionally. Simply stated, counselling is not just a gift of advice-giving, but it is a method based on empathy, active listening, and evidence-based interventions to develop not only self-awareness

but also positive behavioral change.

Within the sporting field, counselling assumes a special dimension in that it deals with performance issues. According to [2], athletes usually face stress, anxiety in performance, injuries and interpersonal conflicts, which may have adverse impacts on the mental health and sport performance. Sport specific counselling may thus be both proactive and curative and provide the tool in sporting people to address stress overload, improve concentration and maintain motivation. According to [5], the counselling environment of sports positively works towards enhancing emotional regulation and resilience and coping mechanisms thus contributing to the best performance. Counselling is performed by combining psychological support to the training regimens to enable athletes to stay in a good state of mind enabling their full potential in competition.

SOCIAL WORK

Social work is a career that is dedicated to enhancing human well being and solving life problems by applying specific interventions at individual, group as well as communal level. [1] explain that social work involves the direct practice and general social intervention that is aimed at improving the ability of individuals to perceive complex situations in their lives. [11] also contributes that the social work is concerned with the comprehensive growth of a person with psychological, social, and environmental factors being interconnected in the formation of outcomes. The multidimensional approach is quite consistent with the needs of athletes, as their performance is determined by a set of personal abilities, social situations, and organizational conditions.

In the field of sports, social work is a source of knowledge about the overall determinants of the well-being and performance of athletes. The interventions can be counselling, advocacy, crisis management, mobilization of resources, and conflict resolution [11]. As an example, social workers may help athletes overcome institutional issues and challenges, cope with academic and athletic stress and mental health resources. [12] assert that athletic social work interventions do have the potential to help individuals develop resilience, improve inter-personal skills, and

develop favorable sporting culture. Systemic and institutional constraints may be imposed on university athletes in Nigeria, and social work views offer important tools to overcome them and help them develop as a whole.

SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

Sport psychology is a field that examines psychological, cognitive and emotional attributes that affect the performance and involvement of athletes. According to [5], sport psychology can be described as the science of the influence of psychological abilities and mental conditions on the sport results and the way of how performance could be enhanced by training programs. [13] build on this, indicating that the techniques applied by sport psychology to maximize mental and physical performance are goal-setting, creating imagery, enhancing concentration, self-talk, and training relaxation. Practically, sport psychology fills a gap between physical conditioning and mental readiness to accomplish the task, providing an athlete with the means to manage the pressure, stay focused, and maintain the motivation.

Sport psychology in this study supports the counselling interventions that have been given to the university athletes. The combination of sport psychology principles enables the direct intervention of performance-related mental skills, e.g. confidence, stress management, and resilience, through counseling programs [3]. This is because this integration will make mental health support not only therapeutic but it is also performance-enhancing, hence the twofold advantage. Indicatively, imagery, cognitive restructuring, and the ability to prepare the athlete to competition situations, decrease stress, and maximize attention are all examples of techniques that help the athlete to achieve better results, showing the direct relationship between psychological interventions and the results on the field.

ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE

Athletic performance can be defined as the capability of an individual to perform tasks that pertain to the sport in an efficient manner, subject to the demands of the physical, psychological and environmental conditions. According to [13], performance is

multidimensional, and it is not only the technical and physical skill, but also cognitive, emotional, and strategic capabilities. Equally, [14] note that to perform optimally, there is need to combine physical conditioning, mastery of the technical, tactical, and psychological preparedness. This is what makes this holistic perspective essential because the success of athletes in sports depends on more than just physical training.

To improve athletic performance thus, there is need to undertake interventions that will target the physiological and psychological determinants. Mental ability in terms of concentration, endurance, drive and emotional control is equally essential as strength, speed, or agility [5]. Studies have also established that athletes undergoing organized psychological services demonstrate high levels of consistency, less performance anxiety and are better and less stressed when dealing with competitive pressure [2]. Therefore, combining counselling, sport psychology, and training interventions is a necessity to achieve the full potential of the athlete and maintain their performance on a long-term basis.

UNIVERSITY ATHLETES

University athletes constitute a group of students in institutions of higher learning who are engaged in organized competitive sports and take up academic work. [4] note that this group of people is exposed to a distinct group of stressors, such as the need to manage both coursework and rigorous training, social demands, and expectations of the coach, peers, and family. Student-athletes have a dual role and this exposes them to extra cognitive and emotional pressure that is likely to affect academic and athletic performance unless it is managed appropriately. The challenges encountered by university students in Nigeria have a certain impact on stress and performance, as they appear to be unique to university athletes. According to [7], the lack of access to sport psychology services, lack of adequate counselling support, and institutional restrictions are some of the factors that increase vulnerability among the Nigerian student-athletes. Even though these problems exist, informal support networks (including peers and coaches) are often used by many athletes, but they do not offer the same structural and evidence-based interventions that can be

effective in helping the athletes perform optimally. Therefore, incorporating counselling and sport psychology provision into the Nigerian universities is an eminent approach towards not only improving the mental health and sport performance of student-athletes.

COUNSELLING IN SOCIAL WORK AND ITS ROLE IN PERFORMANCE

Social work functions mainly through counselling which involves the systematic and professional assistance to people or groups of people who are facing emotional, behavioral and social challenges. According to [15], the counselling in social work means a goal-focused and organized process of helping clients to define the problem, experiment with feelings, and acquire adaptive coping strategies. In the process, one can have an understanding of himself or herself, be able to control their emotions and make a sound judgment regarding their behavior and relationship. [10] also point out that the process of counselling is collaborative based on the principles of empathy and active listening and is directed at the growth of personality and problem-solving. In social work, counselling is not only restricted to crisis intervention but also to preventive care, which leads to the enhancement of resilience and well-being in daily life.

Counselling takes on a new, performance-related aspect in the sporting context. Athletes experience special forms of stressors such as performance anxiety, injuries, coach and peer pressure, juggling between academic and athletic roles and particularly in the university level [2], [3]. Counselling gives the sportsman ways to overcome these challenges which include relaxation, cognitive restructuring, goal setting and visualization exercises. Counselling also serves as a preventive and curative measure taking into consideration the psychological and emotional obstacles that might hinder performances, thus being able to be focused, confident, and motivated during the intensity of competition [5] [13].

In addition to personal mental well-being, the counselling aspect of social work is also concerned with the relational and social aspects of athletic performance. Sportspeople are frequently involved in team-based

disagreements, have social isolation issues, or struggle to fit in with their schoolmates [4]. Social work counselling assists the athletes to manoeuvre these social processes through facilitating communication, conflict management, and empathies. As an example the group counselling sessions or the peer-support intervention can promote team cohesion, reinforce interpersonal relationship and create a supportive environment that indirectly boosts the performance outcomes. This social work philosophy emphasizes the social principle of well-being and performance as related to larger social conditions [1].

The role of counselling among student-athletes in Nigeria has developed increased awareness in the country, but it has yet to be incorporated into the university sports programs on a formal basis. Studies have found that academic stress, a lack of access to professional psychological services, and the expectation to perform well are the factors that increase stress levels among Nigerian university athletes [7]. Another type of coping, called informal, includes the use of peers or family support, which is generally used but might lack the structured, evidence-based advice that would be provided to ensure maximum psychological functioning. Therefore, this gap can be bridged through counselling provided by trained social workers that will provide athletes with skills to overcome stress, improve mental strength, and perform better during pressure.

Prevention is also done through counselling which promotes mental health literacy and proactive coping mechanisms. Social work counselling allows identifying the initial signs of stress, anxiety, or burnout early on to prevent any of the aforementioned problems in more serious psychological or performance issues [15]. In the case of student-athletes, activities such as stress management, time management, and goal-setting performed as proactive counselling can help academic and athletic performance alike. The international research proves that athletes who have undergone an organized counselling or mental skills training have a higher concentration, lower competition anxiety, and performance stability [2]. [5].

Moreover, the counselling interventions are capable of being designed to respond to the culturally-specific issues which shape the

behavior and performance of athletes. The complexity of social norms, educational systems, and resource deficit in the Nigerian context might influence the perceptions of stress and help-seeking in athletes. An appreciation of these contextual factors can thus inform social work counselling that is culturally sensitive and thus will be engaging and effective [6]. As an example, group-based counselling when incorporated with mentorship programs gives athletes an opportunity to form coping mechanisms in an environment that is culturally familiar and socially supportive, which strengthens psychological resilience and performance potential.

Lastly, social work counselling is a medium that connects psychological health and sporting performance. It acknowledges that the performance cannot be influenced by physical training or talent alone but rather heavily affected by emotional control, cognition tactics, and social intervention. Universities should consider counselling one of the tools to implement into athletic programs to offer a holistic support mechanism that meets the multidimensional needs of student-athletes. This practice is consistent with the best practices of sport psychology and social work worldwide, as it requires counselling as the fundamental strategy to improve the performance of university athletes, develop resilience, and accomplish overall holistic development [3], [1], [5].

COUNSELLING STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES FOR ENHANCING ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE

Athletic performance counselling is overly based on evidence-based psychological methods aimed at enhancing the mental preparedness, emotional stability, and the consistency of the performance of athletes. Cognitive-behavioural counselling (CBC) is one of the most popular methods that aim at recognising and changing negative thinking patterns that compromise confidence and concentration. [16] points out that cognitive restructuring assists the individual to substitute irrational cognitions with performance-enhancing thoughts, which are adaptive. This method is useful in sporting environments where athletes can reshape their self-doubt, fear of failure, and build a strong mental state. A study by [13] reveals that athletes using CBC have a

better concentration, less anxiety, and more self-efficacy that lead to better performance consistency during pressure.

Mental skills training (MST) is another important technique in sport psychology which is a combination of counselling techniques with the enhancement of performance. Goal-setting, imagery, arousal control, and attentional control are mental abilities that are necessary in maximizing performance in a competitive environment [5]. One such example is goal-setting, a process used to help athletes to divide long-term performance goals into shorter, feasible goals, which increases motivation and clarity [17]. Visualization or imagery training enables the sportspeople to perform a task mentally, which activates neural pathways that enhance the use of skills and confidence [18]. When led by means of counselling, these techniques avail athletes with sure-footed instruments of staying calm, improving focus, and competing accurately.

Stress management and relaxation training are also part of counselling particularly to the athletes who have difficulty with performance anxiety or who are highly aroused. Deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and mindfulness meditation are the techniques that have been shown to decreasing the amount of physiological tension and enhancing the ability to control attention [19]. Relaxation techniques aid athletes to stay composed, calm and focused within such competitive environments where consistency of performance depends on emotional control. As an illustration, the study by [20] indicates that the strategies of emotional regulation could improve decision-making accuracy and performance results in high-pressure situations significantly. In the case of Nigerian athletes who usually have to perform under great pressure but with little psychological backing, these measures can become performance-altering.

Social work as practiced in counselling also places emphasis on the solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) as it is very successful in the sport setting where time constraints prevail and short term results are required. Instead of focusing on the problems, SFBT urges athletes to discover the strengths, establish attainable goals, and identify action-focused solutions [21]. This strategy will

help the athletes gain confidence, boost self-motivation, and think about the future. It is especially applicable in dealing with lack of motivation, decline in performance or post-injury rehabilitation, which is usually a problem with college athletes.

Moreover, motivational interviewing (MI) is often used in counseling interventions in order to increase the internal motivation and devotion of athletes to performance objectives. [22] state that MI is a client-focused approach that assists individuals to overcome ambivalence and enhance intrinsic motivation by means of reflective dialogue. MI in the sporting contexts is useful with the athletes who have issues with discipline, compliance to training, or academic and athletic roles. MI can be critically needed to keep the Nigerian university athletes committed and minimize burnout as they are prone to athletic training and academic studies which involve heavy training regimes and exhausting school hours.

Another part of the strategies of improvement of athletic performance is group counselling and team-based interventions. Group formats promote the aspects of peer learning, common problem-solving, and social cohesion that positively affect the performance of a group and an individual directly [23]. Team-building activities, team goal-setting, and team conflict management activities contribute to enhancing communication and mitigating inter-personal tension within the teams. Competitive rivalry or academic pressures (as may undermine team cohesion in most universities in Nigeria where institutional support is weak) can be used to enhance team identity and motivate the team through group counselling which would ultimately result in better performance outcomes. Lastly, crisis counselling and psychosocial assistance are significant in dealing with sudden stresses like injuries, educational failure, family or traumatic experiences. Crisis intervention by social workers makes athletes stabilize, re-engage control, and go back to training and competition [24]. To the athletes in Nigeria, who might be struggling with finances, lack of proper medical care, or unreliable family backgrounds, crisis counselling is a much needed safety net to not only ensure their mental wellbeing, but also their continued existence as athletes. The

combination of crisis management and performance-oriented counselling would help practitioners to make sure that an athlete does not lose the career and mental balance following the occurrence of the problems that are not pre-planned.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE

The role of social work in improving the performance of the athlete is achieved through the psychosocial aspects of the athletes that determine their well-being and functioning. Social work follows a holistic, person-in-environment approach to development unlike coaching (which is usually based on physical and technical development), where the social, emotional, and environmental factors influence performance [25]. Such an orientation will enable social workers to assist athletes with a family conflict, academic stress, or social economic issues, which are known to affect mental stability and athletic performance (4). Social workers, among other things assist athletes to cope with these stressors through counselling and case management, which enhances readiness, focus and resilience during competitions.

Second, a significant contribution of social work to athletic performance is video promotion of mental health and psychological strength. Studies have continually indicated that athletes in universities, in addition to high-stress levels associated with academic workload, training needs, and pressure to compete [3]. Social workers who are being trained in therapeutic interventions like cognitive-behavioral, problem-solving counselling, and crisis interventions provide the necessary help in overcoming anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and feeling of doubt [16]. The available evidence suggests that well-structured psychosocial support leads to better concentration, burnout, and competence continuity among athletes [26]. In this way, the social work becomes a safeguard in ensuring that athletes are psychologically stable and focused on performance.

The social work also affects athletic performance based on advocacy and mobilization of resources. Athletes in most cases in developing situations such as the Nigerian universities are faced with structural challenges like poor facilities, poor

accessibility to sport psychology services, and poor welfare systems [27]. Social workers recommend better welfare of athletes through involvement with institutions, finding medical or financial aid and provision of multidisciplinary care [1]. Through mobilization, referrals, and athlete-based policies, social workers eliminate institutional barriers that obstruct the process of athlete preparation and performance. Athletes become more prepared and demonstrate a better course of performance when such systemic barriers are eliminated [13].

Lastly, social work enhances performance in the sport as it promotes good social relationships, team spirit, and development of identity in the athletes. In most cases, athletes have interpersonal disagreements with their colleagues, role conflicts, and team dynamics, which impact motivation and performance [28]. Group counselling, conflict resolution approaches, and training in social skills are the methods employed by social workers in order to foster unity and a positive team atmosphere [11]. Increased team spirit has been associated with enhanced communication, common objectives and better competitiveness [29]. Also, social workers assist athletes to acquire life skills such as emotional control, time management, and ethical decision-making that are of long-lasting performance and long-term self-development. This holistic backing puts social work as an inseparable part of an optimal athletic performance.

SPORT PSYCHOLOGY AND ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE

Sport psychology is a very significant field in sport science as it is a study of mental process in determining an athlete's performance, the management of the emotional state of athletes and the behavioural plans of athletes in different conditions. In addition to other ones, sport psychology has introduced the mental skills training, which is a group of techniques that can improve the performance of diverse sports, among which it has been shown to be effective in this direction, such as: goal-setting, imagery, concentration and arousal regulation [13]. These psychological skills have a direct impact on focus, an athlete's level of anxiety and overall motivation, all of which are essential to optimal

performance. Indicatively, studies indicate that, athletes who participate in well-organized goal-setting interventions exhibit greater persistence, more precise task orientation and greater performance results than those who do not undergo goal-setting training [17]. The facts highlight the significance of the psychological processes in physical performance and winning in competition.

Motivation and its role in influencing behavior and performance of an athlete is another basic field of sport psychology. The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) [28] suggests that optimal performance may occur when motivational climate experienced by the athletes is conducive to feelings of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Intrinsically motivated athletes tend to gain more resilience, better mastering of the skills and maintain their interest in the training process, but extrinsically motivated athletes can have trouble with pressure and burnout [31]. This is particularly true if the sport is associated with the university where the academic goes to school, and his/her motivation and emotional state are affected by the stresses and expectations of the institutions. Understanding the processes of motivation enables practitioners (social workers, coaches etc.) to create positive conditions that will help to ensure sustained performance excellence.

Another important area of study in sport psychology that has a direct influence on the performance of an athlete is emotion regulation. Competition anxiety, fear of failure, and performance expectations are some of the common stressors that athletes face and are capable of interfering with cognitive functioning and physical coordination [30]. Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning (IZOF) is a theory that states that each athlete functions at optimal performance when they are within a certain emotional zone and when they move outside of this zone negatively affects their performance [30]. These techniques are often used to help athletes adjust their arousal level and emotional state while playing, such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation or mindfulness training [32]. The tactics can be transferred to any sport and can help an athlete to stay calm and in the moment when things are at their most critical.

In addition to confidence and self-efficacy, sport psychology also maintains the importance of these factors in the final results of sports. When athletes believe they can do a task, they will persist with the task in the face of challenges and difficulties, as well as use adaptive coping strategies and perform the task at a higher level of performance [33]. Empirical research has shown that self-efficacy is an indicator of persistence in training, quality of decision making and even competitive performance both in a team and individual sport [34]. Thus, the most effective ways to build confidence are mastery experiences, positive feedbacks, and controlled exposures to challenging situations that are part of athlete development. Social work counselling can be used as an additional strategy to deal with the following external factors that might lead to the destabilisation of confidence and psychological stability: family stress; academic pressure; financial difficulties.

In addition, sport psychology aids in understanding group dynamics and the effect that they may have on athletic performance, particularly in group sports. Team cohesion, team communication, team leadership and team efficacy also are shown to be predictive of team performance and athlete satisfaction [23]. If the team environment provides opportunities for trust, teamwork and team responsibility, the players have a greater probability of performing effectively and staying motivated throughout the season. In the case of university athletes that are often subject to the changing team situations and academic changes, cohesive team environments could safeguard against stress and lead to overall well-being. The combination of group-oriented sport psychology interventions and social work interventions are important in developing supportive social networks that are important to performance and personal growth.

However, there are other areas in sport psychology that can directly impact on the sustainability of performance, such as psychological preparedness and injury recovery. Psychological reactions to injury are likely to include fear, frustration and depression, and these are also likely to negatively impact rehabilitation and time to play [35]. Positive self-talk, setting goals in the process of rehabilitation, and imagery of successful return to play are sport

psychology techniques that aid in faster recovery and improve the confidence [36]. With regards to the social work interventions, these may be complemented by social workers participating in social support programs with athletes, such as emotional distress counselling, support by using appropriate rehabilitation resources, and communication between medical staff, coaches and family.

Finally, sport psychology provides key theories and research tools that can significantly affect sports performance. This makes it an important instrument in improving the ability to tackle both the mental performance and psychosocial issues that affect athletes especially in obstacles-constrained situations like in the case of the Nigerian universities. The recognition of the interaction of the mental processes, the emotional stability, the social setting and the performance result, is a holistic and long-term perspective of how sport psychology and social work work together to support a university athlete in developing their performance.

INTEGRATION OF SPORT PSYCHOLOGY INTO SOCIAL WORK COUNSELLING

The working environment for University athletes in Nigeria is complex because of the competing demands from academic, athletic and social factors that affect and influence the performance of University athletes to a great extent. One of the most challenging difficulties is the balance between coursework and intense training and competition regimes [39]. Unlike the Nigerian counterpart who is supported by better-endowed systems, the academic support of athletes (academic adviser, specific learning expert etc.) is not always readily available to the Nigerian university athlete. Often, these are related to a student-athlete's status, leading to stress, fatigue and reduced engagement in academic activities, and consequently, to poor performance and academic engagement in the classroom and on the field [40]. The institutional cultures make this stress even greater by putting the weight on academic achievement to the extent of sports progression where the students have to struggle with this conflict with little or no support at all.

Another peculiarity is the inadequate provision of sports equipment, facilities and technical support in the Nigerian Universities. There are many

challenges faced by many campuses such as the lack of quality infrastructure, poor playing grounds and old training facilities; thus further complicating the best development of athletes [27]. Financial shortfalls also limit the availability of qualified coaches and trainers, and even medical personnel; and athletic programs do not offer the kind of multi-disciplinary program often found with college sports programs. This resource scarcity can cause to poor training quality, high risk of injuries, and failure to reach the national and international excellence [39]. In case of unreliable institutional investment, athletes usually turn to individual motivation and external sources to support their training.

The other major gap in the Nigerian University sports system is Psychological support. But sport psychology and sport counsellors are not routinely integrated into the athletic program of the developed countries, as in the case of the Nigerian universities, which have limited access to such psychological services with the specific aim of addressing mental health problems among athletes [38]. This deficiency leaves athletes vulnerable to stress that is unable to be controlled, performance anxiety, burnout and emotional anguish conditions which have a significant impact on the capability of the athlete to perform [4]. The culture stigma of seeking help, particularly for mental health, can also be experienced by athletes, which further may constrain the opportunity for them to access psychological services [6]. So, many sportsmen suffer from mental and emotional stress without expressing it, which aggravates the state of condition for action and health in the future.

Another contextual hindrance of the university athletes in Nigeria is the financial hardship they face. Many times, the lack of scholarships, low salaries or other personal economic problems force athletes to pursue an additional line of work or secure funds to train while they are away from their sport and unable to focus on their training [41]. For some athletes, sports is also linked to other costs such as food, training facilities and transport costs etc. that most universities may not be able to cover. All these economic pressures contribute to the stress and can lead to demoralization of long-term sport activity particularly with low income sports players. Conversely, the athletes in well-financed systems

tend to enjoy a strong financial support that will enable them to spend more time and energy towards training and competition.

Social and cultural factors also affect the Nigerian University athletes' experiences as well. A number of athletes have to deal with social pressures on gender roles, family roles, and culture that do not favor pursue elite sports [42]. In particular, women athletes suffer from problems related to cultural stereotypes, lack of institutional support and less opportunities to participate in sports, which are detrimental for their performance and retention in sports [43]. Furthermore, sportsmen from university have often to be pushed by teachers, teammates and family to play and this can lead to stress and reduce enjoyment in sport. The social forces are an example of the role supportive counselling systems based on social work models play in instigating emotional stability and well coping.

Another important problem to Nigerian university athletes is injury management. The unreachable nature of the sport medicine specialists, physiotherapists, and rehabilitation facilities implies that most injuries are either not addressed or poorly addressed [39]. This also increases the long-term consequences of re-injury; non-training; and psychological distress in the fear of re-injury or loss of athletic self-identity. Poor injury management mechanisms also put the athletes at pressure of self-treating or playing despite injury, which puts their health at risk in the long-term. While medical care is required to treat an injury, a psychological support to deal with emotional reactions to the resources of an injury is required, but is also under supplied at Nigeria universities [36].

The administrative and policy related issues is also a contributing factor to the problems facing the University athletes in Nigeria. The policies of sports inconsistency, bureaucracy, lack of transparency in the process of team selection, and lack of motivation of athletes to participate in sports activities negatively influence the encouragement of active participation and have a negative impact on confidence in institutional forms [27]. There are also many universities that don't have a well-developed athlete development program or even a performance monitoring system, which makes it difficult to track the athlete's progress and needs aren't being met.

There are no well-organised welfare programmes which means athletes often seem to be without guidance, advocacy and protection of their rights that can be provided by social workers in a unique role.

UNIVERSITY ATHLETES IN NIGERIA: CONTEXTUAL CHALLENGES

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Another contextual hindrance of the university athletes in Nigeria is the financial hardship they face. Many times, the lack of scholarships, low salaries or other personal economic problems force athletes to pursue an additional line of work or secure funds to train while they are away from their sport and unable to focus on their training [41]. For some athletes, sports is also linked to other costs such as food, training facilities and transport costs etc. that most universities may not be able to cover. All these economic pressures contribute to the stress and can lead to demoralization of long-term sport activity particularly with low income sports players. Conversely, the athletes in well-financed systems tend to enjoy a strong financial support that will enable them to spend more time and energy towards training and competition.

Social and cultural factors also affect the Nigerian University athletes' experiences as well. A number of athletes have to deal with social pressures on gender roles, family roles, and culture that do not favor pursue elite sports [42]. In particular, women athletes suffer from problems related to cultural stereotypes, lack of institutional support and less opportunities to participate in sports, which are detrimental for

their performance and retention in sports [43]. Furthermore, sportsmen from university have often to be pushed by teachers, teammates and family to play and this can lead to stress and reduce enjoyment in sport. The social forces are an example of the role supportive counselling systems based on social work models play in instigating emotional stability and well coping.

Another important problem to Nigerian university athletes is injury management. The unreachable nature of the sport medicine specialists, physiotherapists, and rehabilitation facilities implies that most injuries are either not addressed or poorly addressed [39]. This also increases the long-term consequences of re-injury; non-training; and psychological distress in the fear of re-injury or loss of athletic self-identity. Poor injury management mechanisms also put the athletes at pressure of self-treating or playing despite injury, which puts their health at risk in the long-term. While medical care is required to treat an injury, a psychological support to deal with emotional reactions to the resources of an injury is required, but is also under supplied at Nigeria universities [36].

The administrative and policy related issues is also a contributing factor to the problems facing the University athletes in Nigeria. The policies of sports inconsistency, bureaucracy, lack of transparency in the process of team selection, and lack of motivation of athletes to participate in sports activities negatively influence the encouragement of active participation and have a negative impact on confidence in institutional forms [27]. There are also many universities that don't have a well-developed athlete development program or even a performance monitoring system, which makes it difficult to track the athlete's progress and needs aren't being met. There are no well-organised welfare programmes which means athletes often seem to be without guidance, advocacy and protection of their rights that can be provided by social workers in a unique role.

Table 1: Psychological Stress and Coping

Analytical Focus	Key Issues Identified	Relevant Theories/Models	Role of Counselling	Expected Outcomes
Psychological Stress & Coping	• Academic pressure • Competition anxiety • Social expectations • Emotional fatigue	Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)	• Teaches adaptive coping strategies • Reduces anxiety • Enhances emotional regulation • Supports cognitive restructuring	• Increased resilience • Improved focus and confidence • Reduced performance anxiety

As shown in Table 1, psychological stress is a critical variable that influences the performance of athletes in universities and coping is one of the important areas of counselling intervention that has potential for use. Significant stressors such as academic pressure, anxiety with competition, social pressure, and emotional exhaustion can all have an impact on mental stability and readiness to be ready to perform among the athletes as illustrated in the table. It is based on the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping and emphasises the role the athlete plays in his/her evaluation of stressors in relation to how he/she reacts to them emotionally and behaviourally. Counselling is one of such mechanisms whereby adaptive coping strategies such as cognitive restructuring, emotional regulation and stress management strategies can be learnt by the athletes. Through these interventions, athletes will be at a higher position of exhibiting resilience, better concentration and confidence when competing. Thus, Table 1 indicates that the targeted counselling with its roots in the conventional psychological models is fundamental to the decrease of the performance-inhibiting anxiety and enhancement of mental preparedness.

Table 2: Motivation and Goal-Setting

Analytical Focus	Key Issues Identified	Relevant Theories/Models	Role of Counselling	Expected Outcomes
Motivation & Goal-Setting	• Low intrinsic motivation • Poor goal clarity • Inconsistency in training • External pressures	Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000); Goal-Setting Theory (Locke & Latham, 2002)	• Enhances intrinsic motivation • Helps set SMART goals • Promotes self-regulation • Builds athlete autonomy	• Increased discipline • Clear performance direction • Improved persistence and commitment

Table 2 is dedicated to motivation and goal setting as the most important factors in athletic discipline, persistence, and success. The problems highlighted are typical of the university athletes and are faced by athletes in particular, namely the problem of lack of intrinsic motivation, inability to set goals, lack of consistency in training and the problem of outside pressure, which is peculiar to athletes in low-resource countries like Nigeria. The analytical model is based on Self-Determination Theory and Goal-Setting Theory that define the relationship between internal motivation and planned goals to enhance performance. Counselling is integral, as it helps the athletes to articulate clearly, practically and meaningfully, and invigorates self-regulation, self-motivation and autonomy. By coming up with SMART performance objectives and motivational plans, athletes are provided with guidance, commitment and long-term involvement in training. The table comes up with a conclusion that counselling does not only enhance the quality of motivation, but also enhances long-term discipline, which leads to better athletic performance.

Table 3: Performance Metrics

Analytical Focus	Key Performance Indicators	Key Supporting Literature	Influence of Counselling	Performance Impact
Performance Metrics	• Concentration • Decision-making • Reaction time • Emotional control • Confidence	Hanin (2007); Smith (2019); Gustafsson et al. (2017)	• Provides mental skills training • Builds resilience • Improves emotional balance • Enhances confidence through CBT	• Improved competitive outcomes • Faster recovery from setbacks • Higher consistency in performance

Table 3 shows the process of converting psychological variables to the quantifiable performance results. The table reveals that there are important performance markers, such as concentration, decision making accuracy, reaction time, emotional control and confidence, that have a significant influence in the competitive success. The literature in sport psychology indicates that athletes who are in their stable mental conditions have a high level of performance in these areas. Mental Skills Training (such as visualization, self-talk regulation and resilience building techniques) is used in counselling to improve these performance indicators. CB interventions can help athletes develop mental clarity and emotional composure to help them play under pressure. The projected effect is better competitive performance, quicker rebound of training setbacks as well as greater uniformity in training and competition. Therefore, Table 3 points out the fact that mental well-being cannot be separated with athletic performance and that the counselling interventions bring actual changes in the major performance determinants.

Table 4: Integration of Social Work Interventions

Analytical Focus	Core Challenges Addressed	Related Theories/Models	Counselling/Social Work Contributions	Expected Long-Term Outcomes
Social Work Interventions	• Academic strain • Financial difficulties • Poor facilities • Mental health stigma • Cultural pressures	Biopsychosocial Model (Engel, 1977); Ecological Systems Theory (Zastrow & Hessenauer, 2022)	• Advocacy for athlete welfare • Crisis intervention • Access to resources • Emotional support • Strengthening social environments	• Holistic athlete development • Sustainable performance improvement • Improved well-being • Reduced dropout rate

Table 4 highlights the key social, institutional and environmental concerns that the university athletes experience and how social work intervention can complement the psychological counselling. The table shows the key barriers of academic stress, economic insecurity, lack of sports facilities and mental health stigma, and cultural challenges. These systemic problems usually impair the performance of athletes to operate at their best and have a prolonged involvement in sport. The table demonstrates how social work takes into consideration the interrelated layers of influence that individual, relational, institutional and societal have on the athlete's performance through the

Biopsychosocial Model and the Ecological Systems Theory. The social work intervention strategies can include advocacy, welfare of the athlete, crisis management and emotional support and mobilization of resources. These interventions are embedded in sports programs and promote enabling environments that promote holistic development of the athlete. The long-term effect is expected to be the overall improvement in the condition, the potential for improved sustainability of performance and the reduction in drop-out rates. As a whole, Table 4 indicates the need for a multi-disciplinary approach that will involve counselling and systemic support to address the complex reality

of the Nigerian University athletes.

DISCUSSION

The present study explores how counselling, grounded in social work and informed by sport psychology, enhances the performance of university athletes in Nigeria. The discussion follows the analytical framework, examining psychological stress and coping, motivation and goal-setting, performance metrics, and the integration of social work interventions, while drawing on both international and Nigerian contexts.

PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS AND COPING

The results show that the state of psychological stress significantly affects the performance of university athletes, which is in line with the past studies highlighting the negative impact of competition anxiety, academic demands, and social expectations on the performance of athletes [4], [39]. Counselling interventions encompassing cognitive behavioural strategies, emotional control and stress management is much more resilient and focused and helps in the transactional model of stress and coping [44]. It supports the findings of [2] and [13] who highlight the detrimental effects of mental skill training on anxiety and the positive effects of mental skill training on coping ability.

Nevertheless, there are studies that indicate the idea that not every type of counselling has similar effects in a variety of situations. For example, [38] notes that the Nigerian culture might affect the athletes' desire to engage in all aspects of counselling intervention. This is contrary to the literature in the western setting where athletes are more accepting and compliant to psychological interventions [32]. Therefore, the effectiveness of counselling in the Nigerian universities may be moderated by the presence of cultural stigma, institutional support and accessibility of services, thus, counselling improves coping patterns.

MOTIVATION AND GOAL-SETTING

This research affirms that motivation and goal setting goal-setting are very important in maintaining discipline in training and improving sport. Self-Determination Theory [28] and Goal-Setting Theory [17] are powerful explanatory models that demonstrate that intrinsically motivated athletes who have clear objectives have more chances to persist in vain situations to

attain better performance outcomes [13]. The interventions with the help of counselling that assist athletes to create SMART goals, internalize motivations, and create self-regulation strategies are especially effective in the establishment of discipline and consistency.

Nevertheless, this paper also reveals the possible points of divergence. Environmental and systemic factors, including insufficient training facilities, coaching support, and finances, tend to compromise motivation among Nigerian university athletes, even in the case of individual counselling [41], [27]. This implies that motivation-enhancing counselling is required but not enough; it has to be combined with institutional changes and environmental assists to have maximum effectiveness. Conversely, studies within developed nations indicate that goal-setting interventions that are well-structured and organized tend to result in substantial performance improvement without the need to alter the system [29].

PERFORMANCE METRICS

There can also be some evidence of a direct link between psyche and measurable athletic performance results with performance metrics. According to the IZOF model of [30] the athletes in optimum emotional conditions and in optimum confidence rate are better in making decisions, reaction time, skilful performance. Imagery, positive self-talk and arousal regulation are counselling strategies used to achieve more focus and emotional stability in support of these outcomes [5,26]. Support for the results can be derived from investigations in the Nigerian context that shows that the athletes provided with psychological support exhibited greater level of performance stability with fewer mistakes that are related to anxiety [7].

But there are questions in the literature about the effectiveness of psychological interventions for supporting performance in resource-limited settings. While there are substantial benefits that are highlighted in the literature internationally, the Nigerian athletes are often constrained by established constraints within the system, such as lack of access to sports medicine, which may limit sport psychologists' measurable impact on the athletes' performance and experience of sport. Despite the positive benefits of sport

psychology interventions highlighted in literature internationally, the Nigerian athletes are often constrained by established constraints within the system such as lack of access to sports medicine that may limit the measurable impact of sport psychology interventions on their performance and experience of sport. This means that psychological interventions are important but need to be integrated in an overall multi-pronged strategy for addressing the mental and environmental situation.

INTEGRATION OF SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTIONS

The paper indicates the need to incorporate counselling into wider social work contexts. Through social work intervention, including advocacy, crisis intervention, resource mobilization and comprehensive support, systemic, social and environmental barriers are addressed that influence the effectiveness of performance [11, 25]. The findings show that the integration of sport psychology into a social work counselling can be used to offer a holistic perspective that can address mental skills, social stressors and institutional problems simultaneously. This integration is particularly useful to the Nigerian university athletes due to the absence of formal psychological care, inadequate financial resources and culture pressures [40, 38].

However, there are difficulties in implementing such integrated interventions. Limited trained staff, under prioritization of athlete welfare in institutions, and cultural stigma of counselling can all limit the access and success of counselling as a social work intervention [27]. The success rates are generally better in international studies, due to existing support systems and institutionalized mental health services [32]. This is an admission of the significance of contextual adaptation which is integration of counselling, sport psychology and advocacy to get sustainable results in Nigerian universities.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the above analysis shows that the application of counselling to enhance the performance of sports men and women in the university with the application of sport psychology and principles of social work are of

great importance. Counselling also assists athletes in coping with the demands posed by academic, training and competition as well as psychological stress, motivation, goal-setting and resilience. Also, the incorporation of counselling in the social work interventions can help to alleviate systemic and contextual problems with poor facilities, finances, cultural pressures etc. Though the constraints on resources and cultural stigma might mediate its functionality, a multidisciplinary approach based on holistic views, training of mental skills, social support, and institution advocacy has the most promising potential to maintain the well-being of athletes and maximize their performance outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analyses presented in this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Nigerian universities should institutionalize professional counselling services specifically tailored for athletes, combining sport psychology techniques with social work support. This will help athletes manage stress, develop coping strategies, and improve mental resilience, ultimately enhancing performance outcomes.
2. Universities should implement formal programs that guide athletes in setting clear, realistic, and measurable goals, while fostering intrinsic motivation and self-regulation. Such programs can improve training consistency, persistence, and overall athletic success.
3. Institutions should address systemic barriers by improving sports facilities, providing access to medical and psychological support, and offering financial assistance or scholarships. This holistic support framework will reduce environmental stressors that negatively affect performance.
4. Universities should conduct campaigns and workshops to reduce stigma around mental health and counselling, encouraging athletes to seek psychological support without fear or judgment. Promoting a culture that values mental well-being alongside physical training is critical for sustainable performance enhancement.

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