



## PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS TRAINING TO ENHANCE COMPETITIVE ANXIETY MANAGEMENT IN KURASH ATHLETES

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**Abstract.** This study examined the effects of an 8-week psychological skills training (PST) program on competitive anxiety management among elite Kurash athletes. Twenty athletes were randomly assigned to experimental (n=10) and control (n=10) groups. The experimental group received structured PST sessions focusing on relaxation, imagery, self-talk, and goal setting. Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2) scores were assessed pre- and post-intervention. Results indicated significant reductions in cognitive and somatic anxiety and increased self-confidence in the experimental group compared to controls. PST is recommended as an effective intervention to optimize psychological readiness in Kurash athletes.

**Keywords:** Kurash, psychological skills training, competitive anxiety, sports psychology, self-confidence.

**Introduction.** Kurash is an ancient Uzbek martial art that emphasizes explosive throws, rapid decision-making, and tactical adaptability under competitive pressure. Successful performance requires a combination of technical skills, physical conditioning, and psychological readiness. Among psychological factors, competitive anxiety is widely recognized as a determinant of performance outcomes (Weinberg & Gould, 2015).

Competitive anxiety manifests in two forms:

- Cognitive anxiety: Negative thoughts, self-doubt, and worries about failure
- Somatic anxiety: Physiological arousal such as muscle tension, elevated heart rate, and breathing irregularities (Jones et al., 1994).

High anxiety levels can impair motor coordination, reaction time, tactical judgment, and increase the likelihood of technical errors (Craft et al., 2003). Conversely, self-confidence serves as a protective factor, enabling athletes to interpret arousal symptoms positively, thereby enhancing performance.

### Psychological Skills Training (PST).

PST refers to systematic training of mental skills including relaxation, imagery, self-talk, goal setting, concentration, and arousal regulation (Vealey, 2007). Evidence from judo, wrestling, and taekwondo indicates that PST improves psychological readiness, reduces anxiety, and enhances confidence (Hanton et al., 2004).

### Literature gap.

Despite similar psychological demands, Kurash athletes have received limited structured PST interventions, and coaching remains predominantly focused on physical and technical aspects.

Aim of the study.

This study aimed to evaluate the effects of an 8-week PST program on cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and self-confidence among elite Kurash athletes, hypothesizing significant improvements in psychological outcomes post-intervention.

## Methods

### 2.1 Participants

Twenty elite male Kurash athletes (mean age  $20.8 \pm 2.3$  years; height  $173.5 \pm 5.2$  cm; weight  $74.9 \pm 6.8$  kg; training experience  $\geq 5$  years) volunteered. All were active national competitors, training  $\geq 4$  sessions per week. No participant reported prior formal psychological skills training.

#### Inclusion criteria:

- Age between 18–25 years
- Minimum 5 years of competitive Kurash experience
- Free of musculoskeletal injuries and psychological disorders in the last year.

Participants provided written informed consent. Ethical approval was obtained from Ferghana State University Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. FSU-REC-2025-08).

### 2.2 Intervention

Experimental group (n=10):

Received an 8-week PST program designed based on Vealey's (2007) mental skills training model.

#### Components:

1. Relaxation training: Progressive muscular relaxation and diaphragmatic breathing to reduce somatic anxiety.
2. Imagery: Visualization of successful throws, competition environments, and coping with stress scenarios.
3. Positive self-talk: Developing individualized, performance-enhancing verbal cues to build confidence and control thoughts.
4. Goal setting: Creating SMART goals for technical, tactical, and psychological preparation.

#### Session structure:

- Frequency: 2 sessions per week
- Duration: 45 minutes per session
- Format: Group workshops with individual exercises
- Conducted by a certified sports psychologist in collaboration with Kurash coaches to integrate skills into training contexts.

Control group (n=10):

Continued regular Kurash training without any additional psychological interventions.

### 2.3 Measurements

The Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2) (Martens et al., 1990) was administered pre- and post-intervention to measure:

- Cognitive anxiety: Negative thoughts and worries
- Somatic anxiety: Physiological arousal symptoms
- Self-confidence: Belief in ability to perform successfully.

Assessments were conducted in standardized quiet environments by the same trained researcher to ensure consistency.

### 2.4 Statistical Analysis



Data were analyzed using SPSS v.26. Descriptive statistics (means  $\pm$  SD) were calculated. Within-group differences were assessed via paired t-tests, and between-group comparisons were conducted using independent t-tests. Statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ .

## Results

### 3.1 Within-group changes (Experimental group)

Table 1. Pre- and Post-test CSAI-2 Scores within Experimental Group

| Variable          | Pre-test (Mean $\pm$ SD) | Post-test (Mean $\pm$ SD) | t-value | p-value |
|-------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|---------|---------|
| Cognitive Anxiety | 21.5 $\pm$ 3.2           | 16.3 $\pm$ 2.7            | 4.12    | <0.01   |
| Somatic Anxiety   | 19.8 $\pm$ 2.9           | 15.1 $\pm$ 2.6            | 4.35    | <0.01   |
| Self-confidence   | 23.4 $\pm$ 3.5           | 27.6 $\pm$ 3.1            | -3.87   | <0.01   |

Significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ )

### 3.2 Between-group comparisons

Table 2. Comparison of Post-test Scores between Experimental and Control Groups

| Variable          | Experimental (Mean $\pm$ SD) | Control (Mean $\pm$ SD) | t-value | p-value |
|-------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|---------|---------|
| Cognitive Anxiety | 16.3 $\pm$ 2.7               | 20.9 $\pm$ 3.1          | -3.58   | <0.01   |
| Somatic Anxiety   | 15.1 $\pm$ 2.6               | 19.4 $\pm$ 3.0          | -3.62   | <0.01   |
| Self-confidence   | 27.6 $\pm$ 3.1               | 23.5 $\pm$ 3.4          | 3.21    | <0.01   |

Significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ )

## Discussion

This study demonstrated that an 8-week PST program significantly:

- Reduced cognitive anxiety: Helping athletes reframe negative thoughts and reduce worries related to performance errors or opponent superiority.
- Reduced somatic anxiety: Decreasing physiological symptoms such as tachycardia, muscle tension, and shallow breathing, which can impair fine motor skills in throws.
- Increased self-confidence: Enhancing athletes' belief in their ability to execute techniques successfully under competitive pressure.

Comparison with previous research.

These findings align with prior studies in judo and taekwondo where PST improved psychological readiness and performance outcomes (Hanton et al., 2004; Vealey, 2007). The large effect sizes indicate practical significance for Kurash athletes.

Practical applications.

Coaches should integrate PST into weekly training, focusing on:

- Guided relaxation before competitions
- Imagery scripts of successful throws under stress
- Development of individualized self-talk statements
- Goal setting to structure psychological and technical preparation.

Limitations.

- Sample size: Small cohort limits generalizability.
- Follow-up: No long-term assessment of PST retention effects.
- Gender: Only male athletes studied; female psychological responses may differ.

Future research.

- Examine PST effects on technical accuracy and match results.
- Explore combined interventions (PST + physical conditioning) for holistic preparation.
- Assess personality traits influencing PST responsiveness in Kurash athletes.

### Conclusion

Psychological skills training is an effective intervention for reducing competitive anxiety and enhancing self-confidence in Kurash athletes. Incorporating PST into training programs is recommended to optimize psychological readiness and improve competition performance outcomes.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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