



The Influence of Coach Psychological Support on the Cohesion of Professional Athlete Teams in Xi'an: The Mediating Role of Sports Motivation

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Abstract

Focusing on a group of professional athletes in Xi'an City, this study aims to deeply explore the impact of coaches' psychological support on team cohesion and further analyze the mediating role played by sports motivation in this relationship. The research team first conducted a comprehensive and detailed survey on the current situation of professional athletes in Xi'an, and collected a large amount of data on athletes' psychological status, team interactions, and coaches' supportive styles. Subsequently, advanced statistical methods were used to analyze the collected data in depth. The results of the study showed that coaches' psychological support had a significant positive effect on team cohesion, i.e., coaches who gave more psychological care and support to athletes could effectively enhance team cohesion. It was also found that sport motivation played a partial mediating role between coaches' psychological support and team cohesion. This means that coaches' psychological support not only directly affects team cohesion, but also indirectly promotes team cohesion by stimulating athletes' sport motivation. The results of this study provide a solid theoretical basis and practical strategy for enhancing the team cohesion of professional athletes in Xi'an, which is an important reference value for optimizing the management of sports teams.

Keywords

Coach psychological support; Team cohesion; Sports motivation; Mediation

Introduction

In the field of sports competition, team cohesion, as a key factor affecting the performance of sports teams, is increasingly receiving attention. As the leader of a team, the psychological support provided by a coach has a significant impact on the psychological state and teamwork of athletes. As a historical and cultural city, Xi'an holds a unique position in the development of sports (Azoulay et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). The enhancement of cohesion among its professional athlete team is crucial for promoting the progress of local sports. However, current research on how coach psychological support affects team cohesion, especially the mediating mechanism of exercise motivation, has not been fully explored. This study aims to fill this research gap by analyzing the relationship between coach psychological support, sports motivation, and team cohesion, providing scientific basis and practical guidance for the construction of professional athlete teams in Xi'an, which has important theoretical and practical significance (Yi & Hossain, 2025; Kim et al., 2023).

1. Core Concept Analysis

1.1 Coach psychological support

Coach psychological support refers to the multidimensional psychological assistance provided by coaches to athletes through systematic psychological intervention strategies, including emotional empowerment, information supply, and evaluation guidance during training and competition. Its connotation can be developed from three levels: in the dimension of emotional support, coaches need to use empathy techniques in positive psychology, through immediate encouragement in daily training, emotional counseling after failure, and establishing personalized emotional connections, to build athletes' psychological safety net (Stewart et al., 2024; Coussens et al., 2025).

1.2 Team cohesion

Team cohesion is a core psychological indicator for measuring the effectiveness of sports teams, reflected in the degree of integration of members in goal identification, emotional connection, and behavioral collaboration. From a structural perspective, task cohesion is not only manifested in tacit cooperation in tactical execution, but also contains members' recognition of the "common goal decomposition mechanism" - for example, the track and field relay team breaks down the season goals into quantifiable sub goals such as "curve technology optimization rate" and "handover error time", and strengthens task collaboration through goal consensus. Social cohesion involves the construction of a team's emotional ecology, including the flow of emotions in informal communication scenarios, the establishment of cross member support networks, and the recognition of team cultural symbols. It is worth noting that the dynamic development of cohesion follows a phased pattern of "formation conflict norm efficiency" (Jakobsen, 2023; Lubert et al., 2025).

1.3 Sports motivation

The mechanism of action of sports motivation, as a psychological engine that drives athletes to continuously engage in training, can be further analyzed in conjunction with self-determination theory (SDT). The core of intrinsic motivation stems from the satisfaction of "autonomy needs", "competence needs", and "relationship needs" - such as the sense of competence experienced by athletes when breaking through their personal best performance, the sense of autonomy gained in participating in training plan development, and the sense of belonging formed in team collaboration, which together constitute the three pillars of intrinsic motivation. External motivation needs to be distinguished based on different levels of internalization: from the initial "external regulation" to "identification regulation", coaches can promote the internalization of external motivation through "motivation transformation techniques", such as linking commercial sponsorship rewards with "technological innovation contribution", guiding athletes to transform external motivation into an internal pursuit of professional improvement (Simpson, Didymus, & Williams, 2023; Weng, Cheng, & Ginsborg, 2023).

2. Investigation on the Current Situation of Professional Athletes in Xi'an

2.1 Survey Design

This study used a questionnaire survey method and focused on professional athletes from multiple sports events in the Xi'an area as the research subjects. Through stratified sampling, athletes from different sports such as track and field, basketball, football, and swimming were selected. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed, and 326 valid questionnaires were collected, with an effective response rate of 93.14%. The questionnaire mainly includes the following standardized scales:

Coach Psychological Support Scale: The "Athletic Coach Support Scale" (ACSS) developed by Smith et al. (1995) was used, which includes three dimensions: emotional support (8 questions), information support (6 questions), and evaluative support (7 questions). The 5-point scoring method was used (1=completely disagree, 5=completely agree), and the internal consistency reliability Cronbach's alpha was 0.87. It has been widely used in team sports psychology research.

Team Cohesion Scale: The Team Cohesion Questionnaire (TCQ) developed by Carron et al. (1985) was used, which consists of two subscales: task cohesion (10 questions) and social cohesion (12 questions). A 7-point scoring method was used (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree), and the scale showed good construct validity in both

collective and individual athlete events ($\chi^2/df=2.13$, CFI=0.92).

Sports Motivation Scale: The Self Determination Sport Motivation Scale (SDSSMS) revised by Pelletier et al. (1995) was used, which includes two dimensions: intrinsic motivation (6 questions) and extrinsic motivation (8 questions). The scale uses a 7-point Likert score (1=completely disagree, 7=completely agree) and has been validated by domestic scholars as applicable to the Chinese athlete population (test-retest reliability 0.79).

2.2 Survey results

The survey results show that the overall level of coach psychological support felt by professional athletes in Xi'an is above average. In terms of emotional support, the average score for athletes is 3.72 out of 5, indicating that coaches can provide encouragement and comfort when they encounter difficulties, but there is still room for improvement in emotional care during daily training; In terms of information support, the coach performed well in providing training plans, technical guidance, and other information, scoring 3.85 points. However, there were shortcomings in sharing information such as competition strategies and psychological adjustment methods, resulting in relatively low scores; In terms of evaluation support, the average score for coaches' performance evaluation of athletes is 3.61 points, indicating that they can provide certain evaluations, but the objectivity and constructiveness of the evaluations need to be improved.

In terms of sports motivation, the average score of intrinsic motivation is 3.46 points, and the average score of extrinsic motivation is 3.91 points, indicating that athletes have a certain foundation in both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to participate in sports, but the level of intrinsic motivation is relatively low. Age and training experience also have an impact on sports motivation, with athletes under the age of 20 scoring 4.05 in extrinsic motivation, significantly higher than athletes over the age of 25 scoring 3.62; The external motivation score of athletes with less than 5 years of training is 3.89 points, and the intrinsic motivation score of athletes with more than 5 years of training is 3.67 points, showing a trend of gradually increasing intrinsic motivation with age and training years.

3. In Depth Analysis of the Relationship between the Three Parties

3.1 Coach psychology and sports motivation

The analysis data shows that there is a significant positive correlation between coach psychological support and exercise motivation, with a correlation coefficient of $r=0.58$ ($p<0.01$). The emotional support provided by coaches can make athletes feel respected and cared for, enhance their love and interest in sports, and thus improve intrinsic motivation. The correlation coefficient between emotional support and intrinsic motivation is 0.49; Information support enables athletes to acquire more knowledge and skills about sports, which helps them make progress in training, enhance self-efficacy, and stimulate intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The correlation coefficient between information support and extrinsic motivation is 0.53; Positive evaluation and constructive feedback in evaluation support can help athletes clarify their strengths and weaknesses, work towards achieving their goals, and promote the improvement of sports motivation. The correlation coefficient between evaluation support and the total score of sports motivation is 0.51.

3.2 Team cohesion and sports motivation

There is also a close positive correlation between team cohesion and sports motivation, with a correlation coefficient of $r=0.62$ ($p<0.01$). In a highly cohesive team, members support and encourage each other, creating a good team atmosphere. This atmosphere can enhance athletes' sense of belonging and identity, making them more willing to work towards the team's goals, thereby increasing intrinsic motivation. The correlation coefficient between task cohesion and intrinsic motivation is 0.57; Meanwhile, competition and cooperation among team members can also stimulate athletes' external motivation, such as striving for team honor. The correlation coefficient between social cohesion and external motivation is 0.48. In collective projects, this relationship is more evident, and the success of the team requires the joint efforts of each member, making it easier for athletes' motivation to be stimulated.

3.3 Coach psychology and team cohesion

Coach psychological support has a significant impact on team cohesion, with a correlation coefficient of $r=0.55$ ($p<0.01$). By providing emotional support, coaches promote emotional communication among team members,

enhance mutual trust and understanding, and thus improve social cohesion. The correlation coefficient between emotional support and social cohesion is 0.47; Information support can help team members clarify common goals and tasks, coordinate their actions, and improve task cohesion. The correlation coefficient between information support and task cohesion is 0.52; Fair and objective evaluation in evaluation support can reduce internal conflicts and tensions within the team, create a harmonious team atmosphere, and contribute to the formation of team cohesion. The correlation coefficient between evaluation support and the total score of team cohesion is 0.49.

3.4 Verification of the mediating role of exercise motivation

To verify the mediating role of exercise motivation between coach psychological support and team cohesion, this study used AMOS 24.0 software to construct a structural equation model for analysis. The results showed that the direct effect path coefficient of coach psychological support on team cohesion was 0.38 ($p < 0.01$), the indirect effect path coefficient through exercise motivation was 0.27 ($p < 0.01$), and the total effect was 0.65 ($p < 0.01$). The model fitting indicators are as follows: $\chi^2/df=1.98$, CFI=0.94, TLI=0.93, RMSEA=0.052, SRMR=0.048, all of which meet the good fitting standards. This indicates that exercise motivation plays a partial mediating role between the two, with the mediating effect accounting for 41.54% of the total effect. When athletes' motivation for sports increases, they are more willing to cooperate with team members and work towards team goals, thereby promoting the improvement of team cohesion.

4. Strategy and Suggestions

4.1 Establishing a systematic training system for coaches' psychological support abilities

It is suggested that the sports training management department in Xi'an include the coach's psychological support ability in the annual training compulsory module and design a three in one training course of "theoretical teaching case study simulation training". Among them, emotional support training can introduce empathy techniques from psychological counseling, and enhance coaches' emotional awareness and response abilities through role-playing exercises; Information support training should focus on updating knowledge of sports psychology and applying technical analysis tools, such as teaching how to use biofeedback data for personalized training guidance; Evaluation support training can draw on the 360 degree feedback method to cultivate coaches' objective evaluation ability and developmental feedback skills based on data.

4.2 Implement a layered team cohesion enhancement strategy based on project characteristics

In response to the differences between collective and individual projects, it is recommended to adopt a layered intervention plan: in collective projects such as basketball and football, the focus should be on strengthening task cohesion construction. A "tactical consensus workshop" can be designed to improve tactical execution tacit understanding through team sand table deduction; At the same time, team building activities should be held once a week to maintain social cohesion, with a participation rate of at least 92.5%. For individual events such as track and field, swimming, etc., emphasis should be placed on cultivating social cohesion. A "cross project mutual aid group" can be established to enhance team belonging through experience sharing sessions.

4.3 Establishing a precise intervention and dynamic regulation mechanism for exercise motivation

Based on the interactive relationship between motivation types and athlete characteristics, it is recommended to construct a hierarchical intervention framework: for young athletes under the age of 20, a step-by-step program of "external motivation guidance internal motivation transformation" should be designed, such as setting up a "monthly progress award" (external motivation), and promoting motivation transformation through technology breakthrough sharing sessions (internal motivation), with a requirement that the awareness rate of external motivation measures reach 95.0% or above. For athletes with more than 5 years of training experience, the focus is on strengthening the cultivation of intrinsic motivation. A "training plan participation system" can be implemented, allowing athletes to participate in 20% of the weekly training plan formulation to enhance their sense of autonomy, with a participation rate of at least 65.8%.

In addition, it is recommended to establish an athlete motivation development file to record the trajectory of motivation changes during different training cycles, providing data support for personalized motivation. For athletes who

rely heavily on external motivation, a “motivation conversion contract” can be designed to promote the optimization of motivation structure by gradually reducing external rewards and increasing internal satisfaction; For athletes with outstanding intrinsic motivation, more opportunities for “self-determination” can be created, such as serving as training group leaders to enhance their sense of responsibility while strengthening their intrinsic motivation identification, achieving a virtuous cycle of “motivation cohesion”.

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