



Mental Fitness: Psychological Warfare from Battlefield to Playground

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Received: 23 February 2022 / Accepted: 26 March 2022 / Published online: 2 December 2022
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Abstract India and its people are commonly known for their unique culture and tradition. Cricket and mythology are much interwoven into the lives of people as both are almost inseparable part of their life and culture. Although the two fields are completely different from each other, there is a deep-rooted connection between them when it comes to their popularity in India. Most of the people of India have spent their childhood either by listening to the stories of mythology or watching cricket, because the two interesting activities that consciously impact the mind and gain the attention so easily. The psychological aspects of both game and stories literally leave a strong impact in human mind. Hence, this paper attempts to integrate the psychological aspects of the game and mythology by analyzing the existing mental health problems of Indian cricketers with reference to the mythological stories of Indian heroes. It further aims to provide the proposed model for mental fitness named SPORTS as a guide to mental training for contemporary cricketers to manage their emotions and control their mind for optimal performance.

Keywords Mental fitness · Warriors · Indian mythology · Mental training · Self-awareness · Cricket

Introduction

Sport is a physical game involving players or athletes in competitive physical activities and exercises. Generally, a multitude of people get involved into sporting activities for some notable reasons. These people can be categorized into two sets. The first set of people utilizes the sporting activities for relaxation, fun, pleasure, enjoyment, and most importantly to reduce stress. The second set of people is named as elite athletes who engage themselves in sport with utmost dedication and commitment along with intensive hours of training and practice. The motive behind these two sets of people completely contradicts, but, something binds them together is the psychological aspects of the game. Mia Hamm, former American soccer player, quoted that “the most important attribute a player must have is mental toughness” (Hamm, n.d.). Though sport seems to have interconnected with physical attributes, the result that leads to success in any sport is determined by the players’ power of focus, concentration and commitment. Thus, sport is highly related to mental fitness than physical fitness (Afremow, 2014). This paper focuses on the importance of mental fitness, considering Indian mythological warriors and the contemporary cricketers.

Indian mythology is a part and parcel of our Indian culture. It enriches the modern society by educating the morals and ethics through its symbolic characters, narrations and historical events. Mythological warriors are an integral part of human existence. They are considered as ideals, which help to construct the lives of human being in the right direction through their morals and ethics. The great Indian epics, such as Ramayana and Mahabharata, have gifted numerous legends to Indian mythology. India’s diversity of culture, people, and tribes are reflected in the wide variety of sporting disciplines in the country. There are various games in India, ranging from tribal games to mainstream sports such

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as cricket, hockey, tennis, badminton, kabaddi, archery, basketball, volleyball, cycling, shooting, squash, weightlifting, gymnastics, and football. Currently, cricket is considered to be the most popular game in India above all other sports. Hence, it gains more number of audience compared to any other sports. Cricket players have a huge fan base in India and, obviously, the expectations of the audience are high on Indian cricketers. Taking up cricket as a profession and fulfilling the expectation of millions of Indian fans are not an easy task. The cricketers need to focus more on both their physical and mental fitness. This paper analyzes the mental health problems faced by cricketers on and off the field. Further, it attempts to provide the proposed model for mental fitness with reference to Indian mythological heroes through their life lessons.

Mental Fitness

Mental fitness can be defined as being aware of one's own thoughts, emotions, and feelings that influence a human behavior. It is a process of cultivating the ability to handle difficult situations, building resilience, maintaining a state of well-being, and developing mental strength to stay calm and composed without being affected by emotional turbulence (Mack & Casstevens, 2002). The raising concern over mental health-related problems, in the field of sports, has sparked many widespread debates and has drawn attention from the sports fraternity all around the globe (Purcell et al., 2019). Being fit and maintaining physical fitness is a basic requirement for any player in sports (Wood, 2010). The players have to clear the Yo-Yo test which is a benchmark for physical fitness Indian cricketers making into international cricket and is also considered to be the main reason for massive improvement of physical fitness level among players (SportsAdda, 2021). Although both psychological and physical components equally determine the players' optimal performance in sports, there is no test being taken to check whether the player is mentally fit to play or not. This raises an issue that "Is mental health the most neglected areas in sports?" After the pandemic, the status of mental health is a great concern for people worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted or, in some cases, halted critical mental health services in 93% of countries, while the demand for improving mental health is increasing worldwide (Kovacevic, 2021). For any sports player, factors such as quarantine, less practice sessions, and bio-bubble create more stress that greatly impact their performance on the field (Gentile et al., 2021). After India's poor T20 World cup performance in 2021, Indian head coach and few players have expressed and assured that the mental health problem is existing in cricket. "The team has been in a bubble for

the last 6 months. I am mentally drained but these players are mentally and physically drained. We would have ideally liked a bigger gap between the IPL and the T20 World Cup," Ravi Shastri, former Indian head coach told the T20 World Cup broadcasters Star Sports (CricketNext, 2021). Physical fitness is the most important factor for any athlete who gets into a game but the mental fitness determines their success and sustainability in sports. Attempting to address the current mental health problem and to provide solution, this paper aims to propose a model for mental fitness guide with an acronym SPORTS that consists of six components, such as Self-awareness, Preparation, Optimism, Resilience, Team spirit, and Self-motivation. It can be helpful for their overall development to become a better performer and also a better individual as well.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is the very first component of mental fitness. Cricket is a game being played in different formats, such as test, one day match, and T20. Strategies, game plan, and skills are playing a prominent role in cricket, but, winning the game often depends on mental strength of players (Barker & Slater, 2015). Sometimes, one bad over from a bowler, few misfielding, missed catches, and certain decisions can change the course of the game. More focus and concentration are needed throughout the game for every player who gets into the field in order to lead the team toward victory. Hence, mindfulness is the key factor for players to win the match. It is also one of the main aspects of self-awareness. "Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom" quotes Aristotle, Greek philosopher. Self-awareness is a process of understanding oneself, their strength, weakness, abilities, emotions, and potential (Morin, 2011). It also gives them the space to interrogate their own failures, flaws, disabilities, and defects. So, players can utilize their potential to overcome their weaknesses which leads to better performance. When players encounter a do-or-die situation in cricket, their quickness and agility determine that whether a player is good enough in handling the difficult situation with ease or struggling to cope up with that situation. Therefore, self-awareness acts as a core component to build one's personality and helps them to become stronger individual. Further, the player also gains the confidence to face any problems and the consequences in their professional life (Colman, 2008).

To understand the power of self-awareness, the Indian mythological hero, Arjuna's life can be taken for this study. Arjuna is known for his courage, valor, and determination. The magical hero has extended boundaries of Yudhishira's empire through his mighty skills by defeating great kings. Arjuna is the only student who fulfilled the expectation of

his guru Drona in Gurukul by answering “I see the eye of the bird,” (Bhagavatam katha, n.d.). For this reason, he is remembered for the focused attention and the power of concentration. Even though Arjuna stood as the Warrior of ages, he finds himself in a dilemma in the battlefield of Kurukshetra to fight against his own kith and kin. He forgot his duty and responsibility to fight for good against evil. His mental instability and confusions pushed him to decide to go back to jungle instead of participating in the war. Krishna, as a mentor and charioteer, tries to balance the mind of Arjuna from negative thoughts and emotions about the consequences of future and asked him to focus on the present to do his duty. This is a good example for mindfulness. He has clarified his confusions, removed all his doubts, and prepared him to participate for war. Having listened to Krishna, Arjuna decides to participate in the war with more focus and confidence (Modh, 2015). The same way, in cricket, a mentor or a sports psychologist needs to be hired full time like other coaches in order to take care of the psychological, emotional, and social well-being of players. A player can possess skill set, physical fitness, have better strategies, and game plan, but the presence of mind, mental strength leads to success. This would prevent a player from distractions, sharpen their focus, and boost their confidence. It helps them to be more aware of their thoughts and the process of that particular game. Undoubtedly, the most successful player in cricket is M.S. Dhoni. He often expresses his mantra for success in his interviews; he insisted that the process is more important rather than the result (Indian Express, 2019). Self-awareness in cricket is more of engaging themselves in the present and involving the process of the game. No player should focus on winning or losing the game, instead they should be very attentive on the process of giving their best. Thinking about the result will make the player emotive. The fear and nervousness that is connected with the result often prevent a player from giving his best. Thus, self-awareness is a technique of giving a chance to connect with their self and gifts the ability to have a control over his own mind (Frank & Ronald, 1980).

Preparation

Preparation, being a second component of mental fitness, is an essential process in any sports. It engages the players in different activities in order to prepare them for national and international competitions. It includes gym workout plans, practice game, training sessions, enhancing skills, learning strategies, and aerobic exercises. The most important aspect for any form of sporting activities requires mental strength, but the amount of time is being spent for mental preparation is comparatively lesser than physical fitness. Cricketers likely utilize some of the well-known mental

conditioning techniques such as meditation and yoga for mental preparation (Rao, 2020). Every young player has to realize the importance of mental preparation (Biddle, 1985). To enhance cricketers’ mental strength, the role of mentoring is crucial and a proper guidance is much needed. In a game-like cricket, the overall team spirit is essential than individual strength and abilities. To adapt players’ mindset to work as a team to have a better cooperation with captain and team members is quite important. So the cricketers as an individual should be trained to strengthen their mental abilities to have a positive atmosphere among themselves. The main motive of preparation is to transform the players’ mindset as a stronger individual (Crook, 1980).

Hanuman, the son of wind god Vayu in the Hindu epic Ramayana, is believed to be an incarnation of Lord Shiva. He is considered as a role model to understand the nature of human mind and the art of controlling it. He is an embodiment of total self-control, discipline, concentration and ever steadfast in helping his lord Rama to defeat the demon king Ravana and to rescue Sita. Truly, Hanuman is a symbolic of the perfect mind and embodies the highest potential one can achieve. His image is enshrined in gymnasiums all over India and wrestlers worship him before commencing their practice. Valmiki, in this epic, makes no secret of his admiration for Hanuman. He brilliantly depicts Hanuman’s state of mind before he undertakes to leap across the sea in search of Sita. The mental readiness and enthusiasm motivates his fellow mates before they venture into any mission. When they face any challenges, Hanuman focus on the task completely without any diversion. This is an excellent illustration of elevating oneself joining hands with others (Csnarasimhan’s Weblog, 2010). This mental state is more important before undertaking any important mission which requires extraordinary mental stability and physical strength (Vana-mali, 2010).

The preparation of cricketers must include the integrated method of both mental skills along with physical strength. Another interesting method for mental preparation should be visualization (Predoiu et al., 2020). Brown (n.d.) emphasizes that “You must see your goals clearly and specifically before you can set out for them. Hold them in your mind until they become second nature.” Visualizing your goal or success is a guided imagery which is needed for the athlete as a mental rehearsal. Current team Indian captain Rohit Sharma has expressed “Nothing is easy in cricket. Maybe when you watch it on TV, it looks easy. But it is not. You have to use your brain and time the ball” (Lokapally, 2017). This clearly shows that the role of mind in cricket. Visualization is key factor in training the mind to execute the plans on the field. The power of visualizing the success will have an impact on mind which enhances a player’s performance. By training the mind, a player can actually perform the skill more effectively and efficiently as well. Hence, being mentally

prepared will help the players to balance their success and failures. This readiness can be achieved by cricket players through more psychological training sessions (Pybus, n.d.).

Optimism

The third component of mental fitness is Optimism. It is an attitude that has to be developed in all individuals to attain greater heights in life. It is a basic need for the professional cricketers who represent the country and has been considered as role model for many people at the very young age. Optimism ingrains strength, courage, powerful energy for players to face any challenge on and off the field quite easily. To create a positive atmosphere, positive talks have to be encouraged among the players to boost their confidence level. It changes the perception of every player and helps them to balance emotions to handle both the success and failure in the same way. Indian cricketer Virat Kohli emphasized that his mantra lies in optimism. He quotes “It’s very basic, simple. One-day cricket, T20 cricket, anything, you have to be positive in your mindset” (Cricket Country, 2017). For every player who involved in team sport-like cricket having a positive mindset is quiet difficult, because though they expect success they may get failure which is unexpected. In cricket, the negative result may not affect the players but the people who believe in them. Generating a sense of positive attitude and giving positive reinforcement to oneself will have a greater impact in the game. Though a player is physically strong and makes better strategies, without positive approach, he/she would not have succeeded. A player may possess talent and great skills, but if he carries negative thoughts and fear in his mind which obviously lead to many failures (Donnelly, 2017).

The life of Karna has taken for this study as an instance to prove how focusing on the negative aspects in life lead to failures in spite of having greater physical strength and skills. The great archer Karna has possessed extraordinary skills but spent all his life in a dilemma due to the humiliations of being born as a sutaputra (low caste) and the external negative impulses. Karna throughout his life seeks for recognition and focuses more on negative aspects of his life. Being a kind-hearted and righteous person, the tragic hero has failed to take right decisions at the crucial times due to mental stress. Duryodhana has utilized Karna and recognized as a King of Anga. Karna values friendship and he is ready to do anything for the sake of Duryodhana. This blind bond misguided him which led to his defeat and finally ended his life. Saguni and Duryodhana misguided and Karna used his skills for their evil intentions which he is not known. It proves that the psychological injuries is quite harmful than physical injuries. In his deathbed, he came to know about the evil intentions of Duryodhana and realized

his mistakes at the end. Throughout Karna’s life, he focuses on the negative aspects of his own life. As a consequence, he is easily being trapped by Saguni and lost his precious life (Ande, 2021). When a person is into trap of negativity and unable to control his own destructive thoughts, it simply means that he/she literally gives the remote of their own life for taking over the control to somebody else. Hence, they tend to lose their confidence and uniqueness that leads to failures in life.

Success and failures are inseparable part of cricket or in any games. To accept failures, by learning from the mistakes and to handle success, staying humble by understanding the truth is called sportsmanship. “The people who succeed aren’t the ones who avoid failures; they’re the ones who learn how to respond to failures with optimism” (Donnelly, 2017, p. 92). If a player is strong enough to handle failures, he/she will focus on his performance, then success not on the success, gradually, that leads to his/her success. Cricketers should have the same tendency to look both success and failures as one because both are temporary. For any cricketer, in particular young players, optimism is a key factor in attaining such mindset. It would help them to fight against emotional turbulence that arises within them during crucial hours of play. It induces energy to develop the fighting spirit and finally sustains them in the professional cricket in the long run.

Resilience

Resilience is the fourth component of mental fitness. In cricket, there are various factors that affect a player’s career; those are continuous failures, loss of form, injuries, mental health issues, disciplinary issues, etc. Sometimes, these factors end their professional life and make them even more depressed. Resilience helps the cricketers getting back to rhythm after struggles. It is an arduous task for anyone. Obviously it takes time, but it depends on individual’s inner strength which helps them to overcome such hardships and develop their confidence level (Edgley, 2021). Looking for encouragement and support can be helpful, in contrary it may lead the victim to fall for dependency. Cricketers are the heroes of the game. A hero’s essential nature is to keep hope alive and never give up easily against any sorts of hurdles. It sets a hero apart from the other normal people.

Abhimanyu, Arjuna’s son and the great mythological hero from Mahabharata, is remembered for his physical and mental strength (Daily Herald, 2016). Being a young warrior, he valiantly defended his army and defeated many warriors from Kaurava army. Encountering the Chakravyuha of Kurukshetra, Abhimanyu is completely aware that he cannot defeat the mighty Kauravas alone. He is high on his confidence and the fearless warrior never ready to give up. This

confidence is an important key for resilience. Abhimanyu is the resilient person who fought till his last breath with his full potential. He has taught us an important lesson that confidence and resilience are more powerful than the strength of the opponent (Deepak, 2021).

Resilience is one of the popular concepts in positive psychology (Ackerman, 2021). The art of resilience would help cricketers to deal any high-pressure games easily. It instills confidence that players can bounce back into the game at any moment to change the course of the game. In cricket, winning or losing the game hardly matters, but the real challenge is continuing the fighting spirit till the last ball of the game. “Have failed more times than I have succeeded, but I never gave up, and will never give up, till my last breath, and that’s what cricket has taught me” quotes Yuvraj Singh, Former Indian Cricketer, during his final farewell speech (Hindu, 2019). He is the man who hit six runs in the consecutive balls over the ropes and inscribed his name in the golden book of cricket. He is a fighter against cancer and an epitome of perseverance. His struggle to build a success story is reflected in the above quote (Hindu, 2019). In cricket, every ball and even one run can decide the result of the match. During such high-intensity games, resilience is an essential factor that determines the success and every cricketer should be more focused on the field. It gives an opportunity for players to come back with full spirit at any moment of the game.

Team Spirit

The fifth component of mental fitness is Team spirit. Players should be trained to work as a team and develop their mindset to play accordingly. Cricket is a team game, and each player of the team should have a commitment and responsibility when they represent the country as a team. In a team game, winning the match should not depend on the individual’s performance or records. The team should never rely on any individual player instead every player in the team has to contribute for success. Hence, team building is an essential aspect of team game. Even if an individual player scores hundred or takes many wickets, if there is no contribution from the other team members, they cannot enjoy the success. And also if there is no coordination, the individual efforts go in vain (Heermann, 1997). The concept of team spirit has played an important role in the stories of Indian Mythology. The battle between Pandavas and Kauravas at Kurukshetra in Mahabharata teaches the spirit of team work. Kauravas were assisted in the battlefield by Bhishma, the grand uncle of Pandavas and Kauravas and the statesman of Kuru Kingdom, Guru Dronacharya and his son Ashwathama, the Kauravas’ brother-in-law Jayadratha, the Brahmin Kripa, Kritavarma, King Shalya, Shakuni, and many more. Among these, some

are bound by their loyalty toward either Hastinapura or Dhritarashtra, and others are reluctant to fight against Pandavas. Compared to Pandavas, Kauravas have a powerful army which consists of many great warriors. However, Pandavas succeed over Kauravas because of their team spirit, commitment, and coordination which were missing in Kauravas’ army. Arjuna as a great leader leads the army in the war front; the rest of the warriors are obliged to his orders and executed the plans. Though the Kauravas have enough resources, power, and strength, there have failed miserably as a team since they lack team spirit. Pandavas, with minimal resources though equally strength, rely on mental strength and believe in coordination and team spirit which earn them the success.

Rahul Dravid former captain, and current head coach of India, often emphasized the importance of mental health in cricket during his interviews. He believed that team work plays a vital role in determining the winning or losing. He quoted that “You don’t win or lose the games because of the 11 you select. You win or lose with that those 11 do on the field” (Dravid, n.d.). All players are from different parts of the country representing specific region or state. The team captain has many responsibilities start from analyzing the players’ strength and weakness, motivating them whenever necessary, and creating a good rapport with the team members. Hence, team spirit and coordination play in determining the success of all ages.

Self-Motivation

The final and sixth component of mental fitness is self-motivation. Every player need to have self-motivation in order to encourage himself to move forward. Self-motivation is an internal drive propelling everyone to set goals, and keep moving forward to achieve them. To develop self-motivation, self-talk is the very first step (Mead, n.d.). Practicing positive self-talk energizes the cricketers, improvises the mental strength, gives the courage to solve life puzzles, and also guides them to take important decisions (Afrechow, 2014). In times of trials and tribulations, the great warriors of Indian mythology can be taken as role models that everyone looks up to. The Indian mythological inspiring stories of Krishna, Arjuna, Rama, Karna, Bheema, Bhishma, Abhimanyu, and so on have set the path for everyone who faces the hurdles of life. The struggles and hardships that these warriors faced are no way inferior to the existing challenges in sports. These heroes are excelled in specific sport to participate in war. Arjuna, Karna, and Rama excelled in archery, Bhishma in martial arts, Bheema and Duryodhan in mace, etc. The positive and negative aspects of these warriors can be the motivating factors and lessons for the contemporary cricketers. This will motivate them to evolve as a great player and

also to their overall development as a better human. Former Indian player and bowling coach, Venkatesh Prasad, shared a verse from Bhagavad Gita through twitter. He expressed that “The Bhagavad Gita is a phenomenal book of learning and applying in life and I have been very inspired by the Bhagavad Gita. Wanted to share a verse: “Chapter 3, Verse 35.” He said in his video that “is far better to perform one’s natural prescribed duty, though tinged with faults, than to perform another’s prescribed duty, though perfectly. In fact, it is preferable to die in the discharge of one’s duty, than to follow the path of another, which is fraught with danger.” He further expressed how the application of great lessons from mythological texts would change his perspectives and act as a guidance for self-motivation. A real player is the one who motivates himself without seeking appreciation from others. In Cricket, the players who represent the country at very young age can consider the teachings from Bhagavad Gita as great lessons and mythological heroes as an inspiration to motivate them. For young cricketers, self-motivation is a key factor in bringing out one’s true potential, preventing them from distractions and making them to survive in the cricket for longer.

Conclusion

This paper limelights the importance of mental fitness for cricketers through the mythological stories. The life of the mythological heroes serves as a psychic escort for contemporary cricketers. This analysis highlights the need for mental fitness along with physical fitness for professional cricketers to make them mentally strong individuals. This paper proposes a model for mental fitness named SPORTS that consists of six components and its functions in detail. These components of mental fitness which is discussed above would help players mastering their own mind for their overall development physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Lao Tzu, Chinese Philosopher, quotes “Knowing others is intelligence; knowing yourself is true wisdom. Mastering others is strength, mastering yourself is true power.” Being in limelight, the elite cricketers have to face the challenges on and off the field. As mastering own mind is true power, this proposed model guides the players to focus on the aspects of self-awareness, mental preparation, increasing positivity, confidence, team spirit, and self-motivation. As an individual, this would definitely pave the way to understand themselves to overcome any challenges on and off the field. Hence, the players can utilize these major aspects for their own welfare for personal growth. The stories of the mythological warriors act as a motivating factor to impact the minds of the contemporary cricketers. It would help them to connect themselves with those great warriors to boost their confidence level. By incorporating

these aspects of mental fitness along with physical fitness into the training session will result in better output from the players. Finally, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the need of mental fitness in cricket. Hence, playing cricket will not only benefit the players to become stronger individuals physically, but to make them stronger emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. It guides them to understand the essence of their unique individuality and utilize it for their own betterment to represent their country with responsibility and also make them eligible enough for being a role model for young generation.

Acknowledgements Not applicable.

Authors’ Contributions Both authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation was done by IR and analyzed by SL. The first draft of the manuscript was written by IR and edited by SL. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of interest Not applicable.

Ethics Approval Not applicable.

Consent to Participate Not applicable.

Consent for Publication Not applicable.

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