

Conference Paper

Body Ignorance and Toughness Culture: Injury Issues among Elite Indonesian Athletes

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ORCID:Kurniati Rahayu: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0413-2046>**Abstract**

Elite sport is a demanding career and injuries are common among elite athletes. However, empirical attempts to understand it in the Indonesian context through a sport psychology perspective has been rare. In this qualitative research about Indonesian elite athlete psychological demands, 37 elite athletes and 9 sport practitioners were interviewed through semi-structured interview and photographic elicitation interview (PEI) and data were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis. The results showed that athletes realised that their elite athletic career is ephemeral and will come to retirement; during that short time, they moved along in a continuum of caring and exploiting their body. Two distinct sub-themes about injury built from the analysis were: (i) Exploiting the body versus caring the body, which reflects the dynamic stance of athletes in treating their body and its influential factors. (ii) The social environment around athletes that promotes ignorance versus support, which describes the cultural and social nuances of injury. Implications and invitations for future research through a multidisciplinary approach of health and sport sciences is also discussed.

Keywords: injury, elite athlete, Indonesia

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1. Introduction

Elite sport has been highlighted as the stage of human capability, from physical fitness, skill acquisition, and high-performance teamwork, which were developed along with a complex system of training the body and mind. The globalisation and the worldwide broadcast of the elite sport have made it grows as a global scale industry. Clubs, teams, athletes and coaches become the centre of attention that is highly appreciated, endorsed, popularised and also being evaluated and criticized by society. Aside from the highlights, the elite sport has adverse effects: elite sport often recognised as a demanding culture that cause stress among athletes. Elite athletes face the challenge of high-load of training, performance expectations that are demanding, tensions of

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rivalry, unhealthy coach and athlete relationship, physical and mental abuse, the risk to severe mental health disorders, and injury.

Injury is any physical or medical condition that inhibit optimal performance and regarded as “a disruptive event” along with elite athlete career [1]. Psychological aspects of injury in high performers have been the subject of investigation in the sport psychology field. The investigations and discussions ranged from the individual aspect, such as adverse effects of injury, i.e. anxiety and denial after getting an injury, trauma and adherence to rehabilitation, to the social aspects of injury, i.e. the effect of athlete’s injury to his/her coach and teammates [1].

Several model theories about the psychology of injury have been developed to gain more understanding and more effective intervention. For instance, the psychophysiological model of injury risk [2] stated that fear of injury (or re-injury) would change athlete’s behaviour, physically and mentally, which heightened the risk of injury more. In stage models of injury rehabilitation, emotional reactions to sport injury could be defined through two stages: reactive phase, which including shock, anxiety and helplessness, and adaptive phase, which consist of retreatment, acknowledging the injury experience and back to play [3]. Andersen & William’s Stress-Injury model [4] propose several factors as predictors to injury and illness among sports performers. Stress, psychological traits that prone to stress and lack of coping resources would likely heighten the chance of injury occurrence. There are many other theories of injury and rehabilitation recently, which continues to be defined, suggesting the injury issues and rehabilitation has been crucial in elite sport.

Adopting such model to understand injury issues in Indonesian elite athletes would not be enough due to cultural differences from where the psychology injury models are originated. Culture has been prominent to sports performance, including in dealing with injury [5]. In the Indonesian context, discussions about elite athlete injury from sport psychology perspective has been dearth; most of sport psychology research among elite athletes focused of psychological aspects which suspected as having a direct influence on performance, such as motivation, mental toughness, and confidence. The second theme is related to mental intervention, such as visualisation and psychological skills training (PST) on elite athletes. While the injury is an actual phenomenon in elite sport, the lack of this discussion Indonesia perhaps due to the lack of literature within the field. Injury often treated only as a physical condition, ignoring its psychological effect.

In research about psychological demands in Indonesian elite athletes, I have found that injury issues are demanding to athletes and might become stressors to elite athletes.

An injury might decline performance and ending the athlete career, and the process of rehabilitation and recovery might be stressful or demanding as well. This paper discussed part of the analytical result about injury issues among elite athletes, which might give a full description of how Indonesian elite athletes perceived injury along with their elite athlete career.

2. Material and Method

2.1. Participants and data collection preparation

The data collection process lasts for three months in Indonesia between December 2017 to February 2018. After gaining ethics permission from University of Birmingham ethical review board, the researcher sent email and letters to sport organisations in Indonesia to conduct the research, complete with the information and sample of consent forms. The sport is chosen by carefully consider the track record of medal achievements in the last 5 (five) years in Asian and Olympic level. However, not all sports organisations replied to the email, and in several sports, the research could not be conducted because the team is having training abroad or in a distant location. After gaining permission, the researcher made an appointment to come to the training venue and athlete dormitories to conduct the interview. 37 elite athletes and 9 sport practitioners agreed to participate.

2.2. Data collection

Data collection process consisted of two parts: a semi-structured interview and photographic elicitation interview [6]. The interview guidance developed before the interview and flexibly used in terms of sequence and wording, adopting to participant's age and education level [7-8]. For the pictures given by the athletes, separate consent to publish the photograph was given [9].

2.3. Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis [9-10] applied to analyse the interview transcripts. Thematic analysis (TA) is a method for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data through building themes and have been popular in psychology [9-10]. The logical reason for choosing TA because it offers flexibility to decipher and extracting the data without a commitment to any theoretical framework [9-10].

The application of this loose commitment enables the researcher to include cultural nuances concerning injuries that might be resided or different from the previous model; consequently, align with the perspective that psychological aspects of injuries should be understood within its own culture, which is Indonesia [5].

Unexpectedly, rich data were collected with complex layers of individual, social and cultural aspects could interlace together in participant's answer. Careful coding process then employed to dissect which data, resulted in hefty group code. Several group codes related to body issues, particularly injury issues. These group code then examined again to identify the underlying pattern that is related to injury issues.

3. Results

Indonesian athletes are mindful that athletic career is short and only temporary, which one day will come to an end. Vagueness to retirement is demanding psychologically and lead to a perception of how to maximise this short duration of a career as many rewards they can get. This is because as far as athletes listed in national or province draft, they will receive living allowances and salaries, and for any medal results, there are bonus and rewards followed. As Ath-18 stated in her answer:

"[...] what I'm afraid now, is getting old, I'm afraid of it. As far as I'm strong, I'll keep pursue (medals), even though the job (reward) is small, (they're) worth for the old days. If we win, (people) will flatter us [...] there are athlete who were glorify his province and Indonesia but then living jobless. We learn from other's experience..."

Through the short time of athletic career, athlete's perception and attitude also moved along in a continuum of caring to exploit their body. Athletes would maximise the capacity of their body as a form of personal responsibility as an elite athlete, also as a short-time investment with the social and financial reward for future saving after retirement. An injury would lead to disrupting the elite athlete career and potentially ending the career earlier [12].

Two distinct patterns are built from the group code that is related to injury; first, exploiting the body versus caring for the body, which is about the dynamic perspective of treating the body. This perspective moved dynamically in two extremes: exploiting the body, regardless of any illness or injuries, which mobile dynamically to the other extreme: concern and caring for the body. The second theme is the social, environmental

nuances around athlete injuries, which also polarised in two extremes: ignorance and support. Each theme will be explained in further details.

3.1. The continuum of exploiting the body versus caring for the body

Indonesian athletes applied dynamic perspective on how they were treating their body that is flexibly moving around two extremes; exploiting, force and force the body to train and competed, regardless of any illness or injuries, to the other extreme: concern and caring for the body. This perspective is not constant and perceived as contextual, depending on how athletes perceived the medical facilities that are provided, and the environmental constraints of accessing the clinic/medical facilities

Perception toward environmental constraints influence athletes to options on ignoring or taking care of their injuries, such as distance and transportation to access medical facilities. If the training venue located in a remote place, the transportation considered expensive and or would spend hours to go to the clinic, attending the physiotherapy session is time and energy-consuming. Cutting the training duration, which affects performance, would be unnecessary. I suppose they decided to access the facilities; it creates burdening thoughts that they have failed their primary task as an athlete. Often, they chose to have their injury untreated, keep attending training or took self-care that might be improper without a careful diagnosis, or relies upon a traditional approach which is easier to accessed and/or cheaper.

Athletes tend to rationalise their reasons to leave rehabilitation and/or physiotherapy session and prefer to treat their injury by their own or by coach's advice that might be backgrounded without proper diagnosis. Athletes would attend the training session, perform the moves or particular drills before ready or before their injury are fully recovered, which risks to long term effect of harming or worsen the injury.

Athletes also conveyed that they are experiencing stress if they forbid to training due to their injuries; they would prefer to hide it or to leave the injury untreated. This perhaps due to the intense rivalry and the overly formalised structure between athletes, coaches and managers.

Social nuances of the team would also determine how athletes would report their injury or access physiotherapy and/or rehabilitation. Tight rivalry, negative coach and athlete relationships, and the tendency for athletes to obey coaches which not supporting injury rehabilitation might be influential to how athletes perceived their injury.

Here, the second theme shifted to the broader scope of discussing cultural and social nuances, which also has in two extremes: ignorance versus support.

3.2. The social nuances around athlete injuries: ignorance versus support

The ideal model of elite athlete management is the freedom to access medical facilities regard to injury and illness when it occurs. However, in the Indonesian context, there are no standard criteria for all sports about what and how medical facilities provided, nor the exact procedure of treating elite athlete's health problems. Therefore, team and organisation perspective on injury severe by elite athletes also located in two extremes: ignore and support.

Ignorance of injury explicitly shown in the elite athlete culture which appreciates tough culture, where injury issues regarded as a weak character that is improper within the sport. This culture often made coaches ignore an athlete's injury or illness or forcing an athlete to keep competing and/or training. Even worse, this manner of forcing the body to keep training while suffering the pain of injury are socially appreciated. Ath-19 ensures this issue of ignorance:

“KR: If suppose an athlete is ill, is it compulsory to him to keep coming to the corner (of training field)?

Ath-19: Well if he's helpless, just stay here (in the dorm) and sleep. But... it depends on the athlete himself. If he really keen in to training, ill or healthy, he'll coming to training. But it's good if he still coming even though he's sick, it means he's serious on this (training). If he's not coming, that's weakling, weak.”

Social nuances of the team would also determine how athletes would report their injury or access physiotherapy and/or rehabilitation. Tight rivalry, negative coach and athlete relationships and poor athlete management among teams, and the tendency for athletes to obey coaches which is not supporting would influence how athletes deal with injuries. Lack of trust among coach, managers and/or PP/PB's officials toward athlete's injury could potentially be constraints, as happened to Ath-22 who has suffered of injury for long time due to overtraining:

“Ath-22: It (the injury) has happened long ago. Since 2009, but I hold it, never got therapy (at that time), then it started to worse. I was only (injured in) the right knee, then the left knee too. So, now, I cannot train like I was before,

I'm already pressing my limit. I used to have pressured (in training), Monday even to Sunday, but now I can't [...]

KR: [...] Since when you attend physio(therapy)?

Ath-22: 2014, it was very rarely, once in few months, (I got) no attention. If I said to the officials (PP/PBs) that 'I suffer of this kind of pain, my knees felt like this', I asked for solution. Well they gave me solution, 'don't feel it, don't feel it.'. That was it. [...] Perhaps they thought (athlete) should not being spoiled"

Other consideration the athlete did not report their injury and/or access the rehabilitation/physiotherapy session is the fear that any injury reported would lead to the decision they will undrafted from the national team. SP-01, which is a physician who is often dealing with injured athletes, conveyed this multifaceted tendency through his response::

"They (athletes) come to me for injury or health problems. Then they encounter psychological demands when they needed to rehab but (they said) 'okay doc, I'll ask permission to my coach first whether it's okay for me to do this, to skip drills for a certain duration, so-so'. Sometimes their parents also 'if you skip the drills you'll get kicked out (from the team)' and various kinds (of such excuses). There's always that kinds of demands, which is highly influential (to athletes). If he's injured, it means he has problem (to be cured), even though the training (program) is great, he won't give 100%, even riskier to suffer more injuries."

Located in the positive extreme is support If such a system is provided, it is strongly related by the initiatives of sport organisations officials or PP/PB (Pengurus pusat/Pengurus besar) to provide support in the form of easy access sport physician, physiotherapist, sport psychologist and/or transportation to access them, if the location is far away. SP-01 admitted that several PP/PB's has started to accept that rehabilitation is crucial for injured athletes, but such paradigm still very unlikely, and it will take time to ensures all PP/PB's has proper management that supports injury treatments and rehabilitation. Moreover, the need for human resources which are tailored specifically to the sport also remains lack, such as admitted by Ath-06:

"KR: Are there any facilities that might be helped to reduce your psychological demands?

Ath-06: [...] Masseur, who specifically tailored to our sport, who really understand how to treat feet."

Obviously, the two distinct patterns also explicitly reflect the actual challenges face by sport management of the country: lack of resources, in particular when managing athlete injuries and injury prevention.

4. Discussion

Injury and body issues have been discussed in sport psychology from many perspectives, from individual to social. Mental toughness, apart from as an essential attitude among top performers, also criticised as endanger to physical and mental health. Physically, mental toughness potentially is perceived to put all effort regardless of one's condition, as reflected in common phrase within sport 'no pain, no gain' [13]. The displays of toughness culture also being appreciated as positive, but often without further consideration whether the injury or illness would affect damaging health in the long term.

In terms of rehabilitation outcomes, characteristics of the injury and sociodemographic factors are in reciprocal with biological, psychological and social/contextual factors [14]. Psychological assistance to elicit the negative effect derived from injury needed. However, in Indonesia case, it seems that assessing the social and cultural factors are also crucial. To understand how to help athletes who suffer from injury and attending rehabilitation, sports psychologist has to understand the connections between the athletes with his/her social environment too. Including the ecological constraints. However, to develop proper guidance to help Indonesian athletes dealing with injuries, further research that involving multidisciplinary field is needed, including from the field of general psychology, physiotherapy, sports medicine and also to health promotion practitioner. Proper education about how to live well without abusing the body under the name of sport should be established.

5. Conclusion

Athletes realised that elite athlete career is ephemeral and will come to retirement, and during that short time, they moved along in a continuum of caring to exploit their body. Two distinct subthemes about injury built from the analysis: first, exploiting the body versus caring the body, which reflects the dynamic stance of athletes in treating their body and its influential factors. Second, the social environment around athletes that promotes ignorance versus support, which describes the cultural and social nuances of injury. To develop proper guidance to help Indonesian athletes dealing with injuries,

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Conflict of Interest

The author declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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