

## The Role of Optimism and Proactive Coping in Predicting Mental Toughness

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This study examined how optimism and proactive coping predict mental toughness in student-athletes and explored gender differences across optimism, proactive coping, and mental toughness subdomains, confidence, constancy, and control. The sample consisted of 200 student-athletes (101 males, 99 females) from various sports. Participants completed the Revised Life Orientation Test, the Proactive Coping Inventory, and the Sports Mental Toughness Questionnaire (SMTQ). Data analysis involved t-tests, Pearson's correlations, and multiple regression (using the Enter method). Males scored significantly higher in confidence, while females scored higher in control. Optimism and proactive coping were both positively correlated with confidence, constancy, and overall mental toughness. However, regression analyses revealed that proactive coping significantly predicted all three subdomains, whereas optimism did not predict mental toughness after controlling for proactive coping. Proactive coping is a key contributor to mental toughness in student-athletes, highlighting the importance of coping skills training in sport psychology. Gender differences suggest the need for tailored mental training programs. These findings add to the growing understanding of how positive psychological traits support athletic performance.

**Keywords:** Mental Toughness, Optimism, Proactive Coping, Student-athletes

"It is not whether you get knocked down, it is whether you get up." — *Vince Lombardi*.

Participation in competitive sports demands more than just physical ability; psychological resilience and adaptability are equally crucial. Among the various psychological constructs that influence athletic performance, mental toughness has emerged as a pivotal trait that enables athletes to persist through adversity, maintain focus under pressure, and rebound from failure (Gucciardi et al., 2008; Weinberg et al., 2011). Given its emphasis on inner belief, emotional regulation, and sustained goal pursuit, sports mental toughness is conceptually aligned with key constructs in positive psychology, including optimism, emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and

proactive coping. Positive psychology emphasizes the enhancement of personal strengths, adaptive functioning, and well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Psychological attributes that enable individuals to flourish in the face of adversity (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016; Sarkar et al., 2015) are considered crucial for both personal and performance outcomes, particularly in competitive sports settings. Sports mental toughness, optimism, and proactive coping are three such constructs that align closely with this theoretical orientation. Athletes tend to exhibit high levels of mental toughness, effective coping mechanisms, and pronounced optimism (Gould et al., 2002).

Sports Mental Toughness (SMT) refers to an athlete's psychological capacity to

consistently perform well in the face of stress, pressure, and adversity (Sheard et al., 2009). It has confidence, constancy, and control subdomains, each contributing to how an athlete believes in their capabilities, stays committed to long-term goals, and regulates emotions during competition. Confidence relates to an athlete's belief in their abilities; constancy reflects persistence and commitment to goals; and control denotes emotional and attentional regulation during competition. Studies have consistently shown that athletes with high mental toughness demonstrate better performance under pressure, greater consistency in competitions, and faster recovery from failure (Gucciardi et al., 2009; Mahoney et al., 2014).

Optimism, defined as the general expectation that favorable outcomes will occur, has been recognized as a key construct in positive psychology and a critical factor in fostering a motivated mindset in athletes (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Athletes who exhibit higher levels of optimism are more likely to view obstacles as manageable and short-lived, maintaining effort even after setbacks (Ford et al., 2000; Gordon, 2008). This positive cognitive appraisal is closely linked to enhanced mental toughness. Optimism significantly predicts performance outcomes among elite adolescent athletes (Norlander & Archer, 2002), indicating that an optimistic outlook may positively influence competitive success. Optimism has been found to influence coping behaviors, with more optimistic individuals typically adopting adaptive, approach-based strategies and avoiding avoidance-oriented responses (Solberg Nes & Segerstrom, 2006). In sports settings, optimism enhances effort, persistence, and performance expectations (Wilson & Raglin, 2007) and helps athletes reframe stressors as manageable challenges (Golby & Sheard, 2004). It is also associated with better emotional regulation,

sustained motivation, and lower levels of burnout (Bresswein et al., 2022). Additionally, optimism serves as a psychological buffer, helping athletes maintain focus and resilience following setbacks (Peterson & Steen, 2002).

Proactive coping refers to the process of accumulating resources in advance to effectively handle future stressors (Greenglass et al., 1999). As a forward-looking strategy, it is strongly linked to personal agency, optimism, self-worth, and perceived social support (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Tovel & Carmel, 2013). In sports, proactive coping is associated with goal-setting, problem-solving, and mental preparation—skills that foster emotional control and sustained performance under pressure. For instance, Holt (2003) found that athletes employ proactive strategies, such as boosting confidence and maintaining focus, to confront perceived threats. As athletes gain experience, they learn to evaluate and refine their coping approaches for different contexts (Tamminen & Holt, 2010). Those with strong proactive coping abilities tend to regulate their behavior, plan effectively, and maintain mental health and performance (Nicholls et al., 2007). Proactive coping also enhances well-being and reduces stress (Greenglass & Fiksenbaum, 2009), promoting consistency and resilience in high-pressure sports environments (Park et al., 2012).

Several studies have highlighted the interconnections between optimism, proactive coping, and mental toughness in athletes. Greenglass et al. (1999) and Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) emphasized that proactive coping is strongly tied to a positive self-view, perceived control, and effective goal-directed behavior—qualities that also underpin mental toughness. Athletes who anticipate challenges and plan accordingly are better equipped to manage competitive stress, sustain motivation, and maintain

emotional stability (Holt, 2003; Tamminen & Holt, 2010). Additionally, proactive coping has been positively associated with well-being, self-efficacy, and resilience in athletic and academic contexts (Greenglass & Fiksenbaum, 2009; Park et al., 2012). These proactive tendencies often co-occur with optimism, as individuals who expect positive outcomes are more likely to take initiative in managing stress (Tovel & Carmel, 2013).

Despite the growing body of research, the combined influence of optimism and proactive coping on mental toughness remains relatively understudied, particularly among Indian student-athletes who navigate dual academic and athletic demands. The present study aims to address this gap by examining how these psychological strengths interact to promote resilience and performance in a university sports context.

### Objectives

The present study was designed to address three primary objectives: (1) to assess gender differences in optimism, proactive coping, and sports mental toughness (including its subdomains: confidence, constancy, and control); (2) to examine the relationships among optimism, proactive coping, and mental toughness; and (3) to determine the predictive roles of optimism and proactive coping in confidence, constancy, and control among student-athletes.

### Hypotheses

Based on the prior studies, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

- H1: Male and female student-athletes would differ significantly in levels of optimism and proactive coping.
- H2: Significant gender differences would be observed in confidence, constancy, control, and overall sports mental toughness.

H3: Optimism and proactive coping would be positively correlated with all dimensions of sports mental toughness.

H4: Optimism and proactive coping would significantly predict confidence, constancy, and control among student-athletes.

## Method

### Sample

The sample consisted of 200 student-athletes (101 males, 99 females), aged 17 to 25 years ( $M = 20.64$ ). Participants were undergraduate or postgraduate students with a minimum of two years of experience in competitive sports at the inter-college, inter-university, zonal, state, or national level. They represented both individual and team sports. Exclusion criteria included participation in only recreational sports, a gap of over six months in active sports involvement due to injury or academics, or withdrawal/refusal to consent.

### Measures

Mental Toughness was assessed using the 14-item *Sports Mental Toughness Questionnaire* (SMTQ; Sheard et al., 2009), comprising three subscales: Confidence (6 items), Constancy (4 items), and Control (4 items). Responses were recorded on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all true to 4 = Very true). The scale demonstrated good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .81$  overall; subscales  $\alpha = .71-.80$ ) and test-retest reliability ( $r = .87$ ).

Optimism was measured using the *Revised Life Orientation Test* (LOT-R; Scheier et al., 1994), which comprises six scored items (three assessing optimism and three assessing pessimism) and four fillers, all rated on a 5-point scale (0 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree). The tool has demonstrated acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = 0.74-0.84$ ) and strong test-retest stability ( $r = 0.79$ ).

Proactive Coping was assessed via the 14-item *Proactive Coping Scale* from the Proactive Coping Inventory (Greenglass et al., 1999). Items were rated on a 4-point scale (1 = Not at all true to 4 = Completely true). The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

### Procedure

Data were collected during the annual inter-college athletic competitions at Lalit Narayan Mithila University, Darbhanga, Bihar. Participants were personally approached, informed about the study's purpose, and assured of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their participation. After obtaining

written informed consent, they completed a questionnaire battery comprising the Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R), the Proactive Coping Inventory, and the Sports Mental Toughness Questionnaire (SMTQ). The tools were administered before/after their competitive events in a group setting.

### Statistical Analysis

The data collected was analyzed using SPSS, version 26.0. Independent Samples t-tests, Pearson's Correlation Coefficient (two-tailed), and multiple linear regression analysis (Enter) were used to assess the study's objectives.

## Results

Table 1. Significance of Difference between Mean Scores of Males and Females for Confidence, Constancy, Control, Overall Sports Mental Toughness, Optimism, and Proactive Coping

Variables	Males ( $n1=101$ )Mean (SD)	Females ( $n2=99$ )Mean (SD)	<i>t</i> ' values
Optimism	13.54(3.37)	13.42(3.01)	-.12
Proactive Coping	44.36(8.60)	42.74(8.78)	-1.32
Confidence	19.33(4.51)	18.11(4.30)	-1.95*
Constancy	12.94(2.86)	12.53(2.74)	-1.05
Control	8.74(2.19)	9.73(7.41)	3.09**
Overall_SMT	41.01(6.38)	40.36(5.42)	-.77

Note. SMT = Sports Mental Toughness \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

As shown in Table 1, the results demonstrated a statistically significant gender difference in the Control subdomain ( $t = 3.09$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), with female athletes ( $M = 9.73$ ,  $SD = 2.32$ ) scoring notably higher than male athletes ( $M = 8.74$ ,  $SD = 2.19$ ). A significant difference was also observed in the Confidence subdomain ( $t = -1.95$ ,  $p <$

$0.05$ ), indicating that male athletes reported slightly higher confidence levels ( $M = 19.33$ ,  $SD = 4.51$ ) than females ( $M = 18.11$ ,  $SD = 4.30$ ). No significant gender differences were found in Constancy or the overall SMT scores. Additionally, no significant gender differences were found in optimism and proactive coping.

Table 2. Summary of the Relationship between Confidence, Constancy, Control subdomains, and Overall Sports Mental Toughness with Optimism and Proactive Coping

Variable	Confidence	Constancy	Control	Overall_SMTQ
Optimism	.24**	.20**	-.13	.23**
Proactive Coping	.77**	.63**	-.44**	.70**

\*\* $p < 0.01$

As shown in Table 2, Pearson's correlation coefficient results indicate that optimism was positively and significantly correlated with confidence ( $r = 0.24, p < 0.01$ ), constancy ( $r = 0.20, p < 0.01$ ), and overall SMT ( $r = 0.23, p < 0.01$ ).

Proactive coping was positively correlated with confidence ( $r = .77, p < .01$ ), constancy ( $r = .63, p < .01$ ), and with overall SMT ( $r = .70, p < .01$ ), and negatively associated with control ( $r = -.44, p < .01$ ) subdomain of sports mental toughness.

Table 3. Summary of Linear Regression Analysis (Enter method) Predicting Confidence, Constancy, and Control subdomains of Sports Mental Toughness of Student athletes from Optimism and Proactive Coping

Model	Predictor Variables	Beta	SE	$\beta$	95%CI		p
					LL	UL	
1	Confidence						
	Optimism	.024	.067	.017	-.108	.155	.000***
	Proactive Coping	.388	.024	.762	.340	.436	
	Constancy						
	Optimism	.011	.051	.013	-.089	.111	.000***
	Proactive Coping	.203	.019	.629	.166	.239	
	Control						
	Optimism	.003	.048	.004	-.092	.099	.000***
	Proactive Coping	-.117	.018	-.441	-.152	-.082	

Model Summary (Confidence):  $R^2 = .589, Adjusted R^2 = .585, F(2, 197) = 141.23,$

Model Summary (Constancy):  $R^2 = .401, Adjusted R^2 = .395, F(2, 197) = 65.894,$

Model Summary (Control):  $R^2 = .440, Adjusted R^2 = .185, F(2, 197) = 23.624,$

Note. CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit, UL = Upper Limit;  $p^{***} < .001$

Table 3 presents the results, which indicate that the model was statistically significant ( $F(2, 197) = 141.23, p < .001$ ), and proactive coping was a significant positive predictor ( $\beta = 0.762, p < .001$ ). In contrast, optimism did not significantly predict confidence ( $\beta = 0.017, p = 0.903$ ). Optimism and proactive coping together explained 58.9% of the variance in confidence ( $R^2 = .589, Adjusted R^2 = .585$ ).

Proactive coping was also found to be a strong positive predictor of constancy ( $\beta = .629, p < .001$ ). At the same time, optimism was not a significant predictor ( $\beta = .013, p = .900$ ). The model was statistically significant

( $F(2, 197) = 65.89, p < .001$ ), explaining approximately 40.1% of the variance in Constancy ( $R^2 = .401, Adjusted R^2 = .395$ ).

On the Control subdomain, the regression model was statistically significant,  $F(2, 197) = 23.62, p < .001$ , and accounted for 44.0% of the variance in Control ( $R^2 = .440, Adjusted R^2 = .185$ ). As shown in Table 3, proactive coping was a significant negative predictor of Control ( $\beta = -.441, p < .001$ ), indicating that higher proactive coping was associated with lower scores on the Control dimension. Optimism did not significantly predict Control ( $\beta = .004, p = .900$ ).

## Discussion

The findings revealed no significant gender differences in optimism and proactive coping, suggesting that male and female athletes employ similar levels of future-oriented thinking and coping strategies. This aligns with prior research indicating that at higher levels of athletic engagement, athletes, regardless of gender, tend to develop comparable psychological skills (Tamminen & Crocker, 2013).

However, in partial support of Hypothesis 2, significant gender differences were observed in the subdomains of confidence and control. Male athletes scored significantly higher on confidence, which may reflect the influence of traditional gender roles that emphasize assertiveness and competitiveness in male-dominated sports contexts (Nicholls et al., 2009). In contrast, female athletes scored higher on control, indicating stronger emotional regulation under pressure, possibly due to socialization patterns that encourage emotional expressiveness and regulation in females (Krane et al., 2001). Similar findings in a study revealed that male athletes often report greater levels of confidence. At the same time, females typically outperform in emotional control and constancy (Gerber et al., 2012), indicating that female athletes tend to demonstrate stronger emotional regulation, a vital aspect of psychological resilience. No significant gender differences were observed in constancy or overall SMT, indicating that sustained commitment and overall mental resilience are likely nurtured equally through athletic training across genders.

Strong support was found for Hypothesis 3, which predicted positive associations between optimism, proactive coping, and the dimensions of mental toughness. Proactive coping showed strong links with confidence, constancy, and overall mental toughness,

reinforcing its role as a forward-focused strategy for managing stress (Greenglass et al., 1999). Optimism also correlated positively, though more moderately, suggesting its influence may be indirect, shaping a resilient mindset that supports performance (Nes & Segerstrom, 2006). Interestingly, a negative association with control suggests that athletes engaging in proactive coping may experience less need for reactive emotional regulation. Further research is needed to understand this pattern. Regression results offered strong support for Hypothesis 4, confirming that proactive coping is a significant and consistent predictor of all three subdomains of mental toughness, in line with prior evidence emphasizing the importance of anticipatory strategies in athletic resilience (Sheard & Golby, 2006).

Although optimism showed positive correlations with the dimensions of mental toughness, it did not significantly predict any mental toughness outcomes once proactive coping was included in the regression models. This indicates that optimism may provide a general motivational backdrop for resilience, but proactive coping is more directly responsible for shaping mental toughness. This aligns with Carver and Scheier's (2002) view that optimism drives broad motivational orientations, while coping strategies translate these into concrete, goal-directed behaviors. Prior studies have shown that optimistic individuals are more likely to adopt approach-based coping styles and experience better psychological adjustment under stress (Scheier & Carver, 1985), which may explain the indirect contribution of optimism to this outcome. Thus, while optimism may lay the psychological foundation, proactive coping appears to be the more critical mechanism in cultivating the behaviors that define mental toughness.

These findings not only highlight the predictive significance of proactive coping in

shaping mental toughness but also align with broader perspectives within positive psychology. This framework emphasizes the development of internal strengths and adaptive resources that support resilience and performance under pressure (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Mental toughness, optimism, and proactive coping are interrelated traits that contribute to an athlete's psychological preparedness. Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory (2001) further supports the notion that positive emotions and anticipatory strategies help broaden an individual's thought-action repertoire, thereby reinforcing enduring psychological capacities such as confidence, constancy, and control. This study offers key insights for coaches, sports psychologists, and educators working with university athletes. These insights underscore the importance of incorporating coping skills training into athlete development programs to foster sustained well-being and optimal performance.

This cross-sectional study limits the ability to draw causal conclusions. Self-report data may also introduce bias. Future research should adopt longitudinal and experimental designs, incorporate objective performance metrics, and investigate the roles of additional psychological constructs, such as self-efficacy, grit, or mindfulness. Investigating proactive versus reactive coping across different sport types and competitive levels is also recommended.

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