

## Enhancing Athletic Well-Being: Unravelling the Impact of Social Support

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**Abstract:** Enhancing athletic well-being is integral to optimizing sports performance and overall health. Social support serves as a vital component in fostering athletic well-being, offering emotional, tangible, and informational assistance to athletes. This study examines the social support experienced by SUKMA athletes, focusing on support from friends, family, and significant others throughout their sports engagement. The primary objective is to explore the relationship between social support and psychological well-being among SUKMA athletes in Negeri Sembilan. A sample of 298 athletes completed the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and Psychological Well-being Scale. Findings reveal family support as the predominant source of social support, followed by significant others and friends. Notably, significant others exhibit a significant relationship with all elements of psychological well-being. Further research should delve into the nuanced dynamics of social support in athletic contexts through longitudinal and qualitative studies. Strategies to bolster social support networks within sports settings are recommended to enhance athletes' mental health and performance. Moreover, the study lays the groundwork for future research to explore the complexities of social support in athletic environments, advocating for longitudinal and qualitative approaches to better understand these dynamics.

**Keywords:** *Social support, psychological well-being, athletes*

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### 1. Introduction

Athlete well-being is a comprehensive construct that includes physical, psychological, and social aspects, which significantly influence performance outcomes and overall quality of life (Smith & Jones, 2019). In Malaysia, the unique cultural and social dynamics play a critical role in shaping athletes' experiences and well-being, making it essential to explore these factors in depth.

Social support, defined as the assistance or resources provided by others in times of need or during challenging situations, has emerged as a critical determinant of athlete well-being across various sports and competitive levels (Jones & Brown, 2018). The concept of social support, which encompasses emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal dimensions, is a well-established determinant of athlete well-being. It refers to the assistance provided by others, especially during times of need or stress, and has been shown to significantly impact various aspects of athletes' lives, including their mental health and performance (House et al., 1988; Jones & Brown, 2018).

In Malaysia, the focus on mental health and well-being in sports has gained traction, particularly considering the increasing pressures faced by athletes at various levels of competition. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has highlighted the importance of mental health, recognizing that good mental health is crucial for optimal performance and overall well-being (IOC, 2023). This aligns with the global trend of addressing mental health in sports, as seen in the introduction of resources such as mindfulness apps and educational tools designed to support athletes (Olympics.com, 2023).

Furthermore, a study on Malaysian athletes revealed that social factors, such as support from family and the sports environment, significantly influence motivation and performance. These findings underscore the critical role of a supportive network in helping athletes navigate the challenges of competitive sports (Zainuddin et al., 2023). While considerable attention has been given to understanding the relationship between athletic well-being and social support, there exists a notable gap in the current literature regarding the specific mechanisms through which social support influences various dimensions of athletic well-being (Mira, et al., 2023). This study will focus on the relationship between social support and psychological well-being among Negeri Sembilan

SUKMA athletes. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for developing targeted interventions and strategies to enhance social support systems, ultimately promoting better mental health and well-being among Malaysian athletes.

## 2. Literature Review

Athlete well-being is a multifaceted construct encompassing physical, psychological, and social dimensions, each intricately interconnected and influential on performance outcomes and overall quality of life (Smith & Jones, 2019). Within sports psychology literature, considerable attention has been dedicated to understanding the factors that contribute to athlete well-being, with a notable emphasis on the role of social support.

Enhancing athletic well-being is a multifaceted process that involves various factors, with social support playing a crucial role. Research has shown that social support can have a significant impact on athletes' mental health, stress levels, and overall well-being (Covassin et al., 2014; Deegan & Dunne, 2022; Sullivan et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2014). Studies have indicated that social support can act as a buffer against stress, anxiety, and depression, particularly in the context of athletic injuries (Covassin et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2014). Moreover, social support has been linked to reducing burnout and enhancing subjective well-being among athletes (DeFreese & Smith, 2014; Ozer, 2023).

The type and source of social support are essential considerations, as they can influence its effectiveness. For instance, studies have highlighted the importance of received support, perceived support, and the provider of support in determining its impact on athletes' psychological well-being (Katagami & Tsuchiya, 2016). Additionally, the satisfaction levels of social support have been associated with reduced stress perceptions and depression in athletic training students (Deegan & Dunne, 2022). Furthermore, social support has been found to mediate the physical and psychological effects of athletic injuries, facilitating the recovery process (Covassin et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2014). It has also been identified as a predictor of athletes' achievement motivation, emphasizing its role in enhancing performance (Pambudi, 2022). Additionally, social support has been linked to improving athletes' self-esteem, self-regulation, and psychological skill use, contributing to their overall well-being (Portela-Pino et al., 2024; Trotter et al., 2021; Wibowo, 2024).

Recent research has emphasized the importance of social support from different sources, including coaches, teammates, and family members, in fostering resilience and coping abilities among athletes. Katagami and Tsuchiya (2016) demonstrated that perceived social support positively correlates with athletes' psychological well-being and overall satisfaction with their sports experience. Similarly, a study by Williams et al. (2020) highlighted the role of social support in promoting athletes' resilience and coping abilities in the face of stressors commonly encountered in competitive sports environments.

Moreover, research has elucidated the mechanisms through which social support influences athlete well-being. Cutrona and Russell (1990) introduced the concept of social support satisfaction, emphasizing the importance of individuals' perceptions of the adequacy and availability of support in determining its impact on well-being outcomes. Additionally, studies by Delfin et al. (2024) and Thompson et al. (2019) have supported the stress-buffering hypothesis, suggesting that social support serves as a protective factor against the detrimental effects of stress on athletes' mental health.

## 3. Methodology

### *Study design, sampling and procedure*

Young athletes are at a critical developmental stage where physical, psychological, and social changes occur rapidly. As highlighted by Williams et al. (2020), early experiences in sports, including the quality of coaching and support systems, can determine an athlete's future in sports. Identifying and addressing issues during the early stages of an athlete's career can prevent burnout and dropout, ensuring that they have a sustainable and positive relationship with sports. Researchers used a cross-sectional research design to recruit a convenience sample of 298 SUKMA athletes from Negeri Sembilan. These SUKMA athletes were invited to complete a voluntary and anonymous online questionnaire that included demographic items and validated and reliable scales measuring psychological well-being and social support. All respondents presented voluntary informed

consent electronically before disclosing any information used for study purposes. Correlational research was used in the present study to investigate the link between social support and psychological well-being. This research design was chosen to be consistent with the present research's main objective, which is to examine the relationship between social support and psychological well-being among Negeri Sembilan SUKMA athletes.

**Survey instrument**

The survey comprised questionnaires requested for the respondents' demographic, social support, and psychological well-being information. The survey instrument's first few questions measured demographic factors such as gender, age, race, the highest level of education, type of sports, the highest level of competition, and frequency of involvement at the National level. The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Zimet et al., 1988) was utilized to measure the respondents' level of social support. The scale items were ranked from 0 to 7, consisting of very strongly disagree to very strongly agree. The 18-item Psychological Well-being Scale (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff et al., 2010), consists of the following dimensions namely Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life, and Self-Acceptance subscales are used by the researchers to measure the psychological well-being of the athletes. The higher scores mean the higher levels of psychological well-being of the respondents.

**Data analyses**

All analyses were performed using IBM's Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 (IBM Corp.). Descriptive statistics were calculated to describe the respondent characteristics and the study variables of interest. To investigate the relationships between social support and psychological well-being variables, Spearman's rho correlations were calculated. An alpha level of 0.05 was set a priori to indicate statistical significance.

**4. Results**

A compilation of 298 SUKMA athletes from Negeri Sembilan has been gathered. Male athletes were the majority (n=177, 59 percent); female athletes comprised just 41 percent (n=121). SUKMA athletes are 16.67 years old on average (SD=1.92), which corresponds to the mean age of the participants. Furthermore, it corresponds to the secondary school level of education held by 69 percent of the sample (n=206). 58% (n=172) of the athletes identified as Malay, followed by 19% (n=58) as Chinese, 21% (n=62) as Indian, and 2% (n=6) as Others. Individual sports were participated in by 56% (n=168) as opposed to team sports by 44% (n=130). A greater proportion of them (n=213, 71 percent) have participated in national competitions as opposed to international competitions (n=85, 29 percent).

**Table 1: Demographic profile of the athletes (n=298)**

		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	177	59.00
	Female	121	41.00
Age in years	Mean (SD)	16.67 (1.92)	
Race	Malay	172	58.00
	Chinese	58	19.00
	Indian	62	21.00
	Others	6	2.00
Highest Level of Education	Secondary school	206	69.00
	SPM	29	10.00
	STPM	5	2.00
	Diploma	41	14.00
	Bachelor	16	5.00
Type of Sports	Individual	168	56.00
	Team	130	44.00
	National	213	71.00

Highest Level of Competition	International	85	29.00
Frequency of involvement at the national level	No involvement	25	12.00
	1	51	24.00
	2	34	16.00
	3	25	12.00
	4	18	8.00
	5	27	13.00
	More than 5	33	14.00
Frequency of involvement at the	No involvement	4	5.00
	1	17	20.00
	2	19	22.00
	3	15	18.00
	4	12	14.00
	5	2	2.00
	More than 5	16	21.00

The data collection process of this study aimed to address the following research objectives: to examine the psychological well-being factors of Negeri Sembilan SUKMA athletes; to investigate the social support factors among Negeri Sembilan SUKMA athletes; and to examine the relationship between social support and psychological well-being among Negeri Sembilan SUKMA athletes. The initial objective is delineated in Table 1, which presents the three subfactors of social support: support from significant others, and support from family and friends. The findings from the factors reported indicate that a substantial proportion of the athletes consider family support (mean=5.34, SD=1.52) to be the primary source of social support. This is followed by significant others (mean=5.24, SD=1.59) and friends (mean=5.14, SD=1.59).

**Table 2: The social support factors among Negeri Sembilan SUKMA athletes.**

<b>Social Support</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Significant Others	5.24	1.59
Family Support	5.34	1.52
Friends Support	5.14	1.55
Overall Social Support	5.24	1.43

Personal growth accounted for the greatest degree of psychological well-being among the athletes (mean=15.54, SD=3.05), as seen in Table 3 for the second objective. Subsequently, self-acceptance stands at a mean of 15.00 (SD=2.56), followed by environmental mastery at 14.25 (SD=2.53), autonomy at 14.17 (SD=2.30), positive interpersonal relationships at 12.15 (SD=2.91), and a sense of purpose in life at 12.12 (SD=2.92).

**Table 3: The psychological well-being factors among Negeri Sembilan SUKMA athletes.**

<b>Psychological Well-being</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Autonomy	14.17	2.30
Environmental Mastery	14.25	2.53
Personal Growth	15.54	3.05
Positive Relations with Others	12.15	2.91
Purpose in Life	12.12	2.92
Self-Acceptance	15.00	2.56

Table 4 reported the relationship between social support factors and psychological well-being factors among Negeri Sembilan SUKMA athletes. It reported the significant relationship between significant others toward environmental master ( $r=0.23$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), personal growth ( $r=0.19$ ,  $p=0.001$ ), positive relations with others ( $r=0.12$ ,  $p=0.041$ ) and self-acceptance ( $r=0.21$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

There is a significant relationship between family support and autonomy ( $r=0.15$ ,  $p=0.008$ ), environmental mastery ( $r=0.30$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), personal growth ( $r=0.23$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and self-acceptance ( $r=0.28$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). There is a significance relationship between friends support and autonomy ( $r=0.14$ ,  $p=0.017$ ), environmental mastery ( $r=0.27$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), personal growth ( $r=0.20$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and self-acceptance ( $r=0.22$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

There is a significant relationship between overall social support and autonomy ( $r=0.15$ ,  $p=0.011$ ), environmental mastery ( $r=0.29$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), personal growth ( $r=0.23$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), self-acceptance ( $r=0.26$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

**Table 4: Relationship between Social Support and Psychological Well-being among Negeri Sembilan SUKMA athletes**

		Autonomy	Environmental Mastery	Personal Growth	Positive Relations with Others	Purpose in Life	Self-Acceptance
Significant Others	Spearman's rho	0.11	0.23**	0.19**	0.12**	0.02	0.21**
	p-value	0.066	<.001	0.001	0.041	0.781	<.001
Family Support	Spearman's rho	0.15**	0.30**	0.23**	0.07	-0.01	0.28**
	p-value	0.008	<.001	<.001	0.234	0.920	<.001
Friends Support	Spearman's rho	0.14**	0.27**	0.20**	0.04	-0.02	0.22**
	p-value	0.017	<.001	<.001	0.447	0.678	<.001
Overall Social support	Spearman's rho	0.15**	0.29**	0.23**	0.09	-0.00	0.26**
	p-value	0.011	<.001	<.001	0.108	0.958	<.001

### Discussion

The present study offers a comprehensive exploration of the social support dynamics, psychological well-being, and the interrelationship between these two facets among Negeri Sembilan SUKMA athletes. This investigation is pivotal, considering the growing emphasis on the holistic development of athletes, incorporating both physical and psychological dimensions. Our findings, which highlight the critical role of social support and its significant association with various psychological well-being aspects, align with and extend the current literature on adolescent and young athletes.

Our analysis reveals a robust support network for athletes, with family emerging as the primary source, closely followed by significant others and friends, highlighting the multidimensional support system that adolescent and young athletes rely on to navigate the competitive sports landscape. This finding is supported by literature indicating the crucial role of social support in enhancing athletic well-being by moderating stress effects, improving health, and indirectly impacting performance through strategic and motivational advice (Clement & Shannon, 2011; Côté et al., 1999; Smith et al., 1990). The indispensable role of family, as emphasized by Bloom (1985), in the developmental stages of athletes, underscores the broader necessity for a diverse social support network, as corroborated by studies demonstrating the significant impact of coaches, parents, teammates, and significant others on athletes' well-being, satisfaction, and psychological readiness to return to sport after injuries (Forsdyke et al., 2022; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Furthermore, the mediation of social support in both physical and psychological recovery post-injury, alongside its contribution to emotional well-being during challenging times, underscores its importance across the rehabilitation process and overall athlete satisfaction (Burns et al., 2021; Covassin et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2014). Fostering a culture of social support within the athletic community is not only essential for physical recovery but also crucial in promoting emotional well-being and enhancing performance, thereby emphasizing the multifaceted impact of social support on athletes' lives.



The demographic composition of our cohort, primarily adolescent and young athletes, underscores the critical need for a nuanced understanding of their social support and psychological well-being requirements. Adolescence and young adulthood represent pivotal stages for psychological development, where individuals are highly receptive to external influences, including social support, which significantly contributes to their well-being (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Research supports the notion that social support from teammates, coaches, and significant others not only positively impacts psychological well-being but also helps mitigate stress, anxiety, and negative social interactions, thereby improving mental health outcomes (DeFreese & Smith, 2014; Graupensperger et al., 2020). Furthermore, the quality and perception of social support are linked to enhanced performance, mental toughness, resilience, and life satisfaction, highlighting its importance in the holistic development of young athletes (Cho et al., 2020; Katagami & Tsuchiya, 2016; Yıldırım & Green, 2023). This finding aligns with Fraser-Thomas, et al. (2005), emphasizing the role of social support in fostering positive development and addressing the negative impacts of potential disruptions in athletic participation, such as those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Collins et al., 2022). However, the presence of negative social interactions, authoritarian coaching styles, and adverse childhood experiences can adversely affect athletes' mental health and well-being, necessitating the cultivation of positive social environments and supportive relationships within the athletic community (DeFreese & Smith, 2014; Hagerty & Felizzi, 2023). In conclusion, social support emerges as a cornerstone for the psychological, emotional, and physical well-being of adolescent and young athletes, indicating that fostering robust support networks is crucial for their overall development and success in the sporting arena.

The assessment of psychological well-being among Negeri Sembilan SUKMA athletes, particularly highlighting personal growth and self-acceptance, resonates deeply with Ryff's dimensions of psychological well-being, emphasizing the significance of these factors in fostering overall psychological health. This emphasis on personal growth and self-acceptance may reflect the intrinsic motivation and resilience that are characteristic of athletes achieving competitive success. Furthermore, the robust impact of social support from coaches, parents, peers, and healthcare providers on athletes' psychological well-being and perceptions of health underscores the critical role social support plays across various sports settings (Chan et al., 2011; Clement & Shannon, 2011; DeFreese & Smith, 2014). Notably, the satisfaction derived from specific sources of support, such as athletic trainers, significantly contributes to athletes' overall well-being, underlining the multifaceted nature of social support in mediating both the physical and psychological aftermath of athletic injuries and enhancing rehabilitation processes (Covassin et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2014). Additionally, the importance of parental and peer support in youth sports contexts, influencing factors such as motivation, participation, and dropout rates, further exemplifies the broad spectrum of social support's impact on athletes' lives (O'Brien, 2021; Sheridan et al., 2014). The interdependent relationship between social support and psychological well-being is highlighted through the correlations observed between various dimensions of social support and well-being facets, affirming the theory proposed by Cutrona and Russell (1990) that social support significantly enhances psychological well-being by providing emotional, informational, and instrumental resources. This comprehensive view not only reinforces the pivotal role of social support in athletes' performance, motivation, and mental well-being but also emphasizes its capacity to mitigate negative stress-related consequences, thereby promoting health and facilitating a successful athletic career.

Delving into the interplay between social support and psychological well-being, our findings highlight the significant role of social support, particularly from family, in enhancing various dimensions of psychological well-being among athletes. This pivotal role of family, supported by research indicating its foundational contribution to athletes' psychological resilience and well-being, is further complemented by the positive impact of support from teammates, significant others, and friends on mental health and overall well-being (Graupensperger et al., 2020). However, the adverse effects of negative social interactions on psychological well-being cannot be overlooked, underscoring the complex dynamics between social support, negative interactions, and athletes' mental health (DeFreese & Smith, 2014). The satisfaction of basic psychological needs, such as competence and relatedness, plays a crucial mediating role in this relationship, highlighting the importance of a supportive social environment in fulfilling these needs and thereby contributing to well-being (Felton & Jowett, 2012). Additionally, the distinction between received and perceived support emerges as a critical factor in shaping athletes' psychological landscape, with coping skills and secure relationships among teammates further influencing well-being and performance (Katagami & Tsuchiya, 2016; Oliveira et al., 2022). Our study underscores the indispensable role of a comprehensive support system—encompassing family,

significant others, friends, and coaches—in the holistic development of athletes, potentially enhancing their performance and resilience in competitive sports. This multifaceted support system, essential for navigating the pressures of competitive sports, aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the influence of multiple environmental systems on individual development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In conclusion, the critical contribution of social support to athletes' psychological well-being highlights its role as a buffer against stress and an enhancer of mental health, underscoring the necessity for coaches to adopt transformational leadership styles that meet athletes' basic psychological needs, thus promoting their well-being and performance. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics, considering the evolving challenges faced by athletes in a rapidly changing sports landscape, to develop effective interventions to support athletes' mental health and holistic development.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study provides a comprehensive examination of the social support dynamics and psychological well-being among Negeri Sembilan SUKMA athletes, shedding light on their interconnectedness. This investigation is crucial, particularly as there is a growing recognition of the importance of addressing both physical and psychological dimensions for the holistic development of athletes.

Our findings highlight the pivotal role of social support, with family emerging as the primary source, closely followed by significant others and friends. This underscores the multidimensional support system that adolescent and young athletes rely on to navigate the competitive sports landscape. Social support has been shown to moderate stress effects, improve health, and indirectly impact performance through strategic and motivational advice. The study aligns with existing literature emphasizing the significance of social support from various sources in fostering positive development and addressing the negative impacts of disruptions in athletic participation.

Further exploration into the nuanced dynamics of social support within athletic environments is warranted. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into how social support evolves and its impact on athletes' psychological well-being. Additionally, qualitative research methods could offer a deeper understanding of athletes' experiences with social support. Interventions or strategies to enhance social support networks within athletic settings should also be explored to promote athletes' mental health and performance.

Future research should continue to investigate the evolving challenges faced by athletes in a rapidly changing sports landscape. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective interventions to support athletes' mental health and holistic development, ultimately fostering their well-being and success in the sporting arena.

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