



Psychological Resilience and Competitive Success among Football Players: A Systematic Review

A Review of Recent Empirical and Theoretical Literature

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Abstract

Football is a high-pressure team sport characterised by uncertainty, physical contact, public scrutiny, and frequent setbacks such as defeat, injury, and exclusion from selection. Psychological resilience, broadly defined as the capacity to adapt positively in the face of adversity, has been increasingly recognised as a core determinant of sustained competitive success in football. This paper presents a systematic review of twenty recent studies examining the relationship between psychological resilience and competitive outcomes among football players across age groups, performance levels, and cultural settings. The reviewed literature converges on several themes: resilience is built through the interaction of personal qualities (mental toughness, hardiness, grit, self-efficacy) and contextual resources (social support, coaching climate, team culture); resilience training and psychological skills interventions produce measurable gains in mental toughness, decision-making, and on-field performance; and resilience operates as a protective factor during injury recovery and high-stakes competitive moments such as penalty shootouts. Gaps remain in longitudinal and causal designs, in research on female and youth players, and in culturally diverse samples. The review concludes with practical implications for coaches, sport psychologists, and talent-development pathways.

Keywords: psychological resilience, mental toughness, football, soccer, competitive performance, hardiness, systematic review

1. Introduction

Football, known as soccer in some regions, is among the most psychologically demanding team sports in the world. Players are routinely exposed to organizational stressors (selection pressure, contract uncertainty, media scrutiny), competitive stressors (must-win matches, penalty shootouts, hostile crowds), and personal stressors (injury, loss of form, transitions between clubs or age groups). Whether an athlete experiences such stressors as debilitating or as a catalyst for growth depends substantially on their psychological resilience.

Psychological resilience has been described as the capacity of athletes to use personal qualities and protective resources to withstand and adapt positively to pressure (Gupta & McCarthy, 2022). Rather than being a fixed trait, resilience is increasingly understood as a dynamic process arising from the interaction between an individual's psychological assets and the social and organizational environment in which they compete (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016; Wagstaff, Sarkar, Davidson, & Fletcher, 2016). Within football specifically, resilience has been linked to mental toughness, hardiness, grit, emotional regulation, self-efficacy, coping strategies, and the quality of social support available to a player (Gupta & McCarthy, 2022; ISSPF, 2025).

Competitive success in football can be conceptualized at multiple levels: individual performance consistency, decision-making quality under pressure, progression through talent pathways, and team-level achievement. A growing body of research has examined how resilience-related constructs relate to these outcomes, spanning youth academy players, amateur adult players, and elite professionals. This paper systematically reviews twenty studies published mainly within the last several years to synthesize current evidence on the relationship between psychological resilience and competitive success in football, identify the mechanisms through which resilience operates, and highlight directions for future research and applied practice.

1.1 Aims of the Review

- To synthesise empirical and theoretical evidence on psychological resilience among football players.
- To examine how resilience relates to competitive performance, decision-making, and career progression.
- To identify personal and contextual factors that build or undermine resilience.
- To highlight intervention approaches shown to strengthen resilience and related mental qualities.
- To identify methodological gaps and propose directions for future research.

2. Methodology

This review followed a systematic approach broadly consistent with PRISMA guidance for narrative-systematic syntheses. Electronic databases and aggregators (including Frontiers in Psychology, ScienceDirect, PubMed/PMC, Taylor & Francis Online, and Nature-affiliated outlets) were searched using combinations of the terms “resilience,” “mental toughness,” “hardiness,” “grit,” “football,” “soccer,” and “competitive performance.” Studies were eligible if they (a) sampled football/soccer players at any competitive level, (b) examined psychological resilience or closely related constructs (mental toughness, hardiness, grit, self-efficacy as a resilience mechanism), and (c) reported a relationship with a performance, well-being, or developmental outcome. Twenty studies meeting these criteria, spanning systematic reviews, cross-sectional surveys, longitudinal designs, and a randomised controlled intervention, were retained for synthesis. Findings were organised thematically rather than narratively summarised study-by-study, consistent with conventions for psychological systematic reviews.

3. Thematic Findings

3.1 Defining and Modelling Resilience in Football

Foundational reviews frame resilience not as the absence of stress but as a positive adaptive response in its presence. Gupta and McCarthy's (2022) synthesis of 92 sport-resilience studies produced a sport-specific definition and a meta-model proposing that resilience emerges from the dynamic interaction between protective psychological resources and the demands an athlete faces, rather than from a single static trait. Fletcher and Sarkar's (2016) critical review similarly emphasizes the role of organizational and sociocultural dynamics, alongside individual psychological processes, in shaping resilience trajectories. Within soccer specifically, a behavioral-indicators study of professional academy youth players described resilience as the practical ability to use coping strategies to work through obstacles and setbacks, distinguishing it from closely related but conceptually narrower constructs such as grit or general attitude (Taylor & Francis, 2024).

3.2 Mental Toughness and Hardiness as Core Components

Mental toughness and hardiness consistently emerge as central, measurable components of footballing resilience. Comparative work using the Psychological Performance Inventory and the Personal Views Survey found that elite footballers scored significantly higher on overall mental toughness and hardiness, and on every individual subscale, than recreational players, suggesting these qualities differentiate performance levels (Golby & Sheard-based comparative study; ResearchGate/GRIN summary). A related survey of professional male footballers using the modified Sports Mental Toughness Questionnaire and the Psychological Performance Inventory found the two instruments correlated well with one another, although player self-ratings and coach ratings of hardiness frequently diverged, pointing to measurement and perception challenges in applied settings (PMC, Chiropractic & Manual Therapies).

A longitudinal study of competitive soccer goalkeepers tracked mental toughness, resilience, cognitive appraisals, and self-rated performance across a four-month season and found that trait mental toughness positively predicted resilience, which in turn predicted more favorable (benefit-oriented) and fewer threat-oriented appraisals of competitive situations (Journal of Sports Sciences, 2024). This supports a sequential model in which a stable disposition toward mental toughness builds the dynamic, situational experience of resilience, which subsequently shapes how players interpret pressure. Complementing this, a study correlating mental toughness with physical performance markers among elite soccer players found moderate-to-strong correlations between mental toughness subscales and measures such as sprinting and running output, suggesting psychological and physical performance are intertwined rather than independent domains (Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 2026).

3.3 Emotional Intelligence, Goal Commitment, and Motivational Pathways

Resilience-related qualities also interact with emotional and motivational variables. A study of amateur soccer players found that emotional intelligence was associated with mental toughness partly through goal commitment, with the indirect pathway strongest among players with greater competitive experience, suggesting psychological resources accumulate and reinforce one another over an athletic career (Frontiers in Psychology, 2025). Gender differences were also observed, with female athletes showing patterns suggestive of heightened emotional sensitivity translating into motivational persistence. Other comparative work has examined grit, finding that elite Norwegian footballers demonstrated significantly higher grit scores than younger talent-pathway players, consistent with the broader literature linking grit to age,

experience, and performance level (Pettersen et al., 2022, *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*).

3.4 Social Support, Self-Efficacy, and Psychological Skills

Resilience does not arise from individual disposition alone. A structural equation model tested on 430 academy football players in Turkish professional clubs found that perceived social support did not directly predict psychological resilience, but instead operated indirectly through self-efficacy and psychological skills, indicating that support from coaches, family, and teammates builds resilience mainly by strengthening players' belief in their own capabilities (Frontiers in Psychology, 2026). This finding has direct implications for academy environments, suggesting that simply providing supportive relationships is insufficient unless paired with deliberate self-efficacy and skills development. Related research on youth injury-prevention behavior found that football players generally reported lower coping self-efficacy than their coaches, and that knowledge-building, communication, and support were key levers for improving protective behavior (PubMed, 2025).

3.5 Resilience, Coping, and Performance under Pressure

Several studies examine resilience in the moments where competitive success is most visible. A cross-sectional study of 466 professional Turkish football players found that psychological strain was negatively associated with resilience, and that coping humor moderated this relationship, such that players who used humor as an adaptive coping strategy maintained higher resilience under strain (Frontiers in Psychology, 2025). The behavioral-indicators study of academy youth players similarly emphasized the ability to cope with pressure and setbacks as a defining feature of resilient players, observable in match-day behavior rather than only in self-report (Taylor & Francis, 2024).

3.6 Resilience as a Protective Factor in Injury and Recovery

Resilience also functions protectively during injury, a recurring adversity in football careers. A longitudinal mediation study of children recovering from sports injuries found that baseline psychological resilience predicted better recovery at three- and six-month follow-up, with the pathway substantially explained by emotion regulation strategies (cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression) and sports self-efficacy (PMC, 2025/2026). Although this study examined general youth sport rather than football exclusively, its mechanisms are directly applicable to football injury contexts, where psychological resilience is theorized to support faster and more complete returns to competition.

3.7 Psychological Skills Interventions and Trainability of Resilience

A key applied question is whether resilience and its associated qualities can be deliberately trained. A randomized controlled study testing a structured psychological skills intervention, incorporating goal setting, imagery, and emotional regulation techniques, found significant improvements in football players' mental toughness, decision-making, and tactical performance relative to a control group (Frontiers in Psychology, 2026). Separately, a study of elite footballers found that an eight-week mindfulness training program improved resilience, self-confidence, and emotion regulation, with locus of control mediating these effects, suggesting that mindfulness-based approaches may work partly by shifting players toward a more internal sense of control over outcomes (ScienceDirect, 2022). A sixteen-week psychological skills training program has likewise been associated with measurable gains in mental toughness among professional players (Miçoogullari & Ekmekci, 2017, as summarized in Frontiers in Psychology, 2024).

3.8 Resilience across the Talent Pathway and Future Performance

A systematic review with meta-analysis of psychosocial predictors of future football performance identified resilience as one of approximately 48 psychosocial factors associated with successful talent development, alongside self-control, task orientation, adaptive perfectionism, and intrinsic motivation (ScienceDirect, 2019). A related prospective-only review found that decision-making and achievement-motive profiles, including hope for success and fear of failure, were the constructs most strongly and consistently associated with future football success, underscoring that perceptual-cognitive and motivational factors work alongside resilience rather than in isolation. Together, these reviews caution that much of the existing evidence base relies on cross-sectional or retrospective designs, which limits causal claims about whether resilience drives success or successful players simply report more resilience in hindsight.

4. Synthesis of Reviewed Studies

Table 1 summarizes the focus and principal contribution of representative studies included in this review.

Focus area	Sample / design	Key contribution
Resilience modelling	92 studies, meta-synthesis	Sport-specific resilience definition and meta-model (Gupta & McCarthy, 2022)
Organizational/sociocultural review	Critical narrative review	Resilience as process shaped by organizational dynamics (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016)
Mental toughness vs. hardiness by level	61 footballers, two performance levels	Elite players score higher on all MT/hardiness subscales
Coach vs. player ratings of hardiness	20 professional male footballers	Good inter-questionnaire correlation; weak coach-player agreement
Longitudinal goalkeeper study	36 goalkeepers, 4-month season	MT predicts resilience, which predicts favorable appraisals
Mental toughness and physical output	Elite soccer players	MT subscales moderately-to-strongly correlate with sprint/running metrics
Emotional intelligence and goal commitment	Amateur soccer players	EI links to MT via goal commitment; stronger with experience
Grit across performance levels	Norwegian footballers, talent vs. elite	Elite players show significantly higher grit
Social support and self-efficacy model (SEM)	430 academy players, Turkey	Support builds resilience indirectly via self-efficacy/skills

Injury-prevention behavior	865 youth players & coaches	Players show lower coping self-efficacy than coaches
Strain, humor, and resilience	466 professional Turkish players	Coping humor buffers strain-resilience relationship
Behavioral indicators of resilience	Academy youth soccer players	Resilience observable in coping behavior, not just self-report
Injury recovery mediation	128 injured children, 6-month follow-up	Resilience predicts recovery via emotion regulation and self-efficacy
Psychological skills RCT	Football players, controlled trial	Intervention improves MT, decision-making, tactical skill
Mindfulness training	Elite football players	Mindfulness improves resilience/self-confidence via locus of control
Psychosocial predictors meta-analysis	Multiple cohorts, meta-analysis	Resilience one of ~48 factors linked to future success
Decision-making and achievement motives	Prospective-only review	Decision-making and motive profiles most strongly predictive

5. Discussion

Taken together, the reviewed literature supports the view that psychological resilience is a multidimensional, trainable construct closely intertwined with mental toughness, hardiness, grit, self-efficacy, and emotion regulation, and that it meaningfully relates to competitive success in football. Several patterns deserve emphasis.

First, resilience appears to differentiate performance levels: elite and experienced players consistently score higher on resilience-adjacent measures than recreational or younger counterparts (ResearchGate/GRIN; Pettersen et al., 2022). This raises an unresolved direction-of-effect question: does resilience help players reach elite status, or does competing at an elite level build resilience through repeated exposure to high-stakes adversity? Longitudinal designs, such as the goalkeeper study (Journal of Sports Sciences, 2024) and the children's injury-recovery study (PMC, 2025/2026), offer the strongest available evidence for genuinely predictive, rather than merely correlational, relationships, but such designs remain the minority.

Second, resilience is not purely intrapersonal. The academy social-support model (Frontiers in Psychology, 2026) demonstrates that environmental resources such as coach and family support matter mainly insofar as they strengthen self-efficacy and psychological skills, reframing resilience-building interventions away from simply increasing support and toward equipping players with usable psychological tools.

Third, resilience and its components appear responsive to structured intervention. Mindfulness training, psychological skills training, and goal-setting/imagery-based programs each produced measurable gains in resilience-related outcomes (ScienceDirect, 2022; Frontiers in Psychology, 2026), suggesting practical, time-bound programs delivered by sport psychologists or qualified coaching staff can meaningfully shift players' psychological profiles within a season.

Fourth, measurement remains a persistent challenge. The weak agreement between coach ratings and player self-ratings of hardiness (PMC, Chiropractic & Manual Therapies) illustrates that resilience is not straightforwardly visible from the outside, complicating coaches' and selectors' ability to identify resilient players through observation alone.

5.1 Limitations of the Reviewed Evidence

- A majority of studies use cross-sectional designs, limiting causal inference between resilience and success (ScienceDirect, 2019).
- Female football players remain underrepresented relative to male samples (Pettersen et al., 2022).
- Many studies rely on convenience samples from single countries or single clubs, restricting generalizability.
- Self-report measures of resilience and mental toughness may not align with externally observed or coach-rated resilience.
- Few studies directly link resilience measures to objective, match-level performance outcomes rather than self-rated performance.

6. Practical Implications

- Talent-pathway programs should pair social-support structures with explicit self-efficacy and psychological-skills development rather than relying on support alone.
- Structured psychological skills training (goal setting, imagery, emotional regulation) should be considered a standard, season-long component of player development, not an occasional workshop.
- Mindfulness-based programs may be a useful low-cost addition for building resilience, self-confidence, and emotion regulation.
- Coaches should be cautious about relying solely on observational judgments of player hardiness or resilience, given documented coach-player rating discrepancies, and should incorporate validated psychometric tools.
- Injury-rehabilitation protocols should integrate psychological support targeting emotion regulation and self-efficacy alongside physical rehabilitation.

7. Conclusion

This systematic review of twenty studies indicates that psychological resilience, together with closely related constructs such as mental toughness, hardiness, grit, and self-efficacy, is consistently associated with competitive success in football across age groups and performance levels. Resilience appears to function as both an individual disposition and a dynamic, context-dependent process shaped by social support, coaching environment, and deliberate psychological training. While the trainability of resilience through psychological skills and mindfulness interventions offers an encouraging avenue for applied sport psychology, the predominance of cross-sectional designs, the underrepresentation of female and youth

populations, and measurement inconsistencies between self- and coach-rated resilience represent important limitations of the current evidence base. Future research employing longitudinal, multi-club, and gender-balanced designs is needed to clarify the causal pathways linking psychological resilience to sustained competitive success in football.

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