

Motivational Differences Between Athletes in Individual and Team Sports: A Survey-Based Study

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ABSTRACT

Motivation is a central psychological factor that influences athletic participation, training commitment, performance quality, and persistence in sport. Athletes may be motivated by several factors, including enjoyment, personal mastery, competition, social belonging, recognition, and goal achievement. However, motivation may differ according to the type of sport in which athletes participate. This study examined motivational differences between athletes in individual sports and team sports. A survey-based comparative design was used. The sample consisted of 60 competitive athletes aged 18 to 25 years, with 30 athletes from individual sports and 30 athletes from team sports. Individual sports included activities such as tennis, swimming, and track and field, while team sports included football, basketball, and volleyball. All participants had at least two years of competitive experience. A standardized motivation questionnaire adapted from the Sport Motivation Scale was used to measure intrinsic motivation dimensions, including mastery, challenge, enjoyment, and self-determined goal setting. The results showed that athletes in individual sports reported higher motivation scores than athletes in team sports. Individual sport athletes had a mean motivation score of 4.12 with a standard deviation of 0.36, while team sport athletes had a mean score of 3.74 with a standard deviation of 0.47. An independent samples t-test indicated that the difference was statistically significant, $t(58) = 3.586$, $p = 0.0007$. These findings suggest that individual sport athletes may experience stronger intrinsic and goal-directed motivation, possibly due to higher personal accountability, autonomy, and direct feedback from performance outcomes. The study highlights the importance of understanding motivational differences across sport types. Coaches and sport psychologists should consider the unique motivational needs of athletes and design training environments that support autonomy, competence, enjoyment, and personal development. In team sports, greater attention may be needed to strengthen individual goal-setting and intrinsic motivation within the team environment.

KEYWORDS

Motivation, individual sports, team sports, sport psychology, intrinsic motivation, athlete behavior, self-determination theory, t-test, competitive athletes, goal setting

INTRODUCTION

Motivation plays an important role in sport participation and athletic performance. It influences how much effort athletes invest in training, how they respond to setbacks, how consistently they attend practice, and how long they remain committed to sport. Athletes who are highly motivated are more likely to set goals, work through challenges, improve their skills, and maintain confidence during competition. In sport psychology, motivation is often understood as the internal and external forces that direct behavior. Some athletes participate because they enjoy the sport and want to improve their skills. Others may be motivated by rewards, recognition, competition, scholarships, team selection, or social approval. These different forms of motivation can influence performance and psychological well-being in different ways.

Self-Determination Theory provides an important framework for understanding motivation in sport. According to this theory, athletes are more likely to develop strong and lasting motivation when three psychological needs are supported: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the feeling of having choice and control. Competence refers to the feeling of being capable and improving. Relatedness refers to the feeling of connection with others. Different sport environments may support these needs in different ways.

Individual sports and team sports differ in structure, responsibility, feedback, and social environment. In individual sports, athletes are often directly responsible for their own performance outcomes. Success or failure is usually linked clearly to the athlete's personal effort, preparation, and execution. This may encourage athletes to develop stronger personal goals, self-discipline, and intrinsic motivation. Individual sport athletes may also experience greater autonomy in training and competition because their progress is often based on personal improvement.

Team sports, on the other hand, involve shared responsibility and group interaction. Athletes in team sports are influenced by teammates, coaches, team roles, communication patterns, and collective goals. Motivation in team sports may be shaped by social belonging, team identity, group success, and coach feedback. While these factors can be highly motivating, individual motivation may sometimes fluctuate depending on playing time, team dynamics, role clarity, or the overall performance of the team.

Understanding motivational differences between individual and team sport athletes is important for coaching and athlete development. If individual sport athletes show higher intrinsic motivation, coaches in team sports may need to create more opportunities for personal goal-setting, autonomy, and individual feedback. Similarly, coaches of individual sport athletes should ensure that athletes receive adequate social support and do not become isolated or overly self-critical. Previous research has shown that motivation is strongly related to persistence, performance, and psychological well-being in sport. However, more attention is needed to compare motivational patterns between athletes in different sport structures. This study aims to examine whether athletes in individual sports differ significantly from athletes in team sports in their motivation levels. The main objective of this study is to compare the mean motivation scores of individual and team sport athletes using survey data and an independent samples t-test. The study also aims to interpret the practical meaning of the findings for coaches, sport psychologists, and athlete development programs.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a comparative survey-based research design. The purpose was to compare motivation levels between two groups of athletes: those participating in individual sports and those participating in team sports. The design was appropriate because the study aimed to measure existing differences in motivation rather than manipulate any variables.

Participants

The study included 60 competitive athletes between the ages of 18 and 25 years. The participants were divided into two equal groups. The first group consisted of 30 athletes from individual sports, such as tennis, swimming, and track and field. The second group consisted of 30 athletes from team sports, such as football, basketball, and volleyball.

All participants had at least two years of competitive experience. This inclusion criterion was used to ensure that participants had sufficient exposure to training, competition, and the psychological demands of sport. Participation was voluntary, and responses were kept anonymous.

Instrument

A motivation questionnaire adapted from the Sport Motivation Scale was used to collect data. The questionnaire included Likert-type items rated from 1 to 5, where higher scores indicated higher motivation. The instrument focused mainly on intrinsic motivation dimensions, including:

1. **Mastery:** Motivation to improve skills and achieve personal excellence.
2. **Challenge:** Motivation to test oneself and overcome difficult tasks.
3. **Enjoyment:** Motivation based on pleasure, satisfaction, and interest in the sport.
4. **Self-determined goal setting:** Motivation based on personal goals and autonomous commitment.

The questionnaire was suitable for comparing motivational tendencies across sport types because it measured both personal interest and goal-directed behavior.

Procedure

Participants completed the questionnaire electronically in a supervised setting. Before completing the survey, athletes were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain confidential. They were instructed to answer honestly based on their usual motivation toward training and competition.

After data collection, responses were anonymized and entered into statistical software for analysis. Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated for each group.

Statistical Analysis

An independent samples t-test was used to compare the mean motivation scores of individual sport athletes and team sport athletes. This test was appropriate because the study compared the mean scores of two independent groups. The level of statistical significance was interpreted using the reported p-value.

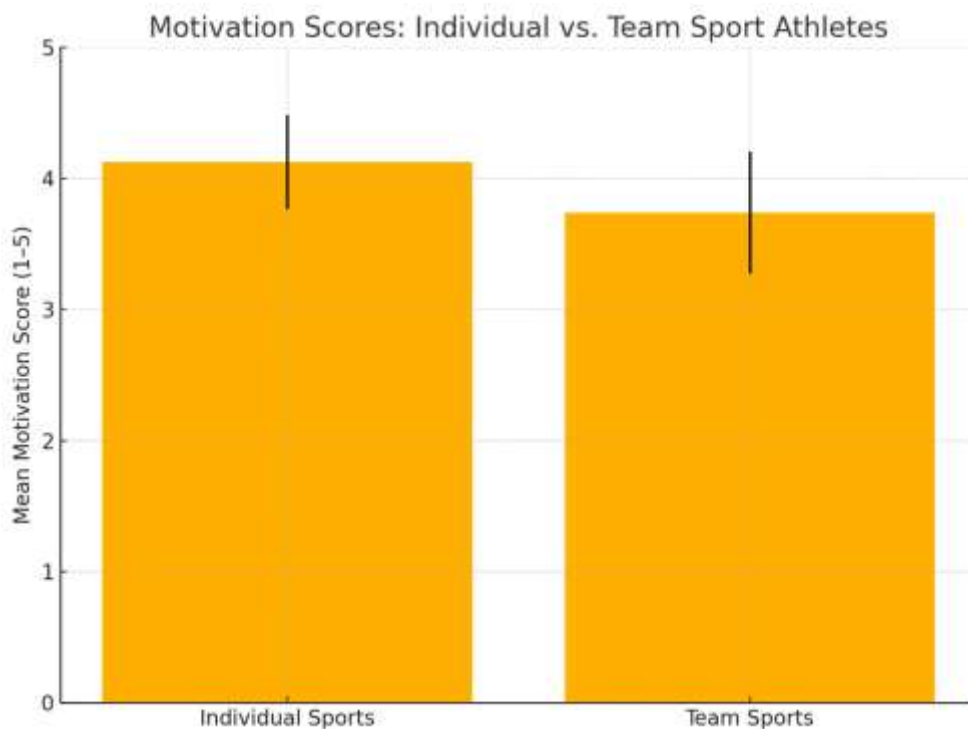
RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results showed that athletes in individual sports reported higher motivation scores than athletes in team sports.

Group	Mean Motivation Score	Standard Deviation
Individual Sports	4.12	0.36
Team Sports	3.74	0.47

The independent samples t-test produced the following result:

$$t(58) = 3.586, p = 0.0007$$



The p-value of 0.0007 is less than 0.001, which indicates a statistically significant difference between the two groups. This means that the difference in motivation scores between individual sport athletes and team sport athletes is unlikely to be due to chance alone.

Individual sport athletes had a higher mean motivation score of 4.12, compared with 3.74 for team sport athletes. The lower standard deviation among individual sport athletes also suggests that their motivation scores were slightly more consistent. These results indicate that individual sport athletes in this sample demonstrated higher and more stable motivation levels.

The findings suggest that individual sport athletes may be more strongly motivated by personal mastery, challenge, enjoyment, and self-determined goals. Team sport athletes also showed a relatively high motivation score, but their motivation was lower than that of individual sport athletes in this study.

DISCUSSION

The findings support the idea that motivation differs according to sport type. Athletes in individual sports reported significantly higher motivation levels than athletes in team sports. This difference may be explained by the structure and psychological demands of individual sports. In individual sports, athletes are directly responsible for their performance. Results are often clearly linked to personal effort, preparation, and skill execution. This direct connection between effort and outcome may strengthen intrinsic motivation because athletes can see the results of their own improvement. Individual sport athletes may also have greater control over goal-setting, training focus, and performance evaluation. The higher motivation among individual sport athletes may also be related to personal accountability. Since athletes in individual sports cannot rely on teammates during competition, they may develop stronger self-discipline and internal drive. Improvement is often measured through personal records, rankings, times, or match results, which can provide clear feedback and reinforce motivation. Team sport athletes, although still motivated, may experience motivation differently. Their performance is influenced by teammates, team roles, coaching decisions, and collective outcomes. Some athletes may feel highly motivated by team identity and social belonging, while others may experience reduced motivation due to limited playing time, unclear roles, or team conflict. Because responsibility is shared, individual motivation may sometimes be affected by the wider team environment.

The findings are consistent with Self-Determination Theory. Individual sports may provide stronger opportunities for autonomy and competence because athletes often set personal goals and receive direct feedback from their performance. Team sports may provide relatedness through social connection, but they may need stronger structures to support individual autonomy and competence. These results do not suggest that team sports are less valuable or that team athletes lack motivation. Rather, they indicate that motivation may operate differently in team settings. Coaches in team sports should help athletes develop personal goals within the broader team framework. This can allow athletes to feel individually responsible and personally invested while still contributing to group success. For individual sport athletes, coaches should continue supporting autonomy and mastery while also ensuring emotional and social support. Because individual athletes may carry full responsibility for outcomes, they may be at risk of pressure, self-criticism, or isolation. Balanced support is therefore important in both sport types.

CONCLUSION

This study found a statistically significant difference in motivation levels between athletes in individual sports and athletes in team sports. Individual sport athletes reported higher motivation scores than team sport athletes, suggesting that intrinsic and goal-oriented motivation may be stronger in individual sport contexts. The findings may be explained by greater personal accountability, autonomy, direct feedback, and self-determined goal-setting in individual sports. Team sport athletes may be influenced more strongly by group dynamics, team roles, coach feedback, and shared outcomes. The study highlights the importance of sport-specific motivational strategies. Coaches and sport psychologists should support individual goals, autonomy, competence, and enjoyment in both individual and team sport environments. In team sports, personal goal-setting and role clarity may help strengthen motivation. In individual sports, social support and balanced feedback may help maintain long-term motivation and well-being.

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