



## Reflections on clinical practice: Integrating literature and personal experience as a sports physiotherapist in elite multi-sport tournaments

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### Abstract

In elite multi-sport tournaments, physiotherapists play a pivotal role that extends beyond injury management encompassing real-time decision-making, environmental adaptation, interprofessional collaboration, and psychosocial care. This reflective article explores 17 years of hands-on experience working with national and international teams across cricket, athletics, tennis, football, and volleyball. Through thematic case narratives, the paper integrates personal experience with current literature, examining challenges such as acute injury management under pressure, performance in extreme climates, and the mental health of athletes. Using Schön's reflective framework and contemporary clinical guidelines, this paper provides insight into how physiotherapists can evolve from technicians to educators, strategists, and advocates for athlete welfare. The reflections not only highlight the intricacies of sports physiotherapy but also argue for the inclusion of emotional intelligence, adaptive reasoning, and interprofessional leadership in high-performance care. This synthesis underscores the value of reflective practice as both a personal development tool and a contributor to professional excellence in sports rehabilitation.

**Keywords:** Sports physiotherapy, reflective practice, elite athletes, interdisciplinary collaboration

### Introduction

The role of a physiotherapist in elite multi-sport tournaments extends far beyond injury management it involves being a critical part of an athlete's physical readiness, psychological well-being, and performance optimization. In high-performance environments, where milliseconds and micro-decisions shape outcomes, physiotherapists are not just caregivers but strategic contributors. The demands are multifaceted: acute on-field decision-making, load monitoring, injury prevention, recovery optimization, and seamless communication with coaches, doctors, and support staff. Over the past 17 years, I have had the privilege of working across a diverse range of elite sporting platforms, including the Tamil Nadu Cricket Association (TNCA), Indian Athletics Team, ATP and ITF Tennis circuits, I-League Football, Prime Volleyball League, and the MRF Pace Foundation. Each of these environments posed unique challenges ranging from injury surveillance during back-to-back tournaments to managing psychological readiness in high-stakes finals and navigating the limitations of infrastructure during travel or overseas tours<sup>[1]</sup>.

This paper adopts a reflective approach to explore those experiences, weaving personal narratives into a structured review of current literature. Reflection in clinical practice, as suggested by Schön (1983), is an essential tool in transforming technical expertise into professional wisdom. Integrating personal experience with peer-reviewed evidence helps bridge the often-cited gap between theory and practice, especially in dynamic and unpredictable environments like elite sport. The objective of this paper is threefold. First, to reflect critically on real-world clinical encounters that shaped my understanding and application of sports physiotherapy. Second, to compare and contextualize those experiences with current best practices and evidence-based literature. Third, to derive insights that inform both

professional growth and broader clinical application in elite athletic care. In doing so, this paper hopes to contribute not only to personal learning but also to the evolving discourse on reflective practice in sports physiotherapy<sup>[2, 3]</sup>.

### Methodology

#### Clinical Reflections and Literature Integration

##### On-field decision-making under pressure

During a high-stakes ITF tennis quarterfinal, 2017 one of our Indian seeded players collapsed with an acute lateral ankle sprain. With less than ten minutes available before the walkover limit, I had to decide: should I tape and clear him for return, or advocate for rest and forfeiture? This tension between athlete ambition and clinical caution is common in elite sport.

In such moments, on-field decisions demand not only technical skill but rapid clinical reasoning under pressure. The POLICE model Protection, Optimal Loading, Ice, Compression, Elevation offers a shift from the traditional PRICE protocol by emphasizing the early, gentle mobilization of injured tissues (Bleakley *et al.*, 2010). Applying this, I provided supportive taping and structured sideline mobilization drills to assess functional readiness<sup>[4]</sup>. Brukner & Khan (2012) emphasize that physiotherapists must weigh short-term functional recovery against long-term consequences. My decision to allow return-to-play was guided by athlete feedback, objective signs, and risk grading. The athlete completed the match without worsening, but post-tournament rehab reinforced the importance of clinical assertiveness, especially when external pressures (coach, federation) mount. This case reinforced the physiotherapist's role as a protector of long-term health, even when balancing against short-term competitive goals.

### Environmental and Logistical Stressors

At the 38th National Games held in Uttarakhand, our tennis team moved between venues at 7°C in the mornings to over 33°C by afternoon. Players experienced dizziness, tightness, and muscle cramps clear signs of environmental stress and inadequate hydration. Compounding this were long travel hours and limited access to recovery equipment.

Athlete safety and performance in such conditions rely heavily on thermoregulation and recovery strategies. Maughan & Shirreffs (2004) documented that even a 2% reduction in body mass due to fluid loss can significantly impair physical and cognitive performance. In my role, I initiated on-site hydration monitoring, electrolyte supplementation, and shortened warm-up durations to prevent overheating. Additionally, frequent match schedules with inadequate recovery time increase soft-tissue injury risks (Gabbett *et al.*, 2007). Our team rotated players where possible and enforced strict post-match recovery cold-water immersion when available, and guided breathing for vagal activation when not. These adjustments were only possible with real-time adaptability, blending clinical knowledge with logistical planning. Reflecting back, the tournament shaped my understanding of non-clinical determinants of injury and emphasized how environmental awareness is a fundamental skill in sports physiotherapy<sup>[5, 6]</sup>.

### Interdisciplinary Teamwork and Role Fluidity

During the I-League football season, with team Chennai united fc one of our midfielders sustained a hamstring strain just 10 days before a must-win match. The team's doctor leaned toward platelet-rich plasma (PRP) therapy; the coach wanted him on the field in five days; the strength coach pushed for aggressive rehab. As the physiotherapist, I found myself in the middle of a decision triangle. World Physiotherapy (2021) outlines that interdisciplinary coordination is not optional it is essential. Effective communication among healthcare and performance staff not only improves outcomes but also reduces conflicting advice. In this case, I facilitated a team meeting to align on treatment goals and timelines. The athlete underwent a conservative approach: neuromuscular re-education, pain-modulated isometrics, and proprioceptive loading returning successfully on match day 10.

Forbes *et al.* (2016) affirm that physiotherapists who take leadership in interdisciplinary environments can bridge clinical and performance perspectives. This case taught me to step beyond treatment tables and into collaborative strategy. I moved from being a clinician in isolation to a coordinator of athlete care, managing personalities and professional philosophies alike. This role fluidity demands soft skills, emotional intelligence, and ethical clarity qualities not often taught, but essential for long-term success in elite sport<sup>[7, 8]</sup>.

### Managing Athlete Mental Health and Psychosocial Needs

While working with the Indian Athletics team, I encountered a promising javelin thrower who reported persistent wrist pain despite no observable pathology on imaging or clinical tests. After several sessions, it became clear this was a case of psychosomatic distress, exacerbated by performance anxiety and fear of failure. Physiotherapists are frequently the first point of contact for athlete distress, and our touch-based therapy often creates space for deeper

emotional dialogue. This athlete eventually shared struggles related to selection pressures and family expectations, manifesting as somatic symptoms<sup>[9]</sup>.

Weigand *et al.* (2013) emphasize that emotional support from support staff strongly influences athlete outcomes. Integrating basic pain neuroscience education (PNE), as supported by Louw *et al.* (2016), I helped the athlete understand how stress and fear can amplify pain perception. Combined with diaphragmatic breathing, guided reassurance, and non-threatening movement exposure, the pain subsided over the next two weeks. This encounter redefined my clinical lens. I learned that behind every injury may lie layers of psychosocial factors that demand time, empathy, and trust. Managing mental health is not outside our scope it is part of holistic athlete care<sup>[10, 11]</sup>.

### Evolving Professional Identity and Growth

Across my 17-year journey from working with young cricketers at TNCA to elite international athletes on ATP and ITF circuits my role has continuously evolved. Initially, I viewed myself primarily as a technician: mobilizing joints, taping ankles, and designing exercise sheets. But each tournament, each team, and each unexpected situation nudged me into a broader role as an educator, strategist, and sometimes even a counselor.

Schön (1983) describes the reflective practitioner as someone who not only solves problems but also learns from the act of solving them. Higgs & Titchen (2001) expand this idea by linking reflection with clinical reasoning transformation. In elite sports, protocols alone do not suffice; adaptability, judgment, and self-awareness are equally vital. This professional identity shift did not happen overnight. It evolved through high-pressure decisions, sleepless nights on tour buses, and the quiet realization that athletes don't just need treatment they need a clinician who listens, thinks, adapts, and leads. My reflections, framed through literature, helped me recognize patterns in chaos, structure in stress, and purpose in persistence. And that, perhaps, is the true growth curve of a sports physiotherapist<sup>[12]</sup>.

### Discussion

Reflecting on nearly two decades of practice in elite sports physiotherapy, this journey has been more than a clinical role it has been a commitment to resilience, learning, and purpose. Each theme explored in this paper ranging from acute on-field decisions to mental health management demonstrates how clinical practice, when coupled with reflective insight and literature integration, becomes a deeply transformative experience. The literature provided a foundational framework to navigate complex clinical decisions, while real-world exposure constantly challenged me to personalize and adapt those frameworks. For example, understanding the POLICE model helped guide confident on-field returns, while studies on interprofessional collaboration gave me the language and perspective to manage complex team dynamics in high-performance environments. Through it all, experience grounded the theory, and the theory helped elevate my practice<sup>[13]</sup>.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of personal reflection. While stories and patterns can illustrate rich insights, they are inherently anecdotal and subject to personal bias. These reflections do not claim universal applicability but aim to initiate deeper dialogue around the

lived realities of sports physiotherapists particularly in the Indian context, where field-based literature is still emerging. Beyond the clinical and academic domains, this journey has tested my emotional and physical boundaries. Staying consistent in this field has often meant accepting modest financial rewards, long hours, and personal sacrifices. There were times when I worked tirelessly battling difficult work environments, navigating internal politics, and even compromising my own health yet I showed up every single time, not for the applause but for the athlete who needed me. While many opportunities slipped through due to timing or circumstance, I have had the unparalleled privilege of serving at over 100 tournaments national and international across cricket, athletics, football, volleyball, tennis, and more. Each one has deepened my commitment to this profession and strengthened my identity as an Indian physiotherapist. I am incredibly proud to have supported so many athletes representing our nation, and I carry that pride with humility. Now, as I reflect from a place of experience and gratitude, my focus is on mentoring the next generation. I aspire to lead with purpose, not just through treatment protocols but by being an example of perseverance, compassion, and professional integrity. Sports physiotherapy is more than a job it is a legacy. And I am determined to leave behind not just memories, but momentum for the future of our field. To truly advance this profession, we need more reflective, field-based, and qualitative studies that capture the nuances of working with athletes, especially in resource-variable settings like India and Southeast Asia. These insights can humanize our profession and validate the voices of clinicians working at the grassroots and elite levels alike <sup>[14, 15]</sup>.

### Conclusion

This paper has reflected on the multifaceted realities of working as a physiotherapist in elite multi-sport tournaments, integrating lived experience with contemporary literature. From high-pressure decision-making to empathetic mental health support, the evolving scope of sports physiotherapy demands not just skill, but emotional intelligence, adaptability, and vision. Through over 17 years of experience across 100+ tournaments and a variety of sports, I have learned that clinical excellence must walk hand-in-hand with humility and patience. While rewards are often slow, the journey offers immense personal and professional growth. The integration of literature into practice helped refine my reasoning, strengthen my voice, and clarify my role as a protector of athlete welfare <sup>[16]</sup>.

Moving forward, I advocate for a culture of reflective practice in sports physiotherapy education and professional development. It is through these reflections that we grow, guide others, and contribute meaningfully to the evolution of our profession. I stand today not just as a seasoned clinician but as a grateful and proud contributor to Indian sports physiotherapy and I look forward to shaping the path for the champions yet to come.

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