



Pre-competition anxiety and coping strategies among Indian boxers

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Abstract

Boxing is one of the oldest combat sports practised in India, and over the last two decades it has grown from a marginal discipline into one of the country's most medal-rich Olympic sports. Yet, behind every punch thrown in the ring lies a mental battle that is fought much before the bell rings — the battle against pre-competition anxiety. This paper looks closely at the nature, causes, and levels of pre-competition anxiety experienced by boxers training and competing in Nagpur, Maharashtra, and examines the coping strategies these athletes use to manage this anxiety. Nagpur, being a rapidly emerging centre for boxing in central India with several government and private academies producing state and national-level talent, offers a useful setting to study how young Indian boxers handle the psychological pressure of competition. The paper draws upon existing literature in sport psychology, particularly the multidimensional theory of anxiety, and situates it within the socio-cultural realities of Indian sport — joint family expectations, financial constraints on training, the coach-as-mentor tradition, and the pressure of balancing academics with athletics. A descriptive survey approach involving boxers from Nagpur's district and state-level boxing academies was used to understand somatic anxiety, cognitive worry, and self-confidence patterns before competition, along with the problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance-based coping mechanisms adopted by these athletes. The findings suggest that pre-competition anxiety among Nagpur boxers is shaped as much by external, culturally rooted pressures as by the demands of the sport itself, and that coping is often a blend of modern sport psychology techniques and traditional, faith-based, and family-oriented practices. The paper closes with practical suggestions for coaches, sports psychologists, and boxing federations on how psychological preparation can be woven into the everyday training culture of Indian boxing academies.

Keywords: Pre-competition anxiety, coping strategies, Indian boxers, sport psychology, Nagpur, Maharashtra, combat sports, competitive anxiety, athlete mental health, boxing training

Introduction

Anyone who has stood at the edge of a boxing ring just minutes before a bout knows that the real fight often begins long before the first punch is thrown. The tightening in the chest, the restless pacing, and the sudden dryness in the throat— these are not signs of weakness but of a very normal human response to a high-stakes situation. Sport psychologists call this pre-competition anxiety, and it is perhaps nowhere more visible than in combat sports like boxing, where the athlete has nowhere to hide once the contest begins. There is no teammate to pass the ball to, no timeout to regroup with a coach mid-round in the way that team sports allow, and no substitute waiting on the bench. It is one boxer against another, and increasingly, it is also the boxer against his or her own mind.

In India, boxing has moved a long way from being a sport practised in a handful of army cantonments and a few pockets of the north-east. Cities like Bhiwani in Haryana became almost legendary as boxing nurseries after the success of Vijender Singh and others, but in recent years, central India too has begun producing its share of talented boxers, and Nagpur in Maharashtra is very much a part of this story. The city has a fairly active network of boxing clubs, government-supported academies under schemes connected to the Sports Authority of India and the Maharashtra state sports department, and increasingly, private coaching set-ups run by former state and national boxers. Boys and girls from middle-class and lower-middle-class families in Nagpur and its surrounding areas train with

genuine hope of using boxing as a path towards government jobs, sports quota admissions, or simply personal pride and recognition.

However, the physical training these boxers receive is rarely matched by equal attention to their mental preparation. Most academies in tier-two cities like Nagpur do not have a full-time sports psychologist on their coaching staff, and psychological readiness is often left to the boxer's own instinct, the coach's informal pep talks, or family support. This gap becomes particularly important when we consider that boxing, unlike many other sports, involves a very personal and physical confrontation, where fear of injury, fear of losing in front of family and community, and fear of letting down the coach who has invested years of effort all combine to create a unique psychological burden.

This paper attempts to understand this burden more closely. It asks a simple but important question: what does pre-competition anxiety actually look like for a boxer training in Nagpur, and how does he or she cope with it? In answering this question, the paper does not treat the Indian boxer as a smaller version of a Western athlete studied in international sport psychology textbooks. Instead, it tries to place the discussion within the lived reality of Indian sport — where a boxer might be skipping college lectures to make it to evening training, where a mother's blessing before a bout may matter as much as a proper warm-up routine, and where the fear of disappointing an entire neighbourhood that has pooled money for travel expenses can weigh as heavily as the fear of a punch to the jaw.

Review of Related Literature

The study of anxiety in sport has a long history in psychology, and much of the early theoretical groundwork was laid outside India, though its relevance to Indian athletes has grown steadily. Martens and his colleagues developed the idea that competitive anxiety is not one single feeling but has at least two separate parts — cognitive anxiety, which is the worry and negative thinking about performance, and somatic anxiety, which is the physical symptoms like a racing heart, sweaty palms, or an upset stomach (Martens, Vealey, & Burton, 1990) ^[11]. This distinction remains central to almost every study conducted on athletic anxiety since then, including the present one.

Building on this, researchers proposed that the relationship between anxiety and performance is not a simple straight line where more anxiety always means worse performance. Instead, athletes seem to perform best within a certain zone of arousal that is unique to them, a idea often referred to as the Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning, first proposed by Hanin (1980) ^[5]. This is a particularly useful lens for boxing, where a certain amount of nervous energy is actually needed to be alert and aggressive in the ring, but too much of it can cause a boxer to freeze, overthink footwork, or gas out early due to excess muscular tension.

Coping, the second half of this paper's focus, has generally been understood through the lens of the transactional model proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) ^[10], who argued that coping is not a fixed trait but a dynamic process that changes depending on how a person appraises a stressful situation and what resources they believe they have to deal with it. Sport psychologists later divided coping strategies broadly into problem-focused coping (actively trying to change or manage the source of stress, such as extra training or tactical planning), emotion-focused coping (managing one's emotional reaction, such as relaxation techniques or self-talk), and avoidance coping (distracting oneself or mentally escaping the stressor) (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993) ^[3].

Interestingly, some of the classic work by Gould and colleagues on Olympic wrestlers found that successful athletes did not necessarily experience less anxiety than unsuccessful ones, but they were far better at managing and channelling it productively.

Closer to the Indian context, several sport psychology scholars and physical education researchers have written about the psychological preparation of Indian athletes, often pointing out that Indian sport still largely lags behind in institutionalising mental training compared to physical conditioning (Kamlesh, 2011) ^[8]. Uppal (2001) ^[14], in his widely used physical education textbooks, discusses anxiety and motivation as central concerns for Indian coaches but notes that formal psychological assessment tools are rarely used at the grassroots level, especially outside major metropolitan training centres. This observation is particularly relevant to a city like Nagpur, which, despite its growing boxing culture, still functions largely outside the elite national training infrastructure available in cities like Delhi, Pune, or Patiala.

Studies specifically on combat sport athletes have also highlighted some distinct patterns. Because boxing and similar sports involve direct physical confrontation and a public, individual outcome (win or lose, with no team to share the result), anxiety levels among combat athletes have often been found to be somewhat higher than in team-sport

athletes before major competitions (Cox, 2012) ^[1]. Fear of physical injury, fear of public embarrassment, and concern over letting down one's coach or family have been repeatedly identified as major sources of pre-competition worry among boxers and wrestlers, both internationally and in Indian settings.

On coping mechanisms specific to Indian athletes, a recurring theme across informal reports and smaller regional studies is the strong role played by religious and spiritual practices — prayer, visiting a temple, mosque, or gurudwara before a competition, seeking blessings from elders, and family rituals. While Western coping literature often categorises such behaviour loosely under emotion-focused coping, Indian sport psychologists have argued that these practices deserve to be understood on their own terms, as they are deeply tied to a sense of social and cultural identity rather than being merely psychological tricks (Kamlesh, 2011) ^[8]. This paper takes this argument seriously and treats spiritual and family-based coping as a distinct and important category rather than folding it entirely into Western frameworks.

Statement of the Problem and Objectives of the Study

Despite boxing's growing popularity in Maharashtra, and Nagpur's emerging role within it, there is very little documented work that looks specifically at the psychological experience of boxers training in this region. Most sport psychology research available on Indian athletes tends to focus on national camps or elite centres, leaving out the everyday experience of district and state-level boxers who form the actual base of the sport's pyramid. This paper was undertaken to partly fill that gap, with the following objectives:

1. To understand the nature and intensity of pre-competition anxiety experienced by boxers training in Nagpur, Maharashtra, including its cognitive, somatic, and self-confidence-related components.
2. To identify the major sources of this anxiety, with particular attention to factors specific to the Indian and Maharashtrian sporting environment.
3. To examine the coping strategies used by these boxers, including modern sport psychology techniques as well as traditional, family, and faith-based practices.
4. To offer practical suggestions for coaches, academy administrators, and sports authorities on how psychological support can be better integrated into boxing training in tier-two cities like Nagpur.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey design, which is well suited to exploring the attitudes, feelings, and coping behaviours of a specific athlete population without manipulating any variables. The approach allowed the researcher to gather a fairly detailed picture of the psychological experience of Nagpur's boxers as it naturally exists, rather than under artificial or laboratory conditions.

1. Sample

The study population consisted of boxers, both male and female, training under recognised boxing clubs and academies in and around Nagpur city, including boxers affiliated with district-level associations under the

Maharashtra State Boxing Association and those attached to Sports Authority of India-supported centres in the region. Boxers between the ages of 15 and 25 years, having at least one year of competitive experience at the district level or above, were considered eligible for inclusion. A purposive sampling method was used, given the relatively limited and identifiable population of serious competitive boxers in the city, and care was taken to include boxers across different weight categories and experience levels, from those who had only competed at district tournaments to a smaller number who had represented the state at the national level.

2. Tools Used

Pre-competition anxiety was assessed using a modified and translated version of the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2), originally developed by Martens, Vealey, and Burton (1990)^[11], which measures cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and self-confidence as three separate sub-scales. The inventory was translated into simple Hindi and Marathi phrasing where necessary, keeping in mind that many boxers from smaller towns and rural backgrounds around Nagpur are more comfortable expressing themselves in their mother tongue than in English. Coping strategies were assessed using a coping inventory adapted from established sport-coping literature (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993)^[3], broadly covering problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance-based coping, with additional items added specifically to capture faith-based and family-oriented coping practices relevant to the Indian context, based on informal discussions held with coaches and senior boxers during the preparatory phase of the study.

3. Procedure

Questionnaires were administered in person at training venues, usually a day or two before a scheduled district or state-level tournament, so that the responses would genuinely reflect pre-competition feelings rather than a boxer's general disposition. Coaches were consulted beforehand and were requested not to be present during the filling of the questionnaires, so that boxers could respond honestly without feeling observed or judged. Verbal instructions were given in the boxer's preferred language, and questions were clarified individually wherever needed, since several younger boxers were unfamiliar with formal questionnaire formats.

Results and Discussion

1. Levels and Nature of Pre-Competition Anxiety

The overall pattern that emerged among Nagpur's boxers was one of moderate to fairly high somatic anxiety combined with a wide range of cognitive worry, depending heavily on the boxer's experience level. Younger and less experienced boxers, particularly those competing at the state level for the first time, reported noticeably higher cognitive anxiety — persistent worrying thoughts about losing, about performing poorly in front of family members who had travelled to watch, or about disappointing their coach. More experienced boxers, including several who had competed at the national level, still reported physical symptoms of anxiety such as a faster heartbeat or restlessness before their bout, but these symptoms tended to reduce sharply once the warm-up began, suggesting that experience plays a strong

role in converting anxiety into readiness rather than letting it remain as unproductive worry.

An interesting pattern specific to the boxing context was the difference between anxiety reported the night before a competition and anxiety reported in the final hour before entering the ring. Many boxers described the night before as the most mentally difficult period, filled with overthinking and disturbed sleep, whereas the final hour, despite involving intense physical symptoms like sweating and a dry mouth, was often accompanied by a strange sense of clarity and readiness. This aligns closely with the idea of individual zones of optimal functioning discussed earlier (Hanin, 1980)^[5], where a rise in physical arousal close to competition time can actually support performance rather than harm it, provided the athlete has learned to interpret these sensations correctly.

Weight-category pressures also emerged as a distinct and somewhat under-discussed source of anxiety. Several boxers, particularly those competing in lower weight categories, reported significant stress related to last-minute weight-cutting practices, including reduced food and water intake in the final one or two days before the weigh-in. This form of anxiety, tied closely to the body rather than purely to the opponent or the outcome, is not always captured fully by standard anxiety inventories designed with other sports in mind, and it stood out as a theme worth highlighting separately in the Indian boxing context.

2. Sources of Anxiety Rooted in the Local and Cultural Context

Beyond the standard competitive pressures found in boxing anywhere in the world, several sources of anxiety among Nagpur's boxers were closely tied to their specific social and economic environment. A recurring concern among boxers from modest financial backgrounds was the pressure associated with the cost of travel, equipment, and nutrition required to compete at higher levels. Several boxers mentioned that their families or local well-wishers had contributed money for a particular tournament, and the thought of "wasting" this support by losing early added a distinct layer of psychological burden that has little to do with the sport itself and everything to do with the boxer's sense of social obligation.

The tension between academics and sport was another theme that surfaced repeatedly, especially among boxers in the sixteen to nineteen age group who were simultaneously preparing for board examinations or early college years. Many spoke of guilt over time spent training instead of studying, and a fear that a poor performance in the ring would be used by relatives as proof that boxing had been a wasteful distraction. This particular pressure, though not unique to Nagpur, appears with striking regularity in Indian sport psychology discussions and reflects a broader cultural ambivalence toward sport as a serious career path outside of cricket.

Gender-related factors also shaped anxiety differently for the female boxers in the sample. Several young women described an additional layer of anxiety connected to social attitudes in their neighbourhoods or extended families regarding girls participating in a physically aggressive contact sport. A few mentioned that they felt they had to perform not just for themselves but to "prove a point" to relatives who had initially discouraged their participation,

adding an extra emotional weight to competition that their male counterparts did not describe in quite the same way.

3. Coping Strategies Used by Nagpur's Boxers

The coping strategies reported by boxers in this study reflected a genuine blend of formal sport psychology techniques, informal coach-guided methods, and deeply rooted cultural and spiritual practices. On the more formal end, several boxers described using breathing exercises, shadow boxing as a warm-up ritual to settle nerves, and mental rehearsal of their fight strategy, techniques that align closely with established problem-focused and emotion-focused coping categories from sport psychology literature (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993) ^[3]. A smaller number of the more experienced, nationally exposed boxers described specific pre-fight routines involving music, visualisation, or repeated tactical review with their coach, indicating a more structured and individualised approach to psychological preparation that typically develops only with years of competitive exposure.

At the same time, and often just as prominently, boxers described coping practices that sit outside conventional sport psychology categories but are extremely common in the Indian setting. Seeking blessings from parents or grandparents before leaving for a tournament, offering a short prayer at a family temple, wearing a particular thread, locket, or item gifted by a family member, and receiving a phone call from home just before the bout were mentioned frequently and were described by many boxers as more calming than any technique taught during training. Coaches in Nagpur, several boxers noted, were generally supportive of these practices and sometimes actively encouraged them, viewing them as part of the mental discipline of the sport rather than superstition to be discouraged.

The coach-athlete relationship itself emerged as perhaps the single most important coping resource across almost all boxers surveyed. In a setting where formal sports psychologists are largely unavailable, the boxing coach in Nagpur often ends up performing an informal counselling role, offering reassurance, adjusting last-minute strategy to boost confidence, and sometimes simply being a calm, familiar presence in an otherwise nerve-racking environment. This reliance on the coach mirrors the traditional guru-shishya relationship found across many Indian sporting and artistic disciplines, where the mentor's guidance extends well beyond technical instruction into the emotional and moral support of the student.

Avoidance-based coping was also present, though less openly acknowledged. A number of younger boxers admitted to distracting themselves with mobile phones, music, or conversation with friends specifically to avoid thinking about the upcoming bout, a pattern consistent with avoidance coping described in the broader sport psychology literature (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993) ^[3]. While this strategy provided short-term relief for some, a few boxers and coaches noted that excessive reliance on distraction sometimes led to poor tactical preparation, suggesting that avoidance coping, while common, is not necessarily the most effective long-term strategy in a sport that demands sharp tactical awareness.

Discussion and Interpretation

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that pre-competition anxiety among Nagpur's boxers cannot be fully

understood through standard sport psychology models alone, useful as these models are as a starting point. The physical and cognitive symptoms of anxiety described by these boxers largely match what has been documented among combat-sport athletes elsewhere in the world, confirming the continued relevance of the multidimensional anxiety framework in an Indian setting (Martens, Vealey, & Burton, 1990) ^[11]. However, the specific sources of this anxiety, and even more so the coping strategies used to manage it, are shaped in important ways by the boxer's social environment — the financial sacrifices of the family, the tension between education and sport, community attitudes toward female participation, and a deep-rooted reliance on faith and family blessing as psychological anchors.

This has a fairly direct practical implication. Psychological training programmes designed purely on Western models, without adaptation, may miss important sources of stress that are specific to Indian athletes, and may also undervalue coping resources — like family involvement and spiritual practice — that Indian boxers already draw upon effectively. A more useful approach for coaches and sports administrators in Nagpur and similar cities may be to build on what already works, formalising and strengthening existing informal support systems rather than replacing them wholesale with imported models of sport psychology.

It is also worth noting the strong dependence on coaches as informal psychological support figures. While this reflects a valuable and culturally rooted strength of Indian sport, it also represents a vulnerability, since not every coach is equally equipped to handle the emotional needs of every athlete, and coaches themselves are rarely given any formal training in sport psychology. Strengthening this link through short, practical training modules for coaches — rather than expecting every academy to hire a separate sports psychologist, which may not be financially realistic for many Nagpur-based clubs — appears to be a more sustainable path forward.

Practical Implications and Suggestions

Based on the findings discussed above, a few practical suggestions can be offered for those involved in boxing training and administration in Nagpur and comparable Indian cities. First, boxing academies could benefit from short, low-cost workshops on basic sport psychology principles for coaches, covering simple breathing and relaxation techniques, basic pre-competition routines, and ways of recognising when a boxer's anxiety has moved from a helpful to a harmful level. Second, given the strong role played by family support, academies could consider formally involving parents in pre-competition briefings, helping them understand how to support their child emotionally without adding unintended pressure. Third, weight-category-related stress deserves specific attention, with proper nutritional guidance provided well in advance of tournaments rather than leaving boxers to manage last-minute weight cuts on their own, which appears to be a distinct and significant source of anxiety. Fourth, given the additional social pressures reported by female boxers, academies and state boxing associations could consider mentorship programmes connecting younger female boxers with senior women boxers who have navigated similar challenges, providing both practical and emotional guidance. Finally, at a broader policy level, incorporating

basic psychological skills training into the syllabus of coaching certification courses conducted by state and national boxing federations would help ensure that mental preparation is treated as seriously as physical conditioning, even in cities that do not have easy access to dedicated sports psychologists.

Conclusion

Pre-competition anxiety is not a flaw in a boxer's character but a natural and, in the right measure, even useful response to the demands of competitive sport. What this study of Nagpur's boxers makes clear is that anxiety and coping among Indian athletes cannot be fully separated from the wider social fabric in which these athletes live and train. A punch thrown in the ring in Nagpur carries with it the weight of family sacrifice, community expectation, financial constraint, and personal ambition, all wrapped into a few tense minutes before the first bell. The coping strategies these young boxers have developed — some drawn from modern sport science, many more inherited from family tradition, faith, and the guidance of a trusted coach — reflect a resourcefulness that deserves greater recognition and support from sports administrators. As boxing continues to grow in Maharashtra and across India, paying closer attention to the psychological, and not just the physical, preparation of athletes in cities like Nagpur will be essential if the country hopes to convert its expanding grassroots talent into consistent success on bigger stages.

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