

Exploring the Emotional Lives of Adolescent Athletes Under Competitive Pressure

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore the emotional experiences of adolescent athletes participating in competitive sports.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative research employed a thematic analysis approach to investigate the emotional lives of adolescent athletes. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 26 participants aged 14–18 years, all of whom were active in competitive sports across various disciplines in the United States. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, and interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo software to identify key themes and patterns within the data.

Findings: Three major themes emerged from the analysis: emotional responses to competitive pressure, coping strategies and emotional regulation, and external influences on emotional experiences. Participants reported intense emotional fluctuations, including performance anxiety, emotional highs and lows, emotional suppression, and burnout symptoms. Coping strategies included cognitive reframing, social support, and pre-competition rituals. External influences such as coaching style, parental expectations, peer comparison, and social media presence significantly shaped emotional responses. The findings highlight both the vulnerability and adaptive capabilities of adolescent athletes in emotionally demanding sport environments.

Conclusion: Adolescent athletes face a complex emotional landscape in competitive sports, influenced by internal expectations and external pressures. While many develop effective coping mechanisms, others struggle with emotional suppression and burnout. Supporting emotional awareness and regulation within youth sports is essential for promoting long-term psychological well-being and sustained participation.

Keywords: Adolescent athletes, emotional regulation, competitive pressure, youth sports, qualitative research, mental health, coping strategies.

1. Introduction

Youth sports play a vital role in the physical, social, and emotional development of adolescents, offering a context for skill-building, self-discovery, and peer interaction. At the same time, the highly competitive nature of youth athletics often introduces considerable psychological stress that can impact young athletes' well-being. Emotional experiences in sports are not simply byproducts of physical activity; they are deeply embedded in the motivational climate, interpersonal relationships, and structural pressures that shape how adolescents perceive themselves and their environments (Azevedo, 2025). As young athletes are still developing emotionally and cognitively, their reactions to success, failure, expectation, and feedback often reflect both their internal dispositions and the external structures in which they participate (Fernandes et al., 2024). Despite the critical developmental stage that adolescence represents, the emotional lives of adolescent athletes—especially under competitive pressure—remain underexplored in research.

The intensity of sports competition during adolescence is frequently tied to achievement goals, coaching behaviors, and social comparisons, all of which shape emotional outcomes. Athletes motivated by performance-based goals, particularly in environments emphasizing winning, are more likely to experience anxiety, emotional volatility, and reduced enjoyment (Teques et al., 2024). On the other hand, when sports contexts promote mastery and learning-oriented climates, they can foster emotional resilience and self-regulation (Azevedo, 2025). Still, a complex interplay exists between motivation, emotional regulation, and context-dependent stressors, especially when adolescents compete in high-stakes environments.

The emotional dynamics of youth sport participation are multifaceted. Adolescents experience emotional highs—such as pride, exhilaration, and joy—following success and social validation. Simultaneously, they may encounter emotional lows like frustration, shame, or self-blame after perceived failure or underperformance (Neely, 2022). These experiences can be intensified by overtraining, performance expectations, or limited outlets for emotional expression (Pandya & Lang, 2021). Emotional arousal in sports has been shown to affect not only performance but also long-term engagement and psychological health, particularly when support systems fail to buffer stress responses (Al-Abadi et al., 2023).

Competitive pressure often arises from multiple directions. Coaches, parents, peers, and even social media contribute to an emotionally charged atmosphere that adolescents must navigate. Research shows that athletes who perceive their coaches as overly critical or demanding are more likely to internalize negative emotions and develop anxiety-related symptoms (Raabe et al., 2021). Parental pressure, especially when focused on outcomes rather than effort, can similarly lead to emotional suppression or disengagement (Pynn et al., 2019). Moreover, as youth increasingly engage with digital platforms, curated representations of success amplify feelings of inadequacy or the need to meet external expectations (Zahari et al., 2023).

Emotional regulation is an essential competency that influences how adolescent athletes respond to challenges in sport. It encompasses a range of strategies, from cognitive reframing and mindfulness to emotional expression and behavioral coping. However, the extent to which adolescents effectively apply these strategies depends on both their developmental capacities and the support available to them (Lochbaum et al., 2024). Sports settings that facilitate emotional openness and learning, including environments that model constructive emotional expression, tend to promote healthier long-term participation and psychological well-being (Bruner et al., 2019). Unfortunately, many competitive sports environments reward stoicism and discourage vulnerability, leading some adolescents to suppress emotions in ways that can harm their mental health over time (Shebalina et al., 2020).

While many studies have focused on physical injury and performance outcomes, there is growing recognition of the emotional and psychological dimensions of youth athletic participation. For example, high-level adolescent athletes are more susceptible to burnout, especially when they lack autonomy or feel emotionally unsupported (Caine et al., 2016). Repetitive emotional stress, compounded by chronic fatigue or overtraining, has also been associated with increased dropout rates in youth sports programs (Hsu et al., 2021). At the same time, emotional growth can occur in supportive team environments where young athletes learn to navigate setbacks, build self-confidence, and engage in meaningful peer relationships (Whitley et al., 2021).

The developmental period of adolescence also presents unique challenges in emotional self-awareness and communication. The hormonal and neurological changes typical of this stage often heighten emotional reactivity, making it more difficult for youth to manage disappointment, criticism, or peer conflict in healthy ways

(Conant-Norville, 2016). As a result, emotional challenges in competitive sports contexts may be misinterpreted as lack of motivation or discipline rather than signs of internal distress (Super et al., 2017). Given that adolescence is a critical time for identity formation, repeated negative emotional experiences in sports can shape not only future athletic participation but also broader self-concepts and life trajectories (Deemua, 2019).

The gendered experience of emotion in youth sports is also noteworthy. Studies have observed that male athletes are often less likely to express vulnerability or seek emotional support, in part due to social norms about masculinity in competitive sport (Zakrajsek et al., 2017). Female athletes, while sometimes more open about their emotions, also face unique pressures related to body image, performance expectations, and social comparison (Bisagno et al., 2022). Regardless of gender, however, the ability to talk about emotions and receive validation from peers, coaches, or family members is a key factor in fostering emotional well-being in sports environments (Bates & O'Quinn, 2023).

The sociocultural context in which youth athletes operate also plays a critical role in shaping their emotional lives. For example, socioeconomic disparities can affect access to emotionally supportive environments, with disadvantaged youth often facing additional stressors such as limited resources, unstable family conditions, or unsafe communities (O'Donnell et al., 2020). Sport, in these cases, may serve both as a protective factor and a source of additional emotional strain, depending on the quality of coaching, team cohesion, and structural inclusion (Teques et al., 2024). Adaptive sports programs and inclusive frameworks that recognize the diverse needs of participants are increasingly viewed as essential in promoting emotional health and equitable participation (Emery et al., 2024).

Furthermore, participation in youth sports is influenced by market-driven forces that can commercialize youth identities and elevate performance outcomes over developmental goals (Zahari et al., 2022). The rise of early sport specialization, elite training programs, and recruitment pressures has led to greater emotional stakes for many adolescents (Pandya & Lang, 2021). Athletes may begin to associate their self-worth with performance metrics, leading to heightened emotional instability when outcomes do not align with expectations. This commercialization often exacerbates the internal tension between intrinsic motivation and external validation, especially in high-achieving adolescents (Güngör et al., 2021).

Despite these complexities, sport remains a powerful platform for emotional development when managed appropriately. Programs that incorporate mental skills training, emotional literacy, and interpersonal reflection have demonstrated positive outcomes in building emotional competence among youth athletes (Zakrajsek et al., 2017). When young athletes are taught how to process emotions constructively and are given space to reflect on their experiences, sport can foster a deeper sense of emotional awareness and resilience (Legg & Rose, 2022). Coaches, in particular, are crucial gatekeepers of this process. Their modeling of emotional behavior, responsiveness to athletes' feelings, and capacity to create psychologically safe environments greatly influence how adolescents interpret and manage their emotions (Raabe et al., 2021).

Given the growing awareness of mental health in youth populations, there is a pressing need to better understand how adolescent athletes experience, regulate, and communicate their emotions under competitive conditions. While there is an expanding body of research examining injury prevention, physical training, and performance psychology in youth sports (Hainline et al., 2019; Krabak et al., 2019), fewer studies have provided a qualitative, in-depth account of the emotional narratives of adolescent athletes. The current study addresses this gap by exploring how adolescent athletes in the United States perceive and respond to competitive pressure, with a focus on the emotional highs and lows that define their sports experiences.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the emotional experiences of adolescent athletes facing competitive pressure. The aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of how these young athletes perceive and manage their emotional lives in the context of intense sports environments. The participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation in terms of sport type, gender, and competition level. A total of 26 adolescent athletes aged between 14 and 18 years from various regions across the United States participated in the study. These participants were actively involved in competitive sports at the local, regional, or national level. Recruitment was conducted through youth sports organizations, school athletic programs, and online platforms, and the sample size was determined based on

theoretical saturation, which was reached when no new themes emerged from the data.

2.2. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to express their emotional experiences in their own words while ensuring consistency in key areas of inquiry. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted either in person or via video conferencing, depending on the participant's location and availability. An interview guide with open-ended questions was used to explore themes such as emotional highs and lows, sources of pressure, coping strategies, and the role of coaches and family in emotional regulation. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns and themes related to the emotional lives of the participants. NVivo software was employed to assist with data management, coding, and theme development. Initial coding was performed line-by-line, followed by axial coding to link categories and uncover

relationships between themes. The analysis was iterative and reflexive, with constant comparison across interviews to ensure depth and consistency. To enhance credibility, member checking was employed with selected participants, and peer debriefing sessions were held throughout the analytical process. This rigorous qualitative approach provided rich insights into the complex emotional experiences of adolescent athletes under competitive pressure.

3. Findings and Results

The participants in this study consisted of 26 adolescent athletes aged between 14 and 18 years ($M = 16.2$). Among them, 14 were male and 12 were female. Participants represented a variety of competitive sports, including basketball ($n = 6$), soccer ($n = 5$), swimming ($n = 4$), gymnastics ($n = 3$), track and field ($n = 3$), tennis ($n = 2$), and wrestling ($n = 3$). The majority of participants ($n = 18$) competed at the regional or state level, while the remaining 8 participated in national-level competitions. All participants were currently enrolled in high school and had a minimum of two years of experience in competitive sports. The geographic distribution included athletes from both urban ($n = 15$) and suburban ($n = 11$) areas across the United States.

Table 1

The Results of Qualitative Coding

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory (Subtheme)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Emotional Responses to Competitive Pressure	Performance Anxiety	Fear of failure, racing heartbeat, pre-competition nausea, sleep disturbances
	Emotional Highs	Joy after winning, team celebrations, pride in personal records, energy boosts
	Emotional Lows	Sadness after loss, crying alone, disappointment in performance, self-blame
	Pressure to Win	Expectations from coaches, fear of letting team down, pressure from parents, media focus
	Emotional Suppression	Hiding fear, pretending to be confident, avoiding vulnerability, bottling up emotions
2. Coping Strategies and Emotional Regulation	Burnout Symptoms	Emotional exhaustion, feeling numb, loss of motivation, lack of enjoyment, chronic fatigue
	Mood Swings	Irritability, sudden anger, mood instability, withdrawal from peers
	Cognitive Reframing	Telling myself it's just a game, positive self-talk, focusing on improvement
	Social Support	Talking to teammates, emotional support from parents, advice from coaches
	Pre-competition Rituals	Listening to music, stretching routines, visualization, breathing exercises
3. External Influences on Emotional Experiences	Emotional Expression	Talking about feelings, crying after games, journaling emotions
	Distraction Techniques	Watching movies, video games, spending time with friends, hobbies
	Physical Activity for Relief	Extra workouts, running to release tension, using movement to manage stress
	Coaching Style	Encouraging feedback, harsh criticism, emotional neglect, motivating talks
	Parental Expectations	Pressure to succeed, comparisons to others, constant reminders, praise and criticism

Peer Comparison	Feeling inferior, competing with friends, jealousy, seeking approval
Social Media Influence	Pressure from posts, comparing achievements, seeking likes, fear of judgment
Academic-Athletic Balance	Stress from homework, time conflicts, fatigue from school and practice, lack of sleep

Under the theme of emotional responses to competitive pressure, *performance anxiety* was one of the most frequently discussed subcategories. Many athletes described experiencing physical symptoms like rapid heartbeat, stomachaches, and trouble sleeping before games. One participant shared, “The night before a big match, I literally can’t sleep—my heart just keeps racing.” Another said, “I feel like throwing up before every race, even though I’ve done it a hundred times.” These bodily sensations were tied to fear of underperforming or not meeting others’ expectations.

In contrast, *emotional highs* were equally intense but more positively charged. Athletes recalled moments of triumph that elevated their mood and reinforced their passion for the sport. These included scoring a winning goal, breaking personal records, or celebrating as a team. As one player put it, “The moment the buzzer went off and we had won, I felt like I was flying.” Another noted, “My whole team jumped on me after I made that last shot—it was pure happiness.”

On the other hand, *emotional lows* emerged after losses, mistakes, or personal failures. Participants described intense sadness, self-directed anger, and even isolation after poor performances. “After we lost the championship, I didn’t talk to anyone for two days,” one athlete confessed. Another remarked, “I kept thinking, ‘I’m the reason we lost.’” These emotional downturns often lingered well beyond the event itself.

The *pressure to win* came from various sources and weighed heavily on the emotional wellbeing of athletes. Some reported internalizing expectations from coaches, parents, or even themselves. “I know my dad expects me to be the best,” said one interviewee, “and when I’m not, I feel like I’ve failed him.” Others pointed to how the team’s expectations amplified their anxiety: “When everyone counts on you, it’s hard not to freak out.”

A recurring pattern was *emotional suppression*, in which athletes deliberately hid or denied their emotions to appear strong or composed. Phrases like “I can’t let anyone see I’m scared” and “I just pretend like I’m fine” were common. This emotional concealment often contributed to internal tension and a sense of isolation. One teen reflected, “Crying isn’t an option—if you do, they think you’re weak.”

A notable number of athletes also described signs of *burnout symptoms*. These included emotional exhaustion, disinterest in practice, and a persistent lack of motivation. “Sometimes I’m just numb. Like I’m going through the motions but I don’t care anymore,” one participant explained. Another said, “I used to get excited about practice. Now, I dread it.”

Finally, *mood swings* were reported as a fluctuating emotional state associated with the intensity of the competitive environment. Participants spoke of irritability, sudden anger, or feeling emotionally overwhelmed without warning. “One moment I’m pumped, the next I’m snapping at my teammates,” said a high school soccer player. Others mentioned withdrawing socially during times of high emotional stress.

In the second major theme, coping strategies and emotional regulation, athletes shared how they managed their emotions. One prominent method was *cognitive reframing*. Participants often used mental strategies to reduce pressure and reinterpret stressful experiences. One athlete said, “I tell myself it’s not life or death—it’s just a game.” Another shared, “Even if I mess up, I try to focus on what I learned.”

Social support played a vital role for many athletes in processing their emotions. This came from teammates, parents, or coaches. “After a tough loss, my mom always talks it out with me,” said one teen. Another stated, “My teammates get it—they’ve been through the same stuff.” This network of emotional support often helped athletes regain composure and motivation.

Many also relied on *pre-competition rituals* to emotionally prepare for competition. Common rituals included listening to music, doing specific stretches, or practicing visualization techniques. “I always listen to the same playlist—it calms me down,” one track runner shared. Another said, “I close my eyes and picture myself making the perfect dive.”

Emotional expression was an important outlet for some, though less common than suppression. Athletes who did express their feelings reported crying after games, confiding in trusted individuals, or keeping personal journals. “Sometimes I just write everything down in my notebook—that helps,” one participant admitted. Another shared, “Yeah, I cry. Not in front of people, but it helps me let go.”

Others preferred *distraction techniques* to manage emotional overload. These included engaging in non-sport activities like watching movies, playing video games, or spending time with non-athlete friends. “When I feel down, I just hang out with my friends who aren’t into sports—it gives me a break,” explained one teen.

Additionally, some participants found *physical activity for relief* helpful, especially when emotions were intense. Rather than competing, they would go for solo runs, do light workouts, or simply move their bodies to release tension. “When I’m mad or anxious, I go shoot hoops by myself—it clears my head,” one basketball player shared.

The final theme, external influences on emotional experiences, highlighted the powerful impact of others on athletes’ emotional states. The subcategory of *coaching style* showed that athletes responded differently to encouraging versus critical coaches. “My coach lifts me up when I’m down,” one participant noted, “but some of my friends say their coaches just yell.” Negative coaching experiences often triggered stress and self-doubt.

Parental expectations also had a dual impact. While some parents were described as supportive, others were perceived as overly demanding. “My mom tells me to have fun, no matter what,” one participant said. In contrast, another admitted, “If I don’t perform well, my dad won’t say it, but I can feel his disappointment.”

A strong theme of *peer comparison* emerged, particularly among teammates and friends. Athletes reported feeling inadequate when comparing themselves to others’ achievements or receiving less attention. “When someone else gets all the praise, I feel invisible,” one gymnast shared. Another said, “It’s hard when your best friend always wins and you don’t.”

Social media influence was noted by several participants as a source of emotional pressure. Athletes described the need to project success online and how comparisons to others’ curated images affected their self-esteem. “Everyone’s posting wins and medals, and it makes you feel like you’re not doing enough,” one interviewee confessed.

Finally, the challenge of *academic-athletic balance* surfaced frequently. Managing schoolwork alongside intense training and competitions created stress and fatigue. “I stay up late doing homework after practice, and then I’m exhausted the next day,” said one swimmer. Another shared, “It’s hard to give 100% to both school and sports.”

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the emotional experiences of adolescent athletes within competitive sports contexts, revealing three core thematic domains: emotional responses to competitive pressure, coping strategies and emotional regulation, and external influences on emotional experiences. The findings provide a nuanced portrait of how young athletes interpret, manage, and express emotions in high-pressure environments. These emotional dynamics are shaped by personal expectations, social relationships, and institutional demands, all of which significantly influence mental well-being and continued participation in sport.

The first major finding—intense emotional fluctuations in response to competitive pressure—mirrors existing literature on performance-related affect in youth athletes. Participants described oscillating between emotional highs, such as pride and elation following success, and emotional lows like disappointment and self-blame after perceived failure. This pattern is consistent with research that links sport participation to heightened emotional arousal in adolescents, particularly in high-stakes situations where identity and self-worth are perceived as contingent on athletic performance (Al-Abadi et al., 2023). The emotional lows expressed by athletes often stemmed from a strong fear of letting others down, aligning with studies indicating that adolescent athletes are especially vulnerable to performance anxiety due to external expectations and fear of negative evaluation (Neely, 2022; Teques et al., 2024).

A significant number of participants reported somatic symptoms of anxiety—such as nausea, racing heartbeats, and sleep disturbance—prior to competitions. These physiological indicators reflect findings from prior work on emotional dysregulation in high-pressure youth sport settings (Caine et al., 2016; Pandya & Lang, 2021). Performance anxiety is often intensified when adolescents are navigating identity development and are more reactive to social comparisons and perceived judgment from coaches, parents, or peers (Raabe et al., 2021). Athletes also described suppressing their emotions to project toughness, a phenomenon that parallels the emotional stoicism expected in many sport subcultures. This emotional suppression, while often socially reinforced, may hinder psychological resilience and increase long-term emotional strain (Shebalina et al., 2020; Whitley et al., 2021).

The theme of burnout emerged prominently in the narratives of adolescent athletes who felt emotionally exhausted or disconnected from their sport. Burnout symptoms included fatigue, lack of motivation, and feelings of emotional numbness, even among athletes who

previously enjoyed training and competition. These findings support prior research highlighting burnout as a critical concern for adolescents exposed to chronic performance pressure without adequate recovery or emotional support (Fernandes et al., 2024; Hainline et al., 2019). Notably, early sport specialization and high parental and institutional demands are known contributors to such outcomes (Krabak et al., 2019). Emotional fatigue may also signal a deeper issue in youth sports culture: a shift from enjoyment-based participation to performance-based identity, which, if left unaddressed, can lead to long-term disengagement from sport altogether (Whitley et al., 2021).

In terms of coping strategies, participants shared a wide range of techniques to manage emotional stress, from cognitive reframing and physical activity to emotional expression and distraction. Cognitive strategies such as positive self-talk and reinterpreting competition as a learning opportunity reflect findings from psychological skills training interventions that promote emotional resilience (Zakrajsek et al., 2017). These adaptive approaches are essential for helping adolescents sustain motivation and navigate the ups and downs of competitive sport. Similarly, the use of pre-competition rituals—such as visualization, breathing exercises, and listening to music—was consistent with emotional regulation strategies previously observed in elite youth athletes (Bisagno et al., 2022). Such routines may function as both emotional anchors and symbolic structures that foster a sense of preparedness and control.

Social support, especially from teammates, parents, and coaches, played a pivotal role in how athletes coped with emotional distress. Participants frequently emphasized the importance of feeling understood, validated, and encouraged by others in their sport environment. These findings corroborate previous studies identifying supportive relationships as key buffers against emotional stress and burnout in adolescent athletes (Bates et al., 2021; Bruner et al., 2019). Peer support, in particular, appears to facilitate emotional openness and belonging, which are crucial during the vulnerable stage of adolescence. In contrast, the absence of empathetic feedback or the presence of emotionally distant coaches was associated with greater emotional suppression and withdrawal.

The third thematic domain—external influences on emotional experience—highlighted the significant role of interpersonal and sociocultural factors in shaping emotional development. Coaching style emerged as one of the most influential factors. Athletes whose coaches used supportive, autonomy-promoting methods reported greater emotional

stability and confidence, while those who experienced critical or authoritarian coaching expressed heightened anxiety and emotional avoidance. These results are supported by research indicating that coaching behaviors strongly influence athletes' emotional trajectories and that emotionally intelligent coaching fosters healthier emotional environments (Lochbaum et al., 2024; Raabe et al., 2021). Coaches who fail to recognize the emotional dimensions of youth sport risk perpetuating environments of fear and silence, particularly when performance is prioritized over development (Zakrajsek et al., 2017).

Parental expectations also had a marked impact on emotional outcomes. While some participants described their parents as sources of comfort and understanding, others perceived them as overly demanding or emotionally unavailable after losses. These findings echo previous research showing that parental pressure centered on winning can increase athlete anxiety, reduce enjoyment, and interfere with emotional regulation (Bates & O'Quinn, 2023; Pynn et al., 2019). In many cases, the internalization of parental expectations contributed to self-imposed pressure and fear of disappointing family members. As shown in prior studies, adolescents who perceive conditional support from parents based on athletic success are more likely to engage in emotional suppression and experience heightened psychological distress (Teques et al., 2024).

Another noteworthy influence on athletes' emotional experiences was peer comparison, especially when teammates or competitors received more praise, attention, or success. Participants described feelings of jealousy, inadequacy, and isolation in response to peer achievement, often exacerbated by the visibility of performance metrics and recognition. This aligns with literature that identifies peer comparison as a significant emotional stressor during adolescence, particularly in environments where competition and visibility are high (Azevedo, 2025; Neely, 2022). The normalization of comparison through social media was also evident in participant responses. Several athletes mentioned pressure to perform based on the perceived success of others online, a phenomenon that has been linked to emotional fatigue and self-doubt in other youth contexts (Zahari et al., 2023; Zahari et al., 2022).

Finally, the struggle to balance academic and athletic commitments emerged as a recurring theme. Participants frequently expressed difficulty managing time, energy, and emotional resources when faced with conflicting demands. This struggle mirrors findings from studies highlighting the dual stressors faced by student-athletes and their effects on

emotional regulation and academic performance (Güngör et al., 2021). When school and sport demands converge without institutional or familial support, adolescents are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion and reduced coping capacity. While sport can serve as an outlet and a source of resilience, it can also become an added pressure when the overall ecosystem lacks balance (O'Donnell et al., 2020).

5. Limitations & Suggestions

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the sample consisted solely of adolescent athletes from the United States, which may limit the cultural generalizability of the results. Emotional norms, sport structures, and coping strategies may differ significantly across cultural contexts. Second, the data were collected through self-reported interviews, which can be subject to recall bias and social desirability effects. Some participants may have underreported emotional difficulties or exaggerated coping strengths to align with perceived expectations. Third, the study primarily included athletes from organized and competitive sport environments, possibly overlooking the emotional experiences of those in recreational or informal sports settings. Lastly, while the study reached theoretical saturation, a broader sample across different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds could provide deeper insights into how structural inequalities shape emotional development in youth sports.

Future research should explore emotional experiences in adolescent athletes across different cultural and sporting contexts to uncover how emotional regulation and competitive pressure manifest globally. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in examining how emotional coping strategies evolve over time and influence long-term sport engagement and psychological health. In addition, further research is needed on the experiences of marginalized groups, including LGBTQ+ athletes, athletes with disabilities, and those from low-income backgrounds, to understand the intersecting pressures they face. Expanding qualitative work to include coaches and parents would also enrich our understanding of the broader emotional ecosystem surrounding youth athletes.

Coaches, educators, and sport program designers should prioritize emotional development as a core component of youth sports. This includes fostering environments that normalize emotional expression, training coaches in

emotional intelligence, and encouraging open dialogue about stress and mental health. Programs should also incorporate structured emotional skills training alongside physical training, emphasizing tools like cognitive reframing, stress management, and peer support. Parents should be encouraged to provide unconditional support and recognize effort rather than solely outcomes. Creating a holistic, developmentally appropriate, and emotionally safe sport culture can ensure that young athletes not only perform but also thrive—both on and off the field.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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