

Mental Toughness in Strength and Conditioning Training: Is it really necessary? Perspectives of elite NCAA Strength and Conditioning coaches

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been an increased awareness and consideration of the association of mental toughness (MT) in high performance in sports. However, MT remains both one of the most accepted and misunderstood terms in applied sport psychology, especially when it comes to strength and conditioning training and female student-athletes. **PURPOSE:** To investigate the beliefs of Strength and Conditioning Coaches (SCC) of women's collegiate basketball in regards to MT. In more detail, based on the literature, field tendencies, and practice, 8 areas of interest were covered: 1) Conceptualization, 2) Value, 3) Development, 4) Gender Differences, 5) Measurement, 6) Differences in the responsibilities to develop MT when compared to basketball coaches, 7) Implementation, and 8) Level of interest in learning more. **METHODS:** Ten National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division 1 SCCs for women's basketball from the same Power 5 conference were recruited via email. The study followed an observational and cross-sectional model while a fixed and convergent mixed-method design was used. Data were collected on a quantitative instrument (i.e., questionnaire) and on a qualitative instrument (i.e., interview). Eight SCCs completed the Stronger Than Average Mentality (S.T.A.M.) questionnaire on Qualtrics. S.T.A.M. is a 34-item instrument, which was piloted first. In addition, its items' reliability was estimated using Guttman's λ_2 . Six participated in a semi-structured interview of 10 open-ended questions. Both instruments' items were developed based on the same 8 areas of interest stated above. Capturing the descriptive information about the sample was the goal of analysis of the quantitative data (i.e., descriptive statistics), while data reduction was the goal of analysis of the qualitative data (i.e., thematic analysis). Then, integration of the results from the two strands was performed looking for corroborating or complementary information, which resulted in a 90% inter-rater agreement. In cases of conflict, analytic induction was run. **RESULTS:** There was convergence of the findings in all 8 areas of interest. In more detail, all SCC's find MT to be important and would like to know more about it. The majority of SCC's claimed that they know what MT is, that MT can be developed, that the head coach has more responsibility towards developing MT, and that they know how to measure it. However, there was high variability when ranking MT's key attributes, while there was no consensus on whether MT can be developed in student-athletes or on whether there are gender differences in MT. None SCC reported use of an instrument for measurement. **CONCLUSION:** MT is of value in strength and conditioning in this conference. The findings confirm conclusions of previous research, which indicated that -although MT is reported to be widely used- at the same time, it is a very unclear term. More education of the coaches is necessary, especially in regards to the key components of MT, MT training, and MT measurement. Future research should perhaps use a more grounded theory approach and recruit SCC's from other sports and

different environments (e.g., conference, level, country). The development in this age and the transferability outside sports are two issues that should be addressed in future research efforts.

