

MENTAL BARRIERS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES HINDERING AFRICAN NATIONAL TEAMS FROM WINNING THE FIFA MEN'S WORLD CUP SINCE ITS INCEPTION

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Despite Africa's abundant football talent and increasing presence at the FIFA Men's World Cup, no African team has yet won the tournament. This study examines the major psychological barriers that have hindered African teams' success, focusing on performance anxiety, experience gaps in high-pressure matches, collective efficacy challenges, stereotype threat, and the influence of socioeconomic and structural factors. Through comparative data analysis and relevant psychological theories, the research highlights how limited exposure to elite competition, insufficient sports psychology support, and negative external perceptions contribute to inconsistent performances. Case studies of Ghana (2010), Senegal (2002), and Cameroon (1990) illustrate these dynamics in real-world contexts. The study concludes with strategic recommendations for integrating mental skills training, improving player exposure, stabilizing team cohesion, and addressing systemic challenges. Addressing these psychological factors is critical to narrowing the performance gap and enhancing the potential for African teams to achieve historic success at future World Cups.

Keywords: Psychological barriers, African football teams, FIFA Men's World Cup, Performance anxiety, Collective efficacy, Stereotype threat, Sports psychology, Mental resilience

Introduction

The mental game is often the most decisive battleground in elite sports, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the quest for FIFA Men's World Cup glory where psychological resilience, pressure management, and collective confidence shape champions. Yet, despite boasting some of the world's most gifted football talents, African teams have repeatedly stumbled short of the ultimate prize. Globally, football powerhouses from Europe and South America have dominated the World Cup podium, sharing all 21 tournament titles to date. African nations, while increasing their presence qualifying in every tournament since 1978 have never advanced beyond the quarterfinal stage, a milestone reached only three times by Cameroon (1990), Senegal (2002), and Ghana (2010).

At the national level, African teams face unique psychological challenges: data reveals a penalty shootout success rate of roughly 30% for African nations at the World Cup, compared

to over 55% for South American teams and 60% for European counterparts highlighting a critical mental performance gap under pressure. Locally, within African football development programs, only about 20% of national squads consistently integrate sports psychology professionals, compared to nearly 90% in leading European football federations, underscoring a structural deficit in mental conditioning support. This backdrop frames a pressing question: to what extent do psychological and mental barriers inhibit African teams from transcending historic limitations and clinching football's most coveted trophy?

Since the FIFA Men's World Cup began in 1930, African teams have participated regularly only from the 1970s onward. Despite the continent's wealth of football talent and passion, no African team has ever won the tournament. While many factors contribute such as infrastructure, funding, and tactical experience this analysis focuses on psychological and mental barriers that have hindered African teams' success, comparing available data and psychological theory with performance outcomes.

Historical Performance Overview of African Teams

African nations first made their FIFA Men's World Cup debut in 1934 when Egypt participated as the continent's sole representative. However, it was not until the 1970s that African teams began to participate regularly, reflecting both growing football development across the continent and changes in FIFA's qualification allocations.

By 2022, a total of 11 different African countries has qualified for the World Cup tournaments, including Egypt, Cameroon, Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, DR Congo, and Angola. Despite the growing presence, African teams have yet to progress beyond the quarterfinal stage a milestone reached only on three occasions. Notably, Cameroon's historic run in 1990, where they stunned football fans worldwide by reaching the quarterfinals; Senegal's surprising performance in 2002, which ended at the same stage; and Ghana's narrow quarterfinal exit in 2010 these are the farthest any African teams have advanced to date.

Best Performance

The best performances of African teams at the FIFA Men's World Cup have been their three historic quarterfinal appearances, each representing a significant breakthrough for the continent



and highlighting moments when African football came close to making global history (Darby, 2007; Alegi, 2010).

Cameroon's 1990 run was a watershed moment. Entering the tournament as underdogs, Cameroon stunned the world by defeating defending champions Argentina in the opening match, setting the tone for a remarkable journey (Darby, 2007). Their disciplined defense and the inspired leadership of captain Roger Milla carried them through the group stages and knockout rounds. Though their campaign ended in a quarterfinal loss to England, Cameroon's spirited performance shattered stereotypes about African teams and sparked widespread enthusiasm and belief across the continent (Alegi, 2010).

In 2002, Senegal replicated this breakthrough during their debut World Cup appearance. With a talented squad composed largely of players experienced in European leagues, Senegal defied expectations by beating defending champions France in the opening game and advancing through a challenging group stage (Bale, 2013). Their quarterfinal match against Turkey was tightly contested and decided in extra time. Senegal's run was praised for its tactical organization and mental strength, marking another high point for African football on the global stage (Poli, 2010).

The most recent quarterfinal achievement came from Ghana in 2010; a team often dubbed the "Black Stars." Ghana's campaign was characterized by dynamic play and the emergence of young talents excelling under immense pressure (Darby & Solberg, 2010). Their quarterfinal clash with Uruguay is remembered for its dramatic conclusion, including a last-minute handball that led to a controversial penalty shootout loss (Giulianotti & Armstrong, 2012). Ghana's near-miss brought both heartbreak and pride, underscoring how fine the margins can be at the highest levels of competition.

These three quarterfinal appearances, spanning two decades, emphasize both the potential and progress of African football. However, they also highlight psychological and tactical barriers that have prevented African teams from advancing further. The intensity of pressure, experience in high-stakes matches, and ability to maintain mental resilience during critical moments remain key challenges (Williams & Reilly, 2000; Schempp et al., 2006). Overcoming these obstacles will be essential for African teams aspiring not only to reach but ultimately to win the FIFA Men's World Cup.

Comparative Success

When comparing African teams' World Cup performances to those of South American and European countries, the disparity in success is clear and well-documented. Nations from these continents have dominated the FIFA Men's World Cup historically, collectively winning all 21 titles since the tournament's inception (FIFA, 2022). Countries such as Brazil, Germany, Italy, and Argentina not only have multiple championships but also consistently reach the tournament's final stages, reflecting a culture deeply ingrained with winning mentalities and strategic maturity.

Research indicates that psychological resilience the capacity to maintain or regain mental health despite adversity and extensive experience in high-pressure environments are critical factors contributing to this success (Galli & Vealey, 2008; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). European and South American players frequently compete in elite club tournaments like the UEFA Champions League and Copa Libertadores, which expose them to intense competition and pressure, fostering advanced mental toughness and refined decision-making under stress (Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2007). This experience enhances their readiness to perform consistently on the global stage.

Moreover, well-established football federations in Europe and South America often incorporate sports psychology into their training programs, promoting mental conditioning as a core aspect of athlete development (Weinberg & Gould, 2018). These support systems help athletes manage anxiety, sustain focus, and develop collective team efficacy, which has been shown to positively impact performance in critical match moments (Bandura, 1997; Myers et al., 2012).

In contrast, African teams face systemic challenges in accessing such psychological support and consistent exposure to high-stakes competition. Studies have found that many African national teams lack sufficient sports psychology resources, which contributes to performance inconsistencies during high-pressure World Cup scenarios such as penalty shootouts or knockout matches (Adegoke & Abioye, 2020; Oloruntoba & Adeniyi, 2017). This experiential gap can undermine players' confidence and composure when it matters most.

Performance Anxiety and Pressure

African teams have historically struggled in high-pressure moments such as penalty shootouts at the FIFA Men's World Cup. A notable example is Ghana's 2010 quarterfinal match against Uruguay, which ended in a heartbreaking loss on penalties after a dramatic and tense game (Giulianotti & Armstrong, 2012). Statistical analyses of World Cup shootouts indicate that success is strongly influenced by players' mental toughness, focus, and prior experience under pressure (Jordet et al., 2007). African teams' lower penalty conversion rates compared to European and South American teams highlight the psychological challenges they face in such critical situations (Lidor & Ziv, 2017).

The psychological framework of the Yerkes-Dodson Law provides insight into this phenomenon, proposing that performance improves with physiological and mental arousal up to an optimal point, beyond which excessive anxiety or stress impairs functioning (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). For African players, the immense expectations from their nations and the entire continent can elevate pressure levels beyond this optimal zone, negatively affecting concentration and execution (Adegoke & Abioye, 2020). This heightened performance anxiety may undermine their ability to perform under stress, especially in sudden-death scenarios.

Moreover, research in sports psychology underscores the importance of coping mechanisms, such as relaxation techniques and psychological skills training, in managing anxiety during competition (Weinberg & Gould, 2018). Unfortunately, limited access to these mental conditioning resources in many African football programs compounds the difficulty in overcoming performance pressure, contributing to repeated struggles in penalty shootouts and other clutch moments (Oloruntoba & Adeniyi, 2017).

Experience Gap in High-Pressure Matches

A critical factor influencing African teams' performances at the FIFA Men's World Cup is the disparity in players' exposure to high-pressure matches. Players from European and South American nations frequently compete in elite club competitions such as the UEFA Champions League and Copa Libertadores, where they regularly face intense tactical challenges and high-stakes environments (Poli, Ravenel, & Besson, 2016). This consistent exposure hones mental readiness, decision-making skills, and the ability to manage competitive stress effectively (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012).

In contrast, many African national teams often include players whose club experience varies widely, with some competing in less competitive leagues or lacking regular exposure to such elite contests (Darby, 2010). This inconsistency can undermine players' psychological preparedness for the World Cup's heightened demands. Without repeated encounters with pressure-filled situations, players may struggle to maintain composure, confidence, and tactical clarity during pivotal moments (Williams & Reilly, 2000).

The concept of "mental schemas" cognitive frameworks developed through experience that help athletes anticipate, interpret, and respond to game situations is essential here (Schmidt & Lee, 2011). Players from established football nations benefit from stronger, well-developed mental schemas due to extensive exposure to adversity and complex match scenarios. These mental models enable quicker, more effective decision-making under pressure, giving such teams a competitive psychological edge (Schempp, McCullick, & Mason, 2006).

Therefore, the experience gap between African players and their European or South American counterparts significantly impacts African teams' ability to perform consistently at the highest levels. Addressing this gap through increased access to competitive club environments and mental skills training is crucial for elevating African teams' World Cup success prospects.

Collective Efficacy and Team Cohesion

Research consistently highlights the crucial role of collective efficacy a group's shared belief in its conjoint capabilities in enhancing team performance (Bandura, 1997). In sports, higher collective efficacy correlates strongly with improved coordination, resilience, and overall success, particularly in high-pressure environments like the FIFA World Cup (Feltz & Lirgg, 2001; Myers et al., 2012).

African teams frequently face challenges that undermine collective efficacy and team cohesion. Factors such as inconsistent team selection, fluctuating coaching appointments, administrative interference, and funding limitations disrupt stable preparation and impede the development of strong psychological bonds among players (Alegi, 2010; Darby, 2007). These external issues contribute to a lack of continuity and undermine the mental readiness necessary for success on football's biggest stage.

Conversely, data from African teams that maintain stable coaching staff and consistent training camps, such as Senegal's notable 2022 World Cup campaign, illustrate the benefits of mental

cohesion and collective belief (FIFA, 2022). Senegal's strong team unity, fostered through steady leadership and regular preparation, was linked to their resilience in tight matches and their impressive performance, reinforcing how collective efficacy directly impacts outcomes (Weinberg & Gould, 2018). To bridge the gap with consistently successful football nations, African teams must prioritize stable management structures and invest in building team cohesion through deliberate psychological and social strategies.

Stereotype Threat and External Perceptions

African football teams often contend with pervasive stereotypes, such as being labeled less tactical, less disciplined, or overly reliant on physicality rather than skill or strategy (Alegi, 2010; Darby, 2007). These external perceptions can create a psychological burden known as stereotype threat, a concept introduced by Steele and Aronson (1995), which occurs when individuals fear confirming negative stereotypes about their group. This fear can undermine confidence, increase anxiety, and impair performance.

Research in sports psychology shows that stereotype threat can lead athletes to internalize doubts and anxieties, disrupting their focus and decision-making during critical moments (Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999). For African players, such internalized pressures may manifest as hesitation or reduced assertiveness on the pitch, particularly in high-stakes matches where mental resilience is vital (Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008). An example of this effect can be seen in instances where African teams underperform in crucial matches despite evident talent and preparation potentially reflecting the cognitive load imposed by stereotype threat (Beilock & Carr, 2005). Addressing these psychological barriers requires not only individual mental skills training but also broader efforts to change external narratives and reinforce positive identities within African football culture.

Socioeconomic and Structural Context Impacting Psychology

Beyond individual and team psychological factors, broader socioeconomic and structural conditions significantly influence the mental preparedness of African football teams. One of the most critical gaps is the lack of consistent access to sports psychology support staff. Unlike European football federations, where sports psychologists are integrated routinely into training and preparation programs, many African teams have limited or sporadic psychological support, which diminishes players' ability to develop crucial mental skills such as stress management, focus, and resilience (Adegoke & Abioye, 2020; Weinberg & Gould, 2018).

Moreover, underdeveloped youth football systems in many African countries fail to incorporate structured mental conditioning programs from early stages, unlike their European and South American counterparts (Darby, 2010; Poli, 2010). This deficit means that players often enter senior national teams without having built foundational psychological skills essential for coping with the pressures of elite competition (Williams & Reilly, 2000).

Further compounding these challenges is political and administrative interference in African football federations, which has been linked to increased stress and distraction among players and coaching staff (Alegi, 2010). Instability in management, inconsistent funding, and off-field controversies divert attention and energy from preparation, negatively impacting team cohesion and mental focus (Darby & Solberg, 2010).

Addressing these socioeconomic and structural factors is paramount to improving the psychological readiness of African teams. Investments in consistent psychological services, youth mental skills development, and transparent, stable governance could reduce mental strain and foster an environment conducive to peak performance on the world stage.

Comparative Statistical Analysis

A quantitative comparison of African, European, and South American football teams at the FIFA Men’s World Cup reveals significant disparities in experience, performance, and psychological support—factors that collectively influence outcomes on football’s biggest stage.

Metric	African Teams	European Teams	South American Teams
World Cup Appearances	11 countries qualified	Multiple winners	Multiple winners
Quarterfinal Appearances	3 times	20+ times	15+ times
Penalty Shootout Success Rate	~30%	~60%	~55%
Average Player Experience (Top 5 Leagues)	~40–60% play abroad, some in lower leagues	90%+ in elite leagues	80%+ in elite leagues
Presence of Sports Psychologists	Low (~20%)	High (~90%)	Medium (~60%)



African teams have qualified through 11 different nations but have only reached the quarterfinal stage three times, compared to European and South American teams with over 20 and 15 quarterfinal appearances respectively (FIFA, 2022; Poli et al., 2016). Penalty shootout success rates crucial in knockout stages show African teams winning roughly 30% of the time, substantially lower than Europe's 60% and South America's 55%, highlighting mental toughness and composure gaps under pressure (Jordet et al., 2007; Lidor & Ziv, 2017).

Player experience is another critical metric. Approximately 40–60% of African players compete abroad, with some in lower-tier leagues, whereas over 90% of European players and 80% of South Americans play in elite leagues renowned for their competitive intensity (Darby, 2010; Poli et al., 2016). This differential translates into varying degrees of exposure to high-pressure matches and tactical sophistication. Moreover, the presence of sports psychologists reflects institutional commitment to mental preparation: only about 20% of African teams consistently integrate psychological support, in stark contrast to 90% for European teams and around 60% for South American squads (Adegoke & Abioye, 2020; Weinberg & Gould, 2018). This lack of structured mental conditioning further widens the performance gap. Together, these statistics underscore the multifaceted nature of the challenges African teams face spanning skill development, mental preparedness, and institutional support that impact their ability to compete equally at the World Cup level.

Case Studies

Ghana 2010 stands as a poignant example of how mental fatigue and pressure can critically influence outcomes at the highest level. The Black Stars' quarterfinal match against Uruguay was marked by intense physical and psychological demands, culminating in a penalty shootout loss that many analysts attribute in part to the immense mental strain faced by the players (Giulianotti & Armstrong, 2012; Weinberg & Gould, 2018). The psychological burden of carrying continental expectations, combined with the stress of a high-stakes sudden-death scenario, highlights how mental resilience is crucial in World Cup knockout phases (Jordet et al., 2007).

The Senegal 2002 team demonstrated the power of strong mental cohesion and leadership in propelling an underdog squad to the quarterfinals during their World Cup debut. Under the guidance of experienced coach Bruno Metsu and led by players with extensive European club experience, Senegal exhibited tactical discipline and psychological composure throughout the

tournament (Bale, 2013; Poli, 2010). Their collective efficacy and unified team mindset were central to overcoming more favored opponents and managing the pressures of their maiden campaign on football's biggest stage.

Cameroon's 1990 journey to become the first African team to reach the World Cup quarterfinals was fueled by a remarkable collective belief and the inspirational leadership of Roger Milla (Darby, 2007; Alegi, 2010). However, the accumulated physical and mental fatigue during their extended run became apparent in their quarterfinal loss to England (Williams & Reilly, 2000). This case illustrates how early psychological strength must be coupled with sustained endurance and coping strategies to advance deeper into the tournament. Together, these case studies emphasize the critical role of psychological factors mental toughness, team cohesion, leadership, and fatigue management in shaping African teams' World Cup performances. They also reflect the need for enhanced mental conditioning and support systems to translate potential into historic success.

Strategies for Overcoming Psychological Barriers

To bridge the psychological gap that has hindered African teams from winning the FIFA Men's World Cup, targeted strategies focusing on mental conditioning, structural support, and cultural change are essential.

1. Integrating Sports Psychology into Team Preparation

Regular access to sports psychologists can help players develop crucial mental skills such as anxiety management, concentration, and coping mechanisms for pressure situations (Weinberg & Gould, 2018). Programs should include visualization techniques, goal-setting, and relaxation training to enhance focus during critical moments like penalty shootouts (Vealey, 2007).

2. Increasing Exposure to High-Pressure Competitive Environments

Encouraging African players to participate consistently in elite leagues and international tournaments helps build experience and mental toughness (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). Clubs and national federations can facilitate transfers and loans to top leagues to enhance players' readiness for World Cup pressures (Poli et al., 2016).

3. Building Collective Efficacy and Team Cohesion

Stable coaching staffs and regular, focused training camps foster trust and shared belief within the team, enhancing collective efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Myers et al., 2012). Leadership development programs can empower team captains and influential players to strengthen unity and resilience.

4. Addressing Stereotype Threat through Positive Identity Reinforcement

Workshops and media training can help players recognize and resist negative stereotypes, replacing them with positive self-perceptions (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Celebrating African football successes and role models reinforces a confident team culture (Alegi, 2010).

5. Improving Socioeconomic and Structural Support

Investing in youth mental skills programs and stable football governance reduces off-field stressors (Darby, 2010). Transparent administration and sustained funding enable better preparation, allowing players to focus fully on performance (Adegoke & Abioye, 2020).

Conclusion

While infrastructural and technical challenges undeniably impact African teams' performances at the FIFA Men's World Cup, this analysis underscores that psychological barriers play a crucial and often underappreciated role. Factors such as performance anxiety in high-pressure situations, a significant experience gap in elite competitive environments, difficulties in establishing strong collective efficacy and team cohesion, and the pervasive influence of stereotype threat collectively hinder African teams from achieving greater success on football's biggest stage (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Bandura, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Moreover, socioeconomic and structural constraints—such as limited access to sports psychology support, underdeveloped youth mental conditioning programs, and political interference exacerbate these psychological challenges, reducing players' mental readiness and resilience (Adegoke & Abioye, 2020; Alegi, 2010). Comparative data further reveal significant gaps in player experience, penalty shootout success, and psychological support systems when contrasted with European and South American powerhouses (Jordet et al., 2007; Poli et al., 2016).

Suggestions

Based on the findings and literature reviewed, the following suggestions are proposed to help African football teams overcome psychological barriers and enhance their performance at the FIFA Men's World Cup:

1. African football federations should prioritize hiring qualified sports psychologists as integral members of national team staff. Regular mental skills training, including anxiety management, focus enhancement, and resilience building, must become standard practice throughout all levels of team preparation.
2. National bodies should actively facilitate pathways for talented African players to join top-tier leagues worldwide. This exposure will build experience in high-pressure environments, sharpen decision-making, and increase mental toughness crucial for World Cup success.
3. Consistency in coaching staff and extended, focused training camps will foster collective efficacy and stronger team unity. Leadership development programs should be implemented to empower players who can galvanize team morale and resilience under pressure.
4. Educational workshops and positive identity reinforcement initiatives should be used to combat the negative psychological impact of stereotypes. Highlighting African football achievements and role models can bolster players' confidence and collective self-belief.
5. Efforts must be made to reduce political interference and improve administrative transparency within football federations. Stable funding and governance will create an environment where players and coaching staff can focus solely on performance and psychological preparation.
6. Youth academies and grassroots programs need to integrate mental skills training early in player development. Building psychological resilience from a young age will prepare future generations for the demands of elite international competition.

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