PERCEIVED MOTIVATIONAL CLIMATE AND ITS IMPACT ON WRESTLERS' DRIVE

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ABSTRACT
One of the key factors shaping an athlete's motivation is the motivational climate – the social and psychological environment created by the coach, teammates, and the overall organization of the training process. The present study aims to analyze the perceived motivational climate within the training environment of wrestlers. The „Perceived Motivational Climate in Sport Questionnaire-2" (PMCSQ-2) was used to measure two primary types of motivational climate: mastery, task-oriented, and performance, ego-oriented. In addition, a questionnaire was conducted with the participants to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions of the social and psychological aspects of their training environment. The sample included 54 wrestlers (42 males and 12 females) aged between 18 and 26, practicing Freestyle, Greco-Roman, and Women's Wrestling. The results showed that a task-involving climate was predominant, indicating a focus on personal development, effort, and cooperation within the training environment. No significant differences were found among the participants regarding the perceived motivational climate. Male participants showed values on the ego-involving climate scale (M = 2.5; SD = 0.5) compared to female participants (M = 2.3; SD = 0.4). Female participants scored slightly higher on the task-involving climate scale (M = 4.6; SD = 0.3) compared to males (M = 4.4; SD = 0.4). Overall, the task-involving climate was predominant in the sample (M = 4.5), compared to the ego-involving climate (M = 2.4). The study emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive and development-focused climate, especially in sports like wrestling, where the coach-athlete relationship plays a central role. Understanding the influence of perceived motivational climate can help coaches and sport psychologists to enhance athlete motivation, performance consistency, and overall well-being.

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INTRODUCTION

Motivation is the invisible fuel that separates good athletes from great ones. It is the difference between a competitor who crumbles under pressure and one who thrives in adversity. It pushes an athlete to wake up at dawn for extra training, endure pain, sacrifice comfort, and chase excellence when others settle for mediocrity (Iliev, 2025). Specialists in the field of psychology are unanimous that motivation can be external and internal, but they are also unanimous that the more sustainable and positive one for shaping the athlete's personality and achieving high sports results is the internal one (Nikolov, 2011). In competitive sport, success requires far more than physical preparation—it demands an intricate balance of physical conditioning, technical mastery, tactical awareness, and psychological resilience. Among these elements, motivation stands as one of the most decisive psychological determinants of performance and long-term athletic development (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Within the framework of achievement goal theory, one of the most influential and malleable factors shaping athlete motivation is the motivational climate—the social and psychological environment created by significant others, particularly coaches, but also teammates and the organizational structure of the training process (Ames, 1992; Duda, Balaguer, 2007). Two primary types of motivational climate have been distinguished. A task-involving climate emphasizes effort, cooperation, and personal improvement, encouraging athletes to evaluate success through self-referenced standards. In contrast, an ego-involving climate stresses normative comparisons, competition, and outperforming others, making success contingent on external validation and superiority over peers (Newton, Duda, Yin, 2000).

Theoretical and empirical evidence consistently shows that these climates produce very different psychological outcomes. Task-involving climates are associated with greater intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, resilience, and adaptive coping strategies (Duda & Balaguer, 2007; Smith, Ntoumanis, Duda, 2008). Conversely, ego-involving climates have been linked to heightened anxiety, fear of failure, and risk of burnout, particularly in athletes who perceive their competence as unstable or externally judged (Gustafsson, Hassm, Kentta, Johansson, 2007). While both climates can coexist, the balance between them often determines whether athletes sustain motivation or become vulnerable to psychological strain.

Combat sports such as wrestling are characterized by high physiological and psychological demands, strict weight categories, and a one-on-one competitive structure, all of which place considerable pressure on athletes. Psychological preparation plays a crucial role in athletes' performance due to the unique physical and mental challenges in these sports (Ziv & Lidor, 2013). The individualized and hierarchical nature of wrestling makes the coach–athlete relationship particularly central (Jowett, Cockerill, 2003). Coaches who emphasize mastery, effort, and personal growth create a supportive climate that enhances both performance consistency and long-term development (Pensgaard & Roberts, 2002). In contrast, a strong emphasis on winning, social comparison, or punitive practices may undermine athletes' confidence, increase pressure, and accelerate dropout.

The choice of a certain type of sport starts from the training process and adaptation to external (middle) factors. Children with different types of sports have different personality psychological features. Specific personalities are crucial to the choice of sport and are the basis for a sustainable motivation for their practice. The importance of studying psychological criteria for orientation and selection, as demonstrated by practical achievements and literary analysis, is also determined by the fact that all information obtained during the psychological examination of new recruits is used by the coach in his further work with them, mainly in the individualization of the training process and preparation for competition (Iliev, Rachev, 2019).

Despite a rich body of literature on motivational climate in team sports such as football and basketball, research in combat sports—and wrestling in particular—remains limited. Furthermore, the transitional age range of 18–26 represents a critical period for wrestlers moving from junior to senior competition, a stage marked by increased performance pressures and crucial career decisions. Understanding the motivational climate during this period may help prevent burnout, sustain motivation, and foster athlete retention.

Based on the collected information and our personal experience, we formulated the work hypothesis claiming that most researched individuals wrestlers would be characterized by a motivational climate of mastery, task-oriented.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of the study was to analyze the perceived motivational climate within the training environment of wrestlers and to determine whether there are gender-based differences in athletes' perceptions.

METHODOLOGY

The study sample consisted of 54 competitive wrestlers (42 males and 12 females) aged between 18 and 26 years (mean age, 21.4 years ± 2.3). All participants were enrolled in the National Sports Academy „Vasil Levski" and were actively competing in Freestyle (*n* = 24), Greco-Roman (*n* = 18), and Women's Wrestling (*n* = 12).

1. Perceived Motivational Climate in Sport Questionnaire-2 (PMCSQ-2): Developed by Newton, Duda, and Yin (2000), this instrument measures athletes' perceptions of the motivational climate, comprising two higher-order scales:
   - Mastery/task-oriented motivational climate: Consisting of subscales for cooperative learning, effort/improvement, and role significance.
   - Performance/ego-oriented motivational climate: Including subscales for unequal recognition, rivalry, and punishment for mistakes.

A Bulgarian adaptation of the PMCSQ-2 was used (Domuschieva-Rogleva, 2007).

2. A questionnaire: Participants completed the questionnaire anonymously during wrestling training sessions under the supervision of the researcher. In addition to the standardized items, the questionnaire included several open-ended questions designed to encourage reflection and provide deeper insight into athletes' perceptions of the motivational climate within their training environment. These questions focused on three main areas: *„Athletes' perceptions of coach behavior and feedback"*; *„Team atmosphere and relationships*

among wrestlers"; „Personal sources of motivation and response to challenges".

All participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, and written informed consent was obtained from each athlete prior to taking part. Involvement in the research was entirely voluntary, and the respondents were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their answers. The study protocol was conducted in agreement with the principles stated in the Declaration of Helsinki for Human Research (WMA, 2013) and in compliance with the ethical code of the National Sports Academy (2019).

The data were analyzed using Microsoft Office Excel 2019 and IBM SPSS Statistics v. 23.0.

Variation analysis, descriptive statistics, and comparative analysis (using the Mann–Whitney criterion for two samples) were employed to identify differences between the two groups.

RESULTS

The variation analysis (Table 1) across all the participants showed that mastery-involving climate was predominant, with an overall mean score of $M = 4.5$ ($SD = 0.3$), whereas the performace oriented involving climate was considerably lower ($M = 2.4$, $SD = 0.4$). These findings indicate that wrestlers generally perceived their training environment as emphasizing effort, personal development, and cooperation rather than competition and external validation.

Table 1. *Perceived Motivational Climate of all the participants*

Climate Type	*M*	*SD*
Mastery oriented-Involving climate	4.5	0.3
Pefrormance oriented -Involving climate	2.4	0.4

The comparative analysis between male and female groups (Mann–Whitney *U* test) showed that no statistically significant differences between them ($p > 0.05$), with the mastery-oriented motivational climate prevailing over the performance-oriented climate.

However, slight variations were noted in the mean values (Table 2).

- Female wrestlers reported slightly higher scores on the task-involving climate scale ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 0.3$) compared to male wrestlers ($M = 4.4$, $SD = 0.4$).
- Male wrestlers showed marginally higher scores on the ego-involving climate scale ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 0.5$) compared to female participants ($M = 2.3$, $SD = 0.4$).

These minor differences suggest that while both genders experience predominantly mastery-oriented environments, male wrestlers may perceive slightly stronger elements of rivalry and external comparison.

Table 2. *Gender Differences in Perceived Motivational Climate*

Climate Type	*Mean* Males (*n* = 42)	*Mean* Females (*n* = 12)	*SD* Males	*SD* Females	Min Males	Max Males	Min Females	Max Females
Mastery oriented-Involving climate	4.4	4.6	0.4	0.3	3.6	5	4.1	5
Pefrormance oriented -Involving climate	2.5	2.3	0.5	0.4	1.7	2.6	1.5	2.7

In summary (Table 3), the findings reveal a positive and mastery-focused motivational climate among wrestlers aged 18–26. The absence of significant differences across gender indicates that the athletes share similar perceptions of their training environment, shaped by a coherent coaching philosophy promoting personal growth and collective improvement.

Table 3. *Summary of Key Findings*

Variable Compared	Main Observation
Overall Climate	Predominantly mastery oriented (M = 4.5 vs. 2.4 for performance oriented)
Gender Differences	Females are slightly higher on mastery-oriented, males are slightly higher on performance-oriented
General Conclusion	Mastery-oriented and supportive motivational environment overall

As shown in Figure 1, both male and female wrestlers perceived a predominantly mastery-oriented motivational climate.

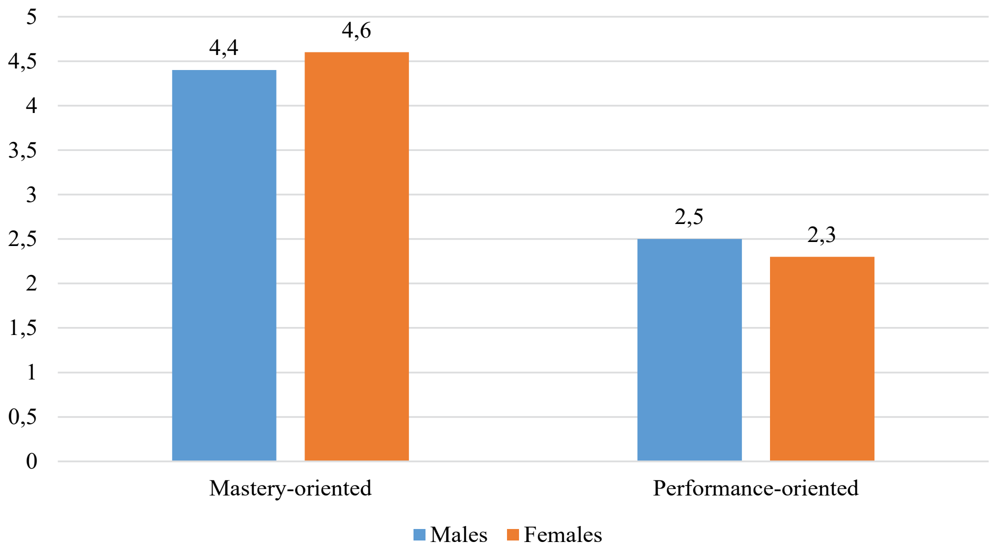

Figure 1. *Perceived Motivational Climate by Gender*

The predominance of a mastery oriented climate is a favorable outcome, as it supports adaptive motivational patterns, higher intrinsic motivation, and resilience — key psychological qualitie in a demanding sport like wrestling.

The results of the questionnaire revealed that the majority of athletes described their coaches as providing constructive and encouraging feedback, emphasizing effort, learning, and improvement rather than punishment for mistakes. These findings are consistent with the quantitative results obtained through the PMCSQ-2 and offer deeper insight into how the social and psychological dimensions of training shape wrestlers' motivation and drive.

A total of 48 out of 54 wrestlers (89%) reported that their coaches primarily focus on effort, learning, and correction, while only 6 athletes (11%) described the coaching approach as more performance-oriented and occasionally critical (Figure 2). Wrestlers emphasized that clear guidance, emotional support, and positive reinforcement from their coaches helped them stay motivated even after unsuccessful performances:

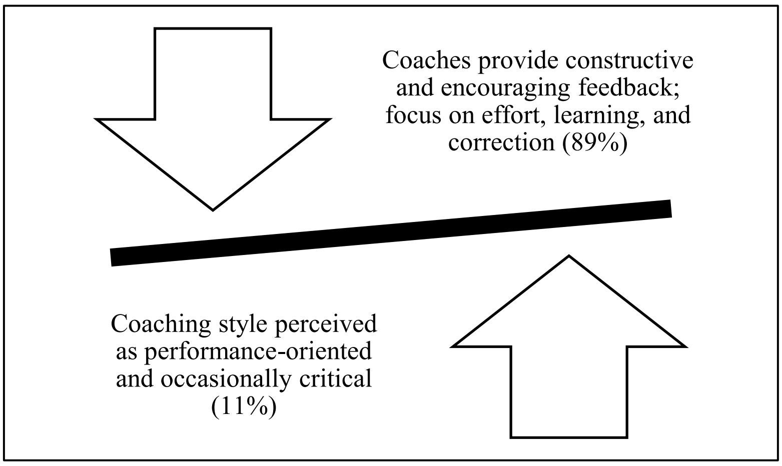

Figure 2. *Coaching approach*

Such responses indicate a mastery-oriented coaching approach, where athletes perceive mistakes as opportunities for growth. This type of environment fosters confidence, persistence, and a strong sense of personal responsibility, reinforcing intrinsic motivation and self-regulated learning.

Furthermore, 43 wrestlers (80%) described the team environment as supportive and collaborative, with teammates helping each other improve and maintaining positive relationships during training. Wrestlers often characterized the group dynamic as a collective effort, despite the inherently individual nature of wrestling. A smaller number of athletes (11 participants, 20%) mentioned moments of rivalry or tension before competitions (Figure 3).

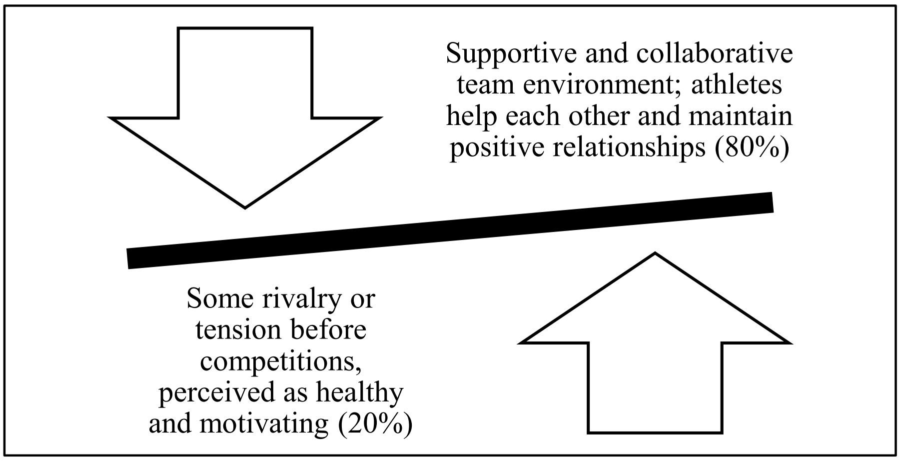

Figure 3. *Team atmosphere*

However, these were interpreted as healthy competitive interactions that contributed to higher motivation and performance rather than creating negative pressure.

All 54 wrestlers, or 100% of the participants (Table 4), identified self-improvement, mastery, and personal growth as their primary motivational drivers. Additionally, 37 wrestlers (69%) emphasized the role of mental resilience — the ability to remain focused, disciplined, and positive under pressure — while 17 athletes (31%) pointed to external sources of encouragement such as coaches, family members, and peers.

Table 4. *Personal sources of motivation and response to challenges*

Category	Main Findings	*n*	%
Primary motivational drivers	Self-improvement, mastery, and personal growth identified as the main sources of motivation.	54	100%
Additional motivational factors	Mental resilience (focus, discipline, positive mindset under pressure).	37	69%
External sources of encouragement	Coaches, family, peers	17	31%

Athletes expressed a high level of intrinsic motivation, driven by their desire to master techniques, test personal limits, and develop both mentally and physically.

When facing setbacks, wrestlers reported relying on self-discipline and social support from their coaches and teammates to overcome frustration and maintain focus. This demonstrates a strong connection between the perceived motivational climate and the wrestlers' inner drive and resilience.

Overall, the qualitative findings highlight that a task-involving, mastery-oriented motivational climate — characterized by constructive coaching, mutual respect, and intrinsic goal orientation — plays a crucial role in sustaining wrestlers' motivation, perseverance, and psychological stability throughout their athletic development.

The results provide empirical evidence that the National Sports Academy's coaching practices align with modern motivational theories, emphasizing learning and mastery rather than performance-based comparison.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study reveal that wrestlers at the National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski" perceive their training environment as predominantly task-involving, emphasizing personal improvement, effort, and cooperation. This result aligns closely with the principles of achievement goal theory (Ames, 1992), which posits that mastery-oriented environments promote adaptive motivational outcomes, such as intrinsic motivation, persistence, and satisfaction.

The predominance of a mastery-oriented climate in this sample supports previous research indicating that athletes who perceive their environment as mastery-focused tend to display greater resilience, enjoyment, and psychological well-being (Duda & Balaguer, 2007; Smith, Ntoumanis, Duda, 2007; Iliev, 2023). Such climates foster internalized motivation by encouraging athletes to evaluate success based on self-referenced standards of effort and progress rather than comparison with others. In sports like wrestling—where success is highly individual and performance pressure is intense—this climate is particularly important for maintaining long-term motivation and preventing burnout.

Although no statistically significant differences were observed across gender, minor variations suggest subtle patterns worth noting. Female wrestlers tended to perceive their climate as more task-involving, whereas male wrestlers showed slightly higher scores on the ego-involving dimension. This finding corresponds with previous evidence suggesting that male athletes often experience more competitive and outcome-oriented environments, while female athletes may emphasize relational and mastery aspects (Kavussanu & Roberts, 1996).

In wrestling, the coach–athlete relationship is a critical determinant of the motivational experience (Iliev & Mutafova-Zaberska, 2013). The individual and hierarchical nature of the sport means that coaches serve not only as technical instructors but also as psychological mentors. The results of the current study reflect an environment in which coaches reinforce mastery-oriented feedback, encourage personal responsibility, and value continuous improvement—all elements known to enhance intrinsic motivation and performance consistency.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study demonstrates that wrestlers in a structured academic and athletic setting perceive a predominantly mastery-oriented motivational climate, which is consistent across genders. Such a climate supports not only athletic performance but also psychological resilience and long-term engagement. The findings reinforce the central role of coaches in fostering environments that balance discipline with autonomy and competition with personal growth—principles essential for sustained success in wrestling and elite sport in general.

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