# **Mindfulness as a Mediator of Mental Toughness in Female Combat Sports Athletes**

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**Introduction**

Sports are most often seen as a masculine domain (Burdzicka-Wolowik & Goral-Radziszewska, 2014). Combat sports in particular are male-dominated and while women have trained, taught, and competed in combat sports for years, it is a new endeavor compared to their long history for males. As many women enter the world of combat sports, mental toughness is increasingly important because of the physical and mental demands. Mindfulness training is one intervention that has been used to develop qualities of mental toughness (Wang et al., 2021). In this literature review I have compiled sources from the University of Western States online library that I use to define combat sports, mental toughness, and mindfulness as they pertain to sport and performance psychology. I will then explain the literature in terms of the traits of females who seek out combat sports, the demands of combat sports, the specific challenges faced by female athletes in combat sports, why and how mental toughness is essential for combat sports, and how mindfulness positively impacts the development of mental toughness. This topic is important to the community of combat sports athletes as a whole and especially to the women who train in the male-dominated world of combat sports. Coaches, gym owners, and athletes alike would benefit from understanding how mindfulness can help these females build mental toughness because it would explain what is needed from all involved to make sure women find and take up their deserved space.

**Body**

Combat sports can be defined as direct confrontational conflict through one-on-one combat that exposes athletes to high emotional loads and the possibility of injury via high-impact techniques (Andrade et al., 2021). Most combat sports evolved from martial arts and have been accommodated from a traditional fighting style to competition under a unified ruleset. One such evolution is that of mixed martial arts (MMA) contests, which combines many techniques sourced from various martial arts. This often covers three dimensions: striking, takedowns, and ground fighting. The first recorded female MMA bout was held in 1997 and the first female main event on a major promotion was in 2009. The Olympic level of combat sports consists of wrestling, taekwondo, judo, boxing, fencing, and karate. The first time women were able to compete in Olympic combat sports at the level equivalent to males was in 1992 when judo added a women’s division. It was added 28 years after men’s judo made its initial introduction to the Games. Following judo, women’s fencing and taekwondo were added in 2000, women’s wrestling was added in 2004, and finally women’s boxing was added in 2012. Karate was only added to the Olympics as recently as 2020 with both male and female divisions. The acceptance of women in combat sports is therefore a new phenomenon.

Mental toughness has many definitions with multiple applications. For this paper I will use the definition by Gordon and Gucciardi (2011) as it pertains to sport. They define mentally tough athletes as believing in their abilities, effectively managing their attentional focus, persevering through tough times, desiring success, expecting positive outcomes, effectively managing their emotions, and understanding their sport context. Mindfulness is a mental skill that improves attention and the acceptance level of physical experience by reducing negative emotional reactions and improving the acceptance of painful stimuli through breathing, body scanning, and the attention regulation (Wang et al., 2021). The effect of mindfulness on the mental toughness required for combat sports will be examined as it pertains to women.

In order to explain the suitability of mental toughness for females in combat sports, it’s important to note their baseline qualities. Females who choose to train in a combat sport have been found to possess certain personality traits and characteristics that qualify as mentally tough. In a study by Burdzicka-Wolowik & Goral-Radziszewska (2014) that compared females in combat sports to non-athlete females, they found that women who train in combat sports consider themselves more masculine or androgynic than feminine. They are persistent, extroverted, sociable, open-minded, and emotionally resistant. They live according to their own beliefs, values, and ideas and break conventions of traditional femininity. They don’t conform to society’s pressures, succumb to their emotions, or give up easily. While the process of training combat sports can and will certainly build these characteristics, the majority of women who choose to enter the realm of combat sports will likely possess these baseline traits.

A battle for women to train combat sports is the challenge of traditional gender roles. According to Judith Butler’s heterosexual matrix, gender is performed and constructed through attitudes and behaviors. In other words, we “do” gender (Channon & Phipps, 2017; McGannon et al., 2017). Combat sports, then, can be attributed to masculinity due to masculine qualities like strength and aggression. Another label for combat sport is fighting sport. What comes to mind with the word fighting are images of violence, struggle, loss, conflict, etc. Butler’s social constructionism viewpoint designates maleness as the opposite of femininity, so a woman who performs male behaviors and attitudes is then questioned about her gender identity. It is assumed that to be a woman and to be a fighter are two roles that are not compatible (Channon & Phipps, 2017). So how can women find their place in the male-dominated world of combat sports? They take on masculine qualities by challenging the idea of femininity and creating a new femininity (McGannon et al., 2017).

This new femininity takes on qualities of power and skill that act as social capital to gain legitimacy in relation to men’s sport (McGannon et al., 2017). Paving a way for females in combat sports is important for the advancement of the sport itself, women empowerment, and opportunities for women to explore a “non-feminine” world. Many women choose to maintain traditional feminine qualities through performative acts as a way to legitimize themselves in this masculine domain. This can be seen through the use of skirts, the color pink, and braided hairstyles (Channon & Phipps, 2017). This act makes femininity possible while still embracing the masculine qualities that are required for successfully training and performing in combat sports.

Mental toughness is important for combat sports because of the psychological demands. Fighters must have the ability to overcome adversity by blocking negative thoughts through positive thinking. Maintaining a sense of pleasure during such a physically and mentally demanding activity is necessary for longevity and enjoyment (Andrade et al., 2020). Combat sports require more pain tolerance due to their full-contact nature. Pain tolerance is one of the most important qualities for success in endurance and contact sports (Leznicka et al., 2017). Mental toughness is correlated with positive behavioral coping strategies that build tolerance to pain and negative emotions (Wang et al., 2021).

A study by Wang et al. (2021) found that mindfulness training effectively increased the mental toughness of female college athletes in endurance sport. Since women are more likely to be affected by their emotions when under stress, mindfulness increased tolerance to pain and other negative body feelings, lessened the likelihood of experience avoidance, improved resilience, and reduced the feeling of fatigue. Even though endurance sport is not directly related to combat sport, the elements of enduring pain, negative emotion, and fatigue are essential to both. Mindfulness training consists of performance enhancement techniques that help athletes view emotions and thoughts as internal elements instead of factual representations of reality that need to be changed or controlled. When mindfulness techniques were applied to South African female provincial hockey players, their mental toughness improved (Walker, 2016). This includes self-regulation of emotions and attention, confidence in ability to overcome challenges, and more effective responses to their sport’s demands.

**Conclusion**

The need for mental toughness in combat sports is evident by the physical and mental demands required of this unique type of sport. Combat sports athletes, whether they be specialized in one sport or combined in the multi-sport of MMA, require a level of toughness against pain, negative emotions, and fatigue. For females, combat sports attract certain characteristics that are seen as traditionally masculine. In fact, many who train in combat sports like boxing and MMA see themselves as more masculine than females who are not athletes. This means that the space for women has not been fully carved out. Women need to adapt to the demands in a different way than men so a study on mindfulness as a means to build the mental toughness would accelerate growth in the sport and make sure that women are respected inside and outside of the mats, cage, and ring.

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