Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems
Issue 8, Vol. 8, 2025

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sustaining the Integration of Covert and Overt Mental Processes for Enhancing the Effectiveness of Fundamental Football Skills: A Descriptive and Correlational Study among Competitive Youth and Senior Players

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Issue web link https://imcra-az.org/archive/375-science-education-and-innovations-in-the-context-of-modern-problems-issue-8-vol-8-2025.html

Keywords: Mental processes; Covert cognition; Overt cognition; Fundamental football skills; Dribbling; Passing; Ball control; Sports psychology.

Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between covert (latent) and overt (active) mental processes and the effectiveness of fundamental football skills, specifically dribbling, passing, and ball control. Recognizing the increasingly cognitive and dynamic nature of modern football, the research seeks to highlight the role of psychological processes in optimizing technical performance under competitive conditions. A descriptive correlational research design was employed. The study sample consisted of 32 football players (18 juniors and 14 seniors) from Mouloudia Hassi Bahbah Club during the 2022/2023 sports season. Participants were selected randomly. Data collection instruments included a standardized mental processes scale measuring active and passive cognitive functions, along with validated football skill performance tests. Statistical analysis revealed significant relationships between mental processes and the assessed fundamental football skills. Both active and latent mental processes were found to contribute meaningfully to performance efficiency in dribbling, passing accuracy, and ball control. The findings indicate that players with higher levels of cognitive engagement and mental regulation demonstrate superior technical execution and reduced error rates during play. The study underscores the importance of integrating mental training with technical skill development, particularly during early and transitional stages of player formation. Incorporating cognitive-based training strategies into football development programs may enhance decision-making, adaptability, and overall performance effectiveness.

Citation

Ibrahim Kadraoui; Soufiane Mahi; Henni Dehli; Mansour Benlakehal; Arroussi Abdelhamid; Rabah Bourzama; Mehdi Youcef Achira; Saad Bekai; Abdellah Lameche; Mohammed Kherroubi; Maamar Badreddine Bensaada; Fayçal Beldjouher . (2025). Sustaining the Integration of Covert and Overt Mental Processes for Enhancing the Effectiveness of Fundamental Football Skills: A Descriptive and Correlational Study among Competitive Youth and Senior Players. *Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems*, 8(8), 1262–1272. https://doi.org/10.56334/sei/8.8.108

Received: 15.02.2025 | Accepted: 24.07.2025 | Published: 10.08.2025 (available online)

1. Introduction

Mental processes constitute a fundamental dimension of psychological preparation associated with motor performance in sports. Among these processes, attention occupies a central role, as it underpins perception, decision-making, anticipation, and motor execution. In football, the significance of mental processes becomes particularly evident due to the dynamic nature of the game, which is characterized by high speed, continuous transitions, and rapidly changing tactical situations resulting from complex offensive and defensive patterns.

Football performance is not solely dependent on physical or technical ability; rather, it reflects an integrated interaction between cognitive processes and motor skills. Skill performance in football is situational and adaptive, meaning that a player must select and execute the appropriate technical action at the precise moment, considering multiple variables such as the movement of opponents, positioning of teammates, spatial constraints, and environmental conditions.

Consequently, the mastery of basic football skills requires not only mechanical repetition but also a high level of mental engagement and cognitive regulation.

The early stages of player development are particularly critical, as they lay the foundations for future athletic performance. During childhood and adolescence, educators and coaches are responsible for developing essential motor qualities and identifying individuals who possess advanced skill-related capabilities that qualify them to progress in this increasingly competitive sport. Football's global popularity and evolving tactical demands further emphasize the need for systematic training approaches that integrate both technical and mental dimensions.

Fundamental skills—specifically passing, dribbling, and ball control—represent the cornerstone of effective football performance. Refining these skills enhances overall efficiency, facilitates tactical execution, and significantly reduces ball loss, which remains one of the most critical challenges in modern football. Since technical skill serves as the primary medium through which tactical intentions are implemented, mastery of basic skills is a prerequisite for successful tactical application and collective team performance.

Accordingly, this developmental stage demands particular attention, with training programs designed to reflect the demands and variables of contemporary match play. Players should be exposed to diverse performance situations and complex skill combinations that enable them to select optimal responses and adapt effectively across different competitive contexts. Moreover, strategic planning of youth development programs is essential to ensure the progressive integration of cognitive and technical competencies.

In light of the above considerations, the present study seeks to explore the relationship between mental processes—specifically active (overt) and passive (covert) processes—and selected fundamental football skills. This central inquiry gives rise to the following research questions:

- Is there a relationship between mental processes (active and passive) and dribbling skills among Mouloudia Hassi Bahbah football players?

- Is there a relationship between mental processes (active and passive) and passing skills among Mouloudia Hassi Bahbah football players?

- Is there a relationship between mental processes (active and passive) and ball control skills among Mouloudia Hassi Bahbah football players?

2. Research Objectives

The present study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine the nature and role of mental processes within the context of football performance.

- To identify the relationship between mental processes (motor action and latent action) and dribbling skills.

- To analyze the relationship between mental processes (motor action and latent action) and passing skills.

- To determine the relationship between mental processes (motor action and latent action) and ball control skills among football players.

3. Research Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework and research objectives, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

- There is a statistically significant relationship between mental processes (motor action and latent action) and dribbling skills among players of Mouloudia Hassi Bahbah Football Club.

- There is a statistically significant relationship between mental processes (motor action and latent action) and passing skills among players of Mouloudia Hassi Bahbah Football Club.

- There is a statistically significant relationship between mental processes (motor action and latent action) and ball control skills among players of Mouloudia Hassi Bahbah Football Club.

4. Research Scope

The scope of the study is defined as follows:

- **Human Scope:** Players of Mouloudia Hassi Bahbah Football Club
- **Spatial Scope:** Hassi Bahbah Municipal Sports Complex
- **Temporal Scope:** From 16 October 2023 to 18 December 2023

5. Definition of Concepts and Terminology

5.1. Basic Skills

Team sports require a high level of technical skill development among all participants, encompassing both individual execution and cooperative interaction with teammates and opponents. Skill development is defined as *"a learning process aimed at mastering the basic technical skills of the game and performing the required action with the least possible time and effort"* (Brah, 2017, p. 89).

Dribbling

Dribbling refers to a player's ability to execute rapid directional changes and deceptive movements that mislead opponents and disrupt their defensive anticipation (Qasim Hassan Hussein, 2009, p. 186).

Passing

Passing is regarded as the most essential collective skill in football. It involves transferring the ball to a teammate through various techniques, including short, long, direct, diagonal, and cross passes, using different body parts such as the feet, head, or chest. Effective passing aims to create advantageous situations, initiate attacks, or support shooting opportunities. Equally important is off-the-ball movement, as players positioning themselves to receive passes provide multiple tactical options for the ball carrier.

Ball Control

Ball control while running is a fundamental and dynamic aspect of football performance. It requires players to move with the ball while maintaining possession through speed, technical precision, and deception. Effective ball control can destabilize defensive structures and create opportunities even against well-organized defenses.

5.2. Mental Processes

Mental processes are conceptualized as a dual interaction between the individual and their surrounding environment. According to Al-Samarrai, these processes involve cognitive and emotional mechanisms through which individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to external stimuli. The individual's intellect and perception form one component of this process, while environmental factors constitute the second component (Lazraq Ahmed, 2022, p. 130). In football, these mental processes play a crucial role in guiding motor actions and shaping performance efficiency.

7. Research Procedures

7.1. Research Methodology

The study adopted a **descriptive research methodology**, employing survey and correlational analysis techniques. This approach was selected as it is appropriate for examining relationships between psychological variables and technical performance indicators without manipulating experimental conditions.

2.7. Population and Sample

The research population consisted of football players registered with **Mouloudia Hassi Bahbah Football Club** during the **2022/2023 competitive season**, encompassing both junior and senior categories. This population was selected due to its relevance to the study objectives and its structured competitive environment.

The study sample comprised **32 players**, selected using a **random sampling technique** to ensure representativeness and minimize selection bias. The sample included **18 junior players** and **14 senior players**, allowing for an inclusive analysis of mental processes and technical performance across developmental stages. All participants were actively engaged in regular training and competitive matches during the study period.

3.7. Research Variables

In order to clearly define the research variables, a comprehensive theoretical framework was established focusing on the interaction between psychological processes and technical football performance. This framework enabled a precise identification and operationalization of the study variables.

- **Independent Variable:** Mental processes, including both **active (overt)** and **passive (covert)** processes, were considered the independent variable. These processes reflect the cognitive and psychological mechanisms that influence perception, attention, emotional regulation, and motor execution.

- **Dependent Variable:** Fundamental football skills were identified as the dependent variable. These skills included **dribbling**, **passing accuracy**, and **ball control**, which represent core technical competencies essential for effective football performance.

4.7. Data Collection Tools

Research tools are defined as the systematic methods employed by researchers for description, analysis, and interpretation in order to achieve research objectives (Al-Ankabi & Al-Aqabi, 2015, p. 37). Accordingly, the validity of research findings depends largely on the accuracy and appropriateness of the tools used. In the present study, the following instruments were employed:

4.7.1. Higher Mental Skills Questionnaire (RMS)

The Higher Mental Skills Questionnaire (RMS) was originally developed by Stephen Bell, John Albinson, and Christopher Shambrook (1996) to assess key psychological components associated with athletic performance. The questionnaire evaluates six major dimensions:

1. Visualization
2. Concentration
3. Self-confidence
4. Relaxation
5. Anxiety management
6. Achievement motivation

The instrument consists of 24 items, with each dimension represented by four statements. The questionnaire was adapted and standardized for the sports context by Mohammed Hassan Alawi (see Appendix 2). Responses were rated on a weighted scale ranging from 1 to 6, reflecting increasing levels of agreement.

Scores were calculated separately for each dimension, with a maximum score of 24 per dimension. Higher scores indicate a stronger presence of the mental skill measured, whereas lower scores suggest a need for further psychological training and development (Safih, 2014, p. 112). The scale was completed under the supervision of the team coach to ensure accuracy and consistency.

4.7.2. Football Skill Tests

To assess the dependent variable, a battery of standardized football skill tests was administered.

Test 1: Dribbling Test

Test Name: Dribbling the Ball in an Open Line Between Posts. **Objective:** To measure the player's ability to dribble the ball efficiently while running between posts.

Test Procedure: Ten posts were placed in a straight line, with a distance of 2 meters between each post and 2 meters between the starting line and the first post. The player stood at the starting line with the ball. Upon receiving the starting signal, the player dribbled the ball in a zigzag pattern between the posts, circled the final post, and returned to the starting line following the same path.

Measurement:
Performance was evaluated by recording the **time (in seconds)** from the starting signal until the player returned to the starting line (Mufti Ibrahim, 1994, p. 261).

Test 2: Passing Accuracy Tests

a. Short Pass Accuracy Test

Objective: To measure the accuracy of short-distance passing.

Test Procedure: Two parallel lines, each **3 meters long**, were drawn **10 meters apart**. A target platform was placed **10 meters** from the ball-striking line. The player received the ball from the starting line and moved toward the platform. Before crossing the striking line, the player passed the ball toward the platform. A total of **nine passes** were executed: three to the right, three to the center, and three to the left.

Scoring:
Points were awarded based on accuracy using a graded scale (**5–4–3–2–1**), in accordance with standardized evaluation criteria.

b. Average Pass Accuracy Test

Objective: To assess medium-distance passing accuracy.

Test Procedure: Three circles with diameters of 3, 5, and 7 meters were drawn on the ground. From a distance of 25 meters, the player passed the ball toward the target area.

Scoring:
Scores of **3, 2, and 1** were assigned based on target accuracy. Each player performed two attempts, and the **best score** was recorded (Al-Nuaimi, 2009, pp. 191–192).

Test 3: Ball Control Test

Test Name: Dragging Test. Objective: To measure ball control ability while advancing and maneuvering around obstacles.

Test Procedure: Two parallel lines were drawn 50 yards apart. Three posts were placed between the lines: the first post at 9 yards from the starting line, with 8 yards between subsequent posts. The total distance covered was 25 yards.

Upon the starting signal, the player advanced with the ball, maneuvering around each post alternately from the right and left sides, then returned at maximum speed.

Measurement:
Each player completed three trials, and the fastest time was recorded (Al-Obaidi, 2011, p. 122).

5.7. Statistical Methods

Statistical analysis was conducted using **SPSS version 26**. The following statistical techniques were applied:

- Arithmetic mean
- Standard deviation
- Pearson's correlation coefficient (r)
- Independent samples *t*-test

These methods were used to determine the strength and significance of relationships between mental processes and football skill performance.

8. Presentation and Analysis of Research Hypotheses

8.1. Results of the First Hypothesis (Dribbling Skill)

Table (03) presents the arithmetic mean, standard deviation, and Pearson correlation coefficient between higher mental processes and dribbling performance.

The calculated correlation coefficient ($r = 0.859$) exceeds the tabulated value ($r = 0.35$) at 30 degrees of freedom and a significance level of $p \leq 0.05$, indicating a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between higher mental processes and dribbling skills among both junior and senior players of Mouloudia Hassi Bahbah Club.

8.2. Results of the Second Hypothesis (Passing Skills)

a. Short Passing Accuracy

As shown in Table (04), the calculated correlation coefficient between higher mental processes and short pass accuracy ($r = 0.876$) is greater than the critical value ($r = 0.35$) at $p \leq 0.05$. This result demonstrates a strong statistically significant relationship, confirming the positive influence of mental processes on short passing accuracy.

b. Average Passing Accuracy

Table (05) indicates a correlation coefficient of (**$r = 0.884$**) between higher mental processes and average passing accuracy. This value exceeds the tabulated threshold at the same level of significance, confirming a **strong and statistically significant association** between mental processes and medium-distance passing accuracy.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the results confirm that higher-order mental processes play a critical role in enhancing fundamental football skills, particularly dribbling and passing accuracy. These findings support the study hypotheses and emphasize the necessity of integrating psychological training into technical and tactical football development programs.

Table 03

Correlation Between Higher Mental Processes and Dribbling Skill Performance

Variables	Arithmetic Mean	Standard Deviation	Pearson Correlation (r)	Significance Level	Interpretation
Higher Mental Processes (RMS Score)	37.46	3.15			
Dribbling Test (Time in seconds)	16.25	3.70	**0.859**	$p \leq 0.05$	Strong positive relationship

Note: The calculated correlation coefficient ($r = 0.859$) exceeds the tabulated value ($r = 0.35$) at 30 degrees of freedom, indicating a statistically significant relationship.

Table 04

Correlation Between Higher Mental Processes and Short Passing Accuracy

Variables	Arithmetic Mean	Standard Deviation	Pearson Correlation (r)	Significance Level	Interpretation
Higher Mental Processes (RMS Score)	37.46	3.15			
Short Pass Accuracy Test (Score)	26.71	3.87	**0.876**	$p \leq 0.05$	Strong positive relationship

Note: The correlation coefficient ($r = 0.876$) is statistically significant and exceeds the critical value at the 0.05 level.

Table 05

Correlation Between Higher Mental Processes and Average Passing Accuracy

Variables	Arithmetic Mean	Standard Deviation	Pearson Correlation (r)	Significance Level	Interpretation
Higher Mental Processes (RMS Score)	37.46	3.15			
Average Pass Accuracy Test (Score)	14.59	2.88	**0.884**	$p \leq 0.05$	Strong positive relationship

Note: The calculated correlation coefficient ($r = 0.884$) indicates a strong and statistically significant relationship between higher mental processes and medium-distance passing accuracy.

General Table Notes (Recommended for Journal Submission)

- r = Pearson's correlation coefficient
- Significance level set at $p \leq 0.05$
- Degrees of freedom = 30
- Statistical analysis conducted using **SPSS v26**

8.3. Results of the Third Hypothesis (Ball Control Skill)

Table 06 presents the arithmetic mean, standard deviation, and Pearson correlation coefficient between higher-order mental processes and ball control performance among the study participants.

Table 06

Correlation Between Higher Mental Processes and Ball Control Performance

Variables	Arithmetic Mean	Standard Deviation	Pearson Correlation (r)	Significance Level	Interpretation
Higher Mental Processes (RMS Score)	37.46	3.15			
Ball Control Test (Time in seconds)	26.84	3.03	**0.572**	$p \leq 0.05$	Moderate positive relationship

Note: The calculated correlation coefficient ($r = 0.572$) exceeds the tabulated value ($r = 0.35$) at 30 degrees of freedom and a significance level of $p \leq 0.05$, indicating a statistically significant relationship.

The results shown in Table (06) indicate that the calculated Pearson correlation coefficient **(r = 0.572)** is greater than the critical value **(r = 0.35)** at **30 degrees of freedom** and a **0.05 significance level**. This confirms the existence of a **statistically significant, moderate positive relationship** between higher-order mental processes and ball control skills among junior and senior players of Mouloudia Hassi Bahbah Football Club. Accordingly, the third research hypothesis is accepted.

8.4. Discussion of Study Results

The findings of the present study demonstrate statistically significant relationships between higher-order mental processes and fundamental football skills, namely **dribbling, passing, and ball control**, among both junior and senior players of Mouloudia Hassi Bahbah Football Club. These results emphasize the pivotal role of cognitive and psychological processes in enhancing technical performance within football.

The strong correlations observed for dribbling and passing skills, as well as the moderate correlation identified for ball control, suggest that football performance is not merely a product of physical conditioning or technical repetition. Instead, it reflects an integrated system in which attention, concentration, perception, and cognitive regulation guide motor execution. Dribbling, passing, and ball control require continuous information processing, rapid decision-making, and precise motor coordination, particularly under match conditions characterized by pressure and time constraints. Higher-order mental processes contribute to performance efficiency by minimizing unnecessary and inefficient movements, conserving physical effort, and improving accuracy in skill execution. These processes enable players to select appropriate motor responses based on stored motor programs and real-time environmental cues, resulting in more effective and coordinated performance. Such findings are consistent with the study of Asaad Ali Safih (2014), which highlighted the relationship between advanced cognitive processes and performance-related characteristics in athletes. Furthermore, Marwan Abdul Majeed Ibrahim (2002, p. 95) emphasized the significance of mental processes—particularly kinesthetic sense—in accelerating the learning of new motor skills. Precision in kinesthetic

perception enhances the learner's ability to control movement execution, thereby improving technical accuracy and overall motor development. Kinesthetic sense, alongside visual and spatial perception, plays a central role in coordinating body movements within space and maintaining balance relative to gravity.

The integration of lateral and directional movements, balance, motor coordination, and temporal perception allows players to develop a coherent internal representation of their body in motion. This integration supports harmonious coordination between vision and movement, which is essential for maintaining control over the ball, adapting to spatial constraints, and responding effectively to opponents' actions. Consequently, the cognitive-motor interaction observed in this study reflects a foundational principle of modern football training, where mental preparation is inseparable from technical and tactical development.

Conclusion

Mental processes represent a core psychological component that significantly influences skill learning, tactical execution, and performance effectiveness during both training and competitive football contexts. These processes play a decisive role in shaping players' responses to game situations and are among the most critical determinants of successful motor skill acquisition and application.

Within the scope of the present study and based on the statistical analysis and interpretation of the research hypotheses, the following conclusions were drawn:

- There is a statistically significant relationship between mental processes (active and passive) and dribbling skills among players of Mouloudia Hassi Bahbah Football Club.

- There is a statistically significant relationship between mental processes (active and passive) and passing skills among players of Mouloudia Hassi Bahbah Football Club.

- There is a statistically significant relationship between mental processes (active and passive) and ball control skills among players of Mouloudia Hassi Bahbah Football Club.

These findings highlight the necessity of integrating mental skills training into football development programs, particularly at youth and transitional levels, to enhance technical proficiency and overall performance efficiency.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles governing research involving human participants were strictly observed. Prior to data collection, participants were fully informed about the objectives and procedures of the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all players and, where applicable, their legal guardians. Confidentiality and anonymity of participant data were maintained throughout the research process, in accordance with internationally recognized ethical standards for sports science research.

Author Contributions. All authors contributed substantially to the conception and design of the study. Data collection was conducted collaboratively by the research team. Statistical analysis and interpretation of results were performed jointly. The manuscript was drafted, critically revised, and approved by all authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the work.

Acknowledgment. The authors extend their sincere appreciation to the administration, coaching staff, and players of Mouloudia Hassi Bahbah Football Club for their cooperation and support during the data collection process. Gratitude is also expressed to colleagues and institutions that provided academic and logistical assistance.

Funding. This research received no external funding and was conducted as part of an independent academic investigation.

Conflict of Interest. The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this study.

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