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The role of intonation in designing machinery for mental sports psychology

Hui Ying Jong [1] * and Garry Kuan [2]

[1] Malay Linguistics Section, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia.
[2] Exercise and Sport Science Programme, School of Health Sciences, Health Campus, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Kubang Kerian, Malaysia.
* Correspondence: jonghuiying@email.com; Tel.: +6016-4996464

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Abstract: Intonation – the variation in pitch, rhythm, and stress in speech – plays a crucial role in cognitive and emotional regulation, particularly in the field of sports psychology. This mini-review examines the role of intonation in designing machinery for mental sports psychology, focusing on three core areas: neurocognitive mechanisms, technological integration, and psychophysiological responses. We explore how the brain processes intonation, how it influences motivation and attention in athletes, and how emerging technologies are incorporating vocal cues for performance optimisation. Neurocognitive research reveals that intonation engages bilateral cortical and subcortical pathways, influencing attention, memory encoding, and motivation regulation. The amygdala and auditory cortex process emotional prosody, while Self Determination Theory (SDT) and Neurovisceral Integration models highlight the motivational and stress-modulating effects of tone of voice. Technological advancements leverage AI-driven coaching, neurofeedback systems, and VR-based training to integrate adaptive vocal cues that regulate athletes' arousal levels. Biofeedback tools and voice analysis systems now track stress and cognitive load via vocal markers, enabling personalised mental training. On a psychophysiological level, intonation directly affects heart rate, respiratory function, and hormonal responses, influencing athletes' readiness, stress resilience, and performance outcomes. Studies show that energising intonations enhance physical output, while calming tones reduce anxiety and improve decision-making under pressure. Structured vocal guidance in imagery training, relaxation techniques, and pre-performance routines optimises arousal modulation for peak performance. Despite growing interest, the literature lacks an integrative framework that explicitly connects intonation-driven vocal modulation with neurocognitive and psychophysiological mechanisms in sport-specific contexts. We propose a conceptual model linking intonation to cognitive and physiological optimisation, emphasising coach-athlete communication, voice-based feedback, and real-time stress tracking. Future research should explore individualised voice training, multimodal integration with movement, and neuroadaptive intonation technologies to refine mental performance strategies in sports.

Keywords: Intonation; Sport psychology; Neurocognition; Psychophysiology; Biofeedback; AI coaching; Voice modulation.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Intonation – the melodic pattern of speech, including variations in pitch, tone, and rhythm – plays a pivotal role in human communication and emotion. In sports psychology, where mental state can critically impact performance, intonation emerges as a subtle yet powerful tool. Coaches' pep talks, the calming voice of a trainer, or even an athlete's self-talk all involve intonational cues that can influence motivation and arousal. In this review, "mental sports psychology mechanisms" refers to both the internal neurocognitive processes that govern attention, motivation, and emotional regulation, as well as the external technological tools – such as neurofeedback, vocal modulation systems, and immersive interfaces – that are designed to influence these mental states. The phrase *"machinery for mental sports psychology"* can be understood on two levels: the internal neural machinery by which the brain processes intonation, and the external technological machinery (devices and training tools) that leverage intonation to enhance mental training for athletes. This mini-review examines three core areas at this intersection – neurocognitive mechanisms (how intonation is processed in the brain and influences cognition), technological integration (how modern tools incorporate intonational cues for training and feedback), and psychophysiological responses (how intonation triggers bodily and psychological reactions in athletes). We synthesise cutting-edge research from neuroscience and sports psychology, drawing on high-impact sources (e.g. *Nature Neuroscience*, *Journal of Sport Psychology*, *NeuroImage*) to build a conceptual understanding. Figures and tables are included to illustrate key models and comparisons. Ultimately, this review critically analyses how intonation can be harnessed in designing technology and protocols to optimise the mental game in sports, bridging theoretical frameworks with practical applications.

2.0 NEUROCOGNITIVE MECHANISMS OF INTONATION IN SPORTS CONTEXTS

Intonation is processed by a broad network of brain regions that handle both the linguistic and emotional content of speech. Neuroimaging evidence shows that prosodic intonation – the rises and falls in pitch and stress of speech – engages bilateral regions in the brain's frontal, temporal, and parietal lobes (LaCroix et al., 2020a). For example, functional MRI meta-analyses have consistently identified activation in the bilateral inferior frontal gyri, superior temporal gyri, and inferior parietal areas when people process sentence intonation (LaCroix et al., 2020b).

Notably, emotional aspects of intonation – such as prosody conveying anger, joy, or other emotions – often recruit right-hemisphere regions, a pattern long observed in neuroscience. This includes areas of the right superior temporal cortex and limbic structures that respond to emotional tone (Gandour et al., 2003; Bach et al., 2013). Such widespread engagement suggests that intonation is a multi-dimensional stimulus. It carries both linguistic information (e.g., emphasis, phrasing) and paralinguistic/emotional content simultaneously, activating language and emotion networks across the brain.

One useful framework for understanding this concept is the dual pathways model for processing emotional prosody (Liebenthal et al., 2016). As depicted in **Figure 1**, there are fast subcortical routes that quickly detect salient emotional sounds – such as a sudden change in tone that might indicate urgency – and slower cortical routes that evaluate meaning and emotional nuance. The amygdala, a limbic region, plays a central role in this process. It acts as a rapid salience detector that alerts the autonomic nervous system to emotionally important cues (Liebenthal et al., 2016).

For example, hearing an urgent or angry tone of voice can trigger an amygdala-driven arousal response before the actual words are even processed. This aligns with the valence-general hypothesis of emotion perception, which proposes that arousal level – how emotionally intense the sound is – may be more critical than whether the tone is positive or negative. For athletes, this means that a coach's vocal tone may instantly influence alertness or stress levels via subcortical mechanisms, even before conscious comprehension occurs.

Crucially, the brain's machinery for intonation is integrative. Research shows overlap between neural circuits used to perceive intonation and those involved in producing it (Gandour, 2000; Hickok & Poeppel, 2004). For instance, Aziz-Zadeh et al. (2010) found that

the left inferior frontal gyrus and mid-cingulate gyrus are active during both the comprehension and expression of emotional prosody. This suggests a sensorimotor mirroring mechanism. In sports, this could enhance empathy and coordination. An athlete might "resonate" with a coach's encouraging tone, mirroring the prosodic pattern internally and aligning their mental state with the coach's intent.

From a cognitive standpoint, intonation plays a key role in guiding attention and supporting working memory. Even in non-emotional contexts, pitch inflexions and prosodic emphasis serve as cues that highlight important information (LaCroix et al., 2020a). Cognitive neuroscience studies have shown that when a speaker modulates their intonation to stress key words or break down information, listeners can better understand complex instructions. This is because prosodic cues direct attention to the most relevant parts. In sports scenarios, for example, a coach giving tactical feedback might emphasise critical cues through intonation – such as saying, "SHIFT your DEFENSE right" with a louder, higher pitch on the emphasised words. This prosodic highlighting reduces the athlete's cognitive load and enhances their comprehension and memory of the instruction, especially under pressure.

Another relevant framework is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which has been applied to the study of vocal communication. According to SDT, communication that supports autonomy – by conveying empathy, choice, and rationale – is more motivating than a controlling style. Research by Weinstein et al. (2018) demonstrated that prosody alone can convey this motivational climate. In their experiments, instructions delivered in an autonomy-supportive tone – characterised by a calmer, warmer, and slower tone – led listeners to feel more in control and less pressured, even when the verbal content was neutral. In contrast, a controlling tone – louder, harsher, and more demanding – conveyed a sense of pressure and reduced well-being. Participants could detect these differences from prosody alone. Moreover, the supportive tone increased feelings of well-being and even prosocial attitudes toward the speaker.

In sports, this means that the tone of voice used by coaches or sport psychologists can fundamentally influence an athlete's motivation and mindset. A warm, supportive tone can foster positive emotions and trust, thereby activating neural circuits associated with reward and social bonding. A harsh or critical tone, however, may activate high-arousal stress circuits, which can hinder learning and performance. Finally, subcortical structures like the basal ganglia also play a role in intonation, particularly in timing and rhythm. Although traditionally associated with motor control, the basal ganglia also assist in structuring the temporal aspects of speech prosody (Blonder et al., 1995; Cancelliere & Kertesz, 1990; Carbary et al., 2000; Kotz & Schwartze, 2010; Paulmann & Pell, 2010; Pichon & Kell, 2013). Damage to these regions can result in flattened or monotone speech – a condition known as aprosodia – or disrupted rhythmic cues.

For athletes, whose performance often depends on precise timing (e.g., in gait, swing, or reaction speed), auditory intonation may synchronise with internal timing systems. Some theorists suggest that rhythmic cadences – such as a coach's chant-like speech – could entrain the athlete's internal timing, enhancing concentration and coordination. Research in Nature Neuroscience has identified shared neural mechanisms for processing rhythm in both speech and movement (Fiveash et al., 2021). This cross-modal coupling implies that auditory-motor networks can be synchronised through rhythmic intonation. A steady vocal rhythm may help stabilise an athlete's neural oscillations for improved focus and timing.

In summary, the neurocognitive foundations of intonation show it to be a powerful and multi-dimensional stimulus. It engages attention systems, emotional networks like the amygdala, and sensorimotor circuits. These combined mechanisms help explain how tone of voice can influence perception, motivation, and memory – all of which are essential for high-level athletic performance. With this understanding, we can now examine how technology leverages these brain mechanisms by incorporating intonation into training tools for mental sports psychology. In simple terms, this means athletes may react to a coach's tone of voice – such as urgency or calm – almost instantly and unconsciously, which can either help sharpen focus or trigger stress during training or competition.

2.1 Technological integration of intonation in mental training

Advancements in technology have opened up new avenues for incorporating vocal intonation into sports psychology interventions. These include wearable biofeedback devices that use sounds to guide mental states, virtual reality (VR) systems simulating crowd noise or coaching instructions with controlled intonation, and AI-driven voice coaches. The goal of

these innovations is to harness the effects of intonation on the brain and body to improve focus, reduce anxiety, and optimise arousal for athletic performance.

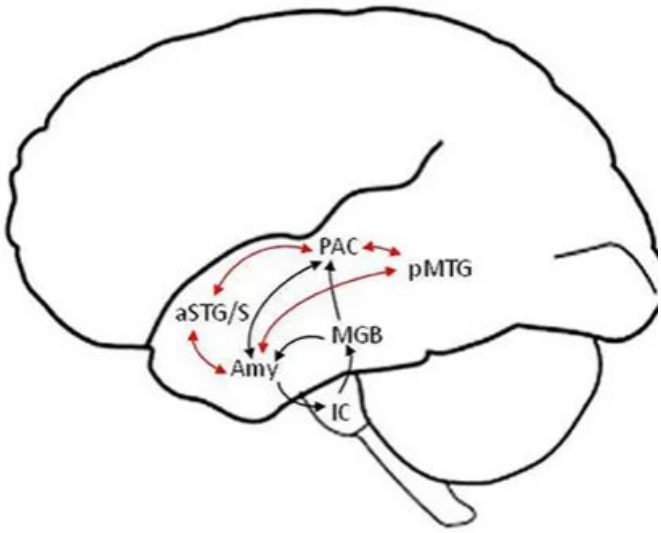

Figure 1. Neural pathways for processing emotional intonation (schematic). The diagram illustrates the involvement of the Primary Auditory Cortex (PAC), Superior Temporal Gyrus (STG), Middle Temporal Gyrus (MTG), and Amygdala (Amy). Adapted from Frühholz et al. (2014). The fast pathway (black) bypasses the higher cortex and quickly activates the amygdala (Amy) in response to salient cues (e.g. a scream or urgent tone), priming an autonomic response. The slow pathway (red) involves the auditory cortex (PAC, STG) and language areas (MTG) analysing prosody and meaning, which then feed into the amygdala for further evaluation. Such neural circuitry highlights how intonation can swiftly influence emotional and arousal systems in the brain.

One prominent development is the use of neurofeedback devices that convert physiological signals into auditory feedback. For instance, the MUSE EEG headband is a consumer-grade brain-sensing device that provides real-time audio feedback based on the user's brainwaves (Raza et al., 2019). Athletes can wear this lightweight EEG sensor during mindfulness or concentration exercises. The device plays sounds, such as gentle weather noise, that vary in intonation-like qualities depending on the athlete's level of focus.

In a study by Raza et al. (2019), adolescent ten-pin bowlers used MUSE-based neurofeedback before competition trials. During 15-minute sessions in a quiet room, athletes were instructed to remain calm and focus on their breathing. When their attention drifted, as detected by the EEG, the audio feedback intensified – rain turned into a storm, with louder and higher-pitched sounds indicating distraction. When focus returned, the sounds softened again. This created a dynamic audio loop where changes in intonation mirrored the athlete's mental state and gently guided them back to a state of focus.

Although the performance gains in this study were not statistically significant, the feedback group showed a trend toward improved scores and reduced anxiety. Several factors may explain the lack of significance, including the small sample size and brief duration of the intervention. Still, the findings aligned with anecdotal reports from athletes who felt more in control of their concentration. Furthermore, other studies support the benefits of auditory biofeedback. When emotionally resonant intonation is used, these tools have been shown to improve attention regulation and reduce stress (Collura, 2014; Escolano et al., 2011). Despite these promising trends, more large-scale, controlled trials are needed to confirm efficacy across different sports.

This example highlights both the promise and limitations of current technology. On the positive side, audio biofeedback loops take advantage of the brain's sensitivity to intonation. The shifting tone offers an intuitive and immediate cue about changes in cognitive state. Auditory and audiovisual signals are frequently used in sports neurofeedback because they are processed rapidly without disrupting visual focus (Egner et al., 2004). However, consumer-grade tools like MUSE are still undergoing validation. As Flanagan & Saikia (2023) noted, many low-cost EEG devices marketed for relaxation or focus have yet to demonstrate consistent effectiveness in rigorous trials. Future systems may overcome these limitations by incorporating more sophisticated intonational patterns or voice-based feedback (i.e., "virtual coaches") once reliability improves.

Beyond neurofeedback, VR and simulation-based training also integrate intonation to create immersive mental rehearsal scenarios. For example, a VR sports psychology platform might simulate competition environments. The system could include crowd noise that rises in volume and pitch to simulate pressure or provide coaching instructions with specific vocal tones to direct focus. A prototype in archery training, for instance, features a calming voice that guides athletes through their shots using slow, even intonation. Background noise gradually intensifies to challenge concentration under pressure. Although empirical

studies specifically on VR intonation in sports are limited, related work in motor learning and stress inoculation shows that realistic audio stressors can improve the transferability of mental training (Raza et al., 2019). Here, intonation is not an afterthought – it is a core design feature that interacts with the athlete's neurocognitive system.

Another promising application is voice analysis software for psychophysiological monitoring. Because speech is a psychophysiological process influenced by stress (Hansen & Patil, 2007; Van Puyvelde et al., 2018), analysing an athlete's voice under pressure can provide insights into their internal state. Voice stress analysis (VSA) algorithms can detect changes in fundamental frequency (F0), jitter, and other vocal features that correlate with stress and cognitive load. For example, an athlete might unconsciously speak in a higher pitch or exhibit vocal instability during stressful moments, such as interviews or in-game communication.

Machine learning models can identify such patterns, though reliability concerns persist – as seen in polygraph-like technologies (Giddens et al., 2013; Hopkins et al., 2005; Horvath, 1982; Kirchhübel et al., 2011). A newer conceptual framework, the Model for Voice and Effort (MoVE), offers an integrative approach. According to MoVE, intonational variability reflects a balance between top-down cognitive control and bottom-up emotional arousal (Van Puyvelde et al., 2018). High control tends to narrow the pitch range, producing a more monotone voice. In contrast, high emotional arousal leads to erratic, wider pitch fluctuations.

Technologically, this opens the door to voice-based stress tracking. For instance, a smart microphone worn by an athlete or coach could capture vocal data. With real-time analysis, the system could provide adaptive coaching based on the athlete's stress state, essentially using voice as a biosignal. While this remains a developing field, it illustrates how intonation can serve not only as feedback to the athlete but also as a diagnostic input for training systems.

In addition to feedback and analysis, mobile applications and digital coaching platforms increasingly incorporate voice-based interaction. Guided meditation and visualisation apps for athletes often use intentionally designed vocal delivery – soothing tones to induce calm, energising tones to motivate. Some apps are beginning to adapt these vocal parameters in real time. For example, a mobile app might use heart rate sensors to detect physiological arousal and then automatically shift the narrator's voice to a slower, softer tone if stress is detected. While empirical evaluations of such adaptive intonation features are still limited, they point to a future of integrated biosignal-responsive vocal guidance.

A particularly exciting frontier involves AI-generated voice synthesis. Advances in this area allow for the creation of personalised intonational feedback. One can imagine a training program in which a virtual coach's voice mimics that of a well-known figure or personal role model. The AI could adjust the tone dynamically: sharpening the voice's urgency when motivation drops or softening it when anxiety spikes. This would essentially function as an "intonation coach," tailoring vocal guidance to each athlete's psychological needs. High-impact research (e.g., Bherer, 2015; Bigand & Tillmann, 2015; Zatorre et al., 2007) has demonstrated how auditory feedback can shape motor learning and cognitive performance. These insights suggest fertile ground for integrating AI voice modulation into sports technology.

In summary, the integration of intonation in sports psychology technologies ranges from simple feedback tones to advanced AI-generated voices. Whether through real-time feedback, stress detection, or tailored vocal guidance, these systems are designed to exploit the brain's responsiveness to sound. The challenge ahead lies in grounding these innovations in empirical research. Only through rigorous validation can intonation-based technologies fulfil their potential to enhance focus, regulate stress, and improve athletic performance.

To bridge these innovations with practical performance outcomes, it is essential to examine how intonation affects the body's physiological systems. The technologies discussed – whether neurofeedback, VR, or voice analytics – ultimately aim to influence arousal, stress regulation, and readiness through sound. Therefore, understanding the psychophysiological mechanisms underlying intonation can clarify why these tools work and how they should be optimised for different sports contexts.

2.2 Psychophysiological responses to intonation

Intonation does not just "stay in the head"; it has concrete effects on the body's physiological state, which in turn feedback into psychological experience. In sports psychology, where regulating arousal (neither too anxious nor too lethargic) is key, understanding these psychophysiological responses to sound is crucial.

2.2.1 Arousal and autonomic responses

The human body reacts to sound patterns very quickly – a phenomenon rooted in our evolutionary need to respond to auditory warnings or social signals. Even simple changes in acoustic features like pitch or tempo can elicit measurable autonomic responses. Chuen et al. (2016) demonstrated that when listeners heard a repetitive tone sequence and then a sudden change in that sequence's pitch or timing, their heart rate immediately increased, and skin conductance (sweat response) often spiked. Notably, these physiological changes occurred even in the absence of any specific emotional content; they were orienting responses, indicating heightened alertness to novelty (Chuen et al., 2016). In the context of sports, this implies that a sharp or unexpected intonation from a coach (e.g. a sudden shout or change in tone) will jolt the athlete's autonomic system – raising heart rate, quickening breathing, and sharpening reflexes as attention is captured. This can be a double-edged sword: it might be useful to snap a distracted athlete into focus, but overuse could elevate anxiety.

Emotional prosody (intonation carrying emotional meaning) adds another layer. Different emotional tones of voice can induce distinct physiological patterns in the listener. A harsh, angry tone tends to induce a stress response – akin to the "threat" reaction – characterised by increased heart rate, blood pressure, and cortisol release. Conversely, a soothing, gentle tone can activate the parasympathetic nervous system (often via the vagus nerve), promoting relaxation – slowed heart rate, deeper breathing, and even changes in facial muscle tension. This is consistent with the principles of the Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2007), which posits that vocal prosody is a key cue the nervous system uses to decide whether an environment is safe or dangerous. When an athlete hears a calm, melodic voice (like a supportive coach or a parent-like figure), it can signal safety and engage the "social engagement system," increasing vagal tone (high-frequency heart rate variability), which is associated with calm focus (Van Puyvelde et al., 2018). In essence, the body biologically *calms down* in response to soothing intonation. On the contrary, a yelling, critical voice might be interpreted as a threat, decreasing vagal activity and spiking sympathetic arousal (the classic fight/flight response).

Neuroimaging correlates support these effects. For example, the amygdala (mentioned earlier as a salience detector) not only sparks neural activity but also triggers downstream autonomic responses (via the hypothalamus and brainstem) when it detects an emotional tone. Neuroimaging studies have found that amygdala activation is sensitive to voice pitch and intensity – even subtle variations relevant to emotional prosody can modulate amygdala response (Liebenthal et al., 2016). An angry tone with higher pitch and volume will cause a larger amygdala response than a neutral tone (Breiter et al., 1996; Fischer et al., 2003; Liebenthal et al., 2016; Morris et al., 1996; Whalen et al.,1998, 2004), correlating with greater autonomic arousal. This link between brain and body explains why a coach's intonation can literally *get your adrenaline pumping* or, conversely, help settle your nerves.

2.2.2 Performance effects and optimal arousal

Psychophysiological responses to intonation can directly impact performance via the arousal mechanism. According to the classic Yerkes-Dodson law (an inverted-U relationship between arousal and performance) and Hanin's Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning (IZOF), athletes have an optimal range of arousal for peak performance. Intonation can be used to modulate an athlete's arousal toward that optimal zone. For instance, before a high-intensity competition, athletes often use music with a strong rhythm and rising intonation (e.g., a fast-tempo song with an energising melody) to psych themselves up – this raises their heart rate and blood flow, priming their muscles for an explosive performance. In contrast, prior to sports requiring fine motor control or calm concentration (archery, golf putting), a softer intonation (like a low, steady voice guidance or calming music) might be employed to avoid over-arousal that could impair precision.

Empirical studies in sports settings support these strategies. Selmi et al. (2017) examined the effect of *verbal encouragement* on young soccer players during training drills. In trials where coaches gave frequent verbal encouragement with enthusiastic intonation, players showed significantly higher heart rates and perceived exertion, but also reported greater enjoyment, compared to trials with no coach encouragement. The raised heart rate indicates that the motivational intonation pushed the players into a higher arousal state, which in this case was beneficial for a

physically demanding drill (the intensity and effort increased). Importantly, because the tone was positive (encouraging rather than scolding), the higher arousal was accompanied by positive affect (enjoyment) rather than anxiety. This finding highlights a crucial point: it is not just whether arousal increases or decreases, but how it is perceived. Intonation that raises arousal in a supportive context can enhance positive activation (often called *eustress*), while intonation that raises arousal in a punitive context might create *distress*. Coaches intuitively try to hit that eustress sweet spot – hence the age-old practice of the pre-game "pump-up speech" delivered in a confident, rising intonation to galvanise team morale.

On the flip side, psychophysiological calming via intonation is equally important, especially in precision sports or clutch moments where nerves can sabotage performance. Consider a basketball player about to take crucial free throws in a tie game: their heart might be racing due to crowd noise and pressure. A sports psychologist might train them with a cue word said in a specific tone (e.g. the word "smooth" spoken internally with a descending, slow intonation) to trigger a relaxation response. Over time, through classical conditioning, that particular intonation becomes associated with feelings of calmness and focus. Biofeedback studies have shown that athletes can learn to consciously lower their physiological arousal (heart rate, skin conductance) by using such auditory-guided techniques. For example, guided imagery scripts often employ deliberate intonation by the narrator, characterised by a slow pace, gentle emphasis, and strategic pauses. A recent experiment monitored skin conductance levels (SCL, a sweat-based arousal indicator) in athletes performing guided imagery versus self-led imagery (Budnik-Przybylska et al., 2024). The guided imagery, where athletes listened to a recorded script spoken in a calm, controlled tone, actually produced *higher* overall arousal (higher SCL) than self-produced imagery (Budnik-Przybylska et al., 2024). At first glance, this seems counterintuitive, but the content of the guided scripts included emotionally charged scenarios to visualise (e.g. envisioning a victorious moment), hence the higher arousal. More interestingly, *fluctuations* in arousal were greater in self-imagery – athletes' SCL went up and down more when they guided their own imagery, possibly reflecting less steady focus (Budnik-Przybylska et al., 2024). The takeaway is that the externally provided intonation in guided imagery kept the athletes' psychophysiological response more consistent and tailored (depending on the script's aim, be it relaxation or excitement). Thus, a well-designed intonational script can help an athlete stay in a desired arousal zone more effectively than if they were left to their own internal voice, which might fluctuate.

2.2.3 Intonation and psychophysiological synchrony

An intriguing area of research is how intonation can create synchrony between individuals, as seen in team sports. When a whole team is listening to the coach's halftime talk, a powerful intonation can effectively synchronise the group's emotional state. There is evidence in social neuroscience that people's heart rates and even brainwaves can partially sync up when sharing an emotional experience or listening to the same rhythmic stimuli. A rousing speech with rhythmic, emphatic intonation (think of the classic examples from sports movies: *"Inches make the difference between victory and defeat!"* delivered with rising cadence) may get all players' hearts pumping in unison, fostering a shared sense of purpose. This collective psychophysiological response can boost group cohesion – a key factor in team sports performance. Conversely, a monotone or inconsistent message may leave the team "out of sync."

2.2.4 Recovery and intonation

After intense exertion, how intonation is used in recovery contexts can also modulate psychophysiology. Athletes often engage in cool-down routines that involve lowering their heart rate and cortisol. Soft music or a calming voice guide can accelerate the return to baseline by stimulating parasympathetic activation. For instance, a Nature Neuroscience report highlighted how soothing auditory input can reduce activation in stress-related brain regions post-stressor (though not sports-specific, the principle applies) (George et al., 1996). This has practical implications: something as simple as the tone of the locker room environment (quiet and reassuring vs. chaotic shouting) after the game can influence how quickly an athlete's body recovers from the stress of competition.

To crystallise the relationships discussed, **Table 1** compares a few scenarios/studies where intonation was manipulated and the observed psychophysiological outcomes. This comparative view underscores that intonation's effects are context-dependent – beneficial when matched appropriately to the situation, but potentially detrimental if misaligned (e.g., yelling at an athlete who is already over-aroused could push them into panic).

Table 1. Comparative examples of intonation effects on psychophysiological responses.

Scenario	Intonational Condition(s)	Psychophysiological Outcome	Source (abridged)	Context (Sport Type / Study Aim)
Coach encouragement vs. silence (Youth soccer training)	Coach giving frequent verbal encouragement in an enthusiastic tone vs. no encouragement	- Higher heart rate and blood lactate (more intensity) - Greater enjoyment and engagement	Selmi et al. (2017)	Youth soccer / Effects of coaching intonation on training intensity
Motivational speech prosody	Hearing autonomy-supportive tone vs. controlling tone (content held constant)	- Supportive tone: feelings of autonomy, lower tension - Controlling tone: increased anxiety and pressure	Weinstein et al. (2018)	General population / Effects of vocal tone on motivation and well-being
EEG neurofeedback with audio (Bowlers' pre-performance)	15-min audio feedback (storm sounds modulating with attention) vs. quiet rest	- Slight anxiety reduction - Trend toward improved performance (not significant)	Raza et al. (2019)	Ten-pin bowling / Use of auditory neurofeedback for focus before competition
Guided imagery vs. self-imagery (Various sports)	Scripted imagery in a calm voice vs. silent, self-guided imagery	- Guided: Higher but stable arousal - Self: Greater variability in arousal	Budnik-Przybylska et al. (2024)	Mixed sports / Comparing guided vs. self-led imagery on physiological regulation
Sudden acoustic change (Basic research)	Steady tone sequence followed by a sudden change in pitch / intensity	- Startle/orienting response - Increased HR and skin conductance	Chuen et al. (2016)	Basic auditory research / Sensitivity of the autonomic system to sound shifts

The above comparisons span both applied sports settings and controlled experiments. They illustrate that intonation and related auditory cues can raise or lower arousal (heart rate, SCL, etc.) and that the *direction* of effect (beneficial vs. detrimental) depends on context. Encouraging tones in training have a beneficial effect on physical output, while overly controlling tones can increase anxiety. Biofeedback and guided imagery use controlled intonation to optimise arousal for performance or recovery.

3.0 SYNTHESIS

Integrating the Evidence: The role of intonation in mental sports psychology is multifaceted, operating through neurocognitive, technological, and physiological channels. Neurocognitively, intonation acts on a broad neural "machinery," from cortical language areas to subcortical emotion centres, to modulate attention, emotion, and motivation. Technologically, we see intonation being woven into tools – whether it is a neurofeedback headband that "speaks" to the athlete in the form of modulating sounds, or a VR system crafting an auditory atmosphere – effectively externalising the coach's or psychologist's voice through machines. Psychophysiologically, intonation proves to be a lever that can nudge the body's stress or relaxation responses, thus influencing an athlete's readiness to perform.

However, one potential limitation of intonation-based interventions lies in their reduced efficacy in high-noise environments, such as team sports in loud stadiums or arenas. In such settings, the auditory clarity and salience of vocal cues can be compromised by ambient crowd noise, player communication, and environmental acoustics. This auditory interference may attenuate the intended cognitive or emotional effects of intonation, especially when precision timing and immediate responsiveness are required. To address this, future applications may need to integrate noise-cancelling technologies, bone conduction systems, or haptic feedback as supplementary channels to reinforce vocal modulation in real-time performance contexts.

3.1 Theoretical frameworks revisited

Several frameworks help explain and predict these outcomes. Self-Determination Theory and related motivational psychology highlight the importance of supportive communication tone for internal motivation – borne out by empirical evidence that intonation alone can satisfy or thwart basic psychological needs. Neurovisceral integration models (like the MoVE model and polyvagal theory) provide a biopsychological explanation of how intonation links to heart, lungs, and brain via the vagus nerve and ACC (Van Puyvelde et al., 2018). The concept of neural entrainment suggests that rhythmic intonation could synchronise neural oscillations to desirable patterns (a ripe area for sports-focused research, perhaps using *NeuroImage*-style EEG/MEG studies to see how a coach's voice rhythm might entrain an athlete's brain waves for attention).

Together, these frameworks point to a convergence: intonation is a controllable stimulus that interfaces directly with the brain-body system to influence mental state.

3.2 Practical insights

For practitioners (coaches, sport psychologists, technologists designing training programs), this review underscores some key insights:

- *Coaches' Communication:* How a coach says something may be as important as what they say. A conscious use of intonation – e.g. starting instructions in a calm tone to ensure comprehension, then crescendoing to an enthusiastic tone to inspire action – can be a simple yet effective psychological tool in the field.
- *Customised Intonation in Tech:* One size may not fit all. Athletes have individual preferences and responses (some might thrive under a drill sergeant tone for a boost, others might shut down). Adaptive systems that can modulate intonation in real-time based on biofeedback (such as increasing the soothing quality if an athlete's heart rate is above their optimal zone or adding urgency in tone if an athlete is under-aroused) could personalise mental training like never before.
- *Monitoring via Voice:* The non-invasive nature of voice analysis presents an attractive way to monitor athlete stress during training or even competition (where wearables might not be allowed). A subtle tremor or pitch elevation in an athlete's voice could alert support staff to intervene or adjust tactics (e.g., calling a timeout to calm a team if the players' voices sound panicky). The technology to do this is emerging and could be integrated into existing communication systems (such as microphones coaches already wear).
- *Intonation as Part of Imagery and Routine:* Athletes should consider not just visualising success, but also "auditorizing" it – incorporating the sound dimension into mental rehearsal. This could mean practising self-talk with intentional intonation (saying motivational phrases out loud with a strong, confident tone to engage auditory feedback) or curating pre-performance playlists that have the right intonational contour to achieve the desired psychophysiological state (pump-up or calm-down).

3.3 Critical gaps and future directions

Despite the advances, there are gaps in the literature. Experimental control in applied settings is challenging – many studies are lab-based, so field studies (e.g. manipulating a coach's tone season-long and measuring athlete outcomes) are needed for ecological validity. Additionally, while we have data on short-term responses, the long-term effects of consistent intonational environments on athlete mental development are not well documented. Could a training atmosphere that constantly uses positive intonation lead to greater resilience, or does it risk complacency? Is there an optimal mix of intonational styles to build mental toughness (perhaps occasionally exposing athletes to harsh tones to train stress tolerance, like how weight training stresses muscles)? These questions align with broader debates in sport psychology on finding the balance between support and challenge.

Another frontier is neuroimaging research (e.g. fMRI, EEG) specifically focusing on athletes or experts. It would be fascinating to use *NeuroImage*-type brain scans to see if elite athletes have different neural responses to intonation compared to novices – perhaps years of coach communication tune their brains to be more or less sensitive to certain tones. Also, the interplay of intonation with other modalities (like visual cues or touch) in multisensory training tools could be explored: do they reinforce each other or is one dominant?

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

Intonation is far more than an abstract linguistic concept; it is an active ingredient in the psychology of sport performance. By engaging neurocognitive mechanisms (attention, emotion, memory) and provoking psychophysiological responses (heart rate, hormonal flux), intonation serves as a bridge between mind and body – one that coaches and technologies can traverse to guide athletes toward their optimal mental state. Designing "machinery" for mental sports psychology thus entails designing the *soundscape* of training and competition in an evidence-based way. As research continues to unravel how the brain processes tone of voice and how the body responds, we can anticipate increasingly sophisticated use of intonation. Perhaps tomorrow's athletes will don smart earpieces that give them perfectly timed vocal cues with precisely tuned intonations, essentially augmenting their mental coach in real-time. The cutting-edge convergence of neuroscience, sports psychology, and technology paints an exciting picture – one where a simple change in tone can make the difference between silver and gold**.**

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