

Original Article

Hope in Fencing: How Goals Shape Mindset, Motivation, and Performance Among Male Fencers

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Received: 14 June 2025

Revised: 28 July 2025

Accepted: 13 August 2025

Published: 30 August 2025

Abstract- Hope is a key factor in sports psychology, influencing motivation, goal achievement, and resilience. While hope has been studied in various sports, its role in Fencing—a sport requiring rapid decision-making and psychological endurance—remains unexplored. This study examines how hope and nonspecific goal-setting impact fencers' performance. This qualitative study conducted semi-structured interviews with seven male fencers (aged 15–17 years) from California. The study uses thematic analysis to identify the common patterns related to hope, goal-setting, and psychological strategies in competition. Hope emerges as a key motivator, helping fencers maintain confidence, reframe setbacks, and balance emotional regulation. The major themes include hope as a driving force in performance; the psychological battle beyond the physical effort; progress as a journey, not a destination; resilience in the face of defeat; the role of community support in perseverance; the balance between confidence and humility; and the power of discipline and strategy. Hope plays a crucial role in fencing and enhancing motivation, strategic adaptability, and resilience. The results have implications for developing hope-based training strategies to improve fencers' performance and stress management. Future research should explore gender differences and the long-term effects of hope interventions in individual sports.

Keywords - Achievement, Fencing, Goal, Hope, Motivation, Performance.

1. Introduction

Hope is a crucial construct in positive psychology and is tied to constructs such as motivation, performance, and overall well-being. Snyder's hope theory [1] breaks hope down into two parts: agency (i.e., the drive to get things done) and pathways (i.e., figuring out strategies to reach goals). Research has shown that hope is not just about feeling optimistic but is linked to improved outcomes in school, sports, and life in general.

In sports, hope is like a secret weapon. It gives athletes the mental strength to keep pushing through tough moments and helps them come up with ways to deal with setbacks. Athletes with high levels of hope cope with challenges and even find ways to thrive. As defined in the positive psychology literature, thriving refers to bouncing back from setbacks and experiencing personal growth, enhanced well-being, and improved functioning in the face of adversity [2,3]. Studies have shown that hope improves how athletes perform and how they feel during their performance. For example, Curry et al. [4] found that hope strongly predicted success in sports, even when compared with natural athletic ability. Hope potentially works as a built-in motivator and problem-solver to keep athletes on track.

Setting goals is an important component of sports psychology. The goal-setting theory states that specific goals, such as “run a mile in under six minutes” or “score 20 points in a game,” are helpful for individuals [5]. However, people are increasingly realizing that nonspecific goals, like “do your best,” could be just as useful, if not better, in certain situations, especially in reducing performance pressure and helping athletes achieve flow states—the feeling of being fully engaged in an activity so much so that everything just “clicks” [6].

This is where hope ties into goal-setting. Athletes with high levels of hope are better at setting and sticking to goals, even when the goals are vague. They have the agency to stay motivated and the pathway thinking to figure out how to adapt when things do not go as planned. One of the author showed that nonspecific goals can increase confidence and reduce stress, which are important for athletes trying to perform their best.

A potential sport to examine with respect to hope and goals is Fencing. Despite Fencing being an interesting sport to examine from a positive psychological lens, it has not been the focus of research on hope and goal achievement. Fencing does



not merely involve physical skills; it is about strategy and making split-second decisions. Hope keeps athletes motivated to compete and helps them think creatively during matches. For example, a fencer may use nonspecific goals such as “focus on improving my reaction time” instead of just “win the match.” Such a hopeful mindset can make a considerable difference in how fencers perform under pressure.

This study is important because research does not adequately explain how hope and nonspecific goals work together in competitive sports like Fencing. By examining this connection, the study can help athletes and coaches figure out more effective ways of improving performance, reducing stress, and making sports more enjoyable. Hope not only helps athletes perform better but also helps them handle stress and anxiety before stepping into the arena. According to a study on martial arts competitors, having positive emotions and “sports hope” seriously cut down on the jitters athletes felt right before a match. In other words, if athletes can keep their spirits high and stay hopeful, they are less likely to be overwhelmed by nerves. They face their challenges with more calmness, which is crucial because too much anxiety can negatively impact even the most skilled athlete’s performance. This idea aligns with Snyder’s hope theory [1], showing that agency and pathways thinking make a difference.

It is not just martial artists who benefit from hope. Other studies show that hope is closely tied to how different athletes cope with stress. One piece of research on youth athletes found that there was a positive relationship between task-focused coping—focusing on what one can control and getting things done—and higher levels of hope for success. This indicated that hope goes beyond feeling good and involves constructive behaviours to handle stress. In this study, associations between hope and different kinds of coping strategies were found among girls, reinforcing the importance of a hopeful outlook. Hope is a hidden tool in individuals’ mental toolboxes. It keeps individuals focused in the face of challenges and encourages them to find new approaches to handle problems.

The concept of hope is not limited to everyday sports challenges. Research on athletes who suffered spinal cord injuries showed how hope helped them rebuild their sense of self and find meaning in their experiences [7]. Although these situations were more intense than the usual pre-game nerves, the underlying idea remained the same. Hope keeps you going when things look bleak, transforming what could have been a chaotic story—where everything felt like it was falling apart—into a quest narrative, where you learn and grow from challenging situations. Hope can shape the stories athletes tell themselves: are they stuck in a slump or in a challenging chapter of a bigger journey toward improvement?

Hope and nonspecific goals can work together to help fencers cope with the fast-paced decision-making and

strategic thinking the sport demands. If a fencer walks into a match thinking, “I will just do my best to react quickly and stay calm,” this hopeful attitude may give them breathing room to adapt on the fly. Instead of being crushed by strict targets, they will be guided by a hopeful, flexible outlook that offers new pathways. Such an approach may reduce anxiety, improve confidence and help athletes find their groove. It is similar to having a mental safety net: if one tactic fails, hope encourages them to try something else until they get it right.

Overall, incorporating hope into training and goal-setting—whether by focusing on fostering positive emotions before a crucial event, using flexible goals to lower pressure, or learning to cope effectively with stress—can lead to better performance and more enjoyment. Hope is a practical resource that athletes and coaches can rely on to navigate the ups and downs of competitive sports.

While several studies have examined hope in sports, Fencing has not received much attention, despite its requiring lightning-fast strategy and physical skill. To date, no research has directly examined how hope operates in Fencing. This is crucial because Fencing requires athletes to combine quick decision-making, creativity, and psychological endurance, making it a unique setting for understanding how hope drives adaptability, resilience, and motivation. Therefore, the study investigated the role of hope in influencing goal achievement and performance among male fencers. The study’s findings can help uncover new ways to boost performance, lower stress, and keep the sport enjoyable. Specifically, the following research question was asked: What role does hope play in fencers’ goal achievement and performance? The research question intended to tap into the broader understanding of hope in Fencing, without unnecessarily limiting the study to specific subdimensions of hope or achievement. The findings can help athletes and coaches understand how hope can serve as a significant resource for motivation, resilience, and overall satisfaction in Fencing. The findings can enrich sports psychology theory and provide coaches with concrete strategies to improve both performance and enjoyment in Fencing.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Design

This qualitative study used a social constructionist lens to explore how hope shapes athletic performance and mindset in competitive Fencing. Social constructionism emphasizes that understanding concepts such as hope and success is not fixed—it is shaped by interactions, conversations, and the cultural stories people tell. In a sport like Fencing, where every match is a blend of strategy, mental sharpness, and split-second decision-making, this perspective helps unpack how athletes’ hopeful mindsets and goal-setting habits influence their performance.

The study used semi-structured interviews to capture the internal mindset and external behaviour of athletes. The interviews delved into male fencers' experiences with hope and goal-setting. The aim was to understand how hope, as a psychological resource, plays out in the unpredictable, high-stakes environment of competitive Fencing. By connecting these insights, the study hopes to offer practical takeaways for athletes, coaches, and sports psychologists, showing how hope and goal-setting strategies can be fine-tuned to boost performance, manage stress, and ultimately make the sport more rewarding.

2.2. Sampling

This study used a purposive sampling method to recruit participants based on their experience and involvement in Fencing. The inclusion criteria included athletes who have participated in at least one competitive fencing tournament in their lifetime.

The sample size comprised seven male fencers aged 15–17 who all reside in California, with diverse representation across competitive levels (two fencers had only fenced in one competition, two others had competed worldwide, and the rest were in between) to capture a wide range of perspectives.

2.3. Method of Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, with open-ended questions to encourage the participants to share their experiences with goal-setting, coping strategies, and their emotional states during competitions. The questions were designed to uncover both explicit strategies (e.g., goal-setting habits) and implicit patterns (e.g., emotional responses). The participants' demographic data, including their age, years of experience, and competitive level, were also recorded. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for accuracy. Informed consent was obtained from the participants and their guardians before data collection, ensuring that they understood the study's purpose, their rights, and how their data will be used.

2.4. Method of Analysis

To analyze the data, thematic analysis was used [8]. This method aligns with the social constructionist perspective because it enabled the exploration of how athletes talk about hope, goal-setting, and mindset, and pieces those themes together to see the bigger picture from their lived experiences.

The study placed participants' voices at the forefront of the analysis, aiming to stay as close to their phrasing as possible. This meant keeping the codes tightly tied to their exact words and expressions, preserving the authenticity of their perspectives.

The analysis involved repeatedly reading through all the transcripts and notes to facilitate immersion in what the participants expressed. Key verbatims were highlighted and

labeled into codes—small, meaningful chunks that acted as the foundation for broader themes. Early on, there were recurring ideas such as determination or resilience, positivity in the face of negativity, a growth mindset, feelings of accomplishment or achievement, encouragement and support, and mental or emotional focus.

From there, clusters of codes that seemed to connect or speak to one another were identified. These emerging themes were double-checked against the original data to make sure they truly reflected what the participants said. Once the themes were solidified, they were refined, each one in more detail.

This approach helped capture both the practical strategies and deeper mindsets that shape how fencers use hope and nonspecific goals in their sport—especially when navigating high-pressure situations.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Any identifying details—such as names and club affiliations—have been removed from the transcripts and reports. The participants were referred to by pseudonyms instead of their real names.

Before data collection began, every participant was fully informed about what the study involved, why and how it would be conducted, and how their information would be handled. Both the participants and their parents provided informed consent.

The participants were told that they can withdraw from the study at any time for any reason, without facing any negative consequences. All audio recordings and transcripts were stored on secure, password-protected devices. Only the research team had access to the data. During the interviews, the participants could skip any question that made them uncomfortable or end the interview entirely if they so wished. It was ensured that the questions were respectful and mindful of each person's comfort level.

By adhering to these guidelines, the study aimed to protect each participant's privacy, autonomy, and overall well-being throughout the research process.

3. Results

Using thematic analysis, the following themes emerged based on the participants' experiences: (1) hope as a motivating force in performance, (2) the psychological battle beyond the physical effort, (3) progress as a journey rather than a destination, (4) resilience in the face of defeat, (5) the role of community support in perseverance, (6) the balance between confidence and humility, and (7) the power of discipline and strategy (Table 1). These themes highlight the complex interplay between the mental and physical aspects of Fencing, demonstrating how athletes navigate challenges,

develop resilience, and refine their skills through experience. The following sections explore these themes in depth.

4.1. Hope as a Motivating Force in Performance

Hope is a motivating force behind performance in Fencing, shaping how athletes cope with both training and competition. For most fencers, hope is not a passive wish but an active force that fuels their drive. It fills the gap between effort and expectation, connecting what they have at the moment with what they aspire to achieve. One of the fencers, Christopher, expressed this relationship when he said, “The more you practice, the more hope you have. The more you push yourself in practice, the more hope that you have.”

This perspective highlights the idea that hope is built from frequent effort and illustrates the belief that hard work leads to improvement. Another fencer, Mateo, echoed this when he said, “It is not like I just show up and hope I do well. I built that hope by working. If I have trained hard, I feel like anything’s possible.” This reveals that for many athletes, hope is something earned—not imagined—which emerges from their consistent preparation.

Apart from facilitating long-term growth, hope also plays an immediate role during competition. Athletes often enter matches believing that their preparation will pay off, directly impacting their confidence and decision-making. One of the fencers, Johnson, described how hope influenced his spontaneous choices, “I think that having hope, like, genuinely, gave me a lot of confidence, you know... I made more confident choices and did things I would never do otherwise, and every now and again, it paid off.”

Similarly, Prashant commented on the emotional presence that hope gave him during a match, “Even when I was down, I had this weird sense that I could come back. That is what kept me fighting—just this small hope that it was not over yet.” These reflections show that hope is not just a feeling but a cognitive and emotional process through which athletes stay focused and make bold decisions based on trust in their training.

Hope also allows fencers to reframe their losses and defeats not as fate-determining failures but as temporary setbacks. Pranav illustrated this by recounting a game in which he started losing but refused to quit, “I turned off my brain and just thought, I am going to beat this guy. I was not going to lose to this man. And I did it—I won.”

Pranav shared a similar sentiment after a tough loss, “I felt crushed, but I also knew it did not define me. I told myself, ‘This just means I’m not there yet. But I will be.’ That’s what kept me going.” These examples reinforce that hope plays a crucial role in athletes’ ability to emotionally regulate and reframe performance outcomes. It helps them view failure as part of the larger journey, not a dead-end.

Ultimately, Fencing encourages competitors to work more, enter contests with confidence, and persevere through difficulty. But it is not blind optimism—it is a faith supported by practice, discipline, and past success. This struggle between effort and anticipation is what makes hope key to sporting performance, not only in training but also in competitions.

4.2. The Psychological Battle Beyond the Physical Effort

Fencing is sometimes referred to as “physical chess” because of its strategic refinement, but the sport involves more than technique and speed: massive psychological fortitude is necessary. The psychological aspect of Fencing may be just as—and in many respects more—challenging as the physical aspect. Competitors must maintain a balance of confidence and doubt, remain calm in pressure situations, and weather the emotional peaks and valleys of competition. Prashant encapsulated this struggle, explaining:

I discovered in Fencing, at least for me and from other individuals I have spoken with, there are two really huge motivators. There is fear of failure, and there is a need to succeed. Hope is when the need to succeed is a lot stronger than the fear of failure.

This quote reveals the delicate mental equilibrium that must be struck by fencers. Where hope is stronger than fear, it becomes stimulating, but performance can fall when doubt begins to creep in. Fencers must develop strategies to stay centered and emotionally balanced, particularly in high-stakes scenarios.

Cornelius described how he kept himself calm under pressure:

I just talked to myself a lot, you know. I just kept telling myself over and over again because Fencing, I mean, you do not really have that much to say—it is really quiet. So, I just told myself my goal over and over and over again, to be my own self-motivator.

Repeating words to oneself is a common method athletes use to manage nerves and stay mentally locked in during tense moments. This form of positive self-talk can help reframe adversity and redirect attention toward achievable goals.

Mateo shared a similar strategy when things started going wrong: “When I lost the first few points, I felt it slipping. I told myself: ‘You have done this before. You are not done.’ That helped me slow down and actually think.” This type of internal coaching—reminding oneself of past success and grounding in the present—plays a key role in preserving emotional composure.

Despite their preparation, all fencers experience moments when their psychological framework is tested. Gerald

described how doubt nearly wrecked his performance, “I got too cocky in the first half. I screwed up some points, and then after that, I had a huge hole to fill.” In some cases, overconfidence can be just as detrimental as self-doubt, causing athletes to lose focus and misjudge their opponents. In contrast, Pranav explained how staying mentally steady helped him regain control during a tight match, “I was down 14-10, and I remember I literally just stopped thinking. I told myself, ‘I am going to beat this dude.’”

Moments like this highlight the psychological resilience required to perform under pressure. Being able to mentally reset and focus on what is still possible—rather than what has already gone wrong—can make the difference between victory and defeat. Johnson reflected on the same idea when asked what separated his best performances from his worst: “It is honestly about not spiraling. When I feel things slipping, I focus on one thing—like fixing my distance. That helps me stop the panic.”

The mental battle in Fencing is not just about motivation—it is about the endurance of the mind. Fencers who learn to control doubt, regulate their emotions, and maintain composure when it matters most often outperform even their equally skilled opponents. They must train their minds as much as their bodies, ensuring that when they step onto the strip, they are not only physically prepared but also mentally fortified against the inevitable pressures of the sport.

4.3. Progress as a Journey, Not a Destination

For most competitors, success tends to be cast as a definable moment—winning a tournament, holding a ranking, or beating an opponent. However, fencers often discover that progress is more about ongoing evolution than arriving at a predetermined point. Pranav described his strategy for setting goals, “I like to set goals not necessarily in terms of outcomes, but in terms of how I can improve. If I am the best I can be, the outcomes will take care of themselves.”

This approach shifts the emphasis from external rewards to internal growth, allowing athletes to measure success by skill development rather than short-term results. Fencers who focus on steady improvement tend to push themselves harder, knowing that each small advancement brings them closer to their full potential.

Gerald explained a seemingly insignificant moment that confirmed his sense of progress:

At my second tournament, I was down 4–0 in a bout. I truly thought I was going to be shut out. But then I executed a clean counterattack, and for the first time in this tournament, I felt like I was in control of something. I still lost 5–1, but that one touch reminded me that I am capable of good fencing moments—I just need to have more of them.

This experience highlights how progress is not always measured in wins and losses but in the ability to refine skills, adapt under pressure, and build confidence. For many fencers, these small victories serve as proof that improvement is happening—even when the scoreboard does not reflect it. Cornelius echoed this mindset, “Sometimes I lose a bout but come out of it feeling like I won because I tried a move I had been working on, and it actually worked. That is a win to me.”

Such reflections underscore that real progress often lies beneath the surface of the final result. These athletes are building technical consistency, emotional control, and match awareness—even when they lose on paper.

Despite this mindset, it is easy to become discouraged when growth feels slow or inconsistent. Many fencers described periods when they questioned whether they were truly improving. Christopher reflected:

When I started Fencing, I thought improvement would happen quickly, but after four years, I have learned it is a process. I still have periods when I am stagnant, but I do have my little victories that tell me I am improving.

Johnson noted, “There were months when I felt like I was not getting better. But then I would look at old videos and be like, ‘Wait—I used to do that?’ That is when I realize how far I have actually come.”

Recognizing that growth happens over time is crucial—not every practice or tournament will result in a breakthrough, but consistent effort leads to long-term development. These retrospective moments often reveal progress more clearly than day-to-day experiences.

Ultimately, development in Fencing is not about reaching a final stage of mastery but about ongoing refinement. The best fencers understand that every drill, every match, and even every mistake plays a role in their growth. By embracing this journey-oriented mindset, athletes stay motivated even when facing setbacks, knowing that each challenge overcome is another step forward.

4.4. Resilience in the Face of Defeat

Losing is arguably the hardest part of competitive sports, but resilience is everything in Fencing—where a single mistake can decide a match. It is not just about bouncing back from a loss, but about refusing to let the loss define an athlete. Gerald captured this mindset, saying, “If you lose hope when you’re down by a deficit, you’ve already lost.”

Resilience is not simply about recovery but about staying mentally engaged when the odds are stacked against you. For fencers, it means not allowing a few bad touches to derail their focus, but instead using those moments as fuel to fight back.

Some fencers find this resilience in the middle of a bout, where the ability to shift their mindset can completely change the outcome. Prashant described a match where he was trailing 14–10 but refused to panic: “I just stopped thinking. I told myself, ‘I am going to beat this dude.’”

That mental shift made the difference between surrendering and coming back. The ability to shut out distractions and focus on solutions allows athletes to stay composed under pressure. Johnson shared a similar experience: “I was losing badly, and my coach told me to stop caring about the score. I did that, and suddenly I was fencing way better. It is weird how just relaxing helped me focus again.” These moments illustrate that resilience is not always loud or dramatic—it can be subtle, internal, and deeply personal.

Experienced competitors understand that until the bout is over, there is always a chance to turn things around. But sometimes, rebounding from a tough loss takes longer. In the moment, defeat can feel overwhelming, and it takes time before it can be reframed as a learning experience rather than just a failure. Cornelius explained how a loss pushed him to reflect and grow, “I did not have a game plan, so I kept doing the same thing, and my opponent read me. I lost because I was not adapting.”

Rather than dwell on the result, he recognized the need to change his tactical approach. This kind of self-awareness is critical. Mateo shared a similar reflection, “I used to get mad after losses and just brush them off. But now I actually go back and write what I did wrong. That is when I started getting better.” Analyzing mistakes and making deliberate adjustments is a core component of long-term improvement. Athletes who reflect deeply and work intentionally on their weaknesses tend to grow faster than those who avoid self-evaluation.

Ultimately, resilience is about refusing to let one bad match define an athlete’s progress. It is about showing up to practice the next day, ready to fix mistakes and improve. Christopher summed this up clearly, “I hate losing. But I hate not getting better even more.” The best fencers are not those who never lose, but those who learn from every loss and come back stronger—with more awareness, more grit, and more belief in their ability to rise again.

4.5. Role of Community Support in Perseverance

Although Fencing is an individual sport on the strip, no athlete succeeds alone. Coaches, teammates, and even rivals play a crucial role in helping fencers build mental toughness. Support from others can be the deciding factor between giving up and pushing forward, especially when an athlete is struggling with self-doubt. Johnson described a turning point after two consecutive losses, “I was feeling so down, and my

teammate just came up to me and said, ‘You got this.’ That little moment gave me a huge mental reset.”

A small gesture of encouragement can make a significant difference, allowing athletes to regain confidence and refocus. More than just providing motivation, teammates offer valuable advice and shared experiences that remind fencers they are not alone in their struggles. Cornelius recalled a difficult practice where they kept making the same mistakes, only to be reassured by a teammate, “One of my teammates took me aside and said they had gone through the same thing when they began... Knowing that even good fencers began badly gave me hope that I might improve as well.”

Moments like these create a sense of belonging, reinforcing the idea that challenges are temporary and improvement is possible. When athletes see others overcome similar struggles, they are more likely to persevere through their own setbacks. Mateo echoed this dynamic, noting:

There was this one teammate who always gave me technical tips and kept reminding me that everyone improves at different speeds. That helped me not compare myself so much.

Hearing shared stories and advice builds a culture of persistence. Supportive environments help fencers replace self-comparison with self-trust.

Coaches also play a vital role in an athlete’s ability to persist by refining technique and shaping mindset. Many fencers described their coaches as stabilizing forces in difficult times. Gerald recalled a competition where he performed poorly and felt discouraged, but was reassured by his coach, “My coach told me my bladework was good, and my biggest problem was footwork, which could be corrected... That made me realize I wasn’t hopeless—I just had some things to work on.”

Christopher had a similar experience: “I was spiraling after a bad bout, and my coach did not yell or anything. He just said, ‘You are better than that bout shows.’ That gave me the clarity to bounce back.” By reframing setbacks as fixable issues instead of identity-defining failures, coaches help fencers stay focused on progress. These interventions act as anchors, preventing frustration from turning into disillusionment.

Perseverance is not just an individual trait—it is reinforced by the environment in which an athlete trains. Fencers who are surrounded by a strong support system, whether through teammates or coaches, are more likely to stay motivated and push through challenges. As Prashant put it, “You can’t do this alone. It is a solo sport, but your mindset is built by everyone who believes in you.” The best athletes are not just those with talent and hard work, but those who are

supported by people who believe in them—especially in moments when they struggle to believe in themselves.

4.6. The Balance Between Confidence and Humility

Confidence is essential in Fencing; a fencer who doubts or hesitates is likely to lose. Overconfidence, however, can be just as damaging, leading to careless mistakes and an inability to adapt. The right balance between confidence and humility allows fencers to perform at their best. Prashant reflected on how overconfidence cost him a match, “I was too cocky in the first half. I bungled some points, and then subsequently, I had a large deficit to overcome.”

This experience highlights the risk of underestimating an opponent or becoming complacent. While confidence helps athletes trust their instincts, an excess of it can lead to lapses in focus and misjudgment. Gerald described how winning initially made him feel more confident—but also made future losses feel more painful, “I learned that I have to balance confidence with realism—knowing I can win, but also knowing I have to work for it.”

Confidence must be grounded in preparation and adaptability rather than an assumption of success. Fencers who enter competitions believing in their training but remain open to adjustments are often the most successful. Christopher elaborated on the importance of earned confidence, “When I have practiced a move a hundred times, I trust it. That is where my confidence comes from. Not from thinking I am better—but from knowing I have put in the work.” This kind of humility does not diminish self-belief—it strengthens it, anchoring confidence in effort rather than ego.

Striking this balance is particularly crucial in high-pressure situations, where emotions can influence decision-making. Johnson recalled a match where he started strong but collapsed in the second half, “I was dominating initially, but then my opponent figured out how I fenced, and I did not adjust. I thought I had it in the bag, and that was my mistake.” This highlights the importance of staying aware and flexible throughout the match. A fencer may feel in control early on, but if they fail to recognize their opponent’s adjustments, they risk losing their advantage.

Mateo described a similar realization, “There was a tournament where I was favored to win, and I just assumed I would. I got lazy with my footwork and lost in the first round. That was humbling.” Such moments demonstrate that humility does not mean lacking belief—it means maintaining vigilance and respect for the sport and your opponent.

At its core, confidence and humility are not opposing traits but complementary strengths. The best fencers trust in their abilities while recognizing that there is always room for improvement.

Cornelius summed it up well, “You gotta believe in your training—but you also gotta be ready to change everything if it is not working.” The most successful athletes are not those who assume victory, but those who step onto the strip with both self-assurance and a willingness to adapt and learn.

4.7. The Power of Discipline and Strategy

Success in Fencing is not just based on talent—it is built on strategy and discipline. The most accomplished fencers are those who train diligently, honing their craft with purpose rather than simply putting in the hours. Pranav described his approach to training:

I approach goal-setting in Fencing by focusing on technique rather than outcome. I set small, realistic goals, like having a faster reaction time or being better at disengaging. Winning a bout is so far away, so I try to do things that will eventually make me get better.

This highlights that discipline is not just about showing up to practice but about training with intention, focusing on small improvements that accumulate over time. Mateo shared a similar mentality, “I try to get one thing better each week—whether it is footwork or timing or just being more patient. That is how I know I am actually improving.”

Discipline, in this context, is a long-term commitment to incremental growth. However, discipline alone is not enough—strategy is what allows fencers to apply their training effectively in competition. Johnson reflected on a tough loss that stemmed from a lack of planning, “Fencing is a technical sport, but it is a lot about game plan. I did not have a game plan, so I kept doing the same thing, and my opponent read me. I lost because I was not adapting.”

This emphasizes the importance of tactical flexibility. Fencers who rely solely on instinct without a strategic framework often struggle against opponents who can analyze and adjust. Developing a plan before a match—and staying ready to adapt mid-bout—can make the difference between a win and a loss. Christopher also commented on the value of in-match adjustments, “There were matches where I was losing badly, but once I changed my tempo or distance, everything shifted. Strategy is not just at the beginning—it is every second.”

A well-developed strategy also helps fencers stay composed in high-pressure situations. Cornelius described how focusing on a clear plan helped them stay grounded before a major competition, “Before a competition, I just like to focus on the small things. I make sure that I am well-rested, get a good warmup, and go in with a clear mind. Everything is step by step.” This structured approach reduces anxiety and ensures that fencers enter a match with clarity and confidence, knowing they have prepared deliberately.

Ultimately, discipline lays the foundation for progress, while strategy ensures that effort translates into results. The most successful fencers are not just those who work the hardest but those who train intelligently and compete with foresight. Gerald succinctly captured this idea: “You can be

fast and strong, but if you do not have a plan, someone smarter will beat you.” A combination of a relentless work ethic and smart decision-making allows athletes to adapt, improve, and succeed in the face of any challenge.

Table 1. Operational definitions of the emerging themes

Theme	Operational definition
Hope is a driving force in performance.	Hope in athletic performance refers to an athlete’s belief that their efforts will yield improvement and success, serving as a motivational force that sustains persistence, confidence, and goal-directed behaviour. It functions as an intrinsic and cognitive framework that influences decision-making, resilience, and self-efficacy in competitive settings.
The psychological battle beyond the physical effort	The psychological dimension of athletic performance encompasses the cognitive and emotional processes influencing an athlete’s ability to regulate stress, manage self-doubt, and sustain focus under pressure. This internal battle involves self-talk, emotion regulation, and cognitive reframing.
Progress is a journey, not a destination.	Progress in sports is a dynamic, non-linear process emphasizing perpetual skill refinement, adaptability, and long-term development over immediate results. Athletes who adopt a process-oriented mindset focus on incremental improvements, fostering intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement in their sport.
Resilience in the face of defeat	Resilience in competitive sports refers to an athlete’s capacity to recover from setbacks and maintain motivation despite failure. It is characterized by cognitive reappraisal and the ability to use losses as learning opportunities rather than deterrents to progress.
Role of community support in perseverance	Social support in athletics plays a critical role in sustaining motivation, emotional well-being, and psychological resilience by providing encouragement, feedback, and a sense of belonging. Peer and coach support contribute to an athlete’s ability to navigate setbacks, maintain confidence, and reinforce goal persistence.
The balance between confidence and humility	Confidence in sports allows athletes to trust their skills and perform decisively, while humility ensures they remain adaptable and open to improvement. Striking this balance enables athletes to refine their techniques, adjust strategies, and sustain long-term growth without becoming complacent or discouraged by setbacks.
The power of discipline and strategy	Discipline in sports fosters consistent training, goal-setting, and skill refinement, while strategy enables athletes to adapt and make tactical decisions in competition. Together, they enhance performance by ensuring athletes are both physically prepared and mentally equipped to respond effectively under pressure.

5. Discussion

The current research examined the role hope plays in the mindset, achievement, and performance of competitive fencers. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven male fencers aged 15–17 from California across a range of competitive levels. A thematic analysis yielded seven crucial themes based on the participants’ experiences: hope as a driving force, the inner conflict rather than brute strength, achievement as a journey and not a destination, resilience, role of community support, balance between confidence and humility, and strategy and discipline over power. These themes contribute to hope research in sports psychology, supporting motivational, goal-setting, and emotion regulation theories while highlighting the unique cognitive challenge of Fencing.

As the researcher, my role was to analyze fencers’ experiences through a social constructionist lens,

acknowledging that the perceptions of hope, success, and performance are shaped by cultural and personal narratives. My background as an observer of competitive sports may have influenced my interpretation, particularly in recognizing patterns of resilience and motivation.

Despite looking for objectivity, my own response to hope as a factor of psychological strategy may have made me lean too far on hope-led coping tactics over strategic adaptability. Understanding this predisposition, I did my best to base conclusions on athletes’ moment-to-moment realities and contemporary psychological literature.

The findings are consonant with and an extension of previous research involving hope and athletic performance. Following Snyder’s hope theory [1], the fencers demonstrated both agency (the desire to keep going) and pathways thinking (planning to recover from setbacks).

Like Curry et al. [4], the results validated that hope is a critical contributor to performance, independent of physical talent. However, the research builds on these results by clarifying the mechanisms through which hope strengthens confidence and allows sport performers to reinterpret setbacks as opportunities for learning, reinforcing evidence from Smith and Sparkes [7] concerning hope in rehabilitation from sports injuries. Furthermore, the study confirms Minda and Piasecka's findings, which revealed that hope is linked to adaptive coping strategies. Hopeful fencers employed self-talk, goal modification, and reframing challenges—all strategies credited to resilience. Additionally, the findings on nonspecific goals improving adaptability align with those of One of the author confirming that adaptive goals can reduce pressure and increase confidence in high-pressure competition.

Achievement emerged not as a static milestone but as an ongoing psychological and emotional journey. Fencers in the study often described success in terms of personal progress, growth, and persistence. Rather than being fixated on winning bouts, they prioritized improvement, learning from losses, and staying mentally present. This outlook mirrors common themes in performance psychology, where internal goals—such as mastering technique or maintaining composure—often serve as more sustainable motivators than external rewards. In this way, hope supports short-term effort and long-term engagement and personal development, reinforcing that progress is a process rather than a product.

A major aspect of this study is the way Fencing as a sport highlights the psychological battle beyond the physical effort. The intellectual component of Fencing requires rapid thinking, strategy shifts, and individual fortitude, making hope particularly significant in such a mentally demanding environment. Hope in fencing functions as a motivator and a cognitive tool that enables fencers to remain resilient in the face of defeat. The interplay between resilience and psychological struggles is key here. Fencers who effectively managed self-doubt through self-talk and emotional regulation demonstrated stronger performance and a higher ability to reframe setbacks as opportunities for growth. This aligns with the broader relationship between hope and resilience, with athletes who maintain confidence and adaptability being more likely to sustain long-term development in their sport.

Figure 1 outlines the complex relationships between hope, resilience, discipline, strategy, and community support. The flowchart illustrates how progress is a journey rather than a destination, reinforcing the importance of adaptability in skill refinement and long-term development. Fencers who embraced this mindset demonstrated an ability to learn and evolve rather than fixating on immediate success. Additionally, the role of discipline and strategy as fundamental components of Fencing supports the idea that

consistent training and tactical decision-making enable fencers to strengthen both their physical and mental performance. The balance between confidence and humility further emerges as a defining factor in an athlete's ability to sustain growth, as trust in skills must be coupled with openness to learning and a willingness to adapt to new challenges.

Another crucial dimension highlighted in both the research and the flowchart is the role of community support in perseverance. The study emphasized that feedback and encouragement from coaches and teammates bolsters a fencer's motivation and provides external validation that enhances resilience. The presence of a strong support system allows athletes to maintain their hope even when faced with failure, as the reinforcement from their community strengthens their self-belief. The ability to receive constructive feedback and integrate it into performance strategies is a crucial aspect of resilience, particularly in individual sports like Fencing, where personal determination is paramount.

These results have a number of implications for athletic development, coaching practices, and sport psychology interventions. Coaches may use hope-based goal-setting strategies to aid fencers in staying motivated, especially under high-stakes conditions. For instance, training protocols may guide athletes toward process-focused goals (e.g., improving footwork or reaction time) instead of inflexible outcome-focused goals, promoting mental flexibility and long-term resilience. Sports psychologists can also design mental training programs involving self-talk, cognitive reframing, and goal adaptation to help athletes deal with performance anxiety and failure. Beyond Fencing, these results may apply to other individual, high-stakes sports such as boxing, tennis, and martial arts, where competitors must balance strategic thinking with psychological resilience. Implementing hope-centred interventions can enhance confidence, emotional control, and well-being among adolescent athletes.

The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, ensuring rigor through repeated coding checks, the iterative refinement of themes, and validation against participants' phrasing. This approach strengthens the trustworthiness of the analysis and highlights the robustness of the findings. Furthermore, the novelty of this study lies in its direct focus on hope within Fencing—a sport rarely examined from a psychological lens—making it the first qualitative study to situate hope in this unique context of rapid decision-making and psychological endurance. By doing so, the research extends existing theories of hope and goal-setting and contributes original insights to sport psychology literature.

Despite the insights it offers, this research is not without its limitations. The small sample size (seven participants) and

male-only sampling of fencers limit generalisability. Including only male participants allowed for a more controlled and focused exploration of hope and motivation within a single gender group, reducing the influence of gender-based variability and making the thematic patterns more cohesive, but future studies should employ a more representative participant group, with an emphasis on recruiting female athletes, to ascertain whether gender differences exist in the hope–performance relationship. This research also relied on self-reported experiences, which are susceptible to recall bias. Future studies should incorporate complementary methods such as observational studies or physiological stress measures (e.g., heart rate variability in matches) to provide deeper insight into the real-time impact of hope on performance.

It is also important to note that situating the findings within the existing literature proved challenging, as few, if any, studies have examined hope in Fencing. This lack of direct comparison highlights both the novelty and significance of the research. By exploring hope in a sport that demands split-second strategy, adaptability, and resilience, the findings extend broader theories of sports psychology and open new directions for future scholarship. In this way, the study provides a foundation for subsequent work on hope in Fencing and related individual sports.

Ultimately, this research underscores the deeply interwoven relationship between hope, resilience, discipline, strategy, and community support in Fencing. Hope is not

merely a motivator but a psychological mechanism that allows athletes to navigate setbacks with mental toughness and adaptability. Through self-talk, goal modification, and cognitive reframing, hopeful fencers exhibited greater control over their emotions and responses to failure. The importance of community reinforcement further amplifies this process, as external validation strengthens internal belief. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on sports psychology and highlight the mental dimensions of competitive Fencing, reinforcing that success is not simply about physical prowess but the psychological battle in every bout.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights hope as a primary psychological resource for Fencing, influencing motivation, goal formation, and psychological resilience. Through the examination of how athletes utilize hope as a coping tool against pressure, failures, and rivalry, the study provides insights that can guide training programs, sports psychology practices, and coaching principles. Future research would be well advised to expand upon these findings by studying gender differences, the longitudinal impact of hope on performance, and intervention-based strategies for the development of hopeful dispositions in junior athletes. As this research suggests, hope in the unfettered wild of competitive Fencing is a tactic, an attitude, and a measure of success.

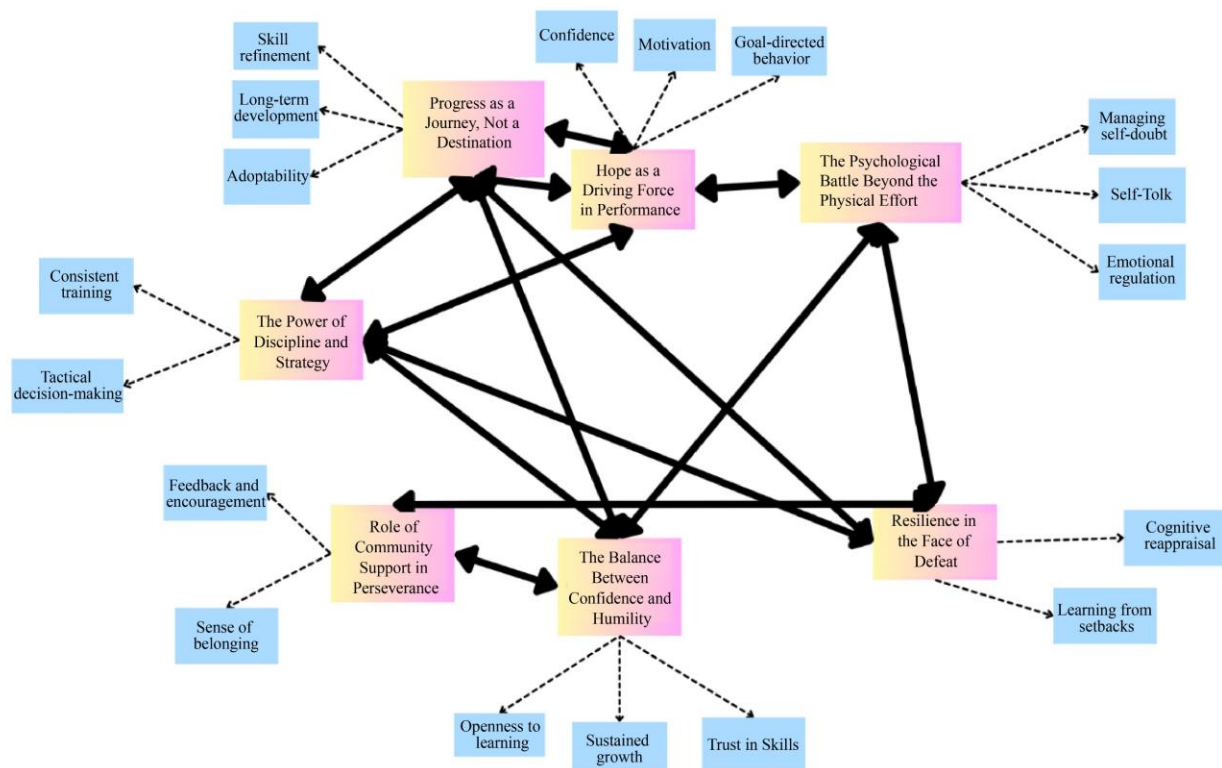


Fig. 1 Flowchart depicting the emerging themes

Author Contributions

AM: Formal analysis, Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft

RKN: Formal analysis, Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – Review & Editing

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