

**Exploring Athletes' Organic Self-talk in Competitive Sport Settings**

by

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## Abstract

**Background.** The area of self-talk has many applications to sport settings, from psychological skills interventions programs as well as the actual use of self-talk by athletes in competition. Overall, self-talk in sports appears to serve several cognitive and behavioral functions that are related to performance, emotions, and self-regulation. However, many questions remain open regarding how, why, where, and under what situations self-talk changes, especially from a qualitative perspective. **Aims.** This research seeks to explore athletes' experiences in a competitive environment to better understand how self-talk changes before, during, and after competition. **Methods.** Semi-structured and open-ended interviews were conducted with competitive athletes from individual sports, using a video-assisted approach. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. **Implications.** This study could offer insights into athletes lived experiences using self-talk in competitive settings and may serve as a valuable resource for athletes, coaches, and practitioners in developing strategies that could help redirect self-talk towards more constructive patterns, promoting positive experiences and healthier practices during competition.

*Keywords:* self-talk, individual sports, organic self-talk, sport psychology

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

Sports demand more than just physical ability; they also require strong mental skills to navigate the challenges of both training and competition. In recent years, increased media coverage has brought to light psychological strategies that elite athletes use to enhance their performance. One strategy that has gained attention is focused on the way athletes talk to themselves. For example, there is a video that shows football player Cristiano Ronaldo preparing to take a free kick while playing for his national team. Before taking the shot, he says, "You can do it. Go over the wall. Do the same as always. This shot is normal for you." Similarly, the British long jumper Jazmin Sawyers was seen encouraging herself with phrases like "Run at full speed" right before her performance (Eunoia Therapy, 2025). Even in tennis, it is very common to observe players engaging in constant verbal exchanges with themselves throughout a match. This phenomenon has also been called inner speech, internal dialogue, or private speech. However, in sport psychology literature the term "self-talk" has prevailed.

### Self-talk in Sports

First, we must note that self-talk studies began within cognitive psychology. Lev Vygotsky (1986) was a pioneer in using related concepts when studying thoughts and language as part of child development. Self-talk is a cognitive process that plays a significant role in shaping emotions, influencing behavior, performance, and supporting self-regulation across different areas of life (Karamitrou et al., 2024b). Thus, the study of self-talk has been of interest in diverse disciplines, such as philosophy, neuroscience, developmental, educational, clinical, social, and sport psychology (Theodorakis et al., 2012). Hardy (2006), in his review of the literature, excluded self-talk from other cognitive processes such as imagery or mind wandering. In addition, he offered a sport-related definition for self-talk including six aspects of its nature to

ensure clarity about the concept. Regarding the conceptualization of self-talk in sport, the growing research has led to the distinction between two types of self-talk: strategic and organic (Latinjak et al., 2019a). Strategic self-talk is typically developed through interventions and deliberately used to enhance performance. In contrast, organic self-talk arises naturally and includes both spontaneous, unintentional thoughts and goal-oriented, task-relevant statements used by athletes (Latinjak et al., 2019a). Furthermore, distinct models for the study of self-talk in sport have been developed (Hardy et al., 2009; Van Raalte et al., 2016) expanding the knowledge of the antecedents and consequences of self-talk and its influence on performance. Currently, self-talk plays a key role in sport psychology because it has been found to be a beneficial tool for building confidence (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2009), sustaining motivation (Fritsch & Latinjak, 2021), focusing (Latinjak et al., 2019b), improving technique (Theodorakis et al., 2000), and performance (Van Raalte et al., 2017).

### **Purpose and Research Question**

Overall, self-talk in sports appears to serve several cognitive and behavioral functions that still require further attention from research. The essence of self-talk is that the desired thought leads to the desired behavior (Johnson et al., 2004). In other words, self-talk is the starting point towards actions. Hence, the purpose of this research is to explore and understand the experience of athletes from individual sports using self-talk in competition. The research question this study addressed is: how does organic self-talk vary before, during, and after competition in individual sport? This study could offer insights into athletes' experiences using self-talk in competitive settings. The findings may serve as a valuable resource for athletes, coaches, and practitioners in developing strategies to enhance, modify, or reinforce current self-talk practices.

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

In recent years, self-talk research has seen significant growth and evolution. To better understand this concept, it is important to examine its development and the body of research conducted within sport contexts. This literature review will address the conceptualization of self-talk, sport-specific models, interventions, its relationship with performance and emotions, the theoretical framework guiding this research, and identified limitations. Finally, the rationale and purpose of the present study will be outlined.

### **Self-talk**

The origins of self-talk studies lie within cognitive psychology (Latinjak, 2020), particularly in Vygotsky's (1986) studies of thoughts and language in which he proposed different types of speech: social speech (communications with others), private speech (aloud self-instructions), and inner speech (internal thoughts). According to the Vygotskian perspective, private speech evolves into inner speech because its function changes and sets the basis of self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1986). Self-talk is also key for psychotherapeutic approaches, such as cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT), as it has been identified as an important piece for behavioral change (Beck, 2021). The basis of the research of self-talk in sport is directly related to the interplay between cognition, behavior, and affect. This proves how sport psychology works closely with cognitive psychology, personality theories, and social-cognitive psychology to have a better understanding of human functioning (Hardy et al., 2018). Self-talk reveals emotions, connections, beliefs, and perceptions based on previous experiences. It is a way to self-regulate while new redefined experiences are being formed (Van Raalte et al., 2016). Self-talk plays a key role in sport psychology, athletes use it as a tool for building confidence, sustaining motivation, attention control, emotional regulation, and improving performance (Fritsch et al., 2020; Fritsch

& Latinjak, 2021; Miles & Neil, 2013; Santos-Rosa et al., 2022; Urquijo et al., 2024). Also, it has been considered an integral part of psychological skills training interventions (Ballıkaya & Saraç, 2024; Einarsson et al., 2020).

### **Conceptualization of Self-talk in Sports**

In sport psychology literature, the term self-talk has had different definitions which have ranged from simple concepts to much more elaborate and detailed proposals. Theodorakis et al. (2000) stated that self-talk was “what people say to themselves either out loud or as a small voice inside their head” (p. 254). This definition presented two key points of self-talk in its initial conceptualization. First, self-talk is expressed either externally or internally. The second point is the fact that the message is directed exclusively toward the self. Furthermore, the initial understanding of self-talk distinguished the content of self-talk, specifically its valence, (positive, neutral, or negative self-statements) and the function (i.e., motivational and instructional self-talk) (Hardy et al., 2001; Theodorakis et al., 2000). Attempting to present a detailed analysis of self-talk literature and with the intentions of proposing a broader conceptualization, Hardy (2006) considered previous definitions as too simple to completely define self-talk. Therefore, defined it as: “(a) verbalizations or statements addressed to the self; (b) multidimensional in nature; (c) having interpretive elements association with the content of statements employed; (d) is somewhat dynamic; and (e) serving at least two functions; instructional and motivational, for the athlete” (p. 84). This definition highlights different factors which were key to have a better understanding of self-talk. However, certain aspects were unclear (i.e., somewhat dynamic) and limited the function of self-talk to a certain extent. Hardy (2006) initially conceptualized self-talk as having several key characteristics: valence (positive or negative), overtness (spoken aloud or internal), self-determined (personally chosen), function (instructional or motivational), and

frequency. Also emphasized that these characteristics are highly interrelated rather than independent. For example, self-talk may be classified as positive or negative not only based on its content, but also on the effect it has on the individual (Hardy et al., 2001). This means that positive statements could have a negative effect, and vice versa, therefore it was suggested that there must be a clear distinction between the content and the impact of self-talk (Karamitrou et al., 2024a). Self-talk could be positive or negative based solely on the content, the terms facilitative or debilitative should be used to refer to the impact of these statements (Theodorakis et al., 2012). Another distinction that began to broaden the concept and categorization of self-talk was the distinction between controlled self-talk, which reflects a mental process focused on making progress on a specific task or to solve a problem used for self-regulation (e.g., “stay focused”), and uncontrolled self-talk, which refers to statements that evaluates a past situation (e.g., “great shot”) or predict an outcome (e.g., “I’m not going to make it”) that appear unintentionally and without effort (Latinjak et al., 2014). Aiming for a more complementary concept, Latinjak et al. (2019a) defined self-talk as verbalizations directed to oneself, internally or externally, with interpretations related to its content. Additionally, they stated that it can be distinguished between organic and strategic self-talk. Strategic self-talk is using predefined key words with the goal to improve performance or for self-regulation. It is typically used before or during performance, and depending on the function could be described as instructional or motivational. While the term organic self-talk refers to inherent thoughts that athletes use for self-regulation before, during, and after their sport participation. In turn, organic self-talk can be distinguished between spontaneous and goal-directed self-talk (Latinjak et al., 2019a), which is referred to the previous classification of controlled and uncontrolled types of self-talk (Latinjak et al., 2014). Considering this, the main difference between organic and strategic self-talk would

be primarily the cognitive origin rather than its function, content, or effects (Latinjak et al., 2023). This conceptualization presented a broader perspective about self-talk and was helpful to understand deeply the different types of self-talk and its functions.

### **Self-talk in Sport Models**

Within the sport context, several studies have been focused on developing models based on theoretical foundations to continue strengthening the research on self-talk. Hardy et al. (2009) proposed a model to facilitate the understanding of self-talk and its relationship with performance. This model included situational and personal factors as part of potential self-talk antecedents, which can shape athletes' self-talk. A key aspect of this work is the possible mechanisms that are the basis of the self-talk-performance relationship. These mechanisms are considered as the potential consequences of self-talk and are categorized as cognitive (i.e., attention), motivational, behavioral, and affective (i.e., anxiety). With the idea of expanding the knowledge and understanding of self-talk in sports, Van Raalte et al. (2016) proposed a model integrating discursive and dual process theories. For this authors, self-talk is differentiated from other forms of inner speech and non-verbal cognition by its structured, syntactic nature, and its ability to occur either internally or externally. This sport specific model highlights the interrelationship between system 1 (self-talk as immediate and emotional reaction), system 2 (instructional and task-oriented self-talk), behavior, and both personal and contextual factors, the latter called situational in Hardy et al.'s (2009) model. Van Raalte et al.'s (2016) model and the organic self-talk framework proposed by Latinjak et al. (2019a) share important similarities, such as the distinction between intuitive/spontaneous and rational/goal-directed self-talk. However, there is a major difference between these approaches. Van Raalte et al. (2016) distinguished intuitive self-talk (system 1) from rational self-talk (system 2) including strategic self-talk within

the latter. Latinjak et al. (2019a) distinguished between organic and strategic self-talk; organic self-talk was categorized as spontaneous and goal-oriented self-talk, while the latter, strategic self-talk, was identified as exclusively focused on performance-related interventions.

More recently, Latinjak et al. (2023) presented a “transdisciplinary” self-talk model. This model is not specifically focused on sports; however, it has diverse applications, including sports. This model proposes an interrelationship between the different types of self-talk (i.e., spontaneous, or goal-directed self-talk) and variables such as personality traits, external factors, self-awareness, and psychological skills, which could influence behavior and vice versa. This model reflects a broad perspective on the literature about interpersonal communication and helps to expand the understanding about self-talk and its relationship with social support, emotions, performance, and mental skills.

### **Methodological Approaches**

When discussing self-talk research, three key questions have been identified related to this skill in sport (Theodorakis et al., 2012). The first one regarding the description and the content of athletes’ self-talk, the second about the antecedents or the factors that shape athletes’ self-talk, and the third about the consequences or impacts of self-talk, of which sport performance being the most popular among researchers (Karamitrou et al., 2020; Theodorakis et al., 2012). Different approaches have been used to study self-talk, from retrospective methods (i.e., Fritsch & Latinjak, 2021) to fully structured assessments (i.e., Karamitrou et al., 2024a). Within sport psychology literature, several questionnaires have been developed to explore the use, the content, and the structure of self-talk. For example, Hardy et al. (2005) designed the Self-Talk Use Questionnaire (STUQ), a self-report questionnaire that measures the frequency of athletes’ use of self-talk within the sport context. In a similar line, Theodorakis et al. (2008)

developed the Functions of Self-Talk Questionnaire (FSTQ); this instrument specifies the processes by which self-talk could facilitate performance-related outcomes. To assess the athletes' self-talk content and structure, Zourbanos et al. (2009) developed the Automatic Self-Talk Questionnaire for Sport (ASTQS), measuring positive, negative, and neutral categories. More recently, Karamitrou et al. (2024a) developed the Organic Self-Talk Questionnaire for Sport (OSTQS), a self-report measure that assesses athletes' organic, spontaneous, and goal-directed self-talk during sport participation to have a better understanding of self-talk antecedents and consequences. Most of the research in sports have used these tools to study self-talk from a variety of individual (Urquijo et al., 2024) and team sports (Karamitrou et al., 2024; Sarig et al., 2023a), obtaining relevant information about how athletes use self-talk and its relationship with emotions and performance from a quantitative perspective.

As regards qualitative studies, most have centered on exploring and analyzing the content of athletes' self-talk through recall interviews, also in a variety of sports. Hardy et al. (2001) conducted a descriptive study about when, where, what, and why athletes used self-talk, finding that most of the athletes used self-talk in sports related environments, mostly after practice or competitions for motivational and instructional purposes. In a more naturalistic approach, Miles & Neil (2013) explore the use of self-talk during critical game moments, finding that athletes used self-talk to redirect their thoughts to performance-related tasks. Also in competitive context, it was found that athletes used goal-directed self-talk for different purposes according to the moment of the game, mostly to generate facilitative attitudes for the future (Latinjak et al., 2019b). Similarly, Fritsch & Latinjak (2021) analyzed the content of goal-directed self-talk used by athletes from individual and team sports during situations that required volitional processes. Findings showed that athletes mostly used goal-directed self-talk to create positive attitudes for

the future (e.g., "I can do it"), to raise activation levels (e.g., "Try harder"), or to redirect focus to the task (e.g., "Focus on the game") during moments athletes felt a lack of motivation (Fritsch & Latinjak, 2021). Overall, self-talk literature has grown and matured in terms of methodology and theory-based studies offering different perspectives about its study. From exploring antecedents and consequences to test effectiveness in interventions and psychological skills training, self-talk appears to be a relevant topic in sport psychology research not only for its relationship to performance, but also to other psychological processes.

## **Interventions**

Self-talk interventions have primarily focused on evaluating their effects on sports performance, often by comparing different types of self-talk its functions. Theodorakis et al. (2000) conducted four experiments examining motivational and instructional self-talk and their effects on performance across different motor tasks. Their findings indicated that instructional self-talk was particularly effective for tasks requiring fine motor skills, whereas both motivational and instructional self-talk improved performance in tasks involving strength and endurance. Similarly, Hatzigeorgiadis et al. (2009) investigated the effects of motivational and instructional self-talk on self-confidence and anxiety among youth competitive tennis players. Participants in the experimental group used predetermined cue words during each set. The results showed that self-talk enhanced overall performance, increased self-confidence, and reduced cognitive anxiety. Extending this work, Hatzigeorgiadis et al. (2014) implemented a 10-week intervention with young competitive swimmers. Participants practiced a combination of instructional and motivational self-talk cues based on structured plans that specified which cues to use, when to use them, and their intended purpose. The findings demonstrated that the intervention group achieved better competition performance compared to the control group.

More recent research has expanded the focus of self-talk interventions to include attentional processes, demonstrating improvements not only in performance but also in perceptual and attentional functions associated with sport performance (Galanis et al., 2022; Sarig et al., 2023b). Overall, intervention-based research has primarily aimed to compare motivational and instructional self-talk (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2009; Sampson et al., 2025) or to examine the effectiveness of using cue words (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2014). Empirical evidence consistently supports the facilitative effects of self-talk on performance and has contributed to a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying its effectiveness across contexts. This body of work has informed the development of more structured and effective self-talk interventions. However, there remains a lack of studies examining self-talk interventions within competitive environments, highlighting an important gap in the literature and a key direction for future research.

### **Self-talk and Emotions**

An issue of interest among sport psychology literature is the reciprocal relationship between self-talk and emotions. The way athletes talk to themselves has an impact on the emotions they experience, and likewise, what athletes feel will influence their self-talk (Fritsch et al., 2020). This means that self-talk could be an antecedent to emotions functioning or a reaction to experienced emotions as a way of self-regulation (Latinjak et al., 2019b) to reduce competitive anxiety and pressure (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2009). The way athletes externally show their emotions is related to their organic self-talk, both spontaneous and goal-directed. Fritsch et al. (2022) explored the relationship between spontaneous and goal-directed self-talk with the intensity of the experienced emotion and the shown reaction. When athletes reported using only goal-directed self-talk, the intensity of emotions and the expressed reaction was lower in

comparison when athletes reported using only spontaneous self-talk (Fritsch et al., 2022). This is because spontaneous self-talk is usually emotionally charged and could be either/or antecedent or consequence of emotions (Latinjak et al., 2020; 2014). Self-talk frequency could increase while experiencing certain emotions. Athletes reported that the more fear of failure they experienced, the more they used self-talk, both positive and negative (De Muynck et al., 2020). There is evidence to support that lower emotional regulation predicts athletes' negative retrospective (e.g., "I played bad") and negative anticipatory (e.g., "I want to give up") self-talk (Karamitrou et al., 2024b), and consequently they perceive higher stress during competitions (Urquijo et al., 2024). Phenomenological research has shown that the dynamic interplay between organic self-talk and emotions could determine athletes' behavior (Latinjak et al., 2019b), especially because they are constantly talking to themselves during sports competitions, particularly when they experience intense emotions and try to regulate them, which will be key for having a better performance (Fritsch et al., 2020).

### **Self-talk and Performance**

Another relevant issue in the study of self-talk is its impact on sports performance. Research has proved that self-talk can contribute to enhance sports performance, in both individual (Santos-Rosa et al., 2022; Van Dyke et al., 2018) and team sports (Fritsch & Latinjak, 2021; Olisola & Olaitan, 2021). Therefore, it is not surprising that research on this subject has become popular. Self-talk can improve self-confidence and reduce stress and anxiety, which has been proven useful for better performance (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2009; Sarig et al., 2023a; Urquijo et al., 2024). Athletes who perform better use self-talk more frequently both in practice and competition and engage in less negative self-talk compared with poorer performance athletes (Hardy et al., 2004). Mostly, sports literature has examined the effects of positive and negative

self-talk on performance. Various studies have proven that the valence of self-talk has an impact on performance. Positive self-talk is related to the upcoming performance and negative self-talk with the current performance (Thibodeaux & Winsler, 2020). For example, it was found that collegiate level gymnasts who used more positive self-talk earned higher scores and had a more consistent performance during their balance beam event, in addition, it helped athletes to redirect their attention, have more cognitive and emotional control, and confidence (Van Dyke et al., 2018). This reflects the influence that self-talk can have in competitive settings and offers evidence about the impact of self-talk on the performance of high-level athletes. Similarly, an observational study conducted with youth tennis players during competitive matches proved that the self-talk valence was related to the odds of winning or losing the following point. Positive self-talk was associated with increased odds of winning, while negative self-talk was associated with increased odds of losing (Thibodeaux & Winsler, 2020). This study showed the relationship of self-talk and current performance, as well as its effects on future performance. Moreover, provides insight into the influence of positive and negative self-talk during competitive matches. Beyond the valence, self-talk could have several functions, such as to facilitate attitudes for upcoming situations, to maintain a behavior, or to construct new cognitions (Latinjak et al., 2019b). These functions have provided evidence about how self-talk is related to performance and self-regulation (Van Dyke et al., 2018). During periods of low performance, athletes found that the frequent use of both instructional and motivational self-talk, was effective for improving athletic skills, attention control, and perceived self-efficacy (Miles & Neil, 2013). Overall, literature in sport psychology suggest that athletes talk to themselves while performing and that they commonly believe it helps them perform better (Nedergaard et al., 2021; Olisola & Olaitan,

2021), therefore self-talk has been used as an effective strategy for improving performance (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2009).

## **Theoretical Framework**

In their conceptualization of self-talk, Latinjak et al. (2019a) differentiated between organic and strategic self-talk. This study was focused on studying organic self-talk. Therefore, it is relevant to explore the literature on the concepts that this framework proposes.

### **Organic Self-talk**

The term organic self-talk refers to inherent self-statement that athletes tell themselves during performance (Latinjak et al., 2019a). Latinjak et al. (2019a) presented this concept as a distinctive characteristic of the living beings and to avoid confusion with other concepts used in psychology for uncontrolled cognitive processes, as could occur with the previous concepts such as spontaneous self-talk (Van Raalte et al., 2016) and automatic self-talk (Zourbanos et al., 2009). In recent years, the study of organic self-talk has gained greater interest, several personal and contextual factors related to organic self-talk have been explored (Sarig et al., 2023a) and has been found that both could shape athletes' organic self-talk (Karamitrou et al., 2024b). Organic self-talk research focuses on self-statements that reflect ongoing cognitive processes and can be spontaneous or goal-directed (Latinjak et al., 2023). Each will be discussed below.

#### ***Spontaneous Self-talk***

Spontaneous self-talk is an uncontrolled process that is usually emotionally charged (Latinjak et al., 2014) and that serves to create self-awareness (Latinjak et al., 2023). It can be categorized according to two dimensions: valence (positive/negative) and time perspective (past, present, and future related) (Latinjak et al., 2014). Theodorakis et al. (2012) identified exploring and describing athletes' automatic self-talk, later called spontaneous self-talk (Latinjak et al.,

2014), as one main branch for research. Spontaneous self-talk can include irrational beliefs (e.g., “I will never have an opportunity again”), irrational demands (e.g., “I can’t afford any mistakes”), or self-downing statements (e.g., “I am such a big failure”) (Fritsch et al., 2020). Overall, spontaneous self-talk has been considered as a window into the human mind (Latinjak et al., 2019a) and it can also be associated with dysfunctional psychological traits, such as fear and pressure (De Muynck et al., 2020). Spontaneous self-talk categories such as positive or negative predictions (e.g., “I will win/ I will fail”), achievement or avoidance goals (e.g., “I hope I score/ They're not going to beat me”), doubts (e.g., “What if I miss?”), or internal or external attribution of success or failure (e.g., “It was my fault/ That was luck”) could be antecedents or consequences of emotions (Latinjak, Masó, et al., 2020). Finally, when talking about the relation with performance, spontaneous self-talk does not itself have any function, only reveals cognitive processes (Fritsch et al., 2020).

### ***Goal-directed Self-talk***

Goal-directed self-talk is a controlled process that looks for self-regulation (Latinjak et al., 2023), often appears during reasoning, decision making, solving problems, and includes the representation of the current state but also developing actions to move towards the desired state. (Latinjak et al., 2019a). It could be categorized in different dimensions according to the activation state (activated, neutral, deactivated), time-orientation (past, past-present, present-future, and future), and their purpose (Latinjak et al., 2014). Goal-directed self-talk could be used to control cognitive responses (e.g., “It’s okay, nothing happened”), control activated states (e.g., “Don’t be scared”), control deactivated states (e.g., “Don’t quit”), create activated states (e.g., “Give your best”), create deactivated states (e.g., “Calm down”), regulate behavior (e.g., “Focus”), and positive predictions (e.g., “You will score”) (Latinjak et al., 2014). Research on goal-directed self-talk has proved that it is helpful for athletes’ motivation, to improve activation

levels, and increased focus on a task (Fritsch & Latinjak, 2021). A study conducted with basketball players, found that goal-directed self-talk facilitated attention control, energy levels, self-confidence, and motivation in the different challenges athletes faced in competition (Latinjak et al., 2019b). Overall, goal-directed self-talk research has been focused on functions and effectiveness, identifying that works closely with other psychological skills such as goal setting or imagery (Latinjak et al., 2023).

Despite some research support that is useful to distinguish and categorized spontaneous and goal-directed self-talk (Latinjak et al., 2014; Van Raalte et al., 2014), the recent transdisciplinary model developed by Latinjak et al. (2023) suggests that goal-directed self-talk, in connection with spontaneous self-talk, has an impact on self-regulation. More recent research also suggests that these two categories should be treated more as proportional rather than divided to offer an accurate picture of the mental process (Fritsch et al., 2024).

### **Limitations in the Self-talk Literature**

Within the self-talk literature, certain limitations have been found. One of them has been its use in training and competitions. Athletes reported using more self-talk during competitions than in practice (Hardy et al., 2005), hence, studying athletes' self-talk while competing could offer more information about the specific demands of this mental process that are required only in the complex environment of competition (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2014; Thibodeaux & Winsler, 2020). However, most studies have been conducted in non-competitive environments. Self-talk can vary during a competition, as the mental and physical demands can change. Athletes under high pressure tend to use short, repetitive phrases, unlike in low-pressure situations where they engage in more varied self-talk (Nedergaard et al., 2021). This highlights the relevance of exploring deeply how self-talk changes during distinct moments of the competition, because that

could allow us to understand the resources that athletes pull from in order to develop proper strategies for them.

### **Rationale and Purpose**

The area of self-talk has many applications to sport settings. From psychological skills interventions programs as well as the actual use of self-talk by athletes in competition, research has shown that self-talk is a critical component in sports that significantly influences performance (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2014; Thibodeaux & Winsler, 2020), emotions (Fritsch et al., 2022), and it appears to be related to other psychological skills (Latinjak, 2020). However, many questions remain open regarding how, why, where, and under what situations self-talk changes, especially from a qualitative perspective. Most of the research has been done from a quantitative inquiry, using questionnaires to explore self-talk and to assess the effectiveness of strategic self-talk interventions in improving performance, most of it done under controlled environments. Little has been done from a qualitative perspective considering the competitive environment and that reflects the athletes' experience, without prior instruction or intervention from researchers. This study aims to address a key gap in the literature by incorporating a qualitative perspective that captures athletes' experiences within natural and competitive settings. By examining self-talk in an uncontrolled environment, the research seeks to better understand how it changes before, during, and after competition. Conducted in real-world competitive contexts, this study focuses on athletes' lived experiences under conditions that remain largely underexplored. The research question guiding this study is: How does organic self-talk vary before, during, and after competition in individual sports?

**Positionality**

As the principal researcher, it is important to state my background to better understand my positionality for this project because it will have an influence on the analysis that will be conducted. I am a former athlete; I played competitive soccer for 15 years in Mexico. During my time as an athlete, I experienced firsthand different variations in my self-talk and the influence this had on my performance. In addition to soccer, I had the opportunity to compete in individual sports (i.e. tennis), and I noticed certain differences in my self-talk depending on the type of sport, which I found very interesting. Once I graduated from University, I was involved in sport psychology and worked with athletes and teams from different sports for several years. During this time, I remember that many of them struggled with their self-talk, and they considered it to be one of the mental aspects that most impacted their game. Self-talk is a topic that has been interesting and intriguing for me for a long time. The analysis of this project will be influenced by my own experiences; however, my goal is to give a voice to athletes' experiences who are currently competing to understand how they use self-talk, when they use it, and how they perceive the impact of it on their performance. I believe my background as a former athlete and professional experiences could allow me to connect with the participants which can contribute to create a rich discussion environment and therefore, contribute to the knowledge and understanding of self-talk.

### **Chapter 3. Methodology**

This qualitative study was conducted under the constructivist paradigm. This paradigm assumes a relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology; meaning that people create their own interpretations of the world around them and that knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and participants aiming to better understand peoples' beliefs and behaviors to create knowledge from different individual experiences (Markula & Silk, 2011). By capturing the experience of athletes' self-talk from different sports, the constructivist paradigm was the best approach as each athlete had a unique perspective regarding self-talk while competing.

#### **Methods**

Using Latinjak et al.'s (2019a) self-talk in sports model as framework, interviews with a naturalistic video assisted approach (Fritsch et al., 2022) with athletes from individual sports were conducted. Seven competitive races were recorded, capturing moments before, during, and after each competition. These video recordings were subsequently used in self-confrontational interviews (von Cranach & Harrè, 1982), during which participants viewed footage of their own performances to elicit stimulated recall. This method has been found effective for studying self-talk, emotions, and psychological processes (Fritsch et al., 2022; Martinent et al., 2015; Miles & Neil, 2013; Sève et al., 2007). The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended to explore further information that arose during the interview. Conducting interviews about the lived experiences of the participants helped to better understand how self-talk changed and how/why athletes use it, especially in competitive situations.

#### **Participants**

A purposive sample strategy was followed according to Robinson's (2014) guidelines about participant sampling in qualitative research. The target population included athletes who:

(a) competed in individual sports, (b) competed at the regional or national level in March 2026 in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and (c) were between 18 and 25 years old. The final sample included five competitive athletes (three men and two women) from individual sports; the sports were swimming (N=1), short-distance running (N=1), mid-distance running (N=3) competing at regional (N=3) and national (N=2) levels. All participants provided written informed consent (Appendix B) prior to participation.

### **Data Collection**

As previously mentioned, data was collected in two ways: 1) video, and 2) interviews.

#### *Video*

To facilitate accurate recall of self-talk during competition, video recordings of each participant's competition were collected and used during the interviews. This approach has been shown to effectively promote more vivid and detailed recollections (Miles & Neil, 2013). In total, footage from seven events was recorded, with a focus on key moments within each competition. Hill and Shaw (2013) identified three key moments in competition: before the competition begins, moments close to the end of the competition, and situations in which the outcome is at stake. In addition, the end of the competition was considered a key moment in the present study in order to explore the impact of performance outcomes on athletes' self-talk. Each event was recorded using an iPad positioned to follow the athlete's performance while capturing these key moments. The day after the competition, the video footage was sent to each participant. Participants were asked to identify what they considered to be the key moments of their event, which were then discussed in detail during the interview.

### *Interview*

Interviews were conducted two days after each participant's competition. This time was intentionally chosen to allow for interview preparation and video clip edition, as well as to give athletes time to rest mentally and physically after their competition, ensuring they could be fully engaged during the interview. Previous research has adopted a similar timeline of one to two days post-competition and has reported effective data collection using this approach (Fritsch et al., 2022; Martinent & Ferrand, 2009). Before the formal interview began, participants completed a practice question. They watched a selected video clip from their event and were asked to describe their self-talk at that moment. This response was not included in the study and served only to familiarize participants with the interview protocol and to clarify any potential doubts about the concept of self-talk prior to the main interview questions.

The interview guide (Appendix A) was developed based on the model proposed by Latinjak et al. (2019a). Following the practice question, the interview was structured into three sections: (a) moments before the competition, (b) moments during the competition, and (c) moments after the competition. For each section, participants watched the video footage and were asked to describe their self-talk in detail. Based on their responses, follow-up questions were asked to further explore the causes, purposes, and perceived impacts of their self-talk.

Before collecting data from study participants, the protocol was piloted with two members of a recreational tennis club. The team competed in a tournament and recorded the matches, which were used for the test. This pilot phase allowed an assessment of whether or not the protocol was understandable and whether or not the interview questions were clear to participants. Based on this, adjustments were made to improve the clarity and overall structure of the questions. For example, question #2, "why would you use those statements," was changed to

“where are those statements coming from?.” This happened because, when answering the question, the participants talked more about the purpose of the self-talk rather than about what caused it, which was the main objective of the question. This confusion likely arose since another question specifically addressed the purpose of using self-talk. Additionally, a brief explanation of the difference between organic and strategic self-talk was included so that participants could focus on statements that arose naturally, not on those they could have used deliberately. This test was conducted after approval by the ethics committee, and the information obtained during this test was not considered for the study or for the analysis; it was solely for testing the protocol.

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Copies of the transcripts were then sent to participants for member checking. This process allowed participants to reflect on their interviews and verify that the transcripts accurately represented their experiences, thereby contributing to the credibility and quality of the study (Zitomer & Goodwin, 2014). Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). This method is widely used in qualitative research to identify, analyze, and report patterns within a data set. It is a flexible approach that aligns with the study’s philosophical stance and allows for rich, detailed, and explicit interpretation of the data. After member checking was completed, the transcripts were reviewed repeatedly to ensure familiarization with the data. An abductive analysis approach was then adopted (Thompson, 2022). This involved engaging with the theoretical framework without applying a predetermined coding scheme. This approach enables greater theoretical flexibility while allowing insights to emerge through an ongoing interplay between data and theory (Khurshid et al., 2026).

## Chapter 4. Results

This chapter presents the findings of the present study, analyzing how athletes' organic self-talk changed in competition. To address the research question, the analysis was organized into three stages: moments before the competition, moments during the competition, and moments after the competition. This structure allowed for a nuanced examination of how self-talk characteristics changed throughout the competition.

Although the study was originally designed to consider two events per participant to compare their self-talk across different competitions, only two participants had more than one due to competition scheduling. These participants contributed data from two separate events, enabling within-participant comparisons and allowing for analysis of variations in their self-talk across distinct events. Overall, the results indicated that the content, function, and perceived purpose of athletes' self-talk varied depending on the stage of the competition. Athletes reported not only differences in what they said to themselves, but also in the purpose of using those statements at each phase of the competition (Table 1).

### Self-talk during key competitive moments

#### Before competition

Before the competition, self-talk primarily served functions related to preparation and regulation. Athletes described using self-talk to manage emotions and to review the race strategies.

***Emotional Regulation*** – Before the competition, athletes reported experiencing feelings of nervousness and competitive anxiety, which they attributed mostly to their own performance expectations. Participants described concerns related to meeting personal standards, race times, and reaching their best performance engaging in statements such as “you need to be faster than them” (P4). To manage these emotions, most of the athletes engaged in self-encouraging

**Table 1.***Reported self-talk within competitive settings*

| Before competition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                   | During competition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                           | After competition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                             |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Self-talk                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Purpose           | Self-talk                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Purpose                                                   | Self-talk                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Purpose                     |
| Give yourself a chance<br>Do the best you can<br>I know how it feels<br>I really have nothing to lose<br>I have no expectations<br>I have no need to really perform<br>I'm just here and I can only move up<br>I'm here for fun, this is a free race for me<br>You need to be faster than them<br>Don't mess up<br>Don't embarrass yourself<br>You need to hold on for your team, not necessarily for yourself | Get into the zone | Stick on to him<br>Try and speed up<br>Okay, this is good. Okay, this is good.<br>We're just gonna keep on working at this, or we just try to go a little bit faster each lap, just a little bit faster<br>I'm almost done<br>Fast and relaxed<br>Hang on to the lead<br>Alright, I'll just sit for now, just hang off the back<br>Stay under<br>Stay with your head down<br>I gotta do my turn, do my underwater                                                                                                | Stay focused on race execution / Follow the race strategy | Wow, that really hurts for a slow time<br>I've ran way faster three years ago<br>I'm annoyed that I was last<br>That definitely wasn't the best performance<br>Shitty way to end your year<br>What a way to end the season<br>Oh well, I did what I could                                                                                                                | Performance self-assessment |
| Relaxed<br>I'm fit<br>I've done this before<br>I've ran this last year; I know what to expect<br>I don't belong here<br>There is no reason that I should be here<br>Stay in the moment                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Regulation        | Okay, that's my time, whatever<br>Yeah, this hurts but it's almost over so push<br>I can't follow that<br>Hang on to the lead<br>This is what we're doing, stay focused                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Regulation                                                | You know what? you did what you wanted to do. You gave it 100% of your effort<br>I am happy with how much effort I gave<br>This was everything I had and that I didn't have any more energy<br>It doesn't matter<br>This is all right. This is maybe not quite what we wanted, but this is okay<br>I tried my best<br>Go rest, go stretch<br>I got another race tomorrow | Reframe                     |
| Be fast, be aggressive<br>Make sure when you gran the baton you switch your hands over<br>Getting three strides out and getting ahead and getting out of trouble<br>Think of your first three strides<br>Just get out hard, go through the 400 you want<br>Get out to the front<br>Get off the line and just slot in right behind him                                                                          | Review strategy   | Give yourself a chance<br>You got 150 meters to go<br>Finish this race, finish feeling like you're done<br>Just keep on, keep going<br>300 to go, try to kick<br>I can still hang on, I can kick a little bit<br>Finish, finish hard, finish strong, leave nothing on the track<br>This is it, last race. Last push in the last race<br>Don't fuck this up now, it's on you<br>Okay, make up time<br>Let's pick it up<br>Don't be slow, don't get passed<br>Yeah, gak kick<br>Keep going, don't hold back at all | Motivation                                                | I can go faster<br>I can definitely push this down a little further, right?<br>Yeah, I finished this<br>I'm happy to finish the race<br>Oh yeah! My process worked<br>Okay, this was good                                                                                                                                                                                | Self-affirmation            |

Note: Athletes reported different types of self-talk and the purpose of using those statements also changed as the competition progressed.

self-talk. This self-talk included motivational and self-affirmation statements such as “give yourself a chance” (P1) and “I am fit, I have done this before. I ran this race last year, so I know what to expect” (P3). Also, specific behavioral instructions such as “stay in the moment” (P5) or “stay relaxed” (P2). Athletes indicated that this form of self-talk was used to reduce feelings of anxiety and nervousness prior to competing. Most of the athletes described using these statements repeatedly in the moments leading up to the event to calm themselves and refocus their attention. The purpose of the self-talk they used was to help them achieve a mental state they associated with being ready to compete, often described as being “in the zone.” One athlete specifically reported that engaging in this type of self-talk allowed him to feel more “locked in and mentally prepared” (P2) before the competition.

***Focusing on the race*** – Another relevant finding concerning athletes’ self-talk before competition was related specifically to race execution and strategy review. Several athletes reported using goal-directed self-talk focused on the initial stages of the race. This self-talk included statements such as “just get out to the front” (P1) or “be fast, be aggressive” (P5), which reflected intentions regarding positioning, pace, and competitive approach at the start of the race. Athletes used these statements as a way to mentally rehearse their desired actions and establish a clear focus before competition. One of the participants mentioned that this has been fundamental throughout his sports career, because it has helped him to give direction to what he wants to do right before starting the race. Beyond start-specific instructions like “think of your firsts three strides” (P2), some athletes also reported engaging in a broader review of their overall race strategy through self-talk prior to competing. This type of self-talk involved recalling planned pacing strategy like “just slot in right behind him” (P1) referring to using another competitor's pace to maintain their own, and performance goals, like “go out hard and go through

the 400 you want to” (P3) referring to his intention to maintaining his position in the first part of the race. Some of the athletes indicated that these statements helped reinforce the tactical aspects of their race plan and served as reminders of previously established goals. Self-talk in this stage helped athletes stay committed to their planned approach and reduced distractions in the moments leading up to the race, as one of them mentioned “I think a lot of that self-talk kind of down the ladder helped with, all right, we're gonna follow through on this plan” (P3).

***Rumination*** – Some athletes reported engaging in self-talk characterized by ruminative thoughts related to previous race experiences and comparisons with other competitors. This form of self-talk included evaluative and pressure-inducing statements such as “don’t mess this up” (P4). Some athletes associated this self-talk with self-doubts, noting that “it can be very easy to have doubts about yourself before a race” (P1). Athletes reported being aware that these thoughts could negatively influence their confidence and emotional state prior to competing, as P3 mentioned “I know it’s because I’m scared that I could fail.” Some athletes indicated that, when these thoughts were present, they tended to diminish their own confidence and increase perceived pressure related to performance expectations as it could lead them to “talk themselves down a little” (P1) before the competition.

### **During competition**

In this stage, self-talk shifted to meet performance demands and became more focused on execution and race strategy. Given the nature of the sports examined and the relatively short duration of the events, athletes’ self-talk during this stage was largely task-focused and oriented toward maintaining concentration, managing effort, and following their race plan.

***Performance / Strategy*** – During competition, athletes reported that their self-talk was mainly focused on monitoring and regulating pace throughout the race. Athletes described using

ongoing statements such as “keep on working at this, try to go a little bit faster each lap, just a little bit faster” (P2), which reflected continuous awareness of their speed and effort. In addition to pace-related self-talk, athletes reported using goal-directed self-talk to remind themselves of specific technical elements, such as “stay under as far as you can, that’s gonna save your arms” (P5), or their race strategy like “stick on to him” (P1). These statements were used to guide their behavior and manage physical resources during the race. Athletes also reported engaging in motivational self-talk during competition to encourage sustained effort and direct their behavior toward their expected performance level. Statements such as “pick it up, let’s go” (P4) and “finish hard, leave nothing on the track” (P3) were used to maintain intensity, particularly during challenging moments right before the end of the race. Participants indicated that self-talk helped them stay engaged with performance demands as the competition progressed.

***Regulation*** – Additionally, during competition, athletes reported using self-talk aimed at regulating physical sensations and maintaining task focus. Participants described statements related to their physical state like “I’m tired and I have half of the race left” (P3) but also using statements such as “this hurts but it’s almost over, so I can push” (P2) to manage that and reframe their physical strain. This type of self-talk reflected athletes’ efforts to tolerate fatigue and sustain effort during demanding phases of the race. Athletes also reported using self-talk to maintain focus on performance execution, including statements such as “300 more to go” (P3). Athletes consistently perceived this form of self-talk as having a positive impact on their performance. One athlete explained that it helped to “block everything that is unimportant” (P2), allowing him to limit overthinking and remain focused on the race helping him to “distract the brain from thinking about hurting” because thinking about hurting too soon would make him have a bad race. Overall, participants described their self-talk as a tool that supported

concentration, emotional control, and sustained engagement with performance demands during the competition.

### **After competition**

After competition, self-talk was mostly centered on evaluation and reflection. Athletes engaged in self-talk to assess their performance, regulate emotional responses to the competition outcomes, and reinforce feelings of accomplishment or acceptance, depending on how they perceived their results.

*Performance Self-assessment / Performance Processing* – Self-talk after competition was linked to the performance outcomes achieved in the event. Most athletes reported engaging in evaluative and critical self-talk as they reflected on their results. For instance, statements such as “definitely wasn’t the best performance, what a way to end the year” (P4) and “I’ve run way faster years ago” (P1) were expressed when athletes processed what happened and assessed the quality of their performance as negative, while statements like “my process worked” (P5) when the perspective of the result was more positive. This form of self-talk appeared to function as an immediate appraisal of performance rather than an emotional reaction alone. Athletes acknowledged that their self-talk was strongly influenced by their competitive mindset and their desire to achieve better results. Several athletes indicated that performance standards were deeply internalized, such that results falling short of expectations often prompted self-questioning and self-critique. As one athlete described, “it’s very engrained in us, if your result isn’t good, then you’re, like, questioning yourself” (P5). This suggests that self-talk after competition may reflect a performance-oriented perspective, in which self-evaluation is closely tied to results.

***Reframing*** – In addition, athletes reported that after competition they tended to engage in self-talk to reframe their thoughts and prevent prolonged focus on negative aspects of their performance or results. This type of self-talk was characterized by statements that emphasized acceptance and self-compassion, such as “Hey, this is all right. Not quite what we wanted, but this is okay” (P2) and “I tried my best, I did what I could” (P3). Athletes indicated that these statements helped them acknowledge their effort and place the performance within a broader context, rather than evaluating themselves solely based on the outcome of the competition, as one of them mentioned: “it is like a zoom out moment” (P1). This self-talk appeared to serve as a regulatory of negative emotional responses and facilitating a more balanced appraisal of performance reframing their mindset from result-based judgments to effort-based appraisals. For example, P1 was coming from a negative immediate response based solely on the results, saying things like “that really hurt for such a slow time” but then shifted to “you know what? You did what you wanted, you gave your 100% of your effort”, which helped to reduce the negative affect. Additionally, some athletes reported that such statements supported motivation by redirecting attention toward future opportunities (e.g., “There’s more races in the future” (P2)). However, athletes consistently noted that the nature of their self-talk after competition was strongly influenced by the results achieved. According to participants, performances perceived as successful were more likely to elicit facilitative and encouraging self-talk, whereas results perceived as poor tended to be associated with more negative or debilitative self-talk. For example, one of the athletes mentioned “I still think about it, obviously, and it's gonna carry it into my next race” (P4), this could suggest that self-talk is outcome-dependent after competition, with athletes’ perceptions of success or failure shaping whether self-talk after competition functioned as a facilitative or debilitative mechanism.

Overall, these findings suggest that athletes engage in multiple forms of self-talk throughout competition, drawing on different cognitive resources based on perceived challenges. This highlights the shifting role of organic self-talk in competitions and its stage-dependent function within an athlete's competitive experiences.

## **Chapter 5. Discussion**

Guided by the self-talk in sport model proposed by Latinjak et al. (2019a), the purpose of this study was to explore how athletes' organic self-talk changed before, during, and after competition based on their lived experiences. The findings indicate differences not only in the content of their self-talk across competitive stages but also in the functions it served. This reinforces the view of organic self-talk as a functional, context-dependent process that adapts to situational demands within competitive environments (Sarig et al., 2023a)

### **Organic self-talk as a dynamic and interactive process**

Consistent with the theoretical framework, the findings demonstrate that organic self-talk changed dynamically throughout competition as athletes' emotional states, expectations, and perceived challenges evolved. The results support the distinction between the two primary categories of organic self-talk, spontaneous and goal-directed, as outlined by Latinjak et al. (2019a). Considered together, both appear to provide a more realistic representation of athletes' cognitive functioning in competitive contexts (Fritsch et al., 2024). The present findings support this perspective that spontaneous and goal-directed self-talk should be understood as interacting processes rather than independent forms, highlighting the dynamic interplay between emotional reactions and deliberate regulatory strategies. This reinforces the view of organic self-talk as an adaptive and integrated cognitive process.

Addressing the research question, the findings indicate that athletes engage in multiple forms of self-talk throughout competition, drawing on different cognitive resources depending on the specific perceived challenges. This highlights the importance of examining self-talk as context-dependent (Latinjak et al., 2020) and reinforces the need to explore how it evolves across different stages of competition.

Across the competition, athletes described moving along a continuum between spontaneous and goal-directed self-talk as they managed performance demands. Self-talk frequently shifted from spontaneous to goal-directed, consistent with the dual-process perspectives (Latinjak et al., 2019a; Van Raalte et al., 2016). Spontaneous self-talk (e.g., “These guys are fast”) typically emerged as an emotional reaction to pressure or nervousness. This was often followed by goal-directed self-talk (e.g., “Get off the line and just slot in right behind him”), which athletes used deliberately to regulate emotions and redirect attention toward task execution. This pattern supports previous findings suggesting that goal-directed self-talk often functions as a regulatory response to emotionally charged spontaneous self-talk (Boudreault et al., 2018; Latinjak et al., 2014) and aligns with Latinjak et al.’s (2023) transdisciplinary model, which conceptualizes goal-directed self-talk as a mechanism for regulating spontaneous cognitive activity.

### ***Functional shifts in self-talk across competition stages***

A notable finding concerns how athletes used motivational and instructional self-talk differently across competition. Before and after the race, athletes predominantly engaged in motivational self-talk. Motivational self-talk is commonly used in competitive contexts (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2014), before the competition, statements such as “I’ve done this before” or “I’m just here and I can only move up” were used to enhance confidence and facilitate entry into an optimal psychological state. After the race, motivational self-talk (e.g., “I can definitely push this down a little further, right?”) was often future-oriented, supporting reflection, goal-setting, and continued engagement in training and competition. These findings align with Ortiz-Velasco et al. (2025), who reported that athletes who believe in their capacity to improve their sport-specific skills are more likely to engage in motivational self-talk.

During the race itself, instructional self-talk was more prevalent, with athletes focusing on pacing, positioning, and technical execution (e.g., “All right, just hang off the back”). This pattern suggests that athletes dynamically adapt the function of their goal-directed self-talk to meet situational demands as competition unfolds (Latinjak et al., 2019a). While previous research has suggested that motivational self-talk may be more effective than instructional self-talk during competition (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2014), the present findings challenge this perspective. Rather than one type being inherently superior, self-talk appears to function as a flexible psychological tool that athletes adjust according to their needs, whether to regulate motivation, manage emotions, or direct behavior.

### ***Stage-specific patterns of organic self-talk***

Organic self-talk not only changed across the overall competition but also showed variations within each stage. Before the competition, self-talk was strongly influenced by emotions and performance expectations, serving functions such as motivation, emotional regulation, and attentional focus. Emotions such as nervousness, pressure, or performance anxiety either generated spontaneous self-talk or were intensified by it, reinforcing the idea that spontaneous self-talk is an integral component of emotional experience rather than a simple antecedent or consequence (Fritsch & Jekauc, 2020). In this sense, spontaneous self-talk reflects ongoing cognitive-emotional processes (Fritsch et al., 2020). To regulate these initial reactions, athletes frequently shifted toward goal-directed self-talk to manage thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to facilitate performance readiness. This supports the notion that the primary function of goal-directed self-talk is self-regulation (Latinjak et al., 2019a) and is consistent with evidence demonstrating its effectiveness among high-performance athletes (Latinjak et al., 2016).

During competition, self-talk was predominantly goal-directed and closely adapted to race demands and performance feedback. Findings align with evidence indicating that goal-directed self-talk is particularly effective for performance regulation in competitive settings (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2014). Athletes used self-talk to maintain attentional focus, regulate effort, and cope with fatigue and pain, especially during critical moments by the end of the race. Statements such as “Okay, yeah, this hurts, but it’s almost over. So, push” illustrate how self-talk was used deliberately to manage physical strain and allocate remaining resources. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that self-talk supports regulation of perceived exertion and effort (Latinjak et al., 2020; Latinjak et al., 2019b), particularly when athletes are aware of the remaining distance or time (de Koning et al., 2011). Intervention studies similarly demonstrate that endurance performance can be enhanced through self-talk during final phases of exertion (DeWolfe et al., 2021). Together, these results reaffirm self-talk as an effective self-regulatory strategy for sustaining or enhancing performance under competitive conditions (Meijen et al., 2023).

After the competition, self-talk commonly shifted toward reflection and evaluation, with athletes cognitively and emotionally processing their performance and competition outcomes. These findings highlight the role of self-talk in shaping post-competition responses, particularly through performance appraisals linked to results. Consistent with cognitive appraisal theory, athletes’ interpretations of their performance influenced their emotional and cognitive reactions (Weinberg & Bianco, 2020). Athletes who initially evaluated their performance negatively often engaged in negative self-talk; however, many subsequently used self-talk adaptively to reframe the experience and regulate emotions. This aligns with research suggesting that negative self-talk frequently emerges from unfavorable appraisals (Borrajó et al., 2024) but can be modified

through re-evaluation. By shifting from outcome-based judgments (e.g., “That definitely wasn’t the best performance”) to effort-based appraisals (e.g., “You gave your 100%”), athletes were able to reduce negative affect and maintain a more constructive outlook. These findings suggest that self-talk functions not only as an immediate emotional response but also as a coping mechanism that facilitates psychological recovery after competition. This process supports resilience by helping athletes regulate motivation, confidence, and emotional responses, enabling them to reappraise competitive experiences as challenges rather than threats (Sarig, Alvarez-Alvarado, et al., 2023). Overall, the post-competition findings underscore the importance of fostering adaptive self-talk strategies, particularly as a means of managing performance-related stress and supporting wellbeing after both successful and unsuccessful outcomes.

### **Use of self-talk in competitive settings**

Within sport, self-talk has been identified as a key psychological process for behavioral and emotional regulation (Galanis & Hatzigeorgiadis, 2020). Despite this recognition, its role within competitive contexts remains relatively underexplored. The present study collaborates in addressing this gap by examining self-talk as it naturally occurs during competition and by centering on athletes lived experiences of this internal process. The findings indicate that overall, athletes engage in continuous and dynamic self-talk throughout competition, using it to interpret events, regulate emotional responses, and adapt to performance demands. Across participants, self-talk was consistently described as essential for maintaining psychological control during competition, particularly for regulating anxiety and emotions. Athletes emphasized its role in promoting mental clarity and focus, as illustrated by one participant who described self-talk as “less noise in my head,” or another who said “self-talk helps me managing how I feel about the race.” This echoes previous research suggesting that self-talk helps athletes to reframe their

mindset (Fritsch & Latinjak, 2021; Miles & Neil, 2013), to build confidence (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2009), and to adopt a more self-compassionate approach toward themselves (Sereda et al., 2022).

Self-talk has also been widely documented as an effective mental strategy in sport performance (Theodorakis et al., 2008), athletes in the present study perceived it as particularly valuable for managing pre-competition nerves, redirecting attention during performance, and maintaining emotional control. Supporting this perspective, Olisola and Olaitan (2021) found that athletes' belief in and use of self-talk was associated with improved performance outcomes in competitive settings. From the athletes' perspective, findings in this study further suggest a bidirectional relationship between organic self-talk and performance. Participants reported that self-talk could influence how they performed, while performance outcomes, in turn, shaped how they spoke to themselves during and after competition. This reciprocal dynamic highlights the importance of self-talk awareness, as understanding one's self-talk has been identified as a critical step in performance enhancement (Ortíz-Velasco et al., 2025). Recognizing this relationship underscores the need for further research examining how organic self-talk and performance interact, particularly within real competitive environments.

Exploring self-talk in competition may offer unique insight into the cognitive and emotional processes athletes experience under high-pressure conditions that are distinct from training or non-competitive settings (Thibodeaux & Winsler, 2020). Previous research suggests that both the content and function of self-talk shift depending on athletes' perceptions of anxiety-provoking situations, such as races or decisive competitive moments (Santos-Rosa et al., 2022). The present findings support this view, demonstrating that athletes adapt their self-talk in response to perceived demands and situational challenges during competition.

Overall, the findings of the present study reinforce the conceptualization of organic self-talk as a psychological process with the capacity to either enhance or undermine confidence, attentional focus, and performance. Importantly, its influence extends beyond performance outcomes to athletes' psychological wellbeing, highlighting self-talk as not only a performance and emotional related construct but also a central component of the broader competitive experience.

### **Implications**

These findings offer practical insights into how athletes use and experience self-talk in competition, providing concrete information that may guide applied practice. By identifying athletes' specific needs, preferences, and perceptions of self-talk, sport psychologists and mental performance consultants could design interventions that are directly relevant to the demands athletes face in competitive settings. While self-talk is a well-established performance strategy, these results underscore the importance of adapting interventions to the individual athlete, the characteristics of their sport, and the competitive context. This applied understanding allows practitioners to assess when and how self-talk strategies should be introduced, modified, or reinforced. As a result, practitioners can implement personalized tools that not only support performance consistency and focus but also promote athletes' psychological wellbeing in competition.

For coaches these findings could provide valuable insight into the cognitive processes that athletes experience during competition. Coaches usually promotes self-talk in both, practice and competition (Thibodeaux & Winsler, 2022), so understanding the types of self-talk athletes use, the situations that trigger it, and its perceived effects can help them better empathize with athletes' competitive experiences. This awareness may enable coaches to tailor feedback,

instructions, and support to the athlete's cognitive and emotional state in competition. Athletes' self-talk is influenced by their perceived support from coaches (Zourbanos et al., 2011), by recognizing and reinforcing adaptive self-talk strategies or guiding athletes toward more effective alternatives, coaches can offer more psychologically-informed support that complements technical and tactical guidance during competition. For athletes, this study offers an opportunity to better understand how their self-talk may operate during competition. The findings can help athletes to recognize the competitive moments they find most challenging and to understand how their self-talk influences their responses in those situations. With this insight, athletes can actively develop personalized self-talk strategies to address the demands they face only when competing. By taking an intentional and informed approach to their self-talk, athletes may enhance not only their performance but also their psychological wellbeing and overall, a more positive competitive experience. Finally, this study could support reflexive self-talk interventions which are less controlled and more focused on the athlete's needs (Latinjak et al., 2019a), this could help athletes to understand their self-talk to encourage them planning and reflecting about the use of cognitive strategies in sport.

### **Limitations and future directions**

Regarding the limitations of this study, it is important to acknowledge that this study is based on athletes' retrospective reflections on their self-talk. Although the video-assisted recall procedure has demonstrated validity (Miles & Neil, 2013), the retrospective design cannot fully ensure the accuracy of reported self-talk. What athletes reported may present memory bias or distortion, influenced by factors such as their mood during the interview or their reflections about what happened in the competition. Another limitation relates to the small sample size and the inclusion of athletes exclusively from individual sports. This narrow sample may have

limited the range of experiences and perspectives captured regarding self-talk in sport. Future research could benefit from examining a larger and more diverse sample, including athletes from both individual and team sports, to explore potential differences in the use and function of self-talk across different sports. Although gender differences were not formally examined in the present study due to the sample size and study objectives, no definitive conclusions can be drawn. However, women more frequently reported engaging in self-critical self-talk and indicated that this negatively influenced subsequent performance. As such, exploring potential gender differences in self-talk represents an important direction for future research, particularly given evidence that contextual and personality factors can shape how self-talk is experienced and used (Hardy et al., 2009; Karamitrou et al., 2020). Building on the findings of this study, future research should continue to examine organic self-talk across different stages of competition, with particular attention to the period following performance. Investigating post-competition organic self-talk may provide deeper insight into its apparent relationship with performance outcomes and clarify how it influences athletes' psychological responses, such as reflection, emotional regulation, self-confidence, and recovery.

## Chapter 6. Conclusion

This research aimed to contribute to the understanding of organic self-talk in competitive sport. The findings support the view that organic self-talk is a dynamic process (Latinjak et al., 2023) and, consistent with previous literature, appears to be stage-dependent within an athlete's competitive experience (Karamitrou et al., 2024; Sarig et al., 2023a). As it was mentioned, self-talk plays a key role in performance (Van Raalte et al., 2017), motivation (Fritsch & Latinjak, 2021), self-regulation (Latinjak et al., 2019b), emotions (Fritsch et al., 2024), and self-confidence (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2009), meaning that ultimately shapes the athlete's overall competitive experience. This study provides a broader perspective on self-talk in competition by offering insight into: (a) the challenges athletes face throughout a competition, (b) how they use self-talk to cope with these challenges, and (c) the impacts they perceive. Beyond these findings, the study deepens our understanding of how athletes use self-talk during key competitive moments and highlights the importance of continuing to examine this psychological skill in such contexts, when athletes must rely on their full range of mental and physical resources. Ultimately, competition is where these processes become most evident; it is, in many ways, where performance and psychological skills meet and at the end "where the magic happens."

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## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

The following questions are to understand your experience using “organic” self-talk in your competition. I am going to start by showing you clips from your race and then proceed with the questions. Please consider “organic” self-talk as those verbalizations that you say to yourself, whether internally or externally, not cue words that you previously determined and intentionally used for enhancing your performance.

Before we start the full interview, I thought it would be good to do a practice question. I will show you a clip from your race and will ask you what was on your mind in that moment. This response will not be recorded or used in the study; it is just for you to familiarize with what we are about to do and gives you a chance to clarify any questions that you may have about the process.

After the practice, I will show clips from different moments of your race and then start with the questions.

The order of video clips will be as follows:

- Moments before the race started
- The actual race
- Moments after the race

Questions for each video:

Note for researcher: Remember to ask for specific phrases directed to themselves

1. Can you tell me, with as many details as possible, what you were saying to yourself during that moment? What kind phrases do you remember using?
2. What do you think could have caused those statements? Where are they coming from?
3. What was the purpose of using those statements? Did they fulfill that purpose?
4. What would you say was the consequence(s) of those statements? / What impact do you think this had on you? \*Follow up questions may be related to performance or emotions\*
5. Overall, how would you describe your experience of using self-talk during competitive moments? (FINAL QUESTION)

## Appendix B

### Participant Informed Consent Form

**Study Title:** Exploring Athletes' Organic Self-talk from Individual Sports in Competitive Settings

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**Conflicts of Interest and Undue Influence:** Estefania Garcia Reyes (Principal Investigator) and Dr. Leisha Strachan (Advisor) do not have any conflicts of interest to declare for this research.

This consent form, a copy of which you can download or print, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not

included here, feel free to ask any of the people named above. Please take the time to read this document and any accompanying information carefully. It is very important that you understand:

- what is being asked of you,
- what the risks and benefits of participation are, and
- how the information you provide will be used and stored.

### **Purpose of the Study**

I am doing this research for the thesis of my master's degree under the supervision of Dr. Leisha Strachan. The purpose of this research is to explore and understand the experience of athletes from individual sports using self-talk during competition in a naturalistic approach. The research question this study will address is: how does organic self-talk vary before, during, and after competition in individual sports? This study could offer insights into athletes lived experiences with self-talk in competitive settings. The findings may serve as a valuable resource for athletes, coaches, and practitioners in developing strategies to enhance, modify, or reinforce current self-talk practices.

### **Study procedures**

If you decide to take part in the study, the procedure will consist in three parts: (1) video recordings of two competitions, (2) identification of key moments within each competition, and (3) interviews. We will schedule video recordings based on your competition schedule. After each competition, you will receive the video and be required to identify what you consider the key moments from that event. These videos will be used during your interview, so you will be asked to bring the timestamps of these moments from the original video the day of the interview. This could take around 15-20 minutes of your time. In addition, the principal investigator will edit these videos to show you the key moments that this research considers, which are: (1) before

the competition starts, (2) during your performance, and (3) after the competition ends. This process is designed to help you recall your self-talk during those events. The next part will consist of interviews (in person or online) conducted no later than two days after each competition to ensure the accuracy of your memories during those competitions, this will require approximately 1 hour for each interview. During the interview, you will see your video clips and will be asked to describe in detail the self-talk that you could have experienced. With your consent, I will audio record our meeting for data analysis purposes. After your interview, you will have the chance to review the transcript (the document of what you said). You will be able to add, change, or delete information from the transcript as you see fit. I will email you a copy of the transcript and you will have two weeks from the date you receive it to respond. If I don't hear from you after 2 weeks, I will assume that you are okay with the transcript as is.

### **Study Risks**

A potential risk is that you may feel badly, as people sometimes do when they talk about past sporting experiences. If that is the case, you can find different resources regarding mental health in the following links:

- Canadian Sport Centre Manitoba, Sport Psychology Resources  
<https://cscm.ca/resources/sport-psychology-resources/>
- Game Plan, Mental Health Support <https://mygameplan.ca/resources/health>

Aside from this, there are no risks other than those you might encounter in your daily life by participating in this research.

### **Study Benefits**

There could be a potential benefit for you by participating in this study. You could gain awareness of your self-talk and how it functions during competition. This information may allow

you to adopt more effective strategies to pursue your personal goals, strive for excellence, and enhance your overall experience. Finally with your help, we hope to expand our knowledge about self-talk during competitive games and how is related not only to performance but also with the quality of the athletic experience.

### **Compensation**

You will be given a compensation in the form of a \$25 gift card in gratitude for your time. The gift card will be given to you (or sent to you) after signing this consent form. We may collect additional personal information from you for record-keeping purposes. I will keep this information separate from any research information. This information will be kept in a secure location for 7 years in case the University of Manitoba has to account for the money during a financial audit.

### **Confidentiality**

All the information you provide as a participant in this study is confidential, which means we as the research team must keep it safe. We will do our best, however, it is not possible to guarantee absolute confidentiality. We will only share your personal information if required through court order or law (e.g., suspected abuse). We have professional obligations to report information to appropriate authorities. Examples of when information is required to be disclosed include expression of suicidal ideas.

### **Use and Storage of Information**

Your information will be stored on a secure platform approved by the University of Manitoba. The research team will see your personal information and/or responses. After we collect your information, we will take out anything that might identify you. We will also replace your name with a code. The research team keeps a file that links each participant's code with their [name,

contact information, etc.]. We keep this file separate from your other research information. When we share the results of this study, we will combine everybody's responses. This means no one will see your answers. We may share some of your information as quotes. The quotes will not include your name or information that may identify you. We will destroy any identifiable information like your [name, recordings, contact information] by December 2030. The transcripts of your interview may be kept indefinitely.

### **Data Sharing**

Your research information may be shared outside of the University of Manitoba with researchers, other organizations, and/or made publicly available. The information is being shared for further analysis or testing, as part of the research study, and/or because it is required by a funder or journal. It will not include your name or any information that could directly identify you.

### **Dissemination**

We will share the results of the study through 1) the publication of a master's thesis; 2) journal publications and research presentations; 3) a summary report of the study results for interested participants.

### **Withdrawing**

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You can choose to do only the activities and/or answer only the questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw your participation from the study for any reason. You do not have to explain why. You will not be penalized in any way. The honorarium is yours to keep. If you withdraw the study, all your information will be destroyed. You may withdraw from the study until March 15, 2026. After this date, we will combine everyone's responses. This means it may not be possible to withdraw

your information. To withdraw from the study, please contact Estefania Garcia Reyes at the email above.

### **Questions or Concerns**

Designated University of Manitoba personnel (and/or the project Funder) may look at your information to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board 1. However, this does not mean that participation is risk-free. If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this study, you may contact any members of the research team listed on the first page or the Office of Human Research Ethics at [humanethics@umanitoba.ca](mailto:humanethics@umanitoba.ca) or (204) 474-7122.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this study, you may contact any members of the research team/a specific member or members of the research team listed on the first page or the Office of Human Research Ethics.

### **Consent**

By signing this document, I agree that:

- I have read the above information or had it read to me.
- I have had the opportunity to ask and have had all of my questions answered.
- I understand what is being asked of me.
- I will be taking part in a research study.
- I may freely stop or leave the research study activities at any time.
- I understand what the researchers will do with the information I give them.
- I do not waive my legal rights by participating in the study.

Please review the following statements. For each statement, please check if you agree or do not agree.

|                                             |                              |                             |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| I agree to participate in this study.       | <input type="checkbox"/> YES | <input type="checkbox"/> NO |
| I agree to be audio-recorded in this study. | <input type="checkbox"/> YES | <input type="checkbox"/> NO |
| I agree to be video recorded for this study | <input type="checkbox"/> YES | <input type="checkbox"/> NO |

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### Summary of Results

Please provide an email address below if you would like to be sent a summary of the study results by July 2026.

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

A summary of the study will be available at the University of Manitoba's library when the study has finished.

### Notice Regarding Collection, Use, and Disclosure of Personal Information

Your personal information is being collected under the authority of The University of Manitoba Act. The University of Manitoba is committed to preserving your right to privacy. The information you provide will be used by the University to support our research. Your personal information will not be used or disclosed for other purposes, unless permitted by The Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act or The Personal Health Information Act. If you have any questions about the collection of personal information: Ph: 204-474-9462 or Email: [fippa@umanitoba.ca](mailto:fippa@umanitoba.ca)