

Conducting Research in Sport Management: Mental Health in Sports

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Literature Review

In today's age, athletes operate in an extremely demanding environment, in which their athletic schedules and personal schedules are filled every day, while also having to be in peak physical condition. This problem leads athletes to face mental health issues throughout their athletic careers due to the extreme stress and pressure they undergo to perform every day while still having a life (Moreland et al., 2017). Athletes are constantly faced with the problems of maintaining their busy schedule and performing on a competitive stage, which can lead them to having mental health issues. Many athletes are scared to seek out mental health help due to many different barriers, such as the negative stigma around mental health, hypermasculinity, busy schedules, and negative past experiences with care (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019). The most common reason that athletes do not seek help is due to the negative stigma of athletes having mental health issues.

The high-performance environment of professional sports misrepresents athletes as being tough and strong, as they should be immune to mental health problems (Andersson et al., 2025). This misinterpreted stereotype reinforces a culture of mental toughness that athletes need to have to compete on this high-level stage, leading to a negative stigma around mental health issues. Especially for female athletes, as they are constantly compared to male athletes in their skills and ability to perform (Bramley et al., 2025). As there are athletes who, instead of seeking professional help, due to the negative stigma, will just ask their teammates or partake in self-help strategies (Bu et al., 2024). Also, athletes end up misusing alcohol and having very strong depression symptoms due to their mental health issues (Ely et al. 2025). Additionally, many

athletes face eating disorders, as a way of coping with their mental health, instead of seeking professional help, as there are many professional options (Rice et al, 2016).

When looking at treatment for mental health, there are many things that athletes can do to improve their mental health and combat the negative stigma around having mental health problems. The program Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement intervention led to significant improvements in athletic coping skills, as there was better emotion regulation, sleep quality, awareness, and mindfulness when completed (Tingaz, 2025). Additionally, it has been found that spiritual experiences can positively influence athletes' mental health, reducing anxiety and boosting motivation and well-being (O'Brien & Kilrea, 2021). Also, in the long run, when looking at retirement, athletes' mental health is better off adjusting to the loss of sport when having a non-athlete identity (Brockett et al., 2024). Overall, this review aims to analyze current evidence around athletes' mental health by identifying core themes, contrasting findings across different contexts, and observing the methodological gaps within academic studies. The stigma around athletes having mental health issues needs to be directly addressed; training loads, fans, and other issues can all negatively affect athletes, making it incredibly important that athletes and fans are educated on mental health issues.

There is a clear problem around athletes and their mental health, as many athletes do not express their struggles due to the negative stigma around mental health and do not seek help, which needs to be addressed.

The four themes within these articles are mental health prevalence, mental health stigma, the influence of the sporting environment, and strategies for support and intervention. These themes appear in different ways within these articles, are explained in different contexts, and are displayed in all types of athletes in the studies.

When athletes are monitored and treated in specialized clinics, Andersson et al. (2025) diagnosed 53.1% of the patient population with stress-related and somatoform disorders. Showing a great population of athletes struggling with mental health disorders. Though this mixed-method study has some gaps in sample size and biases, it still does a great job of showing that these struggles are prevalent. Semi-elite female athletes have also been studied and found to have high rates of both distress and depression (Bramley et al., 2025). Though some biases and problems with sample sizes occurred in this mixed-method study, it brings to light the amount of stress that all types of athletes go through, no matter what level they are. A narrative systematic review on the mental health of athletes states that these athletes are at the same risk for mental health struggles as the general population. But when injury, retirement, or underperformance occurs, they become at a much higher risk for disorders like depression (Rice et al, 2016).

The stigma around athletes' mental health is touched on by many articles. Many think that athletes should be tough and show no weakness, but that isn't the case, and the importance of showing struggles in athletes is growing. College athletes' actions have been studied, looking into how often they use mental health services at their universities. Though hard to directly compare mental health services from school to school, the conclusion is that a reason these services are not being used as much as they should be is the perceived stigma around them. Athletes don't think that using the services will help them, and they think they don't need the help (Moreland et al., 2017). Another study looked directly at Chinese elite athletes, concluding that mental health stigma and lack of mental health literacy are what hold these athletes back from getting the help they require. From direct interviews with these athletes, they prefer to get help from teammates and self-help, because of the social stigma surrounding mental health (Bu et al., 2024). Other deterrents from getting help include busy schedules and hypermasculinity.

The lives of athletes are packed with games, practice, recovery, and family time. There are so many activities athletes do, but because of the stigmatization of mental health, it is always pushed to the back burner in their minds (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019). This leads to mental health problems building up, and athletes never getting the help they require.

The environment of sports is also a leading contributor to the mental health of athletes. Whether it is off-season, preseason, or during the season, these athletes are put through a lot. A study on cricket explores depression and alcohol use during these three periods. The study concludes that depression and alcohol use fluctuate in season and out of season, but there is an increase in both of them during the off-season period for athletes. The three-year longitudinal study does lack control variables, but still illustrates the problems that athletes face, and that the off-season can be the hardest time for many of these athletes (Ely et al. 2025). A mixed-method study, including interviews and surveys, took a look at the transition away from competitive sports for Olympic and Paralympic athletes. The study found that athletes will battle mental health after losing their athletic identity. Athletes feel they are behind in life and don't have an identity other than being an athlete. The study also found that athletes who had a plan, as well as used their resources surrounding mental health and retirement, don't find themselves with these issues. The study lacked a demographic background, but it is understood that even in retirement, athletes can still feel the negative effects of their environment (Brockett et al., 2024).

Some interventions have been explored for athletes to help better set them up for success when these mental health problems occur. The Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE) program was tested to see how it would affect coping skills, confidence, and how they rate their own performance. The results showed significant improvements in all of these categories. Athletes were able to cope with failure better, they were more confident in their

abilities, and believed they performed better due to this confidence and a six-day online program (Tingaz, 2025). This intervention, yet small and with limitations, still proved the importance of help, as just six days made an impact on these athletes. Showing the importance of addressing the problem before it even happens. A quantitative cross-sectional study explored how unitive experiences can predict mental health in athletes. The study proved that a spiritual experience can improve the mental health of athletes. It found that female athletes are more likely to have a unitive experience, but all athletes who go through one have reduced stress and higher intrinsic motivation (O'Brien & Kilrea, 2021).

Overall, these ten articles have given great insight into the mental health of athletes around the world. Taking both qualitative and quantitative approaches to understand how the stigma around mental health affects all types of athletes. The environment that athletes are put in has an impact on their mental health as well. Interventions for these athletes have also been explored to help with mental health struggles. Support for mental health is available and works, but many athletes are affected by the stigma around getting help for these problems. Getting help before they need help is important for these athletes; that is why schools, teams, and leagues have services put in place for their athletes.

In all of this data collected, there are still gaps when it comes to assessing mental health struggles. Athletes aren't always truthful in their answers in surveys and interviews, and biases occur in research because of factors such as small sample size, limited data, and uncontrollable variables. Improving studies for athletes' mental health will help sack the stigma, and get athletes the help they deserve.

Web Scraping

When looking at information on the internet, from non-academic sources, many different reactions towards mental health around sports pop up. However, more recently, there have been lots of athletes speaking up about their mental health struggles on the internet and sharing their stories. Simone Biles is a well-known Olympic athlete who faced mental health struggles during the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, in which she has publicly talked about her struggles. Simone says, “I say put mental health first, because if you don't, then you're not going to enjoy your sport and you're not going to succeed as much as you want to” (Keith, 2021). This quote demonstrates the importance of an athlete's mental health and how it can prevent them from reaching their fullest potential.

In addition to Simone Biles, Michel Phelps and Kevin Love have both spoken out about their mental health struggles as a male. Athletes who are men are perceived as tough and should not have any mental weakness, but both athletes have spoken out about the negative stigma. Phelps believed that asking for help was a sign of weakness and that men are supposed to be big and strong, but he learned not to care and asked for help for his own sake (Gleeson & Brady, 2017). Additionally, Kevin Love also talks about not caring about the stigma anymore and has learned to talk about his inner struggles, instead of keeping them inside and holding himself back (Love, 2018). Both men have helped other male athletes to speak up about their mental health struggles and address the issues at hand.

Also, different websites and organizations have been speaking up about mental health struggles sounding athletes. The NCAA's Chief Medical Officer, Brian Hainline, has spoken up on mental health struggles in college sports, promoting seeking help. Hainline says, “It's imperative on all of us to keep talking about the issues to destigmatize what it means to address your mental health and lift those voices who are brave enough to do so” (NCAA, 2023). The

NCAA must be speaking up about mental health, as college athletes face many different struggles, from academics or even playing their respective sport. Also, a 2019 study reported that 35% of elite athletes have mental health concerns, with the top reasons being feelings of burnout, depression, and anxiety (Athletes and Mental Health, 2025). This study highlights the fact that organizations, such as the NCAA and Universities, need to prioritize their student-athletes' mental health so that they can succeed in the future. Overall, when looking at information from the internet, it is still relevant and helpful information concerning mental health struggles among athletes.

Methodology

This study intends to gain a deeper understanding of the true extent to which mental health issues impact athletes. It explores several aspects of mental health struggles, including how it permeates their performance on the field, as well as how the negative stigma around athletes being vulnerable in public settings prevents them from opening up about their troubles to both trusted loved ones and psychological professionals. The primary object used to conduct this study was a digital survey that was published to an online forum that was available to a select group of students in the Sport Management program within the University of Michigan School of Kinesiology. Each student was presented with a consent form that outlined the details of the survey, assuring them of their confidentiality and right to refuse to answer questions they were not comfortable with. All participants provided consent to answer the questions in the survey.

Results

There were thirty-six participants in this study, the gender of whom was relatively balanced, with 19 males (52.8%) and 17 females (47.2%). Every participant had played sports at some point in their life, with 27.8% continuing to play at the collegiate level. When asked to rank

how important mental health was to them on a scale of 1 through 5, 50% of participants landed at 5, while the remaining half selected an option between 2 and 4. Only 16 participants, or 44%, stated that they have helped others with their mental health problems at one time or another. The same portion of participants reported that they had faced significant mental health difficulties themselves during their athletic career, ranking their stress level while playing sports at a 4 or 5. Each of these respondents added that these challenges seeped into and impacted their play on the field, providing insight into how these daunting obstacles can tear away at athletes' enjoyment of their sport. As a matter of fact, eleven participants confessed that their struggles pushed them to the brink of quitting their sport entirely. Fifteen participants stated that they reached out to their coaches to aid them with their mental health, which, interestingly, was more than the number who consulted professional mental health resources. Although only ten respondents have sought professional help in their mental battles, all ten reported their treatment to be effective in combating their struggles.

Limitations

When looking at the survey as a whole, it is a well-rounded survey and produced good results. However, there are two limitations of the survey and in the future could potentially be improved. The first limitation was that there was a sample size of only 36 participants. In the future, it will be helpful to have more responses and results to see a wider range of answers. The second limitation was that the research was based on professional athletes, but the participants completing the surveys were college students. These students have played sports in the past, but only a handful are playing college sports, and even fewer will go on to play professionally. In the future, the survey can be geared to a specific audience, whether that be those who played sports till high school, college athletes, or professional athletes. This would help for a more

well-rounded response. Overall, the two limitations can be implemented to improve the quality of the survey in the future.

Conclusion and Application

In the survey, there were a few questions about how to combat and improve mental health. Many answers from both athletes and non-athletes give insight into the mental health struggles. Participants listed many strategies to combat mental health. Journaling, talking with others, trusted individuals, friends, and coaches, taking a break and time to yourself, as well as breathing exercises. Others listed techniques such as listening to music, praying, meditating, and making sure they have a set plan. These are all great strategies to use when struggling with mental health, whether it is a big issue or just having an off day.

Then, it was asked how one could improve their mental health. Participants of the survey stated ideas such as educating themselves about mental health, being there for others, being mindful of others, and being able to ask for help when they need help. All of the ideas are great for people to consider when it comes to mental health. Educating ourselves is the most important, because then one can learn about problems people go through, and how to help them, and then combat these issues if one experiences them.

Also, it was asked how, as a fan, one can help with athletes' mental health, and how to make sure one isn't negatively affecting athletes' mental health. The answers are super important because how fans affect athletes' mental health was one of the main reasons this topic is so impactful, due to players coming out talking about their struggles. Many of the answers regard social media and what fans are putting on the internet. Making sure fans show empathy and don't post harmful things regarding athletes and team performance. Fans have to remember these players are trying their best, and they are humans too; sometimes they are going to have a bad

game. Also, fans have to make sure they support these players and are supporting them when they come out saying they struggle with mental health.

As fans, players, and people, the most important thing one can do to help their own mental health and others' mental health is to educate oneself. Through the process of educating oneself, one will learn proper coping techniques, how to be there for someone in need, and a broader understanding of mental health. If one can keep educating themselves and others about mental health within sports, players, coaches, and others will be more comfortable coming out and talking about their experiences. Overall, in this analysis, the importance of educating oneself has been learned through the case studies explored, as well as the answers from athletes and sports fans within the conducted survey.

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