



The unseen battle: Exploring the intersection between mental health struggles in elite athletes

La batalla invisible: explorando la intersección entre las luchas por la salud mental en los atletas de élite

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The focus of developmental research in the past decade has accentuated the critical nature of acknowledging the mental health of elite athletes. Professionals and researchers have come together to recognise the susceptibility of elite athletes to mental health challenges at a level similar to that of the general population (Moesch et al., 2018; Poucher & Cairney, 2021). Elite athletes are recognised to experience a diverse range of disorders such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and substance abuse, which can be influenced by a number of aspects related to their athletic career, performance, and external factors (Rice & Parker, 2016). The notion of 'mental health' has been described in many ways. According to the World Health Organisation, mental health is defined as "a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community" (World Health Organisation, 2014). This given definition highlights that mental health goes beyond the absence of disorders and emphasises the capacity of an individual to achieve optimal well-being. Furthermore, the American Psychiatric Association defines 'mental disorders' as "a syndrome characterised by clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotion regulation, or be-

haviour that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning," including conditions such as eating disorders, depression, and anxiety (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Existing research indicates that mental health issues are projected to be a critical cause of disability in developed nations (Swann & Vella, 2018). The rising prevalence of mental health issues has postured policymakers as needing to identify the critical requirements to implement interventions that promote mental wellbeing and identify emerging mental struggles. Despite these interventions, young adults frequently exhibit a reluctance to seek help for mental health concerns, with a necessity to develop user-friendly, non-stigmatised interventions a must (Salaheddin & Mason, 2016). Sport-based initiatives are viewed as a promising, non-stigmatised intervention strategy that can enhance both mental and physical wellbeing (Carless & Douglas, 2016). Despite the perceived benefits of sports, declining levels of participation are observed as individuals transition from childhood to adolescents and into adulthood, coinciding with the onset of mental health challenges (Emmonds & Lara-Bercial, 2024; Wang & Amemiya, 2017). A systematic review by Eime & Either (2023) examined studies published between 2012 and 2020, finding

that both individual and team-based sport participation conferred benefits for mental health and social outcomes among adults. However, the review emphasised that team sports may be a particularly potent source of positive mental and social outcomes across the adult population (Eime & Either, 2023). In regards to elite athletes, this distinctive population experiences unique stressors related to their sport participation, both individually and collectively, that differ from those of the general population (Gerber et al, 2022). Nevertheless, the available evidence suggests that sport participation can have a beneficial effect on the mental and social health of the general population, despite the potential for mental health concerns among elite athletes due to the demands of their sport and lifestyle. It is crucial to understand this gap in benefits associated with sport participation and the differing demands surrounding its participation from the general population and elite athletes.

The current commentary article aims to provide a small probe into the nuances of mental health among elite athletes, acknowledging the distinctive differences within this particular population group and exploring individual differences that may contribute to the symptoms experienced by elite athletes. Elite athletes encounter unique stressors that differentiate them from the general population. Numerous stressors manifest themselves throughout an athlete's career, encompassing performance-related demands, excessive training, straining personal relationships with teammates, coaches, and family members, injuries, rehabilitation, and unsatisfactory performances. These internal stressors are further compounded by external pressure, most predominantly by the critical evaluation of traditional and social media platforms (McLoughlin et al, 2021). Moreover, additional stressors may stem from the dismantling effect of athlete retirement and the management of their athletic schedule by governing bodies and leagues. These multi-layered influences have the potential to detrimentally impact an elite athlete's training, subsequent performance, and ultimately, their mental health (Purcell & Rice, 2022). Research focused on individual stressors associated with injuries and performance slumps indicates that athletes are more susceptible to mental health disorders during these periods in their careers (Haugen, 2022). Furthermore, studies by Whelen & Petek (2024) suggest that stressors linked to sports participation place athletes at an elevated risk of suicide. An increase in academic literature in the realm of mental health specific to elite athletes has predominately been directed towards fields such as psychiatry and psychology. Among the general population, approximately 20% of individu-

als meet the diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder over a 12-month period across multiple countries (Smetanin et al, 2015), with mood and anxiety disorders being frequently reported. Among elite athletes, the occurrence of symptoms or disorders related to mental health ranges from 5% to 35% annually (Gouttebarga et al, 2018). Screening studies of elite athletes have highlighted prevalent issues such as anxiety, sleep disturbances, depression, excessive alcohol consumption, and eating disorders (Schuring et al, 2017). Specific phases in an athlete's career, notably injury, performance declines, and uncertain sporting futures, have been identified as contributing factors to an increased risk of mental health symptoms (Abbot & Clifford, 2019). Furthermore, athletes who experience involuntary and/or undesired retirement due to deselection or injury demonstrate an increased vulnerability to mental health disorders (Brown et al, 2017). Retired athletes also face an elevated risk of mental health and substance-related disorders, with factors such as unplanned retirement, strong athlete identity, chronic pain, adverse life events, and post-sport unemployment being linked to an increased risk of mental health and substance abuse disorders (Oltmans et al, 2022).

It is crucial that athletes (active or retired), during periods of mental distress, feel empowered to seek professional assistance, with their close support networks (management team, sporting club or authority, and family, friends, and teammates) encouraging these behaviours. Athletes often refrain from seeking support due to various reasons, such as a lack of comprehension of the impact of poor mental health on their sporting performance and the stigma associated with help-seeking being considered a sign of weakness and maybe even targeting (Castaldelli-Maia et al, 2019). It is essential that sporting clubs, organisations, and those involved day-to-day with athletes (coaching, other athletes, management, and family) recognise the signs and symptoms to look for in a struggling athlete, understanding how key periods in an athlete's career can make them susceptible to mental health struggles. Rice & Purcell (2019) conducted a systematic review objectively evaluating the existing evidence surrounding the mental health and well-being of elite athletes, including the prevalence and characteristics of mental illness and substance usage. Of the total of 2279 records initially identified, only 60 were selected after a rigorous screening process. The review highlighted concerns regarding the quality of current literature in the area of elite athlete mental health, revealing only 25% of the studies exhibited clear and methodologically adequate results. They recommended that future research focus on

developing models that prioritise early intervention principles, with interdisciplinary collaboration holding a vital role in designing intervention strategies for elite athletes (Purcell & Rice, 2019). Despite ongoing work utilising clear methodologically accurate results to raise awareness about mental health struggles across elite athletes in numerous sports and sporting cultures globally, there are indications that sport-governing bodies continue to tone down the significance of mental health challenges within this population. This discrepancy can lead to a lack of recognition regarding the magnitude of mental health issues among various stakeholders in elite sports, including governing bodies, athletes, media, fans, coaches, sponsors, and the general population. One clear example of this disconnect in elite sport can be observed in the handling of professional tennis player Naomi Osaka's withdrawal from the French Open in 2021.

Raising concerns regarding the diverse needs of elite athletes to support their mental health is increasingly difficult. Researchers have acknowledged the development of innovative, adaptable interventions that are structured to enhance the mental well-being of athletes, particularly those athletes at risk of or already experiencing mental health issues (Larsen & Henriksen, 2021). The proposal of early identification interventions within elite athletes can plug the hole in mental health struggles before they fully develop. These suggestions include teaching athletes' self-management skills to help them navigate periods of intense mental stress while also providing stakeholders with tools to detect and address struggling athletes (Breslin & Lawlor, 2021). These suggestions ultimately call for a specialised team that incorporates multidisciplinary professionals and researchers capable of assisting athletes dealing with complex mental disorders. This integration would alleviate suffering athletes, allowing them to receive timely and appropriate intervention strategies mixed with professional support away from the eye of outside media and, if needed, other athletes. The need to produce an adaptive framework that can ebb and flow with the ever-changing demands of elite athletes and their surroundings is essential for its prolonged effect throughout an athlete's different career stages (Pilkington & Purcell, 2024). An overarching framework must be developed, taking into account the individual needs of elite athletes at varying career stages, across different sports, and within diverse sport contexts globally (Purcell et al, 2022). An established, overarching framework would provide the foundations for sporting bodies to expand and refine the framework according to the unique needs of their respective athletes. It is essential for stakeholders to be able to

assess the effectiveness of the management and implementation of designed strategies. Understanding the shortcomings and weaknesses of implemented strategies will allow those being utilised to evolve and adapt for the prolonged positive change in elite athletes' mental health concerns.

In 2019, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) issued a comprehensive statement, with expert consensus, addressing mental health in elite athletes (Reardon et al, 2019). This statement offered an in-depth examination of elite athletes' mental health struggles. Recommendations were made for the management of prevalent conditions among athletes, such as anxiety and mood symptoms, as well as complex mental disorders like eating and bipolar disorders in elite sports environments. While this statement serves to guide clinical management decisions for the benefit of athletes' mental health across sports, researchers also critiqued the current care structures in place, pointing out inadequacies in meeting athletes' needs and expressing that with proper development, support systems can enhance awareness and facilitate help-seeking behaviour, although these could prove ineffective and potentially risky without proper development and consideration of sporting bodies. Beyond the role of academics, several sporting associations provide useful guidelines pertaining to athlete welfare, shedding light on critical factors related to managing mental health in sports contexts and environments. These factors encompass the governing bodies responsibility in administering appropriate care and support chains, allowing for the regular screening to monitor changes in athletes mental states, the necessity for maintaining privacy and confidentiality concerning such issues, the consideration of athletes preference in seeking help, the imperative need to refer athletes to external trusted professionals when in-house expertise is limited, and the valuable information that trained individuals, including former athletes, can offer based on their first hand experiences with such mental struggles can shed light for athletes to feel more empowered and understood regarding the specific mental struggles they face and origination of such struggles.

Conclusion

All the factors previously mentioned create a sporting model that facilitates the development and maintenance of adequate mental health support for athletes. Problems then become apparent when the aims and objectives of the sporting body interfere with the maintenance of such proposed strategies

to improve and sustain mental health in athletes. The relationship between the governing body and external stakeholders must emphasise how its aims and objectives will affect athletes both mentally and physically. It is crucial to mention that not all sports incorporate a framework with all the previously mentioned factors. It is essential that not all sporting bodies require the need to implement all factors mentioned to the same standard. These factors can be implemented to a greater or lesser standard based on the needs of the athletes under their governing body. Although a framework that develops and focuses on athlete mental health needs from symptoms to specialist care would benefit a wide range of sporting bodies and their subsequent athletes.

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