

Mental Health in Sport: A Current Issue Report Issues In International Sport (HHPS 566)

Mental wellbeing has been among the most significant matters on the sports agenda in the last decade. The sport participants, who traditionally were supposed to be an icon of strength and endurance, started to discuss their anxiety, depression, burnout, and identity issues more frequently. The rise of prominence is a rejection of sporting subcultures that have long held the view that performance is their ultimate choice. Due to the development of sport psychology, the influence of the mental health of athletes on their performance and, more generally, the further personal growth and happiness has become more apparent (Chang et al., 2020). It is in this case that mental health is introduced as one of the newest topics of sport and its theoretical underpinnings, practicality, and examples in life. It also discusses how one ought to treat or even accidentally subsidize the matter at the time when evidence-based, intelligent, and ethical solutions are being called upon.

Academic Underpinnings

Recent research highlights that athlete mental health is a multifaceted issue influenced by biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors. Chang et al. (2020) provided an essential foundation by emphasizing that mental health is not separate from performance but central to it. Their position statement from the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine stresses the need for early detection, management, and prevention of mental illness through interdisciplinary collaboration among physicians, psychologists, and coaches. This approach redefines mental health care as a core element of athlete performance and underscores the importance of organizational and cultural reform within sports systems.

Reardon (2023) advanced this discussion by identifying a “perfect storm” of factors that contribute to the modern mental health crisis in sport. These include financial pressures, constant media scrutiny, and the effects of globalization, all of which intensify athlete’s stress and public exposure. Although awareness campaigns have increased, Reardon argued that meaningful structural change remains limited. His analysis points out that mental health concerns are deeply connected to the broader economic and cultural landscape of modern sport.

The connection between physical injury and psychological distress is another critical area of concern. Xu et al. (2025) found that young athletes who experience serious injuries often suffer from anxiety, depression, and identity loss when removed from competition. Because many youth athletes strongly define themselves through sport, injury can lead to emotional disconnection and delayed recovery. Their study calls for rehabilitation programs that treat both physical and psychological recovery as equally vital.

Similarly, Martín-Rodríguez et al. (2024) explored how physical activity can both enhance and harm mental health depending on the context. While regular activity improves emotional

regulation and resilience, overtraining, excessive competition, and lack of rest can produce opposite effects. Their findings emphasize the importance of balance and recovery as key psychological needs, not merely as performance luxuries.

McCorry et al. (2025) further demonstrated that many sport organizations remain reactive rather than proactive when addressing mental health. Their work revealed that institutions often lack trained professionals and established systems to prevent mental health crises. Although research supports holistic frameworks, implementation across sport settings remains inconsistent. The authors argue that integrating mental health education and regular psychological check ins should become standard practice in athlete development.

Together, these sources demonstrate that mental health in sport extends far beyond individual coping strategies. Chang et al. (2020) and McCorry et al. (2025) advocate for systemic reform and collaboration between medical and coaching staff, while Reardon (2023) connects mental strain to external social and financial pressures. Xu et al. (2025) highlight the developmental vulnerability of young athletes, and Martín-Rodríguez et al. (2024) emphasize physiological balance and recovery. Collectively, these findings support a biopsychosocial model in which athlete well being depends on the integration of physical care, mental health support, and organizational accountability.

Despite advances, several limitations persist. Much current research relies on cross-sectional data, which limits understanding of long term outcomes (Martín-Rodríguez et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2025). Measurement tools for assessing mental health across sport levels also lack consistency (Reardon, 2023). Additionally, institutional barriers such as stigma, lack of training, and limited access to professional help continue to restrict progress (McCorry et al., 2025). These challenges highlight the need for longitudinal and applied studies that track athlete well being over time and test the effectiveness of mental health programs in real world sport environments.

Mental health in sport is both a performance and human development issue. Physical activity can build resilience, but excessive pressure, injury, and identity fusion can undermine well being. Meaningful progress requires proactive clinical support (Chang et al., 2020), policy reform and education (McCorry et al., 2025), and institutional commitment to holistic athlete care (Reardon, 2023). As evidence continues to grow, it is increasingly clear that athlete mental health is not peripheral, it is essential to sustainable success and overall life balance in sport.

Practical Implications

The scope of mental health issues in sport extends beyond individual athletes, affecting teams, organizations, and the broader sport ecosystem. On a personal level, unresolved mental health challenges lead to decreased motivation, poor focus, and burnout that can end careers prematurely. Chang et al. (2020) found that athletes struggling with anxiety or depression exhibit a greater likelihood of reduced performance and increased injury risk. Mental distress impairs

concentration, reaction time, and overall athletic execution, compounding the problem through a cycle of stress and underperformance. In competitive settings, where athletes are often judged solely by results, acknowledging vulnerability can feel like professional suicide. This stigma is particularly entrenched in male dominated sports, where toxic masculinity discourages emotional openness and reinforces a culture of silence.

At the organizational level, mental health neglect carries both ethical and economic costs. Teams facing mental health crises among players experience absenteeism, decreased morale, and declining performance outcomes, which in turn damage reputations and financial value. Reardon (2023) emphasized that social media amplifies these pressures by exposing athletes to public criticism and intrusive scrutiny. A single mental health incident can quickly become a viral topic, magnifying distress for the athlete while undermining the organization's image. The cost of mental health related absences, lost sponsorships, and shortened careers can amount to millions of dollars in lost productivity and brand trust.

For youth and developmental athletes, the stakes are even higher. Xu et al. (2025) found that adolescent athletes face unique stressors including parental expectations, scholarship competition, and the abrupt loss of athletic identity following injury. Many young athletes are supported by coaches who lack psychological literacy or training in emotional support, leaving warning signs unnoticed. When these issues go unaddressed, they can escalate into long term mental health disorders that extend beyond sport. Schools, clubs, and governing bodies therefore play a vital role in providing mental health education and access to trained professionals at all levels.

Ethically, the implications of ignoring mental health in sport are profound. Martín-Rodríguez et al. (2024) argue that sport organizations have a moral duty of care that extends beyond physical safety to include psychological well-being. When institutions fail to address mental health, they perpetuate a systemic problem that contradicts sport's foundational values of growth, teamwork, and resilience. However, the same research shows that implementing proactive wellness initiatives such as mental skills training, rest protocols, and confidential counseling can improve both athlete welfare and performance outcomes. Athletes who feel supported psychologically tend to recover faster, compete longer, and show higher engagement, creating a mutually beneficial environment for players and organizations alike.

In essence, mental health in sport is not merely an individual concern but a systemic issue with economic, ethical, and cultural consequences. Effective mental health support strengthens athlete longevity, protects institutional reputation, and aligns sport with its true purpose developing both the body and the mind.

Case Examples

Mental health in sport has gained global attention through several high profile cases that have exposed the tension between athlete welfare and institutional demands. One of the most notable instances was Naomi Osaka's withdrawal from the 2021 French Open, citing anxiety and stress caused by media obligations. Her decision sparked international debate about the right of athletes to prioritize mental health over contractual expectations. Reardon (2023) interprets Osaka's case as a clear example of the "perfect storm" of pressures financial, social, and media driven that define modern sport. The polarized reactions to her choice, ranging from admiration to criticism, reflected the ongoing stigma surrounding mental health advocacy. Institutional responses were equally divided, with governing bodies emphasizing professional obligations rather than offering psychological support. This incident revealed how deeply rooted systemic and cultural barriers continue to discourage athletes from expressing vulnerability.

At the youth level, similar challenges emerge, though with less visibility. Xu et al. (2025) highlight a case involving a high school soccer player who became withdrawn and academically disengaged after suffering a serious knee injury. Despite access to physical rehabilitation, no mental health services were available to address the emotional consequences of losing athletic identity. This neglect underscores the broader failure of many youth sports programs to integrate psychological care into injury management. Such examples demonstrate that mental health struggles permeate all levels of sport, from elite professionals to developing athletes. Comprehensive reform emphasizing prevention, education, and accessible mental health services, is essential to create sustainable and humane sporting environments.

Strategies to Address or Subsidize the Issue

According to Chang et al. (2020), the best long term benefits include models of care implemented in settings where medical, psychological, and coaching teams work together. The models have a focus on routine screenings, mental health education, and readily available counselling. Professional teams have gone as far as to offer full time sports psychologists and wellbeing officers in the efforts to normalize help seeking behavior. Reardon (2023) notes, however, that most of the initiatives are window dressing to improve social opinion, and not to make genuine changes. Sponsors and corporate leagues merely provide wellness programs as a PR reaction, a response of doing care instead of solving underlying problems of overtraining, exploitative training regimens, and performance identity. According to McCorry et al. (2025), the institutionalization of education programs can result in psychological literacy among players, parents, and coaches.

These plans stigmatize mental health dialogue and support the recognition of the signs early. Nevertheless, the implementation entails a long term policy and investment, as Martin-Rodriguez et al. (2024) caution. Most schemes would also need organizational responsibility in the form of a wellbeing policy or mental health audits, so that most schemes would not be tokenistic. Making

mental health schemes a component of sport success is a challenge, not a reactive Band Aid or PR bailouts. Sport mental health is an issue and the future of sporting practice.

Conclusion

There is research agreement on this issue: psychological wellbeing determines performance directly, resilience, and ethical behaviors in sport. There are still the forces of systemic pressure, stigma, and commercial interests that study resists. The case of Naomi Osaka and junior athletes shows that they are not isolated cases of a problem, but symptomatic of more structural failures in sport leadership and culture. The next step is to develop the current awareness into responsibility and include mental wellbeing in the performance systems, funding models, and institutional ethics. Mental Health First in Sport is not merely a welfare project but an indication of a groundbreaking venture towards a more humane, sustainable, and realistic sport-based culture.

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