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Get Your Head in the Game: On and Off the Field

Katelyn Le

Abstract: Mental health has recently become a popular topic on college campuses. New resources and programs are being implemented to ensure the mental wellbeing of students, however, on-campus athletic programs seem to be lagging behind. Athletic departments have trainers and methods to track physical wellness, but often do not have tools to measure mental wellness. This article not only explores the transition and challenges of student athletes, but sheds light on the intense mental aspect of college athletics.

Mental health and wellness are popular themes on college campuses, but mental illness in college athletes is a new topic of discussion. Transitioning into college is a challenge for every student's physical, emotional, and mental well-being.¹ The demanding schedule and lifestyle of a college athlete is often overlooked or falsely perceived by professors, classmates, and parents. Student-athletes are expected to meet the same expectations as their peers, on top of having 20-30 hours a week of athletic commitment. Because of the competitive nature of student-athletes at the collegiate level, admitting a mental health concern is often considered a weakness that will hurt their chances of success. Although many universities have implemented programs to help combat these issues, there is still an overall lack of awareness and poor understanding of student-athletes who are experiencing mental health issues. Ultimately, being able to identify and improve the mental health and wellness of student-athletes will help them better combat the challenges of college life and athletic performance.²

University of Michigan athletic counselor, Barb Hansen, often sees students who are accustomed to being self-sufficient suddenly struggle in new environments.³ Moving away from home, academic course-load, high expectations, relationships, financial burdens, and substance abuse are just some of the challenges students deal with during this transition from high school to college. This transition differs for student-athletes because of the drastic change in athletic commitment. Athletes are required to attend daily practices, competitions, workouts, recovery sessions, and programming which can total between 20-30 hours a week. Balancing rigorous athletic responsibility on top of already busy college life can result in a decrease in well-being and athletic performance. Research shows at least 25% of athletes have reported clinically relevant levels of depression.⁴

Two of the most common psychiatric disorders among student-athletes include eating disorders and performance anxiety. Eating disorders are more common in female-dominated sports where a lower body weight can improve athletic performance and in sports that are judged on aesthetics.² College swimmer Kally Fayhee had dreams of becoming an Olympian. What started as a dream, quickly turned into a mental disorder. Fayhee stated, "I started having anxiety of living up to the expectations...because I didn't have a lot of balance and because I truthfully didn't know how to mentally process all of it, the anxiety started to kind of spiral, and I wasn't able to cope". While desperately trying to find a sense of control, Fayhee began meticulously monitoring everything she ate and was fixated on counting calories. It started as a goal to improve

her swimming performance, but eventually developed into an eating disorder. Even after seeking counseling, the recovery was not easy.³ Although it seemed that dietary changes could help advance her swimming career, it ultimately resulted in a negative impact on her mental health.

Performance anxiety occurs when an individual becomes overwhelmed prior to and during specific areas of performance. Individuals suffering from anxiety may present traits such as excessive worrying and intrusive thoughts that are difficult to control.² This anxiety pushes the athlete to train in ineffective ways that result in physical injury and mental instability. Worse though, these types of mental illnesses can easily go unnoticed in athletes. The desire to be successful in their sport consumes the athlete to a point where they are unable to recognize what they are doing.

Because of stigma and the competitive nature of college athletics, student-athletes tend to hide their mental health concerns. The athletic community has adopted a stigma that athletes do not show weaknesses.⁵ The life of a college-athlete demands rigorous training and a constant drive to improve performance, thereby increasing the risk of psychiatric disorders.⁶ According to a study of student-athletes, the most common barriers to wellness included stigma, low mental health literacy, negative past experiences with mental health, busy schedules, and hypermasculinity.⁷ These factors deter athletes from identifying and disclosing symptoms to coaches and athletic trainers, leaving many mental health concerns untreated and at risk for further exacerbation.

Untreated mental health and wellness issues may result in excessive emotional pain and a diminished quality of life. This can also lead to problems in academic success, sport performance, social life, and spiritually.² Some athletes may be reluctant or unsure of how to seek help, so creating a safe environment is crucial for any athletic department. Early recognition of mental health issues has decreased the time between the onset and treatment. Although it has been a challenge for many athletic departments to identify at-risk students, there have been new programs put in place to recognize it sooner.²

Evan Weeden, Butler University's certified strength and conditioning coach, explains a new way of tracking student-

athletes' well-being through wellness and performance logs. The goal of the logs is to monitor the wellness of athletes so that the team can optimize peak athletic performance. They also serve to educate and inform student-athletes of the factors that determine personal wellness and what can affect athletic performance. Butler University Athletics has recently increased awareness on student-athlete healthcare, well-being, and performance, as there has been a growing demand from coaches and athletes to better understand how student-athlete health and well-being factor into athletic performance outcomes.

Five of the eighteen division I athletic teams at Butler University were chosen as trial groups for collecting this data. These teams include men's and women's cross country, men's basketball, volleyball, football, and women's golf. The Student Athlete Wellness and Activity logs can be accessed online and submitted at the end of each day. The log includes categories such as: sleep duration, sleep quality, energy level, physical readiness, mood, stress level, sources of stress, hours of sport activity, and rating of perceived exertion. This data is monitored frequently and kept confidential among the athlete, head coaches, and strength and conditioning coaches. According to Evan Weeden, the logs have shown that the results of the student-athlete's health and well-being directly correlates with sport and athletic performance. Additionally, the implementation of the logs opens the door to a more comprehensive conversation and safer environment to discuss factors that may positively or negatively impact sport or academic performance. This also gives coaches and trainers the opportunity to make adjustments to accommodate the athlete's needs (Evan Weeden, email communication, November 2019).

Student-athletes have numerous responsibilities to tend to, which can be overwhelming. Eating disorders and performance anxiety are common issues among athletes that often go unnoticed. Many student-athletes are reluctant to discuss their mental health and wellness with coaches and trainers, but starting a conversation is an important first step towards better overall health and wellness among the student-athlete population. Implementing a system like the Butler Athletics Wellness Logs may help student-athletes feel comfortable and knowledgeable when discussing their mental health with coaches and trainers. Creating an open dialogue about mental health and wellness will help empower student-athletes to take on the many responsibilities of being both a student and an athlete.

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