



## **Non-Traditionally Aesthetic Body Types for Ideal Sport Performance: Navigating Body Image Topics with Non-Traditionally Aesthetic Athletes**

**Nafees Alam**

*School of Social Work, Boise State University*

**Latoya Attis**

*Ferkauf Graduate School of Psychology, Yeshiva University*

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*The general public often conflates traditional aesthetic appeal with optimal sport performance. Runners, bikers, swimmers, etc. are examples of athletes that generally pass the public's "eye test" for athleticism, indicating that they may be as athletic as they seem. Such is not always the case for NFL linemen, rugby players, shot putters, etc., suggesting to the general public that these athletes may not be as athletic as they seem. Contrary to popular opinion, athletes are just as likely to experience body image dissatisfaction as non-athletes, this is especially true for athletes that play sports and positions calling for non-traditionally aesthetic physiques. Should these athletes eschew sport performance for aesthetic appeal or should they eschew aesthetic appeal for sport performance when the two are mutually exclusive? Athletes often employ a cost-benefit analysis to determine their answers to these questions and this paper discusses strategies on how to help athletes make decisions that are best for them as individuals.*

*Keywords: body image, cost benefit analysis, sport performance, wellbeing*

**A**thletes, like everyone else, can experience body image issues that can have a significant impact on their mental health, performance, and overall wellbeing. Despite their generally fit and toned physiques, athletes may struggle with negative thoughts and emotions related to their body image. This article aims to help mental health practitioners and the general public understand that nobody is inherently immune from experiencing body image issues, including athletes. It should be noted that this article speaks specifically to adult high-performance athletes.

The pressure to have a perfect body is particularly intense for athletes. Their bodies are their primary tools for success, and their physical appearance is often scrutinized by fans, coaches, and the media. Athletes are expected to maintain a certain level of fitness, which can lead to obsessive behaviors around diet and exercise. These behaviors can quickly turn into body

dysmorphia (Malm & Glimp, 2020), a mental health condition where an individual becomes fixated on perceived flaws in their physical appearance, leading to negative self-image, anxiety, and depression.

Athletes may also experience body image issues due to the demands of their sport. Certain sports prioritize certain body types or attributes, such as strength, speed, or endurance. Athletes may feel pressure to conform to these idealized body types, even if it means sacrificing their health or wellbeing. For example, gymnasts and figure skaters are often expected to maintain a slim and petite physique, which can lead to disordered eating habits, including restrictive diets and excessive exercise (Sundgot-Borgen & Garthe, 2011).

Body image issues can have a significant impact on an athlete's mental and physical health. Negative body image can lead to anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and eating disorders. These conditions can impair an athlete's ability to perform at their best and can also affect their quality of life outside of sports.

Public perception tends to be that athletes don't experience body image issues as much as non-athletes. Though there may be a greater concentration of body image issues generally experienced by non-athletes, it would be a fallacy to assume athletes experience no body image issues whatsoever. Within the athlete category, there may be a spectrum of how body image issues are experienced, particularly when cross-referenced with societal beauty norms of tall and lean body types being deemed most attractive (Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005).

Throughout history and across cultures, societal norms have often placed a high value on physical appearance, with certain body types considered more attractive than others. One of the most prevalent ideals of physical beauty is the tall and lean body type, which is often considered the epitome of physical attractiveness (Tiggemann, et al., 2008). The preference for tall and lean bodies has been linked to evolutionary biology. Research suggests that individuals with this body type are perceived as healthier and more fertile, with the potential to produce healthy offspring. This preference for a specific body type has been observed across cultures, with tall and lean bodies often viewed as the ideal (Froment, 2001).

Media and popular culture also play a significant role in shaping societal norms around physical beauty. Tall and lean models are often featured in advertisements, fashion shows, and magazines, which reinforces the message that this body type is desirable and aspirational (Russell, 2011). Social media has also contributed to the promotion of tall and lean bodies, with influencers and celebrities often showcasing their toned physiques on platforms like Instagram (Perloff, 2014).

However, this idealized body type can have negative consequences for individuals who do not fit this standard. Body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem are common among individuals who do not have a tall and lean body type, which can lead to disordered eating, anxiety, and depression. The societal pressure to conform to a certain body type can also contribute to weight stigma and discrimination. Athletes who are overweight or obese may face stigma, which can have a significant impact on their mental health, self-esteem, and quality of life.

It is essential to recognize that beauty standards are not fixed and can change over time. While the preference for tall and lean bodies may be prevalent today, it is possible that other body types will become more desirable in the future. It is also important to promote body positivity and self-acceptance, encouraging individuals to appreciate their bodies regardless of their shape or size.

The societal norm of valuing tall and lean bodies as the most attractive is deeply ingrained in our culture. While this preference may have evolutionary roots, it can also contribute to negative consequences such as body dissatisfaction and weight stigma. Promoting body positivity and self-acceptance can help individuals develop a healthier relationship with their bodies and promote a more inclusive and accepting society.

Sport social workers and other mental health practitioners who work with adult high-performance athletes have the opportunity to discuss aesthetics in the context of performance, and performance in the context of aesthetics. Athletes often assume that their sport performance is the primary topic of conversation in most professional settings, however sport social workers can buck that trend and humanize athletes by putting everything into context.

## Literature Review

Issues related to body image in athletes stem from a wide variety of factors: certain sports value specific weights and body types more than others, athletes may handle puberty in different ways, while some athletes may struggle with control in other areas of their lives, which can lead to body image issues and unhealthy behaviors around food and exercise. All sports can predispose an athlete to developing disordered eating, however there are sports that are more focused on aesthetics such as gymnastics or figure skating, and sports with certain weight classes, such as wrestling or boxing. Other team sports such as football or cross country running, where there are certain body types associated with specific positions or the ability to be successful can predispose athletes to risky behaviors. Risk levels, however, aren't exclusive to one specific "type" of athletes. Athletes of all genders may struggle with pressures to gain weight for aesthetic purposes and to optimize sport performance just as some may struggle to lose weight for aesthetic purposes and to optimize sport performance. Regardless of this struggle, understanding the connection between self-perception and body image is critical. Self-perception and body image are closely linked, and may play a role in body dissatisfaction among athletes. Self-perceptions can be differentiated by thoughts, attitudes, and feelings individuals hold about themselves, as well as formed through one's view of their skills, abilities related to sports and characteristics in a particular achievement domain, whereas body image can be viewed as the internal representation of one's outer appearance (Hesse-Biber, 2004; Thompson et al., 1999). The existing literature suggests that physical activity or sports is closely linked to, and can have a direct influence on, self-perceptions and body image. The type of influence, however, varies depending on the sport, gender and cultural context being examined. Fox and Corbin (1989) investigated the physical subdomain of self-concept and perceptions of physical self-worth and found that perceptions of physical self-worth impact global self-esteem. In other words, how individual's feel about sports competence, body attractiveness, physical condition, and physical strength contribute to their physical self-worth.

The emphasis on body objectification and ideal standards both in and out of sport have been cited as catalysts for increased body shame and thin-ideal idealization for athletes participating in leanness sports [i.e., aesthetic and endurance sports] (Varnes et al., 2015). As a result of this, athletes who participate in leanness sports are more likely to adopt the "thin is going to win" narrative drawing athletes towards body manipulation and weight control (De Bruin et al., 2007; Torstveit et al., 2008). A number of studies over the past decades have investigated the connection between athletes, body dissatisfaction and eating disorders in

women; however very little research focus on men, who also struggle with body dissatisfaction (Berry & Howe, 2000; Debruin et al., 2011; Homan, 2010; Huon et al., 1999; Huon & Walton, 2000; Milligan & Pritchard, 2006). Petrie et al. (2008) found that 19.2% of college athletes across various sports (endurance, aesthetic, weight dependent, ball game, technical, and power sports) displayed symptoms of eating disorders. Male athletes reported engaging in binge eating, purging, restrictive eating, and the use of laxatives and diuretics (Engel et al., 2003; Johnson et al., 1999; Petrie et al., 2008). Although disordered eating can be found in any sport (Petrie et al., 2008), studies have found higher rates among wrestlers and runners (Engel et al., 2003; Johnson et al., 1999).

Peden et al. (2008) in their quantitative study, consisting of 78 male and 85 female undergraduate students at a southwestern university investigated effects of external pressures and competitiveness on characteristics of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. Participants in this study were split between general and athletic samples. External pressures and competitiveness were positively correlated with eating disorder characteristics and body dissatisfaction for the general sample, however for the athletic sample, competitiveness was positively correlated with body dissatisfaction. While some studies have included small samples with a qualitative focus (McHaffie et al., 2022), many have used quantitative surveys to examine provision of athletes and body dissatisfaction in larger, generalizable samples, (Homan et al., 2012; Neves et al., 2016), and still others used mixed methods for investigation (Buckley et al., 2021). Findings from these studies frequently focused on the importance of understanding the pressures many athletes face to fit the “normal” standards of athleticism. Regardless of the methodological approach, there is a traditional gap in literature focusing on sport performance, body image and overall wellbeing among adult men.

Kristjánsdóttir et al. (2019) examined the body image concerns and eating disorder symptoms of elite Icelandic athletes in 20 different sports. The main findings were that 17.9% of the athletes in the study presented severe or moderate body image dissatisfaction, with 18.2% being above the clinical cutoff for body image concern, 2.4% above the cutoff for bulimia, and 9.5% above the cutoff for eating disorder symptoms. Although the study highlights that women’s scores were higher than men’s, it should be noted that 90.7% of the sample were women which could have influenced the results. However, although rates were higher for men, this study draws our attention toward the abnormal thinking and behaviors among athletes that should be taken seriously. In other words, the authors noted that athletes are more likely to seek help from doctors because of decreased performance rather than because of symptoms of clinical problems like eating disorders. As such, increased awareness will not only help address this growing public health issue, but also make early intervention more likely, and thus help the affected athletes avoid suffering more harm.

An earlier quantitative study by Reel and Gill (1996) of 73 college female and 84 high school female cheerleaders revealed that 84% of cheerleaders felt pressure to lose weight or to maintain an unhealthy weight to remain competitive. The study highlighted cheerleaders’ perceptions that uniform, coach, and weight requirements were added pressures. While it is important to understand such pressures as they are an important predictor for body dissatisfaction and eating disorders, it is equally important to promote body positivity and overall sport performance, separate from ones’ body type.

Torres-McGehee et al. (2012) further explored perceptions of 136 female cheerleading athletes on the role of clothing and body image. Participants reported the more revealing

uniforms were in the midriff area, the more likely they were to experience body image dissatisfaction in comparison to cheerleaders with less revealing uniforms. Similar to Torres-McGehee et al.'s findings, Reel & Gill (2001) highlighted that 45% of college female swimmers in their study experienced the same uniform pressure, body dissatisfaction, and feelings of self-consciousness; as did college dancers who reported that their choreographer selected the thinnest dancers for the most important performance roles as a result of dancers' weight gain or loss (Reel et al., 2005).

Reel et al. (2010) investigated 204 female Division I athletes across 17 sports from three universities and found the most frequently reported pressures among female college athletes stemmed from external psychological factors such as teammates noticing weight-gain leading to weight pressure. Similarly, gymnasts also reported receiving negative comments about their bodies from coaches which reinforced the feeling that they should lose weight (Kerr, Berman, De Souza, 2006). These findings were consistent with the findings in Bell et al. (2016) quantitative study which examined the perceptions of 388 females surrounding two concepts whether athletic-ideal was associated with higher body dissatisfaction, dieting, bulimic symptoms, and compulsive exercise, and whether body dissatisfaction mediates the relationship between athletic-ideal internalization and the disordered eating, etc. Findings from this study suggest that although athletic-ideal internalization was not associated with body dissatisfaction, it was associated with a range of disordered eating and exercise behaviors. What is interesting about this study in particular is that the participants endorsed the athletic ideal in relation to 'muscle dissatisfaction' rather than 'body dissatisfaction.' However, while muscle dissatisfaction and body dissatisfaction may appear to be mutually exclusive, they are not. Instead, one may be implicit dissatisfaction, while the other is explicit. The appearance of ones' muscles whether larger or smaller is still connected to perceptions of body image which may lead to body dissatisfaction.

Weight-control behavior is commonly observed in a wide range of elite sports, such as leanness sports, where control over ones' body weight is critical for high peak performance. Nonetheless, there is a fine line between purely functional behavior and clinically relevant eating disorders. Research shows that the culture surrounding athletes may encourage or discourage disordered eating behavior. The prevalence of eating disorders varies widely, in the range 6%–45% in female athletes and 0%–19% in male athletes. In a study of 405 elite French athletes (63% male), this prevalence reached 33% (Bratland-Sanda & Sundgot-Borgen, 2013; Rousselet et al., 2017). It should be noted that while many of the studies draw our attention toward the importance of understanding psychological factors that may stem from a sports environment contributing to body dissatisfaction among athletes (Fortes et al., 2013; Reel & Gill, 2001) there are other systemic factors that play a role in body dissatisfaction among athletes. Such factors include performance-centric environments. While such environments are needed, in terms of the need to prepare athletes for the demands of present competitive performance environments, while concurrently developing athletes of the future. They do, however, pose a fundamental challenge for practitioners concerning how to support athletes in adapting behaviors to solve emergent problems during competitive performance. It is well documented that to maximize the effects of physical training or practice one needs to exert maximal effort throughout the training and practice cycles. For instance, Nash et al. (2011) reported that elite coaches repeatedly made use of highly intense, effortful, and stressful practices. These characteristics create challenging practice and training environments to enable both psychological and physiological adaptations to

take place, but can also predispose athletes to unhealthy behaviors (Fortes et al., 2013; Reel & Gill, 2001).

There is a greater need to focus on athletes' actual sport performance separate from their body type. Focusing on sport performance rather than the aesthetic appeal, which perpetuates the societal norm of valuing tall and lean bodies as the most attractive, may reduce athlete maladaptive coping mechanisms and the need to conform to unrealistic body shape standards and instead promote body positivity and self-acceptance. Viewing the athlete as a whole person and the quality they bring to the sport may help athletes develop a healthier relationship with their bodies and promote a more inclusive and accepting society. Athletes are more likely to seek help from doctors because of decreased performance rather than because of symptoms of clinical problems like eating disorders. As such, increased awareness will not only help address this growing public health issue, but also make early intervention more likely, and thus help the affected athletes avoid suffering more harm.

## Reflection

### Traditional Aesthetics

Traditionally aesthetic male and female body types often emphasize muscularity and low body fat percentages. The height and weight ranges of these body types can vary depending on personal preferences, genetics, and cultural norms.

For traditionally aesthetic males, a study published in the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* found that male bodybuilders had a mean body weight of 100.4 kg (221 lbs) and a mean height of 178.6 cm (5'10.4") (Helms et al., 2014). Male fitness models, who typically have a leaner physique than bodybuilders, had a mean body weight of 83.9 kg (185 lbs) and a mean height of 183.8 cm (6'0.4").

For traditionally aesthetic females, a study published in the *Journal of Sports Sciences* found that female fitness models had a mean body weight of 56.6 kg (124.5 lbs) and a mean height of 168.9 cm (5'6.5"). Female bodybuilders, who typically have a more muscular and leaner physique than fitness models, had a mean body weight of 64.6 kg (142.3 lbs) and a mean height of 163.6 cm (5'4.4") (Rossow et al., 2013).

### Swimming

Swimming is a sport that emphasizes the importance of a lean and muscular physique. The average height and weight of male and female swimmers can vary depending on the swimmer's discipline and level of competition.

According to a study published in the *International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education*, the mean height and weight of elite male swimmers were 188 cm (6'2") and 84 kg (185 lbs), respectively. Elite female swimmers had a mean height of 174 cm (5'8") and a mean weight of 66 kg (145 lbs) (Garrido et al., 2010).

Another study published in the *International Journal of Sports Physiology and Performance* found that male swimmers who competed in sprint and middle-distance events had a mean height of 189 cm (6'2") and a mean weight of 82 kg (181 lbs). For female swimmers, the mean height and weight were 174 cm (5'8") and 64 kg (141 lbs), respectively (Lätt et al., 2010).

## Biking

Biking is a broad term that can refer to different cycling disciplines, such as road cycling, mountain biking, and BMX. The average height and weight of male and female bikers can vary depending on the specific discipline and the athlete's level of competition.

According to a study published in the *Journal of Sports Sciences*, the mean body weight of male road cyclists was 72.8 kg (160.6 lbs), and the mean height was 1.81 m (5'11.3") (Sanders et al., 2019). For female road cyclists, the mean body weight was 59.4 kg (131.0 lbs), and the mean height was 1.69 m (5'6.5").

In mountain biking, the average height and weight can vary more widely due to the nature of the sport, which requires technical skills and endurance. A study published in the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* found that elite male mountain bikers had a mean body weight of 74.5 kg (164.2 lbs), and a mean height of 1.80 m (5'10.9"). Elite female mountain bikers had a mean body weight of 58.7 kg (129.4 lbs) and a mean height of 1.68 m (5'6.1") (Klish et al., 2008).

## Track and Field

The average heights and weights of male and female track and field athletes can vary depending on the specific sport or event. Here are some general ranges based on data from the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF, 2019):

### Men's events:

Sprinters (100m, 200m): Height - 5'9" to 6'1", Weight - 165 to 190 lbs  
 Middle distance runners (800m, 1500m): Height - 5'9" to 6'1", Weight - 140 to 165 lbs  
 Long distance runners (5000m, 10000m): Height - 5'9" to 6'1", Weight - 125 to 145 lbs  
 Hurdlers (110m hurdles, 400m hurdles): Height - 6'0" to 6'2", Weight - 170 to 190 lbs  
 Jumpers (high jump, long jump, triple jump): Height - 5'10" to 6'4",  
 Weight - 155 to 190 lbs  
 Throwers (shot put, discus, hammer, javelin): Height - 6'0" to 6'4",  
 Weight - 245 to 275 lbs

### Women's events:

Sprinters (100m, 200m): Height - 5'5" to 5'9", Weight - 125 to 145 lbs  
 Middle distance runners (800m, 1500m): Height - 5'4" to 5'9", Weight - 110 to 130 lbs  
 Long distance runners (5000m, 10000m): Height - 5'4" to 5'9", Weight - 100 to 120 lbs  
 Hurdlers (100m hurdles, 400m hurdles): Height - 5'7" to 5'11", Weight - 130 to 155 lbs  
 Jumpers (high jump, long jump, triple jump): Height - 5'6" to 6'0",  
 Weight - 120 to 150 lbs  
 Throwers (shot put, discus, hammer, javelin): Height - 5'8" to 6'0",  
 Weight - 180 to 220 lbs

According to a study published in the Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research, the mean body weight of elite male shot putters was 127.1 kg (280.2 lbs), and the mean height was 1.90 m (6'2.8") (Kovacs et al., 2016). For elite female shot putters, the mean body weight was 84.9 kg (187.1 lbs), and the mean height was 1.80 m (5'10.9").

## **Soccer**

The average heights and weights of male and female soccer players can vary depending on their positions. Below are the average heights and weights of male and female soccer players by position, according to a study published in the Journal of Sports Sciences (2019):

Male soccer players:

Goalkeepers: 188 cm (6'2") and 83 kg (183 lbs)  
Defenders: 183 cm (6'0") and 77 kg (170 lbs)  
Midfielders: 179 cm (5'10") and 73 kg (161 lbs)  
Forwards: 180 cm (5'11") and 73 kg (161 lbs)

Female soccer players:

Goalkeepers: 174 cm (5'8") and 68 kg (150 lbs)  
Defenders: 167 cm (5'6") and 60 kg (132 lbs)  
Midfielders: 166 cm (5'5") and 59 kg (130 lbs)  
Forwards: 167 cm (5'6") and 60 kg (132 lbs)

## **American Football**

The average heights and weights of football players can vary significantly depending on the position they play. Some general ranges based on data from the NFL (National Football League) are:

Quarterback: 6'2" to 6'5", 220 to 245 pounds  
Running back: 5'10" to 6'0", 215 to 230 pounds  
Wide receiver: 5'11" to 6'2", 190 to 215 pounds  
Tight end: 6'3" to 6'6", 245 to 260 pounds  
Offensive lineman: 6'3" to 6'7", 300 to 330 pounds  
Defensive lineman: 6'2" to 6'6", 280 to 310 pounds  
Linebacker: 6'1" to 6'3", 230 to 250 pounds  
Cornerback: 5'10" to 6'0", 185 to 200 pounds  
Safety: 6'0" to 6'2", 210 to 225 pounds

## **Rugby**

The average heights and weights of rugby players can vary significantly depending on the position they play. Some general ranges based on data from World Rugby (2021) are:

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<https://doi.org/10.33043/SSWJ.br4crr4>.



Prop: 5'10" to 6'2", 240 to 290 pounds  
 Hooker: 5'11" to 6'2", 230 to 260 pounds  
 Lock: 6'3" to 6'8", 240 to 290 pounds  
 Back row: 6'0" to 6'4", 225 to 250 pounds  
 Scrum-half: 5'6" to 5'9", 155 to 180 pounds  
 Fly-half: 5'9" to 6'1", 170 to 195 pounds  
 Centre: 5'11" to 6'2", 200 to 230 pounds  
 Wing: 5'11" to 6'3", 190 to 220 pounds  
 Fullback: 5'10" to 6'2", 190 to 220 pounds

**Cost-Benefit Analysis: Aesthetics v. Performance**

Data suggests that though the majority of high-performing athletes fall into an arm’s reach of traditional aesthetics (Table 1), male and female throwers (shot put, discus, hammer, javelin), some male rugby players (props, hookers, locks, scrum-half), some female rugby players (props, hookers, locks, back row, centers, wings, fullbacks), and some male football players (tight ends, offensive linemen, defensive linemen, linebackers) tend to fall outside of traditional aesthetics. It should be noted that there is no such data available for female football players at this time.

*Table 1.*

*Aesthetics v. Performance*

Male Athletes		Female Athletes	
Traditionally Aesthetic	Non-traditionally Aesthetic	Traditionally Aesthetic	Non-traditionally Aesthetic
<b>Height:</b> 178.6cm to 183.8cm 5'10.4" to 6'0.4"		<b>Height:</b> 163.6cm to 168.9cm 5'4.4" to 5'6.5"	
<b>Weight:</b> 83.9kg to 100.4kg 185lbs to 221lbs		<b>Weight:</b> 56.6kg to 64.6kg 124.5lbs to 142.3lbs	
Swimmers	Throwers (shot put, discus, hammer, javelin)	Swimmers	Throwers (shot put, discus, hammer, javelin)
Bikers	Football Players (tight ends, offensive linemen, defensive linemen, linebackers)	Bikers	Rugby Players (props, hookers, locks, back row, centres, wings, fullbacks)
Sprinters	Rugby Players (props, hookers, locks, scrum-half)	Sprinters	
Middle Distance Runners		Middle Distance Runners	
Long Distance Runners		Long Distance Runners	
Hurdlers		Hurdlers	
Jumpers		Jumpers	
Soccer Players (goalkeepers, defenders midfielders, forwards)		Soccer Players (goalkeepers, defenders midfielders, forwards)	
Football Players (quarterbacks, running backs, wide receivers, cornerbacks, safeties)			
Rugby Players (back row, fly-half centres, wings, fullbacks)		Rugby Players (scrum-half, fly-half)	
● No data available for female football players			

A cost-benefit analysis of aesthetics against performance, specifically for XYZ, opens the door for a stimulating discussion. On one hand, perhaps athletes should prioritize sport performance over aesthetics: athletes who prioritize sport performance over aesthetics are more likely to achieve success in their respective sports. While it is important for athletes to maintain a certain level of fitness and physical appearance, an athlete's primary focus should be on improving their skills and abilities to compete at a high level. Studies have shown that athletes who prioritize performance over aesthetics are more likely to achieve success in their sport (Baker et al., 2013; Wayment & McDonald, 2020). For example, research has found that soccer players who focus on their performance on the field, rather than their appearance, have a greater chance of success (Baker et al., 2013).

Aesthetic goals can also distract from sport performance goals: focusing too much on aesthetics can take away from an athlete's focus on their sport performance goals. Obsessing over one's physical appearance can be a major distraction and can prevent athletes from reaching their full potential. In addition, striving for a certain aesthetic ideal can lead to unhealthy and potentially dangerous behaviors, such as extreme dieting or over-exercising, which can negatively impact an athlete's overall health and performance (Baker et al., 2013).

On the other hand, aesthetics can enhance an athlete's performance: athletes who focus on their appearance may actually improve their performance in their respective sport. Aesthetics can motivate athletes to improve their physical fitness and enhance their overall performance (Tiggemann et al., 2018). In addition, a study by Wayment and McDonald (2020) found that athletes who prioritize their appearance and engage in activities such as weightlifting and bodybuilding can actually improve their performance in sports such as gymnastics and cheerleading.

Aesthetics can also improve an athlete's mental and emotional well-being: athletes who prioritize their appearance can experience positive psychological effects, such as increased self-esteem and self-confidence (Tiggemann et al., 2018). Feeling good about one's physical appearance can improve an athlete's mental and emotional well-being, which can in turn enhance their performance. In addition, engaging in activities such as weightlifting and bodybuilding can provide a sense of accomplishment and boost an athlete's motivation to continue improving (Wayment & McDonald, 2020).

Athletes who do not conform to traditional beauty standards or have non-traditionally aesthetic bodies may face additional challenges when it comes to body image. Non-traditionally aesthetic athletes are individuals who do not conform to the traditional beauty standards of their sport or society at large. These athletes may have larger or smaller body types, scars, or other physical characteristics that do not fit the traditional athletic ideal. This can lead to feelings of self-doubt, insecurity, and negative body image.

One of the reasons non-traditionally aesthetic athletes may experience body image issues is the lack of representation in the media and popular culture. Athletes who do not conform to traditional beauty standards may not be as visible in the media or may not receive as much attention or endorsement opportunities as their traditionally attractive peers. This lack of representation can reinforce the message that non-traditional bodies are not desirable or valued.

Another potential cause of body image issues among non-traditionally aesthetic athletes is the pressure to conform to traditional beauty standards within their sport, even when it results in sub-optimal sport performance. Society often places a high value on a certain body type or

look, leading non-traditionally aesthetic athletes to feel pressure to change their appearance or hide their physical characteristics

Body image issues can have a significant impact on an athlete's mental and physical health. Negative body image can lead to anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and eating disorders. These conditions can impair an athlete's ability to perform at their best and can also affect their quality of life outside of sports.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

With the immense pressure placed on athletes to succeed combined with the competitive win-lose mindset and the physical toll of pushing ones' body to its limits, these conditions can have serious repercussions. Over the past few years, sports social work specialization has formed to address and meet the needs of athletes and their wellbeing, both on and off the field. As advocates, agents of change, clinicians, researchers, and community organizers, social workers are uniquely positioned to positively impact the lives of the athletic population, including athletes who are predisposed therefore making them vulnerable (National Association of Social Workers, NASW, 2008). Sport Social Work promotes social justice and social change by focusing on the vulnerabilities of athletes including various factors at both an individual and environmental level (Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, ASWIS, 2017). Sport Social Workers not only seek to enhance the capabilities of athletes to address their own psychosocial and behavioral health needs by promoting self-determination, but also encourage athletic organizations, communities, and other social institutions to recognize athletes as a vulnerable population and to join to reduce the systemic factors and challenges present in athletics in an effort to foster overall wellbeing (NASW, 2008).

What can athletes do to manage body image issues and prioritize their mental and physical health? First and foremost, athletes should recognize that body image issues are common and that they are not alone. It can be helpful for athletes to talk to a social work practitioner or mental health professional about these feelings. Through this partnership, athletes can learn ways to prioritize self-care and self-compassion, treating their bodies with kindness and respect, and avoiding negative self-talk.

Athletes can also work on developing a healthy relationship with nutrition and fitness . This may involve a multidisciplinary approach, including seeking guidance from a sports nutritionist or a certified trainer to develop a balanced and sustainable nutrition and exercise plan that addresses how they can meet their sport goals in a healthy way. It's important to remember that food is fuel, and exercise is a means of keeping the body healthy and strong without punishing it.

Sport social workers and other mental health practitioners who work with adult high-performance athletes should discuss aesthetics in the context of performance, and performance in the context of aesthetics. Since most athletes will often prioritize conversations about sport performance over body image issues, the practitioner may have the responsibility of bringing it up in conversations. However, speaking about body image issues at times when sport performance topics are most pressing may not be an effective strategy, thus, speaking about body image issues after conversing about sport performance may be the better option. Ultimately, the practitioner should aim to help humanize the athlete and help them understand that they are more than the sport they play.

In conclusion, athletes experience body image issues like anyone else, and the pressures and expectations of their sport can exacerbate these feelings. It's essential to recognize the signs of negative body image and take steps to manage them, including seeking support from mental health professionals, prioritizing self-care, and developing a healthy relationship with food and exercise. By doing so, athletes can prioritize their mental and physical health, and ultimately perform at their best on and off the field. Likewise, from a sociocultural lens, sport environments such as coaches, etc., can join with athletes in promoting mental and physical health by doing away with the current aesthetic standard of being thin and toned and muscular as this standard may be virtually impossible for individuals to achieve without excessive exercise or dieting.

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