



Mental Health Training for Coaches: A Policy, Practice, and Research Commentary

Samantha Bates

College of Social Work, The Ohio State University

Obidiah Atkinson

Physical Education Department, State University of New York Cortland

This commentary connects policy, practice, and research to provide an update on the status of mental health education and training for coaches, specifically those in K-12 educational settings. Our aim is to discuss current needs regarding student-athlete mental health and advocate coaches be trained on best practices regarding mental health to empower them to go beyond the “X’s and O’s.” We sought to advance the conversation on training coaches by mapping the current policy landscape of coach training and education in the U.S. regarding mental health, summarizing best practices for developing mental health trainings, and outlining opportunities for future research. For sport social workers, understanding the landscape across policy, practice, and research can help us work toward the mission of promoting individual and community well-being through partnerships between social work and athletics.

Keywords: policy, mental health training, coaches, practice, research

The landscape of sport is constantly evolving, and so too are the needs of new generations of student-athletes. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, 2021) Student-Athlete Well-being Survey indicated that student-athletes are experiencing elevated levels of mental exhaustion, anxiety, hopelessness, and feelings of depression. Risks for mental health concerns were the highest among females, student-athletes of color, those identifying as LGBTQ+, and athletes experiencing economic hardships. Comparable concerns also are evident among high school-aged adolescents, and about half of all high school students in the United States (U.S.) play on at least one sport team annually (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023). Among high schoolers, the CDC (2022) reported that 37% of youth reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless, and 19% seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year. In response to these alarming trends, the U.S. Surgeon General put forth an advisory statement calling for a swift, coordinated, and interprofessional response to address the

youth mental health crisis. The statement reflects growing concerns relevant to social workers across sectors of sport, education, mental health, child welfare, and other youth-serving systems regarding the need to support young people's mental health and well-being (Barker et al., 2021; U.S. Surgeon General Advisory, 2021).

Of additional concern, student-athletes playing in interscholastic school settings are known to experience stigma and immense pressures increasing their risks for poor psychological health and maladaptive coping compared to other populations. In fact, the NCAA (2020) Goals Study found 24% to 31% of collegiate student-athletes admitted feeling significantly overwhelmed while balancing academics and athletics. Moreover, 91% of high school student-athletes reported experiencing heightened stressors associated with sport participation (Ward et al., 2023). While some acute stress is healthy and may boost performance, chronic or sustained stress can lead to mental health concerns like depression and anxiety (Schneiderman et al., 2005). Coupled with these trends are the long-lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and ever-evolving sociocultural issues in sport (i.e., recruitment pressures; name, image, likeness; social media; hazing; discrimination; resource inequities, etc.) that have likely only exacerbated risks for heightened stress among student-athletes. Now more than ever, coaches must be equipped to support student-athletes by teaching life skills to help them cope with adversity and recognize, address, and respond to mental health concerns.

While there is a pressing need to prepare coaches, the policy context reflects a landscape where attention is often paid to ensuring coaches are trained to respond to safety concerns and teach tactics and techniques, not to respond to mental health concerns. As a result, gaps in training likely contribute to low confidence levels and missed opportunities for coaches to support student-athletes beyond the field, mat, court, etc. Indeed, findings from the U.S. National Coach Survey (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2022) conducted primarily with high school coaches indicated only 29% of coaches report feeling confident in their ability to address student-athlete mental health concerns, yet 76% are interested in more training on mental health. Findings illuminate opportunities to improve coach efficacy beyond traditional coaching practices to include a focus on promoting overall health and development with an emphasis on mental health. However, the status of mental health training for coaches working in interscholastic school settings remains relatively unidentified from a policy, practice, and research perspective.

The purpose of this commentary is to (a) map the current policy landscape of training and education for school-based coaches in the U.S. regarding mental health; (b) summarize findings on best practices for mental health interventions and trainings for coaches, and (c) outline opportunities for future research regarding mental health trainings for coaches. Our commentary focuses on coaches connected to educational settings, notably those in K-12 contexts, defined as school-based coaches. School-based coaches represent educators and community members coaching sports affiliated with public, private, or charter K-12 schools and governed by state entities including sport associations, interscholastic athletic association, educational governing bodies (e.g., Departments of Education), or local boards. We focus on this population of school-based coaches in lieu of the on-going youth mental health crisis and because schools are significant to social workers as the largest subspecialty in the profession are practitioners working in child and family settings (Council on Social Work Education, 2020).

Understanding the landscape of coach education and training in K-12 contexts can inform and improve school and sport social work practice and research in areas of prevention and intervention. Our commentary also synthesizes findings from systematic and narrative reviews

published in the last five years on best practices regarding mental health training for coaches (Bissett et al., 2020; Breslin et al., 2022). We conclude by describing opportunities for future research opportunities for sport social workers to play a role in advancing coach education and training through advocacy, practice, and scholarship.

Policy Landscape

Education and training for school-based coaches in the U.S. is complex and overseen by multiple entities (Fawver et al., 2020; Van Mullem & Mathias, 2021). To date, no centralized governing body in the U.S. approves coach education and training requirements, provides oversight of training content, assesses the impact of training requirements, facilitates access to open learning environments, or sets supervision standards to continuously improve coaching education. Rather, state- and local-governing bodies such as interscholastic athletic associations, educational entities (e.g., state departments of education), state activity associations, principal associations, and individual school districts are those designated to set coach training requirements and enact licenses to school-based coaches (Atkinson et al., 2022). The benefit of this decentralized approach is that individual states and municipalities can administer training requirements that meet their local, specific, and contextualized needs. Alternatively, the downfall of this approach is a lack of consistency by state, resulting in discrepancies in coach preparation and training expectations by geographic region. Atkinson and colleagues (2022) document evidence of this widespread disarray in training requirements and licensure processes for school-based coaches, noting how this structure contributes to differences in content, costs, and compliance criteria (e.g., annually, biannually) across the U.S.

Beyond variable governance structures, licensure processes for school-based coaches in most states also prioritize training on physical health and safety-related issues, not mental health. For example, all states mandate training on concussions and 92% of states cover first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation. In addition, 57% of states require sudden cardiac arrest training and 33% of states have added a training on heat illness/acclimatization to their coach licensure process (Atkinson et al., 2022). This emphasis on physical health and safety is important to safeguard student-athletes from injuries, a protective factor when thinking about the prevention of mental health concerns. However, only 8% of states require training on character education that covers the content areas of sportspersonship, citizenship, and ethics in youth sports. Moreover, several states only require coaches to complete one sport pedagogy-related training, which often includes coaching strategies such as establishing a team culture and using effective instruction and management skills. Unfortunately, the curricula within these trainings often fail to go beyond the “X’s and O’s” and physical health and safety. To demonstrate, Atkinson and colleagues (2022) conducted an internal audit of training content within Ohio’s coach training requirements. The authors found that only 19% of nearly 14 hours of content focused on social-emotional health or principles of positive youth development as compared to 54% of curricular content dedicated to physical health and safety. Results are concerning as a lack of emphasis on these topics certainly does not aid nor intervene in the prevention of mental health concerns.

In regard to intervening and responding to mental health crises, we argue coaches are even more ill-equipped based on the current policy landscape. To our knowledge, only two states mandate training for school-based coaches on mental health explicitly. Indeed, Ohio is the first state to mandate mental health training for coaches at the state level. House Bill 33, passed in

July of 2023, is the first of its kind in the U.S. and will be embedded within Ohio's coach licensure process. The goal of this training is to equip coaches with the tools needed to identify mental health issues and link and refer student-athletes to mental health supports in their schools and communities. Although the list of trainings that meet state requirements is not yet public, curricula are being reviewed and approved by Ohio's Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. This partnership demonstrates evolving cross-sector collaborations that are unprecedented in other states. Moreover, in New York, coaches are required to complete a training on the "Theory and Techniques of Coaches" and "Philosophy, Principles, and Organization of Athletics in Education". These trainings cover various topics, including coaches' responsibilities as an educator, motivational techniques, and effective coaching methodologies, and recently has added topics related to supporting student-athlete mental health.

Beyond these two states that mandate mental health trainings, some states have started to offer additional opportunities for coaches to learn about supporting student-athlete mental health. For example, Wyoming and Michigan offer supplemental summer clinics for coaches; however, these trainings are not mandated at the state level. In Wyoming, coaches can enroll in the "Theory of Coaching" training, which covers sport-specific content related to human development and the developmental psychology of student-athletes. Michigan State University's Institute for the Study of Youth Sport also offers coaches the opportunity to enroll in their summer coaches' school as credit in Michigan's "Coach Advancement Program." The central theme of the summer school varies each year and allows coaches to hear from trained experts in domains of athlete development and mental health on topics such as engagement, coping, stress, burnout, and psychological safety in sport. Locally, principal associations and school districts may mandate mental health training for coaches, yet within the broader decentralized structure, one could argue that historically this is likely a small percentage due to trends in coaches' confidence levels addressing mental health concerns among student-athletes. This policy context highlights immense opportunities for coalition-building and advocacy to ensure sport is a context that focuses on the whole child, not just the athlete.

Practice Landscape

If future efforts aim to address gaps in mental health training for coaches nationwide, sport social workers, policymakers, and sport leaders will need to understand best practices regarding the design and delivery of mental health interventions. Recently, Breslin and colleagues (2022) conducted a systematic review of sport-focused mental health awareness programs that utilized experimental or quasi-experimental designs. Scholars identified five studies examining mental health trainings implemented with coaches that varied in time and content. Across studies synthesized in this review, scholars found mental health trainings for coaches often ranged from 1.5 to 12 hours and included psychoeducational content, case studies, role play, videos, and discussions. Such approaches were effective for increasing knowledge, such as recognition of mental illness and depression and anxiety literacy and increasing confidence in one's ability to help (Bapat et al., 2009; Breslin et al., 2017; Pierce et al., 2010; Sebbens et al., 2016). Of interest to sport social workers, coaches who participated in an 8-hour mental health first aid training reported reductions in stigma, increased knowledge of mental disorders, and increased confidence in their ability to help someone (Bapat et al., 2009). This may be one avenue to collaborate with school-based coaches to address training gaps.

Researchers have also reviewed extant literature to frame the role of sport coaches in mental health prevention and promotion to guide education and training development. Bissett and colleagues (2020) conducted a narrative review on the role of coaches and mental health help-seeking behaviors. Across 21 studies and using a modified Delphi method, Bissett et al. (2020) concluded that at the primary level, coaches can support mental health by communicating and placing value on the role of seeking help, as well as describing their roles and responsibilities in supporting mental health in accordance with organizational protocols. In addition, coaches can engage in healthy self-care and avoid stigmatizing language to promote positive behaviors among student-athletes. At the secondary level, coaches need to attend to behavioral changes among athletes, respond within the appropriate bounds to connect athletes to resources, and initiate referrals consistent with organizational protocols in the event of an emergency. Finally, at the tertiary level, coaches can protect confidentiality and modify sport-related demands to keep athletes engaged with the team and accommodate their treatment needs while engaged in mental health services (Bissett et al., 2020). This review, informed and co-developed with and among coaches, denotes opportunities to develop trainings that helps coaches foster supportive team cultures, encourage care-seeking, and support student-athletes receiving treatment or those in crisis.

Research Landscape

Notably, research on best practices continues to emerge, especially in lieu of the mental health crisis in schools following the COVID-19 pandemic. For sport social workers, this presents opportunities to build upon existing research to illuminate evidence-based approaches and inform policy change, as evidenced by Bates and colleagues (2023). As a starting point, however, more research is needed to identify effective design elements, dosages, and content areas that result in behavioral changes for coaches. Further, scholars have opportunities to explore whether enacting uniform regulations and consistent training requirements across states improve coaches' perceptions of readiness to support student-athlete mental health or influence the behaviors of school-based coaches in practice (i.e., Do policy mandates related to mental health trainings translate to changes in coach behaviors and competencies?).

In addition, we must focus efforts on tailoring trainings toward the developmental needs of student-athletes. Several studies within Breslin and colleagues' (2022) review did not focus on trainings implemented in K-12 settings, pointing to gaps in our understanding of what training format and content works, for whom, under what circumstances, and why. Future research studies examining implementation practices also are warranted, such as those focusing on factors associated with delivery, including coaches' levels of readiness and buy-in, the backgrounds of the trainers, and the extent of input provided by coaches, athletic directors, and mental health providers in developing the training sessions.

Scholars and practitioners must also examine the effectiveness of trainings with school- and community-based coaches to fully capture whether investments in prevention can mitigate risks for maladaptive coping and improve help-seeking behaviors as athletes reach higher levels of competition. There is also an evident need to explore outcomes associated with trainings implemented in different sport contexts (e.g., team vs. individual sport; male vs. female teams, etc.). Capturing outcomes beyond coaches' perceptions and knowledge would also strengthen our understanding of how participation in training influences coaching behaviors and

complements other important coaching outcomes, including athlete-coach relationships and coach retention, satisfaction, stress, and performance (e.g., wins and losses, promotions, etc.). In this domain, sport social work scholars are uniquely positioned to advance research in this space, given our commitment to working across athletic systems to enact social change.

Conclusion

This commentary sought to illuminate factors associated with policy, practice, and research regarding mental health training for coaches. For sport social workers, this commentary frames strengths and opportunities to help us work toward the mission of promoting “individual and community well-being through partnerships between the profession of social work and the field of athletics (Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, 2023).” Given current needs and risks among student-athletes, addressing gaps in coach training requirements regarding mental health is imperative and can happen through advocacy for more training mandates, through practice by implementing training with the needs and voice of coaches in mind, and through research by continuing to distill best practices in design and delivery.

References

- Alliance of Social Workers in Sports. (2023). *Alliance of Social Workers in Sports bylaws*. <https://www.aswis.org/bylaws>.
- Anderson-Butcher, D., & Bates, S. (2022). National coach survey: Final report. *LiFEsports, The Ohio State University*. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/national-coach-survey-report-preliminary-analysis.pdf>.
- Atkinson, O., Bates, S., Anderson-Butcher, D., Mack, S., & Goodway, J. (2022). Mapping school-based coach education requirements in the United States. *International Sport Coaching Journal*, 10(2), 276-288.
- Bapat, S., Jorm, A., & Lawrence, K. (2009). Evaluation of a mental health literacy training program for junior sporting clubs. *Australasian Psychiatry*, 17(6), 475–479.
- Barker, R., Hartwell, G., Bonell, C., Egan, M., Lock, L., & Viner, R. (2021). Research priorities for mental health in schools in the wake of COVID-19. *Journal of Epidemiol Community Health*, 76, 448-450.
- Bates, S., Anderson-Butcher, D., Ute, D., McVey, D., Mack, S. Nothnagle, E., Wade-Mdivanian, R., Davis, J., DeVoll, J., Vassaloti, J., Hix, J., Pata, K., Bobek, N., Ludban, C., Myers, K., Porter, K., Quackenbush, J., Roberts, J., Hajjar, N., Durbin, P., Wolfe, T., Magistrale, N. (2023). Mental health training for high school coaches and athletic directors: Community-based participatory research to coach beyond. *International Journal of Sport Science & Coaching*.

- Bissett, J. E., Kroshus, E., & Hebard, S. (2020). Determining the role of sport coaches in promoting athlete mental health: A narrative review and Delphi approach. *BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine*, 6(1), 1–9.
- Breslin, G., Shannon, S., Haughey, T., Donnelly, P., & Leavey, G. (2017). A systematic review of interventions to increase awareness of mental health and well-being in athletes, coaches, and officials. *Systematic Reviews*, 6(177), 1–15.
- Breslin, G., Shannon, S., Cummings, M., & Leavey, G. (2022). An updated systematic review of interventions to increase awareness of mental health and well-being in athletes, coaches, officials and parents. *Systematic Reviews*, 11(1), 1-29.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022). *Youth risk behavior survey: data summary & trends report 2009-2019*. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBSDataSummaryTrendsReport2019-508.pdf>.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023). *Youth risk behavior survey: Explorer. High school students who play on at least one sports team*. <https://yrbs-explorer.services.cdc.gov/#!/graphs?questionCode=H80&topicCode=C06&location=XX&year=2021>.
- Council on Social Work Education [CSWE]. (2020). *2019 statistics on social work education in the United States*. <https://www.cswe.org/Research-Statistics/Research-Briefs-and-Publications/2019-Annual-Statistics-on-Social-Work-Education>.
- Fawver, B., Beatty, G. F., Roman, J. T., & Kurtz, K. (2020). The status of youth coach training in the United States: Existing programs and room for improvement. *International Sport Coaching Journal*, 7(2), 239–251.
- National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2020). *NCAA goals study*. <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2013/11/20/ncaa-goals-study.aspx>.
- National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2021). *Student-athlete well-being survey results*. <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2020/5/22/ncaa-student-athlete-well-being-study.aspx>.
- Pierce, D., Liaw, S.T., Dobell, J., & Anderson, R. (2010). Australian rural football club leaders as mental health advocates: An investigation of the impact of the Coach the Coach project. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, 4, 1-8.
- Schneiderman, N., Ironson, G., & Siegel, S.D. (2005). Stress and health: Psychological, behavioral, and biological determinants. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 1(1), 607-628.

- Sebbens, J., Hassmén, P., Crisp, D., & Wensley, K. (2016). Mental health in sport (MHS): Improving the early intervention knowledge and confidence of elite sport staff. *Frontiers in Psychology, 7*, 911.
- United States Surgeon General Advisory. (2021). *Protecting youth mental health*. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>.
- Van Mullem, P., & Mathias, K. (2021). Coach development: Practical recommendations for interscholastic sport. *International Sport Coaching Journal, 8*(1), 101–112.
- Ward, T., Stead, T., Mangal, R., & Ganti, L. (2023). Prevalence of stress amongst high school athletes (v2). *Health Psychology Research, 11*, 1–6.