

From Victory to Vulnerability:

Reflections and Recommendations on the Mental Health Landscape from a Former College Athlete

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As a Division I college athlete, I witnessed firsthand that college athletes face unique challenges, encountering not only academic difficulties but also the mental and physical struggles associated with the pressure to perform at a high level. I, much like other college athletes (Huml et al., 2019; Hwang & Choi, 2016), experienced stressors associated with my dual role as both a student and an athlete. My peers and I experienced academic pressures in our diverse and demanding coursework—something that is often cited as a broader experience among college athletes (Huml et al., 2019; Hwang & Choi, 2016). I also observed and experienced sport-specific stressors, whether it was recovering from an injury, preparing for a big match, or navigating conflict on the team. Similarly, studies have made connections between things such as negative experiences with coaches and higher levels of stress and associated mental health concerns among athletes (Hwang & Choi, 2016; Rice et al., 2016; Simons & Bird, 2023). Furthermore, according to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), almost 40% of first-year college athletes express being frequently overwhelmed by their responsibilities (NCAA, 2019).

As a dean's list student and captain on a national championship team, I can attest to the unprecedented pressure to be great in both academic and athletic arenas. Victory was expected in the classroom and on the range, often leaving little room for vulnerability in the process. As the pressure increased, so did the stress. Given that stress is a risk factor for developing future mental health concerns (Simons & Bird, 2023), college athletes are an at-risk population in need of mental health support, prevention, and interventions designed to address their unique contexts and needs. As such, I write this reflection to share my perspective and highlight opportunities to improve conditions for college athletes by strengthening support systems and addressing mental health stigma.

Concerningly, stigma exists around mental illness, particularly for college athletes who are often expected to “tough it out,” creating barriers to college athletes seeking mental health services (Cosh et al., 2024; Gulliver et al., 2012). I saw firsthand the critical need for mental health services and support for college athletes, as underscored by a growing body of research (Kashian & Kashian, 2021; Nothnagle, 2025; Whelan et al., 2024). Alarming, suicide rates among NCAA athletes have doubled in the last decade, becoming the second leading cause of death for college athletes (Whelan et al., 2024). Only recently has mental health become a concern at the NCAA level with the publication of the first edition of the *Mental Health Best Practices* in 2016, which has since been updated in 2024 (NCAA, 2024). While I applaud the NCAA for responding to this critical need, there is still much work to be done to destigmatize mental health and actively promote psychological well-being in college sport.

As a former college athlete and current sport social worker, I see opportunities for college athletic departments to address the growing need for college athlete mental health support. There is a lack of uniformity regarding mental health screening, services, and resources available to college athletes in the NCAA (Kroshus, 2016; Sudano et al., 2017). Athletic departments are challenged to provide adequate support to college athletes despite varying access to resources (e.g., funding, etc.). I am grateful to have attended a university with a wealth of resources available to athletes, and I want to share my perspective to advocate for strengthened mental health supports across college campuses. All college athletes deserve access to numerous services, especially given the diverse needs among athletes. Some athletes might benefit from individualized therapy, while others may require targeted academic support. Thus, in this strengths-based narrative, I reflect upon the culture of care that I experienced as a college athlete and offer recommendations for fostering athletic environments rooted in equity, care, and systemic change.

Specifically, I will share my experiences as an athlete at The Ohio State University (OSU). In the Department of Athletics, college athletes have access to several forms of mental health resources. I argue that the availability of these mental health services can be mapped on an educational intervention framework: multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). MTSS is often used in schools to offer appropriate academic and mental health services to students based on the level of need (Bates et al., 2021). Within the MTSS framework, supports and services are delivered across three tiers: Tier I (universal), Tier II (targeted), and Tier III (individualized). Universal means all students, targeted indicates a subgroup of students, and individualized is tailored to the student and represents the highest and most nuanced level of need. Given that MTSS addresses both mental health and academic needs within a school system, it serves as an exemplary model for college athletic departments to offer varying supports to address the holistic wellness and success of athletes. As such, I will ground my advocacy in the mental health supports that I witnessed at OSU using MTSS to provide examples of how other colleges can similarly support athletes. I believe that offering at least one mental health support and services across each of the three tiers can destigmatize mental health and improve holistic well-being, allowing athletes to demonstrate vulnerability in their pursuit of victory.

Tier I: Universal Mental Health Supports

Within the MTSS framework, Tier I represents universal access to services for education and prevention. Offering services to all college athletes creates equitable access, as it is not assumed that every individual has the knowledge or skills to respond to mental health challenges or elevated levels of stress and pressure. At the Tier I level, I witnessed how all college athletes at OSU received mental health screening. At the beginning of each year, Sport Psychology and Wellness Services (SPAWS) joins the athletic trainers and team doctors for the annual physical to administer the Counseling Center Assessment of Psychological Symptoms-Screen (CCAPS-Screen; Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2021; Worley et al., 2025). I believe this is powerful, as research has shown that mental health screening is an effective Tier I tool to identify early signs and symptoms of mental disorders, such as depression and anxiety (Tomalski et al., 2019). Early identification of elevated signs and symptoms of mental disorders can allow for referral to more individualized mental health intervention or treatment at the Tier II or Tier III levels (Tomalski et al., 2019).

As a former college athlete, I think this is an opportunity to combat mental health stigma and create awareness of mental health resources. In my opinion, implementing screening measures normalizes and destigmatizes mental health care and help-seeking in athletics, as all college athletes are universally screened and discuss their results with a SPAWS clinician. Completing mental health screening during the physical health screening demonstrates that both mental and physical health are important for holistic athlete well-being. Furthermore, meeting with a SPAWS clinician during this process teaches all athletes how to access mental health services from SPAWS, increasing knowledge about when and how to seek help for mental health.

In addition to mental health screening from SPAWS, the Department of Athletics also supports athlete-led programs designed to promote psychosocial well-being among college athletes. For example, the Student-Athlete Peer Educators (now known as Buckeye State of Mind [BSOM]) host a Finals Week Stress Relief at the end of each fall and spring semester, available to all college athletes at OSU. Leading up to and during finals week, BSOM hosts multiple events designed to promote community, encourage resilience through positive coping skills, and relieve stress. Past events that I particularly enjoyed coordinating or participating in have included yoga, planting succulents, and spending time with therapy dogs.

Historically, BSOM also hosted a mental health summit entitled Buckeye State of Mind. This event was created to address and respond to the needs of college athletes. As such, BSOM was designed to reduce mental health stigma in athletics by encouraging college athletes to share their stories and strengthening college athlete access to mental health resources. As a member

of this organization, I assisted in organizing a Wellness Fair at the event by identifying and coordinating with numerous behavioral health organizations across Central Ohio to increase college athletes' knowledge and awareness of mental health resources available. Additionally, current and former Buckeye coaches and athletes shared their experiences with mental health, ranging from struggling with career-ending injuries to eating disorders. SPAWS clinicians attended and supported the event by offering spaces for athletes in need of immediate assistance and sharing coping strategies for all attendees.

Tier II: Targeted Mental Health Supports

While all athletes had access to mental health screening and programming designed to destigmatize mental health and promote resilience and well-being, some athletes participated in more targeted mental health programming at the Tier II level. Within the MTSS framework, Tier II services include more targeted and specific supports that go beyond what is offered at the universal Tier I level. Tier II supports allow students to receive more tailored support in small group settings, which may improve learning outcomes of skills (Bates, Nothnagle, & Mokadam, 2024). At OSU, college athletes advocated for athlete-led organizations to address issues important to them, such as mental health and the prevention of sexual violence. Such advocacy led to the creation of multiple affinity groups, including BSOM, which addresses mental health and wellness, and Buckeye Athletes for Education on Safe Sex (BAESS), which addresses sexual violence and health among college athletes.

Furthermore, college athletes were empowered to create inclusive organizations to create community and explore racial, gender, and sexual identities. Specifically, Redefining Athletic Standards (RAS) creates space for male athletes of color, SHER-OS provides community for female athletes of color, Global Buckeyes offers connections for international college athletes, and Buckeye Spectrum generates safe spaces for college athletes with diverse sexual and gender identities (LGBTQIA+ athletes). Given that athletes identifying with racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities disproportionately experience mental health concerns (Kashian & Kashian, 2024), it is critical that safe spaces are created for athletes to connect with peers from similar backgrounds and experiences. Thus, offering and supporting athlete-led affinity groups aligns with social work values, as it creates a sense of belonging and fosters autonomy and self-determination, which may buffer against mental health concerns.

In addition to athlete-led initiatives, several Tier II mental health programs were offered by SPAWS as well. Several times per year, and occasionally at the request of coaches, a SPAWS clinician would attend a team practice or meeting to facilitate a group session. These sessions often focused on topics such as mindfulness and were designed to improve mental performance and resilience. Beyond the team sessions, SPAWS also designed and piloted *Scarlet & Grit* (Sullivan et al., 2023) to increase resilience and improve coping strategies among athletes. *Scarlet & Grit* targeted programming for athletes based on year in school to provide developmentally appropriate psychoeducation for athletes (Sullivan et al., 2023). Furthermore, *Scarlet & Grit* participants interacted with athletes from different sports and teams, facilitating greater social networks by connecting athletes across the university (Sullivan et al., 2023). Finally, SPAWS facilitated athlete support groups, as needed. Following a group therapy approach, athlete support groups were established to address challenges that were commonly faced by athletes, such as experiences with trauma and gender-based violence. Offering these spaces for athletes to connect in smaller, more intimate groups is valuable. Again, I believe that such settings destigmatize mental health in athletic contexts, as athletes connect with and learn from others with similar experiences. Athletic departments can emulate this sense of belonging and destigmatization of mental health by offering similar outlets for athletes, either through targeted resilience-building interventions like *Scarlet & Grit* (Sullivan et al., 2023) or through more clinical perspectives like group therapy.

Tier III: Individualized Mental Health Supports

Finally, in addition to student-led advocacy and community-building initiatives, college athletes also had access to professional mental health practitioners through SPAWS at the Tier III level. Tier III services are highly specialized and offered to individuals who require more intense support than is offered at the Tier I or Tier II levels. While Tier I and Tier II offer more educational and preventative services, Tier III is designed to intervene with those in crisis. Through SPAWS, individual counseling services were offered to athletes for free. Athletes in need of Tier III services were identified through several mechanisms. First, athletes who reported elevated signs and symptoms of mental illness in the Tier I mental health CCAPS-Screen (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2021) would meet with a SPAWS clinician to discuss their results and determine a treatment plan, if necessary. Second, athletes could be referred to SPAWS by a coach, teammate, or athletic trainer. Third, SPAWS ac-

cepted self-referrals. Athletes could seek help from a mental health professional for concerns ranging from performance anxiety to depression to eating disorders. Offering individualized therapy by licensed providers is recommended by the NCAA *Mental Health Best Practices* (NCAA, 2024) and is a crucial resource to provide in all college athletic departments. College athletes need a space to talk about balancing their unique stressors with a licensed mental health professional, particularly as new pressures arise, such as Name, Image, and Likeness challenges, transfer decisions, and coach and peer dynamics. It is especially important to have mental health professionals who understand the cultural and contextual struggles that college athletes face to provide culturally competent care.

Recommendations

As I reflect, I hope college athletic departments seeking to improve mental health support read my perspective and choose to apply the MTSS model to comprehensively address the diverse needs of college athletes. At the Tier I level, universities should prioritize implementing universal mental health screenings for athletes. Despite the recommendations in the NCAA *Mental Health Best Practice* (NCAA, 2024), less than half of NCAA institutions have formal mental health screening procedures (Kroshus, 2016). Implementing mental health screening may allow for earlier detection of signs and symptoms of mental health concerns, making it possible for athletes to receive treatment or resources sooner.

Athletic departments should also empower athletes to facilitate, participate, and engage in preventative mental health programming. These programs may be offered at the Tier I or Tier II levels, allowing athletes to engage with like-minded peers and create strong, supportive social networks, which may serve as a protective factor for mental health concerns (Taliaferro et al., 2010). As a member of several athlete groups including BSOM, I benefitted greatly from such social connections. Participating in BSOM introduced me to peers from different sports, fields of study, and backgrounds, generating enriching friendships. As such, I see great value in Tier II interventions as an avenue for creating spaces for social support and engagement as a protective factor for college athlete mental health and well-being. Furthermore, given that autonomy-supportive coach behaviors and positive coach-athlete relationships may serve as protective factors for college athlete mental health (Nothnagle, 2025), athletic departments may consider offering education and training for college coaches to foster better relationships with athletes, encourage athlete autonomy, and support athlete mental health.

Finally, at the Tier III level, athletic departments should have mental health clinicians available for individual counseling for college athletes, either in-house or in college campus mental health centers, as recommended by the NCAA *Mental Health Best Practices* (NCAA, 2024). Formulating partnerships between athletic departments and campus mental health centers may make services more accessible to athletes. For example, campus mental health centers may need to adjust their hours so that athletes can access services despite their demanding schedules. Offering services in the evenings might remove scheduling barriers for athletes seeking mental health support and services, as it is outside of traditional practice or class times. Athletic departments can advocate for more culturally competent mental health care by considering the unique needs of college athletes when hiring or collaborating with mental health professionals.

As a former college athlete, I can personally attest to the value of having access to resources across tiers. College athletes have different needs throughout their college career, and providing different types and levels of mental health support allows college athletes to seek the services they need most.

Same Player, New Game

To conclude, I want to share how my experience as a Division I college athlete in an athletic department that prioritizes college athlete mental health has influenced my professional trajectory. Currently, I am pursuing a PhD in social work, focusing on the intersection of mental health and sport. As an athlete and advocate for mental health in sport, I grew curious about the struggles I saw firsthand, inspiring me to earn an MSW and pursue a PhD. My experiences with athletes and coaches as a former athlete, current sport social worker, and current PhD student continue to inspire me to conduct research that can continue to improve athletic systems to better support coach and athlete well-being and performance. My research has provided me with opportunities to examine topics like grit (Nothnagle & Knoester, 2022) and mental health in sport (Nothnagle, 2025), empowering me to leverage data, social work practices, and my own lived experience as an athlete to support psychological well-being in sport. Importantly, mental health and well-being are not only relevant to college athletes. It is crucial to identify


and develop ways to improve sport for high school student-athlete mental health as well (Bates et al., 2023; Bates, Mack, & Nothnagle, 2024; Bates, Nothnagle, & Mokadam, 2024; Bates et al., 2026; Nothnagle, 2023).

While my college athlete career has ended, I continue to work towards eliminating the mental health stigma in athletics through my research and practice as a sport social worker and researcher. I hope this article shows how we, together, can find victory in vulnerability. I offered my perspective to inspire change, promote meaningful dialogue, and encourage athletic departments to devote resources to enhance mental health outcomes. Given the alarming mental health trends among college athletes (Whelan et al., 2024), it is imperative that we—former and current athletes, sport social workers, researchers, coaches, and athletic departments—collectively invest in and support college athlete mental health.

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