

Overexercising and Disordered Eating Among Athletes:

A Personal Journey Toward Recovery: In Their Own Words

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Abstract

This personal narrative explores the normalization of overexercising and disordered eating among athletes, highlighting the physical, emotional, and social consequences of these behaviors. Drawing from my own experiences from middle school through college, I describe the pressures to perform, the obsession with body image and nutrition, and the cycle of unhealthy behaviors that led to a diagnosis of anorexia nervosa. The essay details the challenges of treatment, recovery, and relapse, emphasizing the importance of structure, support, and self-compassion in regaining health. It also addresses societal misconceptions about eating disorders, the stigma surrounding them, and the critical need for awareness and intervention. Ultimately, this story underscores that recovery is nonlinear, that eating disorders are serious mental illnesses, and that advocating for proper support and understanding is essential for athletes and individuals affected by these conditions.

Overexercising and disordered eating among both male and female athletes have become far too normalized, and it is an issue that desperately needs to be addressed. In the world of sports, there is an unspoken expectation that you should always be doing more—that no matter how hard you train, it is never enough. Rest days begin to feel like a weakness. Eating “off track” or not consuming enough protein leads to intense feelings of guilt. Pushing your body to its limits becomes not only acceptable but celebrated. As an athlete, I found myself caught in this cycle, constantly chasing perfection.

Overexercising and Disordered Eating Among Athletes: A Personal Journey Toward Recovery: In Their Own Words

Sports have been a major part of my life for as long as I can remember. They shaped me into the person I am today and became a core part of my identity. Along with the joys of sports come challenges, and facing those challenges is what builds true strength and resilience. My story begins in middle school. I was naturally athletic and loved playing sports, but even then, I felt pressure to change how I looked. I believed that if I were smaller, I would be prettier—or that losing weight would make me faster and better at sports. Although those thoughts crossed my mind, I never acted on them. I was just a kid, enjoying life without giving it too much thought.

Everything changed when I reached high school. Instead of being excited to play the sports I had always loved, I let negative self-talk and rude comments from others get to my head. I became more concerned with how I looked in my uniform and the number of calories I burned running up and down the field. I was obsessed with eating as “clean” as possible. What began as dedication quickly turned into something unhealthy. It took me years to realize that taking care of myself and resting was just as important as training hard—something I still have to be mindful of today as a retired college student-athlete.

Toward the end of my freshman year of high school, my eating disorder truly took hold. I would come home from lacrosse practice and go on runs, carefully restrict what I ate, and tell people I was on a weight-loss journey. When lacrosse season ended and summer began, I took full advantage of the unstructured time. I slept late to delay eating, worked out for hours on an empty stomach, and was nowhere near eating enough. I lost weight rapidly—and the scariest part was that everyone was complimenting me. People constantly told me how good I looked and asked how I lost the weight, unknowingly reinforcing my disorder.

That summer, I had my annual physical, and my doctor was concerned. She told me I needed professional help and asked me to return in two months. She warned me that if I continued to lose weight, I would need to enter treatment. I was in shock. Me? A problem with eating? I convinced myself I was simply eating “healthy” and working hard in the gym. Meanwhile, I became increasingly isolated. My personality disappeared. My smile faded. I no longer wanted to spend time with friends or family. I was always cold, my hair was falling out, and I had no energy. Still, I continued feeding my negative thoughts.

I worked at a country club that summer, and once again, people continued to compliment me—little did they know I was dying inside. When school started again, I was absolutely miserable. Field hockey season, once my favorite part of the year, became something I dreaded. I no longer saw it as a sport I loved, but simply as a way to burn calories. My days consisted of going to school, suffering through practice, and leaving early for appointments with my dietitian and therapist. Eventually, I reached a breaking point. I told my parents I needed more help because I no longer saw the point in living.

We decided to schedule an intake appointment with an outpatient treatment program in hopes that I could still attend school. That Friday changed my life. After four hours of testing, intake forms, and questionnaires, I was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa and placed on bed rest for two weeks. My resting heart rate was 20 beats per minute—doctors referred to me as “the walking dead.” Those two weeks were the hardest of my life. I was only allowed out of bed for meals, and when I did get up, I was placed in a wheelchair. I kept asking myself, *How did I let it get this far? Why would I do this to myself?* But the truth is, I did not do this to myself. Eating disorders are not a choice; they are mental illnesses that completely take over a person’s life.

I thrive on structure. What many people do not understand about eating disorders is that they go far deeper than wanting to change one’s body—they are about control. Controlling food intake and exercise can feel manageable when everything else feels uncontrollable. So, when my eating disorder behaviors were taken away, I felt hopeless. After being discharged from the hospital, I entered a six-month family-based outpatient program, where my parents were responsible for all of my meals. I am endlessly grateful for them—without their support, I would not be where I am today. For the first two months, I attended the program full time, then transitioned to half days at school and half days in treatment.

Those six months were mentally exhausting. Every day, I woke up and had to fight my eating disorder. Some days were harder than others, but slowly, I noticed myself returning. Just as I was settling back into school, COVID-19 hit. Therapy moved online, and I chose to see the pandemic as a blessing in disguise. This was when I truly decided to take my life back. I created a recovery-focused social media account to hold myself accountable and inspire others. At first, I felt ashamed and hesitant to share my experience due to the stigma surrounding eating disorders. But once I opened up, I realized I could make a difference—and that is exactly what I began to do.

When we were finally allowed back at school, I was able to return to sports. This was terrifying at first, and my energy levels were still low. However, as I learned how to intuitively eat and move my body, my life became fuller. My sport became my motivation for recovery. I knew that without proper nutrition, I would never be able to compete at the next level. I developed a passion for fitness and proper nutrition and learned to love movement as a healthy coping mechanism. I committed to playing field hockey in college and was incredibly proud of myself for reaching a healthier place.

Recovery, however, is not linear. My passion for fitness once again turned into obsession. I never felt like I was doing enough, overexercised, and limited myself to foods I believed I was “allowed” to eat. The summer before my sophomore year, while teaching group fitness classes, a comment from my boss triggered a relapse. He said, “We should get you counting calories. Your stomach sticks out too much—you are muscular but too soft.” I told him about my history, but he did not care. That comment sent me spiraling and serves as a reminder of why no one should ever comment on another person’s body. Fitness, nutrition, and sports are not about appearance—yet society continues to celebrate certain bodies while criticizing others.

That spring, I had to take another semester off from college because I once again felt like life was not worth living. I returned to treatment, got healthy, and eventually went back to school. I was terrified, but I finished my last two years of field hockey. Not only did I persevere, but I also found my passion and purpose as a social worker. I am deeply interested in the

emerging specialty of sports social work and hope to focus on eating disorders among athletes.

Even the people who seem the happiest may be struggling—always check in on your friends. Eating disorders do not have a “look,” and they are not one-size-fits-all. This is simply my story. Seeking help is incredibly difficult, but it is a sign of strength, not weakness. Weight restoration does not mean recovery, and many individuals continue to battle disordered thoughts every day. Eating disorders are not a choice—they are mental illnesses that must be taken seriously.