

Punitive Exercise and Athlete Mental Health: Multilevel Strategies to Support Athlete Safety and Development

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Punitive exercise (i.e., using physical exercise as a disciplinary consequence) remains a persistent cultural practice across many sport environments despite well-documented physical, psychological, and legal risks. Athletes already experience significant performance-related stress, and associating strength and conditioning (S&C) work with humiliation, failure, or fear introduces an avoidable secondary stressor that undermines long-term engagement with S&C, increases anxiety, and contributes to coping behaviors such as injury masking and deliberate underreporting. Drawing on multilevel perspectives, this practice update synthesizes research, clinical insights, and interdisciplinary guidelines to describe how punitive exercise shapes athlete development at the micro (individual), mezzo (team/organizational), and macro (cultural/policy) levels. The paper incorporates safety recommendations from national sport organizations (e.g., National Athletic Trainers' Association) and legal examples (e.g., Lee v. Louisiana Board of Trustees) to illustrate the consequences of punitive exercise. The manuscript concludes with applied strategies for relevant sports staff to help athletes re-establish a safe, evidence-informed relationship with conditioning and challenge harmful norms that compromise athlete well-being.

Keywords: athlete mental health, punishment, strength and conditioning, discipline

Punitive Exercise as an Added Stressor in Athlete Development

Athletes frequently operate under high levels of sport-related stress, such as performance expectations, roster competition, non-athletic demands, and interpersonal pressures (Lopes Dos Santos et al., 2020). Introducing punitive physical exercise adds a second, unnecessary stressor that is not physiologically or psychologically aligned with healthy development (Parsons et al., 2019). Exercise used as punishment has been described as “abandoning sound physiologic principles” and elevating risk without meaningful performance benefit (NCAA Sports Science Institute, 2019).

For many athletes, early sport experiences establish long-lasting associations between punitive conditioning and emotional distress (Battaglia et al., 2017). When conditioning is tied to shame, anger, or humiliation, athletes learn to brace for threat rather than engage in S&C activities from a developmental and growth mindset. These associations often persist into later developmental stages, where athletes struggle to differentiate former punitive exercise practices from evidence-informed S&C programming. The result is a maladaptive relationship with S&C training characterized by dread, avoidance, and dysregulated stress responses.

Micro-Level Impacts: Fear Responses and Coping Patterns

Conditioning as a Learned Threat

From a psychological learning perspective, punitive exercise establishes S&C training environments as predictable sites of harm. When athletes repeatedly experience exhaustion, public shaming, or punitive drills, conditioning becomes paired with fear, guilt, or anxiety. These are classical conditioning processes where athletes begin associating neutral stimuli (e.g., whistles, weight rooms, sprints) with negative outcomes, creating anticipatory anxiety long after the punitive environment is gone (Kuśnierz et al., 2024).

Generalization Across Developmental Stages

Athletes may generalize early experiences of punitive exercise to new contexts. For example, a collegiate athlete may enter a new S&C program expecting that “conditioning equals punishment,” even when the program is evidence-based and grounded in athlete safety. This generalization undermines trust and disrupts an athlete's ability to fully engage in the S&C programming (Robazza et al., 2023).

Injury Masking, Underreporting, and Faked Symptoms

Punitive exercise also fosters unsafe coping behaviors. Athletes learn that showing fatigue or struggling physically results in punishment, leading to:

- masking injuries to avoid appearing weak
- underreporting symptoms to avoid triggering additional conditioning
- faking injuries to escape fear-inducing workouts

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These behaviors significantly increase risk of injury (Casa et al., 2012).

Somatic Anxiety

Athletes exposed to punitive exercise often present with anxiety-driven somatic responses such as stomach pain, elevated heart rate, dissociation, or emotional dysregulation before conditioning sessions. These physiological responses mirror trauma reactivity, as the body anticipates danger due to the paired association between conditioning and punishment (Tanguy et al., 2018).

Mezzo-Level Impacts: Team Culture, Discipline, and Organizational Dynamics

Punitive Exercise and Team Dynamics

Punishment conditioning erodes psychological safety, decreases team cohesion, and fosters adversarial team cultures. SHAPE America (2021) notes that using exercise as punishment disrupts positive behavioral climates and reinforces fear-based compliance rather than intrinsic motivation.

Athletes conditioned under punitive norms often misinterpret neutral coaching cues as threats. Conversely, sport coaches and S&C staff may misinterpret athlete avoidance as laziness rather than a trauma-linked response. This mutual misunderstanding strains relationships across the performance team.

Discipline vs. Punishment

Positive discipline, such as clear expectations, consistent boundaries, and relational trust, is developmentally appropriate and enhances intrinsic motivation (Carson, 2021). Punishment, however, uses fear to enforce compliance, undermining learning and, over time, impairing performance. When athletes associate conditioning with behavioral failure, they may become less engaged, less confident, and more reactive to mistakes.

Inherited Norms Across Contexts

Many sport coaches learned under outdated “run until you puke” or “no pain, no gain” cultures (Casa et al., 2012). When these norms persist, they interfere with modern evidence-based S&C approaches that prioritize load management, acclimatization, recovery, and long-term athlete development.

Macro-Level Impacts: Policy, Safety Guidance, and Legal Consequences

Legal Precedent: The Tiger Mix Case

The case *Lee v. Louisiana Board of Trustees* (2019) demonstrates the severe consequences of punitive exercise gone tragically wrong. After being required to run more than four miles in extreme heat as punishment, one athlete died and another sustained permanent, career-ending medical complications. The court upheld a \$660,000 judgment, citing clear negligence and violation of safety standards. This case illustrates that punitive exercise is not only unsafe, but it also exposes institutions, coaches, and staff to significant legal liability.

Safety Recommendations and Best Practice Guidelines

National organizations such as NATA (Casa et al., 2012), the NCAA Sports Science Institute (2019), and SHAPE America (2021) have issued recommendations discouraging exercise as punishment. These bodies serve as examples of recommended best practices, not exhaustive authorities, but their consensus reflects a clear cultural shift toward athlete safety. The following section focuses on strategies for relevant sport staff when working with athletes regarding these issues.

Multilevel Strategies for Athletes Impacted by Punitive Exercise

Modeled after multilevel intervention systems used across education, mental health, and social services, this framework outlines supports at the micro (individual), mezzo (team/organizational), and macro (system/cultural) levels (Wackerle-Hollman et al., 2021). This structure ensures that athletes receive developmentally appropriate, context-specific support that adapts to their unique developmental history with punitive exercise. The approach emphasizes collaboration and ongoing evaluation, allowing sport environments to remain responsive to athletes' evolving needs.

Micro-Level: Individual Athlete Supports

Micro-level supports address the personal, psychological, and physiological challenges athletes may experience following exposure to punitive exercise. At this level, the emphasis is on individualized care, emotional safety, and rebuilding an athlete's trust in the training process.

- Help athletes differentiate between past punitive exercise and current evidence-based S&C practices through psychoeducation and supportive dialogue.
- Address fear-based responses such as anxiety, avoidance, injury masking, or underreporting through trauma-informed communication and gradual exposure-based training progression.
- Provide strategies for emotional regulation, self-awareness, and performance-related coping that support athletes during high-intensity or high-pressure training.

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- Normalize conversations about fatigue, soreness, and mental load to reduce shame and promote honest reporting.
- Offer individualized mental health support (sport psychology, counseling, or social work services) for athletes exhibiting trauma-like reactions or significant distress related to conditioning environments.

Micro-level work acknowledges that athletes' histories shape their present engagement and highlights the need for personalized, trauma-informed, skill-building interventions.

Mezzo-Level: Team and Organizational Supports

Mezzo-level support focuses on reshaping the training environment, team dynamics, and interdisciplinary relationships that influence how athletes perceive and experience conditioning. This level emphasizes cultural clarity, communication, and relational safety across staff and peers.

- Build a team culture where conditioning is framed as development rather than consequence, reinforcing that S&C training is a tool, not a punishment.
- Create predictable and transparent training structures by sharing plans, rationale, and expectations across S&C, coaches, athletic trainers, and athletes.
- Strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration to ensure consistent language and reduce mixed messaging that may trigger past punitive associations.
- Integrate relational practices that encourage trust, including restorative communication, supportive feedback, and role clarity among staff.
- Encourage mentoring and peer support systems that help athletes navigate fear-based reactions and feel less isolated in their experiences.

Mezzo-level strategies ensure that athletes encounter a cohesive, supportive, and emotionally safe team environment that counters punitive exercise narratives.

Macro-Level: System and Cultural Supports

Macro-level supports address the broader structures, policies, and cultural norms that shape conditioning practices across sport environments. This level focuses on institutional accountability, safety standards, and the prevention of punitive exercise at its roots.

- Develop and enforce organizational policies explicitly prohibiting the use of physical exercise as punishment or retribution.
- Align institutional procedures with national recommendations (e.g., NATA, NCAA Sports Science Institute, SHAPE America) to promote safe, evidence-informed conditioning.
- Provide staff training to ensure all personnel, S&C, sport coaches, athletic trainers, medical staff, and administrators understand the risks, legal implications, and psychological impact of punitive exercise.
- Utilize case examples such as *Lee v. Louisiana Board of Trustees* to highlight the legal and ethical responsibilities associated with training oversight.

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- Implement feedback mechanisms and evaluation processes that allow athletes and staff to report concerns, promote transparency, and review conditioning practices regularly.
- Foster a broader culture of athlete-centered care that recognizes the importance of dignity, physical safety, and mental health in all training decisions.

Macro-level work ensures that the entire system, not just individuals or teams, commits to eliminating punitive exercise and to creating consistent, enforceable standards of safe practice.

Collaborative Support Across Levels

Across micro, mezzo, and macro domains, the effectiveness of this framework relies on collaboration between strength and conditioning staff, sport psychology practitioners, social workers, sport coaches, athletic trainers, sports medicine providers, and administrators. Continuous evaluation, community-building, and shared responsibility are foundational to repairing athletes' relationships with conditioning, preventing harmful training practices, and fostering environments that prioritize development, trust, and well-being.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Punitive exercise is not simply a coaching style; it is a multilevel threat to athlete well-being. At the micro level, it contributes to anxiety, avoidance, and distorted injury reporting. At the mezzo level, it disrupts team culture, erodes psychological safety, and damages trust between athletes and staff. At the macro level, it violates established safety standards and exposes institutions to preventable legal and ethical risks.

Protecting athlete development requires coordinated, interdisciplinary action. Strength and conditioning coaches, sport psychology practitioners, social workers, athletic trainers, sports medicine providers, sport coaches, and administrators all contribute to reshaping how conditioning is taught, communicated, and experienced. When implemented consistently, multilevel strategies can help athletes rebuild trust in strength and conditioning, reduce maladaptive coping behaviors, and promote environments grounded in evidence-based practice and safety.

Punitive exercise is a preventable source of physical harm and psychological distress. Moving beyond punishment-based physical exertion is not an act of softness, it is a commitment to protecting athletes, sustaining performance, and supporting healthy long-term development.

Future research should examine how punitive exercise experiences influence athlete development across the lifespan, including the long-term psychological and physiological effects of early exposure. Studies exploring athlete perceptions of safety, trust, and readiness within modern strength and conditioning programs may clarify how prior punitive environments impact current engagement. Additional work is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of multilevel re-engagement strategies and to identify best practices for interdisciplinary collaboration. Research focused on policy adoption, implementation fidelity, and institutional barriers could further support efforts to eliminate punitive exercise and promote athlete-centered training environments.

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