OBSESSED: Inside the Mental-Health Crisis Hidden in Endurance Sports
By Hope Frost

1,644 days. More than four and a half years. That's how long it's been since I took a real rest day.

Not because I didn't want to rest. Because I couldn't.

Rest didn't feel like recovery; it felt like panic. The moment I stopped moving, my chest tightened, my thoughts buzzed and I felt this rising sense of dread, like I was losing control — something I couldn't afford to lose.

I've been moving my whole life; from childhood training with my active family, to four years as a Division I runner at Duke, and now competing in triathlon at Arizona State. My default was forward, always. Which is why, when pain hit, I treated it the same way I treated everything else: I kept going.

Two miles into a long run last year, my back snapped — a sudden, slicing pain that stole the air from my lungs. Any rational person would have turned around. Not me. I couldn't. I still had 11 miles left, and the idea of turning around felt more dangerous than the pain running down my spine.

By the time I got home, I was crawling between positions on my bed, unable to sit, stand or walk without seizing. But the next morning, I still showed up for practice. Thirty seconds into the warm-up, the same pain ripped through me once again, only this time, the run ended with my face pressed against an athletic training table.

The doctors told me to rest. I agreed.

Then I drove straight to the pool.

I didn't want to swim. But I *had* to.

I slid into the water and started pulling, each stroke sending a dull ache through my back. When I finally decided I'd done "enough," I couldn't hoist myself onto the deck like I usually did. I had to shuffle to the metal ladder — yes, the one typically reserved for older adults was now for me, too.

This wasn't new. I'd run through several injuries before, pushing a body that had been warning me it was done long before I was willing to listen. But why? Why did stopping feel harder than hurting?

I didn't have a name for it at first. For this constant urgency, this fear of stillness, this need to keep moving even when I knew it was doing more harm than good. But researchers do. It's called "compulsive exercise."

Scientific literature describes it as "rigid, rule-bound activity performed to prevent or reduce negative emotion" — a pattern of obsessive, anxiety-driven training that looks a lot like OCD, only the ritual is movement. It's not exercise addiction or simple overtraining. It's an anxiety-driven movement — the inability to stop, even when you're hurt, exhausted or fully aware you shouldn't be training at all.

The line between commitment and compulsion is thinner than most athletes want to admit. You call it discipline. You call it drive. But when missing a workout feels like failure, and rest feels like guilt, you might not be training anymore — you might be chasing something else entirely.

CONTROL: The illusion that keeps me chasing

For a lot of endurance athletes, training isn't just something we do — it's the one thing we can control when everything else feels uncertain. Workouts come with clear rules and predictable outcomes: you run the miles, you hit the paces, you get better. Or at least, that's what you tell yourself.

That illusion of control is powerful. It's also one of the earliest signs that something deeper is happening.

When I was injured, the pain itself wasn't what scared me. What scared me was not knowing what would happen to my fitness if I stopped — whether a week off would erase months of progress, whether someone else would gain ground while I sat still. Rest didn't feel neutral; it felt dangerous. Moving meant control. Stopping meant losing it.

The paradox was impossible to ignore — the thing that made me feel in control was also the thing I had no control over.

Kim McNally, a senior lecturing fellow at Duke University with a doctorate in exercise science, said this is a telltale sign of compulsive exercise.

"For a lot of endurance athletes, movement becomes a way to stay in control," she said. "It's not about joy. It's not even about training. It's about managing the fear of what happens if you don't."

It’s a feedback loop that looks like discipline from the outside. But inside, it feels like holding yourself together by sheer force.

AVOIDANCE: The fear that keeps me running

If control keeps athletes moving, anxiety is what chases them there. Compulsive exercise isn’t driven by ambition — it’s driven by avoidance. The workout becomes a way to outrun the panic that spikes the moment you stop.

McNally sees this pattern constantly in endurance athletes.

“A lot of compulsive exercise is anxiety reduction,” she said. “Movement becomes the quickest way to quiet the fear — whether that fear is losing fitness, losing identity or losing control.”

McNally explained that what separates healthy training from compulsive training isn’t how much you do, it’s why you do it.

“In addictive exercise, the motivation is to seek something positive, like joy or euphoria,” she said. “But compulsive exercise is about avoiding a negative. That might be guilt or shame or fears of gaining weight. It might even be physical irritability — the tension people feel when they don’t work out. Any pathological exercise someone does to avoid a negative falls into the compulsive category.”

Arizona State sports psychology counselor Halle Gydesen echoed that sentiment.

“When rest creates distress, athletes will do anything to avoid it,” she said. “The training isn’t the problem, it’s the purpose behind the training.”

This aligns with what researchers call a negative reinforcement loop. Instead of exercising to feel good, compulsive exercisers train to avoid feeling bad. A 2017 study in *Frontiers in Psychology* found that athletes with compulsive tendencies reported feelings of irritability, tension, anxiety and restlessness within hours of missing a workout. Exercise becomes the fastest way to shut down those sensations, which is why stopping feels impossible.

I recognized myself immediately in these descriptions. Rest didn’t feel restful; it felt like failure. The moment I tried to take a day off, my mind filled the silence with noise: *you’re falling behind, you’re losing fitness, you’re weaker than yesterday.*

And that was exactly it: the fear wasn’t about missing a workout. It was about what missing a workout *said about me*.

WORTH: The pressure that keeps me proving

Endurance sports reward the people who refuse to stop — so I built my worth around never stopping. If I trained hard, I was legitimate. If I trained harder, I was valuable. If I trained through pain, I was the kind of athlete coaches respected.

Rest didn't just threaten progress. It threatened identity.

Part of that came from the environment. In NCAA sports, worth is often measured by output. Coaches notice the athletes who show up early, stay late and push through things they shouldn't. I learned quickly which behaviors earned approval—and which didn't. So I pushed to stay on the right side of that line.

McNally sees this dynamic constantly.

"For a lot of athletes, their self-concept is so tightly tied to performance," she said. "When your identity narrows like that, stopping feels like losing a part of yourself."

That narrowing happened without me noticing. The more I pushed, the more pressure I felt to prove the push was justified — to myself, to the people watching, to the coaches who determined my opportunities. Every workout became evidence: either that I belonged, or that I was slipping.

Gydesen said this pressure shapes athletes long before they know to question it.

"When worth gets tied to output, athletes learn to overlook everything else," she said. "You start chasing a standard that keeps moving, and your sense of self moves with it."

That was me.

It wasn't just fitness I was afraid of losing. It was the only version of myself I believed was worth anything — the disciplined one, the relentless one, the one who kept going no matter what.

The workouts weren't just workouts. They were proof. Evidence. Receipts that I was still enough, still worthy, still the athlete I thought my coaches expected and the one I desperately wanted to be.

And that's the danger. When worth is built on output, rest is no longer an option. But a body that never rests eventually breaks. Biology doesn't negotiate forever.

COST: The damage that keeps me breaking

Research on pathological exercise in endurance athletes links compulsive training to elevated injury risk, stress fractures, hormonal disruption, menstrual and testosterone suppression, impaired immune function and prolonged recovery. A review published in *Current Sports Medicine Reports* found that compulsive exercisers are significantly more likely to train through pain, delay treatment and experience recurring injuries — not in spite of their discipline, but because of it.

The psychology breaks down in parallel. Studies show that athletes in compulsive patterns often report distorted self-assessment, believing they are "undertrained" even as performance declines. A 2016 review in *Current Sports Medicine Reports* found that compulsive exercisers consistently misjudged fatigue, minimized pain signals and overestimated the consequences of rest.

McNally said she sees these patterns constantly in collegiate athletes.

"We call it the cliff," she said. "There were always those people who will train more and more and look lighter and lighter, and they will be really running fast. And then, at some point, they just crash. They go over the cliff."

I know that cliff all too well.

My body got weaker, not stronger. Paces faded, workouts that used to feel comfortable turned crushing. But instead of stopping, I doubled down. I kept thinking more would fix what more was breaking — that if I pushed just one level deeper, I'd finally get the result I was chasing. Even when I knew better, I kept trying anyway.

That belief that more is always better is exactly what Gydesen warned becomes dangerous.

"That mentality can get you to a high level," she said. "But it also pushes athletes to downplay rest, relationships, even their own needs as a person. When 110% becomes the expectation every day, the body eventually breaks before the athlete's will does."

That is the cost. A body breaking, and a mind too afraid to slow it down.

RESISTANCE: The fight that keeps me standing

I wish this were the part where I say I stopped. Where I learned balance. Where I chose rest over mileage and walked away better for it.

But recovery, for me, didn’t arrive as a breakthrough. It arrived as something more like resistance — shaky, inconsistent, but present.

I’m still wired the same way: to work, to push, to move. Compulsion doesn’t vanish when you name it. The fear still flares. The urge still persists. Rest still feels like surrender.

But something *is* changing.

CONTROL used to mean pushing harder. Now I’m learning it might mean taking the power back from the thing that has been controlling me.

AVOIDANCE used to mean running from anxiety. Now toughness means facing it head-on, realizing the bravest thing I can do is stop.

WORTH used to be something I chased. Now I know that my value can’t be measured in pace, mileage or pain tolerance.

COST used to be something I chose to ignore. Now I’m learning to listen, to stop before it catches up.

I like doing hard things. I always have. Maybe rest is just another version of that, one I never trained for.

Some days I still choose mileage over mercy. Some days I still let fear set the pace. Some days the old pattern wins. But some days — I resist.

Because hard isn’t running. Hard is stopping.

Maybe recovery doesn’t start with freedom. Maybe it starts with one interrupted urge. One morning where I don’t lace up, even when my chest tightens.

One day instead of 1,644.