

## The Mental Battle: Inside the Mental Health Crisis in Student Athletes

In 2022, over five college Student-Athletes competing at a NCAA level ended their life. Mental health has increasingly become more of a conversation within the realms of media, however it is still often overlooked in athletic departments. The balance of academics, athletics, and social pressure can become an overwhelming set of demands for a young athlete. Oftentimes Student Athletes are even more reluctant to ask for help than that of non-athletes. Athletes are taught to be seen as 'competitive' and 'resilient' and may view struggling with mental health as a weakness. Student-Athletes at Colorado Christian University navigate this mental health crisis while competing at a rigorous NCAA division II level.

"College Student-Athletes are very unique with the pressures they face. They have their academic responsibilities, they know there is a degree and a level of knowledge, something they are pursuing on the academic side. They also have this athletic pursuit, part of their identity that they very much care about and something that is very important to them," Dr. Bryan Crutcher Professor of School of Kinesiology and Sport Science stated. "They play games, run races, or tournaments and then they are tired. They are fatigued, their body hurts, maybe they are down because they didn't play well. Psychologically, there are all these things, and then they are expected to go home and study for four hours and do homework. That is unique and can be a big pressure for them to live up to those expectations."

After an injury sparked anxiety in one particular high school runner, the pressure to get back and be at the top built up. Sport and performance became the only thing they could think about.

"I remember there was this one race where the gun was about to go off, and I started having a panic attack and hyperventilating. I couldn't get it under control. I finished the race, but I couldn't breathe and felt terrible. That continued for a few years, I hated running, I hated everything. I went into college with that feeling of performance anxiety. This kind of developed into pretty severe depression as well." one student said.

Entering college, she joined a division I program where her enjoyment for the sport faded even more as rigorous coaching and training began. One coach refused to use her name until she earned it one day at practice.

"He asked me in front of everybody, 'Why did I use her name?' This one girl said, 'Because she earned it,' and I didn't realize I had to earn my name there and that just broke me. That was the exact second I knew I was going to leave. I just didn't feel like a person anymore; I felt like a number on the team. I didn't understand why I was the only one who had to prove themselves."

With the pressure to be good and live up to the expectations of the program, anxiety and depression for this student athlete caused the joy of the sport to diminish even further. After transferring to Colorado Christian University, she was able to find hope and joy in her sport again.

"Coming to CCU, I was first seen as a person. I had so much more community and support," she said. "People want me here because they want to be around me, not because I am fast or what I can bring in that sense."

According to the National Institute of Health on the psychological response to injury, injuries in student athletes can unmask many mental health issues and can trigger depression, anxiety, eating disturbances, substance use/abuse, and suicidal ideation(cite). Athletes are often taught to 'push through' obstacles and may fear injuries as a sign of weakness. It is important to promote healthy coping mechanisms for injured athletes as losing a sport can sometimes be a major crisis in their identity.

“When athletes get injured, they often feel a sense of loss. Athletes are used to performing at very peak levels and are able to do whatever they are trained to do. But when an injury happens and that ability is taken away, there is a sense of loss there, and every athlete copes a little differently,” Dr. Crutcher said.

Oftentimes an athlete can feel pressure to perform the way that coaches or themselves expect. Soccer player Cora Lopp has dealt with her mental health in her own career while competing at CCU.

“With performance, if I don’t perform to what I think is good or what coaches think is good, I just marinate and sit on that for a long time and can’t get it out of my head and then I deep spiral into anxiety.” Cora Lopp said.

Injuries often become a major crisis and take an emotional toll on athletes. Rehab and doctors’ appointments can cause time constraints and stress on the athlete, as well as the added stress of not training or participating in games and practice. Injuries can also lead to separation from the team, causing the athlete to feel even more alone.

“When I was injured and couldn’t play, I felt like I had no value to the team and couldn’t add anything to the team.” Lopp said. “Not playing, I felt like I was hurting my team more, and I just felt utterly alone just because of my sport and not feeling related enough to campus either. I think there is this tension between students and student-athletes, and feeling that ‘no one understands this,’ ‘no one understands what I am going through,’ and I just felt super alone.”

Athletics are often stress relievers and emotional support for athletes. On the contrary, athletics can also become a major stressor whether caused by an injury with the pressure to get back or the overall pressure to perform. Volleyball player Kate Ringer spoke to her own experiences with mental health and the challenges that competing at a high level brings.

“Freshman year was very heavy because a lot of people really identified with being an athlete. Being put in that box and identified as an athlete was really interesting because then if I wasn’t getting playing time, people would be showing up to games, and I would be feeling bad because I wasn’t playing. That definitely correlated to my mental health continuously,” Ringer explained. “In high school, my mental health correlated depending on the team I was on, how well I was playing, and status as far as being an athlete goes.”

As she has progressed in college, she has seen that having a coach who invests in you as more than an athlete is critical to creating a positive culture on the team. In addition, she has seen that pouring into teammates has played a huge part in growing her love for her sport.

“Something that has helped free that up is identifying the team as a family, having a sacrificial mindset and thinking it is not about me, it’s about the bigger picture,” Ringer said. “It’s huge to have people that are so willing to encourage you along and crawl down into the pit with you and walk you out of it. It’s huge that we care so deeply about each other and that all stems from having deep rooted relationships and this sisterhood.”

Kate has seen the benefits of finding identity that is not tied to performance but rather Jesus Christ. Finding strength in her faith to help her play for more than just herself has helped free up feelings of anxiety and pressure. She has found that when identity is tied to value beyond achievements and performance, there is immense freedom on the other side of the struggle.

“Stepping into that bigger cause, whether that be for your team or the Kingdom, and stepping into that and **looking beyond yourself makes life so much more worth living and your sport so much more worth playing**,” Kate Ringer said.

Media has unmasked a whole new level of vulnerability and exposure of athletes. Media highlight reels emphasize this importance of success and failure in competition as athletes are constantly being critiqued

for their efforts and open to public opinion. Olympian Simone Biles has opened up the conversation as she pulled out of the 2020 Olympics to focus on her mental health struggles. According to an article by Fox News, 'OK not to be OK,' Simone was not the first elite athlete to open up about mental health. 23 time gold medalist Michael Phelps opened up about his mental health struggles including depression that caused him to contemplate suicide after the 2012 Olympics. This article explores many other elite athletes who have been navigating the struggles of mental health in a world where success and performance is highly valued. These elite athletes are setting an example to young athletes all around that mental health is a real struggle and needs to be a conversation. Mental health is a battle, but it is a battle athletes can win.

"Sometimes they just need someone to come alongside and say you know what, I see you. I see the pressure that you are under. I see the work that you are doing. And you are not always going to be perfect, but you are working hard and I see that. And I just don't know if they are told that enough," Dr. Crutcher commented. "I think they sometimes need somebody to tell them, 'I get how difficult this is and I am rooting for you. I am rooting for you as a person, student, an athlete, and most importantly in your faith. I am rooting for you in life.'"

Crutcher stated that believing in the athlete as a whole person can be a major factor in diminishing this common belief that success and value are tied together. Their well-being must come first because if they can be healthy in every domain, their performance will follow.

"We can not just see them as just these machines that go and go and go. We have to see athletes as a holistic individual, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and be able to feed into all those areas of their wellness. And that we can never put success and win/loss above the wellness of the athlete."

Success at a high level is important and programs are constantly developing in order to grow success in athletics. It is also vitally important for programs to look for ways to support athletes in their well-being. Some athletes fear losing scholarship money, playing time, or academic success and can lead to suffering physically or mentally. Crutcher points out that there is hope in the support athletes can receive when the conversation of mental health carries on.

"Work hard for the things that you want, but your value is so much beyond that. I think when people realize that it brings them to a whole new level of joy and pursuit. Not that things won't be hard, mental health is a very real thing. But there is hope. Because there is hope in Jesus Christ, there is hope in social support, and there is hope when people feed into you and believe in you." Dr. Crutcher said.

The women's soccer team at CCU has started a campaign for suicide prevention month. Three specific soccer players Ashleigh Willette, Cora Lopp, and Alana Lopp have the motivation behind the campaign with the goal to reach across campus and promote resources available when going through mental battles.

"Originally, we as athletes have all struggled with mental health and found it very hard to discuss. We have all three had our fair share of struggles with mental health in all aspects of life: athletics, school, and social. We shared our testimonies and decided we want to do something about the stigma around the conversation of mental health struggles. Our goal is to de-stigmatize the conversation around mental health. We realize there is a stigma around mental health in all areas, not just athletes, so we set out to change this on our campus. Our goal is to say it is okay to have these struggles and let people know that you are not alone. Mental health can be an open conversation," Senior Alana Lopp said

The women's soccer campaign has been selling t-shirts in Anschutz and at CCU sporting events in order to raise money for supporting mental health all around campus. In addition, they are looking to raise funds for additional resources/support for student athletes at CCU. As awareness arises in mental health, college programs are looking at the actions that can be taken to support individuals when they face these psychological stressors. Open conversation and awareness begins with action of students and faculty in

order to reduce this mental health decline. Athletic leadership can begin to destigmatize and prioritize athlete mental health which can lead to athlete's thriving in many areas of life including their athletic pursuit. There is a mental health battle going on in universities all around, but with the right actions schools will start to see improvements.

**“We have to see them as more than just students in a classroom, athletes have to be more than stats on a stat sheet, and just names on a line up.** We have to see them as more and when we do that, we will give them the support they need and the support that they want,” Dr. Crutcher said. “And then I really think we will see changes in mental health and mental wellness, and we will see such wonderful improvements. **And there will always be a battle. But it's a battle we can win.** And if you are fighting mental health, athletes, it is a battle you can win if you have Jesus Christ and the right support. You can win, never give up, keep fighting because there is victory there.”