

# The Life Within the Game: The Importance of Athlete Mental Health

The 2024 Summer Olympics are right around the corner! The exciting world of elite sports is often associated with physical prowess, unparalleled dedication, and the relentless pursuit of excellence. The world will come together to observe in awe, cheer for their favorite athletes, and be instilled with patriotic pride. We hope that fans will also take a moment to appreciate and support the lives of competitors in the games.

Recent high-profile performers, such as gymnast Simone Biles, skateboarder Rayssa Leal, and sprinter Noah Lyles, have bravely brought to light the significant challenges faced by top athletes. Their nuanced self-awareness and recognition of the ebb and flow on the mental and emotional states we all experience were critical to their safety and wellbeing. This awareness of elite amateur and Olympic athletes is crucial for optimizing their overall performance, long-term health, and wellbeing. Whether you are an athlete or a spectator, it's important to understand the role that mental health plays in performance.

## Understanding Mental Health Awareness in Sports

Mental health awareness refers to an individual's ability to recognize their current emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing. It reflects a deep understanding of how we think, feel, and act, influencing how we handle stress, relate to others, and make decisions. Wellness is a holistic concept that encompasses physical, mental, and social aspects of health, aiming for a balanced and fulfilling life.

Elite amateur athletes face unique pressures that can affect their mental health awareness and wellness. The intense training schedules, high expectations to perform, and constant public scrutiny can lead to significant stress. The pressure to excel not only comes from personal ambition but also from coaches, sponsors, and fans, which can create an environment where mental health issues are more common than most may realize.

## **The Impact of Mental Health Practices on Performance**

Prioritizing mental health practices is essential for athletes to perform at their best. When athletes are disciplined in their mental practices, they can maintain focus, manage stress effectively, and cultivate sustainable motivation. Confidence elevates and performance excels.

Conversely, poor mental discipline can severely impact an athlete, leading to decreased performance levels, increased risk of injuries, burnout, and/or early retirement. While many athletes may be able to perform at high levels during these challenges, this is often not sustainable and may have long-term detrimental impacts. To combat these challenges, mental resilience, mental skills training, positive support systems, healthy coping mechanisms, and work-life balance are all countermeasures these top-level athletes call upon to maintain mental health.

## **Common Mental and Emotional Challenges Among Elite Athletes**

Continuous high-intensity training and competition can lead to *burnout and chronic stress*. Symptoms include physical and emotional exhaustion, decreased performance, and a sense of detachment from the sport.

*Anxiety and Depression* are among the most common mental and emotional challenges faced by elite athletes. High prevalence rates are often linked to the immense pressure to perform, fear of failure, and the struggle to balance personal and professional lives. Symptoms can include persistent sadness, loss of interest in activities, and excessive worry.

*Substance Abuse* can be a coping mechanism for dealing with stress, pain, and performance anxiety. Unfortunately, it brings long-term consequences, including addiction and severe health problems. Athletes may turn to performance-enhancing drugs, alcohol, or other substances to manage the pressures of competition.

Athletes, particularly those in sports with a focus on appearance, weight, and body composition, may develop eating disorders. The pressure to maintain a certain body image can lead to unhealthy eating habits, negatively affecting both physical and mental health.

## **Strategies for Promoting Mental Health and Performance**

### **Individual Level**

Adopting self-care practices and routines that promote mental health and performance, such as mindfulness meditation, regular physical activity, and adequate rest is critical. Seeking professional help from licensed clinical psychologists or counselors is crucial when dealing with severe mental, emotional, or social challenges.

### **Team and Organizational Level**

Creating a supportive environment within teams and organizations is essential. This can involve implementing mental health policies, providing resources, and fostering open communication about mental health. Encouraging a culture

where mental health practices are prioritized can make a significant difference. Preventing and mitigating mental and emotional challenges requires recognizing the nuance of early signs and implementing strategies, often with a multidisciplinary approach.

## **Community and Public Level**

Raising awareness and reducing stigma around mental health awareness and practices in sports is vital. The role of media and public figures in promoting mental health practices cannot be underestimated. Public campaigns and educational programs can help change perceptions and encourage athletes to seek help.

## **Supporting Athletes**

The significance of mental health awareness for elite athletes cannot be overstated. Good mental health awareness and discipline is intrinsically linked to peak performance, overall wellbeing, and career longevity. Athletes who prioritize their mental wellbeing often perform better, as they are more likely to adopt best practices to decrease the likelihood that mental and emotional challenges become detrimental to their performances. Their high degree of self-awareness allows them to recognize early signs of mental and emotional challenges and take proactive steps to manage them. These strategies are beneficial for everyone as they go from good to great and explore the bounds of their potential.

Starting with youth sports, we can all play a role in prioritizing mental health initiatives and providing ongoing support and resources to ensure athletes can perform at their best and lead fulfilling lives.

- Leverage and encourage the integration of technology and mental health apps to provide access to resources for athletes while reducing stigma.

- Support the advancements in sports governance that advocate for mental health resources.
- Act with awareness and intention. Observe, engage, and create a culture of open communication.

Encouraging a holistic approach to mental health and wellness will benefit not only the athletes but the entire sports community. As the Olympics commence, let's commit to being fans with a purpose – appreciating and prioritizing the lives within the games!