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Foreword:

In Their Own Words, Sport Social Work Journal Special Issue

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Sport has the power to inspire, challenge, and bring people together, but behind the headlines and statistics are real athletes with experiences that are often overlooked or misunderstood. "In Their Own Words" gives these athletes a platform to share their stories directly with coaches, administrators, social workers, trainers, and others who influence the world of sport.

This special issue focuses on the voices of current and former athletes, inviting them to share personal letters and narratives that highlight their realities. Through these stories, we explore how factors like race, gender, class, sexuality, and other intersecting identities shape their experiences in sport. Athletes often face pressures and challenges that are invisible to those outside the field, and these contributions bring those experiences to light in their own words.

Our goal is to amplify these voices so that members of the sport community, especially those who live and work alongside athletes, can better understand the human side of sport beyond performance and results. By listening to athletes directly, coaches, administrators, social workers, families, and advocates can help create more supportive, inclusive, and ethical environments. We hope this issue sparks reflection, dialogue, and action, encouraging all who engage with sport to consider the social, emotional, and cultural realities that shape athletes' everyday lives.

Ultimately, "In Their Own Words" reminds us that sport is more than just competition. It is a community made up of real individuals shaped by their challenges, their successes, their identities, and their resilience. By centering athlete voices, we can challenge assumptions, rethink policies and practices, and ensure that mental health, well-being, and inclusion are prioritized alongside performance. We hope these stories inspire both empathy and action, encouraging readers not only to hear athletes' experiences, but to use that insight to help make sport safer, fairer, and more empowering for everyone involved.

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Reconstructing a Life Beyond the Game:

A Reflection on Mental Health, Injury, Grief, and Healing

Art Romero
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For as long as I can remember, the baseball field was more than just a place to compete; it was home. The chalk lines, the rhythmic pop of a ball hitting a glove, and the daily grind toward greatness shaped not only my time but also my entire identity. When I earned the opportunity to play collegiately at Cal State Dominguez Hills, it felt like confirmation that every sacrifice had been worth it. Baseball was not merely something I did; it was who I was. My future, my value, and my sense of self were all tightly linked to the sport. Still, I was completely unprepared for what would happen when that foundation collapsed, and for the emotional and psychological battle that followed.

The shift began quietly, without warning, in the form of an opponent I never expected to face myself. Two weeks into the season, while pitching at Grand Canyon University, I tore my labrum and was placed on the injured list for the rest of the year. There was no dramatic stabbing pain, nothing cinematic or heroic. Instead, it appeared quietly, as pitches suddenly refused to obey my commands. After a week of rest, just as my pitching coach ordered, I grabbed a ball at Azusa Pacific University and jogged onto the field to play catch, feeling hopeful. But as I wound up and threw, reality hit harder than any fastball. That familiar, unwelcome jolt shot through my arm, and in an instant, I knew: my season was over. Suddenly, the path I had dedicated my life to was gone, and I was faced with a reality I had never imagined. I had left San Diego a second time to chase this dream. Now, I sat in the dugout, not in a uniform, but in a sling and a fog of confusion, watching the game progress without me. The injury was physical, but the emotional toll revealed itself more slowly. I felt lost, confused, guilty, and increasingly depressed. Every day reminded me of what I could no longer do, and I mentally punished myself for not training harder in the offseason, convinced I had somehow caused this outcome.

The school year passed in a haze, and while I continued rehabbing my shoulder, I clung to the belief that I would come back stronger, reclaim my place, and prove that the injury was only a temporary setback. But at the end of the season, I was called into the coach's office and told that my scholarship was being revoked due to "lack of performance." In that moment, I felt my world unravel, thread by thread, much like the seams of a baseball slowly splitting open under pressure. Everything I had built my identity around disappeared, not gradually but instantly. I was no longer a student-athlete. I was just someone trying to figure out who I was without a glove, a mound, or a jersey.

The loss of baseball, however, was only the start of a series of emotional blows that tested my mental health in ways I never expected. While my athletic identity faded, my personal life was shattered. My father was diagnosed with a brain tumor. My cousin died by suicide. A month later, my grandfather passed away. Grief came not in waves but like a tidal force, intensifying the internal crisis I was already facing. To say I was going through a mental health crisis would be an understatement. Yet despite the overwhelming pain, I felt I could not talk about it. As an athlete and a man, I had been conditioned to push through pain, stay quiet, "figure it out," and never show vulnerability. My grief seemed invisible, unacknowledged, and unsupported. This sense of disenfranchised grief deepened my emotional isolation, leaving me adrift in a psychological rip current. The harder I fought it, the more I sank.

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When I returned home, everything familiar felt foreign. The silence, the lack of structure, and the absence of baseball created a void that frightened me. For the first time, I had no direction. Yet, in that darkness, healing began in quiet, unexpected ways. I did not sit down and craft a strategic recovery plan; instead, I followed my instincts and emotions toward outlets that helped me feel again. Art became the first door. I picked up paintbrushes and started working on canvases as if each piece was commissioned. I poured my emotions into every stroke, letting color and texture express feelings I could not yet put into words. There was no scoreboard, no coach, no comparison—just creation. The canvas did not judge me; it held me.

Music quickly followed. I found peace in rhythm, vibration, and sound—elements that helped me reconnect with my body and spirit, free from the burden of expectation. I started DJing, discovering that spinning records gave me a sense of control and presence similar to what pitching once provided. Where I once aimed to command the strike zone, I now controlled tempo, energy, and atmosphere. Music became my new field, my new place to compete, my new way to feel alive.

Letting go of the dreams I once held for baseball was difficult. It was painful, slow, and filled with moments where I questioned myself and my future. However, the transformation that came from that pain became a victory. Through art and music, I rebuilt my identity, not as an athlete defined by performance but as a person capable of growth, passion, creativity, and reinvention. With time, resilience, and consistent effort, those outlets did more than comfort me; they opened doors I never thought possible. Eleven years after losing my role within baseball, I earned the position of official DJ for a Major League Baseball team. In a poetic twist, the stadium that once symbolized the peak of a sports dream became the stage where a new dream was born.

My journey through injury, grief, and emotional hardship taught me that recovery is not a straight line. Healing rarely comes in the form of simple answers or quick fixes. Sometimes it starts with acknowledging that we are broken. Sometimes it develops quietly through creative expression, connection, and time. Most importantly, healing requires us to accept that we are human, vulnerable, imperfect, and capable of change.

What started as the most painful season of my life ultimately laid the groundwork for a new chapter, one grounded in authenticity, emotional awareness, and resilience. The loss I once feared would break me instead pushed me to discover who I was beyond just athletic identity. I am still a competitor, still driven, still committed to excellence, but now my worth isn't tied to a scoreboard. It exists in my passion, my creativity, my ability to endure, and my refusal to give up on myself. The game may have ended, but life did not. Through art, music, love, and perseverance, I have found a new way to step back onto the field, this time on my own terms.

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From Athlete to Advocate

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Abstract

This reflective narrative explores the lived experience of one athlete whose identity was deeply shaped by sport and the profound impact it had on protecting herself from her worst enemy, herself. While sport provided structure, belonging, and protection from risk behaviors, the lack of open conversations around mental health, recovery, and identity development left significant gaps once the sport came to a natural end. The world of sport has changed significantly since this athlete played. Currently, youth and their families are subjected to overspecialization, commercialization, and socioeconomic barriers that create inequities in access and increase pressures that contribute to burnout, disconnection, and mental health challenges in young athletes. This piece also highlights how these experiences shaped the author's commitment to sport social work, advocating for system change and athlete-centered practices. By integrating personal narrative with current research, this piece emphasizes the need for systems that value the whole person—not just performance. The narrative concludes with a call to action for sport professionals to address inequities, expand mental health support, and foster environments rooted in care, access, and systemic change.

Keywords: sport social work, athlete identity, mental health, burnout, recovery, equity, trauma-informed care, youth sports, access, systemic change.

From Athlete to Advocate

I often say that sport saved me—until it did not. When I first picked up a field hockey stick in middle school, I had no idea it would shape my identity so profoundly. Sport gave me belonging, structure, and a sense of purpose. It kept me focused during years when many peers drifted toward riskier paths. But it also taught me to tie my worth to performance. When that ended, I was left with a deep sense of loss—one that too many athletes face in silence.

Growing up, I played soccer, field hockey, and winter track (to stay in shape). I did not have to choose to specialize in a sport at eight years old. In fact, the idea of U-8 travel teams did not exist the way they do today (Jayanthi et al., 2020). I am grateful for that freedom—the ability to play multiple sports helped me become a better all-around athlete, but more importantly, it allowed me to just be a kid. As youth sports have become increasingly commercialized and specialized, this freedom is disappearing, often replaced by financial barriers and heightened pressure (Aspen Institute Project Play, 2025).

Early specialization, combined with year-round competition and performance expectations, has contributed to alarming rates of athlete burnout, even before adolescence. Burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion, reduced accomplishment, and sport devaluation, has been linked to overtraining, excessive parental pressure, and loss of autonomy (Valenzuela-Moss, 2024). When sports become more about achievement than enjoyment, children are at risk of walking away from physical activity entirely, creating long-term consequences for both their mental and physical health.

My athletic identity deepened in college, where I experienced both the benefits and costs of being a Division I athlete. The structure and discipline were stabilizing, but my sense of self became fully tethered to performance. When injuries, body image struggles, and pressure mounted, I lacked the coping tools to navigate those experiences. Like many athletes, I internalized the belief that my value was measured by how well I played and what my coach thought of me.

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These experiences were not unique. Many athletes face increased mental health risks during performance peaks and transitional moments, particularly when their identity is strongly tied to sport (Henriksen et al., 2020). This reality underscores the importance of athlete-centered support systems that address both performance and well-being.

When my playing career ended, I struggled to find my footing. My identity had been built around the game, and without it, I felt unmoored. This transition period—common for so many athletes—can be a time of heightened vulnerability. Recovery, for me, meant learning to rebuild a sense of self beyond my athletic achievements. It is also what ultimately led me to the profession of social work.

I did not struggle with alcoholism or an eating disorder during my athletic career—those challenges emerged later, when sport was no longer there to give me structure or belonging. During my years as an athlete, these topics were rarely discussed, and seeking help was often seen as weakness. My recovery journey has given me not only empathy for others but also a deep purpose: to create spaces where athletes and former athletes can talk openly about mental health, identity, and healing. It is one of the reasons I am so dedicated to the work I do today.

Today, as a sport social worker, coach, and parent, I see scary patterns. I see young people specializing earlier, losing joy before they even reach high school (Hoffman et al, 2022; The Chronicle of Evidence Based Mentoring, 2024). I see families investing time, money, and emotional energy into their children's athletic identities (Reardon, 2023). I see kids who love their sport, but I also see kids who are being swallowed by it.

These efforts must also address the structural inequities embedded in youth sports: who has access, who is supported, and who is left out. By embedding trauma-informed and equity-driven practices, sport can become a platform for connection, healing, and empowerment rather than harm.

One of the most significant, and often overlooked, barriers in youth sports is cost. The shift from community-based, low-cost recreational sports to competitive travel models has created a landscape where participation is increasingly determined by a family's ability to pay. Pay-to-play models, equipment costs, travel expenses, and club fees can easily amount to thousands of dollars per year (Aspen Institute Project Play, 2025; Hernandez et al., 2023).

This financial reality has created an uneven playing field. Youth from low-income and working-class families face significant obstacles to participation, even when they have the talent and motivation to play. For many families, the choice is not between one sport or another—it is between sport and meeting basic needs. As a result, access to the benefits of sports, such as belonging, discipline, and leadership development, is unequally distributed (Coakley & Donnelly, 2022).

Sport professionals—including social workers, coaches, and administrators—must recognize these barriers as systemic, not individual. Addressing inequities in youth sport access requires intentional action: scholarship funds, partnerships with community organizations, transportation support, and advocating for funding models that prioritize access over profit. Without this shift, sport will continue to mirror and reinforce broader social inequities.

Sport has the power to be transformative—but only if the systems surrounding it are designed with equity and care at their core. Professionals in social work, mental health, and athletic support roles have a unique opportunity to foster environments that protect athletes' holistic well-being. Trauma-informed coaching frameworks, equitable access to resources, and intentional identity development work can shift the culture from performance-centered to person-centered (Campaign for Trauma-Informed Policy and Practice, 2024). By embedding trauma-informed and equity-driven practices, sport can become a platform for connection, healing, and empowerment rather than harm.

This is why I do this work now. It is why I coach, advocate, and build programs focused on mental fitness and athlete well-being. We can build systems where sport is not something young people must survive, but a space where they are seen, supported, and valued beyond their performance. This work requires all of us—educators, social workers, coaches, and parents—to shift how we show up.

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Blue Shoes:

A Letter from the Field

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Dear Coaches, Trainers, Social Workers, Administrators, and Anyone Who Says They Care,

You call me Blue Shoes. I picked the cleats to stand out. I wanted to be remembered. And I guess I am, but not always for the reasons that matter. You see me on the field and think, "There is a winner. That kid gives it everything."

But you do not see what it took to get here. You do not see the nights I stay up late trying to finish homework after practice. You do not see me wondering if I will ever get the same shot as kids from big schools, with better gear, better fields, better cameras to make highlight reels. You do not see the pressure to keep playing, even when I am hurt. Because if I sit out, I might get passed over. You do not see the fear. The fear of your own thoughts. I have seen how fast things can change. One day you are playing. The next, it could be your last game. That is what I think about sometimes. Not because I want to, but because I have to.

When I first joined the team, I did not know if I would fit in. I was quiet. Unsure. It took time to feel like I belonged. And even now, there are things I do not say, like when I am in pain or when I am overwhelmed.

Do not get me wrong, I have always had someone to talk to. My mom has been there for me. But I know not every kid has that. And even if they do, football does not make it easy to talk about what you are going through. You are expected to be tough. To push through. To keep quiet.

I have learned how to hold things in. How to play through pain. How to stay focused even when I feel like there is too much going on at once. That is what the game teaches you. And sometimes, it is not just the game. It is the world around it.

I have not felt racism from my coaches; they have treated me with respect. But outside the team? It is different. Around here, there is an unspoken rule that people stick with their "own." People see you a certain way before you even open your mouth.

So maybe some of that hard work is so that "they" do not see me *that* way. Maybe it is my way of rewriting the story before they write it for me.

I have not had to speak up in front of a crowd yet. But I am the kind of person who will welcome the new kid without being asked. I admire athletes like Mack Hollins, people who use their platform to remind others they are not alone. If I ever had a voice like that, I would use it the same way. Sports reaches people.

Out here, in small towns like mine, the quiet is not empty, it is full of what we carry. The pressure to perform. The pain we do not name. The fear we do not show. Sports teaches us to push through, to stay focused, to keep quiet. But that silence does not mean we are okay. And it does not mean we do not have something to say.

So, if you are reading this, if you are a coach, a trainer, a social worker, or someone who says they care, do not wait until we are broken to show up. Do not wait until we are headlines or hashtags. Listen now. While we are still here. While we are still trying.

Sincerely,
Blue Shoes

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This letter was written by a rural high school football player who chose to remain anonymous to protect any future opportunities he may have in sports. We worked in collaboration through conversations and reflection to create this manuscript so that his words could be heard. His words reflect the emotional truths many young athletes carry, truths that are often overlooked until it is too late. As a social worker, I offer the following reflection not to speak over his voice, but to amplify what it reveals about the systems surrounding him.

I have read countless articles about the role of social work in sports. Most of those articles discuss college and professional sports. These conversations are important, but they often begin too late. By the time an athlete reaches a university or the league, they have already spent years navigating systems that reward silence, punish vulnerability, and ignore the emotional toll of performance. If we want to support athletes holistically, we must start earlier. We must start in high school. We must start in places like Blue Shoes' rural high school's sports programs.

His letter is not a crisis report. It is a quiet warning. A 15-year-old should not be thinking about his "last play." He should not be choosing between his body and his future. He should not be navigating the racialized assumptions of school discipline systems alone. And yet, like so many young athletes, he is.

What strikes me most is not what he says, but what he does not. The way he downplays pain. The way he normalizes pressure. The way he protects his coaches, even as he names the silence around injury and mental health. This is not a failure of character. It is a survival strategy. It is what sports has taught him be tough, be quiet, be grateful, and to be good.

But what if we taught something else? What if social workers were embedded in high school athletic programs, not just to respond to crises, but to build relationships, normalize emotional expression, and advocate for systemic equity? What if we trained coaches to recognize trauma responses, not just missed tackles? What if we created spaces where athletes could speak without fear of losing their spot?

Blue Shoes story is not unique. It is, in fact, painfully common. And yet, it is rarely heard, especially in rural communities where resources are limited, and visibility is low. His voice reminds us that athletes are not just bodies in motion. They are whole people, shaped by race, class, geography, and silence.

Changing sport culture means listening to athletes at every moment, not only in triumph or crisis, but in the spaces where silence is mistaken for strength. Blue Shoes reminds us that athletes are not just performers; they are people navigating complex systems that often fail to see them fully. As social workers, we have a responsibility to show up early, listen deeply, and advocate fiercely. If we wait until they're broken, we've already missed our chance. Let his letter be a call to intervene, not at the finish line, but at the starting block. Because if we wait until they are broken, we have already missed our chance. We must show up, before they break.

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Letter to Your Athlete/Coach:

Dear Coaches & Athletes

Ella Trinh
USA Taekwondo

Burnout, pressure, and emotional exhaustion are common in competitive sports. Still, many athletes struggle to open up to their coaches about these challenges. This piece shares two interconnected letters—one from an athlete's perspective and the other from a coach's—offering honest insight into both sides of the experience.

The athlete's letter captures the difficult balance between meeting expectations and the fear of letting others down. It reflects the inner struggle between loving the sport and feeling overwhelmed by stress. The coach's letter responds with empathy and reflection, drawing from personal experience to emphasize why mental health matters just as much as physical training. Rest matters. Open communication matters.

Together, these letters create a dialogue about shared responsibility in maintaining well-being in sports. They acknowledge that both coaches and athletes are constantly learning and growing, navigating challenges together. This reflective exchange encourages healthier conversations, supports self-care, and reminds us that true strength in sports comes from balance, not from pushing until you break.

Dear Coaches,

Lately, I have been feeling off, not just physically, but deep down. The sport I used to love does not feel the same anymore. I still train, still show up, still push through every drill and correction, but something inside me has changed.

You tell me to shake it off, to train harder, or to focus more. I try. Every day, I try. But somehow, I end up making more "mistakes" in the process.

When you tell me it is my fault, I nod and pretend it does not hurt—but it does. It stings like a knife to the heart, because I already know it is my fault. The sound of correction lingers long after practice ends. I am afraid to open up to you, to admit that I am tired, overwhelmed, or unsure if I can keep going. When I try to speak, my lungs feel suffocated and my tongue twists. I love this sport with everything in me, yet lately, I have started to hate myself for not being enough in it.

Everyone talks about my potential, about the bright future ahead of me. But sometimes I wonder—at what cost? What is the point of feeding my potential if I have to lose pieces of myself to get there? If the cost is crying myself to sleep or forcing myself out of bed for another morning training, pretending I am fine when I am not, then what is the point?

I miss the version of myself who trained every day for hours because it made her feel alive and joyful, not because she was scared of falling behind or disappointing the people who mean the most to her such as fans, family, friends, and coaches.

Maybe this is not me giving up. Maybe it is me asking for help or at least asking someone to understand that loving the game should not mean losing yourself in it.

Sincerely,
Your Athlete

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Dear Athletes,

I am not just a coach. I have walked in your shoes before. I know what it feels like to chase excellence while the world expects you to never miss a step.

I was once a USA National Team member, a high school student balancing honors classes, and a varsity athlete in a completely different sport—all while holding myself to impossible standards during a decade when a 1500 SAT score felt average. I understand the weight of early mornings, late practices, and the silent pressure to be perfect from fans, family, coaches, and peers. I have felt the exhaustion of smiling through stress and depression, the loneliness of being "strong," and the fear and anxiety of becoming a "disappointment."

I remember standing in the competition venue, bright lights blurring through watery eyes, as everyone stared at the screen waiting for judges to post my score while every mistake replayed in my mind like a film I could not pause.

I remember the intense summer and winter camps before Nationals and Team Trials. These were long weeks of training, exhaustion, and immense pressure from coaches and teammates. Those camps built my toughness, but they also took a toll on my mental health. They tested whether I truly loved the sport or simply the idea of it. Being away from home all day and being constantly compared to others made it easy to lose joy in what I once loved.

I started Taekwondo (Freestyle Poomsae) late, and it made me feel like a failure before I even began. Everyone else seemed two steps ahead in a walking race while I was sprinting just to keep up. Burnout became my norm. I thought exhaustion was the price of success. I thought the weight on my chest meant I was getting closer to my goals. I did not realize that weight was actually holding me back.

So, I say this to let you know—I understand. You have been fighting hard, maybe too hard. You keep telling yourself, just as I once did, that one more rep, one more hour, one more sacrifice will make it all worth it. Maybe I have even reinforced that belief. But here is the truth: it will not mean anything if you lose yourself in the process.

I have taught you that toughness means pushing through everything—pain, exhaustion, doubt. That was never my intention. Athletes are not the only ones learning; coaches are too. Real strength is not about how much you can endure. Real strength is about knowing when to stop, breathe, and take care of yourself. Mental health is not a weakness. It is the foundation that allows your potential to truly matter.

You do not have to earn rest. During my athletic career, I often reflected on the phrase, **"Recovery is still training."** A day off does not erase the hours you have put in. A day off rebuilds you so you can keep going. The body heals in silence, and the mind needs that same grace. Just because you do noy see it does noy mean it is noy happening.

You owe it to yourself to pause when you need to. To talk to someone when your world feels like it falling apart. To remember that success is not defined by medals, scores, or expectations—it is shaped by your journey. You are the laughter during warm-ups, the teammate who lifts others up. You str not just an athlete. You are a human being with feelings and needs. You are a story still being written, and that is what gives our sport—**your** sport—its meaning.

Best regards,

Your Coach

Weight of Water:

Navigating Pressure and Identity as a Collegiate Swimmer

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Abstract

This narrative article recounts my experience as a student-athlete. It focuses on the end of my collegiate career when I navigated pressure, disappointment, and identity challenges as I transitioned out of sport. Drawing from my experiences as a collegiate swimmer, I offer recommendations for sport professionals to address the gaps I observed in mental wellness and performance resources for student-athletes. These recommendations include adopting a holistic approach to support student-athletes. This holistic approach should address not only physical training but also mental, emotional, and personal development to better support student-athletes beyond their participation in sports.

Keywords: collegiate athlete, student-athlete, swimmer, athletic identity, pressure, transition out of sport, mental well-being, mental performance, student-athlete support

The Weight of Water: Navigating Pressure and Identity as a Collegiate Swimmer

College is a time of transition and exploration of identity. Entering college as an athlete, you enter the "unknown" and an unfamiliar environment as part of a group: a team. This fosters a sense of belonging when college students may have feelings of being lost and lack self-confidence. When I started college, I experienced homesickness and worried about how I was going to navigate life away from my support system. The one thing that remained constant was swimming. With all the change that starting college brought, I still had swimming. Being a swimmer was part of who I was for as long as I could remember. A pool is a pool regardless of where you are; there is water, chlorine, lane lines, and starting blocks. To me, there is something comforting about the smell of chlorine.

Entering college as a student-athlete, I entered with a "pre-established" identity. I was a student-athlete and a swimmer. I found it challenging to explore who I was beyond swimming and being a student. However, I did not feel the need to find myself outside of being a student-athlete because swimming was so intertwined with who I was. I experienced difficulty transitioning after sport, which was complicated by a disappointing senior season. My collegiate swimming and diving program had a history of success and winning conference championships. Prior to my senior year, my program had won the last seven conference championships. As a team, we entered the season with the goal of continuing this success. My coach never wanted winning championships to feel like an expectation. He encouraged us as a team to decide what we wanted to accomplish by the end of the season, including smaller goals that would help us reach our larger one. Despite of my coach's attempts to alleviate

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the pressure of winning by shifting the focus to other important goals (e.g., academic success), there was still the pressure to uphold the team's legacy and reputation for winning.

During my senior year, the conference championships came down to the last day and the last few events. One of the last events included my best event, which I had won the previous year. In order for us to have a chance to win the championships, I needed to win my event. Before the race, I felt that if I lost, I was letting down my team. In my mind, I wondered what would happen if I lost; would my team still accept me? Additionally, I wanted to repeat as champion, as this was what I had trained for all season. I warmed up as long as possible before the race to keep myself loose, in an attempt to minimize my racing thoughts. I was shaking and had a pit in my stomach before I got on the starting blocks. Once I dove in, muscle memory must have taken over, as I do not recall the race at all. When I finished and saw the number one next to my name, all I felt was a sense of relief. I was glad the race was over. Although defending my title was one of my goals, I also hoped to achieve a personal best, which I ultimately fell short of.

When the final points were tallied, we finished second as a team. There was a somber tone. It felt as though the meet had left us with a sense of disappointment and failure. Some teammates seemed to be searching for answers, and perhaps someone to "blame" for why we lost. Accountability was lacking, despite everyone having contributed to the result in some way. These conversations and rumblings only validated my prerace thoughts. Although we were a team, the feeling of "we are in this together" seemed to fade.

This disappointing ending coincided with the end of my swimming career. I had one final meet; however, it was not with the entire team. After my final race, it did not immediately hit me that I was truly finished with swimming. I was frustrated with how my career came to an end. I felt that there was still more I wanted to accomplish in the sport. However, time had run out. I struggled to figure out what I was without swimming. I felt lost. The one constant in my life was suddenly gone. While swimming had definitely caused stress, it had also been an outlet and a coping mechanism. I recall that during my final weeks of college, I was extremely stressed as I did not have my post-college job lined up. I texted my coach to ask if I could attend practice, as I just needed to train again and experience that feeling of achievement. He was open to me attending, and I practiced just like I had always done. However, I also knew that I needed to "let go."

As my career came to an end, I no longer attended off-season practices. I was no longer sure where I fit within the team. My locker was cleared out, and my nameplate was removed. My schedule no longer had the structure that I thrived on. I did not know what to do with all my extra time. Furthermore, I felt unsure of my place among my teammates, including some of my closest friends, because we no longer shared the one thing that had connected us. I felt like I did not fit in or have a place on campus. I needed help exploring my identity outside of swimming. I needed help understanding how my athletic identity intersected with my other identities. However, those identities were difficult to uncover when my athletic identity had always been the driving force.

Recommendations to Sport Professionals

Throughout my experience as a student-athlete, I observed noticeable gaps in mental wellness education and resources for student-athletes. While it seemed there was a place to go for everything related to athletics (e.g., coaches, athletic trainers, doctors, and nutritionists), the resources for the mental aspect of sport seemed to be lacking. We are focused on training our body, but not our mind. When it came to mental health challenges, students were referred to campus-wide counseling and psychological services. These mental health professionals did not always understand the student-athlete experience. When it came to mental performance, it seemed one would turn to their coach. Universities would benefit from having designated support staff for mental health and performance, who are trained in working with athletes.

Regardless of where student-athletes fall along the mental health continuum, they could benefit from these services. Student-athletes need an additional layer of support outside of their coaches; someone who is removed from the team but still has an understanding of the student-athlete experience. They need a safe space to express themselves. They also need a trusted professional who can help them develop psychological skills that enable them to unlock their full potential, manage stress effectively, build confidence, set actionable goals, and enhance their overall well-being. Additionally, psychoeducation equips student-athletes with practical mental health knowledge and fosters a deeper understanding of their thoughts, emotions, and

behaviors. This empowers them to navigate the demands of sport and life more effectively, enhancing both performance and well-being.

At the start of their first year, student-athletes can benefit from understanding their identities beyond their sport. Support professionals could assist in identity exploration and fostering a sense of self-worth that is not tied to their athletic performance. The transition out of sport needs to be a priority as student-athletes are "grieving" a part of them when their career ends. Additionally, this transition out of sport could be complicated by factors such as injury, which can unexpectedly end one's career, or disappointment in how one's career came to a close. Sport professionals have the opportunity to shift how they support student-athletes by adopting a more holistic approach; one that recognizes them as individuals beyond their athletic performance and prioritizes their mental, emotional, and personal development.

A Call to Action:

A Rightful Place of Pole Sports in Sport Social Work

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"Wow, she's like an athlete or something, right? I could never do that." You say to the friend sitting next to you. He cannot hear you, sorry. He is mesmerized. You just left a professional football game and went to that world famous full nude strip club one mile from the stadium where moments earlier 50,000 fans were cheering for their team. On the lit-up octagonal stage, a young woman is casually risking her life doing an inverted crucifix on spin, a skill she picked up over the years. A skill that poses significant head trauma risks to pole dancers (Naczk et al., 2023).

You and your friend do not know this, but this dancer always works when there is a home game. That is when the money is best. A mix of home fans and visitors from all over the country are here either celebrating their team's success or finding ways to make the most out of a loss. Some of the dancers interact with each other, while others seem to be strangers to one another, and they want to keep it that way. The flat screen television behind the dancers on stage plays the highlights from the game you and your friend were just at. Other televisions are showing highlights from across all sports.

Unlike the athletes being celebrated on the various televisions, nobody seems to think about the athletic skills needed to be successful on the performance stage. Amidst the body objectification, patrons of the venue manifest their own narratives about the dancers – narratives that likely do not include the hours of training that goes into performing the art of pole dancing.

Background of Pole Dancing

Poling, as a form of sport and performance, has existed across continents for thousands of years, emerging from diverse and intersecting cultural traditions. Historical examples illustrate the breadth of its practice: Chinese pole acrobatics, which dates to at least the 12th century, and *mallakhamba*, a pole-based sport from the Indian subcontinent that integrates physical training with spiritual discipline (Alter, 2007). These traditions demonstrate the longstanding use of the pole as both equipment and symbolic apparatus in athletic and performative contexts.

In the United States, pole dancing was uniquely shaped and proliferated as both a sport and an art form through strip club culture. Its development reflects a complex enmeshment of earlier pole sports, circus arts, burlesque, and sex work. By the mid-20th century, poles were common features of strip clubs, with antecedents in early cabaret performances of the early 1900s. The contemporary global phenomenon of pole fitness is traceable to the 1980s, coinciding with the rise of individualistic fitness culture (Martschukat, 2019). In this context, dancers from the club scene began to establish independent studios, introducing pole-based fitness training to wider audiences. By the 1990s, pole classes appeared in commercial gyms such as Crunch Fitness (Singleton, 2023), which later partnered with XPert Fitness, one of the world's leading providers of professional certifications in pole and aerial instruction.

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Today, poling is codified as a globally recognized sport, exemplified by the establishment of the International Pole Sports Federation (IPSF), the regulatory body coordinating national federations and advancing efforts toward Olympic recognition. Yet, while the sport's gains in institutionalization highlight its legitimacy, it also raises critical questions for the specialty of sport social work. Specifically, what is the role of sport social work in engaging with pole sports, fitness, and culture? How might practitioners attend to the intersections of performance, labor, gender, and health within a sport whose origins are deeply intertwined with stigmatized forms of work and expression?

The Club: Athletes from the Margins of Society

One cannot accurately discuss the popularization of poling as a sport and fitness activity without recognizing that its very emergence as a global sport was driven by the athletic labor, creativity, and cultural contributions of strippers. Strippers popularized the pole both aesthetically and athletically, and it was dancers seeking ownership of their art and athleticism outside of the club environment who expanded poling into the internationally recognized sport it is today. The economic opportunities that stripping has historically provided, particularly for marginalized women, constitute the foundation upon which pole as a sport rests. Yet, this foundational truth also helps explain why poling continues to be excluded from mainstream athletic associations, higher education institutions, scholarly journals, sports research, and collegiate athletics. Its persistent association with the "adult" or "taboo" has rendered the sport stigmatized and has limited accessibility to athletic resources, including those offered by sport social work.

From a sports social work perspective, this exclusion has significant implications. Sport social work is concerned not only with advancing equity, inclusion, and wellbeing in athletic environments, but also with addressing the systemic barriers that athletes from marginalized communities face (Moore & Gummelt, 2019). The systematic exclusion of poling from athletic education, professional development pipelines, sports medicine, and sport psychology mirrors and amplifies the broader marginalization of sex workers. The absence of recognition within sport social work practice and research further entrenches inequalities for those who both work in and engage with pole sports. This erasure denies athletes access to the same range of supportive resources, such as trauma-informed care, injury prevention, or career development, that are increasingly emphasized in other athletic contexts (Moore, 2016).

Given its origins and cultural positioning, many polers come from communities that already face structural disadvantage and stigma: women, LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants, current and former sex workers, and survivors of sex trafficking. Here, sport social work has a unique responsibility to parse critical distinctions while acknowledging shared spaces. It is essential to differentiate between consenting sex workers and strippers who exercise agency over their labor, and those who are victims of trafficking and exploitation. Both may occupy the same clubs, stages, and environments, but their lived experiences diverge in profound ways. While strip clubs are technically regulated as legitimate businesses in most jurisdictions, they are not immune to serving as sites of trafficking, sometimes with the complicity of club owners and management, and other times without.

These realities underscore the urgency for sport social work to engage more deeply with pole sports and their affiliated industries. Doing so requires developing practice frameworks that attend to the intersections of stigma, labor, health, and athletic identity. It also demands expanding the scope of sport social work research to include pole athletes, ensuring that questions of legitimacy, access, and wellbeing are not dismissed because of the sport's connection to sex work. By ignoring poling, the profession inadvertently reinforces the very stigmas it seeks to dismantle and misses an opportunity to advocate for one of the most marginalized yet athletically rigorous sporting communities in the world.

Sexual Ethics, Pole Dance, and Sport Social Work

The intersection of sport and sex trafficking is a documented and legitimate phenomenon (Moore et al., 2022). Yet, despite extensive overlap among sport, sport entertainment, pole dancing, sex work, and sexual exploitation, little research has examined these intersections in a systematic or sustained way. Pole dancing, positioned simultaneously within sports entertainment, adult entertainment, and performance art, is inextricably tied to broader concerns of labor exploitation in both sport and the adult entertainment industry. Few social spaces more starkly illuminate these overlaps than strip clubs, where athletic performance, commodification, and vulnerability to trafficking converge. Consequently, pole sport represents a unique site of athletic practice marked by both empowerment and exploitation, making it an important yet overlooked arena for inquiry within sport

social work.

A pressing ethical question arises: what resources and protections are available to working pole dancers who face risks of sexual exploitation? At present, the answer is strikingly limited. Pole athletes have few professional allies. Recognition from sport service providers, including social workers, athletic trainers, and health professionals, is largely absent. This absence represents not only a research gap but also a systemic ethical failure (Moore & Gummelt, 2019). Sport social work, as a sub-specialty dedicated to advancing athlete well-being, equity, and justice, must explicitly acknowledge and address the exclusion of pole dancers, sex workers, and trafficking victims from both scholarship and practice.

Addressing sexual exploitation in sport requires evidence and evidence-based practice. For sport social workers, this necessitates a deliberate effort to generate research, expand theoretical frameworks, and develop practice models that include pole dancers and athletes working in adult entertainment contexts. Without such engagement, the sub-specialty risks reinforcing stigma and perpetuating systemic neglect. Moreover, the continued avoidance of pole sport within sport social work undermines the profession's stated purpose: to mitigate the unique forms of exploitation, marginalization, and harm that athletes encounter (Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, 2025).

Addressing the Professional Discrepancy

To begin, sport social workers must proactively cultivate knowledge of pole sports, including their regulatory bodies, training certifications, safety practices, and equipment (e.g., grip products, footwear, pole apparatus). Equally essential is a commitment to understanding the complex sociologies and lived realities of strippers and working pole dancers across diverse contexts. Such preparation can translate into practice by designing prevention and intervention strategies that address sexual abuse and exploitation in pole dancing spaces (both clubs and studios), supporting labor organization and unionization efforts for strippers seeking workplace protections, providing mental health services to pole athletes navigating injury, harassment, or trauma, and collaborating with dancers to strengthen anti-trafficking efforts.

There is also a need to recognize and support social workers who themselves have lived experience with pole dancing. Many have entered the profession after working in strip clubs to finance their education, or through engagement with pole sport in studio settings. Yet, structural supports for these practitioners, who hold unique positional knowledge and advocacy potential, are minimal. Their skills, insights, and embodied expertise are invaluable to strengthening athletic services and developing culturally responsive interventions. Consulting with athletes who directly navigate sexual exploitation in their sport is not only pragmatic but also ethically necessary if social work seeks to advance equity within sports practice.

Despite pole dancing's long history and cultural significance, scholarly engagement with its historical, cultural, and biopsychosocial complexities remains sparse. This gap contributes to ongoing stigmatization and the systematic neglect of pole athletes within professional practice. Impacted pole dancing populations deserve informed and committed allies across social work, mental health, and sport-based professions. Sport social work, in particular, is uniquely positioned to fill this void by producing research, cultivating practice expertise, and building advocacy frameworks that recognize and legitimize pole sport as both a site of athleticism and a locus of vulnerability.

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Purpose through Pain:

A Letter from an Incarcerated Athlete to Coaches, Trainers, and Mentors

Jennifer Jacobs
Northern Illinois University

Cortez Rice

Dear Coaches, Trainers, and Mentors,

You ever had so much pressure in your chest you feel like you might explode? That is what it was like for me before I started working out in prison. I was heavy, not just my body, but my mind too. Two hundred and fifty pounds of pain, anger, and not knowing who I was. I could not even run right. My posture was off. My spirit was off.

I am writing this from inside a youth prison. There is no view out my window, no fresh kicks squeaking on a gym floor, no sunlight warming your back when you are running drills. In here it is concrete. Hard, cold, and always gray. Time moves slow. Every sound echoes. The slam of a door. The metal clank of keys. The shuffle of feet in chains. It is a place where mistakes follow you everywhere, like a shadow that will not leave. But even in here, I found movement. I found a piece of myself that refused to stay locked up.

Finding Confidence in the Weights

When I first started working out, I did not know what I was doing. I just knew I did not like who I was anymore. My homie, another guy locked up with me, looked at me one day and said, "Bro, what is you doing?" He was talking down on me, clowning a little, but something about it lit a fire. I told myself; I am going to prove him wrong.

So, I got up. I started moving. At first it hurt. Everything hurt. But the pain felt different than before. It felt like progress. Every set, every rep, was me pushing back on the weight of everything I had done and everything I had lost.

Now I am 170 pounds. I lost 80 pounds in here. I move different. I think different. The first time I looked in the mirror while I was working out and saw my chest tightening and my veins popping, I felt a rush, like my body was finally catching up to the man I was trying to become. Fitness gave me confidence, but it also gave me something deeper. Control. In here, you do not get much of that. But when I work out, it is my time, my body, my grind.

Brotherhood Behind Bars

There is another dude in here, Cortez. He is older, more disciplined. He became like a big brother to me. When I was seventeen, he told me straight up, "You are fucking up, bro. You gotta get your health right." He did not sugarcoat it. At first, I did not like hearing it, but I needed it. When you got someone who believes in you, even when you do not believe in yourself, that hits different.

We built a bond over workouts and long talks. He would spot me on the bench, tell me to keep my form right, and later we would talk about life. How to be better men. How to stop letting the world tell us who we are. Cortez said something once

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that stuck with me. “When you water your plants, they all grow.” He meant that when you pour into people, when you show them care and consistency, they will blossom. That is what sport can do. It connects you. It helps you grow.

So, thank you, Cortez. I know we bumped heads. But you helped me find discipline. You helped me see that even behind these walls, I could still become somebody better. You helped me find purpose through pain.

The Mirror

Every day when I look in the mirror, it feels like a metaphor. It is small, scratched up, and foggy. But when I look in it, I see everything. The man I was. The crime I committed. The kid I used to be. I was sixteen when I came in. Sometimes I still feel sixteen. Like no matter how much time passes, I am frozen here, a boy in a man’s world.

When I look at myself, I see the weight of what I did. I took a life. I did not understand what that really meant back then. How permanent it was. How deep it cut. I think about that person’s family. It messes with me every day. I cannot take it back, but I can try to move different now.

Working out keeps me from breaking down. When I feel anger building, I hit the weights. When I feel sad, I do pushups. It is how I escape. The pressure builds in my chest, my veins start to bulge, and I can see the future. Like a crystal ball showing me that if I keep pushing, I can still become someone worth believing in.

The Reality of This Place

Being locked up at nineteen feels like the world pressed pause on your life. I missed prom. Missed college. Missed all the things people my age should be doing. In here, you learn to grow up fast, or you do not grow at all.

Prison is a constant reminder of the worst moment of your life. Every locked door, every loud command reminds you that your freedom is gone. Some people think they understand, but unless you have felt what it is like to be racially profiled every day, to feel eyes on you just for being a Black kid, you do not really know. It is a feeling that runs down your spine like electricity. Uncomfortable. Always there. You cannot even laugh too loud without someone thinking you are up to something.

But I try to stay level-headed. I tell myself I am not going to let my past harden me completely. Yes, the world can be cold and cruel, but I still got warmth in me. I am trying to keep it alive through movement, through fitness, through helping others grow too.

Redemption Through Movement

When I am lifting, it is not just about muscle. It is about forgiveness. Every rep is like I am saying I am sorry. Every set is a prayer. I remind myself that I am not only working for me. I am working for the person who is not here anymore. For her. For the life I took.

When I feel that burn in my arms and that rush in my head, it fuels me. It is pain, yes, but it is also hope. It is me saying I can still do something good with what is left. Maybe I cannot undo the past, but I can help someone else not make the same mistakes.

If I ever get the chance to be out there again, I want to show young kids what I learned too late. That movement can save you before the streets break you. That aggression does not have to turn into violence. You can fight your demons in the gym instead of on the block.

That is what redemption through movement means to me.

To Those Who Work With Us

To the coaches, mentors, and trainers reading this, I want you to really understand something. A lot of us in here never had fathers or stable homes. We learned from each other. From the streets. From pain. We do not need pity. We need people who will tell us the truth and still believe in us when we fall.

Do not overpressure us, but do not baby us either. Tell us it is okay to mess up but stay by us while we figure it out. Be that person who helps a child see himself different. You never know how far that belief can reach. Cortez did that for me, and now I want to do it for someone else.

Sports can be more than just competition. It can be connection, transformation, healing. It is what keeps me sane in a place designed to break you.

Still Growing

Sometimes I think back to when I was four or five. I would wake up early, crawl into bed with my mom, and she would smile when she saw me. That was before the world got complicated. Before guilt. Before fear. I miss that innocence.

Now when I look in the mirror, I still see the boy I used to be, but I also see the man I am becoming. A fierce, unstoppable, determined athlete. Someone trying to learn from his mistakes. Someone trying to find light in a dark place.

I am locked up. But I am still moving. Still growing. Still fighting to become better than I was yesterday. You have the power to tell someone those words. To show up when everyone else forgets about us. To help me turn my mistake into redemption. To show me that weights can be picked up, not held down.

And if my story can remind someone out there, a coach, a teacher, a trainer, to never stop believing in children like me, then maybe that is a kind of freedom too.

With discipline,
A 19-year-old athlete from Joliet, IL

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The Game of a Lifetime:

Supporting Athletes Across Multiple Identities, Multiple Truths

Kathleen Claire Kaufman
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The Game of a Lifetime: Supporting Athletes Across Multiple Identities, Multiple Truths

It was a Monday night home game against a fierce competitor. I was a senior in high school, a power forward and captain on my varsity basketball team. The energy in the gymnasium was electric, the enthusiasm infectious. Family, friends, community members and scouts filled the spectator seats applauding and cheering from the moment we stepped onto the court. The tip-off sent the ball to our point guard who threw a quick outlet pass to me, and I drove down the left lane and scored the first points of the game. The reaction from the crowd was immediate and explosive, and it propelled me into action. I scored 38 points in that single game – a personal and school record. To the dismay of our opponent, we won the game by a slim margin, the final score was 52-49.

I remember my coach offered to bring several of us home that night. I sat in the backseat staring out the window. I was the last one to be dropped off. Looking back, I recognize I could have felt an array of positive emotions in that moment – pride, joy, relief – but I felt exhausted, anxious, and afraid. I knew what was coming. Alone with my coach, he asked me an all-too familiar question, "How do you think you played tonight?". I gave an all-too familiar answer, "Okay", I said simply. That single syllable belied multiple truths that I was not allowed to name: the pressure of performing for the scouts, the fear of disappointing people, the crippling panic connected to an uncertain future, the searing shoulder pain I ignored because strong athletes "push through", the stress of my broken family as my father packed his bags to leave for the final time, and the cacophony of voices whispering and screaming simultaneously that nothing I did would ever be enough. And then it came, like a lighting cue for an actor walking on to center stage in perfect time: "You missed that early shot in the lane. Why did you not use the backboard?"

Years later, after my collegiate basketball career was cut short by successive shoulder injuries, I found myself reflecting on that night in the backseat of the car staring out the window in anxious and dreaded anticipation. I was curious to understand how a night that might have been such a singularly celebratory one was filled with such profound sadness. I realized that even triumph rarely exists without pain, loss, sacrifice and suffering. It was the beginning of understanding a deeper fracture that moved beyond a broken body and a broken heart and encompassed a broken sense of self – a fractured experience of my athletic identity that stood somehow separate from other social identities, complex emotions and lived experiences.

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I recognize that my privilege is woven throughout my intersectional self. I am a White, cisgender, heterosexual female, the second of four children, born in the United States and raised in a middle-class family. Playing sports was always a central part of my life. I had access to health care, mentors, athletic opportunities, year-round skills-building sport programs, and a network of people who rallied around me to succeed on and off the court. And still, I struggled to perform. My early family story was marked by chapters of parental addiction and physical abuse that cultivated perfectionism and a searingly determined drive to hide the pain. To the world, I was disciplined, tenacious and unrelenting; yet, inside I felt fragile, and I was falling apart.

Sports provided me with a community that functioned like family. However, no one – no coach, athletic trainer, nor sport administrator – ever asked me a question that moved beyond statistics and metrics: "How did you do?", is very different than, "How are you doing?". My sport experience also fostered a culture that prized showing toughness over softness which translated into silence over displays of emotion. It prized playing through and with injury over resting and prioritizing full recovery. Sports provided me with a place of belonging and a clear purpose; yet it also taught me to bury my pain, demanding that I "leave it off the court".

Becoming a sport social worker who supports Division I athletes has required, in many ways, that I return to my former athletic self. I struggled in my own athletic career with the invisible weight of my fragile mental health and its impact on performance in the presence of my privilege. As sport social workers, it is critical that we understand more deeply how to support and advocate for athletes navigating the visible and invisible weights of racism, poverty, immigration stress, gender-based bias, pressure from family and fans, trauma, injury and chronic health conditions. We are charged with deepening our understanding in contextual ways that frame the struggle within the rigor, and at times ruthlessness, that often underscores intercollegiate sports.

For the past fifteen years, I have worked with a diverse population of Division I collegiate athletes. Some are navigating chronic racial microaggressions that complicate performance stress. Others are first-generation college students who are trying to balance pressure from family members to preserve their scholarships while facing crippling imposter syndrome. Others are trying to manage anxiety and depression without showing vulnerability or asking for help. Others are working to recover from physical injuries and worrying they will never play with the same intensity or agility. Still others are afraid to share the full truths of their racial, ethnic and gender identities and expressions for fear of threats to their personal safety or standing and belonging within their teams.

Sport social workers are uniquely trained and well-positioned to see both the intersecting truths and identities of athletes and the larger context within which they exist. When coaches, athletic trainers, and sport administrators dare to ask different questions they invite multiple truths and multiple ways of knowing and understanding athletes. When we move away from asking, "How do you think you played?", or "How is your knee?", to questions that cultivate curiosity and invite more truths such as, "How did you celebrate your birthday back in Africa?", or "What is going on in your head right now?", or "What are you carrying onto the court today that feels hard or heavy?" we can transform the experience of the person who is also an athlete. Instead of saying, "Leave it off the court", we can talk with athletes and coaches and struggle with a question that is curious to know, "How can we play our best when we inevitably carry everything onto the court?".

We can also support athletes by operating from a strengths-based perspective, one that notices and affirms the successes that comingle with missed plays and team losses. We can maintain a posture that seeks to understand before it corrects, that asks questions and invites deeper ways of knowing to provide opportunities for more creative, compassionate and synergistic problem-solving. We can approach the work by inviting conversations about race, racism and power into team conversations and individual encounters with athletes who may carry the weight of multiply burdened identities. We can work to build relationships, a core value of the social work profession, to establish connections that promote safer spaces and invoke greater truths.

My work as a sport social worker requires that I continue to develop a more profound understanding of the athlete I was so many years ago. Her story informs the way I understand the complex truths and intersectional identities of the athletes and coaches I support today. I sometimes think back to the athlete in the backseat, the one staring out the window after the big game, carrying the invisible weight of grief, fear and shame. I wish someone had told her that strength doesn't come from silence, and that truths are welcome and rarely revealed in a single word. I wish someone had told her that she did not have to earn her place on the team by pushing through the pain. I wish someone had told her that her mental health mattered as much as her performance, and that addressing one would help the other. I wish someone had said that she had permission to feel

terrified and tenacious, to make mistakes and recover from them, to be broken-hearted and never be fully broken.

Research-informed sport social work practitioners value the importance of engaging with athletes' multiple identities, possibilities and truths. The healing encounters that promise to be the most transformative involve seeing and affirming all parts of the athletes we support. It is an honor to journey with athletes as they witness and acknowledge their histories, examine their environments, and bravely reflect on who they are, who they refuse to be, and who they hope to become. This level of authenticity and allyship, partnered with radical social work practices that seek structural change, is required of sport social workers to support athletes in the process of becoming more holistically healthy and hopeful. When I look back to that momentous night during a tender and transitional time in my athletic career, I wish someone had turned to me and said, "Wow, that was the game of a lifetime," simply because that was the truth, too.

Dear Coach:

See Us, See Them — A Letter from Two Athlete-Parents

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Brandon Doggett

Melissa Doggett

We have both worn jerseys. We have felt the lights, the pressure, the expectations. We have run the drills, heard the yelling, taken the hits—on the field and off. We were athletes once. Now, we are something else. We are athlete-parents—and we are not sitting quietly. And we are writing this not to blame or complain—but to ask you, as directly as we can: see our kids. Really see them. Not just their effort or their stats or their "attitude." See who they are. See what they carry. And understand what sport could mean to them—if you get it right.

We came up in different places. One of us moved from base to base—military towns, new schools, new teams. Sports were the way in, every time. Another grew up in rural North Carolina, where the road outside her house was not even paved until she was grown. Sports were not an option for girls—not real ones. Cheerleading was the only thing available, so she did it. And she worked at it. Hard. But she still had to defend it—prove it even counted as a sport.

We both knew early: sport could be a lifeline. But it could also cut deep.

I, Brandon, played football and baseball at a high level. Then came senior year. A bad ankle break. A whole season—gone. I kept walking, even though I was in pain. No one asked. I did not tell. That is how it was back then. And the mental part? Even worse. The anger, the bitterness, the depression? No one called it anything. No one made space for it. You just kept playing—or got left behind.

I, Melissa, did not have the same opportunities at a young age as my children did. I raced boys and girls on the playground, in PE, and on field day that is where most of my competition was during the school days. However, as a kid I was told that I could not do certain things because I was a girl. I vowed to never hold my daughter to those same standards.

Now we have got three kids in the game. They are fast. Smart. Focused. And they are watching everything. They see how coaches talk to them. Who gets attention. Who gets silence. They see who is assumed to be a leader, and who has to earn that label ten times over. They know what it feels like to be excellent and still not be fully welcomed. We know it too.

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Let us say this plainly: *a coach can make or break a kid*. You have seen it. We have lived it. Some coaches lift kids up. Others look right through them. And that difference? It sticks.

Melanie was doing really well; Bryson was decent also. They [the coaches] just were not paying them any attention. They were not commended for their efforts. We changed clubs because Sam saw Melanie running at an indoor meet and saw how amazing she was. She saw that she needed a little work and she would be "legit" someday. Now they both work hard on speed and technique in track.

At another club, our son showed up, ran drills, did his job—but never stood out. Until he changed teams. That coach saw him. Looked him in the eye. Asked about school. Gave him reps. Treated him like he mattered. Now he will not stop practicing.

But that is what happens when kids feel seen, they blossom.

But too often, the opposite happens. And not just on the scoreboard. Morgan got praised for making it to third base and was all smiles because of it. Really created love for the game. The exact opposite happened to Melanie, who knows very little about softball, but because she is so athletic, they expected her to be great at something she was unfamiliar with. So that killed the love some.

Those are the moments that change kids. Sometimes forever.

We remember it ourselves. One of us played on an all-Black Little League team that dominated the league. Shut teams out. Not one of us was chosen for All-Stars. Not one.

The message was loud. And it does not fade.

So now, we do what we can.

We give rides to the kids who do not have one. We bring extra food. We open our home. We remind the team that the kid who shows up late, or without cleats, might be your best player. We have seen clubs that save scholarships for their "top" teams—and ignore the kids who just need a shot and a ride.

We do not coddle our kids. We push them. But we show up. When they fail—we are there. When they win—we are there. When they break—we do not walk away.

We do not expect coaches to be everything. But if you hold the clipboard, if you blow the whistle, then you are holding something sacred. And we are asking you: do not waste it. Because here is what really breaks kids. It is not just getting benched. It is not even the yelling. It is the silence. The kind of pain no one talks about—because no one asks.

I, Brandon, still remember that senior year. The pain, yes. But the depression too. The spiral. The sense of being alone in it. Back then, no one called it "mental health." You were just expected to deal with it. Quietly. We have done it too — played through injury, smiled through exhaustion, pushed through fear.

And we see the same thing in kids now. The ones who limp but say they are fine. The ones who blink back tears. The ones who make jokes to hide what is under the surface.

We have seen kids break down and get brushed off. Just called dramatic. Just told to toughen up. But we know what that kind of pressure does. We have lived it. Kids today are still scared to speak up. Still convinced that if they admit they are not okay, they will lose minutes. Or lose their spot. Or be labeled "soft." And sometimes they are right. But it should not be that way.

So, if you want to coach right, coach the whole child. Not just the speed or the strength. See who they are. What they carry. Ask questions. Listen for real answers. And when in doubt? Stay. Just stay. That is what they will remember.

Do Better. Start Now.

This letter is not just about our family. It is about every kid with invisible burdens you do not see.
The one who is not eating before practice.
The one who is always late.
The one who talks back.
The one who smiles too hard.
You cannot coach what you do not understand.
You cannot develop what you do not see.

So, here is what we need from you—what every athlete needs from you:

- See the whole child.
- Ask better questions.
- Do not measure a family by how fast they pay.
- Do not measure a kid by one bad day.
- Let talent surprise you.
- And when in doubt, show up.

That is what we are doing. We are showing up. We are holding the line between what sport did for us—and what it could do for them.

With hope,
Brandon & Melissa

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Reflection:

The Importance of Social Work in Supporting International Student-Athletes

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Abstract

This reflection explores the unique challenges faced by international student-athletes in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Drawing on my personal experience as a former international student-athlete, I discuss the difficulties I encountered and those I observed among peers. I also incorporate my perspective as a social worker and academic to consider how social work could address these challenges. The reflection focuses on cultural, academic, and athletic adjustment, as well as the transition out of sport. These are areas where social workers could provide meaningful support for international student-athletes. I strongly believe that social workers bring significant value to the sporting context and can help international student-athletes navigate cultural challenges, identity shifts, and mental health concerns. This reflection calls for greater attention to the unique experiences of international student-athletes to ensure holistic care and promote growth and development during and beyond their athletic careers.

Keywords: college athletics, international student-athlete, adjustment experiences

Reflection: The Importance of Social Work in Supporting International Student-Athletes

There is an increasing number of international students coming to the United States on scholarships to participate in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sports, with approximately 25,000 participating in college athletics in 2022 (NCAA, 2022). The ability to focus on both academic studies and sport is quite rare in many countries, and the unique system in the United States is very appealing to young athletes who hope to continue competing at a high level while earning a degree. As a university student in Australia who was previously competitive at the state and national age level in swimming, I had given up on the possibility of managing my passion for competitive swimming while furthering my education. When I learned about the U.S. college athletic system, where you could balance both sport and academics, I was intrigued and wanted to be part of that experience. Eventually, I secured a full-ride scholarship to a Division I mid-major college in the Midwest.

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Coming from Australia and having visited the United States before, I was not particularly nervous about making the trip and beginning my experience as a student-athlete. At the time, I assumed Australia and the United States were quite similar, as they are both Western countries where English is spoken. I thought, *"How much cultural adjustment could there really be?"* On the surface, these two countries may seem relatively similar, but they are indeed culturally quite different. Reflecting on my experience nearly 18 years later, and now as a social worker, I can see many areas where a social worker would have been invaluable for the adjustment, growth, and development of international athletes who move across the world to pursue their sporting dreams. When thinking about my previous experiences as a former international student-athlete, areas where social work support could make a difference include cultural, academic, and athletic adjustment, as well as transitioning out of sport.

Cultural Adjustment

I had completed a year of university in Australia and had seen TV shows and movies depicting U.S. college life, so I assumed the transition would be smooth and had few concerns. While my transition was relatively smooth overall, I quickly realized that I had a lot to learn about the U.S., as it was culturally very different from Australia. Formally, there was an international student office on campus that provided orientation about life at a U.S. college and the cultural differences we might encounter. However, this was only a brief presentation during orientation day, and I do not recall any specific support targeted toward international student-athletes. I also felt somewhat disconnected from the international student office and other international students because of my role as a student-athlete. Most international students were housed together on campus and built connections that way. As a student-athlete, I was placed with other athletes, which made sense and, upon reflection, I appreciated. However, this arrangement meant I did not utilize the resources or support offered by the international student office as much as I could have.

Given that international student-athletes are often encouraged to live with domestic athletes, there needs to be a stronger focus from athletic departments on supporting their transition, especially as the number of international student-athletes continues to grow. Even as a Westerner, I encountered cultural aspects I did not understand or misinterpreted. It can be a nerve-wracking and anxiety-inducing experience when you are unaware of cultural norms. I reflect on the challenges of my peers from non-Western countries and what they may face, and how hard the cultural transition must be.

From a social work perspective, the cultural competence of athletic staff is key and can impact the international student-athletes' experience in their adjustment. A dedicated social worker embedded within the athletic department could provide psychoeducation, facilitate cultural orientation tailored to athletes, and offer a safe space to process cultural stressors. Thinking back, what may have been helpful would be a dedicated international student-athlete group that allows connection and understanding of the viewpoints and challenges of other international student-athletes, while also providing peer support. In addition, social workers could also advocate for systemic changes, ensuring that international athletes are not overlooked in their transition and orientation planning.

Academic Adjustment

Although I had completed a year of university in Australia, the U.S. college system was quite different. The academic approach and emphasis on grades required a major adjustment. In Australia, many students aim simply to pass a subject (50%), following the familiar expression, *"P's get degrees."* This contrasts sharply with the GPA system in U.S. colleges, where eligibility to compete in your sport depends on maintaining high grades. This emphasis positively impacted me, shifting my focus toward excelling academically rather than just passing classes. However, this is of course not the case for all international student-athletes. I also found that the structure of U.S. degree programs presented additional challenges. Students are required to take general education courses, which is quite different from Australia and many other countries, where degrees are shorter and students begin courses related to their major immediately. As a sociology major with a psychology minor, I struggled in classes such as biology, geology, and music, which were subjects that I had little interest in, and thus found academically challenging.

While the academic study center on campus was helpful and supportive, I believe it could have benefited significantly from a dedicated social worker. The study center team focused on keeping student-athletes on task and maintaining a high GPA, offering tutors and resources. However, the focus was primarily academic. Upon reflection, I now think about and question how mental health challenges may impact performance in the classroom and in the sporting arena. I found that this was not adequately addressed by the athletic department, and there was little awareness or discussion of how mental health can impact

student-athletes. Social workers are well positioned and trained to provide preventative measures, as well as holistic support, addressing stress, anxiety, and identity issues that often accompany academic pressure. For athletes with language barriers, this support becomes even more important. Knowing that a social worker was available, as well as the services they could offer, would have been incredibly helpful for many international student-athletes in navigating these academic challenges, as well as any mental health and well-being challenges.

Athletic Adjustment

I experienced several injuries and periods of time when I had to sit out from competition, particularly due to tendonitis in my shoulder. Sitting out of a sporting meet is a devastating experience, as you want to contribute to your team and you have worked so hard to reach this level. Injuries are common, and most athletes I knew faced them during their college careers, so it is not uncommon. While athletic trainers and doctors provided excellent physical care, the emotional impact of injury was often overlooked. I found this to be especially challenging when you are on a full-ride scholarship, as most international students are, and have travelled across the world with expectations to perform. Social workers are trained to understand the broader impact of injuries and how physical health intersects with mental health. Identifying students who are experiencing an injury and linking them with a social worker for extra support could reduce the risk of depression, anxiety, and identity loss that often accompany athletic setbacks.

Transitioning Out of Sport

Retiring from your sport and finishing your college athletic career is a time of intense emotions and transitions. I reflected on this type of loss several years later during my Master of Social Work program, when I wrote about the loss of athlete identity in my *Grief, Death and Dying* class. Losing your identity as an athlete after college is difficult to navigate, and in my experience, I do not think it is discussed enough with student-athletes who are about to make that transition. Looking back, my concerns centered around questions like: *How do you fill the time once devoted to practice and training? How do you manage your weight when you're used to a large calorie intake to fuel workouts, but now you no longer train and burn calories? Who are you if you are not known as "the Aussie swimmer" (your identity on campus)?* Not being prepared for these situations led to poor time management and significant weight gain after my retirement. While I eventually learned from these experiences and was able to get back on track, I can see how a dedicated social worker who could discuss these challenges and provide resources for transitioning out of sport would have allowed me, and others, to be more prepared for life after athletics.

For many international students, this transition also involves returning to their home country or navigating the complex immigration system to extend a visa or apply for a work permit. These are major decisions that carry emotional weight. Returning home means leaving behind the life you have known for the past four years, along with the friendships and bonds formed with teammates, constituting another layer of loss on top of losing the athlete identity. For me, I stayed in the U.S. because I was able to secure a training visa specifically for international students, which eventually led me to pursue a graduate degree in social work. These were significant transition struggles, and now I can clearly see how social workers could help international student-athletes navigate these phases. Social workers can prepare and support international students during these critical transitions by providing counseling, career planning, and referral to immigration resources, ensuring they have the information and emotional support needed to make the best decisions for themselves.

Conclusion

After reflecting on my personal experiences, I realize how critical social work support could be for international student-athletes like myself. All student-athletes experience challenges and having a dedicated social worker within athletic departments would provide an invaluable resource. I know this is starting to happen more widely across college athletic departments, and I am pleased to see the incorporation of social workers in sport and college athletics. I am passionate about the care of international student-athletes because of my own experience and the unique identity challenges they face. This has inspired previous work on the topic (Terzis, 2022), which provides a synthesis of adjustment experiences for international student-athlete experiences. I acknowledge my experience is different from many other international students, given my privilege of being White-passing and from a Western country, with English as my first language. Despite this, there were still struggles in adap-

tation and transition to U.S. college athletics, and I often think about how much more support those from a different background may need to be able to thrive and perform well both academically and athletically while under immense pressure. Most importantly, I want social workers in sport to consider how they can tailor their approaches when working specifically with international student-athletes, as they face many unique cultural challenges and can benefit from individualized support.

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Overexercising and Disordered Eating Among Athletes:

A Personal Journey Toward Recovery: In Their Own Words

Mary Rojack
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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.

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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.

To the Ones Who Saw Me:

A Letter to the Coaches Who Saved My Life

Megan Fish
True Fish Tales

To the Ones Who Saw Me: A Letter to the Coaches Who Saved My Life

Dear Coaches,

I am writing this letter to you, but also to the people who will read it: administrators, social workers, coaches, policymakers, anyone who shapes the environment that young people walk into when they lace up their shoes or step onto a field. This journal asked athletes to tell their truths, and as I sat with that invitation, I realized that the truths I carry, the ones that taught me what care, safety, and belonging feel like, came from each of you.

So, while these words are addressed to you, they are also being offered *through* you. They are my attempt to honor the lessons you lived out, that coaching is not just about performance, it is about presence. Because if I can offer anything to this journal, it is the truth that the most life-changing coaching moments are not loud or dramatic. They live in the quiet choices a coach makes: to listen, to intervene, to tell the truth, to stay steady when a young person is coming undone. To see the whole human, not just the athlete. You each did that for me. And this letter is my way of passing that wisdom forward.

Coach B,

I joined your basketball team the year before my dad died. At twelve, I did not know how to name grief before it arrived. I did not know how to prepare for the slow disappearance of the strongest person I knew. Watching my father fade from cancer was like living inside a storm without shelter. Everyday life continued around me, but internally, everything felt fractured, suspended, and unreal.

You did not fix it, you could not, but you saw it. In your steady way, you made space for a kind of quiet witnessing I did not know I needed. You were not effusive or overly emotional; you were grounded, observant, and direct. You paid attention to the small shifts: the days I lingered after practice, the mornings I arrived withdrawn, the way my leadership dimmed even when my performance did not. Grief was hollowing me out, and you were the first person who registered what was happening beneath the surface.

You were also the first openly gay adult I ever knew in my small South Carolina town. Without knowing it, you expanded the edges of my world. You existed with an authenticity and steadiness that modeled a different possibility for a life than the rigid one I grew up inside. Only years later, after coming into my own queer and non-binary identity, did I realize how profoundly your presence had shaped me, simply by being yourself.

When my dad died, the grief cracked me open completely. My pain came out sideways: drinking, acting out, pushing boundaries, pushing people away. I was spiraling, but silently. The world around me praised toughness and grit. You, quietly and firmly, gave me permission to be a human being, not a machine.

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The day you sat me down and offered me that choice, to continue the path I was on and be cut or choose accountability and a future version of myself I could be proud of, you were not punishing me. You were extending a hand. The contract you presented for me to sign was not about control; it was about care. You saw me dancing with addiction, and you offered me a way out. It was a structure sturdy enough for me to hold onto when I could not trust myself.

Fifteen years later, returning home with you by my side as a mentor-turned-family member made the full arc of your impact unmistakable. As I kneeled between my father's and brother's graves, my brother, who had died from an overdose the year prior, I felt both the weight of loss and the miracle of survival. My brother's death was not a failure or a moral flaw. It was a pain too heavy for one person to hold alone. I saw myself in him. I saw what my life could have become if you had not come into my life, in the way you did.

As I sat there, I came to understand you differently. You had not just coached me. You had saved a version of me I did not yet know how to protect.

Coach T,

You came to lead our collegiate team during my redshirt sophomore year. I had just come back from two ACL tears back-to-back, and a deeply toxic and soon-to-be-abusive relationship with a teammate. My body was healing, but my sense of self was not. On the surface, I was performing; returning from injury, playing well, leading. But inside, I was unraveling in familiar ways, binge drinking, shutting down emotionally, surviving instead of living.

The way you coached was unlike anything I had ever experienced. You led with positivity, clarity, and consistency, never intimidation. Your values were not slogans taped to a locker room wall; they were a lived culture. "We before me." "Attitude of Gratitude." "Exceed Expectations." You did not just preach them, you modeled them.

When the referenced relationship with a teammate imploded, and I could not breathe inside the environment anymore, I took three months away from the game. I told you I was done. You did not guilt me, punish me, or question my integrity. You asked what I needed. And then you honored it.

It was not until those months away that I rediscovered my love for myself, soccer, and my desire to return. I was terrified to tell you. I expected conditions, skepticism, or consequences. Instead, you opened the door without hesitation. You did not hold my absence against me. You held space for my humanity.

You also recognized something in me I had not fully seen in myself yet: a calling to use sport as a force for social good. You connected me to one of your former national team teammates who ran Leadership Academies built on empowerment, character, and justice. That experience changed everything. It planted a seed that has grown into the entire foundation of the work I do today. You did not just coach me. You cultivated the person I was becoming.

Mrs. J,

You were not a coach in title, but you lived out what every sport administrator should aspire to be. On that service trip abroad, where we used sport to empower youth to pursue their education, you did not treat us as representatives of the athletic department. You treated us as young people on the brink of discovering who we could be. You asked questions that reached beyond surface-level small talk. You noticed what lit me up. You saw how that work resonated with something deep inside me, something I did not yet have the words for.

When an opportunity arose to nominate one student-athlete to attend the Olympism for Humanity Conference in Greece that summer, you chose me. You did not choose the most decorated athlete or the loudest leader or the person with the cleanest résumé. You chose the person whose heart you had taken the time to know. That single nomination rerouted my life. It broadened my world, connected me to purpose, and confirmed what I had long felt but never articulated: that sport is far more powerful as a tool for humanity than it is as a tool for performance. You did not just open a door. You transformed the horizon I could imagine.

To All of You,

I now understand how rare my experience was. I was raised by female coaches who led with confidence, empathy, strong boundaries, and unwavering belief in the potential of young people.

Today, I identify as a non-binary and queer human. Coming into that truth has been liberating, but it also sharpens my understanding of the young people who are being pushed out of sport simply for being who they are. When I think of the trans kids whose existence is being debated, who's right to play is being politicized, I think of my younger self. If I had known who I was then, and if I had been excluded because of it, I would not be writing this letter today. I know exactly where I would be: on the path my brother could not climb out of, or in a grave beside him.

Sport was my lifeline. Not because of wins, rankings, or accolades, but because of the adults who held onto me when I was losing myself.

To the Sport Professionals Reading This:

What saved me were not systems or policies. What saved me were people. People who understand that coaching is not just instruction, but also stewardship. If you want to change sport, change the way you see the humans in front of you. Choose connection over control. Choose presence over performance. Choose to see the whole person, not just the athlete. Because somewhere in your program is a young person holding more pain than they know how to carry. And you may be the one adult who notices before they disappear.

I am here because three people did.

With gratitude,

A former athlete shaped and saved by sport

The Invisible Athlete:

Disordered Eating in Midlife Women in Sport

Meghan Vogt
Tulane University

The Invisible Athlete: Disordered Eating in Midlife Women in Sport

When you are a woman in sports, visibility is temporary. We are only recognized as athletes until we reach middle age, when we are celebrated for staying active but given little to no support or understanding of what it is like to train, fuel, perform, and age in a culture built for such extremes. When my eating disorder resurfaced in my mid-forties, the issue was not that I was good at hiding it. The real problem was that no one thought to look.

I was a teenage record-chasing swimmer pursuing college scholarships. I was a marathoner in my forties, seeking balance and health. Throughout both phases of my life, I realized how easy it is for me to hide exhaustion. How quickly striving for excellence can turn into a harmful cycle of restriction, fatigue, and denial. The only difference this time was that when I asked for help, my symptoms were attributed to age, not under-fueling.

The Dissonance of Healing

At the start of treatment, I thought that recovery meant relief. I believed that when I started to heal, things would get easier. I was wrong. It actually became more difficult.

During my darkest times with my eating disorder, both as a teenager and nearly thirty years later in my late thirties, there was this illusion of peace. I appeared happy, outgoing, and social. I thrived on compliments about my dedication to my "health." I gained more validation from race PRs that seemed to confirm that my commitment to my rigid eating plan was working. I had the energy to spend time with friends and family because I was fulfilling what the eating disorder demanded of me. The voice of the eating disorder was quiet, silent in its approval.

But recovery amplified that voice. Loud. It screamed with every meal, each rest day, every time I tried to live outside its parameters. The depression worsened. The isolation crept in. I pulled away from friends, family, and even from my own children. I realize now that the hardest part of healing is not the physical recovery. It is enduring that mental noise — those critical, chaotic voices — and not giving in to them. And more so, it required me to find a voice to advocate for myself, because, unlike when I was younger, there was no system in place to protect me.

Athletes are taught to push through pain, to endure because suffering signifies progress. We often confuse agony with achievement. That's not a mindset that encourages recovery. When your pain increases, it can feel like you are failing. But more often than not, it is the first real sign of healing.

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When Sport Becomes the Goal of Recovery

My early treatment focused on helping me get back into the pool. All my providers had the best of intentions, believing that sport was my lifeline. While that was partly true, recovery based solely on performance only reinforced the idea that my worth depended on how I performed. I knew how to "look" healthy enough to be cleared, but I did not know how to truly be well.

Decades later, as a clinician working with athletes, I see how easily we fall into this same cycle. We talk in terms of timeframes: when I am healthy enough to be cleared, when I can start thinking about racing, and when I need to be at peak shape for the team. We motivate recovery by referencing sport, but sometimes it is the very thing that prevents athletes from achieving health. Recovery is not about returning to the sport; it is about finding your true self.

When the Eating Disorder Returns in Midlife

I never thought my eating disorder would find me again in my forties. I was not chasing awards or the spotlight anymore; I just wanted stability, health, and the thrill of competition and pushing my body. I was a marathon runner, running seventy-mile weeks, tracking my protein in grams, working my body like a machine. It all felt intentional, mature, even somewhat admirable. But the patterns remained the same.

The signs were more subtle this time: low energy, irregular heart rate, erratic periods, thinning hair, lightheadedness, and abnormal bloodwork. But every time I mentioned it, I was told it was "just perimenopause." When I brought up my fatigue or heart palpitations, I received kind smiles and comments like "that is your age catching up with you." Yet, when my ferritin and hormone levels dropped significantly or my resting heart rate fell into the low thirties, no one asked about my diet, training volume, or history of disordered eating.

I was not invisible because I had concealed my symptoms. I was invisible because the system had stopped looking.

As I sat across from health professionals describing textbook symptoms of under-fueling—cold intolerance, GI issues, amenorrhea, low T3, and fatigue—doctors and dietitians focused on menopause, not my relationship with food. No one asked about training load. No one asked what I was eating. No one asked how I felt about food. And I was never screened or assessed for disordered eating, past or present.

For midlife female athletes, these blind spots are deadly. We are told to "listen to our bodies" and yet are dismissed when we do. We are encouraged to stay active for health and longevity yet are not treated like athletes who need the same level of curiosity, screening, and support as our younger counterparts. For women in midlife, these blind spots are especially disheartening.

I had struggled with an eating disorder as a young adult, and while I knew the signs to look for, I still think often about the women who do not. The women who slide into restriction or overtraining or obsession in the name of "healthy aging." We praise the fifty-year-old woman who is running ultramarathons, but we rarely question what it might cost.

The Healthcare Blind Spot

Sports medicine, dietetics, and mental health services have long since lost sight of the fact that athletic identity has no expiration date. Women in midlife are still competing, training, and grinding with the same intensity as decades before, only with more complicated needs. Hormonal shifts intersect with the culture of performance, but treatment methods stay mired in the past.

When a twenty-year-old elite athlete loses her period, we all react. When a forty-five-year-old runner does the same, it's considered "normal." When a young woman faints during practice, we check her iron, cortisol, and thyroid levels, as well as her calorie intake. When a woman in perimenopause faints, we simply prescribe calcium and a yoga video.

We have created a system that doesn't make space for conversation, for curiosity, or for the recognition that women in their thirties, forties, and fifties are still athletes—and that is how they should be treated.

A Letter to Those Who Work with Female Athletes

To coaches, clinicians, nutritionists, and physicians: please do not let age color your lens. Inquire about nutrition, energy, recovery, body image, and identity. Ask how hormonal shifts might impact training, and how the expectations of aging from society and our peers might intensify these disordered thoughts and behaviors.

Midlife athletes are not former athletes. We are here. We are still pounding pavement, straining in the weight room, and chasing the same finish lines, seeking the same validation we used to get from the stopwatch. We do it with little to no support or systems in place to help us or protect us.

I need you to see us, to understand that disordered eating does not magically disappear at a certain age. It does not. It hides in wellness culture, pretending to be clean eating and performance enhancement, and thrives when no one is paying attention.

In Closing

I no longer measure my worth by the size of my race singlet. But I would be lying if I said that identity is easy to shed. The eating disorder voice still whispers, some days louder than others. Quieting it is a daily practice: a choice to nourish, rest, and trust that my strength is no longer in depletion.

If there is one thing I would tell professionals, it is that midlife female athletes deserve the same level of curiosity, respect, and care as we give to young athletes. We do not stop being athletes when the medals stop coming. We simply need a different kind of attention—one rooted in understanding, not assumptions.

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Author Note

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We Are Student-Athlete Leaders:

Can You See Us and Can You Hear Us?

Chloe Tjarks
Illinois High School Association Student Advisory Committee

Xander Salazar
Illinois High School Association Student Advisory Committee

Diya Iyer
Illinois High School Association Student Advisory Committee

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Illinois State University

We Are Student-Athlete Leaders: Can You See Us and Can You Hear Us?

High school sport holds a special place the lives of student-athletes, in our schools, and our communities. It has the power to bring people together and help us, as adolescents, grow, develop, and escape from the stressors of our daily lives. We are currently senior high school student-athletes, we each play multiple sports, we have been given roles as captains of our teams, we have leadership responsibilities in our schools and communities, and we serve as representatives on the Student Advisory Committee for our state high school association. Over the past four years, we have lived the ups and downs as student-athlete leaders and gained so much from our experiences. We want other student-athletes to get these same benefits from playing high school sport. To make this happen, we need adults to see us and to hear us as leaders, not just as followers of adults.

Why is it Important to See and Hear Student-Athlete Leaders

We believe that being seen and listened to as leaders can have a positive impact across teams, schools, and communities. If our peers and teammates get to see us and hear as leaders, we can truly change the atmosphere of a sports team and the individuals who are a part of that team. As peer leaders, we can help to set the tone for the team's discipline, teamwork, work ethic, and overall attitude for the entirety of the season. Our actions and attitude, if supported, can help to inspire others and mentor future leaders. Being seen and listened to by teammates makes us feel worthy and gives a sense of collective ownership on our teams. Additionally, as student-athletes, we feel that we are often held to a higher standard than other students. No matter where you go, you represent your sport, your team, your school, and your community. When coaches, teachers, and administrators understand the pressure and responsibilities that come with our roles, we feel encouraged to carry ourselves with pride, discipline, and a desire to continue to grow as both a person and as a teammate. Finally, we believe that student-athletes must

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be heard and seen as leaders in high school sports because they are the future of high school sport. By creating a space where student-athletes feel comfortable leading others, we can collectively make high school sport better for the next student and the next generation.

Our Ups and Downs of Being Seen and Heard as Student-Athlete Leaders

Having someone who supports you and truly believes in you is an amazing feeling. For us, this support was the key for us striving to become better leaders each day. It is easy for us to identify one example each of having an adult who has provided us with real leadership opportunities, has developed real relationships with us, and has kept it real by providing authentic support, feedback, and confidence to lead on our teams and in our schools:

> *I had a coach who trusted me as a leader. He allowed me to hold player-led meetings. There are times when a team needs to talk openly without coaches present, and my coach recognized that. He trusted me enough to lead those meetings on my own, without even asking what the discussion would be about. I would simply tell him I needed time with the team, and he would make it happen. That level of trust showed me what real leadership looks like.*
>
> *My former Athletic Director truly listened to me. He believed from the day I stepped foot into the doors of my high school. From the numerous talks in his office or the simple smiles or high fives in the hallway, he has been able to see the true leader within me. He has been able to provide me guidance, life lessons, and constant support through every adversity or battle I have had to face along the way.*
>
> *It was just the other day, but I truly believe that this will be an impactful moment in my life. I was rushing to get my lunch at school because I knew the line would be a mile long. I was laughing and smiling, putting my backpack down on my seat and getting my ID card out to go check out lunch, when I saw him. He was a shy, awkward kid, a freshman, who I briefly met at the beginning of the year. I saw him outside in the courtyard area, sitting by himself and looking like he held the weight of the world on his shoulders. All of a sudden, my heart felt heavy. I went up to the line, grabbed my lunch, and I went outside and sat across from him at the table. We talked and laughed, and I remember it being one of the quickest lunch periods ever. The next day, I ran into my principal in the hallway. She stopped me and said she saw me at lunch the previous day. She told me how proud of me she was because I set the example for other kids and have a gift of making people feel like they matter. It really hit me that even the smallest acts of kindness can make such a difference. By having someone notice such a small moment and believing in me, I feel empowered and a new sense of drive in what I can do for others.*

On the other hand, we have also each experienced what it is like not to be seen and listened to as athletes and leaders. As we reflect, we know that these adults probably have not purposefully tried to ignore us or limit us, and we do know that we learned from these moments. Yet, we feel like we could have been supported more by our coaches and teachers during these moments:

> *I once had a teacher who believed I was "taking on too much." Looking back on it now, I can understand why she felt that way, she was just looking out for me. But at that point, she was blunt in the way she shared this with me. I felt discouraged, like she really did not believe in what I could do. It was hard for me to deal with because I have never felt that lack of support before. I cried and felt defeated, but it also gave me a sense of purpose. From then on, I want to prove that I could be something MORE than what she thought I could be.*
>
> *Since sixth grade, I found a true passion for a sport. I fell in love with it instantly when I stepped onto the court or put on my game day shoes. But as time grew on and constant reps, practices, and games dragged on, I began to lose a love for the sport. My junior year was one of the toughest seasons that I have had to battle through with numerous mental blocks, and I felt like I had no support. I wanted to play, I wanted to get better, and I wanted to be a leader on my team, but I felt like my coach didn't have my back. As my senior year approached, I decided that it would be best if I let go of the sport I used to love and focus on my future. Yes, I was able continue my legacy as a leader within my school and community, but I feel like the coach and team lost a leader.*
>
> *For one of my sports, our workouts are so intense that athletes started getting injured. I am a team leader, and I tried to talk to my coach, to discuss if we needed to focus more on drills instead of constant sprinting, but he didn't listen. I knew our training wasn't helping us, but I didn't know how to speak up effectively at the time. Eventually, I got hurt too. I had feared that we needed a change, and I wish I could we could have been on the same page, but it was too late. It taught me that leadership sometimes means having the courage to speak up, even when it's uncomfortable.*

Recommendations for Seeing and Hearing Student-Athlete Leaders

We hope that our experiences and our stories can provide some encouragement for high school coaches, teachers, and administrators to really think about how they can see student-athletes and listen to student-athletes as leaders in sport and in life. We have three suggestions to help to create a culture where student-athlete leaders can grow. First, please remember that we see and hear everything our adult leaders do. We want adults to lead with effort, teamwork, and integrity. Coaches, administrators, and parents should always remember the importance of a positive attitude and sportsmanship through respect, responsibility, courage, and composure. As teenagers, we learn from them, and we follow them. Second, adults can trust us to lead! We need a foundation of trust. If we have trusting relationships with our coaches and administrators, we see a clearer picture of what leadership is and what leadership can be. Then, it is much easier for us to step up and lead when we know we are supported. Finally, we think true leadership develops through experience, and sometimes that means learning from mistakes. When it comes to leadership, want a focus on growth and character instead of on the team's wins and losses. We value and strive for effort, teamwork, and integrity as leaders, but we are still learning, we are bound to make mistakes. We want adults to teach student-athletes how to use leadership skills in tough situations, provide us with real opportunities to take responsibility, and encourage us to have voice and speak our minds to make a difference within our school and sports team. We think that this helps to build student-athletes' confidence to step up as leaders, and develop the mindsets needed to lead on and off the playing field, inside and outside of the classroom.

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Commentary On Dating A Teammate

Taylor Priestley

Commentary On Dating A Teammate

Romantic relationships within a team setting are often viewed as taboo, risky, or inherently disruptive. Yet these dynamics occur far more often than coaches or administrators acknowledge, especially LGBTQIA+ athletes who may already feel pressure to conceal aspects of their identity. In this commentary, my goal is not to persuade coaches to encourage or discourage these relationships but to highlight the emotional and performance-related consequences that secrecy, stigma, and team culture can create for student-athletes. By sharing my experience, I hope to encourage more inclusive, thoughtful, and supportive environments in sport.

When I entered university, I did not understand that I was bisexual. I knew I felt different, but I never recognized my sexuality as a defining part of who I was. That changed the moment I met one of my teammates—and that realization shaped the next four years of my life in complicated, confusing, and transformative ways.

Dating within a team setting is undeniably tricky. Is it appropriate? Risky? Selfish? In my experience, it is all of these things at once—and the opinions of coaches, teammates, athletic directors, athletic trainers, and strength and conditioning coaches vary wildly. What felt even stranger was hearing people in my athletic circle express strong views about romantic teammate relationships in abstract scenarios, while unknowingly commenting on the very dynamic I was experiencing right beside them.

As a freshman, I was impressionable and desperate to fit in. One night in my dorm, an upperclassman began gossiping about her suspicions that two teammates were romantically seeing each other. My heart pounded—not only because her comments mirrored my own situation, but because my crush was sitting in the room listening.

"I just don't think dating a teammate is acceptable," she said. "Honestly, it's pretty disrespectful to everyone else on the team."

The discomfort in the room was heavy. That word—*disrespectful*—echoed in my mind. I had never viewed my feelings as disrespectful. Attraction is not a choice. I was not trying to disrupt anything. I simply cared for someone.

To avoid suspicion, I nodded along. What hurt most was watching my crush quietly leave the room. The comments affected her, too.

At first, we could not talk about our feelings openly. Our connection lived in glances, shared moments, and intuition. Over time, in private, she finally expressed her feelings. She admitted she was scared—of judgment, rejection, and the fallout within the team. I shared the same fears. The judgment was not always loud—it showed up in subtle ways. During our program's pride-themed games, I studied every teammate's reaction, noting who felt "safe" and who did not. Negative moments stuck with me more than the positive ones.

We started dating my second year and kept it secret for three seasons. Only a few trusted people knew. People often asked, "How did you live with a secret relationship?" My answer was always the same: *It felt better when no one had an opinion.* I could have stayed quiet forever if it meant protecting us from hate, judgment, or backlash.

My sophomore and junior years were the hardest. I dealt with heavy insecurity and low self-esteem. Hiding such a big part of my life took a toll on my mental health and, as a result, my physical performance. Sometimes I wondered how my confidence—and even my athletic development—might have looked if I had felt safe enough to be honest.

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After our senior season ended, I finally told my coach. "I KNEW IT," she said with a smile. Instantly, it felt like a 300-pound weight lifted off my shoulders. I then called a few teammates. Their reactions were overwhelmingly supportive. For the first time in years, I felt like I could breathe.

Although my coach and team did many things to promote inclusion—supporting pride-themed games, encouraging open conversations about identity, and emphasizing respect within the program—I realized that team culture alone is not enough. You can have an inclusive team, inclusive policies, and inclusive messaging, yet still feel unsafe if the people around you reflect society's broader stigmas. What truly shapes an athlete's experience is not only the environment a coach tries to create, but how teammates interpret, internalize, and react to the norms and biases they see outside the team. Even in a supportive program, the fear of judgment rooted in societal attitudes made it difficult for me to fully trust that I could be open about my relationship. Ultimately, it does not matter how inclusive your team appears on paper—it matters how that inclusivity is living in everyday interactions, comments, reactions, and behaviors.

Yes, I chose to keep our relationship hidden. I lacked the confidence to confront possible judgment from the team and the broader athletic community. That fear shaped everything.

Today, my partner and I are about to celebrate our three-year anniversary. Being teammates, best friends, and partners all at once was not easy—but moving beyond the secrecy has strengthened us. We learned resilience, communication, and how to support each other under pressure.

Unexpected romantic dynamics can occur within any team—whether friendships or relationships—and secrecy often makes them more complicated than transparency. What matters most is not policing relationships but cultivating an environment where athletes feel safe, respected, and understood.

During my four years, I watched friendships form and fall apart. Yet teammates still found ways to leave personal baggage at the door and remain professional. Romantic relationships can operate under the same principle when athletes feel supported rather than judged.

This is possible when athletes feel safe enough to be themselves. Coaches play a critical role in shaping that environment through their language, reactions, and openness to differences.

There is not a perfect blueprint for navigating intra-team relationships, especially for LGBTQIA+ athletes. But secrecy, stigma, and fear can have lasting emotional and physical impacts. I often wonder how my experience—and my performance—might have looked if I had felt less anxious about being honest sooner.

By sharing my story, I hope to help coaches, staff, and teammates understand what is at stake. Inclusive behaviors and practices do not just support identity—these behaviors support performance, confidence, and overall athlete wellbeing. If opening up about my experience helps raise awareness and reinforces the need to welcome these stories, especially for athletes who feel alone, then sharing it matters.

Strong not Skinny:

Raising Awareness for RED-S

Tessa Taylor
Frostproof Middle Senior High School

Strong not Skinny: Raising Awareness for RED-S

The morning air was crisp, and the grass was still wet around the track. I stooped down and double-knotted my shoes just to be sure. I shook out my legs and swung my arms as I walked up to the start line, waiting for the signal. Today was going to be the day.

Mrs. Hall blew her whistle, and I was off in a sea of Ked-clad fourth graders. "Be patient," I told myself. "Most of them will slow down after the first curve; you have four laps to run." Tony the Tiger was coaching me along, "Show them that you are a tiger. Show them what you can do. The taste of Tony's Frosted Flakes brings out the tiger in you! You're Grrrrrrreat!"

I heard Mrs. Hall's voice breaking through my song on the final curve, "Tessa, if you run hard, you'll break 7 minutes!"

I ran a 6:38 mile that day. I could taste greatness.

Twelve years later, I watched the evening sun setting over the track with tears in my eyes. I had just run my final Division I race, and I had never lived up to the great runner of my 9-year-old mind's eye.

I always tried hard. My college coach nicknamed me "Blood and Guts." But like many young female runners, I was plagued with body image issues. No one ever talked to us about it. But the unspoken message was clear: skinny equals fast. I ran for four years, fueled by a fat-free and minimal protein diet of salads and Diet Coke. I never drank electrolytes and can remember staggering after a particularly hot track workout with double vision. I often felt feverish after a hard run and chalked it up to "post-workout syndrome."

Despite my efforts and restrictive eating, I often gained weight that fluctuated up and down by 25 pounds during my collegiate career. I felt ashamed that I lacked the discipline to get skinny enough. I knew about anorexia, bulimia, and the female athlete triad, and that it was possible to take it too far. I did not want a full-blown eating disorder that would result in stress fractures and a skeleton physique. I believed the key was to ride the line of being skinny enough to run fast, but not too skinny to become slow, and I could not do it.

Becoming a mother four years later changed many things for me. Pregnancy was tough, and I had to take daily medication to keep down food and water. I began to realize how important proper nutrition was and that my choices were also affecting another life. I started eating real food, and my life was changed.

I began to view food as fuel, rather than the enemy of my life goals and running aspirations. The idea of strong, not skinny, began to take root deep in my soul. Perhaps the plague of my college career was not my lack of discipline, but my chronic under-fueling.

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Five years ago, I began a new journey coaching middle and high school runners. My desire to create a supportive and healthy environment for my athletes led me to earn a Master's in Athletic Coaching. Through my studies, I finally discovered the answer I had been looking for, RED-S.

Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S) describes a syndrome of poor health and declining athletic performance that occurs when athletes do not consume enough food to meet the energy demands of their daily lives and training (Mountjoy et al., 2014). RED-S describes athletes like me who do not fit into the traditional eating disorder categories. Awareness of this syndrome entered the world stage in 2014 when the International Olympic Committee published *"The IOC Consensus Statement: Beyond the Female Athlete Triad—Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S)".* However, the information has been slow to reach coaches, athletes, parents, and healthcare providers.

RED-S can affect any athlete but females going through puberty in sports that have historically placed value on leanness are particularly vulnerable. For boys, puberty marks a more linear path to strength and speed. For girls, movement often feels harder and different in their changing bodies, and performance plateaus are a natural result. Puberty is a steppingstone to emerging as strong women, but most girls do not know this. Studies show that teenage girls drop out of sports at twice the rate of boys (Zarrett et al., 2020). Those who stay in sports and make it to the college level have a much higher risk of developing disordered eating habits than their male counterparts.

As coaches, educators, and parents, we can normalize and talk about menstrual cycles, breast development, and with it, the performance plateaus that are natural for girls experiencing puberty. While I cannot change my past, I can educate my athletes about fueling for optimal performance and refrain from engaging in body shaming. The United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee website provides visual "Athlete Plates" guides for eating that coaches can share with athletes if they do not have qualified nutrition staff (USOPC, 2025).

Educating parents and athletes about RED-S is one step I can take as a coach to help with change. For example, former professional runner Tina Muir developed an accessible YouTube series to educate people on the signs, symptoms, and recovery process for RED-S. When it comes to addressing this threat to athlete health that disproportionally affects girls and women, we need research-backed policies and procedures to ensure no girl stays in the dark. Professional runner and coach Lauren Fleshman explains, "The pathway from concussion research to policy change shows us the way; all we need now is the will" (Fleshman, 2023).

Will. I have always had will. I am back on the starting line, standing shoulder to shoulder with strong women. Some have stories like mine. Twenty years later, our bodies are giving us another chance. The gun fires, and I am off in a sea of women at the Masters Indoor Track and Field World Championships with USA proudly displayed across my chest. I smile at Tony the Tiger as I round the first curve.

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From Victory to Vulnerability:

Reflections and Recommendations on the Mental Health Landscape from a Former College Athlete

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As a Division I college athlete, I witnessed firsthand that college athletes face unique challenges, encountering not only academic difficulties but also the mental and physical struggles associated with the pressure to perform at a high level. I, much like other college athletes (Huml et al., 2019; Hwang & Choi, 2016), experienced stressors associated with my dual role as both a student and an athlete. My peers and I experienced academic pressures in our diverse and demanding coursework—something that is often cited as a broader experience among college athletes (Huml et al., 2019; Hwang & Choi, 2016). I also observed and experienced sport-specific stressors, whether it was recovering from an injury, preparing for a big match, or navigating conflict on the team. Similarly, studies have made connections between things such as negative experiences with coaches and higher levels of stress and associated mental health concerns among athletes (Hwang & Choi, 2016; Rice et al., 2016; Simons & Bird, 2023). Furthermore, according to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), almost 40% of first-year college athletes express being frequently overwhelmed by their responsibilities (NCAA, 2019).

As a dean's list student and captain on a national championship team, I can attest to the unprecedented pressure to be great in both academic and athletic arenas. Victory was expected in the classroom and on the range, often leaving little room for vulnerability in the process. As the pressure increased, so did the stress. Given that stress is a risk factor for developing future mental health concerns (Simons & Bird, 2023), college athletes are an at-risk population in need of mental health support, prevention, and interventions designed to address their unique contexts and needs. As such, I write this reflection to share my perspective and highlight opportunities to improve conditions for college athletes by strengthening support systems and addressing mental health stigma.

Concerningly, stigma exists around mental illness, particularly for college athletes who are often expected to "tough it out," creating barriers to college athletes seeking mental health services (Cosh et al., 2024; Gulliver et al., 2012). I saw firsthand the critical need for mental health services and support for college athletes, as underscored by a growing body of research (Kashian & Kashian, 2021; Nothnagle, 2025; Whelan et al., 2024). Alarmingly, suicide rates among NCAA athletes have doubled in the last decade, becoming the second leading cause of death for college athletes (Whelan et al., 2024). Only recently has mental health become a concern at the NCAA level with the publication of the first edition of the *Mental Health Best Practices* in 2016, which has since been updated in 2024 (NCAA, 2024). While I applaud the NCAA for responding to this critical need, there is still much work to be done to destigmatize mental health and actively promote psychological well-being in college sport.

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As a former college athlete and current sport social worker, I see opportunities for college athletic departments to address the growing need for college athlete mental health support. There is a lack of uniformity regarding mental health screening, services, and resources available to college athletes in the NCAA (Kroshus, 2016; Sudano et al., 2017). Athletic departments are challenged to provide adequate support to college athletes despite varying access to resources (e.g., funding, etc.). I am grateful to have attended a university with a wealth of resources available to athletes, and I want to share my perspective to advocate for strengthened mental health supports across college campuses. All college athletes deserve access to numerous services, especially given the diverse needs among athletes. Some athletes might benefit from individualized therapy, while others may require targeted academic support. Thus, in this strengths-based narrative, I reflect upon the culture of care that I experienced as a college athlete and offer recommendations for fostering athletic environments rooted in equity, care, and systemic change.

Specifically, I will share my experiences as an athlete at The Ohio State University (OSU). In the Department of Athletics, college athletes have access to several forms of mental health resources. I argue that the availability of these mental health services can be mapped on an educational intervention framework: multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). MTSS is often used in schools to offer appropriate academic and mental health services to students based on the level of need (Bates et al., 2021). Within the MTSS framework, supports and services are delivered across three tiers: Tier I (universal), Tier II (targeted), and Tier III (individualized). Universal means all students, targeted indicates a subgroup of students, and individualized is tailored to the student and represents the highest and most nuanced level of need. Given that MTSS addresses both mental health and academic needs within a school system, it serves as an exemplary model for college athletic departments to offer varying supports to address the holistic wellness and success of athletes. As such, I will ground my advocacy in the mental health supports that I witnessed at OSU using MTSS to provide examples of how other colleges can similarly support athletes. I believe that offering at least one mental health support and services across each of the three tiers can destigmatize mental health and improve holistic well-being, allowing athletes to demonstrate vulnerability in their pursuit of victory.

Tier I: Universal Mental Health Supports

Within the MTSS framework, Tier I represents universal access to services for education and prevention. Offering services to all college athletes creates equitable access, as it is not assumed that every individual has the knowledge or skills to respond to mental health challenges or elevated levels of stress and pressure. At the Tier I level, I witnessed how all college athletes at OSU received mental health screening. At the beginning of each year, Sport Psychology and Wellness Services (SPAWS) joins the athletic trainers and team doctors for the annual physical to administer the Counseling Center Assessment of Psychological Symptoms-Screen (CCAPS-Screen; Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2021; Worley et al., 2025). I believe this is powerful, as research has shown that mental health screening is an effective Tier I tool to identify early signs and symptoms of mental disorders, such as depression and anxiety (Tomalski et al., 2019). Early identification of elevated signs and symptoms of mental disorders can allow for referral to more individualized mental health intervention or treatment at the Tier II or Tier III levels (Tomalski et al., 2019).

As a former college athlete, I think this is an opportunity to combat mental health stigma and create awareness of mental health resources. In my opinion, implementing screening measures normalizes and destigmatizes mental health care and help-seeking in athletics, as all college athletes are universally screened and discuss their results with a SPAWS clinician. Completing mental health screening during the physical health screening demonstrates that both mental and physical health are important for holistic athlete well-being. Furthermore, meeting with a SPAWS clinician during this process teaches all athletes how to access mental health services from SPAWS, increasing knowledge about when and how to seek help for mental health.

In addition to mental health screening from SPAWS, the Department of Athletics also supports athlete-led programs designed to promote psychosocial well-being among college athletes. For example, the Student-Athlete Peer Educators (now known as Buckeye State of Mind [BSOM]) host a Finals Week Stress Relief at the end of each fall and spring semester, available to all college athletes at OSU. Leading up to and during finals week, BSOM hosts multiple events designed to promote community, encourage resilience through positive coping skills, and relieve stress. Past events that I particularly enjoyed coordinating or participating in have included yoga, planting succulents, and spending time with therapy dogs.

Historically, BSOM also hosted a mental health summit entitled Buckeye State of Mind. This event was created to address and respond to the needs of college athletes. As such, BSOM was designed to reduce mental health stigma in athletics by encouraging college athletes to share their stories and strengthening college athlete access to mental health resources. As a member

of this organization, I assisted in organizing a Wellness Fair at the event by identifying and coordinating with numerous behavioral health organizations across Central Ohio to increase college athletes' knowledge and awareness of mental health resources available. Additionally, current and former Buckeye coaches and athletes shared their experiences with mental health, ranging from struggling with career-ending injuries to eating disorders. SPAWS clinicians attended and supported the event by offering spaces for athletes in need of immediate assistance and sharing coping strategies for all attendees.

Tier II: Targeted Mental Health Supports

While all athletes had access to mental health screening and programming designed to destigmatize mental health and promote resilience and well-being, some athletes participated in more targeted mental health programming at the Tier II level. Within the MTSS framework, Tier II services include more targeted and specific supports that go beyond what is offered at the universal Tier I level. Tier II supports allow students to receive more tailored support in small group settings, which may improve learning outcomes of skills (Bates, Nothnagle, & Mokadam, 2024). At OSU, college athletes advocated for athlete-led organizations to address issues important to them, such as mental health and the prevention of sexual violence. Such advocacy led to the creation of multiple affinity groups, including BSOM, which addresses mental health and wellness, and Buckeye Athletes for Education on Safe Sex (BAESS), which addresses sexual violence and health among college athletes.

Furthermore, college athletes were empowered to create inclusive organizations to create community and explore racial, gender, and sexual identities. Specifically, Redefining Athletic Standards (RAS) creates space for male athletes of color, SHER-OS provides community for female athletes of color, Global Buckeyes offers connections for international college athletes, and Buckeye Spectrum generates safe spaces for college athletes with diverse sexual and gender identities (LGBTQIA+ athletes). Given that athletes identifying with racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities disproportionately experience mental health concerns (Kashian & Kashian, 2024), it is critical that safe spaces are created for athletes to connect with peers from similar backgrounds and experiences. Thus, offering and supporting athlete-led affinity groups aligns with social work values, as it creates a sense of belonging and fosters autonomy and self-determination, which may buffer against mental health concerns.

In addition to athlete-led initiatives, several Tier II mental health programs were offered by SPAWS as well. Several times per year, and occasionally at the request of coaches, a SPAWS clinician would attend a team practice or meeting to facilitate a group session. These sessions often focused on topics such as mindfulness and were designed to improve mental performance and resilience. Beyond the team sessions, SPAWS also designed and piloted *Scarlet & Grit* (Sullivan et al., 2023) to increase resilience and improve coping strategies among athletes. *Scarlet & Grit* targeted programming for athletes based on year in school to provide developmentally appropriate psychoeducation for athletes (Sullivan et al., 2023). Furthermore, *Scarlet & Grit* participants interacted with athletes from different sports and teams, facilitating greater social networks by connecting athletes across the university (Sullivan et al., 2023). Finally, SPAWS facilitated athlete support groups, as needed. Following a group therapy approach, athlete support groups were established to address challenges that were commonly faced by athletes, such as experiences with trauma and gender-based violence. Offering these spaces for athletes to connect in smaller, more intimate groups is valuable. Again, I believe that such settings destigmatize mental health in athletic contexts, as athletes connect with and learn from others with similar experiences. Athletic departments can emulate this sense of belonging and destigmatization of mental health by offering similar outlets for athletes, either through targeted resilience-building interventions like *Scarlet & Grit* (Sullivan et al., 2023) or through more clinical perspectives like group therapy.

Tier III: Individualized Mental Health Supports

Finally, in addition to student-led advocacy and community-building initiatives, college athletes also had access to professional mental health practitioners through SPAWS at the Tier III level. Tier III services are highly specialized and offered to individuals who require more intense support than is offered at the Tier I or Tier II levels. While Tier I and Tier II offer more educational and preventative services, Tier III is designed to intervene with those in crisis. Through SPAWS, individual counseling services were offered to athletes for free. Athletes in need of Tier III services were identified through several mechanisms. First, athletes who reported elevated signs and symptoms of mental illness in the Tier I mental health CCAPS-Screen (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2021) would meet with a SPAWS clinician to discuss their results and determine a treatment plan, if necessary. Second, athletes could be referred to SPAWS by a coach, teammate, or athletic trainer. Third, SPAWS ac-

cepted self-referrals. Athletes could seek help from a mental health professional for concerns ranging from performance anxiety to depression to eating disorders. Offering individualized therapy by licensed providers is recommended by the NCAA *Mental Health Best Practices* (NCAA, 2024) and is a crucial resource to provide in all college athletic departments. College athletes need a space to talk about balancing their unique stressors with a licensed mental health professional, particularly as new pressures arise, such as Name, Image, and Likeness challenges, transfer decisions, and coach and peer dynamics. It is especially important to have mental health professionals who understand the cultural and contextual struggles that college athletes face to provide culturally competent care.

Recommendations

As I reflect, I hope college athletic departments seeking to improve mental health support read my perspective and choose to apply the MTSS model to comprehensively address the diverse needs of college athletes. At the Tier I level, universities should prioritize implementing universal mental health screenings for athletes. Despite the recommendations in the NCAA *Mental Health Best Practice* (NCAA, 2024), less than half of NCAA institutions have formal mental health screening procedures (Kroshus, 2016). Implementing mental health screening may allow for earlier detection of signs and symptoms of mental health concerns, making it possible for athletes to receive treatment or resources sooner.

Athletic departments should also empower athletes to facilitate, participate, and engage in preventative mental health programming. These programs may be offered at the Tier I or Tier II levels, allowing athletes to engage with like-minded peers and create strong, supportive social networks, which may serve as a protective factor for mental health concerns (Taliaferro et al., 2010). As a member of several athlete groups including BSOM, I benefitted greatly from such social connections. Participating in BSOM introduced me to peers from different sports, fields of study, and backgrounds, generating enriching friendships. As such, I see great value in Tier II interventions as an avenue for creating spaces for social support and engagement as a protective factor for college athlete mental health and well-being. Furthermore, given that autonomy-supportive coach behaviors and positive coach-athlete relationships may serve as protective factors for college athlete mental health (Nothnagle, 2025), athletic departments may consider offering education and training for college coaches to foster better relationships with athletes, encourage athlete autonomy, and support athlete mental health.

Finally, at the Tier III level, athletic departments should have mental health clinicians available for individual counseling for college athletes, either in-house or in college campus mental health centers, as recommended by the NCAA *Mental Health Best Practices* (NCAA, 2024). Formulating partnerships between athletic departments and campus mental health centers may make services more accessible to athletes. For example, campus mental health centers may need to adjust their hours so that athletes can access services despite their demanding schedules. Offering services in the evenings might remove scheduling barriers for athletes seeking mental health support and services, as it is outside of traditional practice or class times. Athletic departments can advocate for more culturally competent mental health care by considering the unique needs of college athletes when hiring or collaborating with mental health professionals.

As a former college athlete, I can personally attest to the value of having access to resources across tiers. College athletes have different needs throughout their college career, and providing different types and levels of mental health support allows college athletes to seek the services they need most.

Same Player, New Game

To conclude, I want to share how my experience as a Division I college athlete in an athletic department that prioritizes college athlete mental health has influenced my professional trajectory. Currently, I am pursuing a PhD in social work, focusing on the intersection of mental health and sport. As an athlete and advocate for mental health in sport, I grew curious about the struggles I saw firsthand, inspiring me to earn an MSW and pursue a PhD. My experiences with athletes and coaches as a former athlete, current sport social worker, and current PhD student continue to inspire me to conduct research that can continue to improve athletic systems to better support coach and athlete well-being and performance. My research has provided me with opportunities to examine topics like grit (Nothnagle & Knoester, 2022) and mental health in sport (Nothnagle, 2025), empowering me to leverage data, social work practices, and my own lived experience as an athlete to support psychological well-being in sport. Importantly, mental health and well-being are not only relevant to college athletes. It is crucial to identify

and develop ways to improve sport for high school student-athlete mental health as well (Bates et al., 2023; Bates, Mack, & Nothnagle, 2024; Bates, Nothnagle, & Mokadam, 2024; Bates et al., 2026; Nothnagle, 2023).

While my college athlete career has ended, I continue to work towards eliminating the mental health stigma in athletics through my research and practice as a sport social worker and researcher. I hope this article shows how we, together, can find victory in vulnerability. I offered my perspective to inspire change, promote meaningful dialogue, and encourage athletic departments to devote resources to enhance mental health outcomes. Given the alarming mental health trends among college athletes (Whelan et al., 2024), it is imperative that we—former and current athletes, sport social workers, researchers, coaches, and athletic departments—collectively invest in and support college athlete mental health.

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