



Athlete Mental Health

SureAthlete for Intercollegiate Athletics:
Mental Health and the
Student Athlete Experience

Scott McLuckie

Senior Director of Psychometrics and Assessments

Paul Tsagaroulis, Ph.D.

EVP, Chief Scientist

FOREWORD

Today, science-backed solutions can help coaches and staff members in intercollegiate athletics make the necessary adjustments to better support each other and student athletes. We believe it is time to focus on the individuals in ways that help elevate everyone, optimize relationships, and avoid crises due to mental health issues.

Mental health is an extremely prevalent issue in all areas of life, but in student athletics specifically it has been a primary concern in recent years. Many student athletes have suffered in different capacities from this issue, and some lives have even been lost. This is not only devastating for those families and individuals, but for everyone in the athletic community. While there is no sure fix to this problem, any step towards a solution is an admirable one. Awareness of mental health resources could help the well-being of student athletes everywhere... transcending their lives on and off the field. At SureAthlete, we're taking these necessary steps and facing this issue in a new light.

Coaches and staff members are faced with many challenges. One major issue is trouble relating to and understanding student athletes. This prevents the development of relationships built on trust which leads to a breakdown in communication and a lack of awareness of potential underlying mental health issues. SureAthlete is addressing these issues through the power of people science with individual-first solutions designed for coaches, staff, and student athletes. Through Prism Analytics we can help build stronger relationships and improve self-awareness to preemptively stunt mental health issues before they arise.

While we know our remedies won't solve everything, their potential to create any level of positive change in the athletic mental health landscape is something to be excited about.

Sean Flynn
President, Sports and Education

Mental Health is as (or More) Important than Physical Health

Approximately 30% of women and 25% of men who are student-athletes report having anxiety, depression, or other mental health conditions. Of those student-athletes, only 10% of them seek care from a mental health professional.^[1]

Today's college athletes manage insurmountable amounts of pressure from tough training regiments, personal crises, and physical injury—all while simultaneously striving for peak performance in both their athletic and academic lives. Lack of conversation about these issues—or the minimization of their importance—has led to the stigmatization of mental health among athletes. Many are left feeling ashamed of their symptoms and unable to speak about how this unique lifestyle affects their mental stamina and health.

When it comes to performance, there is an underlying expectation for athletes to power through. Sometimes this means playing with minor injuries, perhaps even pushing to a point where a full stop is eventually required. Additionally, the mental consequences of physical injury are often ignored when the all-clear is given to return to the field or court. Even when a physical injury is completely healed, there may still be residual side effects on mental acuity and emotional health. Some players may even bury their anxiety of reinjury or underperformance beneath the need to compete for position and prominence within the team. This can further diminish their motivation and ability.

The invisibility of mental stamina allows us to ignore it, diminish it, or denounce its potentially destructive impact on an athlete's life. Consequently, very little has been done in the development of tools to aid athletes, coaches, and staff through mental health crises.

When it comes to college athletic departments, there is a plethora of staff, services, and programs designed to help athletes regain their physical strength and recover from injury. These industry capabilities have grown in recent years with an increased focus on human potential, physical ability, and player safety.

Awareness of mental health among college athletes is as much—if not more so—impactful on wellness and performance than physical health. Nonetheless, there are scant few resources with which to address mental health through an athlete's college years. While most universities do provide campus mental health resources, they lack the bandwidth or specific training needed to support student-athletes. Of the many student-athletes we reached out to, all of them agree with this harrowing sentiment.

The gap between college athletes experiencing mental health issues and the 10% who actually seek help is a concern on every college campus. SureAthlete has an array of development tools for coaches and athletics departments who help bridge that gap. These tools center around a comprehensive psychometric algorithm that lends a lens into who the athlete truly is inside. This type of self-reported data is crucial for removing assumptions and starting conversations about mental health.^[1]

Communication in Crisis

Crisis is inevitable. In college athletics, crises can come in many forms: injury, family emergency, academic demands, performance slump, and so on. With such wide diversity in crises, there is no one size fits all approach.

Research shows that better communication within teams can help minimize the effects of crises on athletes and their performance. For anyone involved in supporting athletes, acknowledgment that players are highly susceptible to mental health issues is an important first step. From there, how we adjust behaviors, communication, emotional support, etc., can better shape the environment for these situations.

In many universities throughout the United States, mental health crises for student-athletes are on the rise. Rates of mental exhaustion, anxiety, and depression among college athletes are now 1.5 - 2 times higher than they were before the Covid-19 pandemic. Further, there were at least 5 NCAA student-athlete suicides in March and April of 2022 alone.^[2]

In an effort to combat these issues, many universities are hiring licensed sports psychologists to provide athletes with an outlet more relatable than typical mental health counselors. While this trend is productive, it isn't without shortcomings. Some of these shortcomings include the ratio of sports psychologists to student-athletes and how the overwhelming discrepancy thereof creates difficulty for inspiring trust.

On average, universities have 20 varsity sports programs and about 300 student-athletes, with schools such as Stanford reaching 36 varsity programs and over 900 student-athletes. One of the main obstacles in seeking mental help for student-athletes,

along with the nation's population at large, is trust. It is understandably difficult to build rapport and discuss vulnerability with an unfamiliar psychologist. It is inconceivable for one or two sports psychologists to create trusting relationships with every student-athlete across dozens of teams, each with its own practice, travel, and game schedules. Consequently, while resources are becoming more available, the gap between student-athletes and necessary help from sports psychologists remains significant.

Much of this fissure spawns from the absence of trust. Trust is built through many factors such as reliability, benevolence, and integrity. Interweaving all of these components is quality time. The average sports psychologist simply doesn't have the ability to spend the necessary time with every athlete. However, teammates and members of the athlete's training and coaching staff do have this ability. There exists an opportunity for teammates, training staff, or coaches to serve as intermediaries between athletes and mental health professionals.

Approaching someone going through a crisis can be a daunting task, and that is where Prism® Psychometrics from SureAthlete can help. Prism psychometrics provides comprehensive insights into who people are. This psychometric data gives coaches, athletes, and staff actionable insights from over 54 traits and attributes. Prism uncovers traits and attributes related to personality, processing, decision making, conflict management styles, motivations, fundamental needs, and changes that may occur under pressure.

SureAthlete was designed from the ground up to help coaches, athletes, and entire athletic departments holistically address and navigate each player's unique circumstances and experiences. Teams that complete Prism are equipped with Prism Portraits along with the tools and knowledge needed to better understand each and every individual as a collective whole.

When reaching out to a struggling athlete, a coach can use Prism's insight tool –Coaching Advisor– to compare their psychometrics to the athlete's. This tool grants them specific strategies on how to enhance communication and development. The advice is prescriptive and fully automated, meaning the recommendations are based on the Prism results of the athlete and the coach in real-time.

For example, Player X has been going through a crisis at home. Their psychometric profile shows they place great focus and value on relationships. Team members would do well by communicating through personal stories and experiences to open lines of communication. Prism also reveals that this player will also respond better to big-picture thinking rather than analytical explanations, details, or concerns. These insights can be used by staff and team members to help guide productive conversations and implement individualized support strategies. While this conversation may not solve the player's crisis altogether, it will add a layer of trust between player and staff, thereby paving a potentially necessary step toward involving a sports psychologist.

Coaching Advisor

The Coaching Advisor generates a side-by-side comparison of any two individuals' Prism Personalities. This powerful tool is used to navigate relationship dynamics, coach one another on conflicting preferences and styles, and help to improve communication and trust between athletes, coaches, and athletic staff.

THOMAS SHOULD MAKE AN EFFORT TO:

- Realize that the way Thomas alternates between personality types confuses Adam.
- Be direct with Adam to get a point across.
- Be precise and open to change.
- Talk in terms of outcomes.
- Take calculated risks and make quicker decisions.
- Speak up when doing so is important.
- Let Adam take charge when it is important to him.
- Offer sincere appreciation and support.
- Demonstrate appreciation for the energy that Adam brings.
- Strive for win-win situations.
- Express appreciation for Adam's ability to get things done.
- Appreciate his humor.

THOMAS SHOULD AVOID:

- Being too passive with Adam, who can mistake silence for agreement.

ADAM SHOULD MAKE AN EFFORT TO:

- Keep in mind that Thomas alternates between being task-oriented and people-oriented.
- Be less controlling and give Thomas freedom and space.
- Ask for Thomas's opinion and listen intently.
- Express admiration for Thomas's accomplishments.
- Drive for win-win situations.
- Challenge Thomas with new and different ideas.
- Speak in terms of goals and objectives.
- Realize that Adam compares Thomas and needs to be perfect.
- Offer sincere appreciation and support.
- Create a safe environment for Thomas to express opinions Adam may not agree with.
- Self-regulate emotions to increase credibility with Thomas.

ADAM SHOULD AVOID:

- Being very territorial.

THOMAS'S PERSONALITY

Primary Personality: **TOUGH & TENDER**

Personality Under Pressure: **SCIENTIST**

ADAM'S PERSONALITY

Primary Personality: **CATALYST**

Personality Under Pressure: **INSTRUCTOR**

THOMAS'S PROCESSING

EXTERNAL	CONCRETE LOGIC	ORDERLY
INTERNAL	INTUITIVE	EMOTION
SPONTANEOUS		

ADAM'S PROCESSING

EXTERNAL	CONCRETE LOGIC	ORDERLY
INTERNAL	INTUITIVE	EMOTION
SPONTANEOUS		

There are many types of crises student-athletes go through and everyone will experience crises differently. A particular service or support that worked for one student-athlete may not for another. Not having an effective communication and support system could result in an athlete being uncomfortable with playing, having an emotional crisis on the field, and possibly taking an unfortunate leave of absence from the game they've grown to love. Being aware of what is happening to the athletes internally and how to best guide them through high-pressure situations can help manage these scenarios in a way that helps alleviate the burden.

A coach with the aforementioned tools could also better understand how to approach athletes experiencing burnout. Burnout happens when an athlete has practiced their sport so frequently and intensely that they suffer physical and emotional exhaustion, resentment, or loss of interest in the game. This may also lead to reduced feelings of achievement for previous accomplishments.

Any athlete can experience burnout but due to the degree of training it takes to get there, it's most common among a team's top players. This creates an undeniably stressful dilemma for coaches. The obvious answer is to grant the athlete temporary leave from the sport, allowing them to seek help while hoping for their speedy return. However, returning from such a leave is not always a given, and the absence could prove costly for the team. Poor results could lead to unsuccessful seasons, potentially jeopardizing a coach's livelihood. Fear of this unfortunate outcome isn't exclusive to student-athlete burnout. An athlete experiencing any mental health crisis could need time away from the game in order to heal, hampering both coach and team.

While the mental health of student-athletes is a priority, the correct response to each case is sometimes alarmingly ambiguous. The quickest way to a solution is to talk with the troubled athlete, using Prism to illuminate strategies and enhance communication. This could lead to an athlete feeling better about staying with the team and continuing to play.

In some cases, time away may indeed prove best for the healing process. In such situations, Prism has the tools necessary to assist a coach with navigating relationships for both active and recovering players. Though some athletes may neither need nor want contact from coaches or team members during time away, others may appreciate being in contact as a subliminal reminder of their importance to the team. These varying approaches depend on the unique personalities of players and how they respond to crises. Prism provides the needed personality insights by which to better understand each individual.

In 2008, a situation similar to the above happened to Elena Delle Donne, the nation's top female basketball recruit. Delle Donne left a scholarship at the University of Connecticut and quit basketball altogether after feeling burned out within her first few days of preseason. She ended up at the University of Delaware, closer to home, where she switched sports entirely, earning a place on the school's volleyball team.^{[3][4][5]}

During this time, the basketball coach at Delaware advised the staff not to contact Delle Donne in any way and gave her the space she needed. After a year of volleyball, Delle Donne eventually decided to return to basketball on her own terms. She would later highlight the role coaches played in this process, mentioning that even the coach from her previous university maintained a supportive and helpful relationship with her while other coaches similarly didn't attempt to influence or pressure her decisions. Delle Donne currently plays in the WNBA, where she is a two-time MVP, a four-time All-WNBA First Team selection, an Olympic Gold Medalist, and a WNBA Champion.^{[3][4][5]}

The above case demonstrates how effective communication, woven with trust and empathy, can allow athletes to have the space they need to process and feel comfortable with the decisions they are making. While a strategy of absence in the athlete's time away worked for Delle Donne, it may not be so straightforward for every athlete going through a similar crisis.


Internal communication within a team is important in assisting players returning to the field or court. A 2019 study by Professor Jan Ekstrand of Sweden's Linköping University and colleagues observes how teams with poor communication between the head coach and medical staff experience an increase in incidence and injury compared to teams with better communication between those groups. This results in lower training attendance and less availability in matches, potentially harming team performance. The use of SureAthlete's tools to improve communication between athletes

and staff can reduce such situations, allowing for effective navigation and support of student-athlete challenges and crises.[6]

As mentioned in the above scenarios, SureAthlete provides coaching and support staff with the tools necessary to better address a crisis situation among players. Through Prism, communication strategies are clearly laid out for the benefit of the player, coach, team, and the organization as a whole.

Communication Cards

Communication Cards offer a consolidated view of each athlete's unique Prism Portrait along with strategic coaching advice. This player specific information provides coaches and staff with critical insights for helping each athlete adapt to challenges while performing at their highest potential.



SUREATHLETE

JOHN SMITH
CENTER

PERSONALITY BIO
Ambitious, Enterprising, Independent
A strong individual, known to others for the sheer power and tenacity applied to any situation

COACHING

- Performs best with a leader who is firm and straightforward but who can similarly handle directness
- Prefers to take charge whenever possible and functions most effectively when given independence to address challenges

COMMUNICATION

- Explains the general idea before providing any explanations, details, or concerns
- Strive to first find the larger goal that can be agreed upon, then propose how to reach that goal together
- May appear to others as excessively blunt, over-controlling, or too self-reliant

DISPOSITION & APPROACH

- Prefers to take charge by defining goals and applying pressure on others to get results
- Concerned with resolving issues, creating win-wins, and not introducing more problems

AMBITIONS & INTENTIONS

- Possesses a hard-line need for achieving goals and tends to charge ahead against all resistance, obstacles, or opinions
- Motivated by achievement of goals, opportunities to lead
- Needs to feel a sense of personal authority and make contributions that impact the greater good

COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

- Assertive, action-oriented, and very independent with a flair for adventure
- Practical and structured, focuses on obtaining results through analysis and objective action


HOW TO

SUMMARY

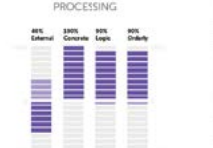
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SUREATHLETE


MOTIVATION (WHY)




PROCESSING




CONFLICT MANAGEMENT




MOTIVATION (HOW)



DECISION MAKING



FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS



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Managing Pressures

“Playing a sport in college, honestly, feels like playing fruit ninja with a butter knife. There are watermelons and cantaloupes being flung at you from all different directions, while you’re trying to defend yourself using one of those flimsy cafeteria knives that can’t even seem to spread room-temperature butter.” [7]

- Cailin Bracken
Vanderbilt lacrosse player

College athletics are full of pressures that can come from many different angles: academic and athletic demands, maintenance of a social life, family obligations, etc. These pressures can also include things like; moving away from home, aiming to go pro, the lack of regular student social life, possible injuries, personal issues, social media, and news outlets. All of this can prove damaging not only an athlete’s performance but their mental health as well.

Pressures are often both external and internal. A 2019 NCAA study determined that fewer than 2% of student-athletes go on to play professionally in their respective sport. Nonetheless, so many of these same athletes have faith in their chances to excel and transition to the next level. For instance, on the men’s side of Division 1 college athletics, 76% of all ice hockey and basketball players, 70% of football players, 66% of soccer players, 65% of golfers, and 52% of baseball players believe they will make it to the professional leagues.[8] See Figure 1 below.

The women’s side of the spectrum isn’t quite as unrealistic, with 47% of female golfers, 38% of ice hockey and basketball players, and 30% of tennis players believing in their chances to become an olympian or professional, according to the same research study. [8] See Figure 2 below.

Figure 1

Being a Professional or Olympic Athlete is at least “somewhat likely”
(Men’s Sports, Division I)

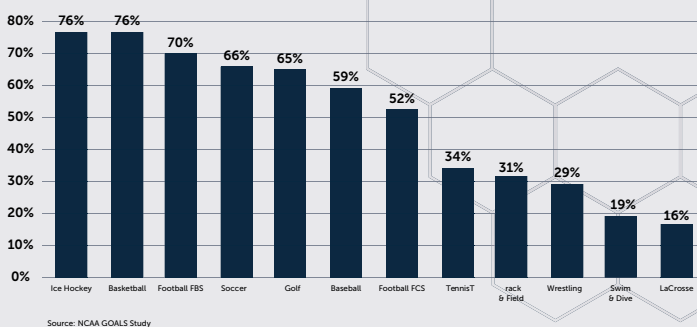
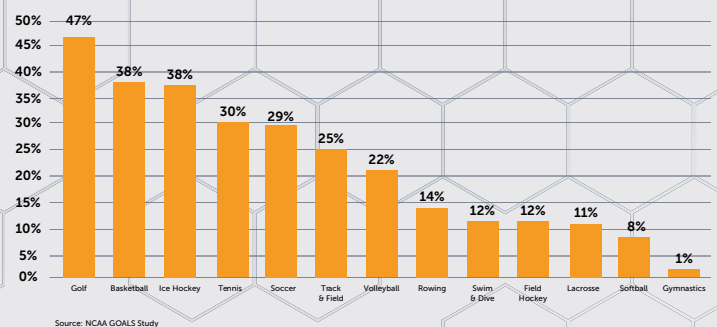


Figure 2

Being a Professional or Olympic Athlete is at least “somewhat likely”
(Women’s Sports, Division I)



Figures 3 and 4 below, illustrate the high expectations placed upon young athletes by their families, many of whom have been applying pressure for some time. [8]

As stated before, pressure can stem from many different sources. Omotade "Tade" Ojora experienced this first hand in his transition to college athletics. Ojora spent his childhood in Nigeria and England before coming to the University of Southern California track and field team as a sprint hurdler. This transition proved to be daunting, for he had never experienced such weather, humor, accents, or even foods. It affected all aspects of his life. He missed his family while engaging in the most competitive and rigorous training environment he had ever experienced. This pressure became so intense that Ojora considered quitting. [9]

"I thought, what am I really doing this for? I'll admit that at first, I was doing it because other people expected me to do it. Other people said I could accomplish this or that. At the end of the day, that can only keep you going for so long, seeking other people's validation. I had to look within myself to find something else to keep me going." [9]

- Omotade Ojora

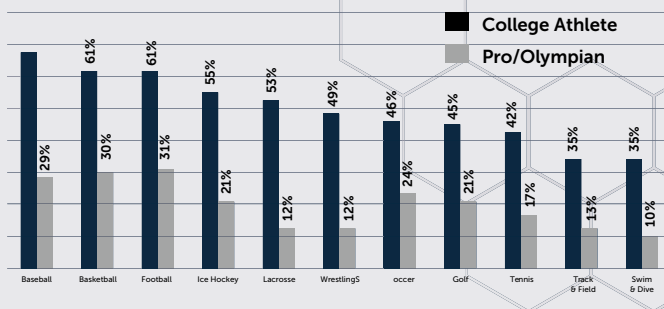
While some athletes' personalities stay consistent during these high-pressure situations, many athletes' personalities and fundamental needs shift under this pressure. For those who do experience such shifts, SureAthlete provides psychometric insight into the difference between an athlete's primary personality and their personality under pressure. This allows for adequate support of the athlete and a thorough understanding of how to manage emotions and stress as they endure high-pressure situations.

For example, Player X was one of the best college basketball players, creating a lot of buzz during his first years. The expectation was for him to take his team to the national championship and eventually get drafted into the league as a first-round pick. As time passed and pressures increased, his incapability to manage those pressures caused his performance to plummet. Subsequently, neither he nor his team performed as expected during his junior and senior years.

In a situation such as this, the pressure becomes acutely evident. With the implementation of a resource such as Prism, a coach or staff member could use the personality under pressure profile to effectively communicate with the athlete. This communication would help them work through the pressure, minimizing its effect on performance and mental health.

Figure 3

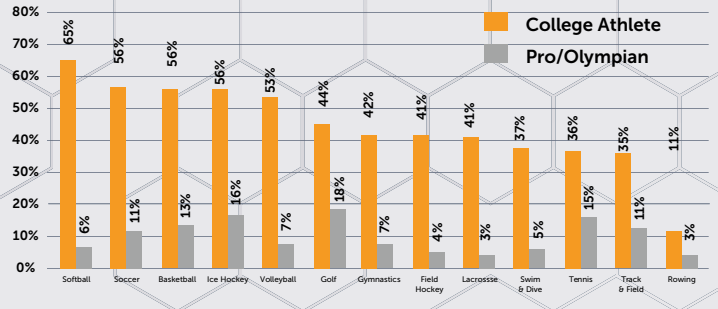
Since I was young, my family expected I would be...
(% Responding Agree or Strongly Agree, Men's Sports)



Source: NCAA GOALS Study

Figure 4

Since I was young, my family expected I would be...
(% Responding Agree or Strongly Agree, Women's Sports)



Source: NCAA GOALS Study

From the outside, college athletes seem like any other student, but again and again, they are trying to cope with insurmountable pressure every day. While close friends might attempt to help overcome pressure, all parties would benefit from deeper insight into these feelings and thought processes.

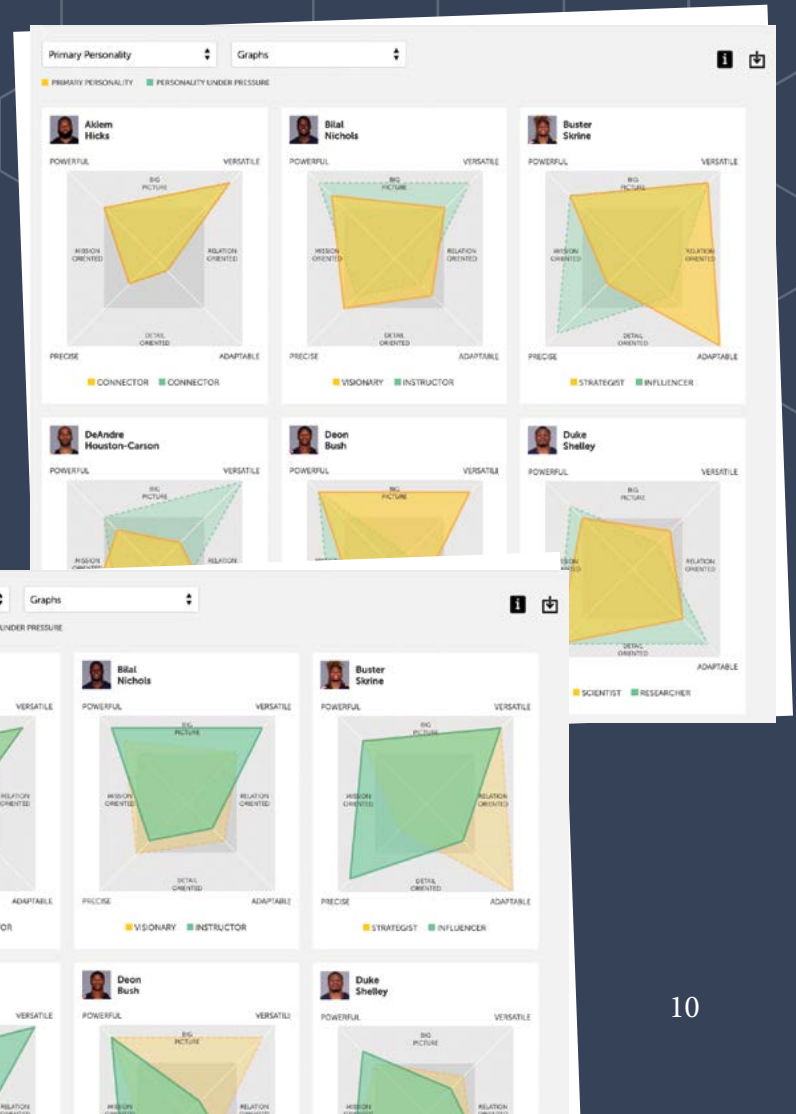
For some student-athletes, when a mental health issue arises, mental health professionals may seem too distant or even unapproachable, leaving students to rely on close friends instead. While this kind of support may work for some, it is not the best solution for many others. Though a close friend may have established the most trust with the athlete, they are seldom the most qualified to appropriately manage these situations.

Because of this, resources should be made available for students and staff alike to have the tools needed to provide specific guidance and care. Despite teammates often being close to each other, they are not always optimizing their supportiveness or getting through to the athlete the way they need to. By utilizing Prism insights, teams, trainers, coaches, etc., gain a thorough view of the athlete's personality while under pressure and can better support them during stressful situations.

Going through Prism is a shared experience, allowing for detailed awareness of thought processing, fundamental needs, and ideal conditions or environments. Teams can form a common language around individual traits and attributes, creating an experience that could help improve overall mental health and influence team chemistry for the better.

Team Advisor

The Team Advisor provides coaches an intuitive edge in designing and fostering team cultures anchored in the needs of their athletes. This dynamic tool aggregates team members' Prism Portrait data, elevating key insights about team composition, and provides prescriptive recommendations to leverage each team's unique attributes and facilitate a high performing team



Continuing the Conversation

In recent years, mental health crises have become more evident, especially in college athletics. College athletes have been silently struggling on how to deal with the pressures of performing and balancing many aspects of their college lives. One of the reasons for this uptick in crises is that more college athletic programs are subjecting student-athletes to requirements similar to those placed on professional league athletes. This professional mentality in training is beginning to trickle down from college and into youth age groups as well. This process, sometimes called “sports professionalization,” is represented by longer practice sessions, more workouts outside of regular training, and along with film sessions as well. This leads to overtraining and exhaustion of a young athlete and is a major contributor to the rise in mental health concerns.

Before the age of 18, 12% of American children have experienced depression, and nearly half have struggled with some form of mental illness.^[10] While studies show that playing sports improves physical and mental health, those who are playing to ultra-competitive levels – with possible year-round training in the hopes of an athletic scholarship – can quickly fall subject to a mental health crisis. Many are left without adequate support against mental instability and burnout. Further, if they are experiencing these situations before even entering college, they cannot reasonably be expected to make it through four or more years of their sport at a higher intensity.

There are, however, some university systems that are actively addressing the problem. Ohio State implemented a wellness center website where student-athletes can access different services related to wellbeing. Similarly, Wake Forest University opened an on-site wellbeing office. Although these are steps in the right direction, they can be broad and not directly specific to the pressures of student-athletes.

Columbia College Chicago, on the other hand, launched an app where students can view stories from different people sharing their experiences with mental health challenges while offering input and support. Additionally, this platform features student-athlete-specific elements. A struggling student-athlete can watch a video of another student-athlete dealing with a mental health situation similar to their own. Nonetheless, this could be insufficient for certain mental health issues requiring professional guidance.

All of these services demonstrate an increased demand for mental health resources, especially in college athletics. However, few colleges have implemented sufficient programs with which to address these issues. Exacerbating the situation, only 47% of student-athletes feel comfortable with seeking support from a mental health provider on campus (NCAA Research, 2021). This illustrates how the gap between the student-athlete and psychology services on campus is further separated by a lack of trust.^[11]

Prism is a complete system that can bridge this gap in vulnerability by providing those trusted by student-athletes the psychometric data necessary to better guide and support them. While Prism alone may not solve these problems entirely, it is an effective resource for illuminating challenges and potential resolutions.

Prism can be used as a conversational aide to begin discussions about the self while serving as a bridge for establishing a common language and sense of security in the face of vulnerability.

Psychometric data serves as an important intermediary between sports psychologists and athletes. They are becoming instrumental as a standard practice not only during times of crisis but as a necessity for dealing with the increasing pressure of being a college athlete.

Authorship Credit

Fiorella Lavaggi

Graduated in Clinical Psychology from the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru (PUCP), has a Diploma in Psychology and Mental Training in Soccer, and recently finished her master's degree in Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. She began working in 2013 as a psychologist for the youth division of a professional soccer team in Peru; From 2018 to 2021, she worked as a psychologist for a soccer player representation agency. Recently she interned at the high-performance center in Sant Cugat, Barcelona, working with table tennis players. She hopes to continue working with athletes in the field of sports psychology, helping athletes perform to their highest potential.

John Bannec

An undergraduate student-athlete at Belmont University. He recently graduated from Indiana University with a B.A. in Journalism and is now finishing up his B.S. in Psychology at Belmont University. John is a men's soccer player who was a part of teams that competed in two NCAA College Cups, including one National Championship game in the Fall of 2017. John hopes to complete his PhD in clinical psychology with ambitions of becoming a clinical psychologist with a specialization in sports and performance.

Project Support Credit

Max Wiley

is in the Statistical & Data Studies degree program at the College of Wooster. Max expects to graduate in 2025 and is interested in a career as a data analyst.

Michael Valenzano

is a student at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, majoring in Recreation, Sports, and Tourism with a minor in Statistics.

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www.SurePeople.com

or contact

Paul Tsagaroulis, Ph.D.
EVP, Chief Scientist
paul@surepeople.com