

Peer relationships, athlete autonomy & athlete wellbeing for success in sport for all

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We all have a big role to play

Whether you are a teammate, coach, parent, or safe sport leader, we all have an incredibly important role to play in championing athlete well-being.

Every adult in sport holds a position of power and privilege that comes with responsibility and exciting opportunity for lasting positive impact.

When we center athlete well-being everyone succeeds and the foundation is built to prevent abuse and ill-being.

Safe Sport seeks to prevent abuse in sport.

A sport culture that prevents abuse values and champions physical, emotional, and psychological safety.

Safe spaces develop healthy humans.



What are the biggest challenges you are seeing that are hindering athlete wellness?

Challenges: Athlete mental health

Rates of **mental health challenges in adolescents including depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts have increased 40% from 2009 to 2019**, and worsened over the pandemic

30-40% of adolescents experience feelings of sadness and hopelessness

Suicide is the #1 cause of death among kids and young adults aged 10-19 in Colorado

Rates of depression and anxiety among college student-athletes nationally are 1.5 to 2 times higher than before the pandemic

Female college athletes were nearly twice as likely as male athletes to report feelings of overwhelm, anxiety, and sadness. However, the number of deaths by suicide in males aged 15-44 are 4 times greater than in females.

35% of elite athletes suffer from disordered eating, burnout, depression and/or anxiety

Athletes have a high likelihood of not asking for help for fear of being perceived as weak by their team or coach

Challenges: Less kids participating in sport

27% of parents reported that their children have lost interest in playing sport (Project Play, 2022)

Sport has to compete with the lure of technology and with long school days with high academic demand

Sport clubs that don't center athlete autonomy and well-being are more likely to have kids drop out to do something that does

Challenge: Old School Sport Myths are a Problem

“Sport is all about being tough...

... tough athletes don’t ask for help or admit they struggle”

- Looking and acting tough for appearances sake is not a sign of strength, but rather mental weakness
- This misconception of toughness perpetuates an unsafe sport culture where athletes are less likely to report feeling unsafe or if they or their peers have experienced abuse
- **Mental strength lies in self-awareness, a keen sense of opportunities for growth, and seeking help and resources early and often to optimize potential**
- **Athletes with good mental wellness know when they are reaching their max and need to take a step back and reset**

Challenge: Old School Sport Myths are a Problem

“What the coach says goes”

- Silence breeds stigma and complacency
- Autocratic coaching styles and club cultures hinder healthy athlete development and decrease the likelihood of reporting abuse
- Trusted adults in an athletes life need to be just as likely to question a coach as we would a teacher at school
- **Athletes can learn hard work and resilience while still having access to autonomy and agency.**
- **Trust and respect are always earned and reciprocal. *Every age of athlete has the right to free choice over their mind and body.***

Challenge: Old School Sport Myths are a Problem

“Winning at all costs mentality wins championships”

- Often leads to **cutting corners** and sometimes **cheating**, attempting to injure opponents, or **playing through injuries**, and **losing focus of perspective** and the process
- **All consuming pressure to perform to win** encourages a **do whatever it takes to get there mentality**. Athletes lose sight of perspective and **trade short term performance for health and longevity**.
- This type of sport culture can also put **athletes at high risk for developing perfectionism, fear of failure, and low self-esteem** which contribute to athletes being less likely to advocate their needs when it matters most.
- **Athletes and coaches with good mental and spiritual wellness show up each day with integrity, and align their goals with their core values, even when there is considerable pressure to win.**



How can we do better?
A healthy motivational sport climate



Healthy Motivational Climate

The motivational climate is the psychological and social environment of a team or club based on feedback given, the types of goals that are focused on, and how teammates and coaches interact with one another.

The goal is to create a task-oriented, not ego-oriented, sport climate for every club.

Task-oriented teams perform better, have better team cohesion, and athletes with task-oriented team climates performed better academically and had less perceived stress.

While ego-oriented teams have less cohesion, perform inconsistently, and have greater stress, and experience more physical and mental exhaustion.

Team climates that were highly controlling were directly linked to greater anger and dysfunctional anxiety among athletes.

A healthy motivational climate supports basic psychological needs

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan)

- **Autonomy**
- Competence
- **Relatedness**

In 4 studies in youth athletes, **controlling coaching behavior** thwarted these needs and were **associated with the development of disordered eating behaviours, depression, and burnout symptoms, and negative affect.**

Athletes were more likely to show **enhanced physiological stress** (i.e. elevated levels of secretory immunoglobulin A) immediately prior to training. (Bartholomew et al., 2011)

Our three basic psychological needs must be supported in order to:

- Have access to thriving and flourishing
- Reach true performance potential
- Enjoy the journey
- *An exceptional amount of evidence & research to support*



1. Think about your most impactful and memorable sport experiences.
2. One that brought joy and one that brought sadness or frustration
3. Who were the main characters?
4. How were autonomy, competence, and relatedness operating?

Task-oriented climate: What is included?

Focuses on the **process** and **effort** over outcome

Teaches **life skills and mental skills** alongside sport

Centers **integrity** and **character**

Fosters **enjoyment** through development of **social and physical competence**

Quality **feedback** that focuses on **positive reinforcement** with skill specific **technical instruction** (*not punishment, shame or blame*)

Rewards **“almost there”** effort

Strong **social support** through **quality peer relationships**

Keeps **perspective** on **life** and **health**

Teach athlete autonomy from the very beginning

Give kids their **choice** of sports to try

Incorporate **choice** and **collaboration** into **team and practice structure** whenever possible - share the *whys*

Teach the **differences between soreness and pain** that needs to be addressed and could lead to injury

Teach athletes that they are **ALWAYS the CEO of their body and mind** and to listen to it, and advocate for and communicate their needs

Teach athletes how to **respectfully ask questions of those in authority**

Foster expectations for positive peer relationships

- Zero tolerance for criticizing, degrading, or humiliating one another
 - Help athletes learn how to recognize and reframe negative self-talk
- Encourage and incentivize positive support of teammates on good and bad days
- Positive communication and respect are role modeled by all coaches, managers, staff, and parents
- Build-in team building and fun time that is non-sport focused
- Provide ways for athletes to get to know each other in a non-sport setting

What is the impact you wish to leave on your sport, club, team, or community?

What are 2-3 action steps or goals you can commit to today to move the needle on normalizing athlete autonomy & wellbeing in sport?



When athlete autonomy and athlete well-being are centered, prioritized and normalized we all win in sport.

Athletes with voices. Athletes with choices.

Let's set the bar high for the positive and lasting outcomes that athletes leave sport with that go far beyond medals, points, trophies, and records.

Questions?

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