

# THE MENTAL GAME: WHY MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS IN SPORTS

Thought Leadership



At the height of her popularity—and on the world’s biggest stage—Olympic gymnast Simone Biles withdrew from competition at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. The reason? To preserve care for her mental health.

When we think of sports, we often focus on the physical aspects of the game—the strength, speed, agility, and endurance of the athletes. We admire their skills, their talent, and their achievements. But we tend to overlook another crucial element that is just as impactful as physical performance: their mental well-being. Biles understood that, for her to perform at her best, she needed to feel at her mental best—even though many at the time didn’t understand this connection.

Mental health affects how a person thinks, feels, and acts. It also influences how a person handles stress and relates to others. Prioritizing mental health is important for everyone, but especially for athletes, who face intense pressure and constant scrutiny. Increasingly, the sports community is recognizing that mental well-being is just as vital as physical fitness in optimizing an athlete’s performance and overall success.

The most successful athletes and teams are those who have a strong mental game. Developing mental skills like confidence, motivation, and emotional regulation can help athletes overcome challenges, cope with setbacks, and perform at their best. However, the stigma around mental health and the culture of sports does not leave much room for athletes to be proactive and seek support.

## The athlete’s dilemma

To be successful, athletes—whether amateur or professional—need to perform at their best, at the time, and under pressure. But rigorous training schedules, competitive environments, and high expectations can take a toll on their mental health. Poor mental health can lead to worsened performance and burnout, causing athletes to quit their sport. The British Journal of Sports Medicine found that around [33% of college athletes end up quitting their sport](#). And [Korn Ferry research](#) says that in the workplace, 40% of turnover is caused by employee burnout.

Back in 2021, professional tennis player Naomi Osaka withdrew from the French Open to address and care for her mental health. Like Biles, the incredible athlete was met with the world’s shock and surprise at the decision. “In my case, I felt under a great amount of pressure to disclose my [mental health] symptoms—frankly because the press and the tournament did not believe me,” Osaka wrote in a [Time essay](#). “I do not wish that on anyone and hope that we can enact measures to protect athletes, especially the fragile ones.”

Athletes take ice baths, receive treatment from athletic trainers, follow sports-specific nutrition plans, and are encouraged to stay hydrated. Their physical needs are consistently met to prevent injuries. Yet, mental health support is rarely a part of an athlete’s regimen—unless they seek it out on their own—and care in the aftermath of a mental health struggle is scattered and infrequent.

Both Biles and Osaka have worked to open the door for athletes to address their mental health without shame. By publicly sharing their stories, these athletes have inspired others to come forward, helping to reframe the conversation around mental health in sports.

## Why mental health matters in sports

Biles and Osaka's respective decisions to take a step back from their sport are prime examples of resilience. And resilience is a key component of mental health that plays a pivotal role in an athlete's ability to navigate setbacks and challenges. Resilient athletes recover more quickly from disappointments and use these experiences as growth opportunities. In a high-stakes environment like competitive sports, the ability to bounce back from obstacles is crucial for long-term success.

The pressure to perform—coupled with the constant scrutiny from fans, coaches, and the media—can lead to heightened [stress](#) levels among athletes. Those who actively work on developing resilience are better equipped to handle these stressors, and use that [tolerable stress](#) to their advantage. [Korn Ferry research](#) shows that in the face of adversity, resilience helps us to transform stressful times into triumphant experiences. Strategies like [mindfulness](#), [visualization](#), and [stress-management techniques](#) are becoming integral parts of athletes' training regimens, helping them build the mental fortitude needed to thrive under pressure.

An athlete can be in peak shape, but performance isn't reliant solely on physical attributes. If it were, the better athlete would always win. But upsets happen, and athletes crumble under pressure—because the game is as much mental as it is physical. For example, the [American Journal of Applied Psychology](#) states that golfers who visualize a successful putt before attempting it are 80% more likely to make it. And the [Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology](#) says that basketball players who focus on positive self-talk during practice have been shown to improve their free throw shooting percentage by 20%.

## 6 ways to improve the mental game

Mental well-being is a silent competitor, and it can make or break the performance of athletes—something Biles understood all too well. But when we take care of our mental health, great things happen. After her leave, Biles stormed back into competition, picking up her sixth global title. This is why coaches, athletes, and organizations should pay more attention to and invest more resources in supporting the mental wellness of athletes. Here are 6 ways to get started:

1. **Provide mental skills training.** Goal setting, imagery, relaxation, self-talk, and mindfulness course can help athletes enhance their confidence, focus, motivation, and emotional regulation.
2. **Lean on sports psychologists to provide mental health education and awareness.** Education can help athletes improve their mental game and focus on ways to perform at their best. At a high level, a study revealed that [75% of Division I athletic departments](#) utilized full-time or part-time sports psychologists.
3. **Offer free mental health services and support.** Counseling, therapy, and life coaching can help athletes cope with stress, trauma, or mental disorders, and reduce the stigma and barriers around seeking help.
4. **Include access to mental health services and support in athlete benefit packages.** If athletes know where to go for mental health support, they will be much more likely to use them. Research shows that [29% of Americans have not received mental health treatment partly due to not knowing where to go for this help](#). The stigma alone accounts for a third of Americans not seeking help, which is why support in combination with access to resources is a necessity.
5. **Foster a positive and supportive culture for athletes to thrive.** Build trust and team synchrony, which [Korn Ferry says can be measured and created](#). A good culture is rooted in positivity and kindness, ensuring the athletic experience isn't a revolving door of stress and suffering.
6. **Hire coaches who prioritize mental well-being, using respectful and adaptable coaching styles.** Find a balance between challenge and support, adjusting communication to individual athlete needs for effective performance.

## Conclusion

Taking care of one's mental health is not a luxury but a necessity. It is not a weakness, but a strength. It is not a problem, but a solution.

Improving an athlete's mental wellness can not only help them achieve their potential but also improve their quality of life. By breaking down the stigma around mental health, implementing supportive policies, and providing support and tools to develop resilience, the sports world can foster an environment where both the body and mind can thrive, ultimately leading to a new era of athletic success.

An athlete's mental feats are just as crucial as their physical skills. Why? Because you can't have one without the other. Instead of simply expecting mental toughness, it is time to foster and create it, leading to new levels of greatness in athletes and their organizations.

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