

Could you be Next: The Tragic Mental Health Decline Among College Student-Athletes

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## Could you be Next: The Tragic Mental Health Decline Among College Student-Athletes

Collegiate student-athletes are struggling with their mental health, and it constantly goes overlooked. If you plan to play sports in college, you must learn more about these problems. There are many reasons why college athletes are struggling with mental health. The reasoning may vary from school causing stress to coaches, environment, time management, or distractions. Student-athletes are always busy and under much pressure; certain things or people cause the decline of student athletes' mental health. Athletes' mental health goes overlooked, and certain things need to be done to improve it. An increased awareness of the mental health of collegiate athletes lends to the realization that the overwhelming pressure of school, life, and sports balance can be managed successfully by ensuring that athletes have someone they can talk to, the proper tools to cope with their stressors, mental health literacy, and an awareness of biases.

Family members remind me of this because they have faced these problems already. I have two cousins who play college basketball, and I asked both of them about their experiences so far and asked if it affected their mental health in any way. One of my cousin's stories stood out to me. During an interview with D.J. Gordon, he talked about how tough playing basketball at the collegiate level is. He said it all started at Penn State. The moment he stepped on campus, it was strictly basketball and schoolwork. He worked out three times a day: weightlifting early in the morning, shootaround in the afternoon, and team practice in the evening. He said, "It was easy initially, but once my college classes began progressing, it got harder." He emphasized that he barely got time to himself and even talked about how coaches pulled him out of class multiple times to work out. He said, "Basketball at this level felt more like a job than a game." Gordon noticed that he also was not playing much in the actual game and began to get frustrated because he was doing all these tough workouts and was barely playing. He talked about how stressed out

he became and decided to go to parties to relieve some stress. Gordon said, "After a while, I sacrificed school over partying and basketball, and eventually, it caught up with me." He could not make the grade and was ineligible for basketball, but eventually, he got the grade up. However, the season was practically over by then. He decided it was time to enter the transfer portal by the year's end and went to Fordham University. He noticed that the same things he experienced at Penn State were happening at Fordham but seemed much worse. Gordon said, "We still work out three times a day, but the people here do not like to party, and nothing exciting happens." He talked about how the coaches lied to him about the school, and he even became homesick. He decided to transfer in hopes of playing more. He decided to move to Jacksonville State. Gordon said he liked it in Alabama, but the coaches were very strict. He said, "I got cussed out so many times by my coaches for messing up on simple things; it made me lose confidence in myself, and I began to become depressed." After the year ended, a Jacksonville State coach told him they did not want him anymore and took away his scholarship. After that, D.J. was forced to enter the portal again and transferred to Bloomsburg University. He currently plays there and says it is better than the other schools he has been to. He has more time to himself. He said, "I definitely lost my love for the game of basketball because of the past experiences, but I am doing better now." Gordon's experiences show future student-athletes the harsh reality of playing a college sport, and he hopes that others can learn from his mistakes. He talks about how he never really had support from his past coaches and wishes he had someone on the training staff that he could go to and chat with. (D.J Gordon, Interview, January 2, 2024).

Having someone on the training staff to talk to can be essential to relieving stress as a student-athlete. *John Hopkins University* realized this and hired Ari Miller to help with that. Miller's position focuses on sports and psychology. Miller allows student-athletes to live

healthier lives and perform better in sports. In the article “A Game Plan for Mental Health,” Brennen Jensen says, “The pressures of sports competition, on top of the rigorous demands of classrooms and labs, can lead to mental health issues, including anxiety, eating disorders, substance abuse, and depression” (*JHU HUB*). It is well known that being a student-athlete is tough, so finding ways to limit student-athletes from having stress is essential. Doing something as simple as talking with a person can help with stress. Miller, in the article, says, ““As we are learning more about the needs of the entire person that plays a sport, we realize that to be mentally tough and physically tough, you need to be able to articulate your feelings and talk through things in your life that are presenting challenges”” (Jensen). The bridge between the athletic department and the counseling center seems severed. Miller is trying to restore it because he notices a disconnect between them. Counseling centers for athletes are a well-needed necessity that goes underlooked. Many other ways exist to deal with these pressures and stressors and even eliminate athletes' stress.

Sydney Bauer writes an article called “4 Mental Health Tips for College Athletes,” which addresses certain things athletes can do that can limit the amount of stress, anxiety, and depression they go through. One primary reason why athletes struggle in college is because they do not have control over their social media. Athletes are constantly criticized, and that can eventually be overwhelming. For social media, one should make one's account private and block anyone whose posts make them feel stressed. Using screen time limits can also help. After all, it is advised not to spend much time scrolling through social media because it can be distracting. Also, deleting any social media that causes stress can help. Bauer interviews Dr. James Borchers, and he says, “Having a support structure you feel comfortable with– is important” (“How College Athletes Can Take Care of Their Mental Health”). With a sound support system, athletes

tend to feel more understood and are willing to share their problems with others. Most of these mental health problems that athletes go through are overlooked because most people cannot tell if an athlete is struggling.

Claire Miller, a pediatric neurologist, wanted to show that no one knows when another person is struggling with mental issues. She surveyed students at *Georgia State University*, and the results showed that the students had very low mental health literacy. Mental health literacy is one's understanding of whether or not someone is struggling with their mental health by reading their body language or noticing changes in behavior. Miller noticed that those who have had mental health issues firsthand have been proven to have higher mental health awareness. She noticed that students struggle with being over-stressed, but she also noticed that student-athletes struggle with both depression and anxiety (Miller). The survey also showed that men had more negative perceptions of mental health than women. This is because it is known that men have been taught to keep their feelings inside and tough things out. According to *MensLine Australia*, an article dedicated to men's mental health states, "Men often feel that they need to be self-reliant and provide for their loved ones, so it is not appropriate to express their emotions. This behavior can be reinforced in the stereotype of the heroic male, so often represented in popular culture" ("Men and Emotions"). This is not the case for all men, but it is for most men. Miller recommends that coaches, trainers, and other college staff establish events or meetings prioritizing the team's mental health. Coaches who take a "tough it out" ("Study: College Athletes"). approaches have a negative effect on the players. This is proven by an article written by *Kids Sports Psychology* called "How Critical Coaches Hurt Young Athletes' Confidence." The article says, "When coaches push young athletes too hard, yell at them, or criticize them, the

kids are likelier to drop out of sports” (“Study: College Athletes”). There are also other factors that are being observed that could be a reason for athletes being mistreated. That factor is race.

Kids constantly corrected by their coaches lose the joy and freedom that helps them play well. When they are criticized, they often over-think their game. Athletes need to be more proactive about their mental health. Miller also noticed that black student-athletes have more mental health problems than white students. This leads to the question: Does race have anything to do with the mental health decline among student-athletes? Marjorie Malpiede, a psychologist, studied black student-athletes and their mental health. Black student-athletes make up 32 percent of the college athlete population. Black student-athletes make up 57 percent of all college football players and 64 percent of all college basketball players. In 2020, 78 percent of black college athletes reported that they were having mental health problems, but only 11 percent of those student-athletes reported using mental health services in the past year. Malpiede says, “Playing sports at the next level is considered to be equivalent to a full-time job” (“Another Added Layer”). College athletes have practices, lift schedules, training rooms, and nutrition centers to go to. She interviewed a black D1 college athlete named Matthew Wilson, who said, “People talked to me about time management, but there was not any time left to manage. My schedule is all laid out for me, and athletics takes it all” (Malpiede). Most athletes seem to be treated the same regardless of race. She found out that African Americans seem to have more mental stress than other races because they seem to have more of a lack of preparation heading to college than others. The ones who are prepared go on to be elite student-athletes, but they, too, face mental struggles.

I interviewed my cousin Isaiah Wilson, who currently plays D1 basketball. Wilson is a prime example of a student-athlete. He has outstanding grades, is a great player on his team, and

is currently well on his way to getting his degree in mass communications. He started his career at Richmond University and said, “I chose Richmond because it felt like home, had little to no distractions, and the people there were very welcoming.” Wilson chose this school based on his needs outside of basketball. Wilson said, “I barely got time to enjoy my summer. I had to head to college at the end of June for team workouts.” From the start, he could tell it would be challenging, but he was well prepared because he went to a preparatory school that challenged him academically and athletically. Once the summer workouts were over and school started, he said, “Adding school into the mix made things challenging, but one of my teammates made things easier for me.” That teammate was Jacob Gilyard, who currently plays for the Memphis Grizzlies. Wilson said, “Gilyard helped put together my school schedule for me. He ensured our basketball schedule did not interfere with my classes. He also ensured my schedule included breaks so I could have time to myself” (I. Wilson, Interview, February 3, 2024).

Wilson took a lot of AP classes during high school and could skip some of the general courses in college and just focus on his major, so he had more free time than the average freshman. Wilson had workouts three times a day, and whenever he had free time, he usually just went to the student lounge to study, do homework, or listen to music. He mentioned how vital his teammate Jacob Gilyard was, and he was like a mentor to him. Wilson said, “Gilyard ensured that I was on task, stayed out of trouble, and continued to perfect my basketball skills.” Making the grade was never a problem for Wilson, and he also got significant playing time. He played in 20 games and started for two of them. Wilson proves that with proper preparation, dedication, and support, you can be successful and experience less stress as an athlete at the next level. Even with all this success, he still experiences some struggles, like missing home and feeling fatigued from all the workouts he does. Wilson had a successful freshman year and an excellent

Sophomore year as well. He continued to do well both academically and in athletics. Through his two years there, he averaged a 3.8 GPA. One day, at the end of his sophomore season, he got called into the coach's office. The head Coach told him they were recruiting two other players at his same positions, who would most likely play over him. After hearing this, he immediately entered his name into the portal. Wilson said, "I was shocked because I felt like I was doing everything right, but at the end of the day, I knew it was nothing personal at this level. It is just business." With Wilson's stellar grades and athletic ability, many other D1 schools became interested in him. He chose to go to the University of Winthrop for all the same reasons he decided on Richmond University. He remembered all the lessons Gilyard had taught him, which had helped him do well in his junior year at Winthrop University. Wilson suffered a season-ending ACL injury this season early on and said, "I would have been depressed if it were not for my teammates. They got me through some tough times." Wilson mentioned that having a sound support system was crucial for dealing with this injury. Wilson said, "I never looked at a college just for the sole purpose of basketball because eventually, the game of basketball ends for everyone, so you have to look beyond that if you want to find the right school for you." Wilson hopes that others can learn from his experiences and pick the school of their choice based on their individual needs instead of just athletic needs. Having good people around you, like how Wilson did, can make a difference as well. Having Gilyard act as a mentor and his current teammates at Winthrop University supporting him through his injury made all the difference for him (I. Wilson, Interview, February 3, 2024). Wilson was lucky enough to have the support he did, but what about other athletes?

An article written by Rosemary Purcell, Kate Gwyther, and Simon M Rice, mental health specialists, discuss how early intervention is critical to stopping or decreasing the current mental



health decline people see today among student-athletes. Colleges are now incorporating early intervention programs to try and bring awareness towards mental health in general. Colleges are now seeing how dangerous and quickly mental health declines among student-athletes, and colleges are now finally stepping up and doing something about it (“Mental Health in Elite Athletes”). The article does not detail which colleges are doing it, but it is still a good sign to see them taking action. Colleges have built their own version of recreation centers called wellness centers for their student-athletes centers specifically for their student-athletes. The normal student lounges will be congested and noisy, which won’t cause any stress to the athletes. These centers are dedicated only to student-athletes to reduce stress and better fit their needs. Colleges with a higher budget have even expanded their wellness centers to add more things to suit their athletes’ needs, like gaming, nutrition, massage, and therapy centers. Some colleges like Florida University, Texas University, Alabama University, Colorado University, Tennessee University, and North Carolina State have even talked about adding a second wellness center for their athletes because they all noticed significant improvements in their student-athletes mental health and grades. They want to build another wellness center that is bigger and better than the first by 2030, but this hasn’t been officially announced by any of the schools. Hopefully, these improvements will continue improving mental health among student-athletes, not only for today's athletes but for the next generation.

Opposing views may claim that it is not the university's job or the coach's job to worry about an athlete’s mental health, and they are partially correct. As an athlete, they should know that it will not be easy, and they will experience some adversity along the way, and with adversity may come mental stress. As an athlete, it is essential that they know they are struggling with their mental health, then they must take the initiative to get it fixed themselves. They must

take the initiative to see a therapist, or if their University has a Wellness Center, then go there so they can better their mental health. Considering that college is challenging for most people, they should prepare for it during high school by getting better with time management, finding things that take the stress off them, and developing study strategies to help them in college. Having these things perfected or at least practiced can help eliminate the stress that most student-athletes face when they first get to college. Taking AP classes during high school, if they can, will help too because if they can pass and get the credits needed for college, then they can enter college by taking little to no general classes, giving them more free time to have to themselves or focus on their sport. Also, when picking classes, they must make sure they align with their sports schedule, and when making their schedule, make sure to leave time for a free period because just doing school work and sports all day can stress anyone out and cause a breakdown. A student's mental health won't affect their eligibility at the college level.

The sad reality of college sports at higher levels like Division 1 and Division 2 is that athletes are still expected to perform at a high level in both practice and games, even if they are dealing with mental stress. This can be even more difficult if an athlete has NIL deals. NIL deals and sponsorships help college athletes get paid for their name, image, and likeness. Because of this, almost any brand can sponsor an athlete in college, and the amount of money they can offer that athlete is virtually limitless. The athletes who get these NIL deals are expected to play no matter what unless they have a significant injury. With student-athletes like Bronny James making 5.9 million a year, Shedeur Sanders making 4.3 million a year, Angel Reese making 1.7 million a year, and many more, they are expected to play (*Icon Source*). When athletes are making that kind of money, more than some professional athletes, they cannot make any type of excuse that you cannot play because of something like your mental health. An athlete who makes

a decent amount of money in college should invest in their free time, they should invest in a therapist or something relaxing that can help build their mental health clarity. As an athlete, they must prioritize their mental health because it is scarce that someone will help them with it. If they cannot help themselves first, no one will do it for them.

Additionally, college is the start of them becoming a young adult, and part of that means they must be able to take care of themselves physically and mentally. They should know themselves and know what they can or can't handle. As a student-athlete it will be stressful, so they shouldn't add to that stress by doing things like getting a job in college as an athlete, getting into drama, and putting themselves in difficult situations. Picking the college that fits their needs is essential. For example, if someone knows they struggle with being away from home, then they must go to a college close to their home because then, if not being homesick, can add on to their stress.

Another example is if a student athlete is easily influenced or distracted, they shouldn't choose the college known for partying or avoid the parties. They need to pick a college they see themselves attending for 4-5 years. It should feel like a second home to them. Many people will pick their college of choice for the wrong reasons, causing a breakdown, causing them to be stressed and struggle through college. If a student-athlete chooses to go to parties to relieve stress, then that's ok, but they must manage it and come up with a system for it, like going to a party once every month or once every three weeks, but it shouldn't be an everyday thing. Parties can be a downfall, so they should be limited for student-athletes. Avoiding things like drugs and alcohol is important for athletes because they both negatively affect the way an athlete performs in their sport and the classroom. When it comes to college, as an athlete, they can't be behind in their classes or they can't play, and if they get too far behind, they could fail out of school. If

they are under the influence while they play, they will play horribly, and if they continuously play badly, then at the end of the season, their coach will possibly take away their athletic scholarship, which will mean they will have to transfer to another school willing to give them an athletic scholarship if they want to continue to play college sports.

In conclusion, collegiate student-athletes are struggling with their mental health, and it constantly goes overlooked. The reasoning may vary from school causing stress to coaches, environment, time management, or distractions. Student-athletes are always busy and under a lot of pressure; certain things or people cause the decline of student athletes' mental health. Athletes' mental health goes overlooked, and certain things need to be done to improve it. College athletes have to deal with time management, school, athletics, and maintaining social life. They do more than the average person, and that causes them to have extreme levels of stress, resulting in a significant mental health decline. We must be more aware of certain signals showing they are struggling. We must do something about this mental health decline. We need to educate ourselves more on this topic and stop it from worsening. I did this paper to show that life as a student-athlete is very challenging, and even though some athletes seem composed of toughness on the outside, they usually deal with internal issues. I plan on playing college sports next year, and I wanted to educate myself on how important mental health is in college, especially after the fact my two cousins told me how difficult it is. This paper is also important to spread awareness of the fact that the mental health decline among college student-athletes is real and affects them in so many different ways. As a reader, you should care about this because you could potentially go through this, or one of your loved ones can potentially go through this, and you don't ever want to see someone you love go through this type of struggle. I care about this topic because I have family and friends who have gone through a mental decline because of college sports. The

whole athletic community also cares because this issue happens nationwide and gets swept under the rug. Writing this article helps spread awareness and be the voice that some athletes need to express the fact that they struggle with things like mental health.

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