

A sporting chance

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The *Lancet Psychiatry* Editorial¹ on mental health in elite athletes and the need for parity between the emphasis placed on their physical health and sporting performances and their mental wellbeing is welcomed. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has increased its focus on mental health, establishing its Mental Health Working Group in 2019. We highlight how challenges identified in the Editorial¹ can be addressed to achieve meaningful improvements in the mental health of elite athletes and the competitive cultures in which they operate.

Sport-related risk factors for mental ill health are becoming increasingly well understood, with the IOC's 2019 Consensus Statement² and accompanying publications providing the most comprehensive reviews to date. As stated in the Editorial,¹ even the most successful athletes are human and susceptible to the ordinary life events or circumstances that can contribute to mental ill health. Our group has developed a sports-specific assessment tool to assist with the early detection of mental health symptoms³ and a mental health toolkit to enable sporting bodies and administrators to plan for pathways of care for those in need.

Part of being recognised as human is also to be intrinsically valued; that is, valued as a person, regardless of sporting role and performance. Being recognised as human is a substantial challenge in high-performance environments which, by definition, focus heavily on achieving success. This narrow focus can contribute to cultures that prioritise winning, sometimes to the detriment of the athlete's wellbeing. Creating sporting environments that are mentally healthy is the next frontier for sporting bodies, who need to find the appropriate balance between striving for success and protecting the wellbeing of their athletes. Creating these environments requires moving beyond the focus of the athlete as the person with the mental health issue, to emphasising how all stakeholders within the so-called sport ecology⁴ can contribute to an athlete's wellbeing or illness, including parents, teammates, coaches, administrators, or associations. Creating psychologically safe environments also requires acknowledging that mental toughness or resilience, which are strong themes in elite sport, and needing mental health care at various points in life are not mutually exclusive. This acknowledgment applies to everyone, not just elite athletes.

The mental health challenges associated with elite sport are increasingly understood, thanks to the powerful voices of athletes and burgeoning research.⁵Now is the time to capitalise on that awareness and build optimal sporting environments to best meet the needs of athletes and enable them to do what they do best.

All authors are members of the IOC's Mental Health Working Group. The IOC provided travel support to all authors to attend in-person meetings in Lausanne, Switzerland in 2019 and 2020.

References

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