

Well-Being Scoreboard on Student Athletes

Every single day at 3:10pm, I would be on a short yet peaceful ride on my bicycle towards the wooden track bleachers. The breeze, gentle sway of the trees, and sunlight along my path made it seem as if I were soaring in the sky. No matter what the external world carried, this reliable ride was a daily reset from my studies and the whirlwind of college life. The click of my bike lock on the rack accompanied with the distant laughter and chatter of my teammates gathering were soothing sounds that I now fondly cherish.

Many routine moments and comforts like these have been stolen by COVID-19 pandemic. Athletics and sports span so much more than persistent hard work and performance. One's sport becomes part of one's identity and life structure. In addition, one's team may become a core social network which over time, may even become like a family journeying and developing alongside one another. This group, united in a sacred time of life, motivates, excites, and teaches you that you are a part of something bigger than yourself.



This pandemic has been heavy weight for many, especially student athletes in high school and college. Statistics to date give us a sense of the magnitude of impact on the mental health of these natural competitors. University of Wisconsin Health and the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health collaborated on a survey of high school athletes across their state¹. Their findings concluded that student athletes have been greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 60% of the 3,243 student athletes surveyed reported feelings of anxiety and depression that would routinely lead to medical care since the start of the pandemic. Moderate to severe depression was 3.5 times higher during May 2020 than historical data. A lead on the study, Dr. Claudia Reardon from the University of Wisconsin, also a member of the International Society for Sports Psychiatry (ISSP) Board and current ISSP Education Committee Chair has been a champion highlighting the interplay between activity, social development, and emotional well-being.

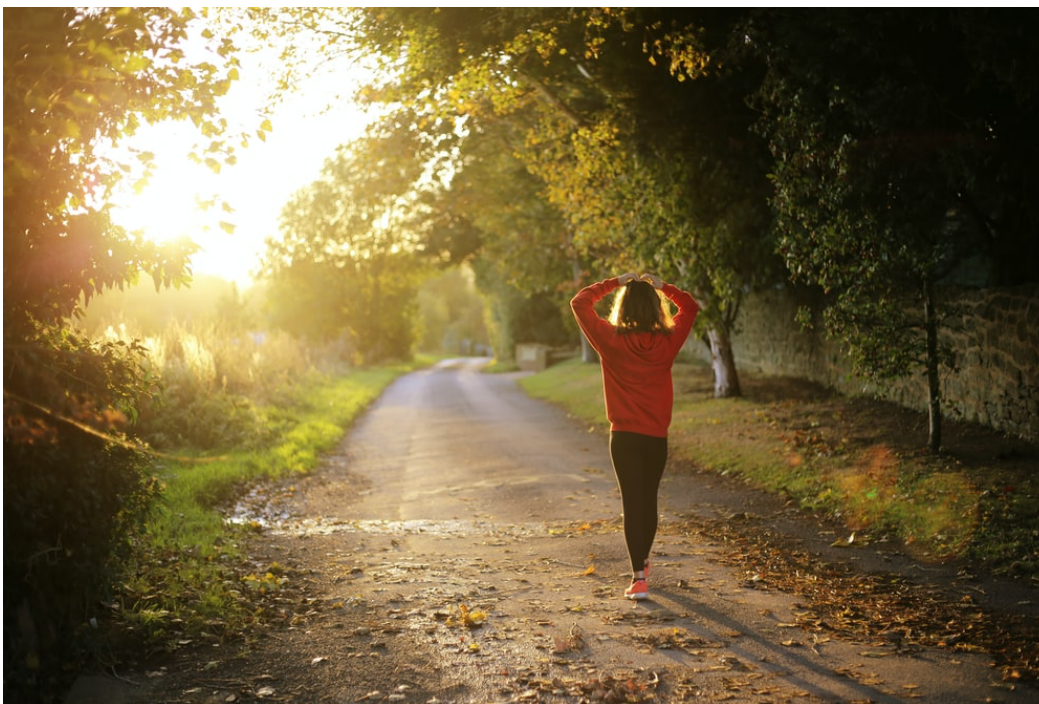
College level student athletes are also faced with navigating these troubling times. The NCAA Student-Athlete COVID-19 Well-being Study of over 37,000 student athletes across the country during April and May of 2020 found that attention must be paid to university level sports². High levels of mental distress were reported since the beginning of the pandemic with 40% of respondents experiencing a lack of motivation to train, 21% feeling too stressed or anxious to train, and 13% feeling too sad or depressed to train. Over one third of student athletes reported problems sleeping and 1 in 12 reported feeling so depressed that it has been difficult to function. The survey did find that communicating with teammates and staff was seen as positive and welcomed. Of particular concern, disparities were seen as Black and Latinx student athletes in this study were more likely to acknowledge family or personal responsibilities as a barrier to their training. This highlights the importance of checking in with athletes who are subject to a combination of stressors including racism, natural disasters, loss, and financial hardship. Combined stressors take a toll on physical and mental health. Creating spaces for student athletes to be heard and valued will serve both the individual and system. It may be these spaces that allow students to acknowledge, *"I am not feeling myself"* which then may lead to a much needed mental health referral or other source of support. On the system level, involving student athletes in the policy and planning process has the potential to promote a sense of belongingness but also lead to creative solutions.

Corrie Falcon is a Coach Success and Performance Coordinator for UC San Diego Athletics. She comments that, “taking away sports from student-athletes is taking away their identity, community, and outlet for stress relief. The day that sports stopped, Friday the 13th of March, our athletes were competing at NCAA championships. I watched a team of swimmers enter the competition facility for the evening finals to have to read the announcement on the score board the championships was cancelled. It was devastation for everyone involved.” Ms. Falcon has gone above and beyond to individually and collectively support her athletes. She has set up a yoga and mindfulness session that incorporates a coping topic with the practice of yoga and meditation, followed by some group exploration of the experience. From student athletes participating, this experience has provided time to decompress after the stress of the week. The unity and shared experience of athletes participating in these groups has helped some cope with the “dark days” as shared by one athlete.

Student athletes around San Diego anonymously shared their feedback about being a student athlete during the COVID pandemic. A spectrum of responses came in with students commenting on the challenges, frustrations, and difficulty with the lack of organization and structure that had once been routine. A few students remarked that being an athlete during COVID was more of a stressor than a stress relief, as it had been previously. There were also comments sharing gratitude for teammates and the opportunity to practice resilience, a chance to use the training they have worked years of their lives cultivating.

Student athletes never signed up for *easy*. Early morning practices and sacrifices are a part of the job. Drawing on the previous successes and determination all can fuel the resilience within these student athletes. Resilience is not the absence of hardship or adversity but rather the ability to adapt and grow amidst challenges. Key ingredients to resilience include positive coping, acceptance of what is in our control, focusing on our meaning/purpose, connection to others, and values. Connection is an especially critical ingredient for adapting to stress. Drop in hours to check in and virtually see familiar faces may be enough to sustain and remind athletes that they are not alone in this situation. Early connection to mental health support may prevent a later crisis. Another tool coaches and athletics staff may weave into their conversations with athletes includes **self-compassion**. Some student athletes are perfectionistic, high achieving, and self-critical. Many derive great confidence and self-efficacy from sports performances and achievement. How can we support their goals and passions without allowing their worlds to collapse? Dr. Kristin Neff breaks down self-compassion into composed of three main components: mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness³. **Mindfulness** brings nonjudgmental awareness to an athlete’s experience, whatever that experience may be. Perhaps it is a feeling of despair, peace, or quiet. A mindful approach accepts and embraces all realities. **Common humanity** reminds athletes that they are not alone. In fact, in a study done by Stanford University and Strava, 22.5% of participating professional athletes reported feeling down down/depressed most days between March and

August of 2020 which is an estimated 5.8 times greater compared to pre-pandemic rates in the same population⁴. This same study also found that endurance athletes were especially vulnerable to anxiety and decreased interest. Acknowledging that superhero athletes are also human may decrease the pressures and expectations younger athletes often place on themselves. Sometimes breaking down the illusion of perfection for others can allow for a more



realistic view of a situation. Finally, **self-kindness**, is extending kindness and gentleness to yourself treating yourself and your situation. Combining these components into a self-compassion statement may be useful: *This is hard.* (mindfulness). *Other athletes people feel this way* (common humanity). *May I be gentle with myself.* (self-kindness). A different sort of practice, this self-compassion practice may allow student athletes the grace needed during these trying times.

The uncertainty and challenges for athletes have been extraordinary. We are all looking forward to the finish line ahead as we unite on the same team to journey forwards.

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