

Mental health resources for student-athletes becoming priority at colleges

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Coming off her gold-medal performance at the Beijing Games, 22-year-old snowboarder Chloe Kim said this week she plans to take off the 2022-23 season to focus on her mental health, citing the need to press

reset after a "draining year."

Kim is the latest [professional athlete](#) to publicly share the impact competition can have on mental wellness and one of several high-profile performers to at least temporarily step back from athletic events entirely, including Olympic gymnast Simone Biles, tennis star Naomi Osaka and Olympic swimmer Caeleb Dressel.

Bringing these choices into the public sphere has helped normalize what has long been a taboo topic on all levels of athletics. According to a 2019 study in the journal Sports Medicine, the barriers impeding an open discussion of mental health issues "include more negative attitudes towards help-seeking amongst athletes than the general population, as well as greater stigma and poorer mental health literacy."

On the college level, conferences and universities are prioritizing overall health by placing mental well-being on an equal plane with the traditional medical support provided to [physical injuries](#), embracing the concept that conditions related to mental health should be treated with the same focus and care as an ACL tear or concussion.

Concerns over mental wellness have gripped college athletics in recent weeks after the deaths of three female student-athletes by suicide, according to statements from family members and local coroners' offices.

Stanford soccer player and team captain Katie Meyer, 22, died March 1. Wisconsin track athlete Sarah Shulze, 21, died April 13. On Thursday, the Western Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Virginia ruled the death of James Madison softball player Lauren Bennett, 20, to be by suicide.

"We have to make it a topic that's OK to talk about, that's OK to be able

to speak about without any sort of stigma or without any sort of judgment," Dr. James Borchers, the chief medical officer for the Big Ten and the co-founder and president of the U.S. Council for Athletes' Health, told USA TODAY Sports.

"Institutions are looking at that, not just with athletes but students in general. In athletics, it's becoming a much more recognized need for athletes that are participating."

Not long after being hired in 2019, Big Ten Commissioner Kevin Warren established the league's Mental Health and Wellness Cabinet with the goal of "creating and maintaining the most comprehensive mental health and wellness platform in college athletics," he said at the time.

Last November, the Big Ten joined the ACC and Pac-12 in establishing an initiative, Teammates for Mental Health, designed to educate coaches and student-athletes on the signs that an individual may be struggling with their mental health.

In terms of creating a public dialogue, these steps and similar programs established on an individual university level have brought the issue into the mainstream after an extended period of neglect on topics such as anxiety, depression and the sports-school balance for student-athletes.

"I think that in the past, if you go back 20 years and we thought about athletes' health and safety, we focused a lot on the physical health and safety," Borchers said. "But this is an area that has definitely come forward as a point of emphasis and point of concern, where in the past it may have been second, third, fourth or even further down the line."

Mental health experts in some athletics departments

Mirroring efforts in place on a broader student-body level, many athletics departments have hired mental health professionals and devoted resources to establish programs designed to address the topic of overall well-being.

One such program at Texas Tech places this conversation into three buckets. The first establishes a primary-care integration model across more traditional health services, ensuring that every trainer, team physician or specialty provider in contact with the Red Raiders' student-athletes is working from the same treatment plans.

The second covers sports psychology, touching on ways student-athletes can weather the ups and downs of competition and schoolwork through increased emotional intelligence. The third involves organizational psychology, or how individuals in a larger group can work together to reach shared goals.

"Our goal, and we say it time and time again, is to create a sustainable, healthy and high-performing environment, really understanding that wellness is the foundation of performance," said Dr. Tyler Bradstreet, an associate athletics director and the school's director of clinical and sport psychology.

"Why that's important is that it gets beyond just providing mental health treatment services on a one-on-one level and really understanding all the different things that actually go into and impact someone's mental health and well-being."

'It's abundantly clear that there's a need'

In addition, nonprofit organizations have filled a void on campuses by connecting directly to [student-athletes](#). One group, Morgan's Message, was established in 2020 to honor Morgan Rodgers, a Duke lacrosse

player who died by suicide in 2019, and has more than 800 "ambassadors" at 168 high schools and 226 college campuses covering 35 states, Washington, D.C., and two Canadian provinces.

"For a lot of us, we don't want anyone else to lose their Morgan," said co-founder Kat Zempolich, one of Rodgers' former teammates. "There's such a stigma surrounding mental health, which I think has been the biggest hill to climb. It's pretty abundantly clear that there's a need."

In addition to expanding the conversation around mental [health](#) struggles, the organization's message touches on the concept of self-worth—the sense of one's own intrinsic value beyond external accomplishments and successes.

"What we're trying to preach as a group is that your value doesn't come from the things you do," Zempolich said. "Your value isn't based on how many goals you put in the back of the net or how (many) minutes you're on the field. It's not based on getting an A, getting a B, getting a C. You are valued just being a human being, just being who you are."

Whether coming from inside an athletics department or from an outside organization, every program devoted to student-athlete mental wellness is aimed at getting out in front of any potential issue. In some cases, that may involve an athlete struggling with the end of his or her playing career or the balance between schoolwork and team work; in others, normalizing conversations about [mental health](#) may serve as a lifeline to a student-athlete struggling with suicidal thoughts.

"The more we do that, the more our teams do that, the more our coaches feel confident in talking about these things, the more athletes see their teammates talking to us, the more they see us talking to their coaches—it just becomes part of the process," said Bradstreet.

"We have to have some action around it," Borchers said. "When I say action, I mean proactive action, not always reactive action. And look, it's like anything else. We have to do our best job at preparing."

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