

It's not just retiring athletes who need mental health support—young sportspeople need it, too

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Retiring from professional sport [can be anguishing for some athletes](#).

In Australia, high-profile [athletes](#) such as [Brendan Cannon](#), [Nathan Bracken](#), [Stephanie Rice](#) and [Lauren Jackson](#) have spoken about the loss of identity, purpose and goals for the future, as well as depression and thoughts of suicide after retirement.

More recently, the death of former Australian Football League (AFL) player Cam McCarthy—who [battled mental health issues](#) during his [career](#)—brought on calls for more support for athletes during retirement, including from [Fremantle coach Justin Longmuir](#).

Meanwhile, the sentencing of former St Kilda footballer Sam Fisher [for drug offenses](#) has driven similar conversations about "life after footy," as has become the go-to phrase for headline writers.

These discussions about the mental health challenges at the end of an athletic career are important—but there's a missing piece of the puzzle.

The danger of the athlete identity

Reaching and maintaining peak performance as an athlete requires immense dedication and discipline.

As a result, [athletes' identities often become closely linked to their status as sportspeople](#). This means when something disrupts their ability to play sport, like injury or retirement, [serious mental health problems can follow](#).

The good news is, sporting organizations are increasingly investing in retirement transition programs that support mental health during and

after the end of athletes' careers.

Programs typically aim to encourage athletes to develop more well-rounded identities, consider future careers and encourage help-seeking when needed.

Such programs are currently being delivered by the [AFL](#), [Australian Institute of Sport \(AIS\)](#) and [National Rugby League](#), among others.

This investment is encouraging. These programs can play important roles in preventing and responding to serious mental health problems among retiring athletes.

But more needs to be done to support athletes' mental health at the start of their careers.

The importance of early intervention

As with all illnesses, early intervention is key. Taking preventative approaches to mental health [is essential](#) to build resilience and prevent symptoms from becoming severe.

There is a need for greater focus on prevention and early intervention for [mental health issues](#) in elite sport.

Elite athletes often have to navigate significant pressures and responsibilities from an early age. For example, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics showcased athletes such as Sky Brown, who competed in skateboarding and [won bronze at the age of only 13](#).

Importantly, athletes are at the most vulnerable age for mental health problems when they enter elite sport settings, given [75% of these issues develop by age 24](#).

Coupled with this, the pressures young athletes face—performance pressure, high training loads, strict lifestyle demands and public and media scrutiny—exist alongside the normal challenges of adolescence: academic pursuits, increasing independence from caregivers, developing a sense of identity and navigating peer relationships and early romantic relationships.

This is clearly a lot for young people to be managing.

And yet so far, little emphasis has been given to promoting athlete mental health during this transition.

Importantly, these efforts need to start from entry into the high-performance system, rather than late in athletes' careers.

What more can be done?

Our research team at [Orygen](#)—a youth mental health organization—recently developed a [framework for promoting mental health during the transition into elite sport](#). This highlights ways people in sport settings (such as coaches, teammates and staff) can support athlete mental health and well-being.

One recommended strategy is ensuring athletes understand the key challenges they're likely to face throughout their careers. This can be complemented by helping them develop healthy strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Across the whole-of-sport system, there's a need to ensure all athletes are valued as people—not just sportspeople. This requires building meaningful relationships in sport and preparing athletes for life beyond the athletic career.

Importantly, opportunities for mental health support should be provided regularly. Athletes need to know seeking help is part of [maintaining optimal health](#) and [may even support performance](#).

Sports organizations are starting to make strides in this area. For example, the AFL delivers [a curriculum to all Talent Pathways players](#) on mental health literacy, resilience, stress management and coping, and skills to contribute to a safe and inclusive team culture.

Similarly, the [AIS's Start Strong program](#) offers [online learning](#) that provides athletes and their parents with important information about the Australian high-performance sport system and topics such as personal values and overcoming obstacles.

Others, [such as the Australian Cricketers' Association](#), have begun to offer support for alternative education and career pathways earlier in a player's career, to ensure they have options after retirement.

Next steps for everyone

These investments are the way forward but we need to push on with preventing mental health problems from the outset, ensuring athletes are best prepared to perform their roles and live healthy lives—physically and mentally—during their lifetimes.

And perhaps the rest of us—including sports fans and media—can use recent events and this Olympic and Paralympic year to remember that sportspeople are often in a developmentally critical period of life.

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