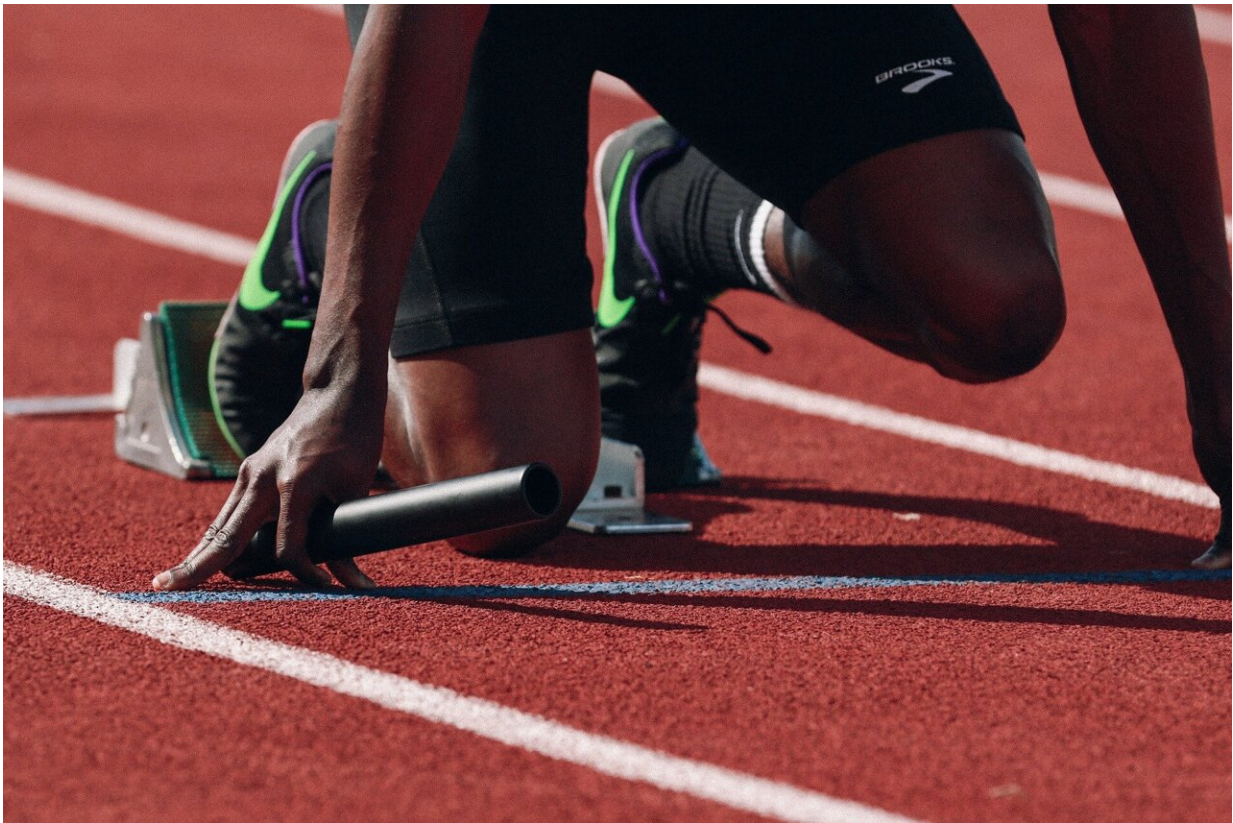


Olympians say conversations on sports, mental health are changing

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Competing on the world stage, Olympic athletes face immense pressure to perform their best and represent their country. Mental health dominated Olympic conversations in 2021 after U.S. gymnast Simone

Biles withdrew from the Tokyo Olympics, citing a disconnect between her brain and body and writing that she felt "the weight of the world on [her] shoulders."

Conversations around the toll elite sports can take on mental health have shifted in recent years, and athletes are talking more openly about the ups and downs of competing.

Five former Seattle-area Olympians spoke with The Seattle Times about the mental pressures of competing on the biggest stage in sports—and the challenge of adjusting back to normal life afterward. They all said the culture around mental health in sports has changed significantly since they competed in the Olympics between 2002 and 2016.

"It's seen more as a necessary tool in the kit, and it's not looked down upon as it once was," said Jeremy Taiwo, a University of Washington graduate who placed 11th in the decathlon in 2016. "If you're not utilizing it, you are missing out on a super crucial tool."

Some of the athletes said they had worked with sports psychologists, specialists who use psychology to help athletes train and perform at a high level. But at that point, broader mental health resources were harder to come by for Olympians.

Now, the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee has built out its [mental health services](#), employing 14 full-time [mental health professionals](#) and maintaining a registry of hundreds of other providers available to see athletes. A 24/7 hotline is available to athletes for mental health and performance concerns.

The Associated Press reported that about half of Team U.S. athletes at the past two Olympics were flagged for at least one of the following: anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, eating disorders, substance use or

abuse.

Dr. Mariah Bullock, a sports psychologist who works with the Canadian women's national soccer team, said conversations about mental health and sports have changed "100%, night and day" since she played soccer for Stanford University and the Seattle Reign in the early 2010s.

"Players are so much more open, and it's the norm to say, 'I speak with a therapist; I have a mental performance coach,'" she said.

Coping with pressure, expectations

Before the 2012 London Olympics, rower Mary Whipple Murray felt pressure. The women's eight had won the [gold medal](#) for Team U.S. in 2008, and most of the team was returning for another shot at gold. As the coxswain, responsible for running the race plan and directing the boat, she felt extra responsibility to keep the team focused and unified.

"At one point, my coach just talked to me and said, 'Just be the [athlete](#), let me take away all this other stress,'" Murray, a UW graduate and three-time Olympic medalist, said. "He didn't want me to feel the weight of that responsibility."

Mental health was uncharted territory in the sport at the time, she said; the team didn't have a sports psychologist for her first Olympics in 2004. They focused on blocking out "the extras" that came with the Olympics: free gear, family members asking about tickets, outside distractions creeping in.

Blocking out external distractions has become harder because of social media and technology, speed skater Apolo Ohno, who grew up in Federal Way, said. In the Salt Lake City opening ceremonies in 2002, his first Olympics, there were no cellphones; some athletes carried video

camcorders during the Parade of Nations.

He still felt a pressure to "win under any and all circumstances," more from himself than from media or outside expectations, he said.

"I would finish a World Championships, having won a race, and go back and watch the video replay again in my room alone and be just disgusted by what I saw," said Ohno, who's won more Winter Olympic medals than any other American. "How could you possibly have been able to get so lucky to have won this race? It's kind of ridiculous to even think like that, but that's how I thought about things."

Mental health wasn't a conversation or a priority when he was competing in the 2000s, he said, but he did work with a sports psychologist focused on performance. This helped him improve his visualization and manage nerves to get into a flow state, which he described as "a beautiful experience where time seems to slow down" and the motions of speed skating felt automatic and natural.

"Sports psychology was the single greatest tool that I had, outside of my blades on my feet," he said. "It really was a game changer."

Both clinical psychology and sports psychology play a role in athletes' success at a high level, said Dr. Kelly Schloredt, the director of psychological services for the University of Washington Athletics.

"I think as fans, we have a tendency to almost dehumanize athletes," Schloredt said. "We put them on great pedestals when they perform well, and we're often very critical of them when something doesn't go quite right. They have this incredible talent, and they're also human; they experience the same ups and downs the rest of us do."

Staying focused during the Games

The mental pressure only intensifies once athletes arrive at the Olympics.

"It's hard to truly describe how all-encompassing it really feels when you're there," swimmer and eight-time Olympic medalist Nathan Adrian, who grew up in Bremerton, said. "It's your entire world and everybody's world around you. If you don't have a good solid base or ability to disengage, you can get caught up in it."

Working with a [mental health](#) professional helped him manage the ups and downs of competing and disconnect when he needed to, he said. Learning to deal with failure and falling short of his goals also kept him grounded.

"I was supposed to have a good 2011 world championships and I didn't," he said. "The sun still rose the next day, my friends were still my friends and my parents still loved me. That really was a good experience for me to have leading into the 2012 Games."

During the Games, athletes said they stay focused by sticking to a routine. Adrian described it as "following a script" with scheduled meals and warmups on a race day. Murray led race visualizations in the days before competition, talking the team through each step of the race plan with their eyes closed.

"If I didn't try to focus on what I'd control, I'd find myself losing sleep at night," said Rob Munn, a former UW rower who placed fourth in the men's eight boat at the 2016 Olympics. "If you're not steadfast and consistent in that mindset, it can be overwhelming."

Staying present is particularly important in the decathlon, a two-day track and field event where athletes complete four runs, three jumps and three throws. Moving from event to event, Taiwo knew he had to "forget

quickly if things didn't go well."

"I'm 100% at each event, really staying present in the moment," Taiwo said. "That's how this event was meant to happen, time to forget it. I'm going on to the next event and now it's time to be a high jumper."

Performance anxiety, the stress of participating in an activity while others are watching, is a main focus for athletes on the Olympic stage, said Bullock, the sports psychologist. The Canadian soccer team she works with won the gold medal in Tokyo in 2021 and medaled in 2016 and 2012; it's easy to feel like they "can't go backward," she said in an interview before the Paris Games.

She helps athletes focus on feeling prepared and limiting negative self-talk after a mistake. If an athlete is injured, she'll work with them to process emotions and feel confident returning to play.

"If you make a mistake, no problem," Bullock said. "I help athletes have some sense of self-compassion, then we shift into, what's the next thing? Where does my focus and attention need to be?"

Coming home and 'extracting a portion of your soul'

After the Games end, many athletes describe a "post-Olympic blues": coming back to normal life after competing at the highest level.

"It's super hard; there's no two ways about it," Adrian said. "You really have to find people who understand it. When people ask me, I tell them it's almost like surfing: You almost don't know when a wave is going to hit you."

When they inevitably retire, athletes describe a new challenge: finding who they are outside of their sport. Ohno calls it a "great divorce" from

an athlete's previous identity.

"Coming down after the Olympics, you hit the very bottom," Taiwo said. "When you do let go of that athlete part of yourself, it's rough. It feels like extracting a portion of your soul from yourself."

Living in Leavenworth, Murray threw herself into mountain biking and skiing after retiring from rowing, finding a "team" of women who helped her get better at new sports. She also started The 9th Seat, an organization providing resources and clinics for coxswains.

Taiwo is a firefighter and EMT for the Shoreline Fire Department. Adrian owns a swim club in California. Ohno is a business consultant, author and motivational speaker.

"It's humbling. I was starting over and restarting a career," said Munn, who now works for a wine and spirits distributor in Bellevue. "You have that realization that all the work you did in that previous sport doesn't truly matter for what you're trying to do next."

All of them still watch the Olympics but say it's a different experience after competing: more emotional, more nerve-wracking, more humanizing.

"I look for small behavioral cues. Hopefully NBC gives me a glimpse of their eyes because that's very important," Ohno said. "Do they do some pattern and routine? Do they stretch a certain way? I fall in love with the little nuances and details."

"I love watching the medal ceremony, especially when a team U.S. athlete wins," Murray said. "Whenever I hear the national anthem, it definitely hits a little differently and the emotions come up about your teammates and your process."

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