

SPORTS

## College Sports' Newest Need: Psychologists

Like weight rooms and nutrition programs, mental-health services have become integral to college athletic departments.

*By Rachel Bachman*

In the fall of his junior year at Indiana University, distance runner Jackson Bertoli was suffering from deep depression. He couldn't voice the words to his girlfriend, so he texted her as she sat beside him: I'm feeling suicidal. She encouraged him to seek professional help. He did an internet search and soon had an appointment with Chelsi Day, Indiana athletics' newly hired director of counseling and sport psychology. Bertoli met with Dr. Day weekly, talking about his nagging injuries and the crushing wait for "the cool part in the movie where the montage comes on and I'm winning all the races," he said. That montage never came. Multiple surgeries slowed his running career. But two years later Bertoli is in graduate school at IU and feeling much better. Indiana, meanwhile, has expanded counseling services for athletes, now employing two doctoral students in addition to two part-time providers in the recently opened Irsay Family Wellness Center inside Memorial Stadium. "I think it's getting to a point where you can use it as like a recruiting tool," Bertoli said. "You can say we have one of the best sports-psychology centers in the country. They're here for you whether you're thinking about making the game-winning free throw at the Big Ten championship or you're going through things like I did." College students in general are reporting more depression and anxiety than ever. Varsity athletes cope with those issues while under a spotlight and balancing studies with time-intensive training. Alongside weight rooms and nutrition programs, mental-health services are growing into indispensable parts of major-college athletic departments.

"The culture of toughness, and just suck it up—that is

increasingly going away,” said Brian Hainline, the NCAA’s chief medical officer. Not only are athletic departments realizing the rising need for mental-health services, he said, but “it’s increasingly recognized that mental-health symptoms and disorders have an adverse impact on performance. So there’s a dual incentive.”

In the early 2000s, a handful of athletic departments employed a sports psychologist. Now, most athletic programs in the nation’s top conferences employ at least one full- or part-time licensed mental health provider apart from a sports psychologist, Dr. Hainline said.

The growth in mental-health services accelerated in 2016, when the NCAA’s mental-health task force issued best practices for everything from protocols for athletes in crisis to promoting overall mental well-being. In January, the death by suicide of Washington State quarterback Tyler Hilinski further prodded sports leaders to action. In-house mental-health services give varsity athletes an alternative to overflowing university clinics. The services also offer more privacy than general-student counseling centers, where athletes are sometimes recognized by other students, athletics officials say.

Years ago, college athletes’ anxiety typically centered on competition, said Robin Scholefield, who started the University of Southern California’s sports psychology services for athletics 20 years ago and still oversees them.

“What I’ve seen in the last decade, really, is performance issues run amok, turned into generalized anxiety disorder,” Dr. Scholefield said. USC now has four full-time licensed psychologists and a part-time sports psychiatrist working with athletes. About 45% of USC’s athletes meet one-on-one with a psychologist in a given year, but nearly all athletes have contact with psychologists through various programs, Dr. Scholefield said.

Among athletes as with the public, self-consciousness about seeking counseling has declined. But it’s still prevalent enough that Oklahoma earlier this year added a counseling office to the athletic-training area where athletes are treated for injuries. That way, “they can walk back there and no one knows if they’re going to see a trainer,” said Cody Commander, director of Psychological Resources for OU Student Athletes.

About 30% of athletes come in with sports-performance issues and 70% with mental-health concerns, Dr. Commander said. But most of the 70% have depression or anxiety related to the time demands and pressure of being a varsity athlete, he said.

Cleveland Cavaliers forward Kevin Love, who wrote about suffering a panic attack during an NBA game last season, recently donated 850 subscriptions for the meditation app Headspace to athletes and coaches at UCLA, his alma mater. Meditation is part of UCLA athletics’ wellness programming, UCLA senior associate athletic director Christina Rivera said.

At the University of Texas, Cecil Reynolds and his wife, Julia Hickman, earlier this year pledged \$20 million to athletics that upon their deaths will fund a center for student-athlete brain and behavioral health. The pledge, which will pay for staff positions rather than a building, is the largest-ever philanthropic commitment to Texas athletics. Dr. Reynolds, who is 66 years old, was drafted by the New York Mets in 1969 but suffered a career-ending injury and found himself ill-prepared for anything besides baseball. “You talk about having a serious mental health crash. Well, I did,” said Dr. Reynolds, a Texas A&M emeritus professor in educational psychology who made his fortune by developing a widely used behavioral-assessment system for children and other diagnostic tools. “It took me six to nine months to basically get to the point where I could function. That has always been in my thoughts.” Bertoli, the Indiana runner, said he used medication for a time, and also learned he feels better when he shares his thoughts with friends and family. He said college athletes sometimes feel guilty for feeling bad because they have so much—scholarships, attention, nice facilities—that others don’t. But those things don’t prevent depression or anxiety.

“Mental illness is just as much an injury as breaking your leg or rupturing your Achilles,” Bertoli said. “You have no idea how many people you walk past on a daily basis that have these mental injuries that just go completely unnoticed.”

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