



MedStar Health

# Sports medicine **monthly.**

Trusted medical partner of Montgomery County Public Schools

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## Mental health

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Did you know that most Olympic hopefuls begin intense training in their sport before their tenth birthday? After years of unrelenting pressure and stress related to athletic performance, it should come as no surprise that many elite athletes struggle with their mental health.

Today, athletes are increasingly sharing their “humanness” with the public. They’re exposing mental health issues caused by a variety of factors. From toxic coaching and pressure from family, to scrutiny on social media. However, even athletes with strong support systems can suffer from feelings of depression and anxiety as they strive to meet their own expectations.

It’s encouraging that elite athletes are finally stepping up to acknowledge their own mental health challenges. But calling them “brave” or “strong” may perpetuate the false narrative that individuals who are struggling in private with their mental health are weak or abnormal. It’s time to reframe how we prioritize our mental health, and that starts with elevating self-care in young athletes.



### **Changing the narrative starts with prioritizing wellness above winning for young athletes.**

As a sports psychiatrist, I often see retired collegiate or professional athletes years after the demands and pressure of their sport has affected their psyche. While it’s never too late to seek help, there are preventative measures we can take to start showing young athletes that they are more than just winning machines.

A true change in mental health and sports requires a shift towards ensuring we meet the developmental needs of young athletes, rather than teaching them that winning is everything. By preparing kids for the challenges they’re going to face early and equipping them to prioritize self-care above reaching a podium, we can help them support their holistic personal growth through participation in sports.

#### **1. Set achievable goals that go beyond “turning pro.”**

Many athletes define success for themselves as winning a particular event or title. And for the most elite, the pinnacle of achievement is becoming a professional athlete. Yet fewer than seven percent of high school athletes play their sport in college and fewer than two percent of college athletes go on to achieve professional status, according to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).

In that context, competitive sports have a tendency to create more losers than winners. That’s why it’s important for an individual athlete to set attainable goals and find meaning and value in the process, rather than the outcome. Setting goals that help you stay intrinsically motivated to get better or achieve mastery can ensure you feel successful, win or lose.

I’ve found this to be true for myself. As a college fencing athlete, it wasn’t until my third and final appearance at the NCAA championships that I achieved my long time goal of becoming an All-American. I’d like to think that even if I had not accomplished my goal, I’d be able to look back on my career as an unmeasured success in terms of the life skills I attained and the relationships I forged.

## 2. Evaluate your purpose for competing.

Sports teach us a lot about camaraderie, the human spirit, and perseverance through adversity. But, often the intrinsic value of sports is overshadowed by the pressure to perform. If you start believing that your athletic achievements are all you have to offer the world, you can lose sight of what is good about you as a person. And, if you perform solely to meet someone else's expectations, you might choose to push through a serious injury and cause long-term damage to your body.

Some young athletes start out by having fun but continue pursuing competitive achievements. They may do this out of pressure from family members or coaches who are living vicariously through them. Kids can easily feel the weight of pressure when the focus shifts from friendly competition to a pre-professional atmosphere where they're treated like adults before their brains are developmentally ready. If your participation in a sport is no longer fun, it's time to reevaluate why you're doing it in the first place.

Do you enjoy competing? Are you having fun in your sport? Losing is often painful but can be transformative. Training and competing should bring you joy and meaning. If you're not passionate about what you're doing, consider stopping or taking a break before it begins to take a toll on your mental health.

## 3. Keep the bigger picture in mind.

We incorrectly assume that achieving a performance goal, like winning a national championship or an Olympic medal will bring happiness. But in reality, it often does the opposite. Many elite "winners" acknowledge that a feeling of emptiness can come even after accomplishing a lifelong goal.

When playing a sport is all you know, it can be hard to figure out where you belong in the world after your career ends. Many elite collegiate and professional athletes struggle to adjust to "civilian" life after they're no longer competing. I know this struggle firsthand, having transitioned abruptly from my collegiate fencing career to medical school. The world goes on as it did before, and many retired competitors will admit that something is lacking in their current life. Or, they look back on their career with regret at what they were unable to accomplish.

Even if you do reach the pinnacle of your sport, you'll still come face-to-face with the end of your elite athletic career at some point. In case you get injured or age or your abilities decline, what do you want your life to look like? Although many of us would like to stay young forever, all of our bodies will age eventually. Staying involved as a coach or a mentor can help ease the challenges of this difficult transition.

One of the ways we can help athletes avoid struggles with mental health or burnout is to reframe the role sports should play in our lives while kids are still young. Instead of making a professional career the end-all-be-all measure of success for youth athletes, we can encourage kids to diversify their passions with non-competitive hobbies, like art or music. This helps shape well-rounded individuals who have a variety of interests that bring a sense of fulfillment in any stage of life.

## Shed the stigma of seeking help.

Historically, mental health has been overlooked in athletes who are otherwise deemed to be exceptionally physically healthy. For professional athletes living in the public eye, many hesitate to seek care for mental health struggles for fear of judgment or perception of weakness.

However, it is completely normal and valid to experience bouts of depression, anxiety, or burnout when competing in sports. Whether you feel self-induced pressure to perform or you're bearing the burden of living up to the expectations of those around you, you don't need to feel ashamed to acknowledge when it's too much.

Mental health challenges look different for everyone, but if you're feeling hopeless, finding it hard to concentrate at school, or struggling with everyday activities, don't be afraid to seek professional help from a psychologist or counselor.

Mental toughness is a necessary quality of all high-performing athletes. But having a strong mind that's capable of overcoming struggle doesn't mean that you have to—or should—do it alone.