

Empowering Professional Athletes: Overcoming PTSD Silence

Milie Gupta¹ and David Yastremski[#]

¹Ridge High School, USA

[#]Advisor

ABSTRACT

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) disproportionately affects professional athletes, with over 13% experiencing the condition compared to less than 4% of the general population. The stigma surrounding mental health in elite sports, fueled by societal expectations of unwavering resilience, inhibits athletes from expressing their struggles. This paper explores the optimal approach to encouraging professional athletes to voice their PTSD experiences through a comprehensive review from legal, psychological, economic, and societal perspectives. Legally, coaches hold a "duty of care" to protect their athletes, positioning them as primary facilitators for mental health discussions. However, psychological limitations exist as coaches often lack adequate mental health training, which can strain their work-life balance. While hiring therapists offers professional support, it is economically unfeasible for all teams due to revenue disparities in professional sports leagues. Moreover, societal stigma remains a critical barrier, suggesting that digital media campaigns may address public perceptions but risk potential backlash, as evidenced by the response to Simone Biles's openness during the 2021 Tokyo Olympics. Despite these challenges, the intervention of coaches, who athletes trust and feel comfortable with, emerges as the most viable solution. This approach, while not without its drawbacks, promotes a supportive environment for athletes to discuss PTSD, fostering a safer and more understanding sports culture.

Introduction

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental disorder that, as explained by Professor of Psychiatry Jonathan Bisson and his team at Cardiff University, is caused by intense traumatic exposure (Bisson et al.). According to Neuroscience Research Australia, a non-profit medical research institute based in Sydney, Australia, PTSD affects less than 4% of the general population worldwide ("Worldwide"). However, PTSD is especially prevalent among professional athletes as, according to Kinesiology Professors Paula Thomson and Victoria Jaque, over 13% of them experience PTSD (Thomson and Jaque 370). Despite being identified as a natural, beneficial human adaptation by Biology Researcher Liana Y. Zanette and her research team (Zanette et al. 32), the general public looks down upon professional athletes having this disorder. The reason for this is highlighted by Lead Columnist for The Athletic Marcus Thompson II who discusses how elite sports often portray "displays of human resolve being tested by circumstances" and that "a special honor is reserved for those who triumph through adversity" (Thompson II 41). These displays and special treatment foster a societal stigma against professional athletes showing weaknesses such as mental illness. According to Independent Researcher of Sport and Human Performance James Bauman, this stigma inhibits them from voicing their struggles with PTSD (Bauman 135). Orthopedic Surgeon Davis Rogers and his team from The Johns Hopkins School of Medicine highlight the urgency to solve this lack of expression, emphasizing the increased risk of physical injury that results from untreated PTSD (Rogers et al. 224). For the safety of professional athletes, it is imperative to ask the question: What is the best way to maximize professional athletes' willingness to voice their struggles with

PTSD? While there are multiple viable solutions to this issue, a review through the legal, psychological, economic, and societal perspectives suggests that formal intervention of athletes' sports coaches, allowing athletes designated time to confide in them, is the best solution. This intervention is not only legally warranted, but would also improve athletes' health.

Legal Perspective

“Duty of care” is a legal ideology in which, as mentioned by The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, if placed upon someone, he or she is expected to protect individuals in their care from any harm (“Duty”). This legal responsibility, according to an Associate Professor of Sport Management Hamidreza Mirsafian, is typically placed upon the coach in a coach-athlete relationship as they are in a position of authority (Mirsafian 5). Mirsafian furthers that this duty is intensified for sports coaches compared to other professions because they receive various benefits—both financial and otherwise—for their athletes' participation and success in sports (Mirsafian 8). Coaches' “duty of care” includes encouraging their athletes to voice their struggles with PTSD given the increased chance of physical injury that results from lingering, untreated PTSD, as previously stated (Rogers et al. 224). Psychiatrist João Mauricio Castaldelli-Maia and their team corroborate Mirsafian's claim, arguing that coaches' “frequent contact with athletes” gives them abundant opportunity and responsibility to “encourage acknowledgement and treatment of mental health symptoms and disorders” (Castaldelli-Maia et al. 718). This opportunity and responsibility that result from coaches' “duty of care” make it clear that coach intervention is the optimal solution. It would allow “mental health treatment-seeking [to be] a core function of training and self-care” for athletes, thereby increasing their willingness to speak up about their PTSD struggles (Castaldelli-Maia et al. 719).

Limitations - Psychological Perspective

While the legal validity of coach interference in this issue is evident, limitations remain as coaches may not have the necessary resources to support their athletes, should their athletes approach them with PTSD trouble. Researcher Florence Lebrun from the Institute of Coaching and Performance and her team confront Mirsafian and Castaldelli-Maia et al.'s argument. While they agree that coaches are “well positioned to [...] encourage help-seeking behaviours,” they point out that many coaches may not have the mental health knowledge necessary, and thus “might not be the most qualified or suitable individuals,” to assist their players with mental health concerns (Lebrun et al. 45-46). Given this lack of mental health knowledge, coaches would have to work additional hours to obtain the knowledge and resources necessary to aid their athletes should they need to. Stephanie Mazerolle, the director of the Athletic Training Program at the University of Connecticut, and Chantel Hunter, a physiologist at the University of Delaware, further Lebrun et al.'s claim emphasizing the challenge for coaches to work extra hours due to already long and demanding schedules, resulting in a poor work-life balance (Mazerolle and Hunter 141). Additional working hours from mental health training for coaches could worsen their work-life balance, potentially impacting their mental well-being.

Counterclaim - Psychological Perspective

An alternate solution to this issue which addresses these limitations is to hire therapists for professional sports teams who support and encourage professional athletes to voice their struggles with PTSD. Not only would hiring therapists lift a potential burden off of coaches, but, as highlighted by Psychiatrists Armaan Zaré and Todd Stull from the University of California Riverside School of Medicine, it would “provide the highest level of medical and psychiatric care” to athletes (Zaré and Stull 161). This is because professional therapists are

already trained and equipped with the necessary resources to support athletes psychologically, unlike many sports coaches. Thus, athletes would receive high-end care while coaches would be spared of overworking themselves and potentially worsening their work-life balance.

Rebuttal - Economic Perspective

While hiring team therapists may seem more effective psychologically, it's economically unfeasible for all elite sports teams due to affordability constraints. This is evident through revenue-sharing, which, according to Economists Duane Rockerbie and Stephen Easton from the University of Lethbridge and Simon Fraser University respectively, is a "system to redistribute revenues from rich to poor teams in professional sports leagues" (Rockerbie and Easton 71). In essence, it ensures that all sports teams in a given league have relatively equal amounts of money, which would allow all of them to supply team therapists for their players. However, Economist Gerald Healy and his team from Iowa State University contend that not all leagues follow this system uniformly, dismissing Zaré and Stull's argument. Thus, therapists may not be universally affordable across all professional sports teams (Healy et al. 215). Unlike hiring therapists, utilizing sports coaches to support athletes with PTSD poses no additional financial burden for sports teams since coaches are already hired and paid primarily for coaching responsibilities. Thus, even with the limitations, sports coaches allocating time to encourage athletes to voice their PTSD struggles is a better solution to this issue than hiring team therapists to do so.

Psychological Perspective

Despite psychological limitations from a coach's standpoint, an athlete's psychological perspective is valid, in addition to the legal and economic rationale for this solution. In a study assessing the impact of a mental health stigma reduction program on attitudes toward mental health, Psychiatrist Claire Henderson from King's College London and her team found that as participants became less distant and more comfortable with individuals with mental health concerns, there was an "increase in reported contact with people with mental health problems" (Henderson et al. 29). This implies that individuals are more likely to open up about mental health issues when they have a closer relationship with the person they are opening up to. In the context of professional sports, for athletes to openly discuss their PTSD, they must feel comfortable with the person they are communicating with. Lebrun et al. assert that coaches are undoubtedly this person as athletes "tend to solicit support and advice from people they trust and are familiar and comfortable with such as coaches" (Lebrun et al. 45). Researcher Helen Ferguson from the English Institute of Sport and her team concur with Lebrun et al. as they confirm that many athletes "feel comfortable approaching their coach if they are struggling" (Ferguson et al. 237). Thus, athletes have a high, if not the highest, chance of revealing their PTSD battles with their coaches, making their coaches the best people to encourage help-seeking behaviors for PTSD among their athletes.

Limitations - Societal Perspective

Although the psychological benefits to athletes in this solution are clear, limitations persist as this proposition may not be addressing the root cause of this issue, raising concerns as to whether there is a more permanent fix. As previously conveyed, the main cause of athlete silence on PTSD is the stigmatization created around athletes expressing mental illness (Bauman 135). Stigma presents itself in a variety of ways; however, the most relevant in the case of professional athletes suffering from PTSD is the general public's negative perception. With a PhD in Clinical Psychology, Emily Kaier and her research team at the University of Tulsa define this as public stigma (related to others' perceptions of someone), and describe personal stigma as one's negative perception of oneself (Kaier et al. 736). In their 2015 study measuring the effects of public versus personal stigmas on athletes, they

emphasize that “athletes reported greater perceived public stigma than personal stigma,” challenging Henderson et al., Lebrun et al., and Ferguson et al.’s conclusion (Kaier et al. 735). Thus, the most problematic stigma associated with athlete mental health is the negative perception of the public at large. However, coaches setting aside time to encourage discourse regarding PTSD concerns does not address this public stigma, as it would only take place internally--between an athlete and his or her coach. Thus, it may not be a lasting solution.

Counterclaim - Societal Perspective

An alternate solution that addresses these limitations is for sports teams to implement digital media campaigns that spread awareness about elite sports players who have PTSD. Sports players who struggle from PTSD would share their story through their team’s awareness campaigns, to express the reality of the situation. These campaigns would confront the public stigma that prevents athletes from discussing their PTSD because, as illustrated by Internet-related Research Expert Stacy Jo Dixon, in 2023, there were an estimated 314 million social media users in the United States alone, meaning that media campaigns would reach a large majority of the general public (Dixon). Thus, PTSD awareness campaigns would not only encourage athletes to express themselves, but, unlike coaches supporting athletes which would solely take place personally, they would also tackle the source of the issue, creating an arguably more stable solution.

Rebuttal - Psychological Perspective

While digital media campaigns may appear to be a more effective solution from the societal perspective, the psychological perspective demonstrates why it would ultimately backfire, making coach intervention the favorable solution. While these campaigns have the potential to raise PTSD awareness and mitigate stigma, they can also elicit more derision and backlash towards athletes. This is apparent through the public’s reaction to star gymnast Simone Biles’s experience during the 2021 Tokyo Olympics. Thompson II explains that when Biles withdrew from the Olympics, she reported to the media that “the mental is not there” (Thompson II 42). News Reporter Katie Kindelan furthers that this mental instability was due to being sexually assaulted, illustrating that Biles was suffering from severe trauma, or PTSD (Kindelan). Biles’s openness to the public, however, was “met with derision,” as she received backlash from many of her fans as they called names and insulted her greatly (Thompson II 43-44). Her story berates digital media campaigns as a solution to athlete silence regarding PTSD because it suggests that any athlete who expresses themselves to the public is susceptible to heavy backlash. This backlash can be extremely damaging to athletes’ mental health, and—according to Social Science Researchers Esa Väliaverronen and Sampsa Saikkonen from the University of Helsinki, in a study aimed at addressing forms of self-censorship and suppression in the media—it can even decrease their willingness to express their mental health concerns in the future, worsening the issue (Väliaverronen and Saikkonen 1175). Therefore, while digital media campaigns address the issue’s root, their potential for worsening it by evoking backlash towards athletes belittles them in front of coach intervention, even with societal limitations.

Conclusion

The continuous unrealistic display of mental strength in professional sports has silenced many athletes and stopped them from speaking up about their mental health struggles. This lack of expression is specifically concerning when related to PTSD, not only because there is a prevalence of PTSD specifically within the professional sports community, but also because it can lead to health issues, both psychologically and physically. To ensure the safety of these athletes, this problem undoubtedly requires an effective solution. Examination through the legal, psychological, economic, and societal perspectives makes it clear that the best method is for coaches

to intervene by allotting time to support and encourage their athletes to voice their PTSD. While this solution may be disadvantageous to coaches' psychological well-being in the aspect of work-life balance, it remains preferable to the alternate solution of hired therapists due to its economic feasibility. Similarly, while coach intervention may not directly address the societal stigma contributing to the problem, resorting to digital media awareness campaigns is not sensible due to the potential risks to athletes' psychological health. Through coach intervention, professional athletes will gradually feel more comfortable voicing their difficulties with PTSD, creating a safer, more understanding environment within professional sports and serving as role models for the sports community at large.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

References

- Bauman, N. James. "The Stigma of Mental Health in Athletes: Are Mental Toughness and Mental Health Seen as Contradictory in Elite Sport?" *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, vol. 50, no. 3, 30 Nov. 2015, pp. 135-136. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2015-095570>. Accessed 18 Mar. 2024.
- Bisson, Jonathan I., et al. "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder." *BMJ*, 26 Nov. 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.h6161>. Accessed 17 Apr. 2024.
- Castaldelli-Maia, João Mauricio, et al. "Mental Health Symptoms and Disorders in Elite Athletes: A Systematic Review on Cultural Influencers and Barriers to Athletes Seeking Treatment." *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, vol. 53, no. 11, 15 May 2019, pp. 707-721, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2019-100710>. Accessed 17 Apr. 2024.
- Dixon, Stacy Jo. "U.S.: Social Media Users 2020-2029." *Statista*, 30 Jan. 2024, www.statista.com/statistics/278409/number-of-social-network-users-in-the-united-states/. Accessed 28 March 2024.
- "Duty of Care." *The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy*, 15 Apr. 2022, www.csp.org.uk/publications/duty-care. Accessed 17 Apr. 2024.
- Ferguson, Helen L., et al. "Investigating Youth Sports Coaches' Perceptions of Their Role in Adolescent Mental Health." *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, vol. 31, no. 2, 17 May 2018, pp. 235-252. *Taylor & Francis Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2018.1466839>. Accessed 17 Apr. 2024.
- Healy, Gerald T., et al. "Measuring Market Power in Professional Baseball, Basketball, Football, and Hockey." *The American Economist*, vol. 65, no. 2, 13 July 2020, pp. 214-231. *SAGE Journals Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0569434520941505>. Accessed 17 Apr. 2024.
- Henderson, Claire, et al. "Public Knowledge, Attitudes, Social Distance and Reported Contact Regarding People with Mental Illness 2009–2015." *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, vol. 134, no. S446, 17 July 2016, pp. 23-33. *WILEY Online Library*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/acps.12607>. Accessed 17 Apr. 2024.
- Kaier, Emily, et al. "Perceptions of Mental Illness Stigma: Comparisons of Athletes to Nonathlete Peers." *Journal of College Student Development*, vol. 56, no. 7, Oct. 2015, pp. 735-739. *ResearchGate*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2015.0079>. Accessed 19 Mar. 2024.
- Kindelan, Katie. "Simone Biles Ties Mental Health Struggle at Tokyo Olympics to Nassar Sexual Abuse." *ABC News*, 15 Sept. 2021, abcnews.go.com/GMA/Wellness/simone-biles-ties-mental-health-struggle-tokyo-olympics/story?id=80038932. Accessed 17 Apr. 2024.

- Lebrun, Florence, et al. "Supporting Young Elite Athletes with Mental Health Issues: Coaches' Experience and Their Perceived Role." *The Sport Psychologist*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1 Mar. 2020, pp. 43-53. *Human Kinetics Journals*, <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.2019-0081>. Accessed 17 Apr. 2024.
- Mazerolle, Stephanie M., and Chantel Hunter. "Work-Life Balance in the Professional Sports Setting: The Athletic Trainer's Perspective." *International Journal of Athletic Therapy and Training*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1 July 2018, pp. 141-149. *Human Kinetics Journals*, <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijatt.2016-0113>. Accessed 17 Apr. 2024.
- Mirsafian, Hamidreza. "Legal Duties and Legal Liabilities of Coaches toward Athletes." *Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research*, vol. 69, no. 1, 1 Mar. 2016, pp. 5-14. *Sciendo*, <https://doi.org/10.1515/pcssr-2016-0002>. Accessed 17 Apr. 2024.
- Rockerbie, Duane, and Stephen Easton. "Revenue Sharing in Major League Baseball: The Moments That Meant so Much." *International Journal of Financial Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, 6 Aug. 2018, p. 71. *Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute*, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijfs6030071>. Accessed 17 Apr. 2024.
- Rogers, Davis L., et al. "How Mental Health Affects Injury Risk and Outcomes in Athletes." *Sports Health: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, vol. 16, no. 2, 16 June 2023, pp. 222-229. *SAGE Journals Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/19417381231179678>. Accessed 18 Mar. 2024.
- Thompson II, Marcus. "Thompson: Simone Biles and the most human meaning of courage." *AP Seminar Performance Task 2: Individual Research-Based Essay and Presentation Directions and Stimulus Materials*, College Board, 2024, pp. 41-44. Originally published in *The Atlantic*, 28 July 2021.
- Thomson, Paula, and Victoria Jaque. "Visiting the Muses: Creativity, Coping, and PTSD in Talented Dancers and Athletes." *American Journal of Play*, vol. 8, no. 3, Spring 2016, pp. 363-378. *ProQuest*, www.proquest.com/docview/1814065200/36A2FE3899BB4354PQ/1?accountid=45439&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals. Accessed 25 Apr. 2024.
- Välvirronen, Esa, and Sampsa Saikkonen. "Freedom of Expression Challenged: Scientists' Perspectives on Hidden Forms of Suppression and Self-censorship." *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, vol. 46, no. 6, 9 Dec. 2020, pp. 1172-1200. *SAGE Journals Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243920978303>. Accessed 17 Apr. 2024.
- "Worldwide Prevalence of PTSD." *NeuRA Library*, 27 Oct. 2021, library.neura.edu.au/ptsd-library/epidemiology-ptsd-library/prevalence-epidemiology-ptsd-library/worldwide-prevalence/index.html. Accessed 17 Apr. 2024.
- Zanette, Liana Y., et al. "Predator-induced fear causes PTSD-like changes in the brains and behavior of wild animals." *AP Seminar Performance Task 2: Individual Research-Based Essay and Presentation Directions and Stimulus Materials*, College Board, 2024, pp. 31-40. Originally published in *Scientific Reports (Nature)*, 2019.
- Zaré, Armaan, and Todd Stull. "Integrating Sports Psychiatry in the Interdisciplinary Care of Elite Sports Teams." *Sports Psychiatry*, vol. 2, no. 4, Nov. 2023, pp. 157-162. *Hogrefe eContent*, <https://doi.org/10.1024/2674-0052/a000055>. Accessed 17 Apr. 2024.