



## Mental health challenges and interventions among collegiate athletes: A thematic literature review (2010–2025)

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Athlete's psychological well-being is fundamental to their success and resilience. Recognizing this critical link, understanding how to enhance mental health for improved sport performance is invaluable to the athletic community. **Aims:** This article aims to concisely examine the intricate relationship between athlete mental health and performance, synthesizing current information and strategies to optimize both. **Methods:** A systematic literature review was conducted to identify, select, and analyze relevant studies on the impact of mental health on athletic performance across various sports. A thematic narrative synthesis summarized findings, informing practical recommendations. **Results:** Findings consistently show that elite and collegiate athletes face comparable or heightened risks of mental health disorders due to intense competition, public scrutiny, and career uncertainties. Conversely, strong team cohesion and social support significantly enhance athletes' mental well-being and performance. Practical strategies include ensuring access to specialized mental health professionals, integrating mindfulness and relaxation techniques (e.g., Progressive Muscle Relaxation), utilizing mental health checklists for self-assessment, and implementing comprehensive coaching guidelines. These guidelines emphasize open communication, mental health education for coaches, and proactive stress management within training programs. **Conclusion:** The profound connection between mental health and athletic performance necessitates a proactive, multifaceted approach. At the same time, current research provides valuable insights, but limitations exist, including potential publication bias and a narrow time frame in many studies. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies to understand long-term effects, explore technological interventions for accessibility, and rigorously evaluate student support services. These efforts will contribute to more effective, evidence-based support systems for athletes.

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### INTRODUCTION

The study of mental health in athletes has become a critical focus in sports psychology and athlete welfare. Recent research has shed light on the prevalence of mental health disorders among athletes, particularly at the elite and collegiate levels, which may rival or even surpass that of the general population (Moesch et al., 2018; Cox, 2015; Prinz et al., 2016; Wolanin et al., 2016). This revelation challenges the longstanding assumption that athletes, due to their rigorous physical

training and perceived mental resilience, are less susceptible to such disorders. The world of athletics presents a unique set of stressors, including demanding training schedules, performance pressures, and constant public and media scrutiny, all of which can contribute to mental health challenges. For elite athletes, these stressors are compounded by the high-stakes nature of their careers, where injuries, overtraining, and uncertainties about career longevity can trigger or exacerbate mental health issues (Moesch et al., 2018). Furthermore, transitions such as retirement from sports can be significant stressors, leading to identity crises and adjustment difficulties, further impacting mental health (Moesch et al., 2018).

In youth and collegiate sports, the role of group dynamics, particularly team cohesion, has emerged as a significant factor in the positive psychological development of young athletes. Studies have consistently shown that higher levels of team cohesion, encompassing both task-focused and social aspects, positively correlate with developing personal and social skills, cognitive abilities, and goal-setting proficiency (Bruner et al., 2014). Task-focused cohesion ensures team members collaborate efficiently to tackle challenges and achieve common objectives, fostering a sense of purpose and accomplishment. Simultaneously, social cohesion contributes to a supportive and positive team environment, promoting open communication, trust, and a shared sense of camaraderie. Combining these elements enhances the team's overall performance. It creates an optimal atmosphere for individual team members to thrive personally, fostering a conducive environment for skill development, job satisfaction, and a robust sense of personal well-being (Publisher, 2016). This relationship underscores the vital importance of cultivating supportive and cohesive team environments for the holistic development of young athletes, extending beyond their physical prowess.

For collegiate athletes, the relationship between social support and mental health, specifically concerning depressive symptoms, takes center stage. Research has highlighted that robust social support systems, both within and outside the realm of athletics, correlate with lower depressive symptoms among student-athletes (Sullivan et al., 2020). This finding underscores the imperative need for robust, multifaceted support structures within athletic programs to safeguard the mental well-being of these individuals.

The psychological well-being of athletes profoundly shapes their overall success, ability to navigate challenges, and sustain excellence in competition (Kindbridge, 2023). Information and strategies to enhance athletes' sports performance through enhanced mental health are of value to the sports community.

Therefore, this article's purpose is to provide a current and necessary examination of the intricate interplay between mental health and performance, considering the unique challenges faced by athletes across various levels of competition. Recognizing the pivotal connection between mental health and athletic performance is imperative. Further, an additional objective of this article is to synthesize strategies for coping with mental health disorders, coaching guidelines, and a variety of procedures to be utilized to benefit athletes' mental health.

## **METHOD**

This literature review aimed to explore the relationship between athletes' mental health and their sport performance. A systematic approach was undertaken to identify, select, and analyze relevant studies addressing the impact of mental health on athletic performance across various sports disciplines.

### *Search Strategy and Selection Process*

A comprehensive search of academic databases, including PsycINFO, PubMed, SPORTDiscus, and Google Scholar, was conducted. The search utilized a combination of keywords and Boolean operators, such as "athletes' mental health," "sport performance," "psychological well-being," "mental health and athletic performance," "stress and performance," and "mental health interventions in sports." The search was restricted to studies published between 2010 and 2025 to ensure the review covered contemporary research. Only studies published in English and from peer-reviewed journals were considered.

### *Eligibility Criteria and Study Evaluation*

Inclusion criteria for this review encompassed: (a) studies focusing on athletes at any competitive level (professional, collegiate, or amateur); (b) research directly or indirectly examining the relationship between mental health factors (e.g., anxiety, depression, stress, coping strategies) and sport performance; (c) studies discussing mental health interventions or strategies aimed at improving athletes' psychological well-being and performance; and (d) empirical studies, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research. Exclusion criteria specifically excluded: (a) studies that did not directly address mental health or psychological factors in athletes; and (b) opinion pieces, editorials, and non-peer-reviewed articles.

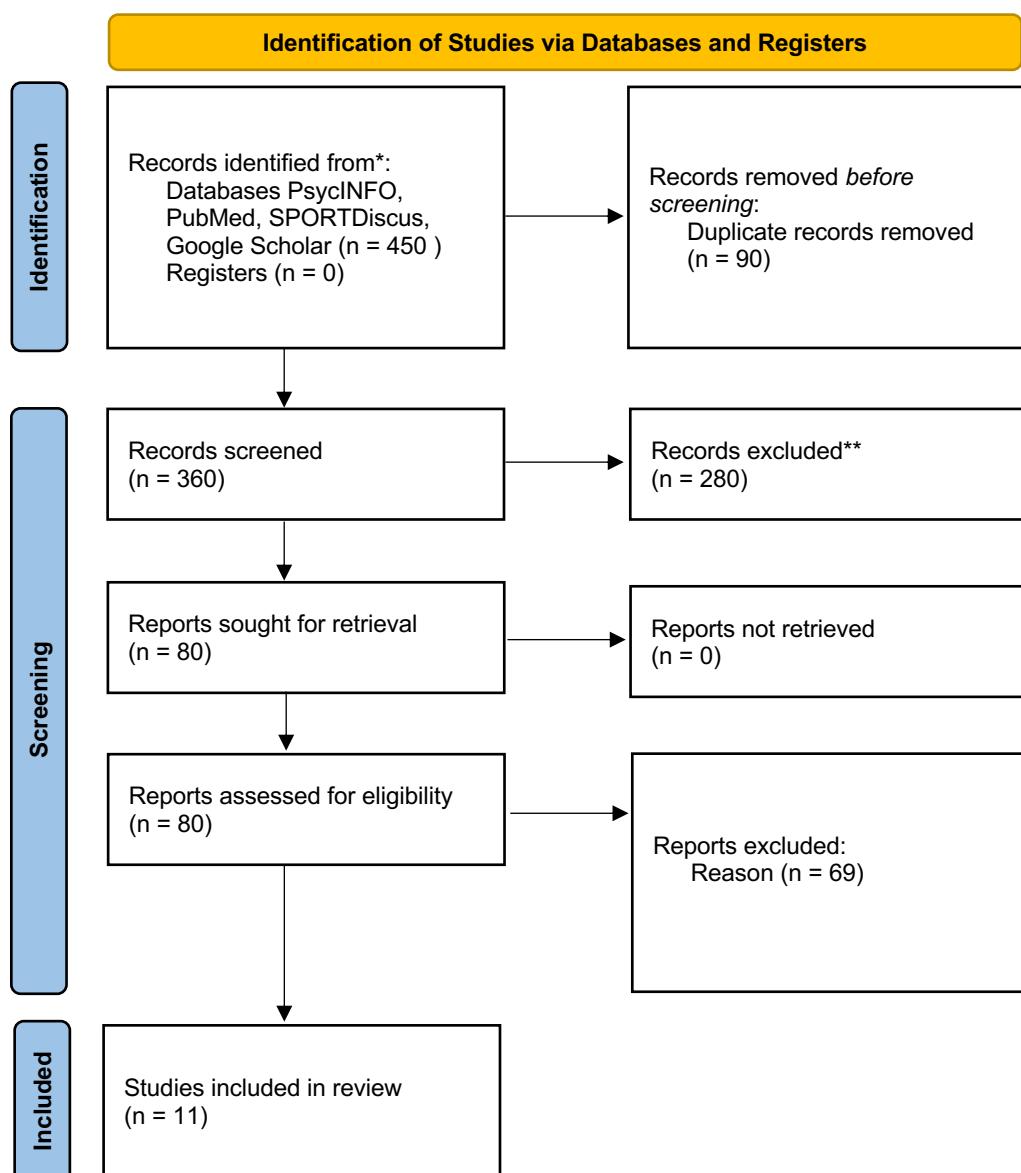
While the current study did not deploy a quality or risk of bias evaluation process, the systematic approach to selection and thematic synthesis implies an inherent level of critical appraisal during data extraction and categorization. Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) is a widely recognized guideline for reporting systematic reviews. While highly valuable for ensuring transparency and rigor, there are several reasons why an author might elect *not* to use PRISMA, or to adapt it, during a literature review. For example, if the review, like that in this case, is not a Systematic Review or Meta-Analysis. PRISMA is specifically designed for systematic reviews and meta-analyses, particularly those evaluating the effects of interventions. Suppose an author is conducting a different type of literature review, such as a narrative review. Narrative reviews are less structured and aim to provide a broad overview, identify gaps, or propose conceptual frameworks. They do not typically involve the systematic search and selection process that PRISMA describes. Nevertheless, future iterations of reviews expanding beyond a narrative analysis could benefit from incorporating a standardized quality assessment tool (e.g., risk of bias tools) to enhance methodological rigor.

### *Data Extraction and Synthesis*

From the initial pool, 11 studies were ultimately selected and analyzed. Relevant data were extracted, including the specific mental health factors investigated (e.g., anxiety, depression, stress), the sport contexts (e.g., individual vs. team sports), and the methodologies employed (e.g., surveys, interviews, performance metrics). These studies were then categorized based on their primary focus areas: psychological interventions, the impact of specific mental health conditions on performance, and the role of mental resilience and coping strategies in athletic success. A thematic narrative synthesis was employed to summarize the findings across the included studies.

### *Thematic Analysis*

After a search of relevant literature was conducted, a thematic narrative synthesis was employed to summarize the findings across the included studies. Common themes regarding the influence of mental health on sport performance and the effectiveness of mental health interventions were identified and discussed in the following sections. Gaps in the literature were also identified, particularly concerning the long-term effects of mental health interventions on performance and the specific mechanisms through which mental health influences athletic outcomes. Suggestions for further inquiry are made after this article based on said gaps. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram summarizing the study selection process for this thematic literature review.

**Figure 1.** The PRISMA Diagram

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

Elite athletes, encompassing individuals competing at professional, Olympic, and collegiate/university levels, including transitions from high school to senior competitions (Åkesdotter et al., 2020; Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019; Gouttebarge et al., 2019), exhibit a higher prevalence of mental health disorders (MHD) than conventionally assumed. Recent research consistently demonstrates that over 50% of elite athletes experience MHD, with symptoms emerging as early as 19 years of age (Åkesdotter et al., 2020). The demanding nature of the sporting environment, characterized by factors such as overtraining, injuries, and career uncertainties, acts as a significant trigger for MHD, refuting the prior notion that rigorous training confers immunity (Åkesdotter et al., 2020; Moesch et al., 2018). Furthermore, elite athletic careers expose individuals to over 640 distinct stressors, increasing susceptibility to mental health symptoms and disorders (Gouttebarge et al., 2019). Specific risk factors include transitions out of sport, severe musculoskeletal injuries, multiple surgeries, and maladaptive perfectionism (Gouttebarge et al., 2019).

### *Barriers to Mental Healthcare and the Role of Support Systems*

Despite the high prevalence of MHD among elite athletes, significant barriers to treatment-seeking persist. These include stigma, low mental health literacy, negative past experiences, demanding schedules, and hypermasculinity (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019). Cultural influences, perpetuating the dichotomy of the "strong, winning athlete" versus the "weak, depressed human being," further exacerbate these challenges (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019; Åkesdotter et al., 2020). Coaches play a pivotal dual role, acting as potential sources of stress and crucial elements of an athlete's support network (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019; Prinz et al., 2016). Their attitudes and support significantly influence athletes' mental health experiences, impacting team cohesion and overall performance (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019). Therefore, a comprehensive and proactive approach from all stakeholders, including coaches, is imperative to foster a supportive environment that promotes mental health awareness, destigmatizes help-seeking, and contributes to elite athletes' overall well-being and success.

### *Mental Health Disparities Across Sport Types*

Research by Wolanin et al. (2016) highlights the critical need to investigate depressive symptoms in collegiate athletes, challenging the misconception of their immunity to mental health issues. Their three-year study revealed a 23.7% prevalence of clinically relevant depressive symptoms among NCAA Division I college athletes, a rate comparable to non-athlete college students. Athletes reporting higher levels of social support, particularly tangible support from athletic and personal sources, demonstrated fewer depressive symptoms, underscoring the necessity of robust support systems within athletic programs (Sullivan et al., 2020). Collegiate athletes face amplified stress due to the dual demands of academic responsibilities and athletic performance, increasing their vulnerability to mental health issues.

While participation in team sports has been associated with lower levels of depression and higher self-esteem, potentially acting as a protective factor against peer victimization (Perron et al., 2012), evidence suggests a distinction based on sport type. Pluhar et al. (2019) found that individual sport athletes may experience higher rates of anxiety and depression (13%) compared to their team sport counterparts (7%). This disparity indicates that the specific demands of a sport discipline can influence susceptibility to MHD. For team sport athletes, the high frequency of competitions, often weekly, poses unique challenges, including the risk of overtraining, which can contribute to anxiety and burnout. Effective periodized training programs for team sports must integrate individual fitness needs with extensive technical and tactical team training sessions (Mujika et al., 2018) to prevent overtraining and its associated mental health consequences.

### *Process- Versus Product-Oriented Approaches in Sport*

Mental and physical preparation are critical for all athletes, although the intensity and nature of this preparation can vary between individual and team sports (Mujika et al., 2018). Individual sport athletes often engage in highly focused training regimens aimed at specific events, leading to an emphasis on individual performance and a heightened potential for anxiety, especially in high-stakes competitions (Pluhar et al., 2019). Conversely, team sport athletes engage in collective training, where shared workload can mitigate some individual pressure, but introduces challenges related to team dynamics, communication, coordination, and collaboration (Thorpe et al., 2017). The distinction between a process-oriented and product-oriented approach is crucial in sports psychology. Individual sport athletes often adopt a product-oriented mindset, where success is primarily measured by performance outcomes and winning, potentially leading to increased pressure and anxiety (Rooney et al., 2021). In contrast, team sport athletes may lean towards a process-oriented approach, emphasizing daily training, team dynamics improvement, and incremental progress (Rooney et al., 2021). This focus on process can alleviate some of the pressure associated with outcome-based thinking.

In conclusion, the mental health landscape in sports is complex, with both team and individual sport athletes encountering distinct challenges and stressors. Understanding these differences is paramount for developing effective support systems and interventions to safeguard athlete well-being. Continued research and attention to this multifaceted domain are essential to

create a healthier and more supportive environment for athletes across all disciplines. Table 1 illustrates the core findings from the review.

**Table 1.** Mental Health in Elite Athletes: Core Findings

Category/Factor	Individual Sport Athletes	Team Sport Athletes	General Elite Athletes
<b>Mental Health Disorder (MHD) Prevalence</b>	Higher rates of anxiety and depression (13%) compared to team sports (Pluhar et al., 2019)	Lower rates of anxiety and depression (7%) compared to individual sports (Pluhar et al., 2019)	Over 50% prevalence of MHD; symptoms as early as 19 years old (Åkesdotter et al., 2020)
<b>Risk Factors/Stressors</b>	Intense, highly focused training; singular focus on personal success; increased anxiety in high-stakes competitions (Mujika et al., 2018; Pluhar et al., 2019)	Higher frequency of competitions (weekly matches); risk of overtraining and burnout (Mujika et al., 2018)	Overtraining, injuries, career uncertainties; over 640 distinct stressors; transitions out of sport; severe musculoskeletal injuries; multiple surgeries; maladaptive perfectionism (Åkesdotter et al., 2020; Gouttebarge et al., 2019)
<b>Protective Factors/Support</b>	Less explicit mention of specific protective factors in the provided text, but robust social support is generally beneficial.	Participation is associated with lower depression and higher self-esteem; benefits from shared workload and team dynamics (Perron et al., 2012; Thorpe et al., 2017)	Robust social support (especially tangible support from athletic and personal sources) leads to fewer depressive symptoms (Sullivan et al., 2020)
<b>Mental Preparation Focus</b>	Primarily product-oriented; emphasis on outcome, personal goals, and winning (Rooney et al., 2021)	Often process-oriented; emphasis on daily training, improving team dynamics, and incremental improvements (Rooney et al., 2021)	Crucial for performance; varies in intensity and nature across sport types (Mujika et al., 2018)
<b>Barriers to Treatment</b>	(Not explicitly differentiated by sport type)	(Not explicitly differentiated by sport type)	Stigma, low mental health literacy, negative past experiences, busy schedules, hypermasculinity, cultural influences ("strong, winning athlete" dichotomy) (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019; Åkesdotter et al., 2020)
<b>Role of Coaches</b>	(Implicitly supportive, but not specifically highlighted as a unique factor for individual sports in the provided text)	Crucial role in supporting athletes and contributing to stressors; attitudes and support shape mental health experiences; significant influence on team dynamics and well-being (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019; Prinz et al., 2016)	Pivotal in shaping athletes' mental health experiences; integral to athletes' support network (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019; Prinz et al., 2016)

Category/Factor	Individual Sport Athletes	Team Sport Athletes	General Elite Athletes
<b>Collegiate Athletes Specifics</b>	(Not specifically distinguished from general individual athletes in the provided text for collegiate level)	(Not specifically distinguished from general team athletes in the provided text for collegiate level)	23.7% prevalence of clinically relevant depressive symptoms; amplified stress due to dual student-athlete roles (Wolanic et al., 2016)

## Discussion

Addressing the complex mental health challenges faced by athletes necessitates a multifaceted strategy that encompasses awareness, robust support systems, and effective intervention. The following synthesized recommendations aim to guide coaches, athletic programs, and institutions in fostering a mentally healthy environment for athletes.

### *Practical Recommendations for Mental Health Support Ensuring Access to Mental Health Professionals.*

Athletes require readily available access to mental health professionals with specialized expertise in sport psychology. These professionals are crucial for providing tailored strategies to manage stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. A key component of this initiative must be a concerted effort to reduce the stigma associated with seeking mental health support, encouraging athletes to utilize these vital resources without hesitation.

### *Integrating Mindfulness and Relaxation Techniques.*

Incorporating mindfulness and relaxation techniques into training routines can significantly benefit athletes in managing stress and anxiety. Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR), a prominent relaxation technique, involves the repetitive contraction and release of muscles in a quiet environment (Resilience, 2016). This practice helps athletes recognize and alleviate muscle tension often associated with anxiety and stress, breaking a vicious cycle that can lead to physical symptoms and heightened distress (Alicea et al., 2024). The consistent practice of relaxation techniques is widely acknowledged as an effective method for emotional regulation in sport.

### *Utilizing a Mental Health Checklist.*

Implementing a mental health checklist, such as the tool described in Table 2, can empower athletes to self-assess their mental well-being periodically. This checklist should include questions of stress levels, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and overall emotional state. Regular use of such a tool can facilitate early detection of concerns, prompting athletes to seek support when needed.

**Table 2.** Mental Health Checklist

Strategy	When/how often was this done today?	How was this done today?
I practiced controlled breathing techniques.		
I supported my body with physical health-enhancing activities.		
I practiced self-compassion and gave myself grace.		
I shifted my thoughts to what I could control.		
I acknowledged small wins or gratitude.		

### *Implementing Coaching Guidelines for a Mentally Healthy Environment:*

Coaches are pivotal in shaping a mentally healthy environment for athletes (Pennington, 2019). The following guidelines are recommended: (a) Open Communication: Coaches must cultivate

open, non-judgmental communication with athletes (Harmon et al., 2019). Athletes need to feel comfortable discussing mental health concerns without fear of negative repercussions. Coaches often serve as the first point of contact for athletes experiencing mental health challenges, and effective communication fosters trust, enhances morale, and improves motivation (Jef, 2023); (b) Mental Health Education: Coaches should receive comprehensive training in recognizing the signs of mental health issues and be knowledgeable about available resources. Equipped with this knowledge, they can educate their athletes about mental health literacy and emphasize the importance of seeking help; and (c) Stress Management Integration: Coaches should proactively incorporate stress management techniques into training programs. This includes ensuring regular breaks, facilitating relaxation exercises, and implementing strategies to reduce performance anxiety. Prioritizing rest and recovery days from constant training and competition is crucial for alleviating athlete stress (Pennington, 2018; Magness, 2019).

#### *Methodological Limitations and Implications for Future Research*

This paper highlights significant issues related to mental health and sport performance, revealing that athletes, both elite and collegiate, face a comparable or heightened risk of mental health disorders due to intense competition, public scrutiny, and career uncertainties. It also underscores the positive impact of team cohesion and social support (Reardon et al., 2019; Chang et al., 2020; Jewett et al., 2019). However, like much of the current literature, this discussion has inherent limitations that warrant reflection and inform future research directions. For instance, there is a potential for publication bias in existing literature, where studies reporting significant or positive findings on mental health challenges in athletes may be more likely to be published than those showing no significant differences or negative results. This can skew the perceived prevalence and impact of mental health issues, potentially overestimating the problem or overlooking other critical factors. Future research should prioritize publishing a wider range of findings to provide a more balanced and accurate understanding.

Also, many studies on athlete mental health are cross-sectional or cover relatively narrow time frames, making it challenging to establish causality or understand the long-term trajectory of mental health conditions. The dynamic nature of an athlete's career, with various transitions (e.g., high school to college, amateur to professional, career termination), suggests that mental health can fluctuate considerably over time. Finally, while "elite" and "collegiate" athletes are broadly discussed, they are often not thoroughly examined within specific sub-populations (e.g., athletes from different socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural contexts, or with varying levels of disability). Thus, the nuances of mental health experiences across these diverse groups may be overlooked.

#### *Research Contribution*

This thematic literature review offers a comprehensive synthesis of mental health challenges and interventions among collegiate and elite athletes, making several key contributions to the field. First, it highlights the significant prevalence of mental health disorders among athletes—challenging the outdated assumption of athlete invulnerability—and contextualizes these issues within the unique stressors of athletic life, such as overtraining, injury, performance pressure, and identity loss post-retirement. Second, this study underscores the importance of protective factors, including team cohesion and robust social support systems, which are positively associated with improved psychological outcomes and athletic performance. Furthermore, the review highlights the differences in mental health risks between individual and team sport athletes, offering a nuanced understanding that can inform more targeted interventions. Importantly, this paper does not stop at identifying problems; it provides practical, evidence-informed strategies—such as mindfulness practices, self-assessment checklists, and mental health education for coaches—which can be implemented in collegiate sport environments. Finally, by focusing on athlete and coach roles in fostering mental well-being, this study is a valuable resource for sports psychologists, athletic departments, and policymakers striving to create sustainable and mentally healthy sports ecosystems.

#### *Limitations*

While this review offers valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. Primarily, the study adopts a thematic narrative synthesis rather than a full systematic review or meta-analysis, which may limit its methodological rigor and transparency. The absence of a formal quality appraisal or risk-of-bias assessment for the included studies could affect the strength of conclusions drawn. Many reviewed studies are cross-sectional, providing only a snapshot of athlete mental health and limiting the ability to infer causality or understand long-term trajectories. Additionally, the findings may be influenced by publication bias, as studies reporting significant outcomes are more likely to be published, potentially overrepresenting the prevalence or severity of mental health issues. Another limitation lies in the generalization across diverse athlete populations without sufficient subgroup analysis—for instance, differences by socioeconomic background, disability status, or cultural context remain underexplored. Lastly, while the review discusses practical strategies, it does not empirically test their effectiveness. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and intervention-based studies, diversify participant samples, and explore the role of emerging technologies (e.g., teletherapy, mental health apps) to enhance both access and outcomes in athlete mental health care.

### *Suggestion*

Future research should consider the following directions to advance our understanding and develop more effective interventions: (a) Implementing longitudinal studies is crucial to track athletes' mental health over extended periods, from early career stages through retirement. This approach would allow researchers to identify risk and protective factors that emerge at different developmental and career junctures, providing insights into the causality and progression of mental health issues; (b) Investigating the effectiveness of technology-based interventions (e.g., mobile applications for mindfulness, tele-mental health services, wearable sensors for stress monitoring) could offer scalable and accessible solutions for athletes, particularly those with demanding schedules or geographical barriers to traditional care; (c) Further research is warranted to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of student support services on college campuses in addressing the mental health needs of student-athletes. This includes identifying best practices, understanding barriers to access, and developing evidence-based interventions tailored to this specific population; (d) Incorporating more qualitative research methods (e.g., in-depth interviews, focus groups) would provide richer insights into athletes' lived experiences with mental health, their perceptions of stigma, and the effectiveness of current support systems from their perspective; and (e) Delving deeper into the specific stressors and protective factors within different sport environments (e.g., individual vs. team sports, contact vs. non-contact sports, varying competitive levels) could lead to more targeted and effective interventions.

## CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this paper was to inform the reading audience of significant issues related to mental health and sport performance in athletes. This exploration has revealed that athletes, both elite and collegiate, face a comparable or heightened risk of mental health disorders compared to the general population. Factors such as intense competition, public scrutiny, and career uncertainties contribute to this vulnerability. Additionally, we examined the positive impact of team cohesion and social support on the mental well-being of athletes.

By addressing these methodological limitations and pursuing these research avenues, we can significantly enhance our understanding of athlete mental health, leading to more robust and evidence-based strategies for support and intervention across all levels of sport.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Under the support of CP, PJ independently developed the vision and approach to the published work, fully earning first authorship based on her contribution. CP contributed by providing editorial feedback and eventually editing and revising based on reviewer feedback during the submission and publication.

## AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors declare that this research was prepared, researched, written, and edited without the aid of artificial intelligence (AI) techniques. The author used Google Gemini during the

preparation of this work to ensure grammatical and spelling accuracy before submitting it for review. After using the tool/service, the author thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the publication's content. The authors declare that this research was prepared, researched, written, and edited without the aid of artificial intelligence (AI) techniques.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. No financial, professional, or personal relationships have influenced the content or outcome of this research. The authors confirm that the work was conducted independently and without commercial or institutional pressure that could affect its objectivity. All contributions were made in good faith to uphold academic integrity and transparency in scholarly publishing.

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