

Beyond Winning: Athlete Mental Health as the New Priority in Sport Psychology

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Abstract

The traditional emphasis of sport psychology has been on improving sport performance via interventions such as goal setting, motivation, concentration, and mental skills training. Such approaches have certainly been successful in the competitive arena, but there is increasing evidence that focusing exclusively on performance may miss the psychological well-being of athletes. The growing number of athletes suffering from stress, anxiety, burnout, depression and emotional exhaustion has highlighted the need for a broader perspective that emphasizes mental health alongside performance goals. This conceptual paper explores the shift in the role of sport psychology from a performance enhancement tool to a focus on holistic well-being for athletes. The paper examines the factors that lead to mental health problems in competitive sport, drawing on contemporary literature, such as performance pressure, injury, overtraining, social expectations and organizational culture. It also discusses the growing role of sport psychologists in fostering psychological resilience, mental health, and supportive sporting environments. The paper suggests that athlete mental health should be a primary, rather than a secondary, objective of sport psychology. A holistic and athlete-centred approach can support coaches, practitioners and sporting organisations to promote both sustainable performance and long-term well-being. The paper concludes by arguing for the increased integration of mental health promotion into sport psychology practice, education and policy, and the positioning of athlete well-being as a central element of excellence in contemporary sport.

Keywords: Athlete-centered approach; Athlete mental health; Mental resilience; Psychological well-being; Sport psychology