



By Anthony Klarica – Elite Performance, Sport Wellbeing & Engagement Survey

Sport Wellbeing and Engagement

Athlete Wellbeing & Mental Health

A few years ago I was woken at 2am by the buzzing of a WhatsApp message. It was from an athlete I was working with, competing in another country. They were in distress. From an outsider's perspective, the perception would be that athlete's in this situation are living the dream. That night, or day for them, the dream was overwhelming. Financial challenges, in-different results, perceived pressure and most of all, loneliness had mounted and taken a toll. Thankfully they reached out and made the call. It wasn't random, as there was an established working relationship and they knew support was there if needed. We put a plan in place and they worked through it.

This is only one example of an athlete in distress. However it is an example that wellbeing and mental health professionals who work in sport relate to well. It also reflects how important it is to establish supportive relationships with athletes as they navigate their sporting endeavours.

Being an athlete does not mean you are immune to worry, stress, a drop in motivation or personal challenges. It has been identified that in the general community, 16-24 years of age is the group with the highest proportion of mental disorders across the lifespan. Twenty-five to 34 years of age is the second highest group (1). In these groups about 25% or 1 in 4 people will experience a mental health disorder. The rates are even higher for "distress" in young people (2). This age group is clearly a challenging time, and the statistics unacceptable. As is evident, this time of life corresponds fully with pursuing sporting goals or being an athlete.

Based on the above data it is not surprising that rates of mental health issues experienced by athletes appear to be similar to that observed in the general community (3). It is worth noting that athletes may be prone to specific stressors that are in addition to factors that impact the mental health of young people in general. Such factors include: low-income, contract insecurity, identity challenges, injury, lack of success, perfectionistic style expectations, low support in striving for their goals, increased criticism from people both within or outside their sport, living away from home and at times, social isolation. It's not as easy as it seems looking on from the outside. Specific vulnerability to anxiety has been found to be influenced by factors including career dissatisfaction, injury and recent adverse life events (4).

A 2019 research investigating mental health of athletes reviewed 52 studies from elite sport and included 13,000 athletes. Athletes were defined as competing at Olympic, professional or collegiate/university level. The study suggested that coaches and sporting bodies play a crucial role in helping de-stigmatise mental ill-health in elite athletes (5). In addition, it was highlighted that in some cultures the lack of acceptance of women as athletes was associated with poor mental health.

Help-seeking Barriers & Facilitators

Early in my career I conducted a study on track and field athletes use of, and attitude towards Sport Psychologists. Interestingly, higher level athletes were the most frequent users of psychology services (6). These athletes possibly experienced greater challenges from competing internationally, or had greater access to services which enhanced their use of support services. However, it could also be considered that their use of support was a factor that assisted performance and their view towards help-seeking was a positive one, rather than negative.

A specific investigation into barriers or facilitators to help-seeking in young elite athletes aged 16-23 gives insight to this important topic (7).

Barriers were:

- Stigma
- Lack of mental health literacy
- Negative past experiences with help-seeking

Busy schedules have also been identified as an additional barrier in elite athletes seeking mental health support (5).

Facilitators were (7):

- Encouragement from others
- Having an established relationship with a provider
- Pleasant previous interactions with providers
- Positive attitudes of others, such as coaches, to support
- Access to the internet



Within sporting contexts, it has to be considered that a culture of not seeking help for mental-health concerns likely relates to the perception of sport being for “mentally-tough” individuals. Showing emotional or mental-health vulnerabilities in many sports is too readily perceived as sign of weakness that does not correlate with performance or success. Proactive help-seeking however, is an important general skill to have. Informing medical and conditioning staff of vulnerabilities to injury or talking to coaches about development are two examples.

Positively the emphasis on wellbeing in sport over the past decade certainly seems to be increasing. Suicide and high profile athletes leaving sport prematurely for mental-health issues have put a spotlight on the topic.

Prevention & Early Detection Of Wellbeing Concerns

With an increasing focus in recent years on athlete wellbeing and mental health, a number of recommendations and models have been put forward to maximise athlete wellbeing and minimise concerns. One such model emphasises building cultures around acknowledging that mental health needs are as important as physical needs to benefit both athlete wellbeing and performance. It is suggested that such programs help athletes develop a range of self-management skills to deal with psychological distress. They add that mental health screening should be included alongside routine physical health checks (8).

In support of the above, coaches and sporting bodies have been identified as playing a crucial role in helping de-stigmatise mental ill-health in elite athletes (5).

In my experience of working with teams and sporting bodies, I emphasise integrating wellbeing and mental health work into athlete programs, in a similar way to integrating physical or mental skills training related to performance. Some of the factors below contribute to enabling this:

- Having a commitment to enhance the culture of your sporting organisation by prioritising people from a wellbeing perspective
- Allocating time in the training program to discuss and coach wellbeing and mental health factors
- Screen all athletes and coaching staff on wellbeing utilising a multi-dimensional tool at appropriate times in a year such as in pre-season and in-season
- Provide group feedback on the wellbeing of the group
- Follow-up with potentially vulnerable individuals on wellbeing
- Refer to specific professionals or service providers if they are not available internally when appropriate
- Educate and inform coaches and staff working with athletes on the integration and importance of wellbeing and mental health in your program
- Dedicating specific professional staff to coach and monitor the wellbeing of athletes*

*If there are limited funds to integrate appropriate professionals into your program (even on a part-time or consultancy basis) allocate coaches or other staff with this portfolio and enable them to identify and work with appropriate external professionals. Having made this point, sports have to explore the difference between prioritising funds versus unavailable funds.

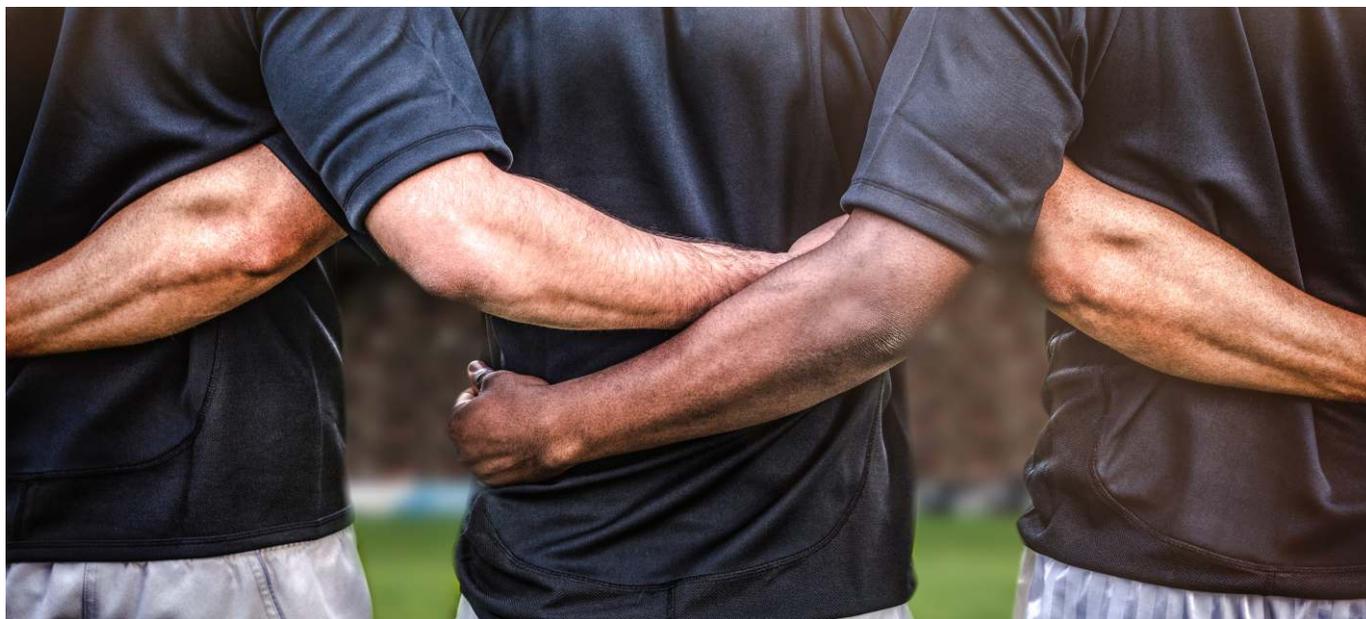


The above also emphasises re-framing your view of an athlete from solely being a performer to a whole person. In addition this model emphasises placing wellbeing above or at least alongside performance. This can be challenging for some coaches. The core business of professional or elite sporting teams/bodies is results. Such a notion potentially blinkers coaches and staff working with athletes. However, there is an absolute necessity for sporting organisations and all associated staff to shift the perspective of their work being purely about performance to including wellbeing development and management.

Intuitively, athletes struggling with low wellbeing and poor mental health may experience symptoms that are not conducive to performance. Such symptoms may include poor or irregular sleep that impacts a range of factors including lower recovery or energy and increased fatigue. In addition distractibility, muscle tension, vulnerability to developing behavioural concerns or addictions, being withdrawn, lowered self-esteem and confidence and lower motivation are all prone to being impacted by lower wellbeing. Appreciating these variables can assist coaches and staff to embrace wellbeing education and management into their programs. In turn, more serious mental health issues can be potentially minimised or avoided. It follows that proactive wellbeing development may contribute to performance, particularly when resilience, engagement and relaxation (for example) are ingredients of such programs.

Six-star Wellbeing

Based on my experience in working with a wide variety of sports over a number of years I developed the Sport Wellbeing Survey. The survey provides an avenue to gain insight to athlete mood, resilience, engagement, relaxation, communication and positivity (9). There is also a staff/coach version (10). The information assists to drive models of proactive wellbeing development as well as provide avenues to follow-up with potentially vulnerable individuals. Such a model can both facilitate help-seeking and create wellbeing coaching opportunities.



The tool is a sub-clinical, multi-dimensional survey rather than a uni-dimensional mental health survey. Multi-dimensional tools are more applicable to entire teams or athlete groups/populations. In addition, multi-dimensional tools intrinsically lead to group education due to the inclusion of positive psychology topics. Even without using data to support your wellbeing conversations the six topics can be a framework for wellbeing development and education. Such programs not only assist develop individual social and emotional skills, but also positively impact the overall culture of a team or organisation.

I recommend the survey be conducted with individuals across their life-span in a team or sporting body. It reflects an investment in social and emotional wellbeing of individuals and the organisation as a whole.

Summary

In summary, wellbeing and mental health in athletes has deservedly gained increased attention in recent years. Coaches and staff working in teams, sporting organisations and with athletes have a responsibility to prioritise proactive wellbeing education to maximise the overall wellbeing and mental health of their groups. To achieve this barriers and facilitators to help-seeking also need to be identified and managed.

The Sport Wellbeing Survey provides an avenue to screen sporting groups and integrate and structure education around athlete wellbeing into sporting programs. In turn the culture of sporting organisations and experience of both staff and athletes in those organisations can be enhanced by such actions.



Anthony Klarica



Anthony has worked in education, sport and corporate environments in wellbeing and performance for over 20 years

Want to know more?



sportwellbeing
survey



MOOD

RESILIENCE

ENGAGEMENT

COMMUNICATION

RELAXATION

POSITIVITY

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018. Australia's Health. 2018.
2. The mental health of children and adolescents: report on the second Australian child and adolescent survey on mental health and wellbeing. Lawrence et. al. Commonwealth of Australia, 2015.
3. The mental health of Australian elite athletes. Gulliver et. al. Journal of Science and medicine in Sport. 2015.
4. Determinants of anxiety in elite athletes: A systematic review and meta-analysis. Rice et. al. British Journal of Sports Medicine. 2019
5. Mental health symptoms and disorders in elite athletes: A systematic review on cultural influencers and barriers to athletes seeking treatment. Mauricio Castaldelli-Maia et al. British Journal of Sports Medicine. 2019, 0: 1-16
6. Attitude towards and use of Sport Psychologist's by Track and Field athletes and coaches. Klarica. Unpublished research at RMIT University. 1993.
7. Barriers and facilitators to mental health help-seeking for young elite athletes: a qualitative study. Gulliver et al. BioMed Central Psychiatry. 2012, 12, 157
8. Mental health in elite athletes: Increased awareness requires an early intervention framework to respond to athlete needs. Purcell et. al. Sports Medicine – Open. 2019.
9. The Sport Wellbeing Survey; A universal wellbeing screening for athletes and sports. Klarica et al. www.sportwellbeing.com.au
10. The Six-Star Corporate Wellbeing Survey. Klarica www.sixstarwellbeing.com.au