

The Unique Issues of Athlete Mental Health

Sometimes, it takes one to know one. How Onrise Player Care is helping athletes improve their mental health.

When Tasha Saunders was a student athlete at Sewanee, life could feel overwhelming at some points. There were academic challenges, major injuries and time on the sidelines, and the pressure to keep all her many balls in the air. Yet reaching out to a coach to confide her worries and concerns felt risky, so she did the best she could. Her experience and sentiments are likely more common than not, especially since the onset of the pandemic.

In 2020, the NCAA surveyed nearly 10,000 D1-D3 student athletes, and the findings back up these experiences. Overwhelmingly, the respondents reported elevated levels of mental health concerns, one and a half to two times higher than historically reported before 2020. Academic worries topped the list of factors affecting their mental health (44 percent), followed by planning for the future (37 percent), and financial concerns (26 percent). While two-thirds of the surveyed athletes indicated they knew where to seek help on campus, fewer than half said they would be comfortable seeking support from a campus provider.

For all these reasons and more, Kim Quigley, MD, and Brenda McBride, MD, decided to form a new division of Onrise. Player Care Program is a complete, whole-person wellness program prioritizing telehealth and support for athletes, considering their unique life experiences. Separate from sports performance, Player Care is focused on athletes' overall mental health.

Athletes Helping Athletes

The Player Care Program was officially launched in April of this year. Quigley explained, "We started getting more and more referrals for athletes because they wanted to access mental health services outside of their school setting. They were simply worried about going to someone at their school." Quigley has been a practicing psychiatrist for 20 years and formalized Onrise in 2018 as a telehealth company aimed at reaching vulnerable populations.

Player Care targets both collegiate and professional athletes who share commonalities when it comes to mental health and seeking assistance. While many schools and professional teams have adequate mental health services available, athletes are sometimes reticent to access them. The NCAA survey found that 54% of male athletes and 52% of female athletes fall into this category.

"While many schools have excellent and effective resources, they can't control athlete beliefs that drive engagement," said Quigley. "The athletes worry that seeking mental health care will be a strike against them. Mental health stigmas still exist, especially in high-performance environments like college and pro athletics."

Another issue in the athletic world is that it can prove difficult to find practitioners who understand the unique pressures the athletes face. Too often, these athletes are left trying to manage anxiety-provoking scenarios. "They're trying to figure out their class and practice schedules, who their friends are, what to do when academics and sports conflict, and more," McBride explained. "Individually each of these might not seem like a big deal, but when they have to handle 20 of them, it stacks up."

For some students, this can be incapacitating. A lack of management skills, along with the physical and emotional demands of athletics, can lead to anxiety and depression.

Because of the overwhelming need for mental health services and the extreme shortage of practitioners, Quigley and McBride designed a unique approach, creating "Player Care Specialists." These are former athletes — like Saunders — who uniquely understand what student athletes experience. "These are young adults who want to stay connected to sports in some capacity," said McBride. "They've been through their own, similar experiences and are committed to helping others as they navigate the waters."

The Player Care Specialists receive special training in mental health care from licensed clinicians and work under strict supervision. They represent a diverse gender and ethnic background, so that they can closely relate to the athletes they serve.

Their tasks vary widely from one athlete to the next, but all the specialists perform screenings and are empowered to push clients up the care ladder. This might look like a referral to a licensed Onrise



therapist or psychiatrist. Athletes can reach out with a phone call, email or the Wellness U app, a strategic partner of Onrise. Because Onrise is independent of the players' school or organization, athletes are more comfortable sharing difficulties going on in their lives. Once contact is initiated, athletes will have someone connect with them within 48 hours.

For Saunders, who was a D3 soccer player, the job has entailed a good deal of simply showing up for her clients. "I spent a lot of time with an injured, high-level ACC player over the summer," she said. "Sometimes that meant just sitting on the sidelines next to him as someone who understood how he was feeling."

Because of her own injury experience, Saunders uniquely understands the stress and emotions that come along with missing the sport you love. She pointed out "When you're injured, it's this weird space where you're part of the team but you're unable to play. You're not able to balance your emotions with exercise and it can be helpful to have a Player Care Specialist to support you."

So far, Saunders has worked with athletes both in person, and virtually, depending on their location and situation. "I like to be on the ground with them when I can, but have also worked via Zoom when it's needed," she said. "Having clinicians to send them to when necessary is key for success."

Like Saunders, 36-year-old Derrick Furlow, Jr., Vice President of Athlete Engagement at Onrise, understands these pressures and concerns. A former football player at the University of Tennessee with a post-collegiate career in the Arena Football League, he struggled the most transitioning to a life after athletics. "I didn't have anyone to help me understand how the skills I developed as an athlete could serve me in a career," he explained. "I've seen many athletes struggle with that transition."

Furlow has witnessed these former athletes try to cope with addiction and mental health because they've lost their life-long identity. "It's easy to live in the past so I help athletes take a step back and understand that the same mental toughness that served them as players can serve them in the next phase of life," he explained.

The Nuts and Bolts of Player Care

The Onrise Player Care Program contracts directly with universities and professional teams and leagues in a B2B format. "We don't want to offer our services directly to the athlete, but rather integrate with the athletic programs," explained Quigley. "We give athletic departments a branded tool to add to their arsenals."

They're currently working with the United Soccer League. "At this level, professional sport doesn't provide a stable life," said McBride. "They're earning a low salary, might not have health insurance and some are playing on limited visas. That's a lot of pressure and the players don't want their coaches to know they're feeling it."

And because the stress and pressure of athletics doesn't end with the athletes themselves, the Onrise program also extends to the coaching and support staff, should they want to access it.

Now on the other side of their collegiate athletic careers, Saunders and Furlow, Jr. wish a service like Onrise had existed when they were players. "It's hard to speak to your coaches or resources on campus because you worry it will impact your playing career," Saunders said. "Knowing there's someone on the outside who can lend a listening ear is huge for overall well-being."



Onrise Player Care Specialists create an optimal environment and player experience leading to increased athlete satisfaction and well-being.