

MENTAL HEALTH

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Changing the Game: A Review of Collegiate Coaching and Its Effects on Mental Health

Yohanan Nekrasov

A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Spring 2021

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

Donald Alban, Ph.D.
Thesis Chair

Bruce Kirk, Ed.D.
Committee Member

Christopher Nelson, M.F.A.
Assistant Honors Director

Date

Abstract

Mental health has become an increasingly important topic within the sports world over the past decade, with athletes raising awareness on both the professional and collegiate levels. The coach plays a key role in supporting the mental health of his or her athletes, but some coaching methods may run counter to that objective. Research was conducted through a literature review, examining the psychological trends within athletics and the ways coaches can adapt their methods. The accompanying print and audio feature stories will aim to help deliver this research to the public by educating coaches on this important issue, including interviews with coaches, athletes, and psychological experts to provide faces to the issue.

Keywords: mental health, college athletics, NCAA, coaching

Changing the Game: A Review of Collegiate Coaching and Its Effects on Mental Health

More than any generation before them, students in Generation Z are locked in a mental health crisis. Students in this age group (born after 1995, according to sociologist Jean Twenge) are facing anxiety, depression and other personality disorders at unprecedented rates, and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted just how widespread those struggles are (Twenge, 2017). Though awareness of mental illness and its solutions has also been increasing over the past few decades, the dramatic rise in mental disorders in American society has been closely tied to the rise of Generation Z, with Twenge writing that in 2016, over 50% of college students reported lower than average mental health entering college, including symptoms like depression and anxiety (Twenge, 2017). Sadly, as Generation Z fills colleges across America and begins entering the workforce, those issues are intensifying.

Adapting Society to Generation Z

Students in Generation Z (also referred to by Twenge as iGen) face a range of mental stressors unlike any previous generation. Researchers are just scratching the surface of how the social pressures of a post-9/11, post-Great Recession world impacted by technology have changed the brains of students growing up in that environment. This changing mental health reality means that workplaces and colleges across America have to adjust to accommodate a new generation and its differences in psychology and sociology. As a result, recognizing the root issues of mental illness in Generation Z (as is true with any generational personality type) is crucial to building a world that recognizes the new generation's strengths while working within its weaknesses. Making these adjustments requires an informed, supportive network of authority figures in workplaces, homes, and sports teams working together across the country, a process

that begins with education. However, Generation Z's changing relationship to authority figures is one of the primary ways that it differs from previous generations, meaning that the roles of teachers, coaches, and parents will become increasingly important in helping Generation Z face its mental health crisis. At times, that will mean the way those authority roles function will have to change as well.

Though an increased awareness of mental health issues in society as a whole has provided a wealth of research on the ways environments shape mental health, much of the research on Generation Z is still new and untested, with one source on coaching Generation Z athletes writing:

Our research team was unable to identify any studies describing the characteristics of Gen Z athletes or strategies for effectively teaching or coaching them. Hence, there is a need for research in this area to inform coaches and applied sport science providers currently working with Gen Z athletes. (Gould et al., 2020, p. 106)

Understanding the ways authority figures across the board shape the mental wellbeing of Generation Z is one of the most important topics of research within modern sociology and psychology. However, the role of the college coach is of particular importance in the developing mental health conversation within the sports world.

Sports, Mental Illness, and Coaching

Sports as a whole have often lagged behind in addressing mental health concerns until relatively recently, with concussion research in the NFL in the late 1990s and early 2000s inspiring more curiosity about mental health in the sports world. An environment that demanded

“mental toughness” and ferocity at the expense of all else left many athletes who may have been struggling with mental illness unwilling to share their struggles. However, when professional athletes like NBA stars Kevin Love and DeMar DeRozan began speaking up and describing their experiences with mental illness within the professional world (Love, 2018), the environment within sports began to shift. Counselors became crucial elements of team infrastructure, with the NBA, for example, instituting a mandate for every team to have on staff at least one full-time mental health professional (Shama, 2019). Mental health became a regular part of the media conversation, with more athletes starting to share their experiences and to describe the pressures elite athletes face. Years of calloused indifference to the mental health of athletes was finally dissipating.

Over time, this area of interest began to shift from the professional leagues into college athletics as well, but much more slowly. In the past, if athletes needed psychological help, they could consult a school counselor, but with mental health rarely a topic of conversation at the time within sports teams, many issues went undetected, particularly at smaller colleges with fewer resources. Specialized psychological care is becoming increasingly common within larger athletics programs, but even today, smaller schools often cannot afford to have a full-time counselor working solely with athletics. In 2014, however, the NCAA published a handbook titled “Mind, Body, and Sport,” suggesting a wide range of mental health-related reforms college athletics programs needed to implement, looking to reduce some of those discrepancies and marking the beginning of the current movement to support athletes’ mental health (NCAA, 2014).

Schools at the Division I (DI) level began to lead the way in providing specialist care for their athletes, but many smaller schools, however, struggle to scrape together the resources to fund such an enterprise. For example, a 2016 study of the mental health resources available at DI programs across the country found that only 18.1% of the schools had a counselor located within the athletics department, meaning that many of the schools have to rely on general school counseling centers (Sudano & Miles, 2016). With the growing numbers of students suffering from mental illness, however, counseling centers across America are often wildly overburdened, leading to a growing crisis.

The shift of college student demographics into Generation Z students is only intensifying the situation. All the social pressures and relational challenges Generation Z students face are transplanted into the collegiate athletics world. Perhaps more than any other time in recent memory, the challenges of COVID-19 are forcing more and more colleges to recognize their need for increased mental health support. Athletics programs need more counseling resources, better education for staff on mental illness, and a clearer set of protocols for helping students get the help they need, with Sudano and Miles writing, “There is a lack of uniformity in the services available to the student-athletes” (2016, p. 264). However, though all these resources are necessary, the importance of coaches in this developing process cannot be underestimated. Unlike school counseling staff, coaches interact with their athletes every day in a variety of settings, and as a result, they are basically the first line of defense when it comes to mental illness. Continuing the process of building a sports environment conducive to strong mental health thus requires examining the evolving role of the coach in a Generation Z-driven world.

Coaching Through Mental Health Issues

The role of the college coach has existed since the beginning of college sports, and depending on the size of the school and success of the athletics program, a coach's responsibilities at a DIII school may be roughly on par with the role of the coach of a large high school team, or at some DI schools they may be almost on the level of coaching a professional NFL team. Regardless of a school's size, however, a coach has to balance on-field success with the wellbeing of his or her athletes to ensure a successful team in the long run, which used to mean managing team relational dynamics and keeping players safe from injury risk. According to a 2015 study, many people previously believed that athletes were less susceptible to mental illness, writing, "A commonly held misconception was that athletes may be at decreased risk for mental health issues due to increased levels of exercise" (Wolanin et al., 2016, p. 167). However, the study actually found that depression rates in college athletes were roughly equivalent to the general student population, with 23.7% of the athletes surveyed displaying clinically relevant symptoms (Wolanin et al., 2016). With mental health only growing in prominence as a topic, coaches can no longer just deal with physical injuries and avoid the potential mental health issues on their teams. Mental illness rates like eating disorders, anxiety, and depression are only continuing to increase, and sooner or later most college coaches in America will have to work with athletes who are severely hampered by mental illness. Recognizing the ways coaching within a sports context can adversely affect athletes' mental health is crucial to creating a sporting environment where coaches are an asset and not a hindrance to their athletes' wellbeing

Within the greater sphere of mental health measures, some areas of collegiate coaching have not been intensely studied in regards to their effects on mental illness and athlete mental health, but as research on mental health and its ties to coaches in all areas of sports increases,

relevant research (from both inside and outside the sports world) can be applied to college programs to determine what is and is not working within the field of sports coaching as a whole. Through those studies, understanding coaches' views of mental health and the stigma surrounding mental illness, coaches' perceptions of their role in relation to their athletes' mental health, and the changing authority dynamic caused by the shift in Generation Z psychology and relation to authority is crucial to recognizing how coaching needs to adapt to the current mental health crisis.

The Current Situation

In many cases, however, coaches are unprepared for the task in front of them, not just due to the lack of resources at their disposal but because at times, coaches' actions directly harm their athletes' mental health. For example, a 2017 study of controlling coaching behaviors found that coaches trying to assert power over their players often resulted in negative mental or psychological outcomes for their athletes. One source wrote, "Coach controlling motivational styles have been linked with a range of maladaptive outcomes including increased burnout and stress. These findings under-score the potentially stressful nature of controlling motivational styles within sporting contexts" (Gucciardi et al., 2017, p. 719). In a competitive industry like sports, coaching requires pushing athletes to high expectations to generate success on the field, but successful coaches have always had to balance on-field results with player wellbeing to ensure the long-term health of their teams. With the rise of Generation Z, however, the mental health crisis means that when coaches look for team success, they have to take into account the ways their coaching techniques and management styles affect the players on their teams – and

that begins with the impact of their messaging on team culture surrounding the topic of mental health.

Tackling the Stigma

In areas of sports from high school to professional leagues, athletes describe the challenge of overcoming the stigma of mental illness in a competitive industry as one of the biggest challenges they face in owning up to their struggles and seeking assistance. A coach's stance on mental illness thus becomes crucial in ensuring that from the top down, mental health is viewed as a normal topic of discussion, especially with how easy many athletes find it to hide symptoms while under pressure (Gorczynski et al., 2017). Shifting the view of mental illness from a form of weakness or failure to viewing it as no less important than physical health is one of the first steps coaches can take in shifting a team's culture, giving students the freedom to be open about their struggles and be honest about how they are doing.

A key problem, however, is that though education programs on mental health are increasing, it is still very difficult to determine the state of actual awareness in the athletics community, with one 2017 study finding that many programs had success rates very difficult to verify (Breslin et al., 2017). Embedded specialist sports psychologists and education programs can both bring useful knowledge to bear, but particularly with coaches who began coaching before mental illness became a prime topic of conversation, some school counselors have to even overcome stigmatized views of mental illness that coaches themselves hold to begin the process.

The Coach's Responsibility

Though education on mental illness and its effects will be crucial in shaping the conversation within athletics, perhaps one of the biggest areas coaches need to grasp is their responsibility in relation to the wellbeing of their athletes. In a situation where an adult athlete is ultimately responsible for seeking help, what is the role of the coach in that process, and how much responsibility does the coach bear for the athlete being able to cope or not cope with various stressors? Though a coach can provide general guidance and point athletes to counseling if needed, a coach's job is ultimately to ensure sporting success – and if an athlete is not capable mentally of performing at the necessary level, coaches have to make decisions regarding the ability of an athlete to continue in the sport. As Duffy and Matthews discussed in a 2019 paper, however, encouraging coaches to understand mental health as part of their role will motivate them to learn more about the situation, writing, “Assisting coaches to engage in these helping behaviors by developing their efficacy and clearly aligning these behaviors to the coaching role may help reduce the burden of mental health problems among young people” (Duffy & Matthews, 2019, p. 3). Coaches can adapt messaging, change communication styles, and work to ensure stronger personal relationships, but choosing between team on-field success and player health is a dilemma that will become increasingly prevalent as mental illness statistics continue to skyrocket.

Research shows, however, that there is a conflict between the ways athletes and coaches may view that responsibility, with athletes both viewing themselves as more susceptible to mental illness compared to coaches' views of athletes and also viewing coaches as a crucial part in the support system for mental illness (Biggin et al., 2017). Previous stereotypes of compartmentalized authority relationships, particularly in sports, where coaches mandated

intensity and punished any weakness, built a system where coaches were expected to be distant. Generation Z's changing perceptions of authority figures, however, are one of the age group's defining factors, and across society, their ramifications are becoming clearer.

The challenge from the coach's perspective is that sports, ultimately, are a results-driven business, and the further up the pyramid of sporting success one goes, the more intense the pressure is to succeed at all costs. The pressure on a coach at a top-tier collegiate football program to ignore the wellbeing of his star quarterback for the sporting asset he is to the team also increases simultaneously – meaning that the higher areas of college sports may have more resources available to promote mental wellness, but they also face much more intense pressure to ignore those same concerns. However, a study of professional German women's soccer players indicated that athletes in lower leagues actually struggled with mental health more than those in higher leagues, perhaps due to a lack of some of the coping mechanisms elite athletes have (Junge & Prinz, 2019). Whether an athlete plays for an SEC team or a DIII program, however, coaches have to recognize that for the majority of student-athletes, sports will just be a tiny fraction of their lives. Even in NCAA football, one of the sports where students are most likely to become professional athletes one day, the vast majority of athletes never play professional sports, with the NCAA website noting, for example, that of 16,380 NCAA football players eligible for the NFL draft in 2019, only 1.6% moved on to the professional league (NCAA, 2020). That reality means that in the long run, their mental health is far, far more important than any on-field performance – and coaches need to recognize the reality that their impact on their athletes' mental health may end up being far more long-lasting than a few game-winning plays.

Particularly in more results-driven generations, both athletes and coaches expected that team performance would be emphasized above personal relationships, but Generation Z students expect to be treated like humans now – not as cogs in a machine. Even in an intense, highly-structured and disciplined environment like the military, that dynamic is starting to take shape, with a study of the Lithuanian military highlighting the fact that Generation Z – at least in that cultural context – expects a much more relational approach than previous generations (Smaliukiene & Bekesiene, 2020). Using the classic carrot-versus-stick motivation principle, drill sergeants and college coaches alike might have used the stick side of the equation to motivate higher-quality performances, berating students for not meeting expectations. Generation Z's desire to understand the *why* behind their actions, however, means that “stick” motivators may actually prove ineffective, while providing a clear set of reasons for why a task needs to be accomplished and its relation to a broader picture could actually serve as a much better source of motivation, whether preparing military cadets or wide receivers on a football team.

Changing Relational Dynamics

To understand how coaches fit into the broader situation surrounding Generation Z's struggled with mental illness, understanding the ways that authority figures in other spheres of society are adapting to working with Generation Z can be informative in directing the practical changes needed to better reach Generation Z. Applying those broader principles of motivation to practical changes in communication styles and coaching techniques therefore has to begin with understanding how Generation Z views authority figures. In particular, Twenge highlights the ways that parental relationships with Generation Z students are changing, with young people

actually expecting more oversight than before from parents and other authority figures, working fewer jobs and engaging in activities viewed as rebellious considerably less as well (2017). This shift in reliance on authority can easily bleed into coach-athlete relationships, and with shifting relational dynamics, the power structures and aggressive methods that stereotypical coaches used in the past may become outmoded as student-athletes struggle with self-confidence and expect closer relationships with authority. For example, research conducted on coaching relationships in U.S. tennis found that coaches believe students are more sensitive to criticism, more easily confused by unclear communication, and more dependent on external motivation than previous generations, meaning that within the results-driven framework of sports, coaches have to recognize the trends that carry over from the workplace and education to ascertain how to best help students grow into functioning, healthy members of a team (Gould et al., 2020).

These differences in communication styles between previous generations and Generation Z, however, can be much more than simple communication problems, particularly when mental illness is involved. A study of two elite Norwegian athletes found that certain coaching behaviors, particularly when they are ignoring athletes' workloads and needs, can trigger depression, meaning that coaches aware of the concerns of their athletes need to adapt their approaches to regular team functions like criticism to help an athlete perform better (Kristiansen et al., 2012). Long gone are the days when it was a given that a coach could berate a player in front of the entire locker room and maintain a normal relationship – criticism and feedback now have to come in the context of the closer relationships that athletes often expect to have with their coaches.

New Communication Strategies

This reality means that practically, coaches must begin the process of adjusting to a world of more sensitive athletes by recognizing the ways current coaching strategies and methodologies need to adapt to a new generation of athletes. Though research on how those changes will apply to athletics has barely scratched the surface, other societal contexts, such as education, have had to ask similar questions of the relationship between authority figures and Generation Z students, and examining their practices will be instrumental to understanding how athletics might proceed.

Since the education system, particularly with colleges, is dealing with the same demographic as college athletic programs, the lessons academicians are learning can be applied to athletics programs as well, particularly in the relationship between professors and students regarding mental illness. Even in the classroom, professors are recognizing the different teaching styles Generation Z students require, with a 2019 article highlighting the fact that teachers who actively seem to care about their students' wellbeing were viewed by students as much more helpful. The study noted, "In particular, several elements emerged as repeatedly mentioned demonstrations of care: empathy, relatability, approachability, and encouraging enthusiasm" (Miller & Mills, 2019, p. 82). Those attempts at being personable and helping Generation Z students succeed can easily transfer into a coaching context, where athletes may respond better to criticism if it is couched in positive terms, for example.

Culture Changes

Though the administrative issues both colleges and athletics programs face in increasing the mental health resources available are one of the primary crucial areas of improvement that athletics programs are facing, moving forward in increasing mental health support will ultimately begin with personal relationships, meaning coaches and their behavior are the first line of

defense necessary to see serious progress. Certain techniques or mentalities will have to be unlearned, education will have to increase, and coaches will need to continue deepening their relationships with their athletes – even when it is difficult.

Regardless of the level of competition, a coach plays a crucial role in team culture, and ultimately his or her communication methods shape much of how a team will respond to issues from playoff losses to mental crises. Players' responses to stressful situations, their relationships to each other, and their relationships with authority are heavily influenced by the ways that coaches set expectations and foster team community – or lack thereof. For example, a study of Greek tennis players showed that coaches being more negative ultimately resulted in their athletes' mental states being harmed in certain contexts, a situation that can result in athletes being less open with coaches and reinforcing the preexisting stigma of toughness (Zourbanos et al., 2010). Teams where coaches intentionally counteract those stereotypes, improve education on mental health, and actively create an environment where athletes are encouraged to be honest ultimately may not stop mental illness in its tracks, but they provide an opportunity for athletes to get the help they need when they do struggle with mental illness. As the sports world evolves and education increases on the specifics of how coaches should handle individual situations, the role of the coach will continue to mirror the changing role of parents, deepening relationships with athletes, staying open for dialogue, and seeking to deepen communication in a way that sets expectations clearly and helps athletes function in a world increasingly defined by uncertainty.

Conclusion

In a world where sociologists and psychologists are only just beginning to understand the effects of social media and societal pressures on athletes and their overall mental wellbeing,

coaches being educated on those issues is ultimately the first step in addressing the rest of the chain of causes and consequences. Obviously, coaches cannot solve the collective psychological problems that Generation Z is currently facing, but within the confines of the sports world, recognizing what needs to change in order to better promote mental wellbeing for the new generation of collegiate and professional athletes is a crucial first step.

Ultimately, that process begins with reframing the way the competitive world of athletics – and, by extension, athletes themselves – is viewed, both by the industry and by connected worlds like fans. Athletics will always be about competition in various forms, and where competition driven by money exists, high-pressure situations will also exist that strain the minds of young people and add stressors beyond the challenges of everyday life. Within that lens, the question moves from addressing how to cut stressors out of the life of a student-athlete to recognizing ways that coaches and administrators can create an environment where those stressors are more manageable and where problems that do arise can be addressed in a healthy manner. Athletes like Kevin Love and DeMar DeRozan that invest time and energy in sharing their testimonies and creating charities to promote mental wellness begins that process, but the work of helping college students find their voice in the same manner is only just beginning and bringing more resources to bear in helping them with that process will be a crucial next step.

As Generation Z athletes move into professional sports as well, however, coaches across the board will have to grapple with these same realities, and the tension between elite performance and a caring environment will continue to increase as the mental issues of Generation Z continue to skyrocket and sports continue to commercialize. Ultimately, a coach is not responsible for micromanaging the mental health of his athletes, but at the bare minimum he

is responsible for taking steps to avoid directly damaging their mental wellness and providing a safe environment for athletes to grow into functioning members of society. Sports provide a platform for young people to mature as leaders like few other areas of society, but athletes need coaches to begin bridging that gap between generations and finding connection points with a generation more isolated than any other.

Important as they are, however, these changes are just one element of a shift in the sports world that the mental health crisis is underlining. A world where young adults with their own worth are shoved into the limelight, paid millions of dollars, and told to make a name for themselves in an increasingly commercialized sports industry has the potential to turn every player into a machine to be bought, traded, and worked into the ground for the success of the broader organization – whether an NBA team or a DI football program. The Generation Z mental health crisis highlights the fact that somehow, that reality will have to change. A new generation of talented athletes is taking the stage, but they want to be treated like humans – not automatons. Instead of taskmasters, coaches need to become mentors and friends in that process, taking a personal interest in their athletes' lives, understanding their struggles and opening the door to discuss anything from difficult breakups to panic attacks with their student-athletes. As Generation Z gradually takes over the sporting world, those changes will become more and more important – and the most successful coaches will adapt accordingly to ensure that their students are both healthy and successful.

Coaching A New Generation – Longform Story

Austin Cannon sat in his dorm room, a knife in his hand, asking himself what there was left to live for. The Virginia Tech offensive lineman was scared – but he just wanted the pain to stop.

The freshman from Mechanicsville, Virginia, was new to the school and the pressures of ACC football, and he had also just gone through the loss of his great-grandmother and his dog, a serious breakup and a cancer diagnosis for his father. To top it all off, he had just suffered a concussion in training camp that afternoon, and as he sat at his desk, head still spinning, he felt like suicide was the only way out – and he plunged the knife into his leg.

“I felt like the whole world came crashing down. Like I'm trying to hold it up, you know, above my head,” Cannon said. “But just seeing all the blood pouring out, I started to get weak. And then it clicked where I'm like, ‘Oh crap, I messed up big time. I (tried) to call the trainers, I'm like, ‘Hey, I'm not okay. Like, I just tried to kill myself and I need help, ASAP.’”

Athletic trainers, police and coaching staff flooded Cannon's apartment, stabilizing his leg to bring him to the hospital and ultimately to mental rehabilitation. Eventually, Cannon would recover, play a full college career for Virginia Tech's football team, and move on to coaching once he graduated. But in that moment, blood on the floor, Cannon just wanted to talk to Justin Fuente, his coach.

“All I wanted to do is talk to Coach, and so I got him to come over,” Cannon said. “He squatted down and held my hand and, I never cried that much in front of a man before. And I

was like, ‘Coach, I’m so sorry.’ And he was like, ‘There’s no need to be sorry. We’re going to get you help – everything’s going to be okay.’”

Cannon just needed his coach’s support in that moment – and that’s exactly what he had. Sadly, however, Cannon’s [story](#) is one that is becoming all too familiar across college sports as mental illness rates skyrocket among college-aged students, and some athletics programs are still woefully underprepared to meet that challenge. Coaches like Fuente across America today are facing a growing challenge much bigger than winning football games or running lacrosse drills – they are having to change out their playbooks to face an unprecedented mental health crisis among Generation Z athletes.

A Changing Environment

Though mental illness as a topic has been gaining awareness throughout society over the past couple of decades, the past few years have seen a sudden surge in understanding of mental health and mental illness throughout the sports world. Prominent athletes like NBA stars Kevin Love and DeMar DeRozan [discussing](#) their struggles with intense anxiety and depression began bringing discussions to the forefront, and the NCAA began to respond as well, putting together a set of [guidelines](#) in 2014 that aimed to put together a cohesive response to mental wellness among NCAA schools.

However, even as research has grown on the effects of mental illness on athletes, the new generation of athletes entering the world of NCAA and professional athletics is suffering from mental illness at increasingly staggering rates. Chris Yeager, a men’s soccer coach at the University of Lynchburg in Lynchburg, Virginia, is in his 19th year with the school’s soccer

program, but he has seen that reality develop firsthand over the past few years, and he thinks the situation is not even close to under control.

“It’s this huge wave that’s literally just ready to break on us. And it’s getting worse and worse,” Yeager said. “I’ve seen it in the last three years ... it seems like almost everyone (around college age) is coming in with some form of anxiety.”

For years, coaches were viewed in many contexts as emotionally distant leaders who expected their players to just control themselves and perform, no matter the cost to their mental or physical wellbeing. But a generation of student-athletes increasingly prone to emotional struggles often requires emotional connection with coaches as much as external motivation – and as a result, bringing coaching into the modern era has often required a perspective shift for coaches.

“Growing up and playing football, it was such a mentality of your football coaches (that) going through all that stuff (mental struggles), you kind of keep it to yourself internally, and you don’t go and have those conversations with those certain people,” Cannon said.

With rates of mental illness growing so quickly, however, coaches [cannot last long](#) in the industry without encountering an athlete struggling with mental illness – and maintaining a healthy team requires learning some difficult lessons. For Benjamin Walton, a women’s soccer coach at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, that first encounter came very soon after he started coaching.

“When I first started in 2003 as a head coach, I had one player who (had manic depression). And I was 23, trying to figure out how to deal with that,” Walton said. “And it was

really just hearing from her, and then helping her find help. She would come to me upset, and it's like, 'Okay, I'm not a counselor, I'm here, I'll listen to you – but (we're) taking you to the trainers ... (so) our doctors get you the right help. ... (Mental illness has) just shown up more and more as the years are going by.'"

Raising Awareness

With situations like Walton's, helping a struggling athlete can be a daunting task for an inexperienced coach. But misunderstanding the seriousness of mental-health related challenges can be seriously damaging to an athlete's wellbeing, especially because athletes already struggle to be honest about their feelings in a subculture that traditionally emphasizes toughness. As a result, educating coaches on how to create an open environment is often the first step in creating a mentally healthy team.

Jennifer Bondurant, director of the counseling center at Randolph College in Lynchburg, Virginia, shares that in her experience with athletes and coaches, using education to overcome the stigma of sharing about mental illness is the first step toward bridging any gaps that may exist.

"I think the feeling of being a strong performer, if you reach out for help you feel weak, I think that's magnified on the athletic scale," Bondurant said in a 2019 interview. "I think that stigma certainly still exists, that I can take care of it and fix it on my own. I don't think reaching out for help is as desired from an athletic standpoint. So, I think it takes a lot of education and awareness, and having some of these role models in more of the elite sports saying what they say is extremely helpful."

Often, however, the challenge at smaller schools – and occasionally, even at larger schools – is that counseling resources are [limited](#). With many schools providing a counseling center that serves all students, athletes' unique needs are sometimes passed over, meaning that they may find it harder to get help.

“I know that our counseling center here on campus is overwhelmed – absolutely overwhelmed,” Yeager said. “I always thought that if you need to get a job, go in the counseling world, because they should be hiring you as soon as you get out of school. Because you call up to get an appointment, and it's like, ‘Yeah, well, we'll see you in three months.’ And you're like, ‘No, I needed to be seen yesterday.’”

The position of specialist sports psychologist slots perfectly into that hole. Though smaller schools on the DII or DIII level with limited budgets rarely can afford to have a psychologist embedded within an athletics program, many DI schools [are increasingly relying](#) on specialists who work with their athletes every day and regularly educate coaches and athletics staff on everything from depression warning signs to proper protocol for helping students.

Dr. Gary Bennett is the head of Virginia Tech's athletics counseling, with his full-time sports psychologist position the first of its kind in the ACC when it was formed in 2007. He sees his full-time involvement in the day-to-day workings of the athletics department as key to making sure students are aware of his services – and increasing coaches' knowledge on the challenges of mental illness.

“It's just kind of a part of our culture, and part of the reason it's so heavily utilized is we don't just sit in our office waiting for people to come,” Bennett said in a 2020 Zoom interview.

“We’re out at practices, we work with teams, I’m part of our leadership institute, I do a lot of programming with students in general. ... We’ve experienced what it’s like to be in their shoes.”

Recognizing the Pressures of Sports

In the high-intensity world of sports, however, results are the ultimate goal – and that can easily come into conflict with mental health initiatives when coaches are trying to push players to their limits. For example, a 2012 [study](#) of Norwegian professional athletes examined the ways that coaches ignored the workload of two athletes, finding that ignoring the strain placed on the athletes resulted in serious pressure and ultimately depression for those athletes.

Though the pressures of competition will never be eliminated, coaches like Yeager are learning how to balance those concerns with the obvious need for driving athletes to their athletic limits to achieve success.

“I think it's still just trying to read kids, seeing what they need. You know, if they need the hug after practice, if they need the kick in the pants, always trying to get the best out of kids,” Yeager said. “It becomes, are we going to sacrifice this success that we may have for the betterment of the athlete? And I'm always going to choose the athlete, I'm never going to choose victories – or however you want to define success.”

At times, that balance means that coaches even have to adjust the way they communicate with their athletes. Though it could be interpreted by some more traditional coaches as coddling or babying athletes, coaches like Walton gradually have come to realize that adjusting to the new

generation's communication style ultimately keeps the team happier and creates better results in the long run – even if it does feel different.

“Every single time when I create a training session, I don't just think about how to make them a better soccer team,” Walton said. “I'm also going, ‘Alright, what stressors am I putting on that player?’ ... We started posting practice plans and telling them up front, ‘Hey, here's the game plan for the day. And this is what I need from you.’ ... And it was amazing. It worked. (Their) overall demeanor was much, much more consistent.”

In a multi-million dollar industry driven by income and results, players can easily become automatons within a system, with coaches berating their players for every mistake. Especially at the college level, however, the vast majority of college athletes will [never move on](#) to the professional world, and the ramifications of the game on their long-term mental wellbeing will ultimately be much more important than the results of a few seasons of college sports.

Neil Binette, the sports psychologist for Liberty University's DI athletics program, has encountered some situations where more traditional coaches have struggled to understand why the changes are necessary. Many coaches expect their players to just push through their mental struggles and fight for results anyway, but he believes that education is key to continuing to erode that mentality.

“Some coaches are maybe more old school and maybe just tell you to buck up and get to practice, and we are working with coaches to help them see the need for it,” Binette said in a 2019 interview. “But most coaches can recognize the mental aspect of the game, so we'll do some psychoeducation with the coaches or the teams and help them recognize what those mental health hindrances might be as it relates to performance.”

However, Binette believes that building an environment where coaches recognize warning signs and embrace the impact they have on their players will ultimately lead to a more healthy future for the sports world.

“Each team has a different culture – some sports are more prone to substance abuse, or overworking themselves,” Binette said. “There’s different trends within different teams, looking at those cultures. A lot of that starts from the top and trickles down, so having coaches increase their awareness around what they say and do and how that impacts their players and how it shows through their behaviors (is crucial).”

A Look Forward

Five years since that excruciating night in the Tech dorms, Cannon has finished his career at Virginia Tech and moved on to coaching high school football at Hanover High School in his hometown of Mechanicsville. The traumatic events he experienced ultimately serve as a reminder that his coaches cared about him – and reaching out is the first step for any athlete in getting help.

“You don't have to have an event like I had to realize that they do care about you as a human being,” Cannon said. “Because, you know, it was there all along. It's just, you have to go out of your way and say, ‘Hey, like, something's going on I need to talk to you about.’ ... I was very fortunate to be surrounded by a program like that ... It was hard at first, but then once I realized that they care about you as a human being, I knew I was in the right place.”

For Cannon, getting to coach high schoolers is an opportunity to help the next generation of athletes face their challenges head-on and create that environment for a new set of student-

athletes. Though he wants to help his players succeed on the field, he knows that his experiences off the field may turn out to be more important than any of his days suiting up for Virginia Tech.

“I always want to be an outlet, because I understand,” Cannon said. “I understand there's things going on in life, I understand there's stress, there's anxiety, if you're going through depression, I get it, I've been there. So, I want to use what I've learned from my experiences and give those tools to these kids. You know, because those kids shouldn't be sitting there in the dark.”

Audio Script

Yohanan Nekrasov: Virginia Tech offensive lineman Austin Cannon sat in his dorm room. He had a knife in his hand. The concussion he had just suffered in training camp had left his brain in a fog – and it was getting worse.

His father had just received a cancer diagnosis, his great-grandmother had died, his dog had died, he was trying to find his place as a freshman at a new school and a new team, and his girlfriend had just broken up with him. He felt like he had nothing left to live for – and plunged the knife into his leg.

Austin Cannon: “Just seeing all the blood pouring out, I started to get weak. And then it clicked where I'm like, ‘Oh crap, I messed up big time. Eventually, I tried to call the trainers, I'm like, ‘Hey, I'm not okay. Like, I just tried to kill myself and I need help, ASAP.’”

Yohanan Nekrasov: Thankfully, that moment wasn't the end of Austin's story. He called a trainer, and soon medical staff flooded his apartment. They started stabilizing him to be moved to the hospital, but he just wanted to talk to his coach – Justin Fuente.

Austin Cannon: “All I wanted to do is talk to Coach, and so I got him to come over. He squatted down and held my hand, and I'd never cried that much in front of a man before. And I was like, ‘Coach, I'm so sorry.’ And he was like, ‘There's no need to be sorry. We're going to get you help – everything's going to be okay.’”

Yohanan Nekrasov: Thanks to the support of his teammates and his coach, Cannon made it through rehab and ultimately made it onto the field for four seasons of ACC football. But he needed his coaches every step of the way, and that's what this story is about.

Over the past few years, pro athletes like NBA stars Kevin Love and DeMar DeRozan have started speaking up about their struggles with mental illness. Mental health isn't a new topic in the sports world.

But the place coaches have in this ever-expanding story hasn't been talked about very much. In fact, when I started asking some of these questions in 2019, many of the people in the sports world I talked to knew they were barely scratching the surface of the mental health challenges we're about to face.

For soccer coach Chris Yeager, a coach at the University of Lynchburg who has coached at the school for nearly 20 years, the challenges are just beginning.

Chris Yeager: "It's this huge wave that's literally just ready to break on us. And it's getting worse and worse. I've seen it in the last three years, I think it's because there are buzzwords now with anxiety, it seems like almost everyone (around college age) is coming in with some form of anxiety – or they think they have it."

With rates of mental illness among young athletes skyrocketing, matching the rates among college students across America, coaches can't last long in the industry without encountering an athlete struggling with mental illness. Yeager has faced some serious situations with his athletes in the past few years, including a case he was concerned was suicidal.

For the counseling staff that serve those athletes, regardless of the size of the school, helping educate coaches on the warning signs of mental illness is a huge first step.

But for some coaches, creating a team more aware of mental health doesn't just mean watching out for warning signs – it also means adjusting the ways they communicate. Generation Z

athletes often struggle with vague expectations, for example – and poor communication can cause their stress to amplify.

Benjamin Walton, a soccer coach at Kennesaw State, had numerous players tell him that, actually – and he decided to change communication styles to match his players' needs. It worked.

Benjamin Walton: “Every single time when I create a training session, I don't just think about how to make them a better soccer team. I'm also going, ‘Alright, what stressors am I putting on that player?’ So where back then it wasn't really something I thought of, now it's like, ‘Alright, we need heart fitness today, I know that's going to stress my players out.’ So, with my leaders I tell them in advance, I said them a text, ‘Hey, we're doing this, this and this today, be prepared. Let your teammates know, get their mindset right about it.’”

Whether clarifying details or using positive language to soften criticism, today's coaches are learning how to balance success in competitions with the need to manage athletes' mental health – and that takes time and education.

And that takes us back around to Cannon's story. Austin eventually made it back on the field, played four seasons for Virginia Tech, and finished his college career last year. Now, he coaches at a high school in his hometown of Mechanicsville, Virginia, and he's looking to apply the lessons he learned as a football player to help the next generation of athletes.

Austin Cannon: “I didn't want to be a coach just to win football games. Of course, that's the ultimate goal. I always want to be an outlet, because I understand. I understand there's things going on in life, I understand there's stress, there's anxiety, if you're going through depression, I

get it, I've been there. So, I want to use what I've learned from my experiences and give those tools to these kids. You know, because those kids shouldn't be sitting there in the dark, all alone. I want to be that guiding light for them.”

Building a sports world where athletes can be open about their struggles won't be easy. But through coaches like Cannon, we may be taking our first steps toward that future.

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