

**No Longer a Sign of Weakness? Media Reporting on Mental Ill Health in Sport**

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### **Abstract**

This study analysed media framing of athletes who have suffered mental ill health. The mass media play a crucial role in shaping public attitudes and perceptions surrounding mental health and the present study aimed to examine the media reporting of athletes' mental ill health, and to further explore how this reporting has changed over time. We examined the reporting of elite athletes in three United Kingdom media outlets between January 2000 and December 2019, identifying 75 athletes from 26 different sports. From analysis, four themes were developed to consider the content of media reporting and how it has changed over three time phases. The analysis revealed that media reporting of mental ill health has increased over time, and changes were observed in terms of the specific terminology used, with greater depth in the articles, such as journalists speaking to other professionals to construct the articles. This study contributes towards our growing understanding of the reporting of mental ill health by providing empirical evidence of the increased attention to the topic and increasingly responsible reporting within the media.

*Keywords:* mental ill health, sport, media reporting, framing, masculinity

### **No Longer a Sign of Weakness? Media Reporting on Mental Ill Health in Sport**

According to NHS England (2020), one in four adults will experience some form of mental ill health during their lifetime. Despite the prevalence of mental ill health, there is a long-standing public stigma attached to mental illness, and towards those suffering with its affects (Bauman, 2016; Sieff, 2003). Public stigma can be referred to as a “belief that society perceives seeking help for mental health treatment as undesirable and individuals who seek help are socially unacceptable” (Hilliard et al., 2022, p. 1476). This public stigmatisation has meant that the topic has, for a very long time, also been ignored (Gorczyński et al., 2021). As a result, many people who have a diagnosed mental health disorder will experience social anxiety, low self-esteem, and a desire to withdraw from others (Bowen & Lovell, 2013). These conditions make it unlikely for those with mental health disorders to seek help, which is a problem that is more so the case with elite athletes (Bu et al., 2020). Given that elite sport creates an environment that is rife with stressors, such as performance expectations or media scrutiny, it may be expected that elite athletes will experience mental ill health in high numbers (Purcell et al., 2022). However, due to sport’s longstanding associations with hegemonic masculine ideals, elite athletes have been expected to display mental toughness to the extent that instances of mental ill health have frequently been hidden by elite athletes. Thus, a greater understanding of the mental health of elite athletes, and factors that might influence public stigmatisation, is needed.

As sport is increasingly consumed via media platforms, framing theory, or frame analysis as it was initially termed (Goffman, 1974), can be used to understand the media’s construction of knowledge. This approach recognises the role that the mass media play in shaping societal conceptions of sport and societal perceptions through sport. Similarly, the mass media play a crucial role in framing attitudes and perceptions surrounding mental ill health and those that suffer with it (Cassilo, 2022 Parrott et al., 2021). For example, media

representation of the topic continues to have an over-association with dangerous and violent tendencies (Bowen & Lovell, 2013), which contributes to stigmatising understanding of mental illness (Bowen & Lovell, 2021). Thus, the framing of mental health in the mass media can have detrimental effects, with those that suffer with mental ill health often experiencing housing, employment, education, and medical discrimination (Rüsch et al., 2005). Therefore, a more positive, or fairer, media representation could challenge negative public perceptions and ease the stigma surrounding mental health issues (Klin & Lemish, 2008). It should be noted that celebrity mental ill health disclosures may not be as effective as non-celebrity disclosures in reducing public stigma of mental illness as the former group are viewed as dissimilar to the general population and less likeable (Corrigan et al., 2022). However, this lack of effectiveness may not be the same when it comes to sports celebrities who are viewed as more likeable than other celebrities and worthy of emulation (Parry, 2009).

The current study seeks to gain an understanding of media reporting of mental ill health within professional sport, a context where there has been a lack of understanding of the topic (Smith & Runswick, 2021). The idea that an athlete should be a warrior that endures pain stoically is archaic (Parry et al., 2022) but endures and contributes to explaining why athletes may have struggled historically to publicly disclose their mental ill health (Messner, 2013). There has recently been an increase in research examining mental health in elite sport contexts and a recognition that athletes are at least as likely to experience mental health problems as the general population (Poucher et al., 2021a). It has also been argued, based on anecdotal evidence, that elite athletes are now speaking about their mental ill health in greater numbers and have been treated more favourably after disclosing mental health problems (Parry et al., 2019). Our study aims to provide empirical evidence for how the British media report the mental ill health of elite athletes, detailing the ways that mass media frame mental ill health, and how reporting of mental ill health has changed in the twenty first century. Our

focus on British media and elite athletes adds to the existing body of work that has typically focussed North American contexts (e.g., Cassilo, 2022; Cassilo, & Kluch, 2023; Lavelle, 2021; Parrott et al., 2020; Parrott et al., 2021).

### **Mental Health of Elite Athletes – an Issue of Masculinity**

The concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) can explain why elite athletes may be reluctant to disclose a mental illness diagnosis because mental toughness and mental strength are seen as key elements of masculine ideals (Muir et al., 2022). Trujillo (1991) identifies physical force and control (over both the body and the mind) as one of the five characteristics of hegemonic masculinity and, despite medical science dictating that mental ill health in many cases cannot be controlled, it has been viewed as a weakness. Interestingly, professional athletes utilising sports psychologists are accepted and even expected in modern sport, but seeking help with a mental health problem has previously been seen as a taboo topic (Merz et al., 2020).

Furthermore, elite athletes are discouraged from showing emotions related to sadness, as they are deemed less masculine when they do so (Lavelle, 2021). MacMullan (2018) found that some coaches deemed mental ill health to be a ‘liability’, while it is also believed to impact negatively upon an athlete’s career success in terms of being selected for a team or being recruited by other teams (Leonard, 2017). Within sport, there has been a separation of the body and the mind, with disclosures of the side-lining of athletes due to physical injury a routine and unproblematic part of sporting life (Elsley et al., 2023). However, as we note below, when elite athletes are absent for reasons relating to mental health concerns, the media has, historically, not reported favourably on them. Elsley et al. also highlight the challenge for athletes in defining, describing or conceptualising their mental health issues while simultaneously wishing to retain a degree of privacy as they undergo assessment and treatment. Smith and Runswick (2021) highlight negative media reporting on issues of mental

ill health was a likely contributor to elite athletes experiencing additional stress and was seen to be detrimental to recovery.

The media plays a crucial role in how messages relating to the health of elite athletes are received and interpreted in masculine sporting environments (Parry et al., 2021a) and a growing number of studies have examined the role of media framing in sport. However, research surrounding the reporting of mental ill health in the media, and the way the media frames the mental ill health of athletes is still limited, particularly in the United Kingdom (UK) context. It is this gap that the current study seeks to fill.

### **Room for Improvement in Media Reporting**

Researchers have highlighted previously areas of concern in the media reporting of the mental health of celebrity figures, such as elite athletes. Van den Bulck (2017) examined celebrity health narratives, and identified how media stories often provided limited and even sceptical medical information on mental ill health. Similarly, when the media identified a single factor as contributing to a deterioration of mental health, this presented an incomplete and simplified narrative which ignores the substantial complexities that surround the issue (Lavelle, 2021). Furthermore, stigma researchers recommend that journalists adopt a “nothing about them without them mentality” when it comes to covering athletes and their mental ill health, by speaking to the athletes themselves when reporting on their mental health (Corrigan, 2017, p. 82). By including the athlete voice, media consumers may get much more detailed and accurate information about individual cases, which will allow a deeper understanding of the topic. Without these insights from athletes, reporting can often be speculative or inaccurate on the details of a specific case and mental health generally.

When it comes to reporting on the mental health of athletes, it is often common practice for current or past coaches and players to be used as official sources in addition to, or more worryingly, in place of medical professionals (White et al., 2022). These sources play a

key role in media framing as, in the case of breaking news stories, they set the framing process in motion (Entman, 1993). When the views given in the media contain inaccurate information on mental ill health, this can be detrimental to the wider understanding of mental health matters. The affects that such frames of mental ill health could have on the acceptance of the mentally ill in society may be long-lasting and dangerous. Consistently framing mental ill health inaccurately offers a lazy definition of what mental ill health and its affects look like, potentially presenting mental ill health in a negative manner (McCombs, 1997).

### **Media Framing**

Framing theory (Goffman, 1974) has been utilised as a way of explaining the media's position of power in shaping public opinion. Essentially, framing relies heavily on the selection or omission of key pieces of information within a text to encourage a particular conclusion, moral evaluation and / or treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993). In simple terms, frames identify a problem, evaluate it, and prescribe the best way to move forward (Gamson, 1992). Entman devised a four-step framework that journalists undertake to effectively encode discourses. They first define specific problems based on the costs and benefits that certain representations have, combined with their own or their company's agenda that they are trying to push, as well as the common cultural ideologies of the public; second, journalists identify the forces creating the problems; third is the recommendation of a potential solution; finally, they extend moral evaluations. Frames highlight certain pieces of information in order to increase their salience (Entman, 1993), heightening the likelihood that receivers will process a particular piece of information and remember it, which may alter or strengthen judgements of the topic (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). The general public, when less-informed, have been shown to be influenced by media framing within a sporting context (Kim et al., 2017; Parry et al., 2022; Santos et al., 2013).

In the media, sports stars are frequently displayed as heroic for their sporting achievements (Parry, 2021) but elite athletes have not always been venerated in the same way when they have used their profile to raise awareness of mental health issues. Recently, a series of high-profile players have begun to disclose publicly mental illnesses. For example, in the National Basketball Association (NBA), Kevin Love, Royce White, and DeMar DeRozan have spoken about their mental health and these disclosures have given rise to a growing body of research on the media framing of mental illness (e.g., Cassilo, 2022; Cassilo, & Kluch, 2023; Lavelle, 2021; Parrott et al., 2020; Parrott et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2022). Parrott et al. (2021) found that news stories of Love and DeRozan framed the athletes as strong characters for disclosing mental health battles in a sport culture that frequently stigmatises any potential weaknesses. It was also identified that there was an increased awareness of the topic of mental health in sport (Cassilo, 2022). Significantly, Cassilo argues that the coverage of DeRozan and White humanises the experience of mental ill health and is suggestive of changes in the conceptualisation of masculinity among athletes. In a separate analysis of fan responses to their mental health disclosures, Parrott et al. (2020) found that public responses were overwhelmingly positive, which increases the acceptance of mental ill health disclosures. However, Lavelle (2021) notes that there were enduring associations between mental ill health and weakness, which meant that mental health problems were seen as incompatible with competitive sporting success. Lavelle claims that these links may be detrimental to elite athletes seeking treatment for their illness for fear of stigmatization and so there is clearly scope for improvement in media reporting on this topic.

Elsewhere, analyses of mental ill health disclosures by other elite athletes have revealed that media framing of these events is often intersectional in its nature. Lavelle (2022) found that the disclosures of Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) basketballer Liz Cambage provided counter stories that challenged media stereotypes around



Black women and mental health. Previously the Strong Black Woman stereotype had discouraged mental ill health disclosures and limited the support that the WNBA provided to athletes. Similarly, Thompson et al. (2022) employed framing theory to analyse media coverage of American gymnast Simone Biles and identified that her gender and race featured prominently in the frames found. This study also identified differences in media reporting on the mental ill health of elite athletes based on whether the publications were domestic (from the same country as the athlete) or international. In this instance, domestic (US) sources were found to be more likely to mention Biles' race. Given these national differences, it is important for further research in contexts other than North American, which has been the basis of the majority of studies in this area. The current study, therefore, contributes towards our growing understanding of the reporting of the mental health of elite athletes by examining media coverage of the topic in the UK. By examining both the frequency and framing of the topic we provide empirical evidence for increased attention to the topic and a more welcoming and knowledgeable environment within sport. Our study has two main aims. First, we aim to provide a thorough examination of media reports on the subject of mental ill health of elite athletes. Second, we aim to analyse how media reporting of mental ill health in elite sport has changed over time.

### **Method**

To retrieve articles involving media reporting of the mental ill health of elite athletes, an online search via a university repository was conducted. This search used a combination of the word "sport" (or individual sport names such as "football", "rugby", "cricket") with terms around mental ill health (e.g., "mental health", "mental ill health", "depression", "anxiety", "burnout", and "stress"). These search terms were chosen because they encapsulate key areas of mental ill health (NHS England, 2020). In line with the aims of the study, the focus of the search was reports in the UK media. A further criterion was searching for articles between

January 2000 and December 2019, with this focus on elite athletes in the last 20 years due to the availability of online articles in this time period. In addition, the cut off of December 2019 was just before the Covid-19 pandemic commenced. We acknowledge that the pandemic has dramatically increased the number of mental ill health cases in the general population (WHO, 2022) and so this end date for data collection allowed the focus of the current study to remain on general mental health reporting and not issues compounded by Covid-19-related problems. Thus, the search was filtered to locate articles for each year in turn, which allowed optimal identification and organisation of relevant articles about athletes. In this process, we had no restriction on age, sport, gender, or the nationality of the athletes.

### **Sample**

A list of athletes who had received media attention for mental ill health was recorded in a table, including their name, sport, date of reporting mental health issue, and primary mental health issue. The final list included 75 elite athletes (male = 60; female = 15) from 26 different sports (a full breakdown of sports is provided in Table 1). For each athlete, a further search was conducted to find an online article about their mental ill health in one of three UK media sources, *BBC Sport*, *The Guardian*, and *The Daily Mail*, to give us a range of perspectives from varying types of media. In our selection of these three outlets, we followed Parry et al.'s (2021a) division of media sources, with *BBC Sport* identified as a sports news website, *The Guardian* a compact, quality newspaper, and *The Daily Mail* as a Tabloid newspaper. We selected one article per athlete from each source, to avoid repetition of sources, and to make the analysis manageable. If the source had multiple articles about an athlete's mental ill health, we chose the first one chronologically to take forwards for analysis. We chose the article published first for consistency, and also due to it being the closest chronologically to the news breaking about the athlete's mental ill health. While we are aware that factors such as the athlete's gender and ethnicity may be influential in the

framing of media reporting (Thompson et al., 2022), we did not include this layer of complexity in our study. We do acknowledge that an intersectional approach to this area of study may be beneficial, however, we felt it beyond the scope of the aims of the current study.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

### **Analysis Strategy**

A data driven approach was used to allow researchers to search for patterns in the data, and thus, develop themes from these patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second and third authors read through all the articles to generate initial themes. As part of this process, the researchers noted any aspects in the articles with regards to mental ill health that could be used to develop initial themes. For example, coding involved examining the level of detail that was provided when reporting on mental ill health and reflections on the language used in reports, with particular attention paid to whether this was framed positively or negatively. After doing this separately, the two researchers met to compare their coding of the data, and this process ultimately resulted in the development of four themes. Authors one and four then acted as critical friends to challenge the researchers on their analysis (Smith & McGannon, 2018). For example, the first theme was around the depth of reporting in articles. In conversations within the research team, we discussed how this theme was specifically linked with how articles increasingly incorporated comments from experts to provide detail on mental ill health within the articles. After discussions, this theme was titled *Greater engagement with official sources* to reflect the input of such experts. Furthermore, our themes were not finalised until all of the data had been read through and all of the research team had scrutinised the coding (Nowell et al., 2017). These meaningful interactions and dialogue as a team were seen as important in increasing the likelihood that our themes and findings will be seen as credible and trustworthy (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

## Results

A total of 233 articles were identified; the breakdown across the three publications was as follows: *BBC Sport* published 84 articles (36.05%), *The Guardian* 79 (33.90%), and *The Daily Mail* 70 (30.03%). There was a total of 145 incidents from 26 sports across the three publications, with some incidents reported in multiple publications. Association football was the most commonly discussed sport ( $n = 54$ ), followed by cricket ( $n = 14$ ), and rugby ( $n = 13$ ). This distribution of sports reflects the relative interest in these sports in the UK and also historical trends in media reporting (Boyle & Haynes, 2009).

Figure 1 shows the number of articles published from 2000 to 2019 and the temporal distribution (i.e., year-by-year) of these articles. We have identified three phases in media reporting across our twenty years of analysis. The first of these is the period 2000-2011, which we term *superficial awareness*. It had 47 articles and we found little variation in frequency or detail across years – a finding consistent with that of Lewison et al. (2012) who record a consistent number of reports on ‘mental disorders’ from the *BBC* between 2000 and 2007. Second was the *transition to acceptance* phase ( $n = 68$  articles) from 2012- 2016, where although there was a steady increase in media reporting there were frequent misconceptions. Finally, from 2017 onwards, we term the *enlightened openness* phase ( $n = 118$ ). It is apparent that from 2017, there has been a notable increase in media reporting on elite athletes’ mental ill health and, as we will show, a greater positivity shown towards elite athletes who have opened up about their mental health issues. In seeking to explain these temporal divisions, we note that 2012 was the year the Summer Olympics was held in England, and thus, explains a spike in media reporting in sport occurred at around this time. 2017 coincided with the #MeToo movement, which may explain this second increase in reporting of mental ill health, with people (including high profile athletes) being more willing to share and report stories describing difficult personal issues. We do acknowledge that the

increased shift towards online reporting by newspapers (Rowe, 2011) may also be a factor due to the greater availability of online articles, but this trend was consistent across publications, including *BBC Sport*, which has always been an online-only outlet.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

### **Discussion**

In this next section, we identify four thematic frames that arose from our analysis: Greater engagement with official sources; From general to precise terminology; Acknowledging the need for education and support; and The need for a cultural change within sport. In addition, we detail whether and how each of these themes shifted over time to examine how media reporting on mental health has changed.

#### **Greater Engagement with Official Sources**

Throughout the articles retrieved, journalists generally spoke to three groups of official sources (White et al., 2022) to gain deeper insight into elite athletes' experiences of mental ill health and to frame this reporting. These three sources were i) family and friends, ii) professionals and governing bodies, and iii) colleagues. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of how often the journalists spoke to each of these groups, and how this changed from 2000 to 2019. The main difference was the increase in speaking to professionals and governing bodies, such as sport psychologists, chief executives of mental health charities, and representatives from the Professional Footballers' Association. Stigma researchers recommend that journalists adopt a "nothing about them without them" mentality when it comes to covering elite athletes and their mental health (Corrigan, 2017, p. 82) so that media consumers get much more detailed and accurate information. As such, a shift towards a greater use of mental health professionals as official sources in media reports appears to provide a more balanced discussion, with greater depth and less focus on masculine ideals. It has been shown that those working within the sport industry are often embedded within the

deeply ingrained cultural ethos and scripts of sport, that not only demands sacrifice and a stoical acceptance of suffering, but that can also result in ill-informed or erroneous comments (White et al., 2022). Those in positions of power have often reached their positions through overconforming to the dominant norms of sport that have traditionally reinforced hegemonic masculinity (Parry et al., 2021b), and are thus less likely to understand aspects that may be seen as ‘soft’ or weak, such as mental health issues.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

### **From General to Precise Terminology**

Analysis of the media reports revealed a number of interesting patterns in how the three publications were reporting on mental health in terms of the language used within the reports. Table 2 details the frequency of specific terms across our three time periods. The four most frequently used terms were depression ( $n = 223$ ), mental health issue / problem ( $n = 103$ ), suicide / suicidal ( $n = 95$ ), and anxiety ( $n = 69$ ). Figure 3 shows how often these terms were used across the three time periods. This graph shows a gradual increase in the frequency of reference to mental health issue / problem and anxiety, while the word suicide / suicidal has remained relatively constant. The use of depression has fluctuated across the three periods.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

It is argued that elite athletes may be more predisposed to depression than the general population (Poucher, et al. 2021b) so it may be unsurprising that this term was used so frequently in media reports. However, prior to 2017, the term depression was used to label the majority of mental health struggles, peaking during the 2012-2016 period. For example, in 2014, it was revealed that Jonathan Trott was “burn[ed] out but not depressed” as was previously stated by news reports. However, at the end of 2016 a sport psychiatrist said that

Trott had anxiety not depression. Another example of how mental health terminology has progressed is in 2019 when the BBC used the terms “anxiety”, “depression”, and “bulimia” to inform the reader on what Billy Kee was receiving treatment for. In the *enlightened openness* phase, more accurate terms were used such as Keyon Dooling suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, whereas in the *superficial awareness* phase Robert Enke, Marcus Trescothick, and Stan Collymore were all labelled “depressed” in news articles.

Similarly, the use of the phrase stress-related illness, which Smith and Runswick (2021) found to be a common descriptor employed in reports on athletes’ mental health problems, occurs at the start of our study period but is less frequently utilised within our later *enlightened openness* phase. There has been a shift away from these two labels towards the use of the broader term mental health issue / problem. Mental health is also a generic term, indicative of a state of wellbeing, but it has more positive connotations. The addition of *issue / problem*, therefore, points towards a move away from this harmonious state. However, mental health issue / problem remains a rather broad term, and Lavelle (2021, p. 963) argues that both the media and athletes may be more comfortable with broad terms “because specificity about conditions or symptoms may demonstrate weakness” that is incompatible with the culture of hegemonic masculinity in sport. In the *enlightened openness* phase, we found greater reference to specific mental health conditions such as anxiety and panic attacks, and a wider variety of terminology was used, such as eating disorders, self-harm, and bipolar (as shown in Table 2). This shift is indicative of the greater depth that media reports provided in this period, where articles were more inclined to discuss the specifics of mental health. It is also suggestive of a move away from a reliance on hegemonic masculinity and a tendency to view details on mental ill health as a weakness.

The language used in articles also featured personification of mental health struggles, with 28 per cent of articles using the term “battle” to describe the athlete’s experience. For

example, *BBC Sport* describes Robert Enke as being in “a battle with depression”. Similarly, Marvin Sordell was described as being “haunted by ghosts”, with the ghost being his mental illness. Other articles used phrases familiar to the athlete's sport, such as *The Guardian* describing MMA wrestler Ronda Rousey's mental health struggles as her opponent. It has been previously shown that media reporting on mental ill health employs metaphors, with this most likely to be found in tabloid newspapers (Clement & Foster, 2008). While we do not have sufficient data to examine this trend it would be useful for future studies to explore the link between publication type and the use of metaphors. This form of language can be related back to hegemonic masculine ideals whereby sport is viewed as battle or struggle against an opponent. Through personification, illnesses are presented in more corporeal forms that may be easier for those that follow sport to comprehend. Similarly, MacLean et al. (2015), who examined UK newspaper reporting on eating disorders between 2002 and 2012, found that males with these issues were presented as being atypical and, furthermore, were feminised or demasculinised within media reports. Therefore, when portrayed in such a manner, the mental health illness might be overcome through strength and toughness, key tenets of traditional forms of masculinity, and any admission to weakness can be minimised. However, this description of a battle is particularly significant as it has been found that the use of metaphors as a framing element may lessen the perceived seriousness of an illness (Chopra & Doody, 2007). Therefore, metaphorical presentations of battles against mental ill health continue to be problematic and indicate that there is still room for improvement in reporting.

### **Acknowledging the Need for Education and Support**

Our findings identify the continued need for education of athletes and reporters on mental health issues, with twenty-three articles displaying a lack of understanding or awareness by either those who were experiencing mental health problems or from those



around them. For example, some athletes thought they were immune from suffering with mental health problems, with golfer Dean Robertson stating that he "...didn't believe it at first. How can a professional golfer...have depression?" (quoted in Donegan, 2005, para. 5). Athletes also appeared to show a general lack of understanding on mental health problems and the symptoms that accompanied them. For example, high jumper Jayne Nisbet suffered with bulimia without knowing it because she genuinely thought losing weight was helping her sport. However, more positively, thirty-one articles provided some degree of education for readers on aspects related to mental health. Goulden et al. (2011) note that there had been a similar shift in the early 2000s whereby media publications between 1992 and 2008 showed an increase in explaining psychiatric disorders when reporting on them. We also observed a greater tendency to provide reports based on research and articles that included links to helplines and charities that are able to offer advice and support (see Figure 2). Such an outcome is consistent with the findings of White et al. (2022) who noted a growing tendency for UK-based media outlets to provide education on wider public health issues within sport reporting. *The Guardian*, a centre-left publication (Smith, 2017) was most likely to include links to helplines, with details in 30.4 per cent ( $n = 24$ ) of their articles, while *BBC Sport* provided details in 17 articles (20.2 per cent) and *The Daily Mail* in 11.4 per cent ( $n = 8$ ) of articles.

Within this theme, articles also provided education that aimed to reposition the importance of sport within wider society, highlighting the tendency for those involved in sport to overconform and to prioritise sport above considerations of personal health and wellbeing. Hegemonic masculine ideals have long required athletes to sacrifice their body and wellbeing in the pursuit of success, however twenty-seven articles put sport in perspective, emphasising the need to prioritise wellbeing over athletic success. Such articles often drew on personal accounts of athletes such as manager Brendan Rodgers, discussing

footballer Leigh Griffiths, who suggested how football should come second to the player's health;

He [Griffiths] is struggling and the best thing we feel is for him to get better. Yes, it leaves us short but that is irrelevant. This is our values. It is always the player and the person's welfare. That is what is most important. (Rodgers cited in McGowan, 2018)

Jonathan Trott highlighted a similar issue regarding not making personal wellbeing a priority, reflecting how he had put playing cricket first to the point where it made him ill. This was demonstrated by Trott highlighting how he had pushed himself so hard that he lost sleep, before reaching a 'breaking point'. The stress and lack of enjoyment that elite athletes can be faced with was made clear by footballer Marvin Sordell, who stated that he was happier now that he has moved on from the "ugly side of the game...that had a hugely detrimental effect on my mental health" (quoted in *The Guardian*, 2019). Therefore, articles that challenge the prioritisation of sport over wellbeing, and articles that provide greater education on mental ill health might have a positive impact on societal attitudes. In turn, this may influence greater self-reporting behaviours amongst not only elite athletes but also the wider population.

### **The Need for a Cultural Change Within Sport**

There was a large number of articles ( $n = 57$ ) that not only discussed the athlete, but also referred to the support that sporting structures (for example clubs, coaches or governing body) had offered to athletes. These articles reveal a somewhat mixed picture in terms of the acceptance that was afforded, or not, to elite athletes with mental health problems. Some athletes claimed that they were not accepted, with this pattern most apparent in the earlier years within our analysis. For example, footballer David James (2006) stated in an article in *The Guardian* that he was not expected to ask for help and that seeking help was stigmatised. Alex Rae, a footballer, also stated that he was worried about the potential repercussions for his career if it became known that he was addicted to alcohol (Ridley, 2002). Going on, Rae

added that many players were reluctant to speak to their club about mental health issues that they were faced with. Italian rugby union player Andrea Lo Cicero claimed that his club did not believe that was experiencing depression and had even demanded a medical certificate to support his claim (BBC Sport, 2003).

By our second temporal phase, between 2012 and 2016, there is evidence for increased awareness and acceptance of mental health issues. Nevertheless, this acceptance and the positive discussions that were evident, were generally not supported with evidence of direct action. For example, it was reported in *The Daily Mail* that rugby league player Darius Boyd had admitted himself into a “mental health facility” due to depression (AAP, 2014, para. 1). It was reported that a statement on his club’s website noted that he was not due to return to playing for the remainder of the season to focus on his recovery, with the club’s chief executive quoted as saying “...depression is a serious illness in our society and we are pleased Darius has taken the first step in his recovery by acknowledging he needs help” (Gidley quoted in AAP, 2014, para. 19). However, within this statement, there was no indication that the club would, or even felt they needed, to take any action to support Boyd. As further evidence for the lack of support, Crace (2013) documented the struggles of former England footballers Paul Gascoigne and Kenny Sansom, and stated that although football clubs were making progress, they still had a long way to go to offer a supportive environment. Similarly, former footballer turned boxer, Leon McKenzie, praised the chief executive of the Professional Footballers’ Association for his support, but also pointed towards a general lack of support from elsewhere within football for failing to broach the subject of mental health. He claimed that it took the death by suicide of former Wales international, and then manager of the Welsh national football team, Gary Speed, for the sport to take mental ill health seriously (Riach, 2015).

In our third temporal phase, articles made reference to the support that athletes were receiving from sporting structures, and how athletes had been thankful for such support in a number of instances. Footballer Leigh Griffiths spoke of the help and support that he had received from both his manager and the club's supporters. Similarly, footballer Kelly Smith acknowledged a conversation with Hope Powell, the then England women's manager, as helping her with her problems (South, 2017). Nevertheless, the inherent masculinity within sport was still apparent within this temporal phase. For example, Olu Maintain, who was released as a footballer at the age of 18 (Rotherham & Jones, 2019) and England men's national team manager Gareth Southgate (Lambert, 2019) have spoken of a widespread reluctance amongst football players to open up and discuss their emotions, or to admit that they were struggling for fear of appearing 'weak'. In a *BBC Sport* article on Wales footballer David Cotterill, it was claimed that "These were times and moments he would never dare discuss in front of managers or team-mates, fearful more of the consequences of opening up than of death" (Watham, 2018, para. 6).

As has been argued previously (see Parry et al., 2021b), sport and particularly those that run sporting organisations, have lagged behind when it comes to social movements, and have been seen to be slow to adapt to shifts when it comes to the acceptance of mental ill health. Given that attitudes within sport can be shaped by those that run sporting organisations, it is important that these individuals provide leadership and offer not only acceptance for elite athletes experiencing mental ill health, but also offer meaningful support for them, as has been advocated previously in the context of the WNBA (Lavelle, 2022). The evidence presented in our analysis of media articles suggests that there is some way to go for this situation to be realised.

### **Conclusion**

This paper aimed to examine media coverage of mental ill health of professional athletes and to consider if and how this reporting has changed over time. We identify that there has been an increase in media coverage around incidences of mental ill health, which we explain in the context of global social movements, along with a gradual acceptance and increased understanding of mental ill health observed in the three sources, *BBC Sport*, *The Guardian*, and *The Daily Mail*. Within these reports, we identified four themes: Greater engagement with official sources; From general to precise terminology; Acknowledging the need for education and support; and The need for a cultural change within sport. The first of these themes reflected an increased use of mental health professionals to provide a more balanced discussion with greater depth of reporting. We next found that when mental health disorders were discussed within articles, there was a noticeable shift towards the use of the term mental health issue or problem over the course of our analysis. Our third theme identified that although articles were increasingly likely to include education on mental ill health, less than a third included links to helplines for readers that may be experiencing similar situations, indicating an area for improvement in media reporting. Finally, our fourth theme suggested how reports that discussed the support structures available to elite athletes via their clubs or from governing bodies of sport provided evidence for a gradual acceptance and increased support from these bodies, but challenges to complete acceptance remained due to the enduring influence of masculinity in sport and the influence of organisational cultural lag.

This paper, therefore, provides evidence for an improving understanding of mental ill health within the UK media when reporting on elite athletes. We also conclude that reporting on this topic has become more responsible, which has the potential to increase understanding of mental ill health within the wider population, and in turn, reduce stigmatisation. This shift is reflective of a society that is moving away from hegemonic masculine ideals which

previously meant that athletes had to endure any suffering and be in denial of mental health concerns. While we have highlighted a broadly positive trend in reporting, we nonetheless identify areas where improvements are still needed. The most noticeable of these areas for improvement is perhaps the need for greater inclusion of links to helplines and charities that can offer advice and support to readers – an inclusion that is identified as good practice in media reporting on topics such as suicide (John et al., 2014). We also recommend that media reporting includes precise terminology when reporting on mental ill health, providing details on specific illnesses when known and avoiding speculation. As an example, the term depression should only be used when a diagnosis of depression has been revealed. Finally, it is important that those reporting on mental ill health of elite athletes either use mental health professionals or the elite athletes themselves as official sources, rather than utilising fellow athletes who have been shown to downplay the significance of injuries and to adhere to hegemonic masculine ideals (White et al., 2022).

As elite athletes disclosing mental illnesses becomes more normalised, the potential for further research grows and widens. Given that this study has revealed some distinct findings from earlier studies conducted with samples from the US, it is recommended that further studies examine media framing of elite athletes and mental health in different cultural and national settings to understand similarities and differences in this area. Future studies should also consider differences in reporting on the basis of whether the source is from the same country as the athlete or not, given that Thompson et al. (2022) noted the place of publication as a factor in media reporting on Simone Biles. A cross-cultural design could also be adopted to understand better these national differences. We also acknowledge the lack of balance in the number of male and female athletes in our study, with the greater number of reports on male athletes reflective of media reporting in the UK over the last 20 years. Furthermore, it was beyond the scope of the present study to examine gender differences in

reporting. As there has been a shift towards a more balanced reporting of male and female sports (Parry et al., 2021a), future research might explore the specific differences in reporting of mental ill health depending on gender. Similarly, it was beyond the scope of the present study to look at differences in reporting for race and ethnicity, and future research might investigate such differences. Finally, as we note earlier, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic might also be considered, with further studies examining media reporting of mental ill health during this period.

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**Table 1**

*Number of Incidents by Sport*

<b>Sport</b>	<b>Number of incidents</b>
Association football	54
Cricket	14
Rugby	13
Boxing	8
Swimming	8
Athletics	7
Basketball	7
Tennis	5
American football	4
Hockey	3
Wrestling	3
Australian football	2
Cycling	2
Golf	2
Snowboarding	2
Badminton	1
Bobsleigh	1
Canadian football	1
Diving	1
Horse racing	1
Mixed martial arts	1
Netball	1
Para-athletics	1
Skiing	1
Speed skating	1
Weightlifting	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>145</b>

**Table 2**

*How Frequently Key Terms Were Used Across the Three Time Periods*

Term	Time period			Total
	2000-2011	2012-2016	2017-2019	
	Frequency (percentage of articles in this time period)			
<b>Depression</b>	58 (46.4%)	128 (45.4%)	37 (13.2%)	223 (32.4%)
<b>Mental health issue / problem</b>	3 (2.4%)	37 (13.1%)	63 (22.4%)	103 (15.0%)
<b>Suicide / suicidal</b>	21 (16.8%)	32 (11.3%)	42 (14.9%)	95 (13.8%)
<b>Anxiety</b>	6 (4.8%)	26 (9.2%)	37 (13.2%)	69 (10.0%)
<b>Illness</b>	13 (10.4%)	14 (5.0%)	11 (3.9%)	38 (5.5%)
<b>Addiction</b>	7 (5.6%)	4 (1.4%)	16 (5.7%)	27 (3.9%)
<b>Gambling</b>	1 (0.8%)	3 (1.1%)	20 (7.1%)	24 (3.5%)
<b>Panic attack</b>	2 (1.6%)	2 (0.7%)	18 (6.4%)	22 (3.2%)
<b>Mental illness</b>	6 (4.8%)	9 (3.2%)	5 (1.8%)	20 (2.9%)
<b>Self-harm</b>	2 (1.6%)	7 (2.5%)	10 (3.6%)	19 (2.8%)
<b>Bipolar</b>	1 (0.8%)	5 (1.8%)	8 (2.8%)	14 (2.0%)
<b>Stress-related illness</b>	3 (2.4%)	4 (1.4%)	1 (0.4%)	8 (1.2%)
<b>PTSD</b>	0	4 (1.4%)	2 (0.7%)	6 (0.9%)
<b>Bulimia</b>	0	2 (0.7%)	3 (1.1%)	5 (0.7%)
<b>Alcoholism</b>	2 (1.6%)	0	3 (1.1%)	5 (0.7%)
<b>Borderline personality disorder</b>	0	4 (1.4%)	0	4 (0.6%)
<b>Eating disorder</b>	0	0	4 (1.4%)	4 (0.6%)
<b>OCD</b>	0	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.4%)	2 (0.3%)

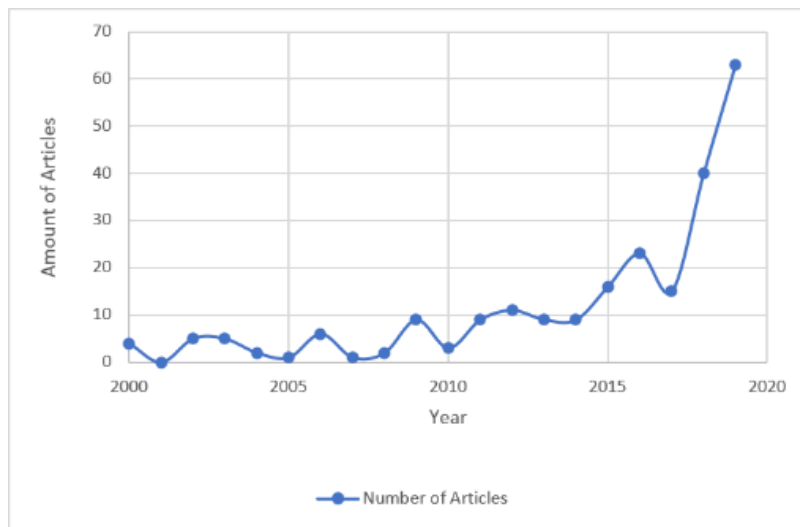
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<b>Total</b>	125	282	281	688
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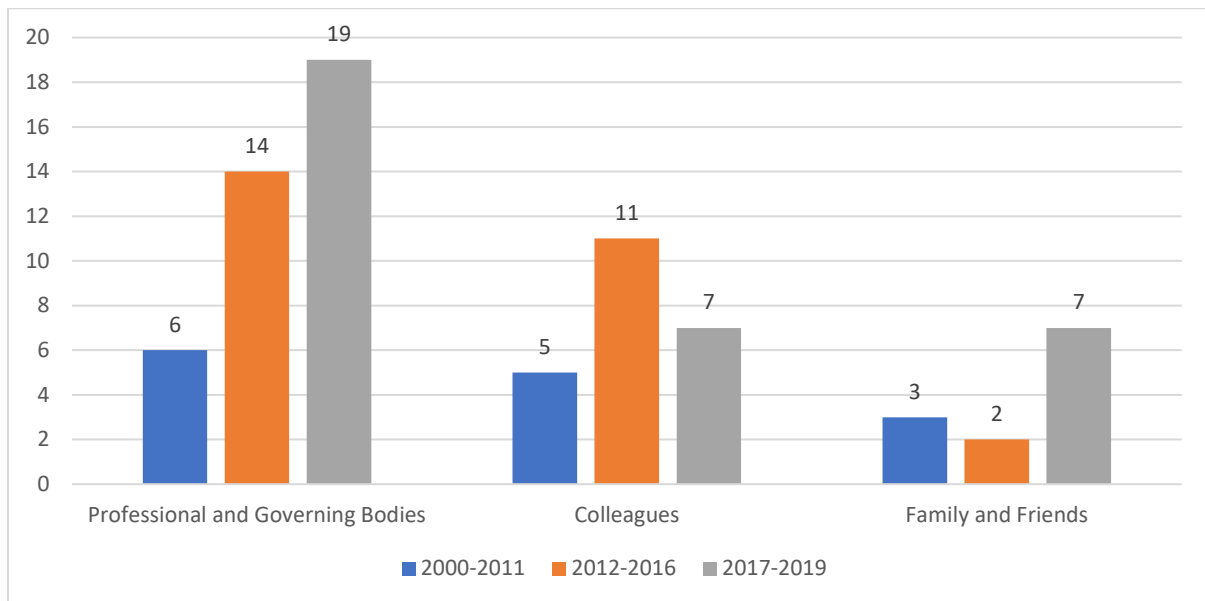
**Figure 1**

*Number of Articles Published Per Year*



**Figure 2**

*Distribution of Official Sources Mapped by Time Period*



**Figure 3**

*Change in Terminology Used Across the Three Time Periods*

