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## Mental Health in Sports Media

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# MENTAL HEALTH IN SPORTS MEDIA

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Submitted for the partial fulfillment of the Bachelors Degree in Communication  
and Media Studies



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## **Abstract**

This paper looks at the increasingly popular conversation surrounding mental health in sports. It provides a glimpse into how common the struggle of mental health can be for many high-level athletes while also examining the narrative and expectations that society and the media have created. The paper also provides examples of prominent athletes from a variety of different sports and delves into their personal mental health experiences in the eyes of the media. The goal of this paper is to show the progression and change of how the media portrays mental health amongst athletes in today's ever-changing world.

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## Mental Health in Sports Media

When an athlete suffers a sports-related injury, fans of the sport and the media almost never question the toughness of the athlete. However, when an athlete decides they need to take some time off for mental health related issues, the reaction to this news can often be entirely different. Over the course of the last decade mental health has become a prominent topic. The number of athletes who experience mental health struggles has continued to rise, “In fact about 33 percent of college athletes deal with symptoms of depression, anxiety or other conditions and for professionals the research shows that up to 35 percent suffer from some sort of mental health issue which could include stress, eating disorders, burnout, substance misuse or depression and anxiety” (Athletes for Hope, 2021). It would be difficult to imagine that the general public is familiar with many of these stories and more importantly the backstories behind the headlines. You often hear or read headlines about decisions certain athletes have made but then the narrative tends to not go into much more depth. For a long time, it was seldom revealed what athletes may have been going through behind the scenes on a personal level that influenced them to make these decisions in the first place. It is also important to remember that despite their status, athletes are still humans too. Tennis star, Naomi Osaka, echoed this sentiment during an interview for a recent article, stating “I hope I was able to help some people and for them to see that even athletes are still humans like the rest of us and we are all dealing with something in our lives” (Plosser, 2021). With our society beginning to talk more about mental health, along with media outlets giving it more coverage, conversations surrounding this issue have become more important than ever.

Throughout history images of athletes have almost always portrayed them as tough and full of “grit”. The media has been one of the biggest components in the shaping of this image. Opening up and talking about one’s feelings can be seen as non-masculine or “weak” and this stigma is ingrained even outside of the sports world. However, in the sports world there is even more of an emphasis on being tough and “playing through things”. Older players and coaches are more attached to these types of ideals, but luckily younger players are beginning to speak up to change the narrative. The all-male national football league is an organization in which these kinds of beliefs are deep-rooted. Solomon Thomas of the Las Vegas Raiders spoke about this issue, saying "I still think the stigma's pretty strong," he further talked about how he first started to seek help after the death of his sister, "That's the one reason I didn't come out and start speaking right away about my depression, about my journey, and about my sister's journey, as well. I was afraid of, like, what fans would think, if teammates would think I'm soft." (Breen, 2021). This stigma has been ingrained across various sports and it does not apply to male athletes exclusively. Former skier Lindsey Vonn did not feel like mental health was something she could discuss in the early stages of her career, "I was embarrassed, and also didn't feel like it was something that I could talk about, as a competitor, you know, I felt like it was also potentially a weakness" (McCarriston, 2021). In one of the more recent and publicized incidents in which mental health was at the forefront of national attention, esteemed gymnast Simone Biles decided to pull out of her events in the Olympics. Biles made a statement after withdrawing from the competition which demonstrated how respecting one’s mental health is a decision which takes a certain amount of strength, "I say put mental health first. Because if you don't, then you're not going to enjoy your sport and you're not going to succeed as much as

you want to. So it's OK sometimes to even sit out the big competitions to focus on yourself, because it shows how strong of a competitor and person that you really are — rather than just battle through it" (Silva, 2021). The notion that toughness and prioritization of mental health are at odds has been around for so long that it is going to take time to break, but through comments like these the narrative is slowly starting to change.

The way in which information is delivered through media is constantly changing. A significant aspect of this evolution is the presence of various social media platforms. Social media has to be a huge factor into today's stress and anxiety for athletes, at any time they can go on the internet and see what is being said about them. The unique thing about social media in comparison to other forms of media is that it can be used by the average spectator to voice their opinion on a team or athlete. These spectators do not have to be writers or commentators on TV, they just need to have a smartphone and an account. This accessibility can be both positive and negative. On one hand, it allows athletes to speak their mind in an unedited fashion which can be beneficial for them. However, at the same time it allows spectators to voice their opinion in the same fashion and a lot of these opinions tend to be in criticism of an athlete's performance or views. It can often seem easier to focus on the negative rather than the positive in these types of interactions. Young people are also much more likely to use social media and as a result it can take a toll on their mental health. Even prior to social media, other forms of media often took a toll on athletes. For example, former Olympic Swimmer Michael Phelps discussed the impact media coverage had on him; "And really, to be blunt, the media is part of that. They dragged me through the dirt for everything I

did wrong over the years -- and trust me, I know there was plenty. I'm responsible for every mistake I've ever made. Nobody else" I've gotten help and I ended my career on a high note, so the nice neat story is to put me back on a pedestal. But here's the reality: I won't ever be "cured." This will never go away. It's something where I've had to accept it, learn to deal with it and make it a priority in my life. And yes, that's a hell of a lot easier said than done" (Drehs, 2021). To a certain degree the media does have to do their job by addressing stories that come up in relation to athletes and we must recognize that in the business of media, certain headlines do bring more coverage (and money). However, there is a way they can choose to go about covering these stories and how they choose to portray the athletes they are discussing. A lot of it comes down to perspective, do they want to look at it from more of a critical or empathetic view? Unfortunately, many media outlets are only able to look at it from an empathetic view if it sells.

If mental health practices are not widespread in society throughout workplaces and schools how can we expect professional athletes on the main stage to be treated with respect? Or is it the athlete's responsibility to help bring these issues to the forefront? As with most things, opinions tend to vary and this would probably depend on which athlete you ask. I am not sure if it's their responsibility, but by discussing it on media platforms whether that may be Twitter, Instagram, or through interviews, it helps to give the topic more coverage and as a result helps others come out and talk about what they may be struggling with. This inspiration could be for other athletes or just regular human beings in general.

For an athlete to reach the professional level of their respective sport they have to put in a tremendous amount of time and work into their craft. This level of dedication usually



involves athletes beginning to train and compete at an extremely young age. The more talented they are, the quicker they reach the highest level of their sport. Naomi Osaka became a professional tennis player shortly before her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, while Simone Biles began competing in gymnastics when she was only 14 years old. When fans, spectators and media members watch these young athletes compete against adults at the highest stage of competition they tend to automatically treat them as adults, but it's not that simple. Many of these athletes are still teenagers or in their early twenties when they are thrust into the spotlight. Not only are they forced to deal with the regular growing pains that all of us go through, but on top of that they are forced to deal with all of the media coverage in the public eye which is often harsh and unforgiving. Well known quarterback, Tom Brady of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, touched on some of the pressures young athletes face, "I think there are so many young people in sports. Obviously, Naomi's really young. Simone's really young. I'm 44. When I was 24, I certainly didn't have all the answers to all the different pressures and the adversities that you face. I don't know if we have expectations for people that we should have all the answers, have all things figured out at young ages" (Wells, 2021). Society tends to have a certain level of understanding when people are young and still figuring things out, but unfortunately that courtesy is rarely extended to young athletes. A large number of habits and coping skills (both good and bad) are developed at a young age. The sooner mental health can be taken more seriously, the sooner young athletes will be given the opportunity to get the correct resources they need to assist in their development.

Athletes such as Naomi Osaka and Simone Biles are not only facing pressure from one group of sports fans but rather from an entire nation questioning their patriotism. It can be

hard enough being criticized by one group of passionate fans, but when one competes in events such as the Olympics it opens up a whole country who feel entitled to criticize a performance. For many athletes this is the ultimate stage of competition and the stakes are much higher than the state or regional meets that determine whether or not they will be on the Olympic team. Sports such as gymnastics are not generally watched heavily by the public until it comes time for the Olympics. Once the Olympics start, spectators tend to take the view of it's America vs the world and people take a lot of pride in that. When Simone Biles decided to withdraw from her events in this past year's Olympics in Tokyo, many conservative news outlets attacked her for the decision. Ben Maller was one of them, he called Biles "the biggest quitter in sports" on his Fox Sports Radio Show and alluded to the fact that another gymnast might have missed out on a chance to compete as a result of her decision (Hill, 2021). Jemele Hill who is a well known sports journalist and a woman of color herself described these attacks profoundly, "Efforts to paint Biles as a mentally fragile quitter play into conservatives' frequent insinuations that Black Americans are not as patriotic as they are—despite the long history of Black people representing, performing for, and fighting for this country without the benefit of full equality" (Hill, 2021). This delusional idea that Black Americans are less patriotic than their white counterparts is an unfortunate reality that certain sectors of the media seem to believe. The Olympics are a form of nationalism that we don't often see much of in the sports world and with that comes increased levels of scrutiny.

People take shots at not only athletes' mental toughness but bring factors such as gender and race into their criticism as well. Conservative activist Charlie Kirk slammed Simone Biles on his podcast for her decision to withdraw from events during this past years Olympics,

"We are raising a generation of weak people like Simone Biles," he told listeners. "If she's got all these mental health problems: don't show up." He continued on with his comments, "She's an incredible athlete, of course, she's an incredible athlete, I'm not saying that — she's probably the greatest gymnast of all time. She's also very selfish, she's immature and she's a shame to the country" (Goertzen, 2021). Former host of Good Morning Britain, Piers Morgan, also had some harsh criticism for Simone Biles after she made a decision to withdraw from her Olympic events, "Are 'mental health issues' now the go-to excuse for any poor performance in elite sport? What a joke," Morgan tweeted. "Just admit you did badly, made mistakes, and will strive to do better next time. Kids need strong role models not this nonsense" (Goertzen, 2021). Morgan also had some choice words for Naomi Osaka, another woman of color, when she chose to withdraw from the French Open and skip Wimbledon in order to focus on her mental health. Interestingly enough, Morgan did not carry the same type of malicious energy in his commentary when England Cricketer, Ben Stokes, decided to take some time away from his sport to focus on his mental health. Many fellow journalists noticed the stark contrast in Piers Morgan reaction to these similar events by different athletes and called him out for his hypocrisy (Beresford, 2021). I do not think the notion of women in sports, and more specifically women of color in sports, being criticized more brutally than their male counterparts is far fetched. That being said, not all the commentary on Simone Biles' situation was negative. Celebrities and prominent figures ranging from former first lady Michelle Obama to musician Justin Bieber offered words of encouragement and voiced how much of an inspiration she is. Renowned tennis star Serena Williams offered her comments on Simone Biles during an interview with Time Magazine:

“Simone's greatest work, however, is what's being done outside of the gym. She is using her mature voice and platform to share her personal journey of self-love, respect and acceptance — Simone is wise beyond her years. By living her truth so loudly and by championing mental health, she is setting new standards of beauty, strength and resilience, breaking down today's image-obsessed stereotypes and encouraging others to do the same. Simone is a shining example of what success looks like when you let go of what the world thinks and gather your strength from yourself . . . from your soul.”

(Cheung, 2021)

When athletes like Biles are making groundbreaking decisions that go against what we are used to, there will more than likely be a certain level of criticism, but at the same time there are just as many people, if not more, who are inspired by their decision.

Athletes are expected to be in tip top shape yet they still get injured and people seem to accept that, why can't people do the same in regards to their mental health? Some of this bias is likely correlated with the views our country takes on mental health. Since mental health is getting newfound attention on a societal level as of recently, it is also starting to trickle down to other areas. This recent attention is not only a result of a societal trend, but also because of the toll Covid-19 has taken on many people's emotional state. Mental health can be as important as physical performance for competing at the best of your ability, most people and fans in specific tend to take this for granted. Dr. Nyaka NiiLampti, NFL Vice President of Wellness and Clinical Services said “research has made it clear that for optimal performance, on and off the field, players have to make sure they are focusing intentionally on all aspects of wellness. Traditionally, sports performance has been viewed only through the lens of physical

health, but NiiLampti said the sports world has finally gotten to a point where it is willing to have conversations around other aspects of wellness” (Battista, 2021). This shift may be due to the simple fact that you can tell when someone is in great shape physically but to the naked eye there is no way to determine mental shape. There is also no way to really tell if an athlete’s mental shape is not doing well and this probably goes into why the media/fans are so critical when an athlete announces they need to take some time off. Competition in sports is much as a mental battle as it is physical.

Winning and succeeding is often put before everything else in professional sports and the approach of “at any cost” is one that is often taken. Due to the high level of competition and expectations of success, athletes may neglect other areas of their life. They spend large amounts of time putting in work to become successful in their craft and are frequently left with little time to improve in other aspects of life and wellness. Most regular people live a life in which they have more free time than the typical athlete. However, many of them still struggle to make time to work on improving their mental health so I can only imagine how hard it must be for athletes. Sports and physical exercise are great outlets for individuals who may be dealing with anxiety or depression. However, what happens when an athlete gets injured, or sports are shut down due to Covid-19, or the inevitable time comes for an athlete to retire? This is why addressing mental health during their playing careers and finding ways to help themselves outside of just playing their respective sport is crucial for athletes' well-being. NBA champion and Olympic gold medalist, Kevin Love, talked about some of the struggles which he has gone through in an essay he wrote on the Player’s Tribune titled “To Anybody Going Through it”. In the essay, Love described one of the most challenging periods of his life that

came when he was a member of the Minnesota Timberwolves. The former 5th overall pick had played just 18 games during the 2012-13 season and broke his hand twice. Not being able to play basketball took its toll on Love and his emotional-well being. "My identity was gone. My emotional outlet was gone. All I was left with was *me* and my mind. I was living alone at the time, and my social anxiety was so bad that I never even left my apartment. Actually, I would rarely even leave my bedroom. I would have the shades down most of the day, no lights on, no TV, nothing. It felt like I was on a deserted island by myself, and it was always midnight" (Bengel, 2021). Alex Smith, a former NFL quarterback suffered a severe injury to his right leg and the rehabilitation process, which took two years, was as much mental as it was physical. He talked about what some of the early stages of the process looked and felt like, "I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a lot of the 'Why me?' especially early in the hospital," Smith said. "You fall asleep, you kind of forget what had happened, and you wake up and it kind of hits you again every single day, like, 'Nah, this is really real. And it's not coming back. There's no going back. This is what I've got moving forward for the rest of my life" ( Jhabvala, 2021). Sports are great for both the athletes who have the opportunity to play and for us as fans to enjoy watching. However, just like everything else they eventually come to an end, this is why it is important to not ignore the other aspects of life that are still there once the game is over.

Athletes deal with immense pressure and expectations, sometimes they deal with these things by going out to drink or using other substances. When an individual engages in these types of behaviors it is generally to mask an underlying issue. Unfortunately, when athletes take this route they are almost always criticized, however when they try to take a healthier route by taking time off to address their mental health they are still criticized. It can often be a

lose-lose situation for the athlete and if the appropriate resources aren't readily available through the league or association in which the athlete competes, how can we blame them for seeking out their own solution. Michael Phelps has discussed his use of substances in past interviews, "Drugs were a way of running from 'whatever it was I wanted to run from,'" he said. "It would be just me self-medicating myself, basically daily, to try to fix whatever it was that I was trying to run from" (Scutti, 2018). Rehab for an injury and rehab for the mind are looked at completely differently. In the past the media has not been very empathetic when an athlete decides they need to take time off for an undisclosed reason that doesn't include a physical injury, but fortunately this outlook has started to change recently. Some may argue that professional athletes are aware of what comes with their profession and that they are paid very generously for their services. Though this may be true to a certain extent, why does the media have the right to bash an individual when they are trying to be both the best athlete and human being they can. Criticizing an athlete who is dealing with a mental health issue often makes the issue even worse and harder to deal with for the individual, especially in today's day and age of the non-stop news cycle.

Luckily, mental health has started to get more of the recognition it deserves, and some members of the media do recognize how important it is for athletes to take care of their mind as well as their body. Many leagues and organizations are following this trend and are starting to make changes in how they handle mental health and what kind of resources they offer to athletes. A prime example of media outlets becoming more empathetic with how they handle reporting on athlete's mental health comes from salon.com and their article on Simone Biles from September 2021. The article is titled, "Our Endless Demands on Simone Biles, The young

Woman has already achieved so much. How many more barriers will we ask her to break?” (Cheung, 2021). There is a vast difference between the title of this article and one written by Bleacher Report in October of 2013 titled “The Biggest Divas in Sports” (Dimengo, 2013). There is less than a ten-year difference between the times these articles were published, however nowadays you would be hard pressed to find an article calling athletes prominent divas. Fortunately, the NFL has begun to take action to help implement measures to help with Mental Health. “Under the joint agreement signed in 2019, the NFL and NFLPA formed a Comprehensive Mental Health and Wellness Committee, which develops programs and resources for players, coaches, club personnel and players' family members regarding mental health and wellness” (NFL, 2019). In May of 2021 the NFL also launched a series of videos in support of Mental Health Awareness Month (Battista, 2021). The NBA is another organization which has also begun to carry out measures to address mental health amongst its players in recent years. In one of these moves they realized that they needed to start implementing mental health measures at an earlier point in player’s careers:

“The data Regarding mental health suggests the groundwork for future issues is laid early in life, long before players arrive in the NBA. Commissioner Adam Silver says it occurred to him one day that while the league's NBA Fit and Jr. NBA programs had introduced comprehensive physical training, ‘we weren't holistically addressing the complete person.’ That has changed. A component of stress relief has been added to both programs. Mental health is now part of the rookie transition program and the junior elite program. While many teams have employed sports psychologists for a



number of years, the league is now requiring that teams establish a connection with a licensed psychiatrist as well” (MacMullan, 2018).

Many athletes are still calling out for their respective league or organization to do more in regards to their handling of mental health, although courses of action like these are definitely a step in the right direction.

An important question to ask during this conversation around mental health in sports, is why has this issue never been addressed until recently? Well, a big part of it is because the other areas of our society only started acknowledging it not too long ago themselves. Sometimes athletes in sports help the breakthrough of social issues and sometimes the sports world doesn't address these issues until the larger sector of society already has begun to. In the case of mental health, I feel as if the sports world and society are moving the discussion of the issue at about the same pace. Throughout history portrayals and images of athletes competing at the highest level of competitions have consistently been displayed as the peak of toughness and grit. Spectators of sports are usually watching athletes compete at a distance whether that be from on TV from the couch in their living room or hundreds of feet away in the stands. As a result of this distance, athletes are looked at as larger than life and put on a pedestal by most of the general public. Prominent skier Lindsey Vonn addressed some of the notions the public tends to have about athletes, "Everyone assumes that [athletes are] so strong and tough and, you know, physically, they're strong, but you know, mentally, it's, it's not always the case. You make assumptions, and you don't talk about it, and then it becomes a problem and athletes can't cope ... Talking about it and allowing athletes to have the support

they need is really important. I think something that people don't realize is, sports and athletes, it seems like such a glamorous life, and especially if you're successful, but at the end of the day, you still come home, and when the lights go off, you're by yourself" (McCarriston, 2021).

Mental health is an invisible injury that nobody other than the person going through it at the time can see for themselves.

One of the biggest reasons why it's starting to get addressed now is because prominent figures in the sports world are starting to speak up about their personal struggles. I am positive that it is something athletes have been going through for as long as competitive sports have been around, but just hasn't been talked about. Now that we are starting to see and hear notable athletes speak up about mental health, we are experiencing a domino effect in which it seems like almost every week there is a new athlete addressing their experience with it. Athletes speaking up about their mental health and internal struggles at a higher rate than ever before is a good thing and it's one of the more powerful components of dealing with mental health issues. When Simone Biles made the courageous decision to pull out of most of her events in this year's past gymnastic events during the Olympics she mentioned being inspired by Naomi Osaka who did something similar a few months earlier. Metta Sandiford Artest, a retired NBA star formerly known as Ron Artest, discussed in a recent interview how he looked up to Dennis Rodman because of him being one of the first NBA players to talk about his struggles with mental health. He talked about how he was able to understand and relate to Rodman, because of this connection he changed his number to 91 which was Rodman's number (Olivieri, 2021). Hopefully through more athletes opening up and having the media begin to talk about it from a different perspective up we can start to change the narrative and

conversation. Doing this will help mental health and the struggles that so often come with it, to become more normalized rather than something that is seen as a weakness.

### **Accompanying Radio Shows**

Accompanying the paper are a collection of ten radio shows which were recorded live during the fall semester of 2021. Each episode focuses on a different individual athlete or group of athletes and provides a background of their athletic achievements/career. The second half of every episode discusses their relationship surrounding mental health and lastly how their mental health was portrayed by the media. Along with discussing prominent athletes, some episodes also contain interviews with division II student athletes from the Dominican University of California in which they discuss their own experiences with the topic of mental health in sports. These collection of episodes help to widen the scope and open the conversation of how mental health in sports is portrayed in the media.

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