

Brain Health and Emotional Well-being in Athletes: A Sports Neuropsychology Conversation

By Dr. Rosemarie Scolaro Moser and Dr. Bridget Mayer



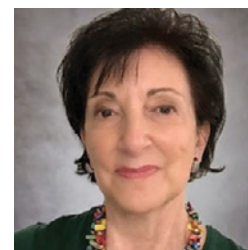
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all costs, athletes can be vulnerable to worry, anxiety, and depression. Also, the stories of abuse, trauma, suicide, eating disorders, drug use, stigmatization, racism, and prejudice are heartbreaking. These are what Dr. William Parham, the first ever Director of Mental Health and Wellness of the National Basketball Players Association, calls “hidden tattoos.” Many of us do not realize the enormity of the pressures of competition, the lack of privacy, the grueling practice and training schedules, the sleep deprivation, the isolation, the bullying, and the back-room politics that can target athletes whose passions and goals are at stake.

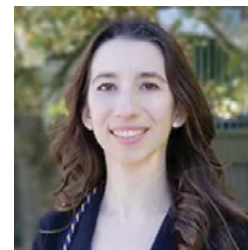
BM: I really applaud those high-profile athletes, like Simone Biles, Michael Phelps, Lindsey Vonn, and Serena Williams, who are coming forward as advocates of emotional well-being for their fellow athletes. Now, we all need to step up to the plate and provide the supports they need.

RSM: Here is my checklist of supports for athletes, and all of these items are equally important: Provide athletes with reasonable schedules that include plenty of sleep, regular down-time, and reduced pressure to perform. Provide mental health awareness training through webinars, podcasts, educational meetings, and printed materials.

Allow for user-friendly, non-stigmatized access to counseling, psychotherapy, group workshops, and training in mindfulness, meditation, and relaxation training for stress reduction. Help athletes take care of their bodies with monitoring for concussion and other injuries, proper pain management, and good nutrition. Provide academic supports and accommodations so that athletes can keep up with their academics in the face of athletic demands. Last, but not least, encourage their talents and interests in other areas of life so their self-worth is not solely defined by the sport. It’s important to keep a diversified life portfolio.



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For more information, visit sccnj.com and RSMPsychology.com.

Dr. Bridget Mayer (BM): Congratulations on becoming elected as president of the Sports Neuropsychology Society! I suspect some readers of *Princeton Magazine* have never heard of sports neuropsychology.

Dr. Rosemarie Scolaro Moser (RSM): Thank you and I don’t doubt you are right. Sports neuropsychology is a specialized field of health care that focuses on the brain health and emotional well-being of athletes of all ages and of all skill levels, whether pee wee, travel, community, high school, college, or pro sports. Sports neuropsychologists helped launch the first programs for concussion testing, identification, treatment, and research in professional athletes back in the 1990s. Soon after, we brought those programs to youth and amateur sports. But we are not only experts in concussion management and brain injury. We are focused on keeping athletes’ brains healthy and promoting emotional well-being.

BM: Keeping athletes’ brains healthy is not an easy task, yet it’s critical to emotional well-being. I try to explain that the brain is an extraordinary, complex organ comprised of billions of nerve cells called neurons. These nerve cells connect to send electrochemical messages throughout the nervous system. Basically, the brain is the master controller of everything your body does and feels: your sensations, movements, thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. When your brain neurochemistry gets

rattled, all kinds of quirky symptoms can occur: physical, cognitive, behavioral, and emotional.

RSM: Yes! And we need to remember that concussions are not the only things that can disturb your brain neurochemistry. There are other factors to consider like diet, stress, physical injury, hormonal changes, substance and alcohol use, disease, and especially poor sleep. Unfortunately, we are a sleep-deprived culture, and lack of sleep wreaks havoc on brain neurochemistry. Disturbing your brain neurochemistry can result in a variety of symptoms like fatigue, poor focus and attention, learning difficulties, depression, anxiety, and memory problems. These symptoms will affect not only athletic performance, but academics, job performance, and family and social relationships.

BM: The message here is that it is not just concussions that cause problems for athletes. Sports neuropsychologists help athletes identify and control the life factors that alter brain function and produce distress. In this way, athletes can improve overall performance and their physical and emotional well-being. I think the public is now becoming more aware of the stress on athletes to perform and compete.

RSM: I am gravely concerned that for too long we have overlooked the significant stressors and challenges affecting our athletes. Whether it’s overspecialization at a very young age, the college athletic recruitment process, or pressure to excel at