

KEEPING YOUR ATHLETE IN THE GAME

# MVP PARENT

SPRING 2022

\$4.95

## Checking In:

Taking the Time to  
Evaluate the Mental  
Health Component

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# Mission

**MVP PARENT** is committed to providing a credible resource that educates and supports the parents of youth athletes. **MVP PARENT** gives parents the information they need to keep youth athletes performing at the highest level physically, mentally, and emotionally. **MVP PARENT** takes a holistic and evidence-based approach to injury prevention, skill development, nutrition, and sports psychology.

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# FROM THE PUBLISHER

BY RICHARD B. DUBIN



## HOPE DOES SPRING ETERNAL!

We seem to be coming out of COVID-19 sports protocols and things are obviously changing. The past several months have brought some exciting sports opportunities for my daughters. My oldest plays basketball for Ithaca College and was able to play this season and the team won the Liberty League Chip and moved on to the tournament. What an incredible experience for her. My younger daughter was finally able to be on the basketball court. What a joy it has been for us to watch and for them to play. Engaging with our kids and checking in with them to see how they are doing will only further enhance that relationship and make sure they are in the right mindset to tackle what is in front of them. Being away from it for so long has made this communication even more important.

In past MVP Parent cover stories, we focused on speaking with the parents of youth athletes; after discussion with our team, we felt a conversation with the athletes themselves could be enlightening for parents. This issue takes a twist on the parent perspective by talking with the kids directly. Our cover story by Joshua Cupp captures the emotional, mental and spiritual well-being of two youth athletes. Check out the interviews to learn their views on their lives today.

Keeping with the mental game, Linda Sterling discusses how to help your young athlete build a mental game plan. Being aware and in touch with the mental aspect of youth sports is super important as a parent and will help take your child to the next level.

The National Athletic Trainers Association—NATA—also stays in tune with the mental health aspect of youth sports. Their piece delves into the signs of stress—and there are many—and what you can do as parents. Pay attention and communicate.

Helping your child navigate performance issues is another valuable discussion that we need to understand as parents and Greg Bach from National Alliance for Youth Sports offers up some suggestions.

The Sports Doctor is IN with Dr. Bob Weil tackles the challenge of drugs and youth sports.

We have an awesome piece on Training the Female Athlete by Warren Potash. There are differences and we must be aware of them as parents, coaches and trainers.

We are also always talking about technology and the benefits for youth athletes to obtain objective data while training to improve performance and reduce injury risk. Phil Stotter's piece clearly outlines what tech means to youth sports.

As I am finishing up this issue and reading through all the incredibly valuable content, I am extremely grateful and humbled by the engagement, interaction and collaboration that we are creating with the MVP Parent community. A huge thanks goes out to everyone that has devoted their time, effort and energy to making the youth sports experience better and safer. ■



# *Safely Training the Youth Female Athlete*

BY WARREN J. POTASH

**Y**our daughter wants to play a sport. You want to support her but you're not sure what to do next. It's important to note that historically, girls have played sports and boys have trained to play sports. Read that again and you'll understand the discrepancy in injury rates between the sexes.

Many people—experts, parents, coaches—incorrectly assume that children are automatically in good physical condition and can just pick up a sport the more they play it. But there is clear evidence this is not the case. Most experts today believe that children should train for a particular sport rather than expecting the sport to get them in shape.





To do that, you need a training plan. What does Vern Gambetta, a leading trainer with 50 years' experience say about training?

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**“Adaptation to various training stimuli take time. You can’t force adaptation to happen faster than the athlete’s current level of trainability and physical capacity. You must be willing to go step by step. Sometimes, it is small baby steps forward, sometimes there are steps back, and sometimes there are giant leaps forward. Have a system that defines the process, then trust the process and take it step by step.”**

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What does this mean? Simply put, this means to play a sport, every athlete needs to get better over time, developing their body and mind as well as developing the skills required for each sport. In other words, athletes (with their coaches and parents) need to develop a plan to help them on their journey. The plan should be designed to minimize the athlete’s risk for injury while she is striving to be the best she can become on and off her field of play.

## ***Female Athletes, Unique Challenges***

Females are not males with less testosterone (a phrase I coined almost 30 years ago). Female bodies are different from males—in obvious and not so obvious ways. For example, females are 3 – 8 times more likely than males to damage their anterior cruciate (ACL) ligament in the knee. Due to basic biology, females have a wider hip-to-knee angle—the Q angle: average  $<22^\circ$  for females with the knee extended compared to males at  $<18^\circ$ . And then there’s the female athlete triad—a term developed by the American College of Sports Medicine to describe a condition in female athletes that consists of disordered eating, amenorrhea, and osteoporosis—which can be life-threatening if not properly addressed. All of these basic biological traits unique to females place them at greater risk of injury, particularly during adolescence, when their bodies are growing on a daily basis.

The good news is that with a Spine-Safe and Age-Appropriate Training Program the risk of injury can be minimized. If injured, the trained athlete will return to play faster than an untrained athlete. There is no downside to this type of training, which some call neuromuscular training; an athlete becomes better able to perform her skills while minimizing her risk for injury.

Safe and age-appropriate weight training, proper biomechanics, nutrition, recovery, cross-training—all these (and more) need to be included in a sound training program. And for youth under 12, fun should be key. Did you know that European countries do not allow their top players to play to win until they are 15+ in soccer? They focus on skill development and training before winning at these early ages.

## ***Youth Sports (12U) Should Be Fun***

Children under age 12 need to have fun, that goes without saying. Good sports coaches and good training programs incorporate fun exercises as part of skill development. And they focus on proper biomechanics

to help young bodies minimize their risk for injury. These might include learning to recruit hamstrings when running (females are quadriceps dominant); jumping with a soft landing and knee flexed; balancing on one leg with flexed knee; stretches for warming up and cooling down; exercises to strengthen the core, or cardio. These basic movements can be taught by a local trainer, certified athletic trainer (ATC), or physical therapist.

As athletes become more serious about their sport, visualization, mediation, and breathing exercises may be involved. A good training plan is the combination of what skills the sport requires and what your athlete needs to do to develop and ultimately master those skills.



## ***Youth Sports Develop Adults***

If children are having fun playing sports, they will develop habits to help them on their journey to becoming responsible adults. Team sports teach each athlete how to support their own hopes and dreams while caring about how their teammates are doing. Playing sports helps children learn how their bodies function in the world and how to give their bodies what they need when they need it—water, nutrition, rest and recovery.

For young female athletes, spine-safe and age-appropriate training can encourage a lifetime of active living and all the affiliated health benefits. ■

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**WARREN J. POTASH**, Sports Performance Coach, Fitness Therapist for 30 years. He has successfully trained more than 600 teen female athletes since 1993 and specializes in lower body stabilization as an integral part of Spine-Safe and Age-Appropriate Training to play sports and live an active life. He is creator and co-author of *Your Lower Back* and author of *Safely Training The Adolescent Female Athlete*. His website, [learn2trainsafely.com](http://learn2trainsafely.com) provides quality information to help everyone make informed decisions about training to play sports.

A young boy with short dark hair, wearing a grey t-shirt, is running from left to right. He is smiling and looking towards the right. In the background, there is a large, dark grey shield-shaped sign with white text and graphics. The text reads "LOUISVILLE SLUGGER" in a large, bold, sans-serif font, and "HITTING SCIENCE CENTER" in a smaller, bold, sans-serif font below it. Below the text is a white graphic of a lightning bolt. The sign is mounted on a dark wall.

# LOUISVILLE SLUGGER HITTING SCIENCE CENTER

# Youth Sports Technology:

**KEEPING YOUR YOUTH ATHLETE  
INJURY FREE AND ON THE FIELD OF PLAY**

**BY PHILIP STOTTER, CEP**

**Across the United States, nearly 30 million children and teens participate in organized sports every year. Of them, almost 12 percent, or more than 3.5 million, suffer an injury that can cause time out from school, lost participation time, alter their physical development, and contribute to lifelong pain.**





Injuries that include muscle strains, stress fractures, and concussions are becoming more common among young athletes as they face an increasingly competitive culture and a drive to succeed. The rise of traumatic brain injuries as a result of impact sports and an increase in knee injuries have made innovative treatment options vital to the future of young athletes. Improved sports technology and the unique age specific testing programs they include are helping young student-athletes recover faster as well as prevent the next injury.

Children and adolescents are a unique cohort of athletes. They are actively learning and developing new skills, not only honing established skill levels. Their bodies are actively growing and changing, exposing them to unique injuries not seen in adults. This is why specialized tests and screens are necessary to measure risk and baseline these athletes.

## AVOIDING A SPORTS INJURY STARTS WITH HIGH TECH KNOWLEDGE.

In recent years, sports technologies have emerged that use specialized hardware's like 3D cameras, ground force pressure plates, and wearable sensors that objectively collect data for the purpose of screening and testing young athletes.

The more we know about how an athlete moves directly translates to a better chance of avoiding a major injury down the road. Currently, most athletic competitive sports trainers and coaches rely on subjectivity and a coach's opinion on how best to perform and what to train for improvement. The same goes for medical practitioners, assessing an athlete's readiness to return to normal activity. The athlete will perform some movements and the trainer makes a decision that is heavily based on the opinion and experience of that trainer.

This is where sports technology can help. There is a growing list of sports technologies that provide objective biomechanical analysis with insight necessary to drive targeted training and help trainers or coaches make more accurate decisions regarding an athlete's ability to perform on the field without loss of performance or risk of injury or reinjury.

Companies like **RAPID-Sports** (NEED LOCATION, WEBSITE here) utilizes multiple types of digital hardware's to collect age specific data on young athletes to augment the coach's decision-making process and ensure proper programming is chosen as well as to help coaches understand the physical limits of their athletes. RAPID-Sports testing ranges from functional movement screens to concussion protocols.

RAPID-Sports recently developed a computer-based sports performance and injury prevention program for the **Louisville Slugger Hitting Science Center** (Louisville, KY; [sluggerscience.com](http://sluggerscience.com)). This program is an in-depth program that has been specifically created for baseball and softball players, which gathers data to help an athlete improve

performance and manage or prevent injuries. A key component of the program uses information such as biometrics and other workload metrics to single out players who are more at risk of injury than others. A portable ground pressure mat is used to capture the abilities of the players, then generates results in real time. This data is run and analyzed so players and coaches can make decisions on performance and changes to prevent injuries before they happen.

**Kinetisense** (Medicine Hat, Alberta, Canada; [kinetisense.com](http://kinetisense.com)) is a technology that uses 3D cameras to help screen players for potential injuries. Their unique testing formats are designed to be age specific. Another technology is Catapult One (Melbourne, Australia; [catapultsports.com](http://catapultsports.com)), which is a state of the art soccer and football performance solution, using elite level GPS tracking to measure sprint distance, total distance, top speed, and more while also identifying overtraining that causes injury.

Utilizing sports technology ensures kids are practicing their chosen sport safely and with that a healthy commitment to competition is achieved. From reducing the risk of injuries, to concussion baseline and reassessment, the data captured by these technologies is essential to keeping young athletes healthy now and in the future. With affordability, efficiency, and portability, technologies like RAPID-Sports, Kinetisense, and Catapult One can help enhance the coach's or trainers' decision-making process. Professionals in athletics, fitness, therapy, research, and beyond can all leverage these types of technologies to redefine the future of these youth athletes and the future of youth sports as a whole. ■

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**PHILIP STOTTER**, CEP, is a veteran clinical exercise physiologist and biomechanics expert turned technology inventor/business developer. He is the Director of Sports Science for V1 Sports, a software development firm specializing in integrated video capture and analysis, ground pressure measurement, game tracking and stat tools to help coaches and athletes improve their game.

# MVP EXCLUSIVE



First round  
of CIF  
playoffs



# Checking In:

## Taking the Time to Evaluate the Mental Health Component

BY JOSH CUPP

Sports, sports, sports. We cannot get enough. Our parents played, we played and still do, we are binge watching March Madness, MLB coming soon, NBA playoffs around the corner, the Masters—you know who you are, you're a fan of athletics. As our competitive playing careers come to a close in early adulthood, most of us greatly look forward to watching our kids play the sports we love. When we do this right, sharing athletics with our kids is a beautiful pursuit. Light instruction, gentle cheering from the sidelines, and encouraging words are great places to start on a journey toward keeping competition a fun and positive experience.





**I**nevitably, it doesn't always go as planned. Whether it's wanting athletic success for our children too much or perhaps trying to live through our kids' endeavors, sometimes we put a little too much pressure on their results and performance. We forget that except for the 1/8th of 1% that are playing youth sports, we are participating merely to learn life lessons, understand the value of hard work, teamwork, and get some good old fashion exercise. Other times as well, the stressors are self-inflicted with kids just wanting to achieve and impress on their own.


Simone Biles, Naomi Osaka and Mardy Fish are just a few world class athletes that have recently reminded us that we need to check in with our kids on their mental and emotional well-being. The physical part of junior sports instruction and training has long received either all or the lion's share of attention, and frankly, that needs to change. Speaking candidly with kids about their overall satisfaction with playing their respective sports, asking how they feel about performing in pressure situations... is it exciting and exhilarating or does it cause them unwanted

anxiety? I can say I was never asked these questions growing up, playing junior sports in the 80s and 90s. I'm not sure these conversations are had all that often today. They should be.

MVP Parent decided to chat with two young athletes. We wanted to check in, and make sure all is well, and to ask the questions we should all start asking.

First up, my kid. Francisco (Ceko) Cupp (FC below). Ceko is an 11-year-old 5th grader at Lake Avenue Elementary School in Saratoga Springs, New York. At a time when many kids start narrowing down which sports to continue with, mine revels in the fact that he still participates in five sports competitively. Baseball is his true love, for now, and that could change at any point. I sat down with him on a Saturday afternoon after a morning that included Little League assessments at 9:30, a quick change of wardrobe in the car, and a basketball game at 10:30. I told him I wanted to ask him a few questions about sports, he agreed provided I fix him a turkey sandwich first. He's a keen negotiator.

BP with my Dad!



**"I FEEL NERVES,  
BUT I DON'T FEEL A  
NEGATIVE ANXIETY.  
I AM AWARE THAT  
THOSE MOMENTS  
ARE HARD FOR SOME  
PEOPLE, BUT I JUST  
LIKE THE STAGE  
AND THE CHANCE  
TO CRUSH IT."**

**- CEKO CUPP**



Ceko, 11



**MVP PARENT:** When you think of all your athletic efforts, how often do you think about the mental component? For example, you're playing a sport because you always have, do you check in with yourself in a "am I truly enjoying this activity? There isn't anything else I'd rather be doing right now" type of way?

**FC:** I do think about how much I am enjoying each activity, sometimes I'd rather be just having a catch with you [me, his dad], not playing on a formal team. Games are way more fun than practice, I think everyone agrees with that. I do really like all my sports. I know that if I didn't I could tell you and Mom and that would be that.

**MVP PARENT:** I've spoken with you about how when I played Little League, though I was very accomplished player with a sizable batting average and a tiny ERA, by the time I was 12, I had tremendous anxiety during my plate appearances and would put far too much pressure on myself. If I were to strike out, the tears would come. That anxiety led to me hanging up the bat and glove for a few years, a move I regretted. I never felt like I could talk about that with a coach or my folks. Have you ever felt that kind of anxiety like I did during my plate appearances, and if so, is that something you feel like you could talk through with me or a coach?

**FC:** I feel nerves, but I don't feel a negative anxiety. Because we [Francisco and me] have had talks about how baseball made you feel, I am aware that those moments are hard for some people, but I just like the stage and the chance to crush it. Most of the coaches I have had don't talk about how we feel in tough moments, if they do, it's not about how we feel and how the moments affect us personally, it's more about taking a deep breath so that we perform better.

**MVP PARENT:** Do kids on your teams or your opponents you compete against in individual sports ever talk about how much you're actually enjoying participating in sports, or how difficult some moments can be when the game is on the line? If they do, are those conversations useful? If those things aren't talked about do you wish they were?



**FC:** It's absolutely NOT talked about. I definitely wish it was talked about because those teammates are going through the same exact experiences and are facing the same fast pitcher and it would be cool to know they are nervous too; it'd make me feel more comfortable. Not only do we not talk about things like that, if I ever did, I feel like my teammates would think less of me or call me scared or soft. When we all talk sports, it's mostly just about pro teams or players. If we do talk about OUR sports, it's just to brag about how well we did, and if we had a bad game, we just don't say anything about it.

**MVP PARENT:** Does thinking or talking about performing your sport down the line, in the future, add to the wonderment and enjoyment of the game or does it cause anxiety and make you feel stress about having to live up to an expectation? For example, like a lot of kids that play baseball, they want to play in the majors or get a college scholarship. We have talked about that a bunch. How does that thought/projection make you feel?

**FC:** I think I just see it as a goal. Yeah, I would love to play for the Sox, but that's just more of a fun thing to think about. I don't see every pitch or AB [at-bat] as a step toward that goal, I am just having fun along the way. I also always have the built-in excuse that if I don't play in the bigs that I can just blame my poor genetics. (Laughs) [Dad only found that answer moderately amusing.]

Ellie, 17



Our second athlete is Ellie Davidson (ED), a junior at Torrey Pines High School outside San Diego, California. Ellie excels at lacrosse,

but her true love is soccer and she recently committed to Dartmouth and will join the Big Green in the fall of

2023. I got in touch with Ellie through a connection with one of her high school coaches, Pam Kalinoski. Pam was only part of four National Championship teams at University of North Carolina (a graduating class that went 89-0-6) and been a head coach at every level possible including National College Athletic Association (NCAA) Division 1 at the University of San Francisco. PK described Ellie as humble, shy at times and having a relentless work ethic all of the time.

**MVP PARENT:** As your soccer career has transitioned from fun/kid/activity to a fairly conscious, focused, deliberately competitive endeavor, do you feel like you check in with yourself or with the people in your circle regarding your overall enjoyment of your sport? For example, am I feeling it every time I set foot out on the pitch? Is the weight room fun? Am I truly enjoying my coaches and teammates? Am I doing this because I am still head over heels for it or because it's expected and just part of who I am?

**ED:** My overall enjoyment of soccer was a question that came up a lot between my parents and I during the recruiting process. That check-in and the subsequent discovery that soccer is my true physical passion and outlet in a very competitive world has been a conscious effort for me, but I have seen peers that have failed to check-in on it and as a result, they've gone in a different direction and in some cases, they're not playing anymore. Don't get me wrong, I think anyone that says they're psyched for drills every day at practice is nuts, but when that whistle blows, it still feels like magic for me.

**MVP PARENT:** Big moments on the field, do you feel anxiety and stress in maybe a penalty kick (PK) situation to settle a tie in regulation or is it more, "I love the spotlight with this cool opportunity to shine and put the biscuit in the basket" type of thing, or perhaps somewhere in between?

**ED:** There IS anxiety there, no question. My anxiety comes from not wanting to let the team down. It is tough because a PK is such a singular moment, either you score or you don't, that is inherently stressful. Yes, there is stress there. If I am asked to take a PK, I'm on it, no doubt. I think there is a difference between nerves and anxiety, but that line is delicate at times.

**MVP PARENT:** Two-part Q. Do the girls on any of the teams you've competed with ever share their thoughts with each other about the stresses you might feel when maybe facing a challenging opponent, playing in a big game or maybe even about the difficulty of balancing academics with athletics? If they do talk about those things, do you find those conversations useful?

**ED:** My teams have been particularly close. We DO communicate about tough moments or being stressed about schoolwork. Especially club soccer, we practice so much and commit so much time to the team. That common shared experience of balancing school, sports, college recruiting, it's a lot and to not talk about it with my teammates would make it more challenging than it already is.

**MVP PARENT:** It's natural as a talented athlete to often think about progressing to the next level in your journey. When you were in junior high wanting to try out for varsity, or wanting to play up a level in club soccer, thinking about scoring a collegiate scholarship...did those thoughts motivate you and add to the wonderment of the athletic experience or at times does that thinking forward cause some measure of anxiety or do you have an innate ability to just stay in the present and enjoy each experience as it unfolds?

**ED:** Being so competitive, I have always wanted to play up or play against the best competition. I am very familiar with the narrative in this question. I balked at the added commitment of the "next" level, that was more intimidating than the competition. For example, practicing four times per week verses two or three, and wondering how I'd get to academic stuff or other sports. Once I did level up, I always found that anxiety left fairly quickly and I was able to handle the older players or the increased commitment.

**"Yes, there is stress there. If I am asked to take a PK, I'm on it, no doubt. I think there is a difference between nerves and anxiety, but that line is delicate at times." - Ellie Davidson**





I live for the  
competition!

Two check ins completed. Two quality athletes that have, are, and will continue to achieve some great things on and off the field. There were some great take aways as I button up this very necessary piece on young athletes and their mental well-being.

Both of these athletes have strong support systems and that is a wonderful place to start. A common theme I noticed with both athletes is that neither of them felt unwanted stress from external sources, meaning it didn't seem like parents or coaches could possibly put more pressure on them that they already place on themselves. I believe that self-imposed pressure to be more manageable than pressure placed by authority figures (parents, coaches, media, fans, etc.). However, all of it is so much easier to navigate if there is a trusted person or persons to speak with to regain that feeling of normalcy and set their worlds right again. That pressure you're feeling IS normal and other people you're competing with and against are feeling it too.

I wanted to pick athletes that were different ages and even genders to see if there were some differences there as well. There were. It is widely accepted that females communicate more readily and efficiently than their male counterparts and in this microscopic sample size it does seem like that is the case. Ceko made mention that the boys on his teams wouldn't dream of chatting with each other about feeling unsettled

or overwhelmed in a difficult situation due to a fear of being viewed as inferior or not as tough. Ellie said she experienced just the opposite, as she felt she gained perspective and had her sense of normalcy reset by checking in with her teammates in challenging moments. This difference might be an age thing too, as Ceko is merely 11 and Ellie is a junior prepping to ship off to the Ivy League in 16 months.

Allocating time to speak specifically about mental health was a unique opportunity. In all my years as an athlete and coach, I am not certain I've collectively spent that much time on consciously checking in with others about how much they're enjoying their athletic endeavors emotionally. That's a failing. As a coach, I have touched on the mental side of sport and how best to deal with pressure situations in regards to overcoming and performing better, but I have precious few times ever had that check-in to ensure my kids were happy, fulfilled and doing exactly what it is they were meant to do. I am ready to improve on that.

A huge thank you to Ellie and Ceko for their candid answers. ■

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**JOSH CUPP** is a former NCAA D1 student athlete and head coach and has competed at golf's highest professional level. In addition to writing, he pitches never-ending batting practice to his best friend and son, Francisco, and peddles wine at the Thirsty Owl in Saratoga Springs, NY. He can be reached at [joshuacupp@gmail.com](mailto:joshuacupp@gmail.com).

**A COMMON THEME I NOTICED WITH BOTH ATHLETES IS THAT NEITHER OF THEM FELT UNWANTED STRESS FROM EXTERNAL SOURCES, MEANING IT DIDN'T SEEM LIKE PARENTS OR COACHES COULD POSSIBLY PUT MORE PRESSURE ON THEM THAT THEY ALREADY PLACE ON THEMSELVES.**





We want to feature your athlete in

# MVP PARENT



**WE HOPE YOU ENJOYED THESE STUDENT ATHLETE INTERVIEWS! MVP PARENT** would love to continue featuring athletes in an ongoing effort to help parents understand how to best serve their young stars. Contact us today if your child is interested in being interviewed for an upcoming issue. Visit **[mvpparent.com](https://mvpparent.com)** for more information.





Getting Started with Sport Psychology:

# HELPING YOUR ATHLETE BUILD A MENTAL GAME PLAN

BY LINDA STERLING, CMPC, LPC



In athletics, it's widely known that mindset is key to being a well-rounded, competitive athlete. People talk about mindset. They share mindset quotes. They say things like "get out of your head" and "find your zone." You hear it, you believe it, you're all in. Now you're left wondering how to help your athlete develop a strong mental game.

As a sport parent, you see all of the time and effort your athlete puts in. You know that they've got talent (and you're not just saying that because you're the parent!), but you also see where a solid mindset would be helpful.

- You see that they're loving the game and dominating on the court in middle school, but you worry about how they'll handle adversity when they try out for varsity next year.
- You know your athlete has D-1 aspirations and that they'll need to be mentally tough to make it happen.
- You notice when they can't seem to shake their anxiety. They're so focused on what could go wrong, they're terrified to make a mistake, or they're worried a college coach won't notice them.
- You may be wondering if they'll ever get out of their head and enjoy their sport again.

Whichever the scenario for your athlete, sport psychology skills are the difference maker in competitive athletics. Successful athletes

(and their sport parents) realize that mindset is key to taking their game to the next level, whether that be making the team or signing a college offer.

Sport psychology is a new(ish) field. It's actually been around for a while, but it's just now starting to get the media exposure it deserves. Elite athletes sharing about mental health and their sport psychology work is paving the way for all athletes to work on their mindset and wellness game. It also helps that a sport psychologist is featured in the Apple TV+ sports comedy-drama Ted Lasso!

Since the field is still somewhat new, many athletes and sport parents have no idea what to expect when seeing a sport psychologist or mental performance consultant. Sometimes coaches and athletic staff don't even really know. According to the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP), the goal of sport psychology is to "facilitate optimal involvement, performance, and enjoyment in sport and exercise."

The way I see it, there are two sides to sport psychology, which I'll explain ESPN style.

## Sport Psychology ESPN Style

### First there's the **SportsCenter Top 10 side** of sport psychology.

This is geared toward achieving a best performance, every performance. It's where sport psychologists help athletes develop their mental game plan. An athlete's work with a sport psychologist or mental performance consultant would cover topics like confidence, composure, imagery, focus, goal setting (and getting), pre-performance routines, mindfulness, and even recovering from burnout.

Well-meaning individuals will tell athletes to "focus!" But they don't tell athletes HOW to focus. That's what sport psychologists do: How to focus. How to get and stay confident. How to maintain composure...even when the official blows the call. How to lessen the nerves but maintain game time intensity.

### Next there's the **E:60/Outside the Lines/30 for 30 side** of sport psychology.

This is about the athlete as a person: Being one's best off the court and navigating the pressure and emotional challenges that come with being an athlete. Sport psychologists cover topics like communicating with teammates/coaches/professors, working through the mental side of injury and career transition, and developing an identity outside of sport.

When your athlete gets hurt, has a changing role on the team, becomes overwhelmed with the juggling of responsibilities, it changes more than the game. Sport psychologists and mental performance consultants get this and help athletes deal when challenges come their way.

## GETTING STARTED WITH A MENTAL GAME PLAN

Now that you know more about sport psychology, you may still be wondering about the next step for your athlete. They've put in the physical practice: the miles, the swings, the shots. Now it's time for the mental reps. To get your athlete started on the path to a strong mental game, implement these strategies.

## Leading Up to Competition

### Time to See It & Believe It



**Imagery:** Visualize success in your upcoming competition. Find a quiet place, close your eyes, and mentally take yourself through your performance. Always end with a stellar performance.



**Self-Talk:** Become aware of your thinking. Our thoughts determine our feelings, actions, and results so you'll want to dump the doubt. Write out your thoughts, throw out the mind trash, and give yourself a pre-game pep talk.



**Recognize & Replace:** Recognize if negativity comes your way. Acknowledge it, then replace with a focus on your breath and a thought that feels better. You may have to work up to the super positive, confident thought you're ultimately going for.

**NOW IT'S  
TIME  
FOR THE  
MENTAL  
REPS.**





## Pre-Game

## Game Time

### Your Mental Warm-Up



**Green/Gold Zone:** The green zone is everything leading up to the game. It's important to stay loose and relaxed in the green zone. The gold zone is game time. In the gold zone your sole focus is your role as an athlete. It's important to know when to flip that switch. Decide where that transition is for you.



**Routine:** Develop a repeatable routine that you can do at every competition. Great routines have three components: a focal point, an action that you'll take, and a go-to phrase you'll say to yourself. Pair it all with a breath.



**Zone of Optimal Functioning:** Each athlete is different in how they approach their athletic events. You've probably noticed that athletes have their own hype levels. Super psyched, quiet & chill, or somewhere in between. Find what's best for you.

### Keeping Your Head in the Game



**Control the Controllables:** Make sure your focus is where it matters. Make lists of what is in your control and what is out of your control. When you find yourself focusing on the uncontrollables, use a refocus routine to get back on track.



**Refocus Routine:** Sometimes we lose focus. The key is to have a quick refocus routine. Something you can do to remind yourself to get back on your game. It can be a short version of your pre-game routine or something new to quickly remind your brain where it needs to be.



**Breathing:** This may be the most underrated mental training technique. Being able to focus on your breathing allows your heart rate to slow down, your body to relax, and your thoughts to stop racing.



Implementing these techniques will help your athlete develop their mindset and go from pre-game to podium. Want a personalized mental game plan for your athlete? Consider seeing a sport psychologist or mental performance consultant. It's a game changer. ■

**LINDA STERLING, PHD, CMPC**, a former collegiate softball player, has masters and doctoral degrees in Counseling Psychology and Sport Psychology and is a licensed professional counselor and Certified Mental Performance Consultant. To learn more about her approach, visit [drlindasterling.com](http://drlindasterling.com).

A Word from the NATA

# What Parents Need to Know About Mental Health and Their Athletic Teens

**W**e all know high school is stressful. If you've forgotten, think back to your freshman year. Add sports, competition and performance, and stress levels can skyrocket. Top that with COVID-19 restrictions, and it's no wonder athletic kids today are stressed out.





# “Undoubtedly, experiencing overwhelming and/or ineffectively managed stress exposes an adolescent to poor long-term well-being. Being an athlete does not provide immunity from these stressors.”

“The adolescent brain is still maturing up to age 25,” said Timothy Neal, MS, ATC, assistant professor and athletic training program director at Concordia University, Ann Arbor, Michigan, and a member of the National Athletic Trainers’ Association (NATA). “The adolescent brain, when exposed to high stress levels, such as performing in the classroom and on the athletic field, is challenged to effectively keep events in perspective and develop coping mechanisms to address their continued stress.”

According to a consensus statement by NATA, demands and stressors on the student athlete can be physical, as in suffering a concussion; mental, such as meeting a coach’s expectations; and academic, as in maintaining the required grade point average to remain on the team.

Being a student athlete also means dealing with unique stressors that other non-athlete teens may not experience, such as the stress of staying athletically eligible, being cut from the team, dealing with injury, mistakes in play and early termination from the sport.

“Undoubtedly, experiencing overwhelming and/or ineffectively managed stress exposes an adolescent to poor long-term well-being,” Neal said. “Being an athlete does not provide immunity from these stressors.”

So, what can you do as a parent to help your child to prioritize their mental well-being?

## 1 Monitor Your Child’s Behavior

There are several behavioral patterns to look for when your child is suffering from stress. Some of the most common signs include lack of appetite or overeating; poor sleeping patterns; withdrawal or lack of interest in their sport or hobbies; easily agitated or a flat effect of emotions; and poor academic effort and results.

## 2 Open Up Lines of Communication

Talk to your child in a non-judgmental manner and offer your observations and concerns about their behavior. It’s OK if your child doesn’t want to talk about it at first. Try again at a later time or under different circumstances.

“By opening up lines of communication and allowing their child to speak when ready, the parent can hear of the stressors and its effects,” Neal said. “Stress is a normal part of life, and it is normal for anyone to feel overwhelmed from time to time.”

## SIGNS OF STRESS

- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Unexplained weight loss or weight gain
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Gambling issues
- Withdrawal from social contact
- Decreased interest in activities that have been enjoyable or taking up risky behavior
- Talking about death, dying, or “going away”
- Loss of emotion or sudden changes of emotion within a short period of time
- Problems concentrating, focusing or remembering
- Frequent complaints of fatigue, illness, or being injured that prevent participation
- Unexplained wounds or deliberate self-harm
- Becoming more irritable or having problems managing anger
- Irresponsible, lying
- Legal concerns, fighting, difficulty with authority
- All-or-nothing thinking
- Negative self-talk
- Feeling out of control
- Mood swings
- Excessive worry or fear
- Agitation or irritability
- Shaking, trembling
- Gastrointestinal complaints, headaches
- Overuse, unresolved, or frequent injuries

*Adapted with permission from the National Collegiate Athletic Association*

## STRESSORS/EVENTS UNIQUE TO STUDENT ATHLETES

Events may serve to trigger a new mental or emotional health concern or exacerbate an existing condition in a student-athlete. Some examples of those triggering events are:

- Poor performance or perceived poor performance by the student-athlete
- Conflicts with coaches or teammates
- A debilitating injury or illness resulting in a loss of playing time or surgery
- Concussions
- Class concerns; schedule, grades, amount of work
- Lack of playing time
- Family and relationship issues
- Changes in importance of sport, expectations by self/parents, role of sport in life
- Bullying or hazing
- Adapting to school schedule
- Violence: being assaulted, a victim of domestic violence, automobile accident or merely witnessing a personal injury or assault on a family member, friend, or teammate
- Lack of sleep
- History of mental disorder
- Burnout from sport or school
- Anticipated end of playing career
- Sudden end of career due to injury or medical condition
- Death of a loved one or close friend
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Significant dieting or weight loss
- History of physical or sexual abuse
- Gambling problems

*Adapted with permission from the National Collegiate Athletic Association*

### 3 Address Possible Solutions

Talk about addressing the stressor with your child and discuss options your child believes would help. Involving your teen in the decision-making process to find a solution is key, Neal said.

“Forcing a resolution on someone who has no input into their own care rarely proves effective,” he said.

### 4 Seek Help

Lastly, if you’re concerned about the effects of stress and the unmanageable nature of the situation, seek counseling services through the school, family physician or social service agency.

According to the NATA consensus statement, the athletic department and secondary school personnel have the trust of the student athlete, and the student athlete may turn to them for advice or assistance with a personal concern or during a crisis. Many schools have plans that address the mental health needs of their students and a healthcare team that includes athletic trainers, school nurses and administrators to develop and administer plans on an individual basis.

Maria Rosanelli Allen, LAT, ATC, head athletic trainer at Richardson High School in Richardson, Texas, said she implemented a healthcare plan



recently for an athlete who began having panic attacks during practices and games. “We needed to handle this, so we invited the coaches, the athlete and the parents to discuss ways to help the student through episodes,” Allen said. “We developed a healthcare plan specifically for her.”

The plan consisted of signs for recognizing a panic attack, management tools and other resources on anxiety, Allen said.

“We also discussed scenarios, like away games, and had input from the student because we want them to feel empowered,” she said. “We made copies of the plan for all the coaches, the parents and other healthcare personnel on campus. The plan is

open-ended so there is always room for improvement.”

## TO LEARN MORE

The NATA consensus statement, “Interassociation Recommendations for Developing a Plan to Recognize and Refer Student-Athletes With Psychological Concerns at the Secondary School Level: A Consensus Statement,” is available for free online at <https://meridian.allenpress.com/jat/article/50/3/231/112658/Interassociation-Recommendations-for-Developing-a?searchresult=1>





# HELPING YOUR CHILD NAVIGATE PERFORMANCE ISSUES

BY GREG BACH

**Long before Caroline Burckle emerged as a world class swimmer and an Olympic medalist,** the door to the mental side of competing was nudged open by her father during rides home from her youth swim meets.

Like all young athletes, she had to learn how to navigate the sting of a disappointing performance and sort through the negative debris that accompanies those rocky moments which can chip away at confidence and impede development.

**“My dad would say, ‘I know you weren’t super happy with that outcome, but I’m really proud of you. What is it that you feel you can do better?’” Burckle says of those all-important talks that still resonate all these years later. “His questions made me think on my own more than being told what I was doing wrong or right. It was really great being asked questions and supported in that way.”**

He didn’t criticize, pressure, or make demands. Those talks were draped in love and encouragement and drove two-way dialogue. And it gave Burckle the chance to learn, grow and later flourish on the world stage.

“It’s interesting because I felt more pressure from myself than I did from anybody,” she says. “My parents were the most supportive individuals when it came to sports, and they were the kind of parents who were like, ‘Well, if you don’t want to do it for yourself, then you don’t need to do it.’ Of course, hearing that from your parents kind of tells a child something; it gave me the power of choice.”

Talk to your kids about their experiences in their practices and games and ask them what they are feeling. You’ll likely hear about their fears or what’s causing some anxiety, and then you can help them begin to understand those emotions. “Everyone experiences fear,” says former Division One swimming coach Christen Shefchunas, author of *30 DAYS TO CONFIDENT: A 30 Day Confidence Challenge for Female Athletes*. “But everyone also thinks that they’re the only one experiencing fear and then we start to wonder what’s wrong with me? Am I weak? What’s wrong with me that I’m afraid? It’s 100 percent normal – even the women that are the best in the world struggle with fear and doubts, too.”

### **DON’T EXCUSE EXCUSES**

Young athletes often have a tendency to throw blame around when performances don’t go as expected – a bad habit that parents can help their kids work through and squash. “Having parents and coaches who aren’t willing to accept excuses but do it in a loving and caring way

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As your young athletes head out to compete in sports this spring keep these tips in mind to help foster productive conversations that they will remember for the rest of their lives, just like Burckle does.

### **CONCENTRATE ON WHAT’S IN YOUR CONTROL**

Yes, you’ve heard it said countless times, but young athletes new to the challenges of competing need to be reminded of it so their focus isn’t wrapped up in what is out of their hands. “It’s simple but it’s so true, and young athletes need to be constantly reminded of that,” says Kim Carducci, author of *The I of the Tiger* and founder of Everything Athletes. “In swimming, if the person in the lane next to you beats you by 10 seconds and you gave your best effort – you can’t control what they do. You don’t control what coach they train with, and you don’t control what nutrition plan they’re on. You can only control what you can control, and I think just reminding your brain of that when you are facing defeat should offer some relief.”

really helped me realize that it’s just swimming – it’s going to be fine no matter what happens,” says Maya DiRado, who won two gold medals among the four she hauled home from the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio. “It kind of helped me realize that the feeling that I hated most was getting done with a race or getting done with a meet and realizing that I had kind of let myself off the hook, like I had accepted a less than 100 percent effort. And that was a lesson that I learned on my own.”

### **MAKE TIME FOR MENTAL HEALTH**

“I know young athletes have homework and so many other things to do, but if they can choose one thing that they can do daily just to help their mind and help their emotions,” Carducci says. “It could be listening to a podcast, reading one chapter of a book, or finding a YouTube video of a professional athlete speaking about what they have gone through. You have to support your mental health just as you do your physical health.” ■

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**GREG BACH** is Senior Director of Communications & Content at National Alliance for Youth Sports.

**START DIALOGUE**





# THE CHALLENGE OF DRUGS & YOUTH SPORTS

BY ROBERT WEIL, DPM

**T**he link between drugs and sports runs deep! Drugs and sports have been connected for about as long as sports have been played. This includes the whole array of painkillers and anti-inflammatory drugs both prescribed by doctors and available over the counter.

One of the concerns I've always had, especially at the elite and professional level, is that the physical and mental demands of sports all too often are extreme. This often leads to the use of pain meds and anti-inflammatories even in younger athletes to survive. This "routine use" is alarming! The acetaminophens and ibuprofens are too often overused to keep these young athletes "in the game."

NOT SMART! Parents beware! Youth sports injuries – both acute and chronic – are at epidemic levels. We've got to pay real attention!

Are the schedules and physical demands we put on these kids often too much with not enough time for their growing bodies to recover? Too often the answer is yes. For the past 3-4 decades I've watched as college

and professional athletes and even Olympians faced these challenges. Now, not much is different at the high school level, and especially for adolescent standouts in club and traveling sports, particularly those who specialize in a single sport.

One of the difficult realities in the world of medicine and sports is that these drugs work. Under proper medical supervision, medicines can be of real value. Problems arise when the drugs are used to replace proper rest and recovery. In past years, it soon became apparent to athletes, coaches, trainers (and parents) that drugs work. This soon led to rapid overuse and reliance on these drugs to shorten recovery time, dull pain and discomfort, and allow more intense workouts and training. BIG MISTAKE! We all know all too well these endless stories at the highest level of sports.

This scenario of course has filtered down to young athletes. Prescription pain medicines, such as opioids, which were often given for sports injuries and after surgery, have become a national epidemic nightmare.



Seriously question your child's doctors if they prescribe these. It is not unusual to recommend over-the-counter anti-inflammatory drugs for young athletes, but even these should always be accompanied by strict guidelines and instructions for short-term use. This is always combined with decreased intensity, frequency, and level of training or playing – what I call “Intelligent Rest.”

An important rule for parents and coaches is that if they are using these drugs for their youngsters to participate or stay in the game, they have **CROSSED THE LINE!** I can't tell you how often I see this rule broken – especially when “the pressure to play is on.”

We are bombarded with TV ads about all sorts of over-the-counter and prescription pain and anti-inflammation drugs. The United States is one of only a few countries that allow this. It's easy for one to be fooled into thinking that all these drugs are without side effects or consequences and that is simply not true. Get educated!

Besides the drugs themselves, the whole world of sports supplements and energy drinks are also of concern because children and adolescent bodies are still growing and developing. As a rule, most experts do not recommend these supplements under 18 yrs of age. Again, the reality is that it's all too common for high school and even younger athletes to be using these easily obtainable products to try and “get an edge” over their teammates and rivals.

Parents should always check with their doctors or dietitians before allowing the routine use of any sports drinks that contain high amounts of caffeine, which can be potentially dangerous for some kids. Sports doctors and pediatricians alike have been alarmed by the number of heart and high blood pressure problems that can be caffeine-related.

Let's not fool ourselves with this very important challenge of drugs and youth sports. It's everywhere! Because youth sports is such big business and injuries are of epidemic proportions, it stands to reason that all sorts of demands and problems are right there with them. Physical and mental pressures seem to be always increasing for our young athletes, so parents and coaches need to pay attention and listen to and observe their young kids and players. Awareness and education are always the keys. ■

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**DR. BOB WEIL** is a sports podiatrist in private practice in Aurora, Illinois. He hosts “The Sports Doctor,” a live weekly radio show on [bbsradio.com](http://bbsradio.com). For more information, go to [sportsdoctorradio.com](http://sportsdoctorradio.com).



There are many tough decisions now for parents whose children want to participate in sports: how to choose the right program, how to help coach them, preventing injuries.

Dr. Robert Weil, an original New Yorker with an office in Aurora, IL, is a sports podiatrist that has helped many elite athletes and hosts the radio show “The Sports Doctor”. His co- author Sharkie Zartman, is a former All-American volleyball player and former member of the U.S. National team. They have combined their expertise into one book designed to help parents navigate through youth sports programs.

**#Hey Sports Parents** is broken down in four Sections. The first section written by Sharkie, is *Sports Parenting 101* which includes choosing the right program, nutritional guidelines, college recruiting and stress management.

“In the next section,” says Dr. Bob, “called *The Sports Doctor Is In*, I talk about overtraining, sports and drugs, the importance of the right shoes and orthotics, and the very real risks of contact football for kids. The third and fourth section highlight various experts in youth sports and parenting.

Dr. Bob and Sharkie met years ago when they both hosted shows for the same radio network. “We thought this book would be a great resource because of our different professional perspectives” says Sharkie.

**You can find #Hey Sports Parents on Amazon, Kindle, and Ingram.**



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