

One Size Fits No One

Why Mental Health Literacy Has to Match the Athlete in Front of You

Episode 5 | Season 1 | *Coaching Research to Results Podcast*

EPIISODE AT A GLANCE

Paper	Developing Mental Health Literacy and Cultural Competence in Elite Sport
Author	Gorczyński et al.
Published	Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 2021
Episode Length	Under 10 minutes
Tags	Mental Health; Mental Health Literacy; Cultural Competence; Athlete Wellbeing; Sport Psychology; Coaching Practice; Elite Sport; Help-Seeking; Diversity in Sport; Coach Education

THE THREE STICKY IDEAS

These are the labels to remember from this episode. They are designed to stick with you long after the research fades.

The Cultural Blind Spot

Knowing the signs of depression or anxiety is not enough. Mental health literacy only works if it is delivered in a way that actually makes sense for who an athlete is; their background, their community, their culture, and what the words 'mental health' even mean to them. The education has to match the person. For a lot of athletes, it currently does not.

The Invisible Athletes

Between 19 and 34 percent of elite athletes are currently experiencing mental health symptoms. But most of the research behind those numbers was done on male, team-sport athletes in high-income Western countries. Women, athletes of colour, 2SLGBTQI+ athletes, athletes with disabilities, and athletes from lower-income countries are barely in the data. For the athletes who hold more than one underrepresented identity, it may be even harder.

Don't Leave It at the Athlete's Door

Seven separate expert bodies all said the same thing: you cannot put all the responsibility for mental health on the individual athlete. If stigma exists in asking for help, if there is no referral pathway, if the coach models silence, educating athletes about the signs of depression is not enough. Structural, organisational change has to happen alongside individual education.

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TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

Take one or more of these actions into your next coaching session.

Action 1 (Just-in-Time Coach Learning)

Before your next training session, ask yourself one question: if an athlete on my team was struggling with their mental health right now, what would stop them from telling me? Just sit with that. Do not try to fix it today. What is the friction? Is it the team culture? The norms of your sport? Something about your own history with mental health conversations? Name it. Because you cannot address a blind spot you have not spotted yet. And if you want to go further: ask a trusted athlete on your team the same question. You might be surprised by the answer.

Action 2 (Just-in-Case Coach Learning)

Over the next month, look up a Mental Health First Aid course that has been specifically designed for or adapted to sport settings. These exist, and they are different from generic awareness modules because they take the performance context of sport seriously. Then ask yourself: who else on my coaching staff should have this training? And if your organisation has never invested in sport-specific mental health training, ask why not. That question alone might start a conversation worth having.

RESEARCH REFERENCE

Primary Source: Gorczynski, P., et al. (2021). Developing mental health literacy and cultural competence in elite sport. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*.

Counterpoint Sources: Breslin, G., Shannon, S., Haughey, T., Donnelly, P., & Leavey, G. (2017). A systematic review of interventions to increase awareness of mental health and well-being in athletes, coaches and officials. *Systematic Reviews*, 6(1), 177.

LINKS AND RESOURCES

- Full episode library: thecoachdeveloper.com
- Show notes: thecoachdeveloper.com/coaching-research-to-results-podcast-notes
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Share this episode with one coach this week, since that's how research actually travels.

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FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

The following is the complete script for this episode of *Coaching Research To Results*.

Cold Open

You've probably sat through a mental health awareness session at some point in your coaching career. Maybe it was an hour-long workshop. Maybe an online module. Maybe someone handed you a brochure at a conference. And you walked away thinking: okay, I know the signs. I know to refer. I know how to have the conversation. Good. Done.

But what if that training — the very training designed to help your athletes — was actually built for a completely different athlete than the ones you currently serve? A team of eleven researchers from thirteen countries looked at the evidence and found that's not just possible. For many coaches, it is probably the default. And once you see it, you can't unsee it.

Intro and Show ID

Welcome to Coaching Research To Results — 1 paper, 3 ideas, and 2 actions for tomorrow in under 15 minutes. This is the podcast where research for coaches gets off the shelf, out of your notes, and into your practice. Let's go.

The Paper

The paper is called "Developing Mental Health Literacy and Cultural Competence in Elite Sport." It was published in 2021 in the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*. The lead author, Paul Gorczynski from the University of Portsmouth, led a team of eleven researchers from thirteen countries — spanning sports psychiatry, sport psychology, and clinical psychology.

So, what prompted this research? Seven separate international expert panels — including one from the International Olympic Committee — had all independently said the same thing: mental health education is the key strategy for preventing and treating mental health problems in elite athletes. These authors wanted to take that recommendation seriously and ask: what does good mental health education actually look like when you take culture and context seriously? Here is what they found.

Big Idea #1

The big idea from this paper could be called 'The Cultural Blind Spot.' Here it is: knowing the signs of depression or anxiety is not enough. Mental health literacy — the knowledge and skills around mental health — only works if it is delivered in a way that actually makes sense for who an athlete is. Their background, their community, their culture, and yes, even what the words 'mental health' mean to them.

Here is what this might look like in your coaching context. An athlete from a background where emotional struggle is managed through faith, family, or community may not respond to a referral to a clinical psychologist — not because they are resistant, but because that is just not how they have learned to make sense of what they are going through. An athlete from a culture where asking for help is understood as weakness faces a barrier that a standard awareness module simply does not touch. The education has to match the person. Right now, for a lot of athletes, it does not.

Ideas #2 and #3

Okay, idea two. Between nineteen and thirty-four percent of elite athletes are currently experiencing some kind of mental health symptom – depression, anxiety, sleep problems, alcohol misuse. Those numbers come from a major research review in 2019 and they are alarming enough on their own, let alone factoring in a post-pandemic world. But here is the part that does not get talked about enough: most of that research was done on male, team-sport athletes in high-income, Western countries.

Women were underrepresented. Athletes of colour, 2SLGBTQI+ athletes, athletes with disabilities, athletes from different faith communities, athletes from lower-income countries are barely there in the data at all. The paper calls this out directly. What it means is that for many of the athletes you coach – especially those who hold more than one underrepresented identity – researchers do not even have a clear picture of how bad things are. The data has not been collected. These are The Invisible Athletes – the ones the research has not properly looked at yet. Think about your own roster. Who might be invisible in your environment?

Idea three, and this one is aimed at sport organisations as much as it is at individual coaches. Seven separate expert bodies all independently said the same thing: you cannot put all of the responsibility for mental health on the individual athlete. If the team environment stigmatises asking for help, if there is no referral pathway, if the coach models silence around mental health – educating athletes about the signs of depression is not going to cut it on its own.

‘Don’t Leave It at the Athlete’s Door.’ The paper is clear that structural, organisational change has to happen alongside individual education. That means clubs, federations, schools, and programs need to have mental health strategies that are visible, resourced, and accountable. And coaches are often the people in the best position to ask: does our organisation actually have one? Because if not, someone has to start that conversation. It could be you.

The Counterpoint

Now, let’s complicate the picture a little here. A 2017 systematic review by Breslin and colleagues looked at every mental health education program that had been tested in sport settings up to that point. Their conclusion? The programs showed some positive signs – improved knowledge, reduced stigma, better intentions to seek help. So far, so good.

But here is the catch: the research quality behind those programs was weak. Small samples, no control groups, short follow-up periods, and in many cases, measurement tools that had not been properly validated. The authors of the Gorczyński paper cite this directly. So what can we actually say? Mental health education in sport is probably worth doing. We just can’t yet say with confidence what kind works best, for whom, or for how long. The evidence is promising. But it is thin. We know enough to act. We don’t know enough to be complacent about how we act.

The Anecdote

This paper made me reflect again on an experience I had with a former athlete whom I respected immensely. A senior leader and integral team member, respected for calm personal control and yet capable of incredible ferocity on the field, came to me prior to the season, telling me about the decision to step away from the team. I was dumbfounded! Why would such a successful

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athlete and beloved human leave, especially in the middle of a highly successful period for the team, which they deeply cared about?

I tried everything I could to convince, cajole, and persuade and in the end, I could see that there was something else that I didn't understand and that was deeply concerning since I cared. And I cared a LOT.

Fast forward several years, and then, as that athlete went through an identity transition, I finally understood. Their mental health had to come first, and being part of a team that didn't fit their identity was far worse than being successful on a team that couldn't see their full self.

Two Actions

This week — and you can do this before your next training session — ask yourself one question: if an athlete on my team was struggling with their mental health right now, what would stop them from telling me? Just sit with that. Don't try to fix it today. What is the friction? Is it the team culture? Is it the norms of your sport? Is it something about your own history with mental health conversations? Name it. Because you cannot address a blind spot you have not spotted yet. And if you want to go further: ask a trusted athlete on your team the same question. You might be surprised by the answer.

For the next action — something to take on over the next month or so — look up a Mental Health First Aid course that has been specifically designed for or adapted to sport settings. These exist, and they are different from generic awareness modules because they take the performance context of sport seriously. Then ask yourself: who else on my coaching staff should have this training? And if your organisation has never invested in sport-specific mental health training, ask why not. That question alone might start a conversation worth having.

Close and Invite

Here is what I want to leave you with from this episode. Mental health literacy in sport is not a box you check. It is a conversation you need to keep having — and it has to be tailored to the actual humans in front of you: their backgrounds, their cultures, the environments you have both been placed inside. The research says a one-size approach fits no one.

The three ideas: The Cultural Blind Spot — mental health literacy has to match who your athlete is. The Invisible Athletes — we are not collecting the data on the people who may need it most. And Don't Leave It at the Athlete's Door — the system has to own part of this too.

I'm Beth Barz, The Coach Developer. You'll find the show notes and the full library of episodes at www.thecoachdeveloper.com. If any idea from today lands for you like, subscribe, and share it with another coach this week. That is how research actually travels. See you next time!