

## **Responding to COVID-19 Related Mental Health Impacts Among Elite Athletes**

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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted considerably on elite athletes' performance. In this paper, we aim to examine how the psychosocial effects of COVID-19 may impact on athletes. First, mental health problems are as common among elite athletes as among the general population. Second, the mental health effects of COVID-19 are common in adolescents and young adults. Third, there are recognised gender differences in mental health related help-seeking behaviour. There is emerging evidence that these issues may be exacerbated by the pandemic. While there is little evidence on what interventions may help to address this problem, it is possible that optimising the identification and treatment of mental health problems (in an appropriate and acceptable manner) and promoting team cohesion and interaction may be effective. Addressing this issue is important for all team doctors and healthcare professionals associated with sports teams (both elite and non-elite).

It is generally recognised that the performance of elite team sports has been adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has been especially the case for elite sports that are amateur in nature (especially Gaelic Games). The fundamentally changed experience of playing elite sports since the COVID-19 pandemic, with greatly diminished crowds, less social contact, altered team preparations, etc drive this phenomenon. But only to some extent - as we believe the psychosocial effects of COVID-19 affecting individual players are an important determinant, or at least exacerbator, of how elite teams perform and thus an important area for team doctors to address.

There are several reasons for this. First, there is increasing recognition that elite athletes suffer from mental health symptoms and disorders at rates equivalent to or exceeding those in the general population <sup>1,2</sup> and pandemic era research also indicates that mental health issues among athlete populations are a concern <sup>3</sup>.

Second, research shows that the mental health consequences of COVID-19 are especially marked in adolescents and young adults, a cohort which constitutes a large proportion of elite athlete populations <sup>4</sup>. Third, it is now accepted that 'men are less likely than women to seek help for mental health issues, with socially constructed masculinity norms in men's help-seeking behaviour for mental health issues a major reason for this' <sup>5</sup>, and negative help-seeking attitudes are believed to especially prominent among male athlete populations <sup>6</sup>.

While much of the literature on caring for athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic has focused on cardiac complications, screening for asymptomatic disease and return to sport<sup>7</sup>, having a better understanding of how COVID-19 has impacted on elite players' mental health and wellbeing is essential for many reasons. Most importantly, this knowledge will help promote athletes' mental health and wellbeing, but from a sporting perspective, it will also help towards ensuring that athletes and teams perform to their full capability.

To our knowledge there is no large-scale numeric data outlining COVID-19 related changes in rates of mental health issues among elite athletes. However, a recently published narrative review outlined how the pandemic may precipitate or worsen mental health symptoms due to social isolation, cancelled schedules, loss of income, loss of access to training venues and team staff, teammates and coaches, family infection risks, loss of daily routines and selfcare, anxiety about contracting COVID-19 during sporting events, and persistent community distress and family conflicts <sup>7</sup>. These impacts will inevitably affect performance at a personal and collective level, and strategies to address this should therefore be considered by medical teams who are caring for elite athletes. This is especially the case for doctors caring for vulnerable groups who may be more susceptible to such issues including female and impoverished populations<sup>8</sup>.

At an individual level, it is important to identify mental health problems, and to initiate any treatment that may be required. However, doing this in a manner that is acceptable to the athlete(s) is important, especially if dealing with groups of young men who may be reluctant to discuss mental health symptoms. In this specific setting, it should be remembered that the sports team may very well be a 'trusted community' where discussion of mental health symptoms can be accommodated, if even indirectly<sup>5</sup> (p.16).

At a collective level, strategies that promote team cohesion, especially when training / team meeting schedules are curtailed, are important. These are well described by Moran and Toner, who highlighted the value of social activities and games in this regard and cite specific examples of successful teams who have adopted these techniques<sup>9</sup> (p.261-294).

But viewed more broadly, mental health identification and treatment in young athletes needs a different approach, and perhaps COVID-19 will encourage society and sporting organisations to address this issue. There is already some indication that this is happening in Ireland as evidenced by recent GAA, FAI, IRFU, and Sport Ireland initiatives among others. Although sports participation provides benefits that can be protective for mental health, stressors unique to sport compound

mental health problems among adolescents and young adults. The importance of multidisciplinary teams and coordination of care can provide a holistic approach that ensures young athletes optimize their personal and athletic goals<sup>10</sup>. That said, systematic reviews of interventions to increase awareness of mental health and wellbeing in athletes' coaches and officials have found the quality of evidence in this area to be lacking<sup>11</sup>.

Adolescents and young adults frequently experience mental health problems but tend not to seek help. Stigma and embarrassment, poor mental health literacy and a preference for self-reliance are often identified as important barriers to help seeking<sup>12</sup>. While facilitators remain comparatively under researched, there is evidence that past positive experiences and social support can aid a person's help seeking behaviour and intervention strategies for improving help seeking in young elite athletes should focus on improving relations with potential providers<sup>13</sup>.

However therein lies the difficulty. Current models need to change to facilitate young adults to access mental health services. There are examples in Ireland (e.g., Jigsaw Youth Mental Health) and worldwide (e.g., Headspace – National Youth Mental Health Foundation) of how changing services to adapt to the needs of young people needs can enhance accessibility and acceptability. The work of McGorry et al <sup>14</sup> offers considerable promise, especially if it could be expanded to work with and support young athletes in collaboration with community-based sporting organisations.

Servicing the unique characteristics and needs of athletes allows us to address health threats experienced by young adults more broadly. In this group, mental health is heavily influenced by a myriad of factors compared to the general population; a higher prevalence and burden of disorder coupled with lower levels of access to mental health supports. Using existing networks, such as community-based sports clubs, could advance the awareness and management of mental health problems given their regular contact with adolescents and young adults.

In summary, COVID-19 has impacted on how elite athletes perform. The reasons for this are complex and inter-related, but the effect of the pandemic on an athlete's mental health and wellbeing is likely to be an important factor. Especially after the pandemic, we recommend that elite teams (and their medical teams) aim to, or continue to, support the mental health and wellbeing of their players, and consider strategies such as regular checks, optimizing access to (psychological / pharmacological) treatment if necessary, and promoting team cohesion through regular (socially distanced / virtual) social interaction. For those GPs who act as team doctors for such elite teams in the UK, Ireland and indeed internationally, there exists a unique opportunity to improve performance by being mindful of the considerable psychological impact of COVID-19 on individual players. As the 2021-22 sports seasons unfold, it is possible that the lessons learned may have wider benefits for population health; involvement in team-based sports activity can be an important protective factor against adverse COVID-related mental health outcomes. Lastly, further research is needed examining policies and procedures for mental health screening/ management/ reporting in elite sports.

**Declaration of Conflicts of Interest:**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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