

## ROLE OF SPORTS ORGANISATIONS: KEY LEARNING POINTS

- Sports organisations have an essential role in facilitating a **safe and supportive environment** that allows athletes to feel comfortable in coming forward with concerns about their mental health.
- **A positive culture** surrounding mental health should be adopted at all levels of a sports organisation, and supported by the top leadership/management.
- Sports organisations also play a role in promoting **positive mental health values** within their local community, and should ensure that all internal policy is in line with public policy.
- Sports organisations must recognise their **duty of care** and how that extends to safeguarding athletes' mental health.
- Sports organisations should include the **protection and promotion of mental health** in formal written documentation alongside the protection of athletes' physical safety.
- Organisations should develop appropriate **mental health policies** and communicate those policies to all departments and stakeholders, regardless of the nature of their relationship with athletes.
- All sporting organisations should develop a **Mental Health Emergency Action Plan (MHEAP)** to support athletes in the event of a mental health emergency.
- Those in sports organisations with specific mental health roles and responsibilities for mental health should receive sufficient **training to support** them in exercising their role.
- Sports organisations should create and implement **career transition programmes** to support athletes' mental health as they make the transition out of sport.



### 3.3. ROLE OF SPORTS ORGANISATIONS

Sports organisations play a powerful role in facilitating the creation of psychologically safe environments, not just for elite athletes, but for all stakeholders linked to the organisation. In this section we will discuss the roles and responsibilities of sports organisations in supporting elite athlete mental health, and outline key recommendations.

**Recognition of the importance of mental health and well-being by the top leadership and at executive levels helps to foster a supportive organisational culture that can positively impact employees and all of those who are influenced by the organisation.**

Sports organisations also play an important role in supporting mental health in the wider community through the social support and resources available to members. This may be especially effective when:

- their organisations' activities are aligned with public policy concerning mental health and physical activity
- they seek to utilise the power of sport to help promote physical and mental well-being.<sup>(76,77)</sup>

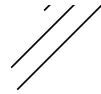
"Sports organisations" includes, but is not limited to: National Olympic Committees, National Paralympic Committees, International Federations, Continental Associations, National Federations, clubs and teams.



The Olympic Movement, to accomplish its mission, encourages all stakeholders to take measures... necessary to protect the health of participants by minimising the risks of physical injury, illness and psychological harm.

**THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT MEDICAL CODE (2016)**





### 3.3.1 PLACING ATHLETE MENTAL WELL-BEING AS A PRIORITY

As discussed in **SECTIONS 2** and **3.2** of this toolkit, participation in sport has many benefits for both physical and psychological health. However, it is acknowledged that “the very nature of [sports] competition can provoke, augment or expose psychological issues in athletes”.<sup>(16)</sup> Knowing this and considering the duty of care that sports organisations have towards athletes, it is incumbent upon them to make certain that athlete mental wellness is placed as a priority and that measures are in place to protect and promote mental health and well-being.

One way for this to be clearly demonstrated is by ensuring that the protection and promotion of athlete mental health and the requirement to minimise the risk of physical injury and psychological harm are included in the formal written documents that outline your organisation’s authorities, commitments and responsibilities, for example, your organisation’s statutes, code of ethics, medical code, code of conduct, etc. (hereafter, foundational guiding documents). By clearly stating this, your organisation is:

1. Demonstrating a commitment to placing mental well-being as a priority
2. Sending a strong message of support, which may help to raise awareness and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health
3. Providing a foundation on which your organisation’s mental health policies, guidelines and action plans can be developed.

*Examples of how such provisions are included in the foundational guiding documents of the Olympic and Paralympic Movements can be found in **SECTION 1.3**.*



#### QUICK CHECK:

Does your organisation specifically reference the protection and promotion of mental health and well-being in its foundational guiding documents?

### 3.3.2 DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING MENTAL HEALTH POLICIES AND ACTION PLANS

The next step is to verify that appropriate mental health policies and action plans are in place.

Policies and action plans clearly define the approach your organisation intends to take to uphold the principles to which it has committed. Having policies related to “sports medicine support” and “athletic and post career support” (both of which should include athlete mental health) has also been shown to be a factor in influencing both individual and national athletic success.<sup>(78)</sup> Below we will seek to identify the key mental health policies, action plans and guidance that your organisation may look to develop and implement. These include:

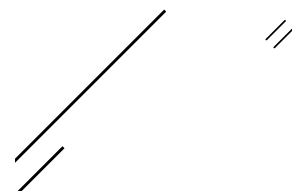
- An organisational mental health action plan
- A Mental Health Emergency Action Plan (MHEAP)
- Mental health referral pathways
- Coaching frameworks and education related to athlete mental health

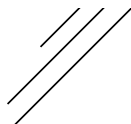
*Other important organisational policies which also help to protect the mental well-being of members include those which address discrimination of all kinds – which underpin harassment and abuse in sport policies and diversity and inclusion policies.*

## BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLE:

The **Mental Health Charter for Sport and Recreation**, developed by the **Sport+ Recreation Alliance**, encourages sports organisations to help embed mental health and wellness in the sports and recreation sector by:

- ✓ Publicly promoting and adopting good mental health policies and best practice in sport and recreational activities.
- ✓ Actively tackling discrimination on the grounds of mental health to make sure that everyone is treated with dignity and respect.
- ✓ Using the power of sport and recreation to promote well-being, with a special focus on encouraging physical activity and social interaction due to their contribution to good mental health.
- ✓ Supporting the establishment of a network to work closely with the mental health sector to develop resources and best practice.
- ✓ Promoting positive public health messages using diverse role models and ambassadors to reduce the stigma attached to mental health issues.
- ✓ Regularly monitoring performance, assessing progress and taking positive action on mental health issues.





### Developing an organisational mental health action plan

A mental health action plan will help your organisation to translate commitments made into tangible actions promoting and protecting athlete mental health. It will help you to set out key activities and/or initiatives that your organisation can implement in order to prioritise mental health, and support best practice such as:

-  Ensuring mental health and well-being is set as a priority
-  Developing organisational campaigns to raise awareness of mental health and the role of sport in protecting and promoting mental and physical well-being
-  Developing coach, athlete and other stakeholder educational programmes and tools
-  Developing and implementing key mental health policies such as an Emergency Mental Health Action Plan
-  Identifying champions of mental health, including athletes, entourage members, leadership and community champions, to tackle stigma and improve recognition
-  Building formal and informal external support networks, including referral pathways, links to community organisations, schools and mental health services
-  Creating and implementing effective athlete safeguarding policies, procedures and education
-  Developing initiatives embracing diversity and inclusion
-  Developing initiatives that build a culture of support, promote open lines of communication and foster mental wellness

Adapted from Orygen 2019<sup>(79)</sup>

Your organisational mental health action plan will provide a framework to help you outline the key initiatives to be developed, the resources and support required, timeframes, and how progress will be monitored. In essence, it provides a tangible roadmap to help you monitor your organisation's commitment and progress in protecting and promoting athlete mental health.

An example of a mental health action plan template for sports organisations can be found [HERE](#).<sup>(80)</sup>

An example of a Governmental Mental Health and Elite Sport Action plan can be found [HERE](#).<sup>(81)</sup>

### Ensuring the existence and effective implementation of a Mental Health Emergency Action Plan (MHEAP)

Mental Health Emergency Action Plans (MHEAPs) outline the steps that are to be followed when faced with an emergency or non-emergency mental health situation and the stakeholders who should be involved. MHEAPs are usually developed by an organisation's medical team in conjunction with licensed experts in mental health, such as clinical psychologists or psychiatrists.

This plan should be well communicated throughout your organisation and to your key stakeholders to make certain that they are aware of the procedure to be followed if faced with a mental health emergency.

As a sports organisation, it is your responsibility to ensure that your organisation has an MHEAP, and if not, to make sure that one is developed and that those who are responsible for its implementation are trained to do so.

### Ensuring the existence and effective implementation of routine mental health referral pathways

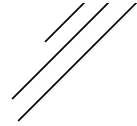
Routine mental health referral plans are a key component in the recognition and diagnosis of mental health disorders in elite athletes. These plans define the referral procedures that should be followed in the event that an athlete presents with a non-emergent mental health concern. Within your organisation it is important to designate those people responsible for developing this plan and those responsible for facilitating referrals.

Designated persons should receive training in the recognition of signs and symptoms of mental health disorders. It is also important that the existence of key information related to the plan is well communicated to all those in your organisation.

### Providing mental health education within the framework of coaching expectations and duties

Supporting the development of educational initiatives to improve mental health awareness and understanding for critical stakeholders such as coaches is another significant form of organisational guidance. This education should be embedded in the framework of a coach's expectations and duties established by the sports organisation – providing motivation, obligations and pathways for coaches to increase their awareness and adapt their responsibilities surrounding this issue.





### 3.3.3 RESOURCES AND FUNDING

In order to establish a solid and reliable mental health framework for athletes, sports organisations must first recognise the need to allocate resources and funding to support mental health programmes and initiatives.

Organisational resources and funding may refer to human resources, such as project managers, mental health specialists, etc., or to monetary funding earmarked for developing mental health initiatives such as educational programmes, seminars, communication campaigns, research or event-specific considerations.

That being said, there are often limitations to resources and available funding. In this instance, sports organisations may seek to request advice on developing organisational mental health policies and practices from external experts, such as professionals on your organisation's Medical Commission. You may also consider collaborating with community mental health services, charities and non-governmental organisations in order to establish a network of services and support for athletes. An example is the Australian Institute of Sport's Mental Health Referral Network.<sup>(63)</sup> This network was created to support high performance athletes in Australia's elite sports system who may be struggling with mental health or well-being concerns.

In addition, resources that have already been created to assist athletes and sports organisations, such as the IOC's #MentallyFit initiatives,<sup>(64)</sup> could be shared by your organisation to raise awareness and educate stakeholders.



## BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLE: NCAA

In 2017, the NCAA Sports Science Institute formed a task force to advance mental health best practice strategies. This task force included NCAA school presidents, administrators, coaches, student-athletes and mental health experts, and delivered a comprehensive database of Mental Health Best Practice educational resources.<sup>(62)</sup> The interactive tools, videos and training that were developed can be found [HERE](#).

### 3.3.4 CHOOSING THE TEAM

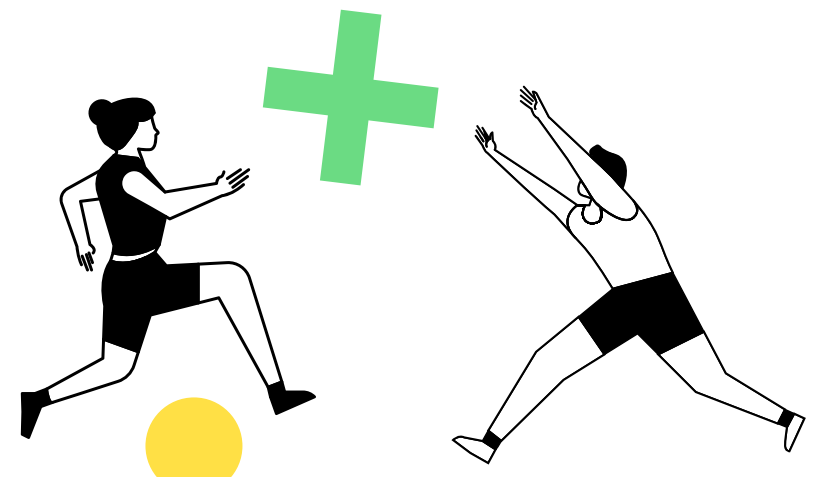
It is important to note that it is not just mental health practitioners or medical personnel who play a role in creating and promoting safe and psychologically supportive athletic environments. In fact, many members of your organisation and wider stakeholder network may play a direct or indirect role in influencing athlete mental health and well-being. Therefore, it is crucial to build a multi-stakeholder, multi-disciplinary team or task force when looking to monitor and/or implement mental health programmes and procedures in a sports organisation.



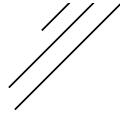
We need to tackle the day-to-day wellness of athletes rather than wait to intervene in critical situations. The Australian Institute of Sport's Mental Health Referral Network enables athletes to check in, to talk to someone outside the athlete's sporting environment in order to help them understand and manage any issue they may be facing.



**MATT BUTTERWORTH**  
AIS Mental Health Manager



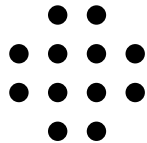




### Inclusion of a mental health professional on the Medical Commission

If your organisation has a Medical Commission (or similar body), it is recommended that mental health professionals be represented in the composition of the Commission.

Establishing a seat for a mental health professional on your Medical Commission (or similar body) demonstrates your organisation's commitment to placing athlete mental health as a priority. Furthermore, this approach ensures that mental health considerations will be discussed at the organisation's decision-making level and will be integrated into organisational policies and standards from the outset.



Athletic administrators should reassess metrics of success for the sport psychologist beyond athletes performing better on the field. On-field performance improvement is certainly key, but the overall betterment of athletes' mental health status and well-being is of utmost importance.<sup>(86)</sup>

### 3.3.5 CONSIDERATIONS FOR EVENTS, CALENDARS AND SCHEDULING

For many sports organisations, the hosting and organisation of and/or participation in sports competitions and events is one of its most fundamental roles and activities.

There are many different aspects of sports events that can directly impact elite athlete mental health. Examples include travel, sleep, accommodation, communication, nutrition, calendar and scheduling considerations, all of which should be factored into planning and operations when hosting a sports event or when travelling with a delegation. The IOC Consensus Statement on Load in Sport and Risk of Illness<sup>(85)</sup> suggests that frequent and prolonged air travel across multiple time zones may be associated with the risk of illness in athletes, suggesting that sports governing bodies concerned with athlete health need to consider the overall competition load when planning event calendars. It further recommends that more research is conducted on the impact of competition calendar congestion on the risk of illness, including psychological factors.

## EXAMPLE APPLICATION: SCHEDULING IN ELITE PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL

An example of reforms being made to sporting calendars following concerns for athletes' physical and mental health comes from elite professional football.

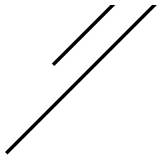
During a normal competitive season, individuals may play more than 60 matches per season, considering domestic leagues, domestic competitions and international competitions. This can see athletes travelling over 100,000km in a season.<sup>(87)</sup> Over the past few years, many leagues have taken measures to adapt competition schedules to allow for a winter break – providing a period for players and team staff to rest not only physically, but also

mentally. Studies have indicated that the inclusion of a winter break (or some form of break during the season) can have a positive effect on an athlete's health and well-being. Results pointed to the conclusion that athletes suffer fewer injuries throughout the entire season<sup>(88)</sup> and also benefit from psychological and physiological stress relief.<sup>(89)</sup> The entire FIFPRO report on athlete workload can be found [HERE](#).



When the rigours of training for professional sports teams or individual sports are combined with a comprehensive competition schedule, the risk associated with injuries and 'mental fatigue' is elevated.<sup>(90)</sup>





### Accommodation and sleep

As highlighted in **SECTION 2**, a study by Drew in 2018<sup>(40)</sup> surmised that 49 per cent of Olympic athletes would be classified as “poor sleepers” (a term that includes multiple sleep problems). Poor sleep is strongly linked to poor mental health and can negatively impact athletic performance. Therefore, it is important for both event organisers and those managing travelling delegations to make certain that athletes have sufficient rest time and adequate rooms that encourage a good night’s rest. This may mean making sure that hotels in noisy locations are avoided, bedrooms are not overexposed to bright light, which can delay sleep onset, and educating athletes on how they can improve their sleep quality.<sup>(91,92)</sup>

**49%** OF OLYMPIC ATHLETES WOULD BE CLASSIFIED AS “POOR SLEEPERS”

### Communication

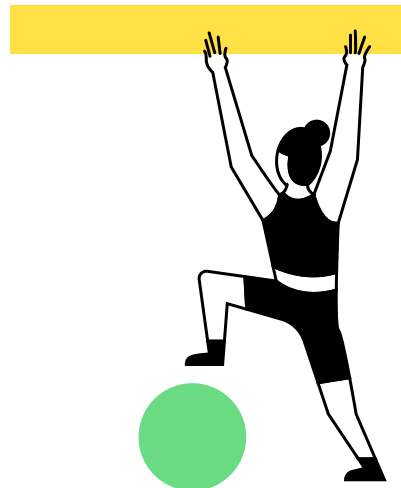
When travelling away from home, communication with family and friends (or lack thereof) can be a stressor that can impact an athlete’s mental health, especially for those suffering from anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress. Sports organisations can take measures to support athletes by ensuring easy and readily available access to good Wi-Fi connections.



### Nutrition

Even for those people closest to an athlete, eating disorders or disordered eating by an athlete may be difficult to identify. Athletes have been shown to underreport this issue more frequently than non-athletes.<sup>(93)</sup> In addition to the multitude of health concerns caused by eating disorders, an athlete with an eating disorder can expect to be more prone to injury, and to have a shorter sports career that is troubled by inconsistent performances.<sup>(94)</sup>

There are steps that can be taken during travel and/or events to monitor athlete nutrition, easing detection of signs that an athlete may need further support. One example is to ensure boarding locations have communal areas in which group eating can take place. It should also be guaranteed that the catering available to athletes is varied and nutritious and considers dietary restrictions and/or allergies. If boarding locations have on-site gyms, pharmacies or supermarkets in close proximity, the ability to observe athletes’ use of such facilities may also be a consideration in the selection of the location.



### Alcohol and gambling

Studies have shown that even at the most elite level of sport, athletes may be prone to alcohol abuse, heavy drinking and/or binge drinking. A 2015 study of elite rugby league players over a competitive season found that 62.8 per cent had hazardous levels of alcohol use during the season.<sup>(24)</sup> This data highlights that even during competition and travel, measures should be taken to support healthy decision-making, particularly related to the avoidance of alcohol, gambling and substance misuse. Precautions might include vetting accommodation to ensure onsite casinos, bars, mini-bars or small arcade-type facilities that can encourage gambling or drinking are avoided.

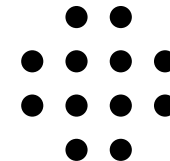
**62.8%**

OF ATHLETES HAD HAZARDOUS LEVELS OF ALCOHOL USE DURING THE SEASON

In summary, it is important that mental health and well-being is routinely considered when planning a sporting event, managing a competition calendar or making travel arrangements for a delegation.

### 3.3.6 SUPPORT FOR POST-CAREER TRANSITION

Elite athletes often live a life of structure and sacrifice that revolves around a full-time training schedule. Their identities (as seen by themselves and others) are often connected only to their athleticism. Due to their demanding schedule, athletes often forgo academic, personal, romantic or financial pursuits during their athletic career, making the transition out of sport into “regular life” overwhelming. While some athletes do experience a positive and healthy retirement transition, others find the process particularly difficult, potentially triggering pre-existing or previously unrecognised mental symptoms and disorders.<sup>(95)</sup>



“ Sports organisations should view their athletes as whole persons from a life-span perspective and be especially vigilant in reducing threats to mental health during difficult career transitions.”<sup>(95)</sup>

Sports organisations need to support this chapter of an athlete’s career in the same way they supported the chapters that came before. A study by Crook and Robertson<sup>(96)</sup> refers to this transition as “a discontinuity in one’s life”, and highlights five career transition factors:



### 1. Anticipatory socialisation

The process of learning new norms in anticipation of taking on a new role. Organisations should consider the need for athletes to be involved and proactive in planning for their upcoming transition out of sport. In many cases athletes are so focused on their remaining sporting careers that they do not pay (or do not want to pay) much attention to life after sport.



### 2. Identity and self-esteem

When it’s time to transition out of sport, many athletes are left feeling lost and disconnected from their identity which has been closely connected with their sport; they find that they have lost confidence to function outside the sporting world.



### 3. Personal management skills

Many elite athletes are surrounded by entourage, organisational, and coaching frameworks which dictate much of their life and many of their decisions. A lack of personal management skills (e.g., decision making, financial management, daily structure) can become a challenge area for athletes who feel the loss of systematic direction and support as they step out of organised sport.



### 4. Social support systems

Leaving sport can be a very emotional and psychologically taxing experience. This factor highlights the need for effective emotional support and communication from friends and family to assist the athlete during this time of change.



### 5. Voluntary versus involuntary retirement

Unplanned or forced retirement (e.g., due to injury or being cut from the team) can be especially stressful for an elite athlete, made worse by the lack of an adjustment period.

All sports organisations should develop and implement a structured career transition programme that provides meaningful support to athletes transitioning out of sport.

These programmes may provide educational resources for both athletes and their entourage to increase awareness of the expected and unexpected stressors that may come with leaving sport, and/or workshops for athletes focused on the fundamentals of applying their skillset in the outside world, financial management, career services, coping skills, mentoring programmes, etc. Career transition programmes should also consider the experiences of retirement that are unique to Paralympic athletes (such as retirement due to declassification) in order to provide more targeted support.<sup>(97)</sup>

The IOC has developed a number of resources to provide support for athletes during their career transition. You can find the Athlete365 “Life after Sport” courses [HERE](#).



## CAREER TRANSITION SUPPORT practical suggestions for sports organisations

- Educate athletes and make them aware of the potential challenges that may occur during their transition into retirement
- Encourage the development of strategies that enable athletes to self-manage their previous injuries and lifestyle when they are outside the high-performance system
- Aim to increase the understanding of these issues amongst the high-performance team, and encourage open discussion, which in turn will benefit the athletes
- Raise awareness of this issue among governing bodies to help improve the post-retirement support they offer to athletes
- Encourage athletes to use their downtime effectively during their careers; optimising the development of a broader range of social identities outside sport, thus providing a stronger social support network before, during and after retirement
- Encourage athletes to develop life and lifestyle management skills in sports organisations throughout their athletic career
- Find ways to keep previously and/or soon-to-be retired athletes in the sports system. Coaching and ad-hoc mentoring programmes are viable options that sports organisations could fund

Hattersley et al., 2019 <sup>(98)</sup>



### 3.3.7 CHECKLIST FOR SPORTS ORGANISATIONS

- Specifically reference mental health and well-being in organisations' foundational documents (code of ethics, etc.)
- Promote positive public health messages around mental health using diverse role models and ambassadors to reduce the stigma attached to mental health issues
- Develop an organisational mental health action plan, with clear key performance indicators (KPIs) and time frames against which progress can be monitored
- Ensure existence and monitor correct implementation of a Mental Health Emergency Action and Management Plan
- Ensure existence of a routine mental health referral plan and designate a referral lead
- Staff, coaches and athletes to receive mental health awareness training and support – which should also be included as part of induction processes
- Allocate resources and funding to support mental health initiatives
- Set up a multi-stakeholder and multi-disciplinary working group to develop mental health initiatives. This group should include athletes, mental health professionals and public health representatives
- Consider allocating a seat on your organisation's Medical Commission to a mental health professional (e.g., a psychologist or psychiatrist with sports specialisation or experience)
- Make certain that both mental and physical health is considered when looking at competition scheduling and planning events
- Develop and implement initiatives to prepare for and support post-career transition

