

# Bench out the stigma: Athletes struggle with mental health too

**Melanie Matts and Ronan Lambert**

It's no secret that playing a collegiate sport is equivalent to a full-time job. Student athletes are tasked with balancing everyday practices, early morning weight training and constant travel on top of the ongoing pressures of college life – keeping up with classes, socializing with friends and figuring out a career path.

Between March and April of 2022, five NCAA athletes committed suicide in the United States. Each played a different sport and attended different universities across the country. Their one shared experience — mental health struggles on and off the field.



Approximately 30% of women and 25% of men who are student-athletes report having anxiety, and only 10% of all college athletes with known mental health conditions seek care from a mental health professional, according to The American College of Sport Medicine's 2021 findings.

At the University of New Hampshire, there are 18 Division one varsity athletic teams and nearly 600 student athletes with no full-time sports psychologist on-site. Athletes have access to the same mental health services all students on campus do, the Psychological and Counseling Services (PACS).

PACS is the on-campus mental health resource for Durham's 11,500+ undergraduate population, along with the 2,500+ graduate population.

While student athletes have access to professional psychologists through PACS, it is often hard to find an appointment around their busy schedules.

Ava Boutilier, a graduate student on the women's ice hockey team and captain of the Student Athletic Advisory Committee (SAAC) commented on her experiences with PACS.

"Being someone that's went to PACS, having someone that doesn't really understand sports, and the intensity of competition and stuff like that is challenging as well," she said.

Is there a need for a sports psychologist at UNH?

Hannah Keller, an assistant strength coach in the athletic department said that she notices when her athletes are struggling.

"Since we spend so much time with them, we can notice body language, we can notice that they're not mentally checked in, they're not there," she said.

Keller said that she feels a sports psychologist would be extremely beneficial to the athletic department.

"I wish every team had their own!" she said. "I think some coaches don't exactly realize how much a sports psychologist could help."

Katie Palmateer, a first-year student on the women's track and field team, agreed that there is a need for a sports psychologist at UNH, and said it is one of her goals before she graduates.

"I think that all student athletes need to have a point of contact outside of their coach, and outside of their team that they feel safe to go to," Palmateer said. "I think that's hugely important, even just having a person on campus makes student athletes feel like they're going to be more heard."

Why is there no full-time sports psychologist at UNH According to Deputy Athletic Director Michele

Bronner, the athletic department does not have the funding to bring in a full-time sports psychologist, but it is a long-term goal of the department.

"We recognize that the need is there," Bronner said. "Would we love to ultimately have a full-time position? Yes! Do I think one full-time position is enough? No!"

Although there is no sports psychologist on campus, Bronner said that the university has provided funding to outsource a few counselors that athletes can use both in-person or via zoom when needed. These counselors are contractual and not full time, according to Bronner.

Raising awareness – SAAC hosts sixth annual Bench Out The Stigma Event

Earlier this month, Boutilier, Palmateer and fellow SAAC members organized their sixth annual "Bench Out The Stigma" (BOTS) event that is a weight lifting competition to advocate for student athletes mental health and raise money for a mental health charity.

This year's charity was Morgan's Message, an organization that strives to eliminate the stigma surrounding mental health within the student-athlete community and equalize the treatment of physical and mental health in athletics.

Teams of four packed the UNH fieldhouse on Sunday, April 2, ready to pump iron, and break the stigma that athletes are immune to mental health struggles.



Bench Out The Stigma participants gather in the UNH Fieldhouse on 4/2/23.

"Why we do it is because there's so much stigma in college athletics about mental health, and how mental health isn't real, and it really impacts our game," said Ande Allison, a third-year on the women's soccer team, and mental health chair for SAAC.



Allison shared that one of the hardest aspects of playing a collegiate sport is finding your identity, both on and off of the field.

“I would say that the biggest struggle is figuring out your identity in all aspects of your life and not just your athletic identity,” Allison said. “And not letting that define how good you are as a person or your self worth as a person.”

This year’s BOTS competition not only awarded teams that could bench press the most weight, but those who were the most enthusiastic, best dressed costumes and most repetitions in a given set.

Aside from the physical competition, participants and guests were able to educate themselves through the seven mental health organizations present at the event. The organizations ranged from on-campus resources such as Health & Wellness and PACS, to outside resources such as Morgan’s Message, National Alliance on Mental Illness and The Hidden Opponent.

Alex Bachhman, a second-year on the men’s soccer team reflected on the pressure that comes with being a student athlete.

“As a male athlete growing up there are a lot of expectations that are put on you and when you don’t meet those expectations it’s like ‘Work harder, try again tomorrow, be tough,’” he said. “It’s hard as a male athlete to come to terms with that a lot of times, the environment where you don’t really have a lot of time to reflect, especially when ‘you know’ you’re practicing or in a game.”

Bachhman shared that this is something he has personally struggled with, but come to terms with since coming to UNH.

“You know, having a community at UNH like this, and events like this, kind of makes it easier and a lot more comfortable for myself,” he said.



Hannah Serbousek, Kaleigh Whalen, Nadia Goich and Camryn Hon, members of the women’s volleyball team won best costumes at this year’s Bench Out The Stigma. 4/2/23

