AJEMATES
African Journal of Educational Management, Teaching and Entrepreneurship Studies
VOL.15 (2), May-August, 2025 https://ajemates.org

# INTEGRATING MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT IN SPORTS: ENHANCING ATHLETE WELL-BEING, PERFORMANCE, AND RESILIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

*Mental health is increasingly recognised as a critical component of athlete well-being and optimal performance in both amateur and professional sports. While physical fitness and skill development have traditionally dominated sports training, the psychological demands of competitive environments, such as performance, anxiety, injury-related stress, burnout, and identity crises, have placed growing emphasis on the need for structured mental health support. This paper explores the significance of mental health integration within sports systems, emphasising the role of psychological, emotional regulation, and social support in enhancing athletes' performance and personal development. The paper also adopts Self-Determination Theory. The study underscores how psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness can reduce emotional exhaustion and promote sustained engagement. The paper recommends the inclusion of trained mental health professionals in sports teams, the incorporation of mental health literacy in coaching curricula, strategic partnerships with academic and medical institutions, and the use of technology to deliver flexible mental health services. It argues that such interventions not only address stigma and help-seeking barriers but also position mental health as an essential pillar in the overall success of athletes' careers.*

**Keywords**: Athlete, Mental Health, Social Support, Well-being

## Introduction

Mental health is the state of happiness in which each individual realises his or her potential, can overcome the normal stress of life, can work productively, and can contribute to his or her community (World Health Organisation, (WHO) 2024). According to the WHO concept of mental health, it is considered from a biological, psychological, and social point of view (Hernández-Torrano, 2020) that incorporates these factors, and mental health is more than the absence of mental illness (Galderisi *et al*., 2015). Mental health involves emotions and social well-being. It influences our thoughts, feelings, and actions (Jaiyeoba, 2018). It also

assists in determining how people cope with stress and make decisions. Mental health is essential throughout life, from birth through adulthood (Jaiyeoba, 2018).

Onifade (2003) cited in Jaiyeoba and Oguntuase(2019)viewed sports as an institutionalised competitive activity that involve vigorous physical exertion or thè use of relatively complete physical skills by individuals .Participation in sports is widely acknowledged for its benefits to physical health, social development, and character formation. However, the psychological challenges that athletes face, such as performance anxiety, burnout, fear of failure, and injury-related trauma, are often minimised or disregarded. A study by Ziegler *et al.* (2002) in Jaiyeoba (2016) demonstrated how athletes health is a concern due to the sports increased competitiveness. In recent years, awareness has increased regarding the mental health struggles experienced by athletes at all levels. Studies highlight various associated risks to the mental well-being of athletes in high-level sports environments (Purcell *et al.*, 2019). These risks encompass factors such as stress within organisations, negative perceptions surrounding mental health issues, acceptance of harmful practices, injuries, job dissatisfaction, misconduct and maltreatment, as well as harmful coaching styles or other unhealthy relationships (Reardon *et al.*, 2019). As a result, support for mental health in athletics is now considered an important aspect instead of an added component for ensuring the well-being of athletes and encouraging lasting performance (Purcell *et al.*, 2019).

Athletes are vulnerable to mental stress, nervousness, sadness, and fatigue as a result of pressures from training, competing, and outside influences. This increased understanding highlights the importance of handling these challenges to enhance athletes' general health and performance (Du Preez *et al.*, 2017). Emphasis in sports has been on physical performance, while mental health problems have not been reported or have been stigmatised. These include serious physical injuries, performance problems, and competition pressure to select teams (Eather, *et al.* 2023). Athletes often face common life stressors such as financial worries, discrimination, and limited social support (Purcell *et al.*, 2019; Walton *et al.*, 2021).

Social support from others has proven to be a crucial resource for those experiencing stress. Social support refers to actions that help people or that strengthen their feelings of connection to important groups. Studies indicate that individuals with increased social support tend to experience improved well-being and better physical health, and they are less adversely impacted by stressful situations. Long-term stress can cause significant health problems, such as high blood pressure, weakened immune system, greater chances of heart disease and stroke, difficulties with fertility, faster ageing, and an increased likelihood of anxiety and depression (Rasheed, & Alghasham, 2012; Jaiyeoba, 2017). Athletes frequently encounter considerable physical and psychological stress, and if not handled well, these can result in mental health challenges such as anxiety, grief, and fatigue. These

elements can greatly affect an athlete's ability to perform and their general health.

Hughes and Leavey (2012) and Jaiyeoba and Ogunsanya (2021) ) noted that elite athletes are subject to particular and severe pressures that can have a detrimental impact on their mental health and general well-being underscoring the need for more assistance from sports organisations .These pressures encompass performance expectations, anxiety about failing, injuries, and disputes with coaches or teammates, among various others. Social support from coaches, fellow athletes, family members, friends, and staff are seen as having a positive impact on athletes' mental, emotional, and behavioural elements (Rees, 2007). Since social support is widely acknowledged as a crucial element for athletes' achievements, researchers in sports psychology have worked to explain the practical roles of social support (Rees & Hardy, 2000). Studies in psychology have indicated that the awareness of accessible support may serve as a more effective indicator of health or well-being results (Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990).

While qualitative studies show that receiving support offers clear benefits, these benefits are beyond just improving athletic performance. Support also plays a crucial role in the psychological well-being and overall health of athletes. For example, studies have shown that consistent support from others is a significant characteristic of highly successful athletes throughout their careers (Morgan, Parker, Alvarez-Jimenez, & Jorm, 2013). Support from coaches helps foster positive relationships with athletes (Hassell, Sabiston, & Bloom, 2010), which can enhance satisfaction with their sport environment.

Athletes are often expected to consistently perform at highest levels, endure tough training programmes, and recover quickly from injuries. These expectations create high levels of stress, which can manifest as disorders such as depression, anxiety, or eating disorders (Reardon *et al*., 2019). Younger athletes, particularly those in developmental stages, may lack the psychological tools to cope with these demands, further highlighting the need for timely and targeted interventions. Athletes with greater psycho-physiological self-regulation over somatic (physical) and cognitive (mental) components of anxiety show a greater sense of personal control over their performance and cope better with the stress of competition (Hatfield & Hillman, 2001; Jaiyeoba, 2022). The competitive nature of sports exposes athletes to external pressures from fans, coaches, family, and media, which can amplify emotional vulnerability.

In spite of the growing recognition of mental health challenges in sports, there are barriers to help-seeking. Athletes are frequently conditioned to associate mental strength with emotional suppression, making it difficult to acknowledge vulnerability or access support (Henriksen *et al.*, 2020). The fear of appearing weak or jeopardising selection opportunities often deters athletes from disclosing struggles. Although there is a

growing emphasis on mental well-being in athletics, research on methods specifically aimed at alleviating feelings of loneliness remains scarce. The study highlights the need for specific strategies that prioritise the development of social ties within sports settings, as such approaches may assist in mitigating the adverse effects associated with loneliness. In order to establish a thriving and positive athletic atmosphere, it is essential for coaches, sports psychologists, and team managers to work together to encourage transparent communication, focus on the well-being of athletes, and support long-term achievements. In the face of increased awareness, many sports programmes still lack formal mental health policies. Coaches often have not received adequate training to identify signs of psychological distress, and athletes might fear speaking up because they worry about losing playing time or being judged (Kroshus, Paskus & Bell, 2018). To truly support athletes, strategies must be integrated into coaching education, team practices, and institutional systems, emphasising the importance of creating policies and educational initiatives that meet athletes' psychological needs. This study examines the conceptual foundation and practical implications of mental health support in athletics, emphasising its crucial role in promoting resilience, enhancing overall well-being, and facilitating the long-term development of athletes.

## Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2017) theoretical models:

### Self-Determination Theory

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a comprehensive model that examines psychological development and happiness, greatly changing our understanding of what influences human motivation and the evolution of personality. Propounded by Deci and Ryan, (2017). SDT highlights three essential psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, investigating how social settings that fulfil these needs improve personal decision-making, vitality, and general performance. This theory has encouraged a higher level of motivation, involvement, and fulfilment and has laid the groundwork for fresh and more effective approaches in many areas of life, such as parenting, education, business, sports, and healthcare. SDT suggests that mental health improves when fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and connection are met. In the realm of sports, athletes tend to perform better and experience greater well-being when they enjoy emotional freedom, have strong relationships, and feel capable of overcoming obstacles. Support for mental health can help address these needs, reducing the risk of burnout and emotional fatigue (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Within the sport setting, these needs are deeply relevant. Athletes tend to perform better and experience greater well-being when they feel emotionally autonomous (making meaningful choices about their training and performance), perceive themselves as competent (succeeding in skill acquisition and competition), and maintain supportive relationships with coaches,

teammates, and others in their sporting environment.

Mental health support plays a crucial role in satisfying these needs**.** For instance, counselling and psychological interventions can empower athletes to develop self-awareness**,** clarify goals, build confidence, and strengthen social connections. These processes mitigate the risk of psychological distress, including burnout, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion, which are common issues in high-performance sports environments. When psychological needs are unmet, athletes are more likely to experience reduced motivation, reduced performance, and poor mental health outcomes.

## Literature Review

### Mental Health as a Foundation of Athletic Performance

According to the World Health Organisation (2024), mental health is a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and can contribute to the community. Mental health encompasses more than only the lack of mental diseases. It occurs on a multifaceted scale, experienced uniquely by each individual, with diverse levels of challenge and suffering, leading to potentially disparate social and clinical consequences. Mental health includes emotional, psychological, and social aspects, impacting focus, resilience, and overall success in sports. At one end of the spectrum lie individuals who experience healthy mental health, characterised by high levels of well-being, positive emotions, and effective coping strategies. On the other end of the range are individuals battling mental health issues, which include a wide variety of conditions like depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and substance abuse, among others. Research shows that mental health struggles such as depression, anxiety, and burnout are quite common in the athletic community, often affecting athletes' ability to train and perform at their best (Athletes for Hope, 2019). These challenges are not limited to any specific group; they cut across all levels of sport, from elite competitors to casual, recreational athletes, as emphasised in a recent scoping review. Athletes in high-performance settings are especially vulnerable to issues like anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and substance misuse (Gouttebarge *et al.*, 2016). Findings also indicate that about 35% of athletes report experiencing mental health crises that interfere with their performance (Moesch *et al.*, 2018).

Injuries are inevitable and inevitable elements of sports participation. Some injuries can be easily managed, while others disturb and threaten the mental health of athletes (Jaiyeoba, 2021). Factors such as the pressure to win, fear of injury, media scrutiny, and limited coping strategies can all heighten emotional stress, especially among young athletes still figuring out their identity (Nicholls *et al.*, 2021). A study by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) found that student-athletes are experiencing higher rates of mental health challenges, with about 31% of males and

48% of females experiencing anxiety and depression. These issues are partly linked to the pressures of balancing academics and athletics (Moreland, Coxe, & Yang, 2018). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, these rates have stayed greatly higher, about 1.5 to 2 times greater than pre-pandemic levels (Johnson, 2022). Research also shows that students who participate in sports are at a higher risk of dropping out, 71% in their first year compared to non-athletes (Wilkerson, Fridley, Arthur-Banning, Aicher, & Stokowski, 2022). How athletes perceive their mental health greatly influences whether they seek help when needed (Moore, 2017). Despite acknowledging their struggles, only about 10% pursue treatment for mental health issues (Henderson, Harris, Kirkham, Charlesworth, & Murphy, 2023). When asked, 55% of male athletes and 47% of female athletes felt that their athletic department prioritised mental health. Besides, 59% of men's teams and 50% of women's teams believed coaches took their mental health concerns seriously (Johnson, 2022). Similarly, 58% of men's sports and 65% of women's sports felt their teammates were supportive of mental health issues. Interestingly, 56% of athletes in both men's and women's sports knew how to support a teammate dealing with mental health concerns. These figures might seem inconsistent, which could be due to the ongoing stigma around mental health.

Financial pressures also create a complicated layer to athletic performance. On one hand, prize money and monetary rewards can boost athletes' motivation and help them set clear goals. On the other hand, these financial factors can also increase their mental stress and anxiety levels (UK Sport, 2018). This heightened worry often makes athletes more concerned about losing matches, which can negatively affect their performance in competition (UK Sport, 2018). What's more, the financial strain doesn't end when their athletic careers do. Many athletes encounter significant difficulties transitioning to life after sports, and studies indicate that financial concerns are associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression symptoms. Athletes who have challenges with their finances are likely to experience anxiety symptoms and develop depression (Van Slingerland & Durand-Bush, 2021).

Common mental health challenges faced by athletes and the impact on sports on well-being:

**Depression:** Studies show that athletes experience depression at rates similar to the general population. (Marconcin *et al,* 2023). However, there is a concern that athletes might be less willing to seek help for these issues, potentially leading to unaddressed struggles.

**Anxiety:** A survey of college athletes revealed that half of them dealt with overwhelming anxiety over the past year, emphasising how common mental stress is in competitive sports. Athletes who compete in individual sports may be more susceptible to anxiety than those who play team sports Pluhar *et al* 2019; Pantea ,Oravitan & Gligor 2021)

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**Social Anxiety Disorder** :The hallmark of social anxiety disorder also known as social phobia is the fear of being scrutinized or given a poor rating in a performance or social setting((American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM-5), 2013). People with the disorder either stay away from these kinds of situations or deal with them in a very distressing way. According to self-report 14–7% of athletes experience symptoms of social anxiety disorder (Gulliver *et al*, 2015) which is comparable to the general populations 13 percent rate (Bandelow & Michaelis, 2015)

**Traumatic Stress Disorders:** Injuries sustained during sports, such as concussions, can lead to symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A person who has experienced or witnessed a traumatic event may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). traumatic incident and who subsequently experiences intrusive feelings and thoughts. alterations in behavior brought on by that incident (American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM-5), 2013) Athletes have a prevalence of this disorder. been estimated to be around 13 percent (Thomson & Jaque,2016) surpassing the general populations lifetime prevalence of 6 to 9 percent. Goldstein *et al*,2016) Major injuries sustained while playing sports are increasingly being characterised as debilitating humiliation (Aron *et al*,2019) bullying and an inciting traumatic event. or sexual assault are a few more incidents in sports that can cause symptoms of trauma. Studies have shown that injured athletes often experience intrusive thoughts and avoidance behaviours more than their non-injured counterparts.

**Eating Disorders**: Athletes, particularly those in sports where a lower body weight provides a competitive edge, are at increased risk of developing eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia. These conditions can have serious health consequences. (Reardon *et al.*, 2019;Fatt *et al.*, 2024)

**Sleep Disorders:** Training schedules and competition times can interfere with athletes' natural circadian rhythms, often leading to sleep disruptions. Anxiety or nervousness may keep athletes awake, and chronic sleep deprivation can negatively impact metabolism, hormonal balance, performance, and mental health, even increasing perceived effort during exercise. (Gouttebarge *et al.*, 2019;Poucher *et al.*, 2021)

. **Importance of Mental Health**

Mental health is fundamental for overall well-being and a significant component of an individual's ability to lead a fulfilling life. Here are some reasons highlighting the importance of mental health (World Health Organisation, 2022).

- Quality of Life: Good mental health contributes to a higher quality of life. It enhances an individual's ability to enjoy positive experiences, build meaningful relationships, and navigate life's challenges.
- Productivity and Performance: Mental well-being is linked to productivity and performance in various aspects of life, including work, education, and personal

pursuits. A healthy mind is better equipped to focus, make decisions, and achieve goals.

- Emotional Resilience: Mental health enables individuals to cope with stress, adversity, and emotional challenges. Emotional resilience allows for better adaptation to life's ups and downs.
- Social Participation: The well-being of an individual's mental health influences their involvement in social activities and community engagement. It fosters a greater sense of social connection and belonging.
- Personal Progress and Advancement: A constructive mental condition encourages individual growth, self-exploration, and ongoing improvement. It promotes an attitude receptive to gaining knowledge and adjusting to fresh experiences.
- Strength in the Midst of Difficulties: Mental well-being provides people with the strength to recover from difficulties, tackle obstacles, and continue striving towards their objectives.

**Barriers to Mental Health Support in Sports Culture**

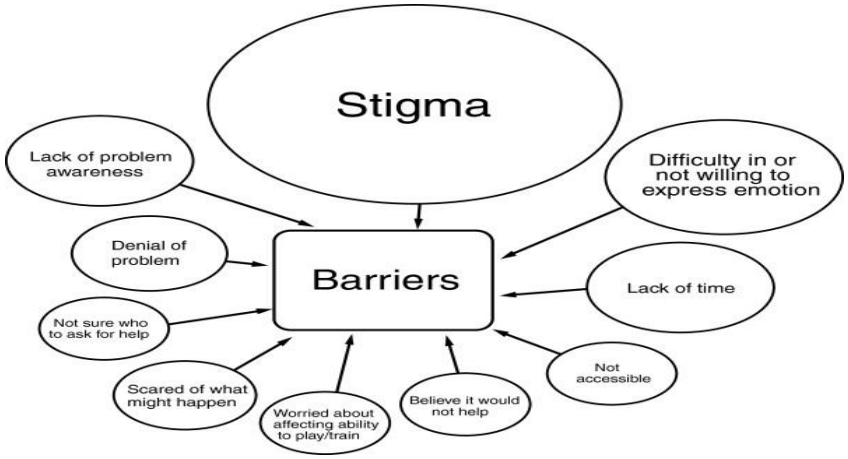
Elite athletes encounter unique pressures that can increase their likelihood of experiencing mental health difficulties, yet they often face significant barriers when seeking assistance. The primary obstacles include stigma, insufficient awareness regarding mental health issues, negative attitudes, and limited access to mental health resources. These challenges are amplified by cultural, institutional, and individual elements present in elite sports settings. Although there is a clear demand and necessity for mental health support in these groups, obtaining such care continues to be a major obstacle (Perry *et al.,* 2022).

The stigma associated with seeking assistance and accessing mental health services is the primary and most challenging barrier for athletes and sports personnel. This is influenced by several factors, such as a deep connection to their athletic identity and the high-performance atmosphere (Cosh *et al.,* 2024). Kola-Palmer *et al.,* (2020) found that individuals who sought assistance experienced much greater psychological stress than those who did not ask for help. Seeking assistance was associated with an enhanced understanding of mental health and a heightened sense of psychological stress, as indicated by a multivariate analysis. The qualitative analysis revealed that there were multiple perceived barriers to obtaining help, with a lack of knowledge about mental health and stigma being the most prominent issues. Yoon and Petrie (2023) identified clear differences in how athletes evaluated both internal and external barriers. For example, the belief in one's independence and insufficient time were recognised as significant barriers, alongside the unfavourable view that their head coach had regarding mental health. Additionally, female student-athletes rated the importance of having a shared gender identity with their sport psychologist as much higher compared to their male peers. Castaldelli-Maia *et al.* (2019) identified several obstacles that prevent elite athletes from pursuing mental health treatment, including stigma, inadequate understanding of mental health issues, negative previous encounters with

seeking mental health care, hectic lifestyles, and hyper-masculine attitudes.

A recent study by Young *et al.* (2023) found that many top-performing college student-athletes choose not to seek counselling for several reasons. They often feel there's no need, want to avoid personal discomfort, are worried about how others might see them, or simply do not have the time. The changes induced by transition out of sport may affect the perceptions of individuals, their abilities and health-related quality of life. (Jaiyeoba & Ogunsanya, 2021). Pilkington *et al.* (2024) study focused on retired athletes, emphasised several common barriers in seeking help. These include not recognising they have a problem, feeling embarrassed or ashamed, believing that seeking help might make them seem weak, issues with insurance coverage, and practical constraints like travel and busy schedules. Many also prefer relying on family, friends, or spiritual practices rather than professional help. Top-level athletes frequently find it challenging to pursue mental health assistance because of stigma, insufficient information, negative perceptions, and restricted availability of care. Tackling these obstacles, particularly by weakening stigma, enhancing awareness about mental health, and increasing the availability of support, can foster a more encouraging atmosphere for the mental well-being of athletes.

**Barriers to Help-seeking for Mental Health Problems**




**Source:** Gulliver, A., Griffiths, K.M. & Christensen, H. (2012). Barriers and facilitators to mental health help-seeking for young elite athletes: a qualitative study. *BMC Psychiatry* 12, 157 https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-244X-12-157

**The Role of Mental Health Support Systems**

A support system encompasses the network of family, friends, healthcare professionals, and community resources that provide emotional, informational, and practical help. Beyond just offering a listening ear, support systems facilitate access to care, advocate for the individual's needs, and provide a sense of belonging and acceptance. In mental health setting, such networks are invaluable, offering a buffer against the isolation often imposed by mental illness. Integrating mental health support into sports involves creating environments that encourage help-seeking, provide professional psychological services, and educate coaches and athletes on emotional well-being (Gorczynski *et al.*, 2022). Mental health support includes counseling, performance psychology, peer mentoring, resilience training, and crisis interventions. When systematically integrated, these measures reduce stigma and foster mental toughness not through suppression, but through regulation and awareness (Rice *et al.*, 2016).

**Social Support**

Social support is studied across a wide range of disciplines including psychology, communications, medicine, sociology, nursing, public health, education, rehabilitation, and social work. Social support occurs in the presence of a social network (Kent de Grey *et al.*, 2018), the concept is often used in a broad sense, referring to any process through which social relationships might provide health and well-being (Kent de Grey *et al*., 2018). Social support refers to the assistance, resources, and network of relationships that individuals rely on for emotional, practical, and informational help during times of need. It encompasses the feeling of being cared for, valued, and belonging to a community or social network that provides support and mutual obligations. This support can come from various sources like family, friends, coworkers, and even professionals. Social support has been linked to many benefits for both physical and mental health, Social support refers to the awareness and reality that an individual is cared for, has help accessible from others, and is often part of a caring social network. These helpful resources can take the form of emotional support (nurturing), informational help (guidance), or companionship (a sense of being included); they can also be practical (financial assistance) or non-material (personal guidance). Social support may be assessed through the belief that help is available, the help that is received, or the extent to which someone is connected in a social network. Support can emerge from various sources, including family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues, organisations, and so on. Social support helps individuals re-establish connections with the outside world, allowing them to focus on their relationships and interactions with others.

Social support, which involves the assistance and resources offered by others during times of need or challenging situations, has become a key factor in

determining athlete well-being across different sports and levels of competition (Latif *et al*,2024). This concept includes emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support each playing a critical role in athletes' mental health and overall performance. Support from coaches, teammates, family, friends, and staff plays an important role in shaping an athlete's mental, emotional, and behavioural well-being (Rees, 2007). Recognising just how important this support is, sports psychology researchers have dedicated considerable effort to exploring how social backing influences athletic success (Rees & Hardy, 2000). Social support is recognised as an essential factor in maintaining physical health (Malinauskas, 2008) and is also significant for mental well-being (Holt & Hoar, 2006). The encouragement and assistance received from coaches, fellow athletes, family members, friends, and staff are believed to influence athletes' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions positively (Rees, 2007).

**Psychosocial Support**

Apart from organised assistance professional athletes receive, psychosocial support has drawn a lot of interest in sports psychology and related disciplines in recent years. Psychosocial support which refers to the practical emotional and informational help given by people in an athletes network is essential for developing coping strategies protective resources and resilience in professional athletes (Lane, 2024; Rice *et al.*,2016).Psychosocial support in professional sports according to Park Lavallee and Tod (2013) includes both athletes (coaches, trainers, teammates) and non-athletes (spouses family, friends and significant others) who offer assistance in different ways. This support aims to improve an athletes' wellbeing resources by offering information, tangible help, emotional reinforcement and self-esteem boosts. According to Sarafino and Smith (2014) in Omokhabi (2022) social support from family consists of various elements including appreciation support (positively assessing the thoughts, feelings and actions of others demonstrated by respect for family members) and emotional support (expressing feelings, demonstrating empathy and paying attention to someone else), understanding counsel, guidance and feedback on how to approach a specific circumstance are all examples of informational support. The provision of supervision, fulfillment of personal needs, financial support or help in finishing a task are all examples of instrumental support which involves family members as a source of help and unwavering support. Importantly research has indicated that psychosocial support is positively correlated with a number of outcomes such as enhanced performance (Schinke *et al.*,2021), decreases in burnout rates (Lavallee & Robinson 2007) lower risk of mental health problems (Beable *et al.*,2017) as well as improved readiness to handle the difficulties that come with changing careers. (Hanton *et al.* ,2005). Mental health problems may be challenging to treat. A person may occasionally die as a result of feeling unworthy of care or social

connections. But its important to overcome these emotions and acknowledge that everyone is deserving of love and care.

**Benefits of Support Systems Reduced Stress and Increased Resilience:**

According to Bryan *et al.* (2018), in Jaiyeoba *et al* (2023) resilience is a dynamic process that deals with the ability to maintain regular functioning despite various challenges or to through utilisation of coping resources. Support systems are an essential line of defense against stress, enabling individuals to better manage challenges and recover from setbacks. Social support is frequently emphasised as a critical factor in the success of athletes and professionals alike. Sport psychology researchers have endeavoured to clarify the functional aspects of social support (Rees & Hardy, 2000). Athlete confidence and well-being can be enhanced through the support they receive and/or perceive and the relationships that they develop through playing sports (Gencer & Öztürk, 2018). Support has been reported, mostly in the interviews with athletes, as a significant factor in athletes' self-confidence (Hays, Maynard, Thomas, & Bawden, 2007), performance improvement (Rees & Freeman, 2010), in dealing with negative psychological states due to injury in sport (Carson & Poleman, 2012), competitive stressors (Weston, Thelwell, Bond, & Hutching, 2009), and organizational stressors (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010).

**Improved Mental and Physical Health:**

Feeling connected and supported contributes to a greater sense of purpose and overall well-being. Strong social connections have been linked to better mental health outcomes, including reduced anxiety and depression, and improved physical health. Social connection is acknowledged to be a fundamental human need (Cacioppo *et al.,* 2015) linked to higher well-being, safety, resilience and prosperity, and to a longer lifespan. Across social species, research has demonstrated that social connection is one of the strongest predictors of survival, both early and later in life, through adaptive behavioural and biological mechanisms (Snyder-Mackler *et al.,* 2020). The availability and diversity of social relationships, interactions and networks are critical for health and well-being (Badcock et al., 2022)**.**

**Enhanced Well-being and Fulfillment:**

Feeling connected and supported contributes to a greater sense of purpose and overall well-being. Social support cushions the effect of stress, helping athletes to cope with the demands of training and competition. This can manifest as improved mood, reduced anxiety, and enhanced resilience. Social support has also been recognised as a significant factor in maintaining physical health (Malinauskas, 2008) and psychological health (Holt & Hoar, 2006). Social support from coaches, teammates, family, friends, and staff is considered to affect athletes' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects in a positive manner (Rees, 2007). Social support impacts athletes' performance by boosting confidence, motivation, and focus. Feelings of support from others can lead to

improved self-esteem and a greater sense of self-efficacy, positively influencing athletic outcomes.

**Better Decision-Making:**

Support systems, particularly decision support systems, can aid in analysing information, assessing risks, and making more informed choices. Positive social interactions and a sense of belonging contribute to overall mental well-being, which is crucial for clear thinking and effective decision-making. Also, athletes who feel supported are more likely to believe in their abilities and take calculated risks, leading to more confident and effective decisions (Lane, 2024). Li (2025) study shows a fuzzy logic-based decision-support system designed to monitor athlete fatigue in real time. The study demonstrates that coaches and athletes analyse complex physiological information, assess risks, and make well-informed decisions that protect both health and performance.

**Increased Productivity:**

Social support is one of the factors that influence achievement motivation. Social support received can make individuals feel calm, cared for, self-confident, and competent. When individuals feel supported, they are more likely to be productive and achieve their goals. Social support is crucial for athletes' productivity. Feeling supported by coaches, teammates, and others fosters a positive mindset, reduces stress, and provides practical assistance, ultimately enhancing performance and goal achievement (Pambudi *et al.*, 2022).

**Feeling of Belonging and Security:**

Social support impacts athletes' sense of belonging and security, contributing to their overall well-being and performance. This support, whether from coaches, teammates, family, or friends, provides a crucial foundation for athletes to feel connected, accepted, and safe, which are fundamental human needs. When athletes experience strong social support, they are more likely to thrive in their sport and personal lives. In the phase of injury experience, an athlete benefits maximally from emotional support, listening support and material aid (transportation, household chores, financial) which provides immeasurable assistance (Arvinen-Barrow & Walker, 2013).

**Institutionalising Mental Health Support**

Despite growing advocacy on mental health support, many sports programmes lack institutionalized mental health policies. Coaches often lack training in recognising psychological distress, and athletes may feel unsafe disclosing mental health struggles for fear of reduced playtime or judgment (Kroshus *et al.*, 2020). This highlights the need for structural policies and education-based interventions that address the psychological needs of athletes. Institutionalising mental health services within sports organisations is a strategic necessity. Establishing mental health support within sports organizations requires the development of structured methods aimed at enhancing mental well-being and

tackling mental health issues. This process involves incorporating training on mental health knowledge, implementing mentorship initiatives, and adopting effective communication strategies to cultivate a nurturing atmosphere. Institutionalising mental health support in sports offers numerous benefits, including improved athlete performance, reduced risk of mental health issues, and better overall well-being. It also fosters a more supportive environment, encourages open conversations about mental health, and helps athletes develop essential coping mechanisms.

**Strategies to Improve Mental Health Support for Athletes':** the following are some of the strategies improve mental health support for athletes'

**Integrate Mental Health Professionals into Sports Teams**

Every sports team management and administration, amateur or professional, should have qualified mental health professionals (for example sports psychologists, counsellors, or clinical psychologists) as part of the core medical or performance team. These professionals should be involved in routine mental health assessments, and not just crisis interventions.

**Include Mental Health Education in Coaching and Training Curricula**

Coaches, trainers, and staff should undergo regular mental health literacy training to recognise early warning signs of distress, respond appropriately and refer when necessary, and create psychologically safe environments for athletes to succeed.

**Partner with Health Institutions and Universities**

Sports federations, associations, universities and research institutions such as the Nigeria Football Federation (NFF), Athletics Federation of Nigeria (AFN), or National Sports Commission should collaborate with mental health research institutions and universities to train staff and interns, conduct needs assessments and impact evaluations and develop sport-specific mental health programmes for athletes.

**Leverage Technology**

Ministries of Sports, Health, and Education can offer mobile mental health platforms for example apps, teletherapy to provide flexible access to care, especially for athletes in remote areas.

**Conclusion**

This study offers a thorough analysis of social support and argues that mental health care needs to be a basic component of sports development policies and procedures. This investigation is crucial, particularly as there is a growing recognition of the importance of addressing the psychological development of athletes. Without adequate psychological care, athletes are at risk of underperforming, dropping out, or facing long-term mental health challenges. Sports bodies, coaches, and governments must move beyond awareness campaigns and implement systemic, evidence-based

support systems. Mental health is not a luxury or optional service; it is essential to the health, performance, and dignity of athletes. Integrating mental health professionals into sports teams and cultivating a culture that values psychological well-being are indispensable steps toward building sustainable and humane athletic systems.

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