

# How Auburn University is taking initiative to prioritize the well-being of its athletes amidst a mental health crisis

**By: Mikayla Kelly and Carsen McFadden | December 4, 2022**

With the rise of a potential nationwide mental health crisis in student athletes, people are beginning to wonder if universities are doing enough.

“I think a lot of people see athletes and they are like, ‘they have it all,’ but there's definitely a struggle that a lot of people don't see and thankfully there has been awareness of it recently but it's something that I have to keep talking about,” Auburn soccer’s goalkeeper and Maddie Prohaska said.

This past spring, at least five known collegiate athletes across the nation, Katie Meyer, Robert Martin, Jayden Hill, Sarah Shulze and Lauren Bernett, had taken their own lives, opening up the eye’s of Americans that mental health needs to be discussed, destigmatized, and universities need to start making it a priority.

The transition into college life can be a difficult adjustment for most young adults, and for collegiate athletes, they are living this same struggle. However, they are experiencing this while simultaneously being expected to perform physically at the highest standard. Student athletes are subject to a strict and structured schedule. They have to juggle the daily practices and workouts, while also attending classes and completing assignments like every other student. They do all this while the outside world is watching and critiquing their every move.

There comes a point in which this constant demand can become too much for the athlete to handle and they need help.

Auburn University has been progressive in not only implementing different resources to provide the help their athletes need, but making sure the coaches and athletes know help is available.

The success has come from taking a proactive approach.

The sports psychologists on campus provide mental health screenings right when the athlete comes to Auburn and every year after. The yearly mental health screenings are a way to not only introduce athletes to the services, but aid those who need help before it is too late.

“In psychology, there is preventative, intervention and reactive, and we want to be preventative,” Auburn sports psychologist Dr. Jackson Howard said. “So, by screening our athletes as they're coming in, you can get an idea or maybe think this person might benefit from our services right now, rather than three months down the road when things are already happening, things are already really challenging, and it's much harder to change, so the prevention side is awesome.”

Another aspect that has benefited Auburn's success in mental health awareness and treatment, is the engagement of the coaches in their athletes' mental state and ensuring they seek help when it is needed.

Perhaps the most progressive team on Auburn's campus is the women's soccer team, led by a coach who puts her player's well-being first.

Head coach Karen Hoppa has been at the helm of the Tigers for 24 seasons, and was a collegiate athlete herself at Central Florida in the late '80s, so she is no stranger to the intense pressure that student athletes are constantly facing.

"If I see that they are struggling mentally, I will encourage them to go see one of our psychologists and spend time with them because that mental health side is just as important as the physical health side," Hoppa said. "When they are hurt physically, they don't hesitate for a second to go to our athletic trainer or medical doctors, so when they're struggling mentally I want to make sure they don't hesitate for a second to go to a psychologist and see the experts."

The Auburn sport psychologists ensure they build great relationships with those involved in the athletes' everyday lives. Dr. Joanna Foss, a member of the sports psychology team, speaks to the importance of these relationships.

"We also may consult with different staff members in the department whether that's coaches, administrators, sports medicine staff and have a strong partnership to be able to help everyone really try and help support the mental health and well being of student athletes," Dr. Foss explained.

For many people, the COVID-19 quarantine and pandemic spiked mental health issues. However during 2020, even as the world was slowly opening up, athletes were forced to isolate themselves from everyone besides their team, and had to practice safe health procedures.

According to an [NCAA survey](#) performed this past May, rates of mental exhaustion, anxiety and depression have remained 1.5 to two times higher than pre-pandemic rates.

Despite the increase in mental health issues that arose because of the pandemic, it also allowed for more conversations. The awareness has allowed it to become more normalized to talk about and treat.

"I think COVID kind of opened that door and gave it a little crack that has let the students burst through and really put their mind and their heart into how they're feeling and being vulnerable with the people around them to make sure that some of the suicides that have happened in the athletics world doesn't keep going because that's what we really have to focus on..." Prohaska said. "...they are people too and putting that person first is something that just has to continue to be prioritized."

During a time when help was needed most, some universities were not equipped to maintain a solid sports psychology department, but for Auburn University, they ensured that this would not be the case. Dr. Foss was hired in the summer of 2020 and started immediately. Despite financial uncertainty, Auburn University never stopped placing mental health at the forefront.

A commonality frequently mentioned is the concept that athletes are left feeling like they need to perfect all the time.

“I think one issue in athletics is that we feel like we need to be superhuman and I think that's something that athletics has the ability to teach us- to overcome, to persevere, to be mentally tough and in my sport, the difference between good gymnasts and great gymnasts are the mentally tough and I think that's a very great life lesson,” Auburn gymnast Adeline Sabados said. “...but there comes a point in the athlete's career where you have to say, like, ‘Hey, I'm tired, I need a day off. I need to recuperate. I'll come back tomorrow.’”

For some of the athletes, it can be a struggle to open up in such a vulnerable way, causing them to internalize and if never dealt with it can spiral into depression, anxiety or sometimes suicide. Dr. Foss explained that the best solution to the mental health crisis is for it to be talked about.

Destigmatizing is the first step.

“The culture has to destigmatize it and I also think it's even seen athletes like and peers being able to know our resources and be comfortable with that,” Foss said. “It goes back to systematically making sure that everyone is creating a supportive environment of how to access mental health resources, and that's not perfect. So there are still people who will not be as comfortable reaching out, but we're gonna do everything we can to decrease that barrier.”