

A close-up photograph of a person's torso and hand. The person is wearing a red and black sports jersey that is heavily stained with mud. They are holding a worn, muddy football in their right hand. The background is blurred, showing a grassy field and some orange cones.

Mental health in elite sport

How attitudes and
support have changed



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“Even with the medal targets, there’s also a need to get the best out of people. We know that to get the best out of people they need to be functioning well and they need to be looking after their mental health.”

British Swimming interviewee



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Content warning:

This report mentions suicide, addiction and eating disorders. If you find these subjects difficult, contact Mind’s Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or Samaritans on 116 123 for immediate support. Or visit mind.org.uk for information on supporting your mental health.

If you work or volunteer in sport, you may be able to get help from your professional body.

Introduction

Elite sportspeople face huge pressures. They compete at the top level, where expectations are high and their every move is watched. This affects their mental health.

Back in 2014, we looked at the mental health support available for sportspeople. A lot has changed since then.

Today, attitudes have moved on and sports organisations are doing more to help. Athletes are speaking out, sports offer a wide range of professional mental health support, and there's mental health training for staff.

This report shows some of the great work sports have been doing. But there's still more to do. We've spoken to people across sport, and listened to athletes who've spoken out in the media. Now you can hear what they have to say.

“People have seen my personal journey, not just my ‘performance’ journey and I genuinely don’t think I would have received this kind of support two or three years ago.”

Hannah Craig, 2012 Olympic canoeist, speaking in 2020

Our research

We asked research experts Fiveways to see what's changed since our 2014 report. They interviewed people from sports including canoeing, boxing, cricket, football, rowing, Rugby League, Rugby Union, and swimming. The interviews happened between 27 April – 16 September 2021.

What's driving change?

Mental health support for athletes has come a long way in the past seven years. Attitudes are moving on and sports are prioritising mental health.

Here's why things are changing.

The Duty of Care report and Mental Health in Elite Sport Action Plan

Team GB had an amazing 2016 Rio Olympics and Paralympics. But athletes said bullying and a 'win at all costs' approach damaged their mental health.

The Minister of Sport wanted to know if sports took athlete welfare and safety seriously. So politician and former Paralympian Tanni Grey-Thompson created the [Duty of Care report](#).

She said winning shouldn't be more important than "the duty of care towards athletes, coaches and others involved in the system". Her report asked national governing bodies to make mental health part of coaching. It also urged them to work more closely with the NHS and tell people about confidential support outside of sport. This included athletes, coaches, and staff.

Then came the [Mental Health in Elite Sport Action Plan](#) in 2018 – which was shaped by mental health and sports organisations. It highlighted ways to improve mental health support, building on what professional team sports had done through players' associations.

Mental health is now part of performance

The people we spoke to in elite sport say it's not just about winning anymore. It's about making sure athletes have the mental health support they need to perform well in every part of their lives.

Sports organisations now understand sportspeople need good mental health to perform at a high level. Especially if they want to keep this up for the future. Medical and mental health professionals are supporting this change in culture.

People can see this approach works. A member of Rugby League Cares told us “It's no coincidence that the places you know are flourishing and have got the best wellbeing programme generally are the best performing.”

This is a positive change – but it needs to be remembered on the ground. Especially in moments of high pressure.

Sportspeople are speaking out

More athletes are making mental health a priority by speaking out.

Gymnast Simone Biles got the world's attention when she pulled out of the Tokyo Olympics women's gymnastics team final in summer 2021.

“I have to focus on my mental health,” she told journalists. “I just think mental health is more prevalent in sports right now. We have to protect our minds and our bodies and not just go out and do what the world wants us to do.”

In tennis, Naomi Osaka left the 2021 French Open for mental health reasons. At first, she faced a backlash from some parts of the media, tennis authorities and sponsors. But she stood her ground and insisted it's “OK to not be OK”.

“To get a good performance out of someone, in the short term you don't need good wellbeing. But you want people to build, and you want people to come back time and time again and get better and better. That's why you need good mental wellbeing.”

Changing Minds



High-profile campaigns are supporting change

Over the past few years, high-profile campaigns have spread the word about mental health.

Since 2018, Mind and the English Football League (EFL) have worked together to start conversations about mental health and raise money for support. The Mind logo was on all shirts and replica kits in the EFL - getting players, coaches, and fans talking.

In 2019–2020, the [Heads Up](#) campaign (led by The Duke of Cambridge and the Football Association) led to all football's major names signing the [Mentally Healthy Football Declaration](#).

The declaration “recognises that mental health is as important as physical health” and commits to “making mental health and fitness a key priority within football’s agenda in all affiliated clubs and organisations across the UK now and for future generations.”

When sports raise awareness of mental health, more athletes look for support. And this support becomes less expensive because people are getting help earlier – before things reach crisis point.

“I think one of the big changes over the last few years is our partnership with Mind. It is very significant to promote the message that we should be talking about mental health more. We should feel more comfortable about it.”

EFL interviewee

“There’s a correlation – you do a load of awareness raising focused on promoting positive mental health and spotting the signs, you get people talking about mental health, you signpost more clearly where you can get support from and see an uptick in referrals for support.”

English Institute for Sport (EIS) interviewee



There's less stigma

Athletes say there's now less stigma around mental health problems. And it's getting better as sports offer more support.

“There's still a long way to go [...] but it seems like a more open environment. You see current players come out and talk about their struggles which shows the environment is a lot more accepting and there's less stigma.”

Amber Reed, England rugby player



What's been working well

Sports organisations are finding new ways to support their people's mental health. From apps to mental health screening – here's what's been working well over the past seven years.

Looking after 'the whole person'

Our sporting heroes aren't just athletes. They're people.

So projects like Rugby League Cares are looking after the 'whole person' – helping players learn and develop from experiences on and off the pitch.

This approach also guides the Professional Footballers' Association's (PFA) work. One person we spoke to said

"I'm not working with a footballer. I'm working with the person that plays football. Clubs need to understand that."

Olympic and Paralympic sports are focusing on the 'whole person' too. Everyone we spoke to said things have been getting better since the [UK Sport Mental Health Strategy](#).

“It's very much about people and watching people change their lives for the better. That's at the core of everything that we do as a support system.”

GB Boxing interviewee

Working together

More sports are working together for better mental health.

For example, the Rugby Football Union, Rugby Players Association (RPA), and Premiership Rugby meet regularly to talk about mental health and improve support.

In football, the Mentally Healthy Football Declaration brings people together. It has helped the Football Association work with chairs, CEOs, players, and managers to make mental health a national priority.

Sports also use the Professional Players Federation to make connections and learn from other organisations.

“You need your league, national governing body and your players’ association to be working in harmony.”

Rugby Football Union interviewee

“We’re supporting grassroots clubs, county football associations, and the Women’s Super League and Women’s Championship leagues to write their own mental health strategies – making sure it’s a fundamental part of the national game.”

The Football Association interviewee



Screening for mental health problems

If a small injury isn't spotted early, it can turn into a big problem. It's the same for mental health. Screening athletes has helped sports find problems and quickly offer support.

Sports are doing this in different ways¹. Some use questionnaires on depression and anxiety. Others use welfare apps to spot if players are struggling.

In Rugby League, Player Welfare Managers talk to players daily, with formal catch ups every three months. This can be about anything – from careers, game rules, families, finance, and transition (moving in and from the game). England Rugby and Premiership Rugby also screen at the start and end of the season, and when players face risks (like being injured).

Athletes need to feel safe, accepted, and secure during screening. If they don't, they might not want to talk. Some athletes worry if they talk about their mental health they won't be picked for competitions.

Sportspeople also told us the conversation after screening is really important. Athletes need to know they're being listened to, and that action will be taken.

British Swimming did this well at the Tokyo Olympics. After they screened athletes, they followed-up with mental health resources and offered extra support to people who needed it.

1. Examples of screening tools are: the [Public Health Questionnaire 9 \(PHQ-9\)](#), the [Generalised Anxiety Disorder Questionnaire \(GAD-7\)](#), and the [SMHAT-1](#) tool. The EIS also offer the AER (availability, effort and recovery) monitoring app so coaches and support staff can manage performance and health programmes – the app links to the medical record system used by physios and doctors (PDMS).

In football, England players are screened when they get to training camp. This makes sure there's support for anyone who needs it – opening the door for safe supportive conversations. If an England player is ever struggling with their mental health, the Football Association work with Sporting Chance to support them.

“We use screening tools as conversation starters. We don't rely on them as monitoring tools.”

Changing Minds interviewee



Understanding who's at risk

Athletes face unique pressures on their mental health. When sports understand what these pressures are, and who's at risk, they can give early support. Things like injury, coming to the end of a contract, online abuse, and worrying about money and the future can all take a toll.

Research has helped highlight these risks. In 2021, Cardiff Metropolitan University worked on [a study with the Rugby Football Union](#), the Rugby Players Association and Premiership Rugby. It looked at mental demands on professional rugby players and found the end of the season was very difficult.

When sports understand risks, they can tackle them. For example, footballers who aren't fluent in English and are away from home can struggle. So football clubs offer therapists who speak players' first language through the Professional Football Association's counselling service.

In boxing, athletes are encouraged to get qualifications for when their sporting career ends – making this massive change easier to manage.

“I think ‘so what have I got to show for everything I’ve done?’ I’ve won all of those trophies – and that’s great. But realistically, what next? Where do I go from here?”

Current Women's Super League footballer

“We have a Performance Lifestyle Advisor who helped me apply to university. He even came to my Masters meetings – he's been a great support.”

Current GB Boxer interviewee

Funding mental health support

Mental health support needs proper funding.

In Rugby Union, this is done in two ways. Restart (the Rugby Player Association's charity) pays for and runs a counselling service for all current or past players. At the same time, clubs use their medical budget for any mental health treatment their players need.

Investing in mental health makes financial sense. One person told us about a leading football club that signed an 18-year-old and put him in a house far away from home. This affected his mental health. When there were problems, the club ended up selling him for much less than they bought him.

But funding does depend on what sports can afford. Budgets can also get complicated when players leave national teams and clubs have to start paying for support.

“Unlocking the funding was [based] on saying ‘look, rugby coaches, administrators, players, you know mental health is a health issue, let's treat it like all other health issues. Now [access to funding] is part of a core benefit.”

RFU interviewee

Giving different kinds of support

Sports are offering different kinds of support – making it easier for athletes to find help that suits them. Here are some examples:

Confidential helplines and counselling

Player associations and clubs refer athletes to mental health organisations like Sporting Chance, Cognacity, and Changing Minds. These give confidential and free support to members. Some help past members and their families too.

Workshops and programmes

- Rugby League has programmes for players facing new challenges – like moving up to the first team.
- The Professional Footballers' Association has workshops about getting a new manager, being injured, going out on loan, or living away from family.
- The English Institute of Sport (EIS) works with Changing Minds to provide workshops to sportspeople, coaches, and their performance teams. These give people ways to cope when things are stressful.

Support from other sportspeople

In Rugby League and cricket, past players come and help current athletes. Sports also teach players about mental health so they can support each other – sparking conversations on pitches and in changing rooms. No one understands the pressures athletes and players face like people who've been there too.

Making sure there's independent support

Sports associations and governing bodies are making sure athletes can get help away from work.

For example, the British Athlete Commission (BAC) and professional players associations help athletes get independent specialist support.

This independent support is really important. It gives athletes another choice if they think talking to their organisation will damage their career. It also levels the playing field. The help athletes get at work can depend on budget and what a head coach thinks about mental health.



Training and employing staff

Sports are training staff and hiring experts to help athletes with mental health problems. They're also working with other organisations to give sportspeople the best support.

Together, the English Institute of Sport (EIS) and Changing Minds gave mental health training to 8 out of 10 people in Olympic and Paralympic sports. Both EIS and Changing Minds have experts who advise on mental health, and Mental Health Leads too.

In Rugby Union, full-time professional clubs also need a Mental Health Lead. And training is a key part of the Mental Health Fitness Charter for the 2022 Rugby League World Cup. By the final game of the tournament, the charter says it will train 'every player, team official, match official, teammate and volunteer to look after their own mental fitness and that of those around them.'

In football, the FA has a full-time lead for mental health and wellbeing. Premier League clubs also need to train and hire mental health staff as part of Premier League rules. Each club must have at least one education session for players every season, and a full-time care manager in their academies. They also need a board member in charge of a mental and emotional wellbeing action plan.

People with experience of mental health problems are also becoming board members. UK Sport has athletes on its board – and the Rugby Players Association had an ex-player who has experienced depression on their Welfare Advisory Board. These athletes are experts, and make sure decisions are made with mental health in mind.

In Olympic and Paralympic sports like rowing – and team sports including cricket and football – clinical psychologists work in the performance team, supporting the mental health of athletes and other staff.

Campaigns to raise awareness and understanding

Campaigns and events help raise awareness and promote support.

In 2017, the Rugby Players Association ran their [Lift the Weight](#) campaign. It gave information and advice about different mental health problems, and showed athletes where to get help.

In football, the Professional Footballers' Association told clubs about their support at [Injured](#) – their yearly mental health and wellbeing conference.

The Mind and EFL [On Your side](#) partnership, and the [Heads Up](#) campaign, also raised awareness of mental health for players, coaches, support staff, and fans.

Mental health support during coronavirus

The first UK lockdown in spring 2020 hit athletes and players hard. They couldn't train or play sport, and their future looked very uncertain.

Things got worse because of cancelled events, being furloughed, and worries about job security and pay cuts.

Sports acted quickly. They kept in touch with athletes online, offered more mental health support, and raised awareness of existing support.

What we do next

Mental health support for sportspeople is getting a lot better. But there's still work to do. More players are facing online abuse. And women aren't getting the support they need.

Here's how things could improve.

More help for coaches and the wider team

Behind every athlete is a team. But when we think about sport and mental health, we can forget people working behind the scenes. Coaches and support teams are under a lot of pressure – so they need support.

Some sports have counselling and support for the whole team. Others have clinical psychologists for everyone in their sport. But this isn't happening everywhere. [Mental health problems affect all sporting staff](#), and we need to know why more isn't being done.

The government may need to protect some money they give to sports for the wider team. This could pay for support like Employee Assistance Programmes, which include 24-hour helplines and counselling.



To help improve and support the mental health of everyone, all sports should consider signing up to the [Mental Health at Work Commitment](#). A roadmap to achieve real change, the Commitment is a simple, evidence-based set of actions that any organisation can follow.

- 💬 **You have a bad run, and you have to go home and tell your partner, 'we're moving'.** 💬 Sporting Chance interviewee
- 💬 **There's an acknowledgement [of] the change we need to make, but in terms of accessing the same clinical support (as athletes), that's not there yet.** 💬 British Rowing interviewee



More help for women

Women's team sports – such as cricket, football and rugby – are becoming more professionalised. And athletes told us they want help facing the extra pressure.

In 2020, the FA started supporting England's women footballers with their mental health. The Professional Football Association also has help for members. But for most women, there isn't much support directly from their sports.

We need more research about mental health in women's sport – and more support.

“**[There's] no one to just go and speak to – there's nothing in between keeping quiet and using a counselling line.**”

Women's Super League footballer

More help to cope with social media abuse

Social media abuse is a huge problem. We all saw this when the England men's football team faced racist and hateful abuse after the Euro 2020 final. And it's not just aimed at footballers. Players, coaches, and officials from all sports face it too.

Online abuse damages people's mental health – especially when it's racist or sexist. So tackling it needs to be a priority. Everyone in sport needs more specialist services, training, and support.

Some sports are doing this already. In 2021, football organised a social media boycott and gave support to players and clubs through their reporting system. Now they look at each case and act straight away. They also make sure there's support at grassroots level, where people can't get help through the Professional Players Association or League Managers Association. But this isn't the same for all sports.

Sportspeople's mental health will suffer if we don't do more to tackle online abuse.

“**In my time you played for 90 minutes and expected abuse from opposing fans. But in general you played and finished and it was gone. Now I feel for the young players, as social media is part of everyone's life.**”

Rio Ferdinand

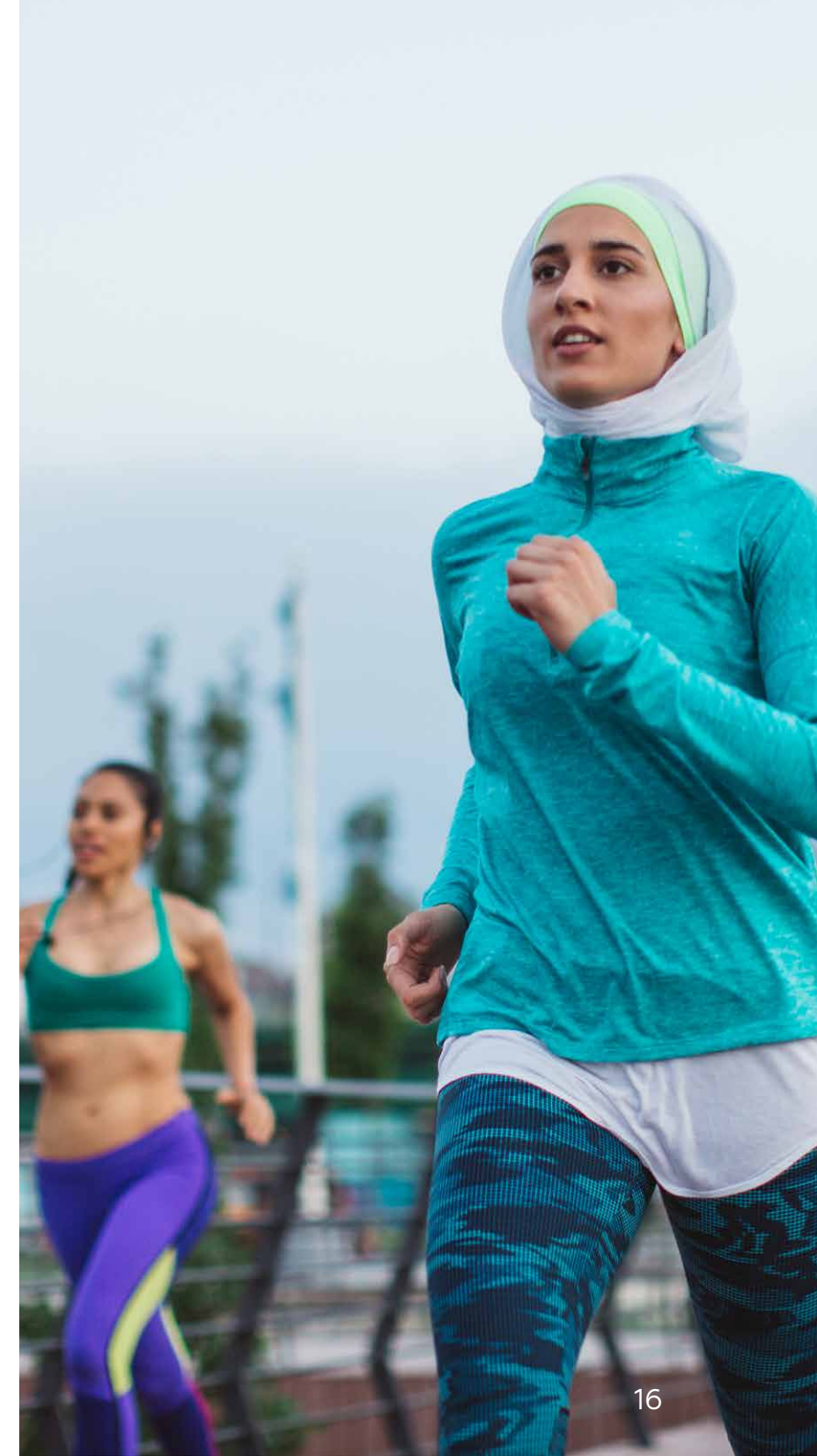
More work to tackle stigma

We need to do more to tackle stigma in sport. There's less stigma, but it's still there.

When footballer David Cox shared his experiences of depression to help others – including talking about the time he tried to take his own life – a player told him he “should have done it right first time.” He quit football for good in the middle of that game. “Some folk might not think it's a big deal, but I'm fed up listening to it,” he said.

“There's a massive stigma that men can't talk about what they feel. I think you want to talk to your closest circle, so your partner, your best friend or your coach or whoever it's going to be. You've got to talk to people and get it off your chest. I respond really well to an issue by just saying something, just getting it off my chest and really thinking about it.”

Adam Peaty, Olympic gold medal-winning swimmer, speaking in 2020



Help for more complicated problems

Today, sports are much better at managing common mental health problems. But people with more complicated problems need expert support fast.

These problems include suicidal thoughts, self-harm, eating disorders, and psychosis.

Sports should work with expert providers² to get their staff seen by mental health professionals. These need to be sports psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and other experts who understand the pressures athletes and their team face. Staff need support in and out of work, so they have choice, control, and confidentiality.

Player associations might also need to change how they offer support. A lot of help comes from their charities, but this isn't sustainable when mental health problems are getting more complicated and need long-term support.

“I was diagnosed [with anorexia] when I was 14. Rejection and failure are hard to take and although disappointment is a fact of life, I didn't always deal with it positively. It felt like emotional quicksand that dragged me down and zapped me of energy and enthusiasm.”

Molly Bartrip, footballer, speaking in 2018

“We need more awareness among decision makers that mental health sometimes means low level support and at other times much more.”

Sports psychiatrist

2. The EIS Mental Health Expert Team, Sporting Chance, Changing Minds, and Cognacity are some expert providers that can provide mental health professionals.



Better communication

People told us mental health workers outside sport could share more information with sports' own mental health teams (if it's ok with the athlete). This would give sports useful feedback and advice - and help athletes when they come back to sport.



Treating mental health the same as physical health

Athletes often still don't get as much help for their mental health as they do for their physical health. Sportspeople want funders (like the Department for Culture, Media and Sport) to spend money making sure mental and physical health are treated the same.

Mental health training and support needs to be part of every development programme – making mental health a priority right from the start of an athlete's career.

“We’re trying to save people’s lives because of the baggage that they’ve picked up [as an] athlete. I think we’ve saved a lot of lives.”

Player association interviewee

Thank you

Thanks to everyone who helped with our report:

The English Football League (EFL)
The Football Association (FA)
The Professional Footballers Association (PFA)
The Premier League
The Professional Cricketers Association (PCA)
The Professional Players Federation (PPF)
The Rugby Players Association (RPA)
The Rugby Football Union (RFU)
Rugby League Cares
State of Mind
Sporting Chance
UK Sport
The Royal College of Psychiatrists Sports and Exercise Special Interest Group (SEPSIG)

British Canoeing
GB Boxing
British Rowing
British Swimming
English Institute of Sport
British Athletes Commission
Changing Minds
Department of Culture, Media and Sport
Sport England
UK Coaching
The Royal Foundation

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ASICS was founded more than 70 years ago with the belief that sport had a benefit not just on the body, but also on the mind. It's why ASICS is called ASICS. It's an acronym for the Latin "Anima Sana in Corpore Sano" or "a Sound Mind in a Sound Body". We believe our founding purpose is more relevant today than ever before. That's why our partnership with Mind is so important to us. Together we aim to support more people to increase their mental health by becoming physically active.



Fiveways provides the insight for voluntary and community organisations to maximise their impact. We specialise in audience research and all forms of programme evaluation.






Mind is here to fight for mental health.

We won't give up until everyone experiencing a mental health problem gets both support and respect.

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