

# Athletes' mental health could be at risk



By **Nia Daniels**  
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Some athletes have expressed their desire to focus on their mental health and take time away from their sport.

Simone Biles shocked the world when she decided to withdraw from the team final competition for the 2021 Tokyo Olympics. Biles are a four-time Olympic gold medalist and the most decorated American gymnast of all time. She decided to remove herself from the team competition because "she was not in the right state of mind to continue the competition," Biles said.

The decision she made resulted in uproar, backlash and a national conversation about athletes' mental health.

"My day starts at 6:30 a.m. with practice, followed by morning weights," said a groggy, soft-spoken Midori Williams, a sophomore softball player. "I then attend my four classes, eat, study and then I have another evening practice, and then I have to hit on my own. After practice I study for all my classes, and as an honors student I have to keep a 3.5 G.P.A. On average I get about four to five hours of sleep. I try to take naps when I can. We practice every day and we have about four practices each day, except for Saturday. On Saturday we work the concessions at

Oklahoma State University to raise money for the softball program, and on Sundays we have a game. Sometimes I don't feel like I have enough time to get everything done."

Langston University student athletes face a busy practice schedule. With many responsibilities, these athletes often feel tired, and don't have enough time for self-care.

"The biggest hinderance that I've observed is that a lot of students don't get a lot of rest or sleep during the season they're in," Dr. Elizabeth Albright, acting chair of the department of psychology, said. "That includes being able to recharge physically and emotionally. Students are tired when doing their schoolwork and workouts, and then dealing with classes, work and personal life adds another layer of stress."

De Asia Montgomery, a junior dancer for The Golden Felines, struggles with anxiety and panic attacks. When it comes to practice, "according to the schedule it states we practice from 6 to 8 p.m. but since we practice with the band, we don't leave until they dismiss us, and there is no designated time for that."

In weeks prior to performances, that time could be as late as midnight or 1 a.m., she said.

"We practice every day, Monday through Friday, and then we perform on Saturday at the

game, and then we sometimes practice or perform on Sunday. It's a struggle to be a part of an organization that requires a lot of your time. I understand that is what I signed up for and I try to take care of myself. I do have anxiety, and I can sometimes have panic attacks. There aren't any resources on campus that I'm aware of that could help me when I'm not feeling my best mentally," Montgomery said.

According to Albright, "it's important for student athletes to pay attention to the signs of stress, such as how much sleep they're getting, how they're responding to their diet needs and their physical needs. Finding ways to alleviate stress and learning how to be in good communication with their professors, especially when they're having trouble in school, that way professors can help get them back on track and not let the stress accumulate."

Athletes deal with a lot of stress, eating disorders and the pressure to perform. The social media element also takes their focus off what's actually happening and puts the focus on the performance and people's opinion. Resources to consider are activities that will help students refocus themselves like exercise, meditation, prayer, spending time with loved ones, or even seeking therapy or counseling, Albright said.

Coaches spend a lot of time with their players training and developing them. Coaches need to be aware of the stress and frustrations their players are having and providing a sense of comfort and support for them. Coaches can help their players manage time well by finding the balance between practice, study time, and students' personal lives. "Too much time spent in any of those other areas takes away from what's left and can lead to frustration and burnout. Everyone must find a balance," according to Albright.

According to Athletic Director Donnita Rodgers, athletes practice limit is 24 to 25 hours a week with a day off, which means a practice limit of four hours a day. Rodgers and the department offer resources like a webinar series presented by Galea Health. The webinar series provides students with counselors and mental health professionals and they will be targeting mental health topics for student athletes. These topics include stress, anxiety, and eating disorders. This conference runs throughout the whole month of October.

"Playing basketball is a way that helps me cope with my mental health, however basketball can be rigorous on your body physically and emotionally and it's been challenging trying to manage school and

basketball at the same time," junior basketball player Sade Bass said. "I'm unaware of there being any resources on campus or anyone I can talk about my feelings with, especially when I'm not feeling the best mentally. It seems like I have to find a slot, when it comes to taking care of myself."

Some student athletes are not aware of resources on campus that they can turn to when they are not doing well mentally. Yet, they are expected to give a great performance in and outside of their sport. Not just athletes, but all students are in need of more counseling support. "I do hope that we can get more counseling support on campus," Albright said. Student athletes can only be required to practice for a certain amount of hours and days per week. It is important to make sure rules are upheld and that student athletes get the help they need.

"Put mental health first, because if you don't, then you're not going to enjoy your sport and you're not going to succeed as much as you want to. So it's ok sometimes to even sit out the big competitions to focus on yourself, because it shows how strong of a competitor that you really are, rather than just battle through it," said Biles.

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