

# Health News And Notes

## Sports And Mental Health: What You Should Know

by Paolo del Vecchio, MSW

(NAPSA)—For many participants, team sports are more than just a game. In fact, a growing body of research supports the idea that physical exercise is associated with decreasing the risk of depression and reducing its symptoms.

Participating in athletics has many benefits, such as building fitness, teamwork and self-confidence. Further, participating in sports or fitness activities with others aligns with two of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) major dimensions of recovery—health and community.

However, athletics can also involve risk. Throughout the seasons of professional, collegiate, high school and amateur athletics, fans keep their fingers crossed that players will make it through the season without an injury.

One issue receiving a great deal of attention is the connection between concussions and depression. Numerous athletes with histories of concussion have spoken out about their depression, and this problem is not limited to professional athletes, who get paid millions of dollars to put their health on the line. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), young athletes—both male and female—suffer concussions in many different sports. One study examining data from over 30,000 adolescents found that concussions were associated with a 3.3-fold increase in the risk of depression.

Athletes are also at risk of prescription drug misuse, which can lead to addiction and misuse of other drugs. A recent *Sports Illustrated* special report introduced readers to several young athletes who had initially used prescription pain medications, then became dependent and moved on to using heroin. The article chronicled the life of one young man, a three-sport star in high school, who eventually died from a drug overdose.

Fortunately, help is available. At the high school and college level, SAMHSA supports programs like the Safe Schools/Healthy Students and Garrett Lee Smith Suicide Prevention initiatives. Athletics programs offer their own support, but too often, athletes are unwilling to ask for help until it is too late.



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By sharing their stories, athletes are helping to raise awareness that it is okay to seek help. Professional football star Brandon Marshall is an example of an athlete who has the courage to speak out publicly about his experiences with mental illness, and his foundation funds early intervention programs to help identify at-risk youth and build resilience. In 2012, SAMHSA presented Marshall, along with several other athletes, with Voice Awards for their efforts.

In addition, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) offers a helpful publication, "Mind, Body and Sport: Understanding and Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Wellness," which includes the stories of athletes and coaches who have personally struggled with mental and substance use problems. The publication encourages coaches, athletic trainers, and teammates to be aware of problems and offer support.

However, many people don't know what to look for or how to help. That's why SAMHSA supports initiatives like The Campaign to Change Direction, which educates people about five signs of distress: withdrawal, agitation, hopelessness, decline in personal care, and change in personality. Knowing the signs means we can watch out for ourselves and for the people around us, be it our family, our friends or our teammates.

Working together is important, not just on the field or court, but in the game of life.

To learn more about the links between athletics and mental health, visit <http://blog.samhsa.gov/2015/09/09/sports-and-mental-health/#.VgrfgvIVhBc>.

*Paolo del Vecchio is the Director, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.*