

EATING DISORDERS PERPETRATED IN SPORTS



Photo: The Queens Journal

Pursuing athletics seems undeniably extremely positive -- it can be a hobby, a passion, a profession, a means to college, a social activity, a way to promote physical health, a stress-reliever, a self-esteem booster, and so much more. However, it has the potential to become toxic when immense emphasis is put on diet, body weight, shape, and physical capabilities/fitness. The National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) reports that in a study of Division 1 NCAA athletes, over one-third of female athletes reported attitudes and symptoms placing them at risk for anorexia nervosa. And this detrimental issue finds itself among males as well.

In particular, sports such as gymnastics, figure skating, diving, wrestling, bodybuilding, running, and other sports that focus on the individual put athletes at heightened risks for developing eating disorders. When children, starting from young ages, commit themselves wholly to a sport, there is immense pressure on them to maintain a certain fitness and physique, which can result in strict diets and weight goals. Excessive pressure from coaches and parents to be the "best" instills trauma among young athletes, and constantly overtraining can have negative, long-term impacts. Many sports even are built around a dangerous belief that lower body weight can improve performance. For example, a widespread and harmful belief in figure-skating culture is that lower bodyweight allows females to spin in the air more easily and for longer periods of time.

This issue is especially dangerous for preteens who are meant to undergo puberty. Overexercising and lack of proper nutrition can lead to delayed puberty and damaged, irregular hormone levels, which can even lead to long-term troubles. Girls may lose or even never develop their menstruation cycles (a condition called amenorrhea). Such females cannot become pregnant, and disturbed hormone levels can lead to increased risk of heart and blood vessel disorders, calcium and bone loss, and many other health concerns.

Thus, not only is early intervention crucial, but also it is crucial that athletes thrive in supportive and safe environments. Coaches and parents must *always* prioritize health and well-being over performance success, fellow athletes and the public at-large must have supportive attitudes towards size and shape, and everyone must understand the importance of allowing the body to develop, change, and grow naturally.

HIGH RISK OF DEVELOPING AN EATING DISORDER FOR ATHLETES

College athletes have an elevated risk of developing an eating disorder. One study found the number of college athletes at-risk for developing Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia Nervosa to be:⁴



Photo: NEDA