

# Eating Disorders in Athletes

*Unique characteristics of the athlete's sport training environment can place this population at heightened risk for development of anorexia, bulimia or EDNOS.*

## **In the shadow of sport's epic moments of glory lies a troublesome reality—the incidence of eating disorders among elite athletes.**

Experts generally agree that certain categories of athletics place these high achieving individuals at a greater risk for developing anorexia, bulimia and eating disorders not otherwise specified (EDNOS). In fact, research published by Craig Johnson, Chief Clinical Officer at Eating Recovery Center, found that at least one-third of female college athletes have some type of eating disorder.

Interestingly, the very same perfectionistic, overachieving and people-pleasing temperament that fuels achievement in athletic competition closely mirrors the personality traits of those individuals who tend to develop eating disorders. For both male and female athletes, the combination of these traits with the body shape- and weight-focused demands of many competitive sports creates the perfect storm that can trigger eating disordered thoughts and behaviors. The direct consequences of eating disorders on health and sport performance vary, and depend on a variety of factors including the athlete's immediate physical and psychological status, the specific demands of their training regimen, the acuity of eating disordered behaviors, and the timing and quality of therapeutic intervention.

*"I believe that the greatest risk to athletes is the challenge to identify an eating disorder within the sport world—if an at-risk or symptomatic athlete isn't identified, they cannot be treated. Issues complicating identification involve 'sport body stereotypes' in which thinness is accepted as both normal and desirable, as well as the presumption of health with good performance."*

*—Ron Thompson, PhD*



## **Risk Factors in the Athletic Environment**

According to Ron Thompson, PhD, a licensed psychologist specializing in eating disorders treatment at the Bloomington Center for Counseling and Human Development, consultant to the NCAA and International Olympic Committee Medical Commission and author of multiple books, including *Eating Disorders in Sport*, several factors converge to make athletes a special population at risk for eating disorders:

The pervasive belief in the sport world, held by both coaches and athletes alike, that the leaner athlete performs better, which leads to dieting.

Aesthetic, judged and endurance sports, including gymnastics, dance/cheerleading, cross country, swimming and wrestling.

Sports requiring revealing uniforms, which can put participating athletes at risk for body dissatisfaction and competitive thinness.

"Good athletes" possess similar personality traits to those who suffer from Anorexia Nervosa, which may predispose them to potential development of an eating disorder.



## Screening and Intervention

Warning signs of eating disorders among athletes can be difficult to identify, as they can be masked easily and often go unreported by the athlete themselves. Common indicators specific to sport participation include a decrease in performance, an increase in exercise outside of routine training activities, menstrual irregularity (in female athletes) and stress fractures and other overuse injuries.

Interventions for athletes that may be struggling with an eating disorder must be handled with sensitivity, confidentiality and expert support to achieve productive outcomes. Coaches and athletic trainers have the capacity—and responsibility—to play an active role as a champion for health for the individuals they oversee. Not only can coaches and athletic trainers leverage their rapport with athletes to voice genuine concern for their health, but they also engage with athletes frequently enough to facilitate the surveillance necessary for early illness detection and treatment compliance.

## Expert Care, Lasting Recovery

When it comes to selecting a treatment resource for an athlete, experience addressing this eating disordered population is critical. Eating Recovery Center offers specialized tracks designed to meet athletes' distinctive recovery needs, fusing medical, psychiatric, nutritional and psychological interventions to provide the necessary tools to achieve lasting behavioral change. Of particular importance in eating disorders treatment programming for athletes is identifying strategies to protect recovery following discharge, especially as athletes consider re-engaging in athletic activity on a casual or competitive level.

### Contact Us Today

To schedule an assessment, speak with a member of our clinical team or learn more about Eating Recovery Center's programs and services:

Call toll free: **877-218-1344**

Email: **info@EatingRecoveryCenter.com**

Live confidential chat: **EatingRecoveryCenter.com**

## Prevention Strategies for Athletes, Coaches and Trainers

Page Love, MS, RD, CSSD, LD, owner of NutriFit, Sport, Therapy, Inc., and consultant to the Atlanta Braves, WTA and ATP tennis tours and USTA Player Development, shares insights to help athletes combat the development of eating disorders in themselves and teammates, as well as guidance for coaches and trainers to help them support the creation and maintenance of healthy training environments.

### Athletes:

Prepare early for weight management demand events (ie. weigh-ins, competitions) to avoid the need for last-minute weight loss behaviors.

Avoid fad diets and other swift weight-loss strategies that increase the risk of malnutrition.

Participate in comprehensive nutrition assessments, including body composition screenings, with professionals to determine safe weight and body fat percentage goals.

Consider your thoughts around food and weight and consider speaking with a professional if you become aware of distortions or obsessions.

### Coaches and Trainers:

Commit to understanding the eating disorder risks involved in your sport and learn about preventative strategies and treatment resources.

Recognize your role and strength in the relationship with your athletes, and use that influence to prevent eating disorders.

Emphasize overall performance over weight, body fat percentage, and other quantitative measures.

Be aware that low energy and susceptibility to heat stress can stem from low energy intake or restricted eating in your athletes.



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