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How Sports Affect One's Mental Health

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ABSTRACT

Sports offer significant mental health benefits, including improved self-esteem, stress relief, and resilience. There is a difference between the health benefits derived by amateurs versus professionals' regular participation enhances physical health and mental well-being, boosting mood and confidence. Research also found a correlation between certain sports and nationalistic behavior. While sports are generally positive for mental health, they also come with challenges, including performance and public perception pressures. Additionally, sports can impact societal issues such as aggression and unrealistic beauty standards.

KEYWORDS: *Mental Health, Sports, Endorphins, Psychology, Physical Well Being*

INTRODUCTION

Why do so many people enjoy sports? According to sports destination management, it has been recorded that a “total of 242 million people in the United States — nearly 80% of all Americans 6 years and older — participated in at least one sports or fitness activity in 2023”, and that's only in the US. IPSOS states that every 1 in 3 people are most likely to play or be interested in sports which is a third of our population (US). Liking or playing sports anywhere is unlimited, whether age, ability, or exposure. You see different people enjoying sports from 2 to 80 years old or people in a ton of professional clubs just kids on the street playing. It's a well-known fact that sports are an amazing strategy to gain and improve both physical and mental health. (“Real-Life Benefits of Exercise and Physical Activity”) Our psychological well-being can benefit incredibly from working out with others. Sports may also provide a safe environment for stress relief and self-esteem building, along with their numerous health benefits. In this paper, we'll explore how sports have a positive effect on our mental health because they can teach us important life lessons such as resilience, leadership, accountability, respect, and patience (inspiration.) and help us understand who we are. There are also negative effects that come with most things such as stress or anxiety that are commonly found within more advanced athletes (Bhandari). It is common knowledge that people on average find the effects of sports to be addictive, when one works out dopamine and serotonin levels boost up, and it's done in a natural way that makes the body crave it. Sports overall are commonly done to keep one in shape. According to WebMD, there was a study that proved that playing a sport has the same effect as an antidepressant to someone struggling with depression which just shows that exercising has the same power as a drug. Sports also leave you with long-term mental health effects, mainly good ones (Bhandari).

MENTAL HEALTH DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PROFESSIONALS AND AMATEURS:

There is a big difference between Professional and amateur athletes, they face different mental health challenges due to irregular pressures. Professionals like Simone Biles, as well as Michael Phelps, Serena Williams, and more, have had to endure intense public scrutiny and high expectations, which can lead to severe stress and anxiety. They have access to mental health resources but may struggle with the action of seeking help.

There are many examples of talented people who are expected to perform such as Simone Biles and Micheal Phelps along with other athletes who were pressured to exceed the limits, as talent comes with expectations. Simone Biles in specifics was not able to overcome this challenge that many athletes face. Around the time when the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, Japan Simone Biles mentioned that she had a minor injury, which led to widespread speculation and criticism. Many people believed that the pressure of performing and achieving success had become too overwhelming for her. Later, Biles clarified that her withdrawal was primarily due to mental health concerns, specifically experiencing the "twisties," a term that many gymnasts have been affected by, it impacts spatial awareness mid-air making it dangerous to compete. Later on, this emphasized the intense mental and emotional strain that athletes often experience, creating a larger awareness of the importance of mental health in sports. (Astor).

Micheal Phelps has won almost 30 medals in the Olympic Games being the very first athlete in Olympic history to get 28 medals with 23 of them being gold. He was born June 30, 1985, in Baltimore, Maryland, U.S. At the beginning of 2018, he revealed to the public that he has been suffering from both anxiety and depression coming from the pressure to succeed. According to Adelphi Physc, Medical Center said that “many athletes report feeling a “crash,” in which they come down from the physical and mental height of the games and sink into depression.” There's been a common effect after participating in the Olympics that many athletes have gone through called the “deep drop”. “Olympic skier Nick Goepper experienced this type of “deep drop,” as he dubbed it in an interview; and it drove him to alcoholism so severe that he had to attend rehab for months.” (“Michael Phelps Describes His Severe Anxiety and Post-Olympic Depression | Adelphi Psych Med”). That is the same effect that Phelps experienced he stated that he had fallen into a great depression during an interview at a mental health conference. After winning two silver medals and four gold medals at the London games, he felt as if it wasn't enough and could've performed better which led to his first episode, he told them that “I didn't want to be in the sport anymore,” he says. “I didn't want to be alive.” At his lowest point, he even thought about suicide. Only speaking about his mental health for two years after being depressed for over 17 years, Phelps says “We're supposed to be big, macho, physically strong human beings, but this is not a weakness,”. “We are seeking and reaching for help” With much counseling and treatment gained his mental health balance. This gave more athletes to have the courage to open up about this issue.

Serena Williams is an American former professional tennis player. Widely regarded as one of the greatest tennis players of all time (“Serena Williams”). The difference about this athlete is that she accepted the struggle of mental health as an athlete and faced it instead of pushing it away and letting her be affected as many professionals do. She uses tactics to preserve through the pressure such as separating her sports life and her personal life, shes learned to Practice under pressure, stay in the moment, and not get too caught up in what people say, (“Serena Williams Gives A 3-Step Tutorial On Mental Toughness, Her 'Greatest Strength'”) She Loses With Grace, She Finds Motivation in Setbacks, She Has Spoken Out About Disparities in Maternal Health and Shared Her Own Story (Byrne). All of these aspects have made Williams the great player she turned out to be, she uses losses as strengths, and in an interview, she says that she lost more matches than won but that hasn't stopped her from still giving it her all, she learns from her mistakes and grows, and most of all shes open about her mental health and never allowed it to get to her.

PRODUCE LONG-TERM MENTAL HEALTH EFFECTS.

In addition to the physical benefits, sports can have a large and long-lasting effect on mental health. Confidence and self-esteem can be boosted by the satisfaction that comes from learning a new skill or beating your record (“Sporting Mind: The Interplay of Physical Activity and Psychological Health”). Regular participation in sports promotes the growth of self-control, determination, and teamwork - all qualities that are essential to overcoming life's difficulties. In addition, the bonds and connections formed in group activities provide a safety net that reduces feelings of depression and promotes mental health. According to WebMD “Researchers studied 9,688 children who had bad childhood experiences, such as physical and sexual abuse, or emotional neglect. They found that those children who took part in team sports had better mental well-being when they were adults.” (Bhandari). Therefore not only does it have short-term effects but ones that can affect your entire life for the healthier and better. The social part of sports also plays a key role in mental health. The bonds and connections formed through group activities provide a strong support network that can decrease feelings of isolation and depression. And create a sense of belonging and community that many people adhere to. Adults who have done sports throughout their childhood are more likely to be open-minded and get along better with people because habits are created when you are younger sports force you to enhance and train these qualities for that reason they stick till you are older (Neighmond). The endurance and overall mental health of athletes can be improved by playing sports that promote persistence and purpose. According to Advanced Sports and Spine sports “Boost Your Mood, Reduce Depression and Anxiety, Improve Your Concentration and Focus, Get Quality Sleep, Boost Your Self-Confidence, Improve Your Social Skills, Promote Leadership Skills, Maintain a Healthy Weight. Amateurs, on the other hand, balance playing sports with academics and personal life, facing stress from balancing multiple responsibilities. They often have less access to mental health support, making it harder to cope with these pressures. However, for amateurs, the pressure of having to succeed is less therefore making it more enjoyable.

BENEFITS FOR AMATUERS

Playing sports provides numerous benefits for amateurs, enhancing both physical and mental health. Engaging in regular physical activity helps improve cardiovascular health by lowering cholesterol levels and regulating thyroid function, which in turn supports overall metabolic health (Medical News Today). According to Verywell Health “Exercising with hyperthyroidism or hypothyroidism has many benefits. It increases energy levels, improves sleep quality, and helps relieve other symptoms of thyroid disease.” According to the American Thyroid Association “An estimated 20 million Americans have some form of thyroid disease. Up to 60 percent of those with thyroid disease are unaware of their condition”, therefore doing sports is very useful in preventing the chance of getting diseases that older people seem to get when they grow up.

Sports also enhance coordination and mobility, making everyday activities easier and reducing the risk of injuries, especially in older adults (Medical News Today) (Health.gov). When Older people have done sports their whole life the probability of getting injuries due to lack of coordination and mobility is less likely. Additionally, physical activity has been linked to improved mental function and a reduced risk of Alzheimer's disease. Regular exercise promotes brain health by enhancing memory and processing speed, potentially delaying the onset of dementia-related conditions (Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia) (Health.gov). Moreover, playing sports is an effective way to manage stress and improve mental well-being. As mentioned earlier it can reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, promoting a more positive mood and better sleep quality (Medical News Today) (Health.gov). Overall, the different benefits of participating in sports make it an excellent activity for maintaining and enhancing physical and mental health.

According to WebMD “When you exercise, your body releases chemicals called endorphins. These endorphins interact with the receptors in your brain that reduce your perception of pain.” this is why exercising is so important and good for one's mental health, there have been studies that have resulted in showing that 20 to 30 minutes of exercise each day can make people feel calmer.

For people who deal with problems such as stress, anxiety, or depression, exercising helps lessen the effect. This is the reason why many people enjoy playing sports and exercising, it makes them happy and feels good. (Bruce)

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

When professional athletes don't live up to expectations, it affects amateurs. Their failures get a lot of attention, and that can change how we see a sport. It might make some people doubt themselves, wondering if they can ever be that good. But for others, seeing pros push through tough times can be a huge motivator. It shows them that setbacks are part of the game, and if they can bounce back, so can we. (American Psychological Association) (1AND1). According to the Crown Prosecution Service, during the men's World Cup 2022, stark figures reported that "incidents increased by 26 percent if England play, 38 percent if England lose, and 11 percent the next day, win or lose." Many people in England feel emotionally attached to sports specifically football as you can see from the data, even England just playing increased the quantity of incidents of domestic violence within days of the football match.

According to PubMed Central, researchers have "found a connection between international soccer match days and an increase in assault-related presentations at emergency departments" Many people become addicted to supporting a team, and when there's a loss as the study mentioned above people specifically men tend to act out of anger. Anger such as abuse towards partners or unreasonable violence ("Major sports events and domestic violence: A systematic review").

AGGRESSION

Anger in sports is often a response to injustices, frustrations, or threats. Athletes may struggle with managing these emotions due to the high-pressure nature of competition. Research suggests that effective anger management strategies, such as mental conditioning and cognitive restructuring, can help athletes control their responses to provocations and setbacks. While some athletes manage to channel their anger into performance, others find themselves facing significant consequences for their outbursts. A great example of this is John McEnroe, The former tennis champion is known for his volatile behavior on the court, frequently breaking the rules and throwing tantrums. His outbursts became a defining aspect of his career, showing how frustration over perceived injustices can escalate into public displays of anger. A more recent example is Kepa Arrizabalaga, The Chelsea goalkeeper caused a stir during the 2019 EFL Cup final when he refused to be substituted, leading to a heated argument with his coach. His refusal and aggressive shouting match were publicized all around, demonstrating how anger can disrupt the team dynamic ("Kepa Arrizabalaga: Chelsea goalkeeper apologizes to former boss Maurizio Sarri over Carabao Cup final confusion").

SPORTS AND NATIONALISM

According to Britannica the definition of the word "jingoism" is "an attitude of belligerent nationalism, or a blind adherence to the rightness or virtue of one's nation, society, or group, simply because it is one's own." it's an aggressive form of nationalism there have been many cases when someone's national identity is tied to sports and the negative consequences of jingoism are great. For example, the Olympics or the World Cup when each person is representing their own country fighting for victory. A big instance when this happened was during the 2014 Super Bowl many people made complaints about the advertising showcasing a same-sex couple. Many American people petitioned for the event to be canceled as it was seen as "un-American" and not befitting an iconic event such as the Super Bowl. ("Super Bowl Ads Spark Controversy -- Diversity, Inclusion, And Unity Are Common Themes")

According to G.K. Peatling Jingoism in sports refers to the extreme nationalism that can emerge during sporting events, where patriotism is taken to an aggressive level. This often occurs in fans and players expressing fierce loyalty to their country, sometimes leading to strong emotions towards opponents. Historically, sports have been used as a platform to promote national pride and unity, especially during events like the Olympics or World Cup as mentioned above, many people take sports seriously and with passion. Critics argue that this jingoistic attitude can overshadow the spirit of fair competition and inclusivity, turning sports into a battleground for nationalistic sentiments. As seen around the 20th century in Great Britain, such then led to even greater problems and issues related to broader political movements, causing concerns about imperialism and the moral implications of national pride in sports. For example, in Ireland, the claim of Gaelic games to be truly "national" is weakened by the fact that some Irish nationalists prefer sports like rugby and soccer, and the Protestant community in Northern Ireland has rejected Gaelic games and ignored the tradition. Their preferences contradict Irish republican ideals, which strive to include both Catholics and Protestants in the national identity. ("Sports and Nationalism - Sociology of Sport - iResearchNet")

UNREALISTIC BEAUTY STANDARDS DUE TO SOCIAL MEDIA

The intersection of beauty standards and sports can significantly impact athletes, particularly women, by creating pressures that often lead to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. Athletes in sports that emphasize leanness, such as gymnastics, swimming, and dance, are at higher risk of developing disordered eating habits. This is partly due to the cultural expectation that a specific body type is required for success. Studies have shown that female athletes are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction compared to their non-athlete peers, with nearly half of athletes in such sports reporting disordered eating patterns. ("Disordered Eating in Female Athletes Fueled by Body Image Ideals, Coach-Athlete Power Dynamic"). According to BMC, there was a study where they analyzed the correlation between ballet dancers and eating disorders, they discovered that "the overall prevalence of ED in ballet dancers was 16.4%, being 2.0% for anorexia and 14.9% for bulimia. In professional ballet dancers, the frequency of eating disordered behaviors is higher amongst those with BI dissatisfaction" ("Amateur ballet practicing, body image, and eating behaviors: a comparative study of classical ballet dancers, gym users, and sedentary women - Journal of Eating Disorders"). Ballet, specifically has been known to be a sport that requires dancers to have a specifically tall and lean physique to be considered eligible and have a successful career This has led many young girls to compare themselves to unrealistic beauty standards. Social media has had a major role in the effects of creating disorders and other health-related problems.

Fitness influencers and professional athletes also play a role in promoting unhealthy practices.

Especially influencers tend to showcase unattainable physiques, sometimes achieved through extreme and unhealthy diets or misleading fitness advice, and even false images created by photo editing apps such as Photoshop, causing followers to adopt dangerous habits in the pursuit of gaining similar results. This can lead to eating disorders, anxiety, and depression, especially among younger populations that have more access to media like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. (“Why Fitness Influencers Are Bad (The Negative Impact Revealed)”). A famous gymnast Livvy Dunne was attacked when the public found out her big secret that many of her photos had been edited and contradicted her past statements saying that she “wants to be a role model for young girls” which created a huge backlash against her. This made audiences furious as she was supposed to be a role model for young people but instead set unrealistic expectations (“Olivia Dunne under fire for photoshopping Instagram images to extremes”).

CONCLUSION

Sports are popular among many people of different ages and places both for their physical and mental health benefits. Exercise boosts one's mood by reducing stress and anxiety, releases endorphins, prevents future illnesses, and builds resilience. Studies showed that children who played sports growing up tended to have better mental health when they grew older. The bonds and connections formed through group activities provide a strong support network that can decrease feelings of isolation and depression. And create a sense of belonging and community that many people adhere to. Results show that there's a clear difference when it comes to who is playing sports. Amateurs often enjoy these benefits without much stress to perform while professional athletes, such as Simone Biles and Michael Phelps, in contrast, face intense scrutiny and high expectations, which can lead to mental health struggles like anxiety and depression. Their experiences have raised awareness about the need for better support systems in sports. Additionally, studies have shown a link between issues like domestic violence and sports. Professional athletes have been seen on TV being aggressive. In another example, researchers have found a link between Great Britain and football, and the violent effects it leads to. Extreme nationalism and unrealistic beauty standards show how societal pressures can negatively impact both athletes and amateurs especially influenced by media and cultural expectations, reminding us that while sports are beneficial, these pressures need to be managed.

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