

**Coaching for Wellness: A Guide to Mental Health and Substance Use Prevention in  
Women's Aesthetic Sports**

Reese Nelson

University Honors Program

Colorado State University Honors Program

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Advisor: Katrina Popichak

Committee Member: Brian Butki

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## **Project Overview**

"Coaching for Wellness" is a creative, research-driven coaching manual that will help coaches in aesthetic and high-performance sports create mentally healthy, supportive, and trauma-informed training environments. Supported by the current literature, athlete reflections, and clinical research, the guide addresses the rising mental health challenges faced by athletes, with a particular emphasis on those who are judged in body-focused sports such as gymnastics, dance, and figure skating.

This manual integrates both psychology and prevention sciences into coaching education. Its goal is to help coaches identify red flags and respond to athletes who struggle with mental health. This manual should teach coaches how to center practices toward promoting good habits rather than harm. Checklists, scenarios, case studies, Q&As, and visual tools are used to help both learning and real-world applications.

At its heart, the project reinforces the idea that coaches are not just instructors but role models in an athlete's life. This manual will redefine coaching as a centerpiece of athlete welfare and long-term success by providing educational information on safe sport principles, trauma awareness, and protective coaching styles.

## Stages of Project Development

The abuse and trauma in aesthetic sports did not become mainstream until the 2021 Summer Olympics, when Simone Biles stepped away from the team—Biles, who had dominated women's artistic gymnastics since 2013 and went on to win four gold medals at the 2016 Rio Olympics (team, individual all-around, vault, and floor exercise) plus a bronze on the balance beam. She was favored to win again in 2021. Still, she stepped down after suffering from the "twisties," where Biles explained the "twisties" happen when her mental health and physical health do not align, and she gets lost in the air while flipping, leading to detrimental mistakes (McDermott, 2024). Biles explained that in professional sports, it is looked down upon to discuss experiencing a mental health crisis. Athletes are not allowed to show any weakness, which leads society to forget that they are human, too. By not competing at the Olympics, Biles opened the door for professional athletes to question these narratives and expectations, and to prioritize their mental well-being. (McDermott, 2024).

During my research, I found 62% of studies found negative body image common in aesthetic sports, 69% of athletes reported eating disorders linked to body image, 61.5% showed mental health outcome (anxiety, depression, etc), and 38.5% reported external influences (coaches, judges, social media) played significant roles, (Willaims et. al, 2025). I reference studies that demonstrated how emotionally abusive coaching increases the likelihood of mental health crises, eating disorders, trauma, and addiction. In a 2022 study by Salim and Winters, 11 retired gymnasts all reported emotional abuse by coaches, resulting in 82% being diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms, highlighting the long-term psychological consequences of harmful coaching techniques. Another study done in 2010 looked at 16 female professional ballerinas; 38% smoked cigarettes and 19% used appetite suppressants for weight management

(Sekulic, 2010). These statistics started to reveal the patterns of how aesthetic sports promote environments where disordered behaviors and emotional harm are normalized as coping mechanisms. I also noticed that these issues affect athletes not only psychologically but also their physical health. In my review, I found that athletes face reproductive problems like menstrual irregularities and fertility issues, low bone mineral density leading to stress fractures, hormonal imbalances, and raised cortisol levels (Mountjoy et. al, 2014). I learned that these issues are not rare among aesthetic athletes: up to 69% of dancers, 65% of long-distance runners, 22% of cheerleaders, divers, figure skaters, and gymnasts are high-risk athletes for Relative Energy Deficiency in Sports, better known as RED-S, a state where an athlete is not consuming enough to meet the demands of their training, resulting in insufficient energy for the body to function normally (Mountjoy et al., 2014), the impact does not end when the season or career is over. I noticed that the consequences of RED-S, psychological damage, and disordered eating carry into life after retirement. I found that former aesthetic athletes often report lasting issues with body image, perfectionism, and difficulty with self-worth (Reardon et. al, 2016). Building upon lifelong challenges after retirement from sports, I was interested in learning how coach-athlete relationships intersect within the aesthetic sports environment.

As a Human Development and Family Studies major, I drew on my background in human development, trauma, and family systems to better understand how coaching styles shape athletes' long-term well-being. It became clear through my research that emotionally supportive, autonomy-focused coaching can buffer athletes from risks such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and disordered eating (Salim and Winter, 20220). In contrast, controlling and authoritative coaching environments hinder the athletes' experience in the sport and cause psychological distress (Salim and Winter, 2022).

## **Steps in the Creative Process**

I chose the topic of coaching habits and athletes' well-being in aesthetic sports for my Honors Thesis because I am passionate about athlete mental health, youth development, and the lasting impact of relationships after retirement. As a retired gymnast, I have firsthand experience with the harmful coaching era that once existed. I have seen the effort and changes made in the sport to prevent all forms of abuse and trauma. SafeSport has been a great start in 2017, as it includes mandatory training on athlete safety and emotional well-being. It requires mandatory reporting of harmful behaviors, showing that healthy coaching practices and the protection of athletes are finally being prioritized in their training environment. However, this is just the beginning; there are still generations of damaged athletes and coaches who continue to ignore these trainings and use outdated coaching methods. As a Human Development and Family Studies major, I have spent years studying how early environments, power dynamics, and attachment relationships shape long-term well-being. This project allowed me to bring those concepts into the athletic space, where coaching relationships often carry intense psychological weight and where many athletes spend more time training with their coaches than with their family. I wanted to create something that would educate, empower, and inspire change for generations to come.

I chose the coaching manual format over a traditional research paper to deliver work that would serve future generations. As I have stated, this is only the beginning of healing in aesthetic sports, but I like my coaching manual to serve as a step and a resource in the right direction. Coaches do not need another 20-page report on the statistics. We are familiar with the years of abuse, trauma, and harm that have been in aesthetic sports. Coaches need visuals, real-world scenarios, and quick-reference tools they can actually use day to day. This digital format allowed

me to combine rigorous research with creative expression, using color, icons, infographics, and interactive tools like checklists and sample weekly plans.

I identified my audience as aesthetic coaches at all levels and ages, including youth and collegiate coaches. I began coaching gymnastics at age 14, even though I was just coaching at the recreational level; this manual is tailored towards all ages and levels. It allows youth coaches to build lasting, beneficial practices and healthy habits, and for veteran coaches to grow their knowledge and implement new practices.

This manual considers athletes' demands and limitations and then organizes the most relevant topics: trauma-informed coaching, body image, mental health stigma, and early intervention. I summarized my research findings and used them to create a manual that equips coaches with the tools they need, including conversation starters, checklists, and a sample weekly schedule, to keep the reader engaged. Using my knowledge in Human Development and Family Studies helped me connect theories to real-world applications, turning risks into solutions coaches can use to protect athlete wellness.

A challenge I faced in creating my manual was narrowing emotional topics into concise, digestible content. Athlete trauma, mental health, and substance use are complex and very personal issues. There are many stories, statistics, and research on the challenges athletes face. Interpreting the research, identifying common themes, and presenting them in ways that did not overwhelm the reader were very important to me during this process. I pushed myself to go beyond awareness of mental health and into prevention by providing ideas that change coaching culture rather than only reporting the numbers and statistics of cognitive harm.

## **Connection to Present-Day Issues**

My Honors Thesis is not only an essential subject to me but also a response to the current challenges faced by youth, collegiate, and elite athletes in aesthetic sports. My primary audience for this project includes coaches; however, it also offers insight for athletic departments, trainers, and anyone involved in supporting athletes. Though mental health issues, trauma exposure, and body image struggles are increasingly recognized across all sports, they are particularly intense within judged and appearance-based disciplines, such as gymnastics, dance, and figure skating. I never reached the elite level of sports, but through this manual, I have gained more insight into the effects of elite sports and elite coaching. Through this project, I furthered my understanding of how the culture in aesthetic sports influences athlete identity, development, and well-being. The pressure to maintain an ideal body type, perform flawlessly, and satisfy subjective standards of judgment may introduce specific psychological demands that can begin in childhood and continue into adulthood. Issues like this can be prevented by educating coaches on trauma-informed practices, to stop hurtful training behaviors and power imbalances between coaches and athletes.

In doing so, it became real to me that most of the risks aesthetic athletes face are either downplayed or normalized, pressures to body ideals, silences around emotional hurts, and low levels of mental health screening set them up for long-term harm. Athletes internalise these stressors to develop anxiety, disordered eating, and burnout-and they often do not receive the support they need. This manual will provide coaches with the resources to identify red flags and to actively create a safe training environment through diligent research and statistics. 35% of aesthetic athletes in one study showed signs of eating disorders vs. 0% in non-aesthetic sports (Williams et. al, 2025). This statistic alone indicates that sports focused on skill, strength, and

growth, rather than body image or appearance, create a healthier environment that reduces athletes' risk of disordered eating. Yet, in aesthetic sports, the narrative shifts from performance to physical appearance. With mental health and disordered eating rates rising over the last decade, I cannot overlook how these expectations create significant risks for athletes.

Coaches play a vital role and are often the most consistent adult figures in an athlete's life. The greater purpose of this manual is to bridge the gap between research and real-world application by assisting coaches in reframing their role not simply as a manager of performance, but as a role model. More than 60% of elite female athletes report body-shaming pressure from coaches (Reardon, 2016). This statistic highlights the influence coaches have not only on athletes' training but also on their self-perception, confidence, and mental health years after retirement. Recognizing the influence coaches have is the first step in moving toward more intentional practices that create an environment for athlete well-being alongside performance. Aesthetic athletes often practice over 20 hours a week; many athletes view their coaches as parental figures (Salim & Winter, 2022). Coaches being aware of their position of authority and the influence they have on their athletes' mental health allows them to be the frontlines for recognizing warning signs for mental health crises. Coaches can also model good practices by being vulnerable and seeking help for their own struggles, encouraging athletes to do the same (Bissett et al., 2020). This guide contributes to that movement by offering practical, prevention-focused strategies that protect both performance and personal life.

## **Impact and Personal Growth**

In addition to expanding my knowledge of the psychological experiences of athletes in aesthetic sports, my honors thesis sparked my desire to continue advocating for the mental health of athletes who are often overlooked in sports culture, not only through coaching but also on a larger scale to reach a wider audience. Growing up, as a gymnast, I have seen the standards that aesthetic athletes are held to; beauty and precision are usually valued above health. No matter your age, you didn't need to size up in your competition leotard. No matter how small you were, you were required to lose more weight. No matter how tired you were, it meant you needed to push yourself harder. I have experienced the long-term impacts of a high-pressure environment and of authoritative coaching. However, it wasn't until I dove headfirst into conducting this research that I realized just how profound the mental health risks and long-term emotional effects were on all aesthetic athletes.

One of the most critical points learned was from the qualitative work, such as Salim & Winter (2022), which reported emotional abuse, low self-worth, and post-traumatic stress symptoms from retired gymnasts even decades after they left the sport, or the research by Williams et al. (2025), finding that 35% of collegiate gymnasts scored low on resilience at some point in the season. These studies helped me realize that poor mental health in athletes is not just burnout but a pattern influenced by coaching styles, body image pressure, and perfectionism. This pushed me to frame my thesis not just as an academic project but as a platform to raise awareness.

Writing this thesis has had a significant impact on me, both personally and academically, including learning to efficiently organize my findings from several articles into an easily understandable format. I improved my ability to spot trends across studies, such as how

resilience is directly related to well-being scores at key moments in the athletic season or how perfectionism and low energy availability often correlate with disordered eating. (Williams et al., 2025). Learning how to spot trends allows me to apply what I have learned in my Human Development and Family Studies courses to think critically about athlete well-being from a developmental perspective. The process of creating a manual itself challenged my time management and long-term planning as I balanced months of research, outlining, writing, and visual formatting with discipline and flexibility.

I have also further developed my ability to communicate complex psychological and physiological issues in a manner that is engaging and accurate. It was vital to me that my coaching manual remained sensitive and supportive of athletes. This project has not only left me in awe of the struggles many athletes face behind the scenes, but has also made me feel justified in the emotions I've had as a retired aesthetic athlete. The struggle among aesthetic athletes was not limited to my gym; it was present at all levels, in all nations, and across all aesthetic sports. I've committed to promoting mental health in all performance-based sports as a result of this project. I've discovered that support networks, self-worth, and well-being are more than just academic concepts—for far too many young athletes, they are lifesavers.



*A Guide to Mental Health and Substance Use Prevention in Womens Aesthetic Sports*

*Reese Nelson*

## COACHING FOR WELLNESS

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## COACHING FOR WELLNESS

# WELCOME TO THE MANUAL

Athletes in aesthetic sports face such a unique challenge. Gymnasts, dancers, cheerleaders, divers, and figure skaters are not just judged for their skills, but also for their appearances—how slim they appear, their facial expressions, and whether they fit the mold of traditional beauty. The list continues. These rare circumstances create conditions for aesthetic athletes to have increased rates of body dysmorphia, substance use, depression, and anxiety (Williams et al., 2024).



As you read through this manual, remember that, as a coach, your role is to guide, correct, and challenge athletes, not just be their friend. Good coaching includes corrections, firmness, and a commitment to help athletes reach their full potential.

In aesthetic sports, the focus must remain on skill execution, technique, and performance quality, not on an athlete's body type. Focusing on the development of mastery, strength, and artistry minimizes safety and health risks and allows for long-term success.

This manual is designed to help aesthetic sport coaches better address the mental health of their athletes and deter the use of substances. Under pressure to appear flawless, athletes are especially susceptible in such stressful environments to burnout or overtraining, leading to body image issues, disordered eating, substance abuse, depression, etc.

You don't need to be a therapist to do good. With the right resources, you can create a competitive team culture that's safe, supportive, and sustainable. This manual gives you quick, convenient techniques for identifying red flags, responding wisely, and coaching compassionately.

### This manual will tackle the questions:

- How can coaching style impact an athlete's mental health and risk of substance use?
- What are the warning signs of mental distress or substance use in athletes?
- What practical steps can coaches take to create a safer, more supportive team culture?

# THE PROBLEM IN AESTHETIC SPORTS



Competition in aesthetic sports differs from that in performance-only sports in that success is determined not only by how athletes look but also by how they compete. Criticism and judgment of appearances exert pressure that begins at a young age and can quickly manifest in harmful ways if left unaddressed.



**Appearance:** In aesthetic sports, athletes are judged on both their appearance and their performance. This frequently results in body dysmorphia, anxiety, and low self-esteem. (Martin et al., 2025).

**Relative Energy Deficiency Disorder (RED-S):** Energy deficiency, hormonal dysfunction, and long-term health problems can result from aesthetic athletes aiming to meet body expectations (Mountjoy et al., 2014).

**Psychological Trauma:** Authoritarian coaching causes aesthetic athletes to experience emotional distress during training and retirement (Salim & Winter, 2022).

**Mental Health Stress:** Compared to non-student athletes, student athletes are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and other mental illnesses. (Moore et al., 2025).

**Substance Use Risk:** Athletes may use drugs or alcohol to manage stress or sustain performance if they are emotionally struggling (McDuff & Garvin, 2016). <sup>4</sup>

## COACHING FOR WELLNESS

# MENTAL HEALTH IN ATHLETIC ENVIRONMENTS

MYTH	FACT
"Strong athletes do not struggle emotionally."	Elite athletes experience anxiety, depression, and trauma – they just hide it better (Williams et al., 2024).
"Talking about mental health makes athletes soft."	Elite athletes experience mental health issues at similar rates to the general population; stigma and discouragement often prevent them from recognizing or seeking help for these struggles (Uphill et al., 2016).
"If they're still performing well, they must be fine."	Many athletes mask emotional pain through overtraining or perfectionism – performance doesn't always show the full story (Moore et al., 2025).
"Mental health isn't a coach's problem."	Coaches are often the first line of defense and can spot early signs before a crisis hits (McDuff & Baron, 2005).
"Aesthetic athletes should just accept they will be judged for their appearance instead of their skills."	Appearance-based judgment increases risk for eating disorders, anxiety, and low self-esteem. (Mountjoy et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2024).

# SUBSTANCE USE IN ATHLETES



## Case Study:

Nicole Bobek, a U.S. figure skating champion, faced significant pressure as a child to perform well and support her family. She worked with eight different coaches in different places, constantly moving about in search of becoming something without stability or clear direction. Many of her coaches would describe Bobek as talented but undisciplined, highlighting how the constant instability and lack of trust prevented her from growing in figure skating. The perfectionism and focus on physical appearance in figure skating led to burnout and emotional distance instead of resilience. After a disappointing 17th-place finish at the 1998 Olympics, Bobek lost direction and struggled to adjust to life outside competition. Without structure and support, she got involved in the use of drugs, and by 2009, her career instability had worsened into drug addiction and arrest for selling methamphetamine (Nelson, 2009).



### This is not a rare scenario:

- 71–93% of female college athletes use alcohol. (McDuff & Baron, 2005)
- 25–50% athletes report binge drinking, compared to 16–43% in nonathletes (McDuff & Baron, 2005)
- Higher ephedrine use in women's sports (McDuff & Baron, 2005).
- Female dancers show higher smoking and appetite suppressant use, linked to body weight management and aesthetic pressure (Sekulic et al., 2010).

## COACHING FOR WELLNESS

# RELATIVE ENERGY DEFICIENCY IN SPORTS (RED-S)

## What is RED-S?

Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport is a syndrome characterized by impaired health and performance, in which an athlete's energy intake is insufficient to meet their energy expenditure, thereby affecting physiological functions. (Mountjoy et al., 2014)

<b>Reproductive</b>	Up to 69% of dancers and 22% of cheerleaders, gymnastics, and divers experience amenorrhea- the absence of a menstrual period. (Mountjoy et al., 2014)
<b>Skeletal</b>	Low bone mineral density leads to increased risk of fractures and breaks.
<b>Metabolic</b>	Reduced resting metabolic rate leading to decreased thyroid hormones and increased cortisol levels.
<b>Cardiovascular</b>	High levels of "bad" cholesterol (LDL), Low levels of "good" cholesterol (HDL), and high levels of triglycerides and endothelial dysfunction
<b>Muscular</b>	Reduced protein synthesis
<b>Psychological</b>	Increased stress, depression, and anxiety
<b>Performance</b>	Decreased training responsiveness, fatigue, increased injury and illness susceptibility

**Minimizing risks of the Female Athlete Triad: low energy availability (with or without an eating disorder), menstrual dysfunction (missed periods), and low bone mineral density (osteoporosis)**

- Menstrual and Hormonal Function: Weight gain and restoring glycogen levels
- Bone Health Support: Calcium: 1500 mg/day, Vitamin D: 1500–2000 IU/day, Weight-bearing exercise: 2–3x per week for bone stimulation.

### How Coaches Can Help:

- Emphasize health and performance over weight.
- Avoid body-shaming or comments on physique.
- Provide education on RED-S, nutrition, and safe training loads.

(Mountjoy et al., 2014)

## COACHING FOR WELLNESS

# DISORDERED EATING

## Overview of Study (Martin et al., 2025)

- Female athletes  $\geq 12$  years old
- Total studies included: 13
- Total participants: 1,035 female athletes
- Average age: 18.2 years
- Sports covered: Gymnastics, rhythmic gymnastics, dance, ballet, cheerleading, artistic swimming, figure skating, etc.
- Levels of competition: Recreational  $\rightarrow$  International elite.

(Martin et al., 2025)

1

### Body Image

- One study found 35% of aesthetic athletes showed signs of eating disorders vs. 0% in non-aesthetic sports.
- Aesthetic athletes often internalize the “thin to win” approach, prioritizing appearance over health.

2

### Eating Disorders

- Perfectionism & competitiveness
- Pressure to maintain low body fat
- Restrictive diets or purging behaviors

3

### Mental Health Impacts

- Anxiety, depression, chronic stress, and low self-esteem.
- Stress sources: self-comparison, judgment from coaches/peers, and body checking in mirrors



## External Factors (Martin et al., 2025)

Coaches	Body shaming, appearance critiques, or reinforcing unhealthy ideals.
Judges	Scores tied to body aesthetics more than execution.
Social Media	23.6% of gymnasts reported negative body image from online comments.
Body checking and uniforms	Mirrors and costumes intensify self-comparison.

- 44% of rhythmic gymnasts are at risk for EDs.
  - 65% of ballroom dancers are dissatisfied with their bodies.
  - 14.9% of adolescent artistic swimmers are at risk.
  - 61.1% of rhythmic gymnasts showed body image distortion
  - 38% of collegiate dancers experience anxiety/depression
- (Martin et al., 2025)

# WHY COACHES MATTER



Harmful Behavior	Helpful Behavior
Yelling at athletes for having mental blocks	Encouraging athletes to do drills, visualize the skill, and ask for a spotter
Focusing on weight and appearance	Promote fueling bodies in a healthy manner and celebrating a strong, healthy body
Ignoring behavioral changes	Notice red flags early: constant anxiety, crying often, and neglecting injuries.
To not talk about mental health	Encourage talking about anxiety, sadness, and vulnerability

## Did you know?

91% of gymnasts felt authoritarian coaching was necessary for success (Salim & Winter, 2022).

Coaches are often the sole reliable adults athletes engage with daily. In aesthetic sports, where pressure is increased, a supportive coach can deter disordered eating, substance abuse, and burnout.

## Coach Identity Quiz: What Kind of Coach Are You?

### Check all that apply:

- I check in on how my athletes are feeling – not just performing
- I avoid commenting on appearance, weight, or size
- I follow up when an athlete seems “off”

- Know what resources to refer athletes to for mental or physical support
- I praise effort and adaptability over results
- I model vulnerability and encourage open conversations

## COACHING FOR WELLNESS

# TRAUMA AND COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIPS

A study done with 11 British gymnasts reported:

(Salim & Winter, 2022).

Type of Abuse	Description	Percentage
Emotional	Shouting, name calling, threats, body shaming	11/11 (100%)
Physical	Training through injury, forced stretching, physical punishments	8/11 (~73%)
Neglect	Overlook of needs, lack of protection	9/11 (~82%)
Psychological Outcome	Examples	Percentage
PTSD	Nightmares, flashbacks, panic attacks	9/11 (~82%)
Low Self Worth	Feelings of guilt and perfectionist	10/11 (~91%)
Anxiety/ Depression	Constant anxiety and depressive episodes	8/11 (~73%)
Eating Disorder	Restricting food, body dysmorphia	7/11 (~64%)

## Breaking the cycle

- In a 2022 study, most participants described their coaches as parental figures, aligning with attachment theory; the athlete's voice, especially that of the retiree, must be at the center of the reform process to avoid feelings of abandonment (Salim & Winter, 2022).
- Coaches must be trained in athlete mental health and emotional safety.
- Trauma-informed coaching models must be adopted.

## COACHING FOR WELLNESS

## COACHING STYLES THAT PROTECT

**What is protective coaching?**

Protective coaching is about leading with care first, performance second.

It is connection before correction – where athletes feel safe, seen, and supported. This results in a secure relationship, which in turn leads to confidence, motivation, and development (Jowett, 2017).

**4Cs of Protective Coaching**

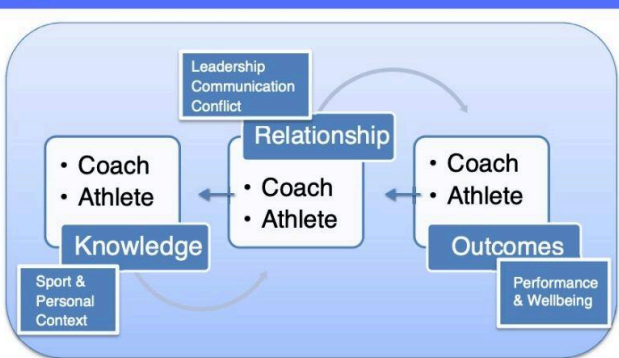
(Jowett, 2017).

**CLOSENESS** → Mutual respect, truth, and appreciation for one another

**COMMITMENT** → Maintaining an close relationship despite ups and down

**COMPLEMENTARITY** → Cooperation and teamwork between coach and athlete

**CO-ORIENTATION** → A shared understanding of interdependence to prevent miscommunication



Knowledge → what you know



Relationship → how you connect



Outcomes → what you achieve together

**Protection happens when all three work in harmony.**

## COACHING FOR WELLNESS

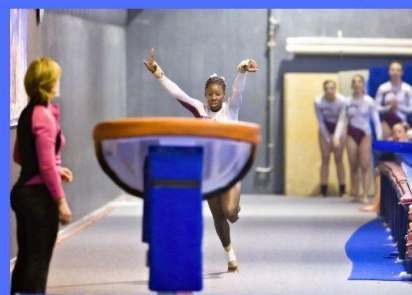
## COACHING RED FLAGS: WHAT TO AVOID

**Why does it matter?**

Even coaches with good intentions can lose sight of how to perform well as a coach; red flags often arise when they become demeaning and prioritize winning over athletes' physical and emotional well-being.

**Common Red Flags****Exhaustion**

- 64% of Olympic athletes report insomnia symptoms. (Reardon et al., 2019)
- “You’d score better if you stayed past practice to keep training.”
- Contributing factors: Circadian dysregulation from travel across time zones, Insomnia disorder due to mood disorders

**Depression and Anxiety**

(Reardon et al., 2019)

- 61.5% of female aesthetic athletes showed symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress (Martin et al., 2025)
- “If you’re not bleeding, broken, or dead, get up and do another routine.”
- Contributing factors: injury, poor performance, retirement, pain, overtraining

**Eating Disorders**

(Reardon et al., 2019)

(Martin et al., 2025)

- 62% of studies found negative body image common across aesthetic sports.
- 69% reported eating disorders linked to negative body image. (Martin et al., 2025)
- “We need to do more arm workouts to get rid of your bat wings.”
- Contributing Factors: Perfectionism and competitiveness, pressure to maintain low body fat. (Reardon et al., 2019)

**Dr. Jade Salim and Dr. Stacy Winter recommend:**

Shift focus from performance-first to well-being-first coaching.

Mandatory safeguarding training for coaches and sport psychologists.

Establish independent athlete welfare officers in clubs.

Encourage former athletes to advocate against abusive norms.

Integrate trauma-informed care approaches in sports settings. (Salim & Winter, 2022)

# RECOGNIZING WARNING SIGNS IN ATHLETES



## Performance without wellbeing means nothing

(Reardon et al., 2019)

- Up to 25% of collegiate athletes experience depression or eating disorders.
- In aesthetic sports, 61% of athletes show poor mental health outcomes, and 69% are at risk for disordered eating.



### Ask yourself:

Have I noticed subtle changes in attitude, energy, or interaction?  
Do my athletes know I care about them beyond performance?

## COACHING FOR WELLNESS

# WHAT TO DO WHEN CONCERNED

## Notice the signs:

- Disordered eating, RED-S, overtraining, and burnout often don't appear overnight- they will appear physically, emotionally, behaviorally, and relationally:
  - Fatigue (Mountjoy et al., 2014)
  - Decreased willingness to train and take correction (Mountjoy et al., 2014)
  - Extreme dieting and rapid weight loss (Martin et al., 2025)
    - If you sense something is wrong, speak up and take action to protect.

## Approach with care:

- Coaches who have the potential to create a healthy team culture that normalizes and supports seeking mental health help, a proactive environment reduces stigma and stress, promoting overall mental well-being (Bissett et al., 2020).



"You seem withdrawn from the team lately, are you doing okay?"



"Is anything about practice or food making you feel anxious lately?"



"Are you sure you're eating?" or "You're acting weird lately"

## Listen and validate athletes' emotions.

- Discussing mental health is difficult, especially with the stigma around emotional wellbeing in sports- if an athlete chooses to open up, make sure they feel heard and not judged.
  - Listen more than you speak.
  - Praise personality and not performance
  - Reinforce that value comes from within and not your appearance

## Refer your athlete to find support

- You don't have to fix everything- you are not a therapist, but your support is essential (Mountjoy et al., 2014)
  - Refer to a... Sports dietitian, licensed therapist, athletic trainer, etc.

## Stay Connected

- Check in regularly
- Model self-care behaviors as a coach (Bissett et al., 2020)
- Reinforce positive athlete behaviors beyond performance (Bissett et al., 2020)

## COACHING FOR WELLNESS

# STIGMA AND SILENCE IN AESTHETIC SPORTS



## Intervention is prevention

A 2025 study found pressure to maintain strength during challenges related to deselection and retirement. The influences from coaches, clubs, and sponsors also played a significant role in shaping elite athletes' mental health (Andersson et al., 2025).

In 2021, at the Tokyo Summer Olympics, arguably the best female gymnast of all time, Simone Biles, withdrew from the competition. Her reasoning- for mental health. This sparked an uproar, both positive (92 of 100 posts) and negative (8 of 100 posts), in comments and discussions regarding Biles' decision (McDermott, 2024).



"I can't imagine the pressure Simone has been feeling. Sending her SO much love. It's easy to forget she's still human. WE LOVE YOU." - Former Olympic figure skater Adam Rippon



"Just a friendly reminder: Olympic athletes are human & they're doing the best they can. It's REALLY hard to peak at the right moment & do the routine of your life under such pressure." - Former teammate of Biles and Olympic gold gymnast, Aly Raisman

## How Simone Biles changed the future of aesthetic sports

Simone Biles's choice to withdraw from the 2021 Tokyo Olympics was a turning point in modern sports, drawing attention to the mental health of athletes throughout the world. Understanding and Improving Athletes' Mental Health states that Biles's withdrawal was a turning point that prompted many other athletes worldwide to speak out (Stevens et al., 2024). Biles demonstrated that mental health is essential for performance. Her vulnerability sparked worldwide dialogue and encouraged sports institutions to value mental health as seriously as physical health. There has been an increase in the focus on mental health among researchers and policymakers, with nine position statements issued by the leading sports organizations since 2018 and numerous efforts to guide research in this area. This rising attention reflects the increasing awareness of mental health challenges among athletes (Stevens et al., 2024)

## Why Simone Biles withdrawal is the future of aesthetic sports

**Genuineness-** The act of behaving without a facade during a moment in time (McDermott, 2024). Biles shared on her instagram story that that her negative mental state was impacting her performance and could lead to injury. Despite the stigma of mental illness in sports, Biles having this private information created a sense of trust and vulnerability (McDermott, 2024).

**Responsibility-** Biles took ownership of her decision to step down, she acknowledged her decision was made to ensure the team could perform at its best and not jeopardize its chances of winning a medal (McDermott, 2024).

**Resistance-** Biles took ownership of her how mental health is given less importance compared to physical health, teamwork, sportsmanship, and mindful mental well-being over performance outcomes (McDermott, 2024). 15

## COACHING FOR WELLNESS

# PREVENTION-FOCUSED TRAINING ENVIRONMENTS

The Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act of 2017 created the US Center for SafeSport (Our Story Mission and Vision | U.S. Center for SafeSport, 2024). In sports that made headlines in the 2010s, SafeSport creates a safe culture to prevent abuse across the United States. SafeSport offers over 5 million online training sessions and has increased its investigative staff by over 400% to protect athletes across all levels (Our Story | Mission and Vision | U.S. CeUS for SafeSport, 2024).



(Aine et al., 2022)

- I ensure there is no bullying
- I put my athletes mental health first
- I check in regularly with my athletes
- I make sure my athletes feel safe
- I make sure my athletes know they can talk to me
- I do not punish my athletes for their poor performances

The focus on athlete-centered, conversational coaching replaces authoritarian styles, thereby contributing to safer, more supportive training environments (Aine et al., 2022)

# THE BEAUTY OF AESTHETIC SPORTS

Beauty doesn't always mean "pretty" in the moment. It's about the creativity and courage to create something new.

Athletes shape the aesthetic of sport every time they invent something new.



## Elena Shushunova — Artistic Gymnastics

- Invented a new floor skill, the Shushunova:
  - Straddle jump → to push up position, debuted at the 1988 Seoul Olympics
- Added to the Code of Points as an official skill.
- Vision and creativity turned a possibility into the new standard.

(Lacerda & Mumford, 2010)



A perfect replica can be identical in appearance, but the original carries the actual aesthetic value. Like Van Gogh's Sunflowers, it's compared to Fosbury's first jump; it's admired for being new, inspiring, and unprecedented (Lacerda & Mumford, 2010).

When athletes create something new, they don't just change technique— they change the aesthetic experience of sport itself.



## Jan Boklöv — Ski Jumping

- Introduced the V-style jump
  - Skis in a V instead of parallel
- Looked wrong, but increased jump length by 10%.
- Became the dominant technique worldwide.

(Lacerda & Mumford, 2010)



## Dick Fosbury — High Jump

- Created the famous Fosbury Flop
  - Backward bar clearance.
- Revolutionized jumping after decades of "the old way."
- Now used by nearly every elite high jumper.

(Lacerda & Mumford, 2010)

## COACHING FOR WELLNESS

# SAMPLE WEEKLY WELLNESS ROUTINE

Journaling and setting clear goals are vital in aesthetic sports; having a journal where athletes can write their thoughts, goals, and frustrations is essential for growth.

Day	Focus	Sample Activities or Prompts
Monday	Mental Health Check	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How am I truly feeling ?</li> <li>• Take 5 minutes to visualize how your practice will look today</li> </ul>
Tuesday	Body Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask yourself, have you fueled your body adequately today?</li> <li>• 12 oz Water Chug!</li> </ul>
Wednesday	Emotional Wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Journal one high and one low moment</li> </ul>
Thursday	Physical Wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rate your energy on a scale 1-10, how can it be improved?</li> </ul>
Friday	Reflect on the Week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What went well? What was difficult?</li> <li>• Coach one-to-one check ins</li> </ul>
Saturday	Rest and Reset	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spend with family and friends and do something to make you happy</li> </ul>
Sunday	Intentions for the Week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Journal entry: "This week, I want to feel ___"</li> </ul>

## COACHING FOR WELLNESS

# QUICK REFERENCE COACHING CHECKLIST

## DAILY PRACTICES

- Check in with at least one athlete personally
- Praise effort and progress
- Avoid comments on weight, body, or appearance.
- Listen to athletes with care and empathy

## MENTAL HEALTH

- Reinforce that asking for help is a strength, not a weakness.
- Know referral contacts for mental health support
- Never ignore sudden mood or behavioral changes.
- Create an environment where athletes can speak up

## COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

- Establish clear boundaries and mutual respect.
- Trust is earned through care, not control.
- Did I offer support or just correction today?
- Apply athlete-centered coaching



## COACHING FOR WELLNESS

# Q&A WITH A COLLEGIATE CHEERLEADER

Alina is a Division I cheerleader at Grand Canyon University and has been a cheerleader for 7 years, sharing her experience as a collegiate athlete

**Q: What's one thing a coach has done that made you feel truly supported — as a person, not just an athlete?**

A: One college coach made a significant impact on me by letting me confide in her when I usually keep things to myself. She genuinely cared about my well-being, which made me feel seen and supported. My respect for her grew more, and my love for her cheer grew due to feeling supported and loved in the environment.”

**Q: Have you ever felt pressured to stay silent or about something that was bothering you in cheer?**

“On my high school team, I felt pressured to stay silent after my coach made a decision I felt was morally wrong. It damaged my trust in her, but I felt pressured to stay quiet to protect my place on the team and not be moved down or not coached the same as I once was. I also didn't want my coach to not like me in years to come and help me further my goal to cheer in college.”

**Q: What do you wish your coach understood better about the mental and emotional side of cheer?**

“I wish my coach understood how deeply athletes can internalize the things she says. Her comments will sometimes hurt my team's confidence, including mine, especially when she called me a ‘pipsqueak’ and made me doubt my abilities. Even the little things coaches say matter, and they can affect whether athletes feel motivated or discouraged.”

**Q: Do you ever feel like there's a difference between “toughing it out” and taking care of your body both physically and mentally? How do you balance that?**

“There's a big difference between pushing through and taking care of yourself. After a hard fall where I hit my head, I went to practice despite feeling dizzy because I felt pressured to, and ended up showing signs of a concussion. I should've spoken up, but mental burnout and the demands of cheer make it hard to take breaks without letting my team or coaches down. It's hard to take care of your health, and it's a balance I'm still learning.”

## COACHING FOR WELLNESS

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Gymnastics has been one of the most defining parts of my life. I competed for six years until five broken ankles forced me to retire at 14, ending my dream of becoming a collegiate gymnast. Along the way, I had many coaches – some who lifted me, and others who left lasting scars. The pressure of an aesthetic sport took a toll, leading to struggles with eating, body dysmorphia, and perfectionism.

When I retired from gymnastics, I told myself I would become the coach I always needed. One who encourages athletes rather than tearing them down. I am thankful for the great coaches who showed me what gymnastics is and for serving as role models for becoming an empowering coach.

After five years of coaching recreational gymnastics, I've now become the head coach of a competitive team and entered a new era of coaching where compassion, empowerment, and empathy are a priority. I am proud to be part of the new era of coaching, where athletes are heard rather than silenced. That is why I wrote this manual: to help make aesthetic sports healthier and safer in the years to come.



# FURTHER LEARNING AND RESOURCES

## **Coaching effectiveness: the coach–athlete relationship at its heart**

- Jowett, S. (2017). Coaching effectiveness: the coach–athlete relationship at its heart. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 16, 154–158. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.05.006>

## **The IOC Consensus Statement: Beyond the Female Athlete Triad—Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S).**

- Mountjoy, M., Sundgot-Borgen, J., Burke, L., Carter, S., Constantini, N., Lebrun, C., et al. “The IOC Consensus Statement: Beyond the Female Athlete Triad—Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S).” *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, vol. 48, no. 7, 2014, pp. 491–497. Web.

## **U.S. Center for SafeSport**

- Preventing and Addressing Abuse | U.S. Center for SafeSport. (2025, October 22). SafeSport. <https://uscenterforsafesport.org/former-teammates-support>.

## **Mental health in elite athletes: International Olympic Committee consensus statement**

- Reardon, C. L., Hainline, B., Aron, C. M., Baron, D., Baum, A. L., Bindra, A., Budgett, R., Campriani, N., Castaldelli-Maia, J. M., Currie, A., Derevensky, J. L., Glick, I. D., Gorczyński, P., Gouttebauge, V., Grandner, M. A., Han, D. H., McDuff, D., Mountjoy, M., Polat, A., ... Engebretsen, L. (2019). Mental health in elite athletes: International Olympic Committee consensus statement (2019). *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 53(11), 667–699. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2019-100715>

## **“I still wake up with nightmares” ... The long-term psychological impacts from gymnasts’ maltreatment experiences.**

- Salim, J., & Winter, S. (2022). “I Still Wake Up With Nightmares” ... The Long-Term Psychological Impacts From Gymnasts’ Maltreatment Experiences. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, 11(4), 429–443. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spy0000302>

## **Resilience and Well-Being Over the Course of a National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I Gymnastics Season.**

- Williams, S.-M., Baez, S. E., Derrico, D., Robinson, H., Coyne, K., Settle, H., & Jochimsen, K. N. (2025). Resilience and Well-Being Over the Course of a National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I Gymnastics Season. *Journal of Sport Rehabilitation*, 34(4), 423–427. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsr.2023-0379>

### Annotated Bibliography

Aine, A., Muhonen, J. & Toivonen, V. Children's right to play sports in a safe and healthy environment. *Int Sports Law J* 22, 93–104 (2022).

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40318-022-00217-2>

This article explores children's legal right to participate in sports within safe, healthy, and supportive environments. This source helps outline the moral and legal parameters for constructing safe youth sport environments.

Andersson, M. J., Rahim, Y. A., Göran Kenttä, Anders Håkansson, & Claesdotter-Knutsson, E. (2025). Mental health challenges in elite sports, barriers to treatment, and quality of psychiatric care at an elite sports-centered mental health clinic—a mixed-methods study. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 79, 102859–102859.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2025.102859>

This study explores the mental health issues of elite athletes and potential barriers to treatment. The article looks into pressures and performance expectations as barriers to help-seeking. This source is helpful for my thesis in understanding challenges and solutions in supporting athletes' mental well-being.

Bissett JE, Kroshus E, Hebard S. Determining the role of sport coaches in promoting athlete mental health: a narrative review and Delphi approach. *BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine*. 2020;6:e000676.

<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjsem-2019-000676>

This peer-reviewed article explores how coaches can support and promote their athletes' mental health. It delves into fostering a supportive environment, recognizing warning

signs, and prioritizing athletes' well-being. The research supports my thesis by emphasizing that coaches play a critical role in shaping team culture.

Jowett, S. (2017). Coaching effectiveness: the coach–athlete relationship at its heart.

*Current Opinion in Psychology*, 16, 154–158.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.05.006>

Jowett explores how effective coaching is based on the quality of the coach-athlete relationship. The article identifies four core factors and how they influence athlete motivation, performance, and well-being. This article supports how to be a strong and supportive coach.

Lacerda, T., & Mumford, S. (2010). The Genius in Art and in Sport: A Contribution to the Investigation of Aesthetics of Sport. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 37(2), 182–193.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2010.9714775>

Lacerda and Mumford discuss how "genius" can be used to understand aesthetic sports in both art and sport. Lacerda and Mumford argue that originality is what makes aesthetic sports special. The article uses examples such as the Fosbury Flop and Boklöv's V-style ski jump to show how these sports are being coached. This article offers insight into how aesthetic beauty in sport often arises from innovation and how the "first instance" of such a creative act holds special significance.

Martin, C., Trang Nguyen, L., Williams, A., & Bunn, J. (2025). Examining the roles of body image perception on the mental health of female athletes in highly aesthetic sports: A systematic review. *Current Issues in Sport Science*, 10(1), 4.

<https://doi.org/10.36950/2025.10ciss004>

In this source, 1,035 female aesthetic athletes identify common pressures related to appearance, performance expectations, and judging standards. This systematic review investigates the increased risks for anxiety, disordered eating, and low self-esteem in aesthetic sport environments. It also helps identify the psychological challenges unique to aesthetic-sport athletes.

McDermott, V. (2024). Framing, agency, and athlete activism: The case of Simone Biles at the 2020 Olympics. *Public Relations Review*, 50(2), 102457.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2024.102457>

McDermott deconstructs how the media framed Simone Biles' decision to withdraw from events at the 2020 Olympics and how Biles started a movement in reducing stigma in elite sports. This source helps discuss athlete activism, media representation, and the cultural impact of Biles' advocacy for mental well-being.

McDuff, D. R., & Baron, D. (2005). Substance Use in Athletics: A Sports Psychiatry Perspective. *Clinics in Sports Medicine*, 24(4), 885–897.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.csm.2005.06.004>

McDuff and Garvin explore substance use behaviors among athletes, such as drug prevalence, risk factors, and prevention. This peer-reviewed paper provides a current account of the SUD scenario in sports populations, making it especially useful in supporting my thesis. It works to position substance use as a coping mechanism between aesthetic and non-aesthetic athletes.

Mendoza, Alina, Division I Cheerleader. (2025, November 24). Personal Interview.

This interview presents perspectives, advice, and firsthand experiences from a Division I aesthetic athlete. It serves a valuable purpose for my thesis as a firsthand account and perspective from a long-time aesthetic athlete who continued their athletic

Moore, E. M., Simmons, M. A., & Threatt, J. (2025). Mental health challenges and substance use in student-athletes: prevalence and impact. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 7, 1527793. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2025.1527793>

This source investigates the correlation between mental health and substance use behaviors in collegiate athletes. This peer-reviewed article offers recent information on the issues student-athletes face, particularly those participating in appearance or high-performance sports. It brings insight, affirming my thesis, that underreporting of mental health issues is high due to stigma, which links anxiety of aesthetic sport environments with drug use as a coping mechanism.

Mountjoy, M., Sundgot-Borgen, J., Burke, L., Carter, S., Constantini, N., Lebrun, C., et al. "The IOC Consensus Statement: Beyond the Female Athlete Triad—Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S)." *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, vol. 48, no. 7, 2014, pp. 491–497. Web.

This article presents Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S) as a framework for exploring menstrual and bone issues in female athletes, as well as the physiological and psychological effects of disordered eating in sports participants. As published by the International Olympic Committee, this is a highly credible paper that serves as a foundation for research on athlete health. It demonstrates how the demands of aesthetic sports on appearance and body control lead to energy imbalance and psychological stress, which can manifest into lifelong issues.

Nelson, A. K. (2009, August 11). Nicole Bobek: Falling through ice - ESPN. ESPN.com; ESPN.

[https://www.espn.com/olympics/figureskating/columns/story?columnist=nelson\\_amy&id=4389556](https://www.espn.com/olympics/figureskating/columns/story?columnist=nelson_amy&id=4389556)

Nelson's article explores the story of Nicole Bobek, a former elite figure skater. With a focus on instability, and later substance-related issues after retirement. This article supports my thesis by examining how pressure and a lack of support manifest into problems faced after retirement.

Preventing and Addressing Abuse | U.S. Center for SafeSport. (2025, October 22). SafeSport.

<https://uscenterforsafesport.org/>

This webpage outlines the policy and educational resources developed by the U.S. Center for SafeSport to address issues of abuse and misconduct in sport. The source helps explain current best practices for safeguarding athletes and promoting safe, abuse-free sport environments.

Raisman, A. [@Aly\_Raisman]. (2021, July 26). Just a friendly reminder: Olympic athletes are human & they're doing the best they can. It's REALLY hard to peak at the right moment & do the routine of your life under such pressure. Really hard. [Tweet]. X.

[https://x.com/Aly\\_Raisman/status/1419753425214421000](https://x.com/Aly_Raisman/status/1419753425214421000)

This tweet is used as a response to Biles' withdrawal from the 2021 Olympics and her former teammates' support.

Reardon, C. L., Hainline, B., Aron, C. M., Baron, D., Baum, A. L., Bindra, A., Budgett, R., Campriani, N., Castaldelli-Maia, J. M., Currie, A., Derevensky, J. L., Glick, I. D., Gorczynski, P., Gouttebauge, V., Grandner, M. A., Han, D. H., McDuff, D., Mountjoy, M., Polat, A., ... Engebretsen, L. (2019). Mental health in elite athletes: International

Olympic Committee consensus statement (2019). *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 53(11), 667–699. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2019-100715>

This IOC consensus writes about the prevalence, causes, and consequences of mental health disorders among elite athletes. It goes on to discuss best practices for prevention and supporting athletes. The source serves as an overview of mental health challenges in elite sports.

Rippon, A. [@Adaripp]. (2021, July 27). I can't imagine the pressure Simone has been feeling. Sending her SO much love. It's easy to forget she's still human. WE LOVE YOU. [Tweet]. X. <https://x.com/Adaripp/status/1420056167923716101>

This tweet is another response to Biles' withdrawal from the 2021 Olympics and to a former Olympic figure skater's support.

Salim, J., & Winter, S. (2022). “I Still Wake Up With Nightmares” ... The Long-Term Psychological Impacts From Gymnasts’ Maltreatment Experiences. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, 11(4), 429–443. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spy0000302>

This research looks into the long-term psychological consequences of the maltreatment faced by gymnasts: emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, and unsafe training environments. The article examines the long-lasting harm caused by abusive coaching cultures and the need for reforming aesthetic sport environments and support for mental health in gymnastics.

Sekulic, D., Peric, M., & Rodek, J. (2010). Substance Use and Misuse Among Professional Ballet Dancers. *Substance Use & Misuse*, 45(9), 1420–1430. <https://doi.org/10.3109/10826081003682198>

This peer-reviewed article investigates substance use among professional ballet dancers and pressures on the nature of aesthetic sport. The results support that an aesthetic-driven performance environment contributes to unhealthy coping behaviors in the context of substance misuse, especially in the context of body image and weight control.

Stevens, M., Cruwys, T., Olive, L., & Rice, S. (2024). Understanding and Improving Athletes Mental Health: A Social Identity Approach. *Sports Medicine*, 54(4), 837–853.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-024-01996-4>

Stevens and colleagues use a social identity framework to explain how an athlete's sense of belonging to teams positively influences mental health. To support my thesis, the authors also offer recommendations for fostering healthier team cultures and provide insight into how team dynamics shape athletes' well-being.

Williams, S.-M., Baez, S. E., Derrico, D., Robinson, H., Coyne, K., Settle, H., & Jochimsen, K. N. (2025). Resilience and Well-Being Over the Course of a National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I Gymnastics Season. *Journal of Sport Rehabilitation*, 34(4), 423–427. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsr.2023-0379>

This study examines how resilience and well-being change throughout an NCAA Division I gymnastics season. The authors discuss the psychological challenges; these results help understand the psychological demands of collegiate gymnastics competition and the resources available and needed to support the well-being of student athletes.