

INJURIES, INSULTS AND APPLAUSE

Youth experiences of sport,
injury and mental health:

A focus group study
and recommendations
for training and resources

Participation in physical activity and sport is known to be beneficial for our mental health. With rates of mental health difficulty rising among children and young people over the last 20 years, and especially since the start of the pandemic, the importance of mentally healthy activities is greater than ever.

For young people who become injured during sporting activity, it's vital that the benefits of participation are not lost while they are unable to be so active. Suddenly being unable to compete in their chosen sport may put young people at risk of poorer mental and physical health. Good mental health during this time in young people's lives is, we know, an essential foundation for wellbeing throughout adulthood.

We're pleased to collaborate with Podium Analytics to conduct this research and to learn about the psychological and emotional impacts of injury from the experiences of young people themselves. We're grateful to the young people who shared their views and experiences with us and dedicate this report to them.

Sports can be at the forefront of a culture change that puts our mental health on an equal footing with our physical health. They can ensure everyone gets to benefit from the good that sports can do for our mental health. And they can support a new generation of sports people whose mental and physical health is the best it can be for the challenges that lie ahead in their sports and in their lives to come.

Andy Bell
CEO, Centre for Mental Health

Our mission to tackle sports injury puts young people's voices at the heart of its work. This report is the first to explore young people's social and emotional experiences of injury and recovery in grassroots sport.

In this report, young people explain the psychological impact of injury, and what support they think would help them recover and return to participation.

Sport has a unique position in our nation's cultural and recreational life: young people look up to sporting heroes and many thousands engage with organised sport after school and every weekend.

Sports leaders have a responsibility to help deliver safe and healthy grassroots sport, and to support the physical and mental benefits of long-term participation. Yet young people's perspectives are too often ignored by sports governance. The Whyte Review of British Gymnastics laid bare the potential for physical and emotional harm when young people felt unable to raise complaints about mistreatment, and when coaches prioritised their own needs over those of the young people they were training.

Sport's potential to improve young people's lives has put long-term participation at the heart of the UK's approach to public health. Regular training and competition foster essential life skills, as well as promoting physical and mental health. That is why we believe that protecting sport for current and future generations of young people is so vitally important.

Andy Hunt
CEO, Podium Analytics

YOUNG PEOPLE ON SPORTS INJURY

“Last year when I took the decision to recover from RED-S*, I had to take a step back from all the training and racing. It mentally tears you apart that you can't physically put in the hundred percent to your passion, your sport. I wanted to speak out about how an injury mentally affects an athlete so clubs and coaches can support people like me who may be recovering from RED-S or an injury.”

SCARLETT, 18, ROWER

*Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S) is a mismatch between nutritional intake and energy expenditure.

This study, a collaboration between Podium Analytics (Podium) and Centre for Mental Health, explores young people's experiences of sport, injury and mental health in their own words. Separately, Podium has conducted a review of how sport's National Governing Bodies (NGBs) are supporting young people's mental health in relation to sports injury and during general participation, and the Podium Institute at the University of Oxford will publish a review of research evidence linking youth sport injury and mental health symptoms later in 2023.

Youth sport participation supports physical and mental health: it is linked to higher levels of self-esteem and self-confidence, and a better quality of life. Sports injuries happen for many reasons during adolescence as young people navigate physical, social and emotional changes, but psychosocial factors – principally related to stress – are likely to be key risk factors. At the same time, young people who miss out on sport, school or socialising through injury report negative psychological responses and, sometimes, long-term physical and mental health problems leading to dropout.

Young people's perspectives are poorly represented in sport governance decision-making. The Whyte Review (2022), which investigated allegations of mistreatment in the sport of gymnastics, found that young people felt unable to raise complaints, and that coaches prioritised their own needs over those of the young people they were training. The Duty of Care in Sport Review (2017) highlighted that athletes' voices are too often ignored in sport governance.

Listening to young people helps create healthy sport experiences that children and young people want, supporting long-term participation.

To help address this need, Podium and Centre for Mental Health worked with young people to co-develop four research aims:

- 1. To explore the psychological impact of injuries leading to time away from sport, and how young people deal with these.**
- 2. To investigate what support they would find helpful when recovering from injury.**
- 3. To identify sources of sport-related stress.**
- 4. To understand what makes positive sporting environments.**

We conducted seven focus groups with 32 young people aged between 12 and 18 from across England who regularly took part in training and competitive sport. They came from diverse backgrounds and competed in a range of sports in grassroots clubs, school teams, talent pathways and at national level.

Young people described negative psychological responses to injury including anxiety, fear, discouragement, loss of identity, unhealthy thoughts, and forced recovery – although some reported that time out post-injury gave them space to assess progress, and to appreciate the importance of sport.

They told us they often relied on establishing their own coping strategies when injured because there is little formal, sport-endorsed support available. Their asks included having a return-to-play plan, a supportive network of peers and adults, alternative ways to be involved in sport while recovering, and help maintaining motivation to return to play.

Many reflected that a coaching culture that was more accepting of time out for recovery would be welcome.

Sources of stress in sport included performance-based worries, selection pressure, injury, balancing schoolwork and training, letting others down and competition-related anxiety. Young people emphasised that coaches, peers and family can all make positive contributions to their sporting experience – and their injury recovery – by being encouraging, inclusive, respectful and well balanced. They wanted to be coached to an age-appropriate standard and intensity.

Our conversations suggest young people who play competitive sport can articulate their thoughts and feelings about stress, injury and recovery. Our findings indicate that there is scope to meet the needs they identify by giving them the tools to cope with stress in sport, to help them develop resilience to injury and rehabilitation, and to enhance their motivation to return to play and long-term participation. Addressing the needs young people express will require systems-level change and action by sport NGBs, clubs, coaches, families and young people themselves:

OUR SUGGESTIONS

- 1. We recommend a programme of work with young people, sport and mental health organisations to develop a package of injury-related mental health and resilience training and resources for young people and their coaches and families.**
- 2. We advise that these resources are co-produced with young people and adults.**
- 3. We suggest sport's NGBs agree an implementation framework against which progress can be benchmarked.**

Read our full recommendations on page 21.

Podium Analytics is a registered charity committed to reducing the incidence and impact of injury in youth sport. Its focus is on young people taking part in grassroots school and club sport, and on talent pathways. More information about Podium, including its mental health strategy and impact framework, can be found at www.podiumanalytics.org

Centre for Mental Health is an independent charity. We take the lead in challenging injustices in policies, systems and society, so that everyone can have better mental health. By building research evidence to create fairer mental health policy, we are pursuing equality, social justice and good mental health for all. More information about Centre for Mental Health can be found at www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk

Research scope and methodology

Young people's voices are poorly represented in sport governance, and there is a reluctance to consider negative factors such as physical injury and mental ill health. A review of the sports science literature indicated scope to expand the evidence base concerning young people's thoughts and feelings about injury in sport, especially at grassroots.

Our initial aim was therefore to explore how young people talk about injury and mental health in sports.

We developed our research plan in a co-production meeting with four young people in sport (three females and one male, aged 13–18 years). **The group indicated that key issues were being heard when they raised concerns about injuries, how injuries made them feel, and what support they receive during injury.** They also advised us on constructing the focus groups, how to encourage open discussion and how to maintain a safe, youth-friendly environment. Based on their feedback, we revised the study plan and finalised our research questions to reflect these priorities.

A note on terminology

In this report we use the following definitions:

Sport: Competitive sport representing a school team, club, or nation. We excluded school PE.

Injury: Any physical complaint directly related to competitive sport or exercise activity that results in missing training and competition.

Positive mental health: The ability to think, feel, relate, and behave in ways that allow us to live well. Mental health is influenced by factors including life experiences, social relationships and how we process our thoughts and feelings.

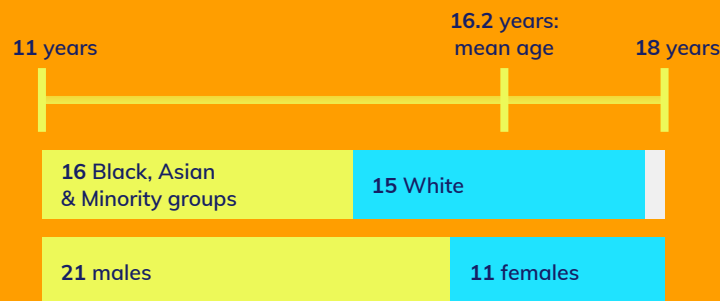
Resilience: The ability to cope with, adapt to and recover from life's stresses and setbacks. Some people are resilient by nature, and there are coping strategies we can learn.

From

140
VOLUNTEERS

A diverse sample of 32 young people were selected who played competitive sport and had experience of sports injury.

We conducted seven focus groups:



Prefer not to say

3

with lived experience of mental ill health

5

eligible for free school meals

1

with a neurodiversity / learning disability

4

identified as LGBTQ+

Participants took part in football, rugby, cricket, golf, swimming, hockey, athletics, badminton, karate, rowing, netball, basketball, trampolining, handball, weightlifting, gymnastics and volleyball.

Sport and mental health

In recent years, there has been a sharp rise in the number of young people reporting mental health concerns: one in six young people has a probable mental health problem¹ and the long-term impact of Covid-19 on this generation's psychological wellbeing is still not fully understood.

Sport supports mental and physical health, which is why long-term participation is a key feature of public health approaches. Regular participation is linked with improved cardiovascular health, a better quality of life and reduced risk of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts and behaviours^{2,3}. In addition, sport participation is linked with dimensions of psychological wellbeing such as self-esteem⁴, self-acceptance, social relationships, and purpose in life⁵. Organised sports correlate more positively with good adolescent mental health than other forms of physical activity⁴.

The psychological benefits of sport and physical activity have been re-emphasised during the pandemic: participation mitigated symptoms of anxiety and depression among young people and improved their mental wellbeing over the period^{6,7}. The latest data from Sport England (2022) on children and young people's activity levels (ages five to 16 years) shows that around 3.4 million young people are currently taking part in sport and physical activity for an average of 60 minutes or more every day. Overall, young people's activity levels have recovered to pre-pandemic levels, although younger age groups, girls and Black young people continue to be less active than pre-pandemic⁸.

Supporting sport participation through adolescence is important because this is a period when poor mental health can start to emerge: half of all problems are established by age 14. Competitive sport can bring unique challenges and stressful periods, so young people who take part in sport might encounter mental health risk factors over and above those who do not. Podium and Centre for Mental Health therefore wanted to explore whether young people identify a need for support for long-term, mentally healthy participation.

A focus on sport injuries

Sports injuries happen for many reasons, and young people are particularly vulnerable due to their changing bodies and their willingness to take risks. Nearly half of sport-related Accident and Emergency visits involve people under 19 years of age, according to data from two hospitals in Oxford⁹. In the US, where there is more comprehensive data, sport-related injuries are estimated to cause nearly 3 million emergency department visits per year for those between the age of five and 24 years¹⁰.

Depending on their severity and frequency, sports injuries can jeopardise sport careers and have a significant impact on economical, occupational, and educational outcomes, as well as physical and psychological health¹¹.

Psychological stressors are risk factors for injury and delayed recovery in elite and adult athletes. Of these, negative life-event stress and a strong individual stress response have the greatest associations with injury risk¹². Although stress management has been effectively incorporated in several injury prevention interventions^{13,14}, there are almost no official guidelines or recommendations for coaches or parents/carers to address these factors with the aim of mitigating injury risk in young people¹⁴.

To fill a knowledge gap, Podium and Centre for Mental Health wanted to explore what are key sport-related stressors among young people, what contributes to a positive sport environment and what support might be useful when recovering from injury. Our exploratory research tackles the need to represent young people's voices and describe their experiences of sports injury, their perceptions of mental risk factors, and the psychological impact of injury.

To inform future interventions and policy advocacy, the aims of this study were to:

- Explore the psychological impact of injuries leading to time off sport and what coping strategies are helpful.
- Explore what support young people would find helpful when recovering from sports injuries.
- Identify common sources of sport-related stress.
- Understand what creates a positive sporting environment for young people.

AN OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Participants had experienced a wide range of injuries. One sustained a head injury that had kept him off sport and school for two months. Other injuries reported included concussion, a torn back muscle, a fractured shin, a broken finger, broken metatarsals and multiple sprains. Injuries typically happened during competitions. We heard about a range of thoughts and feelings in response to injury and time off sport and school.

AREAS OF EXPLORATION	THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF SPORTS INJURY	WHAT COPING STRATEGIES ARE HELPFUL?	WHAT POST-INJURY SUPPORT WOULD HELP?	SOURCES OF SPORT-RELATED STRESS	WHAT MAKES A SUPPORTIVE SPORT ENVIRONMENT?
THEMES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling lost and aimless Forcing injury recovery Loss of self-identity Anxious, frustrated and scared Discouraged and worried about performance Relief and new perspectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participating in sport-related activities Obtaining emotional support Accessing formal mental health and specialist physical support Keeping the passion for their sport Learning about their injury and how to prevent it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Having a return-to-play plan A supportive network: teammates, coaches and family A sport culture that is more accepting of time off for recovery Indirect ways to contribute and “stay in the game” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performance-based worries Selection pressure Injury worries Pressures of time management Letting other people down Competition-related anxiety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peers who encourage, motivate and show respect Peers who maintain relationships in different contexts Coaches who are encouraging and motivating Coaches who look after young people’s interests Coaches who provide age-appropriate support Coaches who listen and give constructive feedback Coaches who are inclusive Families that encourage without exerting pressure Supportive fans and good facilities

Feeling lost and aimless

Feeling lost and unsure how to fill their spare time while off sport was the most common response to injury. This feeling was consistent across players irrespective of how long they were off sport, although it was more intense and persistent for those who could not take part for several months or more.

"[...] it took me out for a year and that was really difficult for me mentally because I felt like without sport, I didn't know what to do with myself."

(FEMALE, 17, RUGBY)

"I lost my independence [...] I missed simple pleasures like being able to take my dog for a walk [...] I was just laying down on the sofa and not able to do anything."

(MALE, 14, RUGBY)

Forcing injury recovery

Many young people noted that they forced the injury recovery process and attempted to return before they were physically recovered. Once the injury became a bit better, they would be "too eager and motivated" to go back to training and play matches, despite knowing that it might not be optimal for their physical recovery.

"[...] I couldn't walk for a while but as soon as I could walk again, a few days later I was at training. Looking back on that, I wish I didn't do that because I knew that doing that set me out for longer."

(FEMALE, 17, RUGBY)

Loss of self-identity

A common theme, identified in previous research, was a loss of self-identity after injury.

"It's kinda like my personality trait almost. Among my friends, that's what they kinda know me for – for other things as well, but that's the main thing."

(MALE, 17, ATHLETICS)

"Rugby is a big part of my personality [...] it felt like a big part of me was missing [...] my friends were talking about the game, and I felt really bad because I couldn't be there to help [...] it was a negative time in my life."

(MALE, 14, RUGBY)



Anxious, frustrated, and scared

Another common psychological response to injury was feeling anxious, frustrated, and scared, especially in the immediate aftermath when there is uncertainty about how severe the injury is or how long recovery and return to play will take. One participant, whose breathing and movement was affected by a torn back muscle and who was off sport for eight months explained:

“It got so frustrating [...] there is nothing you can do except give it time and rest [...] not being able to do normal things [...] I had to walk slower; I wasn’t able to train.”

(FEMALE, 16, KARATE)

Discouraged and worried about performance after returning

A consistent theme was worry about performance when returning to play following an injury. Young people reported feeling concerned about regaining levels of fitness and skill and feeling “left behind” by other teammates. Some suggested that these concerns explained why young people delayed their return or dropped out after injury.



A more positive impact: relief and new perspectives

In line with adult literature, some young people expressed relief and appreciation for the opportunity injury gave them to rest and recover, and to understand more about their physical vulnerabilities.

“[...] obviously you would never put that in your training plan, but sometimes it’s beneficial [...] In running, if I get an injury from overuse or something, I’d know that I need to make that part stronger [...] so I see parts that I can improve for myself.”

(MALE, 17, ATHLETICS)

“Things happen for a reason [...] I wanted to channel the positive aspect [and I thought to myself] ‘it’s time for a break to reflect on where I am and where I’m heading to.’”

(MALE, 16, FOOTBALL)

One who had made a full recovery said injury made them appreciate their ability to perform at a high level and to acknowledge that injury can happen easily.

“It changed the way I view sports in general, but it was difficult to handle it.”

(MALE, 17, RUGBY AND POWERLIFTING)

Young people described a range of individual coping strategies they found helpful for dealing with the negative effects of injury. These involved both self-reliance and obtaining help from others.

Participating in sport-related activities

The most commonly described strategy for coping with injury was engaging with other sport-related activities to “stay in the game”. These included going to the gym; playing other sports where possible; and watching their team’s training sessions or games. With the support of their school or club, some young people were given the opportunity to coach younger players. In a more indirect and less active approach, a few young people said watching YouTube videos to learn more about techniques and strategies was helpful.

Obtaining emotional support

Many young people mentioned that obtaining support from other people – either by actively asking or as a more passive recipient – helped with recovery. Examples included regular check-ins with family, friends and partners as well as their coach, physiotherapist and teammates. Some mentioned that they appreciated their coach showing care for them, not just as an athlete but as an individual and part of a team.

“My coach was very supportive [...] He allowed me to take it easy and he would send me different stretches and exercise to help my body get back on to it [...] He completely understood that I couldn’t get straight back to where I was before.”

(FEMALE, 16, KARATE)

Notably, some young people, and especially those at elite level, described a lack of understanding among others not at the same level or who don’t play sports, which made sharing frustrations difficult.

Young people with more severe injuries that led to long periods of non-participation said that using techniques such as mindfulness and reflective thinking helped them deal with negative emotions associated with injuries and develop healthy coping behaviours.

Accessing formal mental health and specialist physical support

Young people who received counselling said it helped to reduce the negative impact of injury and to develop positive coping strategies. However, for most, formal support was unavailable, and their main source of psychological support came from family and friends.

For those on elite or talent pathways, physical rehabilitation treatment was helpful. For example, they appreciated advice from their coach or physiotherapist about different exercises or stretches. Some mentioned being to take part in strength and conditioning sessions with their team promoted feelings of belonging.

Keeping the passion for their sport

Young people mentioned their own passion for their sport as a big motivation for them to overcome difficulties during recovery and come back to play. For example, one participant told us:

“Once [young people with injuries] have like, even just a few months off, and they see like how their life can be that and they realise ‘Oh, it’s actually just not worth it’, so I think it’s a bit of mindset in elite sports, how bad you actually want it – ‘cause if you really want it, you will come back.”

(MALE, 17, ATHLETICS)

Learning about their injury and how to prevent it

A few young people said that learning more about the physiology of their injury and recovery, and how to prevent it from happening again in the future, was a helpful coping strategy.

We asked young people what support from others would help them stay positively engaged with sport while injured.

Having a return-to-play plan

The most common suggestion was for an agreed recovery and return-to-play plan to be standard practice in sport, covering an explanation of the injury, ideas for physical rehabilitation and tips for looking after mental health. Young people mentioned having more resources from their club or governing bodies to help players deal with injury. They stressed that understanding more about their specific injury could reduce associated anxiety. They said that young people without access to physiotherapy could benefit from more information about strength and conditioning exercises. They suggested that having mental health support available, if needed, could potentially be helpful. Young people – notably rugby players – suggested coaches should be given guidance on graduated return-to-play, covering length and intensity of post-injury sessions, to help them avoid pushing and putting too much pressure on players to perform.

“[...] you sort of ease back into it and see how you feel. For example, say you’re coming back from an injury, you wouldn’t have to go in full straight into like a first team game, you might be able to come off the bench for a few minutes to a friendly match to be able to ease yourself back into it.”

(MALE, 11, CRICKET AND RUGBY)

Young people wanted to play more friendly matches when returning to play, providing an opportunity to regain match fitness with less accompanying pressure to perform at pre-injury standards.

A supportive network: teammates, coaches and family

Young people highlighted that support from the network of people around them – teammates, coaches and family – is essential in the recovery journey.

Peers have potential to play an important part in the return-to-play process, according to young people. They suggested that team-mates could offer to demonstrate new skills or techniques learned during training, and they could remind returning players of their value in the team. Some also mentioned that having opportunities to socialise with their team or club “friends” can help motivate players to come back because they still feel part of the team.

Grassroots coaches could assist recovery and return by being inclusive and aiming to avoid players feeling isolated and demotivated once they come back, young people told us.

“[...] with some people I know, once they come back from an injury, our coach forgets about them and focus on the new players that replaced them so I think coaches can be more inclusive and everyone else should be more supportive really.”

(MALE, 12, HOCKEY)

They also called for coaches to avoid putting too much pressure on injured young people to return to play, and to recognise that it might take time to regain skills, fitness and confidence. They wanted coaches to give them the opportunity to engage in light training and not push them into activities they perceived as potentially harmful.

Family members are an important source of emotional support during time out and return to play, according to many young people we heard from. Some mentioned that parents tried to ease pressure to return by reminding them to take their time and wait until they felt ready. Their role was contrasted with that of other trusted adults such as coaches (and physiotherapists in elite settings), who were described as offering technical support.

WHAT POST-INJURY SUPPORT WOULD HELP?

A more accepting culture

Encouraging a culture where individual feelings and opinions are more accepted, respected and heard, could help young people feel less pressured and more comfortable returning to play in their own time, according to some young people. They strongly believed that they are experts in their own feelings about injury, and that they should have some agency in how recovery and return are managed.

One rugby player described the extreme “culture of the sport” and another suggested that a culture of “being a man, suck up the pain, stay on the pitch” can lead to young people having more severe injuries and taking longer to recover.

Indirect ways to contribute and “stay in the game”

Young people called for access to flexible and low-pressure ways of contributing to the team, connecting with teammates and participating in competitions. Suggestions included coming to training to help out, participating in club/team events, and playing friendly matches.



When asked about sport-related stress, most young people emphasised that they generally felt very positive about participation and that sport and physical activity was often part of their daily routine. In line with existing literature, young people identified benefits including reduced stress, social connections, improved physical and mental health, and personal growth and development including enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence.

Some highlighted the broader opportunities that sport can create:

"[...] Athletics is not really a big money sport unless you're the best of the best, so you definitely need to have other things to fall back on, but it can get you to places, for example, my university place next year basically is all dependent on my running and I wouldn't get that without my running so it opens opportunity for me which is cool."

(MALE, 17, ATHLETICS)

Performance-based worries

Worries about not being good enough, not reaching the expected level, making mistakes, or poor performance in relation to others were common concerns mentioned by young people.

"[...] you see others and you're not as good as them, you know that you don't train as hard as them or as often as them [...] you just have to motivate yourself and keep on going."

(FEMALE, 18, FOOTBALL)



"I think for me it's the fear of failure, like you're putting all this time and effort in and not reach the outcome to where you wanna be [...] if you're in an academy, not everyone is gonna make it but we're putting in the same time and effort, and they can just release you anytime they want [...]"

(FEMALE, 17, RUGBY)

"If you have a big game, everyone is expecting you to perform."

(MALE, 12, HOCKEY)

There was some awareness that these thoughts are unhelpful and can potentially negatively influence their performance.

"You can't really play your best if you're thinking 'Oh, I'm playing badly'."

(MALE, 15, FOOTBALL)



Selection pressure

Many young people described self-imposed pressure to keep their position in a team, not to be downgraded to a substitute and not to be dropped to another team. Those on talent pathways described pressure to get into certain academies.

“If you’re constantly injured or have bad training sessions, there is pressure to lose places. There is also pressure to perform in training – if the people who are in the same position as you are training really hard, you have to up your level so that adds the pressure mentally.”

(MALE, 17, RUGBY)

“[...] There are opportunities to be dropped at different levels, so you always have to perform at the highest level.”

(FEMALE, 17, RUGBY)

Worries about injury

Most young people acknowledged that injuries – and recovery – are part of sport, though expectations vary: taking part in rugby and other contact sports is seen as having a bigger injury risk than non-contact sports. So although some young people displayed concerns over getting injured during training and competition, many seemed relaxed despite thinking about it from time to time.

Another relevant theme emerged from our conversation was that perhaps young people were not given enough information on injury and how to deal with it, even at higher levels of play.

“When it gets to competitive sports like that, you always know that you might get injured like that. I think [...] you have to be prepared that you are going to get hurt [...] but I didn’t know that the injury would get that bad or it would be this long-term.”

(FEMALE, 18, FOOTBALL)

“I feel like you don’t really get any kind of information on that because it’s such a depressing thing to talk about. And at the stage I am at now, no one makes it as such [...] so like it’s kind of just part of it [...] and it’s probably not the club or whoever responsibility to do with that but I do think that maybe they [sports team or club] can offer you support.”

(MALE, 17, ATHLETICS)

We heard some initial reflections from young people about how injury severity and timing – at the beginning or end of the season – can potentially change how young people feel and react: some expressed less worry when an injury occurred after the season had finished.

Time management

Balancing time spent on sports with social life and education was another frequently mentioned challenge, and one that was emphasised by young people approaching public exams and also those in talent pathways who have intensive schedules: some described six or seven training sessions per week and long travel at weekends for competitions.

“[...] it can be quite demanding. If you train lots of times a week, sometimes you miss out on things that people who don't play sports do so it can be quite hard in that sense.”

(MALE, 17, ATHLETICS)

“[...] either I get too focused on the sport, or I get too focused on schoolwork, and I don't know how to reach the balance between the two.”

(FEMALE, 17, NETBALL)

Young people felt that stress and pressure came from their desire to “do well in both school and sport”, although some also mentioned additional pressure from parents and teachers to focus and do well at school.

Letting other people down

Being worried about letting others down is closely related to performance-based worries. This stress factor was particularly apparent among players who hold key positions in the team (e.g. goalkeeper, penalty taker) and keenly felt during important matches.

Competition-related anxiety

Young people described feeling at their most stressed and anxious before competitions, although they emphasised that anxiety is strongest and most frequent before the competition rather than during the actual event.



Are pressures and worries the same for everyone?

Most young people expressed feelings of sport-related stress, but experiences varied across different sports and between individual and team sports.

Young people agreed that those who play at higher level of competition or who play popular sports such as football or rugby tend to experience more pressure.

“I think people with larger names have more pressure than us definitely, because there are so many fans, cameras, faces watching them, so I feel like it’s kind of beneficial that we are your everyday young people just trying to enjoy sports.”

(MALE, 16, NETBALL)

“Football is more popular so people care about that a lot more, over like netball I would say.”

(FEMALE, 17, NETBALL)

Participants acknowledged that worries could take different forms in different sports or in different team positions. For instance, in throwing sports, worry might centre on quality of mental preparation or focus, whereas in sports such as weightlifting, worries concern physical factors such as getting injured. Young people noted different pressures at play in team and individual sports. In team sports they feel pressure around “not letting your team down”, while in individual sports the “spotlight is only on you” – which was generally regarded as being higher-pressure.

“When you play team sports, you always worry that you’re letting other people down. I play goalkeeper and I know that I’m always worried about letting my team down [...] and I know that people who play basketball as well, like they always worry about not passing the ball to the wrong person and stuff. So, I think that when you play team sports, you worry about your team. When you play individual sports, you might not worry like that.”

(MALE, 11, FOOTBALL)

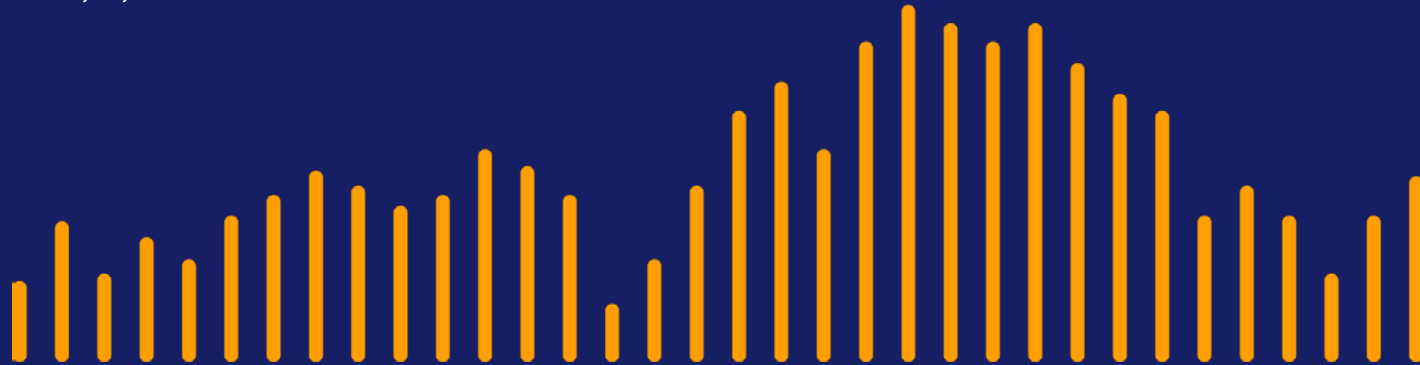
“In the team, the spotlight is on everyone. You might have one or two really good players that stand out but at the end of the day, you’re all together whereas in individual sports, it’s just you by yourself so it’s mentally tougher.”

(MALE, 17, RUGBY)

“[...] you only have yourself to blame [...] it’s all on you, you have no one else to blame.”

(FEMALE, 16, TRAMPOLINE)

Surprisingly, given their emphasis on mutual support, young people from both individual and team sports said they felt competitive towards their teammates or their peers because they are competing either for their position or for a limited number of spots in a team or club selection.



HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE COPE WITH PRESSURE AND WORRIES?

STAYING ACTIVE

Going to the gym, mediating, and home exercises were mentioned.

PRACTISING POSITIVE THINKING

Approaches such as “*everyone makes mistake, we are all humans. You can’t always be perfect*” or “*I have done it before; I can do it again*” were typical. Some also mentioned it was helpful to visualise doing a good job before taking on a task.

REFLECTIVE THINKING

Having time to reflect on individual ability and performance, and good moments, was mentioned as a way of reducing pressure and worries and “*making it all worth it*”. Reflective thinking with coaches, offering a perspective on how to improve and do better next time, was also highlighted.

TAKING APPROPRIATE REST

Strategies mentioned were mental relaxation techniques, taking physical breaks to relax the body, sleeping well and eating healthily. These appeared to be particularly important and effective in dealing with competition-related worries.

GETTING SUPPORT FROM OTHER PEOPLE

Simply being around family and friends was highlighted.

WHAT MAKES A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT?

Young people consistently said that supportive coaches, teammates, and family contribute to their sporting experience. We explored further what are the social and environmental characteristics of a supportive sport environment.

Peers who encourage, motivate and respect

Young people strongly emphasised the importance of team dynamic: many mentioned that good teammates should support and encourage each other, especially when peers have had a bad game, missed a penalty kick, or suffered an injury, for example.

“Just the little things, maybe me falling over and you pick me up and ask if I’m okay, building one another, just being there for each other.”

(FEMALE, 18, VOLLEYBALL)

Giving compliments, and not criticising or blaming, also seem important for good team spirit. As one put it, having good teammates can “keep you humble and not take things for granted and not getting too ahead of yourself”.

Mutual respect was mentioned by a number of young people. Examples included acknowledging and respecting each other’s boundaries and abilities, and showing understanding of individual circumstances, commitment and priorities.

Peers who maintain team relationships in different contexts

Young people highlighted that relationships that endured outside of the sporting environment were more meaningful connections and benefited team morale and motivation.

Coaches who are encouraging and motivating

The most consistent positive characteristics we heard were “encouraging” and “motivating”. Specifically, young people appreciated words of encouragement during stressful and difficult periods to raise team morale and encourage those affected by personal performance or team losses. During challenging times, young people viewed such encouragement as a validation of their performance and skills, which improved self-esteem and confidence.

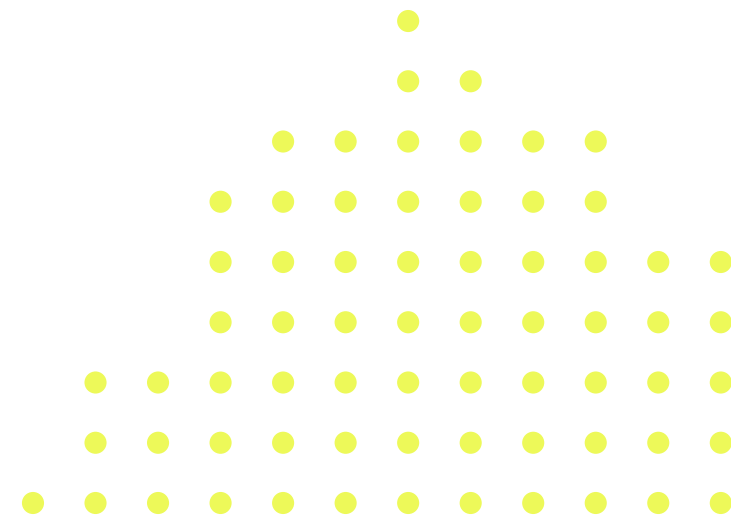
Coaches who look after young people’s interests

Young people compared coaches to “parents” and suggested that they needed to strike a balance between being caring and strict. Some said they expected “punishment” after a poor performance in a game, which might involve extra training or exercises to target a specific skill. Some also mentioned that they recognised that the coach provided support and a safety net when needed.

Young people wanted their coach to encourage them but without resorting to unhealthy pressuring behaviour, such as screaming at poor performance, ignoring young people’s opinions, or pushing them to perform when injured.

“If the coach is there to nurture you and protect you in times when you need it, they are also there to tell you off or criticise you and you know that it’s coming from a good place, and they just want you to see you at your best. I think that if they love what they are doing, they’re gonna have a good team.”

(MALE, 17, RUGBY)



Coaches who provide age-appropriate support

Among the experienced and higher-level players we heard from, there was a clear emphasis on coaches tailoring the intensity of training and the types of exercises to a young person's age and developmental stage. One gave an example of what they perceived as bad practice:

"I know there are people who are training like they are professional athletes but they are like 12-, 13 year-olds, and they are the ones who are no longer doing the sports now [...] A large part of that comes down to the coach to remember that, at the end of the day, it's the athlete that the result is coming from not the coach, and they kind of get too involved in some scenarios."

(MALE, 17, ATHLETICS)

Coaches who listen and give constructive feedback

Having sessions where players can openly discuss their performance and their skills, and create future goals, were mentioned as positive and helpful for improving performance.

Coaches who are inclusive

Some participants highlighted that a good coach needs to be inclusive and make everyone feel welcomed and comfortable – and not have favourites.

"[...] being left out can just ruin you or you can feel alone, or it can defeat your self-esteem and stuff. And I feel like you (the coach) need to give them a safe space where you can listen to their ideas."

(FEMALE, 18, FOOTBALL)

Families that encourage without exerting pressure

A supportive family – described as one that encourages without being overly pushy or involved – can promote a positive experience in sport. Young people acknowledged that family has a crucial role in developing their interest and continuing to improve in their sport, especially when they are younger. Elements of support identified were transport, financial support, attending matches or competitions, or playing and enjoying the sport themselves.

A positive fan culture

Young people drew our attention to the role of fans and other people around them in influencing how they perform and the way they view their sport. For example, people watching and cheering during a match can help young people to feel good about themselves and motivated to perform better. Additionally, it can make them feel noticed and seen.

Others' perceptions of their sport was also an important factor in their overall experience. One young person observed:

"There are certain sports that people find it more appealing to watch and they all give you more support and more praises if you can do a cool skill or something but maybe if you're doing another sport that isn't as cool, they are not gonna give that much support and that doesn't really make you feel that good."

(FEMALE, 16, TRAMPOLINE)

Good facilities and equipment

Less discussed, but still important, is the quality and standard of available facilities and equipment: young people described how having what they felt were "good" conditions for training, performing and relaxing could potentially improve performance.

Young people's perspectives are poorly represented in sport governance decision-making: our study addresses this gap by listening to their experiences of injury, its psychological impact, what coping strategies are helpful, and what more could be done to tackle stress and promote injury recovery in grassroots youth sport.

Overall, we found young people can articulate their feelings about stress, injury and coping. Some feel well supported by family and coaches, but others identified unhelpful behaviour and cultures that fail to identify or acknowledge stress, pressure or worries about injury and recovery. Few feel able to rely on peers for support – even though they might wish to – and indeed some expressed feelings of rivalry or worries about falling behind after injury.

Young people accept that competitive sport comes with a risk of injury, and not all sports injuries are linked to psychological distress, so it is important to maintain a focus on the benefits of participation. Our findings also appear to suggest that young people want to be recognised and treated as individuals, with feelings and opinions on their physical and mental health and how they participate in sport. They value support from others, but they want their voices to be heard.

The psychosocial impact of injuries and helpful coping strategies

Our research explored stress and coping in youth sport, and the psychological impact of sport injuries on young people. We identified common psychological responses to injury, including loss of identity, anxiety, frustration and feelings of discouragement, in line with studies of elite youth athletes¹⁵. But we also found that young people in grassroots sport describe forcing quick recovery to overcome these feelings, and that some coaches and sport cultures can facilitate this behaviour by being intolerant of time off for recovery.

Young people in grassroots sport worry about performance and retaining their place on the team or squad after returning from injury. This response is especially clear among those competing at a higher level, and it appears to be linked to anxiety about taking time out. These negative emotional responses to sports injury are consistent with previous studies in youth sport^{16, 17} and they are a potential barrier to long-term participation.

We heard about individual approaches to coping with the psychological impact of injury, such as taking part in activities related to sport, obtaining emotional support from others including family and friends, and learning more about an injury and how to avoid it in

future. Suggestions for club or NGB-led assistance built on these strategies, and included a structured plan to support injury recovery and return to play. Drawing on a range of observations, this could incorporate regular contact from coaches, maintaining links with the team or club through opportunities to socialise or attend training in a non-playing capacity, and physiological and mental health support where available. These measures could address positive and negative factors associated with returning to sport including self-motivation, confidence, and fear of reduced performance and re-injury¹⁸.

A key finding is a perceived lack of mental health information and support for young grassroots players following injury. These are available in elite adult sport, and there is evidence that psychological interventions such as goal setting, stress management and very brief ('micro') counselling and are effective in reducing post-injury mental health problems and improving coping during rehabilitation among older youth and adults in grassroots settings¹⁶. Nevertheless, they appear sparsely implemented in youth sport and there is scope to develop interventions suitable for grassroots youth participants.

The “stressful side” of sport

Young people acknowledged the multiple benefits of sport, but they also described sport-related stressors including performance-based worries, selection pressure, fear of injury, time management, letting other people down and competition-related anxiety. We heard about how some young people were, to an extent, able to develop their own strategies for tackling stress such as staying active, practising positive thinking, and asking for help from others to deal with pressure and worries.

Given that stress is a risk factor for injury and delayed recovery, and that many of these factors are also linked with dropping out of sport¹⁹, addressing them early – during adolescence²⁰ – could have implications for reducing injury incidence and improved outcomes including long-term participation.

How we can create a positive sporting environment

Young people’s reflections on what makes a positive sporting environment are important because there is evidence that good experiences reduce sport-related stress, mitigate injury risk, improve recovery and promote overall mental wellbeing. The role of coaches, teammates, and family appear essential to young people’s experience, in line with previous research^{21, 22, 23}. Young people told us that valued coach characteristics include being encouraging, providing constructive feedback, being inclusive, balanced, and creating an age-appropriate training and competition environment. Among teammates, encouragement, motivation and respect are considered positive qualities. For family members, striking a balance between caring and pushing too hard can reduce stress and help maintain young people’s motivation. Young people mentioned other factors that can impact young people’s sporting experience including fans, facilities and equipment, which are worthy of further research.

Strengths and limitations

Young voices are under-represented in sport governance: our exploration of young people’s experiences and perspectives on injury, stress, coping and mental health in community sport and talent pathways is a step towards addressing concerns that have been highlighted in recent reports. Our sample includes a large proportion of young people from racialised communities, who are often overlooked in sport-related research, so our findings can contribute to ongoing conversations about removing participation barriers.

Findings from our relatively small sample should be interpreted with caution. Different sports have different patterns and types of injuries. Age and sex influence injury prevalence and, possibly, useful coping strategies. Injury context – including severity and timing – can impact young people’s responses. Although it marks a starting point, our research did not explore these issues in depth. Our research focused on young people with positive mental health: only three young people in our sample reported lived experience of poor mental health. Further research is required to generalise findings more widely and to explore specific contexts in depth.

THANKS TO ALL THE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO TOOK PART IN THIS STUDY AND SHARED THEIR THOUGHTS, FEELINGS AND SUGGESTIONS WITH US.

1 INFORMED, WRAP-AROUND SUPPORT FROM SPORT AND FAMILY

There is a need for resources and training to help young people cope with stress in grassroots sport, develop resilience to deal with injury and maintain motivation to return to play, highlighting the benefits of participation.

RECOMMENDATION:

Building on research evidence, learnings from elite sport and 'what works' at grassroots youth sport, mental health organisations collaborate to co-design a package of resources and resilience training with young people, parents and coaching organisations, which can be tailored to support young people across different sports.

2 PEER-TO-PEER SUPPORT

Young people value support from their club and team-mates during injury and recovery, to maintain self-identity and to mitigate fears and worries about returning to play.

RECOMMENDATION:

Youth sport and mental health organisations draw on insights from effective practice, and collaborate to co-design a peer-to-peer support programme for injured young people who are struggling with social and emotional problems.

4 GUIDANCE FOR FAMILIES

Engaged families are well-placed to support their children to develop injury coping strategies and resilience.

RECOMMENDATION:

Sport NGBs partner with mental health and youth sport organisations to develop resources and share them with families when children join sports clubs.

3 CLUB INJURY CHAMPIONS AND RETURN-TO-PLAY PLANS

There is a grassroots coaching knowledge gap in injury-related mental health awareness, and scope to develop active listening skills, person-centred approaches and capabilities to identify signs of distress.

RECOMMENDATION:

Sport NGBs support clubs to identify and develop injury-related mental health champions who can advise injured young people, their coaches and their families and put in place a return to play plan.

5 AN IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

Addressing the needs young people express will require systems-level change and action by sport NGBs, clubs, coaches, families and young people themselves, addressing negative cultures and behaviours.

RECOMMENDATION:

Sport NGBs, in collaboration with youth sport and mental health organisations, design and agree a sport NGB implementation framework for injury-related mental health and resilience resources and training, and an evaluation framework to monitor progress.

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