

Beyond the scoreboard: Mental health challenges of elite youth soccer athletes

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Introduction

“You play MLS NEXT? That’s awesome, you must be having the dream time of your life. All that travel, the competition, the academy environment, it must make getting into college so much easier, right?” I have heard some versions of this statement countless times. I have to admit, from outside, elite youth soccer looks exciting. People usually see the travels, competitions, showcases, recognition, opportunities, those glorious moments captured on social media, and the celebrations after winning. Some even assume that playing at this level is a golden ticket to a good college, that college coaches watch every game, and scholarships are there, waiting around the corner. What people don’t see are the struggles and challenges a student-athlete faces between these moments of excitement.

I have been playing MLS NEXT for a few years now. Athletes like me, who compete in elite leagues such as MLS NEXT and ECNL, are expected to perform in front of coaches and scouts, keep our grades up, manage demanding travel and training schedules, recover from injuries, and still maintain some kind of normal life. We are also expected to make all of it look effortless.

There were times while, recovering from an injury, I watched a teammate play my position. I watched my team win without me. I celebrated while quietly wondering about my place on the team. I have traveled to tournaments expecting to compete but have spent game after game on the bench. I have returned home physically exhausted from training but still expected to finish homework and prepare for exams the next day in school. It almost feels like the pressure from one part of my life has followed me directly into the other.

What surprised me was learning that my experiences were so common among elite athletes. Dr. Geoffrey F. Woodman, a sports psychologist at Vanderbilt University, reminded me that athletes are not immune to mental health challenges simply because they compete at a high level. In fact, he explained that athletes are “a huge sample of the general population,” meaning their likelihood of experiencing mental health struggles is similar to everyone else’s. Dr. Woodman estimated that roughly “one-quarter to one-third” of people are dealing with a major mental health challenge at any given time. Elite athletes face those same realities while also managing the pressures of competition, performance, injury, and constant evaluation.

The pressures look different from player to player, but the mental toll is almost always hidden from coaches, parents, teammates, and even the athletes themselves. A 2023 study of elite youth athletes found that nearly one in five met the clinical threshold for anxiety, and nearly one in five met the threshold for depression (*Journal of Sports Sciences*). These statistics don’t equate every disappointment, injury, or difficult game as a mental health condition. But they do show that the pressures student-athletes experience deserve more attention than they receive.

For a long time, I believed managing these pressures silently was part of being mentally strong. Most of that pressure never gets noticed by the people around you, because athletes are raised to look tough no matter what's going on in their minds (and hearts!). Admitting that you're

struggling doesn't feel like an option when everyone around you has been trained to read that as weakness. I now understand that appearing fine and actually being fine are not always the same. Mental health awareness in sports has come a long way in the last few years, but at the elite youth level, in soccer especially, the actual support hasn't caught up. Athletes are still left to deal with performance pressure largely on their own.

The Demands and Pressures of Elite Youth Soccer

Training four days a week is the baseline at this level, and that's before school, travel, and everything else gets factored in. Playing in MLS NEXT or ECNL means every single game carries weight, every practice session feels like an audition and not an opportunity to become a better player. Over time, this constant pressure to 'perform' wears you down. It does not always show up right away.

A study in *Frontiers in Physiology* notes that elite young athletes face training volume, physical and mental fatigue, and time management problems all at once. This very well explains my daily routine. As I return home around 10:00 p.m. from training, I put down my soccer bag, shower, eat, and then open my laptop. There may be assignments waiting, SAT prep waiting, or preparation for an upcoming test. I might be physically and mentally exhausted; my academic schedule does not change because I play soccer. I am expected to perform well in both.

That pressure became real on the day I took the SAT exam. I had a game right after my test. While taking the test, I tried to block out thoughts about whether I would arrive at the game on time and how I would perform. On the way to the field, I tried to stop thinking about the questions I might have answered incorrectly. By kickoff, I was expected to be nothing but focused and ready to play. Part of my mind, however, was still in the testing room. I had already spent hours concentrating on an exam that could influence my college future, but there was no real time to decompress before entering yet another environment where I would be evaluated.

That day, it felt as though I had taken two tests. One was measured by a SAT score. The other was measured by every pass, touch, and decision I made on the field. This is one of the parts people miss when they only see the highlight clips or the scoreboard. The stress compounds. It doesn't reset between games the way people assume it does, and most athletes at this level are never taught how to process any of this pressure. Elite training programs tend to treat the mental side as something that will just sort itself out, but for a lot of players it does not; it builds.

Dr. Brian Foster, a sports psychologist at Florida State University, told me that today's athletes face unprecedented levels of pressure. He attributes much of this to the rising costs of youth sports and higher education, which have transformed athletic scholarships from a welcome opportunity into what many families see as the only realistic path to affording college. Once that shift happens, soccer stops being something you do for fun and starts feeling more like a job you can't afford to lose. Ashley McFeeley, a student-athlete mental health counselor at the University of Central Florida Athletics, pointed out that NIL has added a new layer of expectation. NIL refers to the rights of athletes, particularly college athletes in the United States, to earn money from the commercial use of their Name, Image, and Likeness. McFeeley, who previously worked with elite athletes at IMG Academy in Bradenton, Florida, explained that elite youth athletes now face the pressure to perform because of "financial expectations," and this means that the more a sport starts to feel like a career, the less room there is to actually enjoy it.

I began playing soccer because I loved how free I felt with the ball at my feet. That feeling is still there, but it can become harder to access when every practice feels connected to

playing time, college opportunities, family sacrifices, and my future. The sport I love can begin to feel like something I cannot afford to lose.

The Stigma Around Seeking Help

Dr. Foster explained that sport culture is built around rewarding toughness, so asking for help gets read as a sign you can't handle it, even though it is really the opposite. Even athletes who know something's wrong usually do not say anything about it. This 'being tough' message gets drilled in early. Like everyone around I faced severe growth pain in my legs, days when even simple movements made it very uncomfortable. I did not want to speak up as it might make me look like someone making excuses or unable to handle the demands of elite soccer or avoiding competition. Advil before practice and games was my go-to, and I somehow convinced myself that pushing through pain was the right thing to do. Looking back, I realize I was not so much afraid of the pain as I was of the perception that I could not handle it. I almost felt that speaking up would make me look weak or less committed. This mindset is very common among athletes. Staying quiet just feels safer than risking being seen as fragile or losing playing time because a coach decides you cannot handle the pressure.

McFeeley sees this play out among athletes trying to decide whether to reach out for mental health help. She said the stigma has eased over the last several years but has not disappeared altogether, and that some athletes are still hesitant "just because they believe they will be perceived as weak or needing help." She also said that athletes already juggling training, school, and a social life would rather spend their limited free time resting than adding another appointment with a mental health specialist to their schedule. Coaches, she added, play a bigger role than most people realize in this context. The more actively coaches support and normalize mental health care, the more likely their athletes are to actually use mental health services. "Until that gets reframed from the top down, and asking for help starts being treated as its own kind of strength, most athletes are going to keep choosing silence," McFeeley explained.

McFeeley's comments reminded me of something Dr. Woodman told me during our interview. He explained that many athletes avoid asking for help because they fear "being perceived as a liability on the field/court." Looking back, that concern makes a lot of sense. For athletes whose positions, playing time, and opportunities often feel uncertain, admitting that they are struggling emotionally can feel like giving people a reason to doubt them. The irony is that support is often available. As he explained, conversations with sports psychologists are confidential and legally protected, allowing athletes to discuss their challenges without worrying that those conversations will automatically reach coaches, parents, or teammates.

Recognizing Burnout Before It's Too Late

According to Dr. Foster, burnout often involves three connected experiences: physical exhaustion, a reduced sense of accomplishment, and losing the emotional connection an athlete once had with the sport. He emphasized the importance of noticing players who appear drained, stop recognizing their own progress, or begin saying, "I don't care anymore." McFeeley felt that burnout was the result of high pressure and high expectations combined with a demanding training load. She said that the warning signs athletes show before they ever ask for help tend to be consistent: isolation, changes in energy levels and engagement, withdrawal, and increased emotional responses, even as every athlete presents these differently.

I can understand how these signs develop. My exhaustion does not come from one source. It may begin with a full day at school, continue through the commute and soccer practice, and follow me home as assignments are due or I need to prepare for an exam. And the cycle begins the next morning again, and it continues. As this routine continues four days a week, it can become difficult to know whether I am losing motivation or simply running out of energy. There have been practices when I completed every drill while thinking about the work waiting for me at home. There have been classes when I appeared present but struggled to concentrate because I had studied late after practice. A coach may see a player reacting a second too slowly. A teacher may see a student struggling to stay engaged. Neither may see the complete person balancing both environments.

Initially, I thought burnout would be obvious at some point, that an athlete would stop trying or quit. My experiences have taught me that it can look much quieter. It can look like a player who still arrives at practice, completes every drill, submits every assignment, and encourages his teammates while gradually feeling less connected to everything he is doing. I watched this happen to a former teammate, Sebastian. He told me, "After every game, I struggled silently, no help, just me on my own. Every performance got worse, and I looked terrible as a player in front of my teammates, parents, and coaches. I felt so bad. Instead of help, I got benched, and it made me depressed; it was bad."

Whatever Sebastian said has stayed with me. Dr. Woodman explained that when performance becomes central to an athlete's identity, setbacks such as injuries, poor performances, or losing a starting position can feel far more significant than most people realize. He told me that these experiences can be "as difficult to handle as other major life events, such as the loss of an intimate relationship or the loss of a close friend." While some athletes learn and grow from adversity, he noted that others experience more harmful effects when they become consumed by things outside their control.

At a tournament in Arizona two years ago, my first time traveling to another state with my team and without my parents, and I was benched for successive games. I was looking forward to this trip for weeks. I imagined myself competing against strong teams, contributing for my team, in what would be an important step in my soccer development. When I finally asked my coach what I needed to improve, he told me I was not physically big enough. I nodded and accepted his feedback. I did not want to appear unable to handle criticism. But his words stayed with me. I wished I could grow an inch overnight. I kept asking myself if I actually belonged at this level.

Being away from my parents made the situation more difficult. I did not want to call home and sound as though I could not manage disappointment. I did not want my teammates to think I was upset about not playing. Inside, I was shattered; I doubted my ability, my body, and all the work I had put into reaching this level. This experience helped me understand that athletes do not always stop functioning when they are struggling. Sometimes we continue doing everything expected of us while using most of our mental energy to keep the struggle from becoming visible.

That is almost exactly what Dr. Foster described as what might have been playing out in real time in our team. None of us had the language for what we were seeing back then, and nobody on staff was equipped to notice either.

The Importance of Identity Beyond the Sport

Dr. Foster also brought up something that does not get talked about enough: having interests outside soccer actually matters for long-term well-being. Elite youth sports, however, do not really leave room for nurturing such interests. Youth athletes who want to play a second sport, join a club, or just have a hobby often do not have the hours in the week to do so. So, one's entire sense of self ends up tied to one thing: being an elite youth soccer player. And when this one thing goes badly, whether it is due to an injury, a bad season, or getting benched, it feels like losing part of who you are. Dr. Woodman explained that athletic setbacks become especially painful when sport occupies a central part of an athlete's identity. When that happens, injuries, poor performances, or losing a starting role are no longer viewed simply as athletic challenges. They begin to affect how athletes see themselves as people.

After a concussion, I had to stay home for weeks in a dark room with no screen or light. Though I was recovering physically, mentally I was torn, struggling to figure out who I was when I was not a soccer player. McFeeley sees this phenomenon most commonly with injuries, since by the time an athlete reaches an elite level, most of their life has already been built around being an athlete. She explained that when an injury happens, especially a season-ending one, it makes obvious just how much of a player's identity has been consumed by the sport, and that every athlete responds to that differently. It is important then to treat each situation individually. With my concussion, the hardest part was not the injury; it was the feeling of being disconnected from something that had shaped so much of my daily life.

What Elite Youth Soccer Programs Can Do Differently

None of this is unfixable, and Dr. Foster had specific ideas about what actually needs to change. He mentioned real rest periods and an actual offseason, coaches trained to recognize mental health warning signs, parents educated on how to support their kids, and less unnecessary travel, since there is no real reason young athletes should be flying across the country for games. McFeeley said elite youth soccer programs need embedded mental health and mental performance professionals who are consistently around the team, rather than staff who are only available once something has already gone wrong. Additionally, regular workshops, individual check-ins, and support built specifically for transitions like injuries or retirement are also a must. McFeeley also emphasized that recovery should be treated as part of training instead of something athletes have to earn, and that the most effective way to prevent burnout is teaching athletes to recognize it early and giving them real tools to manage stress before it builds up. McFeeley argued that organizations should not wait to take mental health seriously until an athlete is already struggling; mental health language has to be built into the organizational culture. Dr. Woodman noted that athletes would benefit greatly if "we could have a sports psychologist in every high school in America." Although he acknowledged the financial challenges of making that a reality, his point was clear: mental health support should be accessible before athletes reach a crisis point, and supporting athletes' mental well-being should be a fundamental part of athlete development.

Conclusion

Elite youth soccer has given me opportunities, friendships, discipline, and experiences I deeply value. It has also challenged me mentally in ways no scoreboard can show.

The cuts and bruises eventually faded, the concussion healed, the exams were completed, and the seasons moved on. What stayed with me longer were the moments in between. From the outside, those moments were invisible. People around me saw me as a player competing at a high level and also as a kid succeeding academically. They did not see the doubts, the exhaustion, or the mental challenges. that often came with trying to meet expectations everywhere at once. I faced some of the hardest battles not on a soccer field, but internally.

The scoreboard can tell you who won the game. It cannot tell you who spent the night questioning whether they belonged. It cannot show the athlete studying after practice, the injured player wondering if he will return the same, or the teammate smiling through self-doubt. Those stories exist beyond the scoreboard. And they deserve to be seen too.