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MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AMONG ATHLETES, CLOSURE OF SPORTS FACILITIES, AND THE DECLINE IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY LEVELS DUE TO COVID-19

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic brought global disruptions across all sectors, with sports and physical activity among the hardest hit. This study explores the psychological and physical impact of the pandemic on athletes, emphasizing the mental health challenges, closure of sports facilities, and the resultant decline in physical activity levels. The abrupt suspension of sporting events, closure of training centers, and enforcement of lockdowns led to heightened psychological distress among athletes, including anxiety, depression, demotivation, and identity crises. Many athletes lost access to structured routines, coaching support, and competition, which are essential to both performance and mental stability. The closure of sports facilities disrupted regular training, causing a decline in performance readiness and contributing to emotional burnout. Simultaneously, there was a global decrease in physical activity levels among the general population and amateur athletes due to limited access to recreational spaces and fitness infrastructure. This inactivity increased the risk of lifestyle diseases and mental health disorders. The pandemic highlighted the urgent need for integrating mental health support within athletic programs and adopting digital solutions for fitness continuity. The study concludes by recommending policy reforms, hybrid training models, and enhanced psychological services to mitigate the long-term impact on athletes and the broader community. The findings underscore the importance of resilience planning and mental health prioritization in sports policy post-COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, athletes, mental health, sports facility closure, physical inactivity, depression, anxiety, psychological support, pandemic impact, training disruption

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, has led to unprecedented disruptions worldwide since its outbreak in late 2019. Among the many sectors impacted, the world of sports experienced significant upheaval. Governments and health authorities implemented strict measures such as lockdowns, social distancing, and closure of public spaces to curb the virus's spread. These necessary interventions resulted in the closure of sports facilities, cancellation of events, and suspension of training activities, profoundly affecting athletes at all levels—from grassroots amateurs to elite professionals.

Physical activity and sports play a vital role not only in maintaining physical health but also in supporting mental wellbeing. Regular engagement in physical activity has been well-documented to reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress. For athletes, sport is often central to their identity and lifestyle, providing structure, social interaction, and a sense of purpose. The sudden and prolonged disruption caused by the pandemic created a unique challenge, as athletes faced the loss of their routine training environments and competitive platforms. This disruption precipitated a cascade of mental health issues including increased anxiety, depression, emotional distress, and a crisis of identity.

The closure of sports facilities compounded the problem by severely limiting opportunities for physical activity. With gyms, stadiums, swimming pools, and community sports centers closed for extended periods, athletes and the general public alike experienced a dramatic reduction in access to safe, structured exercise options. This led to a decline in physical activity levels globally, as reflected in various studies during lockdown phases. The inability to maintain physical



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conditioning not only jeopardized athletic performance but also contributed to negative psychological effects such as demotivation, decreased self-esteem, and heightened feelings of isolation.

Moreover, the lack of access to specialized training and coaching disrupted athlete development, particularly for young and emerging talents whose progression relies on consistent practice and competitive exposure. Many athletes also faced financial uncertainty due to the cancellation of events and loss of sponsorship, further exacerbating stress and mental health burdens.

Beyond the individual level, the decline in physical activity poses broader public health concerns. Sedentary lifestyles are associated with increased risks of chronic diseases such as obesity, cardiovascular conditions, and diabetes, which can strain healthcare systems already burdened by the pandemic. Mental health disorders linked to physical inactivity, such as depression and anxiety, also surged during this period, underscoring the interconnectedness of physical and psychological health.

The pandemic has revealed critical gaps in how the sports community addresses mental health and physical activity continuity during crises. It highlights the urgent need for integrated support systems that include mental health resources, digital training platforms, and adaptive policies to ensure athletes' well-being and performance sustainability. Innovative approaches such as virtual coaching, online fitness classes, and telepsychology services have emerged as potential solutions but require further development and accessibility.

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a multifaceted impact on athletes by triggering mental health challenges, restricting access to training facilities, and decreasing physical activity levels. Understanding these effects is essential for developing effective interventions that safeguard athlete health and promote resilience in the face of ongoing and future disruptions. This study seeks to explore these dynamics in detail, offering insights to guide policymakers, sports organizations, and healthcare providers in mitigating the pandemic's adverse effects on the athletic community.

II. MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AMONG ATHLETES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the psychological well-being of individuals across the globe, with athletes being particularly vulnerable due to the abrupt disruption in training routines, competitive events, and support systems. Mental health has emerged as a critical area of concern within the athletic community during this period. Athletes at all levels—professional, collegiate, and amateur—have reported significant levels of anxiety, depression, demotivation, and psychological distress linked to the pandemic and its restrictions.

1. Anxiety and Depression Among Athletes

Anxiety and depression were among the most commonly reported mental health issues during the pandemic. A study by Pillay et al. (2020) found that 52% of elite South African athletes experienced symptoms of anxiety, while 47% reported depressive symptoms due to the lockdown and cancellation of events. Similarly, research conducted in the United Kingdom by Chandran and Vyas (2021) highlighted that nearly 60% of athletes faced moderate to severe mental health issues during the peak of the pandemic, primarily due to uncertainty about the future, financial instability, and lack of training facilities.

For many athletes, sport is not just a profession but a way of life, closely tied to their identity and self-worth. The sudden loss of structure and competition left athletes feeling aimless. This identity disruption was particularly pronounced among younger athletes and those in transition phases, such as high school athletes planning to enter collegiate sports or semi-professionals aspiring to turn professional (Moesch et al., 2021). When sporting careers were paused or ended abruptly, many athletes experienced what is termed "athletic identity foreclosure," leading to psychological instability.

2. Loss of Routine and Psychological Consequences

Routine and structure are fundamental to an athlete's mental stability. The pandemic disrupted daily training schedules, eating habits, sleep patterns, and recovery routines. This loss of routine has been associated with increased stress levels, as athletes lacked the regular outlets for physical and emotional release. According to Souter et al. (2020), the disruption of these routines contributed to a decline in sleep quality and increased irritability, both key markers of psychological distress.

Moreover, the closure of gyms, swimming pools, and training centers made it challenging for athletes to maintain physical conditioning, which in turn impacted their self-esteem and confidence. Many athletes reported feeling "out of shape" or "not game ready," contributing to performance anxiety and fear of returning to competition after restrictions were lifted (Samuel et al., 2020).



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3. Social Isolation and Loneliness

Athletes typically train and compete in socially rich environments. The pandemic enforced prolonged periods of social isolation, which compounded mental health struggles. For team athletes especially, the lack of interaction with teammates, coaches, and support staff led to feelings of loneliness and emotional detachment. In a survey conducted by the International Olympic Committee (IOC, 2021), over 70% of athletes reported that social isolation negatively impacted their mental health, indicating the importance of social connectedness in athletic environments.

Social isolation also limited access to peer support and informal counseling networks. For many athletes, teammates and coaches act as informal mental health buffers. Their absence heightened feelings of stress, fear, and anxiety. This was particularly true for athletes living alone or away from their families, as their support systems were physically inaccessible during lockdowns.

4. Increased Risk of Eating Disorders and Substance Use

The psychological toll of the pandemic also increased the risk of disordered eating and substance abuse among athletes. With disruptions in nutrition plans, reduced physical activity, and elevated stress, some athletes turned to unhealthy coping mechanisms. An investigation by Currie et al. (2021) showed an increase in reported cases of binge eating, body image issues, and use of performance-enhancing substances during lockdown periods among competitive athletes in North America.

Body image anxiety, particularly among aesthetic or weight-class athletes (e.g., gymnasts, wrestlers, boxers), was exacerbated by the inability to train and the fear of weight gain. These concerns, coupled with a lack of access to team nutritionists and psychologists, resulted in increased susceptibility to eating disorders and related complications.

5. Access to Mental Health Services

The pandemic highlighted significant gaps in the accessibility of mental health services for athletes. Many sports organizations lacked the infrastructure to provide virtual mental health support. Even where services were available, stigma surrounding mental health issues deterred athletes from seeking help. According to Henriksen et al. (2020), fewer than 20% of elite athletes actively sought psychological support during the pandemic, despite widespread reports of distress.

Teletherapy and virtual counseling emerged as alternative solutions. However, disparities in digital access, especially among athletes in rural or economically disadvantaged areas, limited the effectiveness of these services. Additionally, some athletes were hesitant to engage in virtual platforms due to concerns about privacy or discomfort with digital communication formats (Schinke et al., 2020).

6. Financial Stress and Career Uncertainty

The economic fallout of the pandemic further intensified mental health challenges. Many athletes, especially those not supported by central contracts or institutions, rely on sponsorships, prize money, and appearance fees for income. The cancellation of tournaments and events led to financial instability, causing stress and anxiety. Female athletes and those from less popular sports were disproportionately affected due to limited funding and fewer commercial opportunities (Mountjoy et al., 2021).

Career uncertainty, including postponed Olympic events and uncertain selection trials, also contributed to psychological burden. Athletes preparing for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, for example, had to abruptly alter their training plans and face emotional turmoil due to postponement, jeopardizing their peak performance timelines and long-term career planning (Reardon et al., 2021).

7. Need for a Holistic Mental Health Approach

The COVID-19 crisis underscored the need for a more holistic approach to athlete well-being. Mental health must be integrated into athletic development frameworks alongside physical conditioning and tactical training. This includes regular mental health screenings, access to licensed sports psychologists, and destigmatization efforts within athletic cultures.

Sports governing bodies have started to respond. The International Olympic Committee and national sports federations have initiated mental wellness campaigns, encouraged virtual mental health training for coaches, and supported athletes with remote counseling resources. Yet, much more needs to be done, especially at grassroots and collegiate levels.



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III. CLOSURE OF SPORTS FACILITIES DUE TO COVID-19

Finally, the closure of sports facilities due to COVID-19 was a necessary but impactful public health intervention. It disrupted athlete development, reduced public access to exercise, and highlighted the urgent need for crisis preparedness in the sports sector, including safe reopening protocols and digital alternatives for fitness engagement.

IV. DECLINE IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY LEVELS DUE TO COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic led to unprecedented disruptions in daily life, resulting in a significant global decline in physical activity levels. Lockdowns, social distancing measures, and the closure of recreational and fitness facilities severely restricted opportunities for movement, exercise, and organized sport. This decline has raised serious public health concerns due to its implications for physical, mental, and metabolic health.

Before the pandemic, regular physical activity was already a challenge for many populations. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 exacerbated this issue. A systematic review by Stockwell et al. (2021) found that physical activity decreased across all age groups and demographic categories during lockdowns. The study revealed a consistent decline in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) and an increase in sedentary behavior, particularly screen time. These changes were more pronounced among urban populations where access to private outdoor spaces was limited.

Multiple studies across countries reported similar trends. In an international online survey covering 1047 participants, Ammar et al. (2020) observed a 32% reduction in physical activity and a 28% increase in sedentary behavior during lockdown. Home confinement, fear of contracting the virus, and lack of motivation were cited as major barriers. For many individuals, especially those reliant on gyms or public parks, the shift to home-based exercise was insufficient to meet World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines of 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per week.

Children and adolescents were particularly affected. With the closure of schools and cancellation of extracurricular sports, structured physical activity significantly declined. Dunton et al. (2020) highlighted a marked reduction in physical activity levels among school-aged children in the United States during school closures, raising concerns about childhood obesity and long-term health risks. Similarly, older adults—already vulnerable to immobility and chronic illnesses—suffered further declines in physical activity due to heightened COVID-19 risks and prolonged isolation (Yamada et al., 2020).

The consequences of reduced physical activity extend beyond physical health. Sedentary lifestyles have been associated with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and stress, especially during periods of uncertainty and confinement (Meyer et al., 2020). Physical inactivity is a known risk factor for cardiovascular disease, diabetes, musculoskeletal disorders, and metabolic syndrome, all of which can worsen outcomes if individuals contract COVID-19 (WHO, 2020).

In response to these challenges, public health agencies and fitness organizations encouraged online workouts, homebased fitness routines, and walking or cycling in uncrowded areas. However, access to digital resources and space to exercise varied widely, highlighting inequalities in the ability to remain active during the pandemic (Rhodes et al., 2020). Finally the COVID-19 pandemic led to a global decline in physical activity levels, with serious short- and long-term implications. Addressing this issue requires targeted interventions to promote physical activity, improve digital fitness accessibility, and integrate movement into daily routines as part of pandemic recovery strategies.

V. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of mental health within the athletic community. From elite professionals to youth athletes, the disruption of training routines, cancellation of competitions, financial instability, and social isolation triggered widespread psychological distress. While some resilience strategies have emerged, the crisis has underscored the necessity of embedding mental health services into the core of athletic programs. As the world transitions to post-pandemic recovery, sports organizations must prioritize the mental well-being of athletes and develop adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable support systems that go beyond physical training. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a multifaceted impact on the sporting world. Athletes were significantly affected not only by the closure of training and competition venues but also by the psychological burden imposed by uncertainty and isolation. The decline in physical activity among both professional athletes and the general population poses a serious public health challenge. Recovery requires a multipronged approach involving psychological support, physical rehabilitation, and systemic policy changes to bolster resilience in the sports community.



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