

SHORT COMMUNICATION

# Reimagining Coaching: A Dual-Competency Framework for Embedding Mental Health Literacy in Collegiate Sport

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## Abstract

Coaching plays a pivotal role in shaping the mental health and well-being of student-athletes, profoundly influencing psychological resilience, motivation, and athletic performance. Coaching styles, ranging from autonomy-supportive to authoritarian, carry distinct implications for stress regulation, emotional well-being, and burnout risk. Research increasingly demonstrates that positive coaching behaviors, characterized by empathy, autonomy support, and emotional intelligence, are associated with improved mental health outcomes; while controlling and punitive approaches exacerbate psychological strain. Despite growing awareness, significant gaps persist in how coaching is systematically integrated into athlete mental health frameworks. This short communication synthesizes theoretical and empirical literature to advance a novel Dual-Competency Model of Coaching that repositions mental health literacy as a core coaching function, co-equal with technical and performance expertise. By bridging coach education and mental health disciplines, the model provides an interdisciplinary framework for reimagining coaching practice, policy, and education.

**Keywords:** Coaching Styles, Athlete Mental Health, Student-Athlete Well-Being.

## 1. Introduction

Collegiate sport imposes a dual mandate of academic distinction and elite athletic performance, subjecting student-athletes to relentless training volumes, compressed travel schedules, and pervasive public scrutiny. This convergence fuels elevated rates of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion, eroding engagement in both classrooms and competition. Recent surveillance indicates that more than one-third of female athletes and nearly 30 % of male athletes report chronic mental fatigue, while depressive symptoms and performance anxiety continue to rise across National Collegiate Athletic Association divisions (NCAA, 2025). Longitudinal evidence further links these pressures to early sport attrition and disrupted academic trajectories (Bissett & Tamminen, 2020), underscoring the need for mental-

health supports that permeate daily operations rather than episodic, referral-based interventions.

This short communication propounds a Dual-Competency Model of Coaching that positions mental-health literacy as a coequal pillar alongside technical and tactical expertise. It first critically integrates motivation-based theories with the latest empirical evidence, then rigorously delineates the mechanisms and praxis of the model, and finally advances actionable accreditation, policy, and research directives to embed psychological safety within collegiate-sport governance.

### 1.1 Coaching Styles and Their Psychological Impact on Student-Athlete Mental Health

Coaching behaviors shape the psychological climate in which collegiate athletes balance intense athletic

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and academic demands. Two complementary motivational frameworks; Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Achievement Goal Theory (AGT) explain how specific leadership approaches either foster resilience or precipitate distress (Balaguer et al., 2012; Gustafsson et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Smith et al., 2019).

### ***1.1.1 Self-Determination Theory: Nurturing Basic Psychological Needs***

SDT identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as prerequisites for optimal motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Autonomy-supportive coaches cultivate these needs by inviting athlete input, acknowledging feelings, and providing empathic, actionable feedback. Among collegiate athletes, such behaviors predict greater enjoyment, sustained engagement, and lower emotional exhaustion (Balaguer et al., 2012; Gorczynski et al., 2024). Conversely, controlling coaching, excessive criticism, conditional regard, or punitive sanctions, thwarts the same needs and elevates anxiety, stress, and burnout (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2019). SDT therefore establishes psychological-need satisfaction as the primary pathway through which coaching style influences mental health. However, the model must be adapted to collegiate realities (e.g., scholarship dependency and institutional performance mandates), that can constrain athletes' autonomy even in otherwise supportive climates.

### ***1.1.2 Achievement Goal Theory: Mastery- versus Performance-Oriented Climates***

AGT complements SDT by clarifying how coaches frame success. Mastery-oriented climates emphasize effort, learning, and self-improvement and are linked to higher self-efficacy, better emotional regulation, and stronger long-term sport commitment (Smith et al., 2007; Moore et al., 2022). Performance-oriented climates elevate winning and normative comparison; they correlate with fear of failure, maladaptive perfectionism, and elevated burnout risk (Gustafsson et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2023). External pressures, media scrutiny, roster competition, financial incentives, can distort even well-intentioned climates. Pasquini et al. (2024) demonstrate that athletes' perceptions of immediacy and value mediate how such mixed signals are internalized, underscoring the need for coaches to align daily interactions with espoused mastery values.

### ***1.1.3 Integrated Implications for Mental Health***

Collectively, SDT and AGT converge on a central

proposition: coaching styles that satisfy psychological needs, prioritize mastery, and deliver autonomy-supportive feedback create climates that protect mental health and build mental-health literacy. Those that thwart needs, elevate ego-involvement, or rely on coercive feedback contribute to anxiety, burnout, and dropout. The next section synthesizes empirical evidence linking these theoretical mechanisms to concrete psychological outcomes, motivation, stress physiology, burnout trajectories, and resilience, within collegiate sport.

## **1.2 Psychological Outcomes**

### ***1.2.1 Motivation and Sport Commitment***

Athlete motivation is a critical determinant of sport commitment and long-term engagement. Autonomy-supportive coaching environments have been consistently linked to higher levels of intrinsic motivation, increased enjoyment, and sustained participation (Liu et al., 2023; Varghese et al., 2022). These environments foster internalized goals by promoting autonomy, competence, and relatedness; core tenets of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In contrast, controlling coaching behaviors, such as excessive use of rewards, punitive feedback, and rigid demands, are associated with external regulation and amotivation, undermining athlete engagement.

### ***1.2.2 Stress and Performance Anxiety***

The psychological demands of competitive sport often elicit complex stress responses, and coaching behaviors are central to how athletes cognitively appraise and physiologically respond to these pressures. Research has consistently demonstrated that supportive coaching environments, those that emphasize mastery goals, emotional encouragement, and athlete autonomy, can buffer the effects of stress and reframe high-pressure situations as challenges rather than threats (Judge et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2007). This cognitive reframing has been associated with improved concentration, enhanced self-confidence, and superior athletic performance. In contrast, ego-involving coaching climates, characterized by excessive pressure, fear-based motivation, and punitive feedback, have been positively associated with elevated competitive anxiety, self-doubt, and maladaptive coping behaviors (Gustafsson et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2023).

### ***1.2.3 Burnout and Athlete Well-Being***

Burnout represents a severe consequence of prolonged psychological stress in sport, typically manifesting as emotional exhaustion, a diminished

sense of accomplishment, and devaluation of one's athletic role (Li et al., 2022; Raedeke, 1997). The relationship between coaching climate and burnout is well-documented; autonomy-supportive coaching mitigates burnout risk by satisfying athletes' basic psychological needs and encouraging adaptive motivational regulation (Varghese et al., 2022). In contrast, controlling or punitive coaching styles contribute to the onset and intensification of burnout symptoms, particularly among athletes exposed to sustained performance pressure without adequate psychological support (Judge et al., 2012; Li et al., 2022).

### 1.2.4 Resilience and Psychological Well-Being

Beyond mitigating adverse outcomes, coaching style also influences athletes' capacity for resilience. Transformational and autonomy-supportive coaches, who emphasize empathy, individualized support, and growth-oriented feedback, play a pivotal role in fostering psychological resilience and optimism among athletes (Zhang et al., 2025). Liu et al. (2023) reported that autonomy-supportive coaching significantly enhanced resilience in athletes, equipping them with coping strategies that buffered against competitive stress and performance-related setbacks. In contrast, fear-based or authoritarian environments, which rely on discipline and control rather than collaboration and support, are associated with negative mental health outcomes and diminished athlete confidence (Smith et al., 2019).

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1 The Critical Role of Mental Health Literacy in Coaching

As the connection between coaching behaviors and athlete mental health becomes increasingly clear, there is a growing consensus on the need to embed mental health literacy into coach education. Coaches who are trained in mental health awareness are more likely to create psychologically safe environments, recognize early signs of distress, and facilitate appropriate referrals to mental health professionals (Gorczynski et al., 2023). Moreover, athletes under such coaches report greater trust, improved motivation, and enhanced well-being (Judge et al., 2024). Moore et al. (2022) explored the need for interprofessional competency collaboration to promote mental health literacy in sport. This includes a shared goal by all individuals collaborating with athletes on respecting the dignity and worth of an athlete, building trust-based relationships, exposing athletes to diverse

professionals outside of their coaching staff, and ensuring routine discussions on mental health.

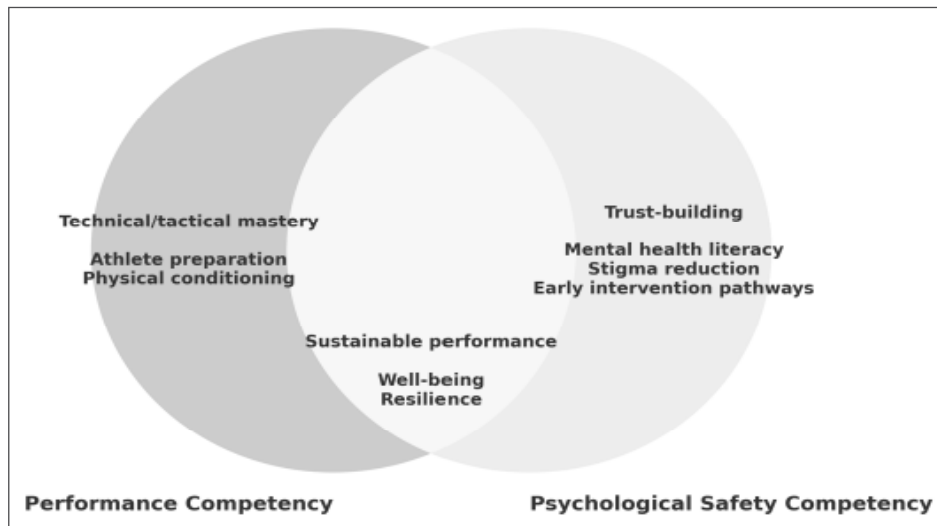
Despite these promising efforts, most coaching certification programs still lack structured training on mental health issues. Zaré and Stull (2023) found this curricular omission contributes to an environment in which mental health challenges may go undetected, dismissed, or mismanaged, perpetuating stigma and exacerbating athlete distress. Judge and Smith (2023) further critique existing coaching education systems for their outdated content, lack of practical application, and failure to address critical areas such as mental health and cultural competence. The integration of mental health education within certification frameworks is therefore both a professional and ethical imperative.

### Dual-Competency Model of Coaching

Despite growing recognition of the critical role coaches play in supporting athlete mental health, systemic limitations in coach education continue to hinder meaningful progress. Recent reviews underscore that mental health training for coaches remains fragmented, inconsistently implemented, and insufficiently institutionalized across sport systems. Gorczynski et al. (2023) identify three pervasive structural deficits 1) absence of formalized standards, 2) limited competency in referral pathways, and 3) entrenched stigma and cultural resistance.

Addressing these systemic barriers demands a coordinated response involving sport governing bodies, coach accrediting organizations, and academic institutions. Universal standards for mental health training, embedded within coach education curricula and reinforced through continuing professional development, are essential. These standards must move beyond awareness-raising to include competency-based assessment, referral protocols, and culturally responsive frameworks that equip coaches to navigate the complex intersection of performance and psychological well-being. Without such reforms, mental health literacy in coaching will remain uneven, ad hoc, and insufficient to meet the evolving demands of contemporary sport.

The authors propose a Dual-Competency Model of Coaching where mental health-integration is paramount. This conceptual model emphasizes that effective coaching in contemporary collegiate sport requires the concurrent development of two equally critical competencies (See Figure 1):



**Figure 1.** *The Dual-Competency Model for Mental Health-Integrated Coaching*

Rather than treating mental health knowledge as an adjunct to traditional coaching skills, the Dual-Competency Model of Coaching conceptualizes psychological safety as integral to optimizing athletic performance. These competencies are not sequential but mutually reinforcing. By embedding mental health literacy within the broader framework of performance leadership (Moore et al., 2022; Zaré & Stull, 2023), coaching education programs can empower coaches to engage confidently with interdisciplinary support systems without perceiving mental health initiatives as encroachments on their authority. This integrated approach represents a necessary evolution in coaching praxis in the modern sporting landscape. The approach collectively moves the coaching profession toward a more holistic paradigm, one in which athletic success is inextricably linked to mental health and psychological resilience.

### 3. Conclusion

Coaching behaviors do far more than refine technical skill; they engineer the motivational architecture and psychological safety of collegiate sport. As competitive stakes escalate, the field must move from a performance-centric paradigm to one that regards psychological leadership as fundamental—on par with tactical expertise (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Gustafsson et al., 2017). To convert knowledge into practice, we advance the Dual-Competency Model of Coaching, which positions performance optimization and psychological safety as mutually reinforcing imperatives rather than competing priorities.

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