

# Mental Health TRAINERS



*OU's sport psychology program  
is first in the nation to address  
the unique needs of student-athletes.*

BY APRIL WILKERSON  
Photos by Travis Caperton

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**N**icole Mendes knew something wasn't right. She was a sophomore on OU's elite softball team, yet she felt sad and lacked motivation for the sport she loved. Her grades suffered, her performance on the field was affected, and she began isolating herself from friends and teammates.

In years past, student-athletes like Mendes might have been told to brush it off and pull herself together. But today, OU Athletics prioritizes mental health and helps people like Mendes, who face unique challenges as student-athletes. Not only did Mendes get the help she needed, she has become a leader in raising awareness about mental health, backed by a sport psychology program that is immersed in the lives of OU's 600 student-athletes.

"I compare mental health to going to your athletic trainer when something is hurting—they do rehab and help you get back to your prime," says Mendes, who is now a senior. "It's the same thing mentally—you may not know why you feel down, but you can do the mental rehab to get back to your fullest self."

OU not only recognizes the stressors that student-athletes face, but the university is also a leader in the way it supports student-athletes: through PROS, or Psychological Resources for OU Student-Athletes. OU was the first university in the nation to have a sport psychologist on staff, beginning in 2004, and it provides an increasingly broad range of services to athletes.

"Student-athletes face all the typical stressors of the college experience, but they're also putting in at least 20 hours a week in their sports, which increases the need for mental health professionals to be involved in college athletics," says Cody Commander, director of PROS. "We want to be proactive in helping our student-athletes."

Providing psychological services to student-athletes is a diverse and robust undertaking. The PROS team offers mental health counseling and provides medication management through a psychiatrist on campus each week. Psychological testing is provided to determine if students have any learning disorders that might hinder them in the classroom. Student-athletes may experience depression or anxiety, heightened by

the transition to college and varsity sports. Because of frequent practice and travel, student-athletes must do make-up work for their classes and create effective study habits—how they studied in high school may no longer work.

In addition, student-athletes usually can't afford to make the same mistakes as their peers who don't play sports. "Especially for athletes who are higher profile, if they do something they shouldn't have, it may be on ESPN and the whole nation knows about it," Commander says. "So, there is a lot more stress centered around not making any mistakes, which can stunt people developmentally because we learn from our mistakes. If they're not able to make those mistakes, it's hard to learn from them."

Student-athletes also may face anxiety around seemingly normal activities, like going out with friends or eating at a restaurant. "They can't go eat lunch at a fast-food place with other students in class because they're having to manage what they eat so they can fuel their bodies to perform at the highest levels," Commander says. "They also may not be able to attend social events because they have a curfew or are out of town. They can be stressed because they don't have an outlet for socializing that other students may have."

To help student-athletes manage their stress, PROS team members make themselves visible by going to team practices; visiting with athletes in the training room; talking with athletic directors, strength and conditioning coaches and nutrition staff; and communicating with academic advisers. Dolores Christensen, assistant director of PROS, says the team doesn't want to be seen as faceless psychologists on an upper floor, but as athletic staff who are there to help them.

"If student-athletes are struggling, they're not going reach out to someone they don't have a sense of, so at the minimum, I want them to know who I am and what I do," Christensen says. "Then, if they've had a conversation with me or if we've joked around in the training room before practice, they're going to be all the more comfortable in reaching out for help or recommending that a teammate reach out for help. Because we are so integrated into the department, it promotes the destigmatization of services."

Since athletic department staff members spend so much time with student-athletes, the sport psychology team also

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Opposite page - The PROS team is all in for student-athlete mental health. From left are Cody Commander, director; Kyla Cummings, graduate assistant; Tamara Bailey, doctoral intern; J.J. Swearingen, assistant director; Dolores Christensen, assistant director; and Jon Fledzinskas, doctoral intern.

educates them about potential warning signs of depression or anxiety.

“We work closely with athletic trainers—because they see the athletes every day, they may notice that someone is noticeably different in practice,” Commander says. “Sometimes they will see the physiological symptoms before the cognitive symptoms, like students being slower in their drills. Or students may be continually late to practice, or they’ve become the quiet person when they’ve usually been the talkative one. Athletic staff are in a position to notice that and let us know that a student-athlete may need some help.”

One of the biggest champions for mental health awareness in student-athletes, however, may be the students themselves. Last year, Mendes and her fellow members of SAIL—Student-Athlete Innovative Leaders—organized the “Your Mental Health Matters” campaign. Several teams designated some of their competitions as “mental health games,” wearing the color green on their uniforms to raise awareness about the



Doctoral interns Tamara Bailey and Jon Fiedzinskas talk with director Cody Commander, right, about the PROS program. The program’s services include mental health counseling, psychological testing and medication management.

sources, it normalizes it,” he says. “Students think, ‘That person is having the exact experience I am; I guess I’m not so unusual. Maybe I’ll go in and get some help.’”

*“As student-athletes, we know we have a platform and we’re very visible, not just to other students but in the community and even around the world.”*

importance of mental health. Other teams made videos talking about how they take care of their mental health or how they overcame struggles.

If student-athletes hear from their peers about mental health awareness, they are more likely to seek help when they need it, Commander says.

“When student-athletes speak out about mental health re-

OU’s second “Your Mental Health Matters” campaign is under way. More sports are designating competitions as mental health games and making videos about the importance of taking care of mental health.

“As student-athletes, we know we have a platform and we’re very visible, not just to

other students but in the community and even around the world,” Mendes says. “With that platform, we hope we can be vulnerable so others feel comfortable being vulnerable and know that sometimes it’s OK to not be OK. When we get help, we can discover a version of ourselves that’s better than we knew existed.”

Sport psychology services represent about 80 percent of



Commander and his staff serve the 600 student-athletes who call OU home. The director says students are starting to see that taking care of their mental health is as important as their physical well-being.

the work of PROS staff. The rest of their efforts focus on sport performance, leadership and personal development of student-athletes. Student-athletes have a tendency to make unfavorable comparisons—comparing themselves to others but not recognizing that each has strengths and weaknesses, Commander says. The staff also works with students on proper goal-setting and basing their confidence not on how well they're performing, but their level of ability.

"We'll have student-athletes whose goal is to win a national championship. While that sounds like a great goal, how much control do they really have over that? We talk to them about setting goals concerning what they can control—how well they do every day and how well they perform," Commander says. "Hopefully that sets them up for a larger possibility of winning the national championship, but their goals are centered around what they can influence."


Leadership development focuses on helping OU student-athletes be better leaders for their teams, as well as in the classroom and community. Personal development also is a priority. Last year, PROS launched a group for student-athletes of color. Because they are on a predominantly white-identified campus, Christensen says, the group gives them time to connect with one another and with white-identified athletes who want to learn how to be better allies and to talk about race and racism.

"It's a space to interact with student-athletes in a different context – not clinical, not leadership training, but personal development, which I really love," Christensen says.

The thread running through everything PROS offers is its doctoral internship program to train the next generation of sport psychologists. OU's program also is the first among its peers to have a full focus on sport psychology, with nearly all of its hours focused on athletics as opposed to other settings.

Doctoral students work with student-athletes four days each week, and the depth of training is unmatched, Commander says.

Most sport psychologists, on staff or in training, are former athletes themselves. Commander played collegiate tennis, Christensen played volleyball, others played golf and football. That background gives them an additional window into what student-athletes are going through each day and a desire to support those who are driven to both play sports and earn their college degree.

"I love our student-athletes and getting to know them," Christensen says. "They are such incredible, amazing people, and I enjoy being part of their process of becoming better athletes and human beings. I think I have the best job in the world to be able to do that every day." 

*April Wilkerson is editor of OU Medicine.*