

**Advocacy Plan**

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### **Introduction:**

Youth sports create environments that aim to benefit children physically, socially, and mentally through activities and competition. However, when youth athletes show competence and excellence, parents and coaches often place more pressure on them. Gwyther and colleagues express, “The commitment and lifestyle demands associated with elite sport—including ongoing and frequent training and competition, maintaining strict diets and ensuring adequate recovery, rest and sleep—mandate high levels of discipline and responsibility, requiring elite youth athletes to often behave as ‘mini adults’” (2024). But we must remember that these gifted athletes are children. These can result in overtraining, burnout, and perfectionism, while allowing the athlete to be vulnerable to abuse.

In this paper, I present two related advocacy topics and plans on how I can advocate for youth athletes. I will also present ethical concerns about the two advocacy topics. The last section of this paper will lay out an advocacy plan. Through this plan, I will become a strong advocate for youth athletes and their mental health.

### **Advocacy Topics:**

I am interested in high-performing youth athletes and their mental health safety. *Youth* and *young athletes* will be defined as athletes under the age of 18. These young athletes are surrounded by coaches, teachers, specialists, and parents. *High Performance* will be defined as athletes who qualify for Multi-State or National competitions.

The first advocacy topic is high-performing youth athletes. As mentioned before, high-performing athletes are in situations where they are given adult expectations. However, they are reliant on adults since they are still minors. Coaches strongly influence the athlete’s experience because they control the training volume, intensity, and modalities. We recognize this

responsibility and acknowledge that it creates a power imbalance within the coach-athlete relationship. The US Center for SafeSport code states, “A Power Imbalance refers to an actual or perceived unequal distribution of power and authority between individuals” (2024). Minor athletes naturally feel this imbalance more than adults with coaches. Coaches can overlook each athlete's mental, physical, and social development. Therefore, this population remains vulnerable and requires advocates who understand these developmental needs. This is why I have chosen high-performing athletes as the specific population and the first issue addressed in this paper.

The second advocacy topic is the mental health of youth athletes. When developmental needs are ignored, young athletes are placed in situations that can endanger their health. They may have a coach overtraining them, parents who pressure them to win at all costs, or decide to specialize in one sport/position too early. Such choices can lead to situations like Overtraining Syndrome (OTS), which can impact an athlete’s social, emotional, and physiological development (Watkins et al., 2024). Watkins and colleagues also mention that young athletes can also feel pressures of perfectionism and fear, which can lead to suicidal ideations. Currently, no laws or guidelines specifically prevent young athletes from overtraining. But creating laws and policies can be difficult because “adolescence is inherently dynamic and non-linear with asynchronous development of physical, physiological, psychological and social attributes within and between individuals continuing from late childhood into early adulthood. The trajectories, timing and tempo across the biological, cognitive and psychosocial domains of development also vary by sex, race and ethnicity” (Bergeron et al., 2024). Parents of talented youth athletes can positively or negatively impact the athlete’s mental health. Walton et al. suggest that “Parental pressure has been linked to youth athletes’ perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns, and parental climates that emphasize concerns about failure are associated with perfectionism

and burnout among competitive junior athletes” (2024). Sports Psychology Professionals (SPP) should use their knowledge, training, and roles to advocate for these athletes and their mental health.

On an individual level, young athletes need mental and physical support to help with these concerns. To help on a larger scale, National and International sports governing bodies must create better guidelines and rules to protect young athletes’ physical and mental health.

### **Ethical Analysis:**

The US Center for SafeSport (SafeSport) guidelines offer principles and parameters for sports-related behavior. Any National Governing Body (NGB) member for sports in the United States of America must participate in annual SafeSport training. SafeSport also has its own code that includes definitions, instructions, and expectations. The foundational principles of the AASP Code of Ethics include Concern for Others’ Welfare and Social Responsibility (AASP, 20214). The ACA Code of Ethics Code Section A.7.a asks that counselors advocate for clients to combat obstacles that may impede a client’s development (ACA, 2014). Both Codes also have sections that state that practitioners should do no harm. One clear difference between the SafeSport code and those from AASP and ACA is that SAFESPORT is reactive rather than preventative. They list situations where things have gone wrong and train a person to respond. The AASP and ACA codes set expectations on how a practitioner should behave to avoid ethical concerns. SPPs should recognize this difference when working with youth athletes and youth teams.

Ethical concerns arise when we see patterns of overuse injuries and mental health concerns from youth sports. Because SafeSport lacks guidelines preventing these patterns, education is needed for culture and organizational change. SPPs have knowledge, experience, and access to teams. These qualities make them uniquely equipped to advocate for change within

youth sports organizations. SPPs should evaluate individual, relational, and organizational factors that may contribute to these concerns. These can be sensitive issues and should be approached with sensitivity and consideration. SPPs should diligently operate within competency and refer to other licensed professionals when finding a case outside of competency.

### **Advocacy Plan:**

In my current role as a coach, I can advocate for youth athletes when they are on my team or on teams near me. However, I can have a more significant influence and impact through a role as a mental performance counselor. I plan to use additional modules to educate coaches, parents, and athletes.

Here are the steps I would take to advocate for positive mental health in high-performing youth athletes.

### **Mental Performance Consulting**

- Offer specific training to help recognize emotional, social, and physical health markers with a list of resources and licensed professionals that can help in each competency.
  - Each training should be directed to either the coach, parents, or athlete to help create a collaborative and cohesive situation where the athlete's well-being is the priority.
  - The specific training modules could be developed within six months after completing my UWS education.
- I will find these opportunities through building my network through swimming workshops and conferences like the American Swimming Coaches Association Annual World Clinic and the Association for Applied Sport Psychology Annual Conference.

- I hope to use these networking opportunities to find like-minded coaches and SPPs who will work with me to advocate for better mental health resources and preventative techniques for youth athletes.
- After each workshop, I will send out a questionnaire to participants for feedback. I will ask which parts of the training were helpful and realistic, and ask for suggestions for future workshops.
  - These questionnaires will help me record the workshops and evaluate them.
  - I will follow up with each team or athlete six months after completion to see if they have made any helpful adjustments.
- After I receive feedback, I will ask myself the following questions:
  - Did this make a difference in protecting athletes?
  - Can this workshop be more effective?
- These questionnaires can help me reflect on what I am doing well, what I need to adjust, and what I need to learn.
- I will continue my learning by staying engaged in coaching, researching youth athletes, and seeking out continuing education through conferences like AASP, ACA, and ASCA.
- Further research should focus on how different training volumes, loads, and modalities can be developmentally appropriate for different stages of adolescence.

### **Summary:**

In conclusion, high-performing youth athletes need advocates who understand their physical, emotional, and social development. When coaches, parents, and other adults ignore these needs, we leave this group of athletes vulnerable to physical, emotional, and social risks. Sports Psychology Practitioners are ethically bound to advocate for rules and behaviors that

protect minor athletes. A critical area would be examining training loads and volumes that are developmentally appropriate.

My first step toward these goals is to create training modules for coaches, athletes, and parents that educate them. Coaches must understand the dangers of overtraining adolescents and the mental toll it can take on a young athlete. Athletes should feel empowered to look for resources to help them when facing these psychological and physical challenges. Parents should be trained to recognize appropriate training for each developmental stage and where the risks may be. I believe that with my education and resources, I can become a strong advocate for Youth Athletes and their mental health.

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