We are witnessing a sea change regarding mental health in sports media, led in part by professional athletes such as Michael Phelps, Kevin Love, Naomi Osaka, and Simone Biles, who are sharing their own experiences with mental illness, bucking stereotypes in which people experiencing mental health issues are condemned to unfulfilling lives. From quarterbacks to pitchers, power forwards to Olympic swimmers, athletes are increasingly using the mass media—including social media—to share their experiences with depression, anxiety, and other disorders.

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Praise for *Head Game: Mental Health in Sports Media*

“*Head Game* represents the first book of its kind to tackle one of today’s most pressing public health crises, one that has been forced into the shadows for far too long, through the lens of sport. Billings and Parrott explore the key media moments in this movement, the storytellers who shaped them, the institutional response from leagues and teams, and the first-hand accounts of elite athletes who have struggled to bring mental health awareness to the forefront—all of which has come to shape how we talk about mental health today. This timely, well-researched and expansive volume offers a powerful compilation of perspectives from prominent athletes like Olympians Michael Phelps and Gracie Gold, to the NFL’s Brandon Bostick, to the NHL’s Corey Hirsch. In combating the silence, stigma, stereotypes and prejudice that have often plagued discussions of mental health, *Head Game* tracks the modern movement for mental health advocacy within the world of sport and beyond. I highly recommend this book to anyone teaching courses in communication, sport and society, as students will undoubtedly find the material engaging and relatable, as well as to any reader interested in mental health portrayals in the media. I suspect everyone who reads *Head Game* will find a story within it that they can connect to.”

—Leigh Moscowitz, Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communications, University of South Carolina

“For too long the discourse of ‘mental toughness’ has dominated sports culture, from the way we coach and train athletes to how athletes are covered in the media. Through interviews with elite/professional athletes who have publicly disclosed mental health issues, the sports journalists who cover their stories, and sports organizations’ own efforts to address mental health, *Head Game* dissects how dangerous this discourse has been, and creates much-needed awareness on an issue that has been stigmatized in our culture. *Head Game* humanizes athletes, reminding readers that gold medals, championships, million-dollar salaries, corporate endorsements, or superstar celebrity do not immunize athletes against mental health struggles. Sadly, what is at stake is a matter of life or death. *Head Game* is required reading for all athletes, coaches, journalists, sports fans, or anyone who cares about the mental health and well-being of athletes.”

—Cheryl Cooky, Professor of American Studies and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Purdue University
Head Game
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It’s an age-old question in the academic world: should something be written solo, or in conjunction with another author? For us, the answer appeared quite simply: neither of us could have accomplished it alone. One of us had focused heavily on sports media; the other on health stigma in media. What happens when those cultures and issues collide? By working together, we hope we have revealed some answers.

We initially conceived of this project in 2019. It was pre-pandemic. Pre-Naomi Osaka. Pre-Simone Biles. Even then, our sense was that sports media was experiencing a mental health moment. We were right: the time for such a book was, indeed, prescient. We were also wrong: these subjects were being discussed in far more than a moment. When do enough moments accumulate to the point that the culture is irrevocably altered? We are not sure, but we are hoping that mental health in sports media has now reached such a “critical mass” level of distinction. There’s no going back. Nor should athletes, teams, leagues, and larger sports entities wish to do so.

We must thank Niall Kennedy and his colleagues at Peter Lang Publishing for shepherding this book project. We also wish to thank Lawrence Wenner and Marie Hardin for their guidance and ultimate placement of this volume within the Communication, Sport, and Society series. We’re honored to be a part of
it. We are also grateful for the athletes, journalists, broadcasters, and industry leaders that were part of this interview-heavy process. You gave us the words; we just had to translate them. Finally, we thank our families, including a pair of extremely understanding wives who understood when the evening must be interrupted so we could conduct yet another Zoom interview.

We’ve been a part of many projects that we feel is important. This one joins the apex of those simply because of the magnitude of the need for mental health understanding in the United States and, indeed, the world. This is a conversation that needs to continue. It’s been our privilege to advance it.

–Andrew C. Billings and Scott Parrott, May 2022
“A single spark can start an inferno. Or it can flare harmlessly, like a firefly. The difference is oxygen, kindling, and luck.”

– Hawley, 2022, p. 16

“Get your head in the game”

– Hoosiers (1986)

The head game.

In sport, the phrase summons images of extraordinary focus and mental jousting among competitors: a pitcher stepping off the mound and calling for the sign to disrupt a batter; a shooting guard leaving an arched palm hanging to remind her defender she just got schooled; a placekicker tuning out 100,000 screaming fans as the clock reads 0:01, then nodding for the snap.

Despite all the talk about physicality in sport, the weight rooms and work outs, Tommy Johns and twisted ankles, the world of athletic competition is one whose outcome is often decided by the mind. Athletes must be able to block out distraction, focus on the goal at hand, and out strategize the competition. In 1989, during his final Super Bowl-winning drive, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Joe Montana famously used valuable seconds in the huddle to gesture to the stands and calmly ask his teammates: “Look, isn’t that John Candy?” THAT was the legend of a player known as “Joe Cool.”

A few months later, professional golfer Scott Hoch was faced with a tap-in putt—less than two feet to win the U.S. Open—and missed. His nickname? Scott Choke.
The head game is key.

Still, that’s not the reason we chose the title for this book. There is another head game taking place with much less fanfare within the sporting landscape, one whose outcome could mean winning or losing, success or failure, and sometimes, even, life or death. We are not exaggerating. Throughout the narratives in the fifteen chapters that follow, this book shares the stories of professional athletes who experienced mental illness while in the glare of the public spotlight. We named the book Head Game because these athletes—and others—navigated both positive and negative consequences when deciding whether to disclose their illness to teammates, coaches, family, friends, and ultimately the public via mass media. Using the term game does not trivialize the experiences of athletes and others who experience mental illness. Quite the contrary. Games describe periods, episodes, and times in which forces compete against one another toward an undetermined outcome. Such is the experience of mental health in sport, a conglomeration of ups and downs, along with struggles, successes, and questions concerning whom to trust and when, with the undetermined outcome being one’s overall mental health.

Millions of Americans will experience mental illness at some point during their lives, yet societal stigma leads people to avoid pursuing help, telling loved ones, or openly discussing the subject of mental health. It is fair to argue that we are witnessing a sea change, though, led in part by professional athletes who are sharing their own experiences with depression, anxiety, and other conditions, and bucking stereotypes in which people with mental illness are condemned to unfulfilling lives. From quarterbacks to pitchers, power forwards to Olympic swimmers, athletes are increasingly using the mass media—including social media—to share their experiences with mental illness. Each athlete can now be a media producer. They have been given the megaphone and the ability to advance their narrative in a far less filtered manner than ever before.

So they have.

While their true expertise lay on the courts and the fields and the pitches, athletes are powerful persuaders of public opinion. Professional athletes’ disclosures might be inspirational for fans (and even non-fans), nurturing heightened awareness of resources, treatment, and the commonality of mental illness. The importance of such dialogue cannot be understated, especially given the context of professional sport in which athletes are trained to be “tough” from a young age. In this book, professional athletes describe their own experiences with mental illness, including the challenges and opportunities they encountered in the locker room, field of play, and mass media. The athletes, who represent a spectrum of
professional sports, describe their decisions to disclose and their recommendations for current—and future—generations of athletes.

Sport represents a cauldron for mental and emotional stress. Professional athletes work before thousands—at times millions—of people, their highs and lows exposed for the world to see and watch on replay time and again. They work lifetimes to reach “The Show,” only to balance a fine line between success and failure. They shoulder the pressure of family, friends, alma maters, and hometowns in the quest to make it. They operate within a context in which Green Bay Packer quarterback Brett Favre was expected to play in a game one day after his father’s death. They function in an ecosphere where a player like Boston Celtic Al Horford can be criticized in the media for wanting to be present for the birth of his child, as he was in 2016. He should have induced the labor and chartered a private jet, the critics said, we pay him millions to make these kinds of sacrifices.

And so they become legends via their steadfast dedication. They can become inspirations, larger-than-life personas perceived by jersey-clad 12-year-olds as superhuman, infallible, and indestructible. Their personal lives come under the media microscope with or without permission. They spend months away from family, living in hotel rooms and buses and clubhouses, trying to sidestep injury, fighting for playing time, and living in a culture that stigmatizes depression, anxiety, and other illnesses. Seeking mental help requires a consideration of dueling consequences: On one side, treatment could translate into health and well-being; on the other, disclosing mental illness could mean reduced playing time and being chastised by teammates, coaches, reporters and fans. American society stigmatizes mental illness. So, too, does sport. Think a fan won’t bring up a personal struggle from a decade ago? Think again.

Consider Zack Greinke. In 2006, the major league pitcher took a break from spring training for the Kansas City Royals, generating attention from reporters. Ultimately it came to light that Greinke experienced depression and anxiety, illnesses that were threatening his love for the game. Greinke told reporters that the conditions never bothered him on the mound, adding that medication helped. Still, pundits and fans have dissected Greinke’s mental health throughout his career with the Royals, Dodgers, and Astros. Others even went so far as to use the conditions as verbal weapons. The president of the San Diego Padres called Greinke “Rain Man,” referencing a movie whose title character has autism. Yankees fans taunted Greinke as he warmed up in the 2019 American League
playoffs, making fun of him for experiencing social anxiety. Fans saw a chink in his armor and attacked. All is fair in love and war—and playoffs are war.

Or, consider the case of Kevin Love, All-Star power forward for the Cleveland Cavaliers. Love left the court before the final buzzer twice during the 2017 season, experiencing panic attacks so strong he thought he “might die.” Beyond anxiety, Love also faced ridicule from high-profile teammates who described him as malingering. In March 2018, Love published an essay with The Players’ Tribune in which he publicly shared his experiences with depression and anxiety. “Mental health is an invisible thing, but it touches all of us at some point or another,” he wrote. “It’s part of life.” When he committed an on-court blunder in 2021, lackadaisically in-bounding the ball to have it easily stolen, media narratives were infused with Love’s admission about mental health. Be careful here, even his advocates would note, seemingly treating him as though he might fall apart.

As stories in this book illustrate, an athlete’s decision to disclose their experience with mental illness is sometimes forced by the mass media. Tennis phenom Naomi Osaka, a four-time Grand Slam winner, announced before the 2021 French Open that she would not participate in interviews with international media during the event. Citing mental health issues while writing on Instagram, she wrote that “I’ve often felt that people have no regard for athletes (sic) mental health and this rings very true whenever I see a press conference or partake in one.” Athletes, she said, are often asked the same questions again and again, introducing (or reinforcing) doubt within the competitor, and the “whole situation is kicking a person while they’re down.”

While some professional athletes praised the 23-year-old, others criticized her decision, saying media interviews were part of a professional athlete’s commitment. Fearing a mass exodus of players who felt similarly, French Open officials and organizers of the Grand Slam fined Osaka and threatened her with sanctions should she refuse to talk to the media. The Twitter account for Roland-Garros, where the tournament was being held, posted a photograph of other athletes

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1 It’s worth noting that Greinke will likely be enshrined in Cooperstown, professional baseball’s Hall of Fame, after a career in which he won the American League Cy Young and played in numerous All Star games. Meanwhile, the Padres president resigned three months after insulting Greinke and leading the club on a double-digit losing streak. Back in the Bronx, police led the Yankees fan out of the game for which ticket costs broke MLB records. Greinke and the Astros won that game, ultimately advancing to the World Series.
completing press interviews with the statement, “They understood the assignment.” The next day, Osaka withdrew from the event.

Indeed, mental health is a part of life touching everyone to varying degrees at varying times. Men and women who are paid millions of dollars and adored for playing the games they generally love are not immune. As the list of professional athletes who are openly discussing mental health grows, this is a concept we believe is increasingly becoming apparent for the general public.

The examples of Greinke, Love, and Osaka illustrate the myriad ways that professional athletes might disclose mental illness through the mass media. Greinke answered questions from inquiring journalists, Love wrote a first-person essay; Osaka explained her experience through social media. Other athletes offer a single disclosure with little clarification or desire to revisit it. Basketball star DeMar DeRozan tweeted a single lyric about depression from a rap song. UFC champion Ronda Rousey discussed suicidal thoughts on Ellen. Serena Williams posted an extended explanation of her postpartum depression on Instagram. Others are stories we never hear until after their passing: Eric Show, Tommy Hanson, Junior Seau. The list is long. Olympedia offers a list of Olympians who have died by suicide. A total of 170 names are posted. We also know the list is incomplete.

While the methods of coming out can be diverse, common themes also emerge as athletes describe their experiences with mental illness, questions concerning strength, stigmatizing attitudes within sport, and initial suspicions of psychologists, medication, and therapy. The athletes who do openly talk about their mental health are demonstrating strength by taking a risk. The implications, we are finding, can be incredibly important for society and other athletes. The more risks taken, the less risky it is perceived by others. Previous athlete disclosures function as a common thread in the case studies in this book. One athlete saw another athlete speak up and emerge seemingly better for doing so. Therefore, another athlete grabbed the baton. Academics now are left to synthesize and ascribe meaning to it.

The Sociology of Mental Health in Sport

A multitude of disciplines— with sociology arguably leading the way— have explored the relationship between mental health and overall performance. Varying degrees of findings have been revealed, yet with one consistent through-line: mental health matters... substantially. Sport can help—or harm— one’s
mental acuity depending on the role it plays in your life. Jewett et al. (2014) surveyed 853 adolescents, finding that involvement in a school-sponsored sport lowered depression and perceived stress, with those athletes self-reporting higher levels of mental health standards.

However, elite sport appears to introduce additional variables that can hinder wellness overall. Sociological insights reveal a culture of “appearing strong” at all costs, infused with hegemonic masculinity and external pressures that facilitate a stigmatizing environment. Atkinson (2019) advances ties between athletics and disordered eating, suicidal ideation, depression, and a plethora of other disorders. Souter et al. (2018) focused on male athletes, finding that they were “vulnerable to profession-specific stressors” (p. 8). To encapsulate the mindset often found in elite sports, athletes often concede that “you have to be mental” (Coyle et al., 2016, p. 10) to succeed.

Exacerbating such problems are a lack of psychiatric and psychotherapeutic care within sports organizations (Pichler & Claussen, 2020). Left to their own devices, athletes are fed—and then ultimately feel pressure to maintain—a mindset of invulnerability. As Larson et al. (2021) contend, “the relative failure to address mental health in sport over the years has been in part due to prevailing stigma and false conceptions that athletes have an indestructible psyche” (p. 2). Instead, athletes are informed that to excel, they must compartmentalize, failing to acknowledge the degree to which elements of their sporting and non-sporting public and private lives intertwine (Roderick et al., 2017).

Consequently, athletes receive messages that sport should be embraced as a mechanism for navigating mental health concerns rather than acknowledging that, particularly at sports’ highest levels, injuries, and threats to one’s overall career viability may amplify rather than mitigate these concerns (see Rice et al., 2016). The challenge then tacitly becomes to debunk stereotypes impeding an athlete’s mental health by defining the mental aspect of the athletic experience by grappling “with the oft contested assertion that sport can be an effective elixir to manage mental illness” (Atkinson, 2019, p. 6).

Overall, it seems athletes face comparable mental illness rates as the general population. However, they face unique challenges and stigmatizing environments, including a pressure to perform in a short period of time, monetary strains, consequences of physical injury, and abusive related stakeholders (e.g., fans, coaches, teammates). Thus, examining elite athletes within the heightened media spotlight appears highly warranted. We adopt a strategy akin to Gibson and Gorczynski’s (2019) work that connects media to mental illness via the philosophy of the spectacle while also concurring with the argument that “winning
'at any cost’ is incompatible with a modern sport system that values the human behind the performer” (Larsen et al., 2021, p. 2).

**Head Game: An Overview**

While Charles Barkley might claim to be nobody’s role model, people look up to athletes and listen to what they say. Athletes’ conversations about mental health can help educate the public, improve attitudes toward people with mental illness, and inspire people who need help to seek it. Still, sport can be slow to change, so the de-stigmatization of mental illness will take time. We hope the information presented here can be a step toward the goal. We want the work to help athletes understand the commonality of mental illness, the potential benefits of treatment, and the consequences (both positive and negative) of coming out to family, friends, teammates, and coaches. Meanwhile, we hope the stories contained in these pages will help the public appreciate that mental illness affects everyone.

As we started to request interviews for this book, we learned there were generally two types of responses: fairly enthusiastic “yes’s” and private and somewhat perfunctory “no’s.” Neither type of response should be judged negatively. Some athletes have started foundations and have become accustomed to the media spotlight—even finding advantages by embracing it. Others are still in the early stages of discovering their own mental health realities or have already navigated difficult terrain and do not wish to revisit what is often the darkest moments of their lives. Each response to our query, whether affirmative or negative, informed us of the sensitivity in which these topics must be covered. We hope we have done so with the proper tact and tone.

We discussed this project with a group of college students who generally were thrilled to see a book being advanced on these topics. It was so needed, they stressed, but also they asked: “do you think you should offer a trigger warning?” Yes, given the topics that are covered in this book, ranging from suicidal ideation to body dysmorphia to substance abuse, that seems appropriate. Consider yourself warned. There are some dark passages here.

There’s a logic to what unfolds in this book. We open with four key “media moments” in Chapters 1–4 that seem to define the discussion we are currently having with mental health in sports. The first focuses on Michael Phelps, arguably at the pinnacle of all athletic achievement at the time that he entered a rehabilitation facility and then voluntarily opted to speak with the media about the elements that led to that moment. We follow with the more curated example of
Kevin Love, who revealed elements of a 2017 panic attack in a first-person narrative via *The Players’ Tribune*, leading with the moniker that “everyone’s going through something.” In doing so, Love expanded the conversation to infer: we know others are out there, if only they’ll speak about it.

The two other “media moments” we chronicle in detail come from women in light of the unparalleled circumstances the world found itself in during the year 2021. First, Naomi Osaka’s media moment was predicated upon the media itself: opting not to participate in press conferences during the French Open led to controversy over the decision, which led to her withdrawal. “I’ve often felt that people have no regard for athletes’ mental health and this rings true whenever I see a press conference or partake in one,” Osaka offered via Instagram, equating it to “kicking a person while they’re down.” The fact that the resistance to Osaka’s stance was strong—even with her agreeing to the fines that would be incurred—denotes the entrenched sports media machine that athletes seeking to invoke wellness much challenge when discussing mental health. Several months later, a different case emerged via Simone Biles, whom many preordained at the ascending unequivocal “world’s best” until the realities of the disorienting disorder colloquially referred to as the “twisties” emerged in the opening days of the Tokyo Summer Olympics. The adoring public was seemingly offering the imperative: “Dance for me, Simone,” to which she tacitly replied “I would, but I can’t.” “But we only ask for this every four years,” came the response from the uninformed masses. Seriously, Simone Biles could not provide the fans with what they wanted—nay, demanded—in return for the adoration they had offered her in prior years.

Next, we look inside the sports media industry more directly: both inside it as well as its ancillary components. First, in Chapter 5 we interview four sports media journalists/personalities who have had roles in telling the stories of mental health within the sports world. Through the voices of former *New York Times* journalist Karen Crouse, legendary television broadcaster Bob Costas, *Time* magazine Senior Sports Correspondent Sean Gregory, and *USA Today*/CNN/ABC News/NPR reporter Christine Brennan, the chapter explores how athlete stories have changed, as well as explicating the role the media plays in responsibly rendering these stories.

Then, we adopt an institutional perspective to addressing the media in Chapter 6, synthesizing how sports media, leagues, and teams have approached the media moment related to talking about and advancing mental health initiatives. To do so, we utilized exemplars, with ESPN serving as the example from media, the National Basketball Association (NBA) serving as the example for
league responses, and the National Football League’s Indianapolis Colts as the example for team responses. A common vein of narrative is revealed within these organizational responses, as each seek to find the optimal manner in which mental health can be responsibly covered and usefully advanced in the world of sports.

Next is the core of the book, as Chapters 7–14 provide first-person voice to the athletes that have opted to speak in the media about issues related to mental health. The athletes we interviewed who are receiving full case study focus include:

- Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps
- Rugby Union footballer Kearnan Myall
- NFL tight end Brandon Bostick
- Olympic figure skater Gracie Gold
- NCAA and now professional basketball player Trey Moses
- Olympic swimmer Amanda Beard
- NHL goaltender Corey Hirsch
- Olympic skeleton athlete Katie Uhlaender

There are tons of ways these stories could be divided. Some are likely athletes you know; some are likely unfamiliar. Some are Olympians whose spotlight comes every four years; some enjoy a lesser but continual media gaze. Some are elite and never felt a mental health disclosure threatened their place in the sports world; others felt considerable pressure not to make any waves that could prematurely end their career. Permutations abound, including elements of biological sex and race as well. However, one common thread can be extracted: each opted to share their mental health status not only with their family and friends but also with the media writ large.

Other athletes have opted to tell their mental health stories in singular form, sometimes in something as simple as an isolated tweet. Those stories still should be embraced, as it is not every athlete’s responsibility to “own” this issue by making it a continual thread in which their narrative unfolds. Nevertheless, the case studies from the interviews in this book are also particularly insightful from the perspective of telling one’s tales, gauging the response, and ultimately coming back to embrace the issue in even more replete dimensions.

Finally, we conclude in Chapter 15 with recommendations for athletes who are affected by mental illness. We outline strategies for maintaining mental health while competing. We relay recommendations from professional athletes concerning disclosure. Through the stories shared here, we hope to communicate helpful
information athletes might not have encountered in little league or youth ball or camp, the challenges of a largely hidden part of sport: the head game.

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Key Media Moment #1: Michael Phelps

“I learned how to communicate when I’m 30. But I did. And it’s better late than never.”

It is difficult to articulate the degree of dominance Michael Phelps achieved in swimming. You take half of his 28 Olympic medals and he would still be the most decorated Olympic swimmer in world history. You could take half of his 23 gold medals and he would still possess more Olympic gold medals than any Olympian in any discipline in any nation in the world. He set new world records on 39 different occasions. At the peak of his dominance in 2008, when he won a record eight gold medals in Beijing, NBC Olympic host Bob Costas described him as swimming perfection personified:

If you were to build the perfect swimmer, the finished product would look just like this. Michael Phelps stands six foot four with an enormous wingspan of 6’7”, creating the elongated stroke that has broken 22 world records…His size fourteen feet might as well be flippers. Dinner plate sized hands grab water like a pair of paddles, and the flex of double-jointed elbows and knees adds an exaggerated range of motion. Phelps is also perfectly tall and short. He has the legs of man who stands only about six feet tall but the torso of someone about 6’8”. His short sturdy legs provide ideal balance and a powerful kick, while a long upper body forms a sculpted ‘V’ shape that begins with wide shoulders and concludes with narrow hips and a flat backside. Put it together, and you’ve got a human speed boat skimming the water’s surface.