

# How Self-Esteem and Peer Pressure Affect Young Athletes' Mental Health in Today's Sports World

**Felipe Blanco**

E-mail: Felipe\_blanco@cate.org

Accepted for Publication: 2023

Published Date: October 2023

## Abstract

In today's sports world, young athletes not only contend with the traditional pressures of performance and competition but also grapple with an array of new challenges ushered in by the digital age. As they seek mastery in their chosen disciplines, the metrics of success have expanded beyond just medals and accolades. This research delves deep into the intricate and often subtle ways in which self-esteem and peer pressure converge to shape the mental landscapes of these athletes. The ubiquitous nature of digital media, from social platforms to instant news outlets, means that athletes are under a near-constant spotlight. Such heightened visibility magnifies their achievements and failures, leading to an intensified sense of scrutiny and comparison. Moreover, the digital realm creates an arena where perceptions can be easily skewed, and external validations become potent influencers. In dissecting the athletes' self-view and juxtaposing it with peer expectations and behaviors, this study offers a panoramic view of the psychological environment they inhabit. By comprehensively understanding these dynamics, we can better equip mentors, coaches, and parents to offer nuanced support to young athletes. This emphasizes the dire need to cultivate a robust sense of self-worth, and to instill strategies that fortify against undue external pressures, ensuring that athletes are mentally resilient and grounded in their journey.

Keywords: young athletes, digital age, self-esteem, peer pressure, mental health, clinical psychology, mental resilience

## 1. The Influence of Self-Worth and Peer Dynamics on Athletes' Mental Health

In the competitive realm of sports, an athlete's mental health is profoundly influenced not just by their performance outcomes but equally by their self-worth and peer interactions. This self-worth is often molded by external validations or criticisms, making it sometimes a vulnerable component of their psyche. A robust self-esteem acts as a shield, defending them from external opinions, ensuring consistent self-belief even amidst challenging times. Conversely, peer dynamics bring in an added layer of complexity. Teammates can provide emotional support but can also introduce competitive stressors. The presence of digital platforms extends this dynamic, subjecting athletes to a stream of achievements of peers worldwide, potentially skewing their perceptions and setting unrealistic benchmarks.

For mentors and coaches, recognizing and addressing these influences is paramount. They play a pivotal role in moderating these interactions, providing perspective, and instilling resilience. Ensuring athletes maintain a balanced view of their worth, independent of constant comparisons and peer achievements, is crucial. Ultimately, striking a harmonious balance between self-worth, peer interactions, and external feedback is what often determines between an athlete's prolonged burnout and their ability to achieve consistent, long-term success.

### *1.1 The Role of Self-Esteem in Athletes' Psychological Well-being*

Self-esteem goes beyond just how athletes view themselves; it deeply influences how they react to the world around them. High self-esteem empowers athletes to interpret

setbacks as opportunities for growth rather than markers of inherent incapability. They tend to be more resilient, adaptable, and more receptive to constructive criticism. On the other hand, athletes with low self-esteem often internalize negative feedback, leading to a cycle of self-doubt and decreased motivation. The undercurrent of sports, which inherently ties performance to personal value, makes it crucial for stakeholders—be it coaches, teammates, or family—to continually nurture and boost an athlete's self-worth, helping them distinguish between their intrinsic value and the inevitable ups and downs of their sporting career.

role of coaches, mentors, and even digital literacy becomes paramount. Athletes need to cultivate a mindset that can separate genuine feedback from online noise. Coaches and mentors have the added responsibility of grounding young athletes in reality, helping them navigate this digital maze with perspective, and emphasizing the timeless values of discipline, genuine effort, and intrinsic motivation, far away from the glow of screen-based validations.

## 2. Simone Biles - The Intersection of Athletic Prowess, Mental Health, and Digital Age Pressures

### 2.1 Background and Rise to Stardom

Simone Biles, an American gymnast, is often regarded as the greatest in her discipline. With her collection of 19 World Championship gold medals and 4 Olympic gold medals by 2020, she has an unparalleled record. Born in Columbus, Ohio, Biles navigated through challenges, including a period in foster care before being adopted by her grandparents. Her ascent from humble origins to gymnastic legend provides a backdrop of determination and resilience.

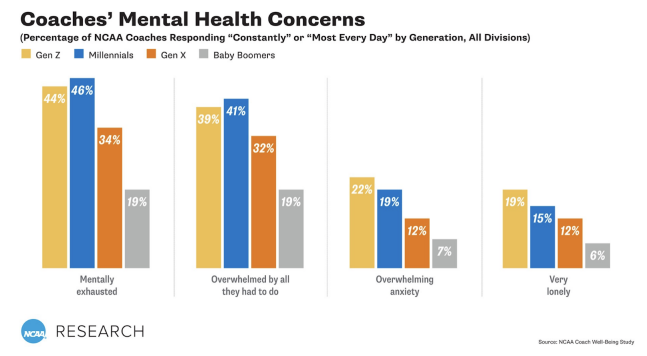


Figure 1: Prevalence of Mental Health Concerns Among Coaches Across Generations

### 1.1.1 Navigating Peer Pressure in the Digital Sports Era

The digital age has redefined the playing field for athletes, not just in terms of physical prowess but also in their psychological battles. Previously, peer interactions were mostly confined to the boundaries of team practices, tournaments, and face-to-face engagements. Now, in our hyper-connected world, athletes find themselves immersed in a 24/7 stream of digital interactions, where every moment, whether it's a victorious highlight or a casual training routine, is broadcasted on platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. This relentless flow of information, while offering a window to global sports standards, also sets the stage for an intensified culture of comparison. As athletes scroll through their feeds, the achievements of peers from distant corners of the world can set benchmarks, often leading to feelings of inadequacy or an insatiable drive to outperform. This constant tug-of-war between inspiration and intimidation can push athletes into unsustainable routines or even tempt them towards performance-enhancing shortcuts. The nature of digital validation—where likes, retweets, and fleeting moments of fame become the new currency—can blur an athlete's vision, making them prioritize online applause over actual skill mastery. It's in this challenging backdrop that the

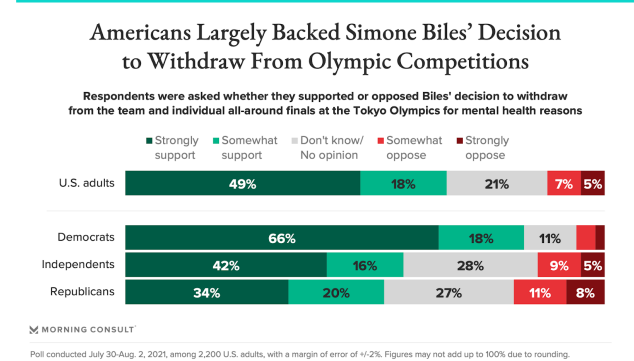


Figure 2: Public Support for Simone Biles's Decision to Withdraw from Tokyo Olympics

### 2.2 The Tokyo 2020 Conundrum: Mental Health in the Limelight

During the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, Biles was the athlete to watch. But the world was taken aback when she withdrew after her first vault during the team final, pointing to her mental well-being as the primary reason. Biles later clarified she had been experiencing the "twisties"—a mental block for gymnasts where they lose their bearings in mid-air. This phenomenon is not just psychologically distressing but can be physically perilous, especially in a precision-centric sport like gymnastics.

The unique pressures of the Tokyo Olympics, such as the absence of audiences due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the strain of the event's one-year delay, contributed to the mental challenges Biles confronted.

### 2.3 Digital Age Dynamics: Global Reactions and Peer Interactions

Biles' decision and the consequent reactions were instantaneously transmitted across the globe, courtesy of the digital era. Her peers, global celebrities, and even political figures shared their viewpoints. Many commended her choice, underlining the significance of mental health, while some critics questioned her dedication to the sport. Biles took to her own digital platforms, expressing appreciation for the support and amplifying the conversation around athletes' mental well-being in high-pressure situations.

### 2.4 Insights

Simone Biles' experience during Tokyo 2020 underscored the multifaceted pressures today's athletes face, magnified exponentially by the scrutiny of the digital age. Her brave choice to foreground mental health has set a new precedent in sports, emphasizing that mental well-being is as crucial as physical prowess. Biles' narrative serves as an essential reminder of the need to address and prioritize the psychological landscape of athletes in our contemporary, hyper-connected sports ecosystem.

barrage of likes and shares, can sometimes distort perceptions of genuine achievement. For those mentoring young athletes, it's essential to foster a resilient sense of self, while also guiding them through the challenges of peer pressures and digital validations. In doing so, athletes can achieve holistic success, striking a balance between external acclaim and internal fulfillment.

### References

- [1] <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1612197X.2019.1570473>
- [2] <https://pro.morningconsult.com/articles/olympics-mental-health-poll>
- [3] <https://www.ncaa.org/news/2023/5/4/media-center-college-sports-not-immune-to-mental-health-challenges.aspx>
- [4] <https://bmjopensem.bmj.com/content/6/1/e000676.abstract>
- [5] <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1469029223000456>
- [6] <http://celticfl.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/CriticalIssuesYouthSports.pdf>
- [7] <https://www.ncaa.org/news/2022/5/24/media-center-mental-health-issues-remain-on-minds-of-student-athletes.aspx>
- [8] <https://www.apa.org/topics/sport-rehabilitation/psychologists>
- [9] <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S221126691300025X>
- [10] <https://thesportjournal.org/article/effects-of-early-sport-participation-on-self-esteem-and-happiness/>
- [11] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10286465/>
- [12] <https://blogs.bmj.com/bjism/2017/08/14/mental-health-elite-young-athletes-spot-support-late/>
- [13] <https://olympics.com/en/news/simone-biles-bravest-act-choosing-herself>

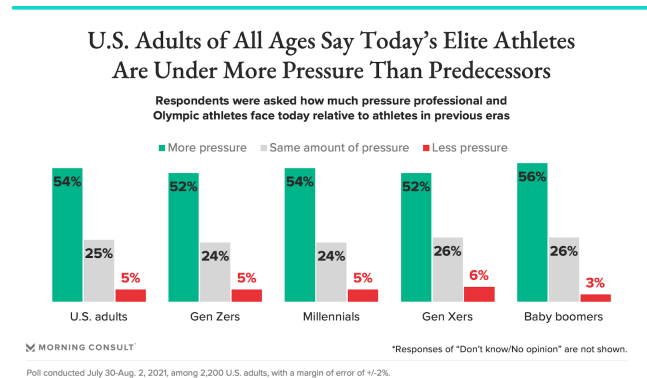


Figure 3: Comparative Pressure on Contemporary Elite Athletes

### Conclusion

Modern sports demand not just physical prowess but a keen understanding of the complexities of self-worth, peer interactions, and digital influences. An athlete's self-esteem, though intrinsic, is susceptible to the myriad pressures of both offline and online worlds. In today's hyper-connected age, peer dynamics often blur the line between inspiration and overwhelming comparison. The digital realm, with its