



When Performance Becomes a Public Wager: Athlete Identity, Disclosure, and the New Pressures of Sport

How Performance Culture, Public Scrutiny, and Role Loss Can Make Distress Harder to Disclose

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Abstract

Background: Sport can provide meaning, belonging, and structure, yet continued athletic functioning should not be treated as a sufficient indicator of psychological safety. Public visibility, NIL arrangements, and wagering-related harassment have also changed the environment surrounding some athletes.

Purpose: This essay examines how established vulnerability processes may be experienced within a changing public field of sport through the Wagered Self framework.

Approach: The essay develops a conceptual synthesis across athlete mental-health, perfectionistic self-presentation, athletic-identity, role-transition, social-media, NIL, and wagering-related literature.

Argument: Perfectionistic self-evaluation and narrow athletic identity are considered alongside emerging contextual pressures that may increase the perceived costs of error or disclosure for some athletes. The model is interpretive and does not imply direct or linear causation.

Implications: Athlete-welfare systems should strengthen credible confidential care pathways, support identity plurality, and examine wagering-related harassment as an emerging welfare concern.

Keywords: athlete mental health; athletic identity; help-seeking; perfectionism; suicide prevention

Introduction

There is a particular kind of mistake that institutions make when they become very good at measuring things. The mistake is not that the measurements are useless. Many of them are necessary. It is that, after enough dashboards, intake forms, performance metrics, wellness surveys, training modules, referral pathways, and carefully worded statements about the importance of mental health have accumulated, the existence of the machinery itself can begin to feel like evidence that the problem has been contained.

Sport has become very good at producing machinery.

The contemporary athlete moves through an environment of exceptional precision. Performance is measured in seconds, percentages, repetitions, distances, heart rates, recovery intervals, rankings, selections, contracts, scholarships, views, likes, sponsorship opportunities, and increasingly the wagers of strangers. The body is monitored. The schedule is optimized. The public image is maintained. The athlete is encouraged to be resilient, coachable, grateful, competitive, authentic, marketable, emotionally intelligent, and available for interviews after losses that have already been dissected by people who were not there.

Somewhere inside this arrangement is an ordinary human being.

That person may derive enormous meaning from sport. Sport can offer structure, discipline, movement, companionship, purpose, and a form of belonging that is difficult to reproduce elsewhere. For many athletes, the field, court, track, pool, rink, or gym is not merely a place of competition. It is where relationships are formed, competence becomes visible, time acquires rhythm, and the self begins to feel coherent. The athletic role can provide an answer to questions that are otherwise difficult to answer cleanly: Who am I? Where do I belong? What am I capable of becoming?

The difficulty is that the same role can become increasingly hard to step outside of when the answers begin to change.

The athlete is expected to perform, recover, compete, represent, and remain composed. Even distress can become another task to manage correctly. It should be disclosed early, expressed appropriately, directed through the right channel, and resolved without interfering too seriously with selection, training, team cohesion, or the next game. This is rarely stated so bluntly. It does not need to be. Athletes learn environments partly through what is said and partly through what becomes expensive to say.

The problem is not simply that some athletes experience psychological distress. The problem is that distress may become difficult to make visible before it becomes severe. An athlete can continue attending practice, completing workouts, travelling with the team, posting online, performing well, and answering ordinary questions with ordinary answers while privately struggling. Functioning and safety are not synonyms. A person may appear highly organized around a role precisely because the possibility of losing that role has become intolerable.

This is where athlete suicide prevention becomes more complicated than the distribution of resources or the repetition of reassuring messages. A confidential referral pathway matters. So does the athlete's belief that using it will not quietly alter how coaches, teammates, supporters, sponsors, or institutions understand them. A mental-health campaign matters. So does the culture into which its message is released. Telling athletes that it is acceptable to ask for help is necessary. It is not the same thing as creating conditions in which asking for help feels possible.

Recent mortality studies have made this question harder to dismiss. In an analysis of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletes across nine years, Rao et al. (2015) identified 35 suicide deaths among 477 total athlete deaths. Suicide accounted for 7.3% of all-cause mortality. A later 20-year analysis identified 128 suicide deaths among 1,102 NCAA athlete deaths. Whelan et al. (2024) found that suicide accounted for 11.6% of the deaths observed across the full study period and became the second most common cause of death during the latter decade.

These findings require proportionate interpretation. They do not establish that athletes are universally at greater suicide risk than non-athletes. The broader literature does not support a simple crisis narrative. Gill et al. (2024), for example, found that elite athletes generally showed lower risk of suicidal ideation, suicide attempt, and suicide death than general-population comparison groups. Sport can protect. Sport can also contain conditions that become difficult for particular people at particular moments.

Both truths matter.

The more useful question is not whether sport is good or bad for mental health in the abstract. The more useful question is which athletes become vulnerable, under which conditions, and why distress may remain hidden even in environments that

appear attentive to well-being. The answer is unlikely to be found in a single risk factor. It is more likely to emerge from the interaction between identity, performance, public evaluation, role security, and the perceived consequences of being known too honestly.

Perfectionism is central to this interaction, although the term requires care. Athletes often need high standards. Excellence is not an accidental by-product of indifference. Training demands repetition, correction, discomfort, patience, and an ability to tolerate the irritating fact that the body does not improve simply because the mind would prefer it to do so immediately.

The concern is not ambition. It is what happens when mistakes cease to be ordinary events and begin to feel like exposures of the self.

Socially prescribed perfectionism involves the perception that other people expect faultlessness and that acceptance is conditional upon meeting those expectations. Perfectionistic self-presentation adds another layer. The person does not merely want to do well. The person feels compelled to appear as though they are doing well, including when they are not. Distress becomes difficult to disclose because disclosure threatens the image that has been built to contain it.

The distinction matters because an athlete can be praised for qualities that also make suffering harder to detect. Discipline can conceal exhaustion. Reliability can conceal fear. Composure can conceal shame. Commitment can conceal the growing belief that there is no acceptable version of the self outside continued performance.

The broader perfectionism literature gives this concern empirical weight. Smith et al. (2018) found that socially prescribed perfectionism predicted longitudinal increases in suicidal ideation, while perfectionistic concerns and related dimensions were associated with suicide-related outcomes. In athletes specifically, Courtney et al. (2026) found associations between socially prescribed perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and stigma toward help-seeking among college athletes.

The implication is uncomfortable but clinically important. The athlete most practiced at appearing fine may not be the athlete who requires the least attention. That athlete may be the person for whom disclosure carries the greatest perceived cost.

NCAA survey findings reinforce the importance of this gap between distress and speakability. In the 2023 NCAA Student-Athlete Health and Wellness Study, mental-health concerns had declined from earlier pandemic-era surveys but remained substantial. Among participants in men's sports, 17% reported constantly feeling overwhelmed and 16% reported mental exhaustion. Among participants in women's sports, the corresponding figures were 44% and 35%. Only 54% of participants in men's sports and 40% of participants in women's sports reported that they would feel comfortable talking with coaches about mental-health concerns. Nearly 70% reported having trusted campus supports, yet only about half felt comfortable seeking help from a licensed mental-health provider on campus (NCAA, 2023).

There is a quiet but consequential difference between knowing that support exists and believing that one can use it.

An athlete may reasonably wonder what disclosure changes. Will the information remain private? Will it affect selection? Will it alter how a coach interprets inconsistency, fatigue, injury, or reduced performance? Will teammates see vulnerability where they previously saw reliability? Will supporters become anxious? Will a sponsor quietly reconsider? Will the athlete become known not as the person who plays through difficulty, but as the person whose difficulty must now be managed?

Some of these fears may be unfounded in a particular environment. Others may not be. The clinical task is not to presume that help-seeking is emotionally simple because the service is technically available. The organizational task is not merely to construct a pathway. It is to make the pathway credible.

This challenge has become more complicated because the public field surrounding sport has changed.

Since the NCAA adopted its interim name, image, and likeness policy in 2021, college athletes have been able to derive financial benefit from aspects of their public identity. This change has created opportunities that should not be minimized. Athletes can benefit from the value they generate. They can develop a public voice, support themselves financially, build projects, and participate more fairly in an economy that has long depended upon their labour and visibility.

NIL should not be framed as an established mental-health risk factor. The available evidence does not justify that claim. Hollabaugh et al. (2024) identified athlete mental health, well-being, and academic functioning as important areas for further NIL research precisely because the literature remains limited.

Yet the absence of mature evidence does not mean that the psychological meaning of visibility has remained unchanged.

For some athletes, the public self is no longer only reputational. It may also be economically consequential. Performance, likability, injury, appearance, public tone, online engagement, perceived authenticity, and marketability can begin to overlap.

An athlete may feel pressure not only to compete effectively, but also to remain publicly coherent. The self becomes a project with deliverables.

Sports wagering adds another layer of absurdity, although absurdity is not the same thing as harmlessness.

A person misses a shot, makes an error, becomes injured, or performs poorly. Somewhere else, someone loses money. The disappointment travels instantly through a device and arrives in the athlete's inbox as accusation, contempt, suspicion, or threat. The athlete has never met this person. The person may nevertheless feel entitled to an explanation because the athlete's performance had briefly become part of a private financial plan.

NCAA data released in 2025 illustrate the scale of this emerging concern. Among Division I men's basketball athletes, 36% reported social-media abuse related to sports betting during the previous year. Among Football Bowl Subdivision football athletes, 16% reported receiving negative or threatening messages, while 26% reported interacting with a student who had wagered on their team. Across Division I men's sports, 7% reported receiving negative or threatening messages from fans who had placed bets on their games, and 9% reported that another student told them they had won or lost money based on the athlete's performance (NCAA, 2025a).

These findings do not establish that wagering causes athlete suicide. That claim would exceed the evidence and flatten a complex issue into a headline. The more defensible conclusion is narrower and, in its own way, more unsettling. Wagering changes the social environment around performance. It attaches financial grievance to the athlete's body, decisions, injuries, mistakes, and ordinary human limitations. It allows strangers to experience an athlete's imperfect performance as a personal economic offence.

The concern is not that athletes have suddenly become fragile. The concern is that the burden of appearing invulnerable has acquired new audiences.

This essay extends the concept of the Wagered Self as a way of understanding that burden. The Wagered Self is not only the athlete upon whom money is literally wagered. The term describes a wider condition in which identity, value, visibility, and performance become increasingly entangled with external expectations.

The athlete may be socially wagered through reputation.

The athlete may be institutionally wagered through selection, scholarships, team expectations, and organizational investment.

The athlete may be commercially wagered through public visibility, sponsorship, and NIL opportunities.

The athlete may be psychologically wagered through perfectionistic self-evaluation.

The athlete may be literally wagered through sports betting and the financially motivated scrutiny that can follow.

These pressures do not affect every athlete in the same way. They should not be treated as a linear pathway or a predictive formula. Sport remains capable of providing deep connection, confidence, joy, discipline, and meaning. NIL can create legitimate opportunities. Public visibility can be affirming. Competitive ambition can be healthy. Wagering-related harassment is not the explanation for athlete distress.

The model is useful because it directs attention elsewhere: toward the conditions under which distress becomes harder to disclose, role disruption becomes harder to survive, and the distance between the private person and the public athlete becomes harder to sustain.

The central question is therefore not merely whether an athlete is struggling.

It is whether the athlete believes they are still permitted to be seen struggling without losing the self, the role, or the future that sport has come to represent.

Background and Rationale

The Changing Public Field of Sport

Sport is often discussed as though it were a single environment with a stable psychological meaning. It is treated as protective or pressuring, healthy or unhealthy, liberating or exploitative, depending on which argument the speaker has arrived prepared to make. The reality is less tidy. Sport is not one thing. It is a relationship between a person, a body, a role, an institution, an audience, and an imagined future. Its meaning changes as those relationships change.

For many athletes, sport is profoundly protective. It provides structure to the week, a reason to move, a place to belong, and a vocabulary for effort. It can offer mentorship, friendship, discipline, competence, and the rare pleasure of becoming measurably better at something through sustained work. It can create a community in which identity is affirmed not abstractly,

but through practice, contribution, and shared purpose. The athlete does not merely participate in a sport. The athlete may come to understand themselves through it.

This is precisely why the relationship deserves care.

The mistake is not believing that sport can protect mental health. It often does. The mistake is assuming that protection operates automatically, or that the visible presence of discipline, achievement, and social connection tells us enough about a person's internal condition. A role can be deeply meaningful and still become difficult to inhabit. A team can provide belonging while also intensifying comparison. A coach can be supportive and evaluative at the same time. A scholarship can create opportunity while making the possibility of failure feel economically consequential. A public platform can offer recognition while quietly converting the self into something that must be continually maintained.

The athlete can be grateful and overwhelmed.

The athlete can be successful and frightened.

The athlete can love the sport and feel increasingly unable to survive the terms under which it must be performed.

These are not contradictions to be resolved. They are often the actual conditions of the problem.

This conditional understanding is consistent with the broader evidence base. Rice et al. (2016) concluded that elite athletes experience broadly comparable risks of common mental-health concerns, including anxiety and depression, relative to the general population, while also emphasizing the importance of sport-specific stressors. Gill et al. (2024) later found that elite athletes generally showed lower risk of suicidal ideation, suicide attempt, and suicide death than general-population comparison groups. These findings provide an important corrective to claims that sport participation is inherently harmful or that athlete suicide should be interpreted as evidence of a generalized crisis within sport. The available evidence does not support either conclusion.

Lower average risk, however, does not eliminate the need for subgroup-sensitive prevention. NCAA mortality studies indicate that suicide remains an important cause of death among student-athletes. Rao et al. (2015) found that suicide represented the fourth most common cause of death in their nine-year NCAA sample. Whelan et al. (2024), using a 20-year period, found that suicide became the second most common cause of death during the latter decade of observation. These findings do not establish that athletic participation causes suicide or that athletes are categorically more vulnerable than non-athletes. They indicate that athlete suicide is not peripheral to sports medicine, campus mental health, or athlete-welfare policy.

The more useful question is therefore not whether athletes are generally protected or generally exposed. It is which athletes become vulnerable under particular conditions, and why their distress may remain difficult to identify before it becomes severe. This shift in emphasis matters because many prevention approaches depend upon distress becoming visible. The athlete discloses symptoms, a teammate notices a change in behaviour, a coach observes declining functioning, or a clinician identifies a concern during contact. Each pathway is important. None is fully reliable.

Athletes may continue to train, compete, study, travel, engage publicly, and meet ordinary obligations while experiencing substantial private distress. Outward functioning should not be treated as a proxy for psychological safety. It may reflect resilience, but it may also reflect the athlete's belief that visible difficulty carries unacceptable consequences. In evaluative environments, disclosure is not experienced only as a health-related decision. It may also be interpreted as a risk to selection, playing time, reputation, privacy, team belonging, or perceived reliability.

This distinction is central to understanding why the formal availability of support does not necessarily translate into its use. Cosh et al. (2024), in a systematic review and meta-analysis of athlete mental-health help-seeking, reported a formal help-seeking rate of 22.4% among athletes and identified barriers including stigma, team culture, concerns about selection, and uncertainty about confidentiality. Moreland et al. (2018) similarly found that collegiate athlete service use is shaped by peer norms, coach norms, perceived stigma, and the availability of appropriate services. NCAA survey findings reinforce this gap between the existence of support and the willingness to access it. In the 2023 NCAA Student-Athlete Health and Wellness Study, only about half of student-athletes reported feeling comfortable seeking support from a licensed mental-health provider on campus. Comfort discussing mental-health concerns with coaches was also uneven, particularly among participants in women's sports (NCAA, 2023).

These findings suggest that access must be understood in more than administrative terms. A referral pathway may exist while remaining psychologically difficult to use. An institution may provide services while athletes remain uncertain about what disclosure will change. The relevant concern is not simply whether support is technically available, but whether athletes believe it can be accessed without avoidable damage to privacy, status, trust, or role security.

Perfectionistic self-presentation is particularly important within this context because it connects internal distress with the perceived consequences of being seen imperfectly. Perfectionism is often discussed too broadly. Discipline, persistence, and high personal standards are not inherently maladaptive. Athletic performance frequently depends on sustained effort, correction, and the capacity to tolerate frustration. The concern is more specific to perfectionistic concerns, socially prescribed perfectionism, and perfectionistic self-presentation.

Hewitt and Flett (1991) distinguished socially prescribed perfectionism from more general forms of personal striving. Socially prescribed perfectionism refers to the belief that others expect faultlessness and that approval is conditional upon meeting those expectations. Hewitt et al. (2003) later described perfectionistic self-presentation as the interpersonal pressure to appear flawless and conceal perceived imperfection. Within sport, these processes may be reinforced by environments in which evaluation is continuous and visible. Mistakes can become difficult to interpret as ordinary features of performance. They may instead be experienced as evidence of personal inadequacy or as threats to an identity organized around competence.

The broader literature gives this concern empirical weight. Flett et al. (2014) argued that perfectionism has suicide-prevention relevance when self-critical, socially pressured, and concealment-based processes become pronounced. Smith et al. (2018) found that socially prescribed perfectionism predicted longitudinal increases in suicidal ideation, while perfectionistic concerns and related dimensions were associated with suicide-related outcomes. In athletes specifically, Courtney et al. (2026) found associations between socially prescribed perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and stigma toward help-seeking among college athletes.

The clinical relevance lies partly in the possibility that composure can conceal distress rather than disconfirm it. The athlete most invested in appearing capable may be especially reluctant to acknowledge uncertainty, injury, emotional difficulty, or loss of control. Help-seeking may be experienced not as a neutral step toward care, but as an exposure of the self the athlete has worked to maintain. In this context, continued performance is ambiguous. It may indicate adaptation. It may also indicate that the perceived cost of disclosure has become greater than the perceived cost of silence.

Athletic identity further sharpens this vulnerability. A strong athletic identity can provide motivation, belonging, continuity, and meaning. Brewer et al. (1993) described athletic identity as both a source of strength and a possible vulnerability. The problem is not that sport becomes important. The problem arises when the athletic role becomes the dominant or only stable source of self-worth.

Identity foreclosure refers to the narrowing of available roles and possible selves. When the athlete identity becomes exclusive, injury, deselection, declining performance, or retirement may threaten more than participation. These events can disrupt the athlete's sense of belonging, personal value, and future direction. The loss is not limited to the activity itself. It may affect the narrative structure through which the athlete understands who they are and what remains possible.

Research on athletic transition supports this distinction. Grove et al. (1997) identified the influence of athletic identity on adjustment after retirement. Furie et al. (2023), in a systematic review of involuntary retirement following musculoskeletal injury, found that high athletic identity and identity foreclosure can contribute to mental-health vulnerability. Montero et al. (2024) similarly connected exclusive athletic identity, social disruption, and involuntary retirement with poorer well-being. Haslam et al. (2021) found that identity loss after sport retirement can undermine adjustment, while continued group membership and the development of new social identities may support meaning and a greater sense of control.

These findings suggest that sport transitions should not be treated only as logistical or physical events. Injury is not merely an interruption to training. Deselection is not merely a change in roster status. Retirement is not merely the end of competition. Each transition can acquire deeper psychological significance when the athletic role has become central to the person's sense of self. The implications are particularly important for prevention because role disruption may create vulnerability even when the athlete continues to appear functional.

Identity plurality should therefore be understood as a protective principle rather than as an afterthought. Relationships, interests, education, values, and future roles beyond sport do not weaken athletic commitment. They reduce the extent to which a single disruption threatens the person's entire sense of continuity. Support for identity plurality should not begin only after injury or retirement. It should be embedded within athlete development, rehabilitation, and transition planning.

The public conditions surrounding athletic identity have also changed. Athletes have always been evaluated by coaches, teammates, spectators, and media. What has changed is the reach, speed, persistence, and economic significance of that evaluation. Social media has extended the audience beyond the competition itself. Performance can be isolated, replayed,

interpreted, criticized, and circulated long after an event has ended. The athlete's public identity remains active even when the athlete is no longer competing.

Public visibility is not inherently harmful. Social media can allow athletes to communicate directly with supporters, develop communities, promote causes, and build professional opportunities. The concern is more specific. Public self-presentation can become another domain in which the athlete feels pressure to remain composed, accessible, and marketable. For athletes already shaped by perfectionistic concerns, the maintenance of a coherent public identity may increase the perceived consequences of injury, uncertainty, or disclosure.

Name, image, and likeness policy has made this issue more consequential for some college athletes. Since the NCAA adopted its interim NIL policy in 2021, athletes have been able to benefit financially from aspects of their public identity. This development reflects an important correction within a system that has long benefited from athlete labour, reputation, and visibility. NIL can support autonomy, fairness, and opportunity.

The current literature does not justify framing NIL as a direct mental-health risk factor. Hollabaugh et al. (2024) emphasized that the effects of NIL on young athlete health remain underdeveloped as a research area, including possible effects on mental health, well-being, and academic functioning. The appropriate interpretation is therefore cautious. NIL should not be treated as inherently harmful, but neither should its psychological implications be ignored.

The relevant concern is that NIL may alter the meaning of public visibility. The athlete's reputation, appearance, accessibility, engagement, and perceived authenticity can become connected to opportunity. Public identity is no longer only socially meaningful. It may also become economically consequential. For some athletes, this may introduce an additional incentive to maintain a stable public presentation even when private distress is increasing.

Sports wagering represents a related but distinct change in the public environment of sport. When athletic performance becomes attached to another person's financial outcome, ordinary events within competition can acquire a different meaning. A missed shot, poor performance, injury, substitution, or officiating decision may be interpreted not simply as part of sport, but as the cause of someone else's financial loss.

The broader gambling literature provides important context. Forrest et al. (2026) examined Ontario's expansion of online gambling, including single-event sports betting, and found substantial increases in gambling-related helpline contacts following market liberalization. Among adolescent boys and young men between 15 and 24 years of age, contacts increased markedly across relevant policy comparisons. The study also documented a substantial rise in total monthly wagers within Ontario's private online market.

These findings concern gambling-related harm among members of the public. They do not establish a direct relationship between gambling expansion and athlete suicide. Their relevance lies in the broader environment they describe. Sports wagering has become increasingly accessible, visible, normalized, and commercially integrated into the experience of spectatorship. Athletes perform within that environment even when they have no meaningful control over it.

For athletes, the more immediate concern is wagering-related harassment. NCAA findings indicate that athletes in high-visibility sports receive negative or threatening messages connected to betting outcomes. In 2025, 36% of Division I men's basketball athletes reported social-media abuse related to sports betting during the previous year. Among Football Bowl Subdivision football athletes, 16% reported receiving negative or threatening messages, while 26% reported interacting with a student who had wagered on their team (NCAA, 2025a). The NCAA has also urged regulators and gambling companies to reconsider proposition bets involving college athletes because of concerns related to student-athlete well-being and the integrity of competition.

These findings do not demonstrate that wagering-related harassment causes suicide outcomes. They support a narrower conclusion. Wagering can add financially motivated blame to an environment already structured by evaluation. Performance becomes consequential not only to coaches, teammates, supporters, and institutions, but also to spectators who have attached money to individual outcomes. The athlete may become the target of anger arising from a relationship they never agreed to enter.

Taken together, the evidence supports a restrained but important argument. Athlete suicide should not be attributed simplistically to perfectionism, athletic identity, NIL, social media, or sports wagering. No single factor explains a complex outcome. The stronger interpretation is that these conditions may interact to produce an accumulated social-evaluative pressure for some athletes.

Perfectionistic self-presentation may increase the perceived cost of disclosure. Athletic identity foreclosure may narrow alternative sources of meaning when performance or participation is disrupted. Social media and NIL may make public

identity more continuous and consequential. Wagering-related harassment may add financially motivated scrutiny to an already evaluative environment.

The Wagered Self model organizes these conditions as a risk ecology rather than a linear causal pathway. It describes the possible convergence of psychological, relational, institutional, and commercial pressures that may widen the gap between private distress and the public athletic role. The model does not assume that every athlete experiences these conditions in the same way. It does not treat visibility, ambition, or athletic commitment as pathological. Its purpose is narrower: to identify the circumstances in which an athlete may begin to perceive concealment as necessary to preserve the role upon which belonging, opportunity, and self-worth have come to depend.

Practice and Policy Points

- Continued athletic performance should not be treated as a sufficient indicator that distress is absent or manageable.
- Confidential care pathways, identity plurality, and transition support should be integrated into routine athlete-welfare planning.
- Wagering-related harassment should be addressed as an emerging athlete-welfare concern while its psychological effects are studied directly.

Conceptual Approach

This essay examines how the social conditions surrounding contemporary athletes have changed and how those changes may interact with established vulnerabilities in sport. Its central concern is not whether sports wagering, social media, or name, image, and likeness arrangements directly cause suicide. The available evidence does not support such a claim. Rather, the essay considers how these developments may intensify public scrutiny, commercial pressure, and the perceived consequences of athletic failure.

The discussion is grounded in literature on athlete mental health, suicide and suicidality in sport, perfectionism, self-presentation, athletic identity, stigma, help-seeking, injury, involuntary transition, online abuse, sports wagering, and betting-related harassment. These areas of evidence are not equally developed. Research on perfectionism, identity foreclosure, disclosure barriers, and role disruption is comparatively established. Research on the mental-health implications of monetized visibility and wagering-related harassment remains emerging. These differences in evidentiary strength are maintained throughout the essay.

The conceptual terrain informing the essay is summarized in **Figure 1**, which maps the major source clusters and the domains to which they most directly contribute. The figure is not intended to document a formal review process. Instead, it offers a visual summary of the bodies of literature brought into relation in the development of the essay's argument.

The Wagered Self is therefore presented as an interpretive framework rather than a tested causal model. It identifies a possible point of convergence between several pressures: the expectation of flawless performance, the narrowing of identity around athletic achievement, the public circulation of mistakes, the commercialization of visibility, and the growing exposure of athletes to financially motivated criticism. None of these conditions is sufficient to explain suicide. Their relevance lies in how they may shape the environment in which distress is experienced, concealed, disclosed, or dismissed.

The essay does not analyze individual athlete deaths or attempt to reconstruct personal motives from public information. Such interpretations would exceed the available evidence and risk reducing complex lives to retrospective explanations. The purpose is more limited: to examine the changing structure of pressure around athletes and to consider its implications for prevention, disclosure, and care.

Figure 1 | *Conceptual Source Clusters Informing the Essay*

Literature cluster (n)	Suicidality	MH distress	Help-seeking	Perfectionism	Athletic identity	NIL visibility	Online abuse	Wagering	Clinical / policy	Theory / method
Athlete mental health / help-seeking (n = 23)	S	P	P	—	—	—	—	—	P	—
Sports wagering / gambling policy (n = 21)	C	—	—	—	—	—	S	P	P	—
Perfectionism / self-presentation (n = 16)	S	S	P	P	—	—	—	—	S	—
Athletic identity / transition (n = 13)	S	S	—	—	P	—	—	—	S	—
Athlete suicide / suicidality (n = 7)	P	S	—	—	—	—	—	—	S	—
NIL / public athlete identity (n = 5)	—	C	—	—	—	P	S	—	S	—
Online abuse / social media (n = 5)	—	C	—	—	—	S	P	S	S	—
Suicide theory / framework (n = 5)	P	—	—	C	C	—	—	—	S	P
Review methodology (n = 5)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	C	P

P = Primary contribution
 S = Secondary contribution
 C = Contextual/methodological
 — = No direct contribution

Note. P = primary contribution. S = secondary contribution. C = contextual or methodological contribution. — = no direct contribution.

Argument

The Wagered Self: Older Vulnerabilities in a Changing Sporting Environment

Sport can provide structure, belonging, recognition, routine, and a future organized around meaningful goals. For many athletes, the role becomes an important source of identity and social connection. This does not mean that sport participation is uniformly protective, nor does it mean that athletic identity is inherently restrictive. It means that the athletic role may carry significant psychological and relational weight.

Population-level research does not support the claim that athletes are uniformly at greater risk of suicide than non-athletes. Gill et al. (2024) found that elite athletes generally showed lower rates of suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and suicide deaths than general-population comparison groups. Sport may offer forms of protection through physical activity, social support, mentorship, structured routines, and collective purpose.

These findings should not be interpreted as evidence that athletes are insulated from suicide-related vulnerability. A role that provides meaning may also become difficult to renegotiate when injury, deselection, exhaustion, or uncertainty arise. The relevant question is therefore not whether sport is broadly protective or broadly harmful. It is how the athletic role may shape the experience, interpretation, and disclosure of distress under particular conditions.

Mortality studies within collegiate sport reinforce the need for this more qualified approach. Rao et al. (2015) identified 35 suicide deaths among 477 NCAA athlete deaths over a nine-year period. Whelan et al. (2024) later identified 128 suicide deaths among 1,102 NCAA athlete deaths across two decades, with suicide becoming the second most common cause of death during the latter decade of observation. These findings do not establish that athletic participation increases suicide risk. They do indicate that suicide remains a clinically relevant concern within athletic populations and that visible participation in sport should not be treated as evidence of psychological safety.

The argument developed in this essay draws from five overlapping areas of literature. These bodies of evidence differ in their maturity and directness. Research on perfectionism, help-seeking, and athletic identity provides comparatively established evidence concerning potential vulnerability processes. Research on NIL, monetized visibility, and wagering-related harassment is more recent and should be interpreted as contextual rather than causal. Table 1 summarizes the role of each literature cluster within the essay.

Table 1 | *Literature Clusters Informing the Wagered Self Essay*

Literature cluster	Interpretive relevance to the essay	Representative sources	Evidentiary maturity
Athlete suicide, suicidality, and mental health	Establishes that athletes are not uniformly at elevated risk while indicating that suicide remains a clinically and institutionally relevant concern within athletic populations.	Rao et al. (2015); Rice et al. (2016); Gouttebarger et al. (2019); Reardon et al. (2019); Timpka et al. (2021); Poucher et al. (2021, 2022); Gill et al. (2024); Whelan et al. (2024); Orlins et al. (2025)	Moderate to strong
Perfectionism, self-presentation, and barriers to disclosure	Supports examination of how socially prescribed standards and concerns about visible imperfection may complicate help-seeking and disclosure for some athletes.	Frost et al. (1990); Hewitt & Flett (1991); Hewitt et al. (2003); Gulliver et al. (2012); Flett et al. (2014); Smith et al. (2016, 2017, 2018); Moreland et al. (2018); Dang et al. (2020); Olsson et al. (2022); Yoon & Petrie (2023); Cosh et al. (2024); Courtney et al. (2026)	Strong
Athletic identity, injury, and role transition	Suggests that athletic identity may be protective in some circumstances while becoming more difficult to renegotiate when injury, retirement, or involuntary transition disrupts the role.	Brewer et al. (1993); Grove et al. (1997); Wylleman & Lavalée (2004); Carless & Douglas (2013); Putukian (2016); Brown et al. (2018); Stambulova & Wylleman (2019); Haslam et al. (2021); Lochbaum et al. (2022); Furie et al. (2023); Montero et al. (2024)	Moderate to strong
NIL, social media, and monetized visibility	Identifies an emerging context in which athletic performance, public identity, branding, and commercial opportunity may become more closely connected. Direct mental-health outcome research remains limited.	NCAA (2021, 2022, 2024c); Brougham (2021); Stephenson (2022); Merrill & Faustin (2023); Hollabaugh et al. (2024); Putukian et al. (2024)	Emerging
Sports wagering, online abuse, and financialized scrutiny	Documents a changing public environment in which some athletes may encounter criticism or harassment connected to wagering outcomes. The available evidence does not establish a direct relationship with suicide-related outcomes.	Karlsson & Håkansson (2018); Marionneau & Nikkinen (2022); Kristensen et al. (2025); NCAA & Signify Group (2024); NCAA (2024b, 2025a, 2025b, 2026); Kroshus-Havril et al. (2025); Forrest et al. (2026)	Emerging to moderate

Note. Evidentiary maturity refers to the development and directness of the available literature. It is not a formal risk-of-bias score. The final two clusters are used to describe changes in the sporting environment, not to infer individual psychological outcomes or direct causal relationships with suicide.

When Performance Becomes a Measure of the Self

Competitive sport involves evaluation. Performance is measured, compared, corrected, selected, replayed, and remembered. These features are not necessarily harmful. The capacity to tolerate correction, repeat difficult tasks, and perform under pressure may support development and achievement.

The concern is more specific. For some athletes, self-evaluation may become closely tied to performance outcomes and the perceived judgment of others. A mistake may be experienced not only as an event within competition but also as a threat to competence, belonging, or personal value. This does not mean that athletic ambition is inherently maladaptive. It suggests that the meaning attached to performance deserves attention.

Research on perfectionism provides one way of examining this distinction. High standards and perfectionistic concerns are not interchangeable. High standards may support discipline and persistence. Perfectionistic concerns refer more closely to fear of mistakes, self-critical evaluation, and perceived pressure to meet the expectations of others. Socially prescribed perfectionism describes the perception that acceptance depends on satisfying demanding external standards. Perfectionistic self-presentation refers to the perceived need to appear capable and to avoid revealing limitations or distress (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Hewitt et al., 2003).

The broader literature has associated maladaptive dimensions of perfectionism with depression, hopelessness, suicidal ideation, and suicide-related outcomes (Flett et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2016, 2017, 2018). Sport-specific studies have also associated perfectionistic concerns with burnout, stress, and difficult forms of self-evaluation (Gotwals et al., 2012; Madigan et al., 2015; Olsson et al., 2022). These findings do not imply that perfectionism explains suicide among athletes. They indicate that particular forms of perfectionism may be relevant when considering how athletes interpret setbacks and whether they feel able to disclose distress.

Help-seeking is important within this context. Disclosure is sometimes presented as a straightforward individual decision. In practice, athletes may weigh concerns about confidentiality, team norms, perceived consequences for selection, coach and peer expectations, and uncertainty about how support will be received. Courtney et al. (2026) found that socially prescribed perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation were associated with greater stigma toward help-seeking among college athletes. Other studies have identified barriers related to service accessibility, team culture, confidentiality, and perceived consequences within sport settings (Gulliver et al., 2012; Moreland et al., 2018; Yoon & Petrie, 2023; Cosh et al., 2024).

The implication is not that outward functioning conceals distress in every case. It is that continued participation, training, and performance should not be treated as sufficient evidence that distress is absent or manageable. Some athletes may continue meeting external expectations while finding disclosure increasingly difficult.

When the Role Becomes Difficult to Renegotiate

Athletic identity can provide meaning, community, structure, and recognition. Brewer et al. (1993) described athletic identity as both a potential strength and a potential vulnerability. The distinction depends partly on how flexibly the role is integrated with other sources of identity, belonging, and future orientation.

When athletic identity becomes comparatively exclusive, injury, deselection, and retirement may be experienced as more than disruptions to participation. They may also affect routines, relationships, aspirations, and the athlete's sense of direction. Grove et al. (1997) identified the relevance of athletic identity in adjustment to retirement. More recent work has examined how identity foreclosure and involuntary transition may complicate adjustment when athletes lose access to a role around which significant parts of their lives have been organized (Haslam et al., 2021; Furie et al., 2023; Montero et al., 2024).

This does not mean that injury necessarily produces identity disruption or that retirement is uniformly experienced as loss. Athletes differ in their relationships to sport, their available supports, and the range of roles they occupy beyond competition. The more limited point is that injury and transition may have psychological significance that extends beyond physical recovery or career logistics.

For some athletes, the central challenge may involve renegotiation: how to preserve valued aspects of the athletic self while developing alternative sources of meaning and belonging. A prevention-oriented approach should therefore avoid assuming either that athletic identity is inherently protective or that strong identification with sport is inherently problematic.

The Audience Has Changed

The vulnerabilities described above are not unique to contemporary sport. Athletes have long encountered hierarchy, scrutiny, disappointment, and public evaluation. What appears to be changing is the scale, continuity, and economic character of that visibility.

Social media can extend public evaluation beyond the event itself. Performances may be replayed, circulated, discussed, and directed back toward the athlete through online commentary. This does not mean that online visibility inevitably produces harm. It does suggest that some athletes may experience fewer boundaries between performance, public response, and private life.

Name, image, and likeness arrangements, commonly known as NIL, introduce a related context. NIL can offer athletes income, autonomy, recognition, and a fairer share of the value generated through their public visibility. It should not be framed as inherently harmful. The available literature does not establish NIL as a mental-health risk factor.

Its relevance to this essay is narrower. NIL may bring athletic performance, branding, marketability, and public identity into closer contact. Hollabaugh et al. (2024) identified NIL and athlete health as an underdeveloped area requiring further study. Stephenson (2022) similarly raised questions about possible psychological implications within collegiate sport. These sources identify a research gap rather than a demonstrated pathway of harm.

For some athletes, performance may now be evaluated across multiple overlapping domains. A poor game may affect competitive standing, online commentary, perceived marketability, or future opportunity. Whether these connections have meaningful mental-health consequences remains an empirical question. Their presence is nevertheless relevant when considering how the environment surrounding athletes has changed.

The Financialization of Scrutiny

Sports wagering adds another dimension to this public environment. The current literature does not support the claim that legalized betting causes athlete suicide or that wagering-related harassment constitutes an established suicide-risk mechanism. Its relevance lies in the possibility that wagering may alter the context in which some spectators interpret athletic performance.

A missed shot, dropped pass, unexpected result, or perceived error may be associated with financial gain or loss for individuals who have wagered on the event. In some circumstances, frustration may be communicated directly to athletes through social media or other forms of online contact.

Institutional reporting suggests that betting-related harassment is a measurable athlete-welfare concern. NCAA reports have documented negative and threatening messages directed toward athletes in high-visibility sports. In one report, 36% of Division I men's basketball athletes indicated that they had experienced sports-betting-related social-media abuse during the previous year. NCAA and Signify Group reporting has also described broader patterns of online abuse directed toward athletes, coaches, and officials (NCAA, 2024b, 2025a, 2026; NCAA & Signify Group, 2024).

These reports require careful interpretation. They do not establish that wagering-related harassment produces specific mental-health outcomes. They do not show that athletes targeted by bettors experience the same pathways of risk as individuals living with gambling-related harms. Research concerning suicidality among people who gamble provides relevant public-health context, but it should not be treated as direct evidence concerning athletes who receive wagering-related abuse.

The supported conclusion is limited but important: wagering-related harassment appears to be an emerging feature of the contemporary sporting environment. Its psychological implications require direct study.

The Wagered Self

The Wagered Self is proposed as an interpretive framework for organizing these overlapping literatures. It is not a diagnostic category, a predictive model, or a causal explanation of suicide among athletes.

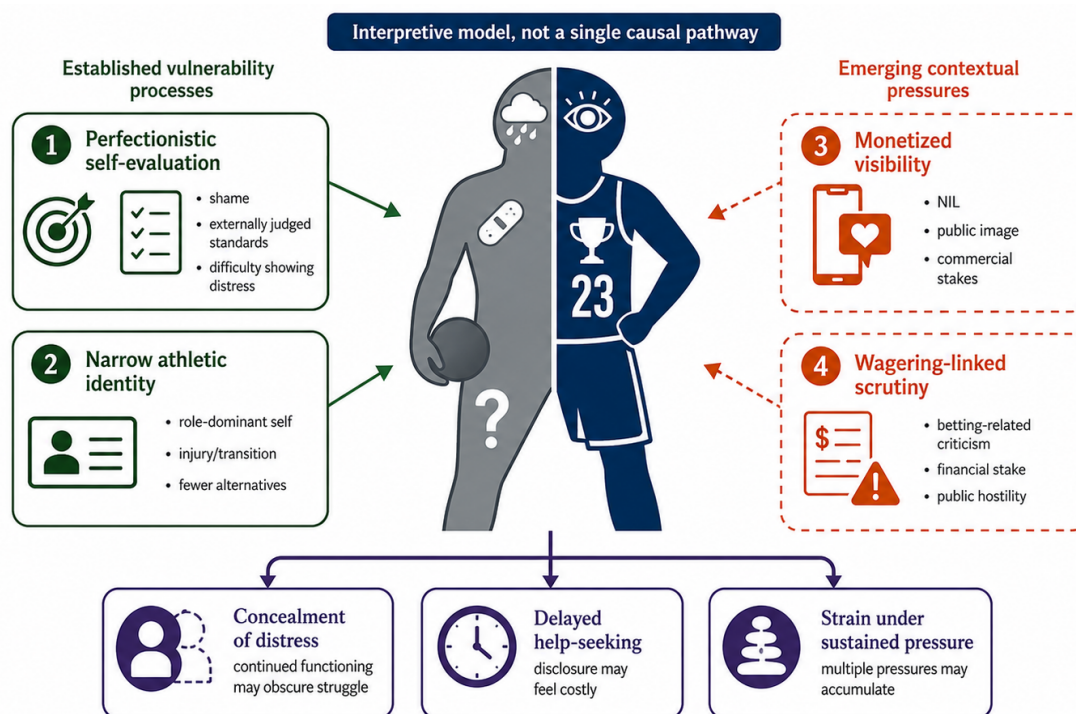
The framework begins with two processes supported by comparatively established bodies of research. The first is perfectionistic self-evaluation, particularly when mistakes are associated with shame, external judgment, or the perceived need to conceal distress. The second is narrow athletic identity, particularly when injury or transition requires the athlete to renegotiate sources of belonging, purpose, and future direction.

The framework places these processes within a changing public environment. Monetized visibility may bring performance into closer contact with public identity, branding, and commercial opportunity. Wagering-related scrutiny may expose some athletes to criticism or hostility tied to the financial outcomes of strangers. These newer conditions should not be treated as equivalent to established vulnerability processes. Their inclusion reflects their potential contextual relevance and the need for further research.

The wager is therefore both literal and interpretive. Money may be attached to athletic performance. Recognition, belonging, opportunity, and self-evaluation may also become tied to the same public role. The model asks whether these pressures sometimes converge in ways that make distress more difficult to disclose or support more difficult to seek.

Figure 2 presents the Wagered Self as a layered risk ecology rather than a linear causal sequence. It distinguishes established vulnerability processes from emerging contextual pressures and places both around a central tension: the possible distance between an athlete's private experience and the public role they are expected to sustain.

Figure 2 | The Wagered Self as a Layered Risk Ecology



Note. Solid outlines indicate comparatively established research areas. Dashed outlines indicate emerging contextual pressures. The model is interpretive and does not imply direct or linear causation.

The prevention implications should remain similarly proportionate. Athlete mental-health systems should not assume that continued performance demonstrates the absence of meaningful distress. Confidential support should be credible, accessible, and clearly separated from performance consequences wherever possible. Injury care and transition planning may benefit from attending to identity alongside physical recovery and career logistics. Teams, institutions, and sport-governance bodies should treat wagering-related harassment as an athlete-welfare concern and support further research into its effects.

The aim is not to pathologize ambition, competition, athletic identity, commercial opportunity, or public visibility. It is to identify questions that become harder to ignore as the sporting environment changes. Prevention begins with the recognition that some athletes may need ways to disclose distress without feeling that disclosure places their role, credibility, or future at risk.

Discussion

Role Security and the Cost of Disclosure

The Wagered Self is not intended to explain athlete suicide through a new sequence of causes. Its usefulness is more limited and, for that reason, more defensible. It provides a way to examine how established vulnerability processes may be experienced within a sporting environment that has become more continuous in its scrutiny, more public in its judgments, and more closely tied to commercial and financial interests. The framework directs attention away from any single pressure and toward the conditions under which distress may become difficult to acknowledge without threatening the role through which the athlete is known to others and, at times, to themselves.

This distinction matters because athlete welfare is often interpreted through what can be observed. A decline in performance, missed practices, academic disruption, behavioural change, injury, or an explicit request for help may all draw appropriate concern. Yet distress does not always present in ways that are immediately visible. An athlete may continue to train, compete, travel, meet academic obligations, and remain publicly engaged while experiencing significant internal strain. Continued functioning should not be treated as evidence that distress is absent or adequately managed. It may coexist with distress, obscure it, or make it more difficult for others to recognize.

The literature on perfectionistic self-presentation provides a particularly useful basis for this concern. The relevant issue is not ambition itself. High standards, persistence, and disciplined self-correction are ordinary and often adaptive features of competitive sport. The concern arises when mistakes are interpreted as threats to worth, when external approval becomes difficult to separate from self-evaluation, and when the disclosure of struggle appears incompatible with the image the athlete feels required to maintain. Courtney et al. (2026) found that socially prescribed perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation were associated with greater stigma toward help-seeking among college athletes. This finding is consistent with a broader help-seeking literature in which athletes describe concerns about confidentiality, team culture, selection, peer norms, coach expectations, and the perceived consequences of becoming known as someone who requires support (Gulliver et al., 2012; Moreland et al., 2018; Yoon & Petrie, 2023; Cosh et al., 2024).

The implication is not that athletes who appear composed are necessarily concealing distress. Nor is it that perfectionism should be interpreted as a proxy for suicide risk. The more proportionate conclusion is that functional presentation alone offers an incomplete account of how an athlete is doing. Assessment should therefore consider not only the presence of distress, but also the athlete's interpretation of what disclosure might place at risk.

This changes the emphasis of clinical inquiry. Asking whether an athlete is anxious, overwhelmed, injured, or uncertain about the future remains important. It is also important to ask what the athlete believes would happen if those experiences became known. Would help-seeking affect selection, playing time, scholarship status, team standing, coach trust, public credibility, or future opportunity? Does the athlete experience support as genuinely confidential, or as another setting in which they may be evaluated? Are there meaningful roles, relationships, and sources of value outside sport that remain available when performance becomes less secure?

These questions are not designed to presume vulnerability. Their purpose is to clarify the athlete's own account of the environment in which distress is being interpreted. Protective factors require the same attention to meaning. A team may provide belonging and intensify comparison. A coach may be experienced as a trusted source of support and as the person who determines role security. A scholarship may reduce financial strain and make the consequences of injury or disclosure feel more consequential. Public visibility may create opportunity, connection, and recognition while also increasing the difficulty of separating performance from personal identity. These conditions do not carry fixed meanings. Their significance depends on how they are experienced within a particular moment of strain.



Athletic identity should be approached with similar care. Strong identification with sport is not inherently restrictive. It may provide coherence, community, discipline, and a durable relationship to the future. The concern arises when the role becomes comparatively exclusive and when injury, deselection, or transition requires a reorganization of the self for which few alternatives have been developed. Research on athletic identity and role transition suggests that adjustment may become more difficult when athletes lose access to a role around which substantial parts of their lives have been organized (Brewer et al., 1993; Grove et al., 1997; Haslam et al., 2021; Furie et al., 2023; Montero et al., 2024).

This does not mean that injury should automatically be interpreted as an identity crisis, or that retirement should be approached as an inevitable psychological loss. Athletes differ in their relationships to sport, the flexibility of their identities, the quality of their supports, and the meanings they assign to transition. The clinical point is narrower: injury and role disruption may have consequences that are not captured by physical recovery timelines, return-to-play decisions, or career planning alone. They may affect belonging, routine, recognition, and the athlete's sense of what remains possible.

A more complete approach to athlete welfare would therefore treat identity plurality as a routine part of development rather than as a response reserved for crisis or retirement. Supporting athletes in cultivating relationships, interests, roles, and future plans beyond sport does not diminish commitment to performance. It may make that commitment more sustainable. The goal is not to loosen the athlete's attachment to a valued role, but to ensure that the role is not required to carry the entire weight of the self.

The same principle should shape institutional responses to mental health. General wellness messaging and encouragement to seek help are necessary but insufficient when athletes remain uncertain about the practical consequences of disclosure. NCAA mental-health guidance emphasizes written plans, referral pathways, and access to qualified providers (NCAA, 2024a). Confidentiality must be credible in practice, clearly explained, and revisited regularly. Athletes should know who can access their information, what will remain private, what may need to be shared, and whether the use of mental-health services could affect participation or selection. Where possible, care pathways should include options outside direct performance structures so that support is not experienced as an extension of evaluation.

Institutions should also pay closer attention to predictable periods of disruption. Injury, loss of starting status, deselection, transfer, retirement, public criticism, and sudden changes in visibility may carry psychological significance for some athletes. None of these events should be treated as inherently destabilizing. Their importance lies in the possibility that they may alter role security, routine, belonging, or future orientation. A proportionate response is not to presume harm, but to create opportunities for meaningful assessment when these transitions occur.

The changing public environment surrounding athletes adds another layer to this work. NIL arrangements can provide legitimate and valuable opportunities, including income, autonomy, recognition, and a fairer distribution of the value generated through athlete visibility. The available evidence does not support framing NIL as a mental-health risk factor. Any discussion of athlete welfare should preserve that boundary.

At the same time, the health implications of NIL remain underdeveloped as an area of study. Hollabaugh et al. (2024) identified the need for closer attention to the relationship between NIL and the health of young athletes, while Stephenson (2022) raised questions about possible psychological ramifications in collegiate sport. These sources do not establish harm. They identify a context in which performance, public identity, endorsement activity, social-media presence, and commercial opportunity may become more closely connected for some athletes.

The appropriate response is neither alarm nor indifference. Athlete-welfare systems should develop alongside the commercial environment. This may include access to guidance on contracts, branding expectations, social-media boundaries, financial literacy, and the management of public attention. Mental-health support should remain available without requiring athletes to choose between seeking care and preserving perceived commercial credibility. The point is not that public opportunity creates vulnerability. It is that opportunity may also introduce demands whose meaning and effects require attention.

Sports wagering raises a related but distinct concern. The reviewed evidence does not establish that legalized wagering causes athlete suicide, nor does it demonstrate that betting-related harassment produces particular mental-health outcomes. The supported claim is more specific: wagering may alter the public environment surrounding athletes by connecting individual performance to the financial gains and losses of spectators.

Institutional reporting indicates that this is already relevant in some high-visibility contexts. NCAA reports have documented negative and threatening messages directed toward athletes, including messages from individuals who had wagered on their games. NCAA and Signify Group monitoring has also described broader patterns of online abuse directed

toward athletes, coaches, and officials (NCAA, 2024b, 2025a, 2026; NCAA & Signify Group, 2024). These reports establish exposure. They do not establish a direct pathway from exposure to psychological harm or suicide-related outcomes.

The distinction should remain explicit. Research on gambling-related harms among people who gamble offers an important public-health context, but it cannot be transferred uncritically to athletes who receive wagering-related harassment. These are different populations and different forms of risk. What can reasonably be concluded is that some athletes are now exposed to a form of scrutiny in which criticism may be tied directly to the financial frustration of strangers. The psychological implications of that exposure require direct study.

Policy should respond at the level supported by the evidence. Athlete welfare should be considered alongside consumer protection, market integrity, regulatory compliance, and gambling revenue when sports-wagering systems are evaluated. Clear reporting pathways, threat monitoring, platform coordination, and appropriate escalation procedures should be available when athletes experience harassment. The implications of individual performance bets may also warrant closer examination where they appear to concentrate scrutiny on particular athletes.

Figure 2 presents the Wagered Self as a layered risk ecology rather than a linear causal model. This framing is important. The model does not propose that perfectionism, athletic identity, visibility, or wagering-related scrutiny operate in a fixed sequence. Nor does it imply that the presence of several pressures predicts an individual outcome. It asks whether established vulnerability processes may become more difficult to manage when they are experienced within a sporting environment where performance is more continuously evaluated, publicly circulated, and financially consequential.

The practical implication is straightforward. Athlete-welfare systems should not wait for performance to deteriorate before taking distress seriously. They should create conditions in which disclosure is possible before the athlete must demonstrate an inability to function.

Conclusion

The Wagered Self remains an interpretive proposal. It should not be treated as a validated model, a screening instrument, or a predictive framework. Its components are drawn from bodies of literature that differ substantially in maturity and directness. Research on perfectionism, help-seeking, athlete mental health, and athletic identity provides a comparatively developed foundation. Research on NIL, monetized visibility, and wagering-related harassment remains newer and more limited. These contextual domains should not be presented as established suicide-risk factors.

The essay is also a conceptual synthesis rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis. It organizes relevant evidence across several domains to develop an interpretive account of contemporary athlete welfare. It does not estimate pooled associations, establish prevalence across all athlete populations, or provide an exhaustive account of the literature. Institutional reports are useful for documenting changes in the sporting environment, but they should not be used to infer individual psychological outcomes without direct evidence.

The framework should not be generalized across athletes, sports, or competitive levels without further study. Athletes differ in visibility, role security, injury history, financial circumstances, public exposure, team culture, identity development, and access to support. The model may be more relevant in settings where several pressures overlap, but this remains a question for empirical investigation.

Future research should examine these relationships longitudinally and with greater subgroup sensitivity. Studies could explore how perfectionistic self-presentation, athletic identity, disclosure concerns, injury, public criticism, and role transitions change across a season or during movement out of sport. Research on NIL should distinguish between athletes who experience visibility as opportunity, those who experience it as demand, and those for whom it carries elements of both. Studies of wagering-related harassment should examine its distribution across sports and athlete groups, as well as its possible relationship with perceived safety, sleep, anxiety, mood, and help-seeking.

The essay does not analyze individual athlete deaths or reconstruct personal motives from public information. This is both an ethical and methodological boundary. Structural analysis should not become retrospective certainty about an individual life. The purpose of the Wagered Self is not to explain any particular death, but to identify questions that deserve closer attention as the conditions surrounding athletic performance continue to change.

The central issue is not whether athletes are resilient enough to withstand pressure. Resilience matters, but it is an incomplete standard for welfare. A credible sporting environment should also make it possible for athletes to disclose distress without assuming that they have jeopardized trust, belonging, selection, opportunity, or the right to remain recognizable within the roles they have worked to build.

The most important measure of athlete welfare may therefore be found before visible collapse: in whether an athlete can say that the role has become difficult to carry, and reasonably expect that the admission will lead to support rather than loss.



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