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## **Vaulted to Unsustainable Heights: Examining Media Coverage of the Mental Health of Olympic Athletes**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines media framing of mental health issues among Olympic athletes during the 2021 Summer Olympic Games and 2022 Winter Olympic Games. The study employs framing theory in conjunction with intersectionality to better understand changing attitudes about the impact of mental health struggles on athletes. Previous research suggests athletes, especially elite Olympic athletes, are framed as superhuman and beyond common human frailties. Results show that while media frames about mental health may be more positive than in the past, differences persist in the way women and athletes of color are portrayed. We discuss implications of such media coverage.

*Keywords: framing, mental health, Olympic athletes*

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**O**n July 28, 2021, sports fans around the world were shocked when Simone Biles withdrew herself from the Tokyo Summer Olympic Games, citing mental health reasons. Just weeks earlier, tennis champion and Olympic cauldron-lighter Naomi Osaka stepped away from the French Open, coming forward about her anxiety when pressed by reporters and articulating that she suffered from depression. Since stigma has and continues to surround mental health concerns, particularly for elite athletes, perhaps even more surprising was the large amount of support that Biles and Osaka received in mass media and social media. The events of the Tokyo 2021 Summer Olympic Games and the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games were watershed events for bringing the discussion of athletes' mental health into the open.

The Olympic Games are the pinnacle of amateur sport. The Games are not just a sporting event, but they are also “part reality show, part nationalistic emblem... part global festival” (Billings, Angelini, & MacArthur, 2017, p.1). These competitions have been widely analyzed from a variety of viewpoints over the years. The pointed media concentration over a two-and-a-half-week period emphasizes the intensity and power of the events. This study examines mass media framing of elite athletes and mental health. We analyzed popular online media coverage of the winter and summer Olympic Games in mainstream mass media publications from the 2021 Tokyo Summer Olympics and 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. The time period was unique because the summer and winter Games took place within months of each other.

This qualitative textual analysis examines frames in media coverage revealed during this unique time in Olympic sports while the world was emerging from a pandemic, social attention was focused on the deaths of unarmed Black people at the hands of police (e.g., George Floyd), and discussions about mental health were becoming more public than in the past. We analyze mass media coverage from an intersectional perspective for the ways media framed mental health and stigma about athlete weakness vs. strength and also examine media framing of mental health regarding athletes of different genders and races. We chose framing theory since it posits that journalists and media organizations communicate how to make sense of the world. We selected intersectional analysis because while there are commonalities in media coverage of women, framing may be different for more specific identity groups (Howard, 2000). Understanding common frames and identities associated with selected athletes in this study provided attention to social construction of reality and how it affects the athlete's image.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Elite Athletes and Mental Health**

Athletes who play at an elite level (both those in professional sports and those who compete as amateurs at the highest levels) are at a greater risk of developing mental health struggles (Foskett & Longstaff, 2018; Küttel & Larsen, 2019; Rice et al., 2016). The extreme mental and physical requirements of playing at the elite level subject athletes to this risk (Foskett & Longstaff, 2018; Küttel & Larsen, 2019; Rice et al., 2016). Also, the peak competitive years of an athlete often overlap with the peak age that individuals develop mental health disorders (Rice

et al., 2016). Furthermore, elite athletes who are injured, close to retirement, or are currently experiencing difficulties in their sport performance are at an even greater risk (Rice et al., 2016). Olympic athletes are commonly categorized as “superhuman,” and their physical achievements are assumed to represent self-actualization and protection against mental distress. However, research has indicated that athletes report mental health disorders at similar rates as the general population; they certainly are human even though they possess great skills and talents (Gorzynski et al., 2017; MacIntyre et al., 2017; Rice et al., 2016).

A variety of factors influence elite athletes developing mental health struggles, including stress from competition, financial worries, training/overtraining, injury, recovery, body image issues, retirement, and conflicts with coaches and teammates (Howells & Lucassen, 2018; MacIntyre et al., 2017; Prinz et al., 2016; Rapkin et al., 2020; Rice et al., 2016; Roderick & Gibbons, 2014; Schinke et al., 2017; Sudano et al., 2017; Wolanin et al., 2016). Despite the high risk of athletes developing mental health problems, many of them have not reported their struggles over the years because of associated stigma (Rice et al., 2016). Athletes often do not speak out or seek mental health services because they fear being considered weak, or losing playing time, a starting position, sponsorship, or a contract (Bauman, 2015). Furthermore, mass media have portrayed elite athletes as mentally tough and indestructible (Bauman, 2015). Athletes are assumed to be immune from mental health issues because of sports culture, social history, and sports organizations that work to make sports look profitable and successful (Bauman, 2015). Therefore, the incentives for elite athletes to seek assistance are typically outweighed by the negative consequences of looking weak or not being able to perform (Bauman, 2015).

In looking at patterns of elite athletes’ mental health, some groups are impacted in different ways than others. For instance, gender differences exist regarding mental health issues in elite athletes (Foskett & Longstaff, 2018; Gorczynski et al., 2017; Gulliver et al., 2015; Torstveit & Sundgot-Borgen, 2004; Walton et al., 2021; Wolanin et al., 2015). Research has demonstrated that elite female athletes are twice as likely to report depressive symptoms compared to their male counterparts (Gorzynski et al., 2017; Walton et al., 2021; Wolanin et al., 2015). Additionally, female athletes report more body image struggles compared to male athletes (Torstveit & Sundgot-Borgen, 2004) and report more signs of distress compared to male athletes (Foskett & Longstaff, 2018; Gulliver et al., 2015). An alarming amount of evidence demonstrates female athletes are at a higher risk of developing mental health problems (Gorzynski et al., 2017; Walton et al., 2021; Wolanin et al., 2015).

Women elite athletes face far more obstacles and experience more stressors compared to men (Walton et al., 2021). For instance, women face more negative and sexualized perceptions of their bodies (Walton et al., 2021). Female athletes typically are required to wear uniforms that include bikinis, sport bras, and tight spandex, which can result in their receiving negative perceptions of their body and mental health struggles (Gorzynski et al., 2017; Walton et al., 2021; Wolanin et al., 2015). Competition and athletic clothing for female athletes can lead to eating disorders and other consequences due to unwanted attention via social media messages

and sexist remarks in social media and mass media (Gorczyński et al., 2017; Walton et al., 2021; Wolanin et al., 2015). Additionally, clothing for women athletes, societal expectations of women to meet specific beauty standards, and powerful positions of coaches and other authorities put them at risk of being sexually harassed (Mountjoy, 2019; Smith & Pegoraro, 2020). Larry Nassar, the United States team doctor for gymnastics, went to trial and pleaded guilty for sexually abusing hundreds of female athletes (Mountjoy, 2019; Smith & Pegoraro, 2020). Many of these women were abused for years and because of societal and gender roles, as well as rape myths about women, they kept quiet for fear of losing a position on the team (Mountjoy, 2019; Smith & Pegoraro, 2020). Overall, the additional stressors and pressures of being female combined with the physical stressors of being an elite athlete put female athletes at a higher risk of developing mental health symptoms compared to their male counterparts.

Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) are another group that displays striking differences from white people regarding mental health (Tran, 2020). Research has demonstrated that BIPOC are not provided the same access to mental health services compared to their white counterparts (Office of the Surgeon General et al., 2001). The recent deaths of unarmed BIPOC by police are an additive stressor (Bor et al., 2018; McLeod et al., 2020). The Black Lives Matter movement demonstrates that BIPOC athletes experience additional struggles and pressure based on the color of their skin (Bor et al., 2018; McLeod et al., 2020). To date, minimal research has been conducted investigating BIPOC groups regarding mental health (Tran, 2020). Despite the disadvantages subgroups such as female athletes and BIPOC have regarding mental health, many famous BIPOC female athletes are using their voice to speak out about social injustices and mental health struggles, including Osaka and Biles. The additive stressors of being a BIPOC combined with stressors of being a female and elite athlete (mentioned above) put them at an even greater risk of developing mental health symptoms.

### **Framing Athletes & Mental Health**

Framing theory illustrates that the public is significantly influenced by what mass media displays (Romney & Johnson, 2018; McQuail, 2010). Framing involves four components, as journalists (a) define problems, (b) identify causes, (c) recommend potential treatments, and (d) extend moral evaluations to their audience (Entman, 1993). Media framing is important because it affects the public's perceptions of reality. Framing is closely tied to agenda-setting theory, which posits that the mass media draw audiences' attention to specific issues, thereby influencing what society considers important (McCombs et al., 1997).

Building upon that theory, media framing states that journalists and media organizations communicate to audiences how to make sense of the world around them. Media framing theory considers some key factors: The social and political context in which the news framing occurs, how journalists build the frames, how readers understand and choose to apply those frames, and the social and political consequences of news media frames (Baran & Davis, 2020). Journalists use tools, such as repetition of certain frames, placement of information in the news (e.g., breaking news on the front page), as well as association with certain social or cultural symbols to

communicate salience of the issue to the audience (Entman, 1993).

### **Framing Identities & Intersectionality**

While researchers have identified commonalities in media coverage of women athletes as a group, framing may be different for more specific identity groups. Identities are “strategic social constructions created through interactions, with social and material consequences,” (Howard, 2000, p. 371) and are recursive between self and society (Mead, 1934/2015). Along with racial and gender identities, a person may identify any number of ways, including as an athlete. Often, athletic identity intersects with hyper-masculine identity, where dominance, aggression, and mental toughness are celebrated (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). Athletic identity, especially for elite athletes, can become overriding as they are encouraged to focus on their sports performance to the detriment of other bonds (Rapkin et al., 2020). Mental illness risk is high when an athlete loses that identity, whether through injury, retirement, or lack of performance (Rice et al., 2016).

The concept of intersectionality posits that, just as individuals are multi-faceted, the ways in which our different identities interact can have unexpected or different effects than the identities separately (Bowleg, 2012). Because of intersectionality, journalists may frame the mental illness of a Black female athlete differently than Black male athletes, white female athletes, or Black female non-athletes in similar circumstances. Understanding common frames and identities associated with Biles and Osaka provide context to the timing and overall discussions around their mental health disclosures.

Media framing of female athletes compared with male athletes has been studied; disparities in media framing also exist along racial lines. Research by Hughey and Goss (2015) discovered the most prevalent themes about Black athletes in the media include inherently racist themes such as “race as biology” (e.g., genes) and “racial outcomes are environmental” (e.g., raised at altitude), implying that success by Black athletes comes from external forces instead of intrinsic character traits. Another stereotype seen in sports framing is that of the “athletic but dumb” Black athlete contrasted with the “smart but unathletic” white athlete (Mercurio & Filak, 2010). A study of Black NFL coaches found that the most common media frame for them was exclusion, appearing less often in *Sports Illustrated* than their white counterparts with similar or more successful seasons (Owusu & Marbley, 2008).

Media framing of Black women athletes follows patterns in coverage of both women and Black athletes. Coverage of Serena Williams has been studied extensively. Frames of Williams include the “angry Black woman” stereotype, othering her from white tennis players, and over-analysis of her muscular body as typified by her catsuit (Martin, 2018; Schultz, 2005; Tredway 2019). Williams and South African track star Caster Semenya both have had their statuses as women questioned, doubly stereotyped due to race and athleticism (Cooky et al., 2013; Litchfield et al., 2018). Research on the WNBA-playing Ogwumike sisters and Osaka identify many of the same stereotypes but posit that their status as second-generation immigrants may cause the model-minority frame to supersede, but not eliminate the other common frames for

Black women athletes (Razack & Joseph, 2020; Zenquis & Mwaniki, 2019).

Along with Biles and Osaka, disclosures of mental health struggles and advocacy were championed by Black women athletes, including tennis pro Venus Williams as well as amateur elite athletes Sha'Carri Richardson (track), Simone Manuel (swimming), and Raven Saunders (shot put). The years-long practice of living with these layers of oppression in mass media might have contributed to inspiring these women to speak up on mental health advocacy during the few times sports media paid attention.

### **Framing Mental Health in Sports**

Media framing of mental health for elite athletes can be affected by their various identities. As public figures, disclosures of athletes' injuries are common discussions with the press, as teams feel obligated to explain player absences and injuries. However, the method and timing of the disclosure must be carefully planned in consideration of opposing team advantages, future employability, and appeasing news and fan interest (Bauman, 2015; Merz et al., 2020). This deliberation is even more complicated when relating a mental health disorder, which can be stigmatized as “weak,” especially in the powerful Olympic Games, where one might muse this is considered a hyper-masculine sporting environment, where physical injury might be more acceptable than mental or emotional distress (Newman et al., 2016). Covering up mental health struggles by omission or using vague language (Biles initially said she pulled out of the Olympics for her “health”) may contribute to the broad stigmatization of mental health being something to be ashamed of (Elsey et al., 2020; Gibson & Gorczynski, 2019; Mellifont & Smith-Merry, 2015). When Biles withdrew from the Tokyo Olympic games, she saw overwhelming support for her decision. However, she also received negative comments. She was criticized for looking “weak,” and some accused her of failing her country by not competing for gold medals (Leger, 2021; Marcus, 2021). To counteract these negative comments, Biles posted on her social media pages videos of the “twisties” to demonstrate to the public how dangerous it was for her to perform her moves at competition (Armour, 2021). Throughout the games and following the Olympics, Biles gave question-and-answer sessions on Instagram to her fans to communicate what she was going through and to take control of her own narrative. For instance, Biles posted, “Put your mental health first. That’s more important than any other medal you could win” (ESPN, 2021).

As the discussion of mental health among athletes becomes less taboo (Elsey et al., 2020), media framing shapes how the public views these disclosures (Hayes et al., 2007). Recent research has uncovered trends of decreasing negativity and the human experience of mental illness (Whitley & Wang, 2016), especially when covering well-known professional athletes (Cassilo, 2020). However, various identities associated with particular athletes may shape the tone of media framing.

One athlete who has been outspoken is swimmer Michael Phelps, who has won more Olympic gold medals than any other athlete (23) and was one of the first elite athletes to speak out about his mental health struggles. Jackson et al. (2022) conducted a content analysis of media

coverage surrounding Phelps' disclosure of how ADHD, depression, and anxiety affected his career and his subsequent work as a mental health advocate. The researchers used social identity and framing theories to examine 280 newspaper articles before and after Phelps' 2016 retirement from competitive swimming. They found that before retirement, news media portrayed Phelps as a celebrity Olympic athlete affected by ADHD, while after retirement, news articles depicted him with more complex conditions, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. As Phelps became more open about his mental health as a public advocate, news coverage depicted him less as a celebrity and more as an activist. The authors also noted that news media covered athlete mental health in more accurate ways over time, in part because of Phelps' activism.

Parrott and co-authors (2019) researched media frames used for NBA player DeMar DeRozan's disclosure of depression in 2018 and its inspiration the next month for fellow NBA player Kevin Love to speak out about having panic attacks and anxiety. At the time of their mental health disclosures, DeRozan and Love shared similarities, including being successful veteran NBA players with 8-figure salaries, and both chose to address their mental health struggles directly with their fans. While DeRozan is Black and played for the only Canadian team in the NBA and Love is white and played with LeBron James on the Cleveland Cavaliers, the coverage studied was similar and nearly universally positive. Parrott et al. (2019) identified several positive themes in media coverage, including allowing the athletes to be sources, declarations of support by coaches, teammates, and the public, and encouragement to pursue treatment.

Gender identity influences media frames. NCAA champion and Olympic middle distance runner Suzy Favor-Hamilton said she had bipolar disorder and anxiety after she was discovered to have worked as an escort during manic episodes. The top two media themes identified were omission of mental illness in sports discussion and Favor-Hamilton as a disgrace (Vaccaro & Butryn, 2020). These frames were likely influenced by role conflict between elite athleticism with mental disorders and the gendered expectations of ideal motherhood for female athletes conflicting with her escort work, even if it resulted from mental illness. How then, can athletes convey mental health struggles effectively? It seems that players are more likely to have positive media frames if they have established success (Cassilo, 2020; Parrot et al., 2021), have a diagnosis and plan for treatment, have support expressed by their team, and are able to speak to their fans directly with their own voices through social or other media (Else et al., 2020).

While elite athletes competing in the Olympic Games often have access to mental health screening and treatment, non-elite athletes, who finance their own training and travel, usually do not have access even though they are subject to the same, or perhaps more, strain and stress (Shannon et al., 2024). This disparity often is missing in sports and Olympic media coverage. Amateur athletes make up the majority of Olympic competitors, but have the least access to external sponsorship funding, sports organizations, and financial help. These factors compound to cause greater mental health strain (especially compared to elite athlete counterparts that have built-in support systems). The International Olympic Committee has developed a tool to test athlete mental health, but it has not yet been tested on amateur non-elite athletes, leaving these

competitors to fend for themselves (Shannon et al., 2024).

### **Research Questions**

This study examines the following research questions:

*RQ 1: How were elite athletes' mental health status framed by mass media regarding stigma and weakness vs. strength?*

*RQ 2: How did mass media frame elite athletes of different genders and races in terms of mental health status?*

### **METHOD**

The researchers examined coverage in articles obtained through Google searches of mass media articles during the Tokyo Summer Olympic Games July 23-August 8, 2021, and Beijing Winter Olympic Games February 4-February 20, 2022. To get a diverse cross-section of articles from varied publications, we searched for news and sports journalism stories with the keywords “Olympic Games” and “mental health” during the length of the competitions. Sources included U.S. news and sports media organizations (e.g., ABC News, NBC News, CNN.com, ESPN.com, SI.com, NYTimes.com) and those based in other countries (e.g., British news outlets SkySports.com, TheGuardian.com, Independent.co.uk, and others such as Reuters.com, IndiaToday.in, Toronto.citynews.ca). We gathered 52 stories about the Winter Olympic Games and 94 about the Summer Olympic Games pertaining to mental health and the Games. The articles all were from reputable legacy news organizations.

Using a textual analysis approach (Hesse-Biber, 2017) it was our goal to discern “common patterns and assumptions” and the meanings that typically occur in relation to these thought patterns (p. 248). Using literature and the stated research questions as a guide, each researcher examined the texts from the above sources, identifying possible categories or topics and to determine patterns that emerge. Three researchers read the articles multiple times, wrote memos on the patterns in the texts, and met after each reading to narrow down and establish commonality in themes. As suggested by Hesse-Biber (2017), we began with descriptive codes, reviewing and labeling news article topics to organize them in categories. Next, we proceeded to categorical codes that connected the identified content of the articles to our theoretical bases of framing and intersectionality. Finally, we organized our findings into analytical codes that interpreted the meaning of the texts: what the journalistic frames were communicating under an intersectional lens. This took several rounds of discussions to verify the validity of the themes.

### **FINDINGS**

To answer the research questions, we examined the news media articles for themes and subthemes. RQ1 asked how elite athletes' mental health was framed by mass media with particular regard to stigma and weakness vs. strength. The following themes emerged:

#### **Elite Athletes Are Open About Mental Health Struggles**

Prominent elite athletes, including Biles, Osaka, and Phelps, openly discussed their mental health struggles during the time period studied, showing that elite athletes were not only willing, but also needed to be transparent about their mental health. Osaka's vulnerability about

her withdrawal from the French Open and Biles' honesty about her mental health "twisties" during the Olympic Games opened the doors for other athletes to also discuss these issues. Osaka wrote an essay for TIME magazine about what she learned from being frank about her health status, commenting, "you can never please everyone," and "everyone suffers from mental health issues or knows someone who does" (Osaka, 2021). In this way, she normalized mental health issues and removed stigma. Other elite athletes came forward saying they had not discussed their struggles in the past because of the fear of being ostracized. Skier Lindsay Vonn revealed she had gone through depression in the past and had not talked about it because she thought it was a "weakness." She noted that her attitude has changed. "I feel like, honestly, everyone should have a therapist," she told *USA Today*. "It should be like having a dentist or going to a pediatrician" (Schad, 2021). Phelps publicly discussed his depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts, and how he sought help to improve his mental health (Jackson et. al, 2022).

The perception of weakness was perpetuated through some critics in the case of Biles' withdrawal from some events. Those who chose to publicly shame her included some right-wing politicians, but also a prominent Black "Saturday Night Live" comedian, Michael Che, who made fun of her. Public comments that she was embarrassing her country, or that she was a "quitter," served to diminish mental health concerns as trivial or uncommon (Fieldstadt, 2021; Russell, 2021). Boston Celtics forward Jayson Tatum tweeted a clip of conservative activist Charlie Kirk (Leger, 2021), who called Biles "a shame to the country" and "a selfish sociopath." Further, Kirk described Biles as reflective as representative of weakness in the United States. In his response, Tatum fully supported Biles and others who might be going through mental health issues. "Is it that hard to be supportive and empathetic to what others are going through ... this is someone's daughter and her health you are referring to" Tatum responded (para. 2).

In fact, experts quoted in news articles noted that research suggests at least "35% of elite athletes are affected by mental health disorders at some stage of their careers" ("Tackling mental health," 2019) and others pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated these concerns. Dr. Naresh Rao, a physician and member of the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee, said in general, as many as "40% to 50%" of people have some form of mental health illness, but "throw in the pandemic and the fact that many of these athletes are teenagers or young adults, you start to see the percentage could go up to as high as 70%" (Park, 2021).

Media coverage from the subsequent winter Olympics focused intentionally on the narrative of mental health, though we note this coverage was not always positive or understanding. Shaun White, long time snowboarder, was used as a clear example of mental health struggles. As a 35-year-old competitor, White was at the end of his career, with intense pressure on him to medal in his final Olympic Games appearance. White noted that in sports, especially at this elite level, athletes are taught to "grit your teeth" and "bear through the challenges" (Scipioni, 2022, p. 1). Further, White noted, "it is not a weakness" to be vulnerable (p. 1). Athletes made a point to temper expectations about their performance and noted the difficult mental strain involved in competing at an elite level. Both the media and athletes mentioned tight COVID-19 protocols set in place by the Beijing organizers; this included strict

quarantine, distancing, testing, and masking rules. Notably, bobsledder Elana Meyers Taylor tested positive for COVID-19 upon arrival to the Games and was open about the emotional stress of preparing for competition while she was restricted to her hotel room.

A sub-theme that emerged was an increase in athlete-generated narratives focusing on their very human struggles to counterbalance the media trope of athletes as “superhuman.” Athletes made efforts to mention mental health and remark on the importance of the holistic experience of competing. In so doing, athletes shifted emphasis away from simply winning medals and placed greater meaning on the time and effort it took for them to train to get to the Olympic Games. For example, White presented the human side in addition to the mental health struggles noted above. After winning medals from age 19 through his current 35, he noted that athletes are not superhuman, that he was getting older, and he could not perform the way he did in his earlier career. When he placed a respectable fourth in his final event, White broke down in tears from the pressure of failing to medal.

Osaka’s TIME magazine essay noted that she hoped she was helping others with mental health problems by revealing her own (Osaka, 2021). Swimmer Simone Manuel told the Associated Press that she had been diagnosed with “overtraining syndrome” (burnout) exacerbated by the mental strain of the pandemic, George Floyd’s death, and subsequent protests. “This last year for the Black community has been brutal,” she said during the Olympic trials (Harris, 2021). Articles pointed out the effects the COVID-19 pandemic had on athletes’ training routines and mental health, delaying workouts, and causing anxiety and depression.

The mix of identity as an athlete and an individual was supported by rowers Kristi Wagner and Gevvie Stone. Stone noted the difficulty of separating one’s performance with how one feels about oneself. “I think it’s really easy as an athlete to integrate how you do performance-wise into how you feel about yourself as a person and equate results to your confidence. Personally, I think it’s hard to separate the two because we spend so much time thinking about our sport, doing our sport...” (Beland & Dering, 2021, para. 1).

Another sub-theme emerged from the data suggesting that athletes’ willingness to talk about mental health represents a cultural shift. Many athletes prior to the summer Olympics in 2021 hinted at the need for greater mental support for athletes. This trend was more apparent during the winter Olympics. For example, figure skater Adam Rippon provided support to Biles as well as others who speak out about their mental health struggles, suggesting this presentation is and should be a shift in how we as a society view athletes publicly acknowledging their struggles. Rippon noted, “as a culture we need to redefine what it means to be brave and what it means to be strong. And I’m very grateful that Simone Biles is showing us the way.” Further, Rippon added, “The extra scrutiny that female athletes and specifically Black females face is unfathomable and unfair” (Panchal, 2021, para. 7).

### **Journalism Still Relies Upon “Drama Framing” and Superhuman Athletes**

A major theme to emerge was the journalists’ tendency to use dramatic framing in both the summer and winter Olympics. We found an interesting dichotomy between framing athletes as either “superhuman” when they win and dehumanizing them when they fail. And even though

mental health carries less stigma than it has in the past, journalists still fall back on framing mental health problems as a “failure.”

One of the most notable incidents was the emotional collapse of Mikaela Shiffrin on the ski slopes. Having recently experienced her father’s death, Shiffrin was struggling with the tremendous expectations of the media and fans while grieving. It was repeatedly noted that Shiffrin was meant to be a top medal contender, but that her father had recently passed; media coverage focused on whether Shiffrin could rise to the challenge and overcome adversity. On a qualifying run, Shiffrin exited the course out of control and collapsed into tears on the side of the mountain. The tight camera angle on her tears and the refusal of producers to cut away was rather grotesque. Noted in an article by Bauder (2022) of the Associated Press, NBC defended its coverage of Shiffrin as she sat “forlornly” with her head down “second guessing everything she had done for 15 years” (Bauder, para. 2). Bauder reported Molly Solomon, an executive producer for NBC’s Olympic coverage, suggested that NBC was merely doing its job in reporting the 20 minutes of dramatic coverage. In an interview with the Associated Press, NBC (Solomon noted) has an obligation to provide this type of drama and emotional perspective in its coverage. “We’re watching real people with real emotions in real time...” (Bauder, para. 2).

Although Shiffrin had been upfront with her struggles, the commentators created an aura of the scene as being overly dramatic and infused it as intrusive. The NBC coverage alluded to her failure to medal as well as the need and even responsibility to so intensely cover Shiffrin in her struggles. The drama frame is common in sports journalism, as many stories are set up to show that athletes “overcame” some kind of adversity. The Shiffrin story is an example of how that framing can backfire when the athlete does not perform the way sports journalists and commentators not only expect, but assume, will happen.

Also employing a drama frame and the “comeback story” trope was the coverage of skater Nathan Chen. A member of Team USA, Chen was lauded as the great hope for a medal in the 2018 winter games, but he failed to medal when he fell repeatedly. The 2022 games marked the supposed great comeback for Chen, and journalists dwelled on his mental health struggles in the runup to the games. The framing reflected an obsession over whether Chen would mentally crack and fail to medal again. When he won, the framing fell back into well-worn comeback and superhuman tropes.

### **Differences in Framing Women and Athletes of Color**

There was evidence that women and people of color were covered differently than other groups. Shiffrin’s coverage of her emotional reaction to failure on the slopes fell into common stereotypes of women as “emotional” and “weak, and unable to handle the pressure of such an event. The persistence of the television producers in focusing on her breakdown for more than 20 minutes could be interpreted as sexism. Another example was Elana Meyers Taylor, one of the few Black athletes in the predominantly white sport of bobsled. Media coverage lauded Taylor as the most-decorated Black athlete in winter Olympic history, thus repeating the common trope of tokenism. This was compounded by coverage pre-race detailing how she caught COVID-19 and was forced to quarantine away from the track and her team. Taylor talked publicly about her

difficulties with mental health issues. Within her commentary, there appeared to be a racial framing, as there are not many Black winter athletes. News media articles noted high expectations of her to win. But when hit with COVID and separation from her family and team, the coverage portrayed Meyers Taylor as being in mental health turmoil rather than focusing on the very human reaction she had to the pressure.

Another example of racial framing as well as intersectionality emerged in a story about shot putter Raven Saunders, who also is Black. In an article, Carlson (2021) shared Saunders' perspective on her role as an Olympic athlete. Saunders felt empty. She described her position as being “young, Black, and gay” (para. 6). Having recently moved to Mississippi, Saunders discussed the stigma that followed her identities. Her mental health issues compounded over the 2021 year. Although she focused on track, things continued to get worse. She revealed that contacting her therapist saved her life and she also spent time in a mental health facility. Saunders said she wanted athletes and the public readers to know mental health issues are real.

## DISCUSSION

There has recently been a shift in elite athletes' willingness to speak about their mental health struggles. Biles, Osaka, Phelps, and others have talked publicly about their mental health struggles, hoping to normalize them and to end the stigma. Additionally, organizations such as the United States Tennis Association, the National Basketball Association, and the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committees, have begun actions to provide mental health services for their athletes. Documentaries such as *The Weight of Gold*, *Untold: Breaking Point*, and *Naomi Osaka* have shed light on the mental health struggles elite athletes face. The recent events of athletes withdrawing from competition have sparked the conversation regarding mental health and many more athletes are gaining the confidence to discuss their struggles and seek assistance.

This project explored the narratives and framing about athlete mental health at one of the most elite sporting events: the Olympic Games. Research question one asked how elite athletes' mental health was framed by mass media regarding stigma and weakness vs. strength. Using framing theory to provide context for this discussion, media coverage of the most recent Olympic Winter 2021 and Summer 2022 Games indicates that framing of athletes' mental health proved to be on the path toward being less stigmatized than in the past. However, we want to note negative framing persists surrounding stigmatization of mental health issues and superhuman expectations of Olympic athletes. The data suggests that athletes are now more open about discussing their mental health struggles and the intense pressure they feel to hide these struggles. For some this was in an apologetic manner, as noted with Mikala Shiffrin. However, for others, such as Lindsey Vonn, who publicly discussed her past belief that depression was a signal of weakness, to her current recommendation that “everyone should have a therapist” (Schad, 2021), it was an awakening. Frank discussions from high-profile athletes like Osaka, Biles, and Phelps helped normalize mental health challenges.

One of the most interesting aspects that emerged from the coverage was the notion that while journalists portrayed mental health as a big issue and covered athletes speaking out on mental health problems, their coverage did not include a holistic view of the athlete as a person.

For instance, with Shiffrin, the mental health struggle became one more hurdle for the “superhuman athlete” to overcome. Moreover, covering athletes who had been open about their mental health seemed to add to the spectacle of the event as if commentators were waiting to see who could overcome their struggles and who would crash and burn. The dual tone of, on the one hand, recognizing mental health as a news story was rather jarringly incongruent with the voyeuristic spectacle of watching athletes break down or cry. Journalists including mental health as a topic is a good first step, but the coverage suggests that work needs to be done on providing more balance and nuanced framing. This type of shift in perspective will need to take place with realization that this approach will not only be viewed as powerful for the athletes, but also accepted and lauded by the public.

Research question two asked how mass media framed elite athletes of different genders and races in terms of mental health status. The results also indicated that a confluence of incidents, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and subsequent protests may have impacted athletes of color most because of societal pressures in addition to the demands of their training and stress of international competition at the highest level. Research has shown women athletes are more likely to experience depressive symptoms and stressors than male athletes (Walton et al., 2021). Also, Black, Indigenous and people of color athletes experience more stressors and less access to mental health resources and care than white people (Tran, 2020). The articles we analyzed revealed these phenomena. For example, Shiffrin received coverage for collapsing and crying on the downhill ski course, reacting emotionally to the pressure to win. On the other hand, articles described male athletes with respect, such as Shaun White, who was portrayed as older than his prime but not in a demeaning manner. The intense portrayal of Shiffrin in this manner exacerbated the emotional nature of what many journalists have employed to describe female athletes. People of color were tokenized to the point that the narrative suggested they are immune from very human foibles such as struggling with stress and mental health. For instance, coverage of Elana Meyers Taylor highlighted her mental health challenge of catching COVID-19 and quarantining away from her young son and her family. Olympic coverage portrayed the quarantine as another hurdle for a superhuman athlete to overcome instead of a wider, more holistic picture of the athlete as a human being. Raven Saunders highlighted her intersectional identity as Black, female, and gay as an explanation for the depression she experienced as part of her training at a high level, but also because discrimination and marginalization related to her race, gender, and sexuality. Some news coverage of Simone Biles was contentious as she was framed as having to bear the responsibility of letting down not only her team, but the entire United States of America. The burden on these athletes pressured them not only to perform better than all others in their competitions, but also to emotionally bear the burden of societal, health, and discriminatory factors without reacting. The athletes wanted people to understand that all people, including athletes, endure struggles.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined mass media framing of elite athletes and mental health. The

Olympic Games are a storied tradition, steeped not only in history, but also are events that combines politics with power and winning. For two weeks, the coverage is intense. Medal counts are provided daily; for example, which country holds the most medals and the highest number of gold medals. Media coverage is often entrenched in dated journalistic frames. Olympic coverage tends to focus on portraying athletes as superhuman beings who thrive on stress and overcoming adversity. Modern athletes, especially women and people of color, are pushing back on this destructive narrative. The results of this study suggest that athletes are more vocal than ever about dispelling the myths of the superhuman athlete and urging fans and journalists to respect their struggles with mental health. The results also suggest that while mental health is increasingly covered by mass media, journalists still rely upon traditional frames of elite athletes that have little basis in reality. Despite athletes asking for better understanding of the emotional strain for elite athletics, journalists often fell back on the importance of winning above everything else and the notion that athletes can and should set aside mental health issues in pursuit of victory. We argue that journalists, commentators, athletic organizers, and fans should take steps to view elite athletes more holistically and better understand the balance of performance and mental health.

### Limitations & Future Research

This was a qualitative examination of coverage in several different news organizations. A more systematic examination of sports media solely or of specific media organizations (e.g. ESPN or *Sports Illustrated*) may have produced different results. In addition, a quantitative study that analyzed specific words or phrasing may have pinpointed tones of writing or noted specific topics that our study did not. Future research could focus on the shift in attitudes toward mental health in society as well as in sports. Studies could examine professional athletes, amateur athletes, college-level athletes, or even high school sports to discover the ways in which journalists frame mental health. Scholars also could make recommendations to journalists on how to report compassionately, accurately, and fairly on athletes' mental health.

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