



Product Research Article

The UI of Mental Wellness in Sports

Why mental training technology in sports has failed thus far - and what comes next for this industry.

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Abstract

The athlete mental health, wellness and performance industry is locked in a misguided arms race for better content, blind to the reality that the true bottleneck is not the quality of the resources, but the architecture of adherence. While physical conditioning solved consistency decades ago through rigorous cues, measurable progress, and built-in accountability, mental training remains invisible and easily neglected... a catastrophic design failure often mislabeled as a lack of discipline.

Introduction

In a recent conversation, a former NFL player admitted to me that his mental health work is the first thing to slip, not because it doesn't matter, but because there are no clear progressions, milestones, or metrics to point to. It's a feel thing. He can tell you his weight-room PRs and his 40 time, but he can't tell you whether he got mentally stronger over the past month.

That's the core problem: invisible progress gets skipped. Not because it doesn't matter, but because nothing makes it feel real. Nobody skips the physical warm-up - the coach is watching, the body is demanding it, the rep is visibly happening. The mind has none of that pressure, so it's the first thing to drop. And when the most disciplined humans on earth share the same blind spot, the problem isn't discipline. It's structural.

Mental training technology - across health, wellness, and performance - only works if it's frictionless. This paper argues the industry has been solving the wrong problem.

Experience:

USC Football Alumni '23
Richmond Lacrosse Alumni '22
Olympic Trials Participant
Founder of AthletesTogether alongside Lucas Ragen, a company built with the mission to be an accessible and engaging platform for athletes to improve their mental health, mental wellness and mental performance.

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The Missing Affordances

Physical training has three things mental training has never replicated:

1. **Cue.** Physical training starts on a whistle, an alarm, a buzzer, or a training schedule. There's a clear beginning, middle, and end. The mental repetition has no whistle, nothing tells the athlete when. It's mostly rooted in whenever they feel like they need it.
2. **Measurement.** Stopwatches, force plates, and clear progressions let you watch your improvement in real time. Deload weeks exist because the data tells you the body needs lower volume to keep progressing. The mind has no scale that you weigh into before lift, so the work feels like it isn't happening.
3. **Witness.** The physical rep is seen, timed, recorded - someone watched it happen. The mental rep is private, so there's no real cost to skipping it.

Redesigning a multi-billion-dollar industry isn't something to tread lightly into. Sports operate the way they do because it works - until it doesn't. But we will never know how much potential the mental game has quietly blocked. For every Derrick Rose ACL story, there may be fifteen 'could've-been' world-class athletes who never had the mental strategies or environment to get there. This isn't a willpower problem. It's a design problem.

The Behavioral Science

According to the Fogg Behavior Model, all behavior requires three things at once:

1. Motivation
2. Ability
3. A Prompt.

Athletes max out motivation and discipline. Tools and training handle ability. The missing piece is almost always the third: the prompt. Without it, there is no behavior - nothing happens.

But I'd argue it further. It's not just that the prompt is missing; it's that mental training has never executed the prompt well. This isn't uncharted territory - Thaler and Sunstein's nudge theory and Gollwitzer's implementation intentions are established, verified frameworks for exactly this problem that explore how even the most important actions require a nudge or implementation strategy. Mental training technology has largely ignored this approach.

Locke and Latham showed that visible, measurable progress is what drives persistence. That's the crux: there has never been a visible, measurable way to show progress in mental training. Generic meditations, endless content libraries - a delivery mechanism that feels more like assigned homework than self-improvement.

The biggest hurdle we've faced as athletes was never that the content is poor or that the meditations fail to guide us; it's that the work demands self-intervention without the reward of progress. It takes real courage just to start. And without immediate felt progress, long-term retention becomes nearly impossible - the stigma is too big a hurdle to clear twice, and the desire to return fades without a delivery mechanism that actually pulls you back.

The science was never the missing piece. It's the execution.

Field Observations

Since March 2026, we've watched these exact deployment problems play out at AthletesTogether. For every person who tells us "I would've loved this when I was playing," we watched current athletes drift - daily usage and goal completion slowly tailing off.

So we ran it as a test. Our initial release deliberately shipped without push notifications or reminders, to see what athletes would do on their own. Of the 150 who onboarded immediately, only six remained and continued to log in and complete their mental training daily after a week. The easy read is that the app simply wasn't engaging enough - but the behavioral science predicts exactly this outcome: high motivation, capable tools, no prompt, no behavior. When we later deployed push notifications, daily usage increased by more than 800%.

I want to be clear about what this is and isn't: a single uncontrolled deployment, not a controlled study, and I won't present it as one. But the signal is hard to ignore, and it lines up cleanly with decades of established research. The takeaway isn't that athletes lack discipline - it's that discipline was never the variable. Even the most motivated athletes won't sustain a daily practice toward a vague goal without a clear objective and a nudge. "Be happier" or "play better" doesn't suffice. Athletes want what they can see move - high recovery scores, faster splits, PRs in the gym - without the barrier of having to remember to do it every day.

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The Thesis

The entire industry has been competing on content. As a recently retired two-sport Division I athlete and Olympic Trials participant, I've been handed the best platforms this space has built - so let me speak freely: nobody uses them. Nobody opens a content library, finds a video that matches exactly how they're feeling, and watches it proactively, hoping to apply it to their life that same day to feel better. That's not how humans operate, and it's especially not how athletes operate. What the industry has actually gotten good at is giving athletes a way to show they're investing in their health and wellness - without any real expectation that they'll use it. And they don't.

Because content was never the hard part. Content is commoditizing: anyone can build a library stacked with the best strategies and world-class psychology. The unsolved problem is adherence - and adherence is the only thing that changes outcomes.

Adherence isn't a content problem - it's a design problem. It's solved in the interface: the cue that starts the rep, the metric that makes progress visible, the structure that makes it feel real. In mental performance technology, the UI isn't the wrapper around the product. The UI is the product. Everyone built the library. Almost no one built the reason to come back.

Consolidation & Implications

Several larger shifts are changing how this industry can actually become more impactful. Most notably, the next generation of athletes learns through app interfaces, personalization layers (usually generative or conversational AI), and intrinsic reward systems. Their attention and their habits are built on those rails. So here's how I see effective mental training deployed going forward.

First, stop shipping endless content libraries. As established, nobody enters them expecting to improve, and nobody builds the kind of repeated use that creates long-term retention. The library isn't the product.

Second, build a personalized behavioral operating system. People speak, feel, and operate differently - there's no way to build an effective mental training tool without a baseline understanding of the individual. At AthletesTogether, we establish that baseline three ways: performance on memory and reaction-based games, the tone and language used in wellness activities like cognitive-reframe drills, and NLP that separates a user's mood and emotion from the intent behind what they're saying. Showing the athlete that real work went into understanding them is what makes the tool feel worth internalizing.

Third, add a gamification layer on top of that operating system. I don't love the word "gamification" - it sounds unserious - but look at the industry: nearly all of it is already gamified. Whoop turns recovery and strain into scores. Strava makes your daily run something you share and compete on. Wellness challenges reward you for hitting 10,000 steps. It's everywhere; it just has to be deployed carefully. At AthletesTogether, that means verified algorithms behind a daily mental readiness score, distinct scoring for wellness and performance activities, and clear long-term progress metrics - where you were days, weeks, and months ago versus where you are now, based on usage and on how your own language and semantics have shifted over time.

Fourth, a desired prompt. Desired is the operative word. Prompting someone to work on their mental wellbeing in an annoying way backfires - it makes the whole thing feel like a chore, like homework, and athletes will tune it out. The nudge has to be one they actually want to receive. Because needing the nudge isn't weakness. It's how every athlete already operates physically. Nobody calls a training schedule a willpower failure.

The goal was never more mental training tools. The goal is a generation of athletes who are happier, healthier, and whole. But that future doesn't arrive until mental training is cued, tracked, and real... until it carries the same weight as the physical one. Until it stops being the thing that gets skipped. And starts being the thing that gets earned.

