



*This story was [originally published](#) by The Mental Matchup and Morgan's Message and is being republished with permission. Cailin Bracken ([@kalewithcail](#)) is a sophomore attacker on the Vanderbilt women's lacrosse team.*

*Morgan's Message amplifies stories, resources and expertise to confront student-athlete mental health, builds a community by and for athletes, and provides a platform for advocacy.*

I recently reposted a trending quote that read, "We have to put the person before the *student* and the *athlete*, otherwise we are at risk of losing all three." The post was written in the wake of the passing of Katie Meyer, [a standout goalie for the women's soccer team at Stanford](#).

I felt nauseous when I read that Katie Meyer had died by suicide. I wanted to unlearn the information as soon as I read it. It was a similar feeling that I experienced in 2014, when [Madison Holleran](#), a collegiate runner at University of Pennsylvania — who had grown up in the town over from me — took her life during her freshman year. Both young women had been described as rays of sunshine; the soul of the team, the life of the party, the embodiment of joy. (Read: *the last people you'd expect to take their own lives*).

I used to think that the uncomfortable feeling that stirs inside my chest when I read stories like these was *sadness*. Or perhaps physical illness, as though my body wanted to reject the knowledge of their passing and deny the tragedy at hand. As gutting as these stories are, I've learned that the feeling that news like the suicide of Stanford soccer's Katie Meyer or UPenn track's Maddy Holleran or [Duke lacrosse's Morgan Rodgers](#) brings up in me is not so much sadness as it is *fear*.

Fear, accompanied by a deep sense of empathy and understanding for the struggles of these young women.

Fear, because I have read the headlines like, “Student athlete pushed to the edge by relentless pressure,” and the articles that describe the tragically deceased as “lively individuals who touched every person that they met.”

Fear, because I have looked at the pictures of these individuals who once shined with a bright smile, surrounded by loved ones, and I know that the reflection that looks back at me in the mirror every day doesn’t look all that different.

Fear, because it scares me so much to wonder if it could’ve been my team; if it could’ve been me.

Those articles read like a template, and they always have, which sucks. Every individual, no matter how their life ends, deserves their own story. But it usually follows the same heart wrenching arc: a testament to what a light the person who has passed was, and how rich their life was with love, followed by the shock that their family and friends have experienced in the wake of their death. Those stories all seem to tiptoe around the same uncomfortable question: *They were so successful, so full of life, how could they feel so lonely inside?* Which is the very question that I want to confront.

We’ve heard and experienced too many of these stories to be ignorant or naive to the fact that an external showing of happiness or stability, no matter how convincing, shouldn’t be enough for us to feel complacent in not checking in with the people in our lives. Quotes like, “It’s often the friends who are checking in on everyone else who need the check ins most themselves” ring this bell for me. My response? *Of course* they need to be checked in with. Everyone does. We shouldn’t qualify the people we offer our support to based on how stable or “happy” they seem, especially when they’re our teammates or players.

Playing a college sport is just hard. It is *really hard*. And if you’d like to have a life outside of your sport, which many of us student athletes do, you’re then taking on a self-imposed responsibility to maintain your academics, your social life, your career, and your relationships — all the while learning to navigate complicated feelings, conflict, the wavering sense of worthiness and having your basic psychological needs met as a young adult.

Playing a sport in college, honestly, feels like playing fruit ninja with a butter knife. There are watermelons and cantaloupes being flung at you from all different directions while you’re trying to defend yourself using one of those flimsy cafeteria knives that can’t even seem to spread room-temperature butter. And beyond the chaos and overwhelm of it all, you’ve got coaches and parents and trainers and professors who expect you to come away from the experience unscathed, fruit salad in hand. And, yes, I understand that all of these people with expectations of me also have lives of their own. I get that they don’t spend every waking moment of their life thinking about the plays I make in practice, or the time I’m getting on the field, or the appointment I was late for, or the essay I handed in. But sometimes the worst part of all of this is that it feels like the people in your life — namely, the adults — aren’t thinking about *you* at all. They’re thinking about the result that you create: the wins or the losses. They forget that when you take away the accolades and the schedule juggling and the success, there’s just a kid there. A kid who simply wants to feel safe — who wants their approval, their support and who wants to feel like they can come crashing down and have a cushion to break their fall.

The problem is that so many of us don't feel like we have this landing pad. Instead, we feel like we're a perfectly curated glass ball, and if we come near a hard surface at the wrong angle, we'll shatter.

I don't know how Katie Meyer, or Maddy Holleran, or Morgan Rodgers felt in the moments before they decided to take their own lives. I don't seek to tell you how they felt, or to take away from their unique experiences. But I do wonder if I can *imagine* how they felt. And I think I can. I think that, if I had the chance to sit down with these young women during their lives, perhaps in the months leading up to their passing, we would've found resonance in our experiences as student athletes. We would've found common ground in conversations about pressure, expectations and worthiness. We would've found that we'd hiked similar, endlessly uphill mountains during our lives as athletes, and that the same darkness I once found my way out of wasn't very different from the pain and loneliness that they too came to know. I'm confident, and disappointed, that most student athletes could engage and find resonance in this same conversation.

Student athletes, coaches, and every adult that comes near an impressionable, vulnerable collegiate athlete needs to be well informed on the practice of offering grace. When [35 percent of elite athletes suffer from disordered eating, burnout, depression and/or anxiety](#) amidst limited privacy, inadequate recovery time and limited independence, there is no room for "mental toughness" or "discipline" when it comes to people's livelihood. There is simply not. You — whoever you are, be it a coach, a player, a parent, a friend — *you* need to remember that athletes aren't taught to hold space for the feeling of failure, or anything that resembles it. I don't care if you were raised with "tough love" or you were having a bad day when you belittled the 20-year-old who stood in front of you, quietly yearning for your approval and feeling rejected when you didn't offer it. Coaching or parenting or administrative philosophies aside, when you are an adult in this space, you have a massive responsibility to — above all else — make sure that the young adults with whom you work feel safe, loved, and valued.

When "mental toughness" is the answer to student athletes who are dreading waking up and going to practice the next day, I need it to be you — the adult — who says that *it's OK* to take a step back. It is OK to reconsider the angle at which you're coming at this from. It's OK to take time away from the sport. Because it really is OK. And the more we resist the idea that we're allowed to stop, or to walk away, or to take a day off, or admit to someone that we're struggling, the more we begin to feel trapped. The more we feel backed up against a wall with no other options than to take the worst way out.

And as much as I'd like to tell athletes to make this decision themselves, and to trust themselves, I know how gutting and impossible it can seem to take even a day off. That is why we need the adults in our lives to make it known that we always have agency in those decisions, and that we won't be punished for making a decision in the name of our own mental health.

I don't spend time wondering about what might've happened had I not trusted myself enough to take time away from lacrosse during my collegiate career. Every bone in my body told me that I was doing what was best for me, while other people looked at me like I was giving up. It didn't feel like giving up. If anything, staying in the dark place that I was in would've been giving up. Letting it consume me. That would've been what I'd done had I chosen to give up.

But instead I chose to continue. I chose to take the space I needed. I took the next steps forward in my life, a few steps away from lacrosse, a few steps away from my pride, from the athlete identity I'd held close for so many years. I needed to figure out who I was without lacrosse, and develop a sense of self — a sense of *worth* — outside of the sport, so that I was no longer depending on my coaches or my parents or the stat sheets to tell me I mattered. If I hadn't taken this time and held this space for myself to fumble with young adulthood and with my identity, I would've resented lacrosse forever. I wouldn't be where I am now, back on the field and playing Division I lacrosse alongside the women with whom I am writing this piece for. The women whose hearts and minds I will fight until my dying day to protect. It was my teammates, my coaches, my parents and myself who offered me the grace to take the time that I needed, to walk an unfamiliar path, and it is because of these people that I was able to find my way back. Because of their support, I was able to navigate my way out of the darkness instead of letting it consume me. Not everyone is so fortunate to tell the story that I do.

I say all of this because I want you to know that there is no shame in walking away. I say it because I want parents to let their children leave something that is no longer serving them, even if it breaks their hearts to see them part with their childhood sport. I say it because I want coaches to look at players like humans rather than commodities. I want athletic administrations to recognize that the pressure, the time and the energy that they impose on these young adults is intolerable. It is unsustainable to expect both perfection and consistency out of any human being, but it is especially egregious to make student athletes question their *worth* because they have not lived up to unrealistic standards.

If you are a student athlete, I know that you are doing your best. Whatever that looks like, I promise you that it is enough. There is choice in the dream. You get to decide what your life looks like, and when you feel backed into a corner, fruit flying at you from all angles, I need you to know that you can walk away. It is your decision, and it is a brave one. Because choosing yourself, and acknowledging that you are worthy simply because you are *breathing* — that is a brave thing. *That* is the most mentally tough thing you can do.

So it is on all of us — coaches, parents, teammates, administrators, professors — to hold one another accountable when we lose sight of what it means to be a teammate, a friend, a mentor, a leader. When we lose sight of the great responsibility that we have as influential figures in the lives of young adults, that is when we must reevaluate.

I would've loved for this piece to be a beautiful tribute to the lives lost, but because so many of these lives are lost because college communities have been remiss in their duty to confront the crisis that is the mental health of student athletes, I am issuing a demand to everyone involved in college sports. Players, coaches, parents, fans, professors, administrators, if you cannot do your job while simultaneously offering grace to the young adults with whom you work, you are unfit for your position.

It is of the utmost urgency that we have *this* conversation, albeit a difficult one, at every college institution in the country, so that I never have to write a piece like this one again.