

A RESOURCE FROM MOMENTUM LABS

What Your Athlete Isn't Telling You

A free guide for parents
of competitive athletes

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Introduction

She has the scholarship locked in. Division I, full ride. Her pre-game routine is meticulous—the same handshake sequence, the same stretches, foam rolling exactly fifteen minutes before warm-ups.

From the outside, she looks like the model of composure.

What her parents don't see: the exhaustion of being watched. Every movement scrutinized by younger teammates who see her success and assume they should copy everything she does. The weight of knowing that when she struggles, she can't just struggle—she has to struggle *while being a role model*.

What her teammates don't see: the Sunday night anxiety. The foam rolling that isn't just physical recovery, but a ritual to quiet the internal voice asking if she's doing enough, working hard enough, being good enough.

After hundreds of coaching conversations with competitive athletes, I've noticed something consistent: the challenges that bring athletes to mental performance work are rarely the ones they initially describe. They come asking for "pre-game confidence" or "help with focus." What emerges over weeks is something far more complex—and far more human.

Section 1: What You're Seeing vs. What's Actually Happening

As a parent, you see the surface behaviors. But beneath those behaviors are complex challenges your athlete may not have the language to express—or may be actively hiding from you.

What Parents See	What's Actually Happening
"She doesn't want to go to practice anymore"	Protecting herself from overtraining injury patterns that have emerged mid-season for the past two years
"He's been really moody and withdrawn lately"	Managing friendship deterioration (friends prioritizing relationships over time together) while using sport as primary coping mechanism
"She's great in practice but struggles in games"	State-dependent performance: when stakes feel high, her brain shifts from autopilot to manual control, causing her to overthink what should be automatic

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"She's great in practice but struggles in games"	State-dependent performance: when stakes feel high, her brain shifts from autopilot to manual control, causing her to overthink what should be automatic
"He's training constantly but still anxious about performance"	Overtraining as armor: if injured, it's because the body gave out (not a personal failure). Physical exhaustion feels safer than the fear of not being good enough
"She seems fine—gets good grades, has scholarship"	Carrying the invisible weight of being watched: every choice observed by younger teammates, every struggle interpreted as instruction. Can't just be herself anymore

The Common Thread

These aren't isolated incidents. They're patterns that emerge when sport becomes the load-bearing wall of an athlete's entire emotional architecture. When it weakens, everything else starts to crack.

Section 2: The Struggles Nobody Talks About When Your Identity Lives in Your Sport

"When running isn't going well, I feel like I'm losing myself."

This comes from a Division I runner dealing with iron deficiency, deteriorating friendships, and a journaling practice that recently revealed how harshly she speaks to herself. When three close friends are in relationships and don't make time for her anymore, sport becomes the primary coping mechanism.

Then injury or low energy makes training impossible, and the spiral accelerates. The challenge isn't "just" performance anxiety. Sport has become the foundation of her entire sense of self. When it weakens, everything else becomes unstable.

The Burden of Being 'The Talented One'

Natural talent creates its own kind of pressure. There's the athlete who notices peers who "don't work as hard" having breakthrough performances and wonders if her compulsive training is actually holding her back.

There's the scholarship athlete who can't take her regular pre-competition routine alone anymore because younger players are watching and mimicking her every move.

Being looked up to sounds like a compliment until you realize it means you're never off-duty. Every choice is being observed. Every struggle is being interpreted as instruction. You can't just have a bad practice—you're teaching someone else what to do when things aren't working.

Overtraining as Self-Protection

"Not training means not improving" is the operating belief. Physical hours equal progress. Rest feels like falling behind.

This mindset works until mid-season, when the same injury pattern emerges that's appeared for the past two years. Here's what's actually happening: If I'm injured, it's because my body gave out, not because I failed.

Overtraining becomes a form of armor against the fear of not being good enough. The body breaking down is easier to accept than the possibility that you're not as talented as everyone thinks.

The Comparison Trap

Every athlete knows the quote: "*Comparison is the thief of joy.*" The problem is that comparison isn't always demotivating. Sometimes it inspires. Sometimes it pushes you to train harder. Sometimes it makes you feel two inches tall.

The real challenge is learning when comparison serves you and when it destroys you. Most athletes haven't been taught this discernment. They just know they can't stop looking at what everyone else is doing.

Perfectionism Across Everything

"Jack of all trades, master of none."

The athlete who says this also rock climbs, mountain bikes, runs competitively, and maintains demanding academics. She expects excellence in all of it. When bouldering doesn't come as naturally as running, it feels like failure—even though she's devoting 20 hours a week to running and 2 hours a week to climbing.

The perfectionism isn't limited to sport. It extends to friendships (being endlessly available even when it depletes you), to academics (anything less than top grades feels catastrophic), to recovery practices (if other people can foam roll and do yoga and ice bath, why can't I do all three?).

Section 3: Why These Stay Hidden

Athletes hide these struggles for predictable reasons. Understanding why can help you create space for them to share what's actually hard.

Sport Culture Values Toughness

The belief: Admitting emotional struggle feels like admitting weakness.

What it sounds like: *"If I can't handle this, maybe I don't want it badly enough."*

Why it persists: Athletes see everyone else grinding, also pushing through pain, also sacrificing. Complaining about the emotional toll feels like weakness when everyone else seems to handle it fine.

What to know: The athletes who appear to "handle it fine" are often experiencing the same internal struggles. The difference is they haven't found a safe space to talk about it yet.

Parental Investment

The belief: My parents have invested so much—time, money, energy. I owe them my silence about struggles.

What it sounds like: *"After everything they've sacrificed, I can't complain about being lonely or stressed."*

Why it persists: Club fees, travel costs, training expenses add up. The unspoken contract feels like: you suffer silently in exchange for this investment.

What to know: Most parents would rather know their child is struggling than have them suffer in silence to "protect" the investment. Your athlete needs permission to be honest about the cost.

Team Dynamics

The belief: The team dynamic requires presenting a certain face.

What it sounds like: *"If I'm the leader, I can't show doubt. If I'm the hard worker, I can't reveal that the work is destroying me."*

Why it persists: Teammates can't know everything. Showing vulnerability might be seen as letting the team down.

What to know: The strongest teams create space for honest conversation about struggles. Your athlete doesn't need to carry everything alone to be a good teammate.

Fear of Consequences

The belief: If I admit I'm struggling mentally, I might lose playing time or be seen as a liability.

What it sounds like: *"Mental struggles mean I can't handle pressure. Coach will bench me."*

Why it persists: Some coaching cultures punish vulnerability. Athletes learn to hide struggles to protect their position.

What to know: Mental performance work strengthens athletes. Coaches who understand this see it as a competitive advantage, not a weakness to be benched.

Isolation

The belief: Nobody else seems to be struggling this way.

What it sounds like: *"Everyone else looks fine from the outside. My inability to cope must be a personal failing."*

Why it persists: Everyone else is also hiding their struggles, creating an illusion that everyone else has it together.

What to know: These challenges are nearly universal among competitive athletes. Your athlete is not uniquely broken or weak—they're experiencing what most athletes face but don't talk about.

Section 4: What Doesn't Help (And What to Try Instead)

Generic advice often backfires. Here's why common responses don't work—and what works better.

✗	What Parents Say	Why It Fails	✓	What to Try Instead
✗	"Just have fun out there"	If they knew how to access that state, they would. This isn't helpful instruction—it's a command to feel something they're not feeling.	✓	"What would help you feel more like yourself out there?"
✗	"Be more confident"	Meaningless when they don't trust their own internal state. You can't manufacture confidence on command.	✓	"What's one thing you trust about your game right now?"
✗	"You're being too hard on yourself"	They know. They can't stop. This dismisses their experience rather than helping them develop better self-talk.	✓	"I notice you talk to yourself differently than you'd talk to a teammate. What would it sound like if you gave yourself the same support?"
✗	"Don't let it get to you"	Too late. It already has. This invalidates their experience and offers no practical help.	✓	"That sounds hard. What helps you reset when you're feeling this way?"
✗	"Other people have it worse"	Comparison doesn't reduce suffering. This creates shame about having struggles when "it could be worse."	✓	"Your experience is valid. What you're dealing with is real."

Section 5: What Actually Helps

Based on hundreds of coaching conversations, here's what makes a meaningful difference.

1. Nervous System Regulation

The skill: Body scans, breathwork (physiological sighs), and grounding techniques (5-4-3-2-1 practice).

Why it works: These aren't wellness trends—they're trainable skills that help athletes move from fight-or-flight into calm-and-confident. When an athlete can't block out coach criticism during a game, the solution isn't "mental toughness." It's learning to physiologically shift their state.

What this looks like: A hockey player learning the "physiological sigh"—breathe in, take an extra sip at the top, then literally sigh it out paired with "let it go." Even when unsure what emotion she's feeling, being able to release *whatever it is* helps her transition between school and practice.

Your role as parent: Model these practices yourself. Normalize them as performance tools, not therapy. "I'm going to do a quick body scan before this meeting" destigmatizes the practice.

2. Recovery as Training

The reframe: Not training *is* training. The body can only handle so much cumulative stress.

Why it works: Physical hours, academic pressure, social stress all "simmer on the stove." Eventually something boils over. Athletes who historically get injured mid-season are often over-training without realizing it.

What this looks like: A tennis/hockey athlete learning that walking, foam rolling, yoga, meditation, and compression boots are what pro athletes use to help their bodies regenerate. The "debt always comes due" – maintenance along the way prevents breakdown.

Your role as parent: Validate rest days. Celebrate recovery practices as much as you celebrate training intensity. "I'm proud you're taking a recovery day" carries weight.

3. Addressing the Person, Not Just the Athlete

The approach: Mental performance challenges are rarely isolated to sport. They're interconnected with friendships, identity, self-worth, family dynamics.

Why it works: The runner with deteriorating friendships doesn't need better race visualization. She needs support in communicating her needs to friends who don't realize they're making her feel unprioritized.

What this looks like: A coaching conversation addressing friendship dynamics, nutritionist support for iron deficiency, and teaching the "platinum rule": treat people the way *they* want to be treated. If you're self-deprecating, friends may think you're okay with being insulted.

Your role as parent: See your athlete as more than their sport. Ask about friendships, school stress, how they're actually doing—not just how practice went.

Building Awareness Before Solutions

The principle: Most athletes don't actually know what they're feeling or where they're holding tension.

Why it works: You can't change what you can't see. Body scans develop proprioception—awareness of how the body is positioned. Self-talk logs reveal negative patterns athletes didn't realize they were running on loop.

What this looks like: A runner's journaling practice revealing harsh self-talk she'd never use with teammates. This awareness creates the foundation for change—now she knows what needs to shift.

Your role as parent: Ask curious questions without immediately problem-solving. "What are you noticing?" creates space for awareness to develop.

5. Creating Controllable Routines

The tool: Pre-game routines, consistent rituals, anchoring practices.

Why it works: You can't control the opponent, weather, referee, or injury. You *can* control your handshake sequence, breathing pattern, five fist-bumps during warmup. Routines aren't superstitions—they're anchors that provide consistency when everything else is chaotic.

What this looks like: An athlete building a pre-comp routine: teammate handshakes, foam rolling, specific lunge stretches. Giving it a few games to see what works, then modifying. The routine creates a sense of control in an uncontrollable environment.

Your role as parent: Support their routines even when they seem odd. Don't disrupt them the night before or morning of competition. Consistency matters more than your understanding of why it matters.

Section 6: Questions That Open Conversations

The questions you ask shape what your athlete feels safe sharing. Here are questions that create space for honest conversation:

Instead of: "How was practice?"

Try: "How are you doing outside of sport?" or "What's hard right now that you're not talking about?"

Instead of: "You need to work harder"

Try: "What would taking care of yourself look like this week?"

Instead of: "Why are you so stressed?"

Try: "When do you feel most like yourself?"

Instead of: "Just relax"

Try: "What helps you feel more grounded?"

When they're struggling:

"I'm here to listen, not fix. What do you need from me right now—to talk, to sit with you, or to give you space?"

Section 7: Is Mental Performance Coaching Right for Your Athlete?

Your Athlete Might Benefit from Coaching If:

Check the boxes that apply to your athlete:

- Sport performance affects their entire emotional state
- They've had recurring injuries at similar points in the season
- They practice well but struggle in competition
- Their self-talk is harsh and constant
- They feel pressure being "the talented one"
- Recovery feels like failure to them
- They're perfectionistic across all areas of life
- Friendships/relationships are suffering due to sport demands

If you checked 3 or more boxes: Your athlete is dealing with challenges that mental performance coaching is designed to address.

What to Expect from Coaching

- **Skills-based, not therapy:** Coaching teaches practical tools –nervous system regulation, self-talk awareness, recovery practices, routine building.
- **Addresses the whole person:** Not just sport performance. Friendships, identity, perfectionism, and how sport fits into life.
- **Builds awareness first:** Most athletes need several weeks to articulate what they're actually dealing with. The presenting problem ("I need confidence") reveals deeper patterns over time.
- **Timeline:** Typically 3-6 months to see meaningful shifts. Some athletes continue longer as they progress through different challenges.
- **Investment:** Momentum Labs offers monthly coaching starting at \$350/month, with a free consultation to discuss fit.

Red Flags vs. Normal Athletic Stress

Mental performance coaching is appropriate for:

- Performance anxiety, perfectionism, identity struggles
- Overtraining patterns, comparison spirals, harsh self-talk
- Difficulty managing pressure, leadership burden, friendship challenges

Seek clinical support (therapy) if your athlete is experiencing:

- Self-harm or suicidal thoughts
- Disordered eating patterns
- Substance use to cope
- Severe depression or anxiety that impairs daily functioning
- Trauma that needs processing

Section 8: Starting the Conversation

Script for Talking to Your Athlete

"I've been noticing [specific observation—quieter lately, more withdrawn, anxious before games]. I'm not worried, but I am curious about how you're actually doing with everything. I found this guide about what athletes sometimes deal with that parents don't always see. Would you want to look through it together?"

What Comes Next

Listen without fixing

If they open up, resist the urge to immediately problem-solve. "That sounds really hard" is often more valuable than "here's what you should do."

Normalize the experience

"A lot of athletes deal with this—it doesn't mean you're weak or not cut out for this."

Offer options

"If you wanted support figuring this out, we could explore coaching. Or if you just want to talk things through at home first, I'm here."

Respect their timeline

Some athletes need time to process before they're ready for coaching. Plant the seed, but don't force it.

If They're Resistant

Reframe coaching as performance enhancement:

"This isn't about fixing what's broken. Elite athletes use mental performance coaches the same way they use strength coaches—to get better at what they do."

Offer a trial:

"The consultation is free. You can talk to Dr. Auerbach, see if it feels like a fit, and decide from there. No commitment."

Emphasize control:

"This would be your decision. I'm just offering it as an option if you want support."

Conclusion: What This Work Actually Does

Mental performance work isn't about getting athletes to "think positive" or "be confident." It's about teaching skills that weren't included in sport training:

- How to regulate your nervous system
- How to recognize when you're in fight-or-flight
- How to create boundaries without feeling like a bad teammate
- How to communicate needs to friends and family
- How to separate your identity from your performance

This work takes time. Most athletes need weeks before they can articulate what they're actually dealing with. The presenting complaint slowly reveals the underlying architecture.

The athletes who do this work don't just perform better.

They suffer less.

They develop tools that serve them long after their athletic career ends.

They learn that asking for help isn't weakness—it's the skill that prevents breakdown.

Ready to Explore Coaching?

Momentum Labs provides mental performance coaching for athletes dealing with more than just pre-game jitters. We address the full scope of what athletes experience—performance anxiety, perfectionism, identity struggles, and the complex emotional landscape of competitive sport.

We work one-on-one to build practical skills: nervous system regulation, boundary-setting, self-talk awareness, recovery as training, and sustainable approaches to high performance.

Coaching starts at \$350/month.

Schedule a free consultation to discuss what your athlete is dealing with and whether Momentum Labs is the right fit.

Contact Information

Have questions, reach out to us below and we'll be happy to hear from you.

- Email: robert@momentumlabs.pro
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About the Author

Dr. Alex Auerbach is a licensed sport psychologist who has worked with hundreds of competitive athletes across multiple sports. He founded Momentum Labs to provide mental performance coaching that addresses what athletes are actually dealing with—not just game-day performance, but the full emotional landscape of competitive sport.

His approach integrates evidence-based techniques with deep understanding of the pressures athletes face: perfectionism, identity struggles, overtraining patterns, comparison spirals, and the burden of being "the talented one."

Dr. Auerbach believes mental performance work is about building practical skills that help athletes not just perform better, but suffer less—skills that serve them long after their athletic careers end.