

Athletes struggle with mental health amidst pandemic

By Ella West and Ellie Monday

A nne-Charlotte Gillard, a Division I water polo commit, had not been in the pool in months as of September. Because the pandemic prompted the cancellation of club practices, Gillard, a senior, was left in a “destabilizing situation” as she attempted to navigate the recruiting process without gameplay opportunities.

“The time leading up to my commitment was extremely stressful,” Gillard said. “A lot of the coaches would ask me what I was doing or what my club was doing, and I had no response. I felt so out of control.”

With players finally returning to fall sports, the pandemic is straining students’ mental health. Junior Lily Pesikoff, once a three-sport athlete, played field hockey for five years, but she decided against participating this fall. In an effort to limit her exposure to Covid-19, Pesikoff had to determine which sports she valued most.

“I had to pick and choose where I was at risk of exposure,” Pesikoff said. “I would rather be at risk playing basketball than field hockey.”

Pesikoff is one of nine field hockey players skipping the 2020 season.

Lisa Ehrlich, an internal medicine doctor on the School’s Covid-19 Task Force and parent of junior Gracie and freshman Marshall Malone, recognizes that individual risk tolerance levels vary.

“Some people are very intolerant of risk; however, others jump out of airplanes without thinking twice,” Ehrlich said. “Most of us are in the middle.”

According to Ehrlich, anxiety, depression and substance abuse rates have skyrocketed since March 13 due to isolation brought on by the virus.

“Right now teenagers’ social and emotional development should be taking place, and this virus has put a damper on that development,” Ehrlich said. “Sports can be a space for children to socialize. We just need to mitigate the risks.”

Quarterback George Caldwell was eager to start his senior season despite being “wary” of the virus.

“Covid-19 is in the back of people’s minds on game day,” Caldwell said.

Due to minimal spectators at games, head football coach Kevin Veltri said that the team must “create energy for themselves.” After witnessing the team’s excitement during their first inter-squad scrimmage, Veltri

recognizes the importance of sports to mental health.

“Football gives them an [opportunity] to get away from the rest of the world and just go out and do something fun,” Veltri said.

With her ability to practice curtailed, Gillard worried about her skills declining and muscles atrophying. Because she does not have a pool at home, she struggled to find practice spaces during the six months her club pool was closed. Instead, she created dryland workouts. With no practice partners, the goalie for the Women’s Youth National Team faced additional challenges.

“Initially, everyone nationally was in my same situation. No one had access to pools or could develop their skills,” Gillard said. “But as the second wave hit southern states, my friends in California were starting club practices and weight lifting.”

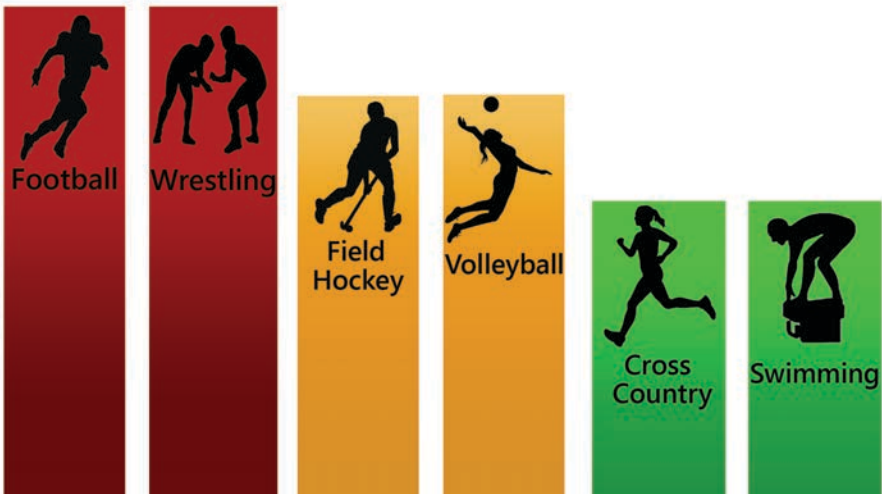
Even after committing, Gillard remains anxious about playing DI water polo because of the training time she lost this year. Now that she has returned to once-a-week practice, Gillard harbors concerns about coronavirus.

“I feel anxious now, especially knowing that we are fully back at school and that there are teachers, students and staff who are particularly at risk,” Gillard said. “I had to go to a water polo tournament recently, and I was really nervous because I didn’t feel comfortable. But at the same time, college coaches want to know what we have been doing to keep up our skills.”

According to Ehrlich, fall sports data has shown that athletes are more likely to contract coronavirus from a teammate than from a competing team.

“Like a highway going from one mouth to another, there needs to be a continuous path at close contact for a [total] of 15 minutes for someone to fall into contact

Sports ranked by risk of infection



Source: National Federation of State High School Associations

GRAPHIC BY Matthew Hensel

tracing for the CDC,” Ehrlich said. “This is the general rule the Task Force goes by when looking at the risks for sports within teams.”

Different sports teams present different levels of risk. For winter sports, Ehrlich says that the data from the fall sports will help the School keep everyone safer.

“Wrestling is going to be a very hard sport to figure out how to do safely. It is a close, sweaty game,” Ehrlich said. “That may be a sport that will need closer scrutiny this year. Meanwhile, volleyball this season has been indoors, and there hasn’t been any documented spread.”

Junior William Suttle hopes to wrestle this season but wants extra precautions such as sticking with one training partner or practicing on alternating days.

“I’d be really upset if the season were canceled,” Suttle said. “But I understand that it’s a hard sport to do while socially distant. We can take the proper safety measures and make it work.”



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