



Fans: Two-Thirds Say OK for Athletes To Sit Out Due to Mental Health Issues, Think Teams Should Employ Mental Health Counselors

South Orange, NJ, Jan. 6 – Some two-thirds of American sports fans say that it is “acceptable” for an athlete to not compete due to mental health issues or concerns. This is the case regardless of whether the athlete is engaged in an individual or a team sport, professional or college.

At the same time, over 70 percent of sports fans think teams should employ mental health counselors just as they do athletic trainers and physical therapists.

These were the findings of a Seton Hall Sports Poll conducted December 8-13, 2021 across the United States using a national representative sample weighted according to gender, age, ethnicity, education, income and geography based on U.S. Census Bureau figures. The Poll had 1,570 adult respondents with a margin of error of +/- 3.2 percent.

The poll was conducted before the widely-covered mid-game departure of Tampa Bay Buccaneers’ receiver Antonio Brown on Sunday, January 2. Brown’s exit has brought the issue of athletes and mental health back to the forefront as colleagues of the wide receiver and media pundits have raised it as a possible concern.

Details

Asked if it’s acceptable for a professional athlete to not compete because of mental health issues or concerns, 62 percent of the general public (for both individual and team sports) agreed.

Among sports fans, however, the number who thought it was ok for athletes to take time off due to mental health issues rose to 66 percent for individual sports (only seven percent disagreed, the rest neither agreed nor disagreed) and 67 percent for team sports (only nine percent disagreeing).

“That’s an overwhelming level of acceptance among sports fans,” said Seton Hall Marketing Professor and Poll Methodologist Daniel Ladik. “Whether you look at individual or team sports – 66 to 7 and 67 to 9 percent respectively – that’s better than a 7 to 1 margin who say it’s ok to not compete due to mental health concerns. What’s more, the support for teams employing mental health counselors in the same way they employ athletic and physical trainers is even greater.”

Should Teams Employ Mental Health Counselors?

Sixty-four percent of the general public agreed that pro teams should employ mental health counselors as they do athletic trainers and physical therapists, a number that rose to 70 percent among sports fans (with only six percent disagreement among the general population and a mere five percent among sports fans).

“The movement on this issue is a long time coming,” said Professor Charles Grantham, director of the Poll and the Center for Sport Management within Seton Hall’s Stillman School of Business. “Care for the whole athlete – especially student-athletes – is essential. Although the rewards can be great, so are the pressures. It is encouraging to see that mental health care now has a more appropriate level of attention and the momentum necessary to make continued strides. And it is good to see that the public supports it – the days of stigmatizing have receded.”

College Athletes

Asked about college athletes, the answers were essentially in line with the responses for pro athletes, with 63 percent of the general population and 68 percent of sports fans agreeing that it is acceptable to not compete in individual sports, and 62 percent and 66 percent respectively agreeing that it is acceptable for college athletes to not compete in team sports because of mental health issues of concerns. On the question of employing mental health counselors at the college level, 65 percent of the general population and 71 percent of sports fans agreed.

Impact of Social Media on Mental Health

By a nearly four to one margin the American public and its sports fans believe that the presence of social media contributes to the mental health issues of athletes more so than traditional media. Among the general population 47 to 14 percent said social media had the greater negative impact, while among sports fans the ratio rose to 51 to 12 percent.

“At one point in our nation’s sports history, a player could choose to escape the media spotlight by playing in a ‘small market’ city,” said Professor Ladik. “But with the advent of social media there is no escape: the spotlight never dims.”

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Questions and charted breakdowns below; an online version of this release may be found at <https://blogs.shu.edu/sportspoll/>

ABOUT THE POLL

The Seton Hall Sports Poll, conducted regularly since 2006, is performed by the Sharkey Institute within the Stillman School of Business. This poll was conducted online by YouGov Plc. using a national representative sample weighted according to gender, age, ethnicity, education, income and geography, based on U.S. Census Bureau figures. Respondents were selected from YouGov’s opt-in panel to be representative of all U.S residents. This poll release conforms to the

Standards of Disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls. The Seton Hall Sports Poll has been chosen for inclusion in iPoll by Cornell’s Roper Center for Public Opinion Research and its findings have been published everywhere from USA Today, ESPN, The New York Times, Washington Post, AP, and Reuters to CNBC, NPR, Yahoo Finance, Fox News and many points in between.

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December 2021 Seton Hall Sports Poll

This SHSP was conducted December 8th through December 13th and includes responses from 1,570 US adults with a margin of error of 3.2%. The sample mirrors the US Census percentages on age, gender, income, education, ethnicity, and region.

Q1. Which, if any, of the following statements best describes you?

- I am an avid sports fan **15%**
- I am a sports fan **38%**
- I am **not** a sports fan **47%**

Within the last year, a number of high-profile athletes have chosen to not compete in games or events, citing mental health concerns. Other athletes have publicly called attention to their own issues with mental health.

Q4b. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **Social media (i.e., trolls, threats, bullying, etc.) has a larger negative impact on the mental health of athletes than does traditional media (i.e., press conferences, negative stories, etc.).**

| N=1,570 | General Population | Sports Fan | Non Fan | Avid Fan | Casual Fan |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|------------|---------|----------|------------|
| Agree | 47% | 52% | 41% | 59% | 50% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 39% | 36% | 44% | 33% | 37% |
| Disagree | 14% | 12% | 15% | 8% | 13% |

Q4c. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **It’s acceptable for a professional athlete to not compete in an individual sporting (i.e. golf, tennis, gymnastics, etc.) event because of mental health issues or concerns.**

| N=1,570 | General Population | Sports Fan | Non Fan | Avid Fan | Casual Fan |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|------------|---------|----------|------------|
| Agree | 62% | 66% | 57% | 65% | 65% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 30% | 27% | 34% | 27% | 28% |
| Disagree | 8% | 7% | 9% | 8% | 7% |

Q4d. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **It's acceptable for a professional athlete to not compete in a team sporting (i.e. basketball, hockey, baseball, football, etc.) event because of mental health issues or concerns.**

| N=1,570 | General Population | Sports Fan | Non Fan | Avid Fan | Casual Fan |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|------------|---------|----------|------------|
| Agree | 62% | 67% | 55% | 66% | 68% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 28% | 24% | 32% | 25% | 24% |
| Disagree | 10% | 9% | 13% | 9% | 8% |

Q4e. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **Because professional sports teams employ athletic trainers and physical therapists to provide day in and day out care for the physical well-being of their athletes, teams should also employ mental health counselors.**

| N=1,570 | General Population | Sports Fan | Non Fan | Avid Fan | Casual Fan |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|------------|---------|----------|------------|
| Agree | 64% | 70% | 56% | 71% | 70% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 30% | 25% | 36% | 24% | 25% |
| Disagree | 6% | 5% | 8% | 5% | 5% |

Moving on the following questions are about **college athletes....**

Q5a. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **It's acceptable for a college athlete to not compete in an individual (i.e. golf, tennis, gymnastics, etc.) sporting event because of mental health issues or concerns.**

| N=1,570 | General Population | Sports Fan | Non Fan | Avid Fan | Casual Fan |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|------------|---------|----------|------------|
| Agree | 63% | 68% | 57% | 66% | 68% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 27% | 22% | 32% | 21% | 23% |
| Disagree | 10% | 10% | 11% | 13% | 9% |

Q5b. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **It's acceptable for a college athlete to not compete in a team (i.e. basketball, hockey, baseball, football, etc.) sporting event because of mental health issues or concerns.**

| N=1,570 | General Population | Sports Fan | Non Fan | Avid Fan | Casual Fan |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|------------|---------|----------|------------|
| Agree | 62% | 66% | 57% | 65% | 67% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 26% | 23% | 30% | 18% | 24% |
| Disagree | 12% | 11% | 13% | 17% | 9% |

Q5c. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **Given the stress and strain of competition in college sports, some college athletes receive mental health and resiliency counseling as part of their training. Because of this, college teams should also employ mental health counselors in the way they employ physical therapists and trainers.**

| N=1,570 | General Population | Sports Fan | Non Fan | Avid Fan | Casual Fan |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|------------|---------|----------|------------|
| Agree | 65% | 71% | 59% | 74% | 70% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 27% | 21% | 33% | 21% | 22% |
| Disagree | 8% | 8% | 8% | 5% | 8% |