

MENTAL HEALTH IN YOUTH FOOTBALL: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

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ABSTRACT

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

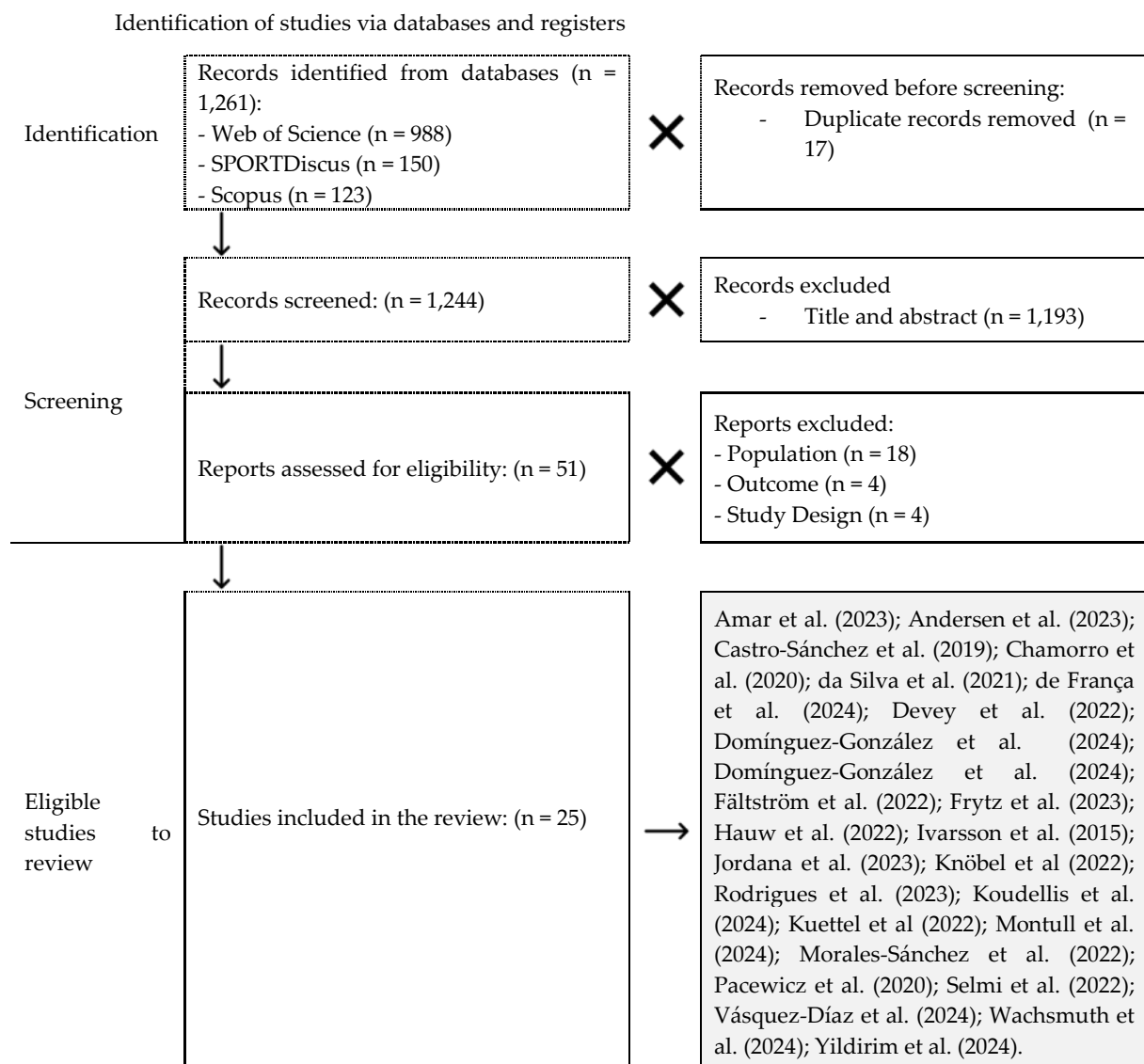
Mental health in athletes was for many years overlooked due to stereotypes of resilience (Gwyther et al., 2024). However, high-profile cases like Álvaro Morata’s openness about depression have challenged this view (McInnes, 2024). Since 2010, research and institutional attention have grown significantly (Gorczynski et al., 2021). The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has emphasized the prevalence of mental health disorders among elite athletes and the need for evidence-based care and destigmatization (Mountjoy et al., 2023). The European Association for Sport Psychology (FEPSAC) stressed that mental disorders in athletes are comparable to the general population but often go unrecognized due to sport-specific stressors and varied healthcare systems (Moesch et al., 2018). The International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP) further advocates a holistic, multidimensional approach, calling for sport-specific assessments, psychologically safe environments, and multidisciplinary teams led by mental health officers to support early detection and interventions like CBT, mindfulness, and digital tools (Schinke et al., 2024). Although several reviews address mental health in football, most of them focus on adult players, specific disorders (e.g., depression, burnout), particular events (e.g., career termination), or the post-COVID-19 period (Andrade et al., 2024). However, there is limited research specifically on youth football players. To address this gap, this systematic review aims to explore relevant studies on mental health and well-being in youth football players, for the ages 12 to 19, identify the relevant factors, assess validated measures, and recommend evidence-informed strategies to mitigate the problem.

REVIEW STRATEGY

The study focuses on studies from the past ten years [2015-2025], following Gouttebarger et al.’s (2015) call for increased awareness of common mental disorders in football and the use of longitudinal designs to understand causal relationships. This time frame also captures changes before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, offering a broader perspective on evolving mental health challenges in youth football.

This systematic review followed the guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA). The systematic search was conducted on Web of Science, EBSCOhost (SPORTDiscus), and Scopus in January 2025. The search keywords were: “youth” OR “adolescen*”, AND “soccer” OR “football”, AND “mental health” or “well-being”. The search revealed 1261 studies, of which 25 were eligible to be included in the review (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Flow diagram according to PRISMA 2020 Guidelines



FINDINGS

The study reveals that youth football players experience mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, burnout, disordered eating, and distress. Additionally, these are demonstrated with

higher rates in female football players and older players, and during key transitions. To better conceptualise the findings, they are categorized into six thematic categories:

- **Prevalence:** Anxiety [11-28%], depression [6.5-40%], disordered eating [11-22%], burnout, distress, and impaired well-being [17-40%] are common, with higher rates in females and during key transitions (e.g., junior to senior).
- **Environment:** Task-oriented and empowering motivational climates characterized by coach support, autonomy, and clear development goals correlate with greater emotional intelligence, self-confidence, and reduced anxiety, whereas ego and controlling climates impair those outcomes.
- **Contextual and Situational Factors:** Elite players demonstrate superior physical fitness, lower anxiety, and higher resilience compared to sub-elite and non-elite peers; international camps, intensive training blocks, and away matches elevate stress, fatigue, and mood disturbances.
- **Basic Psychological Needs and Irrational Beliefs:** Satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness served as a protective factor, while irrational self-determination beliefs, perfectionistic concerns, and obsessive passion predict poorer mental health outcomes.
- **Personality:** External locus of control predicts higher anxiety and lower self-confidence, whereas internal locus and conscientious traits support resilience; dispositional deficits in emotional stability and conscientiousness highlight varied support needs.
- **Other Outcomes:** Effective coping strategies, flow states, interoceptive awareness, executive function variations, and sleep quality disruptions are linked to mental health, underscoring the multifaceted nature of youth footballers' well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study offers a number of recommendations, to mitigate the mental health issues in youth football, such as regular monitoring of mental and physical health, coach education to foster supportive environments, psychological skills training, and broad mental health promotion. Specifically, the following evidence-informed strategies are introduced:

- **Systematic Monitoring** of psychological states (e.g., anxiety, burnout, mood, etc.), lifestyle factors (e.g., sleep, nutrition), and physical states (e.g., training load), particularly during high-stress periods.
- **Coach Education** to cultivate task-oriented and transformational leadership climates, emphasizing constructive feedback, autonomy support, and gender-sensitive approaches.
- **Psychological Skills Training** such as relaxation, goal setting, self-talk, etc. should be integrated into daily routines and tailored to individual needs.
- **Mental Health Promotion** via workshops to improve mental health literacy, destigmatize help-seeking, and provide early intervention pathways.
- **Multidisciplinary Support** involving mental health professionals, sport psychologists, medical and nutritional experts, coaches, and parents providing holistic, context-sensitive care, is vital for early detection and effective intervention.

CONCLUSION

This review found that youth football players face mental health challenges and reduced well-being at rates similar to other youth athletes. Common issues include anxiety, depression, burnout, disordered eating, and distress, with higher rates in female and older players, especially during key transitions. Risk factors include irrational beliefs, disempowering climates, sleep issues, perfectionism, obsessive passion, and external locus of control. Protective factors include fulfilling basic psychological needs, empowering climates, transformational leadership, harmonious passion, and internal locus of control. Recommendations for clubs include regular monitoring of mental and physical health, coach education to foster supportive environments, psychological skills training, and broad mental health promotion. A multidisciplinary support system, engaging coaches, medical staff, parents, and schools, is vital for early detection and effective intervention.

Keywords: Mental health; Well-being; Youth football.

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