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SPORT 16

NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject: Mental health in sport: from individual resilience to system responsibility
- *Exchange of views*

Delegations will find attached a Presidency steering note on the above subject, with a view to the exchange of views at the Council (Education, Youth, Culture and Sport) on 12 May 2026.

Mental health in sport: from individual resilience to system responsibility

Background

Mental health in sport is an emerging priority across the European Union. Within the EU Work Plan for Sport 2024-2027, mental health is recognised as an important dimension of sport policy, linked to participation, performance, and the long-term sustainability of the sport sector¹. Exchanges among Member States at the February 2026 meeting of Directors-General for Sport further highlighted the need to strengthen coordinated approaches to mental health in sport across Europe.

Mental health in sport concerns more than the absence of mental illness²; it encompasses affective, cognitive, and functional components, including individuals' capacity to cope, maintain relationships, and function effectively in daily roles. While it is widely recognised that sport can contribute positively to mental well-being across the lifespan, Member States noted at that meeting that mental health challenges can affect participation, performance, and long-term engagement in sport.

¹ Council of the European Union. (2024). Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the European Union Work Plan for Sport (1 July 2024–31 December 2027) (C/2024/3527). [Official Journal of the European Union, C 2024/3527](#).

² World Health Organization. (2004). Promoting mental health: Concepts, emerging evidence, practice. [World Health Organization](#)

Scientific evidence and policy discussions indicate that participation in competitive environments may expose athletes, coaches, and the wider sport workforce to significant psychological pressures³. These challenges are often reported in relation to key transition points, such as athlete selection and de-selection processes, injury and rehabilitation periods, and the transition out of sporting careers, as well as during phases of increasing demands on performance, with implications for psychological well-being and mental health. Coaches and sports officials (judges, referees, umpires) are also affected, operating in high-pressure environments characterised by heavy workloads, complex roles, and, in some cases, job insecurity. These conditions can contribute to burnout, reduced well-being, and other mental health issues, with implications for retention and potentially for the recruitment and development of the sport workforce.

Across the EU, a range of initiatives have been developed to address these challenges, including awareness-raising activities, education and training for coaches, access to psychological support services, safeguarding measures, and dual career support. These efforts have contributed to the growing recognition of mental health as an important dimension of sport policy, with at least one Member State introducing multi-year funding allocations to strengthen efforts to address mental ill-health in sporting environments.

Towards a Broader Policy Perspective

At the February 2026 meeting of Directors-General for Sport, Member States acknowledged that mental health in sport is closely linked not only to individual factors, but also to the environments in which sport takes place. Training conditions, organisational cultures, competition structures, governance practices, and career pathways all shape the experiences of athletes, coaches, and sports officials.

³ Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union. (2026, February 5). Mental health of athletes and coaches across participation and lifespan: Background paper. EU Sport Directors-General Meeting, Filoxenia Conference Centre, Lefkosia, Cyprus.

While current approaches often focus on strengthening individual resilience and coping capacities, it is increasingly recognised that such measures alone may not be sufficient. In addition, stigma associated with mental health in sport contexts, including perceptions of weakness, may discourage help-seeking and limit the effectiveness of existing measures. Experience from other policy areas indicates that sustained improvements in complex societal challenges, including physical activity and well-being, often require attention to structural conditions alongside individual behaviours. Mental health is influenced by the conditions created within sport systems, including the intensity and organisation of competition, expectations placed on performance, and the level of support available across the sporting pathway. Where these systems continuously require high levels of resilience from their people, it is necessary to examine the conditions that create that need.

From this perspective, a key policy consideration emerges: how sport systems can be designed or adapted to recognise human capacity and boundaries in relation to workload, recovery, and performance demands and to ensure that these are respected. This includes supporting conditions in which well-being and performance can be mutually reinforcing, thereby reducing the need for constant psychological adaptation by athletes, coaches, and sports officials.

Through this lens, attention to the welfare of athletes, coaches, and sports officials enhances rather than weakens performance development and outcomes. As it has been noted at the February meeting of Directors-General for Sport, it is important to distinguish between performance behaviours and mental health, stressing that attention to mental health does not undermine performance.

The proposed policy approach complements existing efforts by placing greater emphasis on prevention, organisational responsibility, and the quality of sports environments. It also invites reflection on the balance between strengthening individual resilience and addressing the structural conditions that shape mental health, such as participation, performance, well-being, and retention. Further, it highlights the importance of considering mental health in sport as a shared responsibility across different actors and policy domains, including sport organisations, education systems, and public health structures, while recognising the role of sport systems in shaping these conditions. Strengthening coordination across these areas may support more sustainable and preventive approaches to mental health in sport.

Role of the European Union and Member States

Within its competence, the European Union can support Member States by facilitating cooperation, knowledge exchange, and the development of shared approaches. This may include:

- promoting the exchange of evidence-based approaches and practices that have been monitored and evaluated;
- strengthening links between sport policy and broader EU initiatives in health, education, and social inclusion;
- supporting capacity-building for coaches, sports officials, and sport organisations;
- encouraging a coordinated approach to safeguarding, working conditions and the welfare of athletes, coaches, and sports officials.

Such actions can contribute to a more coherent and integrated approach to mental health in sport across the EU.

Exchange of views

Ministers are invited to provide their views on the following questions (contributions should not exceed three minutes):

1. How can Member States further develop or strengthen sport policies and practices to ensure that sports environments are designed to reduce psychological pressure while supporting the mental well-being of athletes, coaches, sports officials and the wider sport workforce? Do you have any good practices or examples that could be shared with other Member States in this area?
2. What EU actions or forms of cooperation could best support Member States in addressing mental health challenges and promoting well-being in sport?