

## BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



### Olympic Athletes Train Bodies and Brains

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **Today, we examine the impact of brain health on athletic performance.***

Many of us spent a lot of time watching athletes from around the world compete in the Summer Olympics. We know it takes years of physical training for these elite performers to reach the international stage, and training their brains is also critical when it comes to competing successfully.

A recent article in [Harvard Medicine](#) suggests physical training without preparing the mind has the potential to undermine these athletes' efforts when they face competition. Many Olympic athletes are taking more control of their mental preparation by working with sports psychologists and specially trained coaches who are using visualization, meditation, and a mind–body approach that combines self-talk, meditation and relaxation, and goal setting. These brain performance techniques help the athletes overcome the risks, fears, and tensions related to competition, while maintaining concentration amid distractions.

Last fall, the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee hired Jessica Bartley, a sport psychologist, as its first director of mental health services. She and her team held discussion groups during the Olympic trials — both for athletes who qualified for the Olympics and those who didn't.

In an interview with the [Washington Post](#), Bartley said: “We’re starting to better understand the science (of) what it does to actually emote or to talk with someone. We want to highlight that everybody struggles. The literature actually says athletes struggle just as much as the general population. Why would we not talk about that?”

Developing the ability to cope with the ups and downs of performance, athletic or artistic, can start early. The psychological development of an athlete may begin as play that evolves into competition. By supporting student athletes, at all levels of skill, as they develop, we can foster

their ability to deal with conflict and help them work with others toward achieving their ultimate goal, both on and off the performance field/stage.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

You can play an important role in supporting the brain health of your student athlete. The [National Athletic Trainers' Association](#) recommends these tips for working with coaches and school officials to promote a positive experience and foster a brain healthy culture for student athletes.

- **Make it fun:** A major reason kids quit sports is because it isn't fun anymore. Remember, it's a game. Show good sportsmanship and focus on opportunities to learn, grow, and improve, instead of failures.
- **Compete at the appropriate level.** Playing at a higher age or skill level may lead to stress and anxiety.
- **Provide time to rest.** Student athletes need a break during the season and in the off-season. Their bodies need time to recover.
- **Keep it interesting.** Avoid burnout by encouraging your student athlete to mix it up and participate in a variety of sports and activities.
- **Get screened.** Ask your doctor about including brain health screening as part of your student athlete's pre-participation examination.
- **Know the signs.** Early intervention for brain illness is key to treatment, so know the signs and symptoms that indicate your child is struggling.
- **Remove the stigma around seeking care.** Your school or organization should promote a culture that encourages student athletes to feel comfortable talking with a parent, coach, or mental health professional about their brain health.
- **Have a plan.** Make sure your school has a policy in place for referring student athletes for brain health/mental health support.
- And don't forget to encourage your student athlete **BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle** that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:
  - Stress resilience
  - Nutrition
  - Physical activity
  - Sleep
  - Social connection
  - Emotional wellbeing
  - Meaning and Purpose
  - Cognitive stimulation and creativity
  - Engaging with nature
  - General health
  - Positive impacts

**About the Brain Health Initiative ([www.brainhealthinitiative.org](http://www.brainhealthinitiative.org))**

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is a collaborative effort with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, to build brain healthy communities through education, collaboration, research, innovation, and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention, and optimization of performance*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the ***Be Brain Healthy*** movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference***. To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).