



# Mind games

*For elite sportswomen, mental health has often been a taboo subject. Here, female athletes open up about their struggles in the hope of raising awareness of issues faced by players at the top of their game.*

BY **ANDREW MCNICOL**

**I**t is undeniable that in the male-dominated world of sports, female athletes are often sidelined.

Granted, things are better than they once were: the world has come a long way since Billie Jean King challenged loudmouth Bobby Riggs to a “battle of the sexes” tennis match in the early 1970s and wiped the court with him.

Today we see female Olympic teams, professional leagues and all the individual medals, trophies, podiums and photo finishes that go along with them; and we can watch some of the most popular female athletes live-streaming workouts that few of us at home could aspire to.

But as with males, we are often so focused on results that we tend to turn a blind eye to extracurricular struggles.

An elite athlete’s attainment of peak performance comes with heightened risks of developing mental health issues, which can be brought on by the demands of training and competition, injuries and excruciating periods of rehabilitation, and burnouts. And despite the progress towards equality that has been made in sport, issues such as anxiety, depression and eating disorders tend to be associated with women, whose stresses are too often linked less to their sporting prowess than scrutiny of their physical appearance or family life.

Mental health was declared the “No 1 health and safety issue” in collegiate set-ups in the United States back in 2013, and about 48 per cent of collegiate female athletes reported symptoms of depression or anxiety this year, according to advocacy group Voice in Sport.

Why is this so? Perhaps because women have had to conform to the shapes and standards of the men’s game. Or because of the fear and uncertainty they face when their careers are jeopardised by period pains or pregnancies. Or because they have forever been told to just “be grateful” for what they have, “man up” and “get on with it”.

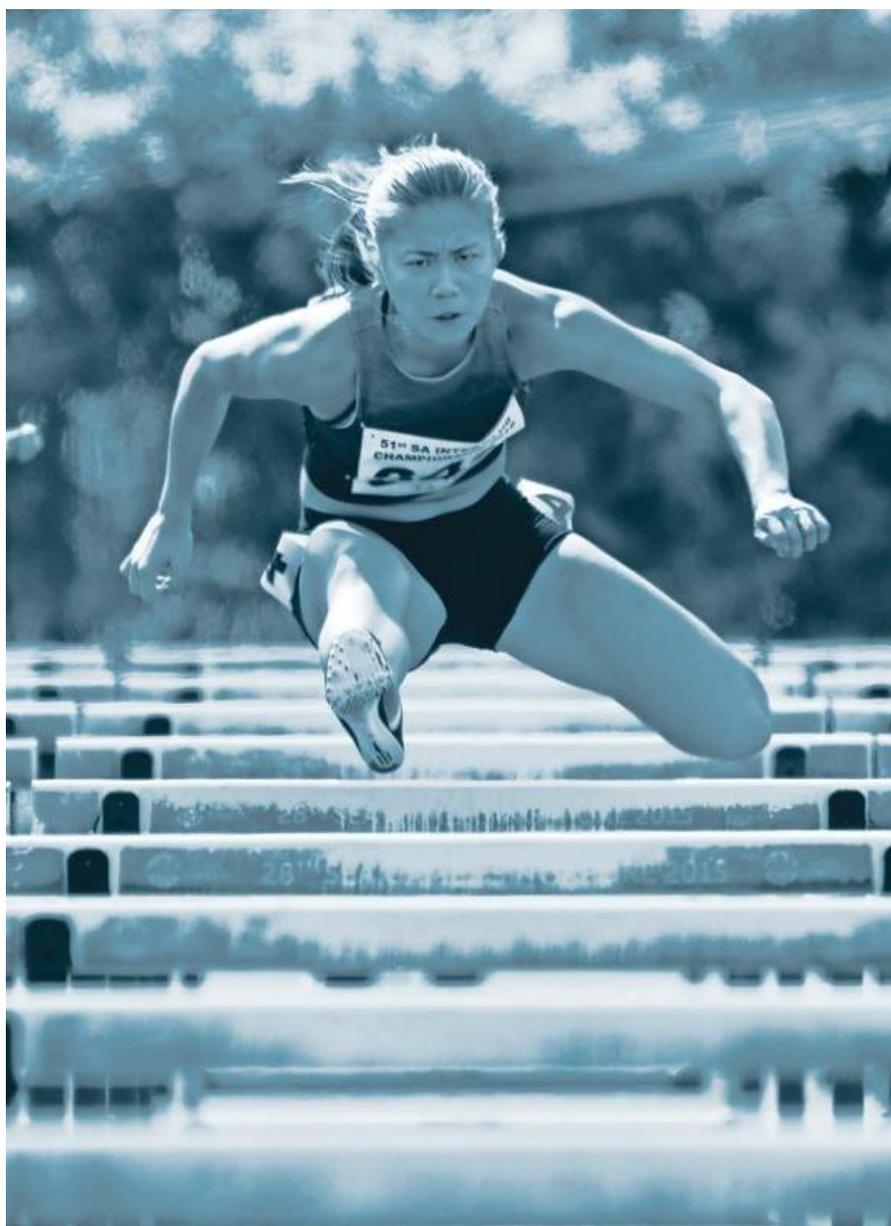
To seek help is the obvious solution but “there is a stigma around seeking psychological consultation or just taking time off to recognise and address a mental health issue”, says former world No 1 épée fencer Vivian Kong Man-wai, of Hong Kong. “What I’ve noticed during this pandemic is that my emotions would mirror whatever is on the news. I’ve also been experiencing more mood swings and it’s so important to be able to accept, understand and separate myself from rapid shifts in mood and come back to what I can control and appreciate in the present. We all need to constantly check-in on our mental health.”

And then there are the more severe cases. Hong Kong hurdling champion Vera Lui Lai-yiu says her experiences of being sexually assaulted by her high school coach will be forever “ingrained” in her mind. Beijing-born Singaporean former figure skater Jessica Shuran Yu similarly bears the mental scars of the “terrifying” physical abuse she suffered at the hands of Chinese coaches as a teen.

In May, Japanese professional wrestler-turned-reality television star Hana Kimura committed suicide after being cyberbullied. Her mother blamed producers for “prioritising ratings over her mental state”. In June, South Korean triathlete Choi Suk-hyeon jumped to her death from her dormitory after complaining of the abuse she suffered by club coaches. Her former teammates testified that they went through “hell”. Both Kimura and Choi were 22.

“Mental health is so broad, it affects us in so many ways and all of us suffer from it,” says Alicia Lui, the founder of WISE Hong Kong (Women in Sport Empowered). “There have been instances of athletes suffering from depression due to the need to win and pushing themselves too hard. We are also very open about calling out harassment, for example, or shaming when coaches call their athletes fat. We don’t try to say that sport is perfect.”

When *Post Magazine* asked women athletes at the top of their game to share their thoughts and experiences, their underlying message was clear: in women’s sport, “it’s OK to not be OK”.



Kerstin Ong. Picture: courtesy of Kerstin Ong

**KERSTIN ONG, HURDLES, SINGAPORE**

“People always think we are so happy, that we have all the sponsors and opportunities coming our way, as if it were easy. It isn’t. All these things you see on the news or social media – it comes with a price. When one does well in their sport and becomes one of the top competitors in their country, it naturally comes with fame. But being able to reach the top in our sport requires daily training and physical pain. It takes a toll on my mind and it’s a frequent fear that doesn’t feel great. Being in the public eye means being scrutinised. You can be the kindest person on Earth but still receive negative remarks. It is part of the journey and, hence, it is important to learn to cope with it.

“Apart from occasionally feeling burnt out from training and mental pressure, body image is another issue that affects me. My sport doesn’t need weighing in, but there is a stigma around an ‘athlete’s size’ and what one should conform to: one should have abs, not have too big thighs, etc. I love to eat dessert and I have a huge appetite, but I can’t eat until I’m full because I will feel fat. I have a ‘size’ to conform to as an athlete.

“Having conversations about mental health can encourage and educate people to seek help and learn how to cope better. It leads to less judgment because the subject becomes less taboo. Conversations are not scary – they are helpful.”

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**VICKY CHUNG PUI-KI, FOOTBALL, HONG KONG**

“I’ve never really talked about my family to anyone. Both my parents are deaf. When I was younger, people around me would laugh and say hurtful things. This made me really angry, but at the same time I felt helpless as I couldn’t help or defend my parents. As a result, I decided to just suffer in silence.

“Speaking about mental health for female athletes is very important because we are constantly being compared to males. And when you consider that the average person on the street has the view that sport is for men, female athletes are often ignored and sometimes mocked or ridiculed. I’ve been ridiculed by male friends for playing football as they look down on girls and think they have no place in the sport – that we are more suited for activities such as dancing and reading.

“There have also been many times when I didn’t get along with a coach due to miscommunication, or a disagreement with them. When that has happened, I have felt at times that coaches picked on me. And when I ‘feel’ this way, it continues a negative cycle. Bad performance on the pitch, bollocking from the coach, repeat.

“There are times when the outside world does not fully understand us – they criticise or scrutinise us. I hope people will be concerned about athletes and try to show more understanding and support. If we have shortfalls, I hope people will speak to us instead of spreading rumours.”

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Vicky Chung



Tin-Tin Ho

**TIN-TIN HO, TABLE TENNIS, ENGLAND**

“Speaking about mental health seems to be on the rise [...] I have spoken to other people, and it’s sad to hear stuff about body image and things around that. In table tennis, you don’t need to have a certain body type – you don’t need to have a weigh-in or anything like that. I don’t think body image problems are necessarily caused only by sport, but also society and social media.

“I’m not that good at opening up about it, but it’s affected me a lot. Not just body image, but low moods. Maybe I felt I’d be seen as lazy or that something was wrong with me. That’s why I want to talk about it now, because maybe it will help other people to talk about it, too.”

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**ALISON YU CHUI-YEE, WHEELCHAIR FENCING, HONG KONG**

“With the Paralympics postponed and many sport competitions cancelled, it’s a weird moment for me as an athlete. On one hand, training stopped, which means the ‘normal life’ of an athlete is disturbed. On the other, I had a peaceful holiday, which gave me time to reflect and discover other sides of myself.

“For a wheelchair fencer in competitions, especially finals, it is a mental struggle rather than physical. I get easily distracted and put too much pressure on myself as I always want to be the best. If I do something that’s not perfect, I feel upset. It’s like an angel and a devil are talking in my mind. It’s good to have expectations and goals, but it is also normal to not meet your expectations. We have to accept imperfections as humans, as athletes.

“We’re supposed to be these bright and energetic individuals, but that doesn’t mean we can’t feel sad or angry. Release the pressure productively. If disabled people define themselves as second-class citizens or burdens to society, then they will be that. So try to improve, speak up and voice opinions to reach equality in the world. Different women have different abilities, but the most important thing is to believe in and appreciate yourself!”

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Alison Yu. Picture: May Tse



Hilda Choi. Picture: Nora Tam

**HILDA CHOI YAN-YIN, TRIATHLON, HONG KONG**

“Mental health is not a topic to shy away from. Many hide from it and even fool themselves into thinking they are fine, but these aggravated emotions are caged and will worsen over time. Being elite athletes, we are meant to be resilient, tough and physically and mentally unbreakable. When we are depressed, we don’t speak up because we are afraid of judgment and the weak image it presents to the world. We can’t change how people see us, but we can change how we see ourselves. Being vulnerable is a strength. Being able to express it and being aware of emotions – to deal with them and turn them around – is the most important thing.

“Last year, I hit the lowest point in my career. I put a lot of expectations on myself to qualify for the 2020 Olympics. I was losing points in most races because I put myself in the wrong place. I had anxiety going into races even though physically I was in top shape. In mid-season, I broke my wrist in a bike accident and I had to end my season early. That was the turning point; I knew I had to change something within. The key thing is to be kind and gentle with our thoughts, which requires us to be aware of them.

“This is a particularly mentally challenging period for everyone. Most things are out of our control and we need to adapt. Being vulnerable is not easy, but it’s an important part of moving forward.”

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**CONSTANCE LIEN, JIU-JITSU, SINGAPORE**

“Being at a high level in any sport comes with a lot of expectations, and that’s where mental health is often neglected because we’re so focused on achieving those expectations and, if we don’t, we’re very hard on ourselves.

“Only recently have I spoken about my struggles and problems, but it’s important that I share my story because I see it as a way to address this stigma of athletes needing to be strong. It’s OK not to feel strong all the time, to break down now and then. I’m still growing as an individual and I still have my insecurities and doubts. Mental health has been something that I’ve been struggling with for a long time, but as I mature and have more experience, I’ve learned to cope with it better. I’m learning my self-worth and how to regulate my emotions better during hard times.

“Even if I don’t have an answer to my problems, I share them because people react, like, ‘Hey, I feel this way, too.’ It’s important to have a united community because you have more understanding.”

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Constance Lien (top). Picture: courtesy of Constance Lien