

In light of the 29th Olympiad, the Academy for Eating Disorders (AED) takes this opportunity to raise awareness of both the positive impact that competitive sports can have on self-esteem and body-esteem of participants as well as some of the risks that can be associated with less supportive aspects of athletics. Research has shown that participation in athletics can serve as a positive influence in the development of self-esteem in young women and young men. Yet, many of the qualities that contribute to becoming an elite athlete such as dedication, perseverance, and perfectionism, when taken to an extreme or applied to dieting, can also contribute to eating disorders risk. Unhealthy approaches to athletic success such as extreme measures to make weight and meet performance goals can compound the risk of eating disorders. The AED is not suggesting that sport participation is the problem; rather, the problem is the risks associated with some aspects of the sport environment regarding weight, body composition, and exercise. In that regard, the AED calls for greater awareness among sports governing bodies, coaches, trainers, athletes, and families of some of the following concerns:

- Individual sports federations should carefully examine their practices for “weigh ins” to ensure athlete safety and wellbeing in terms of the time between weigh-in and competition, as well as the appropriateness of lower weight classes; that is, can they be attained and maintained without unhealthy and extreme weight control methods
- Athletes should refrain from making disparaging comments about the size or physical appearance of their competitors Practice sportsmanship rather than “gamesmanship.”
- Athletic gear should be evaluated as excessively revealing gear can lead to increased self-consciousness, detracts from a focus on performance, and leads to a focus on the thin-body ideal, as well as competitive thinness and unhealthy body comparisons. Make changes in sport attire such that male and female athletes in the same sport are wearing similar attire in terms of how much of the body is exposed.
- Coaches and athletes should critically evaluate the pervasive and inaccurate notion that lower weight and body fat leads to better performance as this can lead to unhealthy attempts at weight and body-fat reduction Sport performance is multiply determined. Coaches, teammates, trainers, and families should take care not to attribute non-winning performances to body weight, shape, or size.
- Emphasis should always be placed on eating healthfully for optimizing performance, not for minimizing weight. Aside from genetics, good health is probably the major contributor to good performance, with good nutrition in turn being the major contributor to good health.
- Athletes may experience reinforcement for thinness from peers and coaches while experiencing severe and potentially life threatening eating disorder behaviors. Everyone involved in athletics should be educated in the detection of eating disorders and feel comfortable with referring athletes for evaluations.
- Treatment for an eating disorder should never be delayed in order to achieve an athletic goal. It is not only potentially dangerous; it is also a communication that says performance is more important than health.
- After retiring from their sport when their bodies are no longer able to perform, athletes are sometimes left without an identity. This is a high risk period for eating disorders and depression. Attention should not only be given to elite athletes after retirement. Planning for life after sport should begin well before retirement.

We should make every effort to support the healthy aspects of sport while simultaneously monitoring untoward effects that may increase the risk of developing syndromes such as the female athlete triad, anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and related conditions. Anorexia nervosa has the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric illness. The emergence of signs and symptoms should always be taken seriously.