



UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

MC Athletics partners with its DI cousin to give student-athletes a mental health boost

ARTICLE SUMMARY

The University of Tennessee Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior Program has worked with Maryville College student-athletes for two years now, but the addition of Dr. Scott Barnicle at UT, and his work with MC Athletics Director Sara Quatrocky and various MC coaches, has further defined a partnership that gives players access to mental performance coaches on the sidelines, at practice and one-on-one. And, coaches say, these graduate-level students from UT have made a difference in player performance and experience.



They're Volunteers by trade, but their contributions to Maryville College Athletics make them honorary Scots by association.

They're graduate-level students in the University of Tennessee's Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior Program, and since the beginning of 2021, they've worked with MC to elevate the on-field performances of the College's student-athletes. It's a partnership that's made believers out of even the most seasoned of coaches.

Pepe Fernandez, for example — who's earned an international reputation as an elite coach during his more than three decades at MC — has witnessed firsthand the difference it can make to have these budding sports psychologists and mental conditioning trainers on the sidelines.

"I remember a game during the most recent conference semi-finals here at home. We were playing Belhaven, and the game was tied 2-2, and we went into overtime and were preparing for penalty kicks," Fernandez said. "Over the years, I've learned that you really can't practice the pressure of penalty kicks, because it's impossible to recreate that environment and make players feel comfortable about it. So we had a young team, and we brought

them into this half-circle, and I asked who wanted to take it first, and the entire group took three steps back and put their heads down.

"And I just was not prepared for that. None of them really wanted that pressure. And our student from UT said, 'Hey, can I talk to them real quick?' And she did some relaxation and breathing exercises and talked them through it, and then I believe everybody hit their shots, and we won the game. I've been doing this for 30-something years, and when you've been doing it that long, you say you've seen every situation, but you haven't.

"I think her calming their nerves and giving them something to focus on really made a difference," he added. "They stepped up there with a lot of confidence. It was a high-pressure situation, and I really think she did a very good job to alleviate that pressure."

It's not an exclusive partnership — the program works with other schools like Carson-Newman University and South College, as well as organizations like the Knoxville

UT Sport Psychology graduate student Robby Letson (far left) works with the Maryville College Softball Team during the spring season. Letson is now a volunteer with the MC Athletics program.



Ice Bears semi-pro hockey team — but it is a prestigious one: According to Dr. Scott Barnicle, associate professor of practice in Sport Psychology at UT, there are less than a dozen programs like this one across the country. It falls under the umbrella of the school’s Department of Kinesiology, Recreation and Sports Studies, and Barnicle is the coordinator of placement for master’s and Ph.D. students who are assigned to programs like Maryville College Athletics.

“Part of what our program is really designed for is to assist with the training of sport psychology tools and techniques and enhancing the psychological aspect within performance,” he said. “How do you enhance your ability to think? How do you handle anxiety? Do you have difficulties sleeping, focusing or finding motivation? We train our students to enhance that whole spectrum.”

A RENEWED COMMITMENT TO MENTAL PREPARATION

Barnicle joined the team roughly six months ago, and during that time he’s worked to strengthen already existing relationships with partners such as MC, which began working with UT graduate-level students about a year and a half ago, he added. Since the beginning of 2023, however, the partnership has become even more formalized: Barnicle and MC Athletic Director Sara Quatrocky signed a memorandum of understanding between the two organizations, allowing UT students to work more closely with all MC athletic programs according to each team’s needs.

“Over the last few years, I have been an advocate of mental health performance, and we have been slowly implementing mental performance strategies in our program year after year,” said Coach Clint Helton ’11, whose MC Baseball Scots fought their way to the inaugural Collegiate Conference of the South championship game last May, finishing with a 26-17 record and only five losses vs. 18 wins in play at home. “I certainly correlate much of our success to the mental performance training this season. Our athletes were able to focus more on a ‘one pitch at a time mentality.’

“We constantly remind them to breathe, visualize and execute. Baseball is one of few sports where failure is a reoccurring theme. Mentally preparing to acknowledge the failure, make an adjustment, and move on is a learned skill. The UT staff was able to implement training sessions during our practices to focus on mental performance.”

Mental preparation has long been championed in sports at the college and professional level, but achieving buy-in for it has been a relatively new development, Barnicle pointed out. Over the past decade, discussions of mental health — and particularly the downside of ignoring it — has been a topic of discussion among some of the world’s top athletes, such as Olympic gymnast Simone Biles. The more marquee stars of the court, track and field discuss the necessity of it, Barnicle said, the more that acceptance trickles down.

“What most people don’t know is that almost every professional team in the big four sports (football, baseball, basketball and hockey) have someone like us there,” Barnicle said. “At the college level, most Division I schools have at least one on staff in their athletic departments. Hearing professional athletes being more open to discussing using sports psychology and how they sometimes struggle with mental health leads to a growth in that acceptance.”

It's important to note, he added, that the students who work with schools like Maryville College aren't mental health therapists, per se: Their focus is on using sport psychology techniques to alleviate mental roadblocks to success in the game, which in turn leads to a healthier mindset overall.

"We work on helping athletes handle anxiety, on helping them visualize what success looks like, whether it's a sport or a play or a move," said Barnicle, whose experience as a coach at the college level for eight years is another factor that helps persuade athletic administrators to give his students access to their players. "It can be hard, because the world of sport psychology is still relatively small, for athletes to get these unique experiences without having to pay for them, and for us, this sort of partnership allows our students to gain experience in the sport specific to what they're interested in working with.

"Going in, we want to establish: What is the actual expectation? What is the role of the student from our program? Most of the coaches don't know, and so from the beginning, we want them to have an understanding of what the relationship looks like, what the expectations are, and what success looks like."

"I believe support leads to success, and the support that was shown through this program for me and my team was a big factor," said Coach Jill Moore of the MC Scots Softball team. "Having a mental health performance coach at practice, in the dugout and having a constant presence throughout the year was incredible. I feel like having this program has helped take a little off my plate but has given more to my team. Athletes and coaches struggle with all kinds of things off the field, and sometimes it takes a different ear to listen to really help, and I believe this program did that for me and my team."

MC Scots running back Julius Mayberry carries the ball during the Homecoming match on Oct. 22, 2022, against North Carolina Wesleyan. Utilizing UT Sport Psychology mental performances coaches, according to football Coach Ben Fox, "is all part of building the best program we can and helping deliver to our players one of the greatest experiences of their lives."



PUTTING A PARTNERSHIP INTO PRACTICE

Barnicle worked closely with Quatrocky after the pair formalized the partnership to further define the expectations of both parties. The resources provided by graduate students in the Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior program can be tailored to each team's specific needs, Barnicle said, and once those needs are mapped out, those students who best fit the desired roles are assigned to their respective teams.

"At that point, we basically hand our students off to the coaches," he said. "Our students are fully invested and work with the coaches on whatever they may want, whether it's a workshop or hanging out at practice or being available for one-on-one sessions or being at every game. There's no typical arrangement, because so much is up to the coach.

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"Ben Fox (MC Football coach), for example, likes our students to give about three workshops a semester and be around practice if the athletes want to meet one-on-one. That gives our students an opportunity to work on

their skills but to do so in a sports-specific way as well, because each individual sport is different. The needs of the football team are going to look different than those of the golf team."

"I think that, as we continue to build our program, any help that we are able to give the players is beneficial," Fox added. "I love the fact that the coaches we get from UT are treated as that — coaches. They want to be called mental performance coaches. I think it helps them generate access and authentic communication with our players, especially in private settings. Our players view them as part of the coaching staff, and it has been a huge benefit.

"It is all part of building the best program we can and helping deliver to our players one of the greatest experiences of their lives. They see all the NFL teams and elite college teams have access to mental performance coaching, and this helps us deliver a better experience to them. For me personally, it has helped provide someone who can give honest feedback to me and the staff about where the guys are, and where I'm wrong or can improve, and that has been a tremendous help."

It's an optional resource, Barnicle said — no student-athletes at Maryville College are required to participate, but those who do discover that the UT mental performance coaches give them an edge, just as a strength and conditioning trainer might. And the grad students from UT, Barnicle added, can provide so much more than pep talks. Some, for example, can help student-athletes look at all aspects of their lives, from their sleep habits to their diets in order to achieve the peak performance they desire on the field.

And it makes a difference: Helton saw it firsthand when the Baseball Scots won several games last season after falling behind early on.



Three members of the University of Tennessee's Department of Kinesiology, Recreation and Sports Studies — Shelby Miller (from left), Robby Letson and Shane Thomson — worked with Maryville College Athletics teams during the 2022-23 academic year as part of a unique partnership designed to provide players with mental performance enhancement.

“In the opening round of the conference tournament, we were down six runs in the third inning, and that isn’t an ideal situation to play in for an elimination game,” he said. “Between innings, we reminded our team to slow the game down, breathe, visualize and execute playing one pitch at a time. Slowly, we chipped away at the lead in a back-and-forth-game to give ourselves a chance to win, and down to our last out several times late in the game, we managed to extend the game until our catcher ended the game with a walk-off three-run home run in the bottom of the 11th inning.”

For a seasoned veteran coach like Fernandez, the addition of Barnicle’s students has literally been — well, a game-changer. Strength and conditioning are critical, and team mechanics are essential, but the brains in those young bodies need equal attention, he said.

“People ask all the time, how much of the game is mental? And the answer is, ‘a ton,’” he said. “What percentage, I don’t know, but I realize we don’t train that part of it enough, and that’s what they do. It allows us as coaches to focus on the X’s and O’s, and I’m really excited to get a little better understanding of the things we can improve on.”

“I think it’s extremely important to convey how wonderful it is that Maryville College is open to the partnership,” Barnicle added. “I think for a lot of athletic departments and coaches, to invite someone in sports psychology into their student-athlete world to be a part of their team and culture, that’s a big step. Being able to sit in the same room with the whole football team and with the head coach and assistant coaches in the room while we give a workshop about anxiety, that doesn’t happen all across the country.”

At Maryville College, however, it’s become a priority. In many ways, Quatrocky pointed out, it’s another tool that allows the Scots who wear the orange and garnet to prepare for anything, on the field and off.

“Giving them the tools to succeed is our goal, and working with UTK’s program has been a perfect partnership,” she said. “Their level of care and commitment to our athletes and coaches has been a game changer. I’m extremely proud of our staff for being open to working together to help our students gain the strength they need to accept the changes, challenges and fears they come in contact with throughout their college careers.” •

Article cover image & below: University of Tennessee Ph.D. student Shelby Miller (left) and second-year master’s student Nicole Rogers coach MC Baseball players through pre-game exercises.

