

“Behind the Jersey: The Invisible Season”

"Behind the Jersey" is a multimedia sports-media campaign that sheds light on the mental health challenges athletes face at every level from high school to professional. The project aims to humanize athletes by highlighting the pressures, expectations, and silent battles that often stay hidden behind performance statistics, highlight reels, and crowd cheers.

My Story: Two Years, Two Seasons: The Public and the Private

I played Division II volleyball at a small school for two years. On paper, it should've been everything I wanted: a tight-knit team, a competitive environment, and the chance to play the sport I had dedicated most of my life to. But what looked perfect from the outside often felt very different from the inside.

On the court, the pressure was loud.

Every mistake felt like a spotlight.

Every lineup decision felt like a verdict.

Every practice felt like a test I couldn't afford to fail.

Being one of the few players fighting for a consistent spot meant I lived in a state of constant evaluation. Even small errors felt like proof I wasn't good enough. I remember leaving practices with my chest tight, replaying every rep in my head, convinced I had disappointed someone. My coach, my team, myself.

Off the court, the pressure was quieter but heavier.

Balancing classes, relationships, sleep, and recovery in a small-school environment meant there wasn't much room to hide. Everyone knew everything, including when you were struggling. Yet talking about mental health felt taboo like it would be interpreted as weakness rather than honesty.

There were nights I didn't feel like an athlete at all. I felt like a shell wearing a jersey. I felt lost between who I thought I had to be and who I actually was.

These experiences opened my eyes to a truth many athletes live with but rarely voice: mental health is as much a part of the game as any physical skill.

The Bigger Picture: An Athlete Crisis We Don't Discuss Enough

My story isn't unique. Across the country, athletes at every level are grappling with:

Performance Pressure

The unspoken belief that any struggle, physical or emotional, must be pushed through.

Identity Loss

For many athletes, the sport becomes the identity. When confidence falls, injury strikes, or playing time shifts, the emotional impact can be devastating.

Burnout

Long seasons, short breaks, demanding schedules, and limited mental recovery opportunities.

Isolation in Small-School Environments

When the athletic community is small, it's easy to feel like everyone is watching... and judging.

The Stigma

Admitting stress, anxiety, or depression is still seen by some as "not being tough enough."

These realities don't show up in box scores but they shape athletes' lives profoundly.

The Silent Locker Room:

What We Never See

For every athlete who walks into a roaring gym, there's a quieter version of them sitting in the locker room after practice.

There's the player who keeps their head down so teammates won't see their frustration.

There's the athlete staring at the wall, wondering why they feel numb after a win.

There's someone replaying mistakes that no one else even noticed.

I've been that athlete.

And so have countless others.

Changing the Culture: What Athletes Need

1. Spaces Where Speaking Up Is Normal

Mental health needs to be treated the same as physical health. If we can talk about injuries, we should be able to talk about anxiety, burnout, and emotional fatigue.

2. Support Systems Within Teams

Coaches, trainers, and captains who check in on players not just as athletes, but as people.

3. Access to Mental Health Resources

Sports psychologists, on-campus counseling, or even peer support groups.

4. A Shift in Media Narratives

Highlight reels and media will always matter, but so should conversations about humanizing athletes.

Why This Campaign Matters

Behind the Jersey is about more than awareness, it's about connection. About reminding athletes they are not alone. About encouraging teammates, coaches, and fans to see the person before the performance.

If someone had said that to me during my two years as a DII volleyball player, it would've changed everything. I might've understood sooner that my struggles didn't make me weaker. They made me human.