

Game on: ASU students join 'hot' field of sports psychology

First graduates emerge from new master's degree program that bridges psychology, kinesiology

By Dolores Tropiano, ASU News
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Nowadays, every time a professional athlete wins a gold medal, dunks a ball or knocks it out of the park, there's a good chance a mental performance coach is celebrating along with the rest of the team.

And while these coaches have long been considered essential at an elite level, they are no longer a luxury reserved for professionals only.

Today, there is a growing understanding that sports psychology coaches can make the difference between success and failure for athletes, and there is a rapidly increasing demand for them at a professional, collegiate, high school and even youth level.

A new Arizona State University graduate program in sports psychology was designed to meet that need.

The [Master of Science in psychology with a concentration in sport psychology](#) — which is offered at ASU's [West Valley campus](#) and through [ASU Online](#) — was created through a collaboration between the [College of Health Solutions](#) and the [School of Social and Behavioral Sciences](#), part of the [New College of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences](#).

The program welcomed its first cohort in fall 2024, and this May, the program will graduate its first cohort of students.

“Sports psychology is sexy. It's kind of a hot degree right now,” said [Lindsey Markwell](#), a certified sports performance consultant and associate teaching professor in the College of Health Solutions. “With the increased conversation around mental health in sports, there's been a lot of people that are interested in sports psychology.”

(Video: {<https://youtu.be/dYnNbBtmQXI?si=tSbFhr00ItxS36LY>})

Sports psychology coaches equip athletes with mental tools that help them perform consistently at a high level. They teach strategies to sharpen focus, manage pressure and quiet negative self-talk.

These skills can be particularly valuable for sideline athletes who can begin to see themselves as an “injured player” instead of an athlete in recovery.

“It’s a lot of building their mental skills,” Markwell said. “Sports psychology is helping people to get their minds to work for them instead of against them, especially in those high-pressure, critical situations.”

Markwell described the two-year degree as a bridge between psychology and kinesiology. The program offers a mix of electives, classes and experiences. Students can fulfill many of the requirements for the Mental Performance Certification through the Association for Applied Sports Psychology, which is not an option at other schools.

Class sizes are also small — a feature faculty says strengthens mentorship.

“There’s much more of a one-to-one relationship with the students, which is huge,” Markwell said.

Landing in the program

[Jake Land](#) is part of the first cohort graduating this May and has already secured a role as director of sports psychology and company-wide assistant manager at the Arizona Center for Neurofeedback.

“It is one of the most important things that is never talked about,” Land said of the mental side of sports. “It is one of the sides of the game that has never been flipped over and explored until just recently.”

Growing up, sports weren’t just an activity for Land — they were a way of life.

He started in youth sports and continued through varsity college baseball. Sports taught him discipline and the meaning of teamwork.

“Sports was one of my greatest teachers,” he said.

After earning an undergraduate degree in psychology, he wondered how he could turn his lifelong passion for sports into a profession. Then he discovered ASU’s sports psychology program.

“When it comes to the Southwest, ASU is one of the biggest pioneers in sports psychology,” he said.

Land worked with the ASU women’s club rugby team, under the guidance of Markwell, witnessing firsthand the impact mental performance training can have on athletic success.

“On a collegiate level, it’s been fantastic to work with these athletes,” he said. “I’m having the opportunity to teach athletes how vital and important the mental side of performance can be.”

Students share common passion for sports

The program attracts students with different goals — including coaching, consulting, strength and conditioning or combining sport with broader mental health work. Some are traditional students, other students are coming back to school after years in another profession.

For Ashley Rodarte, who is also graduating and worked with the women's club rugby team, sports helped shape who she is — teaching her how to manage her time, persevere through challenges and communicate clearly with others.

“I gained many life skills through simply participating in sports growing up,” she said. “I do not think I would be the person I am today without sports.”

An Arizona native, Rodarte wanted to stay in-state and preferred in-person learning. When she saw ASU offered that option, she “knew it was the right fit.”

Matthew Miescke, who works with [ASU Counseling Services](#) and is currently in the program, played sports through college and decided to pursue the degree because he missed working with athletes. He sees the program as a way to take a more holistic approach to athlete care.

“The program is great for students wanting to pursue a career working with athletes from a peak performance perspective,” Miescke said. “The professors are utilizing a hands-on approach to incorporate experiential learning in many different classes. The program is relighting my passion for athletics.”

For Dereck Paulas, a nontraditional part-time student in the program, earning the degree represents a return to something he once loved. After working in sales for years, he missed his time playing and coaching hockey.

“Coaching was one of the most rewarding things I ever did,” he said. “It might not have been my first career, but there’s a part of me that feels like that was my calling and that it still can be.”

Now taking one class per semester while working, Paulas says the experience feels different from earning his first master’s degree.

“It is fun to look forward to classes that you’re really interested in,” Paulas said. “Now, I just want to absorb as much knowledge as I can. I’m not focused on grades — I want to learn.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Sports psychology graduate student Ashley Rodarte (right) talks with Riko Takayoshi, a fourth-year global management student from Japan and member of ASU's women's club rugby team, during practice on March 19. ASU's master's degree in sports psychology launched in fall 2024 and immediately attracted seven students from across the country its first year, including Rodarte, who is now graduating. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



From left: Sports psychology graduate students Jesse Williams, Jake Land and Ashley Rodarte work with members of the ASU women's club rugby team during practice on March 19. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News