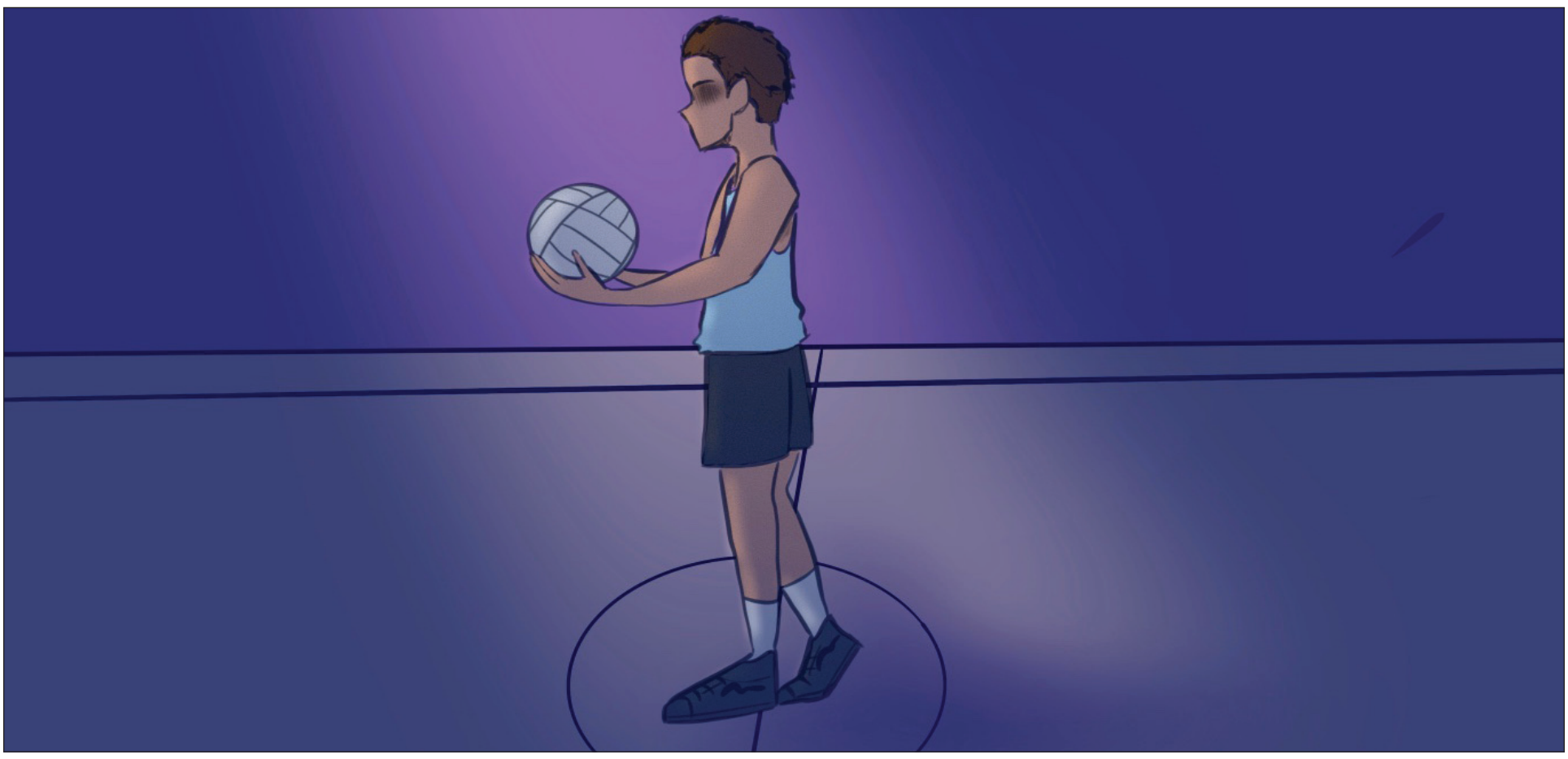

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Athletes feel pressures: mind or body

By Jesus Tellitud
SENIOR STAFF WRITER

Natasha Harris, a San Jose State women's soccer team defender, battled two mental illnesses during her collegiate career, but didn't seek help right away because she "kept pushing through."

"I'll go from the happiest person ever [to] then just bawling my eyes out," Harris said in a phone call. "People are always like, 'What the heck is wrong with you?' And I'm like, I don't know."

For many student-athletes, there is often a stigma associated with mental illness in sports.

According to an NCAA article, student-athletes, coaches and staff tend to minimize mental disorders or psychological distress because of expectations of strength and "mental toughness" associated in sports culture.

Harris was diagnosed in her junior year with both bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder. She then decided to opt-out of her senior year with the women's soccer team to focus on her mental and physical health.

"I knew if I went back [my coaches and teammates] would just want me to focus on the season," Harris said. "[But] I wasn't in a position to put my own fears and worries to the side."

However, Harris said her decision received some backlash from the team and staff members and she felt ostracized.

"It got to the point where Matt Penland [said] 'Natasha is not on the soccer team anymore, why are you guys writing a story on her?', " Harris said. "[But] am I not on the soccer team anymore? I didn't officially quit. I just was opting-out for my mental health."

Harris said she wanted to distance herself because she also felt the lack of support and understanding from the team was "toxic."

"My teammates would [tell me] to do some yoga or put on a face mask and you'll be fine, but what about the voices in my head?" Harris asked. "I was kind of going through it and [my coaches] had me see a mindset coach. And looking back on it, I don't think I needed a mindset coach, I think I needed a therapist."

Harris currently sees her academic adviser for support, but said SJSU doesn't provide enough resources for student-athletes to help them with mental health concerns.

Karin Jeffery, a kinesiology and sports psychology lecturer, agrees with Harris' sentiment and said she has had students drop out mid-semester because they had no support during a mental crisis.

"We don't provide nearly enough mental health resources at San Jose State to student-athletes or to anyone else and it's frustrating," Jeffery said.

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>
> **Natasha Harris**
> women's soccer defender

SJSU Athletics provides resources to its athletes in the form of Spartan Balance, a wellness program that helps players with personal, physical, mental and nutritional health. Athletes are encouraged through the program to reach out to SJSU's Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) for any mental health concerns. However, both Jeffery and Harris said the average time it takes to schedule an appointment with a CAPS counselor is six weeks.

"When you're in crisis, or when you're a student-athlete and you need to talk to somebody immediately, six weeks from now is not going to be very helpful," Jeffery said.

She said student-athletes deserve more resources to help with mental health concerns because they have an enormous amount of responsibility. Yet, she said people fail to realize players are under constant stress.

"There's a huge misconception that student-athletes have an easy life, are given a free ride and all they have to do is play a sport," Jeffery said. "In reality, it's a very difficult life [because] they basically have two full-time jobs."

Jeffery said performance anxiety is a major cause of athletes' stress and deteriorating mental health. She said people who are under chronic stress age six times faster than people who aren't.

"If you put your car in neutral, and sit there revving the engine over and over again, that's kind of what we're doing for our bodies when we're under chronic stress," Jeffery said. "Sooner or later it'll wear out."

She emphasized that student-athletes must continue working to keep their scholarship to pay for their academics, essentially converting their passion into survival resulting in more stress.

Men's soccer head coach Simon Tobin said he understands the added pressures a student-athlete faces but he views playing a collegiate sport as a release instead of a responsibility.

"I never ever want [my players] to think [soccer] is just a job where I'm getting a bit of a scholarship," Tobin said. "I would like to think that all of my [players] love playing soccer and going to school."

However, some student-athletes disagree and feel there's more required of them than just playing a sport and going to class.

Swimming and diving junior Chloe Limargo said on top of school and sports, there are other aspects of an athlete's life that must be sacrificed in order to not be excessively stressed.

"There's a square for athletes," Limargo said. "You have your social life, then your sport, then your sleep and then your school. And you can only pick two."

Limargo said some days her depression gets the best of her and she doesn't want to swim. Yet she feels she has to "push through" in order to keep her scholarship. According to a 2020 NCAA survey that had responses from more than 37,000 student-athletes, 1 in 10 reported feeling depression to the point where it was "difficult to function most days."

"Most people don't get that chance to step back and see that they're destroying themselves," Limargo said.

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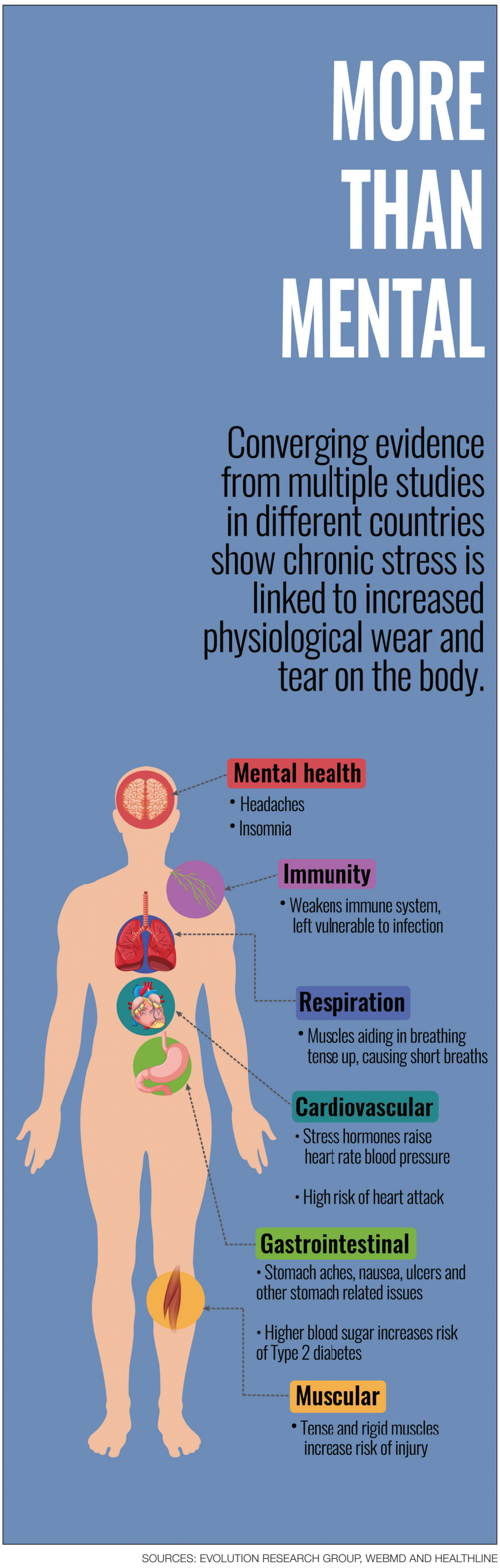

SOURCES: EVOLUTION RESEARCH GROUP, WEBMD AND HEALTHLINE