

# **SIUE Mental Performance Coaches Partner With STL Gallagher Teams To Give Players Mental Edge**

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EDWARDSVILLE – “Keep your head in the game.” It’s a common sports phrase that points to the importance of mental focus in competition.

As many athletics organizations had to limit or place in-person training on hold amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the St. Louis Scott Gallagher Soccer Club (SLSG) used the opportunity to strengthen players’ mental training. This summer, they partnered with Southern Illinois University Edwardsville’s Exercise and Sport Psychology graduate program to pair mental performance coaches with athletes.

“Mental performance coaches work with individuals to help them handle the challenges they experience as athletes,” said Lindsay Ross-Stewart, PhD, graduate program director and sport psychology consultant for the SIUE Cougars. “People often think about sport psychology skills as being something for elite athletes, but skills such as how to handle one’s emotions, dealing with pressure, staying focused and being confident are incredibly important for youth athletes, as well.”

Seven graduate students were each matched with a SLSG youth team, meeting four times to teach topics on what is sport psychology, goal setting, dealing with stressors and confidence building techniques.

“One of the unique outcomes of everyone being at home was that coaches and teams were looking for ways to use that time to gain a mental edge, since they couldn’t physically practice,” Ross-Stewart explained. “The coaches learned the mental techniques that were taught to their athletes, so they can refer to them all season.”

“We are grateful for the opportunity that the SIUE staff and students provided for our membership,” said St. Louis Scott Gallagher Illinois Program Director Shawn Hewitt. -- “Allowing the players to meet virtually to talk through topics that directly impact them proved to be a valuable resource to aid in the players’ development. Discussing these topics also helped elevate our coaches’ understanding of the mental side of the athlete and team encounters on and off the field. We look forward to working with Dr. Lindsay Ross-Stewart and her students this upcoming year.”

“This was a great opportunity for our players to focus on a different aspect of their game,” added SLSG Illinois ECNL Director Laura Heffington. “As we were limited to virtual meetings and training, the ability to have our players working directly with graduate students on mental strength was a huge asset. The exercises that our players went through are not only tools that can be valuable to sport, but also assets in school and other stressful areas of their lives.”

Participating SIUE graduate students emphasize the value of such professional interaction with youth athletes, as they prepare for careers as sport psychologists.

“I utilized videos and goal sheets, and challenged them to discuss and be open about their experiences, despite it being a group Zoom session,” recalled Savana Robinson, of Des Moines, Iowa. “The girls were consistently engaged and never skipped a beat on wanting to delve into techniques to better nervousness, stress or motivation. The competitive nature of Gallagher has made the girls realize the importance of mental strength in sport, which is unique to find at such a young age.”

Graduate student Harben Branco Filho, of Brazil, came to the U.S. at age 17 to play soccer and pursue his education. As a mental performance coach, he was able to gain applied experience that combined his passions for sport and psychology, with the added privilege of helping others.

“We explored the topics of motivation, confidence and dealing with anxiety,” Filho said. “Such topics can be complex even for adults, so one of the major focuses was to tailor the information according to the athletes’ own reality. We must be sensible and creative to adapt the complex information we learn to everyday language that these young people are able to understand and apply to their lives.”

“This experience was crucial to help me draw connections from the classroom material to the real world,” he added.

“Every experience I get to work with athletes on improving their mental skills is a big stride in my growth as a consultant,” agreed graduate student Courtney Kendrick, of Jonesboro.

“Athletes have to train their mind like they train their body,” she explained.

“Oftentimes, youth athletes are in the developing stages, and this means that they are easily influenced and still learning their way. If we, as coaches and consultants, include mental training skills into practice and the team program, we can shape and improve these skills, setting these young athletes up for success.”

Other graduate students serving as mental performance coaches were Landon Braun, of Jefferson, Iowa, Alyssa Lowe, of Mt. Zion, Cameren Pryor, of Raleigh, N.C., and Maira Ogata Negri, of Brazil.

Ross-Stewart mentored the students throughout the trainings. She hopes to continue this partnership in the future online, or in-person when circumstances become safe to do so.

By preparing the next generation of leaders in a knowledge-based economy, SIUE’s Graduate School fulfills the region’s demand for highly trained professionals. Graduate school offerings include arts and sciences, business, education, engineering, nursing and interdisciplinary opportunities. SIUE professors provide students with a unique integration of theoretical education and hands-on research experiences. Students can obtain graduate certificates or pursue master’s degrees, and be part of a supportive learning and rich intellectual environment that is tailored to the needs of adult learners. The Graduate School raises the visibility of research at SIUE, which ranks highest among its Illinois Board of Higher Education peers in total research and development expenditures, according to the National Science Foundation. Doctoral programs are available in the Schools of Education (EdD) and Nursing (DNP). The School of

Engineering and the Department of Historical Studies feature cooperative doctoral programs (PhD), and the College of Arts and Sciences features an Environmental Resources and Policy cooperative PhD.