

Keynote Speaker of the 16th ISSP World Congress - Sponsored by Shine Tak Foundation

Professor Stewart Vella

- Professor - Faculty of the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, School of Psychology, Wollongong, Australia
- Director of the Global Alliance for Mental Health and Sport at the University of Wollongong, Australia
- Most published researcher in the world on the topic of mental health and sport, and has over 100 scientific publications, over AUD\$14 million in research funding



Keynote topic

- Mental Health

Research interests

- Mental health interventions in sport, mental health guidelines, and psychological safety.
- Sport and exercise psychology, Sports medicine, Applied and development psychology, Health psychology

Experiences

- Extensive experience in psychology research and academia, with positions at the University of Wollongong since 2012, currently Professor
- Leader of innovative mental health programs leveraging sport to promote resilience and suicide prevention in young men (Ahead of the Game, partnered with Rugby League World Cup 2021)
- Mental health expertise focuses on recognizing disorders, getting help, building resilience, overcoming challenges in sport and life, through work with November and other major men's health initiatives

The 16th ISSP World Congress – Keynote Abstract

Title

The past and the future of a field: Embracing and optimising the role of sport psychology in mental health promotion in sport

Framing and Objectives

Mental health, broadly defined, has been the subject of sport psychology research and practice since its very beginnings and mental health is now widely recognised as central to the remit of sport psychology.

However, the conceptual, practical, and empirical foundations for this work remain nascent. This keynote addresses the evolving role of the field of sport psychology in the protection and promotion of mental health in both recreational and elite sport. Against the backdrop of increased societal and policy attention, this presentation aims to advance a more integrated, systems-based, and solution-oriented agenda for the field.

Conceptual or Methodological Insights

The field faces both opportunities and challenges as it orients itself around a changing role in mental health. This presentation will introduce some of the conceptual and methodological shifts necessary that can help to define the role of sport psychology research and practice in mental health promotion across all levels of sport. This includes moving from cross-sectional and problem-oriented studies to methodologically diverse, high-quality research designs that are embedded in real-world systems and capable of influencing policy and practice. The presentation will also address the urgent need for conceptual clarity across widely used—but inconsistently defined—constructs like psychological safety and mental fitness, arguing for shared definitions to enable coordinated research, intervention design, and evaluation efforts.

Key Insights or Findings

Four interwoven challenges and opportunities will be explored: (1) the need for solution-oriented research that tests what works to improve mental health in sport; (2) the imperative to shift from individual-level interventions to systemic change strategies; (3) the practice-to-research gap and the struggle to keep up with a rapidly changing sport system; and (4) the proliferation of poorly defined constructs that hinder coherent intervention and policy design. Examples from global initiatives—including the development of national guidelines, embedded care models, and cross-sector partnerships—illustrate how some sport systems are leading this shift. However, the field has yet to establish a clear, scalable research architecture that aligns with emerging practice, and has yet to embed the expertise of practitioners and policy makers at the heart of research. Responsiveness, conceptual precision, and methodological diversity can together position sport psychology as a transformative discipline for mental health.

Implications and Future Directions

The future of mental health in sport depends on the field's capacity to evolve beyond traditional paradigms. A renewed commitment to a science-practice-policy nexus is required—whereby research questions are co-developed with practitioners, policies are evaluated in context, and evidence translates into action. This keynote concludes by proposing a roadmap for how researchers, practitioners, and organisations can work together to build sport systems that not only support performance, but actively protect and promote mental health at every level of participation.

Keywords

Athlete mental health, systems approach, sport policy, psychological safety, implementation science, solution-oriented research.