



The Pressure to Perform: A Reality for Young Athletes

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At first, the pressure feels like motivation. You tell yourself it's what pushes you to train harder, run faster, be better. But for many young athletes, that pressure slowly shifts from fuel to weight.

Studies from the World Health Organisation's Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey show that Irish teenagers report increasing levels of stress related to performance and expectations. According to Sport Ireland research, nearly one in three young athletes experience burnout symptoms, including emotional exhaustion and reduced enjoyment. What begins as passion can quietly turn into anxiety.

I learned this the hard way.

At the start of a new camogie season, I was playing one of the best games of my life. Twenty minutes in, I dislocated my kneecap. One moment I was sprinting; the next I was being helped off the pitch, trying not to cry. Hospital scans. Crutches. Physiotherapy. The season continued without me.

The physical injury healed faster than the mental one.

Recovery was not just rest. I had to complete a structured series of strengthening exercises to rebuild the muscles around my knee - slow, repetitive movements that felt insignificant compared to the pace of a match. Progress was measured in degrees of movement, not points scored. It took two full months before my knee was strong enough to return safely. The hardest part was learning patience - accepting that healing could not be rushed.

When I returned, I expected myself to be exactly the same player. Teammates said, "You're not playing like you used to." They probably meant it casually. But those words followed me home, replaying in my head long after training ended. I trained harder, pushed through discomfort, ignored the fear in my body. I wanted to prove I hadn't fallen behind.

I ended up injured again.

Research from the American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine shows that young athletes who return to sport under psychological pressure are significantly more likely to suffer repeat injuries. Pressure doesn't just affect confidence - it interferes with recovery. My own experience proved that when I rushed back before my body - and mind - were ready, the consequences were immediate.

And pressure rarely comes from one place.

It can come from:

- Parents investing time and money
- Coaches chasing league titles
- Teammates depending on you
- Academic expectations
- Social media comparisons
- And, most powerfully, yourself

A 2023 report from Sport Ireland found that enjoyment - not winning - is the main reason young people stay in sport. Yet the fear of falling short often overshadows that enjoyment.

At my lowest point, I considered quitting. Not because I stopped loving camogie, but because I was exhausted from trying to meet expectations - my own and everyone else's.

What helped wasn't pushing harder. It was being allowed to recover fully. To admit I was scared. To understand that progress is not linear. It took time to accept that stepping back was not weakness but discipline.

Young athletes do not need more pressure. They need environments where effort is valued over perfection, where recovery is respected, and where identity is not tied to a scoreboard.

Because sport should build resilience - not break it.

