

# MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

## DR. REBECCA STEARNS



DR. REBECCA STEARNS is currently the Chief Operating Officer of the Korey Stringer Institute at the University of Connecticut and is a member of the Medical Advisory Panel for USA Football. As one of the founding members of the Korey Stringer Institute, she is dedicated to advancing their mission through education, advocacy, research, and media outreach to prevent sudden death in sport.

Advocating for athlete health and safety has been a driving force in Rebecca's career. With a background in athletic training and personal experience as a runner, she has a deep understanding of the needs and perspectives of athletes.

One of the biggest challenges Dr. Stearns has faced in promoting athlete health and safety is the ever-evolving nature of medicine and best practices. Staying up to date with the latest research and translating it into accessible information for sport organizations has been a priority. Many sport organizations lack a clear resource that outlines best practices and expectations, leading to a gap in implementing health and safety policies.

Through her work with KSI, Dr. Stearns has aimed to bridge this gap by providing organizations with the necessary information and support to adopt these standards.

While there have been barriers to implementing these policies, Rebecca has witnessed significant progress in recent years, particularly at the high school level. Educating coaches and administrators about the importance of health and safety has led to the adoption and implementation of these policies.

One specific incident that highlighted the impact of prioritizing athlete health and safety was Dr. Stearns and KSI's work with the state of New Hampshire. Initially, NH's policies for preventing sudden death in sports were lacking compared to other states. KSI collaborated closely with NH to introduce the "Emergency Plans for Sport Related Injuries" bill, which incorporated various health and safety measures crucial for athlete protection.

These standards include guidelines for emergency action plans, preparticipation exams, cold water immersion for EHS, weather based modifications to practices, and hydration policies.

"We have to be careful about having effective, educated, and safe coaches out there. However, you don't want to put up so many barriers that you don't have any coaches willing to do it right."

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Despite challenges throughout the process, the bill was passed in August of 2021 and went into effect in September 2022. As a result, this bill elevated New Hampshire to the top five states in terms of health and safety standards. While there are other routes organizations can take to have standards in place, this was a huge success which showcased the positive outcomes from choosing this path.

Balancing the push for improved athletic performance with athlete safety and well-being is a crucial aspect of Dr. Stearns' work, and she explains that these two objectives go hand in hand. For example, maintaining proper hydration not only reduces the risk of heat-related illnesses but also enhances endurance and power output. Similarly, heat acclimatization not only benefits performance in hot conditions but also provides advantages in cold environments.

By aligning health and safety practices with performance goals, we can maximize athletic potential while minimizing the risk of injuries.

One area that requires careful attention, especially during the preseason, is strength and conditioning sessions, which pose increased risks to athletes. According to Dr. Stearns, following best practices, such as having trained personnel present, implementing progressive exercise introduction, and avoiding exercise as punishment, can mitigate these risks.

Punishment sessions have been identified as high-risk periods, and it is crucial to create an environment where athletes can thrive physically and mentally without jeopardizing their well-being. Dr. Stearns recommends coaches have sport specific and nonphysical consequences built into their practice plans. There are other ways of instilling your message without harming the athlete, all while maintaining an overall positive experience.

Dr. Stearns' motivation to advocate for athlete health and safety, driven by her athletic training background and personal experience as an athlete, has been accompanied by challenges, yet the rewarding progress in implementing health and safety policies has shaped her career.

By focusing on education, providing resources, and emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between performance and safety, we can create a culture that supports athletes' well-being while maximizing their potential.



"When I say exercise shouldn't be used as punishment, we don't want it to be this unplanned, unexpected, extreme introduction of exercise at the end of a very long, intense exercise battle already. That is where you put an athlete's health and safety at risk. Plan consequences into your program so you know what that could look like and make it within reasonable bounds.