

# INDEPENDENT SCHOOL SPORT

Celebrating sporting achievement and innovation within independent schools

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HOW ARE  
SCHOOLS  
SUPPORTING  
STUDENTS TO HAVE  
HEALTHY BODIES  
AND MINDS?  
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Main image © Lancing College

## news

### Solihull School appoints first director of sport, health and fitness

Solihull School has appointed its first director of sport, health and fitness to lead its restructured sports department.

Chris Dossett, who joined the West Midlands independent school in June, studied sports science at Loughborough University and played rugby for Saracens, Moseley and Birmingham & Solihull.

He started his career as a PE teacher at Ashlawn School, Rugby

before moving to a similar role at King Edward VI Aston School.

Dossett progressed to his first director of sport post at Pangbourne College in 2000, followed by two further directorships at The Portsmouth Grammar School and Uppingham School.

Last September Solihull School rebranded its sports department to become the sport, health and fitness department,

in order to align with its ethos.

Dossett said: "I believe that physical activity develops valuable life skills – from adaptability and grit to collaboration and mental agility, but most importantly it should be fun and enjoyed by all.

"I aim to be a values-driven leader striving to develop altruistic, courageous and positive people who believe in rewarding process and performance over outcomes."



Chris Dossett is a keen cyclist



A pupil playing football at Lancing College in Sussex

# Why mental health is topping the podium in school sport

*The summer of sport showcased extraordinary athletes and mental health. **Melanie Anning** finds out how independent schools are supporting students to have healthy bodies and minds*

Once upon a time, the ultimate goal in sport was to win at all costs. In 2021 the script fully flipped. High-profile athletes put their mental health first.

Tennis star Naomi Osaka, cricketer Ben Stokes and gymnastics legend Simone Biles spoke honestly about their struggles with the pressure of expectation. Today mental health is firmly on the sporting agenda.

But how does this translate to the independent school sector where competition, sporting prowess and success are highly valued?

“The stigma attached to mental health in sport is decreasing,” says Karen Andrew, director of sport and head of PE at Lancing College. “When leading athletes, especially male sports stars, like footballer Tyrone Mings, admit they’re struggling with mental health, it gives young people the confidence to come forward. We talk about it a lot in the classroom, and that’s very important.”

No stranger to sporting pressure herself, Andrew was an England rugby international who achieved 42 caps. “Sports mentors and coaches play a vital role in supporting students at Lancing. Our approach is holistic; it’s active in the classroom, on the games field and across the site. Tutors regularly communicate with the sports staff. If students are finding things difficult, we ensure they take time out of sport to concentrate on their academics or just to rest.”

## FAILURE IS PART OF SUCCESS

Despite the increasing focus on mental health and wellbeing in schools in recent years, Andrew feels that students today struggle more and cope less well in pressurised situations.

“There’s increasing pressure on young people to succeed, which almost certainly spreads from the classroom onto the games field. When parents are paying so much money, teachers and coaches do everything

possible to support their children. We don’t allow young people to fail anymore, and failure surely is the route to success.”

Charlie Knightley, director of sport at Felsted School, agrees. “As an aspiring, young athlete, ‘failure’ was always viewed as unacceptable in elite circles, and this filtered down. A change of mindset and awareness has allowed schools to highlight the importance of sport in pupils’ development, rather than saying we are only here to win and only here for those who want to win.”

Knightley asserts that awareness is critical. “Staff are now well trained to pick up on signs and triggers that might be leading to unhealthy choices and lifestyles. A pupil’s wellbeing will always be number one and performance expectations secondary.”

When the pandemic restricted organised sport and regular competition, Felsted School focused on the impact of the loss of sport on pupils’ mental health.

“We’ve worked on developing sporting skills, over the outcome,”



says Knightley. “It’s a challenge when youngsters naturally hone in on results, but the key is to embrace failure as an essential part of the learning journey.”

Felsted School’s coaching team includes many ex-professionals who share their career ups and downs. “We hope pupils can see that failure is commonplace for everyone who takes on the challenge of competition,” Knightley adds. “Rather than looking at sport as an extra pressure, we use the time with pupils to build skills, make friendships, take on new challenges and opportunities, work on fitness, tactics and strategies, as a support to improving their mental health.”

Christ’s Hospital is implementing similar strategies in its PE and sports department. “Pupils were anxious about not winning or coming top three, and of being judged by others,” says Hannah Nwandu, assistant director of sport.

“Some were focusing on what didn’t go to plan rather than the positives. From this term, there’ll be less of a spotlight on competition and fixtures for the junior pupils, and more opportunities to experience a wide range of activities, learning to win and lose, appreciate and work with others.”

Nwandu believes that constant communication is vital. “It’s important to consider the individual because all young people respond to pressure differently. We continually check in on pupils, particularly aspirational sporting ones, who may not necessarily share their fears or worries. We remind them to enjoy the experience and to think about how they’re feeling at different stages.”

Regardless of ability, pupils at Christ’s Hospital are encouraged to be involved in sport and are offered an array of activities. “The greater the exposure to



Boys rugby practice at Christ’s Hospital in Horsham

## “A pupil’s wellbeing will always be number one and performance expectations secondary”

opportunity means pupils are likely to find something they enjoy and take through actively into adulthood,” says Nwandu.

### IF SPORT IS ENJOYABLE, THE COMPETITION TAKES CARE OF ITSELF

Karen Andrew also wants to see pupils participating in a broader range of sports for a longer period. “Athletes are getting younger and having to specialise in one sport

is another pressure. I didn’t start playing rugby until my early 20s, so I enjoyed all sports throughout my school career.”

Felsted School encourages talented sportspeople to play multi-sports for as long as possible. Charlie Knightley says the positives are two-fold: “I believe it helps both their sport and mental health. A less-intense focus on one event reduces tedium, and students will pick up skills to help whatever will become their sport.”

Like many independent schools, Lancing College, Christ’s Hospital and Felsted School all provide wrap-around care for their pupils, with a network of support including tutors, house staff and access to counsellors. Sports scholars also have mentors who support their physical and mental health needs.

Undeniably, success in the sporting arena is embedded in the DNA and reputation of the independent school sector. Competition is part of its ethos. This will not change. But in this new era of open and honest conversations about stress and mental health, the route to achieving that success is shifting.

The future sporting landscape is a more holistic model where the wellbeing of the student is always central. The message from those leading sports in schools is that, for students to thrive, their mental health must always win, and this is non-negotiable. **IS**



Girls playing hockey at Christ’s Hospital