**Prehistoric college football coaches are killing players. It’s past time to stop them.**

 1:25

'Mistakes were made': Univ. of Maryland takes responsibility for player’s death

University of Maryland president said Aug. 14 that the school accepts "legal and moral responsibility" for the decisions made by its athletic training staff. (Reuters)



By [**Sally Jenkins**](https://www.washingtonpost.com/people/sally-jenkins/)

Columnist

August 21 at 9:12 AM

Heatstroke didn’t kill Jordan McNair; the berserk excesses of Coach DJ Durkin and his staff did. No amount of “honoring” McNair can pretty up that fact. The investigation into what Maryland did wrong after McNair collapsed is misplaced. It’s what came first — the deranged college coaching mentality that drove McNair to the staggering point — that requires full inquiry, and no one should be allowed to forget it.

An NFL player hasn’t died from heat exertion in 17 years. That’s the full measure of the crude, knuckle-dragging stupidity at work here. You know how many kids NCAA football coaches have killed with conditioning drills in that same period? Twenty-seven. I say “kill” because that’s what it is when tyrants force captive young men to run themselves to death out of their own outdated fears of weakness. Why is the NCAA tolerating this kill rate, which is unmatched at any other level of football?

Professional coaches have understood since the lamentable loss of Minnesota Vikings offensive lineman Korey Stringer in 2001 that you don’t build a player by driving him to the brink of organ failure in practice. Only the most backward or mean coach still thinks summer sprints are the only way to breed toughness. Everyone else has learned better — everyone but lunatic, over-striving NCAA wannabes who are in such a big hurry to prove themselves big dogs. The Pete Carrolls and Bill Belichicks aren’t putting their players in the ground; they’re putting them in virtual reality chambers. Only the NCAA tolerates — and refuses to regulate — unhinged dictators who think football has to be conditioned with sadistic extremes.

“They get to dictate these things, and we get to keep burying athletes until we make definitive changes to the culture,” said Douglas Casa, a kinesiologist who serves as CEO of the Korey Stringer Institute at the University of Connecticut.

*[*[*Maryland football players reveal plans to honor Jordan McNair*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/terrapins-insider/wp/2018/08/20/maryland-players-break-silence-reveal-plans-to-honor-jordan-mcnair/)*]*

Since 2000, there have been 40 athlete fatalities in conditioning sessions in multiple sports across the NCAA yet not a single death on the field, according to Casa. This despite the fact that schools have all the education and tools to prevent it: Heatstroke exertion is 100 percent survivable with a thermometer and some ice. The NFL has eliminated it altogether and to its credit continues to consult with the Stringer Institute on research and best practices to prevent sudden deaths.

The NCAA, on the other hand, has remained lethally antiquated. Unlike NFL players, collegians have “no voice and no rights,” Casa pointed out. McNair was forced to run 10 sprints of 110 yards, until his body temperature was at least 106 degrees. It was a nonsensical workout that had zero football relevance and demonstrated nothing about his character except that he was willing to work himself into a coma for fear of punishment from an all-powerful authority figure. “It’s a totally unregulated environment,” Casa said.

University of Oklahoma trainer Scott Anderson has a term for this idiotic and outmoded brand of collegiate workout: “irrational intensity.”

Anderson wrote a 2017 academic paper, titled “NCAA Football Off-Season Training: Unanswered Prayers,” that documents the stunning fatality rate in the college game.

“Collegiate football’s dirty little secret is that we are killing our players — not in competition, almost never in practice, and rarely because of trauma — but primarily because of non-traumatic causes in the off-season alleged to enhance performance,” he wrote.

Anderson cites the example of a player who died from exertion-induced asthma after being forced to run 2,160 yards of serial sprints in just 12 minutes, with a 1:1 work-to-rest ratio. You know what the work-to-rest ratio in an actual football game is? Somewhere between 1:8 and 1:10. Even in a hurry-up offense, it’s 1:4.


Before becoming a head coach at Maryland, DJ Durkin worked at top programs such as Florida, Michigan and Stanford. (John McDonnell/The Washington Post)

*[*[*A year before McNair’s death, Maryland president nixed plan to overhaul athletes’ health care*](http://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/colleges/a-year-before-jordan-mcnairs-death-maryland-president-nixed-plan-to-overhaul-athletes-health-care/2018/08/16/47eb2888-a17c-11e8-83d2-70203b8d7b44_story.html)*]*

Coaches conduct these workouts for only one reason: They have antiquated notions of man-making and are completely unread in the latest sports science. Mesozoic notions die hard. Obviously, the medical fate of other people’s sons should not be in their hands. And yet there are few NCAA rules governing conditioning workouts or none mandating independent medical care for student-athletes. Maryland President Wallace D. Loh declined to implement just such a proposal. So McNair was left to lurch and pant into the hands of athletic department employees who answer not to a medical center but to a hopped-up, impatient-for-success coach. If McNair had independent care, someone would have taken his temperature and iced him down, and he would be alive. Instead what he got was a trainer screaming, “Drag his ass across the field!”

The heat didn’t kill McNair any more than the grass did. What killed him was an overheated attitude that came straight from the top. Durkin is not an outlier as a coach, and he’s not specific to Maryland. Far from it. He’s an acolyte of Ohio State’s Urban Meyer. He has coached at Notre Dame, Stanford, Florida and Michigan. He has worked under Will Muschamp and Jim Harbaugh. He has been everywhere. He is the all-too-common NCAA coach. You’ve seen and heard coaches like Durkin a million times.

He’s the guy who brags he’s only seen one movie in the past eight or 10 years: “Lone Survivor.” He’s the guy who once head-butted one of his helmeted players and made his own head bleed. He’s the guy who boasted in an interview to Sports Illustrated that Richard Sherman wasn’t that tough until he got ahold of him. Who bragged in the same interview that he has sat in meetings in which coaches decided whether a kid was a player, or “a phony, a fraud, total piece of garbage.” He’s the guy who divides players into two groups: wolf pack or prey.

And who has said, “When we’re with our players, we’re at a workout with our guys, that is all-in. We’re fighting for our lives.”

This guy, and all the guys like him, need to be prevented from ever jeopardizing young lives again.