

PEOPLE AND POP CULTURE

Radical Hope Foundation plays growing role in sports by providing mental health assistance to athletes

BY ETHAN JOYCE
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— The organization had its sports breakthrough in 2021 working with Division III Wesleyan University in Connecticut.

COURTESY OF RADICAL HOPE

As mental health and wellness have developed an increasing importance in the conversation around athletes, a nonprofit has found a growing foothold in sports.

Radical Hope has worked with 75-plus communities since the Massachusetts-based organization was founded in 2017, reaching more than 22,500 people through its Radical Health program, a four-week effort to give young adults emotional coping tools to navigate the world. Nearly 25% of that population has been athletes, spreading through the collegiate level (including Oregon, Oklahoma State and Colorado), NFL teams (including the Chargers and Giants) and turning into direct relationships with Ravens head coach John Harbaugh, Patriots owner Robert Kraft and NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell.

Liz Feld, Radical Hope's CEO, said the company's sports breakthrough came in the spring of 2021 at Division III Wesleyan University in Connecticut. The school's director of athletics, Mike Whalen, was bullish on the program in a time when society was stricken by the socially isolated reality of the COVID-19 pandemic. He wanted to pilot with all of his 260 athletes at the time, Feld recalled. If the program didn't work, he said he'd tell everyone. And if it did? He would spread its gospel.

"I said, 'All right, that is a fair deal,'" Feld said, chuckling at the memory.

Whalen liked it so much, he started contacting his counterparts at fellow New England Small College Athletic Conference schools. Radical Hope's efforts allow for peer-led programming, which Feld says creates comfort and relatability when talking about anxiety, depression and stress. It can also be flexible around other topics that organizations want to cover — such as Wesleyan's effort to include diversity, equity and inclusion, or Harbaugh injecting the experience into his coaching academy.

One of the many former pro athletes in Radical Hope's stable of support is Aaron Taylor. Now a college football analyst with CBS Sports Network, his career at Notre Dame earned him a spot in the College Football Hall of Fame and turned into a five-year NFL career. He linked with Feld through an unofficial think tank that connected people who wanted to influence the lives of student athletes.

The pairing has since created a podcast series called "Mind Flex with Aaron Taylor," which tries to empower and connect through six-to-eight-minute sessions. Through both his athletic pursuits and his 25-year journey through sobriety, Taylor saw a similar support structure via Radical Hope that he'd experienced in building camaraderie across communities that influenced his life.

"You've got to meet people where they're at, and you've got to speak to them in a language they already understand," Taylor said. "And by helping them do that, we foster connection and develop resilience."
