

Managing College Athletics With Autoimmune Disease

One athlete's experience navigating training, academics, recovery, self-advocacy, and the unexpected challenges of chronic illness.

By Makenzie • Autoimmune Association Young Adult Advisory Council

Being a college athlete is demanding. Doing it while navigating an autoimmune disease added challenges I never expected — from managing fatigue and medication side effects to learning when to push myself and when to listen to my body. Every person's experience with autoimmune disease is different, and my story won't look exactly like anyone else's. But I hope that by sharing what I learned — the things that helped, the things that were hard, and the ways I learned to advocate for myself — another young athlete might feel a little more prepared and a little less alone. Today, I'm a middle school teacher and youth soccer coach. I love spending time with my friends and family, playing soccer, and sharing my story to advocate for other young people living with autoimmune disease.

A note before you read: This is one person's experience. Autoimmune disease affects everyone differently, and what helped Makenzie may not be right for every athlete.

My name is Makenzie, and I am here today to share my story about being a college athlete while being diagnosed with an autoimmune disease. This is my personal story, and it contains many of my personal opinions. Autoimmune disease does not affect any two people in the same way, so the experiences I had will not line up with the story of every athlete. However, I hope that this story and my advice can help someone- even if it just helps to feel a little less alone. Today, I am a middle school teacher and youth soccer coach. I love being with my friends and family, playing soccer, and sharing my story to advocate for other young people with autoimmune disease.

Understanding the Unique Challenges

College athletics take an immense physical toll on the body, and this is magnified with the presence of an autoimmune disease. For me, problems with fatigue and energy management were at the top of this list. Many programs, including soccer, will have two practices per day in preseason. For four years, I spent a few weeks each year attending two full practices per day outside in the high heat of summer. These weeks are designed to get athletes ready for the demands of their season — but they aren't built for people like me, people whose bodies function differently than the average athlete.

I learned very quickly that recovery after practices and competitions was nonnegotiable for me. The body of someone with an autoimmune disease may function differently than the bodies of other athletes, and I knew I needed to prioritize recovery to keep my body feeling as good as possible. Compression boots and ice baths are two of the more common methods for recovery, but there are many others available to you. I would recommend communicating with your athletic trainer or doctor to find what would be best for you and your recovery.

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Another physical toll of an autoimmune disease can be medication side effects. While these don't happen at the same frequency and intensity for everyone, they can play a huge role in managing pain and the demands of college athletics. My junior year, I had severe nausea from a new medication I had started taking that summer. It felt like just another hoop to jump through on top of all the other challenges I was going through. Eventually, you learn to manage the symptoms and find a new normal — for me, I found that chewing mint gum as I started warm-ups would keep the feeling at bay. Interestingly enough, once I was into the warm-up and had gotten my body moving, the feeling stayed away until I cooled back down after the game.

In addition to the physical challenges, there is also a huge mental and emotional toll on an athlete with an autoimmune disease. It is not uncommon for athletes to feel isolated from teammates — and it happened to me. My senior year, my teammates decided we would walk to and from practice together every day and eat lunch as a team in between. Unfortunately, I was unable to participate fully in most of this because I barely had enough energy to practice, let alone add 40 minutes of walking per day. In addition, I needed to devote my time between practices to recovery. Because I had to do things for my body that no one else really needed to do, I was often isolated from my teammates.

I also had a fear of appearing “weak” to my coaches and teammates. I will admit that I sometimes found myself pushing the limits of my body because I didn't want people to think I wasn't trying or didn't care to put the effort in. For example, we had to pass a fitness test at the beginning of each season to play in games. Due to my sore and weakened muscles and limited training time because of my health issues, I didn't pass on the first try. As a result, I had to do extra fitness before practice every day. Although I am sure my coach would have made an exception or altered the plan for me, I wanted to put in the same amount of work that everyone else did. It can be incredibly difficult to balance your identity as both an athlete and someone living with a chronic illness. Despite the challenges, it was incredibly worth it to me.

With all of the things a person can have on their mind at any given time, it is important to understand how to manage academic responsibilities. At times, I had to miss classes for appointments or simply because I woke up not feeling well. I also had to step out of classes when I would get calls from the doctor's office. My junior year, I missed a midterm exam because I had to go in for a liver biopsy. It can be incredibly unpredictable, which was really hard for me to wrap my head around. Keeping up with coursework in times like these can be really difficult, but some support can help make it easier. Having a trusted classmate or two that can share notes, assignments, and/or messages from the teacher was so helpful (especially from a mental standpoint for me).

Building Your Support Team

Your support team can include a wide range of people, including athletic trainers, medical staff, and friends and family. It can be scary to find yourself in a place where your body may not be able to do things the same way it used to. No matter what, it is important to be honest with yourself, your athletic staff, and your coaches about how you are feeling — these people can help keep you safe while still participating in your sport.

It can be difficult to assemble a supportive medical team, especially if you are away from home at college. Your medical team may include a primary care physician, specialists, physical therapists, and/or mental health professionals. What helped me tremendously was linking my online accounts from different medical systems so that any new doctors could access all of my previous test and procedure results. You can do this right in the app!

My biggest advice would be to lean on your friends and family, even when it feels hard to ask for help. It can be easy to tell ourselves that we are a burden and don't want to inconvenience anyone else. Unfortunately, I got to a point where my fingers were so swollen I couldn't even put on my own cleats for practice. Every single time, without fail, a teammate helped me put them on and take them off without even saying a word. I learned to let my people show up for me- because they wanted to. If needed, you can also turn to academic advisors or your school's disability or student services office.

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Learning to Advocate for Yourself

The greatest support, however, is learning to advocate for yourself and stand up for what you know you need. One important step in this process is to communicate your needs early. Do not wait until you need something before you introduce yourself. Many college athletic programs will require you to do this in some capacity- during the season, I was required to meet with each professor to talk about days I would miss for competitions and how we would handle missing work or making up assignments. I was also able to use this conversation as a time to explain my situation. That way, when something did come up, they knew enough about the situation and how we had discussed handling potential issues.

What you want to say in those conversations is up to you, but I had a brief outline to follow when meeting with my professors. First, I would give a few details about my medical situation and let them know that I would try my best to be at everything, but that wouldn't always be possible. Please remember that you do not owe anyone medical details you don't feel comfortable sharing — you have control over how much they know. Then, I would let them know how I planned to makeup assignments and classwork I missed. I could usually base this on their policies in the syllabus. Finally, you can thank them for their time. I also usually asked if they had any questions, but again, you don't need to share anything you don't want to! Luckily for me, I went to a smaller school and already knew most of my professors and had developed a relationship with them by the second semester of my sophomore year. However, you don't need years of an established relationship to communicate with your professors.

Most professors will greatly appreciate you communicating early and showing effort to work things out as they arise. They want you to succeed and will help you look for a solution that works for everyone.

Another way I would suggest to help you advocate for yourself is to look into how to get accommodations at your school. It is important to know what supports are available to you and how to get them. I had accommodations in place for all four years of college — I rarely needed to use them, but it is always nice to have them just in case. The process for requesting accommodations can vary from school to school, but every college or university will have a department dedicated to handling these requests. It is NOT selfish to request accommodations.

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While I got used to communicating and requesting accommodations early, there were two things I had a particularly hard time with during my journey in college. The first was learning to explain my limitations without apologizing. It took me a long time to realize that I didn’t need to apologize for taking care of myself. There were days I woke up ready to go to class and just had this unsettling feeling, like I knew something was wrong. Even though I hated missing class, I decided to let my professor know I would be missing class that day. Each time I ended up being EXTREMELY sick. I learned that I needed to trust my body and that it’s okay to put myself first — everything else can be worried about and sorted out later.

Strategies for Managing College Athletics

When it comes to managing college athletics, there are a number of factors to consider. One of them is training. First, it is always important to listen to your body and adjust workouts when needed. My strength and conditioning coach modified every single team lift for an entire year so that I could still lift with my team. She would always ask how I felt, and if my fingers were too stiff or swollen that day, we would convert to a lower body-focused workout. It is also important to prioritize recovery. Using compression boots and taking ice baths were my main two sources of recovery, but that can be different for everyone. If you’re unsure of where to start, you can always ask your athletic trainer or other staff to help you out.

Nutrition and sleep are just as important as listening to your body. Fueling properly and staying hydrated are key to managing the load of college athletics with an autoimmune disease. If available to you, I would also recommend consulting a sports nutritionist if possible. My campus had one that I would meet with to discuss the best way for me to get the nutrition my body needed. She helped me come up with anti-inflammatory foods and snacks that would help keep my body fueled, which was especially difficult when I was always on the move from class to practice and back again. If your school does not have a dietitian or nutritionist, there are other options available! For example, the platform Nourish offers virtual meetings with dietitians and can be mostly covered by insurance. If this doesn’t align with your current needs, the Autoimmune Association has put together a list of resources that may be helpful to you. You can find that list [here](#).

One of my biggest tips for managing an autoimmune disease while participating in college athletics is to find some sort of calendar system that works for you. Scheduling everything I needed to do at times felt

like a full-time job. Keeping an organized calendar was a huge help for me, and I always color-coded my calendar- one color for practices, another for games, another for class, another for medical appointments, etc. When possible, I would try to plan my medical appointments around class and competitions. For me, games were on the weekends mostly, so I would aim for Tuesday-Thursday if I needed to schedule any kind of medical appointment or procedure. Whenever there was a conflict, I chose the medical appointment every time. Your health comes first, no matter what.

“Your health comes first, no matter what.”

Handling Setbacks

Learning how to handle setbacks was one of the most difficult things I had to do as a college athlete with an autoimmune disease. It was inevitable that I would have flare-ups during the season, and some of mine required me to miss practices or games. I can still remember one morning that I knew I had to tell my coach I couldn't play in the game that day. I felt so bad, like I was letting my teammates down. I went back and forth on my decision all morning, and I cried when I actually told her because I felt so guilty. She reassured me that I was not letting my team down at all and gave me a few other game day responsibilities so I felt like I was still contributing to the team. After that moment, my mindset started to shift just a little bit, and I realized that needing to sit out a game didn't make me less of a person or teammate.

Another thing that can be so difficult is returning to the game after illness or injury. Due to my illness, I had to miss almost an entire spring offseason. I was able to play in only one game that year, and even though I only played about 20 minutes out of the 90, it was such a huge success for me. There were honestly times I didn't even think I would make it back to the sport — for other players, 20 minutes might have felt like a huge letdown, but it reminded me why I was working so hard and that all that work was worth it in the end. I always try to remember that success doesn't look the same for me as it does for other people — it doesn't even look the same for me from day to day sometimes. Success and progress don't have to just be measured by statistics- resilience, strength, and courage are just as important.

What Coaches and Teammates Should Know

While I did not share everything with my coaches and teammates, there were a few things that I wanted them to know:

Invisible doesn't mean easy

I cannot even count the number of times that someone told me I “looked great” when I did not feel great. This can be one of the most difficult parts of having a largely invisible illness.

Symptoms can change day to day

This one was particularly HARD for my teammates- they couldn't seem to understand why sometimes I was "fine" and sometimes "not fine." To some of them, I know it seemed like I was picking and choosing what I wanted to do or sit out.

Flexibility can help athletes stay healthy

While schedules and dedication are important for a college athlete, it is important for athletes with an autoimmune disease to listen to their body. There were days I had to do a lighter lift than everyone else, times when I could only do half a practice, and times I could only participate in non-contact drills. All of this helped me be able to still compete when I needed to.

Advice from Another Athlete

"To college athletes navigating an autoimmune diagnosis: an autoimmune disease doesn't make you less—it just brings different challenges. I tried to hide my diagnosis because I wanted to be judged on my ability, not my illness, but I learned that performing at my best meant trusting the staff around me. Be open with your coaches and medical team, communicate your symptoms and limits, and collaborate on recovery and training adjustments. That partnership allows you to train smarter, reduce setbacks, and stay competitive without sacrificing your health. Don't be too hard on yourself — you are stronger than you think. Prioritize rest, proper fueling, and recovery as core parts of your training plan, not as weaknesses. Your experience managing an autoimmune disease builds a unique blueprint of resilience and discipline that will serve you both on and off the field. Give yourself grace, lean on your team, and remember: resilience looks like persistence, selfcare, and the courage to ask for support."

— Jacelynn, Autoimmune Association Young Adult Advisory Council member and current college athlete

Beyond Sports

Having an autoimmune disease can affect every part of a person's life, whether that is academics, athletics, relationships, a career, or something else entirely. I always joked that I wish I could put having an autoimmune disease on my resume because of all the skills I developed and traits I strengthened through dealing with the disease. Balancing practices, competitions, medical appointments, blood draws, and dealing with insurance companies improved my time management skills. My communication skills improved tremendously because I needed them to. I became more flexible and able to adapt to different situations because I didn't have a choice. Working to come back to my sport after needing to step away because of my health- the hardest thing I have ever done- showed me that I am resilient. Looking back now, I don't believe that my autoimmune disease gave me any of these things — I think it just gave me a pathway to find them within myself.

This is all a long way to say that success in college athletics is possible for athletes dealing with autoimmune disease- we can prioritize our health while also working toward athletic goals. The bottom line is that an autoimmune disease will probably change how you compete and prepare. It does not, however, determine whether or not you can be successful. With the right support, preparation, and a little bit of perseverance, those goals of yours can still be within reach. It may not look the way you always imagined-it didn't for me. But through it all, I learned to be okay with that, because different doesn't always mean bad.