

The week before U.S. Open, I thought I was already done preparing. I've trained hard, I've steadily lost weight, and I've felt physically more ready than ever. I sat with my phone in my hand after the brackets released for my division, frantically searching up the athletes I might fight against, watching their clips, their past victories at big tournaments, their strongest techniques that they knew they could trust. At first, it felt like I was preparing mentally and getting ahead of the game. But the longer I watched and the deeper I dived, the smaller I felt. Every opponent looked faster in a highlight reel. Every kick looked cleaner when the misses were edited out. Every athlete seemed calmer than I was. By the time I put phone down, no match had started, no points had been scored, and no referee had called "SHIJAK!" But mentally, I had already begun competing.

That is currently one of the biggest mental health challenges athletes face today, whether that be taekwondo or other sports too. Social media makes competition ubiquitous. A match is no longer only on the mat during those three 90 second rounds. A race is no longer only on the track. A personal record, a mistake, a medal, or a loss all contribute to the image athletes feel pressured to manage. Sports are already highly demanding for us to be disciplined and mentally tough, but social media adds a whole another layer. The pressure to always look successful while we are still trying to become successful on the inside.

I have trained in Taekwondo for more than ten years, and I am honestly really grateful for everything the sport has taught me. It has given me confidence, discipline, respect, and perseverance that I have learned to apply to all other aspects of life over the years: talking to strangers, doing work at school, other sports. I have competed at state, national, and international levels, including major tournaments such as U.S. Open and USAT Nationals. But Taekwondo has also taught me that pressure is very much real. In sparring, one mistake can change a match. The last 10 seconds of the last round in finals can topple you with insurmountable amounts of pressure, and social media can make that pressure start before the referee even opens their mouth.

I have felt something similar in track and field. As a sprinter and long jumper, I've learned that despite months of work and effort, everything can come down to a few seconds or one jump at a given day that you need to show out at. Qualifying for states in long jump and competing at nationals were experiences I am proud of, but they also showed me how easy it is to compare myself to others. Competing in the smallest class as a school with only 100 people per grade, after winning state qualifiers, the first thing that I thought was to compare to everyone else. The larger classes had bigger jumps, more athletic people, and after going home, I found myself replaying the U.S. #3 long jump that was hit at that same meet I was at. Track in of it itself is already built upon numbers everywhere: times, distances, rankings, seedings, personal records. Social media only makes those numbers tear up the mind even more.

The problem isn't that athletes use social media. In fact, sometimes social media can help. Watching opponents before a tournament can be strategic. Watching elite athletes train can be the one thing that gets us up in the morning and train hard, and seeing teammates succeed can make you genuinely happy for them. But that same form of social media that helps us prepare can also make us feel anxious. A quick search in the brackets before the big competition often

becomes wondering whether we are good enough. When athletes only see other people's best moments, the normal mundane struggles that they can have mentally can start to feel like personal failures.

Still, I don't think social media is only harmful. I have learned from watching other athletes and have been motivated by training clips. The problem is that athletes are often given access to social media before we are taught how to handle it. We learn how to kick, block, spar, condition, and compete, but we are rarely taught how to deal with comparison or pressure online.

That is why I would create a USA Taekwondo program called "Post with Purpose." The goal of this program would help athletes use social media with the same discipline and self-control that Taekwondo teaches in the dojang.

The first part would be called "Before You Scroll." At tournaments, camps, and local dojangs, athletes would have short conversations about social media and competition mindset. They would discuss real situations: watching opponents before a tournament, checking comments after a loss, feeling pressure to post only wins, or comparing yourself to someone else's highlight reel. Athletes would learn simple yet fundamental habits like limiting scouting time, avoiding social media right before competing, and remembering that something you see online never shows the full story.

The second part would be a "Real Reel Challenge" Instead of only posting medals, trophies, and perfect kicks, athletes would be encouraged to share their most valuable lessons from losses, difficult practices, recovery from mistakes, appreciation for coaches, or goals they are still working toward. This would show the everyday struggles and help younger athletes see that successful competitors are not successful because everything is easy for them. They are successful because they keep going when it is not easy.

The third part would be an optional private reflection tool. Athletes could track sleep, stress, mood, training load, and how social media made them feel that day, journaling their experience. I believe technology can help athletes become more aware of themselves when used carefully. This tool would not replace parents, coaches, or mental health professionals. It would just help athletes notice patterns within themselves, such as whether watching opponents for ten minutes helps them prepare, but watching for an hour creates anxiety.

To implement this program, USA Taekwondo could start small at selected tournaments, national camps, or local dojangs. Coaches would participate in five-minute discussion prompts to use after practice. Older athletes could also serve as ambassadors by sharing their honest stories and anecdotes about their own successes and struggles. USA Taekwondo could also create monthly online challenges focused on perseverance, respect, self-control, and growth instead of only medals.

I am still learning how to handle pressure myself. I can't say that I have a perfect relationship with social media, and I don't think most athletes do either, but that is exactly why this program matters so much. Social media never going to go away, especially in the current generation, but

through “Post with Purpose,” USA Taekwondo can help athletes turn it from a source of comparison into their next biggest inspiration.