The Team ENHANCE Program

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Team ENHANCE is a new and comprehensive system for student-athletes developed by the Women's Athletic Department at the University of Tennessee. Its mission is to create a healthy culture for student-athletes so that they can achieve their personal best in their sports and in their lives.

An alarm sounded in the summer of 1989 that caused widespread concern throughout the country in many women’s athletic departments with nationally competitive programs. The wake-up call was the widely reported news that a number of elite female athletes at the University of Texas were suffering from severe eating disorders that required inpatient treatment. Their athletic careers were put on hold while they received help for this life-threatening illness.

The Texas revelations, along with a mandate from the NCAA the same year that called for eating-disorder prevention and education, sparked the Women's Athletic Department at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK), to take a long, hard look at its own program. Representing the department, the head athletic trainer and a sport psychologist met with a specialist in the field of eating-disorder recovery to grapple with the subject in all its complexity. Recognizing the significance and urgency of the problem, they saw that there was a compelling need to create an eating-disorder-prevention program within the Women’s Athletic Department.

The first step was to bring in an eating-disorder therapist and a nutritionist with a PhD to share their expertise with the entire staff of the department. Next, the department conducted a study to determine the prevalence of eating disorders among female athletes at UTK. The study revealed that close to 25% engaged in disordered eating, ranging from problematic to serious to life threatening. Faced with this startling revelation, the department began to develop an eating-disorder-prevention program.

The initial focus was on nutrition and education, which are nonthreatening subjects to the staff and the student-athletes.

Experts in the field of eating disorders have determined that such disorders are strongly influenced by the culture in which young women are raised. Among the characteristics of people suffering from these serious disorders are denial, secrecy, and low self-esteem. The signs and symptoms—fasting, induced vomiting, compulsive exercise, and taking diuretics and laxatives—can be indicative of profound problems. The dangerous and harmful disorders of anorexia (starving to be thin) and bulimia (binging and then purging) or a combination of the two can lead to death.

During the first year of program development, the Women's Athletic Department drew on the expertise of mental-health and addiction professionals, eating-disorder specialists,
nutrition experts, and national and international authors, lecturers, and consultants. The female athletes at UTK saw that the new program offered them more than information about prevention; they came seeking relief and release from serious eating disorders and other addictions. The program grew to encompass education on alcohol and substance abuse, codependency and growing up in an alcoholic family, and the effects of living by the rules “Don’t talk, don’t trust, don’t feel.” Eventually mental-health problems such as trauma and depression, which block peak performance, were brought under the umbrella of the program, as were such issues as body composition, the use of supplements, and the psychological aspects of injury.

As the program evolved from mainly nutritional lectures to a full-scale continuum of outpatient services, it was named Team ENHANCE, an acronym for Enhancing Nutrition, Health, Athletic performance, Networking, Community, and Education. The name is appropriate because the program addresses all areas in the lives of student-athletes, striving to create a healthier culture in which to compete, to recover, and to thrive (Figure 1).

As Team ENHANCE members continued to listen, monitor, and evaluate the needs of student-athletes and the services for them, they saw needs for a peer-assistance group (for student-athletes to help each other in their recovery), a therapy group, and a family program. Team ENHANCE provides female team members a full continuum of services that includes prevention education, intervention, treatment, inpatient aftercare, and ongoing individual and family support. Program participants enjoy successful partnering relationships with experts from many fields, including inpatient-treatment providers, outpatient therapists, and experts in social work, sport sociology, psychology, and nutrition.

The mission of the Team ENHANCE program is to create a healthy culture for student-athletes so that they can achieve their personal best in their sports and in their lives. In every possible way, Team ENHANCE is committed to helping female athletes improve the quality of their lives not just while they are Tennessee Lady Vols but in life after sports, as well.

**Team ENHANCE Members**

The Team ENHANCE members are a highly skilled cadre with appropriate credentials and experience (Table 1). The members meet once a month to discuss issues pertaining to the performance of student-athletes. They give updates on their progress during the past month and discuss problematic issues, new ideas, and whatever might have an impact on athletic performance. Individuals are not discussed at these meetings; rather, this is a time to consider larger issues concerning the student-athletes and to use the members’ valuable resources to find solutions to problems. Among the topics they discuss are

- Psychological aspects of injury and the need for injury support
- The impact of disabilities (learning, physical, and psychological) on student-athletes and available services
- Eating disorders—signs and symptoms, emotional aspects
- Nutritional needs for training
- Fad diets, performance-enhancing and dieting supplements
- Alcohol and substance abuse