



Spatenka is a former hockey player who received her master's degree in sport and performance psychology in 2019. She is the first full-time mental performance specialist for Team Colorado girls. All photos submitted by Lauren Spatenka

Lauren Spatenka was almost paralyzed in 2009 when she fractured a vertebra during a hockey game. The injury kept her out of hockey for a year and prevented her from playing her freshman season for Owatonna High School in Minnesota.

A neurosurgeon who was aiding Spatenka with her recovery told her to see a sports psychologist, a profession she had never ever heard of at the time.

She didn't follow the advice because it was difficult for her to add another trip to see another doctor during her recovery, but she wishes it would have worked out. Even the mere suggestion got the wheels turning for Spatenka, who eventually combined her love of hockey and psychology into a career as a mental performance specialist.

"Not only did it sound like a fun career, but it was something that meant a lot to me and was meaningful," Spatenka said.

Those passions led her on a path from the North Star State to the Centennial State, where she has been hired as a mental performance specialist by several organizations. She works with the Cherry Creek High School boys' program, where she's an assistant coach with the junior varsity team, and was recently hired by the Team Colorado girls AAA program as its first full-time mental performance specialist — a rarity for many AAA girls clubs across the country.

"It's really necessary at these elite levels to be working with these athletes on the mental side," said Team Colorado girls' director Shaun Hathaway. "It's something that kind of gets lost in the shuffle a little bit at the youth level."

Colorado psych

After earning her B.A. in psychology from Crown College in Minnesota, Spatenka received a master's degree in sport and performance psychology from the University of Denver in 2019. She chose Denver specifically for its noted sport and performance psychology program, where professors are practicing psychologists. That combination was important to Spatenka, who wanted to experience real-world scenarios while earning her degree.

She started her business after graduating, opening Aspen Mental Performance in summer 2019. With a goal of helping athletes train their brains like they would train their bodies. She has assisted ice skaters and a ballerina, but the majority of her work is with hockey players.



Lauren Spatenka

In sports, any participant can have a bad performance without something being physically wrong; often there's another factor at play: a mental hurdle, said Spatenka, adding that her job is to help the athletes identify and deal with the non-physical issues holding them back.

"That's what I call a performance breakdown," she said. "When something's going wrong that's not physical, we look at 'What is the performance breakdown? How do we make it happen less often, and how do we handle it when it does happen?'"



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LAUREN SPATENKA PROVIDES HOCKEY ADVANTAGE FOR TEAM COLORADO GIRLS THROUGH THE MENTAL GAME

By Heather Rule, SportsEngine, 08/18/20, 3:45PM MDT

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Hub exclusive: The University of Denver alumnae founded Aspen Mental Performance in 2019 and recently joined Team Colorado girls as a mental performance specialist.

If a lack of focus is the issue, Spatenka provides an athlete with techniques to notice where his or her focus is and make sure it's being placed toward the right thing or goal. She then helps them make adjustments to achieve their objective.

She also assists athletes dealing with the emotional side of the game, such as methods to help hockey players avoid losing their cool and ending up in the penalty box or getting ejected from a game. Teaching athletes how to healthily express emotion while maintaining composure during performances is really important, Spatenka said.

From top athletes to teenagers

Spatenka finds ordinary themes among the high-school-aged athletes, too. For instance, there can be a disparity in commitment levels between athletes on the same team. One senior playing on the junior varsity squad might have the outlook that he or she simply wants to play hockey on JV. While a teammate in the same grade might really, really want to make varsity.

That can create different effort levels for those two, she said.

"Something I try to do a lot on teams is have them try and understand each other's 'why,'" Spatenka said. "And understand that your reason for being there might look a little bit different than the guy next to you, and you both need to learn to respect why the other person is there."

Something Spatenka said she loves to do with teams is find common ground.

"So what common ground can we find among the whole team or the majority of the team? And what are fair standards to hold each other accountable to?" Spatenka said.

The other key is accountability. Once players know everyone's "why," then the team can set values and standards for itself; those values will look different for different teams, Spatenka said. Those standards can be anything having to do with on- and off-ice events, what time teams arrive at the hockey rink or how they warm up. Then she works with the athletes on putting processes in place to hold each other accountable to those standards.

Communication is at the heart of it all, having athletes communicate effectively with each other.

Neil Ruffini, associate head coach with the Team Colorado girls' 16U squad and Cherry Creek boys' junior varsity, sees Spatenka helping facilitate good communication, as a bridge from coach expectations to the players' ears. It helps the coaching staff get a point across from another perspective and in a different way, Ruffini said.

For Team Colorado, bringing in Spatenka goes right along with its mission to build one of the best high-performance programs in the country. Having a coach work with players on the mental side of the game is what Hathaway called "a tremendous opportunity," especially since not a lot of other programs have this position.

From preparation to dealing with injuries, Spatenka will evaluate teams and individuals, then modify her curriculum or training sessions based on what's happening, according to Hathaway.

Hiring Spatenka is a new opportunity for Team Colorado and part of the program taking steps to get to the next level, Hathaway said.

"She's certainly a true professional, and I'm excited to see what she's going to be able to do with our kids this year," Hathaway said.



The hiring of Spatenka (right) is meant to help Team Colorado girls transition into becoming more competitive nationwide.

Hockey player helping hockey player

A mental performance specialist at the high-school level can be rare and is more common at the collegiate, professional and Olympic levels, Spatenka said.

The upcoming season will be Spatenka's third with the Cherry Creek varsity and JV teams on the mental skills side, but this year will be her first as an assistant coach with the JV team, working alongside Ruffini.

Having Spatenka around is integral to the success of a team, Ruffini said. While the athletes are experiencing life lessons through sports, Spatenka can recognize other challenges they face surrounding their family and friends, Ruffini added.

"I think what makes her so good at what she does is how much passion she has for it," Ruffini said. "Her ability to build relationships with these kids is really fantastic."

There are pros and cons to Spatenka's hockey background when it comes to her work as a mental performance specialist. Perhaps the biggest advantage is that she already knows the sport so well, versus working with a figure skater when Spatenka needs to do a little more research on things like a double axel. On the flip side, Spatenka not knowing as much about figure skating technique can help skaters think through some of that on their own.

Her ability to compete and her hockey-playing background are assets in her current work, Ruffini said. He's seen players have a high-level of respect for Spatenka because of her ability to compete at such a high level in hockey.

"You can see that she's not going to back down," Ruffini said. "She's a competitive person, and I think the players respond to that, especially the ones that are driving to the next level."

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