

Emma Burke: Balancing Mind, Body, and Resilience

By Cally Gudroe



Emma Burke is the Student-Athlete Mental Health Performance Coach at the University of New England.

In a bright upstairs office tucked inside the Athletic's Office in the Harold Alfond Forum at the University of New England, 25-year-old Emma Burke spends most afternoons helping student-athletes untangle the knots of pressure, identity, and expectation that come with college sports.

Some arrive anxious before competitions, some exhausted by the balancing act of school and athletics, and others simply seeking a space to breathe. Emma welcomes them all with the same calm steadiness that has become her signature.

“Athletes need a place where they’re not being told to ‘tough it out,’” she says. “They need a place where their emotions are taken seriously.”

Her role as UNE’s Student-Athlete Mental Health Performance Coach is a new one, and its impact has already rippled across the department.

EMMA’S EARLY LIFE

In the small coastal town of Harwich, Massachusetts, where the ocean laps quietly against the shore and neighbors mostly keep to themselves, Emma Burke’s story began not with gold medals or podiums, but with curiosity and a sense of play.

The youngest of three sisters in a family of five, she grew up trying a little bit of everything, from tennis with her father to softball with her siblings, but never fully committed to organized sports.

“My parents believed that freedom in sports would allow my sisters and I to find something we loved,” Emma explained. “And for me that was true.”

That truth showed up in sixth grade. Her mother, a gymnastics coach, had brought her and her sisters to the gym, and Emma immediately knew she had found her calling.

For most gymnasts, starting this late would be a disadvantage. Many of her peers had been training for years, and Emma’s adolescent growth spurt meant she towered over girls who were far more diminutive—a physical difference that could stunt progress in the sport, but Emma was undeterred.

“I realized if I want to work really hard, I’ll catch up with them eventually,” she says. “Even if their size was more favorable.”

OVERCOMING INJURY AND DISCOVERING MENTAL STRENGTH

Emma’s journey was not without challenges. Overuse injuries plagued her during middle school, culminating in a devastating sophomore-year injury: two fractured vertebrae that left her sidelined for almost a year.

“I couldn’t do anything, but I still went to practice because all my best friends were there,” Emma recalls. It was then that her coaches introduced her to mental imagery: the act of visualizing routines and skills as if she were performing them in real life.

“It’s daydreaming, but in a controlled, purposeful sense,” she explains. For Emma, this technique became more than a training tool, it became a lifeline.

Anxious by nature and managing OCD, she confronted fears that might have otherwise held her back. Mental rehearsal, she discovered, could be as powerful as physical repetition.

By high school, Emma had not only caught up with her peers but had forged a deeper understanding of the mental side of athletic performance. Injuries continued to test her resilience, and by her senior year, the cumulative toll prompted her to make a difficult decision.

REDEFINING COMPETITION AND FINDING BALANCE

Although Emma had toured NCAA Division III programs, she chose to step slightly below that competitive tier by joining University of New England’s Club Gymnastics team. “It was perfect for me,” she says. “Like many club sports on campus, you can choose how competitive you want to be. You keep your skills, compete, or just enjoy the sport.”

At UNE, Emma pursued Environmental Studies with an Art Therapy minor, a choice shaped by her family’s legacy of national park rangers and her interest in counseling and psychology. Though her passion for gymnastics persisted, and her experiences—both the triumphs and the injuries—had planted the seed for a future in mental performance coaching.

After graduation, she continued to combine her love of sports and mental health, attending Springfield College for graduate school, where she studied athletic counseling and clinical mental health.

“I got licensed as a counselor and specialize in working with athletes,” Emma said. “That was my new dream.”

PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Now 25, Emma wears multiple hats. She is the newly appointed Student-Athlete Mental Health Performance Coach at UNE, works as a licensed counselor at Wayfinder Wellness and Psychotherapy Services in Kennebunk, and serves as assistant coach for UNE’s gymnastics team. Her approach emphasizes empathy, self-compassion, and resilience.

“Mental toughness is a very overused word in sports,” she explains. “For a lot of coaches, it means, ‘Suck it up.’ To me, it’s recognizing the emotions you feel, honoring them, then coping and moving forward. You can be competitive while being kind to yourself.”

Emma’s role at UNE is pioneering in its scope. She collaborates with coaches and athletic trainers, offering one-on-one meetings, team workshops, and mental performance strategies to student-athletes.

“I want to give athletes a space to vent without judgment,” she says. “A lot of times, if you talk to parents or friends, they try to fix things. Here we process it, understand it, and then build the tools to move forward.”

IMPACT AND PHILOSOPHY

Emma’s impact is already evident, with student-athletes increasingly seeking her guidance throughout the highs and lows of the season. Her coaching style now balances intensity with understanding, reflecting the lessons she learned as a mental performance coach.

“I was really intense as an athlete,” she says. “Now I try to be more supportive and kind, while still encouraging growth.”

Mallory Nugent, Emma’s co-coach of the Gymnastics team, describes her as “a calm, supportive presence” who balances empathy with high expectations.

“Emma plays an essential role in supporting our athletes both mentally and physically,” she says. “She has a natural ability to connect with them on a personal level, creating an environment where they feel safe, heard, and encouraged.”

Together, the two coaches form a complementary partnership: one structured and big-picture focused, the other grounded in emotional connection.

“We balance each other out really well,” Nugent adds. “The team even started calling me ‘Mom’ and her ‘Auntie.’”

Since joining the team, Emma’s influence has been profound. She’s brought renewed trust, positivity, and unity to the program.

“She consistently goes above and beyond for both the athletes and me,” Nugent says. “Her dedication, compassion, and teamwork make her an absolute joy to work with. She not only lifts up the athletes but everyone around her.”

EMMA'S JOURNEY COMING FULL CIRCLE

As she watches student-athletes step into her office or onto the gym floor, Emma recalls her own journey of catching up to peers, overcoming injury, and learning to navigate anxiety, and channels that experience into every interaction.

In doing so, she ensures that the next generation of athletes not only excels in performance but also understands the value of self-compassion, mental resilience, and the quiet strength that comes from knowing they are not alone.