Mental Health Issues Within the Student-Athlete Community

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**Rationale**

The pressures to perform on the field and in the classroom are things that heavily affect the minds of student-athletes. In the case of many student-athletes, it has become increasingly difficult to differentiate their identity as an athlete from their identity as individuals in society. Having so much weighing on their athletic performance, the mental toll it takes is not always seen by those who watch the games.

**Theoretical Framework**

Mental health has been described as essential but was severely overlooked in years prior when it comes to college sports and protecting collegiate athletes. Many athletes find it difficult to disclose their personal issues, as they may feel an athlete shouldn’t show weakness. This emphasis on “mental toughness” in athletes from young ages has created a “Spiral of Silence” when it comes to discussing mental health issues. As the discussions around mental well-being continue to take place, the focus on positive self-image, athlete-coach relationships, and mental health support in athletics must not be forgotten when seeking to find the more underlying issues that plague this group of talented individuals within today’s society.

**Research Questions**

**R1.How do we break this “Spiral of Silence” within the student-athlete community?**

**R2. What are the biggest issues faced by student-athletes?**

**Literature Review**

In recent years, the importance of mental wellness in college students and athletes has garnered more necessary attention. But it still isn’t where it needs to be in order to foster healthier environments for these populations of athletes. Previous studies show a number of rising issues involving the mental health of athletes following the pandemic. Including performance anxiety, identity crises, and self-harm. Information gathered by the NCAA from student athletes gave a tangible numeric value for many of these issues, but it is still just a start when it comes to breaking the overall stigma behind disclosing mental health issues. An important aspect found in a number of articles is the relationships between athletes and coaches. Fostering healthier relationships between these parties is also something the research showed as essential in improving student-athlete mental health.

**Most Common Issues in Student-Athlete Mental Health**

“The NCAA conducted two student-athlete well-being studies in 2020. Following these studies, the NCAA researchers collaborated with the NCAA Sport Science Institute and the NCAA’s Division I, II, and III Student-Athlete Advisory Committees to design and distribute a similar survey in the fall of 2021. The survey examined the experiences and well-being of 9,808 student-athletes.” (NCAA. 2022)

The pandemic played a key role in some of the increase in mental health issues found in the student-athlete community. Student-athletes over the past few years, and following the pandemic, have reported an increasing number of mental health concerns. One bright spot in the reports found that athletes felt lower levels of hopelessness in the fall of 2021 compared to the beginning of the pandemic. However, increased rates of mental exhaustion, anxiety, and feelings of being depressed have seen little change since 2020.

Mental health issues still remained very high amongst certain demographics within the student-athlete community. These groups that displayed higher rates of mental stress include female athletes, students of color, and those who face economic trouble either personally or within their families. Rates of mental health trouble reported by student-athletes have nearly doubled since the pre-pandemic era. (NCAA 2022)

Athletes responding to the NCAA’s survey were able to highlight a number of specific issues. This most recent survey served to supplement the findings of two previous surveys done which sought to know if the participants felt a number of things, including mental exhaustion, sleep difficulties, overwhelming anxiety, sadness, a sense of loss, or any feelings of hopelessness.

The NCAA constitution calls for each member school to facilitate an environment that supports physical and mental health within athletics by ensuring students have proper access to mental and physical health support. However, less than half of women's sports and men's sports participants said that they would feel comfortable seeking out those services from the provided on-campus resources. Continuing outreach efforts on campuses are necessary to attempt to mend the disconnect between athletes and seeking mental health assistance. (NCAA 2022)

**Self Harm**

Even with the number of studies done by the NCAA, there is still a fairly strong stigma behind athletes' mental health and being open about these issues that they face. A number of tragic events in early 2022 brought many of these issues to light in the public eye. Suicide rates among student-athletes shattered any previous statistics. Within the first four months of the year 2022, the rate had already tripled the yearly average for suicides among female college athletes.

“Three top-performing female student-athletes: James Madison softball star Lauren Bernett (20) Big-10 Wisconsin track athlete Sarah Schulz (21) and Stanford soccer player Katie Meyer (22) all took their own lives in the span of seven weeks. Highlighting the struggle student-athletes have when asking for help, along with keeping up with their overly demanding lives.”(Gazette, S.)

The president of James Madison University described Lauren Bennett as a high-achieving student and served as a great ambassador for the athletics programs at the University. During her time playing for JMU, she was very successful. Her team made the 2021 world series with a 41-4 overall record. As a sophomore catcher, she was third on the team in home runs and second in RBIs, she had an incredibly bright future ahead of her both on and off the field.

Sarah Schulz attended the University of Wisconsin and was a dual athlete on the track and field team as well as the cross country team. Schulz received Big-10 honors for both the 2020 and 2021 seasons in cross country and track. She was an incredibly high-achieving and a decorated athlete who never seemed to show any red flags or give any indication that self-harm would be an issue. In a statement released by her parents, they acknowledged the overwhelming pressure their daughter must’ve felt. “Balancing athletics, academics and the demands of everyday life overwhelmed her in a single, desperate moment,". (Gazette, S 2022)

The tragic loss of Sarah led her family to start the Sarah Schulz Foundation in her honor. This foundation’s goal is to support other student-athletes facing the same struggles Sarah was suffering from at the time including mental health issues and the balance of personal matters while facing the pressures of athletic performance.

Stanford soccer player Katie Meyer, ended her life at 22. Katie had such a large impact on her peers. She was an incredibly intelligent young woman who was majoring in International Relations and minoring in History. Katie was excelling academically and athletically, as a redshirt freshman she led her Stanford Cardinal team to the 2019 NCAA women’s soccer national championship. During an interview with NBC, Katie’s mother explained the perfectionist personality that her daughter held on to throughout her academic and athletic career. “There is [this] anxiety and…stress to be perfect, to be the best, to be number one,” once again placing a spotlight on the expectations held over student-athletes. (Gazette, S 2022)

**Support Systems for Athletes**

Caillin Welles Bracken was another student-athlete struggling to deal with the pressure of balancing sport and academia. Thankfully for Caillin, she had a strong network around her that helped her to step away from sports and focus more on her mental well-being. Unfortunately, not all athletes have this same support network around them when they face a multitude of issues in their athletic and personal lives. Through her experience she now seeks to help advocate for better support for the mental health of all student-athletes across the nation who are in need of the support she received.“I want coaches to look at players as humans, not commodities, I want the administration to recognize the pressure they put on these young adults”. (Gazette, S 2022)

Despite the growing awareness of the discussion around mental illness, the stigma around sports and mental stability remains consistent and lacks the full support necessary to make real change. “USC sports psychology expert [Robin Scholefield](https://studenthealth.usc.edu/directory/robin-m-scholefield/) states that the roots of these issues run much deeper, through college and high school teams and even to youth leagues. Coaches, parents, and athletes themselves increasingly emphasize performance rather than the personal growth and character development that builds a foundation for well-being, fewer mental health challenges, and more consistent success.”(Lindberg, E 2021)

Whether it's academics, athletics, or other areas of performance, the immense pressure to excel in these endeavors can lead to unhealthy amounts of emotional distress. Scholefield’s premise strongly believes athletes of all ages and levels need healthier relationships outside of their sport and to seek a greater purpose beyond winning to sustain motivation and meaning in life.

Athletes need to establish an identity as a person outside of their sport and not rely on good athletic performances to find validation within themselves or others. The persistent issue of scoreboard and performance being the sole determining factor of one’s happiness has been an extreme detriment to the student-athlete mind. Student-athletes do not need to be a slave to the scoreboard because once that buzzer goes off and the game is over what should matter most is the health and well-being of who is underneath that jersey. (Lindberg, E 2021)

While that notion is nice to think about, the constant pressures placed from a young age make it much easier said than done “What is happening inside athletics parallels what’s happening in the larger culture,” she says. “Only it may get a lot messier and more complicated when you’re trying to grow up in the public eye and perform at an elite level all the time.”(Lindberg, E 2021)

This idea of mental toughness is instilled from a young age and collegiate athletes tend to feel a loss of personality once their time on the field comes to an end because they have spent the majority of their lives as athletes (Weigand,2013). Trying to be the best you can possibly be on the field or court a lot of times requires individuals to mask how they feel or the struggles they are going through in order to solely focus on putting out the best performance possible. The task of prioritizing mental health and performance is made even more difficult because a coach’s success is determined solely by the performance of their athletes, regardless of their relationship with the athlete or the athlete’s well-being.

Athletes many times feel they must be successful at the expense of their own well-being, with little risk to the coach because the players are replaceable. “This overemphasis on winning creates tense environments in which athletes typically find themselves longing to escape. They feel as though they must win to be worthy or important (Egan, 2019).”

Coaches and athletic administrators must emphasize a larger investment in the mental health of their athletes just as much as they invest in their physical well-being. Some possible effective strategies for aiding in these efforts include: “prioritizing mental recovery by emphasizing proper sleep and implementing off-days, avoidance of placing unreasonable amounts of pressure on individuals based on performance, and using positive reinforcement rather than negative emotions to motivate players. (Born, J 2017)”

Allowing athletes to voice themselves when they are struggling by establishing a safe environment that is open to these kinds of discussions is vital to breaking the stigma behind mental health in this community. Creating a healthy relationship with players is of utmost importance so that they feel comfortable coming to coaches with these issues when they feel necessary to seek help. There should never be any degradation of athletes for struggling with these issues through name-calling, placing blame, or punishing them.“Inappropriate responses to these concerns due to the imbalance of power between coach and athlete can resemble an abusive relationship (Born, J 2017).”

**Method**

My capstone will focus on The Invisible Opponent, a short-form documentary that I will be filming over the course of this semester. This project aims to focus on mental health issues within the student-athlete community and how we can work together to overcome them. My 8-10 page paper will coincide with this topic and provide a basis for many of the topics I plan to cover in the documentary. In addition to these two deliverables, I will be hosting my own 12-week radio show. This show will be a separate project and follow a different theme but include a segment where I interview student-athletes and discuss different aspects of mental health and what affects them as an athlete. My radio show will be used to showcase my growing skills on-air and to continue improving as a radio personality. All the deliverables that I complete during the course of this capstone will be added to my digital portfolio website as I seek to make myself more presentable to employers. The premiere night for my documentary will be April 6th. I plan on having as many student-athletes attend as possible because I feel that it is a very important piece that could reach a lot of individuals who it may affect positively.

Deliverables

1. An 8-10 page research paper titled “The Mental Health Epidemic Consuming Student-Athletes”. This paper will be the basis for my entire capstone as it outlines the issues I plan to cover in many of my other deliverables relating to the topic.
2. A publicity package consisting of an audio ad, video ad, and print ad for the documentary premiere night as well as a radio show to showcase my ability to create advertising content through different media.
3. A weekly 12-episode radio series will cover music, news, local sports, and campus life. Including guests from Piedmont. This will help me expand the audio portfolio I have been building over the past year and hone my radio broadcast skills.
4. Further, develop my professional website to promote my skills to employers and include my Capstone projects on said site. This site is what I have been using on my resume and with the addition of my capstone deliverables on this site I will hope to make myself more desirable to potential employers.
5. A short-form documentary titled “The Invisible Opponent” directly relates to my research paper, and discusses mental health issues within the student-athlete community and how we work to overcome them. (8-10 minutes)
6. Premiere night for the short-form documentary. Will be working with Caleb Rogers to film each other’s premieres and create a short sizzle reel for each of us to use during our capstone presentations.

**Technologies**

* Sound Forge
* Adobe Audition
* Adobe Premiere Pro
* Adobe Photoshop
* Wix Website Creator

## **Project Management**

**Timeline:**

* Feb 9th- Deliverable One (Research Paper)
* Feb 16th- Deliverable Two (Promotions Package)
* March 2nd- Deliverable Three (Radio Show)
* March 23rd- Deliverable Four (Portfolio Site)
* March 30th - Deliverable Five (Documentary)
* April 6th- Deliverable Six (Premiere Night)

**Challenges**

The biggest challenge I’ve faced is time management between capstone and basketball. Having the schedule for both getting increasingly intense, however, I have been able to find time to work on my deliverables each day to slowly get to where I need to be.

**Successes**

Chipping away at each deliverable day by day has allowed me to be on track for turning everything in on time. I have also done more professional development on my LinkedIn and updated my resume to aid in my job search.

**Conclusion**

There should always be a more significant emphasis placed on the amount of support athletes have rather than making them feel guilty for having these struggles. . ‘As a society, we must make time to develop well-rounded humans, not just athletes. Be able to provide encouragement, support, and suggestions to athletes who are struggling (Purcell et al., 2019). Athletes need to feel that society holds more value for who they are as a person than they are valued as an athlete. Moving into the future, discussions about mental health need to be had at all levels of athletics. Athletes from a young age need to be informed that it is important for them to voice how they feel rather than suppress those feelings. With the improvement in open conversations, ideally, future studies will show a decrease in negative mental health phenomena within the student-athlete community. Through my deliverables, I plan to carry on the conversation around mental health and provide a platform for other athletes to voice their experiences with these issues.

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