

Looking Through the Eyes of Student Athletes

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Introduction

Collegiate athletics play a tremendous role in the average student's life on campus, whether it be attending wild tailgates at homecoming games or playing recreationally with friends. The general community around the university can have differing perceptions of student athletes. Some people support student athletes and love the entertainment aspect of college athletics, and others think that sports in college are a waste of time, since most student athletes don't go professional after college (Tucker 2016). For the elite student athletes themselves, college life becomes different and more intense. Student athletes must balance their academics, athletics, and social lives while trying to take care of themselves as well as dealing with pressures placed on them by coaches, teammates, and the university's community. The participation in college athletics makes for a hectic everyday life and can impact the well-being of student athletes in multiple ways. Some of the student athlete's areas of well-being that are impacted the most are mental health, physical health, and academic performance. These categories are all interconnected within the lives of student athletes. Like all things, there are both positive and negative impacts on well-being prevalent among student athletes.

Mental health, or psychological well-being, is of crucial importance for the student athlete. If a student's mental health is not in a healthy state, it will most likely negatively affect their athletic performance as well as their academic performance. Whitehead and Senecal (2019) studied the balance and mental health of student athletes and identified some negative repercussions. Student athletes may struggle to find a sense of purpose, meaning, and accomplishment within their lives. Likewise, healthy mental states are likely to positively impact athletic and academic performance. Sports are very good at developing mental toughness whether it be through competition or by balancing the hectic demands that student athletes must manage (Micoogullari 2017). These results show that healthy mental states affect not only athletic performance, but overall quality of life and development of important life skills, which in turn is necessary for the physical health and academic performance of student athletes.

Physical fitness is extremely important in the life of a student athlete, and it is entirely connected to college athletics. Injuries can be disastrous, and players will often be removed from competition, practice, and workouts. Injuries directly affect the physical health and emotional health of the player. Not only can physical impairments affect student athletes during their college careers, they can have long-term effects in their future health and negatively impact daily functioning and overall quality of life (Lam 2017). However, physical activity can greatly benefit the physical health of student athletes since the body is usually at its peak condition. Not only can involvement in collegiate athletics maintain great physical physique, but physical activity is positively correlated with the overall well-being of student athletes (Snedden 2019).

Education is the overall main purpose of a student athlete's college experience, so the effect that college athletics have on academic performance is critical. In high revenue-producing sports like football and basketball, athletics can negatively impact the academic performance of

the student athlete (Pascarella 2019). At the same time, athletics can have a positive effect on the academic performance of student athletes. A study conducted by Brecht and Burnett (2019) concluded that academic performance is tied to specific factors such as time management, self-confidence, support systems, commitment, positive self-concept, etc.

In this paper, positive and negative impacts of college athletics on the well-being of student athletes, specifically mental health, physical health, and academic performance, will be discussed and compared. Even with all these potential stressors that go along with the experience of being a student athlete, college athletics can allow a person to grow as an independent individual and competitor as well as establish meaningful relationships with coaches and teammates. Participation in college athletics has an overall positive impact on the well-being of the student athlete.

Psychological Perspective

Student athletes, regardless of sport, are constantly on the move. With full schedules of class, practice, workouts, and other team activities, it can cause pressure and stress for those that have not yet honed their time management skills yet. This stress can build up and cause psychological distress in the form of moodiness, depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues among student athletes (Brown 2014). A study by Matt A. Moore found that “examining psychosocial risks of college athletes correlates athletic participation (both scholarship and non-scholarship) with high levels of depression and suicide attempts, alcohol use, illicit substance use, the development of eating disorders, and lower levels of overall well-being” (Moore 2016). Student athletes are required to deal with a tremendous amount of added pressure that their non-athlete counterparts don’t have to experience. They must undertake the monumental task of obtaining a bachelor’s degree while competing for their school and living up to performance-

based expectations during competition all while maintaining great grades, staying involved in extra-curricular activities, and keeping a decent social life with peers and teammates (Brown 2014). The idea of taking care of oneself gets thrown on the back burner, especially one's mental health. Student athletes will manage to find time to sleep and eat but caring for their mental states just doesn't seem important compared to all the other responsibilities they're expected to undertake. This can lead to serious mental health complications as well as the development of disorders like depression and anxiety, and even more so on the extreme end, eating disorders and suicidal thoughts (Brown 2014).

Some of the more detrimental issues, such as eating disorders, are quite common within specific groups of student athletes. Most eating disorders occur among women, which is not to say that male student athletes don't develop them as well. Some sports are notorious for placing pressure among the athletes to stay a certain weight or to stay thin, such as gymnastics, figure skating, rowing, or wrestling. A study conducted and published within the *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* determined that the female athletes experiencing sport-specific weight pressures were "feeling greater weight pressure from their coaches" (Petrie, Greenleaf, Reel and Carter 2009) compared to athletes in different sports. The research also discovered that "internalization is a distal factor in the etiology of eating disorders...because it has been conceptualized as directly influencing women's body dissatisfaction, a primary risk factor in the development of eating disorders" (Petrie, Greenleaf, Reel and Carter 2009). These student athletes are not only feeling pressure from their coaches and leaders in life, but they don't feel comfortable expressing their feelings to others. This idea of internalization makes the mental health problem even worse; it's detrimental to hold negative thoughts and feelings inside and let them build up (Watson 2019). Internalization is common in athletes and non-athletes. This

doesn't just apply to eating disorders either; it can apply to any other mental health disorder, such as depression, anxiety, emotional instability, suicidal thoughts, etc. The real problem stems from the fact that so many student athletes feel they can't express the thoughts they are having from living this lifestyle because they fear being rejected and ridiculed by their coaches and teammates (Steinfeldt 2009). "Intercollegiate athletes are often perceived by the public to be an exceptionally healthy group of people who are not normally in need of help" (Etzel, Watson, Visek, and Maniar 2006). This statement is far from true. Student athletes are just like everyone else. If anything, they are faced with even more challenges and demands than the average college student, and they're still expected to face everything head on without struggles. It's an immense amount of pressure for someone to deal with, especially a college student during the stage of transition to adulthood, not to mention the added pressure of competition.

Student athletes face pressure from their coaches, teammates, and themselves to perform well. This thought process of performing well all the time can develop in a "playing to win" mindset in which "athletes begin to firmly understand the concept of winning and losing and self-identify with their competitive outcomes" (Naylor 2006). Developing this mindset is a slippery slope because it can translate into the idea that the athlete's self-worth is directly correlated with their successes and failures. If an athlete steps up to the plate with the expectation to execute and win and they don't, they will see themselves as failures. Nobody's perfect, but when the sense of self-worth is based on winning and losing, the mind tricks the athlete into thinking THEY are the failure, even though it's just a game. Viewing their self-worth positively can become impossible. Similarly, when student athletes set their goals extremely high and establish role models at the highest level of achievement, it can also add pressure on themselves. "The role models...are the Olympic champions: The ultimate sense of accomplishment.

However, if these external measures are used for determining self-worth, then the athlete never develops a personal sense of meaning in these processes...” (Whitehead and Senecal 2019). This can occur especially among elite student athletes who have strained relationships with their coaches or teammates, or those who look up to the ultimate athletes, like Olympic athletes, and base their own standards on their role models. It leaves them feeling as though their performance will always determine their sense of accomplishment or disappointment, which isn’t healthy. It is unlikely for student athletes to attain the Olympic level; the amount of college athletes who go professional is very small, fewer than 2% (NCAA 2018). However, basing your own sense of accomplishment on these extremely high expectations is a mindset that is doomed to fail. “Pressures to win are great, yet it is important to remember that the college athlete is an unfinished product with much need of nurturing and opportunity to fulfill athletic potential” (Naylor 2006). Coaches and colleges need to understand that student athletes cannot be expected to attain perfection when it comes to competition and athletic performance as well as remaining successful at all the commitments required of a college student.

Luckily, many schools have mental health awareness programs put into place to support their student athletes’ well-being. “Sports medicine professionals (e.g., team physicians, athletic trainers) are encouraged to cast a broader net of caring to include mental health problems like depression/suicidality, anxiety, substance abuse, grief and loss, and relationship issues” (Etzel, Watson, Visek, and Maniar 2006). Personnel working for the student athletes, including coaches, trainers, etc., are becoming more aware of the mental health issues that dwell among student athletes. They are developing resources for student athletes to utilize during their time on campus. These resources can include mental health counselors or awareness programs. At Sacred Heart University, they have a program called Heart to Heart created by the student athletes

themselves to promote awareness for the mental health issues and encourage student athletes to speak out about their struggles. This program was created by Devan Kane, a goalie on the women's ice hockey team. She said there is an issue with the mental health stigma present on campus, especially among the student athlete population. To her fellow student athletes, Kane says, "You are not alone...there are people who understand. You can be 'not okay.' You don't have to deny it; you can talk about it. And there are lots of resources..." (Swartz 2018). SHU also has a mental health counselor available by appointment for student athletes who feel like they need to talk to someone.

These kinds of resources are available at other universities, not just Sacred Heart. Colleges are becoming more aware the stigmas surrounding athletics, especially when it comes to mental health. Athletes aren't supposed to ask for help or admit they're not okay; it shows signs of weakness. However, there are many student athletes that suffer from mental health issues, whether it be from the everyday stress of college life, adjusting after an injury, or a genetic disorder. A practice that has proven successful in other colleges is a "reliable referral network for student athletes who may be suffering from depression and other mental disorders" and "screening for depression and suicidality" (Etzel, Watson, Visek, and Maniar 2006). These are preventative measures that can be taken to avoid the development of psychological disorders as well as establish structures that can be utilized by student athletes as they are needed. Through utilizing resources available on campus, student athletes can protect their mental health.

College athletics can be very beneficial for the student athlete in terms of developing their psychological well-being. A study of NCAA Division I athletes found that "both coaches and teammates had a positive effect on competence, autonomy, and relatedness... This means that positive peer interactions and relationships outside the athletic environment can nurture

perceptions of competence, autonomy, and relatedness in sport...shown to enhance adjustment and prevent athlete burnout” (Raabe and Zakrajsek 2017). Interactions between coaches and players as well as between players and fellow teammates are of crucial importance in terms of developing essential life skills and qualities, such as competence and autonomy. By being a part of a team, responsibilities are placed on the athlete’s shoulders with the expectation that they fulfill those responsibilities for the team to function effectively (Raabe and Zakrajsek 2017). Players must follow the instruction of their coaches, and teammates must work together to accomplish their goals. Even though this is part of being on a college athletics team, it’s also a huge part of daily life in the real world of adulthood. College is a strange limbo between still feeling like a kid but having to take on adult responsibilities. The responsibilities required by athletes will vary from sport to sport and between coaches, but the effect is still the same. By promoting responsibility and collaboration, student athletes can gain a sense of autonomy in their lives as well as feel competent and confident that they are doing well in their respective environments (Naylor 2006).

By having the support system of teammates and coaches, athletic burnout is often prevented (Raabe and Zakrajsek 2017). The daily life of a student athlete can feel incredibly overwhelming at times, so having that backbone to fall back on when times are tough is very helpful and even encourages better team dynamics. Everyone having each other’s backs will promote a sense of belonging and family-like relationships on the team, which will likely lead to better teamwork and collaboration during competition as well, not just for responsibilities outside athletics. Support from teammates and coaches can also lead athletes to feel more grateful for the opportunities and experiences they have been given. A study on the levels of gratitude and emotional support in athletes showed that “grateful athletes are more satisfied with

their team and overall lives...gratitude can direct one to perceive more support from others, which, in turn, contributes to greater well-being” (Chen 2013). Teammates and coaches supporting each other will create a positive circle of well-being that feeds on itself, like a positive feedback loop. Teammates and coaches support each other in different ways, but the overall result of the positive impact to the psychological well-being of the student athlete is undeniable.

Coaches also can impact athletes’ mental states. Some coaches are infamous for being downright nasty, but for the most part, coaches care about their student athletes and they want them to succeed both in competition and in their lives. “Coaches and the coach-athlete relationship have also been suggested to play a meaningful role in athletes’ sport experience... found that athletes who evaluated their coaches to be autonomy-supportive as opposed to controlling reported higher levels of competence, autonomy, and relatedness” (Raabe and Zakrajsek 2017). The relationship between a coach and an athlete is just as important as the relationships between a player and their teammates in terms of psychological development and well-being.

Sports and coaching can also develop mental toughness among players. “Mental toughness is affiliated with a more effective coping ability and optimistic assessments and high levels of self-esteem” (Micoogullari, Odek and Beyaz 2017). Being able to cope with environmental changes, whether that be academically, socially, competitively, etc. is a skill of utmost importance in life. Staying cool, calm, and collected in times of stress and pressure is a skill that is only developed through experience, and coaches can allow their players to gain these experiences through allotted responsibilities or opportunities to perform and play in competition (Micoogullari, Odek and Beyaz 2017). Student athletes also need to have a sense of self-esteem

to perform any type of task with some semblance of confidence. Good coaches will praise their athletes for their successes and critique their failures in a way that allows them to learn and grow from mistakes instead of tearing them down and destroying any bit of self-esteem they had (Naylor 2006). Self-esteem is important because as a student athlete becomes confident in themselves and holds themselves in a more positive light, it will show in everything they do and accomplish, not just in athletics but in their academics as well.

Physical Perspective

Mental health isn't the only concern of the student athlete when it comes to well-being. Physical health is just as important as mental health in the world of college athletics, especially in terms of injuries. It varies among sports, but overall, student athletes are very prone to injuries during practice and competition. These injuries can be accidental, but they are often a result of overtraining. "The tendency among some coaches today is to gravitate toward the 'more is better' school of thought. Combined with a variety of uncontrollable extraneous life variables, many student athletes tend to become 'overtrained'" (Etzel, Watson, Visek, and Maniar 2006). Overtraining can lead to burnouts, slumps, and added strain on the athlete's life, which makes them more prone to injury. "Injury rates are also thought to be affected by issues such as life stress, daily hassles, and poor coping abilities, which affect the athlete outside of sport...injured athletes often experience not only physical symptoms, but also psychological/emotional and social symptoms" (Etzel, Watson, Visek, and Maniar 2006). Not only can an athlete's physical health, such as being injured, impact their mental health, but athletes can be more prone to injury based on the stressors and pressure of life. Often, student athletes identify themselves with the sport they play. However, injuries can be detrimental and can end up preventing competition for the rest of their lives, let alone college careers. Without that sport in their lives, student athletes

may struggle to find their identity and feel lost in the world. The sport becomes a major part of who they are as individuals, so without that sport, it may feel as though a part of them is missing (Whitehead and Senecal 2019). Physical health is directly tied to mental health as well as things like academics, which is the main purpose of attending college. An athlete needs to stay physically healthy in order to maintain their well-being in every other aspect of their life.

Not only can injuries dock student athletes of their playing time during their college years, but they can have serious long-term effects too. A study on previous collegiate athletes' long-term physical health determined that "collegiate athletes who sustained severe or mild knee injuries reported worse knee-specific function and less ability to complete moderate activities due to physical health...collegiate athletes with a history of a severe knee injury experienced more functional limitations and pain than those with a history of mild or no knee injury" (Lam et al 2017). Injuries sustained while competing in college athletics are presenting negative life-long effects on mobility, functionality, and pain in former student athletes. This can be caused by the severity of the injury as well as not taking the proper time to heal. "Research shows that many athletes are in denial about the severity of their health problems when they are in the training state...some of them have confessed regretting not taking time away from their sport to heal their bodies properly" (Sinden 2013). Some student athletes can feel the pressure of competition and instead of taking their physical health into account, they will continue to compete despite minor injuries, thus making the injury more severe. It's mindboggling to think that the pressure being placed on student athletes to perform is so strong that it would drive the athletes to compete regardless of pain and injuries.

Despite the potential consequences that injuries can play on the physical health of student athletes, for the most part, the athletes are in peak physical condition in terms of the strength,

conditioning, and exercising they must undergo to compete. There are multiple studies that show that physical activity improves both mental health and well-being (Tanir and Ozmaden 2018). As well as the studies previously mentioned, another study on undergraduate Division I athletes stated that “Physical activity has been shown to have many benefits, including improved mental health and well-being. Vigorous physical activity and poor self-reported mental health share an inverse relationship among college students” (Snedden et al 2019). This statement is particularly interesting because it supports the idea that injuries can affect mental health. If physical activity decreases due to injuries, mental states will suffer, but as physical activity increases due to normal competition, mental health will increase as well. As shown in previous studies, good states of physical and mental health also tie into the rest of the student athlete’s responsibilities, such as academics and extracurriculars.

There are some aspects of college athletics that contribute negatively to the psychological well-being of student athletes. However, the overall physical activity of being an athlete alleviates those negative impacts. “In addition to its physical and physiological benefits, exercise is known to reduce stress, to provide psychological wellbeing, to increase life satisfaction, and to be among the treatment methods of psychiatric rehabilitation programs” (Tanir and Ozmaden 2018). Even though college athletics places many stressors on the student athlete that can lead to harmful disorders such as mood disorders, depression, anxiety, confidence issues, etc., simply playing the sport will encourage the elimination of the negative symptoms of mental illness. It’s even been proven that physical activity can be used in psychiatric rehab programs as a treatment for mental illness, so competing in a sport in college has benefits for one’s mental health and psychological well-being simply through the exercise alone (Etzel 2006). Through physical activity, mental health support programs and counseling, there are so many resources available to

the unfortunate student athletes suffering from mental illness that it's almost impossible for them not to receive the help they need.

Academic Perspective

With all the added responsibilities in the lives of student athletes, it's astounding they have time to complete their academic work. Some people would argue that because of the huge commitment of athletics that academic performance would suffer. One study that supports this standpoint found that "student-athletes are more likely to identify as athletes than as students. Hence, these students may default to spending more time focusing on their athletic performance than on their academic success" (Brecht and Burnett 2019). This can be proven true among specific student athletes who lack the time management skills for scheduling as well as those who have the mindset of "failure avoider and failure acceptor motivation" (Bailey 2017). These students don't chase success in their actions; they are just trying to avoid failure, which ends up setting them up for failure in their academic performance. It's also prominent that in higher revenue-producing sports, academic performance is impinged (Pascarella 1999). These sports, including basketball and football, demand more from the student athletes in terms of time commitment, dedication to the team and the game, and extensive traveling. It becomes difficult to keep up with academics with an even heavier load on the schedule, not to mention playing a dangerous contact sport that can lead to frequent head injuries (Pascarella 1999).

Despite some circumstances, most student athletes are quite successful in terms of their academics. A study on collegiate athletes "found a positive relationship between playing ability... the drive to win and the will to become better in their sport could spill over to their academics" (Bailey 2017). In order to become better competitors in their respective sports, student athletes must practice and develop skills. However, it is the drive and motivation to

become better that correlates with success in the sport. It is the same case for academics. To do well in various courses, students must study and apply themselves to understand and apply the knowledge they are learning to obtain better grades. Since most athletes possess a natural drive to become better at their sports, it is likely that this same natural skill will help them perform academically as well, despite a hectic schedule and unique stressors (Corack 2014). Another study “found that academic performance was most strongly related to an academic mindset followed by the will to persevere (grit)” (Brecht and Burnett 2019). Grit allows students to grind and keep going even when things are tough, and the struggles are getting worse. It’s a unique trait that not everyone has, but those do have been proven to be more successful in their endeavors.

Luckily, for those athletes that do struggle with their academics, there are academic support programs integrated within athletic departments in colleges everywhere. “Considerable evidence suggests that student athletes who participate in academic support programs benefit academically” (Brecht and Burnett 2019). These academic programs are often strictly for athletes; non-athletes can’t access them. Sacred Heart University’s athletic department, for example, has academic tutors specifically for athletes, as well as directors who assist student athletes with scheduling, study hall, arranging tutors, time management, etc. It’s very difficult to struggle academically when there are so many available resources to utilize. Struggling to manage time effectively can certainly have a negative outcome on academic performance, but overall, Brecht and Burnett found that when student athletes are able to combine these factors in a positive way, it leads to success in terms of academic performance. These factors are skills or characteristics that can be developed through college athletics, exhibiting the connection between academic performance and physical/mental health of student athletes.

Conclusion

Not only does good academic performance have a positive impact on the overall well-being of the student athlete, but it also affects mental health. With good academic standings, students feel more confident in themselves and their abilities as students and managing their responsibilities. This plays directly into their mental health and states of autonomy, competence, and self-esteem. By improving mental health, student athletes are likely to perform better athletically because the added stress of mental illness as well as poor academic standing is not present. They can focus and dedicate themselves more to their sport during competition with a hopefully better outcome in terms of performance. Mental health, physical health, and academic performance are all interconnected, and together they compose the overall well-being of the student athlete.

Since mental health, physical health, and academic performance are all directly tied together in the life of a student athlete, it is possible that if one aspect is negatively impacted, it can cause a downward spiral involving the other two aspects. However, the overall atmosphere of college athletics includes so many resources such as mental health programs, academic support programs, teammates, and coaches that student athletes need only ask if they require assistance in any of these areas. For these reasons, I argue that college athletics positively impacts the overall well-being of student athletes because of the unique atmosphere that promotes personal growth, the development of essential life skills, and academic achievement for future endeavors.

Looking towards the future, college athletic programs should continue to promote awareness of the potential obstacles that student athletes encounter during their experiences. These programs should be implemented in all athletic departments and promote a safe space for

struggling athletes to be able to communicate what's going on and feel understood. However, even with these programs in place, it's impossible to force people to utilize them. Often, the athletes who are struggling the most don't want to reach out for help. Everyone needs a little help, especially student athletes. Increased education and communication between university officials and student athletes about available resources on campus will hopefully give athletes that push to seek out assistance. Coaches and team members should also communicate and develop a system that works for their team by maximizing success in competition, student health, and academic performance.

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