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Research Project

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Research Question: How does college athletics affect an athlete's mental health?

Abstract

College student-athletes must balance practices, games, travel, classes, homework, and sometimes jobs or leadership roles, which requires strong organization and discipline. This study explores how student-athletes plan and use their time, the academic challenges they face, such as missed classes, fatigue, stress, and difficulty keeping up with assignments, and the strategies they use to stay successful in school. It examines how participation in college sports can both help and hurt academic performance, looking at things like motivation, focus, time-management skills, and grades. The study also considers how support systems, such as academic advisors, coaches, tutors, and professors, influence student-athletes' ability to manage these demands. By highlighting both the struggles and the benefits of being a college athlete, this research provides a clearer picture of how athletics shape the overall learning experience. The findings are intended to help coaches, teachers, and academic advisors better understand student-athletes' needs and create more effective support, policies, and resources to help them succeed both in their sport and in the classroom.

Literature Review

The mental health of college athletes is an increasing concern in higher education, sports medicine, and psychology. Although participating in sports can encourage physical fitness, self-discipline, and social connection, the demands of college athletics also put athletes under

significant psychological stress. Balancing schoolwork, competition, and social expectations can lead to high levels of stress, anxiety, and even depression. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA 2023) reports that more than one-third of college athletes feel mentally exhausted during their athletic season, and around 30% show symptoms of anxiety or depression. These statistics challenge the idea that athletes are more resilient than other students. As academic and competitive pressures rise, it becomes crucial to understand how these factors affect athletes' well-being.

Research in this area highlights both the importance of mental health struggles among college athletes and the specific stressors, social dynamics, and academic challenges they encounter. The existing research forms a base for understanding the risk and protective factors linked to athletic participation. This review discusses current studies that explore the psychological effects of college athletics, the factors causing mental distress, and the gaps that need to be addressed. Ultimately, this research aims to uncover how involvement in sports impacts mental health and how universities can better support their athletes' mental health needs.

First, mental health issues are quite common among college athletes, often at rates similar to or even higher than those of non-athlete students. In a study by Edwards and Froehle (2023), both athletes and non-athletes reported comparable rates of diagnosed mental health conditions. However, athletes are less likely to report or seek help for these issues. The belief that participating in sports protects against stress or anxiety has largely been shown to be false. In reality, the physical and emotional demands of college sports can make athletes more vulnerable to burnout, fatigue, and depression. Brian Edwards notes that national data indicates that between 17% and 21% of college athletes experience depression (Edwards & Froehle, 2023).

The NCAA (2023) found that over 40% of student-athletes feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities, while 35% struggle to keep a healthy work-life balance during their athletic season. Researchers have noted a rise in mental exhaustion among college athletes over the past decade, likely due to increased competition and academic pressures. These findings suggest that the overlap between athletic and academic identities may lead to greater emotional strain, highlighting the need for proactive support from colleges.

Unlike their non-athlete peers, college athletes face distinct psychological stress that comes from juggling their roles as students and competitors. Harris and Maher (2023) found that the time commitment for college athletics often exceeds 40 hours a week, allowing little room for recovery or social activities. This heavy schedule can cause sleep deprivation, anxiety, and feelings of isolation. Additionally, the pressure to excel both academically and athletically can lead to ongoing stress and emotional exhaustion.

Kegelaers, De Brandt, and Wylleman (2024) identified “athletic identity” as a crucial psychological factor affecting athletes’ well-being. When athletes tie their self-worth solely to their performance, injuries or poor results can seriously hurt their self-esteem and identity. Injured athletes, in particular, have an increased risk of depression and withdrawal since they lose not just their physical abilities but also their main source of validation. The ongoing pressure to perform at a high level and meet the demands of coaches, teammates, and fans can lead to long-term mental fatigue and burnout. Furthermore, athletes often associate their self-worth with their sport identity, known as “athletic identity,” which can make them more vulnerable to mental health issues when performance declines or an injury occurs (Edwards & Froehle, 2023).

Even with growing awareness of mental health challenges, many student-athletes hesitate to seek help. Moreland, Coxe, and Yang (2017) found that athletes are significantly less likely to use mental health services than non-athletes, even when they recognize their own symptoms of anxiety or depression. The most common reasons for this hesitation include stigma, fear of being seen as weak, and a lack of access to confidential, specialized care.

Harris and Maher (2023) point out that athletic culture often promotes the idea of “mental toughness,” which discourages athletes from admitting they need help. Many athletes fear that acknowledging mental health issues might impact their playing time, scholarship status, or relationships with coaches. Furthermore, time pressures and demanding schedules limit their chances to seek counseling. While the NCAA and individual schools have launched initiatives like the “Sport Science Institute Mental Health Best Practices” framework, implementation is often inconsistent, and stigma continues in many athletic programs.

Social support is vital for shaping athletes’ mental health outcomes. Cohen-Young, Waller, and O’Rourke (2024) found that strong team cohesion and open communication can significantly lower anxiety and depression levels among college athletes. When athletes feel their teammates and coaches are supportive, they are more likely to seek help and maintain a positive self-image. Conversely, a negative team environment, marked by excessive competition, criticism, or emotional neglect, can lead to stress and emotional drain.

Coaches and athletic staff have a unique opportunity to influence athletes’ mental health by building trust and encouraging open discussions about well-being. However, not all coaching settings promote this openness. Kegelaers (2024) states that a lack of emotional safety within

teams can prevent athletes from expressing their distress, leading to emotional isolation.

Programs that include peer mentoring, mental health education, and regular check-ins have shown promise in addressing these challenges. Creating a supportive and understanding culture can empower athletes to balance their competitive goals with their emotional health.

Despite the increasing focus on athlete mental health, there are still significant gaps in research and practice. Much of the existing research relies on self-reported data, which may not accurately capture the full extent of distress among athletes. There is also a shortage of research on how mental health changes throughout an athlete's college experience or after graduation. Additionally, few studies examine differences based on divisions, gender identities, or racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Moreover, there's a need for more intervention studies to assess the effectiveness of mental health programs in athletic departments. Without this evidence, universities may continue to use general or inconsistent approaches that do not meet the unique needs of athletes. Expanding research beyond typical survey methods can help create more effective support systems tailored to the realities of college athletics.

In conclusion, current research clearly shows that being a college athlete can greatly impact mental health. While participating in sports offers benefits like discipline, camaraderie, and resilience, these advantages often come with considerable emotional strain. Common problems include anxiety, depression, and burnout, driven by academic pressure, injury, identity conflict, and stigma surrounding help-seeking. Despite institutional efforts to enhance mental health support, many athletes still suffer silently due to cultural and structural barriers. This study

will add to the existing research by investigating how specific factors, including athletic identity, perceived social support, and access to mental health resources, interact to affect the well-being of college athletes.

Hypotheses:

- College athletes experience higher stress and anxiety levels than non-athlete students due to the combined demands of school and sports.
- Athletes who feel they have more social support will report better mental health outcomes.
- Perceived stigma around mental health significantly lowers the likelihood of athletes seeking help.

Proposed Methods:

This study will use a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. Surveys will evaluate factors like stress, anxiety, stigma, and social support using validated mental health scales. Communicating with college athletes will provide deeper insights into athletes' experiences and coping strategies. The data will be analyzed to find patterns linking mental health outcomes to social factors. The main goal is to inform universities and athletic programs about specific interventions and policies that can best support athlete well-being.

By integrating both data and personal stories, this research aims to bridge the gap between awareness and action. Understanding the unique pressures faced by college athletes will

help colleges create environments where success and mental health can coexist, allowing athletes to thrive both in competition and in life.

Research Methods

This study used a mixed-methods survey design to explore how collegiate student-athletes experience mental health challenges while balancing academic and athletic responsibilities. The goal was to gather both measurable data (percentages and trends) and descriptive insight (open-ended explanations) to better understand how student-athletes perceive stress, support systems, and institutional resources. This survey method was chosen because it allowed participants to respond anonymously and honestly about sensitive topics related to mental health.

A total of 40 collegiate student-athletes participated in the study. The sample included athletes from different grade levels, representing both men's and women's cross country teams. Participation was voluntary, and no identifying information was collected. This helped ensure confidentiality and increased the likelihood of authentic responses. Because student-athletes often hesitate to discuss mental health publicly, the anonymous aspect was essential for gathering valid data.

The survey contained five open-ended questions focusing on major areas connected to student-athlete mental health:

1. The overall impact of collegiate athletics on their mental health.

2. The biggest sources of stress or pressure they face.
3. How supported they feel by coaches, teammates, and athletic staff.
4. What strategies or resources they personally use to cope.
5. Whether they believe colleges and athletic programs are doing enough to support student-athlete mental health.

These questions were intentionally broad to allow respondents to describe their experiences without being limited by predetermined answer choices. The survey also collected quantitative counts for each theme that emerged (number of athletes who felt supported, number who listed time management as a stressor).

The survey was distributed electronically through Google Forms. Participants were given several days to complete the survey in a private setting to avoid peer influence. Once the survey closed, the responses were recorded for analysis. Open-ended answers were reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy when identifying common themes. Responses were grouped by similarity. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods allowed for a more complete understanding of the student-athlete experience.

Results and Discussion

Survey results showed that 32 out of 40 athletes (80%) described the impact of being a collegiate athlete on their mental health as “both positive and negative.” Responses often

referenced the joy, friendships, and structure that sports provide, while also acknowledging the stress, pressure, and exhaustion that come with competing at a high level.

The remaining athletes were split between mostly negative effects (due to burnout or pressure) and mostly positive effects (due to confidence, motivation, and team culture). Overall, most athletes recognized that their mental health is influenced by both the rewards and demands of college athletics.

The most commonly reported source of stress was balancing academics and athletics, with 28 out of 40 athletes (70%) identifying this as their biggest challenge. Student-athletes described feeling overwhelmed by tight schedules, missed classes due to travel, and the constant need to meet both academic and athletic expectations.

Other stressors included:

- Fear of poor performance or letting the team down
- Pressure from coaches
- Fatigue from long practices and early mornings
- Social pressure or team drama

Although these appeared frequently in responses, academic-athletic balance was the dominant theme.

Only 24 out of 40 athletes (60%) said they felt “somewhat supported” by coaches, teammates, or staff when it comes to mental health. Many explained that support often depends on the coach or sport, some felt their coaches cared deeply, while others felt mental health was

treated as an afterthought. A smaller portion of athletes described feeling unsupported, explaining that mental health was rarely acknowledged unless it affected performance.

Student-athletes reported using a mix of personal and institutional strategies to manage mental health:

- Talking with teammates or friends
- Exercise outside of practice (lifting, walking, yoga)
- Journaling or self-reflection
- Meeting with counselors or athletic trainers
- Prioritizing sleep
- Setting boundaries or limiting social distractions

While many athletes found ways to cope on their own, few mentioned using formal mental health services consistently, suggesting a gap in awareness or accessibility.

A strong majority, 30 out of 40 athletes (75%), believed that colleges and athletic departments are not doing enough to support student-athlete mental health. Athletes often said their school offered resources, but they were not promoted well, or they felt too overwhelmed to access them. Others noted that coaches often emphasized toughness or discipline, making it uncomfortable to talk openly about mental health concerns.

The results of this study show that mental health among student-athletes is shaped by a complex mix of positive and negative factors. Most athletes reported that collegiate athletics benefit their mental health in certain ways, such as providing structure, motivation, and community, yet simultaneously create stress, pressure, and emotional fatigue.

The dominant stressor, balancing academics and athletics, aligns strongly with previous research showing that time demands are one of the biggest contributors to student-athlete stress. The fact that nearly three-fourths of athletes identified this as their biggest challenge suggests that universities may need to adjust academic accommodations or scheduling flexibility for teams with intense travel or practice loads.

Another major finding is the inconsistency of mental health support. Even though 60% of athletes felt “somewhat supported,” this phrasing indicates partial satisfaction. Athletes’ responses suggest that support varies by coach, sport, or individual relationships rather than being built into the structure of the athletic department. This inconsistency can make it difficult for athletes to seek help when they need it.

The result that 75% of athletes believe colleges are not doing enough highlights a major gap between the resources institutions think they offer and the resources athletes actually feel comfortable using. This aligns with national conversations about student-athlete mental health, emphasizing the need for more proactive programming, clearer communication, and better integration of mental health training for coaching staff.

Coping strategies identified in the survey show that most athletes rely on informal support systems rather than formal counseling or mental performance services. This suggests that access, stigma, or scheduling issues may be preventing athletes from using the professional help available.

Overall, the findings show that improving student-athlete mental health requires institutional-level changes, including better communication about resources, mental health

education for coaches, academic flexibility, and consistent department-wide expectations for supporting athletes.

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