



Facing the COVID-19 Opponent: Checking in with Former Collegiate Athlete Women at Halftime

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A group of women who have been left out of the conversation during the COVID-19 pandemic is middle-aged women (30-60 years old) who were formerly collegiate athletes. This population may be in a unique position to reflect on if and how their participation in college athletics has informed their response to COVID-19. Therefore, this study is one of the first to utilize halftime (i.e., middle age and mid-pandemic) to ask former women collegiate athletes to reflect on their college athletic experience and its relevance to the present day as society is facing a global crisis. Results from this exploratory study suggest that collegiate sport experiences serve to promote positive coping responses beyond college years and during difficult times for this group.

Keywords: women, former athletes, middle age, college athletes, COVID-19, coping development

The behavioral health of women has become a significant concern during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Adisa et al., 2021; Gao & Sai, 2020; Kantamneni, 2020; Venta et al., 2021). Multiple studies have reported on the disproportionate burdens women faced in their roles as workers and mothers during the pandemic. For example, women faced additional caregiving responsibilities in the home, and pregnant women faced pandemic-related worries about pre- and post-natal wellbeing and healthcare (Gur et al., 2020; Power, 2020). Furthermore, being female was associated with greater psychological distress, depression, and anxiety (Almeida et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Additional research has also identified various mental health consequences during the pandemic for women that include isolation, depression, anxiety,

and other forms of psychological distress (Thibaut & van Wijngaarden-Cremers, 2020; Ueda et al., 2022; Walton et al., 2021; Yarrington et al., 2021).

However, there is also a growing interest in factors that may contribute to resilience or coping strategies among women (Cloonan et al., 2021; Killgore et al., 2020; Kövesdi et al., 2020; Persich et al., 2021). Thus, Ravera and others (2016) argue that a shift is required; from the “tendency to frame the discussion on women being especially vulnerable to broader environmental and structural forces” (p. S238) to a “focus on women and other marginalized groups being active agents for transforming and adapting to change, collectively and from the margins” (p. S238). Studying adaptations of women during unprecedented events, such as natural disasters or COVID-19, is needed.

Studies on natural disasters have shown that age plays a crucial role in predicting coping barriers. In particular, Cong and colleagues (2021) found that younger and middle-aged adults experience more difficulties in coping during disaster preparation compared to older individuals. A group of women understudied during the COVID-19 pandemic is middle-aged women (30-60 years old) who were former college athletes. Former female collegiate athletes may be in a unique position to reflect upon how their participation in organized sports during college years informed their response to this global crisis since being an athlete is commonly associated with higher appraisals of psychological traits like resiliency (Caldarella et al., 2019). Furthermore, women athletes are uniquely positioned within the context of sport and society since consistent exposure to sex-based disparities in both settings may increase adaptability and resiliency in responding to adversity. Therefore, this study sought to learn if the lessons learned, and the traits developed during college athletics informed their coping response during a global crisis. This study is novel as it is one of the first, if not only, study to examine the reflections of former women collegiate athletes, who are now in middle age and in mid-pandemic (i.e., halftime), on the experiences of being a collegiate athlete, and if and how this experience influenced their coping during COVID-19 restrictions.

Positionality

This research is informed by the anecdotal experiences of the principal investigator. As a former Division I collegiate athlete woman now in middle age and living through the COVID-19 pandemic, the principal investigator was motivated to study the lived experiences of similar women. This motivation came when she noticed that, like her, women who were former college athletes had a unique coping experience during such a difficult societal period. She acknowledged that former college athletes in her social circles were facing similar stressors to everyone else in society, yet they were notably more adaptive—they were finding ways to thrive amidst the chaos. Thus, she wanted to learn more about this observation directly from the voices, memories, and perspectives of such women, especially those outside her immediate social circle. As an insider to this niche population, the principal investigator brings in a strength-based lens as well as her own knowledge of how she has been able to leverage her own college athletic experience to serve her during times of change and transition. This may have also aided in the rapport-building and meaning-making process (Dodgson, 2019; Hunter Revell, 2013) as the principal investigator disclosed her position as a former collegiate athlete while conducting each interview with the women in this study.

Literature Review

To explore the current experiences of middle-aged women who were collegiate athletes, it is necessary to understand key factors that played a role in their ability to participate in college sports. This includes the impact that participation in sports has on the psychosocial development of girls and young women. Thus, the following review of the literature offers an overview of policy and legislation pertinent to women's sports, key ideas in sport for development, and an exploration of COVID-19's impact on women's roles in society.

Title IX and Women's Sports

Women's participation in collegiate athletics received an important endorsement with the passage of Title IX in the Education Amendments of 1972. This historic legislation promoted equality among the sexes and banned discriminatory practices in educational settings that received federal funding.

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation, or be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance. (Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 C.F.R. [1972])

Title IX marked the rise of the elite female athlete as competitive sport participation opened the opportunity for women and girls to participate in sports within schools, universities, and other sports leagues (Allen & Frisby, 2017; Elmenshawy et al., 2015; Messner, 1988). With this decision, female high school athletes and women in college gained opportunities for college scholarships in areas of their sport, improved training facilities specifically for women's sports, and additional funding for sports activities (Simon & Uddin, 2018).

According to Tanaka and colleagues (2021), the percentage of high school females participating in all types of high school sports after the passage of Title IX increased substantially compared to those of high school males. Specifically, from 1973 to 2018, there was a 261.7% increase in females' sport participation versus only an 11.4% increase in males (Tanaka et al., 2021, p. 3). However, these numbers may not actually reflect the total rise in high school-aged females' sports participation as many females in this age group may engage in sports activities outside of their school environment (Simon & Uddin, 2018). This is good news as research consistently suggests that participation in sports activities for females in this age group has significant physical health benefits as well as decreased rates of risky behaviors such as smoking, engagement in sexual activities, and suicidality, and a positive relationship with improved self-esteem (Simon & Uddin, 2018). However, it is also well known that young females face many internal and societal barriers to engaging in sports or any physical activity (McManama O'Brien et al., 2021).

Psycho-Social Development of Girls and Women Through Sports

As young girls and female adolescents began to engage in more organized sports in schools, researchers began to explore the impact of sports engagement on females; often

comparing young girls to boys who are playing sports (Kiliç & İnce, 2021; Nicholls et al., 2009; Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997). There is an abundance of research that indicates youth sport participation is beneficial in multiple ways to young athletes, regardless of gender (Easterlin et al., 2019; Newman, 2020; Pierce et al., 2022; Zuckerman et al., 2021). Specifically, there is a positive correlation between sport participation and youth developmental factors such as mental health, social skills, wellbeing, and increased physical activities levels (Easterlin et al., 2019; Liddle et al., 2017; Malm et al., 2019; Newman, 2020; Newman et al., 2018)

Girls

In a systematic review of 24 qualitative studies that met the inclusion criteria for exploring opinions and insights of girls 12-18 regarding physical activities and sports, girls perceived societal pressures to represent themselves in a way that reinforces traditional girl roles and appearance which inhibits their participation in physical activities and sports (Corr et al., 2019). For instance, girls shared that “it is not possible to ‘look good’ (Loman, 2008) and be active at the same time as: ‘what stops a lot of girls from doing sports is that they’re worried about how they look, their make-up and everything’ (Dwyer et al., 2006)” (Corr et al., 2019, p. 813). In addition, this systematic review noted the influence of the girls’ self-perceived level of competence and skill at a physical activity increased their participation in a sport. However, girls who did not engage in physical activities cited their lack of “perceived skill, a dislike of team sports, and negative feedback from peers and teachers” (Corr et al., 2019, p. 813). This has internal and external consequences as inactive girls also report being humiliated in peer situations due to their lack of competence in this area, damaging their sense of self. (Corr et al., 2019). The conclusions of the systematic review by Corr and colleagues (2019) highlight that conversations about sports for young girls are bifurcated into male or female roles and stereotypes which tends to pull girls away from engaging in physical activities during the crucial adolescent years. This lack of participation can have lasting physical and mental health impacts as it limits opportunities to develop beneficial life skills (Newman, 2020; Pate et al., 2000). Furthermore, this sex-based “stereotyped” approach to physical activities for young girls does not encourage advancement in the multifaceted areas of youth development nor does it lead toward girl empowerment (Heinecken, 2021).

Women

Young girl athletes that go on to become college women athletes face similar issues that influence their psychosocial development as young women. Early on during the integration of women into college sports, particular attention had been given to understanding the physical development of women athletes. For instance, Huston and Wojtys (1996) found differences in neuromuscular performance between men and women, and Vescovi and colleagues (2008) studied the effectiveness of plyometric programs for jumping skills among college women. However, as opportunities for females to participate in collegiate sports teams grew, research continued to explore how being a young adult female athlete impacts psychological, social, and emotional development (Carter-Francique, 2014; Harrison et al., 2009; Mosewich et al., 2014; Otis et al., 1997; Voelker et al., 2019). An area of growing research focuses on the complexities of competing identities for female athletes. One such example of this type of research is the vast

body of literature that explores how being a female athlete challenges the socially constructed norms of what it means to be masculine or feminine (Bell & Coche, 2018; Musto & McGann, 2016; Steinfeldt, Carter, et al., 2011; Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek, et al., 2011). For example, Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek, and colleagues (2011) found differences between women college athletes and non-athletes in conforming to sex-based norms. More specifically, they found that student-athlete women conform to similar feminine norms as non-athletes but that they also conformed to masculine norms that are common in sports (Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek, et al., 2011).

A primary example of the intersection between identifying as an athlete and as a woman comes from my own experience. I, the lead author, was a former collegiate and professional athlete. When I got “too physical” in a women’s basketball game or when I was just as vocal as a male counterpart, I was told to “stay in my role” and to “tone it down” by coaches, officials, and other authority figures. In their study, de Haan and Sotiriadouon (2019) explain that male coaches often let their own beliefs and philosophies about the sexes underestimate characteristics of female athletes such as their mental toughness as well as their commitment to sport because of assumptions that women will become mothers, caretakers and/or wives. Moreover, there is pressure to be strong, but “‘acceptably’ feminine” (Kotzé et al., 2020, p. 1). Thus, the messages sent from the male-dominated sports arena and messages from the empower-women-through-sport movement seem to contradict one another. These opposing views contribute to the inequities still seen today between male and female sports, nearly 51 years after the passage of Title IX (Bowes et al., 2021; Voepel, 2021).

Women, Roles, and COVID-19

Like in the sports realm, the COVID-19 pandemic also saw its fair share of sex-based inequities. For example, women were burdened much more by domestic workloads than men (Adisa et al., 2021). Even though the COVID-19 pandemic’s end is now in sight, the experiences of women during COVID-19 have been examined and lend context to the current study. In order to learn from former college athlete women what skills or coping mechanisms they employed to get through this global crisis, an exploration of women’s adaptation, in general, is needed.

While some research has stated that more men have died from COVID-19 than women, it has also been noted that the financial and emotional impact on individuals who identify as women have been devastating (Adisa et al., 2021; Danielsen et al., 2022). Nearly 1 in 10 (8%) women report quitting their job for reasons related to COVID-19, the majority of which were young women ages 18-35 (Ranji et al., 2021). Women have always been, and continue to be, the primary caregivers for children and also perform more household tasks than men, even if they also work outside of the home (Hess, 2020).

Women’s lives are further complicated by their ascribed and implicit role positions in families as extended sisters, wives, mothers, or family caregivers, with additional cultural expectations to preserve formal and informal traditions, and often must occupy reduced employment options based on sex-based expectations (Almeida et al., 2020; Power, 2020; Zanin et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, women who may already be vulnerable to mental health issues due to socioeconomic status and other stressors took on even more burden which exacerbated these concerns and highlighted gender role disparities (Lindau et al., 2021). When the world was grappling with death, loss, isolation, and uncertainty, women were disproportionately coping with a more significant burden. Although the representation of women

in the workplace, sports, and professional schools has increased significantly in the past 30 years, men still retain a higher status than women in Western society (Haines et al., 2016). Thus, the increase in gender role delineation and responsibilities brought on by the pandemic placed a greater demand on women and has exacerbated mental health disparities already present for women across the globe.

Purpose of Study

Research on sports activities during COVID-19 focused largely on the current youth, collegiate, and professional athletes' responses to the pandemic as these groups faced lost opportunities to function at peak performance times, build additional competitive skill competencies that may have enhanced their careers (Graupensperger et al., 2020; Şenışık et al., 2021; Szczypińska et al., 2021), and various non-athletic skills (i.e., life skills) including confidence, leadership, and teamwork (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021). However, there is no information examining if these skills gained through prior athletic participation assisted with coping during the pandemic.

This study examines how middle-aged women coped during COVID-19. More specifically, this study seeks to know if former collegiate athlete women were utilizing skills that they learned from their college athletic experience to inform their coping with the life stressors of COVID-19. Reflection on this critical developmental time; college years and experience of collegiate sports participation, may offer insight into how to use prior experiences to assist middle-aged women to cope with stressful and uncharted crises.

Methods

This study was approved by the [Blinded] University Institutional Review Board. In-depth interviews were used to investigate if and how prior collegiate sports experiences influenced coping or other behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic of middle-aged women who were former collegiate athletes. Participants were asked to recall their college athletic experience that according to Jin and colleagues (2021), provides the advantage of allowing investigators to capitalize on existing research by facilitating meaning-making between the prior experiences of participants and the current body of knowledge. The researchers utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012) thematic analysis process.

Recruitment

Inclusion criteria for participants were the following: 1) participants for the study had to be between the ages of 30-60 years of age, 2) had previous college athletic experience at any division level, 3) identify as female during the college athletic career, and 4) and live in the United States for at least six months during the COVID-19 pandemic. The timing of this study was during the COVID-19 pandemic: April through July of 2021.

Participants were recruited via purposive and exponential discriminative snowball sampling through listservs and social media advertisements. A web link attached to recruitment a recruitment letter or flyer connected participants to an online questionnaire and scheduling platform (Calendly©). The initial questions confirmed participants meet the inclusion criteria of

the study. When confirmed, participants were directed to an automated calendar that allowed them to choose the date and time of their interview. Interviews were conducted via Zoom©. No incentives were offered for participation in this study.

Interview Protocol

Virtual individual interviews were conducted with consented participants using a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix) that explored the participant's experience with college athletics, social and life skill development in college, as well as their current experience and response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first series of questions asked the respondents to reflect on their athletic careers. The purpose of these questions was to build rapport and gain an understanding of the participant's collegiate athletic involvement, and their sense of self at that time. The next series of questions probed into their adaptations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The final set of questions asked for their reflections on how their athletic experiences may have impacted their life experiences during the pandemic. Although we revised and piloted the interview guide several times, in hindsight, questions 9-14 offered the most robust responses to answer our research questions. However, questions 5-8 provided the context from which the themes were derived.

With the verbal consent of participants before beginning the interviews, all interviews were audio/video recorded and transcribed. The principal investigator conducted all the interviews of the study for consistency purposes and to reduce potential conflicts of interest. The research team elected two software tools to aid in the process. Zoom video conferencing was used to record and transcribe recorded interviews. The researchers independently coded the transcripts that were stored in Dedoose software.

Data Analysis

The data coding and analysis of this study were informed by the process recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012). Briefly, we proceeded in the following way. Three authors comprised the research analytical team. Each member independently read through the transcripts to become familiar with the data. After reading through the transcripts, members of the analytical team independently identified meaningful statements provided by the respondents and generated initial codes to reflect the content of the statement. Then, the team came together to discuss these codes. As discussions continued, each code had to be unanimously agreed about, supported by identified statements, and then categorized. Discussions continued and the categories of codes were further classified into themes that reflect meaning relevant to the research question (Guest et al., 2012). To summarize, we used an iterative team process to ensure that we represented the lived experiences of the participants accurately.

Trustworthiness

Processes related to trustworthiness in the data analysis in qualitative research are important to consider. Four aspects of trustworthiness were addressed for this study: confirmability, dependability, credibility, and transferability (Guba, 1981). Given that the interviewer was a former collegiate athlete, attention to processes to support the confirmability of the findings was paramount. Recognizing that researchers are part of the research instrument in

qualitative interviews (Hunter Revell, 2013), the primary investigator's proximity to the experiences of the study sample was addressed by way of reflective note-taking and other strategies. The interviewer recorded observational, theoretical, and methodological notes (Hunter Revell, 2013) during the interview process for self-reflection and to discuss with the other authors. Observational notes served as documentation of things that stood out during the interview process or that the interviewer wanted to refer back to later. Theoretical notes were the interviewer's attempts at making meaning out of the interview itself or out of the observational notes. The methodological notes aided in reflexivity and self-critique of the interviewer to improve the methodological flow in the interviews that followed. The co-authors met with the lead researcher (i.e., the interviewer) to provide peer debriefing. During the data interpretation process, an iterative process of independent coding, debriefing, and collaboration among the research team also ensured implicit bias was minimized. This process also helped to support the dependability of the findings. To improve rigor and trustworthiness, researchers aimed to reduce the interference of technological transcription errors by reviewing original interview recordings for the accuracy of statements (Hunter Revell, 2013).

In addition, the primary investigator piloted questions for the interview guide with other individuals familiar with collegiate female sports, other researchers, and a few individuals who represented the target population. This method of constructing the interview guide resulted in an iterative process of revising and piloting questions until the entire research team reached a consensus that these questions aided in supporting the replication of the study by others.

This study stopped recruitment when participant stories reached saturation—meaning that respondents were describing similar responses to the questions. While the respondents were all former collegiate athletes, this represented different sports teams with the potential for different experiences. Given the similarity of the responses, no matter what type of sport the respondent played in college, this adds to the credibility and transferability of the findings.

Strategies to obtain a representative sample and increase diversity in the sample were implemented through the recruitment procedure which sought participants via various avenues (listservs, email, social media, etc.). As another way to engage diverse respondents and remove barriers to volunteering for this study, participants were provided a variety of time options to schedule interviews at their convenience.

Findings

This study asked middle-aged women about their response to the pandemic and about their use of college athletic skills as they engaged in retrospection about their college athletic career. The data analysis resulted in four final categories of codes: identity, pivot, grit, and empathy. These categories of codes were collapsed and resulted in the generation of two final themes: Pivot (with a subtheme of grit) and “Sticky People.”

Sample

The final sample consisted of 19 women. These women had a mean age of 42 years old, most women played soccer (n=7), and most of the sample identified as White (n=16). (See Table 1). For anonymity purposes, all names associated with quotes are aliases.

Table 1.
Sample Characteristics (N = 19)

| Age | |
|------------------------|----|
| Mean | 42 |
| Min | 31 |
| Max | 58 |
| Race/Ethnicity | |
| White | 15 |
| Black/African American | 4 |
| Sport | |
| Soccer | 7 |
| Softball | 2 |
| Swimming | 1 |
| Field hockey | 1 |
| Volleyball | 3 |
| Basketball | 2 |
| Track and field | 2 |
| Lacrosse | 1 |

Defining the Context of this Study: “The Dual Pandemic”

Before discussing the findings of this study as they pertain to the main research question (i.e., *how* participants were coping), additional contextual details and findings that aid in understanding *what* the study sample was experiencing are offered. As noted earlier, this study took place during the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, when public health guidance strongly suggested that individuals stay home, refrain from social activities with others outside of their immediate family and avoid enclosed public spaces with large groups of people. Also, our data collection period occurred a year after the tragic murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. This event marked the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. BLM sought to confront the blatant acts of racism, systematic injustices, police brutality, and other acts of violence faced by Black communities. Despite government recommendations to isolate, political, racial, and social unrest occurred worldwide. Thus, as COVID-19 progressed, it became known as the “double or dual pandemic” because of the link to these social justice activities.

Many of the women interviewed for this study were experiencing the pandemic while caring for children and families of their own, as well as their parents. When asked about current experiences that stood out about the pandemic, two perspectives arose. First, these women shared

about the political and racial unrest related to BLM. Second, many of them shared examples that spoke to the intersection of the diverse roles (mother, daughter, employee, etc.) they hold as women in society. More specifically, they spoke of having to juggle the responsibilities of these roles during COVID-19. First, let us present their words regarding the dual pandemic.

I think the first things that come into mind are like, fear, isolation. And not just for me personally, but, just like the community aspect of it... I feel like the protest and then the subsequent riots in some areas and different places like wearing [on me]. (Karla)

It would just be so heavy to see Black people continuously murdered and no consequences or we have a really close family friend who was very much a part of the protests... it was serious stuff to watch someone you actually know be fearful for their life, day in and day out, that was emotionally taxing. (Jess)

So much fear, with the sickness and the politics, and then you're isolated... I think mentally as well, so yeah, I think fear. (Betsy)

A year into the pandemic when these interviews were held, the respondents blended the political and social unrest in the environment with their intrapersonal experience of the pandemic. This revealed heightened levels of fear, isolation, and anxiety from both forces. The world was summarized by Betsy when she shared that “*we are in a collective trauma environment... it definitely does take a toll.*”

Linda speaks to the uncertainty that these women shared when she recalled that, *One of the main things or main themes that comes up is tolerating uncertainty... And so, it was this like this feeling inside, of like, is my job secure?... Definitely anxiety. Definitely fear, and trying to work through that experience. I think, tolerating uncertainty was a huge one, and then it was like well I ever make friends somewhere? Will I find a partner?* (Linda)

Other women shared that isolation continued to be the hardest part of the pandemic:

Isolation was the hardest part; it continues to be. I still haven't been home. I'm planning to go home...for my nephew's second birthday because I missed the first one. (Jess)

The first word [that comes to mind] is isolation. I think that is one that jumps out of me as what the pandemic has really done and a lot of ways, on multiple levels. (Betsy)

Their responses communicated that the political and social unrest, concern with physical wellness, and the impact COVID-19 had on their mental health were further complicated by social isolation. These contextual findings help us understand *what* environment, *what* feelings, and *what* experiences these women were coping with during the study. Therefore, we could answer the main research question of how middle-aged former college athlete women were using skills from college athletic experience to inform their coping during COVID-19 pandemic.

Themes: Pivot and “Sticky People”

Pivot

During the interviews, participants were asked to describe profound memories for them during COVID-19. Conceptually, these middle-aged women associated the pandemic with shifting and having to quickly adapt or redirect during the many demands placed on them by the pandemic. In basketball terminology, a pivot is a movement in which a player holding the ball may move in any direction with one foot, while the other foot (the pivot foot) stays grounded on the floor (World Association of Basketball Coaches, n.d.). These women were describing how being an athlete helped to guide the pivots they made while staying grounded in their lives during the pandemic.

The unpredictability of sports... And really that just equates to life. Because you really never know what's going to happen in life, and I think as an athlete, the ability to develop mental toughness. And I'm not saying every athlete has mental toughness but the athletes that can develop mental toughness I think it gives them the ability to do that pivot, to reframe. And to hold on to that hope. When life doesn't go the way you want it to go and you're not always going to win the game and how do you handle not winning the game. (Laura)

I would say as an athlete as a college athlete sometimes we don't have a lot of control over the decisions that are happening for us, or we have a goal and sometimes we have to sacrifice. You know and make those things happen, but in this area you realize that you do have the control, you can be intentional, have a plan, get connect with folks that have walked the walk so they can support you and I think that's the biggest thing is being prepared to pivot, be flexible. (Jess)

So, it was never a matter of can I do this,... it's more a matter of how do you do what you always did in this new way and I think that comes from being an athlete. you know when you're down in softball when it's the sixth inning and you're down by five runs it's not a matter of oh we're just going to lose, it's a matter of how do we win this game, what do we need to do, what do we need to change. (Eva)

Grit. The Pivot theme encompasses the subtheme of grit. Grit is a concept first identified by Duckworth and colleagues (2007) to represent personal qualities that keep individuals pursuing a goal, more specifically; a long-term goal, even under difficult circumstances. We determined that you needed “grit” in order to “pivot” to achieve a long-term goal—stay healthy—during the pandemic. It was evident throughout the interviews that women had a distinct awareness that participating in college athletics prepared them for tough times, and even COVID-19.

Being an athlete is like requires a big-time commitment, it requires self-motivation. Required requires a commitment to, you know, your sport and training and the time and

being efficient with your time. So, I would say, definitely I use a lot of those same skills during the past year of COVID-19 had, like just being self-motivated, getting myself up. (Sabrina)

I don't [want to] say "regular people", but like non-athletes... I don't know if there's anything that is as comparable to like the physical demand and the mental demand of being an athlete. I've always found that there's an incredible value in that....So, I would say grit and resiliency and accountability are probably those you know all kind of tying together but definitely, each with their own significance. To be able to like get through life successfully. (Tina)

I think, being a college athlete builds a certain level of resilience and that you draw on. So, it was never a matter of can I do this, can I meet my student's needs, can I teach online, can I live isolated alone in [STATE], it was never a matter of can I, it was more matter of how. (Eva)

Just the sense of inner resilience the sense of inner strength that you can continue to apply. ... just get more confidence that we can do that next hard thing, and so I think what I would want for college students to take away is you're doing hard things, and this is going to teach you can still you can do even harder things anything you can. (Linda)

Overall, participants indicated the ability to pivot was a reoccurring theme which they drew on from their athletic experience. Many of them indicated that skills and traits like, “flexibility,” “creativity,” the “ability to adapt,” and “toughness” were significantly engrained in them during college athletics, and these helped them successfully navigate the pandemic. In their descriptions of these skills, they also indicated a level of “grit”. This trait keeps them focused on the long-term goal and adapting to achieve it. They shared that this is also something that current college athletes should appreciate as they are building this skill and that they can utilize it during the pandemic, and later in life. As Dianne said,

The same thing that allowed you to face a tough opponent, you have those qualities that will help you face this crisis we're facing. That same quality, that grit, that determination, that willingness to work hard that, willingness to be a part of a team. And I think knowing how to be part of a team will help you navigate the landscape of facing a pandemic. (Dianne)

“Sticky People”

The former athlete women in this study repeatedly mentioned the relationships, bonds, and comradery of their college athletic experience as something influential in their current lives and during the pandemic. They further attributed their college athletic experience to learning about building a sense of community. For example, as Dianne, a former volleyball player, reminisced on her most profound memories of the COVID-19 pandemic, she shared “*I think the biggest thing [that comes to mind] is my responsibility to my community.*” Similarly, Karla, a former softball player, shared that the “*first things that come to mind are like fear... isolation,*

and not just for me personally, but, just like the community aspect.” She continued by stating that:

You need to connect like family, you know and have that same type of support, so I feel like that has carried me through and even with COVID knowing that I need to be connected with other people. And I think there's always that component to that it doesn't mean you're going to always think the same way you do and feel the same way you do and. That that that to me, though, I feel like I learned that as a team, though it doesn't matter you still need to work together as a team, so I think I've kind of carried that piece. (Karla)

This same sentiment was shared by Katie, an educator who expressed that she has maintained this value of building strong relationships in her career and even during the pandemic:

One of the biggest things that I've taken in the last year was doing a check-in for all of my classes for all of my people from the beginning, how are you doing today, what are you coming in with? how are you feeling? It has made my teaching so much stronger because again my teaching philosophy is relationships is community. (Katie)

Linda shared how social relationships and bonding with others were directly connected to her college experience and that it has helped her get through depressive times during the pandemic:

Honestly, I felt a little bit of depression may not have been that clinical level, but... I looked for ways to have small group physical activity interactions because you could be outside, although you had to you know, obviously still social distance and mask and so. I the few friends, I had, I would go mountain biking with I would you know do hikes where it wasn't a huge group, it was one on one... we're outdoors and so that really helped and I think it stemmed from you know part of it was that collegiate experience (Linda)

Tina realized, as did the other women, that she needed to prioritize social connection during the pandemic:

Feeling like you were missing life events. You know, people had kids that I wasn't able to kind of be out there for... Big events that I normally otherwise would have been at. I think that social circle... it was challenged in a way that was like, okay. Are you going to keep in touch with these people if you don't get to go see them all the time? Like you need to make this a priority. (Tina)

We call this awareness of making efforts to remain connected to individuals, family members, or those in the community the theme of “sticky people”. We use this term as a metaphor for making or maintaining social connections during COVID-19 because in sports, a “zone defense” is a key strategy in which team members move together—relying on the connectedness of the group—to defend against a specific offensive threat on the opposing team, and in this case, it was COVID-19.

In summary, participants recalled how important it was to be a member of a team as well as the importance of a team (i.e., a community) as well. They “stuck” to people during this

pandemic in new ways, using the available time to help others or reconnect with people through the use of technology. During COVID, quite a few of these women mentioned reconnecting with former teammates to check on their status during the pandemic and continuing this renewed relationship.

Identity: A Consideration for Interpreting Findings

While we identified “pivot” and “sticky people” as themes that answered our research question, we also heard respondents speak of the importance of the athletic experience to their adult identity.

Karla shared that,

I just feel like it's been like foundational and like I almost feel like as I continue to get older it kind of builds on that you know, like you, I found different ways to be able to be lead or be a leader and still be part of a team, and so, whatever that looks like.” (Karla)

Francis echoed this idea as she indicated that:

Having that experience of identity as an athlete... I do think back a lot on the control we have on how we identify and that our identities are always growing. I do think about that as a parent of a growing kid. I think about that as a wife, I don't think I realized that at the time, but like always identifying as an athlete and then having to shift that gave me some skills to call back on when I encountered other transitions in life... So, I do think that has roots in like my initial transition from like realizing I'm more than athlete, as the saying goes, to then realizing now like okay, this is my identity now, and these are what's important to me and like how am I nurturing each of those pieces. (Francis)

In the same way, Kathy shared the importance of maintaining athletic identity, especially in middle-age:

We spend longer in our middle age and outside of sport than we spend in sport right, so I mean, most of us, especially women who just don't have a lot of like pro-opportunities really. So, I think you know, anything we can do, I have just had an interest in middle-aged population like what, how do we keep. Women maintain some of that athlete identity or maintain some form of involvement in the in the community, you know with sport. Aside from you know what just becoming you know not just becoming but you know being parents and mothers and all of that, like, how do we, how do we keep the women active and let them still thrive in their sport to even if we can't play pro. (Kathy)

While our research question focused on understanding the coping response of middle-aged women who were former collegiate athletes during the pandemic, we had to notice in their words—their stories—that this college sport experience left a lasting identity that influenced how they managed and what skills they implemented during COVID-19. This was exemplified in Betsy’s account of her experience with identity and how it relates to COVID-19.

there's a lot wrapped into the sport itself it's not just oh I'm done with college and it's over I'm done... like that concept of, to me, identity as your sport, as your identity and your role in that like is so large that it's hard to, you know, learning how to adapt to after that you know and how do you keep that?... knowing how to you know that's still going to be a part of you, but what you know how do you know how or if you don't get a job you want, or you don't, you know, there is a depression or recession or you know how to navigate it based on what you've learned. (Betsy)

Discussion

During a worldwide pandemic, this study sought to explore if former collegiate athlete women who were now in middle age were using skills from their college athletic experience to inform their coping response to the pandemic. Through qualitative inquiry, we found that the women who participated in this study were indeed pulling on traits and lessons that they mastered during college athletics and these abilities could be summarized by way of two themes: 1) The ability to pivot which was characterized by their “gritty” athletic nature and 2) being “sticky people” helped them continue or build social connections within their family, friends, or in their community. These findings highlight the potential that continuous involvement and identification with being an elite-level athlete during emerging adulthood (i.e., college) (Arnett, 2000) can have on life skill application in later adulthood developmental periods. Further considerations and implications are discussed below.

Confronting Covid-19

Many women in this study talked about the pivots they made during COVID-19 while balancing work and family life. For example, Adisa et al. (2021) indicate that achieving the elusive work-family balance was much harder for women during the pandemic due to the conflict between their roles as employees, mothers, and caregivers. This role conflict was especially stressful when lockdowns and quarantine restrictions limited social support from friends, coworkers, family, etc. Thus, women were at greater risk for isolation, anxiety, and stress (Venta et al., 2021). In contrast, the current study showed that the former collegiate athlete women that were interviewed were able to cope and respond quite well to the demands of the pandemic.

The women in this study talked about coping with the strain placed on their roles and responsibilities during the pandemic with optimism and hope. Their accounts of challenges brought on by the pandemic were almost always immediately followed by an explanation of how they countered the challenge (a pivot), a commitment to overcome the struggles of the pandemic (grit), or the importance of community and social connection (“sticky people”). Whether the participants’ college athletic experiences were considered positive or less favorable, these women emerged from college with transferrable life skills (i.e., life skill transfer). They also shared similar sentiments that these skills and traits were more enduring due to their involvement in college athletics.

Participants in this study were adamant that participation in college sports, compared to high school or youth sports, uniquely prepared them with skills that others are not as privy to. Prior research supports their sentiments as it is well documented that being an athlete is associated with greater levels of grit and resilience and that playing at higher levels of competition is positively associated with harnessing these traits (Cormier et al., 2021; From et al., 2020; Kitano et al., 2018). However, a scoping review conducted by Cormier et al. (2021) indicated some contradiction about male and female differences. For example, some studies found that male and female athletes do not differ in levels of grit, while other studies noticed that female athletes demonstrated higher levels of grit and resilience compared to their male counterparts. Other research has suggested that female athletes may face a greater number of challenges by being a marginalized group in sports (Cain et al., 2016; Cormier et al., 2021) and as such, institutions and sports programs that have more gender-based inequities may generate more challenges for female athletes. This may account for higher levels of grit among female athletes compared to males. Further study is needed in this area. Future research should also look at the preference given to male sports in terms of resources and status as compared to women's sports activities.

Former Collegiate Athletes as Middle Age Women

Identity refers to a “sense of self” or the self-determined qualities, beliefs, traits, values, and other factors that help to describe a person or group (Erikson, 1956). The concept of “identity” is central to an athlete. Although both college athletes and non-athletes may face similar developmental challenges during college, the development of athletes may include further complexities due to their involvement with the added social context of college athletics as it is documented that sport can influence life span developmental stages (Kratz & Rosado, 2022; Moore, 2016). For female collegiate athletes, their development may be further complicated by their role as women engaging in non-traditional college career paths in sports, which is also typically characterized as a male-dominated industry (Gearity & Metzger, 2017; Steinfeldt, Carter, et al., 2011; Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek, et al., 2011). Thus, the college developmental period of women athletes may be starkly unique, and the identity experiences of both current and former women athletes need further attention.

Previous studies on athletic identity have suggested that there is a loss of athletic identity once athletes stop playing sports, especially for those who have played at elite levels like college (Lavalley et al., 1997; Martin et al., 2014; Menke & Germany, 2018). This idea is apparent even in our everyday language about athletes who previously played at elite levels as they are often referred to as *former* athletes, as we have done throughout this manuscript. However, the women in this current study demonstrate that those characteristics and qualities of their athletic identity are still very much present and functioning effectively in their various roles. Their continued identification, whether intentional or not, suggests that athletic identity may not be lost, and it points to a need for more strength-based language that does not strip away athletic identity. For example, *athletic identity transfer* (instead of *athletic identity loss*).

When athletes finish their playing careers, many of the characteristics associated with an athletic identity remain intact. Former athletes in this study were all able to identify a clear endpoint to their athletic identity. These women recalled a time close to the end of their college athletic career, or shortly after, in which they came to terms with not being a college athlete

anymore (i.e., transferring their athletic identity), but then also they recalled how important it was for them to revisit that identity and its importance in remaining intact throughout later adulthood.

Considerations, Limitations, and Strengths

Important considerations of this work should be acknowledged. The results from this study should be considered exploratory and may not be transferable, as is often the situation with qualitative studies investigating new topics with specific populations. In addition, it is important to recognize that the questions were focused on retrospective memories of participants' time in college and that this sample of former college athlete women had an age range that spanned from 31 to 58 years old. This means that they were referencing memories of starkly different societal periods for women's college sports.

The lack of diversity in the sample is a limitation that future research should address since minoritized racial and ethnic women were not well represented in our sample. Black female college athletes, in particular, face unique challenges in the systematically predominantly White space of higher education and this experience are many times further complicated by their intersecting identities as a minoritized group of women in the sports industry (Carter-Francique, 2014; Carter-Francique et al., 2017; Crenshaw, 1989; Simien et al., 2019). The strength of this research is its contribution to the scant literature on this population and this topic specifically in the context of a pandemic: middle-aged women who were college athletes and college athletic skill transfer.

Implications for Sport Social Work

Throughout their lifespan, women and girls are at increased risk for depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and other psychosocial issues compared to their male counterparts (Campbell et al., 2021; Freeman & Freeman, 2013; Lesesne & Kennedy, 2005). Additionally, research on disaster and crises responses has established that for women, socially constructed gender role definitions and expectations are connected to increased risk factors for the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) during a disaster (Almeida et al., 2020; Street & Dardis, 2018). Thus, as we consider the continued impact COVID-19 is still having on society, sport social workers are essential for assisting athletes in navigating and preventing psychosocial concerns.

In addition, understanding how female high school athletes negotiate entrance into college sports systems needs additional study. Student-athletes may have additional psychological pressures due to their involvement with college-level sports teams (Author & Author, XXXX). For female collegiate athletes, their development may be further complicated by pursuing a non-traditional college career path—sports, which is typically promoted as a male-dominated industry (Clasen, 2001; Gearity & Metzger, 2017; Messner, 1988). “Mental toughness”, a code word for the rigorous physical and psychological preparation that is needed for consistent performance at a top competitive level, is often portrayed as the ability to receive and not react to stressful and demanding critique no matter how abusive coaching strategies may be, and stereotypically, is more commonly recognized as a “male” response. Yet, female collegiate athletes experience similar “character” building coaching approaches, as do male athletes. Hence, the subspecialty of sport social work is in a unique position to lead the scientific

study of life skill transfer of women collegiate athletes and steer efforts to inform how best to nurture their strengths once women transition into other adult roles.

Conclusion

The participants in this study shed light on the unique experiences of college athletics for women and how these experiences can lead to positive trait development and life skill transfer. These character traits, lessons, and skills had staying power as all the women in the study were in middle age and they found themselves using these positive developmental outcomes even as they faced a worldwide crisis. Overall, there is a continued need to examine women athletes' psychological and developmental experiences during college that may mediate later life transitional periods.

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