

A Different Kind of Walk-On: Sport Social Work Themes and Concepts in the Television Show Chad Powers

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Chad Powers is a new television show that gives a comedic and insightful commentary on sport culture, identity, and access within competitive athletics. What started out as a sketch for Eli Manning's College Football show Eli's Places has transformed into a full-fledged comedic series with actor Glen Powell playing the title character. Manning dressed with hair and makeup to go undercover as an older walk-on quarterback during Penn State's walk-on tryout day. Manning and others developed the concept to become a tv series with back story and depth. The show engages with several concepts in sport social work, including athletic identity, power dynamics in sport systems, mental health, team cohesion, and role transition after sport. This paper applies a sport social work lens to examine how Chad Powers reflects and critiques the social, psychological, and systemic dimensions of contemporary athletic environments.

Keywords: sport social work, collegiate athletics, mental health, identity, power dynamics

Introduction

The integration of social work principles into sport contexts has grown in recent years. There has been an emphasis on athlete well-being, equity, and holistic development (Newman et al., 2024). Sport social work explores how sport systems can influence human behavior and how practitioners/clinicians can promote social justice, inclusion, and psychosocial support in athletic settings (Glickman & Huffman, 2022). Aspects of popular media often reflect these sport social work concepts, providing opportunities to analyze sport culture through narrative storytelling. Chad Powers, a television series created and developed by Eli Manning, extends such an opportunity. The original concept followed Manning, a retired NFL quarterback, as he disguised himself to go undercover during Penn State's walk-on tryout day. Manning took the concept and transformed it into a six-episode series starring movie star Glen Powell. While comedic in tone, Chad Powers captures several sport social work concepts relevant to identity, access, mental health, and transition from sport.

Athletic Identity and Authenticity

Athletic Identity refers to the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role (Brewer et al., 1993). Extreme investment in athletic identity can lead to challenges in one's concept of self and post-athletic career adjustment. Glen Powell plays Russ Holliday, a former Division 1 College Football player who lost the National Championship game for Oregon against Georgia and is disgraced. Years after the tumultuous event that left Russ a pariah to the sports world, he learns about a walk-on quarterback tryout at South Georgia University. Russ's father, a film makeup artist, has tasked Russ with delivering some prosthetics to the movie studio. Russ, with the prosthetics in the back, decides to make the trip from Los Angeles to South Georgia University for his second chance. Russ becomes the character of Chad Powers, and from the beginning, there is a dual portrayal. The dual portrayal of Russ and Chad symbolized the internal conflict many athletes experience between authentic self-expression and the performative duties of sport. From a social work perspective, the duality reflects the pressure athletes face to maintain an assured, high-performing persona while masking vulnerability (Glickman & Huffman, 2022). The show's humor stresses how identity concealment, even in disguise, can become a coping mechanism within competitive high-stress environments.

Equity, Access, and Power Dynamics

Sport social work also promotes issues of social justice and equitable access to sport participation (Newman et al., 2024). Chad Powers subtly analyzes systemic barriers in collegiate athletics, especially how appearance, reputation, and institutional association influence opportunity. The "walk-on" cliché highlights how athletes from disadvantaged, marginalized, or unconventional backgrounds must overcome gatekeeping practices to gain acknowledgement. A walk-on is an athlete who wants to try out for their college team without holding a scholarship (Haney, 2021). The athlete who is attempting to walk on to the team might be coming from a small school where they didn't have college scouts at every game, able to see their talent and just want an opportunity to showcase their skills. Some of the disadvantages to being a walk-on are that there are limited spots on rosters already and priority goes to the players recruited by the coaches, the ability to pay for college might come with having to gain outside employment to

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pay for school, and having to earn the respect of both your teammates and coaches (Haney, 2021; Blake, 2025). The same could be said for women coaches in male-dominated sports. With the establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, there has been a rise in female employment over many different fields (Hensley et al., 2019). In sports, with the passage of Title IX, female participation increased, but there has been a lack of growth when it comes to more female coaches in the ranks of elite male sports (Flanagan, 2017; Hensley, 2019; Stark, 2017). This trend could be attributed to the perception that female coaches need to act more like their male counterparts, embracing their more “masculine” traits like aggression and discipline (Hensley et al., 2019). The study completed by Hensley and Chen found that it really came down to female coaches not being respected by male athletes being the biggest issue for the low number of female coaches in elite male sports (Hensley et al., 2019). There is a belief and hope that with more time and mentorship from strong male coaches who want to see more female coaches take on head coaching in elite male sports, there can be a breaking of the proverbial glass ceiling (Hensley et al., 2019). Social workers in the arena of sport advocate for dismantling these inequalities by addressing structural bias and fostering inclusive avenues for athlete development. Chad Powers, as a series, uses satire to reveal the embedded hierarchies and patriarchies, illustrating how “who gets seen” often predominates “who has potential.”

Mental Health and Performance Pressure

Athletes face unique mental health stressors like performance pressure, identity and self-worth tied to their sport, injury and physical risks, financial and career uncertainty, and media/social media pressures (Newman et al., 2016). Though comedic in tone, Chad Powers depicts anxiety and self-doubt—Russ/Chad’s fear of exposure parallels athletes’ fears of failure and inadequacy. The same can be said for the Head Coach’s daughter, Assistant Coach Ricky Hudson, who is a former D1 athlete herself. Ricky faces a similar struggle with identity, both as a coach trying to make a name for herself in a male dominated sport and transitioning from athlete to a career. Both Coach Ricky and Russ/Chad could benefit for having a Sport Social Worker that is dedicated to breaking down the barriers that surround the help-seeking stigma and sport culture (Newman et al., 2024). Sport social work highlights early mental health intervention, normalization of vulnerability, and systemic approaches to athlete well-being. If we invest in sport social work programs, there can be a transition where elite athletes see their mental and physical health impacted for the better because social workers know and are trained to break down the barriers holding back holistic care (Newman et al., 2024).

Team Culture and Social Relationships

Team cohesion, trust, and social support are central to an athlete’s well-being. Sport social workers often address team dynamics, conflict resolution, and group inclusion (Glickman & Huffman, 2022). As Chad Powers progresses through episodes, reactions by teammates and coaches to this puzzling newcomer expose the social hierarchies and unstated codes governing sport culture. Chad Powers shows how an athletic team functions as a microcosm of broader social systems—where belonging, hierarchy, and inclusion influence mental health and performance. Looking through a sport social work lens helps unpack how these social relationships are either reinforced or challenged as a supportive team climate.

Transition and Role Exit

Finally, Chad Powers operates as a metaphor for the post-sport transition process. Russ Holliday, a retired and disgraced athlete, reenters the athletic space in disguise and undercover. This process highlights the tension athletes face between past identity and new purpose. Research has shown that athletes often struggle to redefine themselves after they retire due to the loss of structure, community around them, and the concept of self (Park et al., 2013). Social workers play a crucial role in facilitating athlete transition through identity reconstruction, career planning, and psychosocial support (Kimber, 2023). Chad Powers provides a lively narrative—“starting over” as a walk-on— becomes an illustration of rediscovery and rebirth beyond the athlete role.

Conclusion

Chad Powers, even though being a fictional and comedic portrayal of college football, the themes align with key principles of sport social work. Through its exploration of identity, access, mental health, and transition, the show provides a cultural medium through which practitioners/clinicians and scholars can contemplate the systemic, psychological, and social realities of sport. Through the integration of sport social work frameworks into media analysis, it not only enhances academic understanding but also amplifies the profession’s relevance and need in addressing athlete well-being and equity at all levels of sport participation.

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