

Weight of Water:

Navigating Pressure and Identity as a Collegiate Swimmer

Erin Barry

Rutgers University School of Social Work

Abstract

This narrative article recounts my experience as a student-athlete. It focuses on the end of my collegiate career when I navigated pressure, disappointment, and identity challenges as I transitioned out of sport. Drawing from my experiences as a collegiate swimmer, I offer recommendations for sport professionals to address the gaps I observed in mental wellness and performance resources for student-athletes. These recommendations include adopting a holistic approach to support student-athletes. This holistic approach should address not only physical training but also mental, emotional, and personal development to better support student-athletes beyond their participation in sports.

Keywords: collegiate athlete, student-athlete, swimmer, athletic identity, pressure, transition out of sport, mental well-being, mental performance, student-athlete support

The Weight of Water:

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College is a time of transition and exploration of identity. Entering college as an athlete, you enter the “unknown” and an unfamiliar environment as part of a group: a team. This fosters a sense of belonging when college students may have feelings of being lost and lack self-confidence. When I started college, I experienced homesickness and worried about how I was going to navigate life away from my support system. The one thing that remained constant was swimming. With all the change that starting college brought, I still had swimming. Being a swimmer was part of who I was for as long as I could remember. A pool is a pool regardless of where you are; there is water, chlorine, lane lines, and starting blocks. To me, there is something comforting about the smell of chlorine.

Entering college as a student-athlete, I entered with a “pre-established” identity. I was a student-athlete and a swimmer. I found it challenging to explore who I was beyond swimming and being a student. However, I did not feel the need to find myself outside of being a student-athlete because swimming was so intertwined with who I was. I experienced difficulty transitioning after sport, which was complicated by a disappointing senior season. My collegiate swimming and diving program had a history of success and winning conference championships. Prior to my senior year, my program had won the last seven conference championships. As a team, we entered the season with the goal of continuing this success. My coach never wanted winning championships to feel like an expectation. He encouraged us as a team to decide what we wanted to accomplish by the end of the season, including smaller goals that would help us reach our larger one. Despite of my coach’s attempts to alleviate

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the pressure of winning by shifting the focus to other important goals (e.g., academic success), there was still the pressure to uphold the team's legacy and reputation for winning.

During my senior year, the conference championships came down to the last day and the last few events. One of the last events included my best event, which I had won the previous year. In order for us to have a chance to win the championships, I needed to win my event. Before the race, I felt that if I lost, I was letting down my team. In my mind, I wondered what would happen if I lost; would my team still accept me? Additionally, I wanted to repeat as champion, as this was what I had trained for all season. I warmed up as long as possible before the race to keep myself loose, in an attempt to minimize my racing thoughts. I was shaking and had a pit in my stomach before I got on the starting blocks. Once I dove in, muscle memory must have taken over, as I do not recall the race at all. When I finished and saw the number one next to my name, all I felt was a sense of relief. I was glad the race was over. Although defending my title was one of my goals, I also hoped to achieve a personal best, which I ultimately fell short of.

When the final points were tallied, we finished second as a team. There was a somber tone. It felt as though the meet had left us with a sense of disappointment and failure. Some teammates seemed to be searching for answers, and perhaps someone to "blame" for why we lost. Accountability was lacking, despite everyone having contributed to the result in some way. These conversations and rumblings only validated my prerace thoughts. Although we were a team, the feeling of "we are in this together" seemed to fade.

This disappointing ending coincided with the end of my swimming career. I had one final meet; however, it was not with the entire team. After my final race, it did not immediately hit me that I was truly finished with swimming. I was frustrated with how my career came to an end. I felt that there was still more I wanted to accomplish in the sport. However, time had run out. I struggled to figure out what I was without swimming. I felt lost. The one constant in my life was suddenly gone. While swimming had definitely caused stress, it had also been an outlet and a coping mechanism. I recall that during my final weeks of college, I was extremely stressed as I did not have my post-college job lined up. I texted my coach to ask if I could attend practice, as I just needed to train again and experience that feeling of achievement. He was open to me attending, and I practiced just like I had always done. However, I also knew that I needed to "let go."

As my career came to an end, I no longer attended off-season practices. I was no longer sure where I fit within the team. My locker was cleared out, and my nameplate was removed. My schedule no longer had the structure that I thrived on. I did not know what to do with all my extra time. Furthermore, I felt unsure of my place among my teammates, including some of my closest friends, because we no longer shared the one thing that had connected us. I felt like I did not fit in or have a place on campus. I needed help exploring my identity outside of swimming. I needed help understanding how my athletic identity intersected with my other identities. However, those identities were difficult to uncover when my athletic identity had always been the driving force.

Recommendations to Sport Professionals

Throughout my experience as a student-athlete, I observed noticeable gaps in mental wellness education and resources for student-athletes. While it seemed there was a place to go for everything related to athletics (e.g., coaches, athletic trainers, doctors, and nutritionists), the resources for the mental aspect of sport seemed to be lacking. We are focused on training our body, but not our mind. When it came to mental health challenges, students were referred to campus-wide counseling and psychological services. These mental health professionals did not always understand the student-athlete experience. When it came to mental performance, it seemed one would turn to their coach. Universities would benefit from having designated support staff for mental health and performance, who are trained in working with athletes.

Regardless of where student-athletes fall along the mental health continuum, they could benefit from these services. Student-athletes need an additional layer of support outside of their coaches; someone who is removed from the team but still has an understanding of the student-athlete experience. They need a safe space to express themselves. They also need a trusted professional who can help them develop psychological skills that enable them to unlock their full potential, manage stress effectively, build confidence, set actionable goals, and enhance their overall well-being. Additionally, psychoeducation equips student-athletes with practical mental health knowledge and fosters a deeper understanding of their thoughts, emotions, and

behaviors. This empowers them to navigate the demands of sport and life more effectively, enhancing both performance and well-being.

At the start of their first year, student-athletes can benefit from understanding their identities beyond their sport. Support professionals could assist in identity exploration and fostering a sense of self-worth that is not tied to their athletic performance. The transition out of sport needs to be a priority as student-athletes are “grieving” a part of them when their career ends. Additionally, this transition out of sport could be complicated by factors such as injury, which can unexpectedly end one’s career, or disappointment in how one’s career came to a close. Sport professionals have the opportunity to shift how they support student-athletes by adopting a more holistic approach; one that recognizes them as individuals beyond their athletic performance and prioritizes their mental, emotional, and personal development.