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"I Need More Training": Insights on Education and Training Available for Sport Social Workers

Erica Magier
Pickerington Local School District

Tarkington Newman
University of Kentucky

Carlyn Kimiecik
Miami University

Lauren Beasley
Georgia State University

Lauren Shute
Louisiana State University

Kaitlin Okamoto
US Soccer Foundation

Anita Tucker
University of New Hampshire

As a new arena in the field, there exists limited knowledge about the available education and training opportunities within the sport social work field. The current study was designed to better understand the learning opportunities utilized by sport social workers to practice competently within the field. A 22-item online questionnaire was administered to the Alliance of Social Workers in Sport (ASWIS) email listserv. A total of 84 participants completed the survey. Results highlight the gaps in the existing opportunities for sport social workers and the format, delivery, topics, and content of trainings that would be most helpful in the future. Identifying existing gaps and opportunities for improvements in the future allows for an expanded field and increased opportunities for competent social work practice.

Keywords: social work education, social work practice, sport social work, athletics, youth sport

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW; 2021) cites *competence*—the notion that social workers are responsible for practicing within their areas of expertise and accessing continuing education to enhance their knowledge—as one of the core values of the profession. Specific learning experiences within social work education provide critical learning opportunities for social workers who wish to develop competence within specialized practice areas. For example, within the classroom, groupwork practice experiences are associated with greater levels of practice competence among social work students (Lee, 2018). Similarly, applied practice and learning agreements within field education are recognized as an integral component of developing and demonstrating readiness for practice (Davis & Reber, 2016). Experiential didactic training also is related to improvements in communication, values, and attitudes related to both linguistic and cultural knowledge (Neely-Barnes et al., 2020). Additionally, simulation-based learning is recognized as a powerful tool for developing holistic competence (Kourgiantakis et al., 2019) and preparing students to practice in integrated healthcare settings (Craig et al., 2017). Moreover, specialized certificate programs are associated with promoting cultural competence among specific populations. For instance, a program's extrinsic support of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQIA+) people is predictive of students who feel more competent to work with LGBTQIA+ populations (McCarty-Caplan, 2018).

One emerging area of social work practice is within sport settings and systems (i.e., sport social work; Newman et al., 2021). From youth involved in community-based programming to professional athletics, athletes have been recognized as "a population group with unique vulnerabilities whose social work-related needs are often not met" (Dean & Rowan, 2014, p. 219). Confounding this lack of support is that social work practice within sport has yet to officially be recognized by the profession or within formal social work education (McHenry et al., 2021). As a result, social workers are often left to seek out supplemental educational opportunities to enhance their competence for providing services within sport (Magier et al., 2022). The purpose of the current study is to explore how social work professionals develop the requisite competence to service the needs of athletes and other stakeholders involved in sport.

Defining a Profession

The three key components that define a profession are: (a) specific standards of training and education, (2) an ethical code, and (3) a theoretical foundation and applied knowledge base (Broman, 1995). For health and human service professions, governing bodies offer registration, certification, and licensure based on education from accredited programs, as well as professional experiences (Adams, 2017). Thus, accrediting and governing bodies help to ensure that the three components that define a profession are met and upheld. For social workers within the United States, the NASW sets the profession's code of ethics, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) oversees undergraduate- and graduate-level educational standards, and state licensing bodies are responsible for confirming that individuals maintain their continuing education requirements (Dyeson, 2004). The culmination of these efforts helps to ensure that social

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workers continuously develop and refine their competence for working with and providing services to diverse populations.

At the heart of any health and human service profession is education and training. Within social work education, the CSWE (2015) defines field placements as social work's signature pedagogy. Field placements at both the bachelors and master's levels have been found to prepare students to enter the work force with a more established professional identity by having the educational opportunity to link theory to practice (Bogo, 2015) and practicing critical social work skills (Fortune et al., 2007). Upon graduating from an accredited program, professional development for social workers comes from professional supervision, guided self-reflection, and reflexivity regarding previous and ongoing practice experience, and continuing education units (CEUs; Kurzman, 2016; Magier et al., 2022).

The importance of adequate educational training and continued professional development relies on the use of evidence-based practices (EBP) when working with and providing services to individuals, groups, and populations. Out of the medical professional, EBP is defined as "the integration of best researched evidence and clinical expertise with patient values" (The Institute of Medicine, 2001, p. 147). Within social work, EBP is conceptualized as the intersection of three components: (a) research, (b) practice experience, and (c) client experience. EBP is especially important because the ability to identify, assess, implement, and evaluate effective interventions is a key social work skill (Morago, 2006). Therefore, internships at field placements provide aspiring social work students opportunities to experientially connect evidence-informed coursework with applied, hands-on practice. After graduation, social work professionals often continue to engage in professional development experiences (e.g., supervision, CEUs), which aid practitioners in staying up to date on current research related to their expertise and specific areas of practice. Ultimately, these types of specialized educational training experiences increase the confidence and competence of social work professionals and adequately prepare them for providing holistic and culturally competent services (Davis & Reber, 2016; Nedegaard & Zwilling, 2017; Neely-Barnes et al., 2020).

Specialized Practice Areas

Within the social work profession, unique subspecialities of social work practice have emerged. Commonly recognized specialized practice areas include child welfare, school social work, gerontological social work, military social work, and international social work. Specialized practice areas have a growing base of uniquely designed educational training and professional development opportunities. As underscored by NASW (2020), the purpose of specialty certifications is…

> …in response to growing workforce trends and societal needs requiring specialization and to help NASW members attain enhanced professional and public recognition; increase visibility as specialized social workers; and association with a select group of specialized social workers who have attained national recognition. (para. 1)

Clearly, the social work profession has prioritized education and training within specialized practice areas. Social workers need both a generalist education and opportunities to learn the

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skills, practices, and modalities specific to their professional practice. However, NASW and CSWE do not yet recognize sport as a social work specialty; thus, social work in sport may be termed a 'nontraditional' and an emerging area of social work practice.

Nontraditional social work practice has been defined as any setting where a social worker is not surrounded by other social work or social welfare professionals (Jasper et al., 2013; Hughes, 2009) and the organization has a core business not related to social work or social welfare services (McLaughlin et al., 2015). To gain competence to work in nontraditional settings, scholarship has pointed to the importance of both focused learning opportunities during social work education (e.g., coursework, field placements), as well as ongoing professional development opportunities post-graduation (Jasper et al., 2013; Lowe & Bohon, 2018; Scholar et al., 2012).

Despite the importance of specialized training, there remain challenges to meaningfully integrate these types of specialized training opportunities into social work education and post-graduation professional development. First and foremost, within social work education, there is a lack of courses related to specialized practice areas (Bosma et al., 2010). Research has also found inconsistency amongst course syllabi for specialized practice areas (Brezin & O'Connor, 2010; Cummings & DeCoster, 2011). Moreover, research has pointed to the difficulties faced by social work field departments with establishing and maintaining new partnerships with organizations, agencies, and programs (CSWE, 2015). This is especially problematic when host organizations do not employ a social worker as part of their staff (Cleak & Zuchowksi, 2018; Zuchowski, 2016). Underscoring these issues are barriers to accessing supplemental educational opportunities. For instance, social work literature has identified barriers such as lack of time, access to training, and inadequate funding (Carnahan et al., 2016; Jivanjee et al., 2015).

Current Study and Purpose Statement

Research has demonstrated that social workers provide a wide range of services to diverse populations involved in sport (Newman et al., 2021). For instance, social workers are known to work within youth sports as coaches, collegiate athletics as mental health specialists, and professional sport leagues as community relationship liaisons (Newman et al., 2019). However, social workers interested in working in sport are confronted with a lack of educational learning and training opportunities. For example, social work professionals noted a gap in available courses related to using sport as a social intervention and/or providing mental and behavioral health services within sport systems (Magier et al., 2022). Research also has highlighted issues regarding the lack of field placement opportunities in sport settings (Beasley et al., 2021; Beasley et al., 2022; Beasley, 2022). Consequently, social work students and continuously developing professionals who are interested in working at the intersection of social work and sport are left to advocate for their own educational needs. And although the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports (ASWIS) hosts the annual *Social Workers in Sports Symposium* and a *Sport Social Work Certificate*, only one CSWE-accredited social work program (i.e., University of Michigan Social of Social Work) has yet to offer anything more than a single elective course specifically designated to social work in sport. As a result, questions remain regarding how social workers who are currently providing services within sport develop the requisite competence. To begin to answer this question, the purpose of the current study was to investigate

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the education, training, and learning opportunities that social workers utilized to prepare them to work competently within sport.

Method

Research Team's Positionality

In accordance with the pragmatic philosophy of the study (Giacobbi et al., 2005), the research team acknowledges that knowledge is constructed in nature yet influenced by historical and contemporary sociopolitical culture. Further, pragmatics hold that agreement about knowledge is gleaned through discourse and ongoing dialog, which allows for practical-level truths to exist (James, 1907). Pragmatists then often use one or more research methods deemed appropriate to advance an inquiry while simultaneously considering the consequences of both the methods used and inquire posed.

The research team acknowledges their position as actively engaged instruments throughout all phases of the study, particularly during data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003). At the time of the study, the first author was a doctoral candidate in social work with a focus on program and practice implementation in education and child-serving spaces. In addition to holding a social work license, she previously worked with youth from economically disadvantaged communities through after-school and community-based programming. The second author—and lead researcher—was a professor of social work and education, studying the intersectionality of social justice, social work services, and sport systems. Additionally, he has over a decade of experience serving as a competitive youth sport coach, from middle and high school athletics to collegiate sport clubs. Several other student researchers, as well as a senior researcher, were engaged in the research process (e.g., project development, crafting of the manuscript); however, the first and second authors were charged with facilitating the data collection and analysis processes. Collectively, the team of researchers come from a diversity of personal backgrounds and upbringings, yet share lived experiences related to their social work education and training.

Procedures

All study procedures were approved by the Principal Investigator's (second author) Institutional Review Board. Data was collected via online Qualtrics surveys with the aim of exploring the perspectives and experiences of social workers who provide services to stakeholders involved in sport (i.e., sport social workers). Participants were recruited through the ASWIS email listserv and—in addition to providing consent—they were required to meet three inclusion criteria: (1) at least a bachelor-level social worker; (2) provide professional services within sport (e.g., therapist, coach, administrator, etc.); and (3) apply their social work education/training in sport. At the time of recruitment, ASWIS had approximately 150 individuals registered on their listserv.

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Participants

A total of 84 social workers provided consent to participate in the study (56% response rate), with 48 individuals completing the full battery of questions. The decision was made to utilize the partial data from the 36 participants who did not complete the entirety of the survey. All participants—even those who did not provide responses to each question—hold valued insights within the context of the study. Further, from a pragmatic perspective (Giacobbi et al., 2005), reducing the data does not provide enhanced "validity" or trustworthiness.

Please note that all data were kept, but demographic questions were asked at the end of the survey. Additionally, participants had the ability to identify with multiple demographic characteristics and types of experiences. Taken together, most participants earned a masters-level degree (n = 37) and were professionally licensed (n = 39; see Table 1).

Table 1. Demographics

	n	%
Gender (n=22)		
Female	15	68
Male	7	32
Race/Ethnicity (n=22)		
Black/African-American	4	18
Caucasian	13	59
Other (e.g., Hispanic, Indian)	5	23
Level of Education (n=50)		
Bachelor's Degree	3	6
Master's Degree	37	74
Doctoral Degree	10	20
Age (in years)	M = 37.68	sd = 13.01
Total years' experience	M = 11.78	sd = 11.27

These social workers provided services in a variety of sport systems, including collegiate athletics (n = 38), after-school programming (n = 30), and high school sports (n = 30; see Table 2). Most participants were officially employed as a social worker (n = 41) providing clinical and/or mental health services (n = 24) and/or worked as youth (n = 45) and/or high school (n = 26) coaches. We also asked participants about the extent to which they, as participants and stakeholders, had engaged in sport (see Table 2).

Data Collection Tool

Participants were asked to complete a 22-item online Qualtrics survey, comprised of both close- (i.e., multiple choice) and open-ended questions. Braun et al. (2020) recently forwarded that "qualitative surveys offer one thing that is fairly unique within qualitative data collection methods – a 'wide-angle lens' on the topic of interest that provides the potential to capture a diversity of perspectives, experiences, or sense-making" (p. 3). This ability to collect data using diverse methods was viewed as being critical given the pragmatic positing of the study and the relatively novel area of study. In the end, data from the survey had the ability to yield two

distinct studies. One study sought to investigate *where and how social work professionals provided services to sport stakeholders*; whereas the current study sought to better understand *how social workers developed their professional competence to work within sport*.

Questions from the survey related to the current study—designed to identify the education, training, and learning opportunities utilized by social workers—included: "Have you received any formal academic education/training related to professionally working in or with a sport setting?" and "If yes, at what level of school did you receive this training/education?" Other questions included, "Do you believe social work education should offer specific educational experiences (e.g., courses, internships, research opportunities) for social work students who are interested in professionally working in or with a sport setting? Please explain." And "Have you received specific training (other than formal education) related to your work in sport? If yes, where and from whom did you receive this training? What was the content and length of training? How satisfied were you with the training that you have received, and why?"

*Table 2. Previous experiences and training in sport**

	Athlete	**Coach**	**Administrator**	**Yes**	**No**
Previous Playing Experience					
Youth	63	45	6		
High School	65	26	3		
Collegiate	50	15	8		
Professional	12	1	5		
Using Sport Within Social Work Practice:					
Formal Academic				51	20
Other				32	37
Professional Working in Or with A Sport Setting					
Formal Academic				49	13
Other				32	29

**10 individuals responded "Other" when reflecting on their previous sport experiences*

Data Analysis

Reflecting the pragmatic positioning of the current study (Giacobbi et al., 2005) and in alignment with Braun et al. (2020), a content analysis was used to analyze the data. This analytic approach is recognized as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts…to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18). Following the four-step process as outlined by Bengtsson (2016), the first author (i.e., the researcher) first familiarized herself with the data by reading through survey transcripts. In this step, the researcher identified meaning units—the smallest unit of meaning from the data—and labeled these units with codes. Next, the researcher reviewed and finalized meaning units to ensure that all relevant data are included in the identified codes. Third, through an iterative process, categories and subcategories were created to group together related codes. Fourth, the first author engaged in a manifest content analysis using techniques to describe the visible text presented originally. Ultimately, the aim of a content analysis is to reduce the total amount of text collected by grouping together related text so that categories can be identified (Bengtsson, 2016).

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Results

The study resulted in three major themes. First, participants provided insight into their formal learning experiences, including during their academic education and additional professional training opportunities. Participants also identified particularly meaningful experiences that helped enhance their competency for working within sport. Finally, participants shared their thoughts regarding the future of this unique area of practice. Due to the nature of the data, participants have been assigned de-identified labels (e.g., SW1) for presenting unique descriptive quotes as applicable.

Formal Educational Training

We asked participants to identify previous and currently accessed opportunities for education and training in the field. In general, among participants who provided responses to the survey, the majority of participants did not receive any formal academic or other training related to using sport within their social work practice or working professionally in or with a sport setting (see Table 2).

Of those who did receive formal education about sport and social work, several individuals (n = 6) stated that it was the primary focus on their Masters/Doctoral education, or it was a part of a Masters/Doctoral course (n = 5). A couple of other participants stated that it was an entire course in their Masters/Doctoral education, or it was their undergraduate major (n = 2, respectively). Many participants (n = 37) did receive such training outside of an academic program.

Existing Learning Opportunities. Participants named a variety of available education opportunities. For example, some participants (n = 5) identified certificate/certification programs, such as coaching, health and fitness, and the ASWIS certifications. Several participants (n = 14) found specific conferences particularly helpful in forming their professional training, while others sought membership from organizations (n = 8). Others (n = 13) sought continuing education units (CEUs) and professional development opportunities to both uphold their licensure and further develop their professional skills.

Supervision. In the field of social work, supervision and mentorship is a critical way of learning, both within our formal academic institutions and in "real-world" practice. While some participants did not receive supervision (n = 13), others did receive supervision through either their current employment (n = 26) or outside of their employment (n = 11). Of those who received supervision at their current employment, the majority (n = 20) of their supervisors were not trained to use social work and sport practices. Conversely, most participants (n = 7) who sought supervision outside of employment, sought supervision from individuals trained within the specialty.

Specialized Trainings. To better understand the preferences of attendees and inform them about the development of future training related to the field of social work and sport, participants were asked to reflect on the features of the training. These questions allowed

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participants to provide a more detailed description of their experiences with the intention of improving training in this unique area of social work practice in the future.

Current Format of Education and Training. Several (n = 12) participants attended trainings intermittently, including workshops, key speakers, two-day mini courses, and different webinars and presentations. Such training and workshops were completed in under one day. Other participants (n = 10) attended conferences that required slightly more commitment, traditionally anywhere from one day to one week. Nonetheless, many others (n = 9) attended training courses that required longer-term commitment, lasting anywhere from one week to one year.

Current Training Content. Some participants (n = 10) also shared the topic areas of the training courses they attended. Half of these participants (n = 5) shared they learned techniques for integrating social work and sport including therapeutic approaches for working with athletes and sports-based positive youth development. Other participants attended trainings on social-justice related topics include race, gender, and discrimination, sexual assault, and working in trauma environments. Lastly, a couple of other participants (n = 2) attended training to learn specific skills in working with the student athlete population. For example, one participant stated that:

> Over 5 years there have been a lot of lectures, presentations, and interactive sessions I have attended. Those included using different therapeutic approaches when working with athletes, evidence base approaches to incorporating sports and social work, theory, race and gender discrimination, and many more. (SW1)

Another participant described their training experience by stating, “the content has included education on sport and mental health policy, individual treatment of athletes, including assessment, evaluation and diagnosis, as well as training on transformational leadership. Length is roughly one year.” (SW2).

Perceptions of Existing Learning Experiences

We asked participants to reflect on their previous education and training experiences. Most participants had positive feedback about their previous learning experiences and noted previous opportunities that were particularly impactful in their learning within the sport social work arena.

***Training Satisfaction*.** Nearly all respondents (n = 32) had positive feedback about the training they attended. For example, one participant noted that they “enjoyed what [they] received” (SW3) while another noted that they were “able to apply interventions while related to [their] own experience [in sport]” (SW4). There were participants who had critiques for the training they attended. For example, SW1 stated, that the trainings included “many speakers [who were] not social workers and some did not even know what social workers do or our approaches. This lack of peers and mentors training fellow social workers has negative impacts on growing social workers in sports/athletics”. Only one participant was completely dissatisfied with the training they attended.

Meaningful Experiences. We asked participants to reflect on particularly meaningful experiences thus far in their career. Several participants mentioned multiple experiences that informed their past and current practice as social workers in sport. Primarily, participants (n = 23) identified field practicums/internships and specific workshops/courses (n = 20) as particularly meaningful. Others (n = 7) discussed the importance of collaboration and learning from their peers who work in the arena and who were former athletes. Some participants (n = 5, respectively) identified specific degree programs (e.g., BSW and MSW programs) and different research opportunities as experiences that helped shape their professional knowledge and skillset. Lastly, various participants (n = 4, respectively) identified conferences, certificate programs, and teaching/coaching opportunities as beneficial opportunities. These meaningful experiences in combination with the aforementioned education, training, and learning opportunities were utilized to inform participants of suggestions for the future of education and training for social workers working with and using sport.

Future Sport Social Work Education and Training

Next, we asked participants to reflect on how they would like to see education and training in the field move forward. Most participants (n = 63) suggested that they would attend future training if offered, while only 3 participants stated that they would not attend. Additionally, most participants (n = 64) indicated that they believed social work education should offer specific educational experiences for social work students who are interested in using sport within social work practice (e.g., coursework, internships, research opportunities).

Suggestions for Education and Training Format

To further explore this area, we asked participants to identify and then describe the structure of future education and training opportunities. Participants comparably wanted in-person (n = 14) and online (n = 13) training, and/or had no preference (n = 13) on the delivery method. Numerous participants (n = 17) wanted workshops and/or courses that were offered over the course of a few hours, or at the most, one day. Others sought longer-term commitments, including conferences (n = 8) and multiple weeklong courses (n = 5).

Participants also reflected on the purveyors of such training. Several participants (n = 10) identified possible higher education institutions and/or professors, while others identified specific organizations (n = 7) who may be able to host and convene such trainings. The vast majority (n = 23) of respondents wanted subject matter experts to lead these training courses, including leaders in the field and those with practice experience. Broadly, SW3 defined subject matter experts as “people who are experienced and knowledgeable in these areas”. Others identified specific subject matter experts such as “someone knowledgeable in sport social work and has field experience in this area” (SW5) and “some of the best, most experienced thinkers in the field, even in other areas such as sport psychologists, athletic directors, [and] athletic trainers” (SW6).

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Training Topics

Similarly, we asked participants to identify and describe education and training topics that would be of most use in advancing education and training opportunities within the field of social work and sport. Participants shared specific areas and topics that were of particular importance in advancing the training and education withing sport social work. For example, many participants (n = 25) desired additional training on different forms of mental health support and interventions with athletes. Examples included crisis and case management, assessment, intervention and treatment with various athlete populations, forms of clinical intervention (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy, positive psychology, mindfulness, and hypnosis) and intervention approaches with specific athlete challenges (e.g., eating disorders, substance use, concussions, and injuries). Others noted a desire to learn more about how to work with specific sport populations (n = 7) and in building expertise in specific skills and areas within the field of social work in sport. Examples include working with athletes transitioning between sports-levels and/or out of sport (i.e., retirement; n = 4) and how to incorporate social work core values and ethics into the sport arena (n = 6).

Beyond learning more about practicing within the traditional contexts of social work in sport, participants also noted a desire to learn more about how to broaden the field. Participants (n = 9) also had a desire to learn more about how to implement sport as an intervention outside of traditional sport arenas. For example, one participant noted a desire to learn more about how to "advance lives through sport, break down barriers through sport, and build social capacity through sport" (SW7) while another participant was interested in "utilizing sports within the treatment setting" (SW8). Participants (n = 8) also noted a desire to advocate at the policy level and among other professionals (e.g., coaches and athletic directors) and programs.

Discussion and Implications

As part of a larger study that sought to understand the perspectives and experiences of social work professionals who use and/or engage in sport (i.e., sport social work), the present study sought to identify especially pertinent education, training, and learning opportunities among social workers in sport. By identifying existing opportunities, we can identify gaps in the specific education and training that is available for social workers in sport and further advance the field. Results suggest social workers who use and/or engage in sport lack academic and professional education and training opportunities. Additionally, participants emphasized that field practicums, internships, workshops, and courses were both meaningful and crucial experiences that contributed to their careers and professional development. Survey responses also indicated that social workers who use and/or engage in sport are open to future training and educational opportunities that are specifically tailored to current and future social work professionals or interested in using sport within social work practice.

Existing Opportunities

Participants overwhelmingly shared that they did not receive any formal training or education related to sport and social work practice. We suspect this to be a result of the growing social work and sport field with ever developing opportunities in the profession and in

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educational settings (Magier et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2019). Among higher education institutions, the University of Michigan (UM), The Ohio State University (OSU), and the University of New Hampshire (UNH) are key innovators at the intersection of social work and sport (i.e., sport social work). For example, beginning in the summer of 2022, UM's School of Social Work offers an Online Sport Social Work Certificate. Their innovative certificate program is a blended and interactive online learning experience, in which participants engage in 12-hours of live online, instructor-led learning sessions and 18-hours of self-paced learning modules. Additionally, as a component of the LiFEsports Initiative, OSU's College of Social Work has offered an undergraduate course titled "Prevention & Youth Development through Sport, Recreation, and Play" for over a decade. This one-of-a-kind course integrates traditional lectures, seminar-style discussions, guest speakers from the field, and sport- and play-based learning that occurs in a gymnasium. Similarly, UNH's Department of Social Work recently offered an undergraduate and cross-listed (undergraduate and graduate) course titled "Positive Youth Development through Social Work & Sport." In alignment with their Dual Degree Masters Program (Social Work, Kinesiology) in Outdoor Education, the course is designed to maximize experiential learning opportunities guided by a trained facilitator, engage students in immersive self-reflection and critical reflexivity, and capitalize on new telecommunication abilities to learn from researchers, social workers, and coaches from around the world. However, educational training, such as these listed, may need to develop a wider reach and following so social work students can have similar opportunities, training, and exposure as well as to further evidence-based practice related to this area of study.

Within the professional sector, participants also expressed few opportunities for specific social work and sport training. To address the lack of professional development opportunities, future research should identify potential barriers to accessing these experiences such as funding or location. Furthermore, increasing opportunities for professionals in the field of social work and sport to learn best practices and collaborate is crucial (Beasley et al., 2022; Beasley et al., 2021; Magier et al., 2022). Such opportunities may come in the form of training, workshops, or conferences led by current professionals within sport and social work. Professional development opportunities allow social workers to network, share knowledge and experiences, and further develop the field. The social work and sport field is collaborative by nature so the training should be reflective (D'Angelo et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2019)

Despite the lack of training and educational opportunities for individuals in social work and sport, findings that include existing training and education opportunities in this field are worth noting. For instance, participants identified certificate and certification programs, specific membership programs, and continuing education units (CEUs) with an emphasis on the intersection of sport and social work particularly useful. Engagement in these training and education activities are supported by existing literature as CEUs in the social work profession are rapidly growing (Kurzman, 2016).

Future Opportunities

Although there are existing opportunities, greater emphasis and development in educational opportunities are needed to meet the professional needs and ethical duties of social workers using and/or working in sport. Participants, as supported by existing literature, identified several gaps in existing training (Beasley et al., 2021). As reflected by the diverse participant

background and experiences, social workers in sport previously and currently work across settings and populations (Newman et al., 2021). Thus, their training, professional development, and education needs are unique and diverse. One possibility includes expanding training topics to include mental health, clinical intervention in sport such as crisis management and assessment, an emphasis and connection to social work core values, how to implement sport interventions, and how to better advocate for the sport social work field. Moreover, as interprofessional care between social workers and various sport professionals is becoming more common in athletic organizations (Beasley et al., 2021; McHenry et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2019), it is important that there is a shared knowledge base among our social work and sport professionals as an outcome of these specialized training opportunities. Interprofessional and dual-degree programs that highlight the intersection of athletics and social work could help to fill this gap in the future. Collaboration between and amongst the programs would allow social work students interested in sport to further specialize in the field and gain valuable knowledge needed for the field.

Not only is the subject matter relevant, the method of training delivery should also be considered. For example, both in person and online training methods should be offered to social work and sport professionals. Further, social workers in sport need training that is facilitated by experts in the field. Facilitators may be individual experts in the field (e.g., research/expert faculty) or organizations who specialize in the intersection of social work and sport, such as ASWIS. By providing intentional training, participants should be able to gain and attribute greater meaning and value to training and education efforts.

Limitations

While findings demonstrate insights into the training and education experiences of social workers in sport, several limitations exist. For instance, due to the sampling strategy, only those who are a member of ASWIS received the recruitment materials. The survey specifically included individuals who provide services and apply their social work education/training within sport. The survey did not include individuals who may work more peripherally in the sport social work field or perspectives of social work professionals who do not work in sport. Similarly, due to the moderate response rate and low rate of completion, findings from this study should not be generalized. Although the overall response rate was larger than the average response rate of online surveys in published research (Wu et al., 2022), approximately 43% of responses were incomplete. Future studies should consider systematically recruiting a larger, representative sample of participants through more expansive social work organizations, such as NASW and/or CSWE. Further, because of the nature research design, participants were not able to expand on their responses or be probed by interviewers when completing the written survey. As such, some responses may have lacked significant detail pertinent to data analysis. Future studies should consider conducting interviews with sport social workers to better understand their experiences with available and future training and education opportunities.

Conclusion

Sport social work is an ever-growing area of social work practice, with professionals who need learning opportunities to enhance competence when providing services in this unique system. To remain compliant with our social work ethical standards, social workers in sport

currently have access to a limited number and variety of educational and training opportunities, leaving room for future development in this space. As a growing and needed arena within the broader social work field, tailored, diverse, and purposeful training can help to advance the field of social work in sport.

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Sport Social Work Journal

Burdened with Glorious Purpose: Racialized Performance Expectations for African American Student-Athletes at Predominantly White Colleges and Universities

M. Daniel Bennett Jr.
University of Arkansas

The current discussion highlights circumstances and certain dynamics that shape attitude and performance expectations of African American student-athletes at PWIs. Research on the topic is limited, but some suggest that African American student-athletes competing in revenue producing sports like football and basketball at the NCAA Division 1 level may experience greater athletic performance expectations than do their non-African American counterparts. It should be noted that while African American student-athletes at PWIs and HBCUs face unique challenges, the nature and impact of racialized performance expectations are thought to differ significantly. HBCUs tend to have a more holistic approach within a culturally affirming environment. In contrast, PWIs may place greater emphasis on athletic performance, which may be influenced by prevailing racial stereotypes and the commercial nature of division 1 collegiate sports. Implications for sport social work are discussed, and culturally competent sport social work practice is highlighted.

Keywords: sport social work, African American, student-athlete, performance, college, athletics, mental health

The racial integration of college athletics in the United States occurred gradually and has been marked by significant challenges and resistance. Since that time, the African American student-athlete has become a prominent figure in the college athletics landscape (Harrison et al., 2017). This prominence has been the result of various factors including resilience, and changes in social and legal norms (Wiggins, 2016). Early pioneers like Jack Trice at Iowa State College (now Iowa State University) demonstrated courage and resilience in breaking the color barrier in college athletics. This has allowed subsequent generations of African American athletes to pursue college athletics at predominantly white colleges and universities (PWIs)

The Civil Rights Movement in the mid-20th century played a crucial role in challenging racial segregation and discrimination throughout the United States, including that which occurred in organized sports (Davis, 2007). The Civil Rights Movement contested the framework for segregation on a societal level and advocated for racial integration and equality (Jackson, 2013). The impact of the Civil Rights movement extended to public colleges and universities, including athletic programs (Freedman, 2013). Social milestones, such as Perry Wallace becoming the first African American basketball player in the Southeastern (SEC) in the 1967-68 season was a demonstration of the Civil Rights Movement's broader desegregation efforts across college sports.

Further, in 1972, Title IX was passed into federal law. This legislation prohibits sex-based discrimination in education, including athletics. Although Title IX was designed primarily to address gender inequity, its implementation has had broader implications for diversity in college sports. This includes opportunities for athletes from underrepresented groups (Sangree, 1999).

Over time, and because of the Civil Rights movement, societal attitudes have evolved, thus leading to greater acceptance of racial diversity in college athletics (Clopton & Bourke, 2011). This perhaps suggests that people have come to recognize the value of diverse perspectives and backgrounds within college athletics. While the integration of college athletics may have been a function of social justice efforts such as the Civil Rights movement, there is also historical evidence to suggest that the acceptance of African Americans at (PWIs) may instead be linked to a given institution's misguided belief in the "*Black athlete stereotype*" and the desire for those institutions to be more competitive in the athletic arena (Moskowitz & Carter, 2018).

To be sure, athletics are designed by nature to be competitive. Thus, there is nothing egregious about institutions seeking to become competitive. However, seeking to do so based on lofty albeit misguided expectations associated with the "*Black athlete stereotype*" is potentially damaging and poses a threat to the mental health and well-being of those who have such expectations thrust upon them.

The "*Black athlete stereotype*" puts forth the idea that African Americans possess natural physical abilities that allow them to excel in athletics, particularly football, basketball, and track & field. To be sure, there is a historical legacy that has contributed to the perpetuation of this stereotype. Theories about the innate physical abilities of African Americans were first published in the 1800s (Stone et al.,1999). Such theories were attempts to explain why African American athletes were able to outperform White athletes in sports previously dominated by majority group members. The consensus was that "*Blacks were physically different from Whites and possessed an accompanying character and temperament that was unique to their species*" (Wiggins, 1997, p. 313).

To be sure, the stereotype of the "*black athlete*" oversimplifies the diversity of talents, abilities, and work ethic of African American athletes. Additionally, the "*black athlete*" stereotype perpetuates harmful assumptions and contributes to the commodification of African

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American student-athletes. This is perhaps illustrated when college / university athletic programs steer African American athletes towards less rigorous academic paths to maintain eligibility. Doing so not only undermines the student-athletes' educational development but further perpetuates the stereotype that their primary if not sole value is athletic (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Such was the case in 2014 when African American student-athletes at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill were found to have been enrolled in fake classes to maintain their eligibility to play sports. As such African American student-athletes were exploited for their athletic abilities while their educational development was compromised, once again reinforcing the stereotype of athletes being valued for their physical skills and abilities (Smith & Willingham, 2019).

The proverbial debate over "*black athleticism*" has continued well into the twentieth century and may in some ways have served as a likely catalyst for the racial integration of college athletics (Olsen, 2020). Once again, colleges and universities perhaps opted to test the "*black athlete*" theory to increase the competitiveness of their athletic programs (Lewis et al., 2020). However, in the world of college athletics, it would seem this test has quickly become an expectation. An expectation that has resulted in differing realities for African American student-athletes. That is, while the demands of being a student-athlete are rigorous to be sure, for African American student-athletes, those demands may be influenced by racialized performance expectations derived from the "*black athlete*" stereotype.

The notion of the "*black athlete*" theory to increase competitiveness of college athletic programs is evidenced by former Major League Baseball player Reggie Jackson recounting an experience he had with then University of Alabama Head Football Coach Paul "Bear" Bryant. According to Jackson, *"I was getting changed, finishing a shower, and putting my shirt on, and Bear Bryant walked up to me and paid me a compliment. 1967."*
"[Bryant] said to the group, 'This is just the kind of [N-word] boy we need in order to compete with Bo [Schembechler], Woody [Hayes], Ara [Parseghian], and Johnny [McKay]..."
Those names referred to the then-head coaches of University of Michigan, Ohio State University, Notre Dame, and the University of Southern California, respectively. Each of these universities had racially integrated football teams. Yet, major Southern universities had yet to integrate.

As it pertains to the "*black athlete*" stereotype, it should be further noted that this was/is not just a theory that explains African American athletes outperforming majority group members, but also a metaphor that aligns with a broader phenomenon of cultural of discrimination against African Americans. This has resulted in a peculiar duality which regards African American athletes as subhuman and superhuman simultaneously. Over-emphasizing physical ability feeds into the widely adopted belief that rather than being dedicated, committed, and possessing a profound work ethic, African Americans are instead "animalistic, uncultivated, less intelligent, and lazy".

The current discussion represents an important area of exploration for research and practice with athlete populations. That is, as awareness of athletes as a uniquely at-risk and vulnerable population increases, it is important to examine the various dynamics within this population that may heighten risk and vulnerability and in turn adversely affect mental health

outcomes. Race/ethnicity is well established as being linked to a host of differential psycho-social outcomes (Fothergill et al., 1999; Cougle & Grubaugh, 2022). However, less is known about race-based athletic demands and expectations for student-athletes, particularly those at PWIs and how this may affect personal identity development, mental health and overall well-being.

This discussion explores the differing athletic expectations for African American student athletes at PWIs compared to their white counterparts. It is argued herein that these racialized expectations are thought to exact a toll that impacts the lived college athletic experience for African American student-athletes. This "toll" is believed to have strong implications for personal identity (Howe, 2020), mental health (Wilkerson et al., 2020), and overall well-being (Ballesteros et al., 2023).

Black Athletes and Social Darwinism

In the late 19th and 20th centuries, eugenics was the principal philosophy used in attempts to explain physical differences across race/ethnicity (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Briefly, eugenics is the study of how to arrange human reproduction to increase the likelihood of heritable characteristics regarded as desirable. However, this ideology has been discredited as unscientific and racially biased after adoption of its doctrines by the Nazis to justify their treatment of Jewish, disabled persons, and other minority groups (Caballero & Aspinall, 2018).

As it pertains to the African American athlete, evidence of discriminatory beliefs based on presumed biological differences dates to the early 20th century. Madison Grant, who wrote "The Passing of the Great Race" in 1916, espoused ideas that were later used to support discriminatory views of athletic abilities based on race. Grant put forth a theory of Nordic superiority, claiming that the "Nordic race" was inherently superior to other human "races". To be sure, these arguments lacked scientific validity and were largely influenced by racist beliefs. Over time, scientific inquiry has evolved, and evidence suggests that there is no inherent biological basis for racial superiority or inferiority including that of athletic abilities (Kerr, 2010).

Despite scientific evidence debunking the stereotypical myth of the black athlete, explanations for why Black athletes seemingly dominate some sports, or appear to play sports differently than White athletes continued to be debated in the 20th century. In 1971, Sports Illustrated senior editor Martin Kane in an article titled "An assessment of "Black is best" argued that Black athletes have superior physical abilities that can be attributed to a form of Social Darwinism. Kane asserted that the average Black man possesses superior physical qualities because the hardship of slavery "weeded out" those who did not possess adaptive physical characteristics (Wiggins, 1989).

Promoting the Black athlete stereotype

These ideas have perhaps been further proliferated by media coverage which often reinforces stereotypes of African American athletes possessing innate physical talents rather than

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owing their success to dedication, hard work, and skill development (Edwards, 1971; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Olsen, 2020). African American athletes have at times been treated as entertainers, particularly in sports where physical prowess was highlighted. This includes hyper-visibility. That is, some African American athletes who achieve success receive a disproportionate amount of media attention. This in some ways contributes to the perception that African American athletes *should* excel in sports (Runstedtler, 2018). To be sure, recognition can be positive, yet it may also create a skewed view of the broader African American athletic community.

Along with hyper-visibility comes the exaggeration of athleticism. The media often overemphasizes the physical attributes and natural talents of African American athletes, thereby reinforcing the belief that their success is primarily a function of genetic factors rather than hard work and dedication (Haslerig et al., 2020). In sum, factors such as these have contributed to the perception that the success of African American athletes is based more on natural ability than training and discipline (Ash et al., 2023).

To be sure, African American athletes have gained prominence and success in certain sports (e.g., football, basketball, baseball, track & field). This prominence and success, combined with existing stereotypes, has perhaps reinforced the notion, albeit erroneous, that African Americans are somehow naturally more adept in these areas of athletics (Van Rheenen, 2019). Moreover, the media's use of monikers like "*Beastmode*" or "*Half man Half amazing*" have added an air of sensationalism that further embeds stereotypical notions of black athleticism into the collective sports consciousness (Hall, 2001; Hoberman, 1997). Further, this sensationalism has perhaps served as an impetus for PWIs to begin recruiting African American athletes for their athletic programs. However, it should be noted that these recruitment efforts initially occurred within the context of segregation (Demas, 2007). Opportunities for African American athletes were limited, and they faced barriers accessing the same educational and athletic resources as their white counterparts.

Although significant progress has been made, challenges and disparities still exist in college athletics and sports in general. Efforts to address these issues and promote inclusivity continue. Nonetheless, the strides of African American student-athletes remain a testament to the positive change that has occurred over the years in college athletics.

Different Expectations, Different Realities

The racial integration of college athletics may be regarded as a reflection of broader racial progress in the United States (Hawkins, 2010). That is, the integration of college athletics, particularly in the context of the desegregation of schools and universities, was a significant milestone in the larger struggle for civil rights. Further, as it pertains to college athletics, it is important to recognize that despite this significant milestone, racially biased attitudes and beliefs have played a key role in the differential experiences of African American athletes.

A host factors may contribute to the expectations placed upon African American athletes, particularly those competing at PWIs. This may range from stereotype threats and racial

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stereotypes to limited diversity of narratives and public pressure. Briefly, stereotype threat refers to the concern that one's actions will confirm a negative stereotype about their racial or ethnic group. This perceived threat can lead to added pressure, anxiety, and higher expectations of performance (Bullock et al., 2020). In the context of African American student-athletes competing in college athletics, stereotype threat can play a significant role in shaping their experiences and the expectations placed on them (Winston, 2019).

Further, racial stereotypes about the natural athletic ability of African Americans can lead to the perception of some that they have a genetic advantage in sports. As such, this may result in higher performance expectations, along with the assumption that as an African American, they *should* excel in athletic endeavors. Lastly, limited diversity of narratives refers to the limited range of narratives and stories for African American athletes, such as those highlighting adversity or exceptionalism (Nwadike, 2020). This narrow focus can lead to unrealistic and erroneous assumptions that all African American athletes follow a similar path.

Psychological Impact of Differential / Racialized Expectations

The psychological impact of the external pressures and demands experienced by African American student-athletes competing at PWIs can be significant (Cooper & Dougherty, 2015; Sadberry & Mobley, 2013). These athletes may experience a range of emotions, including feelings of stress, anxiety, depression, guilt, and even anger (Bennett, 2022). Many African American student-athletes may feel expected to effectively manage multiple roles including that as an athlete, a student, and as a representative for their family, community, or even race. All this while also navigating racial microaggressions from coaches, teammates, and opponents (Lewi et al., 2021; Haywood & Payne, 2017). This in turn may lead to feelings of isolation, self-doubt, and a lack of sense of belonging (Lewis et al., 2021; Beamon, 2014).

To further contextualize this phenomenon, many African American student-athletes may come from low-income backgrounds. And so, socioeconomic challenges, family and community expectations, and societal issues may further add to the psychological burden of differential / racialized expectations of being an African American student-athlete at a PWI. As such, some African American student-athletes may internalize these expectations and thereby increase their vulnerability for poor mental health outcomes.

Counting the costs of Differential / Racialized Expectations

To be sure, the differing, if not racialized expectations of African American student-athletes at PWIs can exact a psychological, emotional, and social toll that stems from the associated pressures and stereotypes. Heightened expectations may lead to increased pressure to perform at a consistently high level. Ultimately, this may result in elevated levels of stress and anxiety, which can have detrimental effects on mental health and well-being (Wilkerson et al., 2022).

Differential expectations may also be detrimental to personal identity and self-concept. That is, some African American student-athletes at PWIs may feel that their worth as an

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individual is solely contingent upon their success as an athlete. This in some instances can lead to social isolation wherein one may come to believe that they are valued solely for their athletic abilities, rather than other personal qualities and attributes. The challenge presented by differential / racialized expectations may cause some African American student-athletes at PWIs to question whether they are being true to themselves or simply fulfilling others' stereotypical notions and expectations.

The Hopes and Dreams of All Those Who Came Before

The burden on African American athletes may be seen as a reflection of the larger collective experience of African Americans. Both the group and the sub-group face similar societal challenges, including discrimination and racism. African American athletes, like African Americans in general, are often held to a different, sometimes unfair standard, and are expected to perform at a higher level to be considered successful (White, 2015). Additionally, African American athletes, like African Americans in general, are often judged more harshly for their mistakes or failures (see Heitzeg, 2016). As such, some African American student-athletes may feel a heightened sense of duress to fulfill expectations. This too can lead to difficulty coping and ultimately have an adverse effect on mental and emotional well-being.

From a practitioner's standpoint, effectively addressing the psychological and emotional tolls that are exacted from African American student-athletes is essential for their well-being and success. College and university and athletic programs must provide viable support systems, that include mental health resources, mentorship programs, and diversity and inclusion initiatives. Coaches and educators should be cognizant of the unique challenges these athletes may face and work to create an inclusive and equitable environment that recognizes their full humanity, individual strengths, and aspirations beyond athletics.

This includes increased awareness, acknowledgement, and open dialogue surrounding these issues. Doing so is crucial for challenging and changing the underlying stereotypes and expectations that contribute to the psychological, emotional, and social incumbrance placed on African American student-athletes, particularly those at PWIs.

To be sure, the competitive atmosphere of college athletics can lead to a range of mental health issues including anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation (Xanthopoulos et al., 2020). Thus, it is vital for sports social workers, coaches, and other athletic support staff to be cognizant of this and to provide appropriate support mechanisms for African American student-athletes to help them cope with the external demands of competing at the NCAA Division 1 level.

Name, Image and Likeness: Upping the Ante?

The United States Court of Appeals Ninth Circuit ruling in *O'Bannon v. NCAA* (2015) was a major departure from previous legal challenges to the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA's) position on amateurism. The court's decision essentially ratified name, image, and likeness (NIL) rights for college athletes. That is, it created a foundation for the passage of legislation at the state level, to permit college athletes to profit from their NIL. This

created financial opportunities for college athletes who have historically been exploited by their respective institutions and the NCAA (Fresh, 2022). Although this legislation applies to athletes across all competitive athletic divisions, much of the discourse related to NIL has focused primarily on NCAA Division 1 athletics, perhaps most notably in football and basketball.

Given the advent of the NIL era, researchers and practitioners must now carefully examine both the implications and ramifications of NIL for the student-athlete. In this regard, a potential complication related to NIL may be that of role conflict and/or confusion. That is, some athletes may experience psychological, emotional, or social difficulties performing a particular role due to the requirements and demands of additional roles and responsibilities (Fridley et al., 2023). Thus, NIL may further complicate the role / identity dynamic by introducing a new role that has the potential to monopolize a student-athletes' time and energy.

To be sure, the NIL phenomenon has the potential to place greater pressures, expectations, and demands on African American student-athletes competing at PWIs (Bartlett, 2022). African American student-athletes are disproportionately represented in revenue-generating sports such as football and basketball. As such, there may be increased pressure for them to perform well enough to secure potentially lucrative NIL opportunities and thereby creating economic stability for themselves and their families (Hollabaugh et al., 2022).

It's important to note that the NIL phenomenon is still evolving and the extent to which it may place greater social, emotional, and psychological pressure on student-athletes is still uncertain. However, to ensure that the overall health and well-being of the student-athlete is protected, it is crucial that the NCAA and other stakeholders consider the potential impact this may have on student-athletes, particularly those from disadvantaged or marginalized communities.

Sport Social Work

To effectively assist African American student-athletes cope with the external pressures and demands of competing at the NCAA Division 1 level, social work practice methods should be adapted in a culturally competent and culturally responsive manner. Sport social workers can help these students identify and understand their emotions, recognize how they are impacted by race-related stressors, and develop effective coping strategies (Henderson et al., 2021). Additionally, sport social workers can provide education and awareness about mental health issues such as anxiety or depression that are likely to result from the pressures of being a student-athlete at this level. Finally, sport social workers can advocate for increased access to resources for African American student-athletes on campus, such as academic support and mental health services. To be sure, these are critical roles and functions for social workers within college / university athletic programs and the larger athletic context.

A special population? A recent study by the NCAA indicates that insomnia, mental exhaustion, anxiety and feeling overwhelmed are common mental health concerns for student-athletes (NCAA, 2023). This is likely due in part to performance expectations, rigorous schedules and time commitments, as well as social and institutional pressures. (Rice et al., 2016). This would seem to suggest that NCAA student-athletes are a uniquely at-risk and vulnerable

population (Hamstra-Wright et al., 2024). Sport social workers are well positioned to provide service to this population and complement the athletic context (Bennett, 2023).

While generally student-athletes may be thought to represent a special population, it is also important to take into consideration that there may exist certain differences between and across this population. While the aforementioned study by the NCAA revealed that insomnia, mental exhaustion, anxiety and feeling overwhelmed were common mental health concerns for student-athletes, this same investigation revealed that this does not hold true for African American student-athletes. (NCAA, 2023).

Non-white athletes reported a different set of common factors impacting their mental well-being. While all student athletes identified academics as having a negative impact on their mental health, non-white students were more likely to identify financial concerns and worries about the future. Thirty-five percent of African American student athletes cited financial worries, compared to 19% of white student athletes. This extended to concerns about family, the amount of playing time, their relationship with the coach and team environments (NCAA, 2023). It is unclear as to what may account for differences in primary mental health concerns among African American student-athletes compared to their white counterparts. However, these differences may be due in part to external pressures and racialized performance expectations (Haywood & Payne, 2017; Cooper & Dougherty, 2015; Sadberry & Mobley, 2013).

Culturally Competent Sport Social Work

The phenomenological dynamics at the intersection of college athletics and African American racial identity are complex. Further, these dynamics are influenced by a host of factors including sport itself, the institution, along with social pressures and expectations. This perhaps underscores the need for culturally competent sport social work practice. In this instance, sport social workers must consider the ways in which African American student-athletes experience the larger athletic and social contexts. Such experiences may influence how well one transitions to college athletics, which in and of itself is generally a tall order; but when the phenomenological dynamics associated with racialized performance expectations are considered, the proposition may become even more difficult.

A credible threat? Within the athletic context as well as the broader social context, prior research suggests that African American athletes are often confronted with stereotype threat (English & Kruger, 2020). As it pertains to African American student-athletes competing in college athletics, stereotype threat may play a significant role in shaping their experiences and how they manage their expectations. To be sure, stereotypes about African Americans and athleticism have been prevalent in society for some time (see Hoberman, 1997; Sailes, 2017). These stereotypes often suggest that African Americans have a physical advantage in sports due to certain genetic factors. While these stereotypes may seem positive at first glance, they have negative consequences. Stereotypes such as these create the expectation that African American athletes *should* excel in sports, which in turn may lead to internalized pressure. Moreover, when African American student-athletes are aware of these stereotypes, they may feel a heightened sense of responsibility to perform well. As such, they may fear that their performance, whether

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good or bad, could be interpreted as confirming these stereotypes. This in turn may lead to amplified stress and anxiety (Tran et al., 2023).

Full coverage. In addition to stereotype threat, media coverage and public perception may also contribute to racialized athletic performance expectations. That is, when African American athletes are portrayed in particular ways by the media, performance expectations are in turn influenced (Ash et al., 2023). Once again, non-human and mythical nicknames given to athletes embed stereotypical notions and hence expectations of (*black*) athleticism into the collective consciousness of the sports community (Hall, 2001; Hoberman, 1997). Thus, it is the media's exaggeration of athleticism and overemphasis on physical attributes and natural talents of African American athletes that may reinforce racialized performance expectations. In summary, media coverage and public perception can contribute to racialized performance expectations for African American athletes by perpetuating stereotypes, creating hyper-visibility, and influencing how athletes are perceived and treated by the public and the broader sports community.

To be sure, performance expectations can vary widely. Therefore, it is essential to recognize that not all African American student-athletes necessarily face higher performance expectations compared to their non-African American counterparts. Moreover, a host of factors are thought to influence the expectations that are placed on them. This includes race, culture, gender, socioeconomic status, and as stated earlier, institutional dynamics, the sport itself, and the coaching staff.

Nonetheless, culturally competent sport social work practice must seek to address stereotype threat, media influence, and other factors that may contribute to racialized performance expectations for African American student-athletes. This includes creating a supportive and inclusive environment that acknowledges these challenges and helps mitigate their effects. Promoting more inclusive and humanistic representations of athletes is essential for creating a fairer and more supportive sports culture.

Conclusion

The current discussion highlights circumstances and certain dynamics that shape attitude and performance expectations of African American student-athletes at PWIs. Research on the topic is limited, but some suggest that African American student-athletes competing in revenue producing sports like football and basketball at the NCAA Division 1 level may experience greater athletic performance expectations than do their non-African American counterparts.

These performance expectations do not begin with, nor are they limited to, the athletic context.
African American student-athletes may also experience greater pressures and expectations from family and friends to be successful in the athletic context compared to other student-athletes. This may be due to a host of factors, including cultural and societal expectations, as well as the fact that many African American student-athletes come from economically challenged

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backgrounds and may see athletics as a means to provide economic stability for themselves and their families.

Once again, not all African American student-athletes experience racialized expectations. Nonetheless, it's important to be cognizant of this phenomenon and its potential impact on the mental health of these student-athletes. Sport social work practice can be instrumental in assisting African American student-athletes effectively cope with the external pressures and demands associated with college athletics at PWIs including racialized performance expectations.

Firstly, sport social workers should have a deep understanding of the cultural background and experiences of African American student-athletes. This includes knowledge of the historical, social, and economic factors that have shaped their experiences. Further, sport social workers can assist African American student-athletes cope with the aforementioned pressures and expectations by providing individual and group counseling to help them process their experiences and develop strategies to successfully navigate the college athletics landscape.

Finally, sport social workers can work to create a more inclusive and equitable environment for African American student-athletes. This includes working with coaches, teammates and other stakeholders to advocate for an environment in which all student-athletes feel comfortable discussing their concerns and struggles thereby creating a sense of belonging and community among African American student-athletes.

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Activist Tiered Systems of Support (ATSS) Framework: An Ecosystem of Care and Well-Being for Student Athlete Activists

Gyasmine George-Williams
California State University Polytechnic University

The re-emergence of the convergence of sports and activism highlights athletes' roles as advocates for social justice, reflecting their engagement with complex dynamics that intertwine their public personas, personal beliefs, and the socio-political context. This intersection presents unique challenges, especially for athletes of marginalized communities, who must navigate the compounded pressures of visibility and personal conviction, thereby impacting their mental well-being. This paper introduces the Activism Tiered Systems of Support (ATSS) framework, recognizing the need for specialized support. The ATSS draws inspiration from the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) used in educational settings (Sailor et al., 2020; Roth and Erbacher, 2021) and is also enriched by the insights of Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), Black Athlete Activist Leadership Model (BAAL) (George-Williams, 2019), The Activism Growth Model (George-Williams, 2021), the Racial Identity Development Model (Tatum, 1992) and the Sexual Identity Development Model (Cass, 1984). The ATSS framework aims to provide comprehensive mental health support tailored to athlete activists, fostering resilience and enabling their success in sports and activism. This paper seeks to establish a foundation for sustained athlete activism engagement, ensuring they can face the challenges and effectively leverage their platforms.

Keywords: athlete activism, social justice, critical race theory, MTSS, social identity

In recent years, the intersection of sports and activism has grown increasingly prominent, with athletes across various sports leveraging their platforms to advocate for social justice and community issues. This intersection, however, is not without its challenges. Athlete activists, particularly those of color, often navigate complex landscapes that intertwine their public personas, personal convictions, and the sociopolitical realities of the times. These individuals grapple with the intricate interplay of public visibility, personal beliefs, and the socio-political landscape, a confluence that can significantly strain their mental well-being. The imperative for a robust support system deeply rooted in mental health care becomes clear under these

circumstances. Developing a framework that recognizes and meticulously addresses the distinct adversities faced by athlete activists is crucial.

This paper introduces the Activism Tiered Systems of Support (ATSS) framework, drawing inspiration from the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) used in educational settings (Sailor et al., 2020; Roth and Erbacher, 2021). The ATSS is also enriched by the insights of Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), the Black Athlete Activist Leadership Model (BAAL) (George-Williams, 2019), The Activism Growth Model (George-Williams, 2021), and Social Identity Development Models such as the Racial Identity Development Model (Tatum, 1992) and the Sexual Identity Development Model (Cass, 1984). The Activism Tiered Systems of Support (ATSS) framework is constructed to ensure that athlete activists receive targeted, comprehensive mental health support tailored to their unique needs, fostering resilience and enabling them to thrive both in their sport and in their activism endeavors. In crafting the ATSS, this paper draws upon existing literature on athlete activism, the challenges they face in the public eye, and the principles of effective support systems. Moreover, this paper outlines the structure and components of the ATSS, detailing each tier of support and how they collectively form a comprehensive support system for athlete activists. By doing so, it aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation on how best to support athletes who step into social activism, ensuring they have the resources, guidance, and advocacy necessary to make their voices heard and their actions impactful.

Challenges Faced by Athlete Activists

Athlete activists, particularly those athlete activists of color, encounter a multifaceted array of challenges as they navigate the realm of public advocacy while maintaining their athletic performance. These challenges can include:

Navigating Intersectionality

Athletes of marginalized racial and gender backgrounds often confront additional layers of discrimination and bias. They may face unique challenges related to their identity, which can compound the pressures of activism (Harrison & Lawrence, 2014). Athlete activists, especially those from multiple intersecting identities, often face discrimination and bias, both within their sport and in broader society. Their activism can exacerbate these challenges, making them targets for racial and gender-based harassment (Harrison & Lawrence, 2014; Davis & Harris, 2020). Black student-athletes at predominantly white institutions face unique challenges, including navigating a campus climate that often perpetuates racial stereotypes and exclusion. This relentless attention can be a source of significant stress, often exacerbated by racial stereotypes and biases that pervade the sports industry and society at large. Consequently, stereotypical expectations and racial discrimination against athletes of marginalized identities can lead to a heightened sense of pressure, contributing to anxiety, stress, and other mental health issues. These environments can affect their academic and athletic pursuits, necessitating a supportive framework that addresses their identity and role as athletes (Simiyu, 2012; Anderson, E. (2019).

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Public Scrutiny and Backlash

Athlete activists are subject to intense scrutiny and criticism from fans, media, and even their peers or sponsors. Athlete activists often face intense backlash for their activism, particularly on social media and from fans who may disagree with their stance. This can lead to significant psychological stress and pressure to conform, resulting in negative publicity, social media harassment, and potential loss of endorsements or career opportunities (Coakley, 2015; Cunningham, 2019). In the digital age, athlete activists are vulnerable to harassment and abuse on social media platforms, which can amplify negative feedback and increase personal stress (Sanderson & Frederick, 2020).

Balancing Athletics and Activism

Athletes who engage in activism must balance their identities as athletes and activists. Managing time and energy between training, competitions, and activism can be demanding. This dual role can create conflict, as the time and energy devoted to activism may be seen as detracting from their sports performance. Athletes must find ways to excel in their sport while committing to their advocacy work, which can lead to physical and mental exhaustion (Simiyu, 2012; Smith & Andrews, 2015).

Lack of Institutional Support

Athletes may not always receive the backing they need from their sports institutions, which can hinder their activist efforts and leave them feeling isolated or marginalized within their teams or organizations (George-Williams, 2019; 2021). Athletes challenging systemic issues may face opposition from sports organizations, leagues, or teams that prefer to maintain the status quo or fear alienating certain segments of their fan base or sponsors (Jackson, 2018; Kellison & Vincent, 2020). Taking a stand on controversial issues can also lead to isolation or alienation from teammates, coaches, or fans who do not share the same views or prioritize sports over social and political engagement (Anderson, 2019; George-Williams, 2019; 2021).

Risk to Professional Career

Engaging in activism can pose risks to an athlete's professional career, including potential conflicts with sponsors, teams, or leagues that may have different political or social stances (Cunningham, 2019). Additionally, there can be financial repercussions through lost endorsements or contractual issues (Stewart & Beauford, 2019). Engaging in activism can sometimes lead to legal consequences, especially if athletes participate in protests or actions that are met with legal retaliation (Carter & Hawkins, 2020).

These challenges underscore the multifaceted experiences athlete activists face and highlight the importance of providing them with comprehensive support systems that address these issues, particularly about their mental health and well-being.

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Impact of Activism on Mental Health

Athlete activists often engage in emotionally and mentally taxing advocacy, challenging systemic injustices while navigating their careers. This dual role can exacerbate stress, anxiety, and depression, highlighting the need for comprehensive mental health support that addresses both their athletic and activist endeavors (Souter, et al, 2018). Furthermore, people of color from multiple walks of life experience racial battle fatigue navigating White or majority White spaces (Smith, 2004). Research also supports the notion that activists experience activist burnout and compassion fatigue (Asa, 2009), the idea that one can get exhausted from caring so much. Perhaps the most insidious aspect of compassion fatigue is that it attacks the core of what brings individuals into activist work: their empathy and compassion for others (Asa, 2009. Furthermore, the plethora of intersecting identities embodied by athlete activists, unless acknowledged and supported, can lead to a perplexity of negative emotional and psychological outcomes. These emotional and psychological problems can range from experiencing isolation, depression, anxiety, and burnout, not just from the physical demands of their sport but also from the emotional labor of their activism. These vulnerabilities underscore the importance of tailored mental health interventions that consider the unique pressures faced by athletes of color (Schinke, et al, 2017; Souter, et. al, 2018; George-Williams, 2019). Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders in the sports ecosystem to provide targeted support, promote inclusivity, and advocate for systemic change. The mental health of athlete activists is not just a personal issue but a reflection of the broader societal dynamics that shape the world of sports.

The next section will inform the conceptual and theoretical frameworks informing the ATSS and introduce the inner workings of the Activism Tiered System of Support (ATSS).

Conceptual Frameworks Informing the ATSS Model

Several conceptual frameworks inform the crafting of the ATSS, which include Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic (1993); Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; McCoy, 2015), Black Athlete Activist Leadership Model (BAAL) (George-Williams, 2019), The Activism Growth Model (George-Williams, 2021), and Social Identity Development Models, such as the Racial Identity Development Model (Tatum, 1992) and the Sexual Identity Development Model (Cass, 1984).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; McCoy, 2015).

Critical Race Theory explores the intersections of race, power, and systemic oppression (Bell, 1979; Donnor, 2005; Harper, 2009b; Milner, 2008). It encourages the examination of institutionalized racism, racial stereotypes, and the impact of racial hierarchies on sports participation, representation, and opportunities (Crenshaw, 1991; (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Under the guidance of CRT, Intersectionality Theory, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), recognizes the interconnectedness of social identities and the unique experiences of individuals

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at the intersections of multiple axes of oppression, including race, gender, sexuality, class, and more (Crenshaw, 1989; Byrd et al, 2019).

The Activism Growth Model (George-Williams, 2021)

The AGM is a framework that provides a structured approach for individuals, including student activists and athlete activists, to develop their activism skills, engage in social change, and achieve personal and collective growth. It includes components such as self-reflection, skill development, and sustained activism.

Black Athlete Activist Leadership Model (BAAL) (George-Williams, 2019)

The Black athlete activist leadership (BAAL) model is an invitation for athletic departments, student services, and higher education practitioners overall to gain a deeper and more informative understanding and support of Black college athlete activists using a holistic lens and approach. When utilizing the suggested pillars in the model, (a) viewing athletes as leaders, (b) embracing intersecting identities, (c) accounting for campus climate, and (d) incorporating holistic support, this will allow athlete activists to operate and navigate their campuses feeling empowered and invigorated.

The Racial Identity Development Model (Tatum,1992)

The Racial Identity Development Model provides a vital framework for understanding the psychological evolution individuals of color may experience about their racial identities. The Racial Identity Development Model's Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, and Internalization provide critical insights into the athletes' experiences, shaping tailored support mechanisms (Tatum, 1992, 1997).

The Sexual Identity Development Model/Cass Identity Model (Cass, 1984)

The CIM can inform athlete activists about the stages individuals go through in understanding and embracing their identities. The Cass Identity Model, a vital framework for understanding LGBTQ identity development, offers invaluable insights into the experiences and needs of these athletes. These models help athletes navigate their journeys and support their advocacy efforts in fostering inclusivity, challenging stereotypes, and promoting acceptance. Gleaning from The Cass Identity Model for insight will provide the ATSS framework a nuanced and affirming support for LGBTQ athlete activists.

This section elucidates why incorporating this model is indispensable in offering holistic and culturally competent support for athlete activists, particularly those of color. Each conceptual framework provides a unique lens to analyze and address the complexities of athlete activism. Athlete activists and their stakeholders can use these frameworks to better understand the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they work and to inform their strategies for promoting social change.

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Theoretical Foundation

The ATSS model adapts the principles of the Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework, a well-regarded approach in educational settings for providing services and interventions tailored to student needs (McIntosh, & Goodman, 2016; Romer, et al, 2018). It is a tiered system that recognizes athlete activists' unique psychological, professional, and personal pressures, particularly those stemming from their intersectional identities.

Overview of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

The essence of MTSS is the building and creating wraparound services for the population of focus. Wraparound services, or wraparound, support or wraparound care, are a holistic approach to providing coordinated and comprehensive support to individuals and families with complex needs (Wackerle-Hollman et al., 2021; Sugai et al., 2016). The concept of wraparound services originated in the field of child welfare and has since been applied to various contexts, including education, mental health, and social services (Bruns & Walker, 2011; Vest et al, 2018; Olson et al, 2021). Wraparound services involve bringing together a team of professionals, family members, and other supportive individuals to collaboratively develop and implement an individualized care plan (Bruns & Walker, 2011; Vest et al, 2018; Olson et al, 2021). The goal is to address multiple needs across different domains, such as education, mental health, housing, employment, and social connections, in a coordinated and integrated manner.

Key features of wraparound services include a) Individualized Care, b) Multidisciplinary Team, c) Family Involvement, d) Strengths-Based Approach, e) Coordination and Integration, and f) Culturally Responsive Care (Wackerle-Hollman et al., 2021; Sugai et al., 2016).

While wraparound services are commonly associated with supporting individuals and families with complex needs, they can also be adapted to provide comprehensive support for athlete activists. Here are some examples of wraparound services that can be applied to support athlete activists:

Personalized Advocacy and Mentorship

Athlete activists can benefit from personalized advocacy and mentorship services. This may involve assigning a mentor or advocate who understands their unique challenges and goals. The mentor can provide guidance, connect them with relevant resources, and support their personal and professional development.

Social and Emotional Support

Wraparound services for athlete activists should include social and emotional support to address the pressures and emotional toll that activism can bring. This may involve access to counseling services, peer support groups, and stress management and self-care resources.

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Legal Assistance and Advocacy

Because of their activism, athlete activists may face legal challenges or encounters with sport governing bodies. Wraparound services can provide access to legal assistance and advocacy to help navigate these situations, ensuring their rights are protected and providing guidance on legal strategies.

Media and Public Relations Support

Effective communication is crucial for athlete activists to amplify their message and navigate media attention. Wraparound services can offer media training, public relations support, and access to communications professionals who can help athletes craft their messaging, handle media interactions, and strategically leverage their platform for social change.

Partnerships with Advocacy Organizations

Athlete activists can benefit from collaborating with advocacy organizations that align with their cause. Wraparound services can help facilitate these partnerships, connecting athletes with established organizations with advocacy, community organizing, and policy change expertise.

Career Development and Education Support

Wraparound services should also address athlete activists' long-term goals and aspirations beyond their activism efforts. This can involve providing access to career development resources, educational opportunities, and networking connections that support their personal and professional growth.

Financial Support and Resources

Wraparound services can assist athlete activists in accessing financial support, such as grants, scholarships, or sponsorships, to sustain their activism efforts. This support can help alleviate financial burdens and allow athletes to focus on their advocacy work.

These examples demonstrate how wraparound services can be adapted to meet the unique needs of athlete activists. When designing and implementing wraparound support, it's important to consider the specific goals, challenges, and aspirations of each athlete activist. The services should be personalized, culturally responsive, and aligned with the athlete's vision for social change. More importantly, collaboration among multiple stakeholders, including athlete activists, is crucial for effective wraparound support.

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Multi-Tiered Approach

Like MTSS, ATSS employs a tiered structure to ensure athletes at all levels of activism receive appropriate support, from universal to individualized assistance. This tiered approach allows for a flexible and responsive support system that can adapt to the evolving landscape of athlete activism. Additionally, the ATSS framework emphasizes the importance of community building, feedback mechanisms, and ongoing evaluation, ensuring the support system remains relevant and effective (Harrison & Lawrence, 2014).

Tier 1: Universal Supports for Student and Athlete Activists:

- This tier is accessible to all athletes, focusing on general education on activism, providing resources, and creating a foundation for advocacy efforts.
- A key component of Tier 1 is creating a positive and inclusive school or team culture that supports activism.
- Provide strategies for fostering a safe and respectful environment that values diverse perspectives.
- Explore integrating social-emotional learning, restorative practices, and character education into curricula.

Tier 2: Targeted Support or Interventions for Student and Athlete Activists

- This tier offers specialized support for athletes who are more actively engaged in advocacy. It addresses specific challenges and enhances their activism skills.
- Identify the signs of stress, burnout, and emotional fatigue among student and athlete activists.
- Offer evidence-based interventions and strategies for promoting self-care and resilience.
- Discuss the role of mentorship and peer support in nurturing and sustaining activist efforts.

Tier 3: Intensive Individualized Supports for Student and Athlete Activists

- Specific mental health challenges faced by athlete activists are explored.
- Athletes facing significant challenges due to their activism receive personalized support, including mental health services, legal advice, and crisis management.
- Guidance is provided on providing professional counseling, therapy, or other mental health services.
- Reiterate the importance of creating a supportive network of professionals, including school counselors, coaches, and mental health experts.

Customizing the wrap-around mental health support to athlete activists' individual needs and circumstances is as important as recognizing their diverse backgrounds, experiences, and personal challenges. Collaboration between mental health professionals, coaches, trainers, and other support staff is crucial in providing a holistic approach that promotes athlete activists' mental well-being and resilience. The comprehensive nature of ATSS ensures a flexible, responsive support system that adapts to the evolving landscape of athlete activism. Crucial to

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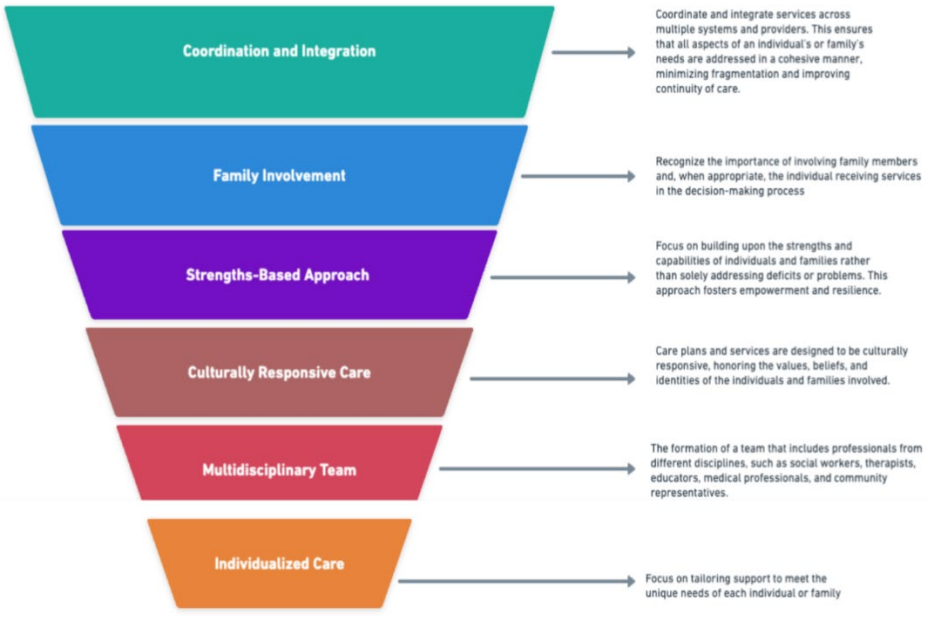
the ATSS is the emphasis on community building, continuous feedback, and ongoing evaluation, ensuring the framework remains attuned to the activists' needs.

Conclusion

Athlete activism, while noble and necessary, often puts them at odds with segments of the public, media, and even their sporting communities. The emotional toll of confronting social injustices, dealing with public and private responses, and striving to make meaningful change can impact athletes' mental health, leading to stress, anxiety, or depression (Williams & Mohammed, 2009). The intersection of sports and activism presents opportunities and challenges for athlete activists. The ATSS framework offers a promising approach to supporting these individuals, providing a structured, tiered system of support tailored to their needs. By fostering an environment that nurtures and empowers athlete activists, ATSS promotes social justice and community engagement through sports. This model aims to enrich the ongoing discourse on supporting athletes as agents of social change, ensuring they have the necessary resources, guidance, and advocacy to amplify their voices and actions. Furthermore, the more practical interventions higher educational practitioners can implement for a growing population of Black athlete activists, the progress toward engaging in meaningful and safe experiences for this population can occur (George-Williams, 2019). The significance of ATSS lies in its potential to empower athlete activists, enabling them to navigate their unique challenges effectively and make impactful contributions to social activism.

Figure 1. *Key Features of Wraparound Services*



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Sport Social Work Journal

Culturally Competent Sport Social Work: A Practice Perspective

M. Daniel Bennett Jr.
University of Arkansas

The current discussion explores and advocates for the integration of cultural competency into sport social work practice. Cultural competency in sport social work provides a philosophical viewpoint that is rooted in theory and offers a framework for working with diverse populations within the athletic context. Cultural competence enhances sport social work practice by promoting understanding, effective communication, tailored interventions, equity, and social justice within the diverse landscape of sports.

Keywords: cultural competence, cultural humility, sport social work, student-athlete, health and well-being.

Cultural competency is a vital feature of social work practice. This also extends to sport social work. Cultural competency in sport social work provides a philosophical viewpoint that is rooted in theory and offers a framework for working with diverse populations within the athletic context. Cultural competency in sport social work draws on phenomenology, critical race theory (CRT), and existentialism to explore the lived experiences of athletes from diverse cultural backgrounds. Further, cultural competency allows for an exploration of the ways in which societal perceptions, institutional dynamics, and personal identity converge to potentially influence the mental health and well-being of athletes from under-represented and/or marginalized population groups.

Culturally Competent Sport Social Work

The field of sport social work continues to grow and expand (Newman et al., 2022). Social workers are uniquely positioned to serve as a complement to the athletic context by addressing the challenges of the athletic experience and providing athletes with the resources and support needed both on and off the field to thrive in all areas of life (Bennett, 2023). However, there is a dearth of research and attention to cultural competency within this field of practice.

The current discussion explores and advocates for the integration of cultural competency into sport social work practice with African American student-athletes at predominantly white institutions (PWI's) as a focal point.

Phenomenological Grounding

Utilizing phenomenological grounding in the context of sport social work practice with African American student-athletes at PWI's involves employing a framework that centers on the subjective lived experiences of those individuals. Phenomenology provides a foundation for culturally competent sport social work practice (Schmid et al., 2022). Thus, an exploration of the unique phenomenological world of the African American athlete that acknowledges the role of attitudes, perceptions, and lived experiences provides a means by which to better understand the potential challenges faced by many African American student athletes, particularly those at PWI's.

To be sure, the experience(s) of African American athletes is unique and one that has been largely influenced by racially biased attitudes and perceptions (Harrison et al., 2002). Prior research suggests that historically, the experiences of African Americans in the athletic context have been characterized by stereotypes, racism, discrimination, and alienation (Simiyu, 2012). Even more recent studies suggest that similar phenomena continue to influence the experience(s) of African American athletes, particularly those at PWI's (Oshiro et al., 2021; Armstrong & Jennings, 2018). And so, sport social work practitioners should acknowledge the (African American) student-athlete as a critical theorist in processing historical factors, contextual cues, and social conditions that either constrain or enlarge their experiences as student-athletes.

Critical Race Theory

To further enhance cultural competency, sport social work practitioners may find critical race theory (CRT) useful in analyzing the systemic and institutional dimensions of racial bias and discrimination. This perspective acknowledges that racism is ingrained into the fabric of society and its institutions of higher learning (Armstrong & Jennings, 2018; Cooper et al., 2017). As such, power dynamics and the perpetuation of racial stereotypes are thought to persist (Wilkerson et al., 2020). The application of CRT therefore allows for an examination of the ways in which racial bias and discrimination may influence the experiences of African American student athletes, shaping not only their social interactions but also potentially impacting their mental health status (Smikle & Trussell, 2024).

Existentialism

An existentialist lens may contribute to the efficacious practice of culturally competent sport social work by exploring the existential anxiety and identity struggles faced by many African American student athletes. The pressure to conform to racialized expectations (social and athletic) and stereotypes can in some instances lead to an existential crisis that challenges their sense of self and purpose. Existentialist concepts such as authenticity, freedom, and

responsibility thus become crucial in understanding how African American student-athletes navigate the landscape of a white institutional framework where their full humanity may not always be recognized (Whitehead & Senecal, 2020).

Dynamics of Cultural Competence

When They See Us

Identity development and formation are an important aspect of personal development. This of course extends to athletes. Prior research suggests that identity formation may pose unique threats for those athletes heavily invested in athletic success (Bennett, 2023). That is, for elite athletes, personal attributes such as determination, focus and commitment, along with high performance expectations may lead some to over invest in a personal identity that is defined by, and through athletic endeavors (Martin, Fogarty & Albion, 2014).

This approach may pose a unique threat to normal identity development and subsequently mental health. A well-established body of research suggests that crafting multiple positive identities is a common protective factor against mental illness (i.e. investing in more than one aspect of the self, such as being a successful student, professional, parent, and/or friend) (Thoits, 1991). And so, in the case of the (*elite*) student-athlete, the fewer identities one possesses, and the greater investment in those few identities, the greater the threat to mental health in the event one of those identities is compromised (Hoetler, 1983).

Identity development and formation may take on additional connotations within the context of race / ethnicity. Here, the intersectionality of race, gender, and athletic identity may play a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of African American student athletes (Howe, 2020). As such, examining this intersectionality is essential for better understanding the complexities of the lived experiences of African American student athletes.

Power and Glory

In addition to identity development and formation, culturally competent sport social work practice demands an acknowledgement of the power dynamics within PWI's. Further, one must also consider how recent events (e.g. name, image, &likeness) may have begun to challenge the traditional power structure. That is, historically, college athletes have been prohibited from profiting from their own name, image, and likeness (N.I.L) due to NCAA regulations. However, with the advent of NIL rights, student-athletes are now able to monetize their personal brands through endorsements, sponsorships, and other ventures.

This shift in power now allows athletes to directly benefit from their talents and popularity, thus challenging the traditional notion of amateurism and economically empowering student-athletes. However, this shift may come with increased performance expectations which to some extent may still be couched in racial stereotypes about black athleticism. And so, these racialized performance microaggressions may have a profound effect on student-athlete

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experiences. By analyzing and understanding these power dynamics, sport social workers can perhaps better comprehend the daily challenges faced by African American student athletes and the impact on their health and well-being.

A Holistic Approach to Athlete Health & Well-Being

Culturally competent sport social work practice must also include a holistic approach to health and well-being. This involves addressing not only individual physical and psychological factors, but also systemic and institutional factors that may contribute to poor outcomes for African American student-athletes. By fostering an athletic environment that embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion, sport social workers can effectively work towards alleviating the psychosocial burden carried by many African American student athletes.

Culturally competent sport social work practice, rooted in phenomenology, CRT, and existentialism, provides a nuanced understanding of how racialized contextual factors within PWI's adversely impact the health and well-being of African American student athletes. By embracing this multidimensional practice perspective, a more inclusive and supportive athletic environment may be created.

Challenging the Status Quo

However, it should be noted that the integration of culturally competent sport social work at predominantly white Division 1 college athletic programs is not without challenge. One of the primary challenges may be to ensure that staff members are culturally aware and sensitive to the needs and experiences of athletes from diverse backgrounds. Thus, the implementation of training programs and ongoing education may be necessary to develop such awareness and sensitivity among staff (Cooper et al., 2020).

Further, addressing implicit bias among staff members is imperative. Even well-intentioned individuals may hold subtle biases that negatively influence their interactions with athletes from different cultural backgrounds (Stensland et al., 2022; Moskowitz & Carter, 2018: Davis, 1994). Recognizing and mitigating these biases is a critical part of providing equitable support to all student-athletes.

Establishing a meaningful rapport and building trust between student-athletes and staff members is foundational to effective sport social work practice (Marsiglia et al., 2021). Hence, it is important to establish open and candid avenues for communication that acknowledge and respect athletes' cultural backgrounds and experiences. This can be challenging in environments where historically, certain population groups have been stereotyped and marginalized. Establishing rapport and building trust may be further complicated when student-athletes do not see themselves reflected among athletic department staff.

In addition to the qualitative and contextual aspects, PWI's may also need to allocate resources specifically for the implementation of culturally competent practices. This may include

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funding for training programs, hiring diverse staff members, and developing culturally relevant programming. To be sure, hiring a diverse staff that reflects the cultural and racial diversity of the student-athlete population is a vital part of providing a culturally competent and supportive environment (Shaw et al., 2019; Fink et al., 2001).

While the current discussion advocates culturally competent sport social work practice, it should be made clear that this is not to suggest that other core social work principles should be abandoned. Indeed, core social work practice principles can and should be adapted to the athletic context to improve health and well-being outcomes for student-athletes. Previous discussions have highlighted (student) athletes as a uniquely at-risk, and vulnerable population (Bennett, 2022). Social work may be adapted to the athletic context to address the personal and contextual influences that potentially affect athlete health and well-being (Bennett, 2023).

And so, the current discussion advocates cultural competence as a means by which to further enhance the efficacy and meaningfulness of sport social work. Cultural competency is vital in any field comprised of diverse populations. This includes athletics. Cultural competence enables sport social workers to acknowledge and understand the diversity within the athletic community.

While the current discussion has focused on the unique experience of the African American student athlete, cultural competence also extends to differences in race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and more. By understanding and embracing these differences, sport social workers may be better able to address the needs of the respective student athletes.

Competence Versus Humility

Cultural competence and cultural humility are important concepts within the field of social work, and this extends to the context of sport social work practice. It should be noted that both concepts are aimed at improving interactions and understanding between individuals from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. However, some have argued that there are subtle differences that should be acknowledged (Danso, 2018).

Cultural competence refers to the ability to effectively understand, communicate with, and interact with people from diverse cultures. Moreover, cultural competence involves acquiring specific knowledge about different cultural practices, beliefs, and values, as well as developing skills to navigate cross-cultural situations effectively (Danso, 2018). Cultural humility, on the other hand, may represent a more introspective and relational approach to cultural understanding. That is, it involves recognizing personal limitations as it relates to understanding other cultures and being amenable to learning from those whose experiences may differ from one's own (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015).

Unlike cultural competence, which may imply a level of mastery or expertise, cultural humility emphasizes an ongoing process of self-reflection, curiosity, and sincerity to

understanding others. Cultural humility also emphasizes building authentic relationships with individuals from diverse backgrounds, acknowledging power imbalances, and striving for equity and social justice (Lekas et al., 2020).

As it pertains to sport social work practice, cultural competency helps sport social workers develop strategies to engage with constituents of the athletic community who may be from diverse cultural backgrounds. Cultural competency may also enhance communication and understanding between the sport social worker and the client, thereby reducing the risk of cultural misunderstandings or biases, improving the delivery of services, and leading to more effective practice.

In the context of sport social work practice, cultural humility involves acknowledging that one can never fully understand or know everything about another person's culture and experiences. Therefore, this perspective would advocate for sport social workers to approach each interaction with a degree of humility, curiosity, and a willingness to listen and learn from the athletes as well as other stakeholders. In some ways, cultural humility may promote a more equitable relationship between the sport social worker and athlete, as it acknowledges their expertise and agency in defining their own experiences and needs. To be sure, both cultural competence and cultural humility are essential for effective sport social work practice. These concepts support culturally responsive and empowering practice efforts that meet the unique needs of athletes and other stakeholders in the athletic community.

Practical Implications

Once again, cultural competence and cultural humility loom large for efficacious sport social work practice. The integration of cultural competence and humility into sport social work practice allows practitioners to value the cultural nuances of athletes, establish trust, build rapport, and create a safe and supportive environment for athletes to discuss their challenges and seek assistance.

This practice perspective may also enable sport social workers to carry out practice and intervention efforts with consideration for the cultural beliefs, values, and practices of athletes. In some instances, this may involve modifying counseling techniques, communication styles, or intervention strategies to more effectively resonate with an athlete's sociocultural background.

Effective communication serves a key function in sport social work practice (Thompson, 2024). Cultural competence and humility also play an important role in facilitating meaningful interactions with athletes. Therefore, sport social workers should be proficient in effective cross-cultural communication strategies. This may include active listening, empathy, non-verbal communication, and other nuanced forms of communication to ensure that athletes feel understood and valued.

From an institutional perspective or vantage point, sport social workers must also be aware of the systemic inequities that may impact athletes from marginalized groups. This may

include limited diversity across the broader institution including faculty and/or staff outside of the athletic department. By incorporating cultural competence and cultural humility into sport social work practice, practitioners can better meet the needs of diverse athlete populations and contribute to their overall well-being and success both on and off the field.

Conclusion

Cultural competence allows sport social workers to tailor interventions to the cultural needs and preferences of athletes. Understanding cultural attitudes towards help-seeking can inform the design of interventions aimed at addressing psychosocial challenges prevalent among student-athletes.

And so, as the athletic enterprise continues to grow and expand, it will become increasingly important for sport social workers to be effective communicators with athletes from various cultural backgrounds. This involves being aware of and respecting cultural norms, beliefs, and modes of expression. Moreover, effective communication helps to foster trust and rapport between the social worker and the athlete, thus leading to better holistic outcomes.

Cultural competence is instrumental in the elimination of stereotyping and biases that may affect interactions with athletes. It requires recognition of one's own biases and prejudices. Therefore, it is imperative for sport social work practitioners to strive for cultural competence and continuously reflect on their beliefs and attitudes, thus ensuring that they do not allow any such biases to negatively influence their interactions with student-athletes. By recognizing their own biases and challenging stereotypes, sport social workers can help to provide more equitable and culturally sensitive support to student-athletes. Finally, cultural competence enhances sport social work practice by promoting understanding, effective communication, tailored interventions, equity, and social justice within the diverse landscape of sports.

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Sport Social Work Journal

Perspectives from Parents of Former Participants in a Sport-Based Positive Youth Development Program: Long-Term Life Skills Transfer

Travis R. Scheadler
The Ohio State University

Samantha Bates
The Ohio State University

Dawn Anderson-Butcher
The Ohio State University

There is growing evidence to support the value of sport-based positive youth development (PYD) programs in promoting holistic health and development of youth (Anderson-Butcher, 2019). However, few studies expand beyond participant self-report to examine whether life skills learned in sport-based PYD programs transfer beyond adolescence into adulthood. This qualitative study examined life skill transfer from the lens of 19 parents and caregivers by exploring perceptions of how former participants (e.g., their once adolescent and now adult children) applied and transferred a subset of specific life skills into other areas of their lives. Semi-structured interviews and thematic content analyses were conducted to identify emergent themes regarding examples and facilitators of life skill transfer. Parents described multiple ways their children applied life skills that were learned and/or reinforced while participating in a sport-based PYD program to work, school, and church, as well as when developing relationships, volunteering, and engaging in advocacy. Facilitators of life skill transfer also included exposure to new and diverse peers, opportunities to try new things, relationships with program staff, program incentives/reinforcements, opportunities for long-term engagement and retention, and parental involvement. Findings support the role of sport-based PYD in promoting long-term outcomes among youth as they grow and develop into adulthood.

Keywords: life skills development, life skills transfer, sport-based positive youth development

Positive youth development (PYD) involves a variety of youth-centered strategies (e.g., engaging in skill-building, fostering positive relationships, promoting youth voice and choice) to boost protective factors and minimize risk factors and problem behaviors among youth (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002). PYD programs aim to promote the successful transfer of life skills and key social competencies (e.g., referred to as life skills transfer) from the program to other contexts outside the program (e.g., home, school, relationships) (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Importantly, the goal of life skills transfer, defined as the process where a youth "internalizes a personal asset in [one context] and then experiences personal change through the application of the asset in one or more life domains" (Pierce et al., 2017, p. 194) is to achieve sustainable outcomes. The goal of these PYD programs is to teach life skills that can be transferred to other contexts and sustained throughout the lifespan.

One context well-suited to foster PYD and contribute to successful life skills transfer is sport (e.g., Newman, 2020). Among socially vulnerable and historically marginalized populations, sport can serve as a protective factor for strengthening moral development, solidifying one's personal values and goals, teaching life skills, and supporting long-term health and development (Hermens et al., 2017). When intentionally leveraged within a sport-based PYD program framework, sport can act as an intervention to enhance young people's assets and skills, counteract multiple systems of oppression affecting youth and their families, and enhance empowerment strategies they use, in tandem with skills learned in programming, to address inequities in their communities (Anderson-Butcher, 2019; Bates & O'Quinn, 2023). Further, from a critical PYD perspective, life skills can be used to support social justice (Camiré et al., 2022). For example, advocacy and activism efforts are considered important life skills that promote social justice and can be taught through sport-based critical PYD (Camiré et al., 2022).

Scholars have documented evidence of successful life skills transfer from sport-based PYD into schools, homes, church, video games, and other sports (Newman, 2020; Newman & Anderson-Butcher, 2021). Pierce et al. (2022) found youth practice self-control at school by remaining calm to focus on academic success and by avoiding problematic confrontations (e.g., potential fights). Moreover, access to sport-based PYD programs and long-term retention also can address structural inequities and promote social justice, especially for youth in underserved and historically marginalized communities (Bates & O'Quinn, 2023).

However, few studies capture the perspectives of parents or caregivers when assessing to what extent youth learn, apply, and transfer life skills learned through sport-based PYD programs into their adult lives. Parents/caregivers, hereafter referred to as *parents*, are uniquely situated to act as observers of life skills transfer after their children participate in sport-based PYD programming. Parents can witness their child's development before, during, and after participation in sport-based PYD programs and can, therefore, act as unique sources of data.

McSweeney (2021) and Riley and Anderson-Butcher (2012) examined parent perspectives of youth associated with participation in two different PYD programs. These two

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programs were effective at enhancing life skills among youth and that children's participation influenced parents. However, the authors focused on short-term outcomes (e.g., several months post-participation) rather than long-term outcomes related to life skills transfer into adulthood.

Notably, Kendellen and Camiré (2019) also interviewed parents, partners, and work colleagues of athletes. Results showed that decision-making, appraisal, and adaptation of a new context are important for life skills transfer. However, this study focused on university intramural athletes. As a result, more research is needed to contextualize investments in sport-based PYD programs. More research also is needed to develop a stronger understanding of life skills transfer into adulthood and to identify the factors that influence life skills transfer. The present study sought to examine the influence of a sport-based PYD program in promoting life skills transfer from the perspective of parents whose children participated in a program during adolescence and are now in young adulthood.

Life Skills Transfer

In the last decade, scholars in sport-based PYD have examined life skills transfer using a model postulated by Pierce and colleagues (2017). The model of life skills transfer emphasizes the roles of the individual learner as well as the learning and transfer contexts. Generally, the model states the individual learner (i.e., youth camper in the PYD program) develops life skills in the learning context (i.e., sport-based PYD program) and applies these life skills to the transfer context (e.g., school, work).

Personal factors, such as previous knowledge and motivation, and contextual factors, such as lived experiences, parents, and program staff, interact to affect the likelihood that a given skill (e.g., emotional regulation) is successfully applied to various transfer contexts (Pierce et al., 2017). To successfully transfer skills, scholars state the learner must recognize the importance of life skills and have the capabilities and interests to integrate them as new personal factors (Pierce et al., 2017). Meanwhile, learners also must be able to identify similarities between the learning and transfer contexts so they may successfully apply learned skills (Pierce et al., 2017).

Several studies document evidence of the life skills transfer model and successful strategies and factors that promote life skills transfer. Newman (2020) and McDonough et al. (2017) interviewed youth who described numerous ways they transferred life skills from a sport-based PYD program to other social settings. Youth mentioned transferring self-control, effort, grit, personal responsibility, communication, teamwork, respect, and social responsibility to school, home, other sport settings, video games, church, with friends, and out in public (Newman, 2020). Pierce et al. (2022) also found youth successfully transferred self-control from LiFE*sports* to school to avoid problems (e.g., abstain from engaging in fights with peers) and achieve success (e.g., maintain focus and stay quiet during tests). In relation to strategies and factors that promote skill transfer, scholars found conscious reflection, autonomy, confidence to use the skill, and perceived importance of the skill can promote life skills transfer (Kendellen & Camiré, 2019; Pierce et al., 2022). Further, strategies such as intentionally emphasizing life skills

transfer in curriculum and implementation efforts (Newman et al., 2021), providing a safe space to practice life skills (McSweeney, 2021; Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012), role modeling the skills, and providing constructive feedback are influential as well (Anderson-Butcher, 2019; Bean et al., 2022; McDonough et al., 2013; Newman et al., 2018).

Caring relationships also play a role in facilitating successful life skills transfer. Positive relationships with staff and peers, as well as a sense of belongingness, were shown to improve life skills development and transfer (McDonough et al., 2013; Newman et al., 2020; Riley et al., 2017). Program staff can promote life skills transfer by building relationships with youth, engaging them in meaningful experiences, and facilitating a sense of belongingness within a mastery climate (Riley et al., 2017). Bean et al. (2018) similarly argued adults can promote life skills transfer by fostering a positive environment and by discussing and practicing life skills in various contexts with youth. Beyond staff, support from peers, friends, and siblings also can enhance life skills development and transfer (Newman & Anderson-Butcher, 2021). Considered together, internal and external programmatic factors influence life skills transfer in the short-term. However, missing from these studies is an examination of life skills development and transfer from the lens of parents and perspectives captured after youth participate in the program and transition into adulthood. Indeed, a primary aim of PYD programs is to promote long-term healthy social development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), yet most research has been situated within a narrow timeframe post-participation (e.g., Newman, 2020; McDonough et al., 2017; Pierce et al., 2022). Researchers must examine the application of life skills beyond youth and into young adulthood to learn more about how sport-based PYD programs can result in sustainable long-term changes. Such knowledge can provide insight into how participation in sport-based PYD programs influences the healthy social development of young people. Parents can provide unique perspectives on the influence of sport-based PYD programs.

Parent Roles and Benefits

Parents can be sources of support to facilitate life skills transfer through sport (Kendellen & Camiré, 2019). Parents who provide warmth and clear and consistent expectations, are actively involved in youth's lives, and emphasize effort and personal growth, promote life skills development and transfer among their children (Dorsch et al., 2015; Knight et al., 2016). For instance, during car rides and meals, parents can promote life skills development and transfer by having conversations with their children about the lessons learned in school, sport, or PYD programs (Dorsch et al., 2015; Newman & Anderson-Butcher, 2021).

The need for life skills to combat environmental stressors is especially important for families experiencing the effects of poverty (Hermens et al., 201&). Parents can benefit from their children learning these skills in PYD programs. For example, Riley and Anderson-Butcher (2012) found sport-based PYD programs improved parent-child communication and parent affect, and in some cases, socially vulnerable parents adopted the prosocial norms and behaviors learned by their children.

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Existing studies on life skills transfer using parent perspectives primarily explore parent roles and experiences during the time periods directly after their children participate in sport-based PYD programming and not those beyond adolescence and into adulthood (McSweeney, 2021; Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012). Therein, the scope of existing research supports the role of sport-based PYD in promoting life skills transfer up to one-year post participation (i.e., Pierce et al., 2022; Newman & Anderson-Butcher, 2021). Nevertheless, understanding the role of sport-based PYD programs and associated long-term (i.e., more than one year later) life skills transfer remains an emerging research priority to advance this body of work (Newman, 2020; Pierce et al., 2017). Indeed, an examination of long-term life skill transfer will provide insight into the possible roles of sport-based PYD programs on the sustainability of healthy social development, an important goal of PYD programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). In addition, interviewing parents of young adults who formerly participated in a sport-based PYD program can be helpful toward providing a unique perspective of life skills transfer. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore parent perspectives of life skills transfer and factors that influence life skills transfer among former sport-based PYD program participants. (i.e., their former adolescent children who are now in early adulthood).

Methods

Positionality

The present study is grounded in ontological relativity. Specifically, ontological relativists believe reality and truth are subjective and multiple realities coexist simultaneously (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Indeed, cultural, historical, and other factors unique to individuals and communities should be considered when examining their experiences and truths (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Epistemologically, this study is guided by subjectivism, which suggests one reality is not possible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As such, the goal of this study was to develop a stronger understanding of the experiences of life skills transfer as well as the factors that promote healthy social development.

Moreover, a constructivist paradigm was adopted in the present study. We understand each parent and child have their own unique experiences and we play important roles in co-constructing knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Both parents and their children who formerly participated in LiFE*sports*, a sport-based PYD program described below, can provide different insights into how life skills have been transferred from LiFE*sports* to other contexts as young adults. In addition, the researchers directly impacted the study. The first author previously held an internship with LiFE*sports* where they worked with youth in learning and practicing life skills. The second and third authors continue to work with youth, parents, and staff in LiFE*sports* in multiple ways (e.g., leading staff training, teaching youth life skills).

The research team also has shared training and background in social work, holding values related to social justice and empowerment. Our direct experience in and knowledge of LiFE*sports* and social work directly informed our study questions, design, and analysis. These

shared backgrounds likely influenced what questions we asked of participants and how we interpreted the data. Other researchers may have asked different questions or may have emphasized examining certain factors of LiFE*sports* and/or other life skills that are implicit in the LiFE*sports* curriculum. Even though our positionality more than likely biased our study, our shared backgrounds in LiFE*sports* promoted rapport with participants. The interviewer easily connected with participants through their similar backgrounds in LiFE*sports*. Training in social work also allowed the researchers to be patient with participants, encourage discussion, and foster safety and inclusivity during the interviews.

Context

The present study focused on parents of young adults who formerly participated in LiFE*sports* a sport-based PYD program for youth from socially vulnerable circumstances aged 9-14 years of age (www.lifesports.osu.edu). The program integrates life skills and sport throughout a free 4-week summer camp, focusing intentionally on four key skills, including Self-Control, Effort, Teamwork, and Social Responsibility (S.E.T.S.). Youth attend the summer camp Monday through Friday from approximately 8 am to 3 pm each day. At LiFE*sports*, youth engage in a play-based, experiential social skill curriculum (called *Chalk Talk*) that focuses on learning and transferring S.E.T.S. to other settings beyond sport.

Youth participants also receive direct technical and tactical instruction in eight sports (e.g., soccer, football, lacrosse, volleyball). Throughout their engagement in the program, youth have opportunities to reflect on their S.E.T.S. learning and application, as well as are encouraged to apply their newly learned social skills in other social settings (i.e., home, school, recess). Additionally, youth receive positive behavioral incentives in the form of S.E.T.S. pins. Through this token economy system, coaches reward youth with pins when they observe them demonstrating S.E.T.S. at the program.

Youth also have opportunities to compete in the LiFE*sports* Games, a culminating event where they have opportunities to showcase their newly learned sport and life skills. Once the 4-week program ends, youth participate in follow-up sports clinics or "booster sessions," where they continue to refine and apply their sport and social skills. Approximately one booster session is offered per month between September and April. However, data related to who attends these sessions and how often they attend these sessions were not collected for this study.

Parents are invited to attend the LiFE*sports* Games and the booster sessions to cheer on their children as they demonstrate life skills and participate in sports. Parents are also provided with information about LiFE*sports* during parent orientations sessions prior to the start of the summer camp. Administrative staff are also available throughout the duration of the camp to address questions and concerns from parents, as applicable.

To date, approximately 800 youth from socially vulnerable circumstances participate in LiFE*sports* annually. Importantly, approximately 30-40% of youth return to the program each

year, so participants may attend the program for multiple years. After participating in LiFE*sports* and transitioning to high school, youth also become eligible for the Youth Leadership Academy (YLA), another PYD program focused on developing further life skills and getting past LiFE*sports*' participants prepared for college and career. Although YLA is not sport-based, YLA does include sport components. For example, youth leaders in YLA serve as mentors for youth during the LiFE*sports* summer camp. Please note youth are only eligible to participate in YLA if they have previously participated in the LiFE*sports* summer camp. Notably, though, the focus of the present study was on LiFE*sports* and not YLA, yet experiences within YLA could not be ignored. Indeed, many of the participants in the present study had children who were members of YLA. The participants recognized YLA as an extension of LiFE*sports* and, therefore, discussed the influence of both LiFE*sports* and YLA on their children throughout the interviews.

Participants

For the current study, parents with at least one child who was 18 years of age or older and previously participated in the LiFE*sports* summer camp for at least one year between 2010 and 2017 were eligible to participate in this study. Parents of former or current LiFE*sports* summer campers below the age of 18 were excluded as this study aimed to explore life skills transfer among young adults who previously participated in LiFE*sports*. Participants (N = 19) included 17 cisgender women and two cisgender men (e.g., pseudonyms Scott and Brandon) who were parents of children who previously participated in LiFE*sports*. All participants identified as Black/African American; one participant (Annalise) self-identified as Black/African American, Asian/Asian American, Latina/Hispanic American, and White. All parents were between 37 and 60 years old (M_{age} = 47.2). In addition, 11 of the parents in the present study had at least one child who also participated in YLA whereas eight parents did not have at least one child who also participated in YLA. Further, at the time of the interviews, the participants' children were between 4 and 10 years removed from LiFE*sports* (M = 7.89 years).

Procedures

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval for the present study, parents and caregivers of child(ren) who were in the LiFE*sports* summer camp between 2010 and 2017 were invited to participate in the study. Specifically, a list of 2,102 former campers included parents' contact information. Among these former campers, 1,393 either did not have a valid email address for their parent(s) listed or included the same email address as another former camper. The remaining 709 contacts were sent an email with information about the study and were told to contact the lead researcher if they had interest in participating. After expressing interest in participating, parents completed an online consent form and a brief demographic questionnaire.

Participants then completed semi-structured interviews via Zoom between March 2021 and March 2022. The interview guide was developed based on the curriculum and goals of LiFE*sports*. Additionally, two staff members in LiFE*sports* were consulted for feedback throughout the development of the interview guide. To start the interviews, participants were

asked to generally share what they remember about LiFE*sports* and then were asked what they remember about the life skills that LiFE*sports* teaches and reinforces. After participants shared what they remember about LiFE*sports*, the interviewer then highlighted the four key life skills LiFE*sports* focused on and provided definitions and additional information upon request. Reminding participants about S.E.T.S. was important to improve memory recall, especially given their children participated in LiFE*sports* approximately 4-10 years prior to the interviews.

Then, participants were asked about each life skill within S.E.T.S. More specifically, participants were asked about how their child(ren) used that skill shortly after participating in LiFE*sports* (e.g., "How did (name of child) use self-control shortly after participating in LiFE*sports*?"), how they have used that skill more recently (e.g., "How have they used effort more recently?"), how they believe LiFE*sports* influenced their current use of that skill (e.g., "What about LiFE*sports* do you think affected their teamwork today?"), and what else they believe impacted their child's use of that skill (e.g., "What else or who else do you think has affected their social responsibility?"). Following the series of questions about S.E.T.S., participants were asked about other ways LiFE*sports* may have influenced them and their child(ren) (e.g., "How do you think LiFE*sports* has impacted you and your family?"). Notably, participants were not asked explicitly about life skills transfer; rather they were asked about the concept of life skills transfer (examples of applying S.E.T.S. to other contexts and how LiFE*sports* influenced the application of S.E.T.S. to other contexts). This was done in effort to simplify language and foster relatedness during the interview process.

On average, interviews lasted 53 minutes and 14 seconds with a range of between 37 minutes and 14 seconds to 1 hour, 17 minutes, and 9 seconds. Participants received a $25 e-gift card to thank them for their time. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo 12 for data analysis. Data were collected until thematic saturation was reached at 17 interviews. Specifically, data were collected until no new information or discrepancies were uncovered and when interviewees began repeating similar experiences to the point of redundancy. An additional two interviews were conducted and confirmed saturation had been met.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used as a guide to data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved six steps. In the first step, the coder became familiar with the raw data by reading and re-reading the transcripts. Afterward, data were coded both deductively and inductively. More specifically, codes were first placed into a priori categories (e.g., self-control, effort, teamwork, social responsibility, facilitators, parental benefits) corresponding with the study's aims, the curriculum of LiFE*sports*, and the interview guide that was developed in conjunction with the research team and staff from LiFE*sports*. Data were then coded inductively within these theme areas, allowing the researcher to maintain an open mind when interpreting participants' experiences related to each category. After coding was completed, each theme was reviewed by returning to the data to ensure the themes accurately represented the participants' voices. Once

themes were reviewed, they were assigned names and defined. Finally, themes were organized, and exemplary quotes were selected to reflect the findings.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. First, the research team, which consisted of an intern with LiFE*sports* and two lead researchers with LiFE*sports*, reviewed the literature in sport-based PYD and consulted with staff in LiFE*sports* to conceptualize the study and ensure the aims were appropriate. Staff were also consulted throughout the development of the interview guide, as mentioned previously. In addition, the authors recorded their reflections in memos after each interview, which were used to help understand the data throughout the analysis. For instance, memoing helped the researchers identify similarities between participants' experiences and relationships between codes prior to conducting the data analysis. The process of memoing also facilitated communication between researchers and ensured consistency throughout the data collection and analysis processes. That is, writing memos served as reminders to discuss interesting quotes and early findings. Memos also were referred to ensuring the coding and themeing of the data corresponded to what was written in the memos.

Peer feedback was obtained through scheduled consultations with the research team, which consisted of three individuals trained and licensed in social work (Padgett, 2016). The research team met biweekly to examine the codes, themes, and quotes to check for misinterpretations and/or gaps in the data. To check for misinterpretations, the research team would discuss the plausibility of alternative explanations for the quotes from the participants. The research team also raised questions amongst each other about areas that need further exploration with additional interviews. The interviewer utilized these discussions to carefully identify follow-up questions to achieve a more in-depth understanding during the interviews with participants.

All participants were then invited to engage in member reflections as an attempt to address possible misconceptions and provide additional insight into the experiences of the participants (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Three participants agreed to meet with the research team to engage in member reflections. They agreed with the researchers' interpretations of their experiences and stated they have no additional information to share (Padgett, 2016; Smith & McGannon, 2018). Combined, these strategies helped to strengthen interpretations of the data.

Results

Three primary themes emerged through our inductive data analysis strategy, including (a) *Protective Factors Associated with Program Participation*, (b) *Facilitators of Life Skills Transfer*, and (c) *Examples of Life Skills Transfer.* These themes and their respective subthemes, along with exemplar quotes from the parent participants, are shared below.

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Protective Factors Associated with Program Participation

Parents mentioned several protective factors associated with their child's participation during the interviews that are important to note within the literature on sport-based PYD programs. These protective factors are particularly important to mention in the context of the present study because parents believed they created a safe, inclusive, and accessible environment conducive to developing and practicing life skills, an important precursor to life skills transfer.

Parents described the benefit of financial relief, especially given the program was free and provided breakfast, supervision, and transportation. Unique, for example, shared:

> The fact that LiFE*sports* is free and it has all of these other elements kind of added into it. What it did for us is allow us to save money and use that and reinvest it into our kids, so whether that was, hey, this one needs a tutor or that one needs braces, or we have to pay for these unexpected medical costs, or it's even something as simple as my kid wants to play football and our school district is pay to play…[LiFE*sports*] allows parents who are raising kids to save money for other things, whether it's putting food on the table and electric bill, getting medicine, or paying fees for band, football equipment, or college applications. It's expensive raising children. It's a blessing to have [LiFE*sports*] in our city.

Parents also mentioned how the program gave them a sense of relief, as they didn't worry so much about their children. They described how LiFE*sports* gave their children something to do over the summer, kept them "out of the streets," and served to connect their child with peers in prosocial ways. Faith, for instance, explained LiFE*sports* afforded her child the opportunity to develop positive relationships with peers around the city, allowing them to safely navigate different neighborhoods when they were in high school and now as a young adult. She said:

> I don't worry about my children becoming statistics of gun violence because somebody recognizes them. "Hey, you can't hurt that kid. That's my friend from LiFE*sports*." You know, I think that it gives a greater sense of belonging to the community.

She continued, recalling a time when another former camper recognized her son from when they participated in LiFE*sports* as campers together. She suggested experiences like this help give her peace of mind and ensure that her children will not be involved in gun violence. Faith said:

> It was just like, oh my God. The kid remembered [my son] from LiFE*sports*…When my kids are out on the north side or the south side, I don't fear for them because I know somebody knows them being able to draw these children from all four corners of the city and them to interact with each other. Well you don't kill your friend. You know, you don't kill your teammate, and kids today they don't call each other brother or they don't call each other friends. They're bro…Well, you don't kill your brother, and so having a sense of community, it's going to take our young people to change that.

That is, participants believed LiFE*sports* created a safe environment and provided youth with a community, allowing them to focus on life skills development and transfer rather than on other risks they might be exposed to throughout society such as gun violence, substance abuse, and lack of food.

Facilitators of Life Skills Transfer

Parents reported on important facilitators of their child's life skills transfer post-program participation while reflecting on their children's behaviors in adulthood, including exposure to new and diverse peers, opportunities to try new things, relationships with program staff, receipt of program incentives/reinforcements, opportunities for long-term engagement and retention, and parental involvement.

Exposure to New and Diverse Peers

Facilitators often referenced specific strategies used within the LiFE*sports* program. For instance, 18 participants mentioned the focus on belonging and engagement of youth from different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds living in different parts of the city allowed campers to meet new people and develop life-long relationships. Parents said putting their kids in teams with diverse groups of peers and staff taught their children how to engage in teamwork and act more socially responsible. Domino, for example, said:

> She didn't have that much diversity in the schools that she was going through and things like that. And so, she wasn't exposed to a diverse group of people until LiFE*sports*, and I think having that exposure to that diverse group of people and their interaction with her being positive gave her the foundation to just basically understand that people are people.

Ebony expanded upon this, tying exposure to diversity from LiFE*sports* to S.E.T.S. She said:

> I think just being around different people from different sides of town and see it just made you look at people's situations different and I realized that, even though this person may act a certain way doesn't mean that they're a bad person. You know, when I grew up, if you are gay, that meant that you were weak, and she could see them in LiFE*sports* for like a week or so. I think those different areas and meeting different people allowed her to be more socially responsible about how she acts.

In addition, inclusion within a diverse group of people helped boost S.E.T.S. by making campers feel more welcomed. Specifically, Black youth were no longer outliers to others when they were at camp. Ava shared:

> A lot of times in the camps that they went to they were the only Black kids most of the time, and so, if [my daughter's] hair was braided, it would be like this big thing and not a

> bad thing. I mean the kids never had any problems with any of the kids at the camps they went to…It was like a big deal to come to camp with their hair braided and, if [my son] came, he has these little sponge things, so his hair's funny, like not dreads or locks but just kind of different and that they stand out in other camps and they go to LiFE*sports* camp, and that's nothing. It's like they might get a compliment actually on their hair as opposed to "Ew, what did you do?" or "You should comb that out."

Opportunities to Try New Things

Sixteen parents also described the importance of exposure to new experiences. For example, being exposed to college encouraged campers to start considering college and improved attitudes toward The Ohio State University. Additionally, playing lacrosse was new for many youths. For Ebony's daughter, learning lacrosse at LiFE*sports* led to other opportunities. That is, her daughter enjoyed the exposure to lacrosse so much that she continued playing the sport, which led to increased opportunities to receive a college education. She said, "She ended up getting a partial scholarship to go play lacrosse…She went to [a different school], which that's where she truly wanted to go and play lacrosse." Also, when asked how LiFE*sports* influenced her child, Faith shared:

> [Through LiFE*sports*], he learned that I can try things that I don't necessarily think I like and find out that I'm actually good at them, so it made him really open to try foreign things or being willing to say, "okay I'm not familiar with that, but at least I'll try it." He's really not uncomfortable with anything. There's nothing that he won't try.

These new experiences provided their children with new transfer contexts and promoted greater effort, facilitating the ease of life skills transfer from the learning context to other contexts.

Relationships with Program Staff

Other factors that promoted life skills transfer, according to the participants, included positive and authentic support from staff. Thirteen participants highlighted the importance of staff support toward life skills transfer. Not only did staff provide encouragement and mentorship toward youth, but staff also maintained their relationships with campers as they developed into young adults. Staff members often served as mentors for former campers even as they aged out of LiFE*sports*. More specifically, staff members continued to stay in contact with former campers via text messages, informal meetings, and other programming opportunities (e.g., YLA). When asked how LiFE*sports* has influenced his son's use of S.E.T.S., Scott described some of the ways staff engaged with his son:

> They were still reaching out to the kids during this pandemic…They were still wanting to interact with these kids because this pandemic was kind of hard and my kids kind of missed, like last year, not being able to go to be around each…Seeing those email messages and text messages coming from their coaches like, okay, people still believe in

> me. That I think is great for the community, knowing that there's someone that's still there, regardless, that someone's still looking out for you and wants the best [for you].

That is, Scott implied that support from staff encouraged former campers to continue to use S.E.T.S. Indeed, staff checked in with former campers and explicitly reminded them about the importance of S.E.T.S. throughout life.

Program Incentives/Reinforcements

S.E.T.S. pins, which are tangible incentives for successfully applying one of the four key life skills taught in the program, also encouraged youth to practice social skills, and helped youth and parents remember the skills. Most parents talked about these program design features relative to when their child was in the program. However, the pins also sparked conversations between youth and their parents which in turn facilitated transfer at home and over years. Unique explained:

> I remember the kids being really excited and proud when they had earned one and then, for me as a parent, even though I couldn't remember them now, I would look at whichever one they had earned for that particular day and, to me, it means that they did something well and that there was some sort of excitement around them earning those particular buttons and then I also remember it as a reminder to kind of give them kudos like "oh, look you did that. That's good and you worked really hard,' and it helps spur conversation about their day and what they did during the day. "What did you do to earn that?" And so, it helped kind of us strengthen our bond between our sons and us as parents and gave them an opportunity to brag a little bit about themselves and be proud about something that they have worked hard on.
>
> In addition, some parents tried making their expectations clear by discussing S.E.T.S.

with their children and hanging up LiFE*sports* memorabilia around the house. Annalise, for example, still has a LiFE*sports* lanyard with S.E.T.S. hanging up at home. The parents' buy-in to the program goals and reinforcing S.E.T.S. learning and application outside of the program were important transfer facilitators and were initiated by providing program memorabilia and other incentives. According to these participants, providing more opportunities for parents may help children experience more benefits from engaging in LiFE*sports*. They also might further engage parents as facilitators of life skills transfer at home and post-program participation.

Opportunities for Long-Term Engagement and Retention

Participation in YLA further boosted life skills transfer by providing young people with additional opportunities to refine and practice social skills in safe settings. Participants saw YLA as an extension of LiFE*sports*, which is understandable given youth must have participated in LiFE*sports* to be eligible for participation in YLA, as described above. Even when not prompted to discuss YLA, parents chose to describe the influence of the leadership program on their

children. In other words, parents in this study argued YLA is a useful component of LiFE*sports* that promotes life skills transfer.

According to the participants, retention through long-term participation in the YLA was especially helpful with transferring social responsibility. In fact, Jennifer stated that she gives YLA "90% of the credit for the social responsibility part." Annalise then provided more details:

> I do remember they did service projects with LiFE*sports,* and I know that she had to be a part of something bigger than herself. So, having those opportunities, working with a group, and putting forth effort, and the caliber of kids that did not just LiFE*sports*, but YLA. That's when it really started changing [my daughter]. The YLA. So that was really where, to me, she saw her effort pay off. I mean, that has a special soft spot in my heart.

Applications of Life Skills

Parents shared stories of how former campers have used life skills throughout young adulthood. This theme was divided into four subthemes emerging due to the intentional program focused on S.E.T.S. (i.e., self-control, effort, teamwork, and social responsibility).

Self-Control

According to the parents in this study, children who were former participants displayed self-control in adulthood while working, attending school, managing relationships, addressing discrimination, and navigating social justice conversations. For example, five participants described how their children used self-control at work to maintain strong customer service at work. Specifically, Ivy shared:

> My daughter works with a leasing agent, and so you get irate callers because of the situation they're in during their apartment, and so people irate in their calling, so instead of her reciprocating that madness back at them, she's learned over the years, gradually and through the help of LiFE*sports*, cannot lash back out.

Brittney shared how her child used self-control when faced with discrimination at work:

> There was a little girl who was white and she kept saying the word, "you're a [explicit]. You're a [explicit]," and so kids they hear it, they see it, they repeat it, right? So [my daughter] said, "that word is not nice," and so she talked to her…She's such a loving and caring person, and so, once she talked to the little girl, then I think she understood that wasn't a good word, and so I think that was a very good example of self-control.

Similarly, parents shared examples of how their children remained calm and focused during school and in relationships with friends, roommates, and family members. Charlotte, for example, shared:

> With him being in school I know he dealt with the situation where we did have a loss in the family and it affected him pretty bad…He went to his professors and he reached out. He said, "hey, I'm struggling. This is what's going on. What steps do I take…because I know that my grades are going to be impacted?" And so, when he came to me, he told me what he did and then one of his professors didn't respond back the way that you think that people should and he was really upset about that. He said, "instead of me lashing out, sending a derogatory email or kind of counteracting back that energy," he said, "I just wrote her back. I simply asked if there's a grace period. What else can I do?" He was like, "I still just was positive about everything."

Seven parents also believed their children displayed self-control because they had no criminal records and/or had not been involved in fights. Brandon said, "I haven't seen him in a fight. So, to me, I feel like they're well versed in trying to minimize their involvement in altercations." Myah also stated, "They don't have a criminal history. No drug use, no alcohol abuse. You know, good neighbors."

Effort

Parents shared many ways their children showed strong effort as young adults. Most commonly, they reported their children showing effort in school, work, and other sports. Fifteen parents provided examples of effort in school. For instance, Domino shared:

> She's taking Spanish now and, I say her effort is like top notch. The girl is like a regular student making her flash cards, but really wanting to put the effort out to get not just a good grade, but the best grade that she can get.

Eleven participants shared examples of effort at work. Annalise reported:

> [She] definitely gives a very good effort. In fact, her manager…the post office she just started there. He did her 30-day [evaluation] and she got satisfactory all across the board and the manager told her, "I never give those satisfactories to somebody in their first 30 days."

In addition, when asked about how their children have used effort recently, eight participants described ways their children put effort into other sports and exercise as young adults. Ava, for example, said her children became more proactive about exercising after they participated in LiFE*sports*. She said, "they just might be a little bit more self-motivated like, 'mom let's go run a mile or two.' So, you know, they might be proactive about it." Others shared their children currently play or recently played various team sports (e.g., basketball, lacrosse), which require effort and persistence.

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Teamwork

Participants explained that former campers demonstrate strong teamwork at home and in relationships, work, other sports, school, and church. Indeed, 14 participants described how families resemble teams and require teamwork. Many of these participants talked about household chores and helping take care of each other. Brittney recalled when everyone in the house except Deja (her daughter) tested positive for COVID-19. She said Deja was "around the house helping me out and making sure that I was getting my medicine and eating and things like that." Domino talked about opening a business that allowed her daughter, Ashley, to demonstrate teamwork:

> I started a business in the last year and she definitely, even though I felt like the mom that was like forcing her to jump into this business that I decided to start, she definitely knew that it was going to take a team for me to reach my goals and…she can do like social media. She definitely understood that her part to play was important…[It] wasn't her favorite thing to do…She definitely knew that she had a responsibility on the team and knew that if she didn't do her part, then the team as a whole and the business wouldn't move forward, so she jumped in.

Eight participants also mentioned their adult children now use skills related to teamwork they learned at LiFE*sports* in their jobs. For example, Vanessa reflected by stating:

> My daughter works for Raisin' Canes. Man, she felt like a team lead, so she's been able to open up several stores and train people to open up the stores, on how to run the cash register, and learn the drive thru…They take the initiative of 'okay we're going to learn this skill and then I'm going to show others and bring them along.'

Relatedly, two parents mentioned that their children have used teamwork to create and maintain non-profit organizations. Charlotte said her child was in the process of collaborating with others to create his own non-profit to provide support for communities lacking resources. Dorothy also shared her son founded a theater company with a group of friends. She said, "That core group started their own production company once they graduated. So, they have a production company where they put on plays like every summer, usually children's plays, and they do it at the performing arts center downtown."

According to the parents, former campers also transferred teamwork to other sports. Eight participants, for example, said their children now use teamwork in other sports like basketball. Ava said, "even if she was on the bench, she would root her teammates on." When asked about when her son uses teamwork, if at all, Jennifer said, "he's on a recreational team and that comes straight from people he's met from LiFE*sports*." That is, according to Jennifer, teamwork is required to play a team sport with other people.

Social Responsibility

Parents described a few ways their children have recently demonstrated social responsibility. Most notably, eight parents said their children engage in advocacy-related behaviors such as posting on social media, holding conversations, public speaking, and voting. They credited these actions to their children's LiFE*sports*' involvement. Scott said:

> [My son] is like a person that has a very high speaking platform, so when there was a lot of the things going on with the Black Lives Matter, [he] was one of the people that was there. You know, helping with the peaceful protest, was able to speak up, and he wanted to be in the forefront…He's not afraid to back off and speak his mind.
> Six others also shared details about their children's volunteering and philanthropy efforts.

Ivy, for instance, shared, "We volunteer at a homeless shelter. We serve food, we cook the food here, and we go, and we serve the food to the homeless individuals." She said her children also volunteer on their own at different camps, schools, and shelters. In addition, her son also started a scholarship fund for low-income youth from single-parent households. Conversely, five participants mentioned how their children actually lacked social responsibility. These parents highlighted situations where their children displayed poor interpersonal skills at work, refused to follow rules, and engaged in arguments and physical fights. Brittney recalled a time when her daughter called her while she was at work:

> She called us and said, "mom, I'm about to get in a fight." I'm like, "you're at work. What are you talking about?" "This kid's trying to fight me." I'm like, "now, you are at work and you cannot put your hands on anybody."

That is, despite learning about S.E.T.S. at LiFE*sports*, some parents described how their adult children struggled to engage in socially responsible behaviors during conflicts with others due to environmental risks and forces that impacted their ability to self-regulate. Notably, in these situations, former campers seemed to lack both social responsibility and self-control.

Discussion

Sport-based PYD programs function with the hope of creating sustainable changes in youth as they transition through adolescence into adulthood (Anderson-Butcher, 2019). The purpose of the present study was to explore life skills transfer and factors that influence life skills transfer among former campers of one sport-based PYD program from the perspective of parents. The present study contributes to a growing body of research related to life skills transfer in numerous ways, which are described below.

The present study expands upon previous studies that have investigated short-term life skill transfer (Bean et al., 2022; McDonough et al., 2017; Newman, 2020; Newman & Anderson-Butcher, 2021; Pierce et al., 2022) by highlighting ways in which former LiFE*sports* campers

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apply S.E.T.S. into their lives as young adults, 4-10 years post-participation. Results demonstrate specific examples shared by parents and caregivers about how their adult children continue to display self-control, effort, and teamwork at work, school, home, church, and in the community. Parents noted the numerous ways transfer occurred, including addressing discrimination, managing relationships with peers and co-workers, helping with chores and family responsibilities, or simply remaining calm to avoid trouble. More specifically, they reported that their now adult children continued to demonstrate effort, work hard, overcome challenges, take initiative, and demonstrate social responsibility through their volunteer work, advocacy, continued sport involvement, volunteerism, and, in some cases, non-profit work. Findings align with prior research denoting the transfer of life skills beyond sport and into life (Bean et al., 2015; Newman, 2020); however, our results expand our understanding of the timeframe in which transfer continues beyond adolescence.

Also, the present study corroborated research on protective factors related to and facilitators of life skills transfer. Specifically, prior research noted conscious reflection, autonomy, confidence, perceived importance of the skill, a safe space to practice life skills, role modeling of the skills, constructive feedback and support, positive relationships with staff and diverse peers, and a sense of belongingness each promote life skills transfer (Kendellen & Camiré, 2019; McSweeney, 2021; Newman et al., 2018; Pierce et al., 2017; Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012).

The present study produced comparable results. Findings provide further support that feelings of safety, support, positive relationships with staff and diverse peers, and a sense of belongingness all promote life skills transfer. For instance, parents mentioned how life skills transfer occurred because their children felt a sense of belonging and connection with staff at the program, as well as adopted prosocial behaviors and norms through incentives (cf. Anderson-Butcher et al., 2021; Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012). Interestingly, the parents also mentioned how they personally learned S.E.T.S. from their children and, in turn, modeled these behaviors for their children, which furthered transfer. They also gave specific examples of setting expectations for their children to demonstrate S.E.T.S. at home, and they reinforced application beyond sport. These strategies mirror effective design strategies shown to promote life skills development in sport-based PYD programs (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2021) and point toward ways parents can truly maximize and reinforce learning to ensure skills extend beyond participation, become familial norms, and are applied in adulthood.

Interviews with parents also suggest opportunities for continued engagement in PYD programming throughout adolescence is important. YLA was noted as an important extension of LiFE*sports* which allowed their children to continue learning and getting support for life skills transfer. Participants believed YLA was particularly important for promoting the transfer of social responsibility. More research is needed to better understand the factors of LiFE*sports* and YLA that differentially influence life skills transfer, especially related to social responsibility.

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Moreover, most research in life skills transfer from sport-based PYD programs centers the perspectives of the campers. For example, Newman (2020) and Newman and Anderson-Butcher (2021) paired semi-structured interviews with photo-elicitation methods to explore life skills transfer of thirteen youth who participated in LiFE*sports*. Although providing space for individuals to share their own perspectives is important, there is also value in interviewing parents about their perspectives on how their children have (or have not) successfully transferred life skills from sport-based PYD to other settings. Few studies, though, have previously explored the perspectives of parents to understand the benefits of sport-based PYD (e.g., McSweeney, 2021; Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012). As such, the present study contributes to the larger body of life skills transfer by centering the perspectives of parents of former campers in LiFE*sports*.

Another important finding of the present study relates to the complex roles and experiences of parents. Prior research has found poverty can increase parental stress, limit access to resources, and inhibit parents' abilities to provide warmth and affection (Duncan et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2016). Youth participation in sport-based PYD programs, though, can provide parents with peace of mind that their children are safe and not involved in criminal activity and can promote parent-child communication (McSweeney, 2021; Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012). Other scholars have argued parents can play roles in promoting life skills transfer by holding conversations with children and role-playing life skills (Dorsch et al., 2015; Newman & Anderson-Butcher, 2021). Participants in our study described how greater capital built through relationships with diverse peers in LiFE*sports* resulted in parents feeling a "sense of relief" during and after their child(ren) participated, giving them peace of mind and a sense of broader social support. Given LiFE*sports* serves youth who are socially vulnerable, safety and stronger relationships among peers in the community are likely assets that help youth and families navigate interpersonal and structural risks (e.g., violence, bullying, etc.). Thus, beyond relational and programmatic factors facilitating life skills transfer reported by parents found in Riley and Anderson-Butcher's study (2012), bringing together diverse youth from across the community can serve as a protective factor that supports PYD beyond participation in programming.

Beyond existing facilitators of transfer, our study also points toward opportunities to improve sport-based PYD programs to further facilitate life skills transfer. Some parents mentioned how their children use S.E.T.S. to address discrimination and promote social justice while others shared how their children fail to apply S.E.T.S.—especially social responsibility—to new contexts as young adults. In addition, while parents mentioned their children felt safe at LiFE*sports* and the staff were "authentic," many felt programs could do more to address social conditions their children face daily in their neighborhoods. Indeed, parents described worries of their children becoming involved in gun violence. As such, more work is needed to promote life skills transfer of social responsibility and to promote social justice actions among LiFE*sports* campers. Also, more work is needed to help youth learn conflict resolution strategies to better navigate the growing violence in their neighborhoods while also continuing to invest in programs like LiFE*sports* that allow youth to build relationships with diverse peers, access safe

environments during out-of-school-time, and relieve the financial burden of camps and sports on socially vulnerable and historically marginalized families.

Limitations

Although rich information was gleaned from the parents in this study, the study findings should be interpreted with caution. Foremost, the study only examined the perspective of parents. Understanding the experiences from the past participants' perspectives would also provide key insights. Further, selection effects exist. The parents in this study were positive about their child's involvement in the sport-based PYD program, as well as on their child's life skills transfer. Other parents of perhaps children who did not have such good experiences are missing from this analysis. Relatedly, little information was collected on the actual children of the parents who participated in the study, outside of just the fact they participated in the program for at least one year. Better understanding of their involvement in relation to dosage would help better inform facilitators and outcomes. Additionally, the study only explored one sport-based PYD program. LiFE*sports* has a very intentional focus and program design. As such, findings are not necessarily generalized to other programs. The present study also explored facilitators of life skills transfer without giving attention to barriers of life skills transfer. In fact, barriers to life skills transfer are often not explored. More research is needed to develop a stronger understanding of barriers to life skills transfer. Lastly, due to the nature of this study, we cannot determine direct causation. The involvement in this sport-based PYD program may be just one of the many factors that encouraged the application of life skills post-program participation. There is a high likelihood that the children of the participants learned and refined S.E.T.S. and other social skills in many contexts. Longitudinal studies would need to further explore these direct impacts, as well as the influence of other social settings on life skills development and transfer over the course of development.

Conclusion

Parent perspectives gleaned through this study on the long-term transfer of life skills among their children provide additional support for the value of sport-based PYD programs. Insights from parents of past participants shed light on various facilitators of long-term application and call for programs to address the various social conditions youth intentionally from socially vulnerable circumstances are exposed to on a regular basis (especially in urban communities). Ultimately, this study furthers our understanding of how parents perceive the benefits of participation and how access to community sport programs can increase protective factors for youth long-term, especially socially vulnerable and historically marginalized youth.

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Doping Self-Regulatory Efficacy Among Elite Athletes in Nigeria

Victor Olowoleni
Kogi State University

Adedeji Tella
University of Ibadan

Olufemi Agegbola Adegbesan
University of Ibadan

Olawumi Adisa
University of Ibadan

Ade Fatai Adeniyi
University of Ibadan

J O Ayorinde
University of Ibadan

Titilola S Akingbola
University of Ibadan

Grace T Adetoye
University of Ibadan

John O Ayorinde
University of Ibadan

Olaitan Johnson Balogun
Stellenbosch University

The increasing gains attributed to sports motivate athletes to strive for victory by any means, including doping. This study seeks to ascertain the doping self-regulatory efficacy of elite athletes in Nigeria. The descriptive survey design guided the study with 206 elite athletes (mean = 26.3 years, ±12.20) from across the six geographical zones of Nigeria voluntarily participating in the study. Athletes signed informed consent, and confidentiality was rigorously maintained after ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Committee of the University of Ibadan. ANOVA, Pearson (r), and Cramer's V tested all hypotheses for the relationship and the extent of such associations. Findings revealed a strong relationship across age and gender ($F(3, 202) = 2.74$, $p = 0.044$) when athletes were encouraged to enhance their performance but a weak association with sports category ($\phi c = 0.100$). Doping self-efficacy indicated a weak-negative correlation with age ($r = -.066$, $p = .93$, $p < .05$) but a weak-positive relationship with gender ($r= .066$, $p= .3463$). The study concludes that athletes in Nigeria demonstrate a high doping self-efficacy in avoiding doping, regardless of stressors.

Keywords: banned substance, doping, elite athletes, likelihood to dope, self-regulatory efficacy

It is imperative to underscore the novelty of our research, which centers on the efficacy beliefs of Nigerian athletes regarding doping. This area has been unexplored, and our study aims to address this significant gap. Doping is the use of any illegal substance that gives athletes an undue advantage in competition. In athletics, it is a complex issue that affects athletes from diverse cultural backgrounds, including Nigerian athletes. It is important to note that individual perspectives may vary within any culture. Athletes social and psychological variables, encompassing cultural appreciation of natural talent, ethical considerations, societal norms (Buckley et al., 2021; Naidoo & Wills, 2016; Nolte et al., 2014; Stoyel et al., 2021), and lack of resources, play a crucial role in their decision-making regarding adherence to the ethical standards of sports (Barkoukis et al., 2019; García-Grimau et al., 2022).

Self-efficacy regulation portrays athletes' control of their attitudes and intentions. Doping self-efficacy regulation of athletes, when understood, helps in understanding their intentions. Ordinarily, a positive athletic environment- with knowledgeable ASPs, seminars, and sensitizations on doping sanctions- should foster a negative attitude towards doping (Backhouse et al., 2015; Kitsantas et al., 2017). Despite the positive environment and existing laws across various countries and federations, there is rarely a sports season not marred with scandals. The likelihood of doping is predicted by athletes' attitudes towards doping, which rely on their self-regulatory efficacy (Ntoumanis et al., 2014; Šukys, 2018).

Literature (Girelli et al., 2020; LaBotz & Griesemer, 2016; Nicholls et al., 2016) revealed that doping is a worldwide public health concern that affects individuals of all ages, particularly the younger generation and that it affects not just top athletes but also those who participate in amateur and recreational sports and occupations that need peak performance. However, a variety of factors contribute to the doping problems in sports today, including financial gain, previous doping incidents, an exaggerated sense of commonality, knowledge, attitude, environmental allure, sponsorship, task difficulty, and injuries(Adegbesan et al., 2023; Blank et al., 2016; Dunn et al., 2020; Lazuras et al., 2010; Woolway et al., 2020).

Primarily, anti-doping education programs aim to change athletes' attitudes toward doping (Lucidi et al., 2017). Therefore, arming oneself with adequate knowledge of the pros and cons of doping early enough results in the ability to either resist or support it. The research focus has been identifying the risk of protective factors against doping behavior or integrating these into preventive measures (Blank et al., 2016; Ntoumanis et al., 2017). However, their intentions (athletes) and belief systems still need to be tapped- especially in developing nations. Low knowledge of crucial anti-doping control systems led to a perceived lack of self-efficacy to collaborate with players on doping-related issues (Adegbesan et al., 2024; Engelberg et al., 2019; Šukys, 2018).

African cultures often emphasize the value of natural talent, hard work in sports, believing that success should be achieved through dedication, discipline, and the development of

inherent abilities. This perspective appreciates athletes who rely on their natural skills and training rather than resorting to artificial means like doping (Adegbesan et al., 2024; Naidoo & Wills, 2016; Nolte et al., 2014). Cheating through doping is seen as a violation of fair competition and a betrayal of the spirit of sportsmanship. Like other regions, African athletes are expected to embody the principles of fair play and integrity (Nolte et al., 2014). Athletic doping can have significant social consequences, especially within African cultures, where sports are viewed as a path to social advancement and a source of inspiration for the youth. If African athletes are found using performance-enhancing drugs, it could tarnish the reputation of the entire African sporting community and discourage future generations from participating in sports (Stoyel et al., 2021). In Nigeria, concerns about doping include cultural infringements, privacy violations, and a potentially compromised testing environment due to the involvement of athlete support staff (ASP). Additionally, traditional doping tests may inflict psychological distress, suffering, and humiliation (Adegbesan et al., 2023). Therefore, when developing global legislation, the peculiarity of athletes, as suggested by earlier stated variables, should be considered, as athletes are not predisposed to the same opportunities.

Adopting legal sanctions embedded in the criminal laws of some developed countries (Australian Crime Commission (ACC), 2013; Westmattelmann et al., 2018) against doping in developing countries like Nigeria, aside from those stated in the World Anti-Doping Code (WADC), could serve as a deterrent for athletes. These laws are considered a more significant deterrent than sports-related sanctions alone (Blank et al., 2021; Sumner, 2017). This was further buttressed by Mallia and colleagues in 2016, who reported that German team athletes resist the social pressure associated with doping use. The revised World Anti-Doping Code (Article 10.6.1) supports a whistleblower policy for athletes to uncover anti-doping rule violations by offering the possibility of reducing the length of their sanctions or even wholly removing them (WADA, 2015). This policy has reduced doping but has insignificant effect among cohesive teams where officials and sponsors support the act, leading to graver sanctions (e.g., the Russian Olympic delegation).

Although athletes' knowledge of doping is essential, assessing their attitudes towards doping is also vital since doping intentions primarily rely on individual values. In the same vein, literature (Girelli et al., 2020; Ntoumanis et al., 2017; Kavussanu & Ring, 2017) identified positive attitudes toward doping, morality, and self-efficacy to resist doping as some of the most potent psychological predictors of doping intentions and behaviors. It is essential to note that these beliefs can vary widely among individual athletes, as their perspectives can be shaped by numerous factors: firsthand experiences, cultural influences, and the broader sporting context (Petróczi & Strauss, 2015; Šukys, 2018). Therefore, their dispositions, precarious events, and conformity or compliance with anti-doping ethics predict the likelihood of using banned substances and the self-regulatory efficacy athletes develop. These findings have significant implications for developing effective anti-doping education programs and formulating anti-doping policies, underscoring the relevance and impact of this research. In the same light, an adverse motivational learning climate has promoted the uptake of illegal PEAs among athletes in

Sub-Saharan countries (Adegbesan et al., 2023; Ruwuya et al., 2022). Similarly, the differences between boys and girls are consistent with previous studies on doping conducted with high school students (Girelli et al., 2020; Lucidi et al., 2017), showing that girls were more efficacious and better able to deal with personal or interpersonal pressure than boys. Nevertheless, there have been several cases of both male and female athletes contravening the anti-doping laws.

Research among elite athletes and para-athletes, non-elite athletes, and non-athletes has demonstrated that the developed attitudes toward doping effectively predict intentions and behavior (Adegbesan et al., 2024; Lazuras et al., 2010; Mallia et al., 2016). The perceived efficacy belief of athletes and their evaluation of behavior that describes athletes doping intentions are well embedded in the Social Cognitive Theory and Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005; Bandura, 1997). These describe how doping indices, and their predisposed capabilities help them avoid or indulge in doping. These indices range from knowledge, economic gains, previous doping infractions, assumption of doping prevalence, and support system. Therefore, in doping contexts, stressors, such as the influence of significant others, peers, and financial gains, may have a significant role concerning the abuse of banned substances (Girelli et al., 2020; Šukys, 2018), as well as individuals' beliefs about their ability to resist them are fundamental.

Although the social cognitive theory's moral disengagement construct predicts that the likelihood of athletes using banned substances is fundamental in describing doping intentions, reports show that some athletes would consider using prohibited PEDs if they would not get caught (Nolte et al., 2014). Moral disengagement is convincing oneself that ethical standards do not apply in a particular context by suspending or deactivating the mechanism of self-condemnation and self-sanction. Self-justification is vital in activating or inhibiting this anti-doping behavior (Kavussanu & Ring, 2017). In the context of doping, moral disengagement refers to a mental rationalization process that permits athletes to reconcile their drug use with moral values, effectively disconnecting their behavior from moral principles and convincing themselves that their actions are justified and ethical (Lucidi et al., 2017). It constitutes a moral conviction for doping, for example, by comparing it with more extremely inhumane actions or when substance use is not perceived as being under the individual's control. That is, athletes do not see doping as against the game's laws due to compliance rather than conformity to them. Therefore, moral disengagement influences athletes' likelihood of using doping substances and depletes their efficacy. On these bases, the researchers sought to investigate the efficacy of doping self-regulation among elite athletes in Nigeria.

Hypothesis

1. No significant relationship will exist between moderating variables (gender, age, sports category) and elite athletes' doping self-regulatory efficacy.
2. There will be no significant relationship between the likelihood of the use of banned substances and the categorical variables.

Materials and Methods

Design

A descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. A 13-item validated questionnaire covering the likelihood of taking banned substances (6 items) and confidentiality to avoid using banned substances (7 items) was used to collect data from the respondents. Some items were adopted from the World Anti-doping Agency research package (Naidoo & Wills, 2016), while others emanated from reviewed literature on doping. The test-rest within a week interval was used to determine the reliability ($\alpha = .86$) after consultation with expert psychometricians familiar with professional sports, a sports physician, a sports psychologist, and a health and sports scientist. To mitigate the potential for bias and reflexivity in this study, a multi-faceted approach was employed. Specifically, the research design incorporated random sampling techniques to enhance representativeness, data triangulation through integrating diverse sources and methodologies, and an initiative-taking pilot study to preemptively identify and address potential limitations. Comprehensive training for researchers and research assistants was also provided to ensure a unified understanding of the study's objectives.

Furthermore, to minimize the influence of reflexivity, the research team engaged in systematic self-reflection to acknowledge and set aside personal biases, cultural assumptions, and religious beliefs. Regular peer debriefing sessions, which were designed to facilitate critical examination of emerging findings and included all team members, were conducted. Rigorous cross-validation of results was performed through collaborative analysis. Transparent reporting of methodologies, limitations, and results was ensured to ensure accountability and replicability.

Participants

Two hundred and six (206) male and female elite athletes drawn from all six geographical zones in Nigeria made up the sample for the study. Participation was voluntary admittance after the objective of the survey had been explained to the athletes. The athletes' ages were between 25 and 40 years old, with a mean age of 26.29 years, across five sports: racket games (19), ball games (82), track and field events (36), combat (35), and aquatic sports (34).

Data Collection

The study's objectives were explained to the respondents, after which they were made to fill out consent forms and ensure confidentiality. Due to security challenges ravaging most parts of the country, research assistants were recruited from the locality of the sampled respondents—some debriefing and sensitizations were online based. Permission was also obtained from the

security chiefs in each state, who later provided security operations for research assistants when needed. Data was collected with the help of coaches, trainers, and research assistants after they had been filled in on the objectives and modalities of the study. The face-to-face method was adopted to collect data on the spot to ensure a high return for analysis. The questionnaire was completed. The respondents were approached individually in their training locations across the six geographical zones in Nigeria. The questionnaire was handed over to the athletes to self-complete. Due to the sensitive nature of the questionnaire items, respondents filled out the questionnaires without distraction. Questionnaires were filled in conducive environments. Researchers met respondents at their training grounds and offices, and then calmed down to fill in the items correctly. Translators were also employed to assist athletes with difficulty understanding English.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was obtained from the Social Science Ethical Committee, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Oyo state. Participants were made to fill out informed consent forms after the researchers assured them of anonymity. Athletes were free to withdraw from participation at any point during the survey and complete specific questions.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics of frequency counts and percentages were used to analyze the respondents' demographic data. ANOVA was used to identify the difference across age, gender, and sport category. Cramer's V Chi-Square Coefficient Contingency was used to determine the extent of the para-athletes' likelihood of taking banned substances and the efficacy of avoiding using banned substances.

Results

Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents

Item	Variable	Frequency	Percent (%)	
Gender	Male	149	72.3	
	Female	57	27.7	
Age (years)	20-24 years	17	8.3	
	25-29 years	93	45.1	Mean age = 26.29 years
	30-34 years	81	39.3	
	35-39 years	15	7.3	
Sports Category	Racket games	19	9.2	
	Ball games	82	39.8	
	Track & field events	36	17.5	
	Combat sports	35	17.0	

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	Aquatic sports	34	16.5

Table 1 revealed that most respondents (72.3%) were male, while females were few (27.7%). From the table, most (45.1%) of the respondents were in the age range of 25-29 years, while the respondents between 35-39 years were the least (7.3%). The mean age of the athletes was 26.29. Most (39.8%) of the respondents engaged in ball games, while those involved in racket games were the least (9.2%).

Table 2: Summary of Results on Athletes' Confidence to Avoid Using Banned Substances differentiated by Age, Sport Category, and Gender (n=206)

S/N	Statements	Age	Sport Category	Gender
	Regarding sports, how confident are you in your ability to avoid using banned substances:			
1.	...when most athletes in your sport use them	0.286	0.746	0.625
2.	...when you feel down physically	0.898	0.442	0.359
3.	...when you have been told to improve your performance	0.698	0.639	0.039*
4.	...when pressure to do so by others	0.254	0.738	0.699
5.	....to improve your performance, even if it will not have any adverse side effects	0.871	0.652	0.558
6.	.... before an important competition even when you can get away with it	0.465	0.127	0.235
7.	.... to get results more quickly, even if no one would ever know	0.534	0.820	0.204

Significant at $p<0.05$*

Table 2 shows that there is no significant difference in the efficacy of athletes to avoid using banned substances and the categorical variables existed. However, when the athlete's performances were questioned and told to improve, their performance was significant across gender (0.039, $p<0.05$).

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Table 3: Summary of association between doping efficacy, and age, sport category and gender

S/N	Statement	Variable	Cramer's V	Remark
	Regarding sports, how confident are you in your ability to avoid using banned substances:			
		Age	0.161	Strong
1.	...when most athletes in your sport use them	Sport Category	0.100	Weak
		Gender	0.227	Strong
		Age	0.144	Moderate
2.	...when you feel down physically	Sport Category	0.152	Strong
		Gender	0.106	Moderate
		Age	0.117	Moderate
3	...when you have been told to improve your performance	Sport Category	0.118	Moderate
		Gender	0.192	Strong
		Age	0.173	Strong
4.	...when pressure to do so by others	Sport Category	0.136	Moderate
		Gender	0.174	Strong
		Age	0.141	Moderate
5.	....to improve your performance, even if it will not have any adverse side effects	Sport Category	0.154	Strong
		Gender	0.205	Strong
		Age	0.144	Moderate
6.	.... before an important competition even when you can get away with it	Sport Category	0.128	Moderate
		Gender	0.154	Strong
		Age	0.166	Strong
7.	.... to get results more quickly, even if no one would ever know	Sport Category	0.142	Moderate
		Gender	0.186	Strong

Decision rule: > 0.25-1.00 = Very strong; > 0.15-0.25 = Strong; > 0.10-0.15 = Moderate; > 0.05-0.10 = weak; 0.0.05 = very weak association

As indicated in Table 3, Cramer's V values indicated a mostly moderate association between athletes' confidentiality and the extent to which they used banned substances with the moderating variables. However, when most athletes in their sports used banned substances, their confidence indicated a weak association (0.100) with the sports category. This indicates that the team's cohesiveness predicted whether teammates would contravene doping laws.

Table 4: Relationship between moderating variables (gender, age, sport category) and elite athlete's efficacy to dope

Model Summary

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error	Change Statistics				
					R^2 Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F change
1	.198[a]	.039	.025	.47603	.039	2.742	3	202	.044

a. Predictors: (Constant), Sport Category, Gender, Age

ANOVA[a]

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	1.864	3	.621	2.742	.044[b]
Residual	45.774	202	.227		
Total	47.638	205			

a. Dependent Variable: Doping Efficacy

b. Predictors (Constant): Sport Category, Gender, Age

Coefficient[s]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	1.861	.165		11.306	.000		
	Age	.101	.046	.157	2.174	.031	.907	1.102
	Gender	.154	.076	.141	2.032	.044	.983	1.017
	Sport Category	-.015	.027	-.040	-.551	.582	.907	1.102

a. Dependent Variable: Efficacy to Dope

The table indicates that there was a significant effect of age, gender, and sport category on efficacy to dope at the $p<.05$ ($F(3, 202) = 2.74$, $p = 0.044$), the effect size ($\eta 2$) was 0.03 indicating a low effect. It also indicates that the sports category was the least predictor of doping efficacy among elite athletes ($t = -.55$, $p=.58$) and was insignificant.

Table 5: Summary of Results on Athletes' Likelihood of Taking Banned Substances differentiated by Age, Sport Category, and Gender

S/N	Statements	Age	Sport Category	Gender
	Regarding sports, what is the likelihood of taking banned substances when the chances of being caught are extremely small:			
1.	……I will use a performance drug to enhance my recovery from my injury even	0.799	0.429	0.017*

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	though I know the substance is illegal or has been banned			
2.	…… because the chance of being caught for the use of a banned drug is small, it is good to use such a drug since it will make me recover faster from any injury	0.530	0.726	0.461
3.	…… are you likely to use banned drugs for your injury recovery	0.152	0.520	0.042*
4.	…… because I want to enhance my performance in the forthcoming competition, I will use a banned drug that will enhance my performance	0.455	0.685	0.377
5.	…… this game/competition is important to me I will engage in the use of banned drugs to enhance my fitness	0.999	0.872	0.841
6.	…… I don't feel I have the necessary fitness for this competition, I may have to use these banned drugs because I know I will not be caught	0.971	0.985	0.360

Significant at $p<0.05$*

Table 5 indicated a significant difference in the likelihood of taking banned substances and the moderating variables (age, gender, and sports type). Nevertheless, there was a significant difference in the fact that the athletes are likely to use banned drugs for their injury recovery, based on age, even though they know it was banned (0.017, $p<0.05$).

Table 6: Relationship between the likelihood of using banned substances and the categorical variables.

	Correlation	Age	Gender	Likelihood
Age	Pearson Correlation	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)			
	N			
Gender	Pearson Correlation	-.105	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.133		
	N	206		
Likelihood	Pearson Correlation	-.006	.066	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.930	.346	
	N	206	206	

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

The table summarized the relationship between variables in the study. The correlation indicated a weak negative correlation between likelihood against age ($r = -.066$, $p = .93$, $p < .05$). A weak positive relationship was obtained between the likelihood to dope and gender ($r= .066$, $p= .3463$).

Discussion

Athletes' confidence (efficacy) to abstain from taking illegal substances did not differ significantly based on their age, gender, or sport category. The finding that elite athletes in this study refused to use prohibited performance-enhancing drugs despite being exposed to a wide range of supportive circumstances implies that they had a thorough awareness of the Anti-Doping Code, including the harmful consequences and harsh penalties linked to non-compliance. This finding indicates an elevated level of knowledge and awareness among these athletes, which served as a deterrent to doping behavior. This buttresses the study by (Naidoo & Wills, 2016) strongly believing that success should be achieved through dedication, discipline, and the development of inherent abilities. It aligns with research (Westmattelmann et al., 2018) that found that German team athletes considered themselves more able to resist social pressure about doping use, which made them develop high doping self-regulatory efficacy and a low likelihood of taking banned substances. This perspective appreciates athletes who rely on their natural skills and training rather than resorting to artificial means like doping (Naidoo & Wills, 2016). This could also indicate that elite athletes from the study were disciplined and joined their chosen career sports by conformity rather than by compliance. This aligns with previous research that, in addition to attitudes, self-regulative efficacy toward doping is effective in predicting doping intentions and self-reported doping use (Lazuras et al., 2010; Mallia et al., 2016; Zelli et al., 2010).

However, findings indicated a significant gender difference (0.039, $p<0.05$), with effect size $\eta 2 = 0.03$ on athletes' confidence to avoid banned substances when told to improve their performance. This indicates that the feedback from the coach or trainers and the pressure from poor results were negatively interpreted by some athletes, who responded by using banned substances as leeway to improve their performances temporarily. This agrees with the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen, 1991), which states that intentions are predicted by perceptions of stressors and events at the athletes' disposition. Therefore, the likelihood of the use of banned substances and the self-regulatory efficacy the athlete develops is predicted by their dispositions, precarious events, and conformity or compliance with anti-doping ethics (Girelli et al., 2020; Petróczi & Strauss, 2015; Westmattelmann et al., 2018). In evaluating the association level between confidence to dope and the categorical variables, results indicated a moderate to strong association with all variables. However, there was a weak association between the sports category ($\phi c= 0.100$) and athletes' confidence to avoid doping when most athletes in their team used them. This indicates that team members had more confidence in not dope than individual sports. This is the team's cohesiveness that predicted whether teammates would contravene

doping laws. Therefore, moral disengagement influences athletes' likelihood to use doping substances and depletes their efficacy (Kavussanu & Ring, 2017; Lucidi et al., 2017).

Findings on athletes' likelihood of taking banned substances differentiated by age, sports category, and gender showed that there was no significant difference across the categorical variables. This negates the research of (Girelli et al., 2020; Lucidi et al., 2008) who reported differences in the efficacy of girls being better able to deal with personal or interpersonal pressure than boys. This agrees with the theory of planned behavior, which states that an athlete's attitude toward doping involves both positive and negative evaluation of its use, either for performance enhancement or aesthetic reasons (Adegbesan et al., 2024; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). However, there was a significant difference in the fact that athletes will use a performance-enhancing drug to enhance the recovery of their injuries even though they knew that the substance was illegal or had been banned based on gender (0.017, $p<0.05$) and equally a significant difference to use banned drugs for injury recovery based on gender (0.042, $p<0.05$). These findings indicate that some elite would resort to taking banned substances to quickly recover or avoid injuries so they can always remain in shape and ready for competition. According to previous research, athletes do not see doping as against the laws of the game due to compliance rather than conformity to them (Adegbesan et al., 2023). In addition to attitudes, self-regulative efficacy toward doping is effective in predicting doping intentions and self-reported use (Barkoukis et al., 2019; Girelli et al., 2020; Lazuras et al., 2010; Lucidi et al., 2017)

The test of association of the likelihood to use banned substances, across age and gender indicated a weak association against age ($\phi c = 0.108$) among younger athletes on the likelihood of using illegal drugs to recover faster from injuries. Commensurately, there was a negative, weak correlation with age ($r = -.066$, $p = .93$, $p < .05$) and a weak positive relationship between the likelihood of doping and gender ($r= .066$, $p= .3463$). This may be because younger athletes naturally recover faster from injuries than older ones, and they have a greater need for oxygen and nutrients by athletes to maintain their relevance in competitions as they age (Ntoumanis et al., 2017). A weak association was also reported with gender ($\phi c = 0.093$) when they felt the competition was crucial and needed to maintain fitness. There was also a robust association with gender ($\phi c= 0.322$) on the likelihood of using banned substances even when they knew it was illegal or banned. This finding supports a previous study (Adegbesan et al., 2024) that reported an association between gender and doping possibilities in female Paralympians.

Conclusion

This research offers an elaborate view on doping practices among professional athletes, exposing a complicated web of awareness, resilience, and adherence to anti-doping laws. The study's athletes were found to have received adequate education on doping and anti-doping regulations. Additionally, they exhibited remarkable efficacy in avoiding the use of banned substances in the face of both internal and external pressures. Some athletes' negative feedback revealed that they were easily swayed to cave in to pressure when their performance was called into question.

Given that the results show a low tendency for doping, they also highlight serious vulnerabilities, especially for female athletes who are more likely to engage in doping-related behaviors. This gender gap calls for attention, indicating that specific interventions and support mechanisms must be developed to address the demands and difficulties faced by female athletes. Furthermore, the increased use of doping by senior athletes to speed up their recuperation from injuries underscores the necessity of re-education campaigns that emphasize the negative effects of doping and anti-doping infractions. Athletes' careers and well-being would be safeguarded, a culture of clean sports would be promoted, and effective doping prevention techniques would be developed by identifying and addressing these issues.

Implications of Findings

The results of this study show that elite athletes, regardless of age, gender, or sport category, have a thorough awareness of anti-doping laws and strong self-efficacy in abstaining from prohibited substances. The tendency for doping is lower in athletes who place a higher value on training and the development of natural talent, and teammates' adherence to anti-doping rules is significantly predicted by team cohesion.

There are noticeable differences between the sexes in terms of confidence to avoid doping: female athletes are more likely to use prohibited substances to heal from injuries, and older athletes are more likely to dope to counteract the negative effects of aging on athletic performance.

Moral disengagement mechanisms impact athletes' propensity to participate in doping behaviors, and self-regulatory efficacy regarding doping behaviors acts as a prominent predictor of doping intentions and self-reported use. Since certain athletes are more susceptible to stress connected to performance than others and would thus engage in doping, educational interventions and re-education focused on the ramifications and repercussions of doping and anti-doping violations are crucial for reducing doping behaviors.

Limitations

The objectives of this study were met. Nevertheless, the following limitations were encountered:

1. The continual rise in insecurity combined with the deplorable roads leading to most states in Nigeria, reduced the number of respondents as some athletes had to relocate. It also led to the prolonged administration and retrieval of questionnaires.
2. These findings from this study were obtained from data from a representative sample of the six geographical areas in the country. The lack of a functional database for athletes hindered the recruitment of a larger number of respondents.

3. Religious and cultural biases still existed in some sampled regions in Nigeria which hindered more females from participating in the study, even after sensitization and recruitment of female research assistants from such backgrounds.

Suggestions for Further Research

Following the findings of this study, further research is suggested in the following areas:

1. Investigating the prevalence, determinants, and cultural factors influencing doping behaviors among Nigerian and African athletes, including the role of traditional medicine, social norms, and access to resources.
2. Examining the effectiveness of current anti-doping policies, programs, and educational interventions in Nigeria and Africa, and developing culturally sensitive approaches to prevent doping behaviors.
3. Analyzing the impact of governance, corruption, and regulatory frameworks on doping behaviors and anti-doping efforts in Nigerian and African sports and identifying strategies to strengthen anti-doping control and enforcement.

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Enhancing Paralympic Sport: The Crucial Role of Sport Social Workers

Lawrence Judge
Ball State University

Matt Moore
University of Kentucky

Jerry Reynolds
Ball State University

Adam Smith
Ball State University

Kim Taylor
Ball State University

In Paralympic sport, athletes have unique social, emotional, and environmental needs that must be acknowledged and addressed. This article proposes the integration of social work professionals with expertise in sport to provide comprehensive support for Paralympic athletes. By incorporating mental health services, advocacy, and assistance in navigating challenges related to well-being and identity, the application of social work principles enhances the overall athlete experience in Paralympic sport (Werner et al., 2023). Education and training for Sport Social Workers are paramount in effectively supporting Paralympic athletes in the sports environment. These specialized programs equip social workers with the requisite skills and knowledge to cater to the specific needs of Paralympic athletes, thereby fostering their development and success in Paralympic sport. The significance of prioritizing the well-being of Paralympic athletes through the integration of Sport Social Work principles is underscored in this paper. Cultivating a supportive environment facilitates the holistic development and achievements of Paralympic athletes. Emphasizing inclusivity and the application of social work principles in Paralympic sports further underscores the broader impact of social work in addressing social issues within the Paralympic sport community.

Keywords: Paralympic Athletics, Social Work, Collaboration, Sport

As the 2024 Paralympic Games approach, the spotlight on these extraordinary athletes will shine even brighter, highlighting their incredible resilience and determination. This global event will celebrate their athletic achievements and continue breaking down barriers, fostering greater acceptance and understanding of disabilities worldwide (DePauw, 2012; Neupert et al., 2024). Paralympic sport stands as a testament to the remarkable athletic talents of individuals with physical disabilities, highlighting their strength, power, technique, endurance, and precision (Brittain & Beacom, 2018). These athletes adapt and employ unique techniques tailored to their specific impairments, classifications, and sports, fundamentally challenging societal perceptions of disability and promoting inclusivity within sports (Arrington & Bookman, 2023; Blauwet & Willick, 2012).

The rapid growth and rising popularity of Paralympic sport, exemplified by attendance figures of 1.1 million in Sydney and 850,000 in London (Gold & Gold, 2016), have sparked increased interest from athletes, media, and sponsors. This has created a fiercely competitive arena that allows athletes to hone their skills and achieve excellence (Kolotouchkina et al., 2020). However, the demanding nature of Paralympic sport brings about a range of challenges that significantly impact the holistic well-being of athletes (Jefferies et al., 2012; McNamee et al., 2021). These challenges include effective time management and balancing multiple responsibilities. Athletes often struggle to juggle career and family obligations, training schedules, and personal commitments, which can lead to burnout and stress. Intense performance pressure, the need to meet expectations from coaches, sponsors, and fans, and the physical demands of training and competition can exacerbate mental and emotional strain (Dehghansai et al., 2022; Werner et al., 2023). The heightened pressure to perform, coupled with the potential for injuries, can lead to anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation (Jefferies et al., 2012; Poucher et al., 2022). Managing personal issues such as relationships and societal stigmas associated with disability presents additional hurdles (Werner et al., 2023).

Access to adequate training facilities and resources can also be a challenge, particularly in regions with harsher conditions and fewer investments in Paralympic sports. Equity in coaching, funding, and medical support is essential but not always guaranteed, leading to disparities that can impact an athlete's performance and overall experience (Beau, 2024; Vanlandewijck & Thompson, 2016). Travel and competition schedules can disrupt daily life, affecting sleep patterns, nutritional intake, and recovery time. The physical toll of travel, combined with the need to adapt to different time zones and environments, adds another layer of complexity to Paralympic athlete’s careers. Addressing these obstacles is essential to ensuring the overall success and health of Paralympic athletes. Comprehensive support systems, including mental health services, career counseling, and flexible training environments, are crucial (Vanlandewijck & Thompson, 2016; Werner et al., 2023). By recognizing and mitigating these challenges, vested partners in the Paralympic movement can foster an inclusive and supportive environment that enables athletes to thrive both on and off the field (Purcell et al., 2019).

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The competitive environment of Paralympic sport also necessitates robust support systems to address the pressing challenges that affect athletes' holistic well-being. This paper aims to explore the necessity of incorporating Sport Social Workers into the Paralympic sports environment. By synthesizing existing research, academic literature, and practical experiences, this paper argues for the integration of sport social work as a vital component of the support systems for Paralympic athletes. Through their unique expertise, Sport Social Workers can provide the comprehensive support needed to address the multifaceted needs of these exceptional athletes, thereby enhancing their overall well-being and performance.

Overview of Paralympic Sport and the Challenges for Athletes

As the complexities and demands of Paralympic sports have evolved, there is an increasing recognition of the need for specialized and multidisciplinary support systems to address the unique needs of these athletes (DePauw, 2012; Moore et al., 2022a). While various support services exist within Paralympic sports, including sport coaches, strength coaches, athletic trainers, nutritionists, physiotherapists, prosthetists, and sports psychologists there is a growing realization that social work professionals with expertise in sports can play a significant role in filling gaps and providing comprehensive support (Judge et al., 2024). To foster the overall development and performance of elite Paralympic athletes, it is essential that various professionals come together to create an interprofessional support network (Gorczynski et al., 2024). This village of support typically includes the following professionals (See Table 1).

Table 1 – *Professionals that Typically Support a Paralympic Athlete*

Professional	Role and Responsibilities	Additional Benefits
Athletic Trainer	Collaborate with medical professionals, therapists, and peer support networks to deliver holistic care.	Prevents and treats injuries, aids in faster recovery, and enhances overall health.
Sport Coach	Responsible for designing training programs, teaching sport-specific skills, and strategizing for competition to enhance athletic performance.	Maximizes performance potential and strategic excellence.
Strength and Conditioning Coach	Focuses on physical training to improve strength, conditioning, and overall athleticism, thereby reducing the risk of injury and enhancing performance.	Enhances physical capabilities and lowers injury risk.
Nutritionist	Provides dietary plans tailored to the unique needs of each athlete, optimizing nutrition for peak performance and recovery.	Improves energy levels, recovery times, and overall health.

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Professional	Role and Responsibilities	Additional Benefits
Physiotherapist	Administer various therapeutic techniques such as massage, stretching, and exercise programming to alleviate pain, improve mobility, and enhance overall physical function.	Supports recovery from injuries and improve physical functioning and performance.
Sports Psychologist	Offers mental health support, helping athletes deal with the psychological demands of training and competition, including stress management and focus enhancement.	Enhances mental resilience, focus, and emotional well-being.
Prosthetist	Designs, fabricates, and fit prosthetic limbs tailored to the specific needs and activities of the athlete.	Improves mobility, comfort, and performance with custom prosthetics.
Wheelchair Mechanic	Maintains, repairs, and customizes wheelchairs and other mobility aids to ensure optimal functionality and comfort for the athlete.	Ensures reliable and optimal performance of mobility equipment.

The Role of the Sport Social Worker

Social Work is a dynamic profession focusing on improving the quality of life and well-being of communities, groups, families, and individuals, through various advocacy, support, and empowerment strategies (National Association of Social Workers, 2023). Building on the foundational principles of traditional social work, the emerging profession of Sport Social Work integrates these values into the unique environments of athletic communities, addressing the specific needs of athletes, coaches, and sports organizations (Beasley et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2018). The social work discipline, unfortunately unknown to many, has deep professional practice roots within sport and serving vulnerable athletes on the margins of society (Reynolds, 2017). Early social work pioneers such as Jane Addams also had the opportunity to train professionally alongside modern Olympic movement leader Pierre de Coubertin. During the Addams-led settlement house movement of the late 1880s to early 1920s, Addams and colleagues had robust sport offerings and training programs at neighborhood-based settlement houses. These programs directly served and benefited thousands of children who were new to the United States and were not welcomed at other facilities due to race or creed. The sport social work movement was also instrumental in securing physical spaces and professional curricula dedicated to serving young people in sport-based contexts at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels (Kratz & Rosado, 2022; Reynolds, 2017). In a more modern context, where interprofessional collaboration and athletic care teams are essential to athlete well-being,

Sport Social Workers can play a pivotal role in ensuring the cohesion and well-being of the support structure. Judge et al. (2024) emphasized the significance of addressing the well-being of student-athletes in college athletics through the integration of sport social work

principles within National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I athletic settings. These principles include offering mental health support, advocating for athletes, and addressing challenges related to well-being and identity (Beasley et al., 2021; Judge et al., 2024; Moore et al., 2022b). Additionally, Sport Social Workers are instrumental in facilitating life skills transfer for athletes (Newman, 2020). The specialized skill sets of Sport Social Workers help athletes navigate social, emotional, and environmental challenges, thereby enhancing their overall experience. They not only address mental health and well-being but also serve as advocates, ensuring that athletes have access to necessary resources and support (Werner et al., 2023). Their role is particularly crucial in coordinating various elements of the support system to ensure that all aspects of an athlete's life are integrated and harmonized (Moore et al., 2022b). Programs like the LiFESports Camp, highlighted by Anderson-Butcher et al. (2014), demonstrate the positive impact that Sport Social Workers can have in youth sports, focusing on promoting well-being and holistic development. Adapting such initiatives to Paralympic sport can further enhance the experiences and outcomes for these athletes.

Coordination and Integration

A comprehensive approach to supporting Paralympic athletes involves multiple dimensions to ensure their overall well-being and performance (Werner et al., 2023). By integrating the expertise of various professionals, the Sport Social Worker plays a crucial role in fostering both the athletic success and well-being of the athletes (Moore et al., 2022a). This integrated support system (See Table 2) is essential for addressing the complex, multifaceted needs of Paralympic athletes, enabling them to perform at their best and thrive in their personal lives.

Table 2 - *The Role of the Sport Social Worker in Multidisciplinary Support*:

Responsibility	Description
Individualized Support Plans	Developing personalized support plans that cater to each athlete's unique needs, incorporating input from different specialists.
Resource Navigation	Assisting athletes in accessing and navigating available resources, whether monetary, psychological, social, nutritional, or physical.
Crisis Management	Offering immediate support during crises or stressful situations, such as injury or intense competition periods, ensuring athletes have the help they need to effectively manage their emotions.
Life Skills Development	Facilitating the development of essential life skills, such as time management, stress management, and coping strategies, is crucial in preparing athletes for careers beyond sport and enhancing their present-day performance by

Responsibility	Description
	maintaining a balanced routine and effectively transitioning into new professional roles after their sports careers.
Advocacy	Representing athletes' interests and ensuring their voices are heard in decision-making processes, enhancing their well-being and satisfaction. Advocate for policy change within sport or other governing bodies
Mental Health Support	Provide direct therapy and counseling to address biopsychosocial and spiritual challenges faced both within and outside the athletic domain. Emphasizing mental health literacy, it aims to enhance overall well-being and equip individuals with the knowledge and skills to manage mental health effectively.

Impact on Paralympic Sport

The inclusion of Sport Social Workers within Paralympic sport settings helps elevate the standard of care and support available to athletes (Moore et al., 2022b). This integrated approach can lead to numerous benefits, including enhanced mental health support, increased access to specialized resources, and tailored guidance for overcoming unique challenges faced by Paralympic athletes (Judge et al., 2024). Furthermore, Sport Social Workers can assist in ensuring a more inclusive environment, promoting equity and representation within the sports community (Newman et al., 2022). Their presence helps address a holistic range of needs, from psychological well-being to social and emotional support, contributing to well-rounded athlete development and performance (See Table 3).

Table 3 – *Potential Benefits of an Integrated Approach with Sport Social Workers*

Benefit	Description
Enhanced Performance	By addressing all aspects of an athlete's life, Sport Social Workers contribute to a more balanced and well-prepared athlete, leading to improved performance.
Improved Mental Health	Constant support and advocacy help mitigate mental health issues, fostering a positive psychological environment for athletes.
Holistic Development	Athletes gain not only in their sport but also in personal and professional life skills, ensuring well-rounded growth and preparation for life after sports.
Stronger Support Networks	Facilitates the development of robust support systems, including family, friends, and community resources, providing a comprehensive safety net for the athlete, promoting of a sense of community and belonging with other Paralympic athletes.

Benefit	Description
Increased Athlete Satisfaction	A well-rounded support system leads to higher levels of satisfaction and engagement in their sport, reducing burnout and enhancing long-term commitment.
Advocacy and Awareness	Paralympic athletes not only raise awareness about their sports but also vigorously advocate for increased funding and the implementation of supportive policies to ensure the continuous growth and development of these sports at the community level.

These additional benefits underscore the importance of an integrated support approach, ensuring that Paralympic athletes are not only successful in their sport but also satisfied and well-supported in all aspects of their lives. Given the specific challenges faced by disabled athletes, such as accessibility issues, training venue access, social stigma, and the need for specialized health care (Gavrilova & Donohue, 2018), Sport Social Workers with specialized education and training are invaluable. Magier et al. (2022) discuss opportunities for specialized education and training for social workers in sports settings, emphasizing the necessity for comprehensive training to navigate the intricacies of Paralympic sport effectively. The inclusion of Sport Social Workers in the support systems for Paralympic athletes is essential to bridge gaps, provide holistic care, and ensure the coordination of multidisciplinary services which enhance the overall well-being and performance of Paralympic athletes. This approach emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive support village that is responsive to the unique needs of each athlete, paving the way for their success both on and off the field (Moore et al., 2022a).

Unique Challenges Faced by Disabled Paralympic Athletes

Participation in disabled sport has been shown to have a profound influence on the emotional and psychosocial development of athletes (Gavrilova & Donohue, 2018). Paralympic athletes often face the pressures of rigorous training, competition, and balancing career and family demands. For disabled athletes, these pressures are compounded by additional challenges (See Table 4).

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Table 4 – *Unique Challenges of Paralympic Sport*

Challenge	Description	Reference
Social Isolation	Disabled athletes may experience feelings of isolation from their peers, especially in environments where they are among the few or only individuals with disabilities.	Gavrilova & Donohue, 2018
Accessibility Issues	Limited access to facilities, adaptive equipment, and transportation can create substantial barriers.	Gavrilova & Donohue, 2018
Societal Stigma	Athletes with disabilities may confront negative stereotypes and biases, which can affect their self-esteem and mental health.	Kolotouchkina et al., 2020

By understanding these unique challenges, sport social workers can better support disabled athletes, promoting their development and success both on and off the field.

Sport Social Workers in Paralympic Setting

Sport Social Workers are essential in recognizing and addressing concerns of Paralympic athletes by providing supportive interventions to the unique needs of athletes (Gavrilova & Donohue, 2018; Moore, 2016). Their role extends to several key areas (See table 5):

Table 5 - *Key Roles of Sport Social Workers in Paralympic Settings*

Role	Description
Individualized Counseling	Offering one-on-one support to address personal and emotional issues, fostering resilience and emotional well-being. They create a safe space for athletes to discuss their challenges and develop personalized strategies to cope with pressures and improve mental health.
Advocacy and Empowerment	Ensuring that athletes have a voice in decision-making processes, advocating for accessible facilities, and equal opportunities. This includes working with organizational leaders to implement policies that support the rights and needs of disabled athletes and empowering athletes to take an active role in advocating for themselves and their peers.
Mental Health Support	Providing strategies and resources for managing stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges by licensed professionals and scaffolding of qualifications to perform duties based on widely recognized licensure standard and the Code of Ethics.
Identity Formation	Assisting athletes in developing a positive self-concept and a sense of identity that integrates both their athletic endeavors and personal attributes. This

Role	Description
	involves helping athletes recognize and celebrate their holistic identities beyond their athletic achievements, which contributes to greater life satisfaction and emotional stability.
Education and Awareness	Conducting workshops and seminars aimed at educating coaches, staff, and volunteers about the challenges faced by disabled athletes, promoting a more inclusive and supportive environment. These educational initiatives focus on dispelling myths, reducing stigma, and fostering a culture of understanding and acceptance within sports organizations and the broader community.

Enhancing Support for Disabled Athletes in Paralympic Sports

The inclusion of Sport Social Workers aligns seamlessly with the existing support structures within Paralympic sports. This integration is crucial for creating a comprehensive framework that addresses every aspect of an athlete's life. Given the distinctive challenges faced by disabled athletes, incorporating Sport Social Workers into their support network ensures that their unique needs are met (See Table 6):

Table 6 - *Roles and Responsibilities of Sport Social Workers in Supporting Disabled Athletes*

Role	Description
Accessibility Advocacy	Sport Social Workers can advocate for adaptive equipment, accessible training facilities, and transportation options tailored to disabled athletes, ensuring they have equal opportunities to train and compete.
Collaboration with Coaches	Sport Social Workers can work closely with sport coaches to understand the physical and emotional demands placed on athletes, ensuring that training programs are both rigorous and supportive yet balances the athlete's well-being.
Coordination with Medical Staff	In collaboration with athletic trainers and medical professionals, Sport Social Workers can monitor athletes' health, ensuring any physical issues are addressed swiftly and appropriately.
Coordination with the National Office	Collaborating with National Office staff to help athletes balance their career demands, manage training schedules, and effectively plan for the competitive season ensures that athletes navigate the complexities of high-performance sports while maintaining their other responsibilities.
Inclusive Programming	They can collaborate with coaches and program directors to develop inclusive competitions that incorporate disabled events into able-bodied competitions, accommodating varied abilities and promoting a sense of belonging and inclusivity.

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Role	Description
Family and Caregiver Support	Recognizing the critical role that families and caregivers play, especially given the varying acuity levels of disabilities, Sport Social Workers can offer support and resources to these individuals, helping them navigate the challenges associated with supporting a Paralympic athlete.
Peer Support Programs	Establishing peer mentoring systems where more experienced athletes can provide guidance and support to newer team members, fosters a community of shared experiences and mutual aid. This peer support is invaluable in helping new athletes acclimate to the demands of Paralympic sports and benefit from the insights of their more experienced counterparts.

By integrating these roles, Sport Social Workers play a pivotal role in enhancing the overall support network for disabled athletes and ensure their unique needs are addressed and promotes a comprehensive approach to their well-being and performance (Gill et al., 2017).

Transitions in and out of Paralympic Sport

Paralympic athletes often face delayed entry into sports, typically due to life-altering incidents such as disease, accident, military service, or congenital conditions. The original intent of the Paralympic Games was to aid in the rehabilitation of injured World War II veterans, highlighting the significant role of the military in the origins of these sports (Brittain & Beacom, 2018). These critical transitions come with unique psychosocial challenges, demanding rapid adaptation to rigorous training schedules and heightened expectations. Engaging in sports during this period helps athletes, particularly former military personnel, redefine their self-concept and societal roles, fostering renewed self-esteem and a positive identity through athletic achievement (Newman, 2020). Athletes must build new social networks within the sports community, balance training with personal life, and overcome societal stigmas related to disability (Stambulova & Samuel, 2020).

Exiting Paralympic sports present a distinct set of complexities, often marked by emotional and psychological challenges due to sport's significant role in their identity and daily routine. The cessation of competition can lead to feelings of loss and an existential void (Newman, 2020). This is especially poignant for athletes with a military background who may already be navigating the transition from military to civilian life (Moore et al., 2024). Athletes may struggle with career transitions, re-establishing identity beyond sport, and managing the psychological impacts of no longer competing at an elevated level (Stambulova & Samuel, 2020). Sport Social Workers play a crucial role in these transitions, providing guidance and resources for career planning, academic paths, and emotional support. Their intervention ensures athletes can navigate these phases with resilience and move towards fulfilling careers and lives beyond sports (Lawson, 2005; Newman, 2020).

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Conclusion

Sport social work is an evolving discipline with immense potential to enhance the well-being and development of Paralympic athletes. This paper has highlighted the crucial role Sport Social Workers play in addressing the unique challenges faced by these athletes, advocating for their specific needs, and fostering holistic development within the high-stakes arena of Paralympic sports. By providing comprehensive support services, Sport Social Workers help create an environment that promotes both athletic excellence and personal well-being. Their expertise in navigating mental health concerns, social stigma, physical rehabilitation, and career transitions significantly enhances individual preparation, emotional resilience, and team dynamics, contributing to a healthier, more inclusive athletic community.

The integration of Sport Social Workers into Paralympic athletic support systems is essential. Higher education institutions, sports organizations, and governing bodies must allocate sufficient resources for these professionals. Additionally, sport clubs play a pivotal role by embedding Sport Social Workers within their structures, offering tailored support from grassroots to elite levels. Collaboration among these entities will not only ensure the holistic development of Paralympic athletes but also cultivate an atmosphere of growth, inclusivity, and unparalleled achievement. Investing in this critical support system will lead to an era of remarkable progress and well-being in Paralympic sports.

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Sport Social Work Journal

Making the Case for Case Management: A Holistic Care Approach for Athletic Organizations

Hannah R. Kloetzer
Department of Sport Management, University of Florida

Lauren Beasley
Department of Kinesiology and Health, Georgia State University

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Driven by recent athlete advocacy and evolving organizational policies, sport organizations must implement comprehensive strategies to address athletes' mental health needs. Scholars advocate for a holistic approach that integrates mental, social, spiritual, and physical health. However, the sport industry currently lacks a practical, interprofessional model that supports holistic wellness at both individual and systemic levels. This conceptual study reviews eight evidence-based healthcare models, revealing that while each offers valuable insights, most focus on individualistic care and lack adaptable implementation strategies for sport organizations. To bridge this gap, we propose three best practices for an athlete-centered, collaborative care model: (1) adopting an interdisciplinary approach, (2) hiring dedicated case managers, and (3) investing in top-down organizational training.

Keywords: athlete well-being, case management, holistic care, interdisciplinary care

Adequate and equitable mental healthcare in athletics is a primary goal across multiple collegiate and professional sport organizations (National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2023; National Football League [NFL], 2024; Women's National Basketball Association [WNBA], 2023). Sport management scholars have suggested that a holistic approach—addressing an athletes' mental, social, spiritual, and physical health—is the most effective care model (e.g., Beasley, et al., 2021; Berg & Warner, 2019; Waller et al., 2016). For example, Waller and colleagues (2016) suggested that college athletes need a variety of different actors with their areas of expertise (i.e., a chaplain) to provide the best level of care for the athlete. However, the sport industry lacks a practical, interprofessional, and comprehensive model of care (MOC) that encapsulates holistic wellness of athletes on an individual and systematic level. Coupled with the call from athletes for greater mental health care (Purcell et al., 2019; Tran, 2024), it is evident that athlete healthcare delivery and structure needs to be addressed (Barkley et al., 2018).

To fill this gap in research, this conceptual study reviewed the strengths and limitations of eight different evidence-based healthcare models (i.e., standard mental health care, injury prevention) to understand what an empirically based, athlete-specific holistic model of care (MOC) could look like. We approach this discussion from the theoretical foundation of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), or a systems approach, to gain a more complete understanding of the impacts of these MOCs. More specifically, the Ecological Systems Theory posited that an individual's development and well-being is a product of five explicit systems: (1) microsystem, (2) mesosystem, (3) exosystem, (4) macrosystem, and (5) chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Table 1 details the distinctions between each of the systems.

Table 1. An Adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) Ecological Systems Theory

System Level	Details	Example
Microsystem	An individual's immediate environment	An individual's family
Mesosystem	Connections between an individual's different microsystems	Relationship between a parent and a coach
Exosystem	Larger organizations and systems that can influence an individual's life	A sport organization deciding practice times
Macrosystem	Cultural values and norms that impact an individual, if not directly	Mental health stigma
Chronosystem	The passing of time	An individual's maturation

These distinctive systems, however, do not operate in isolation. Each level impacts each other, making them integral in understanding an individual's well-being. A systems perspective is often used to both consider the different influences in an athlete's life and utilize each system to provide adequate and appropriate care (Beasley et al., 2021; Saxe et al., 2022).

Using this perspective to guide our review, we found that many MOCs take primarily an individualistic approach, which does not consider systemic issues. Further, we argue that there is no implementation of these models that can easily be adapted to the setup of sport organizations (i.e., athletic department). Namely, there is currently no comprehensive, athlete-specific MOC to address holistic health concerns of athletes. Taking these critiques, the purpose of this research is two-fold: (1) propose an athlete-centered MOC using the strengths found in our conceptual review, and (2) outline actionable steps that can be implemented both on a wide-scale and individual level for different sport organizations within the industry.

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Literature Review

The following section reviews eight areas of physical and behavioral healthcare that frequently use a MOC. We provide an overview of each model, the model's strengths, critiques of the model, and, if applicable, the ways in which the model has been applied in a sport context. In addition, Table 2 outlines aspects of each MOC's best practices and what these could look like in an athletic context.

Table 2. Synthesis of Literature Review

MOC	Aspects Incorporated	Best Practices in an Athletic Setting
PPM	structured delivery, evidence-based, and relationship-based practices	An AT showing a structured care plan to an athlete and their coach for mutual understanding
PCC	Patients playing an active role in their care	A PT asking for feedback from the athlete on their recovery plan
Hospice and Palliative	Comfort care	Structuring in a feedback loop to make sure an athlete is comfortable during their recovery
Childbirth	Patient-centered, case manager	Hiring a case manager to coordinate care for the athletes
IPE	Increased communication and understanding between care professionals	Providing education for all care professionals in an organization to increase communication and knowledge of others' roles
Mental Health	Interdisciplinary care, patient-centered	All members of an athlete's care team communicate effectively and understand their role in the structured care plan, and there is a consistent feedback loop between the athlete and all members of the care team.
Holistic Care	Incorporating many care professionals into one organization	Increasing athletes' access to resources such as a chaplain or life skills coordinator
Sport Injury Rehabilitation	Systems-based approach	Incorporating a case manager to help manage and coordinate care for an athlete throughout different systems level (e.g., athletic department, outside community)

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PPM and Nurse Care

A Professional Practice Model (PPM) is "how registered nurses practice, collaborate, communicate, and develop professionally to provide the highest-quality care for those served by the organization" (UC Davis Health, 2023, para. 1). Within a patient-centered PPM, core to nursing care delivery, Parreria and colleagues (2021) outline the five phases for care delivery: (1) analysis/diagnosis of the situation, (2) goal setting, (3) strategy selection, (4) implementation, and (5) outcome evaluation. They argue that this model allows for the adaptation of patient's needs, intentionality with treatment, and cooperation across nurses to provide the best care (Parreria, et al., 2021).

Further, the University of California, Davis provides an in-depth example on their website of their PPM, including their values (love, compassion, courage, integrity), vision, and philosophy, all which fall under the ideology of patient-centered care (UC Davis Health, 2023). They discuss expectations regarding nursing care delivery, which include evidence-based practice, autonomy, and collaboration. They highlight their emphasis on relationship-based care and how that helps promote their culture of healing and a healthy work environment. The site then ends with examples of how they provide exemplary professional practice (culture, evidence-based practice) and governance (leadership, system structure; UC Davis Health, 2023). This is a great example to understand the primary principles of a nursing community; however, it does not reveal implementation examples or details to highlight the success of their program. Wolf and colleagues (2023) conducted a database search to understand popular components of PPMs. They found that PPMs place, "an emphasis on patient- or family-centered care, a commitment to quality nursing services, nursing's professional distinctiveness" (Wolf et al., 2023, p. 204) and engagement. This holds congruent with that of UC Davis' PPM (UC Davis Health, 2023), suggesting a core theme across multiple PPMs.

PPM's tenets of patient- and/or family-centered care is an effective approach to yield optimal outcomes for patients. Relying on evidence-based practices help to ensure proper care is being delivered and collaboration among the institution's nursing community is a great avenue to increasing trust among coworkers and thus a better-working team. Yet, there are several limitations to PPM. From a cultural, macro perspective, this model fails to incorporate different family structures beyond the White standard where two parents are the main sources of support. To operate fully within family-centered care, more consideration must be given to incorporate all types of family structures, as well as the lack of a familial support system. Additionally, little information is given within PPM on how to coordinate care within different nursing departments. There is a broad assumption given that all nurses understand the different departments within a hospital and know each other's contribution to the patient's care. Yet, while there is little professional crossover between a nurse and athletic setting, key components of structured delivery, evidence-based, and relationship-based practices are important to consider when

developing an athlete-focused MOC. Within a sport organization, this could look like an athletic trainer showing a structured care plan to an athlete and their coach so that everyone has a mutual understanding of what is most effective for the athlete.

Patient-Centered Care

Patient-centered care (PCC) is a type of MOC that operates at the micro, meso, and exo levels within the healthcare industry. In other words, it is an approach to care that impacts personal, professional, and organizational relationships (Epstein & Street, 2011). Grounded in giving patients a more active role in their healthcare treatment, PCC is an engaging model that works to provide patients with the best experience and outcomes possible. Within PCC, patients' preferences are adhered, based on the model's emphasis on expanded involvement for patients (Epstein & Street, 2011).

PCC has a variety of sub-models each with their own adjustments and evolutions, yet all have the goal of providing care for the whole person by involving integrated systems and coordinating teams (John et al., 2020). John and colleagues (2020) explored the function of a patient-centered medical home (PCMH), which incorporates comprehensive and coordinated care with patient engagement through a general practitioner and a multidisciplinary team. Multidisciplinary practice draws on knowledge from other disciplines, but professionals do not often work in collaboration in a coordinated care plan (Choi & Pak, 2006). Research found significant improvements in patient depressive episodes, health-related quality of life, self-management outcomes, and hospitalizations (John et al., 2020).

A prominent example of the patient-centered approach is within the Chronic Care Model (CCM), which highlights the health system as one component of the larger community. Taking both different aspects of the health system (i.e., delivery design, decision support) and the community (i.e., location, culture), health care providers can make informed decisions to have productive interactions with the informed, active patient, to yield improved health outcomes (Wagner, 1998). Yet within CCM, there are a variety of barriers that inhibit the implementation process in a primary care setting, including organizational culture, organizational structure, networks, communication, climate readiness, supportive leadership, and provider attitudes (Kadu & Stolee, 2015).

PCC practices are found to be more effective than standard MOCs and are multidimensional in practice for the patient's many needs (Chouvarda, et al., 2015; John et al., 2020). They can provide continued engagement for patients and contribute to the sustainability of long-term care (Chouvarda, et al., 2015). However, there are still several limitations to PCC. Financial costs of training, education, and staff, burnout due to empathy, and exclusion of certain groups make-up large issues with the current model (Meranius et al., 2020). To expand, cultural competency on both the micro and macro levels is lacking, making PCC inaccessible and/or

inadequate to all cultures or backgrounds. Additionally, with PCC practices utilizing multidisciplinary strategies, there is often no communication between care team members, creating issues with patient care efficiency.

Within athletics, athletic trainers (ATs) play a vital role in PCC (Redinger et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2022). Wilson and colleagues (2022) surveyed ATs on their perspective of utilizing PCC. They found that while ATs valued the same core competencies as PCC, they lacked formal training in the implementation of the model itself. From the athletes' perspective, Redinger and colleagues (2021) found via a mixed-method analysis that athletes agree that their ATs centered the core dimensions of PCC in their care. They perceived PCC to be individualized and prioritizing health care, of which they believe their ATs adhere to these definitions (Redinger et al., 2021). Authors also found when considering potential barriers to implementation in sport that effectively incorporating an athlete's support system proved to be difficult. Additionally, managing the impact of a coach's opinions on care could prevent an AT's proper execution of PCC (Redinger et al., 2021).

Hospice and Palliative Care

Literature around hospice and palliative care also stresses the effectiveness of PCC. Hospice is the treatment provided, emphasizing comfort and quality of life, to a person approaching the end of their life (National Institute of Health, 2021). With this type of care, there is no curative intent. Palliative care, on the other hand, emphasizes the same qualities of hospice care, but has the option to have curative intent (National Institute of Health, 2021).

Dobrina and colleagues (2014), using existing hospice and palliative care models and theories, derived 10 core concepts that encapsulate what is prioritized in these types of care. Overall, these themes reflect the practices of patient-centered philosophies as well as urge the importance of an interdisciplinary team approach. Additionally, the Agency for Clinical Innovation (2022) published their principles for palliative care which include:

(1) Care is patient, family, and career centered
(2) Care provided is based on assessed need
(3) Patients, families, and careers have access to local and networked services to meet their needs
(4) Care is evidence-based, clinically and culturally safe and effective
(5) Care is integrated and coordinated
(6) Care is equitable (para. 1-6).

These principles offer a great overview of expectations for the patient, career, and family, while including examples on how to practice these principles. While this offers great content and guidance on the overall frame of care, little is provided on how to achieve these principles both

on an individual and widescale level. This model operates under the assumption that all actors within the care team know one another, have a broad understanding of one's field, and can work well together. Another limitation of hospice and palliative care is the assumption that there is a strong support system for the patient.

However, while there are no ties to athletics, there is great benefit to understanding the strengths of this model. Patient-centered and comfort care are great strategies that can be utilized in an athletic setting, specifically when we are thinking of athlete injury and ongoing health considerations of the athlete. This could look like checking in with athletes on their comfort levels throughout different stages of their recovery plan. Additionally, a large strength of this model is its ability to incorporate family-centered care. This is an important consideration for the athlete population, specifically college athletes, as this is likely their first time away from home and may need assistance from family members in navigating the healthcare system.

Childbirth

Within childbirth practices, midwifery has been identified as having a distinctive model of care in comparison to standard practices. In particular, the midwife-led continuity model, where a midwife follows a patient from the initial appointment to early parenthood. It is patient-centered, with the midwife as the point person, or 'case manager', throughout the whole pregnancy (Sandall et al., 2016).

Sandall et al. (2016) conducted a robust study targeting whether this MOC is successful. Researchers found that patients who chose a midwife-led continuity care model were more likely to have safer births (for the parent and the child) and were least likely to have adverse outcomes during pregnancy over other models of care. Lastly, patients reported that they were satisfied with their care (Sandall, et al., 2016). These benefits are long-lasting and provide great care for patients. However, it lacks specific steps needed to be reproduced in other settings, such as in sport settings. In addition, this model in its foundation lacks the inclusion of other disciplines that might be necessary during one's pregnancy, such as a nutritionist or endocrinologist.

Regarding athletes, the NCAA has the Model Pregnancy and Parenting Policy document that outlines specific care instructions for all members of the athletic department, specifically ATs as they are usually the first to note if an athlete is pregnant. While this policy is a great resource, it is informationally based, including the first signs of pregnancy, how to practice gender neutral pregnancy, and physiological concerns for pregnant athletes, it does not include a model of care, guidance to best practices for athletic departments to adhere to, or care for the whole person (NCAA, 2021). This policy is reactive and fails to offer a proactive pregnancy education aspect that would enhance the health and safety of athletes. Additionally, this policy is geared to AT. While ATs operate with close contact with college athletes, there is an assumption that ATs are trained to look for and handle pregnancy. In this way, ATs are operating as case

managers for college athletes; managing different aspects of their health and well-being that is not a part of their job description. This can lead to feelings of burnout amongst ATs as they are overwhelmed with a variety of roles they were not trained for (Mazerolle et al., 2010; 2013). Lastly, in professional leagues, no specific model of care for pregnant athletes is publicly available.

IPE

Interprofessional education (IPE) is a popular approach to engaging healthcare students, focusing on collaboration between professionals and professional development, and involving two or more professions. The main goal of IPE is to provide interdisciplinary knowledge between professions and create shared values in the realm of patient care. Interdisciplinary care provides coordinated practice between different disciplines and healthcare providers, wherein all providers are in communication and care is often managed through a case manager (Choi & Pak, 2006), separating itself from multidisciplinary care. IPE can present itself in various ways. Grace (2021) highlights that, primarily, pedagogy falls either within an (1) extracurricular-centric or partially integrated model or (2) a fully integrated model, where IP opportunities are embedded across the curriculum. They also note that within these two models, around 40% utilize phases within their models to "incrementally develop interprofessional capability" (Grace, 2021), or enhance one's skills, in a structured pedagogy, to work in a coordinated team across multiple disciplines. This is a great opportunity for students to get practical experience working with other students and/or professionals across disciplines and emphasizes the important role that interdisciplinary care has in their career. Bridges and colleagues (2011) support these findings and delve into three IPE models from the Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science, the University of Florida, and the University of Washington. All models emphasize community-based experience and interprofessional-simulation experience. Building an understanding of professional roles in a healthcare team was also a primary goal. They end the paper by discussing key factors to the success of these programs: administrative support, program infrastructure, and student success acknowledgements (Bridges, et al., 2011).

The current literature notes some potential barriers to the current IPE models, including lack of resources for training and professional health programs, lack of institutional support, and scheduling process (Breitbach et al., 2013; Hammick et al., 2007; Lash et al., 2014; Reeves et al., 2013; Sheldon et al., 2012). To elaborate, who is involved in IPE is an important question that is often overlooked. In a professional setting, how do we ensure that all actors know each other and have a basic understanding of what each other does? IPE operates under the assumption that all disciplines in healthcare (e.g., nutrition, nursing, psychology, social work) are receiving this training and are prepared to be a part of a coordinated care system.

In an athlete setting, athletic training programs are known to utilize IPE yet lack proper education on the pedagogy of IPE (Breitbach et al., 2015). Breitbach and colleagues (2015) note

this and provide "model pedagogy" to stakeholders on how to implement IPE to professional athletic training programs. They emphasize building skills including cultural competence and ethical decision-making through imperative learning experiences (advocacy through group community-based projects). Breitbach and colleagues (2015) reveal that these skills can be taught through reflection exercises, simulation, problem-based learning, community projects, and service learning. They conclude by noting that facilitator training is a necessary component for well-conducted IPE.

Additionally, Van Slingerland and colleagues (2022) conducted a case study exploring these types of resources through collaborative care. They found that collaboration performance was hindered by logistics, the overlaps of scopes between the professionals, and individual characteristics of the athlete (Van Slingerland et al., 2022). Beasley and colleagues (2021) found similar issues when exploring the emerging role that social workers can play in the mental health care of college athletes. While an important factor in college athlete healthcare, there are still a variety of misconceptions surrounding the care licensed social workers can provide (i.e., therapy vs. sport performance/psychology). They state that social workers are a prime example of in-milieu work and provide great benefits due to their proximity to college athletes. However, a variety of challenges arise regarding their roles in the athletic department that need to be addressed to optimize interprofessional collaboration and comprehensive quality care for college athletes. Participants stated a prominent issue is the lack of education in the department. They felt as if they spent a lot of time educating other department members of their capabilities as a social worker instead of spending time with college athletes (Beasley et al., 2021). Beasley and colleagues (2021) end by proposing a top-down education model, starting with the athletic director, to educate the department on the role of licensed social workers and create an institutionalized understanding of what licensed social workers can and cannot offer to the department. Thus, it appears lack of IPE is a major barrier in effective care in athletic settings.

Mental Health

With regards to mental health care, there is an impending call for holistic change in how healthcare providers approach mental health care and the strategies that they use. Lake and Turner (2017) re-envision current MOCs for mental health care delivery and propose a shift to collaborative, true interdisciplinary care, which can include complementary and alternative approaches (e.g., massage, acupuncture, meditation). Integrative treatment styles or utilizing multiple treatment techniques such as meditation and cognitive-behavioral therapy, are at the forefront of Lake and Turner's agenda as they believe this approach can better address the complex needs of patients (Lake & Turner, 2017), including those experiencing a mental health crisis (Wright et al., 2016). Additionally, creating multiple models that can better address everyone within a population should be considered as effective. Considering age and mental health care, Singh and Tuomainen (2015) posit the need for mental health MOCs as children transition into adulthood. They stress the importance of patient-centered and co-coordinated

transitions between different treatments and the staff involved in each (Singh & Tuomainen, 2015). Looking specifically into youth and college sports, this is important to consider as many athletes are transitioning to adulthood, thus altering their method of care.

However, within all these different models, implementation is difficult as it's through an individual lens as opposed to systematic; iterative steps do not tell the whole story. Further, many assumptions across these models exist. The theme of understanding all actors within interdisciplinary care is prominent here. Additionally, the macro perspective is not fully integrated. Cultural differences of attitudes towards mental health care do exist; however, these perspectives are not taken into consideration under these models. Greater adaptation to account for these differences and prioritize one's culture in their health care is needed.

Within athletics, mental health care has been an increasing concern (Chang et al., 2019; Strohle, 2018). Beasley and Hoffman (2023) conducted a review of mental health literacy of college athletes to determine if they're knowledgeable about mental health management, different disorders and treatment, action to decrease mental health stigma, and effective help-seeking behaviors. They note that athletes and non-athletes presented high levels of mental health literacy but athletes in particular display high levels of mental health stigma. This is a great indication of the current state of mental health care in athletics. Currently, most programming emphasizes the individual functional level (i.e., treatment) and not the societal level (i.e., stigma reduction).

Holistic Care Model

The Holistic Care Model for college athletes (Waller et al., 2016) is an innovative conceptual framework that incorporates various areas (both traditional and emerging) of care within sport:

1. Sport Media Advisor
2. Sport Psychology Consultant
3. Psychiatrist
4. Attorney
5. Academic Advisor
6. Nutritionist
7. Strength & Conditioning
8. Medical Doctor
9. Athletic Trainer
10. Coach
11. Chaplain
12. Life Skills Coordinator
13. Transition Counselor (Waller et al., 2016).

These personnel encapsulate the management of athletes' physical, psychological, and social health. Waller and colleagues (2016) focus specifically on the role of a chaplain to aid in athletes' spiritual journey while they participate in college sport, currently and understudied area. This model provides a great overview of the resources that college athletes need to achieve and sustain holistic wellness. However, missing are the specific types of mental health professionals, especially as there are distinct differences between clinical and performance care (McHenry et al., 2021), the process of interactions between these different actors, equitable implementation tactics for all sports, institutions, and divisions, and proper assistance to help athletes navigate these resources.

Barkley and colleagues (2018) take this a step further with their Holistic Athletic Healthcare Model, which considers the holistic needs during adolescent development, cultural competency, health equity, and integration with the campus medical care community. This comes as an application to the social-ecological model and contains micro and macro factors influencing the individual athlete: healthcare provider relationship, campus community, and society (Barkley et al., 2018). These levels aim to address current gaps in comprehensive quality care for college athletes, including culturally competent care, substance abuse treatment, mental health stigma reduction, and attention to spiritual health. The model is robust and provides great direction to providing quality and holistic care for college athletes while also attempting to address the macro-level. Yet, implementation processes, and coordination between different campus actors are not addressed in detail. This results in an issue of case management. How can a department coordinate holistic care for over 400 college athletes? Frequently, this responsibility falls to the AT or coach, which as previously mentioned, is not a part of their job description, and thus, they lack training to properly address and coordinate needed care.

Sport Injury Rehabilitation

Sport-based injury rehabilitation is a large, multifaceted sector of athlete wellness, as experiencing an injury sometime throughout one's athletic career is common. When approaching rehabilitation, Clement and Arivnen-Barrow (2013) take a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating a multi-level team of professionals via coordinated care to provide both psychological and physiological care to the injured athlete. Their model, multidisciplinary team rehabilitation, is structured into two teams: primary and secondary. Primary includes an athlete's AT and physician/surgeon. Secondary includes actors such as coaches, family members, psychiatrists, podiatrists, dentists, and teammates. The goal of this approach is to emphasize current structures within treatment care:

> Medical professionals in regular contact with the athlete (that is, the primary team) during treatment are in an ideal position to inform, educate and assist with both the psychological and physical process of injury. Whilst members of the secondary team may not be directly involved in the physical treatment of the injured athlete, they often

> contribute to the injured athlete's rehabilitation experience in numerous ways (Clement & Arivnen-Barrow, 2013, p. 159).

By assigning a primary team to help coordinate different aspects of an athlete's rehabilitation, it streamlines the multidisciplinary nature of healthcare to provide the best results for the athlete. The idea of a primary and secondary team, under the lens of a case coordinator, is a strong method in coordinating rehabilitation care for the athlete. However, given this, there are many assumptions that this model takes that result in its limiting factors. Firstly, there is an assumption that all these resources are available to an athlete and offer strong support. What happens when an institution does not have a psychiatrist or family support for this athlete is not prevalent? Secondly, once again we see an AT as the primary care distributor or case manager. Given their proximity to athletes, this is a strong idea. However, ATs are not trained as case managers, nor do they have time to add these responsibilities into their profession (Beasley et al., 2022a). Lastly, a multidisciplinary approach is robust in incorporating different actors into an athlete's care team. However, this form of care lacks the communication aspect between different care team members, something that an interdisciplinary approach can provide. As previously mentioned, the latter allows for greater use of coordinated care, providing strong holistic outcomes for the athlete (Choi & Pak, 2006).

Proposed Approach: Best Practices

Taking the above models into consideration, it is evident that essential in a MOC for athletes is an athlete-centered approach. Integrating an athlete's personal support system(s) into the care process as well as considering an athlete's many needs is reflective of different successful characteristics of sub models within PCC (Chouvarda, et al., 2015; John et al., 2020). Additionally, research indicates that an interdisciplinary approach proves to be a successful strategy in a MOC (e.g., Breitbach et al., 2015; Bridges et al., 2011). As opposed to multidisciplinary strategies, an interdisciplinary approach includes interactions between different actors in the care system, ensuring that everyone is on the same page and working toward similar goals for the athlete.

However, there are several barriers when thinking about an interdisciplinary approach. Firstly, research suggests that it is hard to successfully provide IPE in educational settings (e.g., Lash et al., 2014; Reeves et al., 2013). This problem translates to the workforce, often creating the assumption that there is proper knowledge surrounding an actor's role and how to successfully incorporate them into an organization (Beasley et al., 2021). Secondly, it is difficult to translate IPE into interactions in the industry and create understanding of the details in coordinated care (Van Slingerland et al., 2022). There are many times no set structure of who coordinates an athlete's care with the different providers. And, if there is, such as the AT in the multidisciplinary Sport-based Injury Rehabilitation Model (Clement & Arivnen-Barrow, 2013), there becomes an issue of case load, as an AT does not have the time or proper training to

coordinate care for an athlete (Beasley et al., 2022) Lastly, frequently mentioned in the literature review are model's failure to provide reproducibility steps, as each organization has different structures, actors, and needs.

With the limitations in implementation of PCC and interdisciplinary approaches, there are challenges in proposing a "model" of care. As previously mentioned, difficulties arise in reproducing different models across organizations, as they are all unique in structure and client needs. On the other hand, curating a model that is reproducible would result in a framework that is far too broad and lacks actionable and effective steps for sport organizations. Taking these factors into account, we suggest best practices, including making the case for case management, as an appropriate way to incorporate the needs of different sport organizations at all levels of an ecological system, and provide steps for reproducibility. These recommendations are detailed enough to be applicable to all sport organizations but also provide enough space to adapt and incorporate these practices to fit the needs of each unique sport organization. The following sections describe three best practices for creating a model of care for athletes: (1) An Interdisciplinary Approach, (2) Case Managers, and (3) Top-Down Organizational Training. In addition, each section will conclude with actionable steps for implementation across a variety of sport organizations.

1. An Interdisciplinary Approach

Primary to this set of best practices is the idea of interdisciplinary care throughout the sport organization. An interdisciplinary approach involves coordinated care between different healthcare professionals (i.e., an athletic trainer and a nutritionist; Choi & Pak, 2006). Once all care providers and actors in an organization understand what each other provides (See Best Practices #3), athlete care can incorporate multiple actors. Organized by and facilitated through a case manager at the micro level (See Best Practices #2), an athlete can receive care through multiple professionals. What is unique, however, is that these professionals will communicate with each other on the athlete's progress and/or notes of concern, at the mesolevel. Everyone is on the same page, and, in fact, these meetings can provide insights that can better target care and perhaps implement new strategies for the athlete (McHenry et al., 2022). In addition, with streamlined communication protocols, organizational efficiency can improve.

Actionable Step #1: Implementing Interdisciplinary Care

Sport organizations can implement their own structure of interdisciplinary care. This may vary by who an interdisciplinary team involves, both per an athlete's needs and who an organization has access to. Examples of care team members can include certified mental performance consultants (CMPCs), ATs, strength and conditioning coaches, licensed professional counselors (LPCs), licensed social workers (LSWs), licensed psychologists (LPs), nutritionists, and medical doctors (McHenry et al., 2022; Waller et al., 2016). McHenry and

colleagues (2022) suggest that, specifically within mental health services, CMPCs, LPCs, LSWs, and LPs can serve different roles within the care team to optimize care for athletes, such as intakes versus consultation plans. Extending on this, each member of the interdisciplinary care team, including nutritionists and coaches, can bring their unique competence and skillset to contribute to shared decision making for the athlete.

However, for true interdisciplinary care to be implemented, there needs to be a case manager to assure that communication is happening, care is being adequately coordinated, and that the responsibility of care management is not placed on the athlete. Presently, ATs are often put in this position (Mazerolle et al., 2010; 2013); however, ATs do not have the proper training for this role and are already overworked (Beasley et al., 2022a; Mazerolle et al., 2010; 2013). Therefore, it is essential that someone is hired whose sole responsibility is to manage case load and coordinate care for the athletes.

2. Case Managers

To properly manage all actors and their corresponding care for an athlete, there needs to be adequate case management to guide an athlete through these resources. This leads to the importance of case managers. A case manager, such as an LSW, is a healthcare professional who serves as a care coordinator for clients (Beasley et al., 2022b). They are trained to provide strong case assessment and utilize community and organizational research to put together a care team and plan for the patient. Additionally, an integral part of a case manager position is integrating an evaluation system to ensure they are provided with the most appropriate care for the patient.

Case managers are integral for sport organization's best practices as they have the best training to not only manage the individual needs of athletes in an athletic department or organization, but to advocate within the organization and surrounding community to provide the needed care for the athlete (McHenry et al., 2022). In this way, a case manager can appropriately navigate all systems within an athlete's life. For example, a case manager can operate in the mesosystem, bridging communication gaps between different microsystems (i.e., coaches, AT, family members) and exosystems (i.e., athletic department) in an individual's life (See Figure 1). A case manager can also gauge impacting microsystems, such as mental health stigma in athletics, and advocate for resources to improve these conditions (i.e., mental health literacy training; Moore et al., 2022).

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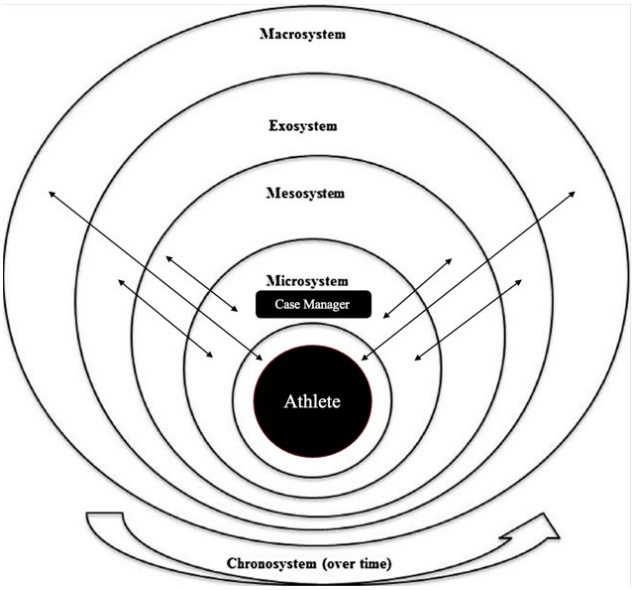
Figure 1. A Visual Adaption of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) Ecological Model



As an adaption to Clement and Arivnen-Barrow's (2013) Sport-based Injury Rehabilitation Model, a case manager can replace the AT and act as the leader in an athlete's primary team, as they have the best training for this role and can offer proper care assessment (Beasley et al., 2022b). Additionally, a case manager can constantly assess who needs to be involved in an athlete's care team, offering a level of flexibility and adaptation to these teams. To explain further through an example, a case manager can loop in the AT to the primary care team for a season as an athlete is going through a rehabilitation protocol. However, once an athlete is back to full play, the AT may not be needed as an actor in the primary care team and can be removed to a secondary care team member who does not need to be as closely involved. The members of each team can be individualized to the athlete. Essential is that this group is guided by the case manager, who can ensure effective meso-level interactions (Beasley et al., 2021) by facilitating meetings with the whole care team, adding and removing people based upon an athlete's needed care, and connecting athletes to community resources when an athletic organization may not have needed services in-house.

In scholarship, this best practice is supported by several studies (e.g., Beasley et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2022). From an industry perspective, case managers in athletics are not common yet. However, top collegiate athletic departments, such as Baylor, Tulane, and Alabama (*Staff Directory – Baylor*, 2024; *Staff Directory - Tulane University Athletics*, 2024; *Staff Directory -*

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University of Alabama Athletics, 2024), are beginning to hire LSWs who can act as case managers, marking an innovative, and we argue effective, practice for the industry.

Actionable Step #2: Hire a Case Manager

Sport organizations should hire a case manager, such as an LSW (Beasley et al., 2022b). Being able to operate between different systems in an athlete's life is integral in understanding their complete picture and providing the most appropriate care. Additionally, case managers have the proper training to manage large caseloads of athletics, taking this responsibility off coaches and/or athletic trainers, who do not have the time or training to provide this care. Within this line of thought, it is essential for these case managers to conduct strong case assessments when working directly with athletes. Adequate care starts with case assessment, as it is essential to understanding the whole picture and thus, pulling in the needed resources. Additionally, strong case assessment must begin at the macrolevel with attention to cultural competency, a lacking element in many current MOCs and in athletics (Gorczynski et al., 2021). By gaining a holistic understanding of an athlete's background (i.e., familial values) a case manager can better assist the needs of the athlete and, again, loop in or advocate for the proper resources.

3. Top-Down Organizational Training

Lastly, for case managers, and thus interdisciplinary care, to be effective in a sport organization, the entire organization needs an understanding of what a case manager can and cannot do, as well as the roles and responsibilities of each other member of the interdisciplinary team both in the organization and in the care of the athlete. It is recommended sport organizations at the exolevel take a top-down approach to organizational training for several reasons. First, it is integral for members of a sport organization to understand each other's roles and responsibilities. This can provide streamlined communication at the mesolevel (e.g., everyone knows who to go to for a certain situation) and allows for the best care to be provided for the athlete (McHenry et al., 2022). In addition, Moore and colleagues (2022) suggested that this training allows for greater respect between care team members regarding their roles, cultures, values, and service delivery processes. Building respect for one another between these different microsystems in an organization, in return, maximizes the informational diversity of the care team, again allowing the best care possible to reach the athlete (Moore et al., 2022).

Second, a top-down approach to this training should be implemented as it sets the precedent that this education and understanding throughout the organization is important and should be prioritized. Thus, education should start with the head of the organization (i.e., an athletic director) and trickle down to other administrations and then to coaches and athletes (Beasley et al., 2023). Recent studies have suggested there is often confusion amongst sport organizations about the roles and limits of certain care team members, usually stemming from lack of knowledge from those in leadership positions (Beasley et al., 2022a; Eckenrod et al.,

2023). This process is also an opportunity for de-stigmatization of mental health resources. If an athletic director is discussing these issues and learning the different resources in the department, it becomes less taboo for athletes to talk about these issues and seek the appropriate resources (Beasley et al., 2023; Eckenrod et al., 2023). Additionally, this aids in dissemination of knowledge within the organization's ranking, allowing for greater utilization and efficiency within the care team (Eckenrod et al., 2023).

Actionable Step #3: Implement Organization-wide Training

Organizational training looks different in every case. Essential to this process is the idea of a top-down approach. Thus, it is integral to gauge where the organization is at in terms of everyone understanding each other's roles and responsibilities. From there, training can look like an interactive seminar where each employee talks about their job. It can also look like an organization-wide infographic for everyone member (Eckenrod et al., 2023), listing out both contact information and a summary of what each person can and cannot help with. Another important area of this training is cultural competency. From the tenets of IPE, cultural competency training can help professionals better understand different needs of athletes and feel confident in providing the best and most appropriate care (Breitbach et al., 2015). Again, essential to this process is the idea that it is initiated by the organization head.

Implications for the Field

These best practices, coupled with direct, actionable steps for implementation on a variety of levels within the sport industry, aim to transform how care is provided to athletes. These best practices, focalized by the inclusion of a case manager to an organization, centers athletes' needs, involve multiple healthcare professionals, and create conducive and collaborative environments for all actors and all ecological systems of an organization. As a result, athlete care is holistic, prioritized, and effective. We urge sport organizations to implement these best practices where appropriate to enhance the level of care for athletes and provide a conducive environment for employees. For example, current care professionals in a sport organization can begin to implement their own lines of communication between themselves and advocate for training to properly understand each other's roles. These strategies can produce more efficient care procedures within the organization, benefiting both the organization's care professionals and athletes.

Yet, we argue it is of the utmost importance to integrate a case management system (i.e., hiring a case manager) in sport organizations. While literature suggests that collaborative, interdisciplinary and patient-centered care is a robust approach to athlete care (Moore et al., 2022), missing is functional and sustainable ways to integrate these approaches. Case managers, such as LSWs, can solve this issue. Not only do they have the professional capacity and training to manage the needs of athletes within an organization, but case managers also have the training

to coordinate care and advocate for resources, with cultural competence, throughout all ecological systems.

There is the potential for concern regarding the financial implications of hiring a case manager. However, it can be argued that hiring a case manager is a good financial decision. Due to the nature of the positions, case managers primarily work through resource connections. Further, if a sport organization can only hire one case manager, and solely a case manager, that person can utilize community resources and make referrals for athletes to receive their needed care. In other words, instead of hiring five professionals, a sport organization could hire one case manager who can coordinate any outside care needed, through athlete insurance. Not only does this provide more efficient allocation of financial resources, but this strategy can also contribute to more efficient care procedures for a sport organization.

Limitations and Future Research

While this model of best practices is derived from existing MOCs and provides flexibility of implementation based upon the sport organization, there are still limitations. Mainly, this model has not been fully executed in the industry to vet for barriers of implementation. Instead, it is based on strengths and weaknesses of existing MOCs and calls for social work in sport in the scholarship.

Yet, we understand there could be difficulties and limitations in incorporating these best practices into a sport organization. Primarily, if the best practices are not implemented in tandem, then such a proposed model of care may not be effective. For example, if there are not organizationally supported IPE efforts, then an interdisciplinary care model, even with inclusion of a case manager, will be challenging. Mainly, there could be budgetary constraints. As previously mentioned with the hiring of a case manager, these financial decisions are likely to be beneficial not only to the efficiency of the sport organization, but also to the care of athletes. However, these need to be empirically tested. As a counter, we call for investigation into the effects of the case managers in sport organizations to build support of these best practices and limit potential difficulties in implementing these practices. In addition, a cost-benefit analysis of hiring a case manager could prove to be beneficial in supporting these best practices and provide further tangible evidence for sport organizations.

Lastly, we urge future research to consider the role that athlete-centered, interdisciplinary care, through our outlined best practices, has on holistic athlete well-being. As argued, this approach to athlete well-being is a necessary step for sport organizations to consider as it can lead to more efficient care practices for the organization, benefiting the well-being athletes. We call for pilot studies to be conducted in a variety of sport organizations to better understand the long-term impacts of implementing these best practices.

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Sport Social Work Journal

Commentary: Navigating the Challenges of Being a Student-Athlete at Harvard University: A Sport Social Work Perspective

Jason M. Judge
Kennesaw State University

Lawrence Judge
Ball State University

This commentary explores the multifaceted challenges track and field student-athletes face at Ivy League universities such as Harvard, through the lens of sport social work. It examines key issues of balancing academics and athletics, mental health, socioeconomic pressures, and navigating a volatile sociopolitical environment. Through tailored support and advocacy, sport social workers may ensure the well-being and success of student-athletes both on and off the track and field.

Keywords: mental health, academic balance, socioeconomic pressures, athletic performance

Life as a varsity track and field athlete at Harvard University requires navigating a complex and demanding landscape, confronting a unique combination of challenges that extend beyond the typical collegiate experience. Ivy League institutions such as Harvard are renowned for their unparalleled academic standards, where the bar for success is set extraordinarily high (Morrison, 2021). These academic demands coincide with the high-performance standards of varsity athletics to create dual pressure that often pushes student-athletes to their physical, mental, and emotional limit. Their schedules, including both intensive training sessions and the time commitment required for academic excellence, leave little room for rest or recovery (Amornsiripanitch et al., 2023).

Through my personal journey, I witnessed not only my own struggles but also those of my fellow student-athletes, each managing Ivy League expectations in their own way. Beyond the demands to excel in both academics and athletics, many faced additional stressors rooted in socioeconomic and sociopolitical issues, echoing concerns highlighted in the Ruderman Family Foundation (2018) report. This report underscored the unique mental health challenges that student-athletes face, particularly within elite academic environments, where the intersection of performance, identity, and external pressure can exacerbate feelings of isolation and stress. This

commentary examines those experiences for Ivy League student-athletes through the lens of sport social work. By focusing on critical areas such as time management, mental health, socioeconomic disparities, and the sociopolitical tensions raised in the Ruderman report, this analysis demonstrates how sport social workers can be vital in mitigating these pressures. Through targeted interventions, sport social work can foster a more supportive and inclusive environment for student-athletes, guiding them through the complexities of their university experience.

Background

Sport social work is dedicated to improving the holistic well-being of athletes by addressing the diverse challenges they face beyond their physical performance (Newman et al., 2019). At elite academic institutions like Harvard, student-athletes face an extraordinary convergence of responsibility, with academic demands and the pursuit of athletic excellence pushing them to their limits. These compounded expectations create a highly stressful environment. Recognizing these unique vulnerabilities, sport social work has evolved to provide comprehensive support tailored to the specific needs of athletes. This field focuses on mitigating issues such as mental health concerns, identity formation, and career transitions (Moore & Gummelt, 2019).

In addition to providing emotional and psychological support, sport social workers play a critical role assisting athletes navigate post-collegiate career transitions and managing injuries that could impact their long-term prospects (Judge et al., 2024). By collaborating with coaches, educational institutions, and athletic teams, sport social workers advocate for policies and interventions that prioritize athlete well-being within systems that often prioritize performance above all else. This support is especially crucial at Ivy League institutions, where the combination of academic and athletic pressures can result in heightened stress (Gorczynski et al., 2024).

Balancing Academics and Athletics

Ivy League student-athletes endeavor to excel in both rigorous academic and competitive athletics. At institutions like Harvard, where academic expectations are especially high, student-athletes often struggle to meet the demands of both arenas simultaneously (Morrison, 2021). The physical and emotional toll of sports, combined with scholarly commitments, frequently results in compromised performance in either or both areas (Nixon et al., 2014).

Recent data highlights the severity of this issue: in one semester, 41% of Ivy League athletes took a leave of absence, and 75% of Yale's women's softball team did the same, underscoring the unsustainable pressure placed on student-athletes (Ruderman Family

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Foundation, 2018). Research has shown that time constraints, particularly during travel for competitions, increase academic strain, making it difficult for student-athletes to balance their responsibilities (Watson & Kissinger, 2007). This unique adversity, less common at Power 5 schools where athletic scholarships dominate, leads many Ivy League athletes to experience burnout, anxiety, and stress as they attempt to excel in both academics and athletics (Ruderman Family Foundation, 2018).

Mental Health Needs of Ivy League Student-Athletes: A Distinct Challenge

While mental health challenges are prevalent among student-athletes across all collegiate institutions, Ivy League athletes require a more specialized, multifaceted approach to mental health care. At Power 5 schools, athletes often grapple with maintaining athletic scholarships and pursuing professional sports careers, while Ivy League athletes must endure a distinct set of stressors. The combination of high academic standards and expectations for success in both athletics and prestigious non-sporting careers places Ivy League student-athletes in a category of their own (Amornsiripanitch et al., 2023).

The convergence of pressures on student-athletes can bring about mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and stress. The competitive culture at elite institutions like Harvard, where academic achievement is paramount, can magnify these mental health concerns. Research has shown that the high intellectual demands of Ivy League schools, combined with athletic commitments, contribute to a unique dual stressor that increases the likelihood of mental health symptoms, including suicidal ideation (Cole & Korkmaz, 2013; Gill, 2008). This is particularly pronounced in environments where perfectionism is pervasive, and failure is deeply feared.

According to the Ruderman Family Foundation Report (2018), student-athletes across elite academic institutions are at higher risk for mental health afflictions compared to their peers at other universities. The report highlights that the unique intersection of academic and athletic stressors creates an environment where many student-athletes feel overwhelmed by the expectation to excel in all areas of life. The Ruderman Report emphasizes that Ivy League athletes are often subject to extreme pressure to maintain academic excellence while simultaneously performing at high athletic levels, a balancing act that contributes to higher rates of anxiety, depression, and burnout.

Harvard University has made strides in supporting student-athletes' mental health by embedding two mental health professionals within its athletic department. Still, the Ruderman Report notes that the demand for mental health services far exceeds available resources, with many Ivy League student-athletes grappling with academic and athletic perfectionism (Billings, 2021). The relentless pursuit of excellence, particularly at institutions like Harvard, where

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students are surrounded by high-achieving peers, exacerbates mental health struggles, leading to increased social comparison, fear of inadequacy, and heightened psychological distress. The Ruderman Report further explains that this environment, compounded by fears of injury, declining athletic performance, and post-collegiate career uncertainty, increases vulnerability to mental health crises.

In comparison to Power 5 schools, where athletic scholarships and a focus on sports often dominate student-athlete experiences, the academic demands at Ivy League institutions more significantly intensify the mental health risks. Moore et al. (2022) found that athletes at elite academic institutions face compounded stress due to the simultaneous pursuit of excellence in academics and athletics. This double burden makes Ivy League student-athletes particularly susceptible to mental health issues that are less common at institutions where academic performance typically plays a secondary role to athletic success.

Sport social workers may address these difficult circumstances by offering targeted interventions such as stress management programs, resilience training, and mental health counseling. Additionally, they can work to reduce the stigma associated with seeking mental health support, which continues to be a significant barrier for many student-athletes (Newman et al., 2019). Advocacy for the expansion of mental health services, especially in elite academic settings like Harvard, is crucial while academic and athletic pressures on student-athletes continue to grow (Judge et al., 2024). The Ruderman Report underscores the need for specialized mental health programs that address the unique situations faced by Ivy League athletes, ensuring that they receive comprehensive care to thrive in their pursuits.

Socioeconomic Pressures at Harvard and Ivy League Institutions

Attending an Ivy League institution presents significant financial challenges, particularly for student-athletes from lower-income backgrounds. Harvard's need-based financial aid adjusts tuition based on family income, but additional costs such as travel, athletic gear, and living expenses, remain significant hurdles (Harvard College, 2023). Financial strain can worsen feelings of social isolation, imposter syndrome, and mental health issues in an elite environment where wealth disparities are evident (Wilkinson, 2020).

Harvard's mental health protocol, which has involved sending at-risk students home after they begin medication for mental health issues, has been controversial. The Ruderman Family Foundation report (2018) demonstrates how this approach may interrupt student-athletes' academic and athletic careers, further isolating those from lower-income backgrounds who may lack the financial means or support networks to support the extended leave of absence and conditions to be readmitted to the university.

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In contrast, student-athletes from wealthier backgrounds are often able to afford additional resources, enhancing their overall college experience. These disparities create significant social and emotional strife, particularly for first-generation or low-income students who may struggle with a sense of inadequacy compared to their more affluent peers (Sacks, 2007).

Sport social workers can connect student-athletes to financial resources and support services, such as need-based scholarships and mental health counseling. These interventions not only help level the playing field but also promote an inclusive and supportive athletic community, ensuring student-athletes from all socioeconomic backgrounds can succeed (Newman et al., 2019).

Sociopolitical Environment and Its Impact on Ivy League Student-Athletes

Ivy League institutions are known for their progressive political climate, which fosters inclusivity for many students but can also create animosity toward those with differing cultural and political beliefs. Research shows that these campuses lean heavily toward progressive ideologies, which can alienate students who hold dissenting views, particularly on divisive issues such as racial discrimination in admissions (Gross & Fosse, 2012). The political discourse can add an additional layer of stress for student-athletes, who are already balancing the demands of academics and athletics in a highly competitive environment.

Harvard's 2019 admissions lawsuit, which addressed racial considerations in admissions, exemplifies how political issues can permeate the campus environment. Many Asian students who supported the lawsuit found themselves reluctant to voice their opinions publicly, fearing social backlash in a predominantly progressive atmosphere (Kyaw, 2023). Such polarization can be particularly difficult for student-athletes, who must face these tensions both within their teams and the broader campus community. The highly charged political environment at Ivy League schools can infiltrate team dynamics, creating conflict among athletes. Student-athletes may feel pushed to conform to the dominant campus ideologies, and those who resist or decline to participate can face social marginalization or even harassment. For instance, athletes who choose not to support certain causes might experience strain with activist teammates, which can disrupt team cohesion and add unnecessary stress (Gross & Fosse, 2012).

Sport social workers' expertise in conflict resolution and promoting human relationships makes them well-equipped to facilitate open conversations among athletes with differing views (Moore et al., 2018). By fostering respectful dialogue and promoting team unity, sport social workers can help student-athletes navigate political tensions without compromising their focus on academics and athletics. In addition, sport social workers can advocate for institutional policies that create safe spaces for political expression, ensuring that student-athletes can voice

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their opinions without fear of retribution. This is particularly important in the Ivy League, where political discourse is often intense and publicized, putting additional pressure on student-athletes to align with dominant ideologies (Judge et al., 2024). By promoting environments where personal beliefs are respected, sport social workers help student-athletes avoid unnecessary political conflicts and focus on their primary responsibilities.

Conclusion

Life as a student-athlete at Harvard University requires balancing academic rigor, athletic demands, mental health, socioeconomic disparities, and sociopolitical conflict. While student-athletes at non-Ivy League schools face similar challenges, the unique intensity of the Ivy League experience amplifies these stressors. The combination of high academic expectations, financial obligations, and elite social dynamics for Ivy League athletes makes them particularly vulnerable compared to elsewhere. Sport social workers can implement specialized interventions to help manage time, alleviate mental health burdens, and create inclusive environments that mitigate socioeconomic and political pressures. Tailoring support to the unique demands of Ivy League student-athletes will not only enhance their well-being but also optimize their athletic and academic performance. Ivy League Universities must invest in comprehensive and forward-thinking strategies that reflect the distinct needs of their student-athletes, ensuring they are equipped to succeed in all areas of their collegiate experience.

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Suicide Bereavement with Sports Teams

Kimberly H. McManama O'Brien
Unlimited Resilience LLC

Kyra Willoughby
Rutgers University

Anna Nilsson
Rutgers University

A suicide death on a sports team can have serious negative consequences for the teammates left behind. Given the short- and long-term psychological sequelae experienced by suicide loss survivors, it is critical that teams who lose a teammate to suicide are provided with comprehensive bereavement support. This practice note details the unique suicide bereavement needs of sports teams, outlines key approaches to utilize following the suicide death of a teammate, provides a framework that can be followed when conducting bereavement work with teams who lose a fellow athlete to suicide, gives an example and evaluation of suicide bereavement support provided to a high school girls athletic team following the death of their teammate, and concludes with lessons learned and future directions for suicide bereavement work with sport teams.

Keywords: mental health, academic balance, socioeconomic pressures, athletic performance

Over the past two decades, from 2000-2022, the suicide rate has increased by 36% in the U.S. (CDC, 2024a) while suicide rates in all other countries outside of the Americas have simultaneously declined (Ilic & Ilic, 2022). In the U.S., suicide is a significant public health problem facing adolescents and young adults, as suicide is the second leading cause of death for ages 10-14 and the third leading cause of death for ages 15-24 (CDC, 2024b). Losing someone to suicide has a profound and widespread impact, with one study finding that for every suicide loss in a community, 135 people are affected (Cerel et al., 2019). Suicide can have a particularly strong impact on the social circles of the suicide decedent, which for adolescents often includes their sports team. Although there is a dearth of data on suicide rates for high school athletes specifically, CDC reports show that 22% of high school students, many of whom identify as

athletes, reported seriously considering attempting suicide (CDC, 2023). One meta-analysis found that rates of suicidal ideation ranged from 3.7 to 6.5% among college athletes and 6.9 to 18% among professional athletes (Gill et al., 2024).

A suicide death on a sports team can have serious negative consequences for the teammates left behind. Acute grief is frequently experienced following a sudden or violent death (Andriessen et al., 2019), making it imperative that the loss of a teammate to suicide is immediately addressed. Suicide-loss survivors are at higher risk for post-traumatic stress, major depression, suicidal thoughts and behaviors, and complicated grief compared to those who have not lost a loved one to suicide (Tal Young et al., 2012). They frequently experience prolonged grief symptoms and struggle with complex emotions associated with the death of a loved one like guilt, anger, or shame (Levi-Belz et al., 2023). Given the short- and long-term psychological sequelae experienced by suicide loss survivors, it is critical that teams who lose a teammate to suicide are provided with comprehensive bereavement support.

Teammates are interdependent on one another inside and outside of their sport, having substantial influence on each other's individual behaviors. One systematic review found that both supportive and pressuring behaviors by teammates (i.e., encouraging weight gain or loss, and/or more exercise) affect individual eating habits, behaviors, and attitudes (Scott, Haycraft, & Plateau, 2019). Findings demonstrated that the quality of teammate friendships had protective impacts on individuals within a team, including reduced negative effects and problematic attitudes and behaviors (Scott, Haycraft, & Plateau, 2019). Athletes with poor mental health and high levels of depression and anxiety are more vulnerable to negative teammate behaviors such as disordered eating, body dissatisfaction, and exercise pathology (Scott, Haycraft, & Plateau, 2019). In contrast, athletes with high self-esteem are more likely to have healthier teammate friendships, in turn leading to reduced psychopathologies (Scott, Plateau, & Haycraft, 2020).

Given the unique and interdependent relationship of teammates, the impact of a teammate's death by suicide is profound. One phenomenological study that conducted interviews with student-athletes following the unexpected death of a teammate found that they dealt with many emotional and behavioral difficulties and needed support in the aftermath with supportive coaches being a critical component (Simpson & Elberty, 2018). Experiencing the suicide of a loved one is associated with multiple negative health and social outcomes (Pitman et al., 2014), and those with pre-existing mental health concerns can experience greater emotional sequelae. As such, athletes with pre-existing mental health concerns or other emotional vulnerabilities may be more likely to struggle following the unexpected death of a teammate.

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Although research consistently demonstrates the negative effects of grief on survivors, almost no research exists on how the death of a teammate impacts a sports team and the corresponding unique bereavement needs for athletes and coaches (Fogaca, Cupit, & Gonzalez, 2023). To our knowledge, no formal case studies or other research exist that describe or evaluate approaches to suicide bereavement specifically for sports teams.

The purpose of this practice note is to detail the unique suicide bereavement needs of sports teams and outline key approaches to utilize following the suicide death of a teammate. We present a case study of suicide bereavement with a high school girls' athletic team and propose a framework that can be used to guide related suicide bereavement support efforts. We conclude with lessons learned and future directions for suicide bereavement work with sport teams.

Unique Suicide Bereavement Needs of Sport Teams

Effective suicide bereavement work requires providing information about suicide and grief, holding space to process emotions about the death including survivor guilt, assessing for suicide contagion, and creating linkages to outside resources (Jordan, 2020). Comprehensive bereavement work is essential given that suicide loss survivors experience more shock and trauma related to the unanticipated and violent death of a loved one compared to those with other forms of bereavement (Andriessen et al., 2019). In addition to these universal guidelines for suicide bereavement, sport teams typically require different spaces and formats for processing the suicide death of a teammate. Grieving athletes need shared emotion- and restoration-focused coping skills, with the most important factor facilitative to coping being bringing the team together (Fogaca, Cupit, & Gonzalez, 2023). Unique considerations for suicide bereavement work with sports teams include the length of time of the bereavement process, media attention and community support, memorializing the deceased player, preceding team dynamics and coach-player relationships, building individual skills and supportive communication patterns surrounding coping with the loss, and identifying individual teammates in need of more support.

Teams may need a longer and more intensive bereavement process than what is typically provided by the school, college, or institution. There is a lot of pressure to speed up the therapeutic process by providing short term crisis-oriented work following a suicide, but a more effective approach may be infrequent sessions with long term availability (Jordan, 2020). On a sports team this long-term availability should last at minimum throughout the season during and/or following the death of the teammate. Long-term availability may help to combat suicide-loss survivors' frequent feelings of poor social support and lack of belonging and disrupt behaviors of low self-disclosure (Levi-Belz et al., 2023). Teams need support in working through the changes in all aspects of the season which may include questions such as what to do with their locker, how to manage first game emotions, what communication patterns among

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teammates need to be adapted, and how to keep the memory of the teammate alive while simultaneously moving forward. Working through these difficult elements is impossible to do in one session and requires a constant back-and-forth between the grief clinician and the team to build trust and determine which needs are precedent at which times. It is also worthwhile to consider whether the death occurred during pre-season, in-season or off-season (North Western Melbourne Primary Health Network, 2020). If the death happened during the off-season, a more conscious effort to bring the team together may be necessary to properly offer support for players, connect them with one another, and provide crucial resources. If the death occurred in-season, coaches must carefully consider when the team should return to play following the death, which is difficult to discern given that team members will be at different points in their grief process (Fogaca et al., 2023).

Media attention and community support are important factors to consider for sports teams affected by the death of a teammate to suicide. One qualitative study found that suicide-loss survivors frequently reported negative experiences with the press, where loved ones felt the deceased were misrepresented, privacy was violated, and that the press did not properly consult with the bereaved (Gregory et al., 2020). Another study found that media was the most common factor impeding the bereavement process (Fogaca et al., 2023), suggesting that minimizing athletes' exposure to news media may allow for more effective healing process. In contrast to the negative effect of media, community support was found to be beneficial for suicide loss survivors on teams (Fogaca et al., 2023). One study found that greater perceived social support was significantly associated with decreased grief difficulties, depressive symptoms, and suicidality, as well as increased personal growth, among suicide loss survivors (Oexle & Sheehan, 2019). Community members can serve to enhance the suicide loss survivors' social network and perceived level of social support, which may improve the overall effectiveness of suicide bereavement (Levi-Belz et al., 2023). Communities can offer critical opportunities to rally around teams to provide support and aid the team in collectively honoring the life of the teammate lost to suicide.

Memorialization of the teammate is a complex question that requires input from all team members and careful thoughts about where, when, and how. Teams often do not feel the school or institutional memorial of the teammate is enough to serve the needs of the surviving teammates or the need for commemoration of the deceased player's contribution to the team and sport. Many players choose to wear armbands or helmet stickers with initials, while others may design special uniforms or patches. Athlete memorials have demonstrated the greatest perception of importance if wearable and institutionalized (Fogaca, Cupit, & Gonzalez, 2023). Athletic events can also provide an opportunity for mental health and suicide awareness that can benefit the entire campus community. One study found that younger generations are more prone to using social media to commemorate a loved one lost to suicide, making social media a key component

of the contemporary grief process (Leaune et al., 2024). As a result, it may also be worthwhile to discuss the role of social media and how team members may individually use social media to memorialize their teammate (North Western Melbourne Primary Health Network, 2020). Regardless of the memorial chosen, the most important part of the process is the team coming together to decide how to commemorate the athlete. Deciding this together further bonds the team and gives them some autonomy and control in the context of a traumatic situation, helping them to move forward in the grief process.

Preceding team culture and dynamics, including coach-player relationships, is another unique element of suicide bereavement work with teams. To work effectively with the team in the grief process the clinician must get an understanding of the team culture and interpersonal dynamics that preceded the suicide, the athletic and social role that the deceased athlete had on the team, and how the team dynamic has shifted since the death of the teammate. One element of team dynamic that warrants attention is the role of the deceased on the team, and whether that individual was considered a significant team member (Fogaca et al., 2023). It is also essential to address the bereavement needs of the team members as well as the coaches to minimize disenfranchised grief (Fogaca et al., 2023). Having separate meetings with the coaches, captains, and other key team members can help to elucidate these dynamics. To better understand team dynamics, the grief clinician collaborating with the team would ideally have a background in sports psychology, given that the death of a team member can negatively impact the performance of players and coaches alike (Fogaca et al., 2023). Coaches and players often experience these dynamics differently, emphasizing the importance of using captains as the team barometer and the go-between across players and coaching staff. Coaches typically want and need to process the effect of the suicide along with the players, but players often feel hesitant to share their honest thoughts and emotions for fear of how this disclosure may impact their coaches' perception of them and how it may impact their playing time and performance.

Effective suicide bereavement with teams involves building both individual skills and team communication patterns among coaches and players to support coping with their profound loss. Improving team communication means training team members in effective communication and understanding social connections within the group (Berardelli et al., 2020). The clinician must emphasize the understanding that no athlete grieves in the same way, which will require flexibility of the coaches in understanding and responding to a variety of emotional reactions and honoring when certain players may need time away from the arena. Being able to identify and label feelings is a critical first step for athletes. Once they have identified a feeling or emotional response they need support around, they not only need to build individual skills and tools to help themselves manage their emotions in the moment, but they also need to have the ability to openly communicate their feelings and needs with teammates and coaches. This involves

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learning individual level coping skills alongside team-based communication strategies that offer support and validation for their emotions and experience.

Throughout the team bereavement process, an important goal is to identify and assist individual athletes in need of greater support. Survivors of suicide lose emotions such as guilt, shame, anger, confusion, rejection, and others (Tal Young et al., 2012). Throughout the course of a season, athletes may cycle in and out of emotional responses and corresponding need, with those with pre-existing vulnerabilities such as mental health disorders and/or previous trauma or loss at greater risk of being impacted by the suicide death. It should be noted that some athletes do not endorse professional counseling as being helpful when grieving a fellow athlete's suicide (Fogaca, Cupit, & Gonzalez, 2023), suggesting the importance of a peer support option in addition to professional support offerings. In addition, when counseling is offered to teams following a teammate's suicide, it is most effective if the sessions are conducted by clinicians not directly affected by the loss (Simpson & Elberty, 2018).

Case Study of Suicide Bereavement with a Sports Team

Upon request from school administration, an outside PhD-level clinical social worker provided bereavement support to a high school girls' sports team after the death of their teammate to suicide. The clinician used a flexible grief group framework that could be adapted for the dynamic needs of athletic teams as they progress throughout their season. Supports provided were in alignment with the suicide toolkit for schools developed by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Center (AFSP & SPRC, 2018). The session frequency and quantity were not predetermined; rather, the clinician requested feedback from the athletes, captains, and coaches following each session to inform the content and format for the next session.

Prior to the first session, the clinician requested to speak with the head coach to get an understanding of his perception of the team's needs at that point in time (one month after the teammate's death and one month prior to the first game of the season). The first session included both players and coaches and aimed to provide a collective safe space to grieve the loss of their teammate together, provide psychoeducation on suicide and the grief process, discuss the school's response to the suicide thus far and the corresponding thoughts and emotions of the team, and assess individual and team needs moving forward.

Using clinical judgement and feedback from captains, the clinician planned for the second session to be held without coaches present so that the athletes could feel safer speaking on their thoughts and emotions about the loss and to speak honestly about how the teammate's suicide had affected the current team dynamic. The session was quiet, and team members

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appeared hesitant to speak about their feelings. Following the session, the clinician debriefed with the captains who gave valuable information about specific team dynamics that differed by grade and were profoundly affecting the team's sense of psychological safety. Using this feedback from captains after the session alongside the clinician's sensing of continued tension across grades and smaller groups within the team, the clinician conducted the third session using a different strategy.

The third session began all together as a team but without the coaches. The clinician explained to the team that for this session the clinician would meet alone with each grade (10th, 11th, 12th) and then come back together as a whole team to discuss concrete ways to move forward together and best support each other. Separate groups were critical to elucidating the problem related to culture and safety which was directly related to the guilt and shame many felt about the teammate's suicide. The grade of the deceased player was particularly sensitive and fractured. For this team, it was only once these fractures were repaired, and psychological safety was established that the team could effectively move forward in planning for the upcoming season. At the end of this third session, the team determined a need to meet once more to discuss emotions around the first game, as well as how to best commemorate or memorialize their teammate.

The fourth and final session was used to decide together on the way the team wanted to remember their teammate throughout the season as well as memorialize her at the first game, and ended with the clinician leading a visualization of the first game back to prepare them for thoughts and emotions that may arise. In addition, the clinician attended the team's first to support the team and in case individual needs of players arose before, during, or after the game. Following the first game, the clinician discussed separately with coaches and captains their perceptions of the emotional needs of the team and decided that grief support would be delivered as needed ongoing.

To evaluate the sessions and interactions related to the suicide bereavement support provided by the clinician, the athletes completed a questionnaire about each of the components and their perceived helpfulness one month following the end of the season, and one qualitative open response question was also asked to elicit feedback on the support they received. Of the 23 team members, 17 completed the survey. As illustrated in Table 1, the players found the sessions to be more helpful after the first two sessions, which were laying the groundwork for psychological safety. Once teammates felt safe and secure in their ability to open about their emotions and share them with each other, concrete work was done to help them build individual coping skills, learn effective communication strategies, and move forward together as a team after the loss.

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Table 1. Helpfulness of grief sessions/interactions (N=17)

How helpful were the following:	M	(SD)	Median	Range	Response
First session, with coach	2.7	0.85	3	3	94%
Second session, without coach (in auditorium)	2.9	1.00	3	3	100%
Third session, without coach (on the turf)	4.5	0.72	5	2	88%
Fourth session, beginning with coach and ending without, to prep for first game (in the school)	4.3	0.67	4	2	100%
First game memorial and presence of clinician	3.9	1.11	4	4	100%
How helpful were the following:					
Having a safe space to express thoughts and emotions	3.8	0.71	4	2	100%
Learning about the grief process	4.00	0.69	4	2	100%
Getting a better understanding of suicide	3.8	1.06	4	4	100%
Learning skills to manage emotions	3.7	1.02	4	3	100%
Learning strategies for team communication	3.7	0.76	4	3	100%
Learning ways to improve team culture	3.9	0.87	4	2	100%
Having the outside ability to communicate with clinician	4.1	0.68	4	2	88%

Qualitative comments on the open response question suggested the importance of having a professional available to work with the team, as one athlete noted the helpfulness of "having a person to answer questions" and another commented on the value of "knowing that someone was there to talk to if I needed." Other athletes commented that the bereavement work helped them to understand critical aspects of how it feels and what people experience after losing a loved one to suicide. One athlete noted the helpfulness of "learning about the grieving process and that all feelings are normal during that time" while another pointed out the importance of "learning that it is okay that everyone goes through the grief process differently." Other athletes talked about the helpfulness of having a safe space for the team to share their experiences and communicate

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with each other about what happened. Four different athletes commented on this by stating the work helped by "being able to say my thoughts to my grade and hearing theirs," "being able to talk without getting judged," "having a space where I felt comfortable to share my thoughts," and "us as a team being able to express what was bothering us and seeing we weren't alone and that our teammates felt the same about situations." In sum, one athlete encapsulates the work that was done by stating, "she helped the team come together and deal with our grief."

Lessons Learned and Future Directions

Over the past two decades, the incidence rate of suicide in college athletes has increased (Whelan et al, 2024), emphasizing the importance of implementing suicide prevention programs with this population. Suicide postvention and community engagement have been found to be key aspects of effective suicide prevention (Calabrese et al., 2024). As mental health is becoming a greater focus in athletics, schools and leagues need to proactively develop resources that schools can utilize in the event of an unexpected suicide loss.

This practice update details one such example of the type of helpful support that can be provided to teams following the suicide death of a teammate. To best prepare schools and programs to effectively respond to the suicide loss of a teammate, a flexible and adaptable framework should be readily available for use that addresses the unique needs of athletes. We have taken the first step in the development of this framework (See Figure 1) which includes the key components of establishing psychological safety, providing psychoeducation on suicide and grief, developing individual coping skills, building team communication strategies, and finally, moving forward.

Psychological safety, the perception that one is protected from, or unlikely to be at risk of, psychological harm in sport (Vella et al., 2024), provides the necessary foundation for information delivery, skills acquisition, and communication needed for effective suicide bereavement on sports teams. Key team-level outcomes that may result from building psychological safety include improved social connections, team effectiveness and performance, learning and transfer of knowledge, and social climate (Vella et al., 2024). Without feeling psychologically safe, individuals cannot express how they feel or what they think for fear of judgment or mistreatment by other individuals or the group. Healing in the aftermath of the suicide of a teammate simply cannot happen if this fear exists. Once psychological safety is established, true healing can begin. When teammates feel psychologically safe to take risks that express their vulnerability, they are not only in a better state of mind to access information and learn individual coping skills, but they can also connect with teammates at a deeper level and communicate together more effectively. Having all these elements in place allows them to move forward together as a team.

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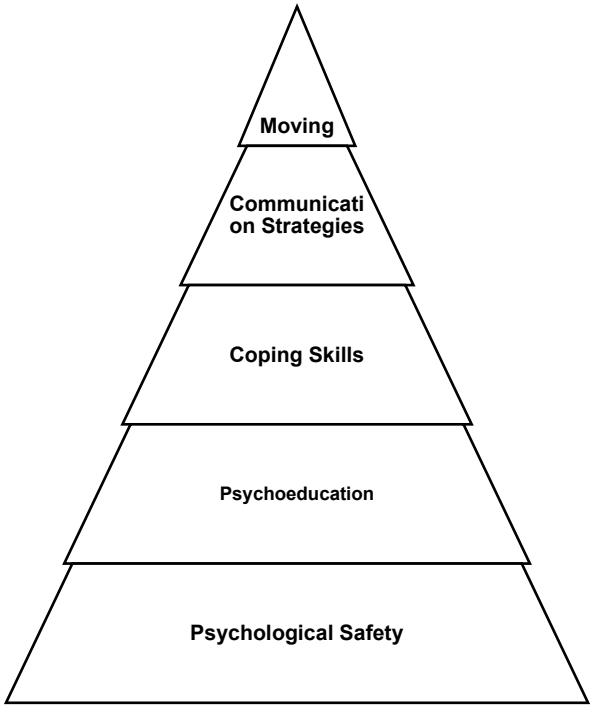
Figure 1. Framework for suicide bereavement support with sports teams



Conclusion

To mitigate the enormous toll that a suicide death on a sports team can have on the teammates left behind, comprehensive and effective approaches to suicide bereavement must be utilized with the team for as long as necessary. Bereavement support frameworks must be flexible and easily adaptable to the dynamic needs of athletic teams as they progress throughout their seasons. Such frameworks must emphasize the need for psychological safety as an integral foundation for information delivery, skill acquisition, and communication needed for effective long term suicide bereavement processes among sports teams.

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