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Navigating Identity and Opportunity: A Scoping Review of Career Development Support for Postsecondary Athletes from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds

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Post-secondary athletes from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds face barriers that may complicate career development and transition beyond sport. Although intercollegiate athletics can provide educational and social mobility opportunities, fewer than 2% of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletes advance to professional sports, requiring most athletes to pursue careers outside of athletics. This scoping review examined the literature on career development supports, institutional practices, and transition-related experiences among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds in the United States. Guided by the methodological frameworks of Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and Levac et al. (2010), a comprehensive search was conducted across 12 databases. Twelve studies met inclusion criteria and were analyzed using thematic analysis. Seven themes were constructed: athletic identity, identity foreclosure, career maturity, institutional support and career programming, socioeconomic inequity, transition and post-sport identity, and cultural responsiveness. Findings identified several promising support approaches, including mentorship, athlete-specific advising, internship opportunities, and identity-informed career development practices. Collectively, the findings suggest that career development among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds is best understood as a multidimensional developmental process shaped by the interaction of athletic identity, socioeconomic opportunity, institutional support, mentoring relationships, career readiness, and culturally responsive practice. However, few formalized and rigorously evaluated interventions specifically designed for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds were identified. These findings highlight a significant gap between documented career development needs and the availability of evidence-informed interventions. Implications for social work practice, policy, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: athletic identity, career development, low socioeconomic status, postsecondary athletes, scoping review, United States

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Introduction

Postsecondary athletes from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds encounter systemic challenges when preparing for careers beyond competitive sport. Although participation in collegiate athletics may provide opportunities for educational attainment, social mobility, and community connection, fewer than 2% of NCAA student-athletes in many sports transition to professional athletics (National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2023). Consequently, most post-secondary athletes ultimately pursue careers outside of athletics while navigating educational, financial, and identity-related barriers. The substantial time demands associated with collegiate sport may limit opportunities for career exploration, while a strong athletic identity can further complicate preparation for careers beyond sport (Brewer et al., 1993; Murdock et al., 2016; Comeaux & Savage, 2025). Existing institutional support often inadequately addresses the intersection of athletic identity, socioeconomic disadvantage, and career development needs among athletes from historically under-resourced communities (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Comeaux & Savage, 2025). For many postsecondary athletes, athletic participation represents more than extracurricular involvement; it becomes a central component of identity, belonging, and perceived opportunity (Brewer et al., 1993; Murdock et al., 2016). Athletic identity may foster motivation, discipline, and persistence while simultaneously constraining career exploration when athletic success is viewed as the primary pathway to economic mobility or social recognition (Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Murdock et al. (2016) found that student-athletes frequently experience difficulty balancing athletic commitments with career preparation activities, while Comeaux and Savage (2025) reported that Black college athletes often lacked sufficient support and guidance regarding careers beyond sport participation.

These challenges may be particularly pronounced for athletes from low SES backgrounds who often navigate postsecondary environments with limited social capital, mentorship opportunities, professional networks, internships, and career development resources beyond sport (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Curry et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025). Black college athletes in Comeaux and Savage's (2025) study described feeling encouraged to prioritize athletic eligibility and sport performance over career exploration, internships, and high-impact educational opportunities. Similarly, previous research has documented that athletes often underutilize career services, counseling centers, and professional development resources because of time demands, athletic obligations, and limited institutional encouragement (Murdock et al., 2016).

Consequently, difficulties navigating career transitions may contribute to uncertainty, diminished social support, and social isolation during post-sport transition experiences (Comeaux & Savage, 2025). These challenges align with the Grand Challenge of eradicating social isolation, which emphasizes the importance of strengthening social connections, supportive relationships, and community engagement across the lifespan (Barth et al., 2022). Research examining former collegiate athletes has identified challenges related to career decision-making, identity adjustment, and preparation for life after sport (Murdock et al., 2016). Despite increasing awareness of athlete mental health and transition concerns, relatively limited attention has been devoted to career development programming specifically designed to support postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020).

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This study is informed primarily by Identity Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory. Identity Theory explains how individuals develop and maintain role-based identities that shape behavior, decision-making, and perceptions of opportunity (Burke & Stets, 2009). Within sport contexts, athletic identity has been associated with both the salience of the athlete role and difficulty exploring alternative career pathways beyond athletics (Brewer et al., 1993; Houle et al., 2010). Prior research suggests that highly salient athletic identities may contribute to identity foreclosure and limited career exploration among athletes navigating transition periods (Wendling & Sagas, 2020).

Social Cognitive Career Theory emphasizes the influence of self-efficacy, environmental supports, and contextual barriers on career development processes (Lent et al., 1994). Within athletic populations, this framework provides insight into how social support, access to opportunity, institutional resources, and perceived barriers influence career decision-making and confidence in pursuing pathways beyond sport (Shurts & Shoffner, 2004; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Recent findings further suggest that environmental barriers, limited mentorship, and restricted engagement opportunities may negatively influence athletes' career preparation and transition experiences (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016).

Although previous studies have examined athletic identity, athlete transition experiences, and career readiness, the literature remains fragmented regarding career development programming and support approaches designed to assist postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds (Murdock et al., 2016). Existing research varies substantially in program structure, institutional context, and attention to identity-related factors, making it difficult to identify consistent approaches that support equitable career development outcomes for this population (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020).

A scoping review was therefore appropriate to examine the breadth of available literature and identify patterns across existing career development programming and support services (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Accordingly, this scoping review addressed the following research question: What career development programs support postsecondary athletes from low socioeconomic status backgrounds?

The purpose of this review was to synthesize United States-based literature examining career development programs, interventions, and support services relevant to postsecondary athletes navigating transitions beyond sport. Findings from this review aim to inform future social work practice, institutional programming, and career development initiatives designed to expand equitable and sustainable post-sport career pathways for athletes from historically under-resourced communities.

Although athletic identity was not operationalized as a formal inclusion criterion, it was consistently identified across the included studies as a significant influence on career exploration, transition experiences, and perceptions of opportunity among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds (Murdock et al., 2016; Comeaux & Savage, 2025). Consequently, athletic identity became an important interpretive lens during thematic synthesis and discussion of the findings rather than a criterion used for study selection.

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Methods

Research Design

This scoping review was guided by the following research question: *What career development programs support postsecondary athletes from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds?* The research question informed the development of the search strategy, inclusion criteria, and analytic framework. A scoping review methodology was selected because of the exploratory nature of the inquiry and the limited body of literature examining career development supports for this specific population. Scoping reviews are particularly appropriate for mapping the breadth of scholarship, identifying research gaps, and examining the characteristics of existing programs, services, and support approaches (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Given the diversity of institutional contexts, support structures, and career development approaches described in the literature, this methodology facilitated a comprehensive examination of the available evidence.

The review followed the five-stage methodological framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), which includes identifying the research question, identifying relevant studies, selecting studies, charting the data, and collating, summarizing, and reporting results. Methodological refinements proposed by Levac et al. (2010) were incorporated to strengthen analytical rigor, transparency, and clarity throughout the review process. Specifically, these recommendations informed the explicit articulation of the research question, the iterative refinement of inclusion criteria, and the systematic documentation of analytic decisions within the structured literature matrix.

This methodological design reflects principles central to social work by examining structural barriers that may influence career development among athletes from low SES backgrounds. The review also considers how access to mentorship, social capital, and institutional supports may shape post-sport transitions and contribute to social isolation (Barth et al., 2022; Kelly & Dixon, 2014). By synthesizing evidence related to career development supports, services, intervention approaches, and identity exploration, this review contributes to social work-informed efforts to expand sustainable post-sport career pathways for athletes from historically under-resourced communities.

The review aligns with the Grand Challenges for Social Work by addressing efforts to eradicate social isolation and ensure healthy development for all youth through supportive relationships, mentorship, identity exploration, and equitable access to career opportunities during evolving adulthood (Barth et al., 2022). Career development programming may strengthen social connectedness and support positive developmental outcomes among postsecondary athletes navigating transitions beyond sport (Barth et al., 2022; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Sears et al., 2024).

Population, Concept, and Context Framework

The inclusion criteria were developed using the Population, Concept, and Context (PCC) framework recommended by the Joanna Briggs Institute for scoping reviews (Peters et al., 2020) (see Table 1 in Appendix 1). The population consisted of postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds participating in organized athletics within the United States. Eligible populations

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included athletes competing within NCAA divisions, NAIA institutions, and community college athletic programs.

Socioeconomic status was inconsistently measured across the included literature; accordingly, studies were considered relevant when low SES was either explicitly reported or reasonably inferred through participant characteristics and contextual indicators described by study authors. Consistent indicators included scholarship dependence, first-generation college status, limited social capital and professional networks, attendance at under-resourced educational institutions, and populations described as historically underserved or marginalized (Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Comeaux & Savage, 2025). This approach allowed a broader examination of career development supports relevant to athletes experiencing socioeconomic barriers while acknowledging variation in how SES was operationalized across studies.

The concept focused on career development supports intended to facilitate career exploration, planning, identity development, and preparation for life beyond sport. To maximize retrieval, the search strategy incorporated the term career access to capture literature describing programs, interventions, and support services that expand awareness of professional opportunities, mentorship, and career pathways available to postsecondary athletes. Athletic identity and identity foreclosure were included as search terms because of their documented relevance within the athlete career development literature (Brewer et al., 1993; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Murdock et al., 2016); however, athletic identity was not operationalized as a participant eligibility criterion.

The context was limited primarily to postsecondary educational environments in which organized athletics are embedded within institutional settings. These contexts included NCAA Division I (DI), Division II (DII), and Division III (DIII) institutions, NAIA programs, and two-year colleges. Postsecondary athletic environments are settings in which athletic identity development, academic experiences, and career planning frequently intersect (Murdock et al., 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020).

Traditional postsecondary athletes within this review referred to individuals participating in collegiate athletic systems, including the NCAA, National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), and community college athletic programs. Non-traditional athletes referred to individuals participating in semi-professional, developmental, or alternative athletic pathways outside formal postsecondary educational institutions. The literature search identified limited research specifically examining career development programming among nontraditional athlete populations. Broader search terms related to semiprofessional, professional development, and elite athletic contexts were initially included to ensure comprehensive retrieval of potentially relevant literature. However, studies focused primarily on semiprofessional or professional athletes were excluded during screening because they represented populations with substantially different career development contexts, support systems, and transition experiences than those of postsecondary athletes.

The review focused specifically on athletes participating within educational environments where career exploration, identity development, and preparation for life beyond sport remain ongoing processes. This focus aligns with evidence indicating that fewer than 2% of collegiate athletes ultimately compete professionally, requiring most athletes to pursue career pathways beyond athletics following their sport participation (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2023). This approach ensured a comprehensive search while maintaining consistency with the review's focus on career development within postsecondary educational environments.

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Key Term Definitions

Key terms were defined to support conceptual consistency throughout the review process (see Table 2 in Appendix 3). Career development refers to the ongoing process of self-exploration, career planning, skill development, and preparation for professional roles beyond sport participation (Bell et al., 2018; Book et al., 2021; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Within postsecondary athletic contexts, career development often involves balancing athletic participation with long-term vocational planning while navigating varying levels of institutional support, mentorship, and career resources (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Sears et al., 2024).

Career pathways refer to structured educational, professional, and experiential opportunities that support progression toward sustainable employment and long-term career goals (Book et al., 2021). Within athletic populations, career pathways may include internships, graduate education, mentoring relationships, professional networking, career services, and experiential learning opportunities that support preparation for careers beyond athletics (Coffin et al., 2021; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Sears et al., 2024).

Postsecondary athletes were defined as individuals aged 18 years or older participating in organized athletics beyond high school within NCAA, NAIA, and community college settings (Bell et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2022). Although broader search terms were initially employed to maximize retrieval of potentially relevant literature, studies involving semiprofessional and professional athletes were excluded during screening to maintain alignment with the review's focus on career development within postsecondary educational environments.

Athletic identity refers to the degree to which individuals identify with the athlete role and organize their self-concept around athletic participation (Brewer et al., 1993). Previous literature suggests that strong athletic identities may contribute to reduced exploration of alternative career roles and increased vulnerability to identity foreclosure during athletic transitions (Bell et al., 2018; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Murdock et al., 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). However, athletic identity functioned as a recurring construct throughout the literature rather than a participant eligibility criterion.

Low SES refers to limited access to economic, educational, and social resources that support long-term opportunity and economic mobility. Within athletic populations, low SES has been associated with structural barriers affecting social capital, professional networks, educational opportunities, mentoring relationships, and career resources (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022).

Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases to identify studies examining career development supports for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. Databases included Academic Search Ultimate, APA PsycInfo, ERIC, Sociological Abstracts, SPORTDiscus, PubMed, and Google Scholar, as well as publicly available professional resources associated with the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports (ASWIS). No publication date restrictions were applied to capture both foundational and contemporary scholarship. The search was limited to peer-reviewed studies conducted within the United States.

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Search terms were developed from the conceptual framework and included combinations of keywords related to athletic identity, identity foreclosure, career development, career readiness, career pathways, low SES backgrounds, career access, and postsecondary athletes. Boolean operators (e.g., AND, OR, and NOT) were used to combine search terms and refine search results.

To maximize retrieval of potentially relevant literature, broader search terms related to semiprofessional, noncollegiate, professional development, and elite athletic contexts were initially included. These terms were incorporated because athletes navigating postsecondary transitions may participate across a range of athletic environments, and the extent of relevant literature was unknown at the outset of the review. However, studies focused primarily on semiprofessional or professional athletes were excluded during screening because they represented populations with substantially different career development contexts, support systems, and transition experiences than those of postsecondary athletes.

The review focused specifically on athletes participating within educational environments where career exploration, identity development, and preparation for life beyond sport remain ongoing processes. This focus aligns with evidence indicating that fewer than 2% of collegiate athletes ultimately compete professionally, requiring most athletes to pursue career pathways beyond athletics following sport participation (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2023). This approach ensured a comprehensive search while maintaining conceptual consistency with the review's focus on career development within postsecondary educational environments.

Although athletic identity and identity foreclosure informed the conceptual framework and search strategy, athletic identity was not operationalized as a formal participant eligibility criterion. Rather, these concepts were examined as recurring constructs within the literature related to career development, transition experiences, identity development, and career exploration behaviors (Bell et al., 2018; Murdock et al., 2016; Shurts & Shoffner, 2004; Wendling & Sagas, 2020).

The search strategy was iteratively refined to improve relevance and comprehensiveness. Resources associated with ASWIS were reviewed to identify potentially relevant literature; however, no additional studies identified through these sources met the final inclusion criteria. Reference lists of all included studies were also examined to identify additional peer-reviewed articles relevant to career development among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. Detailed search strings are presented in Table 3 in Appendix 4.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established before screening to support methodological consistency and transparency (see Table 4 in Appendix 5). Studies were included if they examined postsecondary athletes aged 18 years or older within the United States and described programs, services, interventions, or tools intended to support career development, career exploration, career planning, career pathways, employment preparation, transition planning, or career access. Eligible populations included athletes participating within NCAA, NAIA, and community college athletic settings. Consistent with scoping review methodology, eligible study designs included qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, conceptual, and literature review–based peer-reviewed research (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010). Articles focused exclusively on athletic performance, mental health, or academic outcomes without an explicit career development component were excluded, as were non-peer-reviewed

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sources (e.g., dissertations, theses, editorials, opinion pieces, books, conference proceedings, and gray literature). Only English-language publications were considered.

Study Selection

Study selection followed a multistep screening process consistent with the scoping review framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and refined by Levac et al. (2010). Titles and abstracts were initially reviewed to assess relevance to the research question and alignment with the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles meeting the preliminary screening criteria subsequently underwent full-text review to determine final eligibility. Screening, data extraction, and study management were conducted by the primary researcher using structured eligibility procedures aligned with the review framework.

The data matrix systematically documented the author(s) and year, study purpose, theoretical framework, research design, participant characteristics, indicators of low SES backgrounds, intervention or program characteristics, key findings, and relevance to the review question. This structured approach facilitated consistent comparison across studies and served as the foundation for thematic synthesis.

Search Process

A comprehensive search was conducted across 11 databases (see Table 5 in Appendix 6). The database search identified 63,159 records. After removal of 1,127 duplicate records, 62,032 records remained for title and abstract screening. These records were screened for relevance to the review question and eligibility criteria.

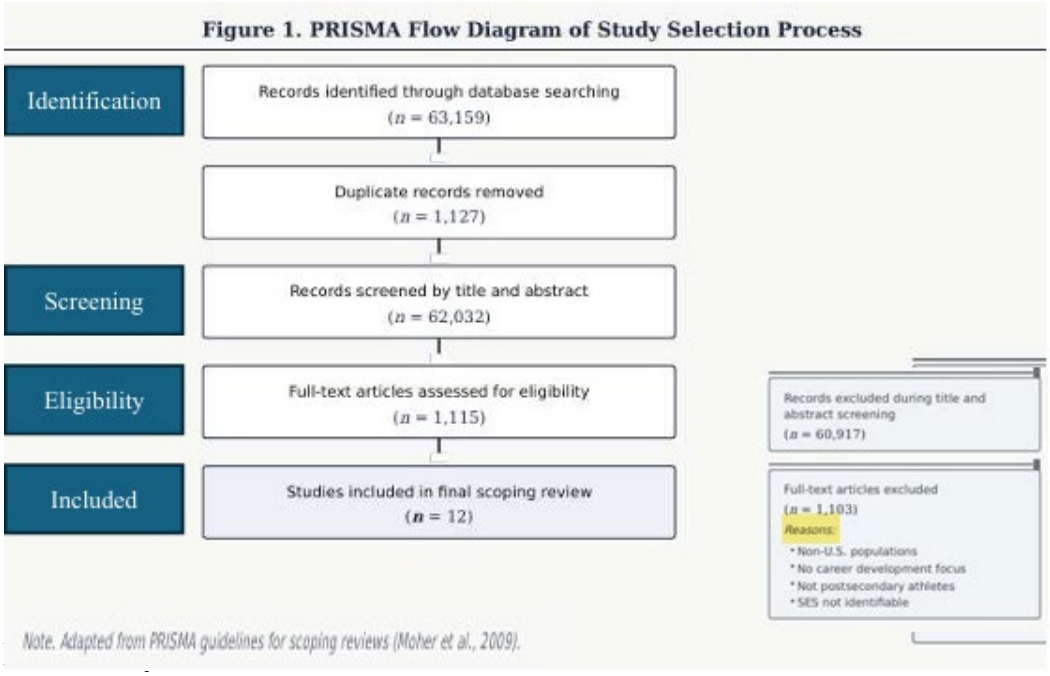
Following title and abstract screening, 1,115 articles remained for full-text review. Studies were excluded if they were conducted outside the United States, lacked a career development focus, did not include postsecondary athletes, or failed to address low SES backgrounds.

Reference lists of eligible studies, key journals, and sport social work resources were manually searched to identify additional relevant studies. These supplemental searches supported inclusion of both foundational and contemporary scholarship relevant to the review topic.

Following full-text review, 12 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the scoping review. Figure 1 presents a simplified PRISMA flow diagram providing a transparent overview of the screening and study selection process used to identify the final sample, consistent with PRISMA reporting guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). A more detailed PRISMA flow diagram, including the number of records excluded at each stage and reasons for exclusion, is provided in Appendix 2.

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Figure 1
Simplified PRISMA flowchart



Following study selection, data from each included study were systematically extracted into the structured digital literature matrix (see Table 5 in Appendix 6). Extracted variables included author and year, study title, theoretical framework, research aims, study design, participant demographics, athletic level, indicators of low SES backgrounds, athletic identity, career transition experiences, program characteristics, intervention descriptions, delivery methods, target population, implementation barriers, participant experiences, and key findings related to career development.

Data extraction and charting were conducted iteratively to facilitate comprehensive comparison across studies and ensure alignment with the review's research question. Printed articles were manually annotated and color-coded to support thematic mapping across athletic identity, low SES backgrounds, career development, institutional support, and transition-related dimensions.

The artificial intelligence-assisted research platform Elicit was used solely as an organizational and verification tool to assist with tracking citations, summarizing study characteristics, and cross-checking patterns identified within the literature matrix. Final decisions regarding study eligibility, data extraction, coding, thematic organization, and interpretation remained the sole responsibility of the primary researcher. No systematic review management software (e.g., Covidence) was used. Instead, all screening, data extraction, coding, and thematic organization were conducted manually by the primary researcher using a structured literature matrix and procedures consistent with the scoping review framework (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010). Because the review was conducted by a single researcher, analytic decisions were documented systematically within the literature matrix to promote consistency and transparency throughout the review process.

Although athletic identity and identity foreclosure informed the conceptual framework and search strategy of this review, athletic identity was not used as a formal inclusion criterion

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and was not measured according to a standardized threshold across studies. Rather, athletic identity was examined as a recurring construct related to career exploration, transition experiences, and career development among postsecondary athletes (Bell et al., 2018; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Murdock et al., 2016).

Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify recurring patterns across the included studies. Consistent with the exploratory purpose of scoping reviews, thematic synthesis allowed for systematic identification and organization of concepts across a heterogeneous body of literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Levac et al., 2010).

Analysis began with repeated reading of each included study and iterative review of the literature matrix to develop initial descriptive codes that captured data relevant to the research question. Codes were developed inductively through manual annotation and constant comparison across studies before being organized into broader conceptual categories. Similar categories were subsequently refined into overarching themes representing recurring patterns within the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Themes were reviewed iteratively to ensure they accurately reflected the evidence across studies, represented the most consistently reported concepts, and remained aligned with the review's central research question. Related codes were compared across studies and refined through iterative review until stable conceptual categories were developed. The final thematic structure was developed inductively from recurring patterns identified across the literature and is presented in the Results section.

Methodological Rigor and Trustworthiness

Although formal critical appraisal is not a standard requirement of scoping reviews, careful attention was given to the methodological rigor, conceptual clarity, and reporting transparency of each included study. Consistent with the scoping review frameworks proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and refined by Levac et al. (2010), the purpose of this review was to systematically map the breadth, characteristics, and patterns within the existing literature rather than formally appraise the quality of included studies.

Study characteristics, contextual factors, theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and reported limitations were systematically documented within the literature matrix (see Table 5 in Appendix 6) to support interpretation, transparent synthesis, and comprehensive comparison across studies. These data were subsequently synthesized and summarized in Table 6 (Appendix 7). The iterative coding process, structured documentation procedures, and cross-verification of extracted study characteristics enhanced the consistency and trustworthiness of the review findings.

Results

Twelve studies met the final inclusion criteria and were included in this scoping review. Ten studies were identified through systematic database searches, and two additional studies were identified through supplemental reference tracking and manual searches of relevant literature sources (Book et al., 2021; Bell et al., 2018).

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The included studies represented diverse methodological approaches. Five studies employed qualitative methodologies (Book et al., 2021; Coffin et al., 2021; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Sears et al., 2024), four utilized quantitative survey designs (Bell et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2022; Murdock et al., 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020), one employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Curry et al., 2021), and two represented conceptual or theoretical analyses (Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Shurts & Shoffner, 2004). These methodological approaches illustrate the interdisciplinary nature of scholarship examining career development among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds.

Sample sizes varied considerably across the included studies, ranging from qualitative investigations involving 10 participants (Book et al., 2021; Sears et al., 2024) and 14 former collegiate football athletes (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016) to quantitative surveys including 538 NCAA student-athletes (Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Quantitative studies also included samples of 44 NCAA Division II student-athletes (Bell et al., 2018), 110 NCAA Division I student-athletes (Murdock et al., 2016), and 143 NCAA Division I student-athletes representing 32 varsity sport programs (Davis et al., 2022).

Characteristics of Included Studies

The 12 included studies represented a diverse body of scholarship examining career development among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. Although the studies varied considerably in methodology, participant characteristics, and theoretical orientation, the evidence base was concentrated within DI athletic settings.

Nine of the 12 included studies focused primarily on DI student-athletes (Coffin et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Murdock et al., 2016; Sears et al., 2024; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). One study examined DII student-athletes (Bell et al., 2018). One study examined African American former professional athletes who spent their formative years in underserved American communities (Book et al., 2021), and one presented a conceptual framework for career counseling with collegiate student-athletes (Shurts & Shoffner, 2004). All included studies were conducted within the United States, consistent with the review's eligibility criteria.

Participant characteristics varied substantially across the included studies with respect to age, race, ethnicity, athletic setting, career stage, and institutional context. Several studies focused specifically on Black student-athletes and historically underserved populations (Book et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Kelly & Dixon, 2014), whereas others included racially diverse NCAA student-athlete populations (Bell et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2022; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Participant ages generally reflected traditional postsecondary students (17–26 years), although two studies examined adult professionals responsible for career development programming (Sears et al., 2024) and former professional athletes reflecting on their career transitions (Book et al., 2021).

Despite the review's focus on athletes from low SES backgrounds, relatively few studies explicitly measured socioeconomic status using standardized indicators. Instead, low SES backgrounds were most often inferred through first-generation college status, scholarship dependence, residence in underserved communities, attendance at under-resourced educational institutions, or authors' descriptions of structurally marginalized populations (Book et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Only Curry et al. (2021) directly reported first-generation college

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student status as an indicator of socioeconomic disadvantage, whereas Wendling and Sagas (2020) documented first-generation college status descriptively without operationalizing it as a measure of socioeconomic status.

Programmatic and Institutional Trends

Across the included studies, career development supports most frequently included athlete-specific advising, mentoring initiatives, career services, internships, leadership development opportunities, graduate education planning, and institutionally coordinated professional development programming (Coffin et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Sears et al., 2024). These supports were typically implemented as institution-based services or targeted initiatives rather than comprehensive, standardized intervention models specifically designed for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds.

The evidence further demonstrated a strong concentration of research conducted within DI athletic settings, with comparatively little attention devoted to DII and DIII, NAIA, community colleges, or other postsecondary athletic environments.

Recurring Patterns Across the Literature

Inductive thematic analysis identified seven recurring patterns that characterized career development among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. In response to the research question, the literature revealed both specific career development programs and services and the broader contextual factors shaping athletes' access to and engagement with those supports. These recurring patterns reflected the concepts most consistently represented across the included literature and were developed through iterative comparison of coded findings across studies. Together, these recurring patterns illustrate how athletic identity, institutional support, socioeconomic context, and career development processes intersect to influence athletes' preparation for careers beyond sport.

Athletic Identity

Athletic identity was consistently identified as a central influence on career exploration, career planning, and transition experiences among postsecondary athletes (Bell et al., 2018; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Murdock et al., 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Although a strong athletic identity promoted commitment, discipline, and persistence, several studies found that high identification with the athlete role was associated with reduced engagement in career exploration, narrower perceptions of career opportunities, and lower confidence in pursuing nonathletic career pathways (Bell et al., 2018; Murdock et al., 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020).

Identity Foreclosure

Identity foreclosure represented a recurring challenge across the literature and frequently occurred when athletic participation became athletes' primary or exclusive source of identity (Book et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Shurts & Shoffner, 2004).

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Limited exposure to alternative career pathways, combined with external expectations regarding athletic success, often constrained career exploration and delayed identity development beyond sport. These challenges were particularly evident among athletes from historically underserved communities, where sport was frequently perceived as the primary avenue for educational and economic mobility (Book et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021).

Career Maturity

Career maturity was consistently associated with athletes' preparedness to make informed career decisions beyond athletics (Davis et al., 2022; Murdock et al., 2016; Sears et al., 2024; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Athletes who reported greater exposure to career planning resources, mentoring relationships, and career exploration opportunities demonstrated stronger confidence in career decision-making and post-sport transitions (Comeaux & Savage, 2025). Conversely, limited institutional support and restricted exposure to professional opportunities appeared to delay career planning among athletes from low SES backgrounds (Davis et al., 2022; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016).

Institutional Support and Career Programming

Institutional support consistently influenced athlete career development outcomes across the reviewed literature (Coffin et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Davis et al., 2022; Sears et al., 2024). Effective approaches included athlete-specific advising, mentoring initiatives, internships, career services, and multidisciplinary collaboration among athletic departments and university personnel. However, several studies suggested that existing services were frequently underutilized or insufficiently tailored to athletes' unique developmental and identity-related experiences (Davis et al., 2022; Sears et al., 2024).

Socioeconomic Inequity

Socioeconomic inequity was identified as a contextual factor influencing athletes' access to career development opportunities (Book et al., 2021; Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016). Financial constraints, limited professional networks, and unequal access to career-related resources were consistently identified as factors shaping athletes' career development experiences and perceptions of opportunity (Book et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Kelly & Dixon, 2014). Despite the centrality of socioeconomic context to this review, relatively few studies explicitly operationalized low SES.

Transition and Post-Sport Identity

Transition beyond sport represented one of the most consistently discussed developmental periods across the included studies (Book et al., 2021; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Murdock et al., 2016). Athletes frequently described uncertainty regarding identity, career direction, and life after sport, particularly when career planning had been delayed during athletic participation. Mentoring relationships, structured transition planning, and identity-supportive interventions were identified as promising approaches for facilitating successful transitions beyond competitive athletics (Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Sears et al., 2024).

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Cultural Responsiveness

Cultural responsiveness was integrated throughout several studies examining career development among historically underserved athlete populations (Book et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016). Collectively, these studies emphasized the importance of recognizing athletes' lived experiences, cultural identities, socioeconomic circumstances, and institutional contexts when designing career development services. Culturally responsive, strengths-based, and asset-oriented approaches were associated with greater relevance, engagement, and perceived effectiveness among diverse athlete populations.

Results Summary

Collectively, the reviewed literature demonstrates that career development among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds extends beyond employment preparation alone. Successful career development reflects the interaction of athletic identity, socioeconomic opportunity, institutional support, mentoring relationships, and culturally responsive programming. Although existing scholarship has expanded understanding of athlete career development, relatively few studies have examined these factors simultaneously or evaluated comprehensive interventions designed specifically for athletes from low SES backgrounds.

Discussion

This scoping review synthesized the available literature examining career development supports for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. Across the 12 included studies, the findings consistently demonstrated that career development extends beyond employment preparation and is influenced by the interaction of athletic identity, socioeconomic opportunity, institutional support, mentoring relationships, and culturally responsive practice. Although the literature addressing athlete career development has expanded in recent years, relatively few studies examined the intersection of these factors within the same investigation. Rather than identifying a single evidence-based intervention, the findings suggest that successful career development should be understood as a multidimensional developmental process requiring coordinated support across educational, athletic, and community systems.

An additional finding identified through this review is the concentration of scholarship within DI institutions. Comparatively little research has examined career development experiences among athletes competing in DII and DIII, NAIA, community college, or other postsecondary athletic settings. Likewise, relatively few studies explicitly measured low SES using standardized indicators, despite frequently discussing barriers. These gaps indicate that the current evidence base remains uneven and suggest important opportunities for future research.

Athletic Identity as Both a Strength and a Developmental Challenge

Athletic identity was identified as one of the most consistently reported influences on career development across the included literature. Several studies found that strong identification with the athlete role contributed to reduced career exploration, narrower perceptions of

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nonathletic career opportunities, and lower engagement in career planning activities (Bell et al., 2018; Murdock et al., 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). At the same time, athletic identity was not inherently problematic. Rather, the literature suggested that athletic identity functions as a developmental asset when accompanied by opportunities for career exploration, mentoring, and identity expansion beyond sport.

Studies examining Black student-athletes and athletes from historically marginalized communities further demonstrated that athletic identity develops within broader social, educational, and cultural contexts (Book et al., 2021; Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021). Limited professional networks, exposure to diverse career pathways, and culturally relevant mentoring often constrained opportunities for identity exploration beyond athletics. Collectively, these findings suggest that career development interventions should not seek to diminish athletic identity but instead leverage the transferable strengths developed through sport while expanding opportunities for career exploration and identity development.

Structural Inequities Shape Career Opportunity

Across the included studies, career development was influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by structural and institutional conditions shaping athletes' professional development experiences. Financial constraints, limited social capital, reduced mentoring relationships, and inconsistent exposure to professional networks were repeatedly identified as barriers affecting athletes from historically marginalized and low SES backgrounds (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Shurts & Shoffner, 2004).

Importantly, socioeconomic status was rarely operationalized through standardized measures. Instead, many studies inferred socioeconomic disadvantage through scholarship dependence, first-generation college status, institutional context, or populations historically experiencing educational inequities. Although this approach reflects the complexity of measuring SES within collegiate athletics, it also highlights the need for more consistent operationalization in future research. Greater precision in measuring SES would strengthen understanding of how structural inequities influence career and identity development, and long-term career outcomes among postsecondary athletes.

Institutional Support Remains Fragmented

Institutional support was identified as another recurring influence on career development; however, the literature suggests that existing services remain fragmented and inconsistently implemented. Several studies described promising practices, including athlete-specific advising, structured mentoring, leadership development, internships, and coordinated professional development programming (Coffin et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Sears et al., 2024). Clemson University's University Professional Internship and Co-op (UPIC) Program illustrates how intentional collaboration between athletic departments and campus career services can provide student-athletes with experiential learning, paid internships, and professional networking competencies before graduation (Coffin et al., 2021).

Despite these promising examples, relatively few studies evaluated comprehensive, replicable career development interventions or reported longitudinal outcomes following program participation (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Davis et al., 2022; Sears et al., 2024). Most investigations relied on cross-sectional, qualitative, or exploratory methodologies, limiting

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understanding of the long-term effectiveness of existing career development supports. Consequently, the literature provides stronger evidence regarding factors influencing long-term career trajectories than regarding which interventions most effectively improve long-term career outcomes.

Although the literature demonstrates growing attention to athlete career development, several important gaps remain. Few studies examined the intersection of low socioeconomic status, athletic identity, and career development within the same investigation. The evidence also remained concentrated within DI institutions, with limited scholarship examining athletes competing in DII and DIII, NAIA, community colleges, and other postsecondary athletic settings. In addition, relatively few studies evaluated comprehensive career development interventions using longitudinal or outcome-based designs, and inconsistent operationalization of socioeconomic status limited comparison across studies and understanding of how structural inequities influence career development and post-sport transitions. Collectively, these findings indicate that the current evidence base remains limited in both scope and methodological consistency, highlighting important opportunities for future research and the continued development of equitable, evidence-informed career development supports for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds.

Career Development as a Social Work Issue

The findings of this review reinforce the relevance of Identity Theory, Social Cognitive Career Theory, Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 2000), and Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) in understanding career development among postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. Identity Theory helps explain why athletic identity consistently influenced career exploration, identity foreclosure, and transition experiences across the included studies (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Murdock et al., 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Likewise, Social Cognitive Career Theory provides a useful framework for interpreting how self-efficacy, environmental supports, mentoring relationships, and perceived barriers influence career decision-making and planning processes (Davis et al., 2022; Shurts & Shoffner, 2004; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Together, these findings suggest that career development is shaped by the interaction of individual identity, self-efficacy, and broader environmental conditions.

While Identity Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory primarily explain individual career development processes, the review findings also highlight broader structural influences that are further illuminated by Empowerment Theory and Critical Race Theory. Empowerment Theory emphasizes individuals' capacity for self-determination while recognizing that access to structural supports influences athletes' ability to navigate career transitions (Zimmerman, 2000). Kelly and Dixon's (2014) constellation mentoring framework reflects an empowerment-oriented approach in which multiple mentoring relationships strengthen athletes' social capital, identity development, and career development. Similarly, Curry et al. (2021) found that Black football student-athletes reported lower career and college readiness capital than their peers, underscoring the importance of interventions that intentionally build the resources and supports necessary for successful career development.

Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) further illuminates how structural inequities shape career development among athletes from historically marginalized communities. Comeaux and Savage (2025) found that Black college athletes were frequently encouraged to prioritize athletic eligibility over career exploration and high-impact educational opportunities,

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reflecting institutional practices that may constrain long-term career development. Likewise, Book et al. (2021) demonstrated that athletes from underserved communities often viewed sport as the primary pathway to economic mobility, illustrating how racialized and socioeconomic inequities can narrow perceptions of opportunity. Together, these findings reinforce the importance of culturally responsive, equity-oriented career development approaches that address systemic barriers while expanding opportunities beyond sport.

Collectively, the findings position career development as a social work issue extending beyond workforce preparation alone. Career development among postsecondary athletes requires coordinated attention to identity development, social support, and institutional collaboration (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Sears et al., 2024). Consequently, sport social workers are uniquely positioned to facilitate comprehensive systems of support that promote career development, social inclusion, and long-term well-being among athletes transitioning beyond sport (Barth et al., 2022; Coffin et al., 2021; Kelly & Dixon, 2014).

Implications for Social Work and Institutional Practice

The findings of this review suggest that career development should be recognized as an integral component of holistic athlete well-being rather than a service reserved for the conclusion of athletic participation. Institutions may benefit from implementing coordinated, athlete-centered career development initiatives earlier in the collegiate experience by integrating career exploration, mentorship, leadership development, and experiential learning throughout athletes' academic and athletic careers (Coffin et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022; Sears et al., 2024). Strengthening partnerships among athletic departments, career centers, faculty, employers, alumni, and community organizations may increase professional networks and career opportunities that extend beyond sport while supporting athletes' identity development and long-term sustainable careers (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016).

Beyond informing campus programming, these findings position sport social workers as important interdisciplinary collaborators capable of addressing both psychosocial and structural barriers influencing athletes' career development. Sport social workers may facilitate constellation mentoring relationships (Kelly & Dixon, 2014), coordinate interdisciplinary career planning with athletic departments and campus career centers (Sears et al., 2024), support athlete-specific career programming (Coffin et al., 2021), and advocate for culturally responsive career development services that address structural barriers experienced by athletes from low SES backgrounds (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021). Through these roles, sport social workers can help bridge gaps between athletic participation and sustainable career development while reducing risks associated with identity foreclosure and social isolation (Barth et al., 2022).

The findings also highlight opportunities to collaboratively develop and evaluate theory-informed, culturally responsive career development initiatives that address the unique needs of postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds while expanding career exploration beyond sport (Comeaux & Savage, 2025; Curry et al., 2021; Sears et al., 2024).

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Strengths and Limitations

This scoping review possesses several methodological strengths. First, the review followed the methodological frameworks proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and refined by Levac et al. (2010), providing a transparent and systematic approach to identifying, selecting, and synthesizing the available literature. The review was further guided by the Population, Concept, and Context (PCC) framework and reported using PRISMA guidelines for scoping reviews, strengthening methodological transparency throughout the review process.

A comprehensive search strategy was implemented across multiple academic databases, supplemented by reference list searches and sport social work–related resources to maximize identification of relevant literature. Screening, data extraction, and thematic analysis were conducted using a structured literature matrix supported by iterative manual coding. The artificial intelligence-assisted research platform Elicit was used to cross-verify identified thematic patterns and enhance organizational consistency during the synthesis process. Although all screening, coding, and thematic analysis were conducted by a single reviewer, iterative comparison between manual coding and Elicit-supported verification enhanced the transparency and consistency of the analytic process.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. First, this review was limited to peer-reviewed studies conducted within the United States and published in English, potentially excluding relevant international scholarship and unpublished literature. Second, socioeconomic status was inconsistently operationalized across the included studies. Consequently, low SES backgrounds were frequently inferred through participant characteristics, institutional context, scholarship status, first-generation college status, or descriptions of historically underserved populations rather than standardized socioeconomic measures. This variability limited direct comparison across studies and represents an important methodological limitation within the existing evidence base, underscoring the need for more consistent operationalization and reporting of socioeconomic status in future research examining athlete career development.

Additionally, the included studies represented diverse methodological approaches, institutional contexts, and outcome measures, limiting opportunities for direct comparison of intervention effectiveness. Most studies were exploratory, qualitative, or cross-sectional in design, with relatively few longitudinal investigations evaluating career development outcomes over time. Finally, because this review was conducted by a single reviewer, the potential for selection and interpretive bias cannot be entirely eliminated despite the structured review procedures employed.

Future Research

The findings of this review identify several priorities for future scholarship. First, researchers should develop and evaluate theory-informed, identity-centered career development interventions specifically designed for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. Although several promising approaches, including mentoring, athlete-specific advising, internships, experiential learning, and career development programming, were identified across the literature, few interventions have been rigorously evaluated using longitudinal or outcome-based research designs (Coffin et al., 2021; Sears et al., 2024).

Future studies should also incorporate standardized measures of socioeconomic status to improve consistency across investigations and strengthen understanding of how socioeconomic

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inequities influence career development, identity formation, and post-sport transitions. Greater attention should be given to athletes competing within DII and DIII, NAIA, community college, and other post-secondary athletic settings, as the existing literature remains heavily concentrated within DI institutions.

Additional research is needed to examine the role of families, mentors, coaches, alumni, employers, and community organizations in supporting athletes' career development across the lifespan. Longitudinal studies following athletes from college through post-sport employment would provide valuable insight into how career and identity development, and institutional support, influence long-term vocational outcomes.

Finally, greater attention should be directed toward evaluating sport social work–informed interventions that integrate career development, identity exploration, mentoring, workforce preparation, and community partnerships within coordinated systems of support. Expanding this evidence will strengthen institutional capacity to promote equitable career opportunities, reduce social isolation, and improve long-term well-being among postsecondary athletes transitioning beyond sport (Barth et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This scoping review synthesized the available literature examining career development supports for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. Across the 12 included studies, the evidence consistently characterized career development as a multidimensional process shaped by the interaction of athletic identity, socioeconomic opportunity, institutional support, mentoring relationships, and culturally responsive practice. Although the literature identified promising approaches, including athlete-specific advising, mentoring initiatives, experiential learning opportunities, and career programming, few studies evaluated comprehensive, evidence-informed interventions specifically designed to address the unique needs of postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds.

An important contribution to this review is the identification of a significant gap in the existing literature regarding career development interventions specifically designed for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. While individual studies examined athletic identity, career development, institutional support, or socioeconomic influences independently, relatively few investigated how these factors collectively shape career development experiences. Likewise, the concentration of research within DI settings highlights the need for greater attention to athletes competing in DII and DIII, NAIA, community college, and other postsecondary athletic environments.

From a sport social work perspective, these findings underscore the importance of collaborative, identity-informed, and culturally responsive approaches that extend beyond traditional career services. Career development should be recognized not only as workforce preparation but also as a process of identity development, social connection, and empowerment. Sport social workers are uniquely positioned to collaborate with athletic departments, career centers, educators, employers, alumni, and community organizations to strengthen career development while addressing the structural barriers that disproportionately affect athletes from low SES backgrounds.

Future research should prioritize the development, implementation, and evaluation of theory-informed, identity-centered career development interventions designed specifically for postsecondary athletes from low SES backgrounds. Longitudinal evaluations examining how

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these interventions influence career and identity development, workforce preparation, and post-sport transition outcomes would further strengthen the evidence base. Expanding this body of scholarship will enhance institutional capacity to support athletes' successful transitions beyond sport while advancing equitable career opportunities, long-term well-being, and sustainable career pathways for future generations of post-secondary athletes.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1

Table 1: Population, Concept, and Context Framework

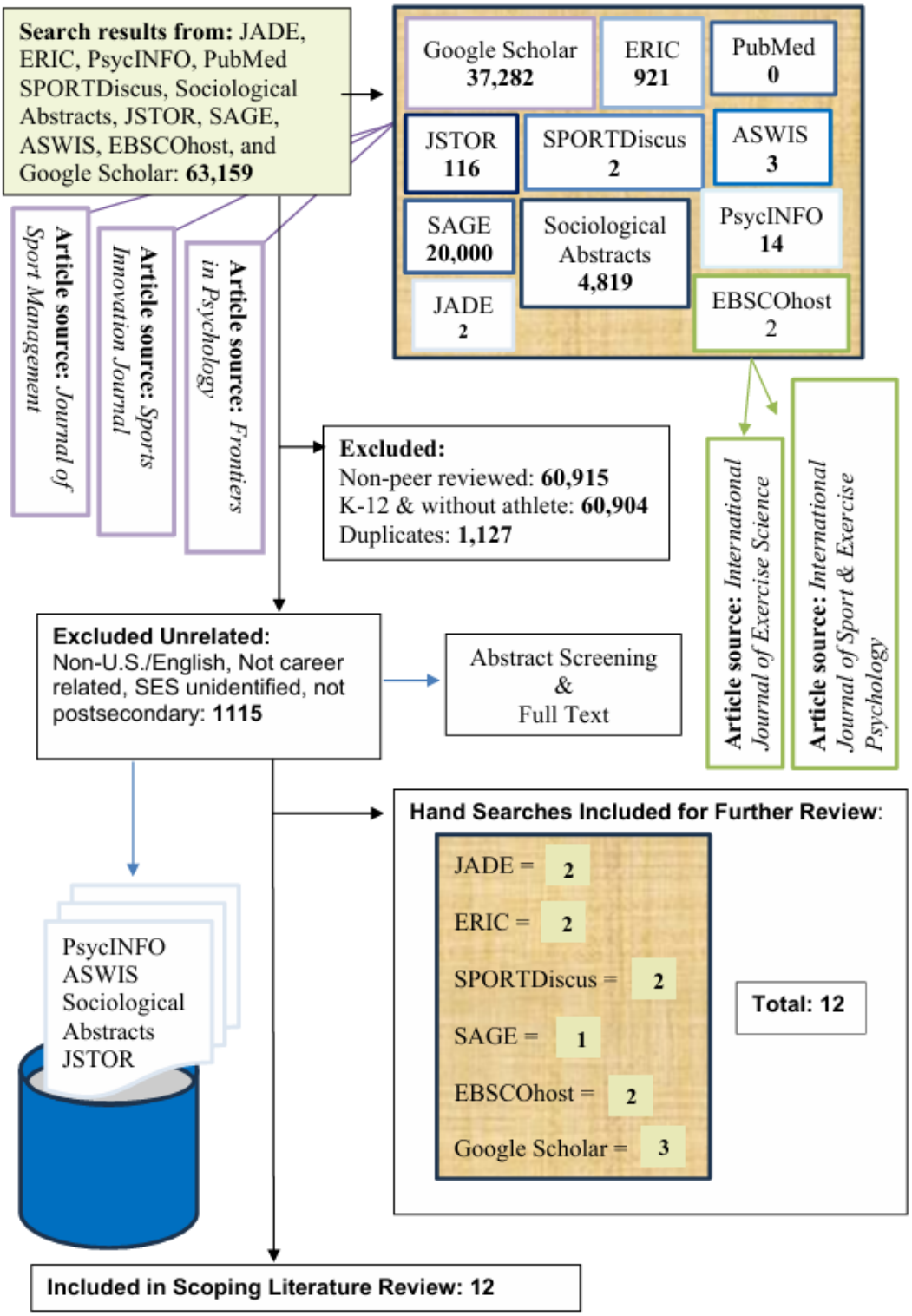
Population	Postsecondary athletes with low SES aged 18 or older, including traditional and nontraditional athletes, community college athletes, and NAIA participants in the United States
Concept	Career development interventions and programs that promote career access, employment preparation, and alternative career pathway exploration beyond athletics
Context	U.S. postsecondary athletic settings, including NCAA Division I–III institutions, NAIA schools, community colleges, and other postsecondary athletics.

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Appendix 2

Figure 1: PRISMA Flowchart



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Appendix 3
Table: *Definitions of Key Terms*

Term	Definition
Career development	Career development refers to the ongoing process through which individuals engage in self-exploration, career planning, and preparation for post athletic roles (Bell et al., 2018; Book et al., 2021; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). For low SES postsecondary athletes with strong athletic identities, career development requires navigating the dual demands of athletic participation and long-term vocational planning, often without access to institutional or professional support (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Comeaux & Savage, 2025).
Career pathway	Career pathways are the structured routes of education, training, and employment experiences that enable progression toward sustainable, meaningful careers (Book et al., 2021). For athletes, awareness of these pathways must begin early and include exposure to opportunities beyond sports participation to mitigate the risk of identity foreclosure (Wendling & Sagas, 2020; Curry et al., 2021).
Postsecondary athlete	Postsecondary athletes are defined as individuals aged 18 or older who participate or have participated in organized athletics beyond high school. This includes those competing in structured collegiate environments such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), and community colleges (Bell et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2022). It also encompasses athletes in non-collegiate contexts such as semi-professional or professional leagues, as well as individuals who entered the workforce directly while maintaining athletic engagement. This broad definition recognizes the diverse pathways athletes take and the varying career development challenges they encounter.
Low SES	Low SES encompasses limited access to economic, educational, and social resources and includes barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized groups such as first-generation college students and BIPOC athletes (Curry et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2022). It is not defined solely by income but by a broader lack of access to social capital and support structures needed to pursue nonathletic careers.
Athletic identity	Athletic identity refers to the degree to which an individual identifies with their role as an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). A strong or exclusive athletic identity can restrict exploration of alternative roles and contribute to identity foreclosure, particularly when accompanied by limited career development support (Bell et al., 2018; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Wendling & Sagas, 2020).

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Appendix 4

Table 3: Detailed Search Strategy

Primary Search String	"interventions" OR "programs" OR "services" AND "athletic identity" OR "identity foreclosure" AND "career access" OR "career development" OR "career readiness" OR "career maturity" OR "career pathways" AND "low-income" OR "low SES" OR "low socioeconomic status" OR "underrepresented" AND "athlete" OR "student-athlete" OR "college athlete" OR "postsecondary athlete"
Secondary Search String	"low-income athletes" OR "low-SES athletes" OR "underrepresented student-athletes" AND "career access" OR "career readiness" OR "career transition" OR "career support" OR "career development" AND "postsecondary athletics" OR "college athletes" OR "collegiate sports" AND "interventions" OR "programs" OR "services" NOT "high school" OR "K-12" OR "affluent"
Additional Search String	"pro league" OR "development league" OR "semi professional" OR "elite athlete" OR "non college athlete" OR "workforce" OR "alternative pathway" AND "initiatives" OR "mentorships" OR "support" AND "career transitions" OR "career planning" OR "career readiness" OR "career support" AND "marginalized" OR "socioeconomically disadvantaged" OR "overrepresented" OR "economically disadvantaged" AND "young adult athletes"

Appendix 5

Table 4: *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population	Low-SES athletes aged 18 or older, including collegiate and noncollegiate athletes (e.g., semipro, pro) in the United States	High school athletes, international athletes, or general youth populations without a focus on postsecondary athletes
Geography	Conducted in the United States	Conducted outside the United States
Focus	Describes interventions, programs, or services that support career pathways, career development, or employment preparation	Focused only on athletic performance, mental health, or academic support without a career access component
Study type	Peer-reviewed full text (empirical, conceptual, qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods studies)	Dissertations, theses, editorials, commentaries, opinion pieces, books, or conference proceedings
Language	English	Non-English publications
Publication date	No filter	No filter

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Appendix 6

Table 5: Database Matrix

Google Scholar	37,282	3	low socioeconomic status athletes; career development; athletic identity	Postsecondary athletes; mixed SES	Career development, athletic identity, and career transitions	Identified foundational and contemporary literature relevant to athletic identity and career development
SAGE	20,000	1	career services; identity foreclosure	NCAA and NAIA student-athletes	Institutional career development supports	Included literature addressing career services and identity development
Sociological Abstracts	4,819	0	underrepresented student-athletes; career transitions	Historically underserved populations	Structural barriers and social inequality	Contributed sociological perspectives but no studies met inclusion criteria
ERIC	921	2	career development; postsecondary athletics	Student-athletes in educational settings	Educational interventions and career development	Identified studies examining educational and career support services
JSTOR	116	0	career development; collegiate athletes	Mixed athletic populations	Historical and theoretical perspectives	Provided background literature; no studies met inclusion criteria
PsycINFO	14	0	athletic identity; career counseling	Student-athletes	Identity development and counseling	Contributed psychological literature; no studies met inclusion criteria
SPORTDiscus	2	2	career development; sport psychology	Collegiate student-athletes	Sport-specific career development supports	Identified sport-focused career development literature
JADE	2	2	student-athlete development	NAIA student-athletes	Student-athlete development and career support	Identified specialized literature relevant to athlete development
Alliance of Social Workers in Sports	3	0	multiple search combinations	N/A	Sport social work resources	No peer-reviewed studies met inclusion criteria

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Academic Search Ultimate	0	0	career development; student-athletes; postsecondary athletics	Postsecondary student-athletes	Career development and educational support services	Broad interdisciplinary coverage of education and social science literature; retrieved studies did not meet the review's postsecondary eligibility criteria.
PubMed	0	0	multiple search combinations	N/A	Supplemental literature identification	No peer-reviewed studies met inclusion criteria
Hand Search (Reference Lists)	N/A	2	reference list screening	Eligible studies	Supplemental identification of relevant literature	Identified Bell et al. (2018) and Book et al. (2021) through manual reference tracking

Appendix 7

Table 6: Characteristics of Included Studies (N = 12)

Study	Design	Population / Sample	Theoretical Framework	Primary Career Development Focus	Major Contribution
Bell et al. (2018)	Quantitative	44 NCAA Division II student-athletes	Not explicitly stated	Relationship between athletic identity, career exploration, and engagement	Demonstrated a strong association between athletic identity and career exploration/engagement among NCAA Division II student-athletes, suggesting that athletic identity may influence preparation for careers beyond sport.
Book et al. (2021)	Qualitative	10 African American former professional male athletes who played at least one year professionally and spent their formative years in	Career Transition Framework	Career pathways following professional sport	Demonstrated that early life adversity, limited educational opportunities, and identity foreclosure influenced long-term career development, while mentoring and community support facilitated successful transitions.

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		underserved U.S. communities			
Coffin et al. (2021)	Qualitative	Student-athletes participating in Clemson's University Professional Internship and Co-op (UPIC) Program sponsored by the Center for Career and Professional Development (CCPD)	Not explicitly stated	Evaluation of Clemson University's UPIC for career development	Examined Clemson University's University Professional Internship and Co-op (UPIC) Program as an institutional career development initiative that provided paid internships, professional networking, experiential learning, and career readiness opportunities for student-athletes.
Comeaux & Savage (2025)	Qualitative	Black collegiate student-athletes	Critical examination of career preparation among Black college athletes/ Critical Race Theory; Social Capital	Career preparation and transition experiences	Identified structural inequities affecting career preparation and emphasized culturally responsive institutional support, mentorship, and equitable access to career opportunities beyond athletics.
Curry et al. (2021)	Mixed methods (sequential explanatory)	53 NCAA Division I football student-athletes (37 Black; 16 White; ages 17–26)	Bourdieu's Social Capital Theory	Academic and career preparation among Black football student-athletes	Identified lower career and college readiness capital among Black athletes, emphasizing inequitable access to social capital, academic preparation, and career resources.
Davis et al. (2022)	Quantitative	143 NCAA Division I student-athletes representing 32 varsity sports	Systems Theory Framework of Career Development	Utilization of career services	Found that career services positively influenced career readiness but were frequently underutilized despite demonstrated benefits.
Haslerig & Navarro (2016)	Qualitative phenomenology	14 former NCAA Division I football student-athletes (primarily ages 21–23)	Savickas' Career Construction Theory	Graduate education and career construction	Found that graduate education represented an important stage in career construction and identity development, although athletic eligibility often influenced educational decision-making.

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Kelly & Dixon (2014)	Conceptual	NCAA Division I African American male student-athletes	Transition Theory; Constellation Mentoring	Mentoring during collegiate transition	Proposed constellation mentoring as a culturally responsive strategy to improve academic success, identity development, social integration, and career preparation among African American male student-athletes.
Murdock et al. (2016)	Quantitative	110 NCAA Division I student-athletes	Career Identity Framework utilizing the Life After Sport Scale (LASS)	Career identity and career programming	Found limited association between attendance at career programming and career-athlete identity, while highlighting persistent concerns regarding career maturity and preparation for life after sport.
Sears et al. (2024)	Qualitative	10 NCAA Division I senior administrators responsible for student-athlete career development	Holistic Care and Interprofessional Teams	Best practices for career development services	Identified collaboration, diverse programming, athletic department buy-in, innovation, and effective communication as essential characteristics of successful student-athlete career development programs.
Shurts & Shoffner (2004)	Conceptual	Collegiate student-athletes; case study	Learning Theory of Career Counseling (LTCC)	Career counseling	Proposed that career counselors can reduce identity foreclosure and improve career decision-making by expanding student-athletes' interests, values, skills, and career exploration experiences.
Wendling & Sagas (2020)	Quantitative	538 NCAA Division I student-athletes (ages 18–23); 430 White, 38 African American, 32 Hispanic, 22 Asian, 11 Other, 5 preferred not to respond; 86 first-generation college students	Social Cognitive Career Theory—Career Self-Management Model	Career planning for life after sport	Demonstrated that career decision self-efficacy, career goals, environmental supports, and perceived barriers significantly influenced career planning for life after sport.

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Ethical Integration of Religion and Spirituality in Sport Social Work Practicum Education: Outcomes of a Field Instructor Training Initiative

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Sport social work is a rapidly emerging area of practice that presents distinct ethical and contextual challenges, particularly within practicum education. Religion and spirituality (R/S) are frequently present in sport environments and are recognized within social work ethical standards as salient dimensions of culturally responsive practice; however, field instructors often report limited preparation for supervising students around ethically complex R/S-related issues in sport settings. This study examines the impact of a targeted field instructor training initiative designed to support the ethical integration of R/S within sport social work practicum education. Using a quantitative pretest–posttest design, data were collected from 49 field instructors, preceptors, and supervisors overseeing students in sport-related or sport-adjacent placements. The training focused on ethical decision-making, culturally responsive supervision, and practical supervisory strategies to address R/S in sport contexts. Paired samples t-tests indicated statistically significant improvements in participants' self-reported knowledge, comfort, and perceived capacity to guide students in navigating faith-related issues within sport-based practice settings. Findings suggest that ethical engagement with R/S in sport social work is a teachable and developable supervisory competence, independent of supervisors' personal spiritual or religious identification. Implications for sport social work field education, supervision, and professional training are discussed.

Key Words: Practicum Education, Spirituality, Religion, Ethical Standards, Social Work Practice

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The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of a targeted field instructor training initiative designed to support the ethical integration of religion and spirituality (R/S) within sport social work practicum education. Situated within the growing field of sport social work and grounded in professional ethical standards, this study responds to a documented gap in field instructor preparation for supervising students on spiritually relevant issues in sport contexts. Using a quantitative pretest–posttest design, the study evaluates whether participation in a structured, evidence-informed training workshop is associated with changes in field instructors' knowledge of ethical R/S integration, comfort addressing R/S in supervision, and perceived capacity to guide students in navigating faith-related issues within sport-based practice settings. By centering on field instruction and supervision as a critical opportunity for ethical competence development, this study provides empirical evidence for sport social work scholarship and offers practice-relevant insights for strengthening field education in ethically complex sport environments.

Introduction

Sport social work has emerged as a distinct and rapidly developing area of social work practice, addressing the complex psychosocial, organizational, and cultural dynamics inherent in sport and athletic environments (Beasley et al., 2021; Moore & Gummelt, 2019; Newman et al., 2021, 2022). Social workers increasingly operate in professional, collegiate, community, and youth sport settings, supporting athletes and organizations around issues such as mental health, identity development, trauma exposure, injury recovery, and performance pressure. As this field expands, scholars have emphasized the need for workforce development strategies that prepare practitioners to address the ethical and contextual complexities of sport-based practice (Bates & Kratz, 2022; Clark et al., 2022; Gill, 2008).

Field education, identified by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) as the profession's signature pedagogy, plays a critical role in this preparation process (CSWE, 2015, 2022). Within sport contexts, practicum placements expose students to organizational cultures shaped by performance imperatives, power hierarchies, and diverse identity expressions. Among these identity domains, religion and spirituality (R/S) represent a particularly salient yet under-addressed dimension.

In contemporary scholarship, spirituality is commonly defined as the pursuit of meaning, purpose, and connection to a transcendent or sacred reality, which may or may not be expressed through organized religion (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013). Religion is defined as "beliefs, behaviors, and organized structures related to supernatural beings or moral forces" (Liu et al, 2025, p.3594). In contrast, atheism and agnosticism reflect alternative epistemological frameworks grounded in empirical rationalism or uncertainty about the existence of the transcendent (APA, 2020; Bullivant & Ruse, 2018). These distinctions are critical in sport social work because athletes and practitioners operate across diverse belief systems that shape meaning-making, coping, and identity. In this study, the authors use the terms religion and spirituality interchangeably to avoid confusion.

The literature suggests growing interest in R/S in sports. Shirvani (2025) and colleagues found that the number of published sports psychology articles examining the relationship

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between R/S in sports has grown from 10 in the first decade of the century (2000-2010) to 40 in the second decade (2011-2021). Religion and spirituality (R/S) represent ethically salient dimensions of practice that are frequently present in sport environments. Athletes and sport organizations often draw on spiritual beliefs, faith-based language, rituals, and moral frameworks to support meaning-making, coping, resilience, and identity formation (Morgan & Minton, 2021).

One common manifestation is pre-competition prayer, defined as the intentional communication with a higher power before athletic participation to seek guidance, peace, confidence, strength, or support (e.g., an athlete offering a brief prayer for composure, focus, and safety before competition). Such practices, along with broader spiritual routines (e.g., prayer, scripture reading, meditation, or reflection), can help athletes regulate emotions, manage stress, and enhance attentional focus prior to performance. Research suggests these practices function as faith-based coping strategies that reduce anxiety, enhance emotional regulation, and promote readiness for competition (Shirvani et al., 2024; Kruk & Abdol-Enein, 2024). More broadly, prayer, meditation, and faith-based rituals may operate similarly to psychological skills training by reinforcing cognitive consistency, self-efficacy, and perceived control in high-pressure environments (Hagan, 2021).

R/S also influences how athletes interpret their experiences through faith-informed interpretations, defined as the process of understanding success, failure, injury, and adversity through a religious or spiritual lens (e.g., viewing challenges as opportunities for growth, character development, or spiritual learning). These perspectives provide a framework for meaning-making, allowing athletes to situate performance outcomes within a broader sense of purpose and transcendence (Shirvani et al., 2024). Research indicates that religious coping and spiritually grounded meaning-making support positive cognitive reappraisal, resilience, and emotional recovery following stress (Noh et al., 2023). Consequently, athletes who engage in faith-based meaning-making may approach competition as an opportunity for growth and perseverance rather than solely as an outcome-based endeavor, thereby contributing to enhanced psychological well-being and adaptive coping. Religious beliefs may also influence athletic participation and performance, as seen in cases such as Muslim athletes competing during Ramadan, where fasting creates physiological and scheduling challenges that intersect with performance demands.

Despite this prevalence, ethical training for integrating R/S into social work practice remains limited, particularly in field education (Moffatt & Oxhandler, 2018). Field instructors often report discomfort navigating R/S-related issues, especially in secular sport environments where spiritual expression may be both visible and institutionally constrained (Aten & Hernandez, 2004; Oxhandler et al., 2024). This creates a gap between professional ethical mandates, which emphasize culturally responsive practice, inclusive of spirituality, and actual supervision practices in sport settings.

This study responds to that gap by examining the impact of a targeted field instructor training initiative designed to support the ethical integration of R/S within sport social work practicum education. By focusing on field supervision within the broader historical and sociocultural intersections of religion, sport, and social work, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how field education can prepare practitioners for ethically complex, spiritually informed practice environments.

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Literature Review

Sport Social Work as a Growing Field of Practice

Sport social work has emerged over the past decade as a distinct and rapidly expanding area of social work practice and scholarship. Drawing on core social work domains such as mental health, trauma-informed care, community engagement, and systems-based intervention, sport social work addresses the complex psychosocial needs of athletes, families, teams, and sport organizations across the lifespan (Beasley et al., 2021, 2025; Moore & Gummelt, 2019; Newman et al., 2021, 2022). Practitioners work in diverse settings, including youth sport organizations, collegiate and professional athletics, military and adaptive sport programs, and community-based sport initiatives.

As interest in sport social work has grown, scholars and professional organizations have increasingly advocated for the development of intentional practicum and internship opportunities in sport settings (Beasley et al., 2021, 2025). Field education is widely recognized as the signature pedagogy of social work (CSWE, 2015, 2018), and the expansion of sport-based practice has created new demand for well-structured field placements that allow students to translate classroom learning into applied sport contexts. Recent publications emphasize that meaningful growth in sport social work as a discipline depends not only on curricular innovation, but also on the availability of competent field instructors who understand both social work competencies and the unique ethical, cultural, and organizational dynamics of sport environments (Bates & Kratz, 2022; Clark et al., 2022; Gill, 2008).

In response to this need, professional organizations such as the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports (ASWIS) have begun to outline best practices for sport-specific practicum placements, including guidance on supervision structures, competency development, and ethical boundaries in sport systems (ASWIS, 2023). Despite these advances, the rapid growth of sport social work has outpaced the development of standardized field instructor preparation models, leaving significant variation in the quality and focus of practicum experiences (Beasley et al., 2021, 2025).

Sport Social Work and the Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Framework

Sport social work has developed as an interdisciplinary field grounded in holistic, person-in-environment perspectives (Moore & Gummelt, 2019). Increasingly, scholars advocate for a biopsychosocial-spiritual framework, recognizing spirituality as a core dimension of human functioning alongside biological, psychological, and social factors (Sumii, 2025). Within sport settings, this framework is particularly relevant given the intense emotional, identity-based, and existential challenges athletes face.

Research in sport psychology and sociology demonstrates that spiritual practices, including prayer, meditation, and faith-based reflection, are commonly used to enhance performance, manage stress, and foster resilience (Brown et al., 2020; Lundqvist, 2020; Hagan, 2021). These practices often function analogously to evidence-based psychological interventions by promoting attentional control, emotional regulation, and self-efficacy.

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Religion, Sport, and Sociocultural Contexts

The relationship between religion and sport is historically complex. Initially characterized by tension, particularly within Christian traditions that viewed sport as morally suspect, this relationship evolved through movements such as Muscular Christianity, which reframed sport as a vehicle for moral development and discipline (Meyer, 2015; McLeod et al., 2018). Contemporary scholarship further suggests that sport may function in ways analogous to religion, fostering collective identity, ritual participation, and shared meaning (Shoemaker, 2026).

At the same time, religion in sport reflects broader social inequities and cultural dynamics. While Christianity maintains high visibility in Western sport contexts, minority faith groups often encounter structural barriers. For instance, Muslim athletes may navigate fasting requirements during Ramadan or face participation barriers related to modesty accommodations, particularly among female athletes (Youth Sport Trust, n.d.). These dynamics underscore the importance of culturally responsive and inclusive practice within sport social work.

Religion and Social Work: Historical Tensions and Ethical Considerations

Social work itself has roots in religious philanthropy but evolved toward secular, empirically grounded frameworks during professionalization (Mattison et al., 2000; Ressler, 2002). This transition produced enduring tensions between spiritual and scientific paradigms. Contemporary literature identifies two competing concerns: the risk of religious proselytization and the presence of a "secular bias" that may minimize clients' spiritual experiences as sources of resilience (Elsayed et al., 2022; Ressler, 2002).

Within social work education, these tensions are reflected in limited curricular attention to R/S, particularly in field supervision. Although the NASW Code of Ethics and CSWE standards emphasize the importance of addressing spirituality as part of cultural competence, many practitioners and supervisors report insufficient preparation in this domain (Moffatt & Oxhandler, 2018).

Field Education and Ethical Gaps in R/S Integration

High-quality field placements are essential to preparing competent social work practitioners, regardless of practice setting. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) mandates that MSW students complete a minimum of 900 hours of supervised field education and demonstrate competence across core professional domains (CSWE, 2015). Field instructors play a pivotal role in this process by modeling ethical practice, facilitating reflective learning, and evaluating student competencies. Research consistently demonstrates that effective supervision and intentional training of field instructors are associated with stronger professional identity formation and practice readiness among students (Cleak, 2015; Matthieu et al., 2016; Shea, 2020).

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Within both generalist and specialized field settings, there is growing recognition that religion and spirituality (R/S) are integral dimensions of many clients' identities and lived experiences. The NASW Code of Ethics and CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards explicitly call for culturally responsive practice that includes attention to clients' spiritual and religious beliefs. Empirical studies indicate that many clients wish for their R/S to be acknowledged and integrated into assessment and intervention when relevant (Moffatt & Oxhandler, 2018). However, social workers frequently report feeling underprepared to address R/S ethically and competently in practice settings, including field education.

This gap is particularly salient in sport contexts, where spirituality, meaning-making, ritual, and faith-based coping are commonly embedded in athletic culture. Research in psychology and sport science literature has documented the role of spiritual practices, such as mindfulness, prayer, and values-based reflection, in enhancing focus, managing stress, fostering resilience, and supporting athlete well-being (Brown et al., 2020; Lundqvist, 2020). Athletes may draw on spirituality to cope with injury, performance pressure, identity transitions, and burnout, making R/S an important consideration in holistic, person-in-environment practice.

For social work students placed in sport settings, integrating R/S raises complex ethical considerations. Practicing within largely secular institutions, students and supervisors must navigate boundaries related to value imposition, cultural humility, client self-determination, and professional roles. Without intentional guidance, field instructors may default to avoiding R/S altogether, despite evidence that such avoidance can undermine comprehensive assessment and culturally responsive practice (Sherwood, 2002). Consequently, quality field placements in sport social work must equip students to engage R/S ethically, critically, and in alignment with professional standards.

Ethical Training for R/S Integration: An Underexamined Area in Field Education

Although scholars have increasingly emphasized the importance of R/S competence in social work practice, and many private Christian/religious schools of social work have added a 10th competency where social work students demonstrate faith integration, training in the ethical integration of R/S, particularly in field education, remains limited. Reviews of MSW curricula suggest that relatively few programs offer standalone courses on R/S, and when such content is included, it is often embedded superficially within broader diversity or culture courses (Moffatt & Oxhandler, 2018). Even fewer studies have examined how R/S is addressed in field supervision or how field instructors are trained to guide students in this domain.

The limited literature on supervision and R/S integration largely draws from psychology rather than social work. For example, Aten and Hernandez (2004) proposed a clinical supervision model for addressing religion in therapy, grounded in the Integrative Developmental Model (IDM). While this framework offers valuable conceptual tools, it has not been empirically tested in the social work field education context, nor does it fully address the distinct ethical mandates of social work supervision. Moreover, reliance on psychology-based models underscores the absence of social work–specific frameworks for field instructor training in R/S integration.

More broadly, research on field instructor training has focused on evidence-based practice, reflective supervision, and supervisory relationships, with minimal attention to

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spirituality or faith-related competencies (Karpetis & Athanasiou, 2017; Matthieu et al., 2016; Shea, 2020). These studies consistently demonstrate that training improves supervisors' knowledge, attitudes, and satisfaction, yet few examine downstream effects on student learning outcomes or competency development. Even fewer consider how training prepares field instructors to navigate ethically complex domains such as R/S.

This gap raises significant ethical concerns. The NASW Code of Ethics requires social workers who function as educators and supervisors to practice within their areas of competence and to seek appropriate training when necessary (NASW, 2017). Placing students in practicum settings without adequately preparing field instructors to address R/S risks professional incompetence, undermines student learning, and may compromise client welfare. Despite these ethical stakes, empirical research linking field instructor training, ethical R/S integration, and student outcomes remain sparse.

Summary and Implications for the Current Study

Collectively, the literature establishes sport social work as a growing field that requires intentional, high-quality field placements; highlights the relevance of religion and spirituality to holistic social work practice, including in sport contexts; and reveals a critical gap in ethical training for R/S integration within field education. While calls for greater attention to spirituality in social work are well documented, little is known about how field instructors are prepared to supervise students in this area or how such training influences student competency development.

This gap is especially consequential in emerging practice areas such as sport social work, where supervisors may possess strong content expertise but limited formal preparation in social work supervision or ethical R/S integration. Addressing this gap through a targeted field instructor training initiative offers an opportunity to strengthen ethical supervision, enhance student learning, and contribute to the growing body of scholarship on sport, social work, and spiritually responsive practice. The current study seeks to address this underexamined area by situating a field instructor training initiative within the broader contexts of sport social work, field education, and ethical R/S integration.

Methods

Study Purpose and Design Rationale

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of a targeted field instructor training initiative focused on the ethical integration of religion and spirituality (R/S) within sport social work practicum education. As identified in the literature, sport social work is a rapidly expanding field that relies heavily on high-quality field placements. However, empirical research examining how field instructors are prepared to address R/S in sport settings ethically remains sparse. To address this gap, the present study evaluated whether an evidence-informed training workshop could enhance field instructors' knowledge, comfort, and supervisory skills related to R/S integration in sport-based practice contexts.

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To address this gap, the present study evaluated whether an evidence-informed training workshop could enhance field instructors' knowledge, comfort, and supervisory skills related to R/S integration in sport-based practice contexts.

To guide this evaluation, the study was structured around the following research questions:

a. Does participation in a targeted field instructor training initiative increase field instructors' knowledge of ethical principles and frameworks for integrating religion and spirituality in sport social work practice?
b. Does participation in the training increase field instructors' comfort and confidence in addressing religion and spirituality in supervision and student development?
c. Does participation in the training enhance field instructors' perceived ability to provide supervision and field instruction related to faith integration in sport-based practicum settings?
d. Are training outcomes associated with participants' self-identified spirituality?

Given the applied focus of the training initiative and its implementation within real-world field education settings, a quantitative pretest–posttest design was employed. This design allowed for the assessment of changes in participants' self-reported competencies following participation in the training while aligning with prior social work education research evaluating training interventions for field instructors.

Training Initiative

The training initiative was delivered at a private Christian university as an interactive, evidence-informed workshop designed specifically for social work field instructors, including those who are supervising students in sport-related placements. The workshop emphasized ethical decision-making, culturally responsive practice, and supervisory competence consistent with the NASW Code of Ethics and CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards.

The training addressed three primary learning objectives:

1. **Increasing knowledge** of ethical principles and frameworks relevant to the integration of R/S in sport social work practice;
2. **Enhancing comfort and confidence** in addressing R/S-related topics in supervision and student development; and
3. **Building practical supervisory skills** to help students navigate faith-related issues within sport settings.

To achieve these objectives, the workshop incorporated multiple pedagogical strategies reflective of best practices in adult learning and field instructor education. These strategies included didactic instruction on ethical standards and emerging scholarship on spirituality in sport, facilitated small-group discussions using sport-specific case examples, supervised role-play exercises, and guided reflection activities. Participants also received written materials, including supervision prompts and decision-making tools, intended to support ongoing application of training concepts within practicum supervision.

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Participants

Participants in the study included 49 individuals who served as field instructors, preceptors, or supervisors for social work students placed in sport-related or sport-adjacent practicum settings. Of the participants, 74% (n = 36) identified as field instructors, 16% (n = 8) as preceptors, and 10% (n = 5) as holding other supervisory roles. The majority of participants identified as spiritual persons (86%, n = 42) which is operationally defined by their pursuit of existential meaning, personal growth, and a deeply felt connection to a transcendent dimension, sacred reality, or the broader cosmos (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013), 74% (n = 36) identified as Christian and 14% of participants did not identify as spiritual, such as atheists and agnostics, whose worldviews are rooted in empirical rationalism and distinct epistemological frameworks (Bullivant & Ruse, 2018).

Participation in the training and associated evaluation was voluntary. Nearly all participants (96%, n = 47) reported being very or somewhat satisfied with the training experience, indicating strong acceptability of the intervention within this professional group.

Data Collection and Measures

Data was collected using a training evaluation survey developed and administered through Qualtrics. Participants completed the survey at a single point in time, immediately following the intervention, using a retrospective post-then-pre design. This approach was specifically chosen to mitigate potential response shift bias, which can occur in traditional pre-post designs when participants' understanding of a construct (e.g., skill or knowledge level) changes as a result of the training (Geldhof et al, 2018). The retrospective method ensures that participants use the same post-intervention frame of reference when assessing both their current (post) and prior (pre) status. This approach enabled assessment of changes in participants' self-reported competencies resulting from the training intervention.

The survey measured three primary outcome domains aligned with the training objectives:

- **Knowledge** of ethical principles and frameworks for integrating R/S in social work practice;
- **Comfort and confidence** in addressing R/S topics in supervision and student development; and
- **Ability to provide supervision and field instruction** related to faith integration in sport social work settings.

Responses were recorded on continuous scales, allowing for quantitative analysis of pre–post differences across domains.

Statistical Analysis

Paired samples t-tests were conducted to examine whether significant differences existed between pretest and posttest scores across the three outcome domains. This statistical approach was selected due to the repeated-measures design, in which each participant served as their own control.

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The assumptions underlying paired t-tests were examined and met, including the continuity of dependent variables, approximate normal distribution of difference scores, relatedness of paired observations, and independence of difference scores across participants. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d to assess the practical significance of observed changes.

In addition to overall pre–post comparisons, exploratory analyses examined whether outcomes differed based on participants' self-identified spirituality. No statistically significant differences were observed between participants who identified as spiritual and those who did not.

Results

Research Question 1

Does participation in the training increase field instructors' knowledge of ethical principles and frameworks for integrating religion and spirituality in sport social work practice?

A paired-samples t-test indicated a statistically significant increase in participants' self-reported knowledge following the training. Post-training knowledge scores ($M = 88.37$, $SD = 11.59$) were significantly higher than retrospective pre-training scores ($M = 71.91$, $SD = 22.94$), $t(48) = 6.28$, $p < .001$. The effect size was large (Cohen's $d = .90$), indicating substantial practical significance. These findings suggest that the training was associated with meaningful gains in participants' perceived knowledge of ethical R/S integration in sport social work contexts.

Research Question 2

Does participation in the training increase field instructors' comfort and confidence in addressing religion and spirituality in supervision and student development?

Results demonstrated a statistically significant increase in comfort following participation in the training. Post-training comfort scores ($M = 86.98$, $SD = 12.33$) were significantly higher than retrospective pre-training scores ($M = 74.93$, $SD = 23.28$), $t(48) = 4.21$, $p < .001$. The effect size was medium (Cohen's $d = .60$), indicating moderate practical significance. These results suggest that the training enhanced participants' comfort in navigating R/S-related topics within supervision and practice discussions.

Research Question 3

Does participation in the training enhance field instructors' perceived ability to provide supervision and field instruction related to faith integration in sport-based practicum settings?

A significant improvement was also observed in participants' perceived supervisory ability. Post-intervention scores ($M = 88.19$, $SD = 11.85$) were significantly higher than retrospective pre-intervention scores ($M = 72.42$, $SD = 23.42$), $t(48) = 7.07$, $p < .001$. The effect size was large (Cohen's $d = .97$), reflecting strong practical significance. These findings indicate that the training was associated with increased confidence in providing supervision related to faith integration within sport social work placements.

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Research Question 4

Are training outcomes associated with participants' self-identified spirituality?

Exploratory analyses examined whether changes in knowledge, comfort, or supervisory ability differed based on participants' self-identified spirituality. No statistically significant differences were observed between participants who identified as spiritual and those who did not. This finding suggests that the observed training effects were not contingent upon participants' personal spiritual identification.

Overall, findings across all research questions indicate that participation in the training initiative was associated with statistically significant and practically meaningful improvements in field instructors' perceived competence in integrating religion and spirituality ethically into sport social work supervision.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical principles relevant to social work education research. Participation was voluntary, and all data were collected anonymously to protect participant confidentiality. The training emphasized ethical integration of R/S consistent with professional standards, reinforcing the study's alignment with the NASW Code of Ethics and the ethical responsibilities of social work educators and supervisors.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether a targeted field instructor training initiative could enhance knowledge, comfort, and supervisory capacity related to the ethical integration of religion and spirituality (R/S) within sport social work practicum education. Consistent with the study's aims and the gaps identified in the literature, findings indicate that participation in a brief, structured training was associated with statistically significant improvements across all three measured domains. These results offer meaningful contributions to emerging scholarship on sport social work, field education, and ethically grounded supervision.

Implications for Sport Social Work Field Education

The observed increases in field instructors' perceived knowledge, comfort, and supervisory ability suggest that ethical R/S integration is not merely a matter of individual disposition or personal belief, but rather a teachable and developable component of professional competence. This finding is particularly salient within sport social work contexts, where athletes frequently engage in spiritual meaning-making related to identity, performance, injury, and transition. Nevertheless, practice settings are often situated within secular or institutionally constrained environments.

Field instructors occupy a critical gatekeeping role in shaping how students navigate these complexities. Prior to training, supervisors may avoid R/S altogether due to uncertainty about ethical boundaries, risk of value imposition, or lack of institutional guidance. The training initiative described in this study appears to have provided participants with tools to move beyond

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avoidance toward more intentional, ethically grounded engagement. In doing so, the training addresses a persistent gap between the profession's endorsement of holistic, person-in-environment practice and the realities of field-based supervision in sport settings.

Additionally, the lack of differences based on supervisors' personal spirituality supports a key ethical principle: competence in R/S integration is professional rather than personal. This aligns with the historical evolution of social work, where the field has sought to balance respect for spirituality with commitment to scientific and ethical practice (Ressler, 2002). Effective supervision, therefore, does not require personal religious identification but rather the ability to engage clients' beliefs with cultural humility and ethical clarity.

These findings align with broader social work education literature demonstrating that targeted field instructor training enhances supervisory confidence and competence. However, this study extends that literature by demonstrating that similar gains are achievable in ethically complex domains, such as R/S integration, within emerging subspecialties, such as sport social work.

Ethical Integration of R/S in Sport Contexts

The lack of significant differences in outcomes across participants' self-identified spirituality suggests that training effects were not contingent on personal religious or spiritual identification. This finding reinforces the ethical framing of the training, which emphasized professional standards, cultural humility, and client self-determination rather than faith endorsement. For sport social work, where practitioners may serve athletes from diverse religious, spiritual, and secular backgrounds, this distinction is particularly important.

Ethical R/S integration in sport contexts requires supervisors to help students discern when spiritual content is clinically or contextually relevant; how to respond when athletes introduce faith-based concerns; and how to maintain appropriate professional boundaries within environments that may simultaneously valorize spirituality (e.g., pregame prayer, faith-based team culture) and restrict its explicit discussion. By increasing supervisors' comfort and skill in addressing these issues, the training initiative supports ethical practice consistent with NASW and CSWE standards.

Implications for Programs and Professional Organizations

Beyond individual supervisory competence, the findings highlight the need for broader structural and institutional support for ethical integration of faith in field education. Training initiatives like the one examined in this study should not be viewed as optional or ancillary, particularly as sport social work continues to expand within diverse and complex organizational settings. Schools of social work, field education offices, and professional organizations such as ASWIS may consider incorporating R/S-related supervision training into standard field instructor development offerings.

Additionally, the training model described in this study demonstrates potential for adaptability across practice settings beyond sport social work. While sport contexts present unique cultural dynamics, the ethical challenges associated with R/S integration are not exclusive

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to athletics, suggesting broader applicability of structured training approaches focused on supervision rather than direct practice alone.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the use of a single-group pretest–posttest design without a comparison group limits the ability to attribute observed changes solely to the training intervention. While significant improvements were observed, results should be interpreted as preliminary and exploratory.

Second, outcome variables were based on self-reported measures of knowledge, comfort, and supervisory ability. Although self-report is commonly used in training evaluation research, it does not capture behavioral change or actual supervisory practices. Future studies would benefit from incorporating observational data, supervisor–student dyadic assessments, or student-reported outcomes to better evaluate the impact of training on practicum experiences.

Third, the sample size was modest and drawn from a specific group of field instructors and preceptors supervising students attending a private Christian university. Additionally, the majority of participants identified as spiritual and Christian, which may limit generalizability to supervisors with more diverse religious, spiritual, or secular identities. Replication with larger and more diverse samples is needed to strengthen external validity.

Finally, the study assessed outcomes immediately following the training. Without longitudinal follow-up, it is unclear whether gains in knowledge, comfort, and supervisory ability are sustained over time or translate into long-term changes in practice. Future research should examine maintenance of training effects and their influence on student learning and client outcomes.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on sport social work by demonstrating that ethical R/S integration can be meaningfully addressed through intentional field instructor training. As sport social work continues to evolve, attention to ethically complex domains such as spirituality, particularly at the level of supervision, will be essential for preparing competent, culturally responsive practitioners. This study provides an initial, practice-informed foundation for expanding field instructor training models that align with the holistic values of the social work profession and the unique contexts of sport-based practice.

Practice Implications

The findings of this study have several important practice implications for sport social work practicum education, supervision, and workforce development. As sport social work continues to expand across youth, collegiate, professional, and community sport contexts, the ethical integration of religion and spirituality (R/S) represents a recurring yet under-addressed dimension of practice that directly affects student learning, client well-being, and organizational culture.

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Implications for Field Instructors and Supervisors

This study suggests that intentional training can meaningfully enhance field instructors' perceived knowledge, comfort, and supervisory capacity related to ethical R/S integration in sport settings. For field instructors, these findings underscore the importance of viewing R/S competence not as a personal belief issue, but as a component of professional supervision grounded in ethical standards, cultural humility, and client self-determination.

In practice, supervisors who receive formal training may be better equipped to help students:

- **Identify** when spiritual content is relevant to an athlete's presenting concerns.
- **Respond** appropriately when athletes initiate faith-related discussions.
- **Navigate** boundaries within sport environments that may simultaneously normalize and constrain spiritual expression.
- **Reflect** critically on their own values and assumptions to avoid value imposition.

Equipping field instructors with supervision-specific tools—such as structured reflection prompts, ethical decision-making frameworks, and sport-based case examples—may reduce avoidance of R/S topics and promote more holistic supervision consistent with person-in-environment practice.

Implications for Schools of Social Work and Field Education Programs

At the programmatic level, findings highlight the need for schools of social work to more intentionally support field instructors who supervise students in sport and sport-adjoining settings. Field education offices may consider incorporating ethical R/S integration into standard field instructor orientations, continuing education offerings, and practicum manuals, rather than treating spirituality as an optional or ancillary topic.

Embedding R/S-related supervision guidance into field education infrastructure can help standardize expectations across diverse placements and reduce instructors' uncertainty about ethical boundaries. This may be particularly important in sport settings, where organizational cultures, institutional policies, and client expectations regarding spirituality vary widely.

Additionally, these findings suggest that preparing supervisors to address R/S ethically may enhance overall practicum quality by strengthening reflective supervision practices, supporting student professional identity development, and aligning field instruction more closely with CSWE competencies and NASW ethical standards.

Implications for Sport Organizations and Professional Associations

Sport organizations that partner with social work programs may also benefit from recognizing the role of ethical R/S integration in supporting athlete well-being. When supervisors are adequately prepared, sport organizations may be better positioned to respond appropriately to athletes' faith-related concerns without conflating spiritual support with proselytization or informal religious counseling.

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Professional organizations such as the Alliance of Social Workers in Sport (ASWIS) are well-positioned to support this work by developing field-instructor training resources, supervision guidelines, and continuing education opportunities that address ethical R/S integration in sport contexts. Such efforts could contribute to greater consistency in supervision practices and promote ethical clarity across an increasingly diverse range of sport social work settings.

Broader Practice Implications

Although this study focused on sport social work, its implications extend to other practice areas where R/S concerns are salient but often ethically complex, including healthcare, military, school-based, and correctional settings. The training model evaluated in this study suggests that supervision-focused approaches may offer a practical pathway for addressing R/S integration across practice domains without requiring extensive curriculum redesign.

By centering on ethical standards, supervision processes, and applied decision-making, this approach aligns with the applied orientation of sport social work and supports the profession's broader commitment to culturally responsive and holistic practice.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing field of sport social work by demonstrating that the ethical integration of religion and spirituality (R/S) can be effectively addressed through targeted field-instructor training. Positioned within the broader intersections of religion, sport, and social work, the findings underscore that spirituality is not a peripheral concern but a central dimension of athlete identity, coping, and well-being.

Historically, both social work and sport have navigated complex relationships with religion—marked by periods of conflict, adaptation, and integration. Contemporary practice reflects a convergence of these domains, recognizing spirituality as a meaningful component of holistic, person-in-environment frameworks. However, this convergence also introduces ethical challenges, particularly in pluralistic and institutionalized sport settings.

The results of this study suggest that structured training can equip field instructors to navigate these challenges with greater confidence and competence. Importantly, such competence is not dependent on personal belief systems but on adherence to professional ethical standards, including cultural humility, client self-determination, and avoidance of value imposition.

As social work in sport continues to expand, integrating R/S into field education represents a critical opportunity to strengthen supervision, enhance student learning, and promote inclusive, holistic practice. Future research should explore long-term impacts of training, including effects on student competencies, athlete outcomes, and organizational culture within sport settings.

Ultimately, advancing ethical R/S integration in sport social work requires continued attention to training, research, and interdisciplinary collaboration. By engaging thoughtfully with

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the intersections of faith, sport, and social work, the profession can better support diverse athlete populations and uphold its commitment to culturally responsive, ethically grounded practice.

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Beyond the Finish Line: Sport Social Work's Role in Horse Racing

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Horse racing in North America is a multi-billion-dollar enterprise, employing close to 500,000 workers who train, ride, and groom horses, as well as those who work to keep the racetrack running daily. In the past 10 years, the mental health needs of jockeys and those who work in the industry have been spotlighted, as issues regarding mental health, substance abuse, debilitating injuries and eating disorders have been noted. Sport social work, an emerging segment of the social work profession, has emerged to address the needs of athletes at all levels, including jockeys, backstretch workers and racetrack workers. This exploratory commentary and review is but one of the few that address the need for sport social work at North American racetracks and will illuminate the need for social work intervention in horse racing. The study will be viewed through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory in order to provide an overarching perspective as to how sport social workers may apply interventions in horse racing.

Keywords: Horse Racing, Mental Health, Stigma, Sport Social Work, Thoroughbred

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Introduction

In defining the term "Thoroughbred", the breed of horse involved in most horse racing in North America, one must refer to the breeding, training and racing of a variety of horses whose ancestry traces back to three male horses-sires-– the Darley Arabian, the Godolphin Arabian, and the Byerley Turk. While horse racing in Europe at the beginning of the 17th century became popular, the animals used in racing tended to be slower and heavier. Arabian horses were known for their grace, speed, and stamina, and as a result, the three sires were brought to England from the Mediterranean Middle East in the early 1700's and bred to the stronger native English horses (The Jockey Club, 2026; University of Oklahoma, 2026).

The result of breeding the English horses to the three Arabian horses resulted in animals which could maintain high rates of speed (up to over 40 miles per hour) and carry weight over extended distances, some as far as 2 ¼ miles. These horses were termed "Thoroughbreds" by the English aristocracy, which supported, promoted, and patronized Thoroughbred racing (The Jockey Club, 2026).

Horse racing and wagering, or betting, originated in the early civilizations of the Romans, Egyptians, and Greeks, who were cognizant of the athletic abilities of horses as well as the potential of racing in these ancient societies. The concept of wagering on the outcome of races began to develop, with spectators "placing bets among themselves as a means to raise the stakes and enhance the excitement of the competition" (Newbury Race Course, 2026, The Origins of Horse Racing and Betting section, para 1).

The first recorded horse race took place in England in 1174. While the sport gained a following throughout the country, royalty and aristocrats noticed the attention paid to horse racing, and as such, the ruling class organized formal betting structures. In the early 16th century, horse racing became a professionalized sport, with standardized guidelines and rules in addition to established racing facilities. As a result, due to the standardized formats and rules of horse racing, betting practices also became formalized and structured, featuring betting pools, bookmakers, and oddsmakers, who would inform the betting public of the chances for victory of the racing horses (The Jockey Club, 2026; Newbury Race Course, 2026, The Origins of Horse Racing and Betting section, para 3).

In North America, Thoroughbred racing was first noted to occur on Long Island in 1665. However, Thoroughbred racing was formally organized in Maryland by Governor Samuel Ogle in 1745. The first race "between pedigreed horses, in the English style" occurred in Annapolis the same year (University of Oklahoma, 2026, para. 15).

Since the beginning of the sport, Thoroughbred horse racing in North America has historically attracted large amounts of money, especially through on- and off-track betting, advertising, sponsorships, and sales of horses at auctions throughout the United States and Canada. Horse racing is "one of the biggest entertainment and sporting industries in the United States" (Bull, 2025, p. 1). In 2023 alone, the horse industry, which includes horse racing, contributed some $177 billion to the US economy(Bull, 2025).

Multi-million-dollar feature races, such as the Kentucky Derby, Belmont Stakes, Preakness Stakes, or the Breeders' Cup, are but a small fraction of the racing industry in the United States and Canada. Few see the preparation needed to enter a horse in a race, whether it

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be the lowest ranks of the sport, thousand-dollar claiming races at obscure rural racetracks, or in the $3 million Kentucky Derby.

For the purposes of this review, the focus will be on those employed in Thoroughbred racing in North America. Arabian and American Quarter Horses race at several tracks across North America; however, the majority of racing is conducted at Thoroughbred facilities. Also, two Directors of Backstretch Programs from mid-Atlantic racetracks were contacted by the author to understand the resource needs of backstretch workers and jockeys and to gauge interest in hosting a master's level student to work with and assist racetrack employees and jockeys in providing social work interventions and resource development and access. These directors were selected by the author due to the racetracks' proximity to the author's place of employment, Millersville University of Pennsylvania. It should be noted that, as this is an exploratory review, personal communication was included to provide an overview and illuminate a potential client population need. Personal communication, along with anecdotes recovered from such conversations, has several limitations. These discussions may be unrecoverable, hold bias, and may be unreliable and ungeneralizable (Lund University, 2026; American Psychological Association, 2020).

In order to gauge the need for potential sport social work involvement in racing, discussions were held with those who currently work with and provide resources to racetrack employees in two mid-Atlantic racetracks, where the author worked with the tracks to set up potential Master's level interns, who attend Millersville University of Pennsylvania's Master of Social Work program. Additionally, this review will examine the issues sport social work can address in working with backstretch workers, track personnel, and the jockeys who ride horses through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is used as a model in social work that directs practitioners to assess client needs across systems, which include the various features that form a client's perspective (Cox et al., 2022). Applying this theory for use by a sport-focused social work practitioner, the author interviewed racetrack personnel and reviewed literature to help understand racetrack workers, jockeys, and trainers' needs for potential social work intervention. By applying an ecological systems approach to the horse racing client population, a sport social worker becomes aware of not only micro individual needs, but also the meso settings within each racing location, in addition to the social network and macro systems that impact those who work in horse racing. Ecological systems theory and its applicability to the sport of horse racing in North America will be further explored in the Discussion section of this review.

Literature Review

Sport Social Work

One of the core missions of social work is the promotion of mental health literacy in the population at large (National Association of Social Workers, 2026). As will be discussed later, the horse racing industry has attached a great deal of stigma to those seeking mental health treatment. Social workers, and more specifically, sport social workers, educate athletes and their support staff on symptomatology, reducing stigma and improving access to treatment. (Moore et al., 2022).

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With the emergence of sport social work as a subset of social work practice in the last 10-15 years, social workers have been hired, or internships have been created for master's level social work students in numerous athletic settings at the professional levels of sport, along with inclusion in college and high school athletic programs. Sport social workers assist athletes of all levels with such topics as decision-making processes, mental health literacy, navigating life and relationships, and developing social support (Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, 2026; Bates & Multer, 2025; Moore et al., 2022).

While the demand for sport social workers in North America has increased over the past 10 years due to an increasing awareness of the mental health needs of athletes, the need for training and educating potential workers has been addressed by several universities and agencies, such as the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, The United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee, the University of Kentucky, the University of Michigan, and Millersville University of Pennsylvania (Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, 2006; Millersville University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work, 2026, The United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee, 2026; The University of Michigan School of Social Work, 2026). Sport social workers assess athletes for mental health or substance abuse issues and provide education on social issues such as dating violence, sexual assault, or career planning (Felizzi, 2017; Gattis & Moore, 2022; Haggerty & Felizzi, 2022).

Additionally, advocacy and service linkage on behalf of clients is a foundation of social work practice across all settings (National Association of Social Workers, 2026). Specifically, sport social work seeks to encourage well-being at the macro, mezzo, and micro levels through collaborations between the profession of social work and athletics of all levels (ASWIS, 2026).

As many racetrack workers are non-unionized, or non-represented, many rely on the charity and support of racetrack staff for basic needs- needs that can be addressed by the creation of food or clothing banks for the workers and jockeys, as well as linkage to medical and dental facilities local to the track. The families of racetrack workers and jockeys often need assistance in registering children for school and in accessing transportation for grocery shopping or medical appointments (New York Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2025; L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025).

While social workers advocate against oppressive policies in all areas of practice, sport social workers must contend with situations and assist clients in identifying repressive practices that marginalize and take advantage of their athletic population. In horse racing, backstretch employees are often cash-poor and can work up to 16 hours a day. Many are undocumented immigrants or hourly wage employees with no benefits (L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025). If a jockey is injured in a race, they must depend on charity, as a jockey will not get paid while they are injured. For jockeys coming from other countries (many come from Mexico, South America, Central America, and the Caribbean, as well as Europe), they may not have support systems established when they first start riding in North America. Using a social justice lens, there appears to be a need for advocacy support and service linkage for those riding professionally and working on North American racetracks. (Bates & Multer, 2025; BEST, 2025; Moore & Gummelt, 2019; Thoroughbred Charities of America, 2025; Voss, 2023).

Sport social work has an immediate opportunity to work with the jockey athletes and their support workers to assist and improve quality of life for those involved in horse racing. The next sections will discuss how sport social work can intervene to educate about the numerous issues that affect professional jockeys and those who are involved in thoroughbred racing in North America.

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Backstretch Workers

For each horse entering a race, there are numerous people preparing the animal to compete. Teams of grooms, hotwalkers, exercise riders, farriers, trainers, and their assistants work with the horses to prepare for competition. Most of this work is unseen by the public, and this preparation occurs at every racetrack. This area, where horses are stabled, bathed, trained, and groomed, is known as the backstretch (New York Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026; Maryland Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026).

The backstretch, depending on the racetrack, often consists of stables, training offices, equine medical facilities, dormitories for the workers, as well as cafeterias for those who spend their days and nights at the track. As many racing seasons span several months of the year, backstretch employees "follow the horse" to the next track where the horse will race. When one track ends its season, workers, trainers, and jockeys often move their tack to another racetrack. On the East Coast of the United States, that often means moving from, for example, Delaware Park to Tampa Bay Downs, in Florida (Delaware Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026; Maryland Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, New York Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026; Pennsylvania Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026).

In North America, many tracks operate for several months in each season. During the times the tracks are not open for racing, most workers, jockeys, and trainers travel to other courses to conduct business. For example, on the east coast of the United States, tracks in New York will operate from January to May, move to Saratoga or Delaware Park or Park Racing, outside of Philadelphia, or to Monmouth Park in New Jersey. Some workers may move to Gulfstream Park in Florida in the winter. In most cases, all workers, jockeys, and trainers live an itinerant lifestyle, one which has them moving several times a year (L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025).

Given that most backstretch employees are transient and follow the racetrack's season, there are numerous issues workers, jockeys, and trainers must contend with to work. It is not unusual to have a groom move from Florida to New York to Kentucky in one year. (J. Hammond, personal communication, November 11, 2025; L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025).

To that end, workers often need to be acclimated to services and resources when they land at a new track. In many cases, backstretch workers will be responsible for moving their families with them, which potentially presents issues in registering children for school, finding living quarters, securing child or health care, and accessing day-to-day services, such as grocery shopping and medical care, for the workers and their families. Often, workers may need to sign up for Medicaid services or, given the large influx of foreign workers in the industry in the last 20 years, depending on where the track is located, they may have to report to immigration authorities to renew their work visas. Additionally, in many tracks across North America, there are often a number of undocumented immigrants working on the backstretch (Bustillo, 2025; L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025). Indeed, in spring 2025, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raided several tracks in the United States, seeking to arrest undocumented workers (Hegerty, 2025). This push by the United States Government to arrest and detain undocumented workers has caused a number of issues among horse trainers, who hire the backstretch workers, to express concern about workers being arrested, deported, and ultimately forcing trainers to scramble to find employees to take care of and prepare the horses for racing (Bustillo, 2025; Hegerty, 2025; Nevills, 2025).

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It was found that services for racetrack workers are not uniform across North America. Existing programs, such as The Jockey Club, the Horseman's Benevolent and Protective Association (HBPA), the Horse Racing Safety and Integrity Authority (HISA), The Jockey Guild, and the Permanently Disabled Jockey's Fund (PDJF), lobby legislators at the federal level to promote the racing industry and mandate safety issues for horses and jockeys. Their intent is not to provide mental health services for jockeys or backstretch employees, but rather to advocate for uniform codes and regulations regarding the sport (Horse Racing Safety and Integrity Authority, 2026; Horseman's Benevolent and Protective Association, 2026; Permanently Disabled Jockey's Fund, 2026; The Jockey Guild, 2026).

In each state where racing is held, there is a Thoroughbred racing association, such as the Maryland Thoroughbred Horseman's Association (MTHA), Pennsylvania Thoroughbred Horseman's Association (PTHA), New York Thoroughbred Horseman's Association (NYTHA), and the Delaware Thoroughbred Horseman's Association (DTHA). These groups, much like the national organizations, promote and lobby for many similar initiatives at the state level. Many local organizations, through funding from the state legislatures, provide a Jockey Health and Welfare fund, which provides monies for medical treatment and disability (L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025; Thoroughbred Charities of America, 2026).

Several racetracks and horse racing associations offer health care insurance and pension funds for backstretch employees throughout North America. However, to be eligible, one must be a salaried, full-time employee of a trainer who holds the required number of horse stalls at each racetrack (Delaware Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026; Maryland Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, New York Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026, Pennsylvania Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026). However, those employees who are hourly, temporary, or undocumented workers are ineligible for health care insurance and pensions, and therefore are often in need of medical, financial, food, and clothing assistance (Casteneda et al., 2010; L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025; Thoroughbred Charities of America, 2026; Tobin et al., 2026). Tobin et al.'s (2026) study of backstretch workers in the United Kingdom showed that among backstretch workers, mental health issues were predominant, with 65% of workers experiencing anxiety, 60% depression, and up to 80% of the respondents reporting stress linked to financial concerns and limited support from the racing profession.

Besides the state-based organizations, there are no uniform providers of resources and services to all North American racetracks. While one local racetrack may provide food banks or clothing closets for employees, others may not offer such services. In New York, the Backstretch Employees Service Team (BEST) and the Belmont Child Care programs provide food, clothing, medical referrals, transportation to services, counseling, and educational assistance to primarily backstretch employees at three racetracks in the state: Belmont Park, Aqueduct Racetrack, and Saratoga Racecourse. Finger Lakes Racetrack, in New York, does not receive services from the BEST program (New York Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026).

As social workers, a foundational underpinning of the profession is to address oppression and advocate for marginalized clients (National Association of Social Workers, 2026). Thoroughbred horse trainers hire and employ grooms, stable hands, and hotwalkers to prepare horse facilities and care for each animal. Backstretch workers, who work for hourly wages, often without medical or health benefits, are susceptible to exploitation by their employers. In 2025, Steve Asmussen, one of the most successful thoroughbred horse trainers in America, settled a case brought by the United States Department of Labor and paid over $350,000 to grooms and

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stable workers in his employ in back wages and overtime he withheld from workers. This was not the first time Asmussen was accused of unfair business practices. In 2012, he was sued by the federal Department of Labor for withholding pay and overtime to his backstretch workers, in a case that was settled. In 2019, the Department of Labor again sued the trainer for non-payment of back wages involving workers in his New York operation. The suit was settled as Asmussen paid $563,800 in back wages to the 170 affected employees. In another case, Asmussen settled with the Department of Labor to reimburse backstretch workers $129,776 to resolve violations of the federal H-2B worker program that occurred from 2016 to 2019. The H-2B program is utilized to allow businesses to hire workers with temporary visas (Downey, 2025; Finley, 2021).

Sport social workers are aware that the needs of itinerant athletes and workers are varied, and for those who work in the horse racing industry, the needs of the population may far surpass what is offered at different tracks. In speaking with program directors at two tracks on the East Coast of the United States, the needs for sport social work in the horse racing industry became apparent. As noted, backstretch employees groom horses, clean the stables, transport horses, and assist trainers in preparing horses to race. Additionally, track workers- those who prepare the racing surfaces, work on the starting gate, maintain the facility, as well as timers, stewards, and other track personnel often travel from track to track during the year and are frequently in need of services and resources for themselves or their families (L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025).

Trainers who are responsible for conditioning and entering horses in races often have issues with referring workers to resources, simply because they focus on training, and not service referral or resource development for workers. Trainers have been affected by the current United States administration's crackdown on illegal immigration, as a number have lost trusted workers to deportation and/ or arrest (Wolken, 2025). To that end, Trainers are often unfamiliar with government regulations concerning employment or immigration and often don't know how or where to refer workers to obtain Medicaid coverage, working papers, or immigration information (Leonhardt, 2025; Nevills, 2025).

Backstretch employees are often unseen by the public, and while jockeys, horses, and trainers may receive the lion's share of attention and notoriety in the racing profession, these workers are what make winning horses and jockeys perform at the highest level (J. Hammond, personal communication, November 11, 2025; L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025; Tobin, 2026). However, the needs of this segment of the population are often overlooked or, in the case of Steve Asmussen, underpaid or cheated out of their hard-earned money.

In the above instance, utilizing an ecological theoretical approach, a sport social work practitioner would help the client navigate the systems that can oppress them, such as dishonest employers, and can educate clients regarding financial and mental health literacy as well as self-advocacy skills, and, as Casteneda et al. stated in their 2010 study, help diminish the idea that " [the] horses get treated better than we [backstretch workers] do" (p. 498).

Jockeys

Jockeys in North America, besides the horses, are often the most visible and courageous participants in the sport of Horse Racing (Gooding, 2025). To become a professional jockey requires years of physical training and mental preparation. It is not uncommon to have a jockey start their training in their early teens. Many jockeys leave their homes in adolescence to live in training centers with trainers, friends, extended family, or relatives. Many jockeys in North

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America come from several countries besides the US and Canada. In recent years, there have been many riders arriving from South America, Central America, Jamaica, England, Ireland, and France (Mmmimal, 2026; VonHippel, 2018).

Jockeys are under pressure to maintain weight, often under 125 pounds, to race. If a jockey is too heavy, they cannot race, as many races have weight limits for the riders. Much as in other sole performance sports such as gymnastics, wrestling, ice skating, track and field, the specter of eating disorders is a constant concern in the racing industry. (King et al., 2021; Losty, 2018; McGuane et al., 2019; McCarthy, P., 2025).

There are several other concerns working with professional jockeys as well. Jockeys may often need the services track workers seek for themselves and their families. Medical referrals, mental health counseling, housing issues, and financial issues are a few of the issues jockeys face while working at various tracks. According to Lynda Furlong, Director of the Backstretch Programs at Delaware Park, jockeys seek mental health counseling only when ordered to do so by track stewards, who oversee handing down discipline when jockeys are accused of acting unsafely or carelessly on the track. Most jockeys are, according to Furlong, referred to anger management education generally after a fight or disagreement, while on the track or in the jockeys' room (L. Furlong personal communication, November 19, 2025).

Jockey Injuries

Much like athletes in other sports, concussion issues are a focus of discussion in the jockey community. Thoroughbred racehorses can reach speeds of up to 45 miles an hour during a workout or in a race (Kelly, 2026). Riding a 1200-pound animal at such speed can present numerous risks. The speed rate, coupled with jostling between horses during a race, can increase the likelihood of physical injury. Between 1993 and 1996, a total of 6,545 injuries occurred during official races, for an average of 600 injuries per 1,000 jockeys per year (Anderson, 2025).

With regard to jockey injuries, a review of the literature found that most researchers focused on post-injury rehabilitation, concussion management, and return to competition. There is a need for coaches, counselors, horse trainers, and social workers to develop awareness of the athletes' emotional and financial needs during recovery (McCarthy, P., 2025; McCarthy, T., 2025; Voss, 2023).

The most common injuries are soft tissue damage, breaks, dislocations, and concussions (O'Connor et al., 2017). The dangers of riding thoroughbreds at high speed add up to an average of close to two jockeys dying from racing each year, and 60 riders suffering some form of paralysis worldwide (Anderson, 2025). Most jockey injuries range from mild (sprains, muscle pulls) to serious, career- and life-threatening injuries such as concussions, brain and spine damage. Falls from horses are a primary cause of these injuries, either during the race or in the starting gate prior to the race (Rosenblatt, 2025).

When a jockey is injured in North America, they often face recovery by themselves and depend on whatever insurance plan they can secure to cover medical costs. There are no team trainers, physical therapists, or medical doctors to assist and evaluate them post-injury. The cost of daily living can become an issue, especially if a jockey has little savings. Ramon Dominguez, a top rider in North America, suffered a career-ending head injury in 2013, when he fell from his mount at Aqueduct Racetrack. Dominguez faced a long recovery; however, he was fortunate to be covered by medical insurance to recover from his head injury and pursue other career opportunities in horse racing (Wilkin, 2013). Many jockeys who are injured often have little

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opportunities outside of racing and often cover their own costs for injury recovery. In Europe, while jockeys are recovering from injury, their day-to-day expenses are covered by entities such as the Professional Jockeys Fund, the Injured Jockey's Fund, and the Jockey's Education and Training Scheme (Brooks, 2025).

Jockeys in the United States and Canada earn no money until they secure a mount to race or ride during training (Voss, 2023). When injured, they earn nothing, unless backstretch employees and fellow jockeys create a GoFundMe or similar charitable program for incapacitated jockeys; but such help cannot be relied upon for the injured and their families. If a jockey in North America is seriously disabled, the Permanently Disabled Jockey's Fund can assist the rider; however, contributions to the PDJF have dwindled in the last few years, causing a restriction on what can be offered (Voss, 2023).

Many jockeys hide injuries and avoid medical care. If a jockey is labeled as "unfit to ride" by the track's doctors, they could lose a substantial amount of money and an opportunity to earn a livelihood. Recovery from injuries sustained on the track is rarely easy (Brooks, 2025). If a jockey is off a horse for a period, a trainer may find a replacement for the injured jockey. If that rider does well as a replacement, the trainer may never offer the original jockey a mount on the horse, or if they are suspicious of the jockey "getting hurt", they may never employ their services again (Voss, 2023). Jockeys will often try to hide physical injuries from owners, trainers, and peers. Since riding is their livelihood and a means of support for their families, there is inherent pressure from the industry to get back in the saddle, like many athletes, even if they are not 100% healthy (Gooding, 2025).

Jockeys and Weight Management

The issue of making weight is prevalent in jockeys' lives (McGuane et al., 2019). Horses are assigned to carry a jockey's weight in each race. In other words, if a horse is slated to carry 119 pounds, that jockey must weigh no more than 117 pounds to be eligible to ride. The extra two pounds account for the jockey's tack, or saddle and helmet, along with their boots, pants, and silks. (Jockey Club of the United Kingdom, n.d.). Due to the required weights of jockeys in horse racing, cutting weight and eating disorders are a constant concern of the riders themselves. Weight-making can negatively impact a jockey's mood as well as their attitudes towards eating, with the attendant issues that can come from missing regular, nutritious meals. If it is determined that a horse must carry a severely low weight, it was found that lower competitive riding weights were associated with more disordered eating attitudes, such as wasting or forced vomiting (King, Cullen, McGoldrick et al., 2021).

Jockeys are no different from other athletes competing in weight-sensitive sports. Many such athletes often implement excessive dieting practices, which, along with losing weight, also increases their likelihood of reducing bone density, developing an eating disorder, renal complications, and the associated stress that accompanies such physical issues (McGuane et al., 2019; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). McGuane et al. also found that in their study of 116 professional jockeys, 75% of the respondents stated they routinely skipped meals, and 81% admitted to restricting food intake during the racing season (2019).

The body of research on jockey weight management addresses "wasting" or forced vomiting to make weight. Many riders consider the practice "part of the game". In several jockey rooms in North America, a special "wasting bowl" for vomiting is included (Jockey Club of the United Kingdom, nd; McGuane et al., 2019; McCarthy, P., 2025). In McGuane et al.'s study

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from 2019, one jockey commented, “Starving is part of the sport and what we all do…We need the rides, so we make the weight” (p. 133).

Jockeys, Help Seeking Stigma, and Mental Health Issues

A search of the literature resulted in finding several articles that address the mental health of jockeys; however, the majority of the results reported on jockey physical and mental health in Europe, Australia, and Asia, not North America (Gooding, 2025; King, Cullen et al., 2023; King et al., 2021; Losty, 2018; McGuane et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the articles report on issues that transcend geographical areas, such as depression, anxiety, stress reactions, and mental health literacy.

While the stigma of seeking help remains an issue with many segments of the population, jockeys and the horse racing profession are not exempt (Whyno, 2023, p.1). Mike Smith, who won the Triple Crown, North America’s most prestigious horse racing series, in 2018 with the horse Justify, stated, “Asking for help in our sport is almost a sign of weakness, sad to say. You certainly don't want to show any signs of that. We're supposed to be tough and be able to handle it all.” Smith also said, "I know several riders that I knew very well committed suicide when it was all said and done. This is not all of a sudden just happening. It's been going on. You just never heard of it." (Whyno, 2023, p. 1).

As noted, most jockeys in North America are self-employed contractors and have a need to maintain positive relationships with trainers and owners responsible for providing horses to race. Jockeys, like many athletes, often disguise fears, concerns, injuries, and illness due to the persistent performance demands assigned to them (Gooding, 2025; King, Cullen et al., 2023).

In King, Cullen et al.’s 2023 study of professional jockeys and the barriers to seeking mental health treatment, one respondent replied: “They (trainers) might think ‘my jockeys not right in the head’… I’m sure in the back of their minds they’ll be thinking they’re just not right in the head… I don’t think it would be great for them to know too much. It might be an excuse for them to maybe get rid [of me] or try someone new.” (p. 196) Jockeys, to secure mounts, in order to make a living, have a need to maintain good relationships with trainers and owners responsible for providing horses to race (Ralph, 2023).

This help-seeking stigma can be, for jockeys, like other athletes, a protective factor against relational and non-relational maltreatment (Gattis & Moore, 2022). Trainers and owners may berate a jockey, in some cases, publicly after a perceived poor riding performance. While the trainer-jockey relationship is similar to a coach-athlete relationship, many considerations regarding negative treatment of athletes, such as emotional and psychological abuse, neglect, and maltreatment, can be applied to how jockeys and trainers relate to each other (Choi, 2019; Hagerty & Felizzi, 2022; Kerr et al., 2020). Whyno (2023) wrote that North American jockey Trevor McCarthy has confronted trainers and owners to stop speaking angrily to fellow jockeys after races. Horse racing in North America is often considered an “old-school sport” (Whyno, 2023, p.3) where a hyper-masculinized set of beliefs has been ingrained in the sport for centuries, and the topic of seeking mental health treatment is still considered a forbidden topic (Whyno, 2023).

Besides the issues that physical injuries cause jockeys, mental issues and related disorders are prevalent in the industry. King, Cullen, and McGoldrick et al. in 2021 found that jockeys reported higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms when compared to other professional athletes. Substance abuse, notably alcohol abuse, appeared higher among jockeys

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than other elite athletes. The researchers found several risk factors for mental health issues among professional riders as well. These risk factors included fear of injury, fear of fear, low levels of social support, injuries themselves, constant and perceived stress issues, dissatisfaction and burnout, as well as contemplation of retirement (Gooding, 2025; Whyno, 2023).

Losty et al., in 2019, conducted an anonymous online study asking over 100 jockeys about their experiences with mental health concerns. Respondents were asked to self-assess regarding psychological distress, depression, anxiety, social phobia, self-esteem, and perceived stress. The researchers found that 54% of the respondents experienced at least one symptom of general psychological distress, depression, social anxiety, or general anxiety disorder. Several jockeys who participated in the study scored a high mean scores in psychological distress, anxiety, and perceived stress (Losty, 2019).

In North America, if a jockey wishes to seek mental health counseling, they must secure treatment mostly on their own, as there are few mental health providers on the payrolls of racetracks. Services must be paid out of pocket or by each individual jockey's health care plan. The local Horsemen's Benevolent Protective Associations may have a list of mental health providers, but due to the stigma of receiving mental health treatment, many choose not to avail of these services (New York Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026; Whyno, 2023)

Eurico da Silva, a retired 30-year veteran jockey and a mental health coach for riders, stated, "In 30 years of riding horses, I can say to you that I never heard anybody talk about the emotional pain, never talked about going for help…I approached many jockeys that I feel like they need help, and many times I said, 'Go for help.' I motivate them to go for help. They just listen, but they don't really want to talk about [mental health]." (p.2) The retired jockey's statement underlines the need for social work intervention in horse racing.

Implications for Sport Social Work

After a review of the extant literature, there appears to be a clear indication for sport social work involvement. As mentioned previously, the need for mental health intervention has been established with jockeys to address a host of issues: eating disorders, anxiety, mental recovery from injuries, end-of-riding-career worries, substance abuse, depression, financial problems, adjusting to new cultures, suicidal ideation, as well as the stigma of seeking help are just a few of the concerns jockeys face.

On the backstretch, many employees who support the industry, grooms, hotwalkers, trainers, hired hands, and track personnel may need services and resources within the community, especially for the itinerant workers who travel from track to track across the country. With frequent moves and upheaval, there is a need for resource access for workers to assist in relocation, registering children in schools, access to medical care, support for those in need of food or clothing assistance, or mental health intervention. Notwithstanding these potential needs, backstretch workers may need to develop advocacy skills for themselves, their families, and co-workers to avoid unfair labor practices such as having overtime wages withheld and poor and unsafe working conditions at the racetrack.

Jockeys have stated the need for assistance with emotional and mental health issues (McCarthy, P, 28 November 2025; Whyno, 2023). Sport social workers possess the skills to work with athletes of all levels, and assisting jockeys with the emotional challenges of a high-level and dangerous sport can fill the gap in mental health services for these athletes. However,

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many in the horse racing industry, especially jockeys themselves, as is the case in other sports, are reluctant to access mental health services due to help-seeking stigma (Gooding, 2025; King et al., 2021; King, 2021; Losty, 2018). This is a challenge for sport social workers, but it is a hurdle all social workers face in dealing with stigma of seeking mental health support. Sport social workers are capable of negotiating and overcoming barriers of mental health treatment stigma and are skilled at working through these issues with athletes and those associated with athletics. While the stigma of mental health treatment, especially with jockeys, may be prevalent (King et al., 2023), those who work in supporting roles and on the backstretch may also hold a negative view of receiving help for their mental health. The backstretch in North America is often populated by immigrants, both documented and undocumented, who may be reluctant to engage with resources for fear of deportation or due to cultural factors regarding seeking mental health treatment (Bustillo, 2025). Again, this is another opportunity for sport social workers to educate and partner with backstretch communities, as well as each track's jockey colony, to overcome the stigma of receiving mental health treatment or social work services and resource linkage. Improving an athlete's mental health awareness and literacy is in line with the social work foundation of educating and helping to improve one's level of emotional well-being (Moore et al., 2022). Sport social workers, because of their training, are well versed in psychoeducation, information dissemination, and in addressing barriers to treatment and service delivery.

Additionally, with the large population of non-English-speaking workers at the racetrack, bilingual or multilingual sport social workers would be a valuable resource in the backstretch and in the jockey's room (L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025). Coupled with the social work value of confidentiality, sport social workers who are multilingual could become trusted supports for those who are working in a new or unfamiliar country.

The opportunities to educate and offer experiences for sport social work students, or those interested in working in the profession, are available and needed at racetracks (L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025). The ability to design, present, and evaluate programs dealing with a host of issues for jockeys and backstretch employees is but one need. According to Lynda Furlong, director of Backstretch Programs at Delaware Park racetrack in Stanton, DE, a sport social work intern would be "Put to work immediately…we need mental health education, substance abuse, eating disorder, domestic violence prevention and anger management programs and educations" (L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025).

Delaware Park offers career counseling services on a PRN basis, as well as a Food Bank and Clothing Closet for all employees, which Furlong said a sport social work intern would be responsible for managing and expanding. Despite the fact that Delaware Park's racing schedule runs from April to November, the need for services is year-round, as the track serves as a training facility and is staffed by workers and jockeys, who exercise horses throughout the year (L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025).

The implications are obvious and clear for sport social work involvement in horse racing. Service provision, resource development, psychoeducation, mental health literacy, eating disorder awareness, anger management, and post-career education, to mention but a few needs, are all indicated for jockeys, backstretch workers, and track personnel. These needs speak to the strengths of social work, and specifically sport social workers, who are adept at working with high-level athletes and their support networks. A proposed systemic approach to these issues will be presented next.

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Discussion

Based upon the findings and research involved in this review, it is clear sport social work has a place in horse racing in North America. The needs of those in the sport speak to the foundational values of the Social Work profession of Service, Competence, Dignity and Worth of the Person, Interpersonal Relationships, Integrity and Competence in several ways (National Association of Social Workers, 2026). Service linkage to racetrack community services, psychoeducation regarding mental health, food and clothing bank needs, as well as the demands for clinical social work are evident. Additionally, social work education programs can partner with racetracks to provide internship opportunities for students who wish to work in program development, service provision, and clinical work can find many opportunities to practice sport social work and work with those who ride and those who train and groom Thoroughbred racehorses.

To intervene with those who work at racetracks across North America, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems model appears to be an appropriate theoretical foundation for sport social work intervention. At racetracks in North America, there are various systems that interact and intersect with each other. Ecological systems theory is widely applied in social work to comprehend how numerous systems shape individuals' lives and to identify potential areas for intervention (Crawford, 2020). As social workers, this person-in-environment perspective allows the practitioner to witness the impacts, as well as the interrelatedness and importance each of the client's systems has on one another.

The ecological systems model includes the concepts of process, person, context, and time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Process relates to "the basic intrapsychic and interpersonal processes of human development that requires their investigation in the actual environments, both immediate and remote, in which human beings live" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 12). In the horse racing population, a sport-focused social worker could utilize the process of psychoeducation to assist in one's emotional, financial, career, and mental health literacy development. At the racetrack, this may include education regarding eating disorders, substance use, coping with career-ending injuries and the resultant anxiety or depression that may occur, or learning how to navigate immigration issues. To that end, the social worker is enriching the developmental processes of the individual through education and support.

Person, according to Bronfenbrenner (1979), represents how people relate to their environment, such as how grooms, hotwalkers, and backstretch workers interact with supervisors, or how they can navigate systems of oppression, such as unscrupulous trainers who may withhold pay or fire them without just cause (Downey, 2025). Person may also refer to how the itinerant track personnel acclimates themselves to a new track's community, and how successfully they secure resources for themselves or their families.

Bronfenbrenner's idea of context refers to microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems of a culture or society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Microsystems in the horse racing community are those in which the individual directly participates with others at the racetrack. This would include how individuals within the track's culture interact with each other- for example, grooms with trainers, jockeys with owners, owners with track administrative personnel. A sport social worker could use their skills of engagement to work with these individual systems to foster collaboration and understanding and assist in developing a safe workspace for the various workers in the backstretch.

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A social worker may have to provide specific interventions for jockeys. These interventions would include working through injuries and the anxiety of losing mounts, and the mental strain of the physical rehabilitation that may be needed to get back in the saddle. Additionally, as noted earlier, jockeys may require psychoeducation and assessment regarding anger management. When fights occur in the Jockey's Room, or anywhere else on the track, jockeys are often required to attend anger management training, most often provided by an outside consultant, or the rider would have to find a therapist on their own, to provide services (L. Furlong, personal communication November 19, 2025). By using an ecological systems approach, an on-site social worker could fill that role to assist the jockeys in relating to the microsystem of the jockey's room in a pro-social and appropriate manner.

In horse racing in North America, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) concept of mesosystems refers to when individuals from different microsystems interact with one another and operate independently. At the racetrack, there are distinct microsystems- backstretch workers, jockeys, trainers, owners, and track personnel such as track maintenance workers, starting gate crews, and support staff. As in any culture, these sub-groups often act independently of each other, with their own ideas of how to conduct their work. Conflicts may arise when trainers criticize or berate jockeys for the manner in which they rode a horse in a race, or when a groom becomes angry if a starting gate worker handles a horse harshly before a race. It may also refer to how the microsystem transitions between the various groups (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Crawford, 2020). Can these groups relate to each other appropriately, or is there constant conflict between them? Applying this concept to sport social work practice, a social worker could mediate issues between the groups by consulting with and bringing together those with disparate perspectives, and arbitrating disagreements between a jockey and a trainer, or a groom and track personnel.

Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) discussed how exosystems, regarding external social environments or societal structures that do not openly involve the individual, may influence the person indirectly by affecting their immediate work, home, or community settings. For a sport-focused social worker, this could involve intervening with state or local horse racing regulatory commissions on behalf of a client who may have a licensing issue, or assisting clients and their families with a child's school registration. It could also refer to helping clients find clothes, food, financial and medical resources as well as housing, as they move from different tracks.

Macrosystems, according to Bronfenbrenner, are the policies, politics, mores, and customs that symbolize the community or larger society of the individual and their family (Crawford, 2020). In a horse racing context, Federal racing authorities, such as HISA, or Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Department of Labor can impact a racetrack worker's life by instituting raids on racetracks, as ICE did in 2025 (Bustillo, 2025). The Department of Labor, consequently, can assist workers in obtaining back wages or other denied benefits by ordering employers to pay disputed or withheld pay (Finley, 2021). HISA can affect the racing community by instituting guidelines for jockey and trainer registration with the agency, or by introducing safety and horse medication standards for track workers (HISA, 2026).

Sport-focused social workers may intervene at the macro level by advocating for individuals when clients are faced with labor disputes, assisting clients in compliance with HISA by assisting with registration, or assisting the racetrack by helping to implement safety procedures with the population. Advocating for a fair and just immigration policy is but one of the roles a sport-focused social worker could play in assisting those undocumented workers with whom they may work. Social justice issues are a foundational aspect of social work (National Association of Social Workers, 2026), and as such, given the raids ICE staged at racetracks

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across the United States in 2025, a sport-focused social worker could be a trusted support for those undocumented and unrepresented.

Bronfenbrenner's precept of chronosystems within ecological systems theory refers to the time experienced by the individual and their community (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). The interaction an individual experiences over time are thought by Bronfenbrenner to impact their genetic proclivities to react to situations, such as living in a time where immigrant and undocumented racetrack workers may be detained by the government (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bustillo, 2025), or a time where society views mental health literacy as acceptable and where jockeys seek such help without fear of losing mounts (Boon, 2011; Bronfenbrenner, 1989; McCarthy, P. 2025; McCarthy, T. 2025). Sport social work advocacy plays a role in assisting clients in working through societal stigma to develop mental health literacy and freedom.

Advocating for oppressed and marginalized populations is a foundational underpinning of the social work profession (National Association of Social Workers, 2026). As noted, many backstretch workers, as well as jockeys, are not represented by labor unions and have little collective bargaining power with their employers. A sport social worker could assist in empowering workers and jockeys by giving voice to their demands, helping to develop self-advocacy skills, and collaborating with colleagues to open conversations with trainers, horse owners, and racetrack administrators to develop resources at the track for mental health literacy, community resource development and access, such as medical and dental care, legal assistance, as well as instituting fair labor practices to ensure employees are paid overtime and on time.

A sport social worker could advocate for clients to state regulatory commissions on the need to develop policies at the macro level to assist those in the industry to receive support, benefits, and resources to ensure a safe, protected, and productive working environment. As noted, many racetrack workers and jockeys are non-represented and may need policies ensuring such protection. Nationally, sport social work could inform entities such as the HISA, HBPA, and the Jockey Guild of the need for sport social work intervention in horse racing at their national conferences, and by discussing the potential need to create programs to address racetrack workers and jockeys.

Given the needs of racetrack workers in North America for a sport-focused social work presence, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) may effectively address the population needs when interventions are proposed. The understanding a sport social worker possesses regarding the intersection of the various systems all workers live within can help to foster individual, group, and community development by creating interventions at these levels to help empower, improve, and strengthen racetrack employees' lives.

The Millersville University School of Social Work developed a relationship with Delaware Park Racetrack, a major East Coast racing facility, to provide a dual-degree Master of Social Work/ Masters of Education in Sport Management student intern. Delaware Park was selected due to the proximity of the racetrack to the Millersville campus, and the interest the Director of Backstretch Programs, Lynda Furlong, showed when the author communicated the idea of placing an intern at the track (L. Furlong, Personal Communication, 11/19/2025; 5/28/2026). The intern will be responsible for maintaining and expanding the racetrack's Food Bank and Clothes Closet. The student will also provide education presentations to jockeys on such topics as anger management, the mental health needs of the jockey athletes, substance abuse, eating disorder awareness, and financial literacy, in addition to providing resources to all backstretch workers, riders, trainers, and their families at Delaware Park. The intern will be supervised by a Millersville University faculty member, and due to the fact the track is open

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year-round, the student will be able to fulfill a sustainable internship throughout the academic year (L. Furlong, personal communication, February 6, 2026). To that end, student intern input would be valuable for those seeking to understand the impact made by placing an intern at the racetrack. This will provide information for planning for future internships, as well as determine any impact the placement, as well as their interventions, had on the client population.

Conclusions

As sport social work has made inroads and strides in North America in the last 10 years, the profession continues to find areas and niches to establish practice. While both ASWIS and the US Olympic and Paralympic organizations have stated a need for social work and mental health interventions with athletes (Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, 2026; United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee, 2026), there continues to be additional athletic arenas where social work may be indicated. Additionally, as those social workers who have worked in athletic programs will note, there may be pushback from those who may perceive social workers as "outsiders". This is not a new development for social workers in all areas of practice. Making inroads will require the social work skills of engagement and trust-building to create a solid working and therapeutic alliance with workers, trainers, and jockeys regarding the development of mental health literacy (Baker, 2025; Bates & Multer, 2025; Moore et al., 2025).

In utilizing an ecological systems approach, it will be critical to educate workers, trainers, and jockeys on how the various systems in the horse racing community can offer one another and empower each other. Additionally, due to the stigma of help-seeking, one must recognize that trust and consistency with those in the horse racing profession must be established, fostered, and maintained, as the provision of mental health services at North American racetracks is still in its infancy as of this writing. Creating relationships, engaging with the various systems, developing trust within the local horse racing communities, and creating collaborations with national racing organizations will assist social workers in establishing effective client services at the racetrack.

The implications for sport social work in horse racing are clear. Social Workers are adept at linking clients to resources and brokering services for those in need, and as noted, those in all phases of horse racing can benefit from service linkage to their communities. Additionally, as social work provides the majority of mental health services in North America (National Association of Social Workers, 2026), the path is clear for Sport Social Work to answer the call to the post and enter the starting gate.

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Left on the Sidelines: A Social Work Commentary on Sports Access Disparities Among Adolescent Girls

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Despite Title IX's five-decade legacy, adolescent girls in the United States continue to face significant disparities in access to school-based sports programs. This commentary examines the structural, economic, and racial barriers—including the enduring role of structural racism—that sustain these gaps and their consequences for the academic achievement, mental health, and long-term development of girls ages 13–18. Evidence indicates that girls excluded from sports face elevated rates of depression and anxiety, lower academic performance, and diminished long-term outcomes. Critically, these gaps reflect structural exclusion rather than a lack of interest: girls are pushed off the sidelines by policy failures, economic gatekeeping, and resource inequities rooted in histories of residential and economic segregation—barriers that fall hardest on girls from low-income and racially minoritized communities. A three-component framework integrating standardized equity assessment, community sports access hubs, and peer mentorship is proposed, grounded in ecological systems theory and empowerment frameworks. Distinct from public health, education, and sport management, social work's person-in-environment orientation positions the profession to both intervene across systems and anchor the interdisciplinary collaboration these disparities demand. Implications for social work advocacy, policy reform, and community-based practice are discussed.

Keywords: sports access, adolescent girls, Title IX, gender equity, social work, pay-to-play, mental health, athletic identity, structural racism

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Introduction

In American schools today, adolescent girls face a persistent crisis of opportunity. Despite more than fifty years of Title IX protections, girls still have 1.13 million fewer opportunities to participate in school sports than boys, representing 49% of high school enrollment but only 43% of athletic participants (National Federation of State High School Associations [NFHS], 2023). This disparity is not a residual artifact of history—it is a present-day structural inequity with measurable consequences for health, academic achievement, and life outcomes. The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics calls on practitioners to pursue social justice, challenge social conditions that create barriers to human well-being, and advocate for vulnerable populations (NASW, 2021). By that standard, equitable sports access for adolescent girls is not peripheral to our profession's mission; it is central to it. Gill (2008) argued nearly two decades ago that social work had both the ethical mandate and the skill set to address mental health needs in athletic communities—yet the profession has been slow to answer that call. The sports access crisis facing adolescent girls is precisely the kind of structural, intersectional injustice social work is uniquely equipped to address.

The evidence connecting sports participation to positive youth development is substantial. Female athletes maintain grade point averages 0.4 points higher than non-athletes, demonstrate 15% higher attendance rates, and are 28% more likely to attend college than their non-athletic peers (Yeung, 2022; Dudley et al., 1997). The mental health implications are equally significant. Adolescent girls who do not participate in sports report 2.5 times higher rates of depression symptoms and 1.8 times higher rates of anxiety compared to their athletic peers (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024). These figures take on greater urgency in a context where more than half of teenage girls report persistent sadness or hopelessness—an increase that has continued over the past decade despite modest improvement from 2021 to 2023 (CDC, 2024). When viewed through a social work lens, sports participation functions as a protective factor and a social determinant of health—one that millions of girls are systematically denied.

Structural Barriers to Equitable Sports Access

Title IX Enforcement Failures

Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments represented a landmark shift in girls' access to school sports, growing female high school athletic participation from fewer than 300,000 to more than 3.4 million (Women's Sports Foundation, 2020). Yet enforcement has remained inconsistent and often inadequate. Over 80% of schools have been found out of compliance with at least one major Title IX requirement between 2002 and 2018, yet enforcement actions were taken against fewer than 10% of those institutions (Staurowsky et al., 2020). The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has documented persistent resource disparities, including cases where boys' baseball teams play on high-quality turf fields while girls' softball teams use poorly maintained grass fields with drainage problems, inadequate fencing, and insufficient lighting (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

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A critical breakdown occurs at the administrative level. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that 51% of athletics administrators either were unaware of or unsupported by their Title IX coordinator, with 40% reporting they were entirely unaware of who their coordinator was (GAO, 2018). This systemic disconnect between those responsible for enforcing Title IX and those administering athletic programs undermines the law's intent from the inside out. At the collegiate level, the picture is similarly troubling: women's athletic participation lags 14 percentage points behind their enrollment rates, 63% of colleges show significant participation gaps, and 40% of colleges have maintained or reduced varsity sports opportunities for women compared to a decade earlier (GAO, 2024).

Economic Barriers and the Pay-to-Play Problem

The commercialization of youth sports has compounded disparities in access. Youth sports have become a $15 billion industry dominated by private clubs, with 63% of parents paying $1,200 to $6,000 per year for their children's participation and nearly one in five paying more than $12,000 annually (Pandya, 2021). The shift from school-based, seasonal sport to club-based, year-round models has created a pay-to-play system that disproportionately excludes low-income families and communities of color, with participation rates highest among White males and increasing directly with household income (Pandya, 2021). This is a structural exclusion problem, not an interest problem—research consistently shows that interest in sports among girls from low-income communities is not lower, but access is (Sabo & Veliz, 2008).

Within public schools, pay-to-play fee policies have proliferated as budgets have tightened. National poll data indicate that only 30% of lower-income families report having a teen playing school sports, compared to 51% of higher-income families, with average school participation fees of $161 per sport, rising to over $408 when equipment, travel, and other costs are included (C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health, 2019). Federal poverty data reveal an even starker picture: sports participation stands at just 31.2% among children below the federal poverty level, compared to 70.2% among those at 400% or more of that level—a gap of nearly 40 percentage points (Black et al., 2022). When families face financial constraints, research shows they are more likely to prioritize sons' sports participation over daughters', deepening the gender divide (GAO, 2017).

The economic barriers do not operate in isolation. Sabo and Veliz (2008) documented that economic disparities are among the most consistent predictors of sports participation gaps, with children from lower-income communities—particularly girls of color—facing the most constrained athletic opportunities. These structural conditions create a compounding disadvantage in which girls who would benefit most from sports participation are the least likely to access it.

Intersecting Disparities: Race, Gender, and Access

Sports access disparities do not affect all girls equally, and the gaps reflect structural exclusion operating across intersecting systems rather than differential interest or motivation. National health data reveal that non-Hispanic White children participate in sports at a rate of 60.4%, compared to 42.1% for non-Hispanic Black children and 46.9% for Hispanic children

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(Black et al., 2022). At the school level, girls attending high schools where the majority of students are Black and/or Hispanic have only 67% of the athletic opportunities that their male peers have, compared to 82% at predominantly white schools (Staurowsky et al., 2020). Girls of color are more likely than their white peers to rely on school-based sports as their primary avenue for athletic participation, making school-level access failures especially consequential for this population (National Women's Law Center, 2022).

The Aspen Institute's Project Play (2023) data reveal a troubling trend reversal: in 2013, 45% of Black children played sports—actually a higher rate than white peers—yet by 2023 that figure had fallen to 35%, a decade-long decline that coincides precisely with the privatization of youth sport. For girls of color, the compounding weight of gender, racial, and economic barriers is particularly acute. When sport is perceived as a pathway to economic mobility, involuntary exclusion carries implications extending beyond individual opportunity to family and community expectations—yet culturally adapted approaches to addressing these structural barriers remain largely absent from both research and practice (Edison et al., 2021). Sabo and Veliz (2008) observed that girls of color across all income levels had lower sports participation rates than their male counterparts, with the gap widest in urban communities where school athletic programs are most underfunded and club-based alternatives are least accessible.

Naming these patterns matters. The disparities above are not byproducts of neutral market forces but the contemporary expression of structural racism. Historic racial segregation shaped the residential and economic geographies that still determine school-district wealth, and because athletic resources track local property values, girls in racially minoritized districts inherit diminished access to safe facilities, equipment, and programming as a direct legacy of that segregation (Noel-London et al., 2024). When youth sport was privatized, it did not create inequity anew - it reinforced an existing racial hierarchy of access behind the seemingly race-neutral logic of fees. For girls of color, this history compounds with gender: they are the group most dependent on school-based sport (National Women's Law Center, 2022) yet attend the schools least equipped to provide it (Staurowsky et al., 2020).

Mental Health and Long-Term Developmental Outcomes

The mental health consequences of sports exclusion are significant and well-documented, and social workers are often the first professionals to encounter them. Girls presenting in school-based or community mental health settings with depression, anxiety, social isolation, and poor body image may be experiencing—among other contributing factors—the downstream effects of systematic exclusion from athletic participation and the developmental benefits it provides. Regular team sports participation has been shown to reduce anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation among female adolescents (Jewett et al., 2022), while social connections formed through athletics create a sense of belonging that buffers against isolation. This protective function is particularly relevant given that female students are consistently less likely than male students to feel close to people at school, reflecting a gender gap in school connectedness that sports participation has been shown to reduce (CDC, 2024). In 2023, more than 1 in 4 adolescent girls seriously considered suicide—a trend that has worsened over the past decade—with sports participation emerging as a vital protective intervention against social isolation, academic pressure, and harmful social media comparisons (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023).

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The adolescent years represent a critical window for intervention. Athletic identity increases most significantly between ages 10 and 15 before stabilizing, meaning that the developmental period in which girls are most actively forming their sense of self is also the period during which disparities in sports access do their most consequential damage (Stambulova, 2017). When girls are excluded from sport during these years - whether by economic barriers, inadequate school programs, or enforcement failures - they lose not only the immediate benefits of participation but the identity, confidence, and social scaffolding that athletic involvement builds during a developmentally critical window. Sports participation also supports positive body image; female athletes are more likely than non-athletes to value bodily functionality over appearance, a finding associated with greater overall psychological well-being (Zaccagni & Gualdi-Russo, 2023).

The long-term benefits extend well beyond adolescence. Female athletes are 60% more likely to maintain physical activity into adulthood, with sustained health advantages including lower rates of heart disease, diabetes, and osteoporosis (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2022). Professionally, 94% of women in executive positions report having athletic backgrounds (Women's Sports Foundation, 2020), and women with athletic histories earn an average of 7% higher wages, even when controlling for educational attainment (Kay, 2009). These outcomes are not incidental - they reflect the sustained developmental benefits of early athletic participation, and they are disproportionately inaccessible to girls from low-income and minoritized communities.

A Social Work Imperative: Toward Equitable Sports Access

Addressing sports access disparities requires intervention at multiple system levels—a framework directly aligned with social work's theoretical traditions. Ecological systems theory illuminates how barriers at every level of a girl's environment—from family financial constraints at the microsystem level, to under-resourced schools at the exosystem level, to federal enforcement failures at the macrosystem level—combine to produce and sustain inequitable outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Empowerment theory complements this framework by centering girls as active agents rather than passive recipients of intervention, recognizing that structural change must be paired with the development of individual confidence, voice, and leadership capacity. Social work's person-in-environment perspective is particularly well-suited to this work: the profession's capacity to assess and intervene simultaneously across individual, family, organizational, and community systems addresses the multisystemic nature of sports access disparities in ways that single-discipline approaches cannot (Gill, 2008).

This distinctiveness is worth stating plainly. Sports access disparities sit at the intersection of several fields, each holding only a partial view: public health sees population-level risk, education sees academic outcomes, sport management sees program economics. None, however, is organized around moving between a struggling individual girl and the systems that shape her circumstances. Social work is. Its person-in-environment orientation and ethical mandate to challenge injustice (NASW, 2021) position social workers not as one more discipline at the table, but as the profession equipped to translate structural analysis into individual advocacy and back again.

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That same orientation makes social work well suited to anchor the collaboration these disparities demand. Complex social problems are rarely solved within a single field, and scholars have called on social work to move beyond participating in interprofessional teams toward operating at the highest level of them (Callahan & Higgins, 2023). Sports access inequity is precisely such a problem: no health system, school, or athletic organization can resolve it alone. Social work's history of brokering across families, schools, and health systems makes it a natural convener for this work. The profession has long had both the mandate and the tools - what is needed now is the will to act.

Three interconnected approaches warrant prioritization. First, schools need standardized assessment tools—such as a Sports Equity Assessment Tool (SEAT) - that proactively identify inequities in resource allocation rather than relying on complaint-driven enforcement systems (Cooky & Messner, 2018). Such tools would shift the compliance burden away from individual families and toward institutional accountability, enabling schools to identify and address disparities before they harden into structural norms. Second, community sports access hubs in underserved areas can address multiple barriers simultaneously through transportation assistance, equipment libraries, sliding-scale fees, and culturally responsive programming. Programs addressing multiple barriers concurrently—rather than targeting isolated obstacles—have consistently demonstrated stronger outcomes for marginalized populations (Sabo & Veliz, 2008). Third, peer athletic mentorship programs that connect high school athletes with middle school girls leverage peer influence during the precise developmental window—ages 10 to 15—when athletic identity is forming most rapidly, and intervention is most likely to shape participation trajectories (Stambulova, 2017). Research indicates that having athletic peers increases the likelihood of sports participation by 22%, making peer-based approaches a cost-effective and developmentally resonant strategy (Jewett et al., 2022).

School social workers are uniquely positioned to operationalize these approaches at the practice level. In schools, they can serve as advocates for equitable resource allocation, Title IX compliance monitoring, and early identification of students at risk of disengagement from sport following transition events such as team cuts or program eliminations. In communities, social workers can facilitate partnerships between schools, nonprofits, and health systems that expand access for underserved girls. At the policy level, the profession can advance legislative advocacy for fully funded school athletic programs and enforcement mechanisms with real accountability. The U.S. Surgeon General's recognition of youth mental health as a national crisis (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023) provides a timely and compelling opening to reframe sports access as both a public health and social justice priority. Social work answered this call-in clinical settings decades ago—it is time to answer it on the field as well.

Conclusion

The evidence is unambiguous: equitable access to sports is not a luxury but a necessity for adolescent girls' health, academic success, and long-term well-being. The girls who are left on the sidelines are not there by choice. They are there because of inadequate Title IX enforcement, economic gatekeeping through pay-to-play policies, underfunded school programs, and racial and economic inequities that compound one another at every system level. These are not inevitable conditions - they are the products of policy choices, institutional failures, and

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resource allocation decisions that can be changed. From the micro-level interventions of peer mentorship and school-based advocacy to the macro-level imperatives of policy reform and Title IX enforcement, social work has both the tools and the professional mandate to act. The NASW Code of Ethics calls us to challenge injustice wherever it appears—and when millions of girls are systematically denied access to the developmental benefits of sports, injustice is exactly what we are witnessing. It is time the profession treated it with the urgency it deserves.

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Systemic Resource Inequity and the Marginalization of Black Women in Soccer

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Despite the global expansion and professionalization of soccer, Black women remain significantly underrepresented at elite collegiate, professional, and leadership levels. This commentary explores the systemic barriers that sustain this disparity. Central to the analysis is the profound resource gap between Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Using Resource Dependency Theory as a framework, the article illustrates how chronic underfunding in HBCU athletic departments leads to substandard facilities, smaller staff sizes, and a critical lack of essential equipment. From a sport social work perspective, the article argues that playing under these conditions negatively impacts mental well-being, athlete confidence, and perceived safety. This work advocates for a multi-faceted approach to equity, calling for targeted investment and specialized research into the unique needs of Black female soccer players to ensure their health, performance, and long-term participation in the sport.

Key words: Black women in soccer; HBCU athletics; Resource inequity; Sports social work; Athlete well-being

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Introduction

The underrepresentation of Black women in soccer, particularly at elite collegiate, professional, and leadership levels, represents a fundamental equity challenge (Gonzalez, 2023). Research indicates a clear disparity in participation rates compared to White counterparts (Lapchick et al., 2023). Systemic barriers, most notably socioeconomic disparities, play a significant role, as the financial prerequisites for elite development, such as access to quality coaching, training facilities, and expensive travel teams, disproportionately affect marginalized communities. Furthermore, cultural factors and a lack of media visibility for Black female soccer players can limit positive role models and discourage participation among young Black girls (Baxter, 2023). The consequences of this lack of diversity extend beyond statistics, impacting team dynamics and failing to fully reflect the diverse communities that the sport aims to serve.

The purpose of this commentary is to acknowledge the systemic barriers that hinder the participation and success of Black women in soccer. Specifically, resource inequities among college settings (i.e., HBCUs and PWIs) exist which lead to athletes playing in inadequate footwear replaced at a substandard frequency leading to athletes' feelings of marginalization and not mattering, as well as perceptions of physical pain and risk of injury (Pennington et al., 2026ab; Prempeh & Pennington, 2026ab). In response to this article, a sports social worker would (1) recognize soccer players at economic disadvantage experience feelings of 'otherness' and marginalization; (2) recognize mental health and mental well-being are negatively affected by playing under the above conditions; and (3) advocate for equity in the soccer space.

Inequitable Working Conditions and Facilities

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have long served as vital centers for education, culture, and social mobility, often operating under conditions of systemic capital deprivation compared to Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (HBCU Money, 2025). This chronic underfunding of the institutions as a whole cascade directly into their athletic departments, creating profound and persistent resource disparities that hinder competitiveness, impede facility maintenance, and limit the capacity to support student-athletes fully (Elliott & Kellison, 2019). Academic literature consistently frames this resource gap using theoretical perspectives, such as Resource Dependency Theory, which posits that an organization's resources determine its overall power and sustainability, demonstrating that HBCUs are the most under-resourced members of the NCAA (Elliott & Kellison, 2019).

A key theme in the literature is the vast difference in annual athletics expenditures and revenue generation between HBCUs and PWIs. Studies comparing athletic budgets confirm that HBCU peer groups spend significantly less than their PWI counterparts across all major categories, including operating expenses, head coach salaries, recruiting, and athletic aid (Elliott & Kellison, 2019). For example, annual athletics expenditures for MEAC and SWAC institutions often average between $11 million and $12 million, figures that are dwarfed by the budgets of Power Five conference schools, which can exceed $150 million (HBCU Money, 2025).

The under-resourced nature of HBCU athletics manifests tangibly in substandard facilities and aging infrastructure. Scholars and coaches have noted that the difference in facilities (e.g., fields, weight rooms, training centers) is a visible consequence of systematic underfunding, with HBCU teams often unable to provide the same resources that are "second

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nature" at well-funded PWIs (Elliott, Kellison, & Cianfrone, 2019). This lack of funding for long-term initiatives, such as facility renovations and additions, can negatively affect recruitment and the overall student-athlete experience (Southern Regional Education Board, 2023).

Furthermore, administrators and coaches at HBCUs often operate with smaller staff sizes and are forced to take on more responsibilities (e.g., coaching/teaching alongside administrative duties) and are paid significantly less than their PWI peers (Elliott & Kellison, 2019). The lack of dedicated marketing or external relations staff is also cited as a barrier to maximizing revenue generation and engaging potential sponsors (Elliott, Kellison, & Cianfrone, 2019).

Factors in Decreased Representation on HBCU Rosters

There are various factors contributing to limited representation of Black women in soccer at all levels of competition. However, a frequently discussed contributor is the “pay-to-play” system. Not just the existence of a barrier that keeps Black women from being able to play club soccer due to financial hardships, but a pathway that has long-since served as a major pool of visibility, development, and opportunity. Within women’s soccer, there are several club leagues in which many of today’s collegiate and professional athletes participated growing up. These leagues most notably include Elite Clubs National League and the Girls’ Academy. To play in these leagues, parents pay several thousand dollars annually over years in hopes of increasing the likelihood of their daughters playing collegiately.

Recruitment: Visibility, Talent evaluation, and Development

High school soccer holds little to any value to current college recruiters and coaches. Coaches rarely attend high school soccer games, instead turning attention to players competing in club soccer, which receives both national and international visibility for talent to be evaluated (Select Generation, 2025). This means that many of the Black women who play soccer only for their high school team due to financial reasons are rarely being evaluated by college scouts. As a result, the window of both exposure and opportunity is diminished for a large percentage of Black women. College recruiting is about evaluating the most talented prospects. Women playing club soccer play the sport year-round. Meaning they are not only being evaluated year-round, but are continuously improving, as opposed to women playing exclusively high school soccer within a short, narrow season (Select Generation, 2025). Women who can only afford to play high school soccer will consistently be at a disadvantage compared to women in systems that include the best coaches and developmental staff.

International Recruiting

Women of Color are at a disadvantage when it comes to opportunity to play college soccer, representing just 9% of all collegiate women’s soccer rosters (NCAA, 2026). Over the last few years, the sport has seen a growing trend in soccer programs recruiting in Asia, Europe, Central America, and Canada, as international players account for 45.5% of women’s college soccer rosters. Of those international players, 19.5% play in the National Athletic Intercollegiate Association (NAIA), the league in which all HBCU’s play (RosterWise, n.d.). Therefore, Black women are being recruited against an increased pool of international candidates who have surpassed overall representation within the sport. With the trend of international recruitment

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growing and socioeconomic and financial difficulties faced by young Black women, disproportionate representation will continue to grow.

Competitive and Policy-Related Disadvantages

Resource limitations directly impact HBCU athletic competitiveness and create unique policy challenges: (a) "Guarantee Games" and Competitive Disparity: HBCU football programs often participate in "guarantee games" against higher-resourced PWIs to generate much-needed revenue, receiving a payment for an almost guaranteed, demoralizing loss (Journey Magazine, 2019). While this provides financial intake, research suggests the contracts may not be as lucrative as they should be, and the talent disparity remains a key issue, primarily driven by the ability of PWIs to offer better resources and exposure to recruits (Journey Magazine, 2019; Elliott & Kellison, 2019); (b) NCAA Policies: NCAA policies, such as the Academic Performance Program (APP) and its metrics (Academic Progress Rate and Graduation Success Rate), have been criticized for unfairly penalizing under-resourced HBCUs (SLR, 2022). By holding institutions to standards without accounting for the inherent disparities in institutional resources available to support student success, the policy can inadvertently perpetuate systemic inequalities and threaten postseason eligibility, further limiting revenue opportunities (SLR, 2022); and (c) Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL): Recent policy changes surrounding NIL and scholar-athlete compensation pose a new challenge for HBCUs, which must find ways to compete for top talent in a landscape where PWIs can leverage their massive resources and alumni networks to establish lucrative deals (Southern Regional Education Board, 2023).

Policy Recommendations

From a sport social work perspective, addressing the inequities experienced by Black female soccer players requires more than providing individual counseling or helping athletes adapt to challenging environments. These observations and interactions with athlete distress should serve as catalysts for policy reform. When multiple athletes report concerns regarding inadequate equipment, unsafe playing conditions, limited access to medical care, or feelings of marginalization, these experiences should not be conceptualized solely as individual psychosocial concerns. Instead, recurring themes represent important indicators of structural inequities that merit organizational intervention. This systems-oriented approach reflects the social work profession's commitment to social justice and advocacy by addressing environmental conditions that contribute to individual well-being (Newman et al., 2024).

Accordingly, collegiate athletic departments (or the NCAA as a whole) should move beyond broad commitments to equity and establish measurable standards for athlete health, safety, and resource allocation. Rather than expecting historically under-resourced institutions to replicate the budgets of highly resourced Power Four institutions, governing bodies should establish minimum standards of care that ensure every student-athlete has equitable access to essential resources. These standards should include appropriate athletic training coverage, strength and conditioning services, mental health resources, injury-prevention programming, safe playing and training facilities, and access to sport-specific equipment. Recent NCAA Mental Health Best Practices emphasize that student-athlete well-being is influenced by several levels of the athletic environment and recommend institution-wide plans that address risk and protective

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factors while ensuring access to licensed mental health professionals (National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2026).

In addition to establishing minimum standards, institutions should implement annual resource equity audits that evaluate the lived experiences of student-athletes rather than relying solely on overall athletic expenditures. Audits should examine athletic trainer-to-athlete ratios, equipment and footwear replacement practices, access to rehabilitation services, facility quality, strength and conditioning resources, mental health availability, travel conditions, and staffing patterns across programs. When disparities are identified, athletic departments should be required to develop measurable corrective action plans with timelines for implementation. Such accountability mechanisms acknowledge that organizational conditions (not simply athlete resilience) shape health, performance, and psychological well-being (Coombs & Bagley, 2025).

Because this commentary highlights footwear as a tangible demonstration of structural inequity, athletic departments should also adopt written policies governing equipment evaluation and replacement. Decisions regarding footwear should be based on fit, wear patterns, injury history, and medical need rather than predetermined budget cycles. Student athletes should have confidential mechanisms to report equipment-related concerns without fear of negative consequences related to playing time or team status. Repeated reports of equipment deficiencies should trigger administrative review and resource allocation rather than relying on athletes to continue competing under potentially unsafe conditions (Ojemaye et al., 2024).

Sport social workers are uniquely positioned to bridge individual clinical practice with macro-level advocacy. Beyond providing counseling services, sport social workers can identify recurring psychosocial concerns, conduct organizational needs assessments, collect anonymous athlete feedback, participate in athletic department health and safety committees, educate coaches and administrators regarding culturally responsive care, and advocate for equitable institutional policies. Rather than viewing athlete distress solely through an individual lens, sport social workers are ethically obligated to examine how organizational policies, resource allocation, and institutional culture contribute to psychological well-being. This approach aligns with the NASW Code of Ethics, which identifies social justice and advocacy for vulnerable populations as central professional responsibilities, and reflects current NCAA guidance emphasizing that healthy athletic environments require coordinated institutional commitment rather than isolated clinical intervention (Beasley et al., 2022).

Ultimately, the responsibility for addressing inequity should not rest on Black female athletes' ability to demonstrate resilience in under-resourced environments. Resilience is undoubtedly a strength, but it should never become a substitute for equitable resources. Sustainable change requires institutions, governing bodies, and policymakers to create systems that ensure all athletes have access to the resources necessary to participate safely, perform optimally, and thrive throughout their athletic careers (Ojemaye et al., 2024).

Conclusion

The resource challenges faced by HBCU athletic departments are inseparable from the historical and systemic underfunding of the institutions themselves. While these programs hold immense cultural pride and serve as vital engagement tools for alumni and the community, their financial sustainability is constantly threatened by inadequate operational budgets, aging facilities, and policies that fail to account for the deep-seated financial inequalities in American higher education (HBCU Money, 2025). The underrepresentation of Black female athletes

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underscores the systemic challenges related to access, resources, and culturally appropriate support (Pennington et al., 2025a, b). Addressing the systemic barriers that limit the participation of Black women requires a multi-faceted approach, encompassing initiatives to increase access to quality training, promote equitable talent evaluation, and foster inclusive and supportive environments. Research specifically examining the footwear needs and experiences of Black female soccer players is notably scarce, highlighting an important area for extension to an often unheard and unseen, yet vital, athlete population (Prempeh & Pennington, 2025a, b).

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The Relationships Between Activism, Community Connectedness, Self-Efficacy, Hope, Resilience, and Depressive Symptoms in Stonewall Sports

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Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other gender and sexual minority (LGBTQ+) individuals feel unwelcome in sport settings yet are still interested in participating in sports. LGBTQ+ focused community sport leagues were formed to promote inclusion and celebrate LGBTQ+ identities. Simultaneously, LGBTQ+ focused community sport leagues provide platforms for activism, which may be associated with improved mental health. Structural equation modeling was performed with survey data from 220 LGBTQ+ adults in Stonewall Sports to examine the relationships between activism, depressive symptoms, and several possible mediators. Descriptive statistics showed participants had a high prevalence of depressive symptoms. The main analysis revealed low-risk activism was associated with more depressive symptoms and high-risk activism was indirectly associated with more depressive symptoms. Also, hope and community connectedness were associated with fewer depressive symptoms. Notably, participating in a remix tournament (i.e., being randomly assigned into new teams) was associated with greater community connectedness. Mental health interventions in Stonewall Sports should emphasize community connectedness and hope.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ sport; community sport; activism; depressive symptoms

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Rethinking Activism: Mental Health in LGBTQ+ Focused Community Sport

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+) individuals reclaim sport and leisure activities by creating their own safe and inclusive spaces to engage in activities typically situated within oppressive and heteronormative power structures (McCartan & Nash, 2023). LGBTQ+ people have reported being bullied, excluded, and otherwise discriminated against within sport (Storr et al., 2022). Denison et al. (2021) even found homonegative language and norms are highly prevalent in youth sport. Without the development of safe and inclusive spaces, many LGBTQ+ people may feel excluded from participating in sport.

LGBTQ+ focused community sport leagues were formed to reclaim sport and provide a safe space for LGBTQ+ people to engage in sport (Jones & McCarthy, 2010; Mock et al., 2022). For example, Stonewall Sports is an LGBTQ+ focused community sport league with over 20 chapters throughout the United States and offers a variety of sports (e.g., kickball, dodgeball) meant to provide a community sport space for LGBTQ+ adults. However, to date, only little research has examined participation in LGBTQ+ focused community sport. Nevertheless, early evidence suggests participation may promote community connectedness, encourage activism, and improve mental health (Scheadler, 2025). Other research similarly indicates participation in LGBTQ+ groups is associated with lower rates of depression (Kulick et al., 2017), which is particularly important given LGBTQ+ adults have high risks for depression and suicide (Ramchand et al., 2022; Ross et al., 2018).

Scholars also have found community connectedness and activism are linked (Talò et al., 2014), which is particularly important given community connectedness has been regarded as a protective factor that improves the mental health of LGBTQ+ people (Lee et al., 2021; Rabasco & Andover, 2021). Relatedly, activism can be empowering and can promote community connectedness and other protective factors for LGBTQ+ people (Gonzalez et al., 2022; Hagen et al., 2018; Riggle et al., 2018; Scheadler et al., 2023) and athletes (Scheadler, 2021; Smith et al., 2016). However, no research has explored if and how activism is a protective factor among members of LGBTQ+ focused community sport leagues. Indeed, research is limited to suggesting LGBTQ+ focused community sport leagues can be environments that foster activism. In addition, little attention has been given to the possibility of activism as a protective factor for LGBTQ+ people. As such, the purpose of the present study was to examine the role of activism and several mediators (e.g., community connectedness) in influencing depressive symptoms among LGBTQ+ adults involved in LGBTQ+ focused community sport.

Athlete Activism & Well-Being

LGBTQ+ focused community sport settings can be leveraged for activism by increasing visibility of LGBTQ+ people, dismantling homonegative attitudes, joining protests, organizing rallies and workshops, and fundraising for social justice causes (Scheadler, 2025; Gaston & Dixon, 2020; Jones & McCarthy, 2010). Research among high school, college, and professional athletes and coaches reveals further implications of activism in sport contexts. For example, Tran

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(2024) insisted engagement in athlete activism may promote meaning in life, allowing athletes to leverage their interests to fulfill a purpose. Relatedly, Smith et al. (2016) reported some athletes believed adopting an activist identity can facilitate a smoother transition into retirement from sport, suggesting activism may give some athletes a sense of purpose. Other athlete activists have been with support from meaningful others and have strengthened transferable life skills such as confidence and agency (Kluch et al., 2025).

Further, college coaches who engage in activism believe that their activism facilitates the development of a safe and inclusive culture, which may promote athlete mental health and well-being (Scheadler et al., 2025). Also, Scheadler (2021) argued activism has the potential to bolster confidence, hope, resilience, and other important psychological skills among athletes by giving them an opportunity to leverage transferable life skills into action. Importantly, though, activism can lead to stress, isolation, and exhaustion, largely due to backlash, stigma, and concerns around reputational damage (Kluch, 2023; Kluch et al., 2024; O'Neill et al., 2025). Nevertheless, some athletes with more experience in activism have adopted emotional regulation skills to withstand the effects of stress and pushback (Smith et al., 2016).

LGBTQ+ Activism & Mental Health

Additionally, research beyond sport contexts has investigated the role of activism on the mental health of LGBTQ+ people. For instance, Scheadler et al. (2023) explained activism can introduce LGBTQ+ people to other LGBTQ+ people who offer safe and affirming spaces, allowing them to explore their gender and sexual identities and accept themselves while simultaneously developing greater responsibility, hope, and resilience. Evidence suggests activism strengthens community connectedness, self-efficacy, hope for the future, and resilience (Hagen et al., 2018; Montagno et al., 2021; Rabkin et al., 2018; Riggle et al., 2018; Scheadler et al., 2023), which may help explain how activism might improve mental health outcomes.

In fact, community connectedness (Lee et al., 2021; Rabasco & Andover, 2021), self-efficacy (Pu et al., 2017), hope (Corrigan & Schutte, 2023), and resilience (Wang et al., 2022) have each been associated with lower depressive symptoms. Likewise, activism has been associated with improved well-being (Frost et al., 2019; Roberts & Christens, 2021). In fact, Chan and Mak (2021) recently developed one measure of collective action for LGBTQ+ rights and found collective action has some buffering effects against the effects of discrimination on depressive symptoms on sexual minority men and women in Hong Kong. However, more research is needed to develop a fuller understanding of the role of activism on mental health among various groups of LGBTQ+ people. That is, research must continue to investigate and identify unique mediators that help explain how activism can influence mental health. Such investigations can provide a stronger understanding of the possible impacts of activism and can be used to justify and design interventions that encourage activism within LGBTQ+ focused community sport settings and other related settings.

Potential Mediators Between Activism and Mental Health

Protective factors are characteristics and conditions associated with improved health and well-being and may include maintaining a healthy diet, getting adequate sleep, and receiving

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high social support (Cairns et al., 2014; Colman et al., 2014). As mentioned previously, scholars have suggested activism can increase many protective factors associated with improved mental health among LGBTQ+ people in and out of sport, including community connectedness, self-efficacy, hope, and resilience. Briefly overviewing each of these potential mediators may help elucidate how activism might be related to mental health.

First, community connectedness refers to a sense of belonging to and affiliation and solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community (Frost & Meyers, 2012), and, like activism, has been associated with coping (Jackson, 2017). Additionally, Lee et al. (2021) found community connectedness attenuates the effects of discrimination on depressive symptoms. Though, some scholars have shared evidence of a positive relationship between community connectedness and depressive symptoms among LGBTQ+ adults during Trump's presidency (Pulice-Fallow et al., 2023). Greater connectedness to the LGBTQ+ community, at least in certain circumstances (such as when LGBTQ+ rights are under attack), may increase rumination, worsening depressive symptoms (Pulice-Farrow et al., 2023). As such, more research is needed to examine the relationship between community connectedness and depressive symptoms in different contexts.

Self-efficacy, or the confidence and beliefs one has about one's own capabilities to achieve success (Bandura, 1977), also may help explain how activism might be a protective factor for LGBTQ+ adults. Like activism, self-efficacy emphasizes problem-focused actions to address stress and accomplish goals (Ouch & Moradi, 2019). Additionally, some research suggests activism boosts self-efficacy (Hagen et al., 2018; Rabkin et al., 2018) and that self-efficacy is associated with fewer depressive symptoms (Pan et al., 2022). As such, there is a possibility that engaging in activism may decrease depressive symptoms by increasing self-efficacy among LGBTQ+ adults.

Hope is another phenomenon that may have protective features for LGBTQ+ people. Specifically, hope, which is entrenched in optimism and confidence, is related to one's belief that change is possible for achieving success in their future (Herth, 1992) and predicts lower levels of depressive symptoms and suicidal risk (Corrigan & Schutte, 2023). Also, like self-efficacy and activism, hope is related to problem-focused coping (Ong et al., 2017). Scholars also have found qualitative evidence that activism, which is considered a form of problem-focused coping, strengthens hope (Hagen et al., 2018; Rabkin et al., 2018). Thus, hope may be another factor to help explain how activism may decrease depressive symptoms among LGBTQ+ adults.

Resilience is related to, but distinct from, self-efficacy and hope, and acts as another protective factor for LGBTQ+ people. Resilience is defined as one's ability to adapt to setbacks and has been associated with improved mental health (Luthar et al., 2000). Research has shown resilience is negatively associated with depressive symptoms among LGBTQ+ people (Wang et al., 2022). Scholars have found activism can boost resilience among LGBTQ+ people (Scheadler et al., 2023; Hagen et al., 2018; Rabkin et al., 2018). However, these studies are mostly exploratory and limited to individuals who have displayed high levels of activism. More research is needed with more unique samples to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between activism, resilience, and mental health among LGBTQ+ people.

Further, it is important to acknowledge that LGBTQ+ focused community sport leagues provide spaces that can foster community connectedness, self-efficacy, hope, and resilience (Scheadler, 2025). Participation in gay rugby and football clubs in the UK provided gay men with the opportunity to socialize with other gay men in ways that are not focused on sex (Gaston & Dixon, 2020; Jones & McCarthy, 2010). van Ingen (2004) also found running in an LGBTQ+

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running club in Toronto provided LGBTQ+ people with an alternative to socialization at gay bars. LGBTQ+ focused community sport also has been shown to boost self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and overall mental health (Scheadler, 2025). Additionally, some LGBTQ+ focused community sport leagues have instituted remix tournaments, which are sport events where players are randomly assigned into new teams to boost community connectedness by encouraging socialization with players from other teams. However, community connectedness, self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and remix tournaments have not yet been quantitatively examined as protective factors within LGBTQ+ focused community sport settings. In fact, to date, no study has ever examined the influence of participation in a remix tournament.

Theoretical Framework

Integrating minority stress theory and empowerment theory can help explain how activism may be related to depressive symptoms among LGBTQ+ adults in LGBTQ+ focused community sport. First, minority stress theory is helpful toward understanding risk and protective factors associated with mental health among LGBTQ+ people (Meyer, 2003). Individual and community coping and social support resources are critical protective factors within minority stress theory, buffering the effects of minority stress on mental health. Community connectedness, for example, provides LGBTQ+ people with a sense of belonging and affiliation to a group and can protect against the effects of discrimination on depressive symptoms (Lee et al., 2021). Self-efficacy (Pachankis et al., 2023), hope (Moe et al., 2023), and resilience (Storholm et al., 2019), also have been identified as protective factors within minority stress theory, improving the coping skills of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Activism is another possible protective factor rarely considered within the context of minority stress theory. Chan and Mak (2021) recently showed collective action can protect against the effects of discrimination on depressive symptoms. Others also have highlighted how activism can act as a form of coping for LGBTQ+ people (Gonzalez et al., 2022; Scheadler et al., 2023). However, minority stress theory is poorly situated to explain how activism and other protective factors influence mental health. Indeed, minority stress theory takes a deficit-based approach, emphasizing the harmful effects of stress and discrimination over the strengths of individuals and communities (Meyer, 2014). Combining minority stress theory with empowerment theory allows for the adoption of a strengths-based approach capable of explaining the protective features of activism.

Empowerment theory helps to explain how activism may influence the mental health of LGBTQ+ people. Indeed, empowerment theory posits that increased engagement in the community can strengthen perceived power and control to improve individual outcomes (Zimmerman, 2000). According to empowerment theory, connecting people to each other, resources, and opportunities to engage in sociopolitical actions can strengthen community connectedness and self-efficacy (Zimmerman, 2000). In addition, research in empowerment theory has argued activism may lower depressive symptoms by increasing community connectedness and hope (Lardier et al., 2019; Poteat et al., 2020). Related research has further insisted activism promotes resilience (Scheadler et al., 2023). As such, activism may improve mental health by boosting community connectedness, self-efficacy, hope, and resilience. This could potentially help explain how activism can be considered a source of community support

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and coping within minority stress theory. Research is needed to examine these possible relationships.

The Current Study

Previous research suggests participation in LGBTQ+ focused community sport can provide a platform of activism, promote community connectedness, and improve mental health (Scheadler, 2025). However, questions remain on how activism may fit within minority stress theory and influence mental health, and only limited empirical research has examined the relationships between these variables. Further, very little research exists within LGBTQ+ focused community sport settings even though they offer opportunities to access parts of the LGBTQ+ adult population. Indeed, research on activism and mental health of LGBTQ+ focused community sport members is warranted to determine the needs of the community and to develop appropriate strengths-based interventions to address these needs. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationships between activism, community connectedness, self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and depressive symptoms among LGBTQ+ adults in Stonewall Sports, one US-based LGBTQ+ focused community sport league. Finally, research has suggested activism can strengthen community connectedness, self-efficacy, hope, and resilience (Gonzalez et al., 2022; Riggle et al., 2018; Scheadler et al., 2023), which all have been associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms (Corrigan & Schutte, 2023; Lee et al., 2021; Pu et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2022). Therefore, the present study posed the following hypothesis:

> H_1: The relationship between activism and depressive symptoms will be mediated by community connectedness, self-efficacy, hope, and resilience.

Method

Context and Procedures

Following approval from an Institutional Review Board, a cross-sectional survey was administered online via Qualtrics with members of Stonewall Sports from December 2023 to May 2024. Stonewall Sports is an LGBTQ+ focused community sport league with several chapters throughout the US. Each chapter of Stonewall Sports offers a combination of sports and activities such as bocce, dodgeball, volleyball, kickball, and pickleball. In addition to offering sport leagues, some Stonewall Sports chapters provide opportunities for players to compete in remix tournaments where they are randomly placed onto a team to meet new people.

LGBTQ+ individuals from two Stonewall Sports chapters in the Midwest and one chapter in the Mid-Atlantic received an e-mail invitation to participate in the present study after registering for at least one sport with their local league. Participants also were recruited via social media posts and email blasts to listservs for the three chapters in Stonewall Sports. Recruitment flyers containing information about the study and a QR code to the survey were also shared in-person to prospective participants at Stonewall Sports events for one Midwest chapter. Notably, some players from other chapters joined the study after viewing the advertisements on social media that were posted by one of the partner chapters. Interested individuals were able to follow

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a link or scan the QR code to access the online survey. Participants were provided an opportunity to enter into a raffle to win one of 20 e-gift cards valued at $50 each.

Sample Demographics

There were 220 participants. Participants were 23-59 years old (M = 33.18, SD = 6.19) and have been playing in Stonewall Sports for 1-10 years (M = 2.78, SD = 1.91). Participants played a variety of sports in Stonewall Sports, including kickball (62.7%), dodgeball (40.7%), bocce (9.5%), pickleball (9.1%), bowling (7.7%), indoor volleyball (8.2%), billiards (5.0%), cornhole (4.5%), basketball (2.7%), sand volleyball (2.3%), and yoga (2.3%). Most players did not compete in a local remix tournament (67.0%). Most participants were White (66.8%), followed by Hispanic (6.8%), Black/African American (6.4%), Asian/Asian American (3.6%), and/or Middle Eastern (2.7%). Participants identified mostly as cisgender (87.7%), followed by men (49.3%), women (25.5%), non-binary (7.2%), genderqueer (3.2%), transgender (2.7%), trans men (1.8%), genderfluid (1.8%), agender (1.4%), gender non-conforming (1.4%), trans women (.9%), and/or two-spirit (.5%). Additionally, most participants identified as gay (61.8%), queer (22.7%), lesbian (18.6%), bisexual (12.7%), pansexual (5.4%), demisexual (4.1%), asexual (2.7%), and/or questioning/unsure (2.3%), among others. Finally, most participants had at least a bachelor's degree (76.4%).

Measures

Latent Variables

The 26-item Black Community Activism Orientation Scale (BCAOS; Hope et al., 2019) was adapted to measure the activism orientations for LGBTQ+ rights. Specifically, "Black" was replaced with "LGBTQ+." The measure consisted of an 11-item subscale for low-risk activism (e.g., "Wear a t-shirt or button with a political message about the LGBTQ+ community"), a seven-item subscale for high-risk activism (e.g., "Engage in any political activity specific to the LGBTQ+ community in which you fear for your personal safety"), and an eight-item subscale for formal political activism (e.g., "Campaign by phone for a political candidate who supports LGBTQ+ issues"). Participants rated the likelihood that they would engage in a variety of actions on a Likert scale from 1 (*extremely unlikely*) to 5 (*extremely likely*) where higher scores represented greater levels of activism orientations. In the present study, the low-risk (α = .87), high-risk (α = .93), and formal political (α = .88) subscales each had strong internal reliability.

Frost and Meyer's (2012) Connectedness to the LGBT Community Scale (CLCS), which included eight items, was used to measure the degree to which LGBTQ+ adults feel connected to the LGBTQ+ community. For this study, the CLCS was adapted so each item would broadly represent connectedness to the LGBTQ+ community (e.g., "You feel you are a part of the LGBTQ+ community"). Participants reported the degree to which they agree to each item from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*). All items were reverse coded so higher scores represented greater community connectedness. The CLCS has demonstrated strong internal and test-retest reliability as well as convergent, discriminant, and factorial validity (Frost & Meyer, 2012). In the present study, the CLCS demonstrated strong internal reliability (α = .87).

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The eight-item New General Self-Efficacy Scale (NGSES; Chen et al., 2001) was used to measure self-efficacy. Respondents indicated the degree to which they agreed with each item (e.g., "I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself") on a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores reflected greater levels of self-efficacy. The NGSES has demonstrated strong internal and test-retest reliability as well as construct, discriminant, factorial, and predictive validity (Chen et al., 2001). The NGSES had strong internal reliability in the present study (α = .92).

The Herth Hope Index (HHI; Herth, 1992) was used to measure hope. The HHI included 12 items (e.g., "I believe that each day has potential") on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 4 = *strongly agree*). After reverse coding appropriate items, higher scores represented greater levels of hope. Herth (1992) found strong support for the internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and construct and discriminant validity of the HHI. In the present study, the HHI had strong internal reliability (α = .88).

Resilience was measured with the 10-item short form of the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC; Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007). The items (e.g., "I am able to adapt when changes occur") were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (*not true at all*) to 4 (*true nearly all the time*) where higher scores represented greater levels of resilience. The short form has demonstrated strong test-retest reliability and convergent and discriminant validity (Windle et al., 2011). The CD-RISC had strong internal reliability in the present study (α = .88).

Finally, the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) was used to measure depressive symptoms (Kroenke et al., 2001). Respondents were asked "Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?" in nine different symptoms (e.g., "Little interest or pleasure in doing things") using a Likert scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*nearly every day*), meaning higher scores represented worse depressive symptomology. Kroenke et al. (2001) reported the PHQ-9 had strong internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and criterion and construct validity. The PHQ-9 had strong internal reliability in the present study (α = .87).

Control Variables

Age, gender, and race were used to predict depressive symptoms. Gender and race were dummy coded so that identifying as cisgender and white were equal to 1. Participants also were asked "In the past 12 months, did you participate in a remix tournament in your local Stonewall Sports chapter?" They could either answer with yes, no, unsure, or prefer not to respond. Responses to this item were dummy coded so that participating in a local remix tournament was equal to one and not participating in a local remix tournament was equal to zero. Other responses were recorded as missing. Because the purpose of hosting remix tournaments is to foster community connectedness, remix participation was used to predict community connectedness.

Data Analysis

SPSS version 28.0.1 was used to report descriptive statistics, including prevalence rates of depressive symptoms. The hypotheses were tested with general SEM and performed using Mplus version 8.9, which accounts for missing values for endogenous variables (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). The means and variance-adjusted weighted least squares (WLSMV) estimator was used. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to evaluate the measurement

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model, which included the indicators for every latent factor. Afterwards, the identification of the structural model, which included paths between latent factors as well as the addition of control variables, was confirmed and the model fit was evaluated (Bollen, 1989).

Model fit was evaluated based on several pre-specified criteria. In addition to χ^2, the comparative fit index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) values were each reported. CFI and TLI values equal to or greater than .95 were considered indicators of good fit (Bowen & Guo, 2012). The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), with 90% confidence intervals, was also reported, where a point estimate less than or equal to .06 was considered an indicator of excellent fit (Bollen, 1989).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive analyses revealed only few participants did not experience any depressive symptoms in the past two weeks (n = 19, 8.6%). Meanwhile, 30.0% of participants (n = 66) experienced minimal depression (i.e., total scores of 1-4); 34.5% (n = 76) experienced mild depression (i.e., total scores of 5-9); 15.9% (n = 35) experienced moderate depression (i.e., total scores of 10-14); 5.9% (n = 13) experienced moderately severe depression (i.e., total scores of 15-19); and 2.7% (n = 6) experienced severe depression. Five participants had missing data on the outcome variable.

Measurement Model

The proposed measurement model was initially a poor fit to the data: $\chi^2(2527) = 3358.174$ ($p < .001$), RMSEA = .039 [.035, .042], CFI = .944, and TLI = .942. Model fit indices suggested adding correlations between indicators on the BCAOS to improve model fit. Therefore, six intercorrelations were added to the measurement model one at a time until acceptable fit was achieved, $\chi^2(2521) = 3233.556$ ($p < .001$), RMSEA = .036 [.032, .039], CFI = .952, and TLI = .950. All intercorrelations that were added were based on theory, empirical research, and model fit indices provided by Mplus (Bowen & Guo, 2012). For example, a correlation was added between the first two items on the CD-RISC. Both items were directly related to adapting, a core component of measuring resilience (Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007).

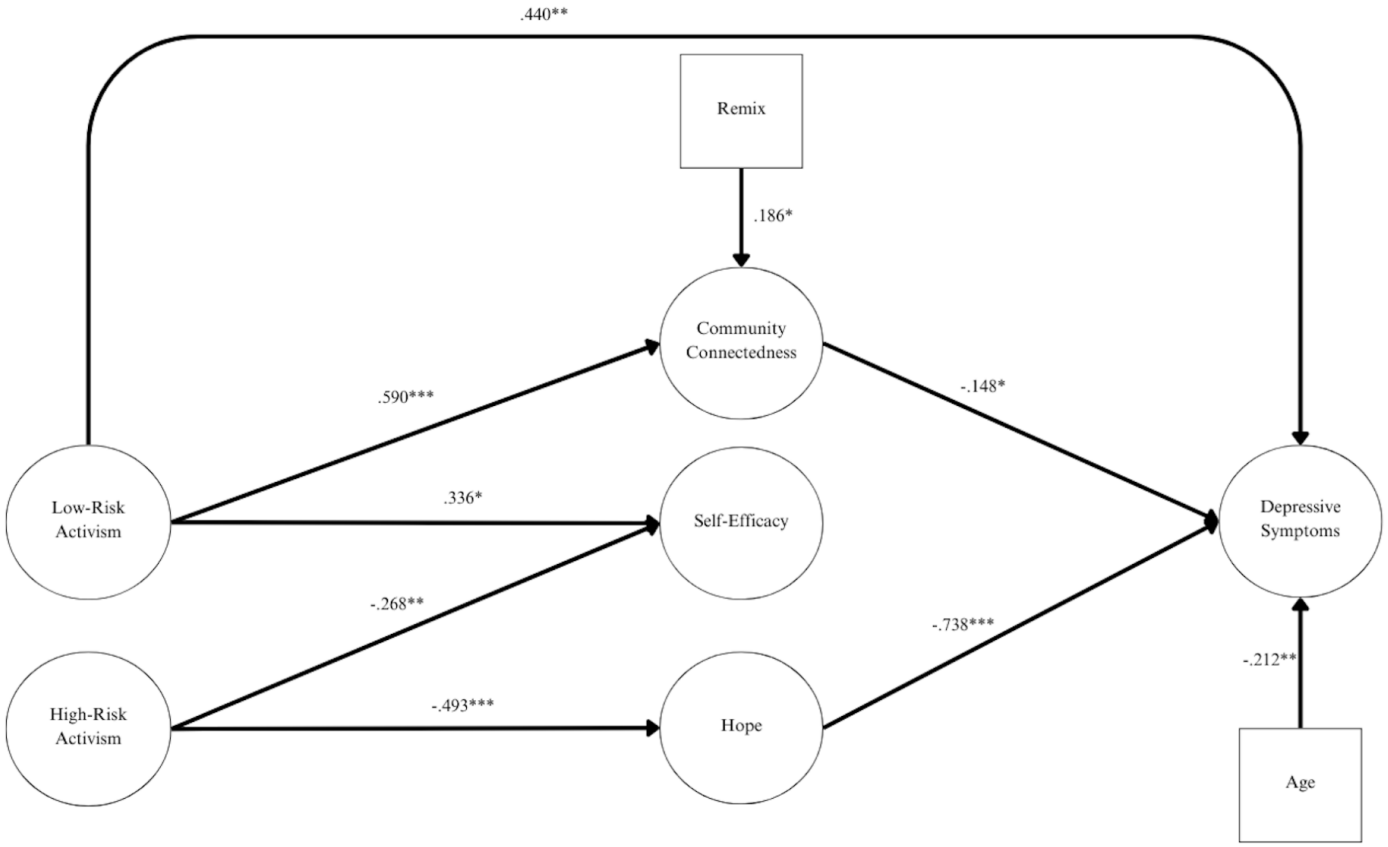
Structural Model

The structural model, which included four control variables (age, identifying as cisgender, identifying as White, and attending a remix tournament), had great fit: $\chi^2(2815) = 3522.077$ ($p < .001$), RMSEA = .034 [.030, .037], CFI = .952, and TLI = .950. The model explained 36.3% of the variance in depressive symptoms, 63.1% of the variance in community connectedness, 91.0% of the variance in self-efficacy, 84.6% of the variance in hope, and 95.1% of the variance in resilience. The significant standardized path coefficients are presented in Figure 1. Nonsignificant paths were not depicted to improve the readability of the figure. Both significant and nonsignificant paths are described below.

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Figure 1

Significant Path Coefficients of Direct and Indirect Pathways Between Sociopolitical Engagement and Depressive Symptoms



Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .005$, ***$p < .001$.

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Low-risk activism had a significant positive effect on depressive symptoms, $\beta = .440$ ($p = .003$). Community connectedness ($\beta = -.148$, $p = .047$) and hope ($\beta = -.738$, $p < .001$) had significant negative effects on depressive symptoms. Age also had a significant negative effect on depressive symptoms, $\beta = -.212$ ($p = .004$). High-risk activism ($\beta = -.159$, $p = .126$), formal political engagement ($\beta = -.102$, $p = .502$), self-efficacy ($\beta = .197$, $p = .083$), and resilience ($\beta = -.176$, $p = .171$) each had nonsignificant effects on depressive symptoms. Identifying as cisgender ($\beta = -.092$, $p = .079$) and identifying as White ($\beta = .034$, $p = .661$) were not significant predictors of depressive symptoms. Thus, greater low-risk activism was associated with more depressive symptoms while greater community connectedness and hope, as well as being older, were associated with less depressive symptoms. Also, participating in a remix tournament was a significant predictor of community connectedness ($\beta = .186$, $p = .012$).

Relationships between the subscales of the BCAOS and the mediating factors were also examined. Low-risk activism had a significant effect on community connectedness ($\beta = .590$, $p < .001$) and self-efficacy ($\beta = .336$, $p = .043$) but not on hope ($\beta = .160$, $p = .299$) or resilience ($\beta = .197$, $p = .230$). High-risk activism was a significant predictor of self-efficacy ($\beta = -.268$, $p = .004$) and hope ($\beta = -.493$, $p < .001$) but not of community connectedness ($\beta = .027$, $p = .778$) or resilience ($\beta = -.199$, $p = .054$). Formal political engagement was not a significant predictor of community connectedness ($\beta = -.035$, $p = .814$), self-efficacy ($\beta = .049$, $p = .764$), hope ($\beta = .269$, $p = .080$), or resilience ($\beta = .097$, $p = .591$).

The indirect effects of paths that demonstrated significance were then examined. Although low-risk activism had a significant effect on both community connectedness and depressive symptoms, the indirect effect of low-risk activism on depressive symptoms through community connectedness was not statistically significant ($\beta = -.088$, $p = .074$). Finally, there was a significant indirect effect of high-risk activism on depressive symptoms through hope ($\beta = .364$, $p < .001$). No other indirect effects were significant.

Discussion

This study examined the role of athlete activism on psychological skills and mental health among LGBTQ+ adults in sport. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between activism, community connectedness, self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and depressive symptoms among LGBTQ+ adults in Stonewall Sports. Generally, descriptive results demonstrate there is a large need for mental health support within Stonewall Sports. In fact, only 8.6% experienced no depressive symptoms in the past two weeks while 24.5% of participants experienced moderate to severe symptoms of depression in the past two weeks. To compare, 32.2% of all LGBTQ+ people have major depressive disorder at some point during their lives (Cai et al., 2024). Given this study was cross-sectional and did not look at lifetime prevalence for depressive symptoms, there is a possibility that even more participants have experienced major depressive disorder at some point during their lives.

The present study also examined the direct and indirect relationships between activism and depressive symptoms through community connectedness, self-efficacy, hope, and resilience. Prior research found activism can be empowering and can promote community connectedness, self-efficacy, hope, and resilience (Scheadler et al., 2023; Hagen et al., 2018; Montagno et al., 2021; Rabkin et al., 2018; Riggle et al., 2018). Previous research also has found collective action, one form of activism, is associated with lower depressive symptoms (Chan & Mak,

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2021). Contrary to prior research, results showed low-risk and high-risk activism were associated with higher–not lower–levels of depressive symptoms among Stonewall Sports players. This may be due to a difference in measurement. More specifically, Chan and Mak (2021) emphasized collective forms of activism whereas the present study focused on individualized actions. Likewise, prior research arguing activism boosts community connectedness, self-efficacy, hope, and resilience have largely focused on organized groups (Scheadler et al., 2023; Rabkin et al., 2018). As such, there is a possibility that activism can decrease depressive symptoms when performed with groups, such as with teams or leagues. However, collective activism was not measured in this study. More research is needed.

To this end, the present study found low-risk activism was associated with higher community connectedness, which was associated with lower depressive symptoms. The results, though, failed to reach significance in showing a full indirect effect of community connectedness between low-risk activism and depressive symptoms. The lack of significance could be due to the large number of other variables present in the model. Alternatively, as mentioned above, community connectedness may mediate the relationship between collective action and depressive symptoms but not between individualized activism and depressive symptoms. Regardless, there is insufficient evidence concluding community connectedness mediates the relationship between low-risk activism and depressive symptoms.

Further, results suggest different forms of activism may have different impacts. Low-risk activism was associated with higher community connectedness and self-efficacy. High-risk activism was associated with lower hope and self-efficacy where hope fully mediated the relationship between high-risk activism and depressive symptoms. Specifically, results indicate that high-risk activism was associated with lower hope, which then predicted worsened depressive symptoms. Formal political activism was unrelated to community connectedness, self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and depressive symptoms. Perhaps, low- and high-risk activism lead individuals to become more aware of LGBTQ+ issues, causing them distress and hurting their mental health. Likewise, high-risk activities may lead to exhaustion and frustration with the lack or delay of social change. Previous researchers found LGBTQ+ and athlete activism can be exhausting and stressful due to failures, setbacks, pushback from others, and the lack of rapid change (Scheadler et al., 2023; Kluch, 2023; Kluch et al., 2024; O'Neill et al., 2025). This could potentially lead to burnout and reduced hope, harming mental health. The lack of change following high-risk actions also may make one feel less in control, decreasing their self-efficacy. Engaging in low-risk activities, though, may require less emotional investment into LGBTQ+ rights, allowing participants to encounter less challenges with activism, protecting them from the loss of hope. Engaging in low-risk activities also may feel safer and more positive than other forms of activism, allowing participants to build community connectedness, which may lower depressive symptoms. Engaging in low-risk activities also may be more aligned with the mission of Stonewall Sports, which focuses on fostering fun and inclusion in a low-stakes environment. Notably, though, many of these possible confounding variables (e.g., awareness of injustice, burnout) were not measured in this study. Future research is needed to examine the relationships between these variables.

Likewise, activism may be related to other phenomena not examined in the present study. For example, scholars argue activism facilitates coping (Gonzalez et al., 2022) while self-efficacy (Ouch & Moradi, 2019) and hope (Ong et al., 2017) each support problem-focused coping, yet coping was not measured in the present study. Stress control mindset may be another

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important factor linking activism to mental health wherein stress related to activism can be perceived as either a challenge or a threat. Perhaps, problem-focused coping and strong stress control mindsets prevent challenges associated with activism from negatively affecting individuals. As such, athlete activism among Stonewall Sports players may only decrease depressive symptoms when problem-focused coping and/or stress control mindsets are considered. However, these possibilities remain speculative. Future research is required to examine the relationships between these variables.

Moreover, there were important findings related to community connectedness. Specifically, community connectedness was directly associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms among Stonewall Sports players. The present study also showed participating in a remix tournament was associated with greater community connectedness. This expands upon previous research which has found LGBTQ+ focused community sport can promote community connectedness (Gaston & Dixon, 2020; Jones & McCarthy, 2010). Perhaps, LGBTQ+ focused community sport leagues can foster community connectedness by organizing remix tournaments. Community connectedness among LGBTQ+ focused community sport players may foster improved mental health outcomes, which is especially important given the high prevalence of depressive symptoms found among participants in the present study. Further, no prior research has examined the impact of remix tournaments. These initial findings suggest remix tournaments may increase community connectedness. Remix tournaments may be serving their purpose, offering players opportunities to become more embedded in the LGBTQ+ community and introducing them to new LGBTQ+ peers in Stonewall Sports via fun and inclusive environments. However, this study was cross-sectional; those with greater community connectedness may be more likely to join remix tournaments. Further research on remix tournaments and other strategies for boosting community connectedness in Stonewall Sports is warranted.

Finally, results from this study suggest hope may be a strong protective factor for LGBTQ+ adults in Stonewall Sports. Indeed, results corroborate prior studies that found hope was significantly associated with fewer depressive symptoms (Corrigan & Schutte, 2023). Therefore, mental health interventions for Stonewall Sports players should emphasize strategies for fostering hope.

Practice Implications

There are several practical implications that can be drawn from this study. Most importantly, results revealed a high need for mental health support within Stonewall Sports. There may be similar needs for mental health support within other LGBTQ+ focused community sport leagues. It is of paramount importance for Stonewall Sports to take action to address the mental health needs of their players. Stonewall Sports and other LGBTQ+ focused community sport leagues should consider compiling a resource list that includes available mental health clinicians to disperse among the membership. LGBTQ+ focused community sport leagues also may consider initiating a campaign encouraging mental health help-seeking among LGBTQ+ people. Such a campaign could include social media and newsletter advertisements for help-seeking as well as booths with mental health resources at sponsored events. Notably, such a campaign may even have impacts that reach both players and non-players. The leadership also should partner with social workers and other mental health experts to offer suicide prevention and intervention training to leaders and other community members.

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When addressing the mental health needs of LGBTQ+ focused community sport members, social workers, league board members, and other relevant practitioners should target players who have engaged in low- and high-risk activism. Results showed low-risk activism was associated with greater depressive symptoms and high-risk activism was associated with greater depressive symptoms via lower levels of hope. These results suggest those with higher levels of low- and high-risk activism may be at greater risks for mental health concerns.

Finally, Stonewall Sports should continue to offer and encourage participation in remix tournaments. The remix tournaments offered by Stonewall Sports aim to encourage social networking and fun. According to results in the current study, remix tournament participation was associated with greater community connectedness, which was associated with lower depressive symptoms. Thus, increasing opportunities to participate in remix tournaments may be one feasible strategy for decreasing depressive symptoms among players. Relatedly, other sport leagues, including non-LGBTQ+ focused community sport leagues, should consider adopting and measuring the impacts of remix tournaments. Indeed, there is a possibility that remix tournaments can boost community connectedness for individuals in various sport settings, regardless of their gender and/or sexuality.

Limitations & Future Directions

This study was not without limitations. This study was cross-sectional and causal conclusions could not be drawn. Future research should examine the longitudinal relationships between these phenomena. Also, the present study only included LGBTQ+ participants from five chapters of Stonewall Sports. Future research should aim to include participants from more chapters, including both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ individuals. Future research should include LGBTQ+ adults not involved in Stonewall Sports as well as adults involved in non-LGBTQ+ focused community sport leagues to gain a stronger understanding of the influence of Stonewall Sports. Another limitation was that the sample was predominantly White and highly educated. Results may not be generalizable to LGBTQ+ individuals of different identities and backgrounds. Additional research is needed to uncover the experiences of those who are multiply marginalized within Stonewall Sports. For instance, research is needed to further explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in Stonewall Sports who identify as a racial/ethnic minority or as a person with disabilities, as these individuals were underrepresented in this study.

Importantly, the BCAOS was originally designed to measure activism for Black rights. Therefore, adapting the BCAOS for LGBTQ+ rights among Stonewall Sports players may not have been appropriate. The adapted scale may not adequately capture the distinct cultural, historical, and political dimensions of LGBTQ+ activism. Future research is needed to evaluate and refine the adapted version of the BCAOS used in this study. Alternatively, future research could build a new scale for LGBTQ+ activism.

More research is needed to investigate the impact and implementation of remix tournaments. Further, the present study did not ask participants about help-seeking behaviors, coping styles, or stress control mindsets. Future research should incorporate relevant measures to evaluate these phenomena. Finally, the present study did not evaluate strategies for decreasing depressive symptoms. Future research evaluating the effectiveness and feasibility of such strategies is warranted.

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Conclusions

The present study was the first to survey participants in Stonewall Sports and gained important insight about activism and mental health. Findings suggest there is a critical need for mental health support within Stonewall Sports. Results from the present study also revealed that cultivating community connectedness and hope are important for decreasing depressive symptoms. Both community connectedness and hope should be emphasized in future research and interventions with LGBTQ+ focused community organizations.

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