



The Holistic Wellness of the Female Collegiate Athlete at a Division I Power 5 Institution

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This study examined the interconnectedness among dimensions of wellness to understand the lived experience of female collegiate athletes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with upperclassmen female college athletes (n=20) to explore their perceptions about the college athlete experience impacting their holistic well-being and their utilization of supportive resources within the institution's athletic department. Using the Indivisible Self Model of Wellness as a framework, the overarching themes were all factors that negatively affected their well-being, including pressure to perform, coach-athlete verbal communication issues, and freshman year blues. When participants experienced these challenges, the resources they found most supportive included athletic trainers and sports psychologists, both of whom helped them cope with the demands of the college athlete lifestyle. These findings have important implications for practitioners working with female collegiate athletes, in addition to designing future interventions to better meet the wellness needs of female collegiate athletes, thus enhancing the overall college athlete experience.

Keywords: collegiate-athlete, female, mental health, student-athlete, well-being

Exceedingly high numbers of college students suffer from mental health issues, with estimates suggesting that one in six report suicide ideations (Mortimer et al., 2018). According to the 2018 American College Health Association- National College Health Assessment, approximately 34% of men and 44% of women in college reported feeling so depressed it was difficult to function in the past 12 months (American College Health Association, 2018). The current COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these mental health issues, with higher proportions of students reporting depression (rising from 35.7% to 40.9% of respondents), and poorer mental health (rising from 21.9% to 30.7% of respondents) (American College Health Association, 2020). On college campuses, college student mental health and well-being is a significant concern for higher education administrators, faculty, and staff (American Council, 2018).

Collegiate athletes are often viewed as a healthy subpopulation compared to the general college student population and perceived to benefit from a subsidized education, academic support, clothing, elite coaching and training facilities, strength and conditioning, sports nutrition, medical advice, and travel expenses (Osborne, 2014). However, recent attention has focused on the mental health and well-being of these athletes due to data showing elevated levels of depression among college athletes (NCAA, 2017; Wolanin et al., 2015) coupled with some high-profile college athlete suicides (e.g., Washington State quarterback Tyler Hilinski, Penn runner Madison Holleran). This concern led to legislation being passed unanimously at the 2019 NCAA Convention guaranteeing collegiate athletes' access to mental health services and resources (Burtlag Hosick, 2019).

Recent studies have found higher percentages of college athletes feeling a moderate to severe need to seek mental health services (Cox et al., 2017; Moore, 2016). Moore (2016) found that 54.3% of Division I college athlete respondents felt the need to seek mental health intervention. However, nearly half of those athletes did not utilize the mental health services available to them. While mental health is only one aspect of wellness, better psychological health has been found to be associated toward higher performance sport (Brand et al., 2013). Lafontaine (2009) suggested that addressing the wellness challenges college athletes are faced with can lead to a more beneficial college athlete experience, both athletically and as a total person.

Evidence suggests that gender perspectives of the college athlete experience are different (LaFontaine, 2009; Schaal et al., 2011). For example, Brown and colleagues (2021) reported female, minority, as well as Division I athletes reported worse mental health concerns than their peers. Female college athletes are constantly balancing the performance benefits of muscularity with the conflicting societal ideal of femininity and beauty, potentially creating different pressures for them to perform (Brunet, 2010). Patricia Allen, executive director of medical services at Summit Behavioral Health, stated: "I think a lot of female athletes try to achieve in a different way. There's more pressure on them to be strong, successful, competitive, healthy, and resilient" (Barcella, 2017).

In an effort to better understand the factors contributing to lower overall wellness for college athletes, this study utilized a holistic wellness approach to the college athlete experience, aimed to enhance the college athlete as a total person, ultimately encouraging a healthy approach to life.

Holistic wellness¹ refers to the maximum functioning of an individual that integrates the mind, body, and spirit as opposed to measuring individual components of functioning (Myers et al., 2000). Research targeted on the female college athlete population has heavily explored the prevalence of eating disorders within the female athlete population (Joy et al., 2016; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004; Wollenberg et al., 2015), yet investigating aspects of holistic wellness for female collegiate athletes has not been researched as heavily.

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore the lived experience of the female upper class collegiate athlete in relation to holistic wellness utilizing The Indivisible Self Model of Wellness (IS-WEL). The study was conducted so that researchers, athletic administrators, coaches, and support staff may gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of current female athletes and how the interaction of different experiences and support systems can help collegiate athletes overcome difficulties and lead to a state of optimal well-being. This research study addressed the following research question:

What aspects of the college athlete experience impact the female collegiate athlete's holistic wellness?

Wellness and the Collegiate Athlete

Due to the demands of athletic participation, collegiate athletes may be more susceptible to mental health issues that may ultimately result in declined overall well-being. Growing literature illustrates that collegiate athletes face unique stressors and challenges, including time demands (e.g., NCAA 2017; Stokowski et al., 2019), academic concerns (e.g., Naphy, 2016; Rubin, 2016), identity conflicts (e.g., Gayles, 2015), mental health concerns (e.g., Egan, 2019; Fogaca, 2021) and career adjustment issues (e.g., Saxe et al., 2017). Time is often seen as a major barrier to academic success, as college athletes often find themselves struggling to manage their dual academic and athletic roles (Ryan et al., 2018). The athletic culture can hinder identity development, potentially creating distress for college athletes when their collegiate athletic career ends and they must adopt new life and career goals (Despres et al., 2008). The culture of athletics may also inhibit college athletes from seeking help to address mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, depression, stress) (Brown et al. 2014; Ferrante & Etzel, 2009), as there is often a public stigma as being viewed as weak if athletes express any kind of mental health issue (Lopez & Levy, 2013; Chow et al. 2020). Finally, barriers to seeking counseling could be due to mental health providers characteristics. For example, Lopez and Levy (2013) found that familiarity with a college athletes' sport and the counselors' gender influenced whether an athlete sought help.

Recently, numerous systematic reviews on various aspects of mental health (e.g., mental health literacy, mental health awareness, mental health and life skills training programs and utilization of these services) among collegiate athletes have been conducted (Breslin et al., 2017; Moreland et al., 2018; Rice et al., 2016), yet few have studied female collegiate athletes exclusively. According to Barcella (2017), approximately 30 percent of surveyed female college athletes showed signs of depression, compared to just 18 percent of surveyed male college athletes. Female college athletes may be more susceptible to mental health issues than their male counterparts, yet it is unclear why (McGuire et al., 2017). Research targeted on the female college athlete population has explored the prevalence of eating disorders within the female

¹ For the sake of this study, holistic wellness and well-being will be used interchangeably.

athlete population (e.g., Joy, Kussman, & Nattiv, 2016; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004), yet incorporating aspects of holistic wellness has been less frequent.

While the NCAA (2016) states, “Coaches and athletic departments must build a culture of support that makes the college athlete feel comfortable with expressing their concerns without feeling they will be labeled or stigmatized as a person with mental problems” (p. 34), it is up to individual universities to decide how to approach athlete wellness. The NCAA Sport Science Institute and leading mental health organizations across the country developed a seminal publication in support of college athlete mental health and wellness (NCAA, 2020). The document recommends athletic departments provide athletes access to a licensed mental health provider. However, beyond a professional who understands the sport context, there is no additional formal statement for level of training or specific certifications. Therefore, support services vary greatly between institutions. Kroshus (2016) studied the variability in institutional screening practices related to collegiate athlete mental health, finding that only 39% of NCAA member institution respondents had a written plan related to identifying collegiate athletes with mental health problems. To more effectively serve female college athletes, there is a need to understand their lived experience and how it relates to holistic wellness. For the purposes of this study, lived experience will be defined as “a representation and understanding of a researcher or research subject’s human experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence one’s perception of knowledge” (Given, 2018, p.1).

Additionally, few studies have assessed the overall wellness of current collegiate athletes using the IS-WEL model (LaFountaine, 2007; 2009; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). However, all were quantitative studies and no study targeted specifically upper-class female college athletes. Upper class collegiate athletes are able to self-reflect and share their thoughts on the different experiences of their collegiate athletic careers. Watson (2015) proposed the IS-WEL model as a potential treatment approach to use when working with collegiate athletes, as it is consistent with other student development models, stating: “Counselors who apply this model are able to identify individuals’ strengths and particular dimensions and use these strengths to improve functioning and overcome deficiencies in other dimensions” (p. 34).

A holistic wellness approach aims to enhance the college-athlete as a total person, ultimately encouraging a healthy approach to life. In addition to the strength of empirical support of the IS-WEL model, its foundation of direct implications for counseling provides a strong theoretical framework to help athletic departments address the unique attributes of collegiate female college athletes. Each of the five second-order factors provide a framework for meeting the evolving needs and addressing the challenges faced by college athletes.

The Indivisible Self Model of Wellness (IS-WEL)

Wellness can be thought of as eating healthy and exercising regularly for athletes (Anderson, 2016), but viewing wellness holistically focuses on the interaction and interdependence among many aspects of life. In this study, holistic wellness was used as a foundation to explore the lived experience of the female college athlete through in-depth, face-to-face interviews. The Indivisible Self Model of Wellness (IS-WEL; Myers & Sweeney, 2004) provides a framework, commonly used in higher education and counseling, for treating college athletes holistically. This strength-based, multidimensional approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of various dimensions of an individual’s life (e.g., *Creative Self*, *Coping Self*, *Social Self*, *Essential Self*, *Physical Self*) that comprise total wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2004).

Therefore, the model was created with self at the core of wellness and incorporates Adlerian theory, observing that human beings are more than the sum of our parts and cannot be divided (Myers & Sweeney, 2008).

The IS-WEL model was created with Total Wellness as the single higher order factor at the core of the model, followed by five second-order factors that make up the Indivisible Self and each of these factors is composed of additional sub factors (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Additionally, four contextual variables are presented within the model. These contextual variables, or environments, in which individuals function include: (a) local contexts which include family, school, community, (b) institutional contexts or policy, laws, or governing bodies, (c) global contests including culture, global events, politics, and environmental impact and (d) chronometrical contexts which represent the ways in which individuals change across the lifespan (Myers & Sweeney). Each context helps to understand individual behavior and wellness and how the individual interacts with their environment. This model can be used to gain a more complete understanding of the individual aspects of wellness that influence a female college athlete's collegiate experience. In addition to the strength of empirical support of the IS-WEL model, its foundation of direct implications for counseling provides a strong theoretical framework to help athletic departments address the unique attributes of collegiate female college athletes.

Within higher education, the role of student well-being has recently been discussed as a core outcome that colleges should pay attention to, as well as ways that colleges can promote their students' well-being (Wexler, 2016). The holistic approach to wellness using the IS-WEL model focuses on the interaction and interdependence among many aspects of wellness (e.g., mental, physical, emotional, financial, social), all factoring into the development of a total person. Holistic wellness refers to the maximum functioning of an individual that integrates the mind, body, and spirit as opposed to measuring individual components of functioning (Myers, et al., 2000).

Related specifically to the IS-WEL model, three studies have assessed and compared the overall wellness between collegiate athletes and non-athletes (LaFountaine, 2007; 2009; Watson & Kissinger, 2007) and one study has used the holistic wellness model to assess overall wellness in former athletes (Warehime et al., 2017). All three studies however used the holistic wellness model as solely a quantitative assessment tool.

Most recently, Warehime and colleagues (2017) explored the factors that led to higher levels of wellness in former college athletes. In part because most research has focused on negative outcomes associated with transitioning from sport (Knights et al., 2016), Warehime and colleagues studied the positive outcomes associated with this transition, as they argued this data can guide future efforts to improve the transition process for college athletes. Overall, participants displayed high levels of wellness in terms of work and exercise. Many former college athletes also perceived their current wellness as equal, if not better compared to when they were college athletes (Warehime et al., 2017).

LaFountaine (2009) suggested that addressing the wellness challenges college athletes are faced with can lead to a more beneficial experience, both athletically and as a total person. In an effort to better understand these factors contributing to the wellness of college athletes, this study targeted the lived experience of female collegiate athlete's holistic wellness. The purpose of this study was to provide athletic administrators, coaches, and support staff with a deeper understanding into the lives of current female collegiate athletes and how the interaction of different experiences as a collegiate athlete can lead to a state of optimal well-being. Using the

IS-WEL model as a theoretical framework, this study sought to understand the areas of support female collegiate athletes are currently utilizing and provide recommendations about how to support their evolving needs. Lastly, this study is significant in that it fills an apparent gap in the extant literature in addressing wellness with collegiate female collegiate athletes.

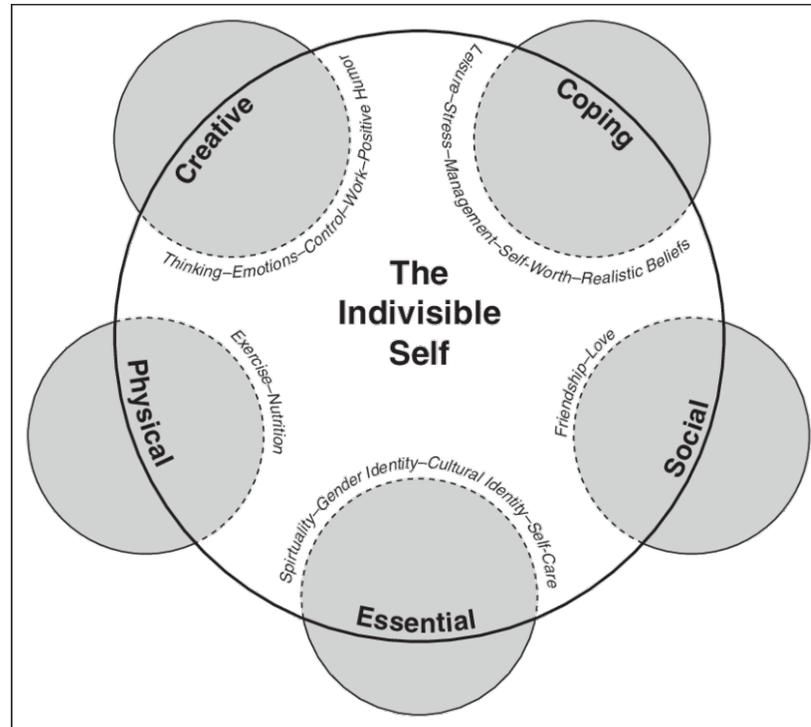


Figure 1.
The Indivisible Self: An Evidence-Based Model of Wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2004).

Methods

Participants

Twenty female collegiate athletes at a NCAA Division I institution in the Southeast United States participated in the study. This university had 277 female collegiate athletes out of a total of 641 total collegiate athletes, which is 43.21%. To participate in this study, participants must have been American female collegiate athletes in their third or fourth year of eligibility at this specific Power Five NCAA Division I institution. The researchers determined that upper class collegiate athletes were preferred because they could reflect on their experiences, as opposed to younger collegiate athletes or transfers that have limited experience in the collegiate setting. Additionally, the focus was on female collegiate athletes from the United States because perceptions of health differ between countries (Kamimura et al., 2018), with some cultures being less willing to talk about wellness due to stigma toward mental illness (Do et al., 2014). Therefore, with the nationalities represented by female collegiate athletes being diverse, and our inability to represent all cultures, we delimited the study to those from the United States.

With the delimitations, there were 80 female collegiate athletes that fit the study criteria. Excluding women's golf, all women's sports at the institution were represented in the study. No members of the women's golf team met the specified recruiting criteria of this study. Participants consisted of two female American upperclassmen collegiate athletes from each of the remaining women's sports at the institution, including women's basketball, women's cross country, gymnastics, rifle (coed), women's soccer, softball, women's swimming and diving, women's tennis, women's track and field and volleyball. The research team determined that two participants per sport allowed for all but one sport to be represented and it would provide for more than one perspective per sport. Thus, there were 20 total interview participants. Fourteen of the participants were in their fourth and final year of eligibility and six of the participants were in their third year of eligibility. Twelve participants classified their race/ethnicity as White/Caucasian, while seven participants classified themselves as Black/African American and one participant considered herself as a European American.

Instrumentation

A general interview guide was developed using the second-order factors of the IS-WEL model. The semi-structured interviews were designed to understand the female collegiate athletes' experiences pertaining to their health and well-being, as well as their perceptions about resources within their athletic department related to collegiate athlete welfare. The face-to-face interviews consisted of in-depth, open-ended questions related to topics such as: mental health, body image, identity outside of sport, collegiate athlete experience, and overall well-being since arriving on campus (See Appendix 1 for full interview guide). Prior to data collection, the interview guide was piloted on two former female collegiate athletes who were associated with a different Division I university than the institution where the participants attended. The pilot study participants provided feedback on the clarity of the questions being asked and the researchers adjusted the wording and flow of various questions. See Appendix for interview guide.

Interview Procedure

Ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the author's and participant's university was obtained prior to data collection. After IRB was approved, the athletic department was contacted by the researcher and permission was granted to conduct a study involving collegiate athletes. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used. Purposive sampling, in which participants were selected based on the criteria set by the researcher (Hays & Singh, 2011), was first used to select collegiate athletes. Purposeful sampling allowed the first author the opportunity to collect data from participants who fit into a wide-ranging group and ensured that the appropriate number of interviewees were drawn from each sport (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). We identified individual collegiate athletes who were eligible to participate in the study based on the information provided on the institution's athletic website. Once identified, these collegiate athletes were contacted by the researcher via email with the goal of recruiting participants for the study. The recruitment email included a brief statement about the purpose of the study and how the gathered data will be used. Additionally, as the study evolved, snowball sampling was used because it allowed the researcher to utilize current participants in an effort to recruit other prospective participants from within the unique population (Vogt, 1999). If necessary, participants were asked to volunteer the names of

teammates they felt would have an interest in participating in the study.

Face-to-face, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, allowing the researcher the flexibility to ask follow-up questions to seek clarification and pursue deeper meaning when necessary (Kvale, 2008). Interviews took place at a time and location that was convenient for the participants and ranged from 25 minutes to 1 hour. Each participant was randomly given a pseudonym in order to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded via iPhone's VoiceRecord application and transcribed verbatim by the first author in Microsoft Word 2017. Participants were given the opportunity to review their verbatim transcriptions to ensure accuracy of what they shared. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2012) theoretical thematic analysis. This process included line-by-line searching for "repeated patterns of meanings" (Braun & Clarke, 2012) and the generation of initial codes that were sorted into potential themes based on the second-order factors (i.e., *Creative Self*, *Coping Self*, *Social Self*, *Essential Self*, *Physical Self*) and contextual variables of Myer and Sweeney's (2004) model shown in Figure 1. These emerging themes were then reviewed by all researchers and refined and labeled to reflect their meaning to ensure trustworthiness (Elo et al., 2014). For the purpose of this study, each participant was randomly given a pseudonym in order to ensure confidentiality.

Results

In this study, the authors sought to understand the collegiate athlete experience, as well as the areas of support within the athletic department, that impact various aspects of a female collegiate athlete's well-being at a Division I Power 5 university. Five sub-themes emerged based on the five second-order factors (i.e., *Creative Self*, *Coping Self*, *Social Self*, *Essential Self*, *Physical Self*) of the IS-WEL model that represent the experiences significantly impacting the participants' holistic wellness. Below, we provide a table presenting the IS-WEL factors of the model and the sub-themes that emerged from the data. Many of the sub-themes overlapped and were interconnected within multiple IS-WEL factors. However, the key findings were organized around the factor that represented the best fit. Additionally, one contextual variable sub-theme (i.e., freshman year blues) was identified that impacted all factors. Quotes from participants represent the key findings within each factor and sub-theme.

Table 1
Holistic Wellness Factors and Sub-Themes

IS-WEL Factor	Sub-Themes
<i>Creative Self</i>	Pressure to Perform Coach-Athlete Verbal Communication Issues
<i>Coping Self</i>	Sport Psychologist
<i>Social Self</i>	Athletic Trainer
Contextual Variables	Freshman Year Blues

IS-WEL Factor 1: Creative Self

Pressure to Perform. The word ‘pressure’ was mentioned a total of 39 times throughout all participant interviews. Pressure was commonly linked to one’s individual and team performance, as well as being identified as one of the most challenging aspects of their collegiate athlete experience and/or as a factor that negatively affected their well-being. Much of the pressure identified came from the expectations placed on the female collegiate athlete, either internally from herself or externally from other people. Externally, Hannah felt that people outside of the athletic department had this false perception that collegiate athletes “have it easy”, but then explained that collegiate athletes “have very high expectations of ourselves from other people” which caused them to be “hard on themselves.”

Participants that mentioned feeling pressure felt that the pressure to perform in their respective sports began as soon as they arrived on campus freshman year due to being young and new to their team environments. Ashley explained, “The first couple of years were very hard when it came to stress and not getting depressed, not getting overly anxious about things.” Hannah commented on the pressure after her good freshman season, “I felt a lot of pressure that I had to perform well every time I stepped foot on the field and my coaches expected it from me.” Rachyl felt that the pressure to perform at the best level you know you can “had her in her own head all the time.” From being one of the nation’s top athletes in high school to transitioning to a large university and top ranked team, the pressure led her to make mistakes by constantly overthinking things.

Furthermore, the expectations from outside sources (i.e., coaches, family, friends) led many participants to translate that external pressure to then internal pressure. A college athlete is highly competitive, which in many instances, correlates to high expectations for herself. Ashley felt that college athletes always tend to have expectations for how things are supposed to go and “to feel disappointed a lot is really difficult and challenging to go through, and then you have to accept what’s going on and move on from it.” Regina described a similar experience, identifying internal pressure as negatively affecting her mental health, “I have a lot of internal pressure on myself and when I don’t meet certain benchmarks that I think I should be meeting by a certain point, I’m definitely a lot harder on myself.” Baylie often felt inadequate and although she perceived that she was giving her best at times, she never felt that she was performing up to her own expectations. Several participants perceived much of this external pressure as coming from their coaching staff, with Bailey further stating, “It was really hard to talk to my coach about all of that because we didn’t click very well.”

Coach-Athlete Verbal Communication Issues. Twelve of the twenty research participants felt that their coach had negatively affected their well-being at some point throughout their collegiate athletic career, specifically in terms of verbal communication issues that created conflict between the coach and athlete. As explained by the participants, coach-athlete communication refers to how coaches speak and verbally interact with their individual college athletes. Some called it tough love, yet others believed that the way a female college athlete perceives communication from her coach depended on what type of person or athlete she was. Beth explained, “It’s just the way he talks to you sometimes. I know he means well and wants everyone to do better, but sometimes it’s just the way he handles things that really makes you feel like shit.” Rachyl pointed out the reality of sports:

In sports, you're going to get harped on and fuzzed at. It just depends on what kind of person you are. I feel like it's important to build a relationship with you, learn what kind of player you are, and learn what type of player you want to become in order for you to be successful. I can take getting yelled at or cursed at, but someone else might not and it might shut them down and ruin their season. It just depends on what kind of person you are.

Bella called it tough love, stating, "You could literally cuss me out and I don't give a fuck... I've been cussed out on multiple occasions. None of that bothers me."

Three participants revealed how their coach's comments at times made them question playing their sport. Hannah mentioned that it "got to a point where I didn't want to be in practice every day" and Beth called it a "vicious cycle". Her teammate, Sophie, revealed, "You start to question if they care about you as a person and overall how you're doing and how your experience is going."

Overall, participants expressed that they felt that their coaches meant well by their comments, but the way the words were delivered negatively affected their mental well-being in specific situations. Several participants called the relationship a "learning experience" that took time to build trust and learn a coach's tendencies. Hannah acknowledged the tough love, stating, "He used to break me down in tears, but I think I've learned that the harder they are on you, it's because they expect so much from you and that was a learning process."

Three participants perceived their coaches to be manipulative at times and three other participants used the words "passive aggressive" to describe each of their coaches. Hannah described the way her coach spoke to her as "very demeaning" and Sophie described her coach's leadership style as "push, push, push" but later stated, "you don't want to push someone to their breaking point in hopes that they push back." Katherine felt that a coach's communication with an athlete could be perceived differently by a female college athlete depending on the gender of her coach:

I think it's more of a male coach to female athlete relationship where a male coach doesn't know what he's saying might be affecting a girl the way it is. And I've seen the aftermath of a girl pretending it doesn't bother them, but it does.

IS-WEL Factor 2: Coping Self

Sport Psychologist. When asked about the areas of support participants utilized within the athletic department, numerous participants mentioned the use of a sport psychologist to cope with the challenges they faced. Participants described the utilization of the sport psychologist in times of need and also seeing their own personal improvement over time. Some of the participants even credited their team's improvement to the team's meetings with the sport psychologist. For example, Kate credited her team's "killer season" last year to their team's bi-weekly meetings with the sports psychologist, stating that they were all better connected because of it.

Bella praised the sport psychologist, stating that they helped her develop a better state of mind in both life and sport. Regina "learned how to cope with team situations" and then applied those skills to problems within her sport specifically, but also growing overall as an athlete. Sarah coped with unique stressors by first talking to her coach, but then described "it got so bad"

that she had to meet with the sport psychologist, but after their initial meeting, she realized that “life’s too short to be really depressed about certain things”.

Others found it challenging to know when to ask for help, due to this perception that they needed to act strong because they were leaders on their team. Sophie expressed:

When you’re looked at as a leader, it’s really hard to show weakness or you don’t want to show weakness because you’re looked at to be strong. I’d say that I internalized a lot of it for a long time. It had gotten to the point where it’d be all built up because I wanted to act so strong or seem so strong and not only do it for myself, but brush things off and do it for my team because I can’t show this weakness. I definitely did not deal with it well.

A few of the participants had utilized the sports psychologist, but felt that they did not personally connect with the sports psychologist. Katherine said, “I went to her a few times and she just personally wasn’t for me.” Lauryn pointed out her frustration at times with the resource, explaining, “I could be wrong, but I feel like what we talk about in my sports psychologist meetings gets back to my coach.” Alexandra met with the sports psychologist once and stated, “It was awful. Sorry. I just felt like I was talking and she was just sitting there because she can’t really tell you what to do.”

IS-WEL Factor 3: Social Self

Athletic Trainer. Participants continued to emphasize the training room and their sport specific athletic trainer as a key resource within the athletic department pertaining to their well-being. An athletic trainer was seen as a mentor, someone who was willing to listen, and someone who female college athletes trusted because in many instances, they were in everyday contact with the college athlete. For example, Bella trusted her athletic trainer, saying:

She’s just always around, so I end up venting to her about a lot of stuff. Even though she doesn’t have a psychologist title to her name, I feel like since I spend so much time with her, she pretty much is one of those to me. Just having someone who is open and willing to listen on campus was very helpful.

Avery felt that she coped with issues by talking to the athletic trainers, acknowledging, “They understand. It’s different for adults to get what you’re going through, but they really see it in 15 other athletes. They truly get it. I would go talk to them a lot.”

Participants emphasized that their athletic trainers were always willing to help if they needed anything, even outside of injuries and sport related issues. Lauren gave a “shout out” to her athletic trainer, pointing out that she should have mentioned her much earlier in the interview than when she did. Regina felt that her athletic trainer was one of the greatest mentors she had ever had and someone who she trusted with everything. Kerry expressed that her athletic trainer always gave her objective advice, stating, “If I’m in the wrong, she’ll tell me but she’ll never be belittling about it. One of the things I realized this past semester was that she never made me feel like I wasn’t good enough.” Athletic trainers were seen as non-bias resources, ultimately wanting what was best for the female college athlete, regardless of athletic performance.

IS-WEL Contextual Variable

Freshman Year Blues. Sixteen out of the 20 participants referenced their freshman year struggles when describing their college athlete experience. Saxe and colleagues (2017) also found that female college athletes transitioning from high school to college had faced challenges. Saxe and colleagues defined these as freshman year blues, which “encompassed struggle and was also a time where the participants learned from teammates, particularly seniors, and felt as though they needed to prove themselves” (p. 34).

Many of the experiences described during our participants’ freshman year encompassed the struggles they had adapting to a new environment and learning to navigate the complexities of the college athlete lifestyle. Hannah referenced her freshman year as a critical time in college in which she felt her overall well-being decreased in terms of confidence, largely due to the fact that she had moved away from home and was surrounded by so many great athletes. Ashley described the new environment as very difficult to adapt to because she did not know anyone and “having to trust everyone was rough.” Rachyl, a then 18-year-old freshman, believed that it was up to the young athletes themselves to find the resources needed, even if they were not presented, which she described as difficult for her at times.

Four participants referenced some type of struggle in terms of connecting with their team and learning the team dynamic their freshman year. Caelynn detailed her freshman year as definitely negatively affecting her well-being, stating:

Freshman year was a struggle for sure with the culture and the team... I was miserable every day just having to go to practice. I didn’t want to go. I didn’t want to travel. The girls just weren’t nice. I don’t know how I got through it...I literally don’t know how I’m still playing.

Her teammate, Ashley, remembered “always being in my dorm room alone and it was so depressing.” Regina revealed a similar situation:

Even though I had upperclassmen who were mentoring me, I felt very distant and hated my first year. Absolutely hated it. I cried almost every single night. I called my mom the very first night and told her that I made the wrong decision and that I wanted to go home.

Baylie felt that freshman year became much tougher mentally when she did not perform up to her and her coach’s standards at the conference meet, “...it really crushed me and then I was kind of brushed aside from the coaches at that point. That was a hard struggle and I really had to fight back to where I wanted to be.” Ashley’s sub-par freshman season created negative thoughts about her self-image, which she described as being the hardest part of the start of her college athlete experience. Six participants also referenced negative body image perceptions about themselves their freshman year. Two noted eating “horribly” their freshman year and two referenced lifting heavy weights for the first time as one of the reasons for the weight gain. Overall, as described in these quotes, freshman year was a time in which many participants reflected on the transitional period as an experience that encompassed struggle for the female college athlete.

Discussion

The results of the semi-structured interviews of college athlete holistic wellness analyzed through the lens of the IS-WEL model provide a multitude of issues and potential areas of support that athletic departments should consider when trying to improve college athlete experience and holistic wellness. Namely, collegiate athletes indicated feeling a high level of pressure and struggled in their transition to being a collegiate college athlete. This was sometimes negatively impacted by the coach. Conversely, college athletes reported high levels of support from teammates and athletic trainers. Participants also noted the importance of the sport psychologist as an individual that helped them cope with problems they were experiencing.

Several participants identified pressure as one of the most challenging aspects of their college athlete experience or as a factor, thus supporting existing literature that identifies pressure to perform as a frequent source of stress for college athletes (e.g., Broughton & Neyer, 2001; Brown et al., 2014; Brunet, 2010). The demands (i.e., practice, travel, academic, competition) of being a college athlete often create a substantial amount of pressure on the athlete, which has been shown to create a greater risk of experiencing mental health problems than their non-athlete peers (Brown et al., 2014; Ferrante & Etzel, 2009). Due to the impact a coach-athlete relationship can have on a college athlete, the relationship is considered particularly crucial in one's experience and related to the pressure felt by participants. Three participants mentioned that they questioned continuing to play their sport after the way their coach talked to them in a demeaning manner.

Tension in relationships with coaches was one factor that impacted the college athlete's mental health, but they sought out the help of the sport psychologist to cope with the unique stressors in times of need. These findings contradict previous research suggesting that the culture of athletics may inhibit college athletes from seeking help (e.g., Brown et al., 2014; Ferrante & Etzel, 2009; Lopez & Levy, 2013). Interestingly though, some research has shown that athletes are becoming more open to the idea of seeking help for their mental health (Barnard, 2016). Participants may have felt comfortable seeking help within the athletic department because many of their teams were already utilizing the sports psychologist, but with a team approach. This reiterates findings from Gavrilova, Donohue, and Galante (2017) who observed that college athletes are more likely to seek help when the program is targeted toward a sports culture.

The sport psychologist was one form of support participants highlighted, but support meant different things to each participant. Regardless of the support mechanism, support was always referenced as enhancing one's overall well-being, further supporting existing literature (e.g., Egan, 2019). Contradicting Watson and Kissinger's (2007) findings that college athletes have been shown to have lower levels of wellness in this area of *Social Self* than other second-order factors, participants described feeling supported by and connected to teammates and their athletic trainer. This support can be important for a college athlete's success, because researchers have found that a strong sense of support is associated with lower levels of mental illness and higher quality of life (Watson & Kissinger, 2007) and a strong predictor of holistic wellness (Williams, 2007). DeFreese and Smith (2014) found that it is nearly impossible to remove all negative experiences from sport. However, when negative experiences do occur, it is important to offer the necessary support and resources to cope with these experiences. The strong social relationships that females have are important in the way they cope with stress (Hagiwara et al., 2017).

Several participants mentioned the importance of their athletic trainer for support throughout their experience. Participants genuinely seemed excited to praise their athletic trainers for their guidance beyond just injury prevention or rehabilitation. Brown et al. (2014) found that athletic trainers are often the first point of contact in managing mental health concerns. Athletic trainers assume several roles and responsibilities, but these findings support previous literature suggesting that perhaps the most important role is that of a counselor (e.g., Washington-Lofgren et al., 2004).

Athletic trainers were noted as particularly important in the formative first year of an athlete's experience. Participants repeatedly referenced their freshman year as a factor of the college athlete experience in which they felt negatively affected their overall well-being. Although transitioning from high school to college can be difficult for any student, evidence suggests that college athletes may experience greater levels of stress due to the dual demands of athletics and academics placed on them during their freshman year (Naphy, 2016). These findings are consistent with previous research that has specifically identified unique sources of stress experienced during the first semester of freshman year for the college athlete including: extensive time demands, loss of star status, injuries, possibility of being benched/red-shirted their freshman year, increased academic needs, and conflicts with their coaches as challenges facing freshman college athletes (Pritchard, 2005).

This present study, along with the evidence presented by Naphy (2016) and Pritchard (2005), suggests that the combination of stressors a college athlete may experience in their freshman year has a negative effect on their well-being and pleads the need for athletic departments to be proactive in supporting college athletes as they transition to their new environment. Successfully managing the challenges of freshman year will not only enhance a college athlete's well-being, but also enhance the overall college experience. This leads to three specific implications that can improve support provided to female Division I collegiate athletes.

Implications for College Athletic Programs

The findings of this study can provide some insight for athletic departments and campuses in providing additional proactive support to female Division I collegiate athletes.

Importance of Connection to Key Medical Personnel

The female college athletes in this study felt an inherent pressure to perform both at an individual and team level. This pressure comes internally as well as extrinsically, which ultimately can impact the mental health of the female college athletes. Several of the participants in this study stated that they did not "connect" with the sport psychologist or felt that what was being discussed may get back to their coach. College athletic programs should examine ways to foster the sport psychologist/athlete relationship. This could impact how much female college athletes are willing to seek counseling from any of the mental health providers on campus. However, building up that trust can take time. Having a sufficient number of sport psychologists who the athletes can relate to can help disrupt the abundance of pressure messages female collegiate athletes often receive, while allowing the psychologists to build up relationships.

Many collegiate athletic programs lack the resources to provide mental health support, particularly as demand is increasing (Burtlag Hosick, 2019). Thus, as many of the athletes noted the support provided by athletic trainers, it may be beneficial to provide trainers with additional

mental health training, such as coach education and training related to mental health screening (see NCAA 2020), something Miles and Sudano (2017) have noted. Additionally, the female college athletes in this study utilized the sport psychologist for several reasons- team performance, coping with difficult team or coaching issues, or assisting with acute mental health challenges. The need for sport psychologists with areas of expertise are varied and could provide a variety of support to college athletes on campuses.

Transition Programs from HS to College

This study highlighted the need for proactive support systems in place specifically for high school female college athletes as they transition from HS to college. First, the college athletes in this study acknowledged that they immediately felt a pressure to perform as freshman on a campus. When female college athletes arrive on a college campus, they immediately feel a pressure to perform both internally and externally. Proactively having systems in place to provide the college athletes with skill sets to cope with these feelings will be critical in assisting with a smooth and successful transition to campus. For example, the NCAA Mental Health Best Practices (2020) publication recommends pre participation mental health screening, as well as a systematic way to refer student athletes to qualified practitioners, along with preventive measures such as developing health promotion efforts that build mental well-being and resilience.

College athletes in this study spoke about the *Freshman Year Blues*- or the struggles they faced with regard to a new campus to navigate, new learning environment, new expectations and an entirely different lifestyle. Athletic Departments can specially target incoming female college athletes to help with this transition. Formation of mentoring programs such as athlete to athlete or faculty/college athlete mentoring programs can begin when the student is still in high school and continue as the student transitions to the college campus. Additionally, creating safe spaces for the female freshman to share their experiences and build confidence will be of importance in providing support and emotional safety. This will help these athletes develop strategies to be successful and enhance their overall collegiate experience.

Importance of Collegiate Coach and Athletic Trainer Education

One of the most disturbing findings in this study was the fact that the majority of participants in this study felt that their coach had negatively affected their well-being at some point throughout their collegiate athletic career, specifically in terms of verbal communication. This is concerning given that the National Athletic Training Association (NATA) (see Neal et al., 2013) and the NCAA (2020) have both recommended coaches recognize the issues of mental health among student athletes and receive mental health education. This study reinforces that despite recommendations made by seminal institutions (e.g., NATA and the NCAA), more effort appears to be needed to address issues of mental health.

With women coaching fewer than half of women's collegiate sports, collegiate coach education programs will be important not only for male coaches but for female coaches as well. Coach education programs should have a specific component focusing on communication with female student athletes, and specific aspects of these programs should focus on the delivery of messages. Beth's comment highlights the impact a coach comment can have on a college athlete. "It's just the way he talks to you sometimes. I know he means well and wants everyone to do

better, but sometimes it's just the way he handles things really makes you feel like shit." These types of comments can often have long lasting effects on the mental and physical well-being of female college athletes. This education should be extended to athletic trainers since the participants in this study emphasized the training room and in particular their sport specific athletic trainer as a key resource to their well-being.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate the interconnectedness of a college athlete's well-being, along with the complexity of the college athlete experience. While unintended, findings from this study leaned more heavily on factors negatively affecting a female college athlete's well-being, yet this model uses a strength-based approach. Future research should consider the use of the IS-WEL model to examine the strengths of an individual's college athlete experience. Secondly, the findings of this study cannot be generalized. Future studies should focus on the lived experience of male college athletes, determining if factors impacting a female college athlete's well-being are gender specific. Additionally, studying college athlete wellness among other dimensions, such as specific racial demographics, international studies, or younger college athletes, warrants future research.

We aimed to better understand the holistic wellness of the female college athlete and factors that impact aspects of her well-being. The findings of this study shed a new light on the complexity of a female college athlete's wellness, in addition to the importance of prioritizing college athlete mental health. Findings clearly indicate that female college athletes encounter challenges in achieving optimal well-being, such as pressure to perform, verbal communication issues with their coaches, and freshman year blues. Participants emphasized the importance of a sense of support throughout their experience, including the support of their teammates and athletic trainer, as well as revealed the importance of the sports psychologists in coping with the demands of being a collegiate athlete. This study adds additional richness to the Indivisible Self Model of Wellness model that is commonly used in higher education and counseling, but also highlights the need for future research on the female college athlete experience and college athlete wellness. Finally, this study has cultivated a greater depth of understanding and awareness of the female college athlete experience and their identified wellness needs for those working in collegiate athletics.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Introduction

First, can you please tell me what sport you participate in?

What year of athletic eligibility are you currently in?

What are you majoring in?

Can you describe your background/participation in sport, including any participation outside of high school sport?

What brought you to this university?

In general, what are your thoughts on your student-athlete experience thus far?

Are you on scholarship? If so, what percentage and how do you feel about it?

Next, I'd like to ask you a few questions about your well-being. Well-being is the state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy. I will be asking you about a combination of factors that influence your health and well-being, including emotional, physical, social, and intellectual factors.

Overview / Total Person

What comes to mind when you think of a student-athlete's wellness/well-being?

How would you describe your overall well-being since you arrived on campus?

How do you identify yourself outside of sport? Explain who you are outside of your sport.

IS-WEL Model

Describe in what ways you prioritize your own health and wellness? How do you take care of yourself in order to be the healthiest and happiest you? [*Essential Self*]

What factors affect your mental health and well-being? Can you describe these factors? How do you cope with these issues you're facing? [*Coping Self*]

Have you ever struggled with body image issues within your sport? If so, when did it start? Can you elaborate on this please? Do you feel pressure to look a certain way in your sport? How would you describe your nutrition? [*Creative/Coping/Physical Self*]

Do you ever feel like you've been mistreated by anyone in the athletic department? If so, can you describe your experience? Have you experienced any type of verbal or emotional abuse in your sport? If so, can you give some examples? How does this affect your thinking and emotions? [*Creative/Coping Self*]

Can you describe the relationships that have been most important to you during your college experience? In general, do you feel like you have someone to turn to for support? If so, who? Can you describe the forms of mentorship you currently have in your life? Who are they? How did you meet them? How do they support you? [*Social Self*]

Do you feel that social media has affected your well-being in any way, either positively or negatively? Can you describe the ways in which it does, if any? [*Coping Self*]

Challenges of Student-Athlete Experience

What aspects of the student-athlete experience are most challenging for you? Do you think your challenges would be similar if you were a male student-athlete? Why or why not?

Describe specific experiences in college that you felt negatively affected your well-being.

Opportunities of Student-Athlete Experience

What aspects of the student-athlete experience are most rewarding for you? Describe specific experiences in college where you felt like you were thriving.

In what areas of your life do you think you could improve your personal well-being?

Areas of Support

What resources do you utilize within the athletic department pertaining to your well-being? Are there any forms of support outside of the athletic department that you utilize on campus? Can you describe any forms of support outside of the university setting that enhance your well-being?

Where is the athletic department lacking/what do you think is lacking in terms of supporting your well-being?

What else do you think athletic departments can do to enhance student-athlete well-being?

What changes do you want to see regarding the female student-athlete experience, if any?