

A Framework for Understanding Internal Athlete Activism in College Sport

Jessica K. Brougham

University of Florida

Christopher M. McLeod

University of Florida

Most research on athlete activism has focused on external athlete activism, where high-profile athletes use broadcast media or social media platforms to engage in activism. This paper draws from organizational behavior literature and Cooper et al.'s (2019) operational definition of activism to conceptualize internal athlete activism. Athletes perform internal athlete activism through formal or informal organizational channels with the explicit goal of challenging organizational power structures to advance social justice aims. Internal athlete activism is characterized by 1) internal, upward voice, 2) prosocial intent, 3) a clear opponent, 4) challenging power structures, 5) specific goals or measurable objectives, 6) connection to social justice movements, and 7) threat of organizationally imposed silence. Internal athlete activism is especially relevant for low-profile athletes with fewer opportunities to use external channels. Our framework illustrates the unique challenges of internal athlete activism and highlights strategies for activists.

Keywords: organizational silence, employee voice, athlete labor

The 2020 murder of George Floyd, a result of police brutality, resulted in Black Lives Matter protests across the United States (U.S.). US athletes' involvement in this movement was prominent, with examples of activism occurring within college and professional sporting arenas. Examples of this protesting include refusal to practice, play, and participate in required activities, such as media interviews. Athletes' participation in activism is connected to broader social justice movements and can be traced back decades (Wulf, 2019). In more recent history, an example is the monumental 1968 Black Power protest at the Mexico Olympic Games (Zolov, 2004). It is this connection of protests to social justice movements that is critical when exploring athlete activism (Cooper et al., 2019), with social justice often being explored through three core values: (1) Equal Rights; (2) Equal Opportunity; and (3) Equal Treatment (San Diego Foundation, 2022). Therefore, athlete activism also consists of action around issues including, but not limited to, disability/ability, LGBTQ+ rights, poverty, and health.

Much scholarship exploring athlete activism focuses on the use of external voice channels such as traditional or social media (Sanderson et al., 2016; Frederick et al., 2018; Cooky & Antunovic, 2020). In this study, we define external voice channels as avenues for communication that transcend the organizations that athletes belong to and cannot be directly controlled by those organizations. However, organizations might still seek to monitor and influence external voice channels. For example, Sedona Prince, a former women's basketball player for the University of Oregon, created a viral TikTok highlighting the inequities between the NCAA Men's and Women's basketball tournaments (Mickanen, 2021). This video's engagement allowed Sedona to transcend the NCAA and use her voice in ways that her organization cannot control, resulting in significant changes from the NCAA (Nierenberg, 2022).

In contrast to external voice, we focus on athlete activism that occurs through internal voice channels as defined by organizational behavior (OB) voice. According to OB voice, internal voice channels can be either formal or informal mechanisms that allow the employee to communicate and generate change within the organizations they are members. While formal voice channels reflect structured meetings and grievance processes (Mowbray et al., 2014), informal voice channels are casual and unstructured conversations with colleagues and unsanctioned organizing among workers (Wilkinson et al., 2020). Specifically, we focus on athlete activism that uses voice channels within the sports organization where the athletes are members or employees. We call this type of activism "internal athlete activism," which we define as actions performed by athletes through formal or informal organizational channels with the explicit goal of challenging organizational power structures to advance social justice aims. Internal athlete activism builds off the operational definition of activism by Cooper et al. (2019), but it occurs through different channels compared to the external athlete activism of Sedona Prince and others. Whereas internal voice channels might provide some opportunities for athletes to engage in activism it also raises unique challenges as internal activists face considerable threats of being silenced by organizational practices in the sport industry. Therefore, our framework also seeks to identify these threats, explain how they operate, and explore strategies for promoting internal athlete activism.

Therefore, this paper aims to conceptualize internal athlete activism, specifically focusing on intercollegiate athletics. We build from the operational definition of activism provided by Cooper et al. (2019), as it identifies critical components that must exist for an action to be classified as activism, and integrate critical factors of OB voice. Our conceptual framework can

be used to identify activities that fulfill the requirements of internal athlete activism. Of importance to practitioners, our framework reveals the main barriers to organizational voice, which hinder internal athlete activism. Further, this framework could allow practitioners to understand where they can enhance athletes' capacity to participate in internal athlete activism. Finally, this conceptual framework has implications for scholars attempting to help athletes enact organizational changes.

Why Internal Athlete Activism?

There are four reasons why scholars must examine internal athlete activism including, (1) External athlete activism is not a plausible option for all athletes; (2) Many athletes are dependent on their sporting organizations to compete; (3) Sport organizations embody many of the social injustices that athlete activism targets; and (4) The necessity for internal athlete activism has been amplified in recent years due to the poor treatment of athletes. First, while the success of Sedona's viral TikTok indicates that external athlete activism can be a successful strategy for athletes, athletes have more opportunities to use external voice channels when they have fame (Galily, 2019). An example of this is the #WEAREUNITED x #WEWANTTOPLAY movement, which was led by Clemson quarterback Trevor Lawrence, who had an established fan base. While this movement included football players from across the nation, and was started by a group of PAC-12 players (Dodd, 2020), Trevor Lawrence was arguably the most effective voice in this movement due to his established social media presence and followership (Black et al., 2022).

Second, many athletes, especially college athletes, depend on athletic departments and universities for scholarships and organizational support and have fewer alternatives (Epstein & Anderson, 2016), so while high-profile athletes are sometimes able to transcend the organizations that employ them through external activism as illustrated through the Sedona Prince and Trevor Lawrence examples, most athletes depend on organizations for their livelihood and well-being. An example of the potential backlash college athletes face is Ariyana Smith, who in 2014 protested the murder of Michael Brown by law enforcement. Smith laid on the basketball court for four and a half minutes to signify the four and a half hours that Brown laid in the street after being shot (Zirin, 2014). Following her protest, Smith was suspended indefinitely from the team. However, due to pressure from the media this suspension was rescinded (Zirin, 2014).

Similarly, the third reason internal athlete activism is important is that critical researchers have shown that sport organizations embody many of the social injustices that are the target of athlete activism (Keaton & Cooper, 2022; Foster et al., 2022). For example, research has shown that college sport organizations and institutions are some of the strongest purveyors of patriarchy, racism, homophobia, and ableism (Edwards, 2017; Hawkins, 2010; Lynch & Hill, 2021; Pelak, 2008; Siegele et al., 2020). Therefore, internal athlete activism is also a crucial site for enacting social change, because, as Stephan et al (2016) illustrated, changes within organizations are necessary for broader changes in society.

Lastly, the necessity for internal athlete activism has been amplified in recent years with the exposure of the poor treatment of athletes, including both physical and mental abuse. An example is Katie Meyer, a women's soccer player who died by suicide in early 2022. Following her passing, Meyer's parents revealed that she was part of a larger investigation at the university and had feared the possible consequences (Gunn, 2022). As organizations control athletes

through their dependence on scholarships and organizational support, athletes can tolerate abuse, leading to a range of negative outcomes including depression, anxiety, burnout, and suicide (Roxas & Ridinger, 2016; Cutler & Dwyer, 2020). Internal athlete activism provides athletes with channels to share their needs and establish change within organizations.

Literature Review

Our literature review section will establish the groundwork for internal athlete activism by describing the three main bodies of literature that support our framework. First, we will provide an overview of athlete activism research with a specific focus on Cooper et al.'s (2019) definition of sporting activism. Second, we will provide an overview of OB research on voice to distill the key components of OB voice. Our internal athlete activism framework lies at the intersection of these two bodies of literature. Finally, we will pay special attention to the concept of silence as defined in organizational literature and apply it to identify the unique challenges of engaging in internal athlete activism.

Athlete Activism Review

The concept of *internal athlete activism* that we develop in this paper extends research on athlete activism. While we specifically integrate the operational definition of activism outlined by Cooper et al. (2019), other scholars such as Kaufman (2008) defined athlete activists as those who “used sport or their role as athletes to promote social and political change” (p. 220), while Lee and Cunningham (2019) stated that social justice activism is “advocating for people without power or voice, while also cognizing a sense of responsibility to combat the injustices of society” (p.9). While these definitions help explain athlete activism, they focus on the macro level, where macro refers to the wider community or social impacts.

Kluch (2020) examined activism in college athletics and identified five conceptualizations of college athlete activism, including social justice action, mentorship, authenticity, intervention, and public acts of resistance. Some of these conceptualizations, such as mentorship and intervention, might happen within organizations rather than through public outlets, suggesting the possibility for internal athlete activism. Kluch (2020) also noted that college-athletes view an activist as someone promoting strategic change in everyday situations.

Agyemang et al. (2010) also explored athletes' perceptions of race and athlete activism, specifically analyzing Black male college athletes. The results of this study identified that Black college athletes understand the history and importance of participating in activism; however, the athletes in Agyemang et al.'s (2010) study were not as involved as athletes from prior generations.

Researchers have also studied how the public responds to college athletes' activism. An example of this is Frederick et al. (2017) who explored Facebook users' response to activism by the college athletes at the University of Missouri. Frederick et al. (2017) found that commenters felt college athletes were “manufacturing racism” (p. 24), and their engagement with activism was not compatible with sport. Some posted that the college athletes' scholarships should be revoked. Work completed by Watanabe et al. (2019) identified that college athlete-led protests could have an impact on football game attendance. Specifically, through regression analysis, Watanabe et al. (2019) found that the voting demographics of the local team has a significant relationship with attendance after protest.

Jolly et al. (2021) conceptualized transformational allyship as the integration of both individual and institutional levels of activism. Specifically, individual activism is where a person is an active member in a social justice organization, whereas institutional activism is where individuals within an institution create and implement a methodical action plan, such as intentional investment in DEI, to establish a more diverse workforce. The integration of these two levels of activism is argued to be necessary for allyship to be transformational. Jolly et al. (2021) further explain, using Cooper et al.'s (2019) definition of activism, that for allyship to meet the criteria of activism it must confront systems of oppression rather than focus on incidents of discrimination. Jolly et al. (2021) make an important distinction between institutional and individual activism by illustrating activism also exists at the micro and meso levels.

Thus, although researchers are often drawn to high profile activism that occurs through external voice channels, there is also growing evidence that athletes are engaging in activism within organizations. Concepts such as mentorship activism and intervention activism identified by Kluch (2020) and institutional activism as defined by Jolly et al., (2021) suggest that athletes can engage in internal voice channels. At the same time, however, researchers have cautioned against using the concept of activism too broadly (Jolly et al., 2021). The challenge is that definitions of activism are actively debated in the literature (Cooper et al., 2019). Specifically, as activism has been explored in many different academic disciplines and through different lenses, finding a uniform definition is challenging (Cooper et al., 2019). In this paper, we build on the framework developed by Cooper et al. (2019) because it identifies critical components that must exist for an action to be classified as activism.

An Operational Definition of Activism. In August of 2020, Illinois State University (ISU) athletic director Larry Lyons held a zoom meeting with the programs' college athletes to discuss the upcoming year and address the Black Lives Matter protests occurring nationwide (Stock, 2020). During this call Lyons stated, "All Redbird Lives Matter," a phrase that shifts public discussion away from being centered specifically on racism against Black people. His comment was met immediately with backlash (Stock, 2020; Mitchell, 2020). Over the coming days, college athletes at Illinois State engaged in activism by removing their attendance at practice and events, organizing a campus wide protest, and releasing a list of demands for the athletic department (Stock, 2020). This activism clearly illustrates the four components of Cooper et al.'s (2019) operational definition of activism and is explored below. These components are: 1) a clear opposition; 2) concrete disruption and challenging of hegemonic structures, norms, and mental processes; 3) specific goals and objectives to assess progress; and 4) a connection to a broader social justice movement.

A clear opposition. The clear opposition component refers to an individual or organization that athletes are challenging through their activism, including both organizations they play within, such as the NCAA, or outside organizations. The athletes at ISU were challenging both the athletic director, Larry Lyons, and the athletic department administration, illustrated through an athlete statement sharing they do not forgive Larry or the administration, and for forgiveness to occur there must be change (Stock, 2020).

Concrete disruption and challenging of hegemonic structures, norms, and mental processes. Cooper et al. (2019) state, "The core dissention in interpretations of activism lies in whether (and to what) extent actions disrupt hegemonic social order, including structures and practices" (p.154). The actions taken by college athletes at ISU had direct impacts on the running

of the athletic department as these individuals used their power to restrict the functioning of the department through their refusal to participate in department activities including sport practices.

Specific goals and objectives to assess progress. Activists require specific goals and objectives to decide whether adequate progress is being made. At ISU, the athletes released a list of four demands which included, (1) required seminars for athletic administration staff, coaches, and athletes; (2) a commitment to more people of color in positions of power and in mental health; (2) a commitment to more diversity in athletic trainers and student athletic trainers; (4) make an athletic department plan of action to support the Black Lives Matter movement and any future social justice movements and share with the public and on social media (Stock, 2020). These demands provided a way for the athletes to measure progress made by the athletic department.

Connection to a broader social justice movement. The final component of Cooper et al.'s (2019) operational definition of activism is the requirement of a connection to a social justice movement. Social justice is often explored through three core values: (1) Equal Rights; (2) Equal Opportunity; and (3) Equal Treatment (San Diego Foundation, 2022), meaning social justice movements can include a large range of issues such as race, gender, sexuality, pay and disability/ability, to name a few. At ISU, the college athlete's connection to a broader social justice movement was a direct connection to Black Lives Matter.

Power and Activism. An important facet of athlete activism, as defined by Cooper et al. (2019), is the effort to disrupt and challenge of hegemonic structures. However, our internal activism framework uses Fleming and Spicer's (2014) theorization of the four "faces" of power. While some power structures are indeed hegemonic, athlete activism can also disrupt and challenge other types of power structures that are not hegemonic. Therefore, we broaden this facet by arguing that internal athlete activism challenges *power structures* more broadly.

Fleming and Spicer (2014) divide their four forms of power into two specific categories which are episodic and systematic. Episodic power includes coercion and manipulation, which reflect a direct exercise of power (Anderson, 2020), while domination and subjectification are components of systematic power, otherwise defined as power that establishes organizing structures within society (Anderson, 2020). Specifically, within episodic power, coercion involves the direct use of power influencing individuals' participation in actions that they otherwise would not. In sport, research has been conducted on eating behaviors of athletes, where coaches coerce athletes to increase (or decrease) caloric intake to earn a spot to compete (Plateau et al., 2014). Manipulation refers to when actors seek to shape the issues considered important and relevant, the type of power involved in agenda setting. An example of this in intercollegiate athletics is the encouragement of athletes to compete despite injury (Ryska, 2009; Weinberg et al., 2013). Specifically, coaches and others often frame competition, success, and team membership as being more important than an athletes' long-term health and career (Kroshus et al., 2015). Within systematic power, domination involves influencing people through the construction of ideological values that become hegemonic. While manipulation is enforced by individuals, domination is a power which exists through organizational or institutional norms (Anderson, 2020). An example of this is the long-standing idea that sport is a masculine preserve where men have special value and women are inferior and of less value (Bryson, 1987; Metcalfe, 2018). Subjectification is a type of influence that constitutes an actor's sense of self, emotions, and identity. Therefore, people believe they are doing something that satisfies their own identities when, in fact, their identities have been created or influenced by others and are,

therefore, mechanisms of control (Fleming and Spicer, 2014). In sport this would be creating an environment where athletes are encouraged to think of themselves through a narrow athletic identity that precludes alternative behavior, such as thinking about and preparing for retirement (Andrijiw, 2020).

While it is likely that Cooper et al. (2019) understand that each of these power structures exist within sporting organizations, the explicit use of hegemonic structures within their work can be restrictive, especially as hegemonic structures falls within the category of domination. The integration of Fleming and Spicer's (2014) four "faces" of power, broadens the approaches individuals can take when analyzing power structures. We believe actions that challenge coercion, manipulation, and subjectification can also be considered activism, so long as they also meet the aforementioned criteria laid out by Cooper et al. (2019).

Organizational Behavior Voice

To conceptualize internal athlete activism, we integrate Cooper et al.'s (2019) operational definition of activism with theory of OB voice. Morrison (2011) defined voice within OB research as "discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organizational or unit functioning" (p. 375). OB research has indicated that voice within organizations is upward, with the goal of challenging the status quo. Upward voice stays internal and allows employees/individuals to express opinions that will benefit the organization (Satterstrom et al., 2021). The structure for voice can vary between formal and informal, allowing for both free flowing exchange of ideas and more structured communication methods (Mowbray et al., 2014). Specifically, OB literature describes formal voice as organized and planned meetings between employees and supervisors, while informal voice is casual, unstructured conversation (Mowbray et al., 2014; Wilkinson et al., 2020).

Research within the OB discipline indicates that an outcome of employee voice is improved mental health (Rollmann et al., 2021). Abdulgalimov et al. (2020) shared that organizations who emphasize the implementation of voice mechanisms and respond to them increase staff retention, satisfaction, and understand operations better. Additionally, organizational voice enhances employees' feelings of job control, which positively impacts employee well-being (Wood, 2008). Conversely, when organizations limit voice and impose silence, this is detrimental to employee mental health and well-being (Perlow & Williams, 2003).

We argue that athlete voice within organizations can be conceptualized as being synonymous with OB voice. Scholars often use OB theories to study athletes, including college athletes (Love & Kim, 2018). Moreover, the recent opinion by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) sharing that college athletes should be counted as employees under the National Labor Relations Act suggests a structural similarity between college athletes and employees (NLRB, 2021). While this topic is strongly debated, scholars in economics and law have explained why college athletes could be or should be counted as employees (Rhim, 1996; Sanderson & Siegfried, 2015; Berri, 2015). Specifically, athletes meet many of the criteria for employment under tests that courts typically use to determine whether labor statutes apply (McLeod et al., 2019). For example, scholarship college athletes perform highly controlled activities, that provide commercial benefit to organizations, and they receive reimbursement for those activities. Thus, irrespective of whether athletes are actually defined as employees, the structural similarities between an athlete's position in an organization and an employee's

position in an organization suggest that OB voice theory might be productively used to examine issues of internal athlete activism in college sport and other sectors of the sport industry. At the same time, we must consider the differences between college athletes and employees and how these might affect athletes' abilities to use internal voice channels.

Organizational Silence

Importantly, employees who have reason to engage in organizational voice can also be silenced. Van Dyne et al. (2003) conceptualized employee silence as a multidimensional construct that is differentiated through three constructs – acquiescent silence, defensive silence and prosocial silence, where each occurs due to differing motivations. Acquiescent silence occurs when an individual is disengaged and therefore not willing to participate in conversation, which is likely to occur in situations where individuals have tried to voice opinions previously and no action has been taken (Cetin, 2020). Acquiescent silence in OB literature is often linked to resignation behaviors (Van Dyne et al., 2003; Lam & Xu, 2019; Knoll & van Dick, 2013). An example of acquiescent silence in sport could be an athlete not speaking up regarding a concussion knowing that their coaches will continue to make them play (New, 2015). These concerns could lead an athlete to “resign” from the team by choosing to enter the transfer portal. Defensive silence is where an individual chooses not to communicate their thoughts due to their own self-protection. Specifically, employees may hide ideas and thoughts as personal strategy and protection (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). In the context of college sport, athletes who avoid criticizing abusive coaches or poor decisions because they do not want to lose scholarship opportunities or playing time are exhibiting defensive silence. Prosocial silence is silence for the benefit of the organization (Cetin, 2020). Specifically, employees do not share information that could damage the reputation of the organization (Kim & Park, 2019). As prosocial silence regards information that is not shared, organizations sometimes incentivize prosocial silence by using rewards such as bonuses, promotions, and organizational status to encourage people not to share.

Silence in Sporting Organizations. A critical component of interpreting our internal athlete activism conceptual framework, is understanding silence. In the OB literature, silence is defined as a collective level phenomenon of neglecting to respond to issues faced by an organization, which might include actively subduing voices that advocate for change (Henrikson & Dayton, 2006). Through the integration of activism and OB literature, we propose three primary avenues of concern for silence in sporting organizations.

First, there are instances where athletes are motivated to use their voice, but organizational actors and structures silence them by ignoring and hiding voice, or by using threats, penalties, or coercion. An illustration of this silence is the case of Larry Nassar and the abuse he, Michigan State University (MSU), and USA gymnastics, allowed athletes to suffer for over 15 years. MSU was first notified of sexual assault concerns by a college-athlete in 1998 but the university failed to take any action (Kamal, 2021; USA Today, n.d.). In fact, it took until the Indianapolis Star wrote a news story in 2016 for any movement to occur, despite over the years complaints being filed to both MSU and USA gymnastics (Kamal, 2021). This example illustrates both defensive silence and prosocial silence as athletes may have personal concerns about speaking up knowing that it could cost them their opportunity to compete at the highest level (defensive silence), as well as having concerns about speaking up and costing other athletes

an opportunity to compete (prosocial silence). It should be noted that coaches and other administrators have substantial power over college athletes so that this type of silence is always a threat in college athletics (Stirling and Kerr, 2009; Whisenant, 2003).

The second type of organizational silence in sport organizations builds on the concept of symbolic activism (Cooper et al., 2019), and refers to situations where athletes' voices are heard, but the organizational response is superficial. Cooper et al. (2019) discussed symbolic activism in their *Typology of African American sport activism*, where symbolic activism is a deliberate decision that should draw attention to social injustices and encourage positive change. However, acts of symbolic activism can become problematic when they merge into performative activism which is defined as "shallow or self-serving support for social justice causes" (Thimsen, 2022, p.83). The role of symbolic activism is important as it brings attention to social justice issues; however, if individuals' participation in symbolic activism is for personal gain, they are not actually making a deliberate effort to challenge hegemonic structures and are taking momentum away from other activists. Penalosa (2021) further expanded performative activism to include surface level changes within an organization. An example of this is the required addition of DEI positions within NCAA athletic departments (Keaton & Cooper, 2022). Keaton and Cooper (2022) explained that the inclusion of these positions within athletic departments appear to ride the wave of racial equity movements within the country, which is important to note as the NCAA has a history of racial exclusion. While the reasoning behind DEI positions in athletic departments is important, these positions come with many challenges such as structural, cultural, and social barriers as identified by Kluch et al. (2022), and these challenges can impact the effectiveness of DEI positions. Therefore, implementation of DEI positions by the NCAA might be considered an act of symbolism that could lead to future acquiescent silence. Specifically, if athletes realize that the response of the NCAA to athlete's activism is symbolic, they may feel their voice does not have any meaningful impacts on sport organizations

The third type of silence in sport organizations is when athletes are motivated to share their voices, but internal mechanisms are structured so that only a partial account of athletes' expression is heard and responded to. Critical organizational theories, such as theories of racialized and gendered organizations (Mastracci, 2016; Ray, 2019), illustrate how organizational structures diminish the agency of certain racialized (Ray, 2019) and gendered (Mastracci, 2016) groups. Ray (2019) discusses how an individual's role within an organization can influence their desire to exercise agency through the organizations control over an individual's time. In college sport, athletes have minimal control over their time which restricts their ability to participate in activities outside of those scheduled for them, such as participating in protests or councils (Paule & Gilson, 2010). Further, Keaton and Cooper (2022) illustrated how NCAA athletic departments, conferences, and other organizations in the institutional field were racialized organizations. In these situations, college athletes who share grievances through formal or informal mechanisms might only be partially heard. For example, an athletes' concern around racism on campus might be reframed and diluted as a concern about receiving adequate academic or support resources. In these instances, athletes might remain vocal about some issues that organizations respond to, while acquiescing on other issues that do not receive adequate attention

Internal Athlete Activism Framework

Building on the literature reviewed above, our framework for internal athlete activism is best understood as existing at the intersection of OB voice and Cooper et al.'s (2019) operational definition of sporting activism. Our framework suggests that an athlete's actions must include features of OB voice and activism to be classified as internal athlete activism. Further, this framework will also expand on the framework set by Cooper et al. (2019) by further exploring the structures that can be challenged within an organization. Lastly, the framework illustrates the main limitations of internal athlete activism.

Therefore, the internal athlete activism framework consists of the following components:

1. Internal, upward voice
2. Prosocial intent, if not always perceived that way by others
3. A clear opponent
4. The challenging of *power structures*, norms, and mental processes
5. A specific goal or measurable objective
6. A broader connection to social justice movements
7. Threat of organizationally imposed silence

1. Internal, Upward Voice

In contrast with external athlete activism, where athletes use mechanisms that exist outside of their organizations, such as the media, to engage in activist practices, internal athlete activism makes use of formal or informal internal organizational channels to engage in activism. Within an NCAA athletic department, a formal channel for voice would be the Student Athlete Advisory Council (NCAA, 2019), a requirement of all NCAA institutions where select athletes serve in roles on a council that meets at least once a month to discuss the student athlete experience and issues within the athletic department (NCAA, 2012). An informal voice channel may be a direct unscheduled conversation between a student-athlete and compliance employee. Some athletes might make formal grievances related to social justice issues or they might engage in informal conversations about making change within their organizations.

2. Prosocial Intent

Athletes engaging in internal athlete activism are doing so because they believe that change within their organization is necessary. Within intercollegiate athletics, "organization" could refer to the team, athletic department, conference, or governing body such as the NCAA. Athletes seek to change organizations because they think organizations can be better, more just, and more equitable, and in that sense their internal athlete activism is prosocial (Canadian Press, 2022). However, since internal athlete activism invariably challenges existing power structures, it is likely that other people in the organization will perceive internal athlete activism to be a disruption. Therefore, it is possible that there will be some conflict around internal athlete activism.

3. A Clear Opponent

Consistent with Cooper et al.'s (2019) operational definition of activism, there must be a clear opponent for internal athlete voice to be activism. The main difference between internal athlete activism and external athlete activism is that internal athlete activism will target an opponent within the organization (or the organization itself).

4. The Challenging of Power Structures, Norms, and Mental Processes

Internal athlete activism provides an opportunity for athletes to challenge a broader array of power structures that exist in organizations, including but not limited to hegemonic power structures. The integration of Fleming and Spicer (2014) identify four “faces” of power that are enacted in organizations broadens the power structures to be challenged, creating more ways in which athletes can advocate for improvements in their experiences.

5. A Specific Goal or Measurable Objective

Consistent with Cooper et al.'s (2019) operational definition of activism, there must be a specific goal or measurable objective for internal activism activities. Internal athlete activism will usually have an objective related to some aspect of organizational change.

6. A Broader Connection to Social Justice Movements

Consistent with Cooper et al.'s (2019) operational definition of activism, internal athlete activism must be connected to broader social justice movements. Internal athlete activism will often find inspiration from broader social movements such as Black Lives Matter. However, whereas external athlete activists often champion those causes and contribute directly to the broader social movement, internal athlete activities are more likely to bring about incremental social change by changing their immediate organizational environments, consistent with Jolly et al.'s (2021) conceptualization of institutional activism.

7. Threat of Organizationally Imposed Silence

Lastly, the main barrier to internal athlete activism is that organizations can silence athletes' voice. This is one of the critical differences between internal and external athlete activism. External athlete activism is powerful, in part, because external athlete activists can transcend organizations. Internal athlete activism has more limitations. A last key point to note, is that sometimes athletes engage in external athlete activism as a last resort after their opportunities for internal athlete activism have been blocked by organizational silence mechanisms

An Example of Internal Athlete Activism within College Athletics. In the Fall of 2013, football players from Grambling State University refused to take the field against Jackson State University citing unsanitary facilities, unsafe equipment, and the removal of interim head coach George Ragsdale (Schroeder, 2013). In this case the strike took place after a meeting between the university's president, athletic director, and Ragsdale that did not go how the players

had intended (Schroeder, 2013). The failed meeting eventually resulted in the strike. In this example, both the meeting and strike are examples of internal athlete activism. While the strike was publicized, the action itself occurred as an internal move where the athletes refused to perform their required tasks. The media attention was an external activism path and occurred outside of the athletes' intended voice mechanism.

Grambling State players actions can be understood as internal athlete activism because they partook in internal, upward voice through meeting with the athletic director and university president. Additionally, this was completed with prosocial intent to improve the working conditions presented to the athletes. The clear opponent was the athletic department. In this situation, the power structure challenged by the athletes is domination, where the athletes were led to believe that what they had was the best that they would get. The specific and measurable goal is the change to the coaching staff that they requested, and investment into new or updated facilities. The connection to a broader social justice movement would be through labor rights – where individuals should be provided with working conditions in which they can thrive.

Finally, the athletes faced a threat of organizationally imposed silence. This is illustrated by the department's efforts to ignore the initial requests of the college athletes. Grambling State players' subsequent refusal to play was a critical next step to resist silencing mechanisms. However, their refusal to play also reveals a significant challenge to internal athlete activism, which many athletes do not overcome. Specifically, athletes must weigh the risk of escalating their resistance to silencing mechanisms against the risk to their careers. In this example, the athletes of the football team approached the situation as a group, bringing more strength to their demands, as discussed earlier in internal, upward voice. Of additional benefit to these athletes, the internal activism was picked up by local media. It appears the external voice pathways enacted by the media strengthened the players' internal voice strategy.

Theoretical Implications of Internal Athlete Activism Framework

Our integration of OB voice with the operationalized definition of sporting activism outlined by Cooper et al. (2019) has implications for the athlete activism literature. Many academic studies have approached athlete activism from a macro level, where the activism is directly impacting the wider community (Doehler, 2021). However, this conceptual framework allows us to identify ways in which athletes can advocate for their own experiences within sporting organizations. The role of athletes as activists within organizations has been noted in research by Kluch (2020) and Jolly et al. (2021); however, our framework theorizes the critical components of this internal activist work from an organizational voice perspective. Specifically, our framework illustrates that internal, upward voice, prosocial intent, and the threat of organizationally imposed silence are the key features that distinguish athlete activism conducted through internal channels from the athlete activism that has been theorized in the literature and used to study activism conducted through external channels.

Moreover, by engaging with the concept of silence, our framework highlights the main limitations of internal athlete activist strategies. Internal athlete activists often face considerable power imbalances and are, therefore, vulnerable to being silenced. Future research is needed to understand how athletes respond to silencing mechanisms. Our analysis demonstrates that many athletes will act acquiescently, defensively, or pro-socially. These types of silence will often result in negative outcomes for athletes, including reduced well-being, and possibly exit from sport (Perlow & Williams, 2003). However, there are also instances, such as in the Grambling

State example, where athletes resist silencing mechanisms. Researchers might productively examine strategies for resisting silencing mechanisms to help athletes engage in internal athlete activism.

Additionally, this conceptual framework allows us to complete future research analyzing organizations and the structural impacts on athlete well-being. As mentioned earlier, OB voice research has indicated that promoting speech increases employee well-being. Given the well-recognized challenges associated with athlete well-being in today's college sport landscape (Gunn, 2022; Kamal, 2021), evaluating organizational voice mechanisms may have a positive impact on the experiences of athletes.

A critical question that arises from our framework is the relationship between internal athlete activism and external athlete activism. On the one hand, our theorization and examples show that external athlete activism is sometimes a consequence of failed internal athlete activism. This is illustrated through the actions of MSU and USA gymnastics regarding their employee Larry Nassar. Unfortunately, this situation reflects a prolonged period of neglect toward athletes from these organizations, and the implications of this resulted in athletes subjecting themselves to further stressful situations by having to come forward and speak out about their negative experiences. Additionally, it appears as though many successful activism campaigns include athletes using internal and external voice mechanism. Grambling State football players appeared to benefit from their grievances being made public through local media. Therefore, a crucial question for future research is to examine the various relationships between internal and external athlete activism strategies.

Practical Implications

Our conceptual framework also provides practical implications for stakeholders attempting to foster and support athlete activism. First, and critically, it reveals opportunities for activism that are available for all athletes, irrespective of their popularity. All athletes should consider their options for engaging in internal activism. Second, our framework shows the characteristics of internal athlete activism. Consistent with Cooper et al.'s (2019) framework, activists need to have a clear opposition, challenge power structures, have specific goals and measurable objectives, and connect their activism to broader social movements. Consistent with OB voice, internal activists also need to operate within the organization, have a prosocial intent, and most importantly, strategically navigate the threat of organizationally imposed silence.

Our framework also reveals strategies for navigating organizationally imposed silence. Athletes must use their social networks to create coalitions as individual athletes can be easily silenced. Athletes will also benefit from more formal voice pathways that are not controlled by organizations. Players unions, associations, and councils might be effective. More research is needed on whether third-party pathways, such as Game Plan's athlete voice platform, will be effective. Lastly, athletes have the option of attempting to use external voice channels.

Our framework also provides some considerations for athletic administrators. It appears external athlete activism is costly for all parties, including athletic departments. It is certainly costly for athletes, who must risk their careers, playing time, reputation, and privacy to be external activists (Leppard, 2022). Therefore, it might be in athletic administrators' best interests to accept and facilitate internal athlete activism so that athletes do not feel like they need to resort to external channels. Of course, it is possible that athletic administrators will coopt athlete

activism through internal channels and implement symbolic or superficial changes rather than meaningful organizational changes (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020).

Although we remain hopeful regarding college athletes' opportunities to use internal athlete activism, we also recognize that the threats of organizationally imposed violence are severe. Engaging in internal athlete activism is a risk, and athletes' voice might never even be heard. Therefore, we do not advocate for using internal voice pathways *instead* of external voice pathways. Rather, we offer internal athlete activism as another approach that might fit the circumstances of individual athletes.

Conclusion

We have conceptualized internal athlete activism as a strategy additional to external athlete activism by integrating Cooper et al.'s (2019) operational definition of activism with research on organizational voice. Internal athlete activism is a critical topic for future research because it is a potential avenue for lower-profile athletes who want to enact socially-just organizational changes. However, to do so, they will need to wrestle with organizational silence mechanisms. Although we initially framed internal athlete activism as an alternative to external athlete activism, it is clear from our conceptualization and the examples we have explored, that internal athlete activism and external athlete activism are related to each other. Internal athlete activists often go external when their internal efforts reach a dead end; external athlete activists can be punished and controlled through organizational processes. We believe these insights enrich research on athlete activism and help stakeholders understand the best strategies for successful activism in the sport industry.

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