
Addressing Student-Athlete Anxiety

At all levels of schooling, a significant number of students are involved in athletic activities. For example, the National Federation of State High School Associations reports that in the U.S. more than 55.5 percent of students enrolled in high school participate in athletics.

Athletics clearly is a broad arena of youth subculture identity, and a variety of subgroups have coalesced around formal and informal sports teams and around peers who adopt an athletic lifestyle. Good athletes usually are admired, and exceptional athletes often are treated as superstars. There are, of course, significant status differentials among the various youth sports and among those who identify with this arena of school life.

Whatever the status, participation in athletics usually adds to the challenges related to school and can increase the psychological pressure experienced by a student-athlete. Practice and competitions consume considerable time. Participation on a team adds another facet of school life with performance expectations and related anxiety. It also can be an outlet for channeling and releasing stress.

What Does Research Say?

There is some research supporting the positive connection between adolescent sport participation and mental health (see below).

Early studies reported that participating in a sport in high school clearly had a positive effect on students' lives (e.g., later occupation status, income, and educational attainment). For example, Marsh (1993) reported that in 14 out of 22 cases, sport participation in the last two years of high school favorably affected college acceptance and educational goals. Trudeau and Shephard (2008) reported positive influences from physical activity on concentration, memory and classroom behavior and intellectual performance (see Trudeau & Shephard for references to early studies).

In 2009, Armstrong and Oomen-Early reported a study on depression, self-esteem and social connectedness of student-athletes. The findings suggest that student-athletes had greater levels of self-esteem, greater levels of perceived social connectedness, and lower rates of depression than their peers.

A recent study surveyed a sample of Canadians in secondary school to assess the impact of participation on a sports team on schooling and three years after graduation. Every three months during their secondary school experience students were surveyed about involvement in a school sport, assessed for depressive symptoms, perceived stress, and self-rated their mental health (covariates included sex, age, parent education, diagnosed mood disorder). The results showed that adolescents who were part of a sports team had fewer symptoms of depression, lower stress levels, and higher self-ratings of mental health than students who were not part of a sport (Jewett, Sabiston, Brunet, O'Loughlin, Scarapicchia, & O'Loughlin, 2014).

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While participation in athletics can be a good outlet for stress and anxiety, there is a body of cautionary research (see below).

Studies have underscored that participation is time consuming and stressful and involves meeting considerable academic regulations in order to play. Research also raises concerns that nonacademic endeavors can lead to time management problems, less time spent on homework, less investment in school, lower GPA, and greater school misconduct than other students (see references in Harrison & Gopalakrishnan, 2003, and in Miller, Melnick, Barnes, Farrell, & Sabo, 2005).

Reluctance to seek help outside of the athletic network for school problems also is reported. For example, studies report that student-athletes are more likely than their peers to deny or try to hide their mental health concerns and avoid therapy. In particular, they do not want coaches and their teammates to learn they have such problems (Barnard, 2016; Pinkerton, Hinz, & Barrow, 1989) .

Possible brain injury is a concern in sports where there is repeated head impact exposure (e.g., high school football). However, researchers note that they don't know yet whether young brains might recover completely in the off-season or whether the expected developmental trajectory might be knocked off-course by the impacts (see research by Davenport and her colleagues).

School Policies and Practices Accounting for Student Athletes

As part of a general policy for all students, schools need to take steps to ensure that anxiety and other problems affecting student athletes are countered. This includes taking steps to assure that athletic programs are designed to maximize healthy development and minimize physical and mental health problems. Particular focus is needed on minimizing the negative impact of athletic programs on participants and on the overall school culture.

In regular practice, schools should monitor and modify programs as well as identifying student-athletes who experience physical, mental, and academic problems. And increased diligence is needed in addressing any negative impact at a school stemming from “jock” culture.

With respect to professional development, special attention must be paid to ensuring that coaches are motivated and able to promote healthy development and prevent problems. And all staff require increased training in monitoring for early warning indicators.

System improvements usually are necessary to ensure that student-athletes remain part of the mainstream life on a campus and that all student problems are carefully monitored and addressed as quickly as feasible. This includes frequent progress reports and helping students self-monitor and seek appropriate help when problems arise. For student-athletes, monitoring needs to go beyond maintaining eligibility; the concern is for any factors interfering with physical and mental health (including positive interpersonal relationships not only with other athletes and coaches but also with other students and staff).

With older students, it is especially important to focus student-athletes on goal formulation and preparation for a future beyond sports (e.g., college and career). At higher education institutions, there is a move to adopt the NCAA Life Skills program (previously known as CHAMPS/Life Skills). This program is designed “to focus on the comprehensive development of the student-athlete and to prepare student-athletes for the challenges of life beyond the playing field.” It is based on the valuing of a balanced life including academic achievement, athletic success and personal well-being. To ensure the academic progress of student-athletes toward intellectual development and graduation, it provides advising, tutoring, mentoring, computing, and other supports. This program demonstrates a model that could be readily adapted by secondary schools and embedded into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports.

Want a Personal Perspective? Ask a Student-Athlete

To add a personal voice to all this, Orly Termeie (the undergraduate working on this topic at the Center) surveyed five student athletes.

When asked: *What is the hardest part about being a student-athlete?*

>A high school basketball player said: "For me, the hardest part about being a student-athlete was figuring out how to manage my time effectively – I tried to finish my homework in class or do it on the bus for away games and soon enough it became a second nature to me."

>A college golf athlete indicated that she feels the pressure but also stated that "Being on two competitive club teams this year has actually improved my academic performance from last year, because I use my time so much more wisely and can't procrastinate."

>A former high school water polo player said that being on a team "definitely did add to my stress. I didn't get along well with the other guys on my team, and felt a lot like an outcast. I was also very tired and came home late, and would then have to do homework that was the last thing I wanted." "I have sought therapy, and am currently seeing a therapist for stress and anxiety. Most of it stems from other sources, but my time as a student-athlete is definitely something we have talked about."*

When asked if there is stigma about seeking therapy:

>A college swimmer answered: "Not really, I think that everyone goes through hard times in their lives and other people realize that – I think that a lot of the girls on the team are able to talk things out that are bothering them with other members of the team." "All of the teachers that I have encountered have been understanding about the classes and exams I've had to miss due to swimming. All student athletes are required to give travel letters to our professors during the first week of class, which indicates when we will be gone, and that's when they will usually tell you if they allow you to make up exams before or after."

>A former high school and college student who is now a professional women's basketball player discussed how her fellow peers treated her: "A lot of people idolized me or had negative views of me because I was an athlete." In response to the question: What was your favorite part about being an athlete? she indicated it was "bonding with my teammates and developing relationships with them."**

*This was the only one of the five who mentioned receiving therapy to deal with the stress associated with being a student-athlete. Some did note it could be helpful to talk to someone about their situation.

**This is a sentiment shared by most of those interviewed.

Concluding Comments

Being a student-athlete is not easy, but clearly many want to participate. Their motivation and developed capabilities often are enough to enable them to cope with the pressures. Some, however, need support to enhance their coping skills (e.g., for task and time management, for dealing with stress). They also need a social support network that facilitates discussion of problems that arise. In improving student and learning support systems, schools need to *embed* a focus on any specific subgroups that needs special attention. Some student-athletes constitute such as subgroup.

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