

# **COLLEGIATE STUDENT ATHLETES AND THE TRANSITION OUT OF SPORTS**

## **Collegiate Student Athletes and the Transition Out of Sports: The Importance of Preparation**

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# COLLEGIATE STUDENT ATHLETES AND THE TRANSITION OUT OF SPORTS

## Abstract

Many young athletes aspire to become professional athletes. They are programmed from an early age to believe that the only way to get there is to play collegiately. Those who do make it to the university level are often plagued by time constraints, injuries, or an overinflated sense of athletic identity, all of which can cause problems when it comes time to transition out of athletics. This paper will look at the aspects that can aid or impede an athlete's transition from collegiate sports to a career. While student-athletes are in a unique position and obtain amazing experiences, they are also put in a high-pressure, high-stakes situation. This paper will highlight the causes of unsuccessful transition and provide recommendations for student-athletes to receive the holistic support they need in order to be successful while in college and in the years beyond.

*Keywords:* student-athlete, athletic identity, transition, retirement, mental health, support

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## Collegiate Student Athletes and the Transition Out of Sports:

### The Importance of Preparation

In the late 1960s, sports science research focused on athletic career termination, aiming to understand athletes' reactions and retirement from elite sports. Drawing on thanatology and gerontology, the end of an athletic career was often seen as a negative and traumatic life event (Küttel et al., 2017). Although there is considerable evidence for the physical and psychological benefits that can be reaped from participation in organized sport at various levels, research shows that athletes who compete at the Division I level in particular may not be well prepared for life after sports. Student-athletes may become more vulnerable as they learn how to manage their academic and athletic responsibilities due to a variety of personal, academic, and sport-related demands. Combining these pressures can have detrimental impacts on mental health, including anxiety, depression, and drug use (Poux & Fry, 2015; Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017).

The end of a sporting career can be a traumatic occurrence for athletes because it disrupts their self-defining activities and signifies a change in identity (Cosh et al., 2013; Küttel & Schmid, 2017). Athletes' lives are committed to competition and training during their careers, which are regulated by coaching personnel. Retirement entails a transition to independent management and life planning. Athletes generally retire at a younger age, which means they must transition into other industries and careers, which frequently require new skill sets. After retirement, they are especially subject to depression, identity crises, alcohol/drug misuse, low self-esteem, and anxiety due to career insecurity (Cosh et al., 2013; Bjornsen and Dinkel, 2017). Furthermore, players frequently pursue sporting careers at the expense of their academic accomplishments, leaving them unprepared for other occupations beyond sport (Cosh et al., 2013).

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This paper will examine the positive and negative aspects of being a collegiate level student-athlete and how the experience can shape the athlete's retirement out of sports. Recommendations for colleges and universities on how to holistically support student-athletes will be made in order to help facilitate the success of student-athletes while in college and after. The findings can be used by academic and athletic departments to develop programs that will provide student-athletes with the support they need in all aspects of their college experience.

## **Literature Review**

The percentage of high school athletes that receive athletic scholarships to compete in college or that get 'signed' is only around 2%. Less than 2% of those student-athletes who play college sports go on to become professional athletes (NCAA, 2023). Student-athletes should treat education as a crucial component of the college athletics experience and the most satisfying outcome of involvement in student athletics should be a college education. For those who do not become a professional athlete, they can still benefit from their experiences in collegiate sports and the life lessons they pick up along the way as they seek professions in a variety of different industries, including business, education, athletics administration, communications, law, medicine, and many more (NCAA, 2023).

## **Collegiate Sports in The United States vs. Europe**

In the late 19th century, higher education in Europe and America gained value, leading to increased college enrollment. These institutions also served as gathering places for youth sports teams, although most were club-based and not always managed by schools or colleges. However, clubs and sports clubs faced criticism for interfering with academics and organized activities, leading to concerns about injuries and behavioral issues. To address this, American school authorities began incorporating sports into their curriculums and parents encouraged extra-

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curricular activities. This involvement in school policies created a deeper connection between the local community and schools and colleges, leading to the development of extra-curricular activities (SportsPlus, 2020; Van Bottenburg, 2019). Currently within the United States, there is a mix of municipal, school, and elite or club teams. However, by the time youth reaches high school age, they are playing their sport either primarily for their educational institution or a mix of school and club sport with the intention continuing to play on the college level. In Europe, the emphasis on playing a sport is not tied to an educational institute. Clubs and associations, in addition to the state-sponsored organizations, dominate the sports infrastructure (SportsPlus, 2020; Van Bottenburg, 2019).

### **National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)**

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is a group committed to giving college athletes a doorway to opportunities (NCAA, 2023). The NCAA was founded in 1906 with the goal of safeguarding student-athletes from harm and exploitation (Holt et al., 2022). The NCAA has more than 1,000 schools and universities as members. Over 500,000 student athletes who compete on over 20,000 teams in NCAA sports are supported by those schools, the NCAA national headquarters, and athletic conferences around the nation. The broad membership of the NCAA includes institutions with enrollments ranging from hundreds to tens of thousands of students (NCAA, 2023). The present NCAA consists of a three-division system which was introduced in 1973 in an effort to level the playing field for teams from similar schools and give collegiate athletes more opportunities to compete in national championships. Division I institutions often have the largest student bodies among the three NCAA divisions, as well as the biggest athletic budgets and the most athletic scholarships available. Through academic success, experience in high-level athletic competition, and a focus on community engagement, the

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Division II strategy offers growth opportunities. The opportunity to compete in a highly competitive athletic environment provided by Division III challenges college players to maximize their performance on the field and develop their potential by taking on new tasks off-campus (NCAA, 2023).

### **Benefits and Drawbacks of Athletics in Academic Institutions**

The literature presents both benefits and drawbacks to the role athletics plays at academic institutions. Athletics are essential to a university's educational foundation because they help students who participate in them advance professionally and socially, increase their graduation rates and GPAs, and develop personally overall. These are all objectives essential to a university's mission. College athletics are also frequently credited with other advantages, including financial support for the university, media attention, increased academic standing, more student enrollment, and improved school spirit (Chalfin et al., 2015). According to numerous studies, playing sports can help develop and teach qualities like self-control, sacrifice, leadership, integrity, ambition, perseverance, teamwork, work ethic, and the will to win. These characteristics can also be referred to as transferable skills. Transferable skills are skills learned in one area that can be used to other areas of life, such as employment in the case of athletes (Migliaccio, 2023). Many of these attributes are encapsulated in the talents that student athletes have that are widely acknowledged as being useful in the employment market (Chalfin et al., 2015; McKnight et al., 2009). Transferable skills are not only beneficial to the employer, but also to the student-athlete. Student-athletes who recognize their skills for success in non-athletic areas can better communicate these to future employers, giving them a competitive advantage in the job market (Migliaccio, 2023).

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However, several academics contest some of the aforementioned advantages and contend that some aspects of university athletics are detrimental to the academy and directly at odds with the goals of higher education. These criticisms have essentially been present ever since late 19th-century attempts to introduce competitive athletics into the classroom. Although commissions and scandals involving amateur college athletics have occurred for nearly a century and a half, these concerns are only now gaining traction in American courts. The intended outcome is to force some change, create new perspectives, and motivate policy development in response to reports highlighting low graduation rates, excessive time commitments of 40+ hours per week that interfere with students' ability to concentrate on their academic studies, and academic scandals involving transcript alterations, grade forging and recruiting violations (Myerberg, 2013; Miller, 2009; Chalfin et al., 2015).

### **Athletic Identity**

Every student athlete identifies with their sport, but for many of them, since it occupies such a significant portion of their lives, it comes to define who they are as individuals. The concept of athletic identity emphasizes group affiliation and social relatedness as well as its function as a self-schema or information processing guide (Newton, et al., 2020). Athletic identity is defined as the degree to which a person identifies as an athlete as well as the relationship between performance, athletic identity, and self-esteem. As a person grows into early adolescence and adulthood and becomes an athlete at any level, their athletic identity begins to take shape. It becomes more powerful as sports involvement rises and can eventually overtake other functions almost entirely. Athletes may develop a strong attachment to the set of roles they play in sports competition because they believe that many of their significant social connections depend on them assuming those identities (Kidd, et al., 1993; Facio, 2020).



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Athletic identity has been proven in numerous studies to have a substantial impact on how an athlete manages the transitioning process. Studies show student-athletes often prioritize athletics over academics, negatively impacting campus integration and engagement, and they struggle with long-term career planning and exploration activities. In addition to limiting a college athlete's capacity to obtain experience outside of their sport, the sheer quantity of time that college athletes devote to sport-related activities heightens an athlete's identity (Navarro & McCormick, 2017; Stokowski, et al., 2019). College athletes that place a strong priority on their sport frequently exhibit a lack of career maturity and go through a number of detrimental physical and psychological effects while they try to establish their sense of career path and throughout the changeover phase. If a person's sense of self-worth is consumed by their sport, it will be more difficult for them to adjust to new circumstances outside of athletics and reintegrate into society or the workforce (Stokowski, et al., 2019; Navarro & McCormick, 2017; Küttel & Schmid, 2017). Results from a study by Küttel and Schmid (2017), supported previous findings that a strong athletic identity is a risk factor for athletes confronting transition. Furthermore, student athletes are underutilizing campus resources like career services and counseling centers, despite institutions' efforts to support them. The demands of playing, traveling, and training often conflict with career preparation. Understanding collegiate athletes and their role in athletic identity can help educational stakeholders provide necessary support for their retention and postgraduate achievement (Murdock, et al., 2016).

### **Mental Health and Athletes**

Mounting evidence indicates several risk variables, such as sports-related injuries, performance decrease, overtraining, sport type, and stress are associated with mental illness in professional athletes. Negative life events, a lack of social support, and sleep issues are examples

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of general risk indicators. These elements can affect the frequency and duration of mental health symptoms and influence the most appropriate course of action (Purcell, et al., 2019; Stokowski, et al., 2019).

Estimates indicate that 10% to 20% of college student-athletes suffer from depression and student-athletes are more likely than non-student-athletes to suffer from depression (Gill, 2008). College-aged individuals and those experiencing significant life transitions are at a higher risk of suicide and suicide is the second-leading cause of death in the U.S. among those aged 18-24 and the fourth most common cause of death for college athletes. However, varied methodology, inconsistent reporting by schools, and a lack of awareness of screening instruments pose challenges to the most recent estimates of the prevalence of depression and suicide (Miller and Buttell, 2018; Rao and Hong, 2015). A study done by Rao et al. (2015) looked at NCAA data on athlete fatalities in the time period of 2003-2012. They found that within those nine years, suicide represented 7.3% of all NCAA student athlete deaths (Rao et al., 2015).

While participating in sports can boost one's self-esteem and sense of community, it can also be undermined by stressors such as parental, peer, and coach pressure, illness or injury, failure to play up to expectations, the end of a career in sports, and high-risk activity. An athlete's social network and sense of worth might be harmed by juggling their sporting commitments with their scholastic, financial, and social obligations (Miller and Buttell, 2018; Rao and Hong, 2015). Rao and Hong (2015) report that binge drinking, which has been linked to suicidal impulsivity, depressive behavior, and other negative behaviors, is more common in athletes. Post-injury mood disturbances can vary among injured athletes, with depression being more prevalent in serious cases. Post-injury depression may place athletes at an increased risk of suicide, especially if other risk factors are present. Factors shared by athletes who have attempted suicide should

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prompt trainers to focus on young, successful athletes who require surgery or long rehabilitation, may be out of sport for some time, and may be replaced on the team upon their return in order to help decrease depression and suicide attempts (Smith and Milliner, 1994).

### **Transition Out of Sports**

Athletic retirement differs significantly from traditional retirement in a number of important ways. Traditional retirement typically occurs with aging and is expected. It is an important life event and an adjustment process, but most retirements will be successful provided a general way of life can be maintained. Traditional retirement may be challenging for retirees who are struggling with their health or finances (Wang & Shi, 2014). For all athletes, retirement or transition from athletics is inevitable (McKnight, et al., 2009). This transitory event is equated with the vocational retirement of older persons. There is a belief that only a limited number of people who compete in elite and professional sport are likely to be affected by this transition, and as a result, athletic retirement has been overlooked. Retirement from an athletic career is considerably different than retirement from a job and can result in severe consequences related to athletic identity and forced retirement (McKnight, et al., 2009). Athletes typically start and finish their careers at a young age, causing stress during athletic retirement. However, many individuals do not experience the same disruption to their identity as athletes. Athletes dedicate much time to their sport, causing a lack of time for other interests, leading to a foreclosed identity, and disrupting normal developmental events (McKnight, et al., 2009). Athletes frequently go through unfavorable transitions and struggle with their identities when their self-worth and identity are related to their sport. If they are troubled by injuries or are cut from teams and are forced to finish their careers, many athletes do not feel they have achieved everything they had hoped to in the sport. High stress can influence the transitional process by increasing anxiety, decreasing the

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sense of self-worth, cause changes in mood, and add to feelings of loneliness and isolation as well as put athletes at risk for mental health disorders. Such occurrences frequently lead to challenging transitions (McKnight, et al., 2009; Cosh et al., 2013; Stokowski, et al., 2019).

### ***Athletes' Perception on Transition***

College students often struggle with the transition after college, feeling lost and powerless. They report a loss of their core identity and face institutionalized role exits, feeling powerless and frustrated (Kidd, et al., 2018). In a study looking at college athletes' perceptions of adapting to transition, Stokowski et al. (2019) found that 57.3% of respondents reported a negative perception of transition, while 42.7% reported a positive perception of transition. Circumstances, such as financial assistance, lack of enthusiasm, or injury, often had a negative impact on the quality of the transition (Küttel and Schmid, 2017). According to the literature, issues develop when a career change is forced through being cut from a team, an injury and aging out and an athlete enters non-normative retirement (McKnight, et al., 2009; Stowkowski, et al., 2019; Taylor and Ogilvie, 1994). Athletes may be unable to control their retirement due to an injury, getting cut, a management issue, or personal obligations. Loss of control over an event deeply linked to an athlete's self-identity can lead to a highly aversive and threatening situation. Research indicates that control perceptions impact self-competence, self-information interpretation, helplessness, motivation, physiological changes, self-confidence, and pathologies like depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (McKnight, et al., 2009; Taylor and Ogilvie, 1994). Career-ending injuries frequently prevent athletes from achieving their objectives and plans for life outside of sport, and those who suffer injury are sometimes powerless to control when and how the retirement process takes place. Athletes who are forced to quit from competition are frequently less prepared and more reluctant than those who do so voluntarily (McKnight, et al.,

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2009; Stowkowski, et al., 2019). Studies have shown that the loss connected with no longer being an athlete caused participants to deal with a range of psychological reactions, including perplexity, bereavement, loss of social support, loss of roles and routines, feelings of failure, despair, and loneliness (Kidd, et al., 2018; Leonard and Schimmel, 2016; Stokowski, 2019).

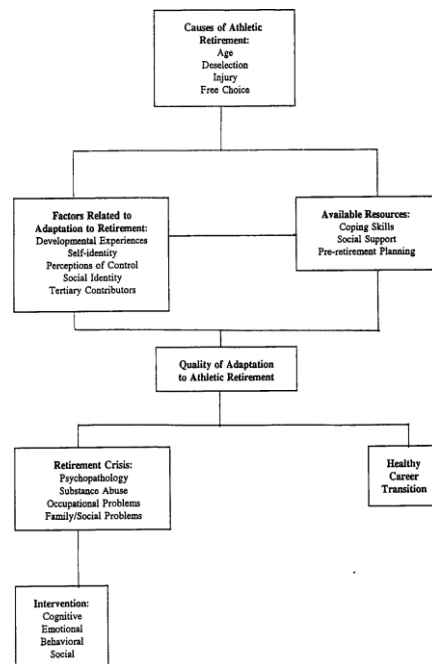
Athletes who possess alternative abilities may be more inclined to voluntarily depart from their sport and are less likely to struggle with adjustment. Leaving interscholastic and amateur sport voluntarily can result in a beneficial transition, and it is thought that this is a typical aspect of development. However, if athletes choose to quit when they are confronted with insurmountable situations, the line between ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ can occasionally become hazy. Only when an athlete has alternative course of action is retirement voluntary (McKnight, 2009). Anticipatory socialization, high self-efficacy and social support have been stated as important factors in a positive transition out of sports (McKnight, et al., 2009; Chan, 2023, Kidd et al., 2018). Anticipatory socialization involves proactive retirement preparation, which can help athletes adjust to life after sports. Many athletes experience existential questioning after retirement due to lack of preparation. Pre-planned athletes find the transition less disruptive, while those not prepared may struggle (McKnight et al., 2009). A student athlete with high self-efficacy has a better capacity to overcome challenges in their professional development and accomplish their goals (Chan, 2023). Research found that post-athletic career transitions were more successful for athletes who retire after achieving self-identified goals such as personal statistics and winning championships and those who proactively plan for retirement. Along with high self-efficacy, successful individuals were also described as optimistic, experienced psychological and social well-being, and possessed positive emotions, engagement, meaningful purpose, self-esteem, optimism, resilience, self-determination, and positive

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relationships with support from family, friends and coaches as seen in the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Retirement Among Athletes (see Figure 1) (Chan, 2023; Sinclair and Orlick, 1993, as cited in Kidd et al., 2018; Knights et al., 2016, as cited in Kidd et al., 2018; Stokowski, et al., 2019; Taylor and Ogilvie, 1994). Kidd et al. (2018) reported that athletes found solace in having other teammates who were going through similar transitions. Some subjects reported talking to teammates about their future, which helped them cope with the anxiety and provide support.

Figure 1

*Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Retirement Among Athletes*



*Note.* This figure was produced by Taylor, J. and Ogilvie, B.C. in 1994. From “A Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Retirement Among Athletes. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 21(3), p. 5.

## ***Athletic Retirement in Europe***

When comparing studies done on European athletes, support was found to be a key contributor to post-athletic transition success. A study conducted on Scottish athletes going

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through professional changes made the case for the significance of adequate and constructive social support. They also distinguished between four types of social support, including emotional support in the form of cheering, esteem support in the form of a constant source of encouragement, informational support in the form of a coach or trainer who enhances athletic ability, and tangible support in the form of parental or guardian assistance (Adams, et al., 2015, as cited in Kidd et al., 2018). A cross-cultural study found that most elite athletes in Switzerland, Denmark, and Poland voluntarily retire, with emotional and social adaptation being the most challenging. They received more support from private environment individuals than those connected to their former elite sports activity. The retirement decision process and future career considerations were more affected by individual assessments, rather than macro-level factors like national cultural dimensions or welfare systems. These findings were consistent with other cross-cultural studies on athletic transition (Küttel, et al., 2017).

### ***Support for Transition***

Athletes who experience a difficult transition frequently lament the loss of a support structure when the majority of their peers continue to participate in sports. The support they receive from past athletes, family, and the sport has been reported to reduce the amount of disruption and help them adjust to their athletic retirement. However, individuals may struggle to access previous support networks and establish new ones, potentially leading to feelings of loneliness (McKnight, et al., 2009).

For those college athletes who sustained a career-ending injury, it was discovered that shifting the athlete's focus to other positive elements of their life was important in easing the transition out of sport for college athletes. This type of contemplation was demonstrated to reduce the detrimental impacts of the abrupt transition. Furthermore, those athletes with a career-

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ending injury who also possessed strong athletic identities relied on social support and social circles as a tool to help them make the emotional, physical, and psychological changes required to successfully transition out of sport (Stokowski, et al., 2019).

According to research, preparing athletes and expanding resources can help with the shift. Athletes' transitions were made easier and more favorable if they could apply the abilities (i.e., time management, performing under pressure, leadership, and organization) they learned while participating in sports to their post-athletic lives. Having a plan for life after sports has a favorable impact on athletes' transition, demonstrating the value of career counseling and guidance in athletic departments. Positive role models and institutional assistance during their four years at their college or university aided in a positive transition, improving future preparedness and success (Stokowski, et al., 2019). Research also indicated that student-athletes felt the university athletic department should educate them on the sport retirement process, with the coach playing a crucial role; and it has been found that intervention programs significantly enhanced student athletes' confidence during the sport retirement transition and their transition to non-sport careers (Leffler, 2012; Stankovich, 1998).

The literature points out the pros and cons of athletic retirement and indicates ways for athletes to have a positive transition out of collegiate sports. However, there are some gaps in the literature looking at missing demographic information, mental health treatment and coaches' perspectives. While studies on the lack of career preparation for athletes have been conducted, the entire picture has not been painted due to a lack of information on other potential contributors, such as parents' educational attainment levels, adolescent athletic-role hyper-socialization, or socioeconomic position prior to college enrollment (Kidd, et al., 2018). Despite the increased interest in athlete mental health, the research contains major service delivery and



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treatment gaps. A structure for addressing professional athletes' mental health requirements is needed, ideally by establishing a whole-system approach. Program evaluation should take an ecological systems perspective, taking into account competitive, individual vulnerability, and organizational aspects (Purcell, et al., 2019). Coach viewpoints on the needs of student-athletes outside of sports are likewise inadequate. Because of the high amount of contact between players and coaches, as well as the necessity of emotional and informational support, coaches may have distinct perspectives on optimal student-athlete experiences (Bjornsen and Dinkel, 2017). There is also a gap in quantifying the educational benefits of athletic involvement, despite evidence indicating that participation may make players more marketable when seeking for jobs (Chalfin, et al., 2015). Finally, many studies focus on Division I athletes leaving a gap in the literature about the experiences of Division II and III student-athletes.

### **Analysis**

#### **Transferable Skills and Attribution Theory**

There are concrete benefits of playing sports on the collegiate level. One of those benefits is the development of certain qualities and skills. Playing sports can develop qualities like self-control, sacrifice, leadership, integrity, ambition, perseverance, teamwork, work ethic, and the will to win. These skills are considered transferable skills because they can be carried over into employment (Stokowski et al., 2019; Chalfin et al., 2015). Attribution theory is the process of inferring the causes of events or behaviors. Employers seek individuals with qualities such as competitive natured, goal-oriented, confidence, coachability, self-motivation and good time management (Stokowski et al., 2019; Chalfin et al., 2015). Looking through the lens of attribution theory and believing that athletes have gained these transferable skills and qualities

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through sports activity, companies want athletes to fill jobs in their organizations and these characteristics are highly valued (Cherry, 2023; McKnight et al., 2009; Chalfin et al., 2015).

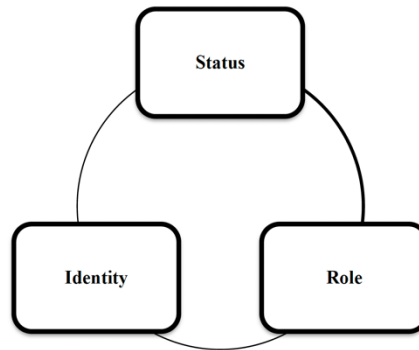
### **Athletic Identity and Role Theory**

The literature's recurring and central theme to whether a transition out of sports for a college athlete was successful revolved around athletic identity. An athletic identity starts to form in adolescence and depending on the circumstances and individual can develop to the point where it is the only identity of the individual. This makes it very difficult for that individual to transition out of sports due to an injury or a natural transition such as graduation or aging out (Stokowski, et al., 2019; Navarro & McCormick, 2017; Küttel & Schmid, 2017, Kidd et al, 2018; Facio, 2020). Role theory, originating from American sociologist Robert Merton, refers to an individual's social position and associated behavior. It consists of concepts of status, role, and identity. Roles carry risks and benefits, varying by individual characteristics, historical time, and cultural context. They provide connections, access to resources, and direction in uncertain situations, promoting feelings of security, status enhancement, and ego gratification (see Figure 2) (Kidd et al., 2018). Interscholastic and intercollegiate social structures reinforce an elite status for athletes and contributes to the inflation of their athletic identity. Based on role theory, because of this inflation of athletic identity, they only see themselves as elite athletes which can make transitioning out of the sport difficult (Kidd et al., 2018).

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Figure 2

### *Role Theory*



*Note.* This figure was produced by Kidd, V., Southall, R.M., Nagel, M.S., Reynolds II, J.F., Scheyett, A.M., Anderson, C.K. in 2018. From “Profit-Athletes’ Athletic Role Set and Post-Athletic Transitions.” *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 11, p. 118.

### **Humanistic Psychological Perspective and Model of Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition**

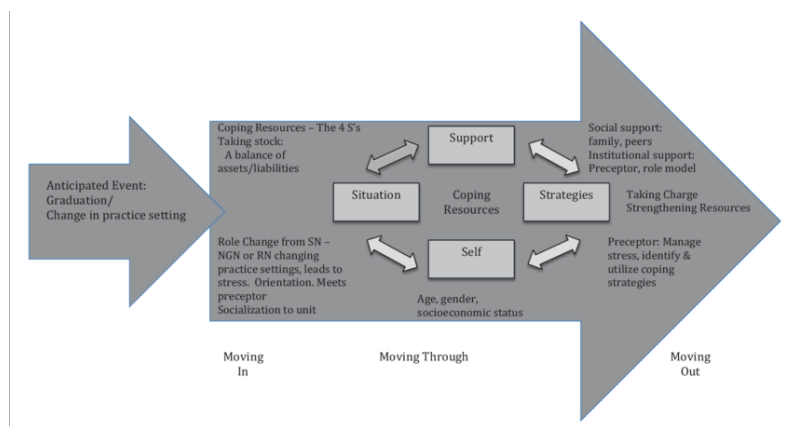
The humanistic psychological perspective can be useful in helping athletes make a smooth transition out of sport and into a career. Humanistic psychology emerged in the 1950s, influenced by Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. The focus is on motivation, self-actualization, and personal growth, focusing on the patient's inner sentiments and self-image, promoting the belief that individuals can develop independently. Positive psychotherapy uses this perspective to foster resilience and self-reliance, transforming treatment from negative to positive (Cherry, 2022). Although not linked to the humanistic perspective in the literature, Schlossberg's Model of Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition was cited numerous times throughout the literature in relation to the transitional process. Schlossberg's model can be a base to utilizing the humanistic approach in helping athletes with their transitions (Schlossberg, 1981). The Model of Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition explains that a transition occurs when an event or

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non-event changes assumptions about oneself and the world, requiring a change in behavior and relationships. Adapting to transitions can be challenging, with three main factors influencing adaptation: the characteristics of the transition, the characteristics of pre- and post-transition environments, and the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition (see Figure 3) (Schmitt and Schiffman, 2019). The event's characteristics significantly influence an individual's adaptation. Depending on the athlete's perceptions, transitions can be positive or negative, offering growth opportunities (Stokowski et al., 2019; Bjornsen and Dinkel, 2017). If sports psychologists, trainers, coaches, etc. can understand and adapt Schlossberg's model, they can then use the humanistic psychology perspective to work with athletes on developing a more holistic view of themselves and their futures, rather than just focusing on themselves through their athletic identity. This can especially help those suffering with negative non-normative transitions (McKnight, et al., 2009; Stowkowski, et al., 2019; Taylor and Ogilvie, 1994).

Figure 3

### *Model of Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition*



*Note.* This figure was produced by Schmitt, C. and Schiffman, R. in 2019. From “Perceived Needs and Coping Resources of Newly Hired Nurses.” SAGE Open Medicine, 7, p. 2.

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### **Cross-Cultural Psychological Perspective and Career Construction Theory**

Career construction theory developed by Mark Savickas (2005) is a differential, developmental, and dynamic process influenced by individual life experiences and life transitions (see Figure 4). It is a highly personalized process in which individuals adapt dynamically to their environment and experiences, shaping their personal job identity and career plans. It has been widely used to better understand general population students and adult learners as they develop career objectives, however, this notion has never been applied to college student-athletes (Navarro and McCormick, 2017). According to a study done by Navarro and McCormick (2017), participants experienced career uncertainty, anxiety, and indecision after graduating with immature future plans, exacerbated by a social and cultural lifestyle transition as well as a loss of athletic identity. They experienced job unhappiness and turnover due to excessive career ambitions, however, progressed toward job satisfaction through self-discovery and exposure to vocation post-graduation (Navarro and McCormick, 2017). Student athletes often spend 34-40 hours per week on sports, resulting in poor career maturity due to time constraints. To enhance career maturity and transition to a life after sports, they should actively participate in career development programs, including internships, practicums, and job shadowing, exposing them to real-life vocational experiences and expanding their self-understanding beyond athletics (Stokowski, et al., 2019; Navarro and McCormick, 2017). The cross-cultural psychological perspective examines how people behave in various cultures and use the knowledge they gain to better understand how culture affects our thinking and behavior (Cherry, 2022). As noted in the literature, there is a difference in the way sports are organized in Europe versus The United States. In Europe, sports are independent of higher education. Therefore, the separation may allow for college-age athletes to focus on their education and career goals as well as their athletic

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goals independent of each other. If a student in The United States has played sports their whole lives, there is a chance they have not had time to hold an after-school job or as the literature states, opportunity for career development programs within their time at college. This puts them at a disadvantage when graduating and going into the workforce and they have not been able to develop their career identity as shown in career construction theory (SportsPlus, 2020; Van Bottenburg, 2019; Navarro and McCormick, 2017). Utilizing the cross-cultural perspective, researchers can investigate the college-aged sports and academic systems of other countries to try to discover more ways that sports transitions can be positive. Combining the successful transition tools with career construction theory, American academic institutions can adapt to better help student athletes with their post-retirement plans (Cherry, 2022; Savickas, 2005).

Figure 4

### *Career Construction Theory*



*Note.* This figure was produced by Tokar, D.M., Savickas, M.L., and Kaut, K.P. in 2019. From “A test of the Career Construction Theory Model of Adaptation in Adult Workers with Chiari Malformation.” *Journal of Career Assessment*, 28(3).

### **Psychodynamic Psychological Perspective and Systems Theory**

Sigmund Freud's psychodynamic perspective relies on the unconscious mind, early childhood experiences, and interpersonal interactions to explain human behavior and treat mental diseases. The id, ego, and superego are three fundamental components of the psyche: the id, which comprises basic urges, the ego, which deals with real-world demands, and the superego, which deals with internalized principles and goals (Cherry, 2022). When an athlete presents with

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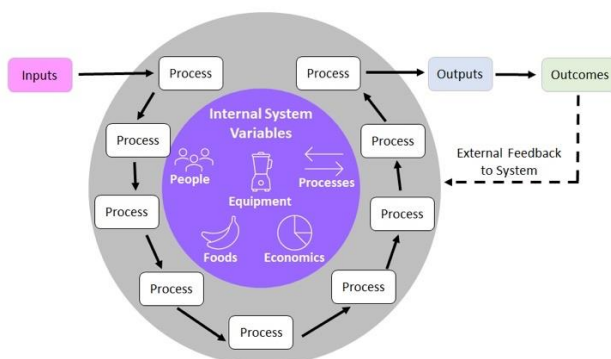
high athletic identity, ego and superego become dominant focusing wholly on the sport, meanwhile suppressing the id which can lead to anxiety. This anxiety can be seen in the form of stress to be the best at the sport or if an injury is involved, it can be seen in mental health complications such as depression (Cherry, 2002). As noted in the literature, post-injury mental disorders might differ between athletes, with depression being more common in severe cases, some even leading to suicide (Smith and Milliner, 1994). Systems theory investigates how smaller systems interact and come together to form a complex system with emergent properties. One of the system's objectives in sports can be to safeguard and improve mental health. Individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and society are all components, with different responsibilities and functions depending on the situation (see Figure 5). The goal of the system can be accomplished through coordinated interactions and control with colleges having a team of professionals who can provide resources and support for the teams they host (Wilkinson, 2011; Vella, 2022). Using the systems within the organization, working with student athletes can start early on and continue throughout the college years. This would be beneficial so that when the time for transition arises, the athlete experiences less anxiety and a more positive transition, thus keeping the id, ego and superego balanced. This is especially important for those who exhibit a high athletic identity (Cherry, 2022; Smith and Milliner, 1994; Wilkinson, 2011; Vella, 2022).

Different psychological perspectives exist to think about and explain human behavior. The humanistic, cross-cultural, and psychodynamic psychological perspectives are three distinct psychological perspectives that psychologists use to investigate how individuals think, feel, and behave. These perspectives help to provide a link to the various mentioned theories and the literature.

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Figure 5

## *Systems Theory*



*Note.* This figure was produced by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2022. From “System Theory.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Environmental Health Services (EHS).

## **Ethical Implications**

The NCAA holds a set of sixteen standards called the Principles for Conduct of Intercollegiate Athletics. The two focused on in this paper are sound academic standards and student-athlete well-being (Holt et al., 2022). If either of these principles are violated, the athlete's well-being may suffer, and the university may be perceived as unethical.

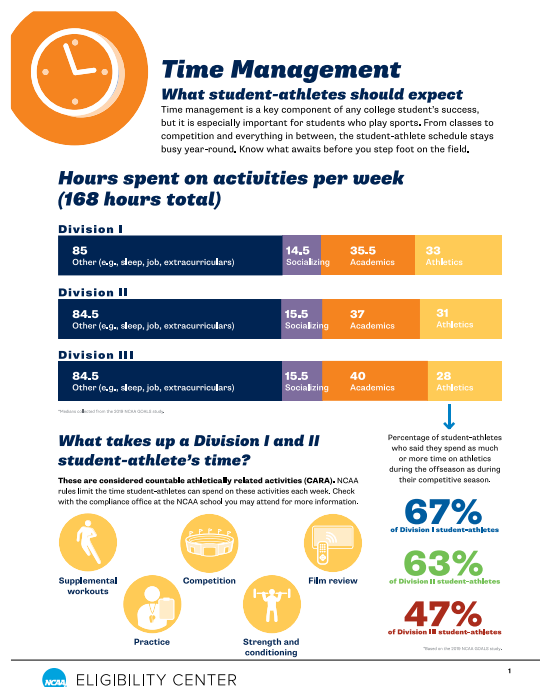
Within the sound academic standards principle, it states that, “student-athletes need to be held to the same academic standards as all other students” (Holt et al., 2022, p. 3). While this is commendable and indicates that student-athletes should not get preferential treatment within their academic classes, it fails to address the disadvantages of being a student-athlete such as time constraints. Even though there is a cap on the time students can spend on athletic-related activities per week, per division, it is reported that they are actually spending between 28-50 hours per week just on athletic activities, leaving little time for extracurricular activities, jobs, internships, and even academics (see Figure 6) (Stokowski, et al., 2019; Hruby, 2021; NCAA, 2023).



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Figure 6

## Time Management DI, DII, DIII



Note. This figure was produced by NCAA in 2023. From “Time Management DI, DII, DIII: What Student Athletes Should Expect.” NCAA.org.

Studies show that without proper career preparation while in college, student-athletes may feel lost and have a higher job turnover while trying to find their place outside of their sport (McKnight et al., 2009; Navarro and McCormick, 2017). According to research, while computers, tutoring, and writing centers are all easily available to college athletes, career preparation outside of sports is not a priority during their undergraduate experience. They see clear signs that coaches and others want to assist them develop their athletic abilities in order to win games and possibly advance to the professional level. At the same time, energy and investment are not directed toward academic objectives (Hruby, 2021). Comeaux (2021, as cited in Hruby, 2021) found that in hindsight student-athletes often say, “I wish I had time to

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participate in internships. I wish I had been in career readiness workshops. But this is not something my coach pushed me to do or that our academic advisor mandated for us” (para. 14). Connections and communication between academic and athletic departments are generally conflicting and students are pushed into majors based on their athletic practice schedule rather than when courses in their intended majors are offered. If an athlete wants to pursue a particularly intense major with significant time demands, they report receiving push-back for a less demanding major. It is the understanding that the culture of a Division I school is that academic support is provided to keep playing eligibility. Many studies have also found that athletes of the same sports team are often clustered into a major. This occurs when more than 25% of the team has declared the same major (Hruby, 2021). The ethical implications of these practices can be detrimental to a student-athletes future. Lack of preparation and skill in a profession might result in a protracted job search or taking a job in a field of disinterest. This can have a trickle-down effect on financial problems or issues with mental health (Hruby, 2021; Navarro and McCormick, 2017).

The other mentioned NCAA principle is student-athlete well-being. This principle requires:

Integration of athletics and education, maintaining a culturally diverse and gender equitable environment, protection of student-athlete’s health and safety, creating an environment that is conducive to positive coach/student-athlete relationships, coaches and administrative staff show honesty, fairness, and openness in their relationships with student-athletes, and student-athlete involvement in decisions that will affect them. (Holt et al., 2022, p. 3)

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The NCAA has incorporated many criteria into this principle; however, they are not explicit in terms of protecting a student-athlete's health and safety. Research suggests that student-athletes may experience mental illness due to risk factors like sports-related injuries, performance decline, overtraining, sport type, stress, negative life events, lack of social support, and sleep issues (Purcell, et al., 2019; Stokowski et al., 2019). As noted, an athlete with a heightened sense of athletic identity can have a stronger reaction to any of these risk factors (Küttel and Schmid, 2017; Murdock et al., 2016). If athletes who are exposed to these risk factors do not receive the necessary support, the consequences could be fatal. Injury is a significant risk factor for student-athletes since, depending on the severity of the injury, it may result in the termination of their athletic career. College athletes are more likely to commit suicide as a result of post-injury mood disturbances, with depression being more prevalent in severe cases, making it the fourth leading cause of death (Miller and Buttell, 2018; Rao and Hong, 2015; Smith and Milliner, 1994). It is the ethical responsibility of the academic institution to have safeguards and support in place in order to help a student-athlete heal not only physically from an injury, but also mentally for as long as they are a student at the institution. Providing appropriate support throughout recovery from an injury can increase satisfaction and improve mental health post-injury helping athletes maintain their pre-injury psychological state (Sullivan, et al., 2022). Due to stigma and a lack of awareness of the psychological components of sports injury and recovery, injured athletes may be less likely to seek social assistance after an injury. Despite the fact that social support is provided, it may not match their needs over time. Teammates and coaches may also be unaware of the mental aspects of sports injury and rehabilitation, resulting in inadvertent or subpar support (Sullivan, et al., 2022). Because of these factors, it is important that academic institutions provide the student-athlete with the resources they need to not only comply with the NCAA

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student-athlete wellness principle, but also to maintain the greatest ethical standards of care for their students.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Amateur college athletics scandals, spanning nearly a century, are gaining traction, moving from the classroom to the courtroom. The aim is to force change, create new perspectives, and motivate policy development in response to low graduation rates, excessive time commitments, and academic scandals like transcript alterations, grade forging, and recruiting violations (Myerberg, 2013; Miller, 2009; Chalfin et al., 2015). These issues create a mounting pressure on student-athletes to succeed in the classroom, within their sport and after graduation. There is a need to implement policy that goes beyond the NCAA Principles for the Conduct of Intercollegiate Athletics (Holt, et al., 2022).

The first change could come with the signing of letters of intent by high school athletic recruits. In the mid-1960s, college athletic conferences created National Letters of Intent (NLIs) to streamline recruiting. These letters allowed athletes to sign a letter agreeing to attend a specific school in exchange for an athletic scholarship. This arrangement was beneficial for both athletes and institutions, as it provided certainty and prevented coaches from scrambling to fill roster holes when talented players left for other schools (Hruby, 2017). However, a NLI is a one-sided agreement that lacks bargaining leverage, doesn't guarantee a scholarship, and could put athletes and their families in a major bind if they change their minds between now and the start of the college preseason (Hruby, 2017). These agreements should be more mutual to benefit the individual not only as an athlete but as a student. It should include terms that align with higher learning institutions, requiring athletes to participate in sustainable academic activities, support from coaches and athletic departments, and involve internships, research projects, and studying

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abroad. Rather than the consequences of a broken NLI agreement falling on the student-athlete, if a NLI with these guidelines is not adhered to by the institution, there should be consequences for the athletic programs (Comeaux, as cited in Hruby, 2021; Hruby, 2017; Stokowski, et al., 2019).

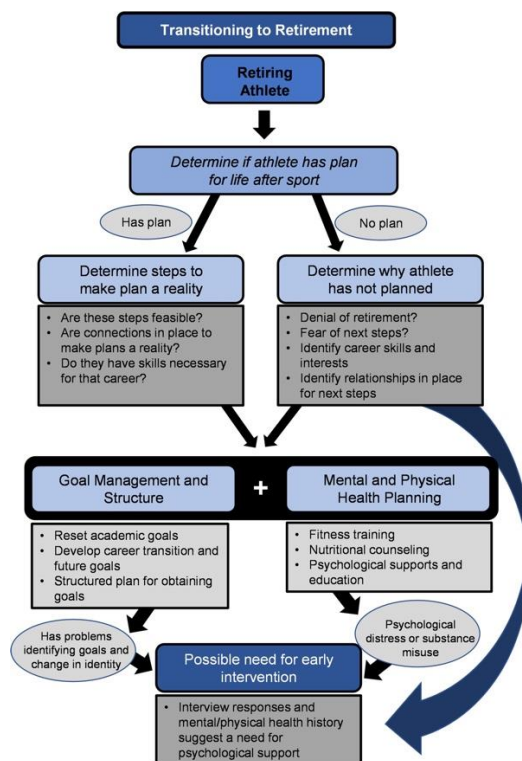
There are numerous benefits to creating policy to encompass the new terms of the NLI if they were implemented. Because so few athletes will leave college to play professionally, they must be supported throughout their collegiate careers (NCAA, 2023). Systems theory can serve as a foundational theoretical framework for developing effective policy. If policymakers understand how the athlete fits into the system and vice versa, they can design a holistic program that meets the requirements of the student-athlete while also providing support where it is required (Vella et al., 2022). In addition to academic support for athletes, there should be a program that focuses on transitional support for athletes. Studies show the importance of an athlete's perception of transition, individual characteristics, and environment in their ability to adapt. College athletes with a plan perceived their transition positively, suggesting the need for institutions to create a plan for athletes to embrace a life after sports (Schlossberg, 1981, as cited in Stokowski et al., 2009). Schlossberg's Model of Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition is a solid base for developing a program that is divided into once-a-semester seminars that focus on crisis readiness, pre-retirement planning, mental health support, and developing coping skills. Research shows that a psycho-educational intervention that focuses on diversifying athletic identity, grieving, developing coping skills, identifying psychosocial supports, and reviewing mental health symptoms and resources may assist retired professional athletes in becoming more resilient and less susceptible to mental health symptoms (Schlossberg, 1981; Miller & Buttell, 2018; Stokowski, et al., 2019). An interview structure (see Figure 7) developed by Esopenko, et

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al. (2020) is also a good tool for universities to use to provide ideas for setting retirement goals and structure, provide mental and physical health preparation, and offer possible solutions to mitigate difficulties that may arise during the retirement process.

Figure 7

### Transitioning into Retirement Interview Structure



*Note.* This figure was produced by Esopenko, C., Coury, J.R., Pieroth, E.M., Noble, J.M., Trofa D.P., and Bottiglieri, T.S. in 2020. From "The Psychological Burden of Retirement from Sport." *Current Sports Medicine Reports* 19(10).

Injured athletes require a separate focus. Interventions should evaluate and adapt assistance to individual needs, and athletes should be screened for mental health symptoms and directed to relevant resources on an ongoing basis (Sullivan et al., 2022). Athletic trainers and athletes should remain in frequent and open communication to understand the physical and psychosocial effects of the injury. Confidential communication will demonstrate the trainer's

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readiness to assess and collaborate with other sports medicine team members for holistic rehabilitation. When an athlete is sidelined due to injury, the trainer can encourage the athlete to maintain their relationship with the coach and team so that they still feel as though they are a part of the team (Smith and Milliner, 1994). In addition to rehabilitating an injury, these approaches are especially important in maintaining an athlete's mental health.

### **Summary**

Some youth play a sport their entire lives on various competitive levels with the hopes to become a collegiate student-athlete. Elite and travel youth teams have come to take over Little League and recreational sports participation at a high price to the parents and at the expense of youth experiences and family events due to demanding schedules and travel. The youth sports industry has grown 55% since 2010 and is now a \$15.3 billion market (Gregory, 2017). Parents get sucked into the 'pay to play' model out of love for their kids and pressure that the only way to succeed is to be on an elite team (Gregory, 2017). Instead of taking on this pressure, parents could guarantee their children a college education by choosing to invest the amount of money they would have spent over time on travel sports teams' fees, private lessons, and equipment, but many do not see it that way (Gregory, 2017). It is a very real possibility that a youth athlete burns out mentally or suffers an injury before even getting the chance to be recruited by a college team. When compared to those following a less structured sport regimen, highly specialized athletes, kids with more weekly engagement than their age, and those who play their major sport for more than 8 months per year, are more likely to report injuries, particularly overuse injuries (Reider, 2017). Intense specialization may strain the mind as well. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (as cited in Gregory, 2017), "Burnout, anxiety, depression, and attrition are increased in early specializers" (para 33). The message that doesn't seem to be portrayed to

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parents or the youth involved is that less than 2% of high school athletes will go on to play a Division I sport and less than 2% of those collegiate student-athletes will go on to the professional leagues (NCAA, 2023). If a youth athlete is fortunate enough to go on to play at the collegiate level, a whole new set of pressures can arise.

By the adolescent years, a youth athlete can start to develop their athletic identity. The level of the athletic identity varies by the individual, but for some it is so strong that there is no separation between who they are without their sport. This can become detrimental to the student-athlete if they suffer a career-ending injury or when it comes time to retire from their sport (Kidd, et al., 1993; Facio, 2020; McKnight, et al., 2009; Stowkowski, et al., 2019).

Understanding a collegiate athlete's athletic identity can assist educational stakeholders in offering the essential assistance for their retention and postgraduate success (Murdock, et al., 2016). If student-athletes are supported holistically from the start of their collegiate careers, they can benefit from the additional support and skills, including coping skills, they will develop in order to successfully transition out of athletics (Stokowski, et al., 2019).

Injury is a big factor in the decline of the mental health of an athlete (Smith and Milliner, 1994). Because of stigma and a lack of knowledge of the psychological components of sports injury and rehabilitation, wounded athletes may be less likely to seek help later in the healing process. Social support is critical in the recovery of injured student athletes. It aids in the maintenance of pre-injury psychological state, allowing for a successful injury recovery and return to sport (Sullivan et al., 2022). The right kind and timing of social support can boost satisfaction and improve mental health after an injury, especially if the injury results in the end of the sports career for the athlete. Social support interventions should be designed to identify and meet the needs of injured athletes. It is also critical to screen athletes for mental health



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problems and provide them with the appropriate resources and services (Sullivan et al., 2022). Throughout recovery, family and friends are the most significant sources of social support, although teammates and coaches are also crucial to ensure student athletes overall success (Sullivan et al., 2022; McKnight et al., 2009).

The goal in collegiate level athletics should be to provide a student-athlete with a comprehensive experience on the field as well as in the classroom. The student-athlete is in a unique position to be able to gain preferential transferable skills that are sought out by future employers (Chalfin et al., 2015; McKnight et al., 2009). However, a student-athlete is not superhuman. They should be granted the same opportunities as their collegiate peers on the educational side including the chance to receive mental support, participate in on-campus activities, internships, career-development programs, study-abroad, etc. (Stokowski et al., 2019; Navarro and McCormick, 2017). According to Gregory (2017), a 9-year-old youth named King-Riley Owens is rated as a five-star potential by the National Youth Basketball Report. If the NBA doesn't work out, he wants to be a veterinarian. According to the literature, if Owens makes it to the Division I level of basketball, he will not have time to take the classes required to prepare him for veterinary school (Hruby, 2021). A student-athlete should not have to choose their sport over pursuing their career of choice due to the time constraints athletics places on the student (Hruby, 2021). Despite the fact that some colleges and universities have programs in place for student-athletes that provide an additional level of support, the literature indicates that there is an overarching need for programs to be put in place to support the athlete on all levels including athletic, academic, career development, physical health, and mental health (Vella et al., 2022).

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