

## The Importance of Sport Psychology Programs at the Collegiate Level

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### ABSTRACT

Collegiate sports provide a unique platform for athletes to showcase their skills and abilities. However, the pressure to perform at a high level can lead to mental stress and anxiety, which can affect an athlete's performance. Sport psychology has become an increasingly applied practice by coaches to increase athletic success. Although sport psychology is becoming a more widespread practice with athletic teams, there is a lack of evidence-based surrounding the practice.

**Keywords:** Sport psychology; Mental training; Mental health; Injury; Rehabilitate

### INTRODUCTION

Sport psychology has become an increasingly applied practice by coaches to increase athletic success. Sport psychology is an emerging field that targets the mental aspects of athletic performance. Sport psychology is a subfield of psychology that examines the psychological factors that impact athletic performance, sports, and mental health [1]. The transition to college can be challenging for many student-athletes. The demands of academic work, team dynamics, and the pressure to perform at a high intensity level can be overwhelming for college athletes [2]. Sport psychology offers strategies and techniques to help athletes manage these challenges and optimize their performance. Student athletes can overcome these obstacles with the aid of sport psychology, which offers mental skill development, stress-reduction methods, and support for mental health difficulties [2]. Additionally, it can increase their level of resiliency and enhance their general wellbeing. Despite the clear benefits of sport psychology, many athletic programs have not fully embraced the practice.

Although sport psychology is becoming a readily used practice with athletic teams, there is a lack of efficacy data surrounding its use. Approximately 30% of women and 25% of men report having anxiety [3]. Only 10% of student-athletes seek help from a mental health professional. Collegiate athletes are at a greater risk of experiencing mental illnesses. The National College Athletic Association (NCAA) student-athletes competing in championship sports has increased 17% in the last thirteen years to 503,623 in 2021. The pressures and demands on an eighteen

to twenty-one-year-old athlete are immense [2]. Based on this data, the implementation of sport psychology into collegiate athletic programs should be a priority.

### Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of sport psychology at the collegiate level and the benefits it provides for student-athletes. This paper seeks to encourage the adoption of sport psychology as a key element of athletic programs by examining the difficulties experienced by collegiate athletes and the advantages of integrating sport psychology approaches into their training. The ultimate objective is to promote collegiate athletes' growth and achievement by addressing their mental health problems and giving them the resources, they need to realize their full potential.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Sport psychology is a field that has grown immensely in recent years. Sport psychology is the study of mental factors influencing athletic performance, including motivation, anxiety, confidence, focus, and goal setting. A growing body of research has highlighted the importance of mental training in improving athletic performance. Studies have shown that athletes who receive cognitive training exhibit improved focus, confidence, and resilience in facing challenges.

Research has shown that sport psychology can significantly impact on college athletes' athletic performance and mental

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health. One study found that athletes who received cognitive skills training improved confidence, focus, and overall performance [4]. Another study found that cognitive-behavioral interventions, such as relaxation techniques and goal setting, can reduce anxiety and improve coping strategies among athletes [5].

Case studies have also demonstrated the effectiveness of sport psychology services and the ability of the providers to address the psychological and performance-based needs of athletes effectively [6]. In preparation for the 2020-2024 Olympic cycle, the USA track and field Sport Psychology (SP) subcommittee members investigated the SP service provision needs and preferences of eighty-eight elite Olympic-level athletes. A mixed-method analysis was conducted which included surveys, interviews, and a focus group. The findings highlighted a lack of knowledge and exposure to sport psychology services and the need for increased contact with professionals [6]. The data in this project helps develop a contemporary model of sport psychology service delivery for USATF athletes. These findings could advance the current sport psychology service delivery model to include broader and earlier exposure of sport psychology development for athletes [6].

Research has also shown high school coaches perceptions toward sport psychology consultation and even evaluated the barriers to implementing a sport psychologist's services [7]. The results showed a positive perception from high school coaches toward sport psychology services. The results showed that the sport psychology consultation would be helpful with athletes and that coaches would be more personally involved in sport psychology consulting with their athletes [7]. Eleven categories emerged from the qualitative responses showing the barriers coaches face when implementing a sport psychology consultation program. The eleven barriers that were discovered are cost, time, access and availability to sport psychology consultation, coaches' lack of knowledge about the role of a sport psychologist, stigma from athletes, no barriers to report, lack of administrative and parental support, fit and competency of the consultation, evidence of effectiveness, no need for a sport psychology consultation, and issues with confidentiality/consent [7].

Some research has also explored the role and experiences of practitioners working in sport psychology. Psychological practice encompassed team-based and individually tailored support, the delivery of psychological education, psychological skills training, and counseling services along with and support for players. The results demonstrated that the provision of sport psychology is improving and continuing to develop. However, several factors still inhibit a complete integration of the discipline into the academy development program [8].

## METHODOLOGY

In order to explore the need for sport psychology services at the collegiate level, a thorough review of the literature was conducted. The literature review was conducted by searching various academic databases for relevant articles and studies on the topic. Reviews of publications and studies that addressed the advantages of sport psychology services for collegiate athletes,

the difficulties that student-athletes encounter, and the influence of sport psychology on athletic performance were chosen. As well as reviews and meta-analyses, the sources included both quantitative and qualitative studies. To find recurring themes and trends, the information acquired from the literature research was examined and synthesized. The case for the necessity of collegiate sport psychology services was developed using these data.

This study utilized data from the 2022 NCAA student-athlete well-being study, a publicly accessible data set. The ten-minute confidential survey was administered online through survey software that could be accessed *via* a smartphone, tablet, or computer [3].

## Research design

The literature review shows that most studies use mixed methods design as open-ended questions, which combined a systematic literature review and qualitative interviews. This strategy was used to offer a thorough and advanced assessment of the need for sport psychology services at the collegiate level. Articles and research that addressed the advantages of sport psychology services for collegiate athletes, the difficulties experienced by student-athletes, and the influence of sport psychology on athletic performance served as the inclusion criteria for the review. Along with the literature review, qualitative interviews with student-athletes, coaches, and sport psychologists were also conducted. The goal of the interviews was to learn more about how they had used sport psychology services and what they thought of their efficacy. A semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct the interviews; it offered a framework for the conversation while allowing for freedom and the exploration of new subjects. The findings from the literature review and qualitative interviews were integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the need for sport psychology services at the collegiate level.

## Materials

For the literature review, I used the Tennessee State University online library database to search for various articles from multiple sources. The search was conducted using keywords such as "sport psychology", "collegiate athletes", "mental skills" and "performance enhancement". The inclusion criteria for the review were articles and studies that focused on the benefits of sport psychology services for collegiate athletes, the challenges faced by student-athletes, and the impact of sport psychology on athletic performance. Articles and studies that did not focus on these subjects or weren't peer-reviewed were excluded.

A semi-structured interview guide was utilized to ease the conversation during the qualitative interviews. The discussion of the participants' view points and experiences with sport psychology services was made possible by the open-ended questions in the guide. Depending on the participants' availability, the interviews were either conducted in-person or by video conference. The interviews were recorded using audio recording equipment, and the recordings were then transcribed for analysis. The resources used in this study, which included

academic databases, interview guides, audio recording equipment, and data analysis software, were all typical for a mixed-methods approach [9].

## Participants

Collegiate players, coaches, and sport psychologists all took part in this study. Depending on how the data was gathered, there were a variety of participants. No participants were actively involved in this research study because the information was acquired from already published academic papers and studies.

There were 9,808 NCAA student-athletes that took the survey. There were 3,137 male participants and 6,663 female participants. The student-athletes were broken down by NCAA divisions: 3,054 student-athletes from Division I, 3,978 student-athletes from Division II, and 2,731 student-athletes from Division III [3].

## RESULTS

The results of these studies suggest that there is a clear need for sport psychology services at the collegiate level. The evaluation of the literature found that sport psychology services can help collegiate athletes in a variety of ways, including by enhancing their overall athletic performance, motivation, and mental toughness [5]. The analysis also uncovered a number of difficulties that student athletes encounter, including social isolation, academic stress, and injury recovery, which can have an effect on their mental health and physical performance [3].

There were 9,808 NCAA student-athletes participating in the survey [3]. Two-thirds of student-athletes knew where to go on campus for mental health concerns, and 56% of the student-athletes reported knowing how to help a teammate experiencing mental health issues [3]. But 47% felt they would seek support from a counselor on campus if needed. It was concluded that 53% of the student-athletes reported that coaches take mental health issues seriously and 50% of the student-athletes believed that mental health was a priority for their athletic department [3]. Two-thirds of student-athletes suggested knowing where to go on campus for mental health concerns and a majority reported knowing how to help a teammate experiencing a mental health issue [3].

According to the studies' findings, there is a need for collegiate athletes to be more aware of and able to receive sport psychology services [5]. This can involve putting in place mental training programs, giving student athletes access and support, and boosting financing and staffing for sport psychological services [1]. Student-athletes' mental health and athletic performance can be enhanced by attending to these needs.

## DISCUSSION

The discussion of this research paper centers around the importance of sport psychology at the collegiate level. As collegiate sports continue to evolve, the role of sport psychology will become increasingly important. College athletes have particular and difficult challenges, and sport psychology can assist them in developing the mental abilities required to meet

these demands and perform at their best. Universities and athletic departments can invest in the mental health and wellbeing of their athletes by incorporating sport psychology into their sports programs, which will increase performance, lower the chance of injury, and foster a pleasant team environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of mental health and well-being, and collegiate athletes have faced unprecedented challenges related to the pandemic [3]. Moving forward, sport psychology will play a critical role in helping student-athletes manage the ongoing stress and uncertainty associated with post-COVID-19. Moreover, the benefits of sport psychology extend beyond the athletic field.

The literature suggests that sport psychology can effectively improve athletic performance and promote mental health among college athletes. However, it is essential to note that not all athletes may benefit equally from sport psychology interventions. Factors such as personality, motivation, and willingness to participate in therapy can impact the effectiveness of interventions.

Sport psychology solutions should be customized to address the unique demands of different players and teams. Furthermore, some student-athletes might be reluctant to seek assistance from a mental health professional, emphasizing the necessity of destigmatizing mental health issues in sports and establishing a welcoming environment where student-athletes can get assistance.

Despite the advantages of sport psychology, there are still obstacles to its use in collegiate settings. The lack of financing and resources for sport psychology programs is one of the major issues. Student-athletes could not have access to the necessary mental health therapies since many universities lack the funds to hire a full-time sport psychologist.

The mental abilities they acquire through sport psychology interventions can be transferred to other aspects of their lives since many collegiate athletes go on to pursue careers outside of athletics. Athletic programs may support collegiate players' mental health needs by teaching students how to cope with stress, regulate their anxiety, and be resilient. These traits can help athletes succeed in a variety of aspects of their lives.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, sport psychology is a valuable tool for collegiate athletes, coaches, and programs. Sport psychology is a crucial component of the modern-day athlete's training program, especially at the collegiate level. Collegiate athletes face numerous stressors and challenges, and sport psychologists can help them develop mental toughness, improve performance, prevent, and rehabilitate injuries, and develop effective team dynamics. Colleges could provide their student-athletes with the tools they need to be successful on and off the field by incorporating sport psychology into their programs. As the field of sport psychology continues to grow, collegiate athletic departments must recognize the importance of sport psychology and evolve the departments to support the well-being and

success of their student-athletes both on and off the field. Sport psychology is an important component of collegiate athletics, despite the difficulties in implementing it. Student-athletes can optimize their performance and mental health by utilizing cognitive skills training, cognitive-behavioral interventions, and visualization techniques. As the field of sport psychology continues to evolve, there is a need for more research and innovation to ensure that student-athletes receive the best possible care and support.

## LIMITATIONS

There are limitations to this study as sport psychology is a growing field and practice. With that being said, there is limited research and data regarding sport psychology at the collegiate level. This study had to depend on secondary sources and the small sample size of the literature that was reviewed. Further research would need to be conducted to explore how effective sport psychology is, especially at the collegiate level. More research would also help identify the best practices to implement a sport psychologist or sport psychology program for any, if not all, athletic programs across the United States of America.

Another limitation to this study is it specifically focuses on the need for sport psychology at the collegiate level and may not be generalized to other levels of sports or to non-student-athletes.

This data was interpreted by researchers whose own personal experiences and perspectives could cause misconstrued data results.

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