

Investigating Collegiate Athletes' Wellbeing During the Travel Season

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore collegiate athletes' sense of wellbeing during the travel season. A qualitative approach was adapted which was founded on the principles of positive psychology. Data were collected utilizing in-depth semi-structured interviews with student athletes via phone or video calls. Participants were recruited through purposive and convenient sampling. To analyze data, thematic content analysis was conducted, and subjective wellbeing theory (Diener, 1984) was used as a guide for data analysis. Interviewees reported that during the competition trips they experience positive emotions such as fun, excitement, and happiness; as well as negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, and exhaustion. Incorporating tourist activities into teams' travel itineraries and giving the athletes a voice in the travel decision making were found to be effective in enhancing athletes' wellbeing.

Keywords: Sport Event Travel; Collegiate Athletes; Wellbeing; Positive Psychology

Introduction

Collegiate student athletes are usually at high risk of mental issues such as anger, anxiety, distress or depression (Kimball & Freysinger, 2003) likely due to difficulties of transitioning from high school to higher education (Pritchard, Wilson, & Yamnitz, 2004) as well as pressures associated with fulfilling their academic and athletic responsibilities (Papanikolaou, Nikolaidis, Patsiaouras, & Alexopoulos, 2003). Factors such as possible loss of the high school star-athlete status, interpersonal conflict, injuries, time pressure, missing classes because of athletic trips and the need to make up the missed work negatively impact student athletes' wellbeing (Humphrey, Yow, & Bowden, 2000). Difficulty in establishing positive relationships with family (Wilson & Pritchard, 2005), other students, coaches, and teachers have been particularly highlighted as an additional stressor (Humphrey et al., 2000; Papanikolaou et al., 2003). Athletes also reported suffering from physical health issues such as tension, fatigue, lack of sleep, digestive issues, and headache (Humphrey et al., 2000) which could be other manifestations of poor mental health.

Although previous studies on this topic provide valuable insights into sources of stress (e.g., Wilson & Pritchard, 2005), and possible curing or coping strategies (e.g., Pinkerton, Hinz, & Barrow, 1989), maintaining athletes' mental health and preventing the disorders/illnesses from happening has received limited attention so far. Prevention of mental issues by fostering positivity and helping individuals to flourish (Seligman, 2002) is the focus of positive psychology which is centered on meaningful subjective experiences (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Accordingly, wellbeing is not only the absence of illness but involves the presence of positive emotions, positive relationships, and a sense of accomplishment (Seligman, 2002). The positivity is determined through individuals' subjective assessment of their experiences. Diener (1984) postulated that wellbeing is comprised of individuals' cognitive and affective subjective judgements of different aspects of their life. In other words, subjective wellbeing is a state of overall contentment with life where positive emotions outweigh the negatives.

So far, a positive psychological approach in assessing student athletes' wellbeing in relation

to team's travel experiences has received little attention from scholars. To address this gap, this study explored collegiate athletes' wellbeing through a positive psychology lens. Findings have implications for designing preventative interventions that help protect collegiate athletes from mental disorders and maintain their wellbeing throughout the travel/competition season when they perform under high pressure and experience heightened levels of stress.

Literature Review

A predominant theme in previous studies on student athletes' mental health has been exploring mental issues such as anxiety, depression, distress, and anger followed by recommendations for possible healing strategies (e.g., Kimball & Freysinger, 2003; Pinkerton, Hinz, & Barrow, 1989). For example, Pinkerton et al. (1989) found that student athletes were more likely to struggle with issues related to fear of failure, identity conflict, social isolation, poor athletic performance, academic and career problems, physiological burnout, eating disorder, alcohol and drug abuse, and injuries compared to non-athletes. However, they underutilize counseling and mental health services (Pinkerton et al., 1989). The authors concluded that early and positive therapeutic relationships are imperative in helping collegiate athletes' well-being. Similarly, Kimball and Freysinger (2003) stated that participation in collegiate sports both buffers and generates stress for athletes. Likewise, Wilson and Pritchard (2005) compared stress levels of collegiate athletes with other college students (i.e., non-athlete). Student athletes were found to be more stressed out than non-athletes because they generally had more responsibilities and were not able to get enough sleep. The authors highlighted the need for actions that could improve student athletes' relationships with other students (Wilson & Pritchard, 2005). Hoffman and Miller (2009) explored the complex relationship between collegiate athletes' sport-related identities and mental health. The authors found two different identities: jock identity and athlete identity. Jock identity referred to ego-oriented athletes while student athlete identity referred to overachieving, and disciplined athletes. The jock identity student athletes had higher rates of suicide and depression (Hoffman & Miller, 2009). In the same vein, Denny (2009) investigated how various internal and external factors affect student athletes as they manage their collegiate career full of stress, strains, and exceptional demands. Internal factors are a person's experiences and personality (mindfulness and self-esteem). External factors relate to the environment in which personality and experience are applied (playing time and scholarship). Findings revealed that internal factors contributed to student-athletes' happiness more than external factors.

Later, Lu & Hsu (2013) examined how hope and social support is linked to predicting postinjury rehabilitation beliefs, behaviors, and wellbeing among injured Taiwanese collegiate student athletes. The authors concluded that many injured athletes either suspend their participation in the sport or permanently leave the sport, hence, taking action to prevent athletic injuries was necessary. Particularly, hope and social support were found to be beneficial to sport injury rehabilitation and athlete wellbeing (Lu & Hsu, 2013). Similarly, the impact of injury on athletes' wellbeing was evident in Kerr, DeFreese, and Marshall's (2014) study of former collegiate athletes' current physical and mental health. Interestingly, former collegiate athletes physical and mental health was found to be similar to the general US population, with the exception of those who previously sustained injures, concussions and/or career ending injuries. Using NCAA Memorial Resolutions list and NCAA demographic data, Rao, Drezner, Toresdahl, and Harmon (2015) examined the rate of suicide within the NCAA over a 9-year period. They found that the suicide rate was lower in NCAA athletes compared to the general and collegiate population of similar age group.

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Furthermore, the suicide rate was found to be higher among male athletes compared to female athletes, with football players being at the greatest risk. More recently, Jeon, Lee, Kwon (2016) investigated the relationship between self-compassion, social support, and well-being among South Korean student athletes. Athletes with more self-compassion experienced more positive emotions every day, felt more fellowship with others, and in general were more satisfied with life. Also, student-athletes with higher perceived social support had fewer symptoms of depression. The results showed a positive relationship between self-compassion, social support, and student athletes' wellbeing (Jeon et al., 2016).

To sum up briefly, previous studies provided valuable contributions to identifying mental issues among collegiate athletes and recommending potential coping strategies. Nevertheless, a focus on positive psychology and athletes' subjective assessment of their own well-being has received little attention so far.

Research Methodology

Given the scarcity of research on this topic, a qualitative approach was adopted. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with collegiate athletes ($N = 5$) via phone or video calls. Interviewees were recruited using purposive and convenient sampling in a mid-western public university in the U.S. Interviewees were asked to reflect on their emotional state throughout the competition season, their competition trip experiences, positive and negative emotions that they experience throughout the competition season, and their overall assessment of their wellbeing. An interview guide was used to direct the conversations, interviews were recorded and transcribed for the analysis.

Thematic content analysis was used to analyze the data. Participants' narratives were coded inductively, however, a positive psychology lens was applied to guide the analysis. Codes were categorized into themes and subthemes based on the frequency (i.e., the number of times something was said).

Findings

Interviewees reported that they experience a range of positive and negative emotions during the competition season and particularly while they are traveling for competition. Stress, anxiety, and exhaustion were the most frequently mentioned negative emotions. Such negative emotions appeared to be closely linked to, a) within group conflict/drama, b) feelings of not having a voice in team's travel plan/activities. Nevertheless, it appeared that support from teammates, as well as communication and conflict resolution by the team leaders can decrease or even eliminate the negative emotions.

On the other hand, interviewees explained that they experienced a range of positive emotions during the season and while on a competition trip. Fun, happiness, and excitement were the most commonly reported positive emotions. It appeared that positive emotions were highly related to positive relationships with teammates who "often help with stress management." Furthermore, the athletes noted that including some tourist activities in team's travel itineraries, particularly the longer trips, can enhance their experiences and overall wellbeing during the season. They further mentioned that they would like to have a voice in decisions about the team's tourist activities.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined collegiate athletes' sense of wellbeing during the travel season. Findings supported previous research findings regarding high level of stress, anxiety, and exhaustion during the season (e.g., Kimball & Freysinger, 2003; Pinkerton et al., 1989) that negatively impact athletes' wellbeing. This research contributed to the body of knowledge by revealing athletes' experiences of positive emotions that are mostly generated through positive relationships with teammates and coaches. Additionally, athletes' wish for having a voice in decisions about team's travel itineraries was a novel finding of this study.

Findings provide some guidelines for enhancing collegiate athletes' wellbeing during the travel season. Incorporating touristic activities into teams' travel itineraries to get the athletes outside of the stressful high-pressure environment and creating opportunities for recovery, enhancing positive emotions, and positive relationships could be a viable strategy. Given that exhaustion during the season has been noted by athletes numerous times across different studies, athletes will likely benefit the most from activities that require minimal mental and physical effort from them. Although this study was focused on enhancing wellbeing of collegiate athletes, findings apply to all parties involved in team's travel such as coaches and medical staff. Replicating the study at different higher education institutions and/or with professional athletes as well as using quantitative methods to test the findings at a large scale can be possible directions for future research.

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