

An Exploration of the Impact of COVID-19 on Collegiate Student Athletes

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic had an unexplainably immense impact on the entire world when it began in March of 2020 including the cancellations or postponements of sports worldwide. The National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) conducted a study shortly after the COVID-19 outbreak began exploring the impact that the pandemic had on the wellbeing of student-athletes. Their study explored areas such as barriers to training, academic experiences, sport/championship cancellations, desired resources, and mental health concerns. The results of the NCAA study found a significant increase in student-athlete academic, athletic- and mental health-related concerns, with students expressing a large list of desired resources for support.

The purpose of this study was to reflect on the findings of the NCAA study, while examining the mental health repercussions of the pandemic, particularly for college student-athletes at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, and how this affected their athletic and academic performance, resilience, well-being, and coping strategies. We concluded the survey with a question asking student-athletes to reflect on what they have learned about themselves and their coping strategies due to COVID-19 to highlight any potential themes of growth and resilience.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

- 169 University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire varsity student-athletes
- Age Range: 18- 23 years of age (M= 19)
- Gender: Male: 52%, Female: 58%
- Academic Status: Freshman: 34%, Sophomore: 27%, Junior: 14%, Senior: 25%

PROCEDURES

- A survey was emailed to the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Athletics Department and all varsity sports teams' coaches to distribute to all athletes.

MEASURE:

- A demographic questionnaire and five qualitative questions regarding student-athletes' concerns pertaining to the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on their athletics, academics, mental health, and what they have learned through the process.

ANALYSIS

- An inductive and theoretical thematic approach was utilized to analyze results and determine if themes emerged.

RESULTS

Do you have any concerns about your athletic pursuits as a result of your experiences due to COVID-19?				
Selected	Common Theme	n	%	Text Response Examples
Yes, please explain.	Sports Season or Competitions	61	60.40%	"It is really hard having a shortened season for my senior year, as well as having no spectators and my parents not being able to watch me for the last time." "Being a female athlete, there's not much for us after college, so the things we've worked for are just not an option and the NCAA canceling our tournament yet all [division one] schools continue to play feels like we are worth nothing." "It is extremely anxiety-provoking to know that the season could be put on hold or end at any moment due to COVID-19 protocols."
	Mental or Physical Health	16	15.84%	"The changes have made it that I do not feel like I am playing the sport how I grew up loving. It feels very different and pointless, very hard to motivate myself." "Staying motivated has been a huge struggle for me each day, and I have mentally become so exhausted that I don't feel mentally prepared to perform my best at the end of this crazy season."
	Training or Athletic Preparation	16	15.84%	"I feel like I am behind on practice due to my time spent in quarantine/isolation." "I don't think I'm getting any faster due to my training being so limited."
	Sports Culture	8	7.92%	"I feel like I am behind in socializing and getting to know my teammates better."
No, please explain.	Optimistic Outlook	36	58.07%	"COVID should end eventually and I still have the facilities to work out and get better." "I find that looking to the positive aspects of my athletic career and academic and personal life is the best way to move forward." "It's become a constant part of my day doing health screenings and antigen tests."
	No Direct Affect	22	35.48%	"My athletics haven't been too affected by COVID." "This year was a weird year, but my coaches were able to provide us with a great year."
	Change in Mindset	4	6.45%	"I was losing my love for the sport anyways, so athletics is no longer a priority in my life."

DISCUSSION

We found that slightly more students (111) had concerns about their academic pursuits than they did about their athletic pursuits (101), but far more had concerns about either pursuit than did not. Based on the more specific, initial themes that were established, most responses (68.81%) indicating concerns about their athletic pursuits were related to a lack of competition or training (35.78%), or to specific frustrations related to COVID-19 policies and how that may have contributed to stress from the continuous uncertainty regarding the future of their athletic seasons (33.03%).

In the final question asking what student-athletes learned about themselves and their coping strategies, we saw four strong themes emerge:

- Mental strength or growth (40.71%)
- Mental self-awareness (33.57%)
- Gained understanding of their supportive needs (21.43%)
- Negative attitudes (4.29%).

The number of students that acknowledged growth, development, and strength within themselves and their coping strategies in the final question (95.71%) was certainly reassuring to see, given the results of the NCAA study and the patterns of stress and adjustment challenges that we received in the first two qualitative questions of our survey.

From the results and patterns of the first two questions' responses, we can see that more can and should be done to support and provide resources for our student-athletes, and questions should be raised regarding what can be done to prioritize the well-being of Blugold student-athletes to the same, equally high standard that we hold their successes. Administration, staff, coaches, and teammates can all contribute more as the world slowly recovers from the consequences of the pandemic. However, it is crucial that we not lose sight of the mental health crisis that faces student-athletes, that will not be disappearing when the pandemic does. How can we ensure that the resources and opportunities for student-athletes to seek help aren't another one of the many "temporary" COVID-19 precautions that become a thing of the past?

SELECTED REFERENCES

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