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Abstract

College athlete mental health has been increasingly spotlighted in recent years, with burnout emerging as a major concern (Gould & Whitley, 2009). While research has focused on burnout causes and prevention, there is limited research exploring how athletic identity and perceptions of life transitions out of sport contribute to burnout. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how athletic identity and perceptions of life transitions influence athlete burnout. In-season college athletes were assessed using an original survey, the Life Transitions for College Athletes Survey (LTCAS), the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale, and the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire. Separate independent t-tests showed that athletes with greater life transition stress were higher on burnout dimensions of greater reduced sense of accomplishment and sport devaluation. There was also partial support that athletes with lower life transition preparedness would have higher burnout in that there was a trend for athletes with lower life transition preparedness to be higher on their reduced sense of accomplishment. Results suggest that college athletes with greater stress about transitioning out of sport will have greater burnout.

Keywords: *athlete burnout, life transitions, athletic identity, sport psychology*

Athletic burnout is a widely researched topic in sports psychology. There are various models and theories regarding the factors that contribute to burnout. However, there remains a lack of research about how athletic identity and the athlete's perception of life transitions can influence their level of burnout. This study aims to explore how the strength of an athlete's identity and their perceptions of life transitions affect athletic burnout levels in collegiate athletes.

Burnout

The construct of burnout was not originally limited to sport and exercise contexts. Burnout was, in fact, first researched among human service professionals (Raedeke & Smith, 2009). Researchers later extended the concept to the sport and exercise domain. Within the sports world, the most common conceptualization of athlete burnout has come from Raedeke and Smith (2009), who defined burnout as a psychological syndrome with dimensions of emotional or physical exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment, and reduced sense of value in their sport. Gould and Whitely (2009) identified five major psychological themes associated with athletic burnout: motivation, coping with adversity, responses to training and recovery, the role of significant others, and athlete identity.

Several models exist that suggest ways that athletic identity and life transitions may affect an athlete's susceptibility to burnout. For example, the Cognitive-Affective Stress Model addresses how one's cognitive appraisal of a situation triggers physiological responses, which may be positive or negative (Gould & Whitley, 2009). In the context of this model, perceived stress related to transitioning out of sport and fear of identity loss may trigger negative physiological and psychological responses, heightening burnout risk. Additionally, the Unidimensional Identity Development and External Control Model addresses the importance of having the ability to branch out and be something other than an athlete (Gould & Whitley, 2009). This model discusses how burnout in sports is caused by the structure of high-performance sport because it constricts the development of identities, especially in younger athletes. Young athletes are taught to focus on their success within sports, leading to an identity that is sport-centered while minimizing the opportunity to develop other identities. Together, these

models suggest that an athlete's cognitive appraisal of stressors and the narrowness of their athletic identity jointly contribute to burnout risk.

Athletic Identity

Athletic identity refers to the degree to which a person identifies with and perceives themselves as an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). The strength of one's athletic identity may influence both motivation and vulnerability to burnout. A strong athletic identity can have positive effects, such as enhancing discipline, commitment, and confidence. However, when this identity becomes too narrow, meaning an athlete's sense of self-worth depends solely on athletic performance, it can lead to psychological distress and increased burnout risk (Gould & Whitely, 2009). Additionally, athletes who define themselves primarily on their athletic role often experience greater difficulty transitioning out of sport compared to those with multiple identities and social roles (Haslam et al., 2014). Athletes who are approaching retirement may experience a natural decline in their athletic identity as they begin to shift their focus toward post-sport roles and future life goals. Brewer et al. (1993) noted that athletic identity is closely tied to the degree to which individuals foresee continued involvement in sport, meaning that impending retirement can reduce the centrality of sport to one's self-concept. The lower level of athletic identity could be attributed to individuals starting to explore or think about their lives outside of sport.

Life Transitions

Life transitions can be particularly challenging for college athletes. These transitions, such as transferring schools or retiring from sport, often bring uncertainty, a loss of structure, and social disconnection. These factors can heighten stress and challenge an athlete's sense of self-worth. Scholssberg's Theory of Transition identified four categories that impact how well a person manages transitions: situation, self, supports, and strategies (Manthey & Smith, 2023). Situation refers to what stressors someone is dealing with during the time of transition. Self is the person's inherent traits. Supports are a person's support systems around them during transition. Strategies are ways the person tries to change the situation and reduce stress around the transition.

Athletes with limited support or ineffective coping strategies may experience heightened stress and identity loss during transitions.

The existing literature has identified two major aspects of life transitions that impact athletes: the situation, including one's level of stress surrounding the transition, and strategies, particularly one's preparedness for managing the transition. Many athletes report experiencing stress and a lack of preparedness when transitioning out of sport, which can increase vulnerability to burnout (Bopp et al., 2021). Additionally, some athletes described feeling lost, isolated, or uncertain about their future (Manthey & Smith, 2023). The sense of being lost in life and perceived low social support may cause elevated stress during an athlete's transition out of sport. Fuller (2014) found that athletes who developed broader social circles and engaged in non-sport-related activities before retirement reported smoother transitions out of sport and less emotional distress. During such life transitions, it is important to emphasize the understanding of personal identity, social support, and mental and physical well-being (Bopp et al., 2021).

Athletes' preparedness has been noted as a key factor in facilitating the life transition process. Some college athletes can take the skills they have learned during sports to help prepare them for a world after athletics (Manthey & Smith, 2023). Although many universities offer career-planning opportunities, athletes often fail to utilize them due to prioritizing athletics (Zvosec et al., 2023). Those who report perceived satisfaction with their athletic achievements also tend to transition out of sport more smoothly, possibly because they experience a sense of closure (Fuller, 2014). Hence, such findings suggest that life transition stress and lack of preparedness both play critical roles in athlete burnout.

Hypotheses

Based on the previous literature, it was hypothesized that athletes with greater athletic identity would exhibit higher levels of athletic burnout. Since the Cognitive-Affective Model of athlete burnout (Gould & Whitely, 2009) posits that burnout develops when situation demands (such as life transitions) exceed one's coping resources, and research shows that life transitions (athlete retirement) present emotional distress (Manthey & Smith, 2023), it is hypothesized that athletes who perceive greater life transition stress will have greater levels of burnout. Additionally, it was hypothesized that

athletes who feel less prepared for life transitions would experience greater burnout. Previous literature has found that athletes who do not mentally and emotionally prepare for the transition out of sport often experience greater difficulty during this period (Fuller, 2014). Moreover, athletes may feel unprepared to transfer skills developed through sport to roles in the workforce (Bopp et al., 2021), which may further contribute to increased burnout. Furthermore, it is expected that athletes who score high on transition stress and low on preparedness on the Life Transitions Survey for College Athletes will demonstrate the highest levels of athlete burnout.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 112 student-athletes (males $n = 78$, females $n = 33$) participated in this study. Fifty-three percent of participants reported being White, with 33% identifying as Black or African American, and 11% identifying as Hispanic. Study participants included freshmen ($n = 25$), sophomores ($n = 26$), juniors ($n = 28$), seniors ($n = 19$), 5th year seniors ($n = 9$), and graduate students ($n = 2$), and all participants were in-season fall athletes actively competing on their respective team's roster. Sports represented included football ($n = 77$), volleyball ($n = 16$), golf ($n = 2$), cross country ($n = 3$), soccer ($n = 2$), cheerleading ($n = 6$), and dance ($n = 6$).

Instruments

Life Transitions Survey for College Athletes

The Life Transitions Survey for College Athletes (LTSCA) was an original survey developed for the purpose of this study and consisted of a small demographic section, a life transition stress section, and a life transition preparation section. The demographic section had eight questions on gender, year in school, age, race, ethnicity, their sport, hopes of playing professionally, and the transfer status of the athlete. The life transition stress section featured statements that focused on how stressed an athlete is about transitioning out of collegiate sport. Each statement was scored on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; see Appendix). Higher scores represented higher levels of stress about transitioning out of collegiate sport. Sample items include "I feel uncertain about my future after leaving my college sport," "I feel like it will be difficult to let go of my identity as a college athlete after

I leave my sport,” and “The loss of social connections with teammates and coaches will make the transition out of my sport difficult.” The life transition preparedness section featured statements that address how prepared an athlete feels for life outside of collegiate sport. Each statement was scored on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Higher scores represented a higher feeling of preparedness for transitioning out of sport. Sample items include “I feel that I have received adequate support about transitioning out of college sports,” “I have given thought to what my life will look like after college athletics,” and “Overall, I feel satisfied with my college athletic career.”

Athletic Identity Measurement Scale

The 7-item version of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer et al., 1993) was used to measure athletic identity. The AIMS consists of three subscales: exclusivity (2 items), social identity (3 items), and negative affectivity (2 items), and each item is assessed on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Higher scores represent stronger athletic identity, and sample items include “I spend more time thinking about sport than anything else” (exclusivity), “Most of my friends are athletes” (social identity), and “I would be very depressed if I were injured and could not compete in sport” (negative affectivity). Subscale scores were calculated by summing each subscale. The AIMS has demonstrated good internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alphas (α) ranging from .80 to .93 (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001), and internal consistency for the AIMS in this study was acceptable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .73$).

Athlete Burnout Questionnaire

The Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ; Raedeke & Smith, 2001) assessed athlete burnout. The ABQ has 15 items, assessed on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = almost never to 5 = almost always), with 5 items corresponding to respective dimensions of emotional and physical exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment, and sport devaluation. Sample items include “I feel physically worn out from my sport” (emotional/physical exhaustion), “I am not performing up to my ability in my

sport” (reduced sense of accomplishment), and “I don’t care about my sport performance as much as I used to” (sport devaluation). The ABQ subscale scores were calculated by averaging subscale items, and a global burnout score was also calculated by averaging scores across all subscales, with greater scores reflecting greater burnout in each dimension. The ABQ has demonstrated good internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alphas ranging from .84 to .91 (Raedeke & Smith, 2009).

Procedures

After receiving university research ethics board approval, fall sport coaches were contacted to establish a time (before or after practice or team meeting) to administer surveys to athletes. Participants who were classmates in the researcher’s fall semester courses and who met the eligibility criteria were also surveyed. Surveys were directly administered to participants, and names were omitted on surveys, thereby maintaining participants’ anonymity. All surveys were completed in under 10 minutes, and participants read and signed consent forms before participating.

Results

Data Analysis

In order to examine the hypothesis that athletes with greater athletic identity would exhibit greater athlete burnout, Pearson correlations were computed on AIMS and ABQ subscales to determine the nature of their relationship. In order to examine the hypothesis that athletes with higher life transition stress would have greater burnout than athletes with lower life transition stress, a series of independent t-tests were performed using life transition stress scores (using a median split score to divide the sample into “high stress” and “low stress”) as the independent variable and ABQ subscales as dependent variables (emotional/physical exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment, sport devaluation). Finally, to examine the hypothesis that athletes with lower life transition preparedness would have greater burnout compared to athletes with higher life transition preparedness, a separate series of independent t-tests was performed using life transition preparedness score (median split

score) as the independent variable and ABQ subscales as dependent variables. The a priori significance level for all analyses was set to the $p = .05$ level.

Athletic Identity and Burnout

Pearson correlations between the AIMS and ABQ subscales examined the hypothesis that athletes with a greater athletic identity will experience greater levels of athlete burnout. The only significant relationship was between athletic identity negative affect (AIMS) and reduced sense of accomplishment (ABQ) ($r = .25, p < .001$).

Life Transition Stress

Independent t-tests were used to examine the hypothesis that athletes with higher life transition stress would have greater burnout as measured by the ABQ subscales. The overall sample was divided into a “high stress” and a “low stress” group based on the median split on the sample’s life transition stress score. Then, the life transition stress group (based on the median split) score was the independent variable, and the ABQ subscales were the dependent variables. Results from the first t-test on reduced sense of accomplishment were significant ($t = -3.83, p < .001$), indicating that athletes from the higher life transition stress group ($M = 13.48, SD = 4.21$) had significantly reduced sense of accomplishment compared to the athletes in the lower life transition stress group ($M = 10.80, SD = 3.08$). Results from a separate independent t-test on sport devaluation were also significant ($t = -2.46, p < .05$), indicating that athletes from the higher life transition group had significantly greater sport devaluation ($M = 12.28, SD = 4.77$) compared to the athletes in the lower life transition stress group ($M = 10.06, SD = 4.76$). For the t-test comparing low and high life transition stress on emotional/physical exhaustion, there was a marginal result ($p = .07$), with the higher life transition stress athletes displaying a trend for greater exhaustion ($M = 16.81, SD = 14.01$) compared to the lower life transition stress group ($M = 13.07, SD = 4.72$).

Life Transition Preparedness

Independent t-tests were used to examine the hypothesis that athletes with lower life transition preparedness would have greater burnout as measured by the ABQ subscales. The life transition preparedness group (based on the median split) was the independent variable, and the ABQ subscales were the dependent

variables. Results from the first t-test on reduced sense of accomplishment were significant ($t = 3.65, p < .001$), indicating that athletes from the lower life transition preparedness group ($M = 13.52, SD = 3.98$) had significantly greater reduced sense of accomplishment compared to the athletes in the higher life transition preparedness group ($M = 10.95, SD = 3.48$). There was one significant result between life transition preparedness and the ABQ burnout subscales.

Discussion

Results of the present study indicate that athletes who have higher life transition stress have greater sport devaluation and a reduced sense of accomplishment. Athletes who are less prepared for life transitions often feel as though they have not achieved what they want in their sport. Results also indicate that those who tend to feel negative about themselves when experiencing failure in their sport will also experience a reduced sense of accomplishment. Researchers have not focused on how life transitions out of sport affect athlete burnout. This investigation focused on how athlete identity and life transitions influence athlete burnout.

Results indicated that athletes with high life transition stress are more likely to experience feeling as though they have underachieved in their sport and have negative feelings toward their sport. This was shown by the scores on the ABQ for the higher life transition stress group. Previous research has shown that increased stress has been associated with higher levels of burnout (Gould & Whitely, 2009). The higher stress levels due to getting ready to transition out of sport could influence an athlete’s sense of burnout. Athletes who have a more difficult time transitioning out of their sport often feel that they have not accomplished what they wanted to in their sport (Fuller, 2014). This sense of unfinished business can intensify the stress surrounding leaving athletics and further increase burnout. The stress from having to transition out of being an athlete can also impact how a player performs. When the stress starts to affect the ability to perform, the athlete may start to distance themselves from their sport or think they have failed (Marangoni et al., 2023). The athlete may start to lose interest in their sport and devalue it as the stress of leaving athletics starts to build and burnout becomes more prominent.

Results also indicated that athletes with low feelings of preparedness for life transitions will also feel like they

are underachieving in their sport. This was supported by the scores on the ABQ for the low life transition preparedness group. Such findings align with previous research from Fuller (2014), who found that athletes who did not achieve their sport goals or feel successful in their sports had a more difficult transition out of sport. When athletes perceive they have underachieved, this feeling may intensify stress and contribute to burnout symptoms. Lack of preparedness for life after sport has also been linked to emotional distress (Bopp et al., 2021). This emotional distress can add fuel to their level of burnout. The feeling of distress may be especially pronounced in athletes who have strong athletic identities due to their self-worth being closely tied to their sport performance and achievement (Brewer et al., 1993). As athletes begin to anticipate the loss of their athletic role, feelings of uncertainty about the future and loss may emerge, further increasing their burnout (Zvosec et al., 2023). Prior research on burnout has shown that chronic stress and emotional strain are central contributors to athletic burnout (Gould & Whitely, 2009). Collectively, these findings suggest that inadequate preparation for life transitions not only increases emotional distress but also influences perceptions of underachievement and burnout. This highlights the importance of transition support for collegiate athletes.

The results showed a positive correlation between the negative affect aspect of athletic identity and the reduced sense of accomplishment dimension of burnout. This indicated that athletes who feel more pressure to perform in their sport will also feel as though they are underachieving as well. This was supported by the correlation between the AIMS subscale of negative affect and the ABQ subscale of reduced sense of accomplishment. As athletes start to continuously feel like they are not performing to their potential, they will start to lose interest in their sport (Marangoni et al., 2023). An athlete's perceptions of their performance can affect their identity as an athlete. As their performance starts to decrease, they may start to change how they feel about their sport. An athlete may tell themselves that their sport does not mean as much as it used to in order to make them feel better about how they are playing.

These findings should be considered in light of several limitations. First, the study design did not allow for examining how burnout might evolve over a season. The study also did not investigate student-athletes by

their status. The time the surveys were administered could have impacted the results. Athletes could have been experiencing more stress and burnout at the time they took the surveys due to other things going on, such as midterms. Additionally, the instruments were also self-reported measures, which could give a possibility of error due to participants not being honest. Finally, the sample was also a convenience sample and was limited to athletes at one university.

Athlete burnout can be influenced by various factors. There needs to be continued research on how athlete identity affects burnout, as well as how perceptions of life transitions affect burnout. With more research on this topic, universities and organizations can start building programs that help athletes as they get ready to transition into a world after athletics. This way, athletes can be supported in all aspects of their lives, not just in the weight room and on the field.

In conclusion, the present study demonstrated that college athletes experiencing greater life transition stress are significantly more likely to report elevated levels of burnout compared to those with lower life transition-related stress. Such findings underscore the importance of recognizing life transitions—such as academic changes, shifting team roles, or impending retirement—as meaningful contributors to athletes' well-being. In terms of practice, this suggests that athletic departments, coaches, and sport psychologists should implement proactive support systems that help athletes navigate major transitions, including structured career planning, mental health resources, and mental skills training in stress management and coping. By addressing these stressors early and comprehensively, higher education institutions can play a key role in reducing burnout risk and promoting healthier, more sustainable athletic experiences.

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Appendix

Life Transition Scale for College Athletes

Read each item below and circle the response that BEST corresponds to you:

Section 1:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I feel uncertain about my future after leaving my college sport.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I feel anxiety when I think about life after my college sport.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I struggle to identify new goals and purposes outside of my college sport.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I find the thought of adjusting to a lifestyle that no longer revolves around my college sport to be stressful.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I feel there will be pressure to perform in other areas of my life (e.g., career, education) after I leave my college sport.	1	2	3	4	5
6. The loss of social connections with teammates and coaches will make transition out of my sport difficult.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I feel like it will be difficult to let go of my identity as a college athlete after I leave my sport.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I worry about my health after my college sport, because of injuries I have suffered in my sport.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I believe that life after sports will be fulfilling, even without the competitive aspect of sport.*	1	2	3	4	5

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Section 2:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
10. I feel the transition out of my college sport will help me to develop a stronger sense of self.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I feel that I have received adequate support about transitioning out of college sports.	1	2	3	4	5
12. The skills I have developed as an athlete are transferable to other areas of life (e.g., career, relationships)	1	2	3	4	5
13. I feel that I have received adequate information about transitioning out of college sports.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I am satisfied with the career or education opportunities I have after my college sport career is over.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I feel confident in my ability to adjust to life after college sports.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I have a clear understanding of what steps to take for my future after college sports.	1	2	3	4	5
17. Overall, I feel satisfied with my college athletic career.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I have a good support system outside of my college sport.	1	2	3	4	5
19. I have given thought to what my life will look like after college athletics.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I have friends outside of my sport that I regularly spend time with.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I have teammates from my college sport who will be my friends after I move on from college sport.	1	2	3	4	5
22. I feel that I did not achieve what I wanted to achieve in my college sport.*	1	2	3	4	5
23. I have started preparing for my future in the workplace (e.g., preparing for interviews, how to look for a job, developing a resume, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
24. I have been actively involved in campus activities or clubs outside of my sport involvement.	1	2	3	4	5
25. I feel confident that I am prepared for my future career.	1	2	3	4	5

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