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A Post Pandemic Analysis of COVID-19 and the Impact on Mental Health of High School
Student-Athletes—Today, more than ever minds matter

Pastora D. Hernández Barbee

A dissertation in practice submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

In Educational Leadership

University of Washington Tacoma

2023

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Abstract

The cancellation of sporting opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic caused many student-athletes to feel deprived of the only outlet they had, which held a significant component of their personal and athletic identities (Grubic et al. 2021). This study aimed to answer the following research question: What are the experiences of high school student-athletes in a Pacific Northwest school district with access and support for holistic wellness in a post-pandemic COVID-19 school environment? The research methodology used was the wellness theory framework (Adams, Bezner, & Steinhardt, 1997). A total of seven student-athletes participated in the study through in-depth interviews. From the data collected, six major themes and many subthemes emerged addressing the tenets of wellness. Furthermore, results indicated the significance of developing social connectedness and belonging through supportive relationships, more specifically with coaches and other athletes. Additionally, the findings shed light on the multifaceted nature of the student-athlete journey, revealing the complexities that exist between physical, emotional, intellectual, psychological, spiritual, and social well-being. All participants in the study had some knowledge about accessing mental health support whether in school or out of school. However, they considered mental health services their last resource to reach if needed. Lastly, the results suggested that while the high demands on academic and athletic performance were present and had caused levels of stress, the post-pandemic COVID-19 school environment did not have a significant impact on the wellbeing of the participants. On the contrary, student-athletes expressed excitement to be back to in-person instruction.

Keywords: high school student-athletes, wellness model, anxiety, depression, pandemic

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Chapter I: Introduction

Today more than ever, mental health occurs in a complex range of experiences varying from an optimal state of well-being to devastating states of emotional pain and suffering. People undergoing mental health conditions are more likely to experience lower levels of mental well-being (WHO, 2022). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (WHO, 1948) while emphasizing that mental health and well-being are basic human rights. For the last twenty years, the international health community and the World Health Organization along with political leaders, community members, and professionals across different sectors have recognized the significance of addressing the impact caused by mental health disorders (WHO, 2022).

Although, about a billion people across the globe live with a mental health disorder that can be diagnosed, many people with mental health disorders do not have access to effective care because services and support are not existent, they lack capacity, accessibility, and affordability; or because widespread stigma discourage people from seeking help (WHO, 2022). It is worth noting that even with the progress made towards addressing mental health related issues, the absence of a psychosocial approach and cross collaboration to care continues to be a barrier today (WHO, 2022). In terms of understanding the concept of psychosocial approach when addressing mental illness, Thomas et al. (2020) stresses that psychosocial factors influence the psychological and social wellbeing of an individual. These factors “can describe individuals in relation to their social environment and how these affect physical and mental health” (Thomas et al. 2020, pg. 2). Thus, mental health possesses a fundamental value, because connecting with others helps us to function, gives us a sense of belonging, and ultimately helps us to cope and

thrive. When an individual learns how to positively cope under encountered stressors, the individual can develop a sense of coherence by experiencing higher motivation, desire to get well, and gain responsibility to manage their wellbeing (Thomas et al. 2020). During the COVID-19 Pandemic student-athletes' mental health was negatively impacted with increased reports of depression as well as symptoms of anxiety (Davis, Gustafsson, Callow, & Woodman, 2020). The social isolation and reduced social and emotional support along with disruptions in training and competition has induced emotional distress among these athletes (Davis, Gustafsson, Callow, & Woodman, 2020).

Zhang et al., (2020) argue that adolescents are greatly attuned to their peer groups. Therefore, the psychological impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic are greater than in adults because adolescents tend to be more vulnerable to the negative consequences of stress. On the other hand, social connectedness and belonging through supportive relationships are found to be positive, because they create greater psychological wellness and help decrease levels of anxiety and depression (Dailey, Parker, & Campbell, 2021). And despite of the fact that physical separation during times of a public health crisis such as COVID-19, is not something new, there is evidence in prior research after a health crisis, that isolation has “significant mental health consequences” (Dailey, Parker, & Campbell, 2021, pg. 1) due to losing daily structure and physical connection with other individuals.

Likewise, Şemşik, Denerel, Köyağasıoğlu, and Tunç (2021) suggest that the effects of isolation due to COVID-19 in athletes are not yet fully available. Knowing that during the COVID-19 Pandemic there was a decreased level of physical activity, I still have some questions about the normalcy student-athletes are experiencing today. Especially when research shows that teenagers are at a higher risk of experiencing mental health problems such as psychological

distress, anxiety, depression, increased suicide risk, sleep disorders and other psychological disorders (Windarwati et al, 2022). Maintaining high-quality and unrestricted social connections has been found to be critical to preserve mental and physical health. Additionally, group belonging is especially valuable to promote general well-being, especially during times of adversity such as a global pandemic (Graupensperger, Benson, Kilmer, & Evans, 2020).

Though, engaging in a healthy lifestyle like organized sports is a well-known preventative coping strategy to manage stress and maintain a healthy mental wellness. The promotion of physical activity and active living has been widely integrated into public health in response to the growing need for developing opportunities to improve interventions and physical activity. (Sillas et al. 2006). Similarly, Lee, Park, and Yoo (2018) suggest that sport involvement is an effective way to promote physical and psychological wellness due to the enjoyable aspects of sport's participation such as social interaction, competition, personal challenge, and goal achievement. Additionally, physical activity and sport involvement has been shown to aid psychological disorders such as stress, depression, and anxiety (Lee, Park, & Yoo, 2018). And while, exercise and sports are beneficial for the general well-being, the athlete population are at a higher risk of experiencing additional mental health risk factors compared to non-athletic populations for a variety of factors such as increased workloads, high stress competition, overtraining, stressful lifestyles, injury, and identity crisis (Schinke, Stambulova, Si, & Moore, 2018). Powers, Fogaca, Gurung, & Jackman (2020) suggest the importance of keeping in mind that student-athletes face other types of challenges such as balancing high expectations between academics and sports.

When studying student-athletes, we need to recognize that this population represents a unique group with specific health attributes and risk factors. Therefore, it is equally important to

understand the physical impact on sport performance and the general psychological welfare of the athlete (Raglin, 2001). For instance, most athletes have the capacity to cope with intense loads of training. However, at least 10% will present disturbances or changes in mood state “associated with a chronic impairment in physical performance, depression and various other physical and psychological symptoms” (Raglin, 2001, pg. 881). In this study, I aim to address the multidimensional aspects (physical, psychological, spiritual, social, emotional, and intellectual) that impact high school student-athletes’ mental health while exploring their experiences in accessing holistic wellness resources in a post pandemic (COVID-19) school environment.

Mental health terms defined by the World Health Organization and used in this document:

***Mental health:** A state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with stresses of life, to realize their abilities, to learn well and work well, and to contribute to their communities. Mental health is an integral component of health and well-being and is more than the absence of mental disorder (WHO, 2022).*

***Mental health condition:** A broad term covering mental disorders and psychosocial disabilities. It also covers other mental states associated with significant distress, impairment of functioning, or risk of self-harm (WHO, 2022).*

***Mental disorder:** As defined by the international Classification of Diseases 11th Revision (ICD-11), a mental disorder is a syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual’s cognition, emotional regulation, or behaviour, that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes that underline mental and behavioural functioning. These disturbances are usually associated with*

distress or impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (WHO, 2022).

COVID-19 (Novel coronavirus 19): is caused by a severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) that developed into a global pandemic (CDC, 2021).

For purposes of this paper, the term mental health disorders and mental health conditions can be used interchangeably.

Statement of the problem

The American Psychiatric Association (2018) has described mental illness as the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional changes that lead to significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other areas of functioning. Furthermore, Locke, Wallace, and Brunner (2016) assert that at least 19.4% of young adults (18-25) in the United States have experienced some form of mental illness such as depression and anxiety. When discussing student-athlete mental health, Rayan, Gayles, and Bell (2018) advise that at least 10-20% of student-athletes suffer from depression. However, an interesting finding was that depressive and anxiety symptoms were more prevalent in female student-athletes than in male student-athletes. A recent study shows that athletes experience additional psychological risk factors compared to non-athletes. These factors include high training loads, tough competitions, and a stressful lifestyle that demands high performance in all areas. And because there is an existing negative perception when athletes experience troubles and worries, there is also a negative perception around those that seek psychological care (Yamaguchi, Nakamura, Noguri, & Shibata, 2020).

In addition to having a negative perception when athletes experience psychological difficulties, the historical concept of mental health used by the medical model assumes that an athlete had or did not have a mental condition, illness, or disordered state, leading to discrimination and misconception of optimal and sub-optimal individual functioning (Schinke, Stambulova, Si, & Moore, 2018). Recent findings in research on mental health challenges for athletes appear to show a link between overly strong athletic identity, the public appraisal of performance, and an almost fanatical drive to win (MacIntyre et al., 2017). Similarly, Yamaguchi, Noguri, and Shibata (2020) argue that when promoting an environment that always requires and expects athletes to win, sport-specific mental health issues begin to emerge. Considering the global physical, psychological, and economic impact the COVID-19 Pandemic has brought upon us, Grubic et al. (2021), remind us of that student-athletes were already presenting high levels of psychological distress before the pandemic, due to a

lack of attention on the unique mental health needs of student-athletes (ie, athletes who participate in secondary and postsecondary school sport programs during their academic studies) during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to limited response from sporting organizations and academic institutions in addressing athletic-specific concerns (pg. 8).

And while the benefits linked to participation in organized sports and exercise are well known, the COVID-19 Pandemic caused many students-athletes to feel deprived of the only outlet they had which was a significant component of their personal and athletic identities (Grubic et al., 2021).

When talking about anxiety in student-athletes, which is another common mental health condition affecting adolescents ages 13-18 (APA, 2022), Rayan, Gayles, and Bell (2018) describe anxiety as being categorized as competitive, generalized, or social. In terms of competitive, or performance anxiety, the anxiety symptoms occur only in the presence of competition or performance. Therefore, competitive anxiety is more likely to be experienced by student-athletes, and symptoms may be more visible when competing (Rayan, Gayles, and Bell, 2018).

Additionally, Rayan, Gayles, and Bell (2018) describe anxiety as being associated with fear of the future, resulting in student-athletes experiencing self-perceived threats to their athletic performance. From the epidemiological context, it is worth saying that before the COVID-19 Pandemic, the prevalence of depressive and anxiety disorders in teenagers ages 10-14 was 13.5% and ages 15-19 was 14.7% (WHO, 2022). However, by 2020, because of the Pandemic, the numbers rose significantly to 31% for anxiety disorders and 28.9% for depressive disorders in both males and females. The pre-pandemic and current research regarding student-athlete's mental health indicates that there is a need to identify ways to conceptualize holistic wellness that support high school student- athletes' mental health in a post-pandemic revolving world. To understand the terms and significance of depression and anxiety as mental health disorders, I'm adding the definitions of both.

Depression

Depression is defined by the American Psychological Association as “a negative affective state, ranging from unhappiness and discontent to an extreme feeling of sadness, pessimism, and despondency, that interferes with daily life. Various physical, cognitive, and

social changes also tend to co-occur, and it is symptomatic of a number of mental health disorders” (APA, 2023). Depression is categorized in four major disorders: disruptive mood dysregulation disorder, major depressive disorder, persistent depressive disorder, and premenstrual dysphoric disorder (DSM-5 APA, 2013). Symptoms of depression include depressed mood expressed as subjective self-report like feeling sad, empty, or hopeless; other symptoms are marked lessened interest in activities that brought joy in the past; insomnia or hypersomnia; fatigue; diminished ability to concentrate or focus; recurrent thoughts of being death (suicidal ideation); significant weight loss; and feeling excessive guilt and worthlessness (APA, 2013).

Anxiety

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) as

an emotion characterized by apprehension and somatic symptoms of tension in which an individual anticipates impending danger, catastrophe, or misfortune. The body often mobilizes itself to meet the perceived threat: Muscles become tense, breathing is faster, and the heart beats more rapidly. Anxiety may be distinguished from fear both conceptually and physiologically, although the two terms are often used interchangeably. Anxiety is considered a future-oriented, long-acting response broadly focused on a diffuse threat, whereas fear is an appropriate, present-oriented, and short-lived response to a clearly identifiable and specific threat (2022).

Study Rationale and Significance of the Study

When we have a full understanding of how mental health commonly presents itself in the high school student-athlete population, we can develop awareness regarding the relevant psychological, cultural, and environmental influences that these athletes experience (Chang et al. 2020). Ryan, Gayles, and Bell (2018) highlight the prevalence of mental health challenges in student-athletes and the barriers they may encounter when seeking support, further evidence has shown that student-athletes underutilize any mental health resources if available due to the stigma associated with these types of services (Wahto, Swift, & Whipple, 2016). Currie et al., (2021) suggest that “improving the mental health literacy of athletes and organizations is critical. The sporting ecosystem should be psychologically safe, with no repercussions for seeking help. Additionally, services should be readily available, and athletes positively encouraged to use them” (pg. 1). Therefore, prevention initiatives like mental health awareness in a post-pandemic high school environment must be encouraged to determine stressors that are more likely to ignite mental health symptoms in high school student-athletes.

And although there is considerable research and data on the psychological issues experienced by college student-athletes, mental health in high school sports has not yet received the attention it merits within the academic community due to the general assumption that there is a low prevalence of psychological difficulties in high school athletes (Doherty, Hannigan, & Campbell, 2016). However, there is a huge need for supporting the person behind the athlete (Doherty, Hannigan, & Campbell, 2016) by conceptualizing holistic wellness to support high school student-athletes.

Purpose of the Study and Research question

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the experiences high school-student athletes had in accessing holistic wellness in a post-pandemic school environment. Chang et al., (2020) suggest that “while sports participation provides many benefits to individual health and well-being, athletes are exposed to additional risk factors that may impact their mental health” (pg. 218). Though, Marchant (2013) cautions us to keep in mind that “a competing athlete is often attempting, simultaneously, to manage the impinging anxiety and trying to foster a positive mindset, whereby negative thoughts and emotions are downplayed” (pg. 264). Although, student athletes have their unique characteristics, Uphill, Sly, and Swain (2016) “suggest that the absence of mental health does not imply the presence of mental illness, and the presence of mental illness, does not imply the absence of mental health” (pg. 3) indicating that interventions should not be directed to treat mental illness. But instead, promoting mental health as a continuum where social support –and this includes the athletic programs and other support systems in high school settings—plays an important role in maintaining health, increased self-esteem, and can keep people highly motivated in self-care behaviors (Lee, Park, & Yoo, 2018).

This study seeks to address the following question:

1. What are the experiences of high school student-athletes in a Pacific Northwest school district with access and support for holistic wellness in a post-pandemic COVID-19 school environment?

Positionality Statement

Throughout this section, I will be describing the various identities and junctions I bring to this project as the researcher. I will share my main identities and biases along with a brief description of my role as a Licensed Mental Health Counselor.

I am originally from the land of lakes and volcanoes, my dear Nicaragua. With Indigenous blood running in my veins, my name means Shepherdess and the literal translation from Spanish to English is Poinsettia also known as the Christmas flower. I was named Pastora to honor my roots and ancestors of past seamstresses and milk farmers. Born in the middle of a civil war and a long fight for freedom, Nicaragua ended its first round of dictatorship in 1979 when I was almost two years old. A temporary period of peace settled in just to start all over again into another period of chaos known to the world as the *Contra War*. Although I survived both wars by hiding in homemade bunkers and eating rationalized food portions—without realizing it until much later—I had developed along with many other Nicaraguans something called Post-Traumatic Growth. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) conceptualized Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) as the positive psychological changes that people experience after overcoming adversity or highly stressful life challenges. Additionally, Jayawickreme and Blackie (2014) suggest that when experiencing the types of events I experienced, there is a greater sense of appreciation for life, spiritual engagement, highlighted and intimate social interactions, personal resiliency, and more openness to life possibilities. Post-Traumatic Growth is the foundation of my resiliency and the strongest identity I have.

The next aspect of my identity developed after falling in love with sports, especially running. Though no other athlete enthusiast was part of my family of origin I became fascinated

with the feeling of freeing my mind through physical exercise. Many years later my kids joined me in this endeavor as I exposed them early in life to the sport I dearly loved. They also became sports enthusiasts getting into organized sports such as volleyball, baseball, football, swimming, and even rugby. Sports and physical well-being became then my other major identity.

Fast forward to 2010, my family and I moved from Nicaragua to start a new life in the United States of America. Upon arrival in the land of “freedom and opportunities”—as we were told to call the new land—I began to understand that I was no longer Nicaraguan but instead I was Latina and Hispanic. I also learned that I needed to identify myself with a race and clearly, I did not belong to the majority. All these names and labels were new for me. And though my children inherited more Caucasian genes than their mom’s little darker complexion, we all established the strong possibility that we belonged to different categories in the new place we started calling home. Likewise, English was also a new venue for me. And even though I was hearing the confusing sounds of the Anglo-Saxon-Germanic language (Spalding, 1853) since being in high school, the sounds never made sense to me. Thus far, I had to abandon—at least temporarily—my native Spanish language and started a new cycle of acculturation and the new identities began to develop.

In the process of learning how to be an “American” citizen, I started school in a local community college in Olympia Washington. Since my previous professional experience was in the medical field, I wanted to be a nurse and enrolled in classes that would allow me to be one. As a Nicaraguan, I had dedicated about 10 years of my life to the profession of Medical Laboratory Technologist so it made sense I would continue in a similar path. However, soon after, the enthusiasm for the medical field faded away along with the energy that was required for me to explain my accent, my origin, and all the whys I was in this country. The acculturation

process was confusing and rather fast. I started thinking in English, speaking in English, and reading/writing in English. I was afraid of all the changes that were occurring so rapidly within me and around me. I had a conflict of competing identities and I refused to accept the changes. Even now the refusal to call myself Latina/Hispanic continues until today.

The intersections of 33 years of living as a Nicaraguan and the years as a new “Americana” started to make peace with each other. After discharging the idea of becoming a nurse, I began to explore other professional routes and started taking classes in psychology, sociology, and leadership. I fell in love with the idea of exploring and understanding human behavior and how we interact with each other as a society. Simultaneously my leadership identity began again to emerge after being quiet for some time. I’m certainly a fighter and I knew at that point that the resiliency that helped me go through the adversity I experienced as a child was the fuel I needed to not only survive in the new land but also thrive. Fast forward to sleepless nights and an accumulation of student loans, I can share that I have completed a Bachelor of Arts, a master’s in counseling psychology, and have been enrolled in a doctoral program in Educational Leadership. The last one is the reason why I am writing this dissertation. My student-scholar identity is clear and actively present in my life.

My personal and professional passion is to advocate for what I believe is meaningful in life like body-mind-spirit congruence, calmness, mindfulness practice, spirituality, love for life, respect for nature, resilience, and positive outlook. Though, I acknowledge and accept the fact that what is meaningful to me based on my personal and professional experiences does not necessarily reflect what is meaningful to others. And because of the population I’m choosing to conduct this research project, I recognize my bias towards the strong value I place on exercise and healthy balance. Along with the expectation that participants and their support system would

have the developmental competency, including mental ability, academic performance, and social skills necessary to thrive in harsh environments.

Nevertheless, my approach to psychological care towards individuals is warm, empathetic, and empowering, I must constantly do a self-reflection work—as a parent of a high school student-athlete myself—to pause and contemplate the student's experiences through their lens while keeping in mind that we just went through a global pandemic. Acknowledging that “love means setting aside walls, fences, and unlocking doors, and saying yes...one can be in paradise by simply saying yes to this moment. The instant we agree to feel fear or vulnerability, greed or agitation, we are holding our life with an unconditionally friendly heart” (Brach 2003, pg. 82). Lastly, as a licensed mental health professional—a counselor— I model and encourage self-love through community connection. But I recognize that in my position as “the mental health expert” I can be perceived as someone that holds power over other people’s mental health. Even though I hold many target memberships like my ethnicity, national origin, and gender, I assert my decisions based on my life principles of authenticity, intuition, self-love, gratitude, and forgiveness.

Definitions of terms

Acculturation. Cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

Group memberships in two general groups: As individuals we likely hold both Agent and Target group memberships.

Agent group: As members of Agent groups, we receive affirmation and support and have ready access to rewards...(Nieto et al. 2010). Social groups that are overvalued and normative we term Agent groups. As members of social groups that hold Agent Rank, we are overvalued and receive unearned advantage and benefit. Examples of Agent groups include adults, heterosexuals, Whites, biological males, or the U.S.-born. (Nieto et al. 2010).

Target group: Social groups that are devalued and ‘otherized’ we term Target groups. As members of social groups that hold Target Rank, we are undervalued and subject to marginalization. Examples of Target groups include children/elders, gay/lesbian/bisexual people, people of Color, women, and people born outside the U.S. (Nieto et al., 2010 pg. 30).

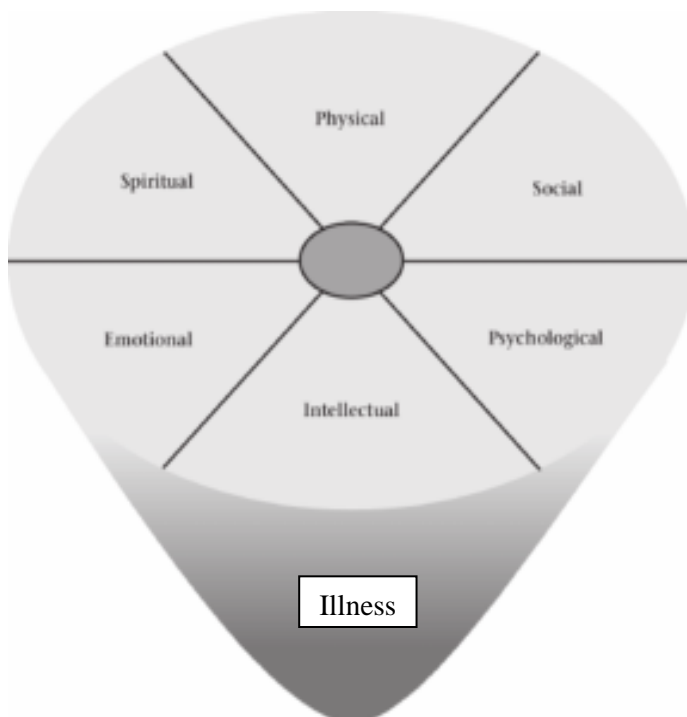
Mental Health Counselor: (1) A counselor who works in a mental health setting. (2) A counselor licensed as a mental health counselor by state. (3) A counselor who has secured certification as a Certified Mental Health Counselor (CCMCH) conferred by the National Board of Certified Counselor (NBCC) after securing National Certified Counselor (NCC) status (Rosenthal, 2003, pg. 206).

Theoretical framework

This study aimed to understand the experiences high school-student athletes had in accessing holistic wellness in a post-pandemic COVID-19 school environment. To achieve the goal of understanding these experiences, I proposed the model of the wellness theory. According to Fullen (2019), the wellness model is multidimensional, holistic, collaborative, and a salutogenic approach. In addition, Myers, Sweeney, and Witmer (2000) suggest that wellness is tailored towards the ideal health and well-being an individual can achieve. Yet, we must take into consideration the individual’s environment because the way we see and experience the

world around us suggests having a powerful and influential impact on our health and wellness (Adams, Bezner, & Steinhardt, 1997). With many wellness models available to address different domains of wellness, for the purpose of this study I have selected the domains of physical wellness, spiritual wellness, psychological wellness, social wellness, emotional wellness, and intellectual wellness. In figure 1, the top of the model represents wellness, and the bottom represents the constriction of the illness.

Figure 1: The Wellness Model proposed by Adams, Bezner, and Steinhardt (1997).



Tenets of Wellness Theory

Physical Wellness

Characterized by the positive perception and belief that physical health perceived as good health was associated with higher levels of physical activity and less psychological problems (Adams, Bezner, & Steinhardt, 1997). Myers, Sweney, and Witmer (2000) added that physical wellness not only included regular physical activity but also nutrition as there is an obvious relationship between eating habits in our psychological wellbeing, general health, and performance.

Spiritual Wellness

Characterized as the belief of a unifying power that integrates mind and body. Considered to have a positive perception that provides meaning and purpose in life, this tenet has been associated with positive health outcomes including self-esteem, coping beliefs, social skills, family togetherness, and connectedness (Adams, Bezner, & Steinhardt, 1997). Additionally, spirituality can be described as a broad concept referring to one's personal beliefs and values. Myers, Sweney, and Witmer (2000) conceptualized spirituality as "an awareness of a being or force that transcends the material aspects of life and gives a deep sense of wholeness or connectedness to the universe" (pg. 78).

Psychological Wellness

Characterized as the general perceptions of experiencing positive outcomes in life. Also called dispositional optimism, an individual can assume to have psychological success and positive results in whatever the individual embarks (Adams, Bezner, & Steinhardt, 1997). In

addition to expecting a positive future, psychological wellness invites us to take responsibility for our own personal habits to prevent harmful behaviors. Myers, Sweney, and Witmer (2000) suggest that “positive self-care improves the quality of life” (pg. 255), encouraging a higher sense of self-direction and self-worth.

Social Wellness

Characterized as the general insight of having a support system available to the individual when needed. When the individual feels valued and supported by their community, and higher levels of support are present, the fewer mental and health risk factors are observed or experienced by the individual. The perception of social support (family, friends, systems like school and athletic programs) constitutes one of the most important health protecting features (Adams, Bezner, & Steinhardt, 1997). Moreover, Swarbrick (2006) suggests that this tenet or dimension involves developing social times, having the opportunities to meet new people, and sharing common interests with the people they identify as their community.

Emotional Wellness

Defined as having the skills of secure identity and positive value of oneself. Emotional wellness is directly linked to self-esteem and the strongest predictor of general wellbeing. An individual that possesses a high sense of secure identity tends to express a higher sense of self-regard. Therefore, as self-esteem increases the internal orientation towards wellness increases (Adams, Bezner, & Steinhardt, 1997). Additionally, Swarbrick (2006) invites us to see this tenet as the ability to express emotions, adapt to the emotional challenges that people encounter, and cope positively with life’s stressors.

Intellectual Wellness

Defined as being internally invigorated by an optimal quantity of intellectual stimulation. The individual then will thrive with the right amount of intellectual/academic activity (Adams, Bezner, & Steinhardt, 1997). Additionally, Swarbrick (2006) suggests that intellectual wellness encourages people's interests to pursue new skills, hobbies, or anything that promotes personal and intellectual growth.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Students are back in the classrooms and the athletics programs are back to full capacity while society is still adjusting to the new normal. The COVID-19 Pandemic brought immense global uncertainty, but for the student-athlete "the consequences of isolation have been especially evident during the physical distancing" (Graupensperger, Benson, Kilmer, & Evans, 2020, 663) and because social connections are critical to preserve both mental and physical health, prioritizing the student-athlete mental health is rather pressing. Additionally, Şenışık, Denerel, Köyağasioğlu, and Tunç (2021) suggest that although physical activity and sports has proven to be effective in preventing psychiatric symptoms, in the post pandemic era, the full extent of the negative effects on mental health in student-athletes is still to be known. To better understand this group of students, I asked the question: What are the experiences of high school student-athletes in a Pacific Northwest school district with access and support for holistic wellness in a post-pandemic COVID-19 school environment? Considering that there is a constant need in promoting and protecting athletes' mental health, Gouttebarga et al. (2022) suggest,

Mental health must be discussed explicitly, and screening undertaken systematically. All sports stakeholders and members of the athletes' entourages

(including coaches) should receive training and resources to be able to identify mental health red flags so the appropriate referrals can be made. Clinicians should routinely check in with all athletes and take prompt steps to intervene, when warranted (pg. 1)

When studying mental health in student-athletes it is essential that we recognize that adolescent athletes represent a large and unique population of students with specific health attributes (McGuine et al., 2021). Subsequently, when defining health in student athletes, we need to consider physical health and mental health, which unavoidably intertwine. Athletes that experience physical challenges can also experience psychological effects like stress, anxiety, depression, behavioral issues, aggression, and substance use-disorders that can ultimately cause physical harm (MacIntyre et al., 2017).

Understanding Barriers Student-Athletes face

Though there are many reasons why adolescents experiencing psychological disorders do not seek out professional help when needed, a growing body of research supports the need to examine the stories and experiences athletes have had while understanding the barriers they face. The perceived stigma, lack of mental health literacy, negative past experiences when seeking help, perceived risk of being excluded from the team and unable to compete, alongside with a sport culture that praises toughness and minimizes perceived weakness (Uphill, Sly, & Swain, 2016) are some of the barriers student-athletes encounter. Although stigma in mental health is not new, it elicits misconceptions and a negative impact when people are labeled mentally ill because it prevents people from engaging in mental health services due to the threat of social condemnation (Corrigan, 2004). Furthermore, Yamaguchi, Noguri, and Shibata (2020) suggest that the general population assumes that athletes are mentally strong and would never be

depressed or experience any psychological distress, and more alarming student-athletes themselves may believe they are mentally stronger and healthier than the rest of their peers.

A systematic review of data conducted in 2010 revealed that the lack of mental health literacy among the student-athlete population has been a concern since then being reported as a barrier for seeking help (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010). Even though, research has revealed student-athletes may be more vulnerable in developing several mental health conditions, as athletes, they maintain negative attitudes toward mental health providers, in particular sports-related professionals which result in the underutilization of mental health services when available (Lopez & Levy, 2010). Reardon (2023) defines mental health literacy as “the knowledge, beliefs, and skills regarding mental health disorders that aid their recognition, management, or prevention” (pg. 6). However, people with certain individual characteristics like high emotion management skills are more likely to seek out help and have more positive expectations about the future than people with individual characteristics with low emotion management skills. These individual characteristics may play a role in recognizing psychological distress (Storrie, Ahern, & Tuckett, 2010).

Despite the plethora of evidence that shows student-athletes required serious counseling and wellness support due to the complex demands they face (Broughton & Neyer (2001), “the perceptions and norms of the athletic team (e.g., teammates, coaches, and athletic trainers), and the social and cultural environment (e. g., athletic department, university) around the athletes impact how athletes view mental health care and those who seek mental health services” (Moreland, Coxe, and Yang, 2017). In addition, Gulliver, Griffiths, and Christensen (2010) suggest the need for developing strategies that improve adolescents’ self-reliance while

increasing mental health literacy among students and athletic programs to help reduce the stigma associated with mental health help seeking.

Current Mental Health Crisis in Sports

COVID-19 has become an event of high magnitude that was experienced individually and collectively. Noel-London, Grimsley, Porter, and Breitbach (2021) denote the Pandemic COVID-19 should be recognized as a traumatic occurrence that has had “lasting influence on an individual’s or a community’s functioning” (pg. 7) including emotional, physical, and social wellbeing. The residual impacts the pandemic has had on young athletes is something that we all must keep inquiring about to better understand the underlying challenges student-athletes are currently facing.

Though many factors can impact mental health in athletes, one of the newest emerging concerns plaguing athletes in the last couple of years is the COVID-19 Pandemic (Readon, 2023). In addition, Noel-London, Grimsley, Porter, and Breitbach (2021) suggest we should consider the sudden removal in accessing “social support systems outside the home” (pg. 7), along with the sedentary lifestyle many students engaged during the stay-at-home mandate as another factor that added to the crisis. All the challenges experienced by many student-athletes during the unexpected transition from schools to home could cause delayed educational outcomes and “halting of the physical and personal development that was occurring through sport participation” (Noel-London, Grimsley, Porter, & Breitbach, 2021, pg. 7). Mental health disorders in student-athletes have been more challenging during and after the pandemic where suicide among young people has become the second leading cause of death in recent times (Readon, 2023). Moreover, Beaupre, Meske, and Buckley (2022) argue that an estimated 32% of

student-athletes in secondary schools have expressed feeling sad, anxious, depressed, and suicidal in the past year. It is important to acknowledge that athletes are barely catching up with the social, academic, and sport related loss they experienced since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020. Yet, the negative health effects of the pandemic may continue for some time.

Psychosocial benefits of sports

It is widely known that physical activity has been attributed to have significant positive health benefits, and sports participation can be consistently connected to having psychosocial benefits for the athlete like higher self-esteem, higher quality of life, and greater academic success (Watson et al., 2023). Before the COVID-19 Pandemic, at least 18,000 high schools in the United States were offering athletic programs. As we all know, participation in organized sports can have profound and significant influences in physical and mental health outcomes (McGuine, et al. 2021). It is worth mentioning that extensive research has helped to establish clear recommendations that support the benefits of exercising for children and adolescents ages 5-17, in preventing cardiovascular diseases, metabolic disease risks, and reduced presentations of mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression (Eime et al. 2013). Organized sport provides physical and mental health benefits extending it to social benefits by allowing spaces to develop social skills. Eimi et al. (2013) suggests that children that engage in physical activities through organized sports “are more likely to be physically active in adulthood than those who do not participate in childhood sport” (pg. 2).

From the socio-ecological perspective, we can say that health effects are the result of the interactions between the individual and their environment and that “psychological aspects of emotional control” (Eimie et al. 2013, pg. 13) were directly linked to sport participation. There

are no doubt the multiple psychosocial and emotional wellbeing sports can provide to student-athlete, MacIntyre et al., (2017) emphasizes that when we share the responsibility for mental health awareness, access to holistic wellness and positive actions across multidisciplinary teams while examining the role of mental health in student-athletes, it is likely to devote time and resources on early intervention for young athletes. If we prioritize student-athlete mental health, and understand the imminent need for academic institutions, sport organizations, and the health care system to collaborate with each other to mitigate the negative psychological outcomes, we have a better chance to support this group. Thus, mental health providers when working in collaboration with athletic trainers, and other members involved in sports, can help in providing comprehensive psychological care to athletes that more than ever need support (Chang et. al., 2020).

Chapter III: Method

This chapter explains in detail the methodology selected for the study, the design and approach used to collect the data, participants selection and screening process, the protection of human subjects, and lastly the data analysis. The present research aimed to understand the experiences high school student-athletes had in accessing support for holistic wellness in a post-pandemic COVID-19 school environment. Understanding and taking into consideration the student-athlete experiences can provide valuable data to conceptualize holistic programs that address the social-emotional needs of the student-athlete. Due to the nature of the study and in order to protect the human subject, I submitted my proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Office of the Youth Protection Program (YPP) of the University of Washington Human Subject Division for their approval. The goal of the IRB is “to protect human subjects in compliance with federal regulations (i. e., 45 CFR part 46). Thus, IRBs function in a role of legal

compliance” (Balkin & Kleist, 2023, pg. 45). Additionally, the YPP of the University of Washington recognizes that it is “everyone’s responsibility to protect youth from harm. Those who have interactions with youth as part of their UW duties must follow the requirements of APS.10.13. Individual units (Colleges, Schools, Offices) and their respective departments are responsible for ensuring that requirements are met” (Retrieved from Roles and Responsibilities for APS 10.13, UW). Following the rigorous approval process by the IRB and YPP, the research study was presented to the school district and after multiple meetings, the study was approved by the Executive Director of the Teaching and Learning Department.

Research design

To effectively capture the students’ experiences, a qualitative research methodology was selected. Hence, recognizing that qualitative inquiries come in a mixture of forms and are not automatic or a mechanical process, developing its framework involves logical and intuitive thinking while understanding the relevance and importance of the meaning of the data collected (Bryman & Burgess, 1994). In this research, the high school students-athletes’ stories during and after the pandemic COVID-19 are the central narratives that propelled this study. From the participant perspective, this qualitative research pursued “to understand the world from the perspective of those living in it” (Hatch, 2002). Therefore, I decided that qualitative Thematic Analysis (TA) was an appropriate method to choose.

Thematic analysis is an approach that helps identify and analyze patterns in qualitative data such as interviews and can be applied “within a range of theoretical frameworks, from essentialist to constructionist” (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Additionally, TA is a flexible approach that allows the researcher to explore and interpret data in alignment with the pre-existing theoretical framework and research question selected for a study. Subsequently, Braun and

Clarke (2022) suggested an implementation of a more deductive inclination to TA by acknowledging that coding and theme development allow acquiring meaning across a spectrum. Likewise, Alhojailan (2012) indicated that thematic analysis supplies a detailed and complex data collection while adding richness to the thematic description to get a “sense of the predominant and important themes” (pg. 14). Moreover, doing deductive thematic analysis allows the researcher to maintain structure and a focused approach to gain deeper insights from the interviews. Though data collection can be dependent on interpretation, deductive TA is appropriate when examining the data to explore common themes from more than one contributor (Alhojailan, 2012).

Continuing the steps for the deductive TA, an interview protocol was designed to be one page in length as suggested by Creswell & Creswell (2018) and consisted in four main open-ended questions with three and four sub-questions (see Appendix E) that addressed the pre-existing theoretical framework. The questions inquired about the overall experience student-athletes had after their return to in-person instruction and sport activities. Additionally, asked about the access these students had to mental health support during the school year 2022-23. The questions were developed by the researcher based on the knowledge from research articles and books gathered during the proposal period. The six (6) tenets of the wellness theory were considered when developing the interview protocol. In addition, the interview questions were reviewed and approved by the chairperson Dr. Minthorn. The semi-structured interviews were conducted all in person apart from one interview that was completed via remote access. The interviews were recorded and set for an estimated time of 60 minutes. However, the length of each interview was less than half an hour.

Participants

Because of the time constraints participants were selected merely based on meeting all the inclusionary criteria. The original sample consisted of 13 student-athletes that were voluntarily recruited after the study announcement was distributed by the athletic departments of each of the high schools participating in the study. Additionally, a set of flyers were circulated by the main office and by the counseling center. Four out of the 13 student-athletes provided some of the demographic's information required in the screening during the initial contact but did not complete the other half of screening process due to time constraints and schedule conflict with practice in their current sports. One of the prospective participants screened in and was scheduled for an interview. However, the prospective participant did not attend the interview and was removed from taking part in the study. One prospective participant did not screen in and was informed immediately after completing the screening script and questionnaire (see Appendix B). Thus, only seven student-athletes formed the sample, completing entirely the screening and interview process.

It is worth noting that twelve subjects of the initial sample were primarily attending one of the high schools selected. Only one student was recruited from the other high school. All the student-athletes had played or were playing sports in the 2022-23 school year. Five participants were freshman students and four of them completed the screening and interview. Three participants were sophomore students but only two completed the screening and interview. Two participants were junior students and zero completed the screening and interview. Finally, three participants were senior students, one completed the screening and interview, one completed the screening but did not attend the interview, and one did not complete the screening and interview. The seven participants that completed the study self-identified their race as White. While the

self-identified ethnicity was Hispanic—descendent—having at least one parent whose country of origin was Latin American* and Non-Hispanic descendent. The age group of all the recruited subjects was mainly between 15–18 years old. The participant full demographic information can be found in following table:

Table 1.

Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Grade	Sport	Gender	Race	Ethnicity	Completed Screening	Completed Interview
Jake**	18	Senior	Football Track & Field	Male	White	Hispanic	Yes	Yes
Memo**	15	Freshman	Football & Wrestling	Male	White	Hispanic	Yes	Yes
Jwen**	15	Freshman	Soccer	Female	White	Hispanic	Yes	Yes
Charles**	15	Freshman	Track & field Swim	Male	White	Non- Hispanic	Yes	Yes
Danny**	15	Freshman	Track & field	Male	White	Non- Hispanic	Yes	Yes
Chris**	15	Sophomore	Football Track & field	Male	White	No- Hispanic	Yes	Yes
June**	16	Sophomore	Volleyball	Female	White	Hispanic*	Yes	Yes

**All names have been changed to protect participants' privacy

* Latin American descendant was not an exclusionary nor an inclusionary criterion for the study, though it came up during the screening process

Inclusionary Criteria

- 1) Participants that played sports at their high schools in the current 2022-23 school year.
All the participants, including the ones that did partial screening or did not complete the interviews, played or were playing sports during the current school year.
- 2) The age group was between 13-19 years old. All the participants were within the age range.
- 3) The grade range was 9-12th grade. All participants were within the grade range.
- 4) Any identified gender. Participants were identified as females and males only.
- 5) Any identified Race/Ethnicity. All participants were identified as White/Hispanic & White/Non-Hispanic only.
- 6) All participants that completed the screening and interview process signed the informed assent/consent/parental permission.

Exclusionary Criteria

- 1) Participants that were out of the age and grade range for the inclusionary criteria.
- 2) Participants that did not play any sports during the 2022-23 school year.
- 3) Participants that did not complete the screening process or interview.
- 4) Participants that scored +2 & +3 in the PHQ-2 question.
- 5) Participants that responded “YES” to have been diagnosed or currently being treated for a mental health condition such as major depression disorder, panic disorder, acute stress disorder, any dissociative disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, or conduct disorder*.
- 6) Participants that responded “YES” to currently feeling suicidal or homicidal**.
- 7) Participants that responded “YES” to currently being treated for any substance use disorder including alcohol***.

8) Participants that did not sign the assent/consent/parental permission form ****.

**One student responded "YES".*

***No student responded "YES" to currently being suicidal or homicidal.*

****No student responded "YES" to currently being treated for any substance use disorder including alcohol.*

*****All students (and their parents/legal guardians) that completed the interview process signed the assent/consent/parental permission.*

Procedure and recruitment process

Participants of this study were identified based on following demographics such as age (13-19), gender (Female, Male, gender binary, queer, pangender, gender fluid, agender, etc.), any race and/or identified ethnicity, grade (9-12), and type of sport participation whether individual or team participation (football, baseball, cross-country, swimming, track & field, golf, tennis etc.) in the 2022-23 school year including competitions. The identified location was two high schools in the Pacific Northwest. The study was initially presented to the school district for their consideration. And was agreed that in order to reduce ethical and legal issues the study needed the approval from the IRB and YPP of the University of Washington Human Subject Division. Subsequently, the school district reviewed the IRB documentation (letter of approval) and proceeded to approve the research through the Teaching and Learning Department.

The study announcement (see Appendix A) was distributed to the Athletic Directors of each of the high schools participating in the study. Afterwards, the announcement was distributed to student-athletes via school email and flyers disseminated through the main office and school counselors/counseling center. Other prospective subjects were recruited from parents who had learned about the study through word of mouth and made contact directly with the researcher. During the initial contact, prospective subjects needed to provide their real name and contact information (phone number or email). Each prospective subject was assigned a code that was linked to their real identifiable information.

After the initial contact was made, student-athletes and/or their parents were told about an initial screening script and questionnaire (see Appendix B) that could be completed via phone. All the participants and their parents were presented with brief information about the study and the background of the researcher. Thus, they were reminded that the researcher in the study was not in the role of the clinician while conducting this study. Consequently, no therapeutic interventions were being provided during the whole process. Although, if needed, a list of mental health providers (see Appendix D) was available to the participants. Prospective subjects were informed that the Screening script and questionnaire (see Appendix B) will help determine if the study was a good fit for the participants and if the participants were a good fit for the study. Additionally, prospective subjects that met all the inclusionary criteria were notified immediately and were given the opportunity to continue or decline their involvement in the study. No one declined from continuing their involvement in the study and an interview meeting was scheduled. Some prospective subjects provided the information needed for the screening during the initial contact and were scheduled for a phone meeting to complete the screening. However, due to schedule conflicts, they were unable to complete the screening script and questionnaire (see Appendix B) and were not scheduled for an interview. Prospective subjects that did not meet the criteria were informed without delay and thanked for their time and interest.

The interview process took place in person mainly at a private office provided by the researcher. A couple of participants selected the interview to be completed in the community. Only one participant was unable to meet in person due to schedule conflicts and was agreed to conduct the interview remotely. In this situation, both participant and legal guardian signed the assent/consent/parental permission via Adobe signature. They also provided verbal consent during the interview. All the participants received a copy of the assent/consent/parental

permission. At the time of the interviews, participants and their legal guardians/parents had the opportunity to ask any clarifying questions that were not addressed or answered during the screening portion. After attending this segment of the process, the researcher informed the participants that a recording device would be activated and that it was optional for their legal guardians or parents to be present during the interview. All participants under 18—that parental permission was required—opted to ask their parents and/or legal guardians to leave. The semi-structured interview questions were created by the researcher and reviewed by the chairperson Dr. Minthorn (see Appendix C). The interview protocol included four main open-ended questions followed by sub-questions addressing the six (6) tenets of wellness: Intellectual, Emotional, Social, Psychological, Spiritual, and Physical. The interviews were scheduled for an hour. However, all of them were completed in less than the times originally anticipated. At the end of the interviews, participants were encouraged to ask any clarifying question.

Data Collection and Analysis

Upon completion of all the interviews, each of the recordings were submitted into two transcribing software, 1) Podcastle.ai (editing and projects) and 2) MAXQDA Plus 2022. Afterwards, the transcripts were completed the researcher compared both transcripts and linked the recordings in the section for coding and document system for analysis in MAXQDA Plus. Taking into consideration that thematic analysis is the foundational method for this qualitative analysis, the researcher followed the six phases of TA proposed by Clarke and Braun (2013):

- 1) Familiarization with the data: is common to all forms of qualitative analysis—the researcher must immerse themselves in, and become intimately familiar with, their data; reading and re-reading the data (and listening to audio-recorded data at least once, if relevant) and noting any initial analytic observations.

- 2) Coding: Also, common element of many approaches to qualitative analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2012a, for thorough comparison), this involves generating pithy labels for important features of the data of relevance to the (broad) research question guiding the analysis. Coding is not simply a method of data reduction, it is also an analytic process, so codes capture both a semantic and conceptual reading of the data. The researcher codes every data item and ends this phase by collating all their codes and relevant data extracts.
- 3) Searching for themes: A theme is a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data relevant to the research question. If codes are the bricks and tiles in a brick and tile house, then themes are the walls and roof panels. Searching for themes is a bit like coding your codes to identify similarity in the data. This ‘searching’ is an active process; themes are not hidden in the data waiting to be discovered by the intrepid researcher, rather the researcher construct themes. The researcher ends this phase by collating all the coded data relevant to each theme.
- 4) Reviewing themes: Involves checking that the themes ‘work’ in relation to both the coded extracts and the full data-set. The researcher should reflect on whether the themes tell a convincing and compelling story about the data, and begin to define the nature of each individual theme, and the relationship between themes. It may be necessary to collapse two themes together or to split a theme into two or more themes, or to discard the candidate themes altogether and begin again the process of theme development.
- 5) Defining and naming themes: Requires the researcher to conduct and write a detailed analysis of each of the theme (the researcher should ask ‘what story does this theme

- tell?’ and ‘how does this theme fit into the overall story about the data?’), identifying the essence of each theme and constructing a concise, punchy and informative name for each theme.
- 6) Writing up: Writing is an integral element of the analytic process in TA (and most qualitative research). Writing-up involves weaving together the analytic narrative and (vivid) data extracts to tell the reader a coherent and persuasive story about the data and contextualizing it in relation to existing literature.

Chapter IV: Results

This chapter describes the relevant information of the participants sample, demographics, themes, and the summary of participants’ endorsement of themes and subthemes. Seven participants were interviewed in this study using guided semi-structured interview questions. The interviews occurred all in person except for one participant who was unable to meet in person. The participants were high school student-athletes recruited via school email and flyers distributed in the two high schools participating in the research study. The full description of demographics can be found in table 1.

Participants Sample

Jake

Jake was an 18-year-old student-athlete in the 12th grade. He requested the interview to be in the late evening as his weekdays were packed with schoolwork and track & field practices and weekends were not available. Jake described himself as being enthusiastic and curious about this study. He indicated that even though he was leaving high school, he wanted to share his experiences as a student-athlete. Jake identified himself as male, White, and Hispanic descendant. As a student in the last year of high school, Jake had completed two years of college

classes and was graduating with a high school diploma and an AA from a community college. He described feeling extremely confident as a student. He was frank about being ready to leave high school, although he expressed feeling nostalgic thinking about how fast the years in high school went by. He paused to take a deep breath and caught his thoughts to continue expressing his feelings regarding the multiple friendships he built throughout the years in high school. Jake was open about discussing the ups and downs of being a student in high school, especially with the academic pressure due to the significant amount of homework he endured during the two years—program—in college called “running stars”. Jake also discussed the opportunities available to him by being an athlete such as learning how to manage his time and knowing more about techniques to improve his athletic performance. He defined the student- athlete as someone who can enjoy a great time and has the ability to switch from athlete to student or school mode and being able to stay on top of things. Adding that doing all these things required consistency and discipline. Jake was confident in his school performance but at times had self-doubt in his sport performance. Jake shared his love for football and articulated how returning to in-person practice saved his passion for football and sports in general. He added that it wasn’t easy at the beginning of the pandemic when he had to stay home and had to adjust to be doing things including practice via “Zoom” or any other type of online platform. He expressed that being away from the social circle and routines didn’t feel natural and that wearing masks next to people he already knew was also unnatural. It was evident the excitement he displayed when talking about coming back to doing everything (academics & sport) in person. He disclosed that coming back in person felt extremely natural, but it brought some challenges along the way. Jake realized that after two years of living on a small screen, the high school years, football, and track & field were coming to an end. Jake was clear about the time lost during the pandemic COVID-

19 lockdown but expressed with certainty that he would encourage other students to do sports as a way to meet people, do self-improvement, and get ready for life.

Jake named his coaches and teammates essential people for his sense of belonging in school. He was candid describing what type of relationships he had developed with teammates whom he called friends, and his coaches he called mentors. He described the support his school gave through the counseling center and other resources available for him during the lockdown and when they went back to in person classes. Jake was honest, acknowledging that holistic wellness is not something that many kids like him do often or know a whole lot about it. Although, he recognized that he should practice meditation and spiritual connection and prompted the thought about ensuring the mind should receive the same amount of dedication to recover like people do for their bodies. In Jake's world, being and maintaining a healthy lifestyle was extremely important. He described with enthusiasm how much he is looking forward to the years in college and going to explore the world. He was proud of being a student that enjoyed learning and felt hopeful for the future. He believes his life has purpose and he is planning to work hard to achieve his goals. Lastly, Jake described how he enjoys activities that involve being at peace with life like enjoying the job you are doing and, if is not enjoyable—he stated—then change it. He closed the interview by asserting that “being at peace is being looking at your life and saying, this is where I want to be, and this where I'm at, and you are where you want to be”.

Memo

Memo was a 15-year-old student-athlete in the 9th grade. The interview was conducted midafternoon on a Saturday as this time was easier for Memo to manage than meeting during the weekdays. Memo explained that his weekdays were too busy between schoolwork and football practices. Memo started the new season football practices, and his afternoons became more

difficult to make free time. Memo shared that he did two sports during the current school year, football, and wrestling. Although he clarified that wrestling was just part of the year. Memo identified himself as male, White, and Hispanic descendant. He disclosed that being new in high school brought some good times as he had met lots of new people. He also described the significant differences between coming from a small campus like middle school and moving to a bigger campus like high school. Adding he liked the new campus. However, he mentioned that the new environment has been stressful due to the amount of homework he needed to manage compared to when he was in middle school. As a freshman student, Memo expressed enjoying the high school experience so far. He described himself as a seven out of ten in confidence level for his academic performance. Memo stated he has friends he can rely on when he is struggling with homework or other school assignments. He thought that friends are also good to hang out with as it was nice to socialize with other kids his age. Memo was eager to share how important is to have tight relationships with other students that also did sports like him (student-athletes). He articulated that connecting with other athletes brought a nice bonding experience especially at the beginning of the season when people can have the opportunity to get to know each other. Although he shared “there are sometimes rocky beginnings”, they all came for the same reasons, to create a good athlete experience and compete as a team. For Memo being healthy and living a healthy lifestyle is very important. He described putting a lot of efforts and sometimes even being too hard on himself trying to be the best he can. Memo stayed momentarily quiet, then added that he wanted to be healthy not only for sports but for his general wellbeing.

Memo described how stressful has been managing his time between academics and sports as on many occasions he was unable to finish his assignments and he felt overloaded during the weekends. Memo expressed having strong feelings regarding managing the schoolwork as he

really didn't have too much time to relax due to the amount of work already built up and thought there was a lot of pressure in both sides, academics, and sports. He immediately emphasized, "academics". He shared that he wished he had known beforehand how challenging doing sports in high school could be. He communicated his deep desire to win and acknowledged how competitive he can be.

During the pandemic COVID-19 lockdown, Memo was in middle school, and did not provide much information about it, just that going back in person learning was weird and interesting at the same time. He disclosed that so many new protocols were in place to keep people with certain distance and the mask mandated, all were new, different, and unique to him. Though he conveyed that it was not difficult to adjust to the new norms. He talked about feeling much better when they went to have everything in-person, adding that even though returning in person had its bright side, Memo recognized that homework and the practices' demands were a lot to handle sometimes. When faced with a challenging situation, he expressed that his first channel of communication was his coaches, then his teammates/friends, and lastly, someone older that knew more than him. He didn't specify if he was referring to an adult or a student older than him. However, after a brief pause, he corrected himself adding, "I'd probably first go to my friends because I feel they are kind of experiencing the same stuff I am". Memo described football as his main sport and disclosed with sadness, he was thinking of quitting the team because he felt he was not good enough to be part of the team and because he considered there were people there, that should never had joined the team. He reiterated being happy that he didn't quit as things got better with the team and the people that "didn't belong" left as they were not good for the morale of the team. He shared his sense of pride in the idea of building a brotherhood with his football teammates. Memo was enthusiastic sharing that he had a good

relationship with his coaches and admitted that sometimes was his fault if he got in trouble with his coaches for not putting in the efforts he should have put. But he believed that clear communication was very helpful to overcome any conflict with his coaches.

Memo didn't think mental health support was available for them in the school. He was aware of choices outside the school like going to counseling but thought counseling was not helpful to address his problems. He considered he should fight his own battles by himself stating that he needs to learn how to deal with his own issues. Memo was embarrassed to say he never had heard about holistic wellness, and acknowledged he just learned the words on the morning of the interview while reading with his mom the assent/consent/parental permission form. Memo was graciously smiling to say he felt hopeful for the future, and he could not wait to see "where life takes" him. The general sense was that he was excited about the future. When thinking about purpose in life, Memo considered he had a purpose even if now is complicated to elaborate on that. He hoped to continue being focused on his sports and getting stronger. He wanted to include that wellness is important to him and that he needed to take care of his body and mind by reminding himself to strive towards his goals and achieve them. He reiterated that the big workload of school assignments made him depleted as the workloads in combination with the athletics demands made him so tired. Memo closed the interview by mentioning that coaches are very supportive, and they reinforce that although sports are important to keep up with, the number one priority of the student-athlete is their academic work.

June

June was a 16-year-old student-athlete in the 10th grade. She was the last student to be recruited and interviewed as time schedules were complicated to work together. June identified herself as female, White, and Hispanic descendant, adding "I'm Latina too". As a sophomore in

high school, June considered herself a straight A student who does well in all her classes and like learning. June expressed having lots of friends and liking her teachers. She addressed that the best part of being in school is the structure it provided since having six classes that she needed to go to every single day, helped her to keep a routine. June disclosed experiencing a great amount of confidence in her academics and school performance, as learning—she reiterated—is something she really enjoyed. June described herself as someone who works really hard and does everything on time. Regarding social groups, June preferred a small group of friends especially because they had many things in common like taking the same classes and having the same interests. For June, hanging out and having fun and doing all the typical things other teenagers like to do was important. June started doing sports in her freshman year and while she acknowledged it was very challenging managing her time between academics and practices, she plans to continue being an athlete and be part of her volleyball team next year. Evidently, being physically healthy and living a healthy lifestyle were very important goals for June. She mentioned specifically how important was to stay healthy to continue playing volleyball. June shared it has been a joyful learning path through her sport career. However, she shared—for example—people don't realize how stressful and challenging is balancing homework with the practices they had every day for about two hours each day. Sometimes, she continued, she was so tired after practice to then go home and do all the homework she had for the six classes. June without hesitation revealed how things got more challenging during game days, as that meant being gone for an average of four hours depending on how far the game was including the time traveling to and from the game. Sometimes doing homework meant improvising while riding the bus at night using their phone flashlight to get some stuff done. Once at home, she added, being

really tired was an understatement. Though, all the challenges June faced during the season, she described with pride how she managed to balance doing all her homework in a timely manner.

Even with all the challenges June described, she expressed that without a doubt, she would encourage other students to do sports because this was a good way to integrate yourself with the community. Additionally, she believed sports were great to develop nice bonding with teammates and other students doing different sports. She believed that people in sports could have a good sense of community and feel more welcome at school. June was sincere, expressing that she wished she would have known ahead of time, the level of commitment that involved playing volleyball at the high school level. She was an experienced volleyball player playing club volleyball. However, she recognized the demands at the high school were much more different than she had anticipated. June revealed that COVID-19 happened when she was in 7th & 8th grade. Therefore, by the time she started high school, the transition to high school felt more like “going back to normal” but with some new rules in place like wearing masks and lots of social distancing which was “kind of hard” during the transition period. She added that going back to in-person practices and classes felt more like pre-pandemic. The only thing June found challenging during the transition period, was that during the lockdown she barely played volleyball and she was trying to jump right back at the start of her freshman year, and it felt like a big-time commitment and going from “almost doing nothing to a lot”, she felt off balance. June emphasized that she knew her coach understood she and her teammates had lot of homework and that the academic demands are there. However, she stated that the key to success in both worlds (academic & sports) was communication and realistic expectations regarding time commitment with the chosen sport and homework. June was eager to relate to her teammates and wanted to be supportive, adding how they have helped each other do homework and develop positive

relationships. Along those lines, June recognized feeling supported by his coaches and teammates.

June expressed not needing mental health support during the school year, but she knew where and how to find the resources available such as counselors at the school she could talk to. She recognized that she wouldn't hesitate in seeking support as she understood that student-athletes have a lot more on their plates. June was unaware of what holistic wellness signified and expressed that it was the first time she had heard this term. In the middle of laughs, she expressed that perhaps holistic wellness was being healthy in all aspects of life. She acknowledged feeling hopeful of the future and she truly believed her life had a purpose and wanted to make sure she was healthy to achieve her ideal wellness. June closed the interview by stating that something important to her was "always being able to move and just keep my body in shape".

Charles

Charles was a 15-year-old student-athlete in the 9th grade. He was the first participant to be interviewed. He shared his excitement about participating in the study and was eager to share his experiences in the high school sport's environment. He identified himself as male, White, and Non-Hispanic descendant. As a freshman student, Charles already had experience in two different sports—track & field and swimming—adding that he considered himself a decent student. He revealed that his experience as a student has not necessarily been enjoyable as he thought people in high school were generally mean. Though, he suggested that being a new student in a new environment where he didn't know many people, his confidence level in achieving good grades was not impacted. He addressed that if he ever needed help or academic support, he would reach out to some people. Nonetheless, he did not consider having close friendships as he would not connect with friends unless they reached out to him first and asked

for help, then he would be there to help. He considered that the relationship with his coaches was good because they were “really amazing and decently supportive coaches”. For Charles being physically healthy was undoubtedly really important. He stated that dieting and working out a decent amount of time was good for his mental wellbeing. Charles characterized some foods as “bad” and identified that fast food or highly processed food, made him “sluggish” and he felt he couldn’t get his work done when eating poorly.

Charles was fond of recognizing that being an athlete in high school requires more time commitment than he estimated as the demands for schoolwork are also higher than in middle school. He shared that he felt that finishing practices late in the day after getting out of school late in the day, made it harder for him to finish his homework on time. Charles acknowledged he was learning how to manage time in terms of finding the right balance between schoolwork and sports aside finding the time to still have a social life outside school. It is worth noting that even with all those demands, Charles found the experience of being a student-athlete amazing, stating that without a doubt he would encourage other people to do sports. He considered founding a sense of community support through sports, and stated he wished he had known that there were nice people in sports as he was under the impression that high school sports were loaded with people with “jocky personality”. Charles was eager to share that since the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown happened when he was in middle school, returning to in-person training and what not, made him very excited since during the lockdown he felt out of everything, including stopping any sports he was doing before the pandemic hit. He also shared his appreciation for teachers and the help he received when they returned to in-person instruction, as he found himself being too distracted with zoom classes and was challenging for him to focus on academics. Therefore, returning to the “normalcy” of pre-pandemic was not difficult at all for

Charles. Returning to in-person practices was something Charles was excited about. However, not long ago, Charles had sprained his ankle making it very hard to keep up with training that forced him to be out for about a week. This challenging situation was annoying—he shared—although not necessarily bad. He added it was a “weird time” as he had prepared to compete but got injured in the process. He felt supported by his coaches during this period in both sports (track & field and swimming). Additionally, he disclosed feeling closer to his track & field teammates than the ones in the swimming team. Charles acknowledged that if he had any mental health challenges, he would go to his mom and school counselor as he felt he could talk about anything with both. He shared feeling embarrassed that he never had heard about holistic wellness before, but he was guessing it had to do with mental wellness. He felt hopeful about the future and thought his life had a purpose. He concluded the interview asserting that “being a productive member of society” meant achieving his ideal wellness.

Chris

Chris was a 15-year-old (almost 16) student-athlete in the 10th grade. He had requested to complete the interview via remote access as it was nearly impossible to schedule something during the upcoming weeks due to football practices. Chris identified himself as male, White, and Non-Hispanic descendant. He was finishing his sophomore year and as a transferred student from another state, he shared that he was also working part-time to earn some money while doing sports. He recognized that although he likes being in high school, things got harder as he got older. However, there’s no part of him that would like to quit what he’s doing. He described having some level of confidence in performing well academically but acknowledged that school just got harder in each grade. He explained having a close network of friends and that everyone knows in school who is friends with who. He said knowing they are there to support each other

made the relationship tight. Chris described that usually homework was a solo job. However, when it was about “hanging out”, the team and the group of friends were always there. Chris shared his excitement for the coming year and the new football season. Although he enjoyed track & field, football was a passion of his. Chris shared that last year it was difficult for him, as at the beginning of football season, he tore his knee and being injured for the entire season put him in a “bad mental health state” as he couldn’t play. Adjusting to not having much to do in sports was a strange experience. This is the main reason why he was looking forward to the start of the new season and he had seen the changes already in his attitude in general by feeling more positive and healthier.

Chris addressed that being physically healthy is one of his main goals. Having a good diet and being in good health while working out were things that came to him naturally. He shared not being too worried about staying fit as he was confident of being able to maintain a healthy lifestyle. In his experiences as an athlete, he said, “the more you play and get involved in sports, the less you seem to care about schoolwork”. He recognized that during his freshman and even sophomore years, school was his priority. However, he felt now that football and sports were more important than school. He added that it didn’t mean grades and all that were not important, but if were to get Bs & Cs grades, he would be satisfied with his school performance. Even with the school challenges, Chris would have encouraged other students to do sports 100%, as he considered sports a great outlet to meet new people and develop new friendships. Something he wished he had known before joining any team, was coaches’ expectations like what they wanted from people or what type of behavior was the expectation. Essentially, he stated, having something to hold himself accountable for. During the pandemic COVID-19 and lockdown Chris was at the end of middle school and did not play any sports. However, when he started his

freshman year at a different school, Chris joined the football team and played the whole time. The only difficulty re-integrating to organized sports was not being physically active during the pandemic and lockdown. He explained that returning to in-person practices was rough at the beginning as he needed to put more effort to catch up with other athletes. Mentally, he said, returning to in person activities was very good. Chris considered that the competitive mindset that drives the team can be “pretty straining” as it puts more pressure on performing at higher levels. This was not a bad thing though, Chris stated. But it can certainly feel like competing against each other. However, he wanted to be the best he could to show others he was committed to the team 100%.

Even with all the pressure in sports, Chris described having a good relationship with his teachers and coaches. He felt he could talk to anyone, especially his friends because they are there to support each other. He explained that the relationship with his main coach is like family because he knew his coach cared about him and that regardless how competitive things can get with his teammates, there has never been a problem they could not solve together. Chris shared that he knew where and how to seek support, especially mental health support if needed. He felt close to his mother and his school counselor. But he admitted that he would probably go first to either his coach or his friends before everyone else. He explained that his friends are the people he is around the most. When talking about holistic wellness, Chris asked to provide hints about the meaning of holistic wellness as he recognized never hearing about this term before. He explained that his best guess about holistic wellness was being something related to overall mental health but that he was unsure if it included physical and mental health together. Chris was keen to share that he felt very hopeful for the future, like looking forward to what was next after high school. He sought after perusing playing football in college and wanting to do well in life.

He also expressed the feeling that his life had a purpose, and without hesitation said 100% “life had a purpose”. He articulated that ideally, wellness will mean he was on top of things by keeping up with school and sports while being healthy mentally. Chris concluded the interview by adding “I don’t know exactly what I want to do after high school and college exactly, but I know whatever I do, I definitely want to end up helping people somehow”.

Danny

Danny was a 15-year-old freshman student-athlete. He identified himself as male, White, Non-Hispanic descendant. Being a freshman student did not intimidate Danny when he decided to join the track & field team. He shared with fondness how good his overall experience as a student has been so far. He considered himself being a straight A student stating school wasn’t really hard for him. Danny recognized having plenty of friends and that he really enjoyed being a student in high school. He described feeling extremely confident in his academic performance and that he knew how to enjoy also social life with friends. The school year 2022-23 was Danny’s first year in high school. He joined the track & field team to be physically healthy as being in shape was very important to him. He learned throughout the track & field season that feeling a lot of pressure to perform well in sports could get daunting as he caught himself being mad if he did not perform well. He most definitely would encourage other students to do sports, even when knowing it can be challenging, especially around homework and school demands. Something he wished he had known before joining sports was the time commitment required and really learning how to manage the time between academics and sports. He disclosed the pressure came out of coming home late in the evenings after practice, then homework and then not much free time left at the end of the day to enjoy.

For Danny returning to in-person activities was “pretty weird” as he was used to doing things on his own all the time. Then people were expected to come back and be with your friends and do all the sports with all your friends. It was not difficult to re-adjust to in person activities, Danny stated, it was just weird. Danny talked about not having any personal challenges, but if it was related to sports, he would like to be faster and would like to connect with his coaches to know what type of workout could help him improve his performance. If something was wrong or bothering him, he would talk to his parents or friends for guidance. He considered it not necessary to talk to coaches about his struggles. Although Danny articulated having a good relationship with his teammates and a couple of his coaches, he really was not that close with some of his coaches and really didn’t talk to them at all. Danny communicated that he knew about mental health resources available in the school and “had plenty of access”, just he didn’t need to use any of the resources available. Danny enthusiastically shared what he knew about holistic wellness. He articulated “I think it just means being like well, in every aspect like your mind, your body...just your overall social health”. Danny expressed feeling hopeful for the future, and although thought that asking if his life had a purpose was a “really deep question”, he did not hesitate to explain that indeed he believed his life had a purpose. Danny finished the interview sharing his thoughts about ideal wellness stating, “being healthy in every way, just have actual health and being really social”.

Jwen

Jwen was a 15-year-old student-athlete in the 9th grade. She had requested the interview on a Monday as that was the only day feasible due to the time constraints between school and sports. Jwen is a freshman student who identified as female, White, Hispanic descendant. She described her academic performance as being an honor student who plans to take more honor

classes as a sophomore student. She illustrated that although she had very good grades in all her classes except for science, she considered she was a “decent student”. Jwen explained she enjoyed being a student and felt confident achieving good grades, but she was kind of tired then clarified that she didn’t hate being a student but her “laziness” was really the only thing keeping her back from anything. Jwen explained that she had friends and that they usually help a lot with homework even if she missed a day, her friends would tell her what to do. She felt very supported by her soccer teammates. Jwen described how enjoyable, and fun was to play with those girls. Although, at some point, Jwen contemplated quitting her sport, but she realized that being physically healthy and fit were very important to her, so she didn’t quit. She shared that being a student-athlete presented its own challenges such as finding the right balance between “work and play stuff” as doing her homework usually happened on the bus due to the lack of time. The challenges sports brought to her academics didn’t stop Jwen from experiencing fun times specially during her first year. Being a freshman student and in sports “it’s like cool meeting people”. Adding that when she was in middle school it’s the same people but when you go to high school, you can get to meet people from so many other schools.

Jwen addressed that knowing how intense the heat can get during practices during summer, she wished she had known what type of attire was appropriate to wear for practices or for a better term, what not to wear. She was very specific advising “not wear black because it’s really hot”. For Jwen, returning to in person instruction and practices was not a whole lot different than before. The only adjustment she endorsed was wearing masks and keeping distance. She expressed not really caring about what others thought of her by not wearing a mask. She identified that building on confidence specifically regarding sport performance was challenging for her as she doubted herself many times. She empathized though, that she would

communicate with her teammates regarding sport performance and then would talk to her coaches for support and guidance. In the other hand, if help was needed with academics, she would connect immediately with her friends. She described having “good relationships” with her teammates, but addressed feeling unmotivated by her coaches as she felt the main coach “wasn’t very passionate and it was making me, and my teammates do not feel cared for or something”. For that specific reason, Jwen contemplated leaving the team and in fact left temporarily. It was because of her teammates that she returned. She added, “the coach is the same person”, but she was hoping the coach would be more engaging this new season.

Jwen recognized that talking about mental health and what type of resources were available was important. She added, “my coaches talk about like not triggering stuff” and would remind everyone to seek out counseling support if needed. Jwen considered not needing to see a counselor during the school year but knew they were available. Holistic wellness was a term that Jwen never had heard before and expressed not having a way to articulate what it meant. She felt hopeful for the future and considered that her life had purpose. She was unsure about her ideal wellness and closed the interview by stating “support, I guess. Support from other people and support from my coaches and showing that they actually want to be there and want to coach”.

Themes & Subthemes

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), “a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned or meaning within the data set” (pg.10). While analyzing the data from the interviews, six major patterns emerged, they were named themes. In addition, minor patterns were also identified and were named subthemes. Some subthemes indicated two to three frequencies; therefore, they were not labeled as “main” themes. The breakdown and frequency of the coded segments, themes and subthemes are represented in table 2, table 3, & table 4.

Table 2.

Themes and Subthemes

Theme 1: The importance of Being Physically Healthy

- Subtheme 1: Never heard about holistic wellness
- Subtheme 2: Holistic wellness perceived meaning
- Subtheme 3: Feeling Hopeful for the Future
- Subtheme 4: Having a Sense of Purpose in Life
- Subtheme 5: My Ideal Wellness

Theme 2: Sports and its Demands

- Subtheme 1: Competitive Mindset
- Subtheme 2: Negative Impact of Injuries on Mental Health
- Subtheme 3: Considered Quitting Sports
- Subtheme 4: Masks for COVID-19 and New Rules
- Subtheme 5: Negative Impact of Pandemic COVID-19

Theme 3: Homework: "There's a lot of Pressure"

- Subtheme 1: Academic Pressure
- Subtheme 2: Time management
- Subtheme 3: Stress as a Negative Influence on Academics
- Subtheme 4: Highly/Extremely Confident Being a Student
- Subtheme 5: Fairly/Pretty Confident Being a Student

Theme 4: Connection with coaches as primary source of support

- Subtheme 1: Perceived Teammate support
- Subtheme 2: Teacher's support
- Subtheme 3: Parents' Support
- Subtheme 4: Counseling center/support

Subtheme 5: Connection with Support Systems

Subtheme 6: No need to talk to coaches

Subtheme 7: Positive Support Systems

Theme 5: General Sense of Belonging

Subtheme 1: Positive Returning in Person felt like normal

Subtheme 2: COVID 19 Didn't change anything

Subtheme 3: Identified having Friends to rely on

Subtheme 4: Negative Perception of Others Based on Assumptions

Subtheme 5: Social Life Outside School is Crucial to Survive

Theme 6: General Student-Athlete Self-Perception

Subtheme 1: Encourage others to do sports

Subtheme 2: Positive Perception of others

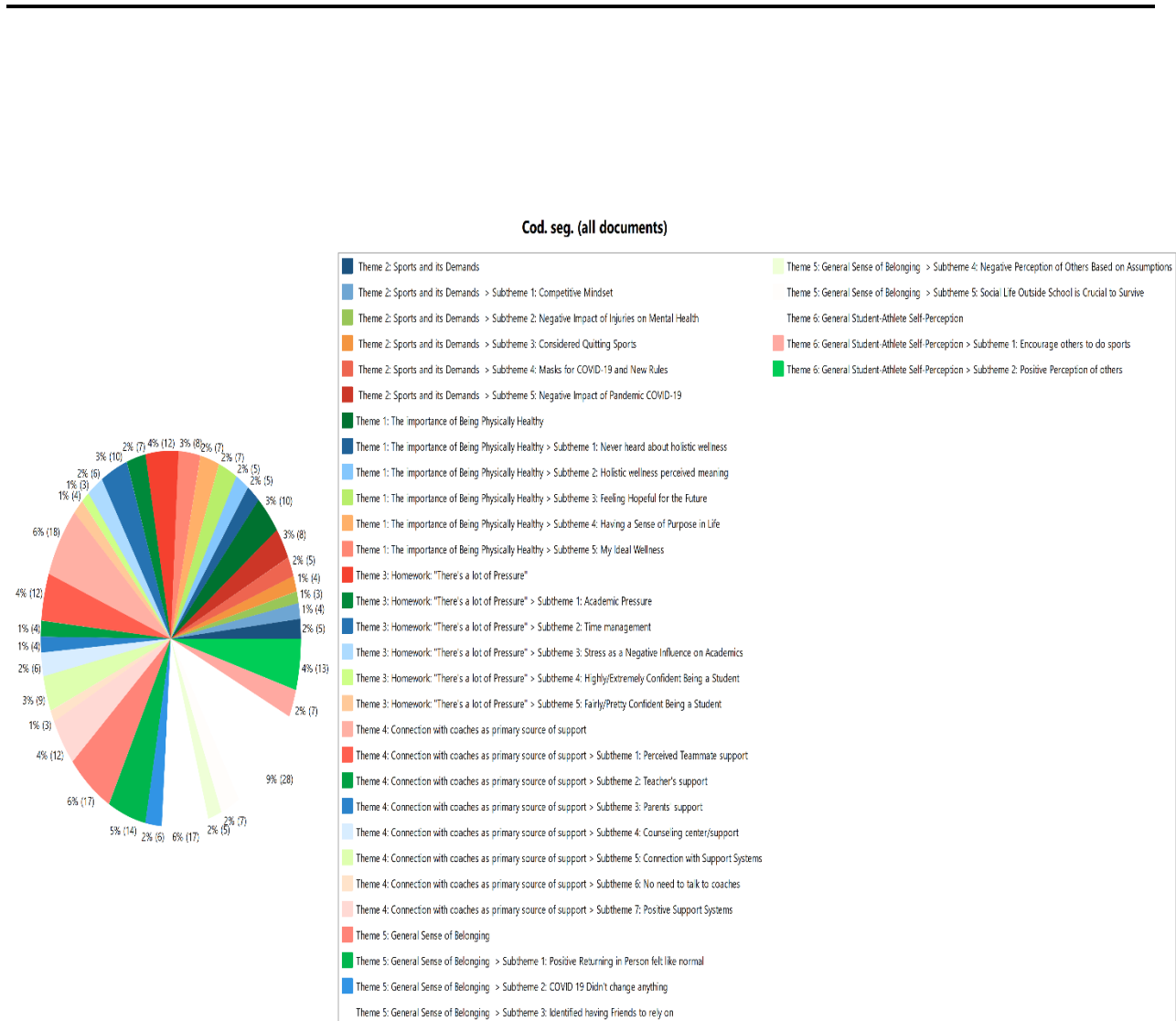
Table 3.

Frequency of Themes and Subthemes endorsed by participants

Code System	CHARLES 20236	MEMO 20234	JWEN 20235	JAKE 20233	DANNY 20238	JUNE 202310	CHRIS 20239
Theme 1: The importance of Being Physically Healthy	2	1	2	2	1	1	1
Subtheme 1: Never heard about holistic wellness	1	1	1			1	1
Subtheme 2: Holistic wellness perceived meaning	1			1	1		2
Subtheme 3: Feeling Hopeful for the Future	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Subtheme 4: Having a Sense of Purpose in Life	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Subtheme 5: My Ideal Wellness	1	1	2	1	1	1	1
Theme 2: Sports and its Demands	1			2	1		1
Subtheme 1: Competitive Mindset		1		1	1		1
Subtheme 2: Negative Impact of Injuries on Mental Health	2						1
Subtheme 3: Considered Quitting Sports		2	2				
Subtheme 4: Masks for COVID-19 and New Rules		1	2	1		1	
Subtheme 5: Negative Impact of Pandemic COVID-19	1			2	1	1	3
Theme 3: Homework: "There's a lot of Pressure"	1	4	1	2	1	3	
Subtheme 1: Academic Pressure		2	1		1	2	1
Subtheme 2: Time management	2	1	1	2	1	3	
Subtheme 3: Stress as a Negative Influence on Academics		4				2	
Subtheme 4: Highly/Extremely Confident Being a Student				1	1	1	
Subtheme 5: Fairly/Pretty Confident Being a Student	1	1	1				1
Theme 4: Connection with coaches as primary source of support	5	3	2	2	3	1	2
Subtheme 1: Perceived Teammate support	1	4	3	1	1	1	1
Subtheme 2: Teacher's support	1	1				1	1
Subtheme 3: Parents' support	2				1		1
Subtheme 4: Counseling center/support	1		1	1	1	1	1
Subtheme 5: Connection with Support Systems		3	1	3		1	1
Subtheme 6: No need to talk to coaches	1		1		1		
Subtheme 7: Positive Support Systems	1	2	4	3	1	1	
Theme 5: General Sense of Belonging	1	4	1	5	2	3	1
Subtheme 1: Positive Returning in Person felt like normal	2	3	1	3	1	2	2
Subtheme 2: COVID 19 Didn't change anything		1	2		1	2	
Subtheme 3: Identified having Friends to rely on	2	1	3	3	2	3	3
Subtheme 4: Negative Perception of Others Based on Assumptions	3	1	1				
Subtheme 5: Social Life Outside School is Crucial to Survive	1	1	1	1		1	2
Theme 6: General Student-Athlete Self-Perception	2	7	4	5	5	2	3
Subtheme 1: Encourage others to do sports	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Subtheme 2: Positive Perception of others	3	4	1	2		1	2

Table 4.

View of coded segments pie chart



Themes

Theme 1: The importance of Being Physically Healthy

All participants stated that being healthy and more specifically being physically healthy was important to them. Additionally, many of the participants mentioned that being physically healthy was considered essential for their sport performance. Likewise, some of the participants associated physical health with mental health by acknowledging a general good feeling when they were at their best physically which included nutrition. Other participants correlated physical health with developing friendships and collaboration.

1.

"It's really important. I like it when I go on a diet. I work out a decent amount and try to stay in shape", "I think it's just good for my mental wellbeing because I think for me like personally, if I like start eating foods that are really bad for me or, like, fast, processed foods, I just feel, like, sluggish, and I feel like I can't get my work done so."

Code: ● Theme 1: The importance of Being Physically Healthy
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"I think it's very important. I think I'm trying to be healthier,"

Code: ● Theme 1: The importance of Being Physically Healthy
MEMO 20234,

3.

" I'd say it's pretty important."

Code: ● Theme 1: The importance of Being Physically Healthy
JWEN 20235,

4.

"Extremely important. I think it's very important to be very fit and maintain a healthy lifestyle.", "Great to be back out and physically fit with the guys and just work on our craft together."

Code: ● Theme 1: The importance of Being Physically Healthy
JAKE 20233,

6.

"It's very important."

Code: ● Theme 1: The importance of Being Physically Healthy
DANNY 20238,

7.

"That's very important for me. I want to make sure I stay fit and able to play volleyball."

Code: ● Theme 1: The importance of Being Physically Healthy
JUNE 202310,

8.

"For me, it's definitely one of my main goals. Like, things that, ummm like, matter to me. It's definitely up there really high, you know, like good health and good diet and just, like, working out and all those are just like, something I just do naturally, kind of, so I don't need to worry about it bunch. But I love to maintain and being healthy."

Code: ● Theme 1: The importance of Being Physically Healthy
CHRIS 20239,

2.1. Subtheme 1: Never heard about holistic wellness.

Several participants had never heard about holistic wellness. Though they were able and willing to create a general idea of what holistic wellness could possibly be. They unanimously recognized hearing this term for the first time in their lives.

1.

"What is holistic? laughs.", "It sounds like almost like mental wellness, so I'll just go with that. It's important to me I guess."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Never heard about holistic wellness
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"I do not know what holistic means?"

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Never heard about holistic wellness
MEMO 20234,

3.

"Holistic I don't know what that is."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Never heard about holistic wellness
JWEN 20235,

4.

"Yeah. I don't think I heard of holistic before, but, like, wellness overall? Yeah, just being healthy in all aspects of your life."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Never heard about holistic wellness
JUNE 202310,

5.

" Holistic? Can you just define what that means?", "Yeah. To me, that kind of sounds like mental health kind of overall", "Um, to me, that kind of this reminds me of, like, mental health kind of overall, I'm guessing. I'm not totally sure. Probably, like, 1s there's always, like, your physical health, and, like, there's the mental health of you, and they both need to be good. Or maybe, like. Overall is your whole wellbeing, I'm not totally sure."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Never heard about holistic wellness
CHRIS 20239,

2.2. Subtheme 2: Holistic wellness perceived meaning

Some participants conveyed their general understanding of what holistic wellness was. Regardless of hearing or not this term for the first time, they pondered in the meaning that it was connected to meditation, general wellbeing, spirituality, self-care, and the connection between the body and the mind.

1.

"I'd say holistic wellness is more of like kind of spiritual peace and spiritual wellness. I'd say that's something that a lot of, especially kids my age, don't necessarily practice as well. Maybe you know focusing on things such as, like, meditation and making sure that as much as we treat our bodies and work our bodies hard through lifting and stuff, we take the same amount of time to recover from them as well. I'd say we should do that both, like, spiritually, mentally as well, have find ways to make ourselves and give ourselves time to recover."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: Holistic wellness perceived meaning
JAKE 20233,

2.

"I think it just means being like well, in every aspect. Like your mind, your body. Uum it's just your overall social health, All the above, really."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: Holistic wellness perceived meaning
DANNY 20238,

2.3. Subtheme 3: Feeling Hopeful for the Future

All participants disclosed a high sense of hope for the future. Without hesitation, one by one reflected on what was next for their lives. Although they didn't have a clear path, they all confidently indicated looking forward to the future and being excited about it.

1.

"Yeah, I'd say so."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Feeling Hopeful for the Future
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"Like, in general, yeah. I'm excited to see where my life takes me. I'm excited to see myself grow and see what I'm going to be in the future."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Feeling Hopeful for the Future
MEMO 20234,

3.

"Yeah. I am!"

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Feeling Hopeful for the Future
JWEN 20235,

4.

"I am extremely hopeful. I'm excited to go to college, excited to go skiing and party down in (*****) and just have some fun, and finally explore the outside world."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Feeling Hopeful for the Future
JAKE 20233,

5.

" Yeah."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Feeling Hopeful for the Future
DANNY 20238,

6.

" Yes."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Feeling Hopeful for the Future
JUNE 202310,

7.

"Yeah. I'm really excited for, like, after high school and stuff. I really want to play college football, and I just want to do really good in life. I'm really excited for next season, this upcoming season in fall, everything's looking really up for me you know, so I'm pretty glad."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Feeling Hopeful for the Future
CHRIS 20239,

2.4. Subtheme 4: Having a Sense of Purpose in Life

All the participants expressed a high sense of purpose in life. They described in one way or another they all felt their life was meaningful and had a purpose.

1.

"Yeah."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Having a Sense of Purpose in Life
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"For the most part. Yeah. I feel like I have a purpose. It's just kind of hard to elaborate on."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Having a Sense of Purpose in Life
MEMO 20234,

3.

" Yeah."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Having a Sense of Purpose in Life
JWEN 20235,

4.

"I would say so. I think all of our lives have a purpose in one way or another. And I think a lot of high school and a lot of college is figuring out what that purpose is or what your purpose should be and working to achieve it."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Having a Sense of Purpose in Life
JAKE 20233,

5.

"It's a really deep question, but yeah, I think so, probably."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Having a Sense of Purpose in Life
DANNY 20238,

6.

" I do, I do, I do think."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Having a Sense of Purpose in Life
JUNE 202310,

7.

"100%. Yeah. I don't know exactly what I want to do after high school and college exactly, career wise, but I know whatever I do, I definitely want to end up helping people somehow. But I definitely do think no matter what I do, it's definitely I'll have a purpose. I do."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Having a Sense of Purpose in Life
CHRIS 20239,

2.5. Subtheme 5: My Ideal Wellness

Participants assessed what an ideal wellness would look like for them. They made references to the importance of being physically healthy. Adding that even though being physically healthy was a priority, they agreed that it would not come at the cost of their mental health. The descriptions of wellness included feeling productive in society, eating healthy, working out, having a sense of belonging, feeling supported by their coaches and other support systems, and a general sense of health.

1.

"Ahhhhh, just being a productive member of society."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: My Ideal Wellness
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"For me, I feel like including body and mental everything, I feel like I could definitely lose some weight. Like, not extreme amount, but I feel like that, I would want to look a bit better. I wouldn't go out of my way. It's not affecting my mental health. It's kind of like a goal for me to strive towards because I love having goals and then trying to complete them."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: My Ideal Wellness
MEMO 20234,

3.

"Support, I guess. Support from other people and support from my coaches and showing that they actually want to be there and want to coach."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: My Ideal Wellness
JWEN 20235,

4.

"Idea of wellness? or ideal wellness? Ummm I'd say being at peace with your life. Nothing necessarily going bad. You enjoy your job. You enjoy your activities outside of it, both socially and for yourself. I think that being at peace is being looking at your life and saying, this is where I want to be, and this is where I'm at, and you are at where you want to be."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: My Ideal Wellness
JAKE 20233,

5.

"Probably just being healthy in every way. Just have actual health and being really social."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: My Ideal Wellness
DANNY 20238,

6.

"Just making sure I'm healthy and fit enough, just always able to move and just keep my body in shape."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: My Ideal Wellness
JUNE 202310,

7.

"Probably making sure that I'm on top of everything in terms of my goals, kept up with school and then physically, I've been being healthy, mentally, taking time to myself just to make sure."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: My Ideal Wellness
CHRIS 20239,

3. Theme 2: Sports and its Demands

Participants articulated the unexpected demands of being a student-athlete such as exhaustion and the unrealistic expectations they are expected to accomplish. And while they shared loving and enjoying being an athlete, they acknowledged how wearying sports made them feel in conjunction with the academic's expectations.

1.

"Oh ummmmm, Okay. So, in this school district, specifically, because we get out of school so late and then practices run for two. Sometimes 3 hours. It's definitely harder to get your work done and still do other stuff and still have a social life outside of school."

Code: ● Theme 2: Sports and its Demands
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"Definitely it's a struggle and managing your time becomes really important and kind of finding balance in your life", " I'd say I've learned kind of to manage my time really well, be able to kind of go from switching from, like, football to switching into school mode. Kind of finding routines that work for me and finding not necessarily little tricks, but kind of ways I can make my day easier. So that way practice is easier and that way homework and everything else is easier."

Code: ● Theme 2: Sports and its Demands
JAKE 20233,

3.

" Definitely it can have pressure to it because you want to perform well, and if you don't perform well, you can kind of get, like, mad at yourself about it. But that's about it. Yeah."

Code: ● Theme 2: Sports and its Demands
DANNY 20238,

4.

"I just came into football here without knowing exactly what was going on and so made things kind of tough."

Code: ● Theme 2: Sports and its Demands
CHRIS 20239,

3.1. Subtheme 1: Competitive Mindset

Participants illustrated their desire to win. Winning in their respective sports was a big drive to improve sport performance. However, some of the participants self-reflected on the winning aspect of their events and addressed that it was precisely competing what had encouraged them to join sports in the first place forcing them to be at their best in order to be “part of the team”.

1.

"I want to win."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Competitive Mindset
MEMO 20234,

2.

"And even though I ran pretty good times, I felt like I could have done better."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Competitive Mindset
JAKE 20233,

3.

"You want to perform well, and if you don't perform well, you can kind of get, like, mad at yourself about it."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Competitive Mindset
DANNY 20238,

4.

" Being a starter, you know like starting on varsity is such a big thing for me, which I really hope I can, and I pretty sure I hope I do, but it's definitely one of the lead things that kind of drives me to do really good at practice and all that. I just kind of want to show it to others. You just have to be as good as possible. Just like, go 100% all the time. But it's pretty straining", "The competitiveness that our team has is even against each other."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Competitive Mindset
CHRIS 20239,

3.2. Subtheme 2: Negative Impact of Injuries on Mental Health

Some participants said that after being injured and out from the social/competitive aspect of their sports had a significant and negative impact on how they felt in general about themselves. Added to that not only their physical body was affected but they experienced a deterioration in their mental status.

1.

"I just recently sprained my ankle, and so I had to let my coach know for my track event that I wouldn't be there for and that I'm out of being able to practice for about a week", "It's kind of annoying, honestly. It's not like, it's not necessarily bad, I guess, because it. I was, like, constantly doing the event. I was constantly preparing for stuff and a bunch of meets and stuff. So, it was definitely weird."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: Negative Impact of Injuries on Mental Health
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"Last year was really tough because I tore my knee like, the day before football started. So, I really did get a really bad mental health state because I couldn't play, and there just wasn't much for me to do. And I've never really been just, like, a student while not playing a sport. So, after school, having nothing to do was just really strange you know."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: Negative Impact of Injuries on Mental Health
CHRIS 20239,

3.3. Subtheme 3: Considered Quitting Sports

Some participants communicated that quitting their sports came to their minds after feeling some people "did not belong" in the team and feeling "the coach didn't care" about athletes. Some left the team and came back per teammates' request. Participants articulated the need to feel valued and to consider that some people joining sports may be a negative influence on the culture of sports overall.

1.

"I felt like quitting very fast because there's a lot of people there that didn't belong there and were not good for the team's morale at all. I was not a fan of that, and that almost made me quit, but I'm glad I didn't."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Considered Quitting Sports

MEMO 20234,

2.

"Yeah. I thought about quitting", "So, I tried to leave the club and then I went back."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Considered Quitting Sports

JWEN 20235,

3.4. Subtheme 4: Masks for COVID-19 and New Rules

Participants articulated that masking as “new rules” did not have any impact on how they felt about joining their respective teams. Many participants stated the whole COVID-19 situation was “interesting, different, and unique”. In addition, participants recognized the need to follow the new rules while at the same time not really being bothered by the requests to keep the masks on or off. The general sense among them was “returning to normal”.

1.

"It was very interesting at the start. It was very weird because there's a bunch of new stuff and new protocols that were very different and unique."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Masks for COVID-19 and New Rules

MEMO 20234,

2.

"I mean, masks were really the only thing that were that much of a problem during the COVID", "Taking off my mask wasn't that big of a deal. I didn't really care about wearing it, and I didn't really care about taking it off."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Masks for COVID-19 and New Rules

JWEN 20235,

4.

"Kind of coming back with just kind of more practice in place like wearing masks or being socially distant more."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Masks for COVID-19 and New Rules

JAKE 20233,

5.

"But as we got back, I think we started out with like masks and stuff and a lot of social distancing, so it's kind of hard. But it was just like the transition back into normal."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Masks for COVID-19 and New Rules

JUNE 202310,

3.5. Subtheme 5: Negative Impact of Pandemic COVID-19

Several participants shared similar experiences regarding stopping any sport activity during the pandemic COVID-19. Additionally, participants recognized the isolation period and being removed from the social life and other aspects of athletics required a significant adjustment period for them. Participants described their experiences as weird, feeling alone, and harder to adjust.

1.

"I stopped playing sports during the pandemic and I just fell out of everything."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Negative Impact of Pandemic COVID-19
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"I think it was a harder adjustment to go into lockdown rather than coming out", "We were already so used to going to school in person in and doing kind of those normal things like practices in person, that when we had to switch to lockdown, it was definitely a weird transition to do like football practices on zoom and all that."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Negative Impact of Pandemic COVID-19
JAKE 20233,

4.

"It's been pretty weird because you used to be just all by yourself, kind of."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Negative Impact of Pandemic COVID-19
DANNY 20238,

5.

"During the COVID year, I barely played any volleyball."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Negative Impact of Pandemic COVID-19
JUNE 202310,

6.

"Well, during middle school, I didn't really play many sports", "But I never played sports with the school while we were still like on lockdown", "Probably physically, I wasn't as physically active as I was before COVID happened. I definitely had put in more effort, but then I caught up with myself, like, a few months after I started you know. In the very beginning, I was pretty just like. Not used to all the exercising,"

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Negative Impact of Pandemic COVID-19
CHRIS 20239,

4. Theme 3: Homework: "There's a lot of Pressure."

Several participants articulated caring about their school/academic performance. However, the workload in school assignments made them feel tired and pressured. Many of them suggested that time aside for homework meant using their phones flashlight while riding the school bus after a game late at night. Other participants explained the need of becoming more aware of the skill of time management by finding routines and “tricks” to be able to complete their school assignments. The pressure they encountered made the student-athlete experience more challenging than they thought it would be.

1.

"It's definitely harder to get your work done and still do other stuff and still have a social life outside of school. But I guess it's just been helping me learn how to manage my time better."

Code: ● Theme 3: Homework: "There's a lot of Pressure"
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"I feel like there's quite a bit of homework", "there's a lot of work build up, like assignments, homework, and I think there's a lot of pressure there", "it's just I feel like I've had a really big work loading, and I feel like I definitely need to, like, catch up a little bit, and that's what I'm gonna be planning on doing this weekend. But I feel like there's been a lot of buildup in, like, workloads with athletics, because I feel like once I come home, I'm, like, depleted, and I feel like I just cannot do any homework", "And so then I feel like that puts a lot of stress on me, because then I have more work for the next day, and then once I do school, and then I start the whole process over and come home with more work, and then just keeps on feeling like it's building up and building up."

Code: ● Theme 3: Homework: "There's a lot of Pressure"
MEMO 20234,

2.

"Pressure to do homework on the bus and stuff like that. But more like balancing the academic piece with the times that you need to practice and all that. Yeah."

Code: ● Theme 3: Homework: "There's a lot of Pressure"
JWEN 20235,

3.

"It's a little bit annoying because it's still school and you still have to do things like homework", "But kind of finding routines that work for me and finding not necessarily little tricks, but kind of ways I can make my day easier."

Code: ● Theme 3: Homework: "There's a lot of Pressure"
JAKE 20233,

4.

"How much time it would take, because you get home at probably, like, 06:00 pm every night, and then with homework, you probably only get, like, an hour of free time."

Code: ● Theme 3: Homework: "There's a lot of Pressure"
DANNY 20238,

5.

"I'd say it's a lot more challenging than a lot of people think, balancing homework and playing volleyball. We have practice every day after school and usually for about 2 hours, so it's hard to sometimes be tired after practice for 2 hours and then have to go home and do all the homework from your six classes", "It's like in the weekends. It's a lot of time that you're using from your days." Um, the challenges usually are mostly just like the schoolwork that we had to do."

Code: ● Theme 3: Homework: "There's a lot of Pressure"
JUNE 202310,

4.1. Subtheme 1: Academic Pressure

Participants shared similar sentiments than in the previous theme. Academic pressure was experienced for almost every single participant. They voiced that between sports and academics, the second one carried a significant amount of pressure.

1.

"I say academic. Academic part and homework, and I think there's a lot of pressure there."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Academic Pressure
MEMO 20234,

2.

"Balancing the academic piece with the times that you need to practice and all that makes it difficult."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Academic Pressure
JWEN 20235,

3.

"Homework, you probably only get, like, an hour of free time."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Academic Pressure
DANNY 20238,

4.

"We have practices every day after school and usually for about 2 hours, so it's hard to sometimes be tired after practice for 2 hours and then have to go home and do all the homework from your six classes. Especially when we have game days, which are like, usually three to 4 hours, depending on how far away the school is that we're traveling to."

And we would do a lot of work in the stands. Like while when we were watching varsity games, we had to sit there."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Academic Pressure
JUNE 202310,

5.

"Yeah, for sure. Yeah. It just gets harder as you get older. Each grade"

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Academic Pressure
CHRIS 20239,

4.2. Subtheme 2: Time management

Several participants addressed the challenges of learning how to balance their time between academics and athletics. Some suggested that it may get easier over time. Others said there was not much time left in the day or the week to do anything outside of sports and schoolwork. However, they all explained that their schoolwork gets turned in, in one way or another, as in order to be part of their sports, they must be good students first.

1.

"Doing sports, I guess it's just been helping me learn how to manage my time better, and as a student, it definitely got easier because I get distracted really easily."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: Time management
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"I don't really have too much time to relax."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: Time management
MEMO 20234

3.

"I need to like level, like. Don't know, balance my work, and play stuff, like being able to do homework on the bus and stuff like that. More like balancing the academic piece with the times that you need to practice and all that."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: Time management
JWEN 20235,

4.

"It's definitely a struggle managing your time", "I'd say I've learned kind of to manage my time really well, be able to kind of go from switching from, like, football to switching into school mode."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: Time management
JAKE 20233

5.

"I usually work very hard. I always turn things on in on time", "We don't have a lot of time to do it. So, it's really about balance and trying to do your homework in a timely manner", "I wish I would have known the time commitment. I've been used to playing club volleyball just like two practices a week, but at school volleyball every day."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: Time management
JUNE 202310,

4.3. Subtheme 3: Stress as a Negative Influence on Academics

Some participants conveyed the negative experiences that added to an increase level of stress and that ultimately impacted their academic performance. The most significant piece was not having time to rest during their weekend. These participants described their frustration and resentment with being a student-athlete and the higher expectations "other people" had about them.

1.

"It has been a bit stressful too", "It's very stressful because there's a lot of time where I cannot finish some of my assignments and then I have to be overloaded over the weekend", "I just want to go straight to sleep. And being so tired is very distracting", "It just feels like an endless rain that just keeps on flooding."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Stress as a Negative Influence on Academics
MEMO 20234,

2.

"That's when we have to do homework on the bus at night. On our way back, we have to use our phones as flashlights to do our homework on the bus because when we get back home, we're really tired. But then also our coach would tell us to cheer. So, it's kind of hard to both do work and cheer for those teams."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Stress as a Negative Influence on Academics
JUNE 202310,

4.4. Subtheme 4: Highly/Extremely Confident Being a student

Participants in this section responded with a straightforward answer. They were eager to rate themselves as being extremely confident to achieve good grades. It was clear that participants felt a sense of pride when being asked how they considered themselves as students.

1.

"Extremely confident."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Highly/Extremely Confident Being a Student
JAKE 20233,

2.

" I'm extremely confident."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Highly/Extremely Confident Being a Student
DANNY 20238,

3.

" I'd say I have a great amount of confidence."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Highly/Extremely Confident Being a Student
JUNE 202310,

4.5. Subtheme 5: Fairly/Pretty Confident Being a student

Participants in this section responded with a straightforward answer. They did not hesitate to rate themselves as being pretty confident to achieve good grades. It was clear that participants felt a sense of pride being asked how they considered themselves as students.

1.

"Pretty well."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Fairly/Pretty Confident Being a student
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"Like I'd say, I have pretty good confidence. I'd say like a seven out of ten."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Fairly/Pretty Confident Being a student
MEMO 20234,

3.

"I'm fairly confident."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Fairly/Pretty Confident Being a student
JWEN 20235,

4.

" Well, last year my grades were much better. This year is probably like, seven or eight."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Fairly/Pretty Confident Being a student
CHRIS 20239,

5. Theme 4: Connection with coaches as primary source of support

All participants recognized coaches as their number one or primary source of support. One by one acknowledged that being connected and feeling supported by their coaches made the differences between liking and enjoying the athlete experience or not. All participants described on multiple occasions the positive impact coaches had on their overall school experience. Despite any challenges their respective sports brought to them, all participants felt that having a coach that cared for them and encouraged them to be better increased their happiness for sports performance. All participants felt comfortable asking for help and guidance and some of them called their coaches “family”.

1.

"The coaches for my specific sports are really like amazing and really helpful. And in all my life, I've had 1s decently, supportive coaches", "Yes, felt supported by coaches", "For swimming. I really like that coach", "Ahhhh For my track coach, I'd say it's, like, really good", "Because I don't really talk to anybody on the swim team, but I like to coach/coaches."

Code: ● Theme 4: Connection with coaches as primary source of support
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"I'll definitely communicate with my coaches to make sure they know", "But I think that I've had a great relationship with the coaches", "Yeah, definitely. But then coaches really try to help you out with that, and they really want to say, if you have any work, just please. They really try to really go into detail with schools, your number one priority, and they would rather you stay back and focus on the academics, because you can always catch up on other stuff, but schools can."

Code: ● Theme 4: Connection with coaches as primary source of support
MEMO 20234,

3.

"And then my coaches, I just say just don't immediately scream at me or something like that, I don't know", " I would talk to my coaches about it. Yeah, I'd probably ask for help or something."

Code: ● Theme 4: Connection with coaches as primary source of support
JWEN 20235,

4.

"It was great to see coaches, great to see mentors", "But that's just something that I wish I would have talked to my coach more about and being like, yeah, you ran this time, which is still great."

Code: ● Theme 4: Connection with coaches as primary source of support
JAKE 20233,

5.

"But it really depends how close you're with the coaches. But it's really fun", "Then I just go up to the coach and ask what kind of workouts I should work out for the day. And They tell you what to do", "With a couple of my coaches I'm close with. But with the coaches that are not in my respected events, I'm not close to because I don't really talk to them."

Code: ● Theme 4: Connection with coaches as primary source of support
DANNY 20238,

6.

"Our coach understands that we have a lot of homework, and it was just really important to communicate that we had to have other time to do work."

Code: ● Theme 4: Connection with coaches as primary source of support
JUNE 202310,

7.

"I always go to my coach's home for lunch with all my friends. And you can tell he cares a lot about us, and we really do like him. Really sad if he ever left", "Probably the first thing goes to is either my coach."

Code: ● Theme 4: Connection with coaches as primary source of support
CHRIS 20239,

5.1. Subtheme 1: Perceived Teammate support

Several participants described feeling supported by their teammates. Some participants correlated good support with a general sense of belonging. Some participants articulated that regardless of the presence of some level of competitiveness between them, friendships were fostered to support each other.

1.

"The teammates the environment is really awesome."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Perceived Teammate support
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"It's very nice because it's a very tight relationship with a bunch of new people that you haven't really met or really sometimes see in day-to-day life", "Being a part of, like, a brotherhood", "I have a great relationship with other teammates, and if not, I try and communicate and make sure that everything that's bad has been cleared."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Perceived Teammate support
MEMO 20234,

3.

"Really supporting soccer girls' program, so it's fun to play there", "I have a good relationship with my teammates", "My teammates wanted me to come back, so I did", "There's new girls there, and there's not a lot of people from my old team there, so I just go back to kind of help with new people."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Perceived Teammate support
JWEN 20235,

4.

"I'd say extremely tight relationships in both track and football. Both my teammates and coaches,"

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Perceived Teammate support
JAKE 20233,

5.

"Ummm with my teammates, I have very good relationships with them."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Perceived Teammate support
DANNY 20238,

6.

"Usually, it's just between teammates that we help each other out with homework and trying to decide when we're going to do it or things like that."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Perceived Teammate support
JUNE 202310,

7.

"And like I said, with all the players, I'm really close with most of them. Yeah. I mean even though there is, like, a lot of competitiveness, in the end, we're all really close you know."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Perceived Teammate support
CHRIS 20239,

5.2. Subtheme 2: Teacher's support

Some participants suggested having good relationships with their teachers. Though, teachers did not represent their first choice for primary support.

1.

"So, like, having someone, liken having teachers, like, telling me what to do helped me do things better."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: Teacher's support
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"And then if not, then I'll try and talk to someone who's, like, older and who has more knowledge."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: Teacher's support
MEMO 20234,

3.

"I like my teachers as well."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: Teacher's support
JUNE 202310,

4.

"I'm really close with more teachers,"

Code: ● Subtheme 2: Teacher's support
CHRIS 20239,

5.3. Subtheme 3: Parents' support

Some participants named their parents or mom as their “person” to talk about anything. Though, parents or mom were not associated with their first choice or primary source of support.

1.

"My mom", "Honestly, like if I need to talk about anything, I normally just go talk to her."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Parents' support
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"Probably My parents"

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Parents' support
DANNY 20238,

3.

"My mom. She and I are pretty close."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Parents' support
CHRIS 20239,

5.4. Subtheme 4: Counseling center/support

Various participants recognized knowing and understanding how to access the counseling center at their school if they needed support. However, the counseling center or counselors were not identified as their first choice or primary source of support. Some participants thought that the need to utilize their services was not present. While other participants acknowledged that being a student-athlete meant more mental and physical demands, having mental health resources like counseling services in their school was a good thing to have.

1.

"Honestly, like if I need to talk about anything, I normally just go talk to them."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Counseling center/support
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"If you need to talk to anyone, we're here, or there's, like, a school counselor or something."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Counseling center/support
JWEN 20235,

3.

"They were really good about making sure we're all supported in the counseling center and everything like that."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Counseling center/support
JAKE 20233,

4.

"I've had plenty of access. I just haven't really needed to use that."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Counseling center/support
DANNY 20238,

5.

"I know we have counselors that we can talk to. And I know it's very important in our high school that student athletes have a lot more on their plate. So, I know that's a resource that's readily available."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Counseling center/support
JUNE 202310,

6.

"I know I have a lot. I could definitely go like I'm really close to my counselor."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Counseling center/support
CHRIS 20239,

5.5. Subtheme 5: Connection with Support Systems

Participants suggested that relationships that were supportive and meaningful were considered their support system. Participants identified connection with teachers, parents, coaches, and teammates as their support system. Participants expressed that they wouldn't hesitate to connect with their identified support systems.

1.

"I've had a great relationship with the coaches", "I have a great relationship with other teammates."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Connection with Support Systems
MEMO 20234,

2.

"They'd be like, hey, if you need to talk to anyone, we're here."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Connection with Support Systems
JWEN 20235,

3.

"Great to be back out", "It was fun to kind of be back in that group environment", "I think that I was really good at building friendships in each of those and that I'm glad they walk away with those."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Connection with Support Systems
JAKE 20233,

4.

"I do know that there's a lot of resources available."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Connection with Support Systems
JUNE 202310,

5.

"Pretty much. Well, I just have a really close friend group, and all of us are really all there for each other."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Connection with Support Systems
CHRIS 20239,

5.6. Subtheme 6: No need to talk to coaches

Some participants articulated not feeling the need to talk to their coaches all the time even when they recognized them as being close or considered them like “family”.

1.

"Maybe. It depends on which one it was."

Code: ● Subtheme 6: No need to talk to coaches
CHARLES 20236,

2.

" I mean, I could just I wouldn't think it was necessary."

Code: ● Subtheme 6: No need to talk to coaches
DANNY 20238,

5.7. Subtheme 7: Positive Support Systems

Many participants labeled their support systems positive. These supportive factors kept them engaged in both academics and sports. The identified support system overlapped with other subthemes which reinforced the positive impact of experiencing meaningful relationships.

1.

"I feel like just having people around you that bring you up is good for your mental health. And I feel like that's the best thing I can have right now, because I definitely had some rough patches. But I feel like the people around me have definitely helped me."

Code: ● Subtheme 7: Positive Support Systems
MEMO 20234,

2.

"Mainly my friends, if I need help with academics and sports and stuff", " I would talk to my coaches about it. Yeah, I'd probably ask for help or something."

Code: ● Subtheme 7: Positive Support Systems
JWEN 20235, 85 - 85

3.

"Yes, I have a support system", "I'd say the schools are pretty good about it, knowing that we all kind of went through a little bit of hell through COVID. They were really good about making sure we're all supported in the counseling center and everything like that."

Code: ● Subtheme 7: Positive Support Systems
JAKE 20233,

6. Theme 5: General Sense of Belonging

All participants identified that feeling welcomed in their school and sports made them feel good about themselves. Having a good time while growing friendships made them feel valued. Some participants considered the high school experience positive, helping to create a community they felt belonged to.

1.

"Had a supportive community, it was in both of my sports."

Code: ● Theme 5: General Sense of Belonging
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"I've had a good time", "I think it's been very nice to have a bigger campus and a lot more people coming in from a bunch of different schools", "We're helping each other", "And then you all come together for one same purpose. It's a very nice bonding experience."

Code: ● Theme 5: General Sense of Belonging
MEMO 20234,

3.

"I'd say it's good."

Code: ● Theme 5: General Sense of Belonging
JWEN 20235,

4.

"Overall, I am leaving very happy and very satisfied with my high school experience", "It is a great way to meet new people and have a great kind of teen experience.", "I know it's such a cliché thing to say, but everybody says, oh, enjoy. It's going to go quick. But then I'm sitting here already done with high school sports and I'm like, oh, man, it really did go really quick. I sometimes wish I could have gone back and savored more moments in my junior and sophomore year rather than only necessarily my senior year, but that's one thing is just always savoring every moment regardless of what year you're in, because your senior year and your last game will come extremely, extremely fast".

Code: ● Theme 5: General Sense of Belonging
JAKE 20233,

5.

"Yeah, I do have friends."

Code: ● Theme 5: General Sense of Belonging
DANNY 20238,

6.

"You create a really nice bond with the teammates, or even if it's just another sport like swimming, you can have a really strong sense of community and feel more welcome at the school", "I'm wishing to return next year as a junior.

Code: ● Theme 5: General Sense of Belonging
JUNE 202310,

7.

"I'm really close with coach ****. All my coaches are basically like my family you know"

Code: ● Theme 5: General Sense of Belonging
CHRIS 20239,

6.1. Subtheme 1: Positive Returning in Person felt like normal

Some participants responded that returning to in person instruction felt like "normal".

Even though there were different expectations and rules in place right at the end of the pandemic COVID-19, when they changed from online to in person practices, they felt as excited as before the pandemic. Some participants expressed that they had a more challenging time doing everything including academics and sports away from their friends. Therefore, they welcomed with a lot of joy coming back to their social life in person and adjusting to "normal" was rather quick.

1.

"As an athlete, was definitely more exciting.", "Ummmm, I don't think it was difficult for me personally,"

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Positive Returning in Person felt like normal
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"I've had a great time I feel like it started to go back to normal pretty quickly", "So there was definitely some change that I needed to like adjust with. But for the most part, I think I had a much better time being back in person."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Positive Returning in Person felt like normal
MEMO 20234,

3.

"Not really that different."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Positive Returning in Person felt like normal
JWEN 20235,

4.

"It was nice to see my friends again after being stuck inside. It was great to see coaches, great to see mentors, great to be back out and physically fit", "But I think coming back, it was very smooth and very natural", "It felt extremely normal coming back."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Positive Returning in Person felt like normal
JAKE 20233,

5.

"And then you can come back and be with all your friends again and do all your sports with all your friends."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Positive Returning in Person felt like normal
DANNY 20238,

6.

"When I went back to high school, that was like sort of the transition into back to normal."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Positive Returning in Person felt like normal
JUNE 202310,

7.

"Coming back from online school was really nice, but it really had no effect sports wise. I'm really excited for this year; this year has been really positive."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Positive Returning in Person felt like normal
CHRIS 20239,

6.2. Subtheme 2: COVID 19 Didn't change anything

Some participants communicated that the pandemic COVID-19 didn't have any effect when returning to in person instruction and sports. Other participants explained that although some adjustments were needed, the pandemic didn't alter their lifestyle. Other participants shared that the pandemic COVID-19 happened when they were in middle school and life in middle school was different anyways.

1.

"Honestly, I don't think so, because I thought it was really nice to be back in person around a lot of people."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: COVID 19 Didn't change anything
MEMO 20234,

2.

"Not really that different. I mean, masks were really the only thing."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: COVID 19 Didn't change anything
JWEN 20235,

3.

"No, it wasn't really that difficult."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: COVID 19 Didn't change anything
DANNY 20238,

4.

"Yeah, so the COVID-19 happened when I was in 7th and 8th grade."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: COVID 19 Didn't change anything
JUNE 202310,

6.3. Subtheme 3: Identified having Friends to rely on

All participants conveyed with emphasis having friends they could count on. They felt confident about their circle of friends and the connections they had developed. Some participants conveyed that if they needed help or support from their friends, it was a matter of just reaching out.

1.

"I like to hang out with friends", "Reaching out to them, and if I ask them for help on something, and they help me."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Identified having Friends to rely on
CHARLES 20236,

3.

"I think I would probably first go to my friends. Because I feel like they're kind of experiencing the same stuff I am. So, I feel like if they have the same knowledge and experiences that I'm having, I feel like it would be a lot easier if they've already overcome some of the challenges that I've had."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Identified having Friends to rely on
MEMO 20234,

4.

"I do have friends", "If they help me out with homework and stuff, and just if I miss a day, tell me what I'm doing", "Mainly my friends, if I need help with academics and sports and stuff."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Identified having Friends to rely on
JWEN 20235,

5.

"I really enjoyed about high school sports and especially football. All of us were really tight, so it was just nice to see good friends again", "And just being a friend, kind of always kind of being there for them", "I'd consider my friends and someone that I'd be there to help out with. And I think that I was really good at building friendships in each of those and that I'm glad they walk away with those. Still intact and still being able to find friends to spend time and do things with outside of sports".

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Identified having Friends to rely on
JAKE 20233,

6.

"I've got plenty of friends and stuff, I got them."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Identified having Friends to rely on
DANNY 20238,

7.

"I have a lot of friends", " Well, I have a small group of friends that we'll sometimes study together", " I'd say it's a very positive relationship."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Identified having Friends to rely on
JUNE 202310,

8.

"We're so close. Everyone there at school knows that. We're all just, like, really close."

Code: ● Subtheme 3: Identified having Friends to rely on
CHRIS 20239,

6.4. Subtheme 4: Negative Perception of Others Based on Assumptions

Some participants acknowledged having a negative perception of other teammates and coaches. These participants recognized later that the negative perception they had was based on assumptions and not necessarily the truth about coaches and teammates. They realized all they needed was time to get to know people, especially their teammates and coaches.

1.

"It's just that people are really mean. Honestly, people are really mean", "Because I felt like going into high school sports, everyone was just going to be like this really mean, kind of like jocky personality."

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Negative Perception of Others Based on Assumptions
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"There's a lot of people there that didn't belong there and were not good for the team's morale at all. And there was a lot of teasing and hazing and stuff,"

Code: ● Subtheme 4: Negative Perception of Others Based on Assumptions
MEMO 20234,

6.5. Subtheme 5: Social Life Outside School is Crucial to Survive

All participants recognized a high need for a social life outside sports and academics demands. Some participants described how important was for them to “hang out with friends”. They expressed that high school was a great opportunity for growing long lasting friendships.

1.

"I like to hang out with friends."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Social Life Outside School is Crucial to Survive
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"We just hang out too. And it's nice to be able to socialize with a bunch of different people too."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Social Life Outside School is Crucial to Survive
MEMO 20234,

3.

"Since you're in just one middle school, you can meet people from other schools."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Social Life Outside School is Crucial to Survive
JWEN 20235,

4.

"Still being able to find friends to spend time and do things with outside of sports."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Social Life Outside School is Crucial to Survive
JAKE 20233,

5.

"And socially, we'll hang out and just have fun a lot of times."

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Social Life Outside School is Crucial to Survive
JUNE 202310,

6.

"Yeah, we're always there for each other and we're always hanging out whenever there's nothing going on", "And then we always do hang out whenever possible".

Code: ● Subtheme 5: Social Life Outside School is Crucial to Survive
CHRIS 20239,

7. Theme 6: General Student-Athlete Self-Perception

Participants considered themselves as being kids with strong desires to be the best in both worlds: academics and sports. The general feeling among participants was the sense of pride and joy of overcoming many obstacles that student-athletes experience compared to the rest of the student population. They called themselves “decent student”, “Straight A student”, and “honor student”, while also acknowledging that they can have fun, have a good time and be teens and athletes at the same time.

1.

"Student wise, I'd say I'm a decent student."

Code: ● Theme 6: General Student-Athlete Self-Perception
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"For the most part? Yeah, I would say I enjoy it", "I want to be the best I can be."

Code: ● Theme 6: General Student-Athlete Self-Perception
MEMO 20234,

3.

"I take an honors class, I'm a decent student."

Code: ● Theme 6: General Student-Athlete Self-Perception
JWEN 20235,

4.

"Being an athlete in high school is great, and it's a great way to meet new people and find a fun thing to do."

Code: ● Theme 6: General Student-Athlete Self-Perception
JAKE 20233,

5.

"I get straight As, so school isn't really that hard for me in general", "Like, in my life regarding sports, I like working out or something for a sport."

Code: ● Theme 6: General Student-Athlete Self-Perception
DANNY 20238,

6.

"I'm a straight A student. I do well in my classes, and I like learning at school", "I started playing volleyball in high school."

Code: ● Theme 6: General Student-Athlete Self-Perception
JUNE 202310,

7.

"Yeah, I really like it. Overall, sometimes it gets tough, and I do like it but there's no part of me that would want to just quit, well, I'm really excited this year. I'm really happy."

Code: ● Theme 6: General Student-Athlete Self-Perception
CHRIS 20239,

7.1. Subtheme 1: Encourage others to do sports.

All participants articulated they would encourage others to join sports. Without hesitation, all participants shared that being a student athlete has impacted positively their school experience and even when it requires a significant amount of time commitment, they would not discourage other students from participating in athletic activities. They called these experiences “amazing”, a “great way to meet people”, “it’s a way to integrate yourself in the community”, and because sports “bring people together”.

1.

"Definitely. It's amazing, I encourage others to do sports."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Encourage others to do sports
CHARLES 20236,

2.

"I would say yes because I think it's a great way to meet new people and also to learn more about yourself, too."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Encourage others to do sports
MEMO 20234,

3.

"Yeah, it's fun. Especially during your freshman year. It’s cool to meet people."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Encourage others to do sports
JWEN 20235,

4.

"I would absolutely think you should get involved at least some way at your school, and sports are definitely one of the best ways to do that."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Encourage others to do sports
JAKE 20233,

5.

"Most definitely, yeah."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Encourage others to do sports
DANNY 20238,

6.

"I would. It's really nice. It's a way to integrate yourself into the community."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Encourage others to do sports

JUNE 202310,

7.

"Oh, 100%. I think sports are really good, especially for people that are new, because they bring people together."

Code: ● Subtheme 1: Encourage others to do sports

CHRIS 20239,

7.2. Subtheme 2: Positive Perception of others

Participants shared feeling positive about people around them. Many participants revealed that meeting and engaging with other people through sports has created an awesome environment.

1.

"The teammates and the environment is really awesome."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: Positive Perception of others

CHARLES 20236,

2.

"I've met lots of people", "They always help me. They're always by my side",

Code: ● Subtheme 2: Positive Perception of others

MEMO 20234,

3.

"I think that I was really good at building friendships in each of those and that I'm glad they walk away with those."

Code: ● Subtheme 2: Positive Perception of others

JAKE 20233,

Summary of results

A total of seven student-athletes participated in the study through in-depth interviews. From the data collected, six major themes and many subthemes emerged addressing the tenets of wellness. Furthermore, results indicated the significance of developing social connectedness and belonging through supportive relationships, more specifically with coaches and other athletes. Additionally, the findings shed light on the multifaceted nature of the student-athlete journey,

revealing the complexities that exist between physical, emotional, intellectual, psychological, spiritual, and social well-being. Also, all student-athletes had some knowledge about accessing mental health support services whether in school or out of school. However, they considered the service unnecessary for them. Lastly, the results suggested that while the high demands on academics and sports performance were present and caused levels of stress, the post-pandemic COVID-19 school environment did not have a significant impact on the wellbeing of the participants. On the contrary, student-athletes expressed excitement to be back to in person instruction.

Chapter V: Discussion, Findings, and Interpretations

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 led to unprecedented global challenges, affecting several aspects of day-by-day life. Among the many dimensions impacted by the pandemic, the mental health of individuals, in particular student-athletes, had emerged as a significant concern. The abrupt stop to organized sports activities, closure of educational institutions, and implementation of remote learning, reshaped the daily routines and social interactions of this population (McGuine et al. 2021). Thus, understanding the impact of COVID-19 on high school student-athletes' mental health and the access they had to holistic wellness in a post pandemic school environment, was the fuel that ignited this research. In this section, the results of this study are interpreted by breaking down the main six themes that appeared throughout the interviews discussed in the previous chapter. I will also discuss the limitations, implications and recommendations, future research, and conclusions.

The importance of Being Physically Healthy

The answers provided by the participants highlighted the interconnectedness of physical health, sport performance, mental well-being, and social connections. These insights underscored

the complexity of the relationships between these factors and offered valuable perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 on high school student athletes' mental health, as athletes “are no less susceptible to mental illness than the general population” (Hill, MacNamara, Collins, & Rodgers 2016, pg. 1). The participants unanimously emphasized the importance of physical wellness because physical healthy habits that included proper nutrition allowed them to perform better academically and in athletics. Additionally, participants identified enjoying sports because it allowed them to engage in social groups that otherwise they wouldn't engage in. The insights provided by participants correlate with the theories and models that address the social influences on behavior as a dominant framework that encourage physical activity (Sallis et al. 2006). In addition to physical wellness, another common theme among participants was the minimal knowledge about the multidimensions of holistic wellness. Nonetheless, many participants cited some understanding of the dimensions of wellness such as spiritual wellness, mental wellness, and social wellness.

Other important subthemes discovered throughout the analysis were that participants have a high sense of purpose and hope for the future emphasizing personal development, fulfillment, and a positive outlook in life. Furthermore, participant's ideal wellness had significant connection with the idea of “thriving towards self-actualization, growth, and excellence” (Myers, 2000, pg. 252). These findings suggest high school student-athletes understood the universal tendency to work towards developing the best version of oneself while recognizing the whole individual. The findings also suggest that the pandemic COVID-19 did not have significant influence in motivating these participants to have a self-defined routine that could offer balance and fulfillment while maintaining their wellness goals (Swarbrick, 2006).

Additionally, the findings addressed the overlapping influences of the tenets of wellness such as physical wellness, psychological wellness, spiritual wellness, and social wellness.

Sports and its Demands

Student athletes are required to attend practices, training sessions, and competitions. The demands of training and competing can be physically and mentally draining, especially when student athletes are expected to excel in their academic performance. And because of these demands, Muir and Munroe-Chandler (2020) suggest that participating in sports may come with some risks and susceptibility to increase the prevalence of mental illness like depression, disordered eating, and risk-taking behaviors. However, participants identified stressors like time management as the biggest factor in feeling depleted. Participants recognized with surprise the unexpected, packed schedules, and high expectations in school performance that were put on them, especially coming back full time to in person instructions after the pandemic COVID-19 lockdown.

Participants were hoping to set realistic expectations with their coaches as the pressure to perform in their respective sports increased the risk of overtraining or injury. Some participants addressed the impact physical injury had on their mental health, which was more significant than the actual pandemic. They described that being away from their social/competitive aspect of their athlete identity, made feel bad about themselves. And because the student-athlete already has a high pressure to be tough and the desire to win is present, fostering resiliency may be granted. McNamara (2014) suggests the importance of fostering resiliency and valuing connecting with peers as being vulnerable “gives the social permission” to reassure athletes no-one is judging them. Quitting their respective sports was a consideration some athletes had. However, their desire to stay connected to a social group like the athletes’ group and being physically healthy,

prevented them from leaving. Here again, social wellness and physical wellness were recognized as an effective buffer to support the student-athlete from different fronts. An interesting finding was that participants did not consider the new rules for returning to in person school activities like wearing masks a problem at all. Many of the participants felt that they were willing to go with flow if they could go back to “normal”. However, as many of them recognized that a negative aspect of the pandemic COVID-19 was the loss of their daily structure resulting in losing contact with their social groups and not being able to do sports.

Homework: “There’s a lot of Pressure”

Participants expressed their commitment and dedication to their sport, team, and training, and without a doubt this requires discipline, perseverance, and a strong work ethic. Participants also articulated how seriously they took their academic responsibilities. Time management was a theme that came often as participants recognized the personal sacrifices they make such as doing homework on the bus or late at night with little time to rest. They acknowledged how challenging balancing their academics workloads was in combination with their athletic demands and personal/social lives. Additionally, those challenges brought them a lot of stress that ended up negatively impacting their school performance, at least temporarily. However, participants indicated feeling either “highly/extremely confident” or “fairly/pretty confident” in achieving good grades. These insights correlated with their sense of emotional wellness mentioned before as they demonstrated having skills of secure identity and positive value of themselves. Suggesting that participants already had an increased self-esteem and had the necessary coping skills to deal positively with those life stressors.

Connection with Coaches as Primary Source of Support

Coaches and the athlete-coach relationship were highly rated and considered more often as a source of support by participants. For some student-athletes, the connections they developed with their coaches was the difference between staying or leaving their sports. Mazzer and Rickwood (2015) suggested as coaches stay in close and regular proximity with a significant number of young students, it was important to develop supportive and caring relationships while providing invaluable life skills that contributed to the youth's development. Participants added other sources of support, naming the positive influences they experienced with parents, teachers, and peers. Previous research has shown the role coaches, parents, teachers, and peers have with student-athletes. McCann et al. (2022) proposed "that relationships with others influence athlete participation, development and performance" (pg. 1228), participants demonstrated that the social agents they named (parents, coaches, teachers, peers) had a significant role in how they felt about themselves and how they viewed their athletic performance.

Some participants recognized their coaches as "family", while others called them "mentors". However, it is worth noting that some participants disclosed not feeling the need to talk to coaches about their "issues" all the time as they thought they could handle their problems on their own. This specific finding can be related to the stigma of mental health experienced by athletes as they are expected to have "mental toughness". This is perhaps a great opportunity to explore the sport culture regarding mental health in high schools as mental health is a key component of student-athletes' general wellness. In addition, acknowledging the role athletic departments play in creating an environment that destigmatizes mental health challenges (NCAA, 2020) can make a significant impact in creating best practices to better serve the student-athlete population. Another significant finding was that all participants knew where or

how to find mental health services by reaching out to their school counselors or counselors in the community. However, they recognized that the counseling center was not their first choice as a primary source of support. Previous research on this matter suggests that athletes are often averse to seeking out mental health services even if they know where to find it. Instead, they tend to look for this support in trusted people such as their coaches (Lebrun et al. 2020). Based on these findings, it appears that that COVID-19 and the lockdown period, did not have any significant impact in the relationship between the student-athlete sense of social wellness in relation with identifying their social group (coaches, parents, teachers, peers) and recognizing all these as positive support systems.

General sense of belonging

To understand what the role of motivation in the student-athlete is, we need to contextualize the influences most seen in this age group and student population the research was conducted. McCann et al. (2022) suggest that the satisfaction of needs of the athlete are influenced by the social interactions they experience. Additionally, satisfaction of needs “can be predicted by the quality of their relationship with coaches” (McCann et al. 2022, pg. 1229) and the autonomy—support—parents provide, along with the “peer-creative motivational climate” (McCann et al. 2022, pg. 1229). Participants felt welcome returning to in-person instruction and sports. In addition to feeling welcomed, they articulated the general feeling that high school has been a positive experience, even though some participants had a negative perception of what it would be like to join high school sports. Though, these negative perceptions were based merely on a wrong assumption, as the participants later realized that the peer-to-peer connection with other student-athletes was incredibly valuable. All participants asserted having friends that they could rely on in both academics and sport related issues. They identified not feeling any

difference at school between the before and after of the pandemic COVID-19. Perhaps the high need to engage in social settings again, overcome the hassle of wearing masks and “social distancing”.

General Student-Athlete Self-Perception

Participants for the most part described feeling proud of overcoming all the challenges they faced during the pandemic lockdown, online instruction, cancelation of sport activities, and later the return to “normal” in 2022. Although the positive traits of the student-athlete self-perception were present, some participants experienced moments of doubt when thinking about their athlete experience. However, they would without a doubt encourage other students to do sports as many participants associated the sport experience with opportunities to broaden their social circles. These findings can be explained by what is one of the motivations behind student-athlete sport participation. McCann et al. (2022) suggest that motivational influences change over time and are linked to the different developmental stages of athletes. For example, older youths (14-18) consider the role of parents secondary as the role of peers in providing social support increases. Therefore, positive perception of others and encouraging other students to do sports make sense for this group of participants. Then the student-athlete self-perception is described as “being kids with strong desires to be the best in both worlds: academics and sports” referring specifically to the relationships they can form as long-term friendships.

Reciprocity statement

This study offered space for participants so they could share their experiences as student-athletes in a COVID-19 post pandemic school environment. I believe in fostering environments that promote growth both academically and athletically, while I recognize the dedication and sacrifice that student-athletes invest especially in balancing their studies and athletic programs.

As student-athletes strive for excellence every day and continue the process of adapting to the demands of “normality” of the post pandemic, my commitment is to continue collaborating with different stakeholders to invest in resources that can best support student-athletes’ mental health. Inspired by the wellness model, and with the spirit of teamwork, I hope that we normalize mental health care as we have normalized physical health care for this population.

Limitations

The present study aimed to understand the experiences high school student-athletes had in a post pandemic COVID-19 school environment. Using the wellness theory, I examined the different dimensions or tenets of wellness by asking participants about their overall experiences as student-athletes, their sense of physical wellness (importance of being physically healthy/ideal wellness), intellectual wellness (enjoyment being an student in high school, and level of confidence in achieving good academic performance), spiritual wellness (sense of purpose in life, and hope for the future), psychological wellness (learned experiences, self-worth and direction, mental health services), social wellness (support systems, peer-to-peer relationships), and emotional wellness (accessing emotions/feelings, recognize needs). Although valuable insights came out of this research, limitations were present. One of the biggest limitations was that I had anticipated recruiting a significant group of senior and junior students from both high schools. However, it was clear since the start of the study that participants were primarily freshman students, and they were coming only from one of the high schools participating. Another significant limitation was that at the time of the release of the study announcement students in higher grades like sophomore and junior years were either finishing their sport season—which was competitive level—or starting practices for the new seasons like football season (2023-24) creating a significant schedule conflict and making the screening process very

challenging. Other students were approaching graduation and getting things ready for college, creating limited availability for them to participate. It is worth noting that, the screening process was also limiting as anyone experiencing the most prevalent mental illness in student-athletes such as anxiety and depression (Davoren & Hwang, 2014) were excluded. Though, inadvertently when developing my screening criteria, I excluded participants that were struggling with more severe or acute symptoms and focused mainly on understanding their experiences as student-athletes in general through the lens of wellness.

The sample recruited was also limited as it only represented one race (White), two ethnicities (Hispanic/Latino or Non-Hispanic/Latino), and two genders (male and female). I consider that recruiting a more diverse sample can provide other insights not addressed in this study. For instance, Williams (2014) suggests that gaining understanding and appreciation for student-athletes that come from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities is crucial to best support them. Especially when research shows that minority students such as black student-athletes experience higher levels of stress and are more vulnerable to develop mental health disorders, yet this group does not voluntarily seek out help in “fear of appearing weak and vulnerable” (pg. 77).

Implications and Recommendations

The seven student-athletes that willingly participated in this study are examples of resiliency, perseverance, and vulnerability as they provided their insights in the importance of physical health. Likewise, participants associated physical health with mental health by acknowledging a general good feeling when they were at their best physically. Other insights participants provided was the correlation between physical health and the development of friendships and collaboration. Furthermore, student-athletes enjoy thriving towards excellence

and continuous improvement while setting high standards for themselves. It was clear that the pursuit of excellence often modeled a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction (self-esteem as a protective factor). McCann et al. (2022) suggests that motivation as internal state that drives action and behavior, play an important role in the student-athletes' sense of direction. Therefore, understanding how the social connection influences student-athlete's participation in sports was insightful as the participants viewed their coaches as a primary source of support. Other positive influences identified in this study were parents, peers, teammates, teachers, and friends. As suggested by McCann et al. (2022), these social agents "influenced environments which create opportunities for athletes to cooperate, make decisions and develop their skills" (pg. 1229).

Additionally, the themes and subthemes that emerged in the study suggest indicated an increased satisfaction in going back to in-person instruction. The motivation student-athletes are experiencing could be a great opportunity for promoting environments that support mental wellbeing. Coaches and athletic programs can learn about the importance of maintaining connections with their athletes to help normalize the need for seeking mental health support. Coaches and other agents have a significant role in facilitating the early detection of mental health symptoms in their athletes while also fostering and encouraging help seeking behaviors (Lebrun et al. 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to promote health education that addresses holistic wellness as an interconnected form of ideal wellness.

Future Research

There are many implications for future exploration of high school student-athletes' mental health. Starting from conducting research at a higher scale with a more diverse sample using the perceived wellness survey (PWS). Additionally, studying the perceived relationship coaches have with their student-athletes and more specific with student-athletes of color or other minority

groups can be crucial in identifying environmental risk factors experienced by this population such as reactionary high-risk factors including substance use disorders (Williams, 2014). Therefore, if coaches are trained to identify these symptoms early interventions are possible. Similarly, if coaches receive the proper training to identify signs of mood disorders such as depression, they can take the first steps to make referral for proper treatment/intervention. As cited before, student-athletes place high value in the relationships/connections they develop with their coaches as factor that determines their stay or leave of a team, and their general sense of belonging.

Conclusion

As we continue to return to the “normality” of the post pandemic, we can expect higher participation in sport activities but with added layers of issues related to mental health. Therefore, to best support student-athletes as they return to their pre-pandemic routines, it is crucial to work in collaboration between schools and community resources. The present study aimed to explore the experiences high school student-athletes had in accessing holistic wellness in a post pandemic COVID-19 school environment. And while crucial information was revealed, it also highlighted the need for promoting mental health literacy among athletic programs. Chew and Thomson (2014) argue that mental health services have significant benefits for students, including a reduced risk for behavioral challenges and a higher overall academic experience. However, stigma about mental illness and the assumption that student-athletes are more equipped with “mental toughness” than non-student-athletes makes it more difficult to differentiate when student-athletes are in high distress or simply having a rough day. Moreover, I believe it’s imperative having a frank and open discussions between athletic programs, parents, and coaches about holistic wellness while presenting mental health services to student-athletes as

part of the sport package during the initial meeting can help destigmatize mental health. Lastly, the findings in this study shed light on the multifaceted nature of the student-athlete journey, revealing the complexities that exist between physical, emotional, intellectual, psychological, spiritual, and social well-being.

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APPENDIX A

Study Announcement

High School Student-Athletes Needed

Are you a student-athlete in grades 9-12, ages 13-19, any identified gender, any identified race/ethnicity, that has been actively participating in sports (whether individual or team sports) at your high school in the current school year 2022-23? Are you willing to share your experiences as a student-athlete? Your participation will contribute to the research on the experiences high school students have in a post-Pandemic COVID-19 school environment. Participation in this study requires an initial screening process that can be done via virtually, by phone, and/or in person. If selected; an in-person interview that will take approximately 60 minutes will be scheduled. **PLEASE NOTE** that all students doing the interviews, parental/legal guardian consent and student assent must be provided to be part of the study.

Contact Leading Researcher: Pastora Hernandez Barbee (she/her/hers)

at hernap11@uw.edu , phone number: (360) 742-9954

If you are eligible to participate in this study and complete the interview, you will receive \$35 dollars in a gift card as compensation for your time.

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) & the Office of the Youth Protection Program of the University of Washington Human Subject Division, Seattle WA.

APPENDIX B

Screening Script and Questionnaire**PLEASE READ:**

Thank you very much for your interest in this study “A Post Pandemic Analysis of COVID-19 and the Impact in Mental Health of High School Student-Athletes—Today, more than ever minds matter”. My study involves doing interviews with young people to learn about their experiences as high school student-athletes in accessing holistic wellness and support in a post-pandemic COVID-19 school environment. The study interview should last no more than 60 minutes and will be audio recorded. The first step is to figure out if this study is a good fit for you.

I (the researcher) am going to ask you some questions to help me figure out if you are eligible to participate in this study. I will let you know at the end of this screening whether or not the study is a good fit for you. You might feel uncomfortable answering some of the screening questions. I hope to keep all of your answers private, but there are some limitations to what I can do.

Prospective subjects will be advised about the limits of confidentiality* and will be reminded that the researcher in the study is not in the role of the clinician while conducting this research, therefore no therapeutic interventions will be provided. If participants need support during the screening process, before and/or after the interviews, a list of clinical providers will be offered by the researcher. If you are eligible and want to participate, we will set up a time for the interview. You and your parent or legal guardian must review and sign the informed assent-consent-parental permission form before the interview takes place. I will go over this form right before we do study interview. Additionally, if you have any questions before we start the screening, please let me know.

****Although you have the right to confidentiality, there are some limitations that exist. Under RCW 26.44 and RCW 74.34 in Washington State, I am required by law to report current or past child, elder, or dependent abuse or neglect. Additionally, if you disclose statements indicating that you are planning or have the intent to harm yourself or someone else, I’m required to break confidentiality and make a report to the appropriate agencies including your school to protect your safety and the safety of others.***

1. Have you played sports at your high school in the current 2022-23 school year?

a. YES _____

b. NO _____

2. If YES, what type of sport have you engaged in?

: _____

3. What is your age group?
 - a. Ages 13-17 _____ (signed parental consent must be provided before any interview is scheduled)
 - b. Ages 18-19 _____ (signed parental consent must be provided before any interview is scheduled)

4. What is your gender identity?

5. What is your identified race/ethnicity?

6. Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by the following problems? (PHQ-2)
 - a. Little interest or pleasure in doing things.
 - Not at all _____ (0)
 - Several days _____ (+1)
 - More than half of the days _____ (+2)
 - Nearly every day _____ (+3)

 - b. Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless.
 - Not at all _____ (0)
 - Several days _____ (+1)
 - More than half of the days _____ (+2)
 - Nearly every day _____ (+3)

7. Have you ever been diagnosed or treated for a mental health condition such as major depression, panic disorder, acute stress disorder, any dissociative disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, or conduct disorder?
 - a. NO _____
 - b. YES, for what disorder (s) _____

8. Are you currently feeling suicidal or homicidal?
- a. YES _____
 - b. NO _____
9. Are you currently being treated for any substance use disorder including alcohol?
- a. YES _____, if yes please specify _____
 - b. NO _____
-

End of the questionnaire

Screens in: _____

Screens out: _____

Researcher Initials: _____

Date of screening: _____.

Participants and their parents/legal guardian will be thanked for their time completing the screening process. If after completing the screening questionnaire the student is eligible the interview will be scheduled.

APPENDIX C

University of Washington

Assent, Consent & Parental Permission

Title of the Study: A Post Pandemic Analysis of COVID-19 and the Impact in Mental Health of High School Student-Athletes—Today, more than ever minds matter.

Lead Researcher: Pastora Hernandez Barbee (she/her/hers)

Contact information: hernap11@uw.edu

Phone Number: (360) 742-9954

Chairperson: Dr. Robin Zape-tah-hol-ah Minthorn, Ph.D. (She/Her/Hers)
(Kiowa/Apache/Nez Perce/Umatilla/Assiniboine)

Associate Professor Director of Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

Director of Indigenous Education Initiatives, School of Education

robstarr@uw.edu

Purpose of this form

The purpose of this form is to offer you and your parents/legal guardians' comprehensive information about this study that may affect your decision to participate or not. Please talk this over with your parents/legal guardians before you decide whether to do this or not. Being in the study is voluntary. You do not have to participate in this study if you don't want to, even if your parent or guardian says it is ok. You can also start the study and change your mind later without any negative consequences. Please read this form and ask as many questions as you want to.

Your signature at the end of this document, indicates you agree to participate in the study. The signature of your parent/legal guardian at the end of this document indicates their permission for you to participate in this study. You and your parents/legal guardians will be given a copy of this form after you, your parents/legal guardians, and the researcher have signed the form. Going forward, the term "you" refers to the student participant.

What is this study about?

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the residual impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on high school student-athletes' mental health and ability to access wellness support.

What will you be asked to do?

If you decide to be in this study, I will ask you to participate in an interview where I ask questions about your overall experience as a student-athlete and how it has been returning to in-person sport activities after the pandemic lockdown ended. The interview will take about 1-hour and it will be audio recorded so I can accurately capture our conversation. The recording will later be typed out word-for-word and your name will be replaced with a fake one to help protect your privacy.

What are the benefits of the study?

You will not benefit directly. The experiences you share will help educational leaders, athletic programs, coaches, and community members develop and promote holistic wellness resources to better support student athletes.

What are the risks?

You may experience some discomfort or unpleasant emotions triggered by talking about your experiences. If at any point in the interviews you appear to be in emotional distress, I will stop the interview and allow you space for you to choose to continue or end your participation. You will be offered a list of clinical providers that can assist you further in case you need support after the interview. There is a risk that the confidentiality of the information you share with me could be lost if there is a data breach. If this happens it could be embarrassing or upsetting to you. There are measures in place to protect your information. As with any research, there is some possibility that you experience risks that have not yet been identified.

How will I protect the information you provide?

As a contributor in this study, you have the right to privacy. To help protect your privacy, you will be assigned a fake name that will be used to label your information. I will store your name and other identifiable information separate from the study data. Unless there is a data breach, access to your identifying information will be limited to certain members of the study team and any individuals from the UW or other agencies that may need to audit study records. ***Although you have the right to confidentiality, there are some limitations that exist. Under RCW 26.44 and RCW 74.34 in Washington State, I am required by law to report current or past child, elder, or dependent abuse or neglect. Additionally, if you disclose statements indicating that you are planning or have the intent to harm yourself or someone else, I'm required to break confidentiality and make a report to the appropriate agencies including your school to protect your safety and the safety of others.***

When I publish the results of this study, we will not use your name. All the information and data collected will be placed in a password protected device. The link between your identifiers and the research data will be destroyed after the records retention period required by state and/or federal law.

Other information about the study.

You will be given a \$35 gift card at the end of the interview in return for your time and kind consideration of participating in the study.

If you have questions that have not been addressed or answered, please let me know or contact my faculty advisor Dr. Minthorn by emailing her at robstarr@uw.edu.

Consent presenter statement

By printing my name on this form, I am attesting that I have provided the participant and their parent or legal guardian with information about this study. The participant and their parent or legal guardian have been given sufficient time to consider participation and I have answered any questions they had. The participant and their parent or legal guardian indicated that they understand the nature of the study, including risks and benefits of participating.

Printed name of study staff obtaining consent

Date

Subject's statement

By signing this consent form I and my parent or legal guardian confirm that the study has been explained to us and I volunteer to participate in the research. I and my parent or legal guardian have had a chance to ask questions. If we have questions later about the research or feel I have been harmed by participating in the study, I can contact a member of the research team using the information listed on page 1 or the UW Human Subjects Division at 206.543.0098 or hsdinfo@uw.edu. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

Printed name of assenting participant: _____

Signature of assenting Participant: _____

Date: _____

Printed name of Parent/legal guardian: _____

Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX D

List of Mental Health providers in the community that are available to take in student-athletes' participants on this study if they needed.

- 1) Laurel Madson-Lawson, MA, LMHC, Certified Life Coach. Website:
www.losningercounseling.com phone number: (253) 861-9053
- 2) Heidi Pottle, MA, LMFT. Website: www.heidipottle.com phone number: (360) 280-8200
- 3) Narissa Whitlock, MSW, LSWAIC, Clinical Social Work/Therapist. Psychology Today
(online therapy), phone number: (360) 531-7282
- 4) Destiny June, MA, LMHC, Doctoral candidate PhD (Psychodelic Studies). Website:
www.enchantedforestcounseling.com phone number: (253) 400-3067
- 5) Grace Porter, MA, LMHC, LCPC. Website: www.graceportertherapy.com phone
number: (425) 765-6208

APPENDIX E

Interview Protocol

- ❖ Tell me about yourself and your overall experience as a student.
 - Do you enjoy being a student in high school?
 - How would you describe your level of confidence to achieve a good grade?
 - How would you tell you have friends that support you academically and socially?

- ❖ Tell me about your overall experience as an athlete!
 - How important is it for you to be physically healthy?
 - What have you learned about the experiences of being a student-athlete?
 - Looking at your experiences, would you encourage other students to do sports?
 - What do you wish you would have known before joining sports at your school?

- ❖ Tell me about how it has been returning to in-person sport activities after the COVID-19 Pandemic lockdown?
 - Was it difficult to adjust (your body-mind)?
 - Can you describe what challenges you are currently facing in your respective sport(s) and how would you communicate those challenges to your coaches or teammates?
 - Would you ask for support if needed to your school, athletic program, parents, and/or friends?
 - How would you describe the relationship you have with your coaches and teammates?

- ❖ Tell me about what type of access you have or have had to mental health support since returning to in person school/sport activities?
 - Can you describe what holistic wellness means to you?
 - Are you hopeful of the future?
 - Do you think your life has a purpose?
 - What is your ideal wellness?