

Not a Student, Not an Athlete, a Person: An Examination of Group of Five Basketball Players' Experience and Self-Perceptions

Amanda Paule-Koba
Bowling Green State University

Todd A. Gilson
Northern Illinois University

Abstract: College athletics can place immense demands on athletes in terms of time commitment, physical conditioning, and pressure to perform. However, one important but less visible dimension affected by participation is one's identity. College athletes hold multiple identities (Sturm et al., 2011) and these identities are further refined through their experiences (Chang et al., 2018). However, much less is known about athletes' cognitive awareness of others' perceptions and how those opinions influence athletes' sense of self. In the present work, 52 Division I collegiate basketball players took part in a qualitative survey focused on understanding their athletic experience based on interactions with others. Responses revealed that athletes had dichotomous beliefs when addressing their perceptions of self and how they believed others viewed them, primarily based on the influence of sport. Conversely, athletes had more differing thoughts when discussing their aspirations and wishes for their future and often discussed professional goals, personality traits, and connections to others. Taken together, these results corroborate the desire (and need) for athletes to foster identities beyond their sport world (Stokowski et al., 2019) and for those who shape the sport experience to proactively work on behalf of athletes in this domain.

Keywords: Athletic identity, basketball, collegiate sport, Division I, experience, self-perception

The Life of Collegiate Athletes

Collegiate athletes often live in a hyphenated world wherein each waking moment they are expected to be (and are viewed as) one of multiple identities (Kidd et al., 2018; Newton et al., 2020). Most notably, collegiate athletes often harbor identities that are shaped around their dual roles as a student and an athlete (Sturm et al., 2011). This paradox can sometimes require difficult navigation on the part of the individual given that identities represent a person's self-understanding, self-objectification, and/or integration of information about self (Pack et al., 2017). Moreover, the fluidity of collegiate athletes' identities is an important consideration, as both positive and negative experiences help further refine identities that are then relied upon in situations and interactions (Chang et al., 2018). Taken together, the understanding of collegiate athletes' identities, including perceptions of such identities by both self and others, is a topic that continues to warrant exploration. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the thoughts and feelings collegiate basketball players had about their athletic experience and how these perceptions impacted subsequent views participants held of themselves.

Pressures of Collegiate Athletics

In their role as collegiate athletes, young men and women oftentimes find themselves thrust into a system focused on sport performance outcomes that are quantified and measured against others – most notably through wins and losses. This elevated pressure to perform can be new to athletes who transition into higher-profile collegiate sport and may result in negative consequences. In particular, social and emotional difficulties may become noticeable as these individuals try to balance competing interests of their sport, school, and social life; those individuals who gravitate towards sport commitments more exclusively are at a greater risk for ineffective coping strategies such as denial and mental disengagement (Grove et al., 1997; Russell et al., 2018). To help acclimate collegiate athletes, coaches will often strive to create a family culture within a team so that collegiate athletes feel at home with their peers. This strategy is highlighted quite regularly in the media in such movies as *Remember the Titans*, *Miracle*, and most recently through the show *Ted Lasso*. Through frequent practices and other time commitments, e.g., volunteering, team gatherings, etc., team solidarity can be formed; however, this structure can also result in collegiate athletes becoming more segregated from the general student population because of the demands placed upon their time (Hawley et al., 2014). Not surprisingly, it is these demands and perceptions from others outside of athletics that can drive potential biases on campus for those not affiliated with the athletic community. Because athletes at NCAA institutions – especially those at the Division I level – experience college differently, English and Kruger (2020) assert they should be included in conversations about equity in higher education because collegiate athletes can be disproportionately disadvantaged.

When exploring the role of the athlete experience in conjunction with other pressures associated with college life, it is clear that some (and perhaps most) athletes face a difficult choice between pursuing success in their sport and finding time for other important activities, such as academics and social life (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018). Though it is noted that participation in collegiate athletics can have implicit academic benefits such as early course registration, specialized advisors and tutors, and dedicated academic buildings (Paule & Gilson, 2010), many collegiate athletes face significant challenges in pursuit of their major because of the inability to attend academic activities outside of dedicated course instruction time (Hatteburg, 2020; Paule-Koba, 2019; Schneider et al., 2010). When faced with this challenge, many athletes prioritize sports – and subsequent time commitment – while academic responsibilities fade (Aquilina, 2013). This leads collegiate athletes to examine decisions through the lens of choosing what they want to do versus what they need to do (Paule & Gilson, 2010).

Identities of Collegiate Athletes

A guiding framework to better understand this identity problem that collegiate athletes face is identity theory. To begin with, it is best to view this construct through the prism of the person and the identities that one holds. Because a person can have many identities, e.g., son, daughter, student, athletes, employee, friend, etc., the individual may call upon any specific identity based on the environment or interactions taking place; it is this interaction that can help to explain behavior (Burke & Stets, 2009). For example, in one day an individual may go to practice (athlete identity), attend class (student identity), have dinner with family (son/daughter identity), and then talk to a friend before bed (friend identity). For each of these instances, it can

be assumed that the individual calls upon the most appropriate identity they have cultivated to navigate the current situation. However, an important distinction to make is that people form their identities in part based on the social groups to which they belong (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). When this occurs, identities can vary in strength – or the degree to which the individual identifies with the group. As such, if a college athlete is away from home for the first time attending a university several states away, their identity of being a son/daughter may be weaker than it was in the previous year when they were in high school and living at home.

In examining the traditional collegiate experience, perhaps the two most salient identities for college athletes are a traditional academic identity and an athletic identity. While there is inconsistency in the literature as to whether these identities operate independently (Sturm et al., 2011; van Rens et al., 2019; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018), it is known, unsurprisingly, that academic identity is positively associated with academic performance (Guay et al., 2004). On the other hand, a parsimonious definition of athletic identity states that it is the extent to which one embraces the role of an athlete (Newton et al., 2020; Pack et al., 2017). Similar to academic identity, the stronger athletic identity one possesses, the stronger subsequent athletic performances one experiences (van Rens et al., 2019) – most likely due to the increasing commitment and effort expended on these activities.

Delving further into the notion of athletic identity, collegiate athletes who hold a strong athletic identity assert that athletic experiences are integral to their personal development (van Rens et al., 2019); unfortunately, it is this same identity that can also lead to negative consequences in a collegiate setting. On the playing surface, a stronger athletic identity has been linked to maladaptive behaviors such as cheating to gain a competitive advantage (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018). Moreover, since participation in athletics places a high demand on one's time, collegiate athletes who have their athletic identity reinforced may experience a greater likelihood that other self-identities are absent (or not as important) outside of sport. As such, when faced with other non-athletic demands, such as academic expectations, these collegiate athletes are likely to experience increased conflict between the various roles they strive to balance (Lu et al., 2018). Additionally, if athletes are more focused on extrinsic forms of motivation that are rewarded in sport settings, they are inclined to report that being a student is not a central part of themselves (van Rens et al., 2019). Furthermore, research has found that athletes with a strong athletic identity have difficulty transitioning to life after sport (Smith & Hardin, 2020; Stokowski et al., 2019). This is critical to note, as only two percent of collegiate athletes play their sport professionally after college (NCAA, 2020), which means that the majority of athletes will transition from athlete to former player sooner rather than later.

It is possible that collegiate athletes may understand these implications at the metacognitive level as research on athletic identity highlights the fluidity of this concept. Miller and Kerr (2003) noted that collegiate athletes identified strongly as athletes at the beginning of their time in college, but this investment decreased and was replaced with greater attention to academics as they progressed through their program of study. Furthermore, van Rens and colleagues (2019) also demonstrated that academic identity was fluid and, based on demands experienced, changed throughout the year, perhaps in correlation with the academic calendar and athletic season. While acknowledgment of this information by collegiate athletes is useful for personal growth and development, it may have little to no impact on the outside perceptions that

are held towards collegiate athletes by others – especially for those who compete at the Division I level where athletic identity is likely to be more salient (Yukhymenko-Lescroart 2018).

Perceptions and Stereotypes of Collegiate Athletes

Merging the concepts of identity and perceptions of others irrevocably leads us to the possibility of stereotype threat. Steele and Aronson (1995) have operationalized the definition of stereotype threat as when “the immediate situational threat that derives from the broad dissemination of negative stereotypes about one’s group – the threat of possibly being judged and treated stereotypically, or of possibly self-fulfilling such a stereotype” (p. 798). In particular, when examining perceptions others hold of many collegiate athletes who compete at Division I i.e., the highest level of collegiate sport in the United States (U.S.), many athletes experience negative perceptions of their intelligence (see Comeaux et al., 2017). Additionally, athletes in “revenue” sports – where athletic departments produce income from tickets, merchandise, concessions, and parking sales – have consistently underperformed in the classroom when compared to non-revenue sports, as well as to the general student population (Haslerig, 2017). This underperformance has subsequently led faculty and the general student population to hold negative perceptions of athletes regarding their academic prowess (Knapp et al., 2001; Simons et al., 2007). In other words, they reinforce one’s athletic identity by devaluing one’s academic identity. Taken together, these patterns of thoughts and resulting behaviors can not only influence the identity of the individual (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019) but may also manifest into a type of stereotype threat, further stunting the academic identity formation and ability of athletes in the classroom.

Moreover, these consequences are more pronounced when individuals strongly identify with a group (Stone et al., 1999). Research in more than 300 studies has confirmed the effects of stereotype threat in multiple domains for athletes (Appel et al., 2011), including sports (Chalabaev et al., 2013). Blending the notions of identity and stereotype threat can create a level of anxiety for collegiate athletes who have a perceived level of inferior intelligence. This anxiety can become a self-fulfilling prophecy for collegiate athletes if their academic performance subsequently suffers.

It is documented that both male and female collegiate athletes can experience stereotype threat (Haslerig, 2017; Hermann & Vollmeyer, 2016; Paule & Gilson, 2010). Both genders are self-aware enough to perceive stereotype threat in the classroom, at least to a moderate degree (Feltz et al., 2013). Finally, while deeply rooted in cognitive tasks, the maladaptive consequences of stereotype threat can also bleed into the world of sport participation because the same labels that are assigned to individuals follow them and act as barriers to future opportunities (English & Kruger, 2020). For example, an athlete who internalizes the notion that they struggle to learn new concepts in the classroom can then have difficulty with new plays, schemes, and adjustments that must be made when participating in sport.

Re-calibrating one’s identity after a negative stereotype can be difficult for multiple reasons. First, since the origin of the threat emanates from outside the individual, the recipient has little to no control over the behaviors of others and can be subject to them on multiple iterations. Moreover, Schmader and Johns (2003) demonstrated that stereotypes reduce one’s

working memory capacity. This phenomenon thus produces a cyclical effect for collegiate athletes, as negative perceptions about their intellectual capabilities can be further reinforced when those capabilities are adversely affected by the very negative perceptions one experiences. One strategy that has shown promise against stereotype threat is the use of self-affirmation statements. For example, when faced with a cognitively challenging task, individuals who spent time reflecting on their most important valued characteristic eliminated the debilitating effects of stereotype threat when compared to the control group who performed no self-affirmation exercise (Martens et al., 2006). However, this is an acquired skill that must be directed towards the ideal identity one is cultivating; furthermore, it is honed outside of the environment where one experiences the threat before it can be applied and the benefits are experienced.

While the existence of negative stereotypes is not in doubt, understanding this principle in conjunction with collegiate athlete identities, especially within a specific sport, warrants future consideration. Comeaux and associates (2017) have noted that many of the aforementioned studies were conducted retrospectively where participants had to recall experiences, in some cases several years after attending the university. Moreover, English and Kruger (2020) have called for more work with collegiate athletes from revenue-generating collegiate sports, and much of the previous literature base reveals a void in examining the identities of athletes from the U.S. intercollegiate system (Ronkainen et al., 2016). By addressing these concerns, researchers and practitioners could gain new insights into how identities are influenced “in the moment” by stereotypes for collegiate athletes and implement strategies to benefit this population. Thus, it is clear that future research should employ methods to reveal perceptions and attitudes, how intersectional identities are developed, and how athletes cope with said identities in their daily life.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

Two guiding frameworks for the current work were to remember that all collegiate athletes' experiences are unique to them (Lu et al., 2018) and the investigation of academic and athletic identities should be conducted simultaneously, as collegiate athletes' identities do not exist in isolation (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018). As such, the purpose of this study was to examine the thoughts and feelings collegiate basketball players had about their athletic experience and how these perceptions impacted subsequent views participants held of themselves. By aligning with the charge from Nam et al. (2018), the present work employed the use of a purposeful, open-ended survey design that sought to explore how athletes' identities are formed, how they are influenced, and how those identities fit into the perceptions of the person on a daily basis.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, the majority of the studies that examine academic identity within collegiate sport examine athletes from Power 5 universities. Athletes from Group of Five or “mid-major” schools are often absent from literature that examines the athlete experience. However, this group of athletes makes up a large percentage of Division I athletes, and their experiences may be markedly different because of travel commitments, high-stakes pressure to perform, etc. (Paule-Koba et al., 2021). Understanding their experiences is crucial in order to fully meet the needs of all athletes who compete in high-level athletics and allow for coaches and administrators to enact policies that further support these individuals.

Method

Design and Instrumentation

A qualitative survey was created by the researchers to identify the thoughts and feelings collegiate basketball players had about their athletic experience. Groves and colleagues (2004) stated a qualitative survey is a “method for gathering information from (a sample of) entities for the purpose of constructing quantitative descriptors of the attributes of the larger population of which the entities are members” (p. 4). Additionally, Rubin and Rubin (1995) believed that using the qualitative survey was important and allowed the researchers to reveal the data utilizing the participant’s voices.

The qualitative survey that was used in this study was designed by the researchers after reviewing previous literature on athlete development and identity. The researchers constructed the qualitative survey to address the purpose of this study, which was an examination of the lived experiences of athletes at the collegiate level, how they viewed themselves, and how they perceived others viewed them. After the survey was developed, it was pilot tested on a group of athletes that were not a part of the study sample to ensure the questions were easily understood. The survey was also sent to a researcher who has examined athlete identity and was not involved in this study for feedback and to ensure that appropriate questions were being asked of participants that aligned with the purpose of this study (Creswell & Poth, 2013). Examples of questions that were on the survey included the following: If you were meeting an individual for the first time how would you introduce yourself and describe yourself?; What perceptions do you think people hold of you when they find out you are an athlete?; and, What is the one thing you wish people knew about you?

Participants

Participants for this study ($N=52$) were current men’s and women’s basketball players from Division I institutions in the Atlantic 10 (A10), American Athletic Conference (AAC), Mid-American Conference (MAC), Missouri Valley Conference (MVC), and the Mountain West Conference (MWC). Athletes from non-Power 5 conferences were selected because these athletes’ voices are often missing or overlooked in the literature. With so few basketball players outside of Power 5 conference schools who play their sport beyond college, it is important to understand their experiences and thoughts about being a collegiate athlete. A total of 52 athletes from 17 different universities were represented in this study.

There were 15 men and 37 women that completed the entire survey. The academic year breakdown was 21 first-year students, 10 sophomores, 10 juniors, nine seniors, one 5th-year senior, and one graduate student. The self-reported ethnic/racial backgrounds of the participants were 14 Black/African American, 34 White/Caucasian, and four multiracial. Finally, a majority of the athletes in this study ($n=46$) were on a full athletic scholarship, while six players were not on an athletic scholarship.

Procedures

Prior to data collection, the researchers gained Institutional Review Board approval. The researchers developed a database of the names and email addresses of men's and women's basketball players from institutions in the A10, AAC, MAC, MVC, and the MWC. Specifically, the researchers went to each school listed in the previously mentioned conferences to identify the names of the individual athletes on the basketball rosters. Each name was recorded in an Excel database. Next, the public directories for every university were used to find the email addresses of the basketball players. The completed database was comprised of 533 basketball players. Athletes were emailed directly to eliminate any potential influence from coaches or administrators regarding the athlete's responses to the questions in the study.

The qualitative survey was distributed to the 533 potential participants via email. Of the initial emails sent out, 27 emails failed and five bounced back, resulting in a total of 501 emails listed as sent. From the sent emails, 106 surveys were started (21.16% response rate) and 52 surveys were completed (10.38% completion rate). While the researchers desired a higher response rate, it is not uncommon for athletes, especially athletes in higher-profile sports such as basketball, to disregard emails requesting participation in research or not respond to emails from unknown senders. Additionally, while the response rate was lower than desired, it does not mean the results are skewed, inaccurate, or biased (Curtin et al., 2000; Groves, 2006; Keeter et al., 2000; Massey & Tourangeau, 2013; Peytchev, 2013).

Data Analysis

The qualitative surveys were read and coded independently by the authors. This was followed by coding as a research team until a complete agreement was reached (Saldana, 2015). An inductive analysis was utilized to reveal the athletes' experiences of being a collegiate athlete, their self-perceptions, and how they believed others perceived them. According to Thomas (2006), the "purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data" (p. 2). All open-ended responses were analyzed for different keywords and lower-order themes using the inductive method (Patton, 2014). Since participants provided direct responses to questions, researchers also worked to establish validity by placing emphasis on the perspectives held by participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). This allows for perspectives to be directly captured from the phrases participants use to communicate their experiences – and scaffolds nicely with an inductive approach. The process of identifying themes continued until all the lower-order themes (initial codes and subthemes) were combined to form four higher-order themes (the final themes).

Results

The purpose of this study was to identify the thoughts and feelings collegiate basketball players had about their athletic experience and how these perceptions impacted subsequent views participants held of themselves. Upon conclusion of the data analysis, four main themes emerged: *perceptions of self*, *how I think others view me*, *what I wish you knew about me*, and *if I had one wish*.

Perceptions of Self

Participants were prompted to respond to the question of how they would introduce themselves to someone they just met. The responses of the athletes were separated into two categories: those that focused on athletic identity and those that focused on attributes and characteristics participants believed they possessed.

Focus on Athletic Identity

This sub-theme was comprised of 31 participants who introduced themselves by giving their name, stating they were a collegiate athlete and the sport they played, the name of the college or university they attended, and/or their academic major or career aspiration. These responses varied in how much detail the athletes provided but each of the replies focused on the central identity of the individual as an athlete. A senior women's basketball player stated, "Hi, I'm [name of participant]. I go to [name of university] where I play on the women's basketball team, and I'm studying bioengineering."

A freshman men's basketball player had a similar way of introducing himself. He remarked, "My name is [name of participant] and I am a freshman at [name of university] who is a business major. I am also on the basketball team at [name of university]."

A junior on the women's basketball team introduced herself in a way that illustrated her understanding of when it was necessary to state she was an athlete. When she was asked how she introduces herself, she commented, "I would say 'Hi my name is [name of participant] and I'm on the women's basketball team' if I'm at school. If I'm not at school, I wouldn't say I'm on the women's basketball team."

Attributes and Characteristics

In contrast, 21 participants listed attributes or characteristics when introducing themselves. For example, a freshman women's basketball player introduced herself by saying she was a "very passionate and driven person. I chase success and when I don't achieve it, I feel down on myself."

Another women's basketball player focused on the characteristics of introducing oneself, as she mentioned it was important to

Emphasize a firm handshake with eye contact, try to come off personable, and attempt to show interest in who they are. I do not like to talk about sports right away because I believe that being a student-athlete does not define me.

When prompted, other participants gave brief statements to describe the characteristics or traits about themselves they use when introducing themselves to someone new. As such, it was common for these collegiate athletes to respond by including specific words or phrases such as "outgoing," "active, competitive, humble," "charming, intellectual, and focused," and "energetic and passionate."

How I Think Others View Me

The participants were then asked how they felt others viewed them after they learned of their athletic status. Participants were split on how they felt others viewed them. Specifically, some felt that being an athlete resulted in others having a negative impression of them, while others believed that being a collegiate athlete resulted in other people viewing them more positively.

Unintelligent or a Dumb Jock

Fourteen of the participants stated comments related to their belief that others view them as unintelligent or as dumb jocks. Several participants used the words “dumb,” “stupid,” and “less intelligent, yet popular.” A freshman men’s basketball player discussed that others think “I’m athletic and care more about sports than school. They probably think I don’t receive good grades.” These perceptions were counter to his perceptions about himself. He went on to state that “I value my schoolwork more than sports while in college.” Similarly, a women’s basketball player mentioned that to combat the negative perceptions others may have, she finds herself “trying to overcompensate to make sure they know academics are my priority, unlike [what] a lot of people think.”

A senior women’s basketball player perhaps summed it up best when she discussed her experience with others’ perceptions. She commented others see athletes at her school as “typical jocks who think they are better than everyone else.” She continued to explain that this may be due to the fact that the athletes “tend to stick together so I can understand where that might come from.” She went on to say that “other students also think we got into the school based on our athletic ability alone and not our academic ability, which is annoying.”

Entitled

In addition to feeling as if classmates and peers did not view them as intelligent, participants also felt others believed they were entitled. The participants stated that they thought others viewed them as “full of myself,” “everything is given to me,” or “because I’m on a scholarship, they probably think I’m cocky.”

Expanding upon these common phrases, a freshman women’s basketball player indicated the following:

A lot of people assume that I don’t take school seriously. They also assume that [athletes] get everything handed to us. I understand where they’re coming from because we do get a lot of benefits, but I don’t know if people know how much time athletes put in.

Another women’s basketball player who was a junior held strong beliefs that others viewed her in this same light. In particular, she explained how others think of her as, “not the smartest. That I get special treatment at school from professors or administrators.”

Respect

While these examples highlight negative perceptions that athletes believed others held of them, some athletes felt their peers valued sport participation. In particular, 24 of the participants believed that the perceptions others had about them were much more positive and that they were

a direct result of their participation in sport. The words that these participants gave when discussing others' beliefs included "hard-working," "dedicated," and "busy."

One freshman women's basketball player remarked, "People think that I must be super busy. I personally haven't felt any negative stereotypes. People usually think it's cool, just like if anyone was really involved in whatever they are passionate about."

A first-year men's basketball player corroborated this account through a similar experience. He stated, "Some are very impressed that you can be a full-time student and Division I athlete. They are also impressed by the ability they see to get to this level [of competition] while others might not be as loving."

What I Wish You Knew About Me

Participants were also asked to consider one aspect they wished more people knew about them. In contrast to previously phrased questions that yielded more dichotomous answers, this question presented each participant with an opportunity to expand into areas of their life to which they attached a great deal of significance. Responses varied greatly but all individuals highlighted character traits, intelligence, or aspirations for the future.

More Than Just My Sport

The most common responses that participants wished to convey when addressing this question were that they were more than just their athletic ability and they held interests outside of basketball. One participant stated that she enjoyed singing while another spoke about the importance of his faith. Several athletes conveyed other passions they had in addition to playing collegiate basketball. A female basketball player stated, "I wish people knew that I am more than just an athlete and that basketball does take a majority of my time, but I am also interested in fashion and photography." Another female player articulated, "I am very artsy. I like to have fun, but I also know when to take things seriously. I am a very determined person and I never give up in hard times."

A male basketball participant perhaps best summed up the responses from others when he mentioned, "I think many people, fans, limit me and my peers, labeling us as just 'athletes.' I wish everyone could see me for all that I am and not one thing that I did."

Just Like Others

Several athletes wanted to convey that they felt they were just normal people like everyone else who happened to be good at basketball. Some mentioned being easy to talk to, funny, or as one athlete aptly pointed out:

Just because I am tall and play basketball does not mean that I am intimidating and aggressive off the court. I get comments all the time that I look intimidating when I walk around, and I am honestly the least intimidating person alive.

Several others shared what they wished others knew about them, including a men's basketball player who commented, "I am a good person, I'm normal and make mistakes" and a women's

basketball player who astutely remarked, “I can relate to other things. I’m a normal person who just devotes a lot of their time to one thing.”

Finally, a female basketball player revealed the struggle she faces when it comes to interacting with others outside her sport: “It takes me a long time to get comfortable around people and spending more time with a person can help me gain confidence to be myself.” These comments from Division I athletes helped to humanize them and put aside the one-dimensional “athletic armor” to which many view their passions and accomplishments.

Kindness and Caring

Seven participants made statements that illustrated their desire for others to understand how caring and compassionate they were. One women’s basketball player stated she wished “people know how much I care about them.” Another female basketball player noted, “I’m very sensitive and love encouragement.” These comments transcended gender, as a male basketball player mentioned, “I love helping others.”

The notion of kindness and caring was also typified through remarks participants made about how improving themselves catalyzed them to help others. A freshman women’s basketball player stated, “I wish people knew I care and I’m trying my best in my own way.” Likewise, another women’s basketball player, a junior at her university, remarked, “I care a lot about those around me. I am a very selfless person and always looking to put others’ needs above my own.”

Academic Excellence

Six participants spoke about academics. One participant simply stated that he wanted people to know he was smart. Likewise, other participants made a point to discuss how seriously they were taking their academics. One women’s basketball player stated, “Student really does come first for me.” Similarly, a women’s basketball player mentioned she wished others would recognize her academic pursuits and, “That I have a legitimate chance of becoming a doctor.”

Expanding upon these comments from participants, one men’s basketball player wanted people to know he prioritized academics and provided evidence to support this assertion. He discussed that in addition to being a member of the basketball team he was “someone who is deeply invested and interested in being a great student. So much so that it has driven me become a finance major in the [name] school of business and enter the undergraduate honors program.”

If I Had One Wish...

When discussing their experiences and thoughts about being a collegiate athlete, the participants all explained their plans for the future. These plans and wishes included big-picture life plans, sport-specific topics, discussions involving health, and their desire to be back around others during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Big Picture

To several athletes, their future seemed nebulous and they focused on “big picture” goals. For instance, athletes wished for security or even more clarity into what the future held for them. One female basketball player wished “to get into medical school.” Another quite simply wished for “a job.”

A freshman women’s basketball player desired that she:

Could have a better understanding of what I want to do after basketball. Right now, it is consuming a lot of my time and energy. I am focusing on the present season and semester in school and not on my goals once it is over.

Embedded within these big-picture comments was the desire to find a clear path forward for one’s life. As an example, one women’s basketball player wished she had a “direction for the future.” Similarly, a senior basketball player reflecting on what her career had meant to her commented, “My basketball career actually just came to an end not too long ago and now I am in the phase of trying to find a new identity. I wish I knew what that was.”

Success

Many athletes wished for future success. Some athletes were unable to be specific in which areas of their life they wanted success. For instance, a women’s basketball player simply wished “to be successful.” In contrast, a men’s basketball player’s wish was more detailed as he stated, “to be successful at this level academically and athletically and make my family and those who care about me proud.”

As expected, athletes also mentioned wishing to perform well in their sport. A women’s basketball player wished to “continue to work hard on the court and have positive outcomes for myself and the team.” Another women’s basketball player wanted to not only do well while in college, but also turn that success into a professional career in basketball. She remarked she wanted to “play professionally overseas after this season and then come back and become a coach.”

Connection

Sixteen athletes had wishes for the future that related to feeling more connected to someone or some purpose in their life. Two of these athletes mentioned feeling more connected in their faith. One stated wanting to know God better and another articulated her wish was for “God’s protection and success.”

This study occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in many athletes reporting their wish for a life that involved other people. One athlete wanted “to be able to see my family,” while another athlete stated she wished she was “not in quarantine.” Additionally, one women’s basketball player expressed the desire to “go back to seeing my teammates, coaches, and friends. It is hard being away from them this long during quarantine.” Most succinctly, another women’s basketball player simply remarked she wished for “the end of COVID-19.”

Other participants in this study also discussed wanting to find more enjoyment in their life. These athletes discussed wanting their future to be filled with “happiness,” “peace,” and “to enjoy daily life.” One men’s basketball player aspired “to be closer to my family and my loved ones.” Another men’s basketball player said, “I hope I’m doing what makes me happiest.”

Rest and Health

The last area that participants discussed when asked about their future involved the desire to be healthy, pain-free/uninjured, and more energetic.

A women’s basketball player said she wanted to “always just [be] healthy, and that all my loved ones are safe.” Another women’s basketball player mentioned, “I wish I was healthy.” For those participants who referenced recovery from injury, responses were specific to each individual’s situation. For example, one women’s basketball player wished “to come back 100% from my injury” while another women’s basketball player desired to reach a point where there would be “no pain in my Achilles.”

Finally, three athletes mentioned wanting to find “more time” because they were always busy between their sport and academic commitments. In addition to more time, one athlete stated she wished that she “was less tired all the time.” However, this women’s basketball player continued, “I think it just comes with the college life.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the thoughts and feelings collegiate basketball players had about their athletic experience and how these perceptions impacted subsequent views participants held of themselves. Through analysis of the participant’s responses, it became clear that the majority of the athletes held multiple identities of themselves, both within and outside of sport. This is important because collegiate athletes who have a high athletic identity – and have that identity reinforced – may experience a greater likelihood that other self-identities are absent outside of sport (Lu et al., 2018; Rubin & Moses, 2017). Most of the athletes in this study did not view themselves as just basketball players. Instead, they described themselves in terms of personal characteristics, attributes they believed they possessed, and academic major/career aspirations. This is a novel finding because many oft-cited studies in the past (see Sturm et al., 2011; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018) have explored identity as a binary construct where athletes can be a combination of high or low athletic and academic identity. But these works have left little space to consider other forms of identity that participants described in this study. For instance, participants discussed identities that were based on hobbies, e.g., creating art, or more career-focused, e.g., entering the medical profession. It is this holistic approach to oneself that may serve to benefit these individuals during their college experience and after their formal participation as an athlete has concluded. Specifically, many institutions have offices dedicated to student-athletes and their development as a person. Taking time to understand how each athlete views herself, as well as how those views evolve, would likely lead to a better collegiate experience for the individual.

These findings further illustrate the need to encourage athletes to pursue other interests and give them the time to engage in these pursuits. Developing identities and interests outside of sport is crucial for athletes to adapt to life beyond athletics (Stokowski et al., 2019). As research has shown, athletes with a high athletic identity have a harder time transitioning to post-athletic life (Smith & Hardin, 2020; Stokowski et al., 2019). In contrast, the athletes who have been able to develop other passions and their academic identity, and who ultimately have a lower athletic identity, are able to transition to post-athletic life more seamlessly because they are prepared for entering graduate school or a career (Moiseichik et al., 2019; Stokowski et al., 2019). Moreover, it was the fact that this preparation was due to the focus on academics, internships, and career development in addition to their sport participation. This suggestion could be implemented in many ways and one tangible idea is to foster this exploration through teammates. Coaches could facilitate opportunities to engage in activities, meals, etc., that are important to each member of the team – thereby valuing the identity of the person sharing while also broadening the horizons of others.

While the participants saw themselves as more than an athlete due to their other interests and identities, they did not feel that others saw them in the same light. They felt that some classmates and faculty viewed them as less intelligent or entitled, which is consistent with what previous research has found surrounding stereotype threat (Feltz et al., 2013; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Stone et al., 1999). To combat this perception that others may have, athletic departments need to highlight and promote athletes' successes off the court in the same way they promote athletic success and honors. Seeing these athletes in a positive and multifaceted manner off the court will not only reduce the stereotypes and preconceptions that others may have about the athlete but will also lessen the athlete's athletic identity. In turn, the athlete and others will see additional aspects of their life getting attention, which may increase other aspects of identity for the athlete.

As aforementioned, athletes may find relief from the consequences of stereotype threat by employing self-affirmation and reframing the event in question (Martens et al., 2006). As many athletes aptly commented in this study, participation in college athletics requires a great deal of time, dedication, and passion – much like any activity one pursues to gain mastery. Therefore, if mechanisms are absent at a university to counteract the effects of stereotype threat, athletes should proactively employ their own strategies to reinforce their strengths, support the notion that abilities are malleable through effort, and allow for poor performance – so there are no long-term effects on perceptions of ability. Taken together, these strategies provide autonomy to the individual in charting their own course to manage stereotype threat, which must be specific to the needs of each population (English & Kruger, 2020).

At the institutional level, one way to mitigate the negative ramifications experienced from stereotype threat is to allow athletes to choose academic majors that align with their career aspirations. Several athletes in this study discussed being highly focused and academic-oriented. In particular, one participant discussed aspiring to be a doctor while another mentioned being a finance major and in the honors college. If athletes are free to pursue majors that are interesting to them and align with career aspirations, it increases the likelihood that they develop their academic identity and career maturity. Furthermore, they would perhaps be more likely to seek out internships and networking opportunities with those in the field they want to enter because

they see the direct value in those paths (Moiseichik et al., 2019; Stokowski et al., 2019; Turick et al., 2019). This suggestion, while not necessarily new, deserves to be revisited in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the past, some degree paths were structured to only deliver courses in a face-to-face modality. Now that it is known that any major can be studied remotely or using a hybrid model.

A surprising finding from the data in the current study centered around athletes' desire to connect with others. This was highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic when, beginning in 2020, athletes were sent home and told to socially isolate and/or self-quarantine. We found that athletes with a higher athletic identity had a harder time in this unforeseen transition due to their inability to be with their social support system of teammates and coaches. Those with interests outside of their sport, including academics, felt their transition was a little easier and they were able to "get the hang of online classes."

Practical Implications

Through the words of the participants, this study provides athlete development specialists with specific implications that can be implemented to enhance the experience of the athletes at their universities. These significant findings can serve as a foundation when discussing the support systems in place for collegiate athletes at this level. First, a majority of the athletes in this study saw themselves as more than just an athlete. Thus, athlete development specialists could provide programming for the athletes that helps develop those multiple identities and interests. This programming should also take note to exist in spaces outside of traditional athletic facilities and/or in settings where athletes would dress and be identified for their sport accomplishments. For instance, finding ways that athletes can participate with their academic peers in job fairs and professional development opportunities will not only assist them in becoming more well-rounded humans but also aid in their positive transition to post-athletic life.

In addition, as the COVID-19 pandemic revealed, college athletes must have a constant support system, e.g., family, friends, and institutional support that is broader than just teammates and coaches. To do this, athletic departments need to create programming for athletes that allows them to explore and develop different identities, academic majors, and areas of interest. This could be done through workshops and practical learning experiences, such as job shadowing, internships, or mentoring programs that allow athletes the opportunity to connect with others who have progressed to the next phase of their lives post-collegiate sport. Through effective programming, collegiate athletes will begin to find additional identities outside of their sport/athleticism and to see their self-worth independent of sport. We view this as an important next step in this line of research and encourage future researchers to take up this call.

There are also implications for athletic administrators. The most obvious suggestion is for administrators to support their athletic development specialists with the resources necessary to create programming to help athletes cultivate their whole selves. Specifically, athletic departments and the NCAA tout the term "student-athlete." If this is actually the case, then more resources need to go toward creating opportunities for the athletes to explore academic major-specific opportunities, participate in study abroad trips, and engage in co-curricular activities. Currently, it can be nearly impossible for athletes, specifically those who compete in

sports that occur across the fall and spring semesters, to take advantage of these types of programs. Thus, if assimilation is not feasible, the athletic department should consider creating these opportunities for their athletes and inviting traditional students to participate so that athletes are not further isolated from their academic peers.

Finally, athletic administrators need to highlight the great achievements of athletes that occur off the court so that those outside of sport further understand the multiple identities and roles these individuals ascribe to. In particular, for others to see athletes as more than just an athlete, they need to be aware of what these young people participate in outside of basketball. Sports information departments regularly alert outsiders to athletes who win conference honors, but equal recognition needs to be given to those who excel in other areas of their life, such as academics and community service. Athletic directors should make this a priority within their athletic departments so coaches, faculty, students, and fans will start seeing athletes as more than just their academic achievements and performance.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

There were several limitations identified in this study. First, this study focused solely on male and female collegiate basketball players from Group of Five or “Mid-Major” schools. While this filled a gap in the literature, there may have been important information provided by athletes in other conferences. Thus, future research should extend this work to examine the experiences of Group of Five athletes in a wide variety of sports, as their experiences could corroborate or further inform the literature in this area.

Another limitation was that the COVID-19 pandemic emerged while this study was underway. This may have limited participation from athletes who were overwhelmed with their sport being abruptly canceled, moving back in with family, and attending class remotely. While there was no way to predict the pandemic – or how individual participants reacted to the restrictions this event imposed upon them – future research could examine the effect the pandemic had on athletes’ experience and self-perceptions. Essentially, these athletes were forced to break from their sport; thus, it would be interesting to see if this altered how the athletes viewed themselves and if it had an impact on their athletic identity.

Conclusion

Key conclusions can be drawn based on the results of this study on collegiate basketball players’ athletic experiences and how these perceptions impacted subsequent views participants held of themselves. The majority of the participants viewed themselves as more than just basketball players or athletes. This reinforces previous literature that has argued that athletes should be allowed to develop their whole selves and not just their athletic identity (Coffin et al., 2021; Navarro et al., 2020). This development is not only helpful for their collegiate experience but for the transition to life after sport as well (Smith & Hardin, 2018; Stokowski et al., 2019).

Secondly, the identities of individuals are complex and fluid by nature. The results of this study further highlight the multidimensional nature of participating in college athletics. In other words, an “ideal” identity profile that one wishes to cultivate is not something that can be

achieved and left unguarded without continuous monitoring. Moreover, athletes in this study should be exalted for recognizing how the bidirectional affect perceptions of identity can influence self and others. As several individuals noted, a self-perceived causal effect between their behaviors and others' perceptions of them may have had a self-fulfilling prophecy for future behaviors and actions. While we echo the call that future research is needed to understand how identities operate with this specific population subset (van Rens et al., 2019; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018), what is clear is that collegiate athletes are in continuous need of opportunities to cultivate identities outside of sport so that they are best positioned for life after these activities (Stokowski et al., 2019).

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