

The Connection Between Athletics, Mental Health, and Academics

DeJuan Crumbles

Mrs. Backstrom

Senior Seminar Humanities

The Connection Between Athletics, Mental Health, and Academics

A student-athlete coming in the freshman year of college at Saint Francis University. During high school, he only focused on his favorite sport, soccer. He could do this during high school because he was treated specially, given good grades, and didn't have to try. Coming into college, he struggled because this was no longer the case. He failed his first semester, and his coach told him he would lose his scholarship if he didn't fix it next term. He realized he needed to focus and try harder in his classes to keep pursuing his dream of playing soccer in college. After his classes, he talked to each of his professors, expressing that he was ready to change and improve his relationship with them. After each of his classes, he had practice, and at the end, he correctly apologized to his coaches for his lack of responsibility and promised to work harder and notify them if they needed help. This story exemplifies the importance of the connection between athletics, mental health, and academics.

Challenges Faced by Student-Athletes

Academic and Athletic Balance

According to Wayne Gretzky, having a proper mindset as a student-athlete who connects to everything is essential, starting with how it connects to the athletic side. I learned from the mental game clinic that you will underperform if you don't have a good mindset. Focusing on the wrong things will force you to overthink the moment you need to have the most focus. When I had a lot on my mind, I performed in the worst race of my entire life. Connecting this to the student side requires a very focused mindset. If you don't, you will get bad grades and be ineligible to participate in your sport. In Sato Shintaro's project, he shows us that if you think you don't ever have to ask for help as a student, you will always perform at a mid-student level. Each teacher has different goals and expectations. That is why you must keep it in your head to talk to

each of your teachers (Tumbarello).

Getting a higher level of education, in general, is a struggle and a hard path. Steele Andrea explained in her source that some paths are known to be more complicated than others, depending on your chosen path. Being a student-athlete, you have to deal with one of the most challenging paths, but struggling in sports and academics is a part of the process. I always appreciate my life hardships because I know they make me stronger. For example, I struggle and want to quit track and field every day after practice. I view training as the worst pain to ever happen to me in my entire life. Sometimes, I study every day for the whole week, and I still don't do well on a test. But I try my hardest to succeed in part of the process to achieve success. You can't complain that you never win if you don't get the desired result when you are scared of failing or allow the fear of failure to stop you from succeeding. Allow yourself to fail so you can be blessed by winning and succeeding even harder.

One of my favorite stories of a student-athlete is the story of Ja Morant. He was a kid who lived in a good neighborhood and went to a private school, but he loved basketball. Even though he was one of the best players in the entire country, he got no attention. He ended up graduating from high school with no offers and no chances. He decided to go to a college chance camp; even though he played terrific, he was sent to the worst sections of players, and while he was playing a pickup game, a coach that walked past to get a drink from a vending machine had a chance to view and see his talent, ending up giving the young Ja Morant a full scholarship and a chance to shine in college. Ja Morant went on to have an insane college first year and got drafted into the NBA, being one of the faces of new-gen NBA players and an NBA superstar. A famous quote from Ja Morant is when he said, *"Whoever I'm going against, put on their shoes the same way I do. There is nothing I should be afraid of"* (Stanizzi).

To succeed as a student-athlete, you must communicate with people constantly, from coaches, teachers, friends, and family. As an athlete, I have to talk to my teacher whenever I miss class to catch up, whether I've been sick or had a track meet on the day of class. I must communicate well with my coaches to help them understand if I struggle in classes or feel injured. People will not help you if you don't help yourself. This doesn't mean the people you communicate with don't care about you; they just can't help you if you don't help yourself. Taking the steps to get help when needed is essential. If you don't communicate when you need help, you will fail because you can't do everything alone. When you don't speak, you make it harder to win and achieve your goals. Once you find yourself able to ask for help, life gets easier. Allowing the people who want you to succeed to help you will make life easier.. Most people will try to work with you to help you overcome the problem, not just let you fail. But leaving them in the dark will make them not care. Living allows people to help you take hard things off your back—not all of them, but some (Safari).

Putting academics before athletics is the most essential part of being athletic. Many great athletes do not get a chance to shine due to academics. It's crucial to beat the stereotype that athletes are not intelligent. Without academics, we can not open doors for our athletes to shine (“Student Athlete Stereotypes”). Pushing aside academics makes the athletic journey more difficult. Most athletes coming into the freshman year of college underperform. That is why athletes should not focus on their performance in their sport in their first year. Instead, the athlete should spend their first year getting used to not being home and their newfound responsibilities. College athletics is a slow-growing process that you can't rush. As long as you do what you need, the goals you want will come to you (Haime).

To play any sport in the NCAA, you have to be eligible. This means you can't fail all

your classes and think you can just lock in college, because if you don't do well now, you will never get the chance to play entirely. The minimum GPA to play sports in college is a 2.2 for D2 and a 2.3 for D1. One thing about this GPA weighting is that it is essential to know that it only weighs your main classes to calculate your GPA. You must go to the website and create an account, then tell your school advisor to send your transcript to the NCAA eligibility center before you can go to college. You must also understand the NCAA rules. You can only play sports in college for a max of 4 years. These years do not count if you enter the NAIA or JUCO route (NCSA).

Mental health is a core factor in success and can be one of the most significant factors in a student athlete's failure. Many people, particularly young men, attempt to ignore and overcome mental health issues when necessary. It is that, as a young man in college, you learn that it is okay to feel away, but you must understand your feelings and not just ignore them. Ignoring problems you face will continuously build and create a bigger problem in the future. However, growing up and learning how to deal with issues you face is a big part of growing up and learning in college, according to a research study by *Frontiers* (Shintaro Sato), who studied the student-athlete well-being framework. The author used four well-being dimensions to capture athlete growth: physical, hedonic, psychological, and social well-being. To assess the information and framework, the data. We must understand how she measured the emotional and physical aspects of a student athlete to discuss Shina's study. Using the SAWBF of four empirically assessed multidimensional well-being scales, selecting reliable scales and items was imperative. The study results showed me how all categories dropped in their first year. But after their first year, there was consistent growth. This study showed me the slow growth as a student-athlete and how the struggle that comes with the huge responsibility can mess up a person's well-

being, trying to survive during college.

The scale I want to talk about first is athletics, which, being the lowest scale, starting in the negative, is physical performance, starting at -0.10 and only at the end reaching a positive 0.75. This shows that, for the most part, sports are just a path to college, and I shouldn't base my happiness around it. Sports being so inconsistent can make an unstable balance in a person's core balance and beliefs/values. Even so, I liked that the athlete slowly grew and got a better performance. This shows me the slow process of improving in college sports. The following physical stat was physical well-being. These stats slowly went lower. This happens because the athletes can be overworked, and it is hard for most to adapt to the intense content training. The statistics that interested me the most were the mental stats, especially virtue and helping people, which started very low. But as time passed and they got themselves together, they learned to try to help others who were in the same situation that they were in. As each student-athlete got used to college, their mental stats increased. This showed me to take my time, be patient, allow myself to get used to the college scene slowly, and try not to stress myself out or overwork myself.

Identity beyond sports

A meaningful subject that I would like to learn, even as a student-athlete, is the importance of not putting my entire identity in the fact that I'm above average at a sport. Coming into the 11th-grade year, I put all my focus into my athletic performance, but it was optimistic. I then became cocky; I started to feel like I was better than other people around me who didn't do sports. I kept this mindset until some bad choices were made, and I couldn't practice because of eligibility. This caused my athletic performance to drop seriously. The drop in something I surrendered my entire life to messed with my mental health very severely. I started to feel like I wasn't doing well in my sport, then what am I to the world? I taught myself that my athletic

ability was my only value and uniqueness. According to thementalgame.com, all competitive athletes seek a constant edge over all their opponents. Involving physical training and practice of technical skills is a very critical component to having a successful athletic career.

However, a very underrated role is the mindset of an athlete. Physical resilience and a positive mental attitude can dramatically influence an athlete's performance and longevity in their sport. This site dives into how the mindset of an athlete can improve athletic success and offers strategies for a winning mental framework. The site gave us 7 steps of growing mental health as a student athlete, the first being growth vs fixed mindset. Research by a psychologist, Carol Dweck, has introduced the concept of growth and fixed mindsets, pivotal in understanding an athlete's performance in their sport. A growth mindset believes that abilities can be developed by dedication and hard work. This view creates a love of learning and resilience, essential for great accomplishment.

A fixed mindset assumes that abilities are static, which can hinder progress and prevent resilience. The next one is mental toughness and building resilience. Mental toughness is often fought for by athletes looking to enhance their resilience and ability to cope with the complex challenges of their sport, like in training and competition. It involves maintaining focus and keeping confidence despite the setbacks and hills you might face during high-stakes moments. That's why developing mental toughness is about enhancing an athlete's capacity to remain determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure. This trait is not just innate; it can be honed through systematic mental training and exposure to challenging situations, and learning effective coping strategies.

The following subject is the role of self-talk. Saying that athletes with a growth mindset engage in positive self-talk which reinforces their confidence and ability to handle pressure

this form of self talk n personal dialogue influences people's training, competition, and recovery, research indicates that positive self talk is linked to improved performance, suggesting its a important component to an athletes mental toolkit. It then digs into the 4 steps of strategies we can take to enhance an athletic mindset. First, one way to set realistic goals. Informing us that goal setting is a fundamental aspect of sports psychology, effective goal setting strategies enable an athlete to help maintain focus and motivate them throughout their training and regimes. It is said to be essential for athletes to set smart (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) goals to track their progress and maintain drive and confidence. The next step is visualization techniques, informing us that visuospatial or mental imagery enhances the mental aspect of training by creating critical sensory experiences. For example, athletes imagine achieving their goals here. By using visualization techniques like guided imagery, meditation can improve concentration, increase mental focus, and manage anxiety levels during crucial moments of performance.

The next step is to embrace challenges. Athletes with a growth mindset thrive on challenges. Viewing challenges as a chance to improve rather than an obstacle in their way is fundamental in sports, encouraging athletes to embrace rather than avoid difficult situations, which can foster resilience and a more persistent work ethic. The next step is continuous learning; the pursuit of mastery is never-ending, and people who perform at the highest levels know that there is always room for improvement. They seek feedback, learn from failures, and continuously push the boundaries of their capabilities. This relentless pursuit will lead to a much better performance and ensure constant personal and professional growth.

As a student athlete, it is essential to ask for help when it is needed, and you should not be afraid to seek it. A source by Audrey Thumbarello talks about his story as an athlete.

Beginning with how he wakes up at 4:30 am for weight lifting then having to leave hour long classes straight into a 5 hour practice barely giving himself the time to eat and sleep feeling like he is not able to keep up with the increasing pressure college sports was putting on him forcing his mental health to slowly decrease even though he was going through so much when someone ask him how he was doing he always told them that he was fine knowing that he wasn't. Ever since he started sports, everyone around him said he had to push through the mental and physical challenges. Feeling like nothing but obstacles and competitiveness is what surrounded him; even so, he slowly climbed the ranks in softball; his depression, anxiety, and eating disorder slowly got worse. The part he felt was the worst was that fact that he knew he wasn't alone, being told almost every day that it is okay not to be OK, but feeling like nothing around him but him, felt like that was true, gave him a rough college experience.

Being an athlete, if you accept your real mental issues, you are seen as a joke and pathetic, which can affect your playing time because the coach might view you as not ready to compete on the field. And suppose you leave your sport because of your mental health. In that case, he says you get viewed as a weakling and a wuss if you admit your mental illness, you are no longer seen as mentally tough which can affect not only your teammates' views on you but your coach's perspective of you and even the general public as a student athlete in college you are viewed more because you have fans that watch you. After all, you are good at what you do, forcing eyes are glued on you being idealized, but vulnerability in college sports is nonexistent, and after a global pandemic and decreasing athletic mental health, we need to force a change in how student-athletes' health is valued.

An important example of student athletes' struggle is seen through the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Duke's sports and race project in 2022¹ famous USA

gymnast, Simone Biles, chose to stand against everything and tell the world that she would not compete in the Tokyo Olympic Games because of her giant decrease in her mental health, surprising me and many other Olympic lovers around the entire world. People of the USA were furious that she would do this, saying she should at least see it through until the end. Her exact words being “I have to conserve my mental health and not jeopardize my health and wellbeing.” This showed me, as a fellow athlete, the true unseen effect that COVID-19 had on the people. Even people so idealized like Simone Biles, who I viewed as a successful athlete, go through struggles while doing amazing in her sport, it didn't make sense to me how someone whose shoes I wish I were in could have been more unhappy than I.

I believe Simone Biles' openness changed me and the rest of the world's perspective on athletes around the world. Just because someone might be doing something I wish I couldn't doesn't mean they don't still go through problems or live the perfect lives that we see through their sports performance. It is more challenging to be a college student than a pro athlete because they are still responsible for maintaining their normal life as a college student. According to Duke, 33% of athletes experience mental health struggles, such as depression, anxiety, or eating disorders. Only 10% of the athletes who need help seek the help that is needed. One of the football players at Duke said that the mental health of he or his teammates was never a priority, and when the staff attempted to address it, it was never effective. They offered the team a team psychiatrist to join on a Zoom call at any time whenever they needed anything, if they had any problems, but even though they had this, no team member would ever say a word and never used the chance they had. The athlete said there were many times when he knew some of his teammates were having issues or didn't feel their best, but he never said anything, so they still always performed at their best, no matter what.

Life as a student athlete is commonly not completely understood by people who aren't on the team or know the person personally. They only see winning games, broken records, receiving college offers, and living the dream with the perfect life. That's the face of the book; what people don't see is the overwhelming struggles that student athletes have to involve themselves in, always under pressure, barely having free time, and having to maintain multiple different lives. This paper explains the connection between relationships, athletics, and mental health. The ways student athletes struggle to balance all three of these to persevere and be successful.

In my personal experience, I learned how important it is to not just focus on myself as an athlete but also on my mental state and my academic life. It is hard to destroy your body during practice every day, then perform badly during a race, then, after struggling with that, go home and have to study for a test I haven't thought about all week. No matter how hard I tried, the results I wanted in school and athletics always fell short. All of these issues made me feel as if no matter how hard I worked, I would never be good enough at anything I would do. I felt like I didn't belong in the sports and academic fields. Over time, fighting and learning during these struggles, I rose and began seeing successes, helping me understand that those times were not to hurt me but to give me a stepping stone to climb as high as I am now. I now understand that the struggles make me into the young man and student athlete I am today.

After rising from my struggles, I finally understood the importance of mental health. Mental health is not something I can ignore forever; it's something that I must prioritize when it gets low and is ruined. As a student athlete, it is easy to let others around you make you think it is unimportant, but it is a core component of true success. Fighting through a world that tells you to let things go, keep pushing, making it hard to say I'm not okay even when you have people who want to help you.

Learning that mental health is important, you have to understand what you must set your core on to protect your mental health. It has to be very strong so that it cannot be easily broken down. That's why I converted my main character from an athlete to having multiple cores, keeping me strong, like academic relationships, athletics, and, most importantly, God. Ultimately the connection between athletics, academics, and mental health is not just an idea i came up with it is the saving clause that provides athletes across the entire world including myself with a platform for them to follow to allow them to successfully understand there struggle get multiple pathways to survive the struggle and rise over to become amazing people that can conquer anything thrown at them. College is a tough place to be, which throws challenges at all people in the world, even those who don't participate in sports. Being a senior going into college, it's nice to use research to build a platform for myself to use when coming into college.

Finally, being a student athlete is not easy at all, but it's worth the pain because fighting through so many struggles will allow you to grow as a person in a way others might not. By embracing your connection between athletics, academics, and mental health, you can create a platform for the future to face all the problems you may face in life, truly allow yourself to be the most successful person that you can be, and also allow support from everyone in your life.

Works Cited

- Banwell, Jenessa, and Gretchen Kerr. "Coaches' Perspectives on Their Roles in Facilitating the Personal Development of Student-Athletes." *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 46, no. 1, 13 Apr. 2016, pp. 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v46i1.185109>.
- Durrant, C. "Usain Bolt Talks Overcoming Mental Stress as an Elite Athlete." *The Edge FM*, 16 Dec. 2021, <https://edge105.com/usain-bolt-talks-overcoming-mental-stress-as-an-elite-athlete/>.
- Haime, John. "What's Next? A Perspective of Athlete Identity." *Player Development Project*, 18 Feb. 2019, <https://playerdevelopmentproject.com/whats-next-a-perspective-of-athlete-identity/>.
- Marley, N. "The Relationship between Mindset and Athletic Success." *The Mental Game Clinic*, 8 Sept. 2024, <https://thementalgame.me/blog/the-relationship-between-mindset-and-athletic-success#:~:text=While%20physical%20training%20and%20technical,performance%20and%20overall%20career%20longevity>.
- NCSA. "NCAA GPA Requirements | What GPA Do You Need to Be Eligible?" *NCSA Sports*, <https://www.ncsasports.org/ncaa-eligibility-center/gpa-requirements>. Accessed 26 Sept. 2024.
- Safari, Aryanna. "College Track and Field Survival Guide: College Freshman Edition." *Streamline Athletes*, 3 June 2022, <https://blog.streamlineathletes.com/college-track-field-survivatl-guide/>. Accessed 26 Sept. 2024.
- Sato, Shintaro, et al. "Student Athlete Well-being Framework: An Empirical Examination of

- Elite College Student Athletes.” *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 14, June 2023, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1171309>.
- Steele, Andrea, et al. “A Systematic Literature Review on the Academic and Athletic Identity of Student-Athletes.” *Journal of Intercollegiate Sports*, vol. 13, no. 1, 8 Sept. 2020, pp. 69–92, <https://doi.org/10.17161/jis.v13i1.13502>.
- Tumbarello, A. “Struggling Student-Athletes, It’s Okay to Seek Help.” *The Daily Free Press*, 6 Apr. 2022, <https://dailyfreepress.com/2022/04/06/struggling-student-athletes-its-okay-to-seek-help/>.
- “*The Unseen Struggles of Being a Student Athlete.*” *Black In Blue*, <https://blackinblue.trinity.duke.edu/unseen-struggles-being-student-athlete-0>. Accessed 26 Sept. 2024.
- Athlete mindset: Wayne Gretzky’s on the athlete mindset - 2025*. MasterClass. (n.d.). <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/athlete-mindset>
- Stanizzi, Joey. “Ja Morant: The Ultimate Underdog Story in the NBA.” *The Underdog Brand*, 16 Sept. 2024, udenergy.shop/blogs/champions-of-adversity/ja-morant-the-ultimate-underdog-story-in-the-nba.
- “Student Athlete Stereotypes.” *Student Athlete Stereotypes*, 19 Apr. 2018, studentathletestereotypes.wordpress.com/.