

**An Investigation into How the Intense Nature of Youth Sport Participation Influences Women's Collegiate Basketball Player's Experiences of Burnout**

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Burnout is one area of athlete well-being garnering increasing attention (Weinberg & Gould, 2019). Burnout can cause athletes to become disempowered in their sport participation leading to fatigue and dropout; therefore, efforts to reduce athletes' likelihood of experiencing burnout are important. Often overlooked in the college athlete literature are the experiences of college athletes' youth sport experience, even though almost all college athletes participate in competitive youth sport. Guided by the conceptual framing of burnout (Coakley, 1992; Raedeke & Smith, 2001) and Côté and Vierimaa's (2014) developmental model of sport participation, the study sought to explore the youth sport experience of current and former college athletes to understand how youth sport experiences of burnout influenced their experiences of burnout at the collegiate level. Findings from eleven semi-structured interviews suggest youth sport experiences impact athletes' experiences of burnout at the collegiate level, although the excitement surrounding athletes' transition to college often represses burnout. Implications for athletic department administrators, as well as youth sport providers for addressing burnout are introduced.

College athletes' entrance into sport does not happen concurrently with the start of their college sport careers. Rather, college athletes arrive on campus having already dedicated years to developing the requisite athletic skills for competing at the collegiate level through deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993). In fact, college athletes' youth sport participation tends to last longer than their collegiate careers.

Organized youth sport programming in the United States both in and out of the school setting is available to youth participants younger than six through to age 18 (Green & Horne, 2022). Although the appropriate age for initial sport participation differs according to sport (Smith et al., 1990), some collegiate athletes have likely competed at the youth sport level for over ten years prior to entering college sport. But when we study college athletes' sport experiences, we often overlook their years as youth athletes (e.g., Melendez, 2006; Merkel, 2013). As the collegiate athlete experience remains a relatively new area of research, this oversight is perhaps not surprising. With only a handful of studies examining college athletes' experiences accounting for the youth sport experience (e.g., Chou et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2017), and to further our understanding of college sport experiences, it is important to examine the effect of the intense nature of youth sport development systems.

Collegiate athletics is a highly professionalized sport setting. Although ostensibly an amateur setting, college athletes spend extensive amounts of their time in college in the sport environment (Foo et

al., 2021). Training regimens of collegiate athletes mimic those of professional athletes. This is also true of many competitive youth sport settings. According to Gould (2019), the allure of earning a scholarship and participating at elite sport levels has both commercialized and professionalized youth sport, creating a youth sport industry worth an estimated \$15 billion (Gregory, 2017) in the United States alone. The development of a \$15 billion industry has been led, in part, by parents' pursuit of a college scholarship for their children (Myer et al., 2015). Consequentially, parents are increasingly enrolling their children in expensive youth sport development programs (Baxter-Jones & Maffuli, 2003; Horne et al., 2022), thus creating a youth sport landscape with the intensity of collegiate and professional settings.

The race to earn athletic scholarships has led to youth athletes and their parents seeking competitive advantages. One such competitive advantage is early specialization, whereby an athlete engages in year-round participation in one or two sports at an earlier age than recommended to allow for more time and opportunity to develop an elite skillset (Côté & Vierimaa, 2014). What was once deemed an advantage, however, is being normalized as youth athletes are increasingly engaging in early youth sport participation (McKay et al., 2019). This has consequences. Intense, prolonged focus on one or two sports puts athletes at greater risk of overuse injuries (DiFiori et al., 2014), burnout (Vitali et al., 2014), dropout (Myer, 2015), and the development of a unidimensional identity (Coakley, 1992). Although attrition rates in

youth sport are a cause for concern (Balish et al., 2014), hundreds of thousands of athletes do not drop out and advance to the collegiate level (NCAA, 2022). Of those advancing, it is likely some do suffer from overuse injuries, burnout, or the development of a unidimensional identity.

The purpose of this study was to examine the youth sport experience of current and former college athletes to determine how youth sport experiences of burnout influenced their experiences of burnout at the collegiate level. This is important, as it addresses an often-overlooked aspect of college athletes' sporting experiences, their youth sport participation. Further, appreciation for the well-being of college athletes' is growing (Cassilo & Kluch, 2021), augmenting the importance and urgency of studies seeking to extend understanding of college athletes' experiences.

Exploring the youth sport experience of college athletes and how youth sport experiences influence athletes' collegiate careers can shed further light on this salient concern, informing relevant stakeholders (e.g., teammates, coaches, athletic departments), and those responsible for existing mechanisms in place on college campuses for improving athlete well-being of how they can improve the college athlete experience. Further, findings could illumine aspects of youth sport participation and development in need of addressing by youth sport program managers, coaches, and parents.

### **Research Questions**

Given our current understanding of college athlete burnout, further study is warranted. This is especially true with the

dearth of literature examining college athletes' youth sport experience with burnout. Therefore, to address the study's purpose of exploring the youth sport experience of current and former college athletes to understand how youth sport experiences of burnout influenced their experiences of burnout at the collegiate level, the following research questions were posed: (RQ1) What are the lived experiences of current and former college athletes with burnout in youth and college sport? (RQ2) How do college athletes believe their current experiences with burnout are influenced by experiences of burnout as youth athletes? (RQ3) How do college athletes believe the impact of youth and college sport social systems contribute to burnout?

### **Literature Review and Conceptual Frameworks**

College athletes' well-being is garnering increasing attention from a multitude of college sport stakeholders. This increased attention is evidenced by athletic departments and universities having advanced existing programs to support athletes beyond sport (Turick et al., 2021), college sport researchers' growing interest in the college athlete experience (Berg & Warner, 2019; Kidd et al., 2018), and greater willingness on athletes' behalf to demand more be done to address mental health and well-being concerns (Cassilo & Kluch, 2021).

One facet of athlete well-being garnering greater attention from scholars examining the athlete experience is the concept of athlete burnout (Gould & Whitley, 2009). While the burnout literature has

gained significant attention in recent decades, no universally accepted definition of burnout exists. Coakley (1992), for instance, argued that definitions failing to account for the social context encompassing sport participation place the emphasis of burnout entirely on the individual, excluding the role of the social organization of sport. To account for the social organization of sport, Coakley (1992) defined burnout as

a social phenomenon grounded in a set of social relations through which young athletes become disempowered to the point of realizing that sport participation has become a developmental dead-end for them and that they no longer have any meaningful control over important parts of their lives. (p. 272)

According to Raedeke and Smith's (2001) popular conceptualization, burnout is "a psychological syndrome of emotional/physical exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment, and sport devaluation" (p. 283). Although widely used, the definition has drawn criticism for overlooking sport's organizational issue (Coakley, 2009).

Regardless of how burnout is defined, there is broad agreement in the literature that athletes suffer from burnout (Gould & Whitley, 2009). However, the research determining the prevalence of burnout among athletes is inconsistent. For instance, Silva's (1990) investigation of 68 college athletes at two Atlantic Coast Conference universities determined 46.9% of participants experienced burnout. In his

1997 study of 236 youth swimmers aged 13–18, competing at the highest level of age-group swimming in Oregon and Southern Washington, Raedeke estimated just 3% of athletes experienced burnout. And, in their study examining burnout frequencies in 980 athletes competing in designated sports high schools in Sweden (a system where only the most promising are admitted), Gustafsson and colleagues (2007) determined between 1–9% of female athletes and 2–6% of male athletes experienced high-level symptoms of burnout.

The current study sought to understand collegiate athletes' experiences of burnout as they advanced through youth sport development systems into the college sport setting. Combining the individualistic emphasis of Raedeke and Smith's (2001) conceptualization of burnout with Coakley's (1992) concept of burnout accounting for the social organization of sport was deemed most appropriate for meeting the study's purpose. Therefore, to meet the study's purpose, the study was guided by both Coakley's (1992) and Raedeke and Smith's (2001) conceptualizations of burnout in conjunction with Côté and Vierimaa's (2014) developmental model of sport participation, which outlines the stages of youth athlete development through childhood and adolescence.

## **Burnout**

The study was guided by a combination of two well-established conceptualizations of athlete burnout. The use of two conceptualizations enables the investigation of both individualistic effects of

burnout such as emotional and physical exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment, and sport devaluation (Raedeke & Smith, 2001), as well as examination of social influences known to contribute to burnout (Coakley, 1992).

Coakley (1992) contended that although stress contributes to athlete burnout, it is not the cause. Rather, stress is a symptom of burnout. According to Coakley, burnout is caused by sport's social structuring (e.g., external controls), which in its current commercialized and professionalized form restricts athletes' autonomy (Gould, 2019). Athletes are instead controlled by influential adults (e.g., parents and coaches) as well as the sports organizations in control of sport and athlete development systems (e.g., college and high school athletic departments, governing bodies of sport).

Coakley (1992) also argued athletes' lack of control, in conjunction with the pressure of high-level sport contributed to the development of a sport-centered identity, or unidimensional identity. This is important, because identity shapes who individuals are, what they do, and who surrounds them (Hitlin, 2003). Individuals who develop a unidimensional identity become consumed by just one dimension. The development of a unidimensional identity is fairly common among competitive athletes in both youth and college sport (Edison et al., 2021; Huml, 2018). Athletes who develop a unidimensional identity by identifying exclusively with the athletic role are described as having an athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993). Within the college athlete identity litera-

ture, research has demonstrated how a strong athletic identity can be problematic, as it has been found to leave athletes questioning who they are and what their life will be without sport when they graduate from college and transition out of sport (e.g., Smith & Hardin, 2018). Individuals with a dominant athletic identity may also suffer from burnout, which can be exacerbated when they fail to meet expectations or lack autonomy in their sporting journey (Coakley, 1992; Martin & Horn, 2013). Burnout is problematic and considered an experience for athletes to avoid or a sensation to reduce as sufferers of burnout report decreased performance, interpersonal difficulties, exhaustion, and in some cases leads athletes to drop out of sport altogether (Raedeke & Smith, 2001; Vealey & Chase, 2016).

### ***Burnout in College Athletes***

A large number of college athletes experience burnout. Of the roughly 480,000 athletes competing at the collegiate level, it is estimated that approximately 10% of athletes experience burnout (NCAA, 2021). College athlete burnout has been attributed to the increasingly intense nature of collegiate athletics (Gould & Whitley, 2009), increased competitive and training stress and average weekly sport training hours (Russell, 2021). Burnout's prevalence in collegiate athletics demonstrates the need for interventions and mechanisms to reduce athletes' likelihood of experiencing burnout, and to treat athletes suffering from burnout. These are especially important as social support dimensions in studies examining predictors

of burnout have found social support is related to lower burnout (DeFreese & Smith, 2014; Russell, 2021). Although burnout has been extensively studied in the college sport setting, burnout's presence remains.

### ***Burnout in Youth Sport Athletes***

In a recent study, Russell (2021) recognized the dearth of research on youth sport burnout. Adopting Côté and Fraser-Thomas's (2007) version of the Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP), Russell (2021) surveyed high-school athletes' youth sport experience and found non-elite high school athletes did not differ in their experiences of burnout according to whether they were youth sport samplers or specializers. Although the current study also adopts Raedeke and Smith's (2001) conceptualization of burnout in conjunction with Côté and Vierimaa's (2014) version of the DMSP in asking athletes to retrospectively recollect their youth sport experiences, the non-elite emphasis in Russell's (2021) study likely accounts for the study's findings. As in their text reviewing the more competitive youth athlete experience with burnout Weinberg and Gould (2019) reported athletes were more susceptible to burnout when they had spent more time in the sporting environment.

In a recent review of critical issues in the current youth sport landscape, Gould (2019) also recognized the need for further investigation into burnout in youth athletes and identified burnout as a critical issue facing youth athletes. Even though youth athlete burnout is garnering greater

attention from researchers, and therefore, so is the knowledge base for informing evidence-based remedies to athlete burnout, recent research suggests prevalence rates of youth athlete burnout are likely to rise. In a recent study examining coaches' perspective of Generation Z youth athletes, Gould and colleagues (2020) call for continued research in stress and burnout levels as this cohort of athletes appear less prepared to deal with stress and adversity compared to their millennial counterparts (Twenge, 2017). This makes sense because, as previously mentioned, the intense nature of youth sport is increasing.

Predictors of burnout in youth athletes are comparable to the predictors found in older athletes. As the youth sport environment intensifies, youth athletes lack autonomy, increasingly consider sport less playful, and find the pressure to succeed and win discomforting (Gould, 2019).

### **The Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP)**

The developmental model of sports participation developed by Côté and Vierimaa (2014) lays out the stages of athlete development, from athletes' first introduction to sport, through to the culmination of their youth sport experience. According to Côté and Vierimaa (2014), there are three stages of sport development and participation. Although this model generalizes the stages of sport developments across sports, it is important to recognize that sport-specific differences do exist (Smith et al., 1990). The first stage, known as the sampling stage, occurs roughly

between the ages of six and 13. At this time athletes are introduced – typically by their parents – to a multitude of sports. Through this initial exposure, athletes and their parents find means for deepening athletes’ sport engagement. The specialization stage of development and participation occurs from 13 to 15 years of age. Here, athletes narrow their focus to just one or two sports, which they participate in year-round. In addition to reducing their commitment to other sports, athletes also often withdraw from other, non-sport extracurricular activities during this phase as they devote greater time to their sport development. It is during the specialization phase where coaches play an increasingly important role, working alongside parents as athletes’ commitment to sport grows. The third and final stage of the DMSP is the investment stage. Athletes enter this phase as they advance through their sport systems between 15 and 18 years of age. At these ages, athletes focus on building elite skills in just one sport. It is during the investment stage athletes start to turn their attention to competing at the next level (e.g., college and/or professional sports). Parents play a far smaller role during this phase than in the previous two phases as coaches become the key facilitator of athletes’ development.

Although sports differ according to recommended age of specialization (i.e., early or late), the DMSP (Côté & Vierimaa, 2014) provides an accurate outline of the pathway undertaken by most athletes, while delineating important others’ roles (parents and coaches). As mentioned earlier, however, youth athletes are special-

izing at increasingly young ages (Myer et al., 2015). Including those who go on to compete at the collegiate level. Recently, in their study of 303 Division I collegiate athletes at two institutions, Swindell and colleagues (2019) found 17.4% of participants reported specializing early. This is noteworthy, as prolonged sport participation is linked to greater risk of burnout (Weinberg & Gould, 2019). And yet little is known about the experiences of athletes who persist in their sport development and participation having suffered from burnout as youth.

### **Method**

The ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying the study were relativism and constructivism. Relativism assumes the belief that realities are multiple and socially constructed and based on peoples’ understanding of their lived reality (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). All authors are former youth sport participants, to varying levels and degrees. The second author is also a former collegiate athlete. Further, authors one and two conduct research on the athlete experience within competitive settings operating under a constructivist lens, where social phenomena are constructed in accordance with culturally situated meanings (Crotty, 1998).

Eleven semi-structured interviews lasting between 30-40 minutes were conducted to gather rich descriptions of participants’ experiences with burnout as youth and collegiate athletes based on their reality and environment.

## Participants

Participants in the study were current and former Division I and II women's college basketball players. Current and former collegiate women's basketball players were chosen as the context for the study for several reasons. First, the experience of women's college sport participants is still an emerging topic in the research literature (Blinde et al., 1993; Russell, 2021; Smith & Hardin, 2019). In addition to furthering our understanding of burnout in elite athletes, the study also contributes to our understanding of the youth and college experience of historically understudied participants (Balish et al., 2014). Second, as one of the most popular sports in the U.S. (Broughton, 2022), and a sport attracting a growing number of international athletes at the NCAA level (NCAA, 2021), basketball is positioned to continue to experience high youth participant rates. Findings illuminating the experience of youth basketball players can be impactful to thousands of future participants. Finally, the Amateur Athletic Union has played a prominent role in the youth sport basketball system. Consequently, youth basketball is one of the most commercialized youth sports in the U.S (Broughton, 2022). As Gould (2019) denoted, the commercialization of youth sport has contributed to some of the critical issues facing youth sport, such as early sport specialization and burnout. Women's collegiate basketball players were deemed an appropriate population for achieving the study's purpose.

To be included in the study, participants were required to have played at least

one full year of college basketball. Former college basketball players who did not complete a full year of college basketball were not included in the study as they may not have sufficient experience to contribute to the college sport component of the study. In total, participants represented 12 different universities, as four participants represented two universities. Although the study included participants who had transferred institutions, as the transfer experience was not a focal point of the study interview questions did not explore participants' transfer experience. Further, as the study sought to determine commonalities across participants' entire playing experiences, as well as the study's qualitative design, participants were not compared according to their role as a starter or non-starter or their playing time. A further breakdown of participant demographics can be found in Table 1.

## Data Collection

A purposive sampling technique using the researchers' personal and professional networks was initially adopted upon approval from IRB to recruit participants meeting the inclusion criterion. Purposive sampling was used to ensure participants could provide accurate information addressing the study's purpose (Creswell, 2013). Snowball sampling was also adopted, whereby successfully recruited participants connect the researcher with peers they know who meet the inclusion criteria. In addition to recruiting participants via the researchers' personal and professional networks, participants were recruited via direct solicitation. During the recruit-



**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Race	Years of Youth Participation	Final Playing Year	Division	Transfer Student
Amanda	African American	13	2023	D1	Y
Megan	White	12	2019	D1	Y
Lauran	African American	11	2024	D1	N
Lynda	African American	11	2024	D1	N
Amelia	Hispanic	10	2021	D1	Y
Michelle	White	12	2024	D1	N
Rebecca	White	13	2025	D1	N
Desiree	African American	13	2022	D1	Y
Beth	White	12	2024	D2	N
Cari	White	10	2022	D2	N
Jade	African American	12	2023	D2	N

ment process, participants were informed of the study's purpose with consent obtained.

Interviews started with participants being asked to describe and define burnout. Participants whose interpretation of burnout misaligned with the two conceptualizations guiding the study (i.e., Coakley, 1992; Raedeke & Smith, 2001), were informed of how burnout was defined in this study, and to adopt this definition in their detailing of their experiences.

Interview protocols were informed by the previously identified frameworks (i.e., Coakley, 1992; Côté, & Vierimaa, 2014; Raedeke & Smith, 2001). Participants were asked to describe their youth sport experiences as they pertain to burnout and explain their participation and development according to the three stages of the DMSP. Following Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) recommendation, probing questions were included to illicit deeper insight into participants' experiences.

**Data Analysis**

Audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed verbatim by researcher one. Data analysis was then conducted by researchers one and two, with researcher three acting as a critical friend (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). As a relativist approach was used, a mostly inductive approach to data analysis was adopted. Inductive coding was adopted to ensure the researchers were mindful of potential new categories that could extend theoretical understanding of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). First, researchers one and two engaged in open coding by summarizing segments of data (Miles et al., 2014). The two researchers then met to establish a codebook from the codes developed in the first round of coding. With the established codebook, a second round of coding was conducted whereby the researchers independently reviewed patterns in the data to search for common scripts in the data from multiple participants (Daiute, 2014). The pattern

codes emerging from the second cycle of analysis led to the development of major themes (Saldaña, 2016). The two researchers met to develop the major themes collaboratively, with researcher three acting as a critical friend during this process. The researchers also related the themes to known concepts as themes were finalized (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

Further, an evolving list of quality measures guided the analysis of data (Tracy, 2010). The quality measures included worthiness of the topic (burnout in youth and collegiate sport is a relevant topic), credibility which was assured by multiple researchers conducting the data analysis and meaningful coherence through a consistent research purpose, methodology and results. To ensure reliability in the coding process, the researchers met on multiple occasions throughout the coding process to reduce researcher bias, and to interpret the data to ensure the credibility of findings (Barbour, 2014; Gerdes & Conn, 2001). Further, to enhance trustworthiness, member checking was utilized (Tracy, 2010), whereby study participants verified transcripts and study interpretations.

### **Findings**

The purpose of the study was to examine the youth sport experience of current and former college athletes to determine how youth sport experiences of burnout influenced their experiences of burnout at the collegiate level. After coding the data, five major themes arose. Those themes include Early Entry and Family Ties, Specialization with Ambitions of Earning a

Scholarship, Youth Burnout and Growing Sport Commitments, A Change of Scene as a Reducer of Burnout and College Burnout, and External Pressures. These themes emerged due to the commonalities between participants' answers.

### **Early Entry and Family Ties**

All participants first experienced basketball by the time they were eight years old, with six participants playing by the age of five. As Lauran reflected on her early youth sport experiences, she recognized how starting to play basketball at the age of five likely contributed to her own experiences of burnout, "I don't regret starting to play at such a young age, but I can see how it led to me burning out by starting so young." When asked to explain why she might think that Lauran said, "because pretty quickly it didn't leave me much space for anything outside of basketball." Beth also recognized the association between when she first started to play basketball and experiencing burnout symptoms in eighth grade, "I think I first started to feel a little burnt out once I got to eighth grade. This was the point where I'd been playing club and school for quite a few years and so I just wasn't as excited about it as I used to be."

When asked what led them to start playing basketball, all but one participant described being introduced to the sport of basketball by their parents. For example Desiree mentioned, "My parents introduced me to basketball. They are both very athletic, so I think they naturally assumed I would be too." For some participants, their parental influence went be-

yond just introducing them to basketball. In some participants' cases, basketball was a family sport, making their introduction to basketball somewhat inevitable. For instance, Michelle stated:

I grew up around basketball. All my family played, and my dad coached basketball, so it was something I just did. I used to watch him coach and this made me feel proud, so I wanted to be a great student for him to teach.

The notion of basketball being a family sport led some participants to spend even more time outside of organized basketball programming playing basketball with their family, as Amanda expressed: "I grew up in a basketball family and ended up liking the game. We'd go to the gym, just shoot and play around. And my dad was a big deal, which motivated me to want to play more." Jade went one step further, recognizing her father's interest in basketball added pressure, "my dad had a big impact on my basketball, but my mother never put pressure on my basketball, and I think that helped a lot." Although parents were the main initial influence for participants, they weren't the only means of introduction to basketball. Two athletes were introduced to basketball through friends, including Amelia who said: "Basketball started with friends at first. It was something we did as kids because my neighbor had a basketball hoop in her front yard."

In addition to starting very young, it was clear that parental figures were the participants' main reason for first playing basketball. And as several participants described their families as basketball fami-

lies, it was clear that the family dynamic created a strong connection to the sport, with two cases where pressure was evident from the start of athletes' participation.

### **Specialization with Ambitions of Earning a Scholarship**

As athletes aged their commitment to basketball developed. This was true of Beth, who explained:

It was probably in sixth grade that I started taking basketball more seriously. I remember trying out for teams and realizing how much room for improvement I had. So, I would say it's about this time when I realized if I wanted to get good I needed to put in some serious effort.

Beth was one of many participants to increase her commitment to basketball around their middle school age, as Amanda who had a similar experience shared: "I started taking it more seriously around middle school. But once I got to seventh or eighth grade, I started developing more and I started to realize like I was actually good." In taking their basketball participation more seriously, participants began to weigh up the need to cut the other sports they were participating in from their schedules in order to prioritize basketball. This step was taken by Amelia, who shared: "I think it was around high school when I picked just basketball. I would say I specialized in middle school, but only in high school did I quit track altogether to focus just on basketball." When asked why they chose to specialize, a driving factor was the desire to earn an athletic

scholarship at the collegiate level. Megan explained in order to earn a scholarship she needed to play club basketball: “It was kind of expected because I put myself through so many years, it was kind of, like an obvious thing, we are doing club circuit basketball.” When asked to describe the club experience, Megan elaborated: “Everybody there wanted to get a scholarship to play college ball, so it was kind of an unthinkable pressure or expectation that I was totally into.” Amanda shared Megan’s sentiments, seeing club basketball as the arena for developing a collegiate skill set: “I never knew how good I was, but I knew I wanted to play in college basketball. So, once I got into club basketball I knew I wanted to keep doing it and take basketball more seriously.” It was clear participants specialized with the intent of advancing to the collegiate level, very much with a scholarship in mind. What also stood out in participants’ reason for specializing was the explanation participants did not share. Not one participant described specializing for the love of the game or for an opportunity to master their sport. Rather, participants described being motivated to achieve a scholarship or a desire to conform to the expectation of their clubs.

### **Youth Burnout and Growing Sport Commitments**

Athletes first described experiencing symptoms of burnout during the specialization stage of development and participation, as their purpose for participating in basketball shifted. All but one participant attested to experiencing some form of burnout as a youth, with almost all

instances occurring at the specialization stage. Lauran was one such athlete to suffer from burnout: “Burnout hit me while playing junior basketball. By the time I was 13, I already started to feel as though I had been doing the same thing for so long.” Michelle had comparable experiences: “I felt genuine burnout. Probably because things started to become more serious and less fun. But I persisted and that feeling faded.” By this point, most of the participants were now playing basketball year-round and their club basketball participation was playing an increasingly large role. As Jade reflected: “There were times I experienced burnout when my body was just so tired. I was physically exhausted. I’d get home late, eat, try and do homework and often fall asleep with my homework on me in bed.”

Amelia recognized a clear connection between her experiences of burnout and club basketball:

I really started to struggle with why I was playing when I got to middle school. Again, maybe it was because I was playing club, so basketball was now year-round, but I just started to wonder why I kept playing. I think club basketball was more serious and that made me think of it more as a job rather than a fun after-school activity.

Jade also shared her belief that playing organized club basketball was a prerequisite for playing collegiately, “club ball is really something you have to do nowadays it seems if you want to play college ball.” A sentiment reinforced by Lauran, “I started playing on the gauntlet series, which is how you get recruited. And I had got my

first couple offers in the first tournament I played in. So, I decided to start taking it more seriously.”

It was evident athletes believed their club basketball participation was a contributing factor to the onset of their experiences with burnout. Club basketball was physically exhausting, more serious, and felt like a job. Yet, the study’s participants felt playing club basketball was necessary for advancing to the collegiate level. It could be asserted then – as only one participant did not burnout – that exposing themselves to an environment where the risk of experiencing burnout is elevated, was necessary for their basketball development.

### **A Change of Scenery as a Reducer of Burnout**

As the conversation shifted towards participants’ collegiate years, athletes described the change of setting and excitement of moving to college. The excitement of reaching the collegiate level and their new surroundings seemed to reduce or eliminate participants’ struggle with burnout, albeit temporarily. For example, Amelia detailed: “I didn’t experience burnout when I started playing college basketball. Because it was new. It was a fresh experience, and I was excited to now be playing somewhere I had always dreamed of.” Desiree had a similar experience to Amelia: “Burnout didn’t happen initially. As I was finishing up high school I was really excited for the next step which was college.” Rebecca, who also did not experience burnout in her first months as a college athlete, expressed how it was her

opinion that not one of her teammates suffered from burnout as college freshmen: “No one I knew experienced burnout in their first year of playing at college.”

The excitement of achieving their dream of playing basketball at the collegiate level and the novelty of their first months on a collegiate campus appeared to suppress athletes’ burnout symptoms that had developed in youth club basketball. However, as participants alluded to, their change of scenery did not permanently eliminate their experiences with burnout, but rather masked burnout until the novelty of their new surroundings wore off.

### **College Burnout and External Pressures**

As the novelty of their freshman year wore off, symptoms of burnout returned, especially as athletes settled into the challenges associated with being a college student. In describing her post-freshman year collegiate experience, Michelle illustrated how as the distraction of her new surroundings started to wane, her loss of passion for basketball returned: “The level of love I had for the game dropped tremendously after my first year of college.” Michelle was not alone. Almost all participants experienced a return of burnout symptoms following their freshman year. Jade also discussed her sophomore slump:

I think it began my sophomore year of college again. My passion just started to get lost for basketball. I realized how many years I had been playing and I think once you hit the major goal of playing in college it’s

hard to find a new major goal when your life has been around playing college basketball.

And, Desiree mentioned: “Burnout in college was the point I considered no longer playing and found it extremely hard to be motivated to show up. As I got into my second year, this was exactly how I was feeling.” On being probed as to why they chose not to drop out at this point, many athletes described external influences and factors compelling them to continue playing basketball. Amelia illustrated: “As burnout set in, I knew dropping out was never an option because I had to make myself and my family proud.” Amanda shared similar sentiments, seeing her parents as a key, although not necessarily positive, influence on why she never considered dropping out:

I never wanted to quit. I’ve never really been a quitter, so I just told myself to push through. And, my parents have always been hard on me, so I just knew if I would’ve quit, they would probably be mad.

Parents were not the only external pressure reducing participants’ likelihood of dropping out. The financial implications of completing a collegiate degree without an athletic scholarship also acted as a retention factor, which was true of Beth: “I knew I couldn’t quit because of my scholarship so that thought never really seriously crossed my mind.”

The experience of playing through burnout symptoms did, however, take its toll on participants. Eight participants described feeling a sense of relief as they approached the end of their collegiate

basketball career or just a general sense of being ready for a life without basketball. For instance, Amanda explained: “Towards the end of my career I had two knee injuries, and my coach just lost confidence in me. So, I was kind of ready for college to be done.” It was also at this stage that athletes became aware of opportunities outside of basketball. As evidenced by Rebecca: “As time progressed, I definitely started to feel as though basketball was not everything.” Of the participants interviewed, Cari expressed feeling the strongest desire for finishing her collegiate career:

By the end of my fifth year, I was like, ‘I want this season to be over. I don’t even care about basketball anymore.’ After the season I went probably five or six months without even touching a basketball, I couldn’t do it. It was like a trigger for me.

In sharing her experiences of burnout in the latter stages of her collegiate basketball career, Beth described a sense of regret for not addressing her struggles with burnout prior to college: “I wonder if I’d handled burnout better in my youth, whether I would have experienced it in college. Even though there were resources available to me in college, I never took the opportunity to talk to anyone about it.”

It was quite clear that once participants were living out their dream of playing collegiately, a part of their reason for playing basketball was lost. Achievement of the goal athletes had strived towards for over ten years coincided with the return

of burnout. The reemergence of burnout led some athletes to regret not addressing burnout as youth sport participants, as they believed it could have altered their experiences of burnout as a collegiate athlete.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the youth sport experience of current and former college athletes to determine how youth sport experiences of burnout influenced experiences of burnout at the collegiate level. In this study we found participants experienced multiple bouts of intense burnout symptoms during their youth and college sport participation. We also found common trends in when participants' burnout symptoms intensified, subsided, and re-intensified. Specifically, we found college basketball players first experienced burnout as they entered the specialization phase of their development (i.e., ages 13–15; Côté & Vierimaa, 2014), which coincided with their entrance into youth club basketball. Symptoms subsided as the novelty of transitioning to collegiate sport refreshed their participation, however, intense symptoms returned as the novelty of their new surroundings wore off. Our findings are important as they suggest collegiate athletes experience intense burnout on multiple occasions throughout their sport involvement and demonstrate how the intensity of burnout fluctuates as athletes advance through sport development pathways.

In addition to our main findings, we also found the demanding schedule of youth club basketball contributed to in-

tense burnout symptoms. This finding is important because participants identified the club setting as a pre-requisite for collegiate basketball. Therefore, the organizational structure of a developmental setting athletes considered necessary for advancement to the collegiate setting contributed to burnout. Making it to the collegiate level of basketball then, may require participation in environments where the risk of exposure to burnout symptoms appear elevated. We also found intense experiences of burnout returned having subsided during athletes' transition to college and their freshman season. In addition to suffering burnout from the demanding schedule and pressures of collegiate sport, participants attributed burnout during this phase to feelings of entrapment, whereby athletes devalued their sport participation but refused to quit because of parental pressure and the need to maintain their scholarship. Burnout during their collegiate years was also driven by the lack of a participation goal. As participants had accomplished their lifelong dream of advancing to the collegiate level, participants purpose for playing had been fulfilled. These findings are important as they demonstrate that the environments of competitive sport settings contribute to burnout.

Previous studies examining athlete burnout have focused on either the youth sport (e.g., DiFiori et al., 2014; Gustafsson et al., 2007; Martin & Horn, 2013; Vitali et al., 2014), or collegiate sport setting (e.g., Crowell & Madigan, 2022; DeFreese & Smith, 2013; Gould & Whitley, 2009; Russell, 2021). By examining one context,

these studies have laid critical groundwork in establishing a robust understanding of athlete burnout causes and potential outcomes for sufferers of burnout, as well as identifying potential remedies for reducing burnout. Our study supports much of the extant literatures' findings. The extant body of athlete burnout literature has shown how athletes can experience burnout symptoms as a consequence of feeling entrapped by restraining factors (Coakley, 1992; Goodger et al., 2007), stressful social relations (Smith et al., 2010), developing a unidimensional identity (Gustafsson et al., 2008), a reduced sense of accomplishment and devaluation of sport (Goodger et al., 2007; Raedeke & Smith, 2001).

Our study supports Coakley (1992) and Goodger et al.'s (2007) work regarding entrapment and restraining factors. In our study, participants were unlikely to quit as college athletes because they depended on their scholarship for completing their degree and/or felt constrained by social relations. The social influence of parents drove some participants to continue playing as they did not want to let their parents down by ending their careers prematurely (Smith et al., 2010). Our study also found athletes as they neared the end of their careers lacked enthusiasm for their sport. Having achieved their ultimate sporting goal, sport no longer held the same significance in their lives, and they began to recognize how their sport participation acted as a barrier to exploring alternative identities (Gustafsson et al., 2008; Raedeke et al., 2001).

Studies have also described some athletes as "active burnouts", whereby in-

dividuals remain in sport at a decreased level (Gould et al., 1996; Gustafsson et al., 2007). As all but one of our participants experienced burnout, and all continued to participate our findings support the notion of "active burnouts." However, our findings differ in that our participants did not decrease their level of engagement once burnout symptoms arrived. Therefore, our findings are amongst the first to show athletes can experience intense symptoms of burnout without dropping their level of sport engagement. This is likely explained by participants need to keep their scholarship. In other words, athletes remain fully engaged even when they are burned out, because of the financial repercussions they would face in losing their scholarship, or because a scholarship is their only means of support for completing their degree program.

The differences between our findings and previous studies highlighting "active burnouts" may also be explained by the methodological approach of our study. Studies of athlete burnout have not examined athletes' entire career or participation.

By examining the youth and collegiate experiences of the same group of athletes, we were able to assuage how burnout symptoms fluctuate throughout athletes' participation. Thus, athletes reflected upon their experiences with burnout over a 10–15-year period. In addition to showing athletes persist with high levels of sport engagement even when suffering severe burnout symptoms, our findings extended our current understanding of athlete burnout by illuminating stages



where burnout symptoms appear to spike (i.e., specializing in the club setting and after freshman year of college), and how burnout fluctuates. Again, likely explained by studying athletes burnout experiences over a prolonged period of time rather than at one specific moment in athletes' participation (Gustafsson et al., 2007; Russell 2021; Vitali et al., 2014), or for a period of one season (e.g., Dubuc-Charbonneau & Durand-Bush, 2018). Further, this retrospective approach suggests burnout in participants successfully advancing to the collegiate level may be an unavoidable component of the prolonged training necessary for advancing under current college athlete development pathway structures and norms (Ericsson et al., 1993).

### **Implications**

Our findings provide several contributions to our understanding of athlete burnout and sport development pathways. First, our findings imply burnout symptoms fluctuate throughout college athletes' sport journeys, and athletes can experience intense burnout symptoms on multiple occasions and for prolonged durations. As one of the first, if not the first studies to investigate burnout in the same group of athletes for multiple years, to the authors' knowledge it is the first study to find athletes can experience multiple bouts of intense burnout symptoms. Further, as participants all successfully advanced to the collegiate level and saw youth club basketball as a pre-requisite for advancement to the collegiate level, our findings suggest that burnout may be an environ-

mental component of advancement to women's collegiate-level basketball.

The findings from this study also offer multiple practical implications. First, we recommend all relevant stakeholders (e.g., coaches, trainers, program managers, parents) are informed and educated in how to recognize burnout symptoms. Further, it is important stakeholders understand symptoms can fluctuate, and the college sport development environments (i.e., youth club basketball) considered a necessary component of development are settings that likely contribute to burnout. To alleviate burnout's impact – without suggesting athletes withdraw or reduce their level of sport engagement – we recommend youth clubs and programs facilitating specialization inform new athletes and parents that this stage of development can elevate risks of burnout. Armed with knowledge of burnout symptoms and causes, parents and athletes can be more informed as they enter this higher level of sport engagement, and therefore be better prepared for the greater risk of burnout.

As the study discovered, athletes appear to experience a freshman reprieve from burnout. This may indicate to stakeholders (e.g., coaches, trainers) athletes burnout symptoms derive purely from their collegiate experiences. Thus, leading to remedies that overlook the pre-existing baggage athletes are carrying from their youth sport participation (i.e., sport as work and no longer fun). It is also important for stakeholders to appreciate the significance of athletes' transition to college, and how it may initially shield some

underlying issues in regard to burnout. It appears especially crucial for coaches and others charged with supporting college athletes to pay close attention to how athletes transition into their sophomore years of college. Specifically, we recommend coaches should work with athletes to establish college basketball goals. By creating new goals for athletes to aspire to as college athletes, coaches can facilitate a reevaluation of sport for athletes by setting targets for them to purposefully work towards accomplishing.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are several limitations in this study. First, only one sport was included in this study. Sport-specific differences exist (Smith et al., 1990), therefore, findings from this study may not align with burnout with youth and collegiate athletes of another sport. Future research should examine different collegiate sports to determine if experiences differ according to sport-specific factors.

Second, participants were only recruited from one region of the U.S, with some participants on the same collegiate team. Therefore, their experiences might be a consequence of the region and institution they represent. In looking to expand upon this study's findings, it may be useful for future studies to limit the number of participants from one institution.

Despite these limitations, this study is one of the first to investigate the intense youth sport experience of current and former college athletes to determine how youth sport experiences influence experiences of burnout at the collegiate level.

We hope this research will contribute to future research around youth and collegiate burnout to ultimately inform athletes, coaches, and athletic departments.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study's findings suggest the youth sport experience of collegiate athletes is particularly relevant to their experiences at the college level. As it pertains to burnout, college athletes especially appear to initially experience burnout long before they arrive at college. Interventions and mechanisms at the collegiate level, therefore, should be cognizant of burnout as a chronic condition or experience, rather than attributing the onset of burnout directly and solely to athletes' collegiate experience. As researchers continue to examine the collegiate athlete experience, the study is evidence of a need to account for youth sport experiences, and the potential baggage athletes may carry from their youth sport days. The study also makes an important contribution in recognizing the novelty of athletes' freshman year, where symptoms of burnout may be superseded by athletes' initial arrival on a collegiate campus and fulfillment of a yearslong goal of playing collegiate basketball.

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