An Exploration of Student-Athletes Perception on the Athletic Trainer/Coach Relationship: A Study on Social Support

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Prior research has examined visual and auditory perceptions by the athletic trainer, the coach, and even the student—athlete, however it has not explored the student—athlete's perception of the athletic trainer coach relationship and whether that impacts social support received. The goal of this study was to explore how the athletic trainer/coach relationship may impact social support through the perception of Division I student—athletes. Interviews were conducted with 11 student—athletes, and data was analyzed using open, constant comparison, axial and selective coding. The results were consistent with previous research on athletic trainers and coaches being major contributors of social support for student—athletes. The findings indicated a relationship between positive athletic trainer/coach relationships and a positive student—athlete experience overall. In contrast, it also showed a relationship between negative athletic trainer/coach relationships and a negative student—athlete experience. The research also highlighted the significance of pressures faced by student—athletes to compete while injured and the prevalence of mental health issues.

Key Words: social support, student—athletes, injuries, athletic trainers, coaches

Approximately 500,000 students-athletes competed in the NCAA in 2022 (NCAA, 2022). The life of a student-athlete competing in collegiate athletics comes with its own challenges. Oftentimes these athletes face academic and performance related stressors. These stressors are associated with strained player-coach relationships, role obligations, fatigue, burnout, and personal performance (Hatteberg, 2020). Further, these stressors increase their risk of negative mental health issues such as lack of self-esteem, anxiety, depression, as well as alcohol and drug use/ abuse. Research has shown approximately one-third of college athletes experience depressive symptoms (Hatteberg, 2020). A recent NCAA study found 30% of female

student-athletes and 25% of male student-athletes admitted to experiencing difficulties they felt they might not be able to overcome within the last month (Simons & Bird, 2022). Injuries are an additional stressor faced by student-athletes. Suffering an injury may lead to both physical and emotional pain that has been linked to anxiety, depression, and mood disturbances (Yang et al., 2010). These stressors along with the associated consequences may increase the need for support by those in the student-athletes' social support network.

Athletic trainers and coaches are two individuals whose lives are centered around the student-athlete and therefore, fall within the social support network. Social support is a multidimensional construct that refers to the provision of assistance or comfort to others. This can be from any relationship within one's social network. In most cases, social support is aimed at improving mental and physical health (Rodriguez & Cohen,1998). Injury is a common stressor faced by student-athletes. Hayden and Lynch (2011) suggest continued and effective communication between coach and athletic trainer has the ability to create an optimal environment for an injured athlete. The athletic trainer often has insight into the student-athletes' physical and psychological status, and if communicated to the coach may create a more positive return-to-play process while limiting the impact of said stressor.

Research has addressed the athletic trainers experience, the coaches experience and even the student-athlete experience within the context of collegiate athletes and social support, however it does not currently provide information on the student-athletes' perspective on the relationship between the athletic trainer/coach and does not address how the relationship could impact their perception of the social support received. Additionally, the relationship between head coach and athletic trainer has yet to be sufficiently researched (Simon & Bird, 2022).

The purpose of this study was to explore how the athletic trainer/coach relationship may impact social support through the perception of Division I student-athletes. This study was developed with three main objectives: First, to explore the type and amount of support received from athletic trainers versus coaches. Second, to explore the perceived quality of athletic trainer-coach relationships, and third, to explore how the quality of that relationship is perceived to impact support received and/or the support environment.

This research adds to the literature and informs both athletic trainers and coaches of ways their relationship affects student-athletes. In addition, the findings recommended ways to improve the overall care student-athletes receive. This aligns with the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) goals, as well as that of the Intercollegiate Council for Sport Medicine (ICSM) for making the physical and mental health or well-being of athletes a priority (NCAA, 2022). Administrators may also have something to gain by better understanding the dynamics within the athletic department and being better prepared to meet the needs of the employees and student-athletes to improve moral, longevity, and decreasing burnout.

Literature Review

Social Support

Social support involves a relationship where there is a provider and a recipient (Rosenfeld et al.,1989). This relationship can involve a system of personal ties, and the purpose is to meet the needs of the recipient with the goal of improving overall well-being. A more precise definition of social support in the context of sport was described as "an athlete's appraisal of the support that might be available to them from their social support network and how satisfied they were with that support" (Yang, 2010, p. 374). The degree of social support provided is influenced by the relationship between the recipient and provider. The recipient-provider relationship, as well as how the recipient perceives the support are all factors that determine if the support offered is positive or negative (Hupcey & Morse, 1997). Hupcey and Morse (1997) stated "the unique aspect of social support is that the action must be given by someone who has a personal relationship with the recipient" (p. 170).

Other factors that may influence social support include the difference between social support received versus received in addition to when that support is provided. Perceived support measures general availability of support and global satisfaction coinciding with this studies goals. This does leave it vulnerable to individual differences in perceptions and memory processes (Haber et al.,2007).

Though with much discussion on the reliability of perceived versus received social support its important to understand the various types of social support to help put it into context. Social support has been categorized into into three primary categories: instrumental, informational, and socioemotional (Hatteberg, 2020; House & Kahn, 1985). Instrumental support provides tangible resources that can be used by the recipient. Informational support includes any advice or direct information given with the goal of helping or improving stressors. Lastly, socioemotional support involves support that aims to alleviate emotional challenges. It can also include reassurance and esteem support (Hatteberg, 2020).

Both coaches and athletic trainers are contributors of social support for student-athletes (de Groot et al., 2018; Larson et al., 2020; Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001; Rosenfeld et al., 1989). Rosenfeld et al. (1989) found coaches, teammates, family, and friends were listed as the top sources for support for student-athletes. Social support from teammates had a strong relationship with reducing mental health concerns, specifically, with women (Hagiwara et al., 2017). Coaches are rated high with giving technical support to student-athletes, but they rarely provide emotional support (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001; Rosenfeld et al., 1989). Simons and Bird (2022) report unsupportive coaching attitudes and perceived differential treatment from coaches were key stressors for student-athletes. They further went on to state these stressors have the potential to influence the well-being of the student-athlete.

Henry et al. (2009) found athletic trainers are more inclined to provide socioemotional support than coaches. Robbins and Rosenfeld (2001) found student-athletes reported a higher level of social support satisfaction with their athletic trainers

compared to their coaches when rehabilitating injuries. When examining pre and post injury social support sources, Yang et al. (2010) found coaches, athletic trainers, and physicians were heavily relied upon. The reliance on athletic trainers for social support post injury increased 24% when compared to pre-injury. Social support received from athletic trainers post injury was found to positively influence the recovery process in both physical and psychological components for student-athletes (Yang et al., 2010). Studies have found student-athlete's view athletic trainers as non-threatening and rate them high in terms of satisfaction, availability, and contribution (de Groot et al., 2018; Larson et al., 2020).

Hagiwara stated that receiving varying types of social support is a significant factor in improving a person's mental health (Hagiwara et al., 2017). Athletic trainers have been found to play a vital role in mental health issues of student-athletes. They are commonly the first to find out about such concerns and help guide student-athletes to seek treatment. Athletic trainers are trusted members of the athlete's support network that can be shared with the coaching staff (Beasley et al., 2022). It is important to note that while connected, social support and mental health support are two separate constructs. Mental health support is the support that focuses on psychosocial well-being and mental health conditions with social support being a complex construct involving relationships within one's social network that can provide support in many different forms. Some of those forms of support may involve helping with mental health. Simon's study concluded weak or negative social support led to an increase in reported depressive symptoms (Simons & Bird 2022). While other research has explored athletic trainers and mental health support, this study differs in that its goal was to understand the student-athletes' perception of overall social support, including mental health support in the context of the dynamic between two of their social support providers. Given the important role athletic trainers and coaches play in the lives of student-athletes, it is relevant to explore how their relationship impacts social support perceived by Division I student-athletes.

Communication, Teamwork, and Perceptions

Effective communication amongst stakeholders who care for student-athletes is deemed as a necessary skill (Henry et al., 2009; Raab et al., 2011). Communication is included more than once as part of the five domains of the athletic training profession. Specifically, the third domain states the care of the athlete needs to be coordinated with relevant individuals including coaching staff (Larson et al., 2020). It is equally important for coaches to build positive interpersonal relationships. Mench and Mitchell (2005) highlighted the important role coaches play in sports medicine. Coaches spend a considerable amount of time communicating and discussing with athletic trainers about student-athletes (Mench & Mitchell, 2005). Student-athletes' competence, confidence, connection, and character are greatly impacted by coaches and athletic trainers (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). Given the amount of time spent with student-athletes, it is important to create an optimal environment so student-athletes feel supported and gain self-confidence.

How the athletic trainer and coach work together is vital to student-athletes'

successes. The two parties must be on the same page to best serve the athlete (Larson et al., 2020). Chichirez and Purcarea (2018) found the "efficacy of communication is dependent on what relationship is established between the two partners, and the relationship in turn, depends on the personality of each one of them" (p.122). If this relationship is negative, it could potentially affect the well-being of the student-athlete. One main issue is the often-colliding goals for both athletic trainers and coaches. For instance, the athletic trainer's responsibility and goal is to provide medical care to the student-athlete. The role of a coach has many goals and responsibilities, but one primary goal is to win. In many sport cultures, there is a win at all cost mentality (Lacy et al., 2020). This leads to pressure from coaches on athletic trainers to return athletes to play on a certain timeline regardless of their injury status. Many athletic trainers report coaches not being pleased when they report an athlete is not cleared to play and that is "expected" as part of the job (Kroshus et al., 2015; Lacy et al., 2020). In some institutions, the athletic trainer reports directly to head coaches. This is widely criticized by those within the sports medicine department as most feel athletic trainers should be a separate department (Kroshus et al., 2015). There is potential for compromised medical decision making when the athletic trainer reports to the head coach.

Despite the known conflicts, there is unique opportunity through consistent communication to avoid the scenario. Athletic trainers have a chance to educate coaches on the athletes mental and physical needs as they re-enter training and competition. Providing medial rationale to coaches can improve communication between coaches, athletic trainers, and athletes (Lacy et al., 2020; Larson et al., 2020). More specifically, when student-athletes are in their final stages of rehabilitation, it is the athletic trainer who helps the coach navigate the athlete's ability to return to play. The medical expertise and knowledge on injuries, rehabilitation, and injury prevention can help coaches achieve their goals (Hayden & Lynch, 2011). As mentioned, athletic trainers often serve as the one to recognize and refer mental health conditions. As mentioned, athletic trainers often serve as the one to recognize and refer mental health conditions creating a safe space for athletes. This is something that coaches can create as well and be expanded upon if both parties know the necessary steps for safe referrals (Beasley et al., 2022). If there is a strain in communication, this may impact the relationship between the coach and athletic trainer, which could lead to negative impacts to the student-athlete's well-being. While conflicts are inevitable, they must be addressed to avoid disruptions, anger, fear, aggression, or retaliation by either party (Scott, 2014).

Unruh et al. (2005) found student-athletes in high profile sports such as football and basketball reported a higher level of satisfaction. Similarly, female student-athletes reported higher levels of satisfaction with their athletic trainers compared to male student-athletes. Unruh et al. (2005), posited high levels of satisfaction meant these student-athletes received adequate support. Noble et al (2016) found student-athletes had positive perceptions towards coaches who facilitated environments that were supportive. Robbins & Rosenfield (2001) found student-athletes received support from their coaches, but the support was more as technical advisors. This sup-

port diminished when an athlete was injured as coaches felt no need to provide this support as they were no longer practicing (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001). Student-athletes also reported a lack of emotional support from their coaches and while they did receive this support from other entities, some expressed wanting this support from their coaches as well (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001).

Given the call by the NCAA and the gap within the literature, the following research questions were developed:

1. What social support do student-athletes perceive from athletic trainers and coaches?
2. How do student-athletes perceive the communicative relationship between athletic trainers and coaches?
3. How does the student-athlete feel the communicative relationship between athletic trainers and coaches affect social support?

Methods

Research Design

This study utilized an interpretive qualitative design via in-depth interviews to explore how the athletic trainer/coach communicative relationship may impact social support perceived by Division I student-athletes. Social support is a nuanced concept, and the use of qualitative research is noted as an appropriate design to gain a better understanding of social support and its role in injury and rehabilitation (de Groot et al., 2018). This design was utilized because it allows for the opportunity to extensively engage with research participants when exploring their perceptions. Moreover, this design allows the researchers to focus on gathering and understanding insights from past experiences as it relates to the topic under exploration. Further, this research design was helpful for this study because it enabled research participants to share their perceptions of social support and explain their experience as student-athletes.

Sampling and Data Collection

Criteria for research participation inclusion included all NCAA sports at a mid-size (less than 15,000 students) Division I university in the Eastern part of the United States. Student-athletes were purposefully recruited due to their experience with athletics. In addition to convenience sampling, snowball sampling helped in securing additional participants for this study. Emails were distributed by athletic trainers to ask if student-athletes were interested in the study. Other means of recruitment involved reaching out to faculty to distribute an email to the student-athletes in their classes asking for participation. Lastly, the primary investigator was able to solicit email addresses from student-athletes. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to the start of data collection. A formal participant consent form was also obtained prior to each interview that was conducted. Seven women and four men were interviewed (see Table 1) and were members of football, volleyball, basketball,

Table 1

Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Sport	Year in School
Penny Doyle	20	Female	W. Soccer	Senior
Tina Ross	21	Female	Field Hockey	Senior
Kelly Zion	21	Female	Field Hockey	Senior
Mary Walsh	21	Female	Volleyball	Senior
Kiley Smith	21	Female	Volleyball	Senior
Rob Danner	22	Male	Football	Graduate Student
Tim Stiles	20	Male	Football	Sophomore
Eric Dean	20	Male	Football	Junior
Jordan Tanner	18	Male	Football	Freshman
Jackie Landis	22	Female	W. Basketball	Graduate Student
Alison Wall	21	Female	Lacrosse	Junior

field hockey, soccer, and lacrosse programs. These participants were all active student-athletes. It should be noted that scholarship status was not included as criteria for inclusion and therefore was not divulged. In addition, the participants varied in year in school, as well as academic major and age. Steps were taken to ensure participants felt comfortable sharing their perceptions by assigning pseudonyms which is reflected in the above table as well as the findings section.

Data was collected with in person in-depth interviews. These interviews were semi structured in nature allowing for follow up questions to be asked if needed. All the interviews were conducted by one researcher and the interviews lasted 10-30 minutes with an average time of 15 minutes. The length of interviews was intentional to appeal to the specific participants of this study. This helped to gain more participants and work around the busy schedule of the student-athlete. Each interview was audio recorded for the purpose of transcription. Interview transcripts were not changed or edited. Questions for the interviews were developed by the primary investigator after an extensive review of the literature (see Table 2). The interview

Table 2

Interview Guide

Questions about Perceptions of Relationships	Social Support Themed Questions
Name, Age, Gender, Sport, Year in school, Major	What does social support mean to you?
How do you perceive the relationship between your athletic trainer and coach?	Have you ever received medical advice from a coach that was different from the medical advice from your athletic trainer?
Can you describe a time you witnessed a positive interaction between your athletic trainer and coach?	How would you say that the relationship affected the social support you received?
Can you describe a time you witness a negative interaction between your athletic trainer and coach?	Have you ever been pressured by a coach to hide an injury? If so, please describe that experience.
If a negative interaction was witnessed, how was that situation resolved?	Looking back on the experience is there anything you feel you could have done to change the experience?
How did the relationship between your athletic trainer and coach make you feel?	
Describe how the relationship between your athletic trainer and coach may have influence on your behavior or experience as a student—athlete	

questions were framed from Alexanders' (2013) study. This was a thesis conducted to explore coaches' experiences with athletic trainers while also studying coaches' knowledge of athletic trainers and their roles and responsibilities at the NCAA Division I level. The similar nature of the research lead to the primary investigator using the questions as a basis.

Questions were modified as well as new questions added to align with the purpose of the study. A list of 10 questions led the discussion. They were centered around the relationship between athletic trainer and coach, participants understanding of social support and the social support they felt they've received. Lastly, the participants overall experience as a student-athlete in the context of their team dynamic. Questions were intended to examine the relationship between head coaches and primary athletic trainers, but participants often discussed assistant coaches in their answers. Therefore, the relationship was defined more generally as to reflect the coach in which the student-athlete had the closer relationship.

Data Analysis

NVivo 12 was used to transcribe the data and to simplify data organization. After each audio recording had been transcribed, open coding (Oliver-Hoyo & Allen, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to code the data into nodes. There was a total of 287 initial nodes or first order codes. Researchers read through the transcripts where common phrases, words, and sentences were grouped together into first order codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Following this, a constant comparison data analysis process began, where the researchers reviewed and compared each first order code. Next, axial coding ensued. Axial coding involved organizing the initial first order codes and clustering together repetitive nodes to create overarching themes. These themes were the second order codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). There were 25 second order codes. Subsequently, selective coding enabled the researchers to further condense the second order codes into three core themes and categories (de Groot et al., 2018).

Data Trustworthiness and Credibility

To demonstrate data trustworthiness and credibility, data source triangulations were incorporated (Oliver-Hoyo & Allen, 2006). This involves comparing the data via time space and people to confirm authentication (Noble & Heale, 2019). It is a form of cross-validation to yield more accurate findings and reduce the instance of bias (Noble & Heale, 2019). First, student-athletes were interviewed at different points during their academic careers and athletic seasons. This allowed for different experiences and perceptions at different points to be recorded and analyzed (Noble & Heale, 2019). Second, member checks conducted enabled the researchers to reach back out to research participants. The purpose of this was to ensure the findings being presented aligned with the statements made from the participants (Busetto et al., 2020). All feedback given was positive and agreed with the current findings, so nothing was changed. The third and final step was co-coding/peer review by the research team. This involved review coding and initial themes to validate the research process (Busetto et al., 2020). In addition to data source triangulations, the trustworthiness/credibility of this research was enhanced because participants were purposefully sampled for their athletic participation and expertise. These aspects and multiple methods help to strengthen the research findings (Noble & Heale, 2019).

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how the athletic trainer/coach relationship may impact social support through the perception of Division I student-athletes. Given the data analysis, three major themes arose: (a) social support within collegiate athletics (b) understanding perceptions of the athletic trainer coach relationship, (c) and depth of impact of the athletic trainer and coach relationship. Social support provided details of the perceived type of support from both the athletic trainer and coach. The quality of the athletic trainer and coach relationship provides descriptions of the intricate dynamic between the athletic trainer and coach and stu-

dent-athlete with an emphasis on the role injuries play in that dynamic. The impact of the athletic trainer coach relationship dives into the multi-faceted effects of that relationship as perceived by the student-athlete specifically regarding the pressures these student-athletes face.

Social Support Within Collegiate Athletics

When asked what social support means to them, the participants described social support as a relationship with an individual that involves communication, help, and encouragement. The person providing the support is described as someone always being there for them no matter what. This involves matters of athletics as well as encompasses other aspects of life such as academics, mental health, and personal matters. It was also noted as being important in the life of student-athletes to help them handle their experience.

> Social Support to me means like, helping somebody through, like, whatever the situation is. Whether it's like on them more but did not treat them differently. In addition to this level of socioemotional support, athletic trainers were able to provide instrumental support by providing contacts to mental health providers so that they could receive appropriate help. They're struggling with handling playing time, like your injuries or schoolwork, stuff at home, mental health issues, whatever the case may be, like, I feel like social support is like, AT, coach, whatever, like if they're willing to actually help you on a level that's like, besides football, or football included. (Rob Danner)

Overall, both coaches and athletic trainers were found to be major contributors to student-athletes' social support. Both parties were described as members of the social support network who listened to them when needed. Alison Wall describes a time she was injured and the support she received by saying, "That was like really hard because I couldn't play, and it just made me very homesick, and I would talk to [the athletic trainer] her." This type of support would fall under socioemotional and including topics outside of athletics with Eric Dean saying "like, you just talked to them about anything really. They look out for you to ask how you are doing, day to day". This form of support was most helpful with an open communication policy for the recipient and provider. An open communication policy meant the student-athlete felt they could walk into the athletic training room or office at any time to talk.

Athletic trainers were often described as being overly attentive and caring individuals' who were able to create an environment where students felt comfortable. They explained their athletic trainers were often quick to check in and make sure they were doing well. Student-athletes reported receiving more emotional type support. This socioemotional support was provided when players were having deep discussions with their athletic trainer. Participants explained they were able to be vulnerable with their athletic trainer.

This environment allowed for an element of deep trust between player and athletic trainer. That level of trust led some student-athletes to confide in athletic trainers about personal struggles and mental health. A few of the participants disclosed they

had dealt with mental health issues as Tim Stiles explained, "Because even though the athletic trainers help with injuries, they're still also there to help talk about anxiety and depression and stuff like that." These student-athletes shared their athletic trainers knew to check up

When asked about social support that was lacking, the most common response involved the athletic trainer not supporting the student-athletes. This included feeling like their athletic trainer was not supporting them enough. Tina Ross compared a previous athletic trainer to her current and stated, "Our last trainer was well liked, and she advocated for us, like a lot. And right now, our current trainer needs to step up a little bit more on that end." A need for more advocating from the athletic trainer was a common word used in the context of injury and specifically speaking with the coach.

When it came to coaches, this study found they provided more informational support than athletic trainers. This aligns with the nature of coaching. This informational support was described as providing advice both on and off the field. Providing the information to improve their performance as well as advice on life choices. Given their experiences, student-athletes felt they could go to their coach when in need of advice. Kiley Smith noted how she could turn to them for advice outside of sport, "And me getting older, I would turn to the coaches for support of bigger life decisions or things that you can talk to your friends about. But they have more input on just being older too." One participant, Rob Danner, opened up about the mental health support he received by saying, "Mental health issues I've struggled with, I think they're very open talking about that and how they can actually help me and provide support for me." A notable and encouraging finding was that some coaches were also able to provide instrumental support by connecting athletes with resources such as a sport psychologist, a professional who is educated in using psychological knowledge and skills to address optimal performance and well-being of athletes', as well as mental health peer support groups at the university.

Coaches were also described as individuals who pushed student-athletes to be better and challenged them to think about their decisions and actions. This also was provided on and off the field. Coaches were described as making student-athletes think about their decisions and actions, as well as pushing them to explore different life options. Participants said their coaches were there for them in times of need and were there for them beyond the typical roles of a coach. Coaches become sounding boards, advice givers, and oftentimes mentors for these young student-athletes.

For the social support that was lacking, participant's described inconsistency from coaches. Rob Danner described it as both "good and bad" and added, "There's been times where I felt like he's [coach] been supporting me, there's been times I felt like the opposite." They hoped for more consistent support often regarding injury to ease with the transition back into sport. Some also felt there was favoritism, explaining they felt some players receive more support from the coach than others.

Understanding Perceptions of the Athletic-Trainer Coach Relationship

The main purpose of the study was to understand how the relationship between

the athletic trainer and coach may impact the social support received by student-athletes. To better understand this, it was important to understand how the participants viewed the relationship between athletic trainer and coach. Participants were asked to describe the relationship between athletic trainer and coach and give examples of interactions they may have directly seen or heard about. It is important to note participants recalled current relationship dynamics as well as past relationship dynamics, which is reflected within the finding's sections.

Many of the participants were able to describe the relationship as good. Good communication was the prominent theme with these participants. Some of them stated they felt a sense that both athletic trainer and coach respected each other. Penny Doyle mentioned this by saying, "I think they have a pretty healthy relationship. Fortunately for us they knew each other prior to working together so they had established a [good] relationship already. They are extremely open and communicate." Student-athletes noted that while they do not see everything, they knew meetings took place and believed the right things were communicated based upon the way they were treated by both coach and athletic trainer. This trickled down to efficient practices and player return.

Student-athletes who perceived a more negative relationship between athletic trainer and coach recalled seeing negative interactions. These negative interactions were linked with two prominent causes: a lack of communication between the athletic trainer and coach or disagreement on whether or not the student-athlete can play due to an injury. Lack of communication was almost always regarding the status of a player's health. A common theme was athletic trainers not relaying enough information to the coaches about a player's health and status of play. Disagreements about whether a student-athlete could participate was one example provided.

> The coach started yelling at the trainer and the player for them being injured. And like, that's not something that you can necessarily help. Like, when they come back is when they come back. But yeah, it was a lot of pressure to get people back to play, not necessarily to make sure that they were 100% healthy and ready to go. (Jackie Landis)

> It's just when they get in arguments of trying to rush players back wanting them to be back quicker, because they want the best player, like they don't, they want the best for the team, but at the same time they are not really letting that person get healthy. (Tim Stiles)

One approach to getting more insight into the disagreements on an athlete's playing status, the participants were asked if they ever felt pressure to hide an injury. It was found that eight of the 11 student-athletes reported feeling pressure to play despite injury at one point or another during their time in the program. This pressure commonly came from coaches. One participant recalled a time where their coach told them to "push through" and tried to convince the athlete they were not actually injured.

If this pressure did not come from the coach, it was reported as being pressure from oneself or teammates. Participants noted feeling the need to play through an

injury due to pressures to play in an important game or feeling like their teammates were counting on them. Internal pressure was described as the feeling of wanting to play no matter what. These participants attributed their competitive nature to the culture of athletics.

Depth of Impact of the Athletic Trainer Coach Relationship

When asked seven of the 11 the student-athletes felt the relationship between athletic trainer and coach influenced the social support they received in some capacity. Both positive and negative perceptions were made about the status of the relationship described.

Participants who described a positive relationship between athletic trainer and coach explained this type of relationship made them feel an overall sense of support from both parties. The trust they saw between the athletic trainer and coach, made them trust their athletic trainer and coach more. They did not feel pressure to hide anything or choose one over the other. Having transparency between coach and athletic trainer and player was felt to be important in helping them. Participants used words like feeling secure and safe, Jackie Landis explained how it allowed her to enjoy the [student-athlete] experience more stating, "You feel like you have somebody that like, cares about, what's going on, on both sides." Another participant, Eric Dean, described the importance of the two being in agreement, "I mean, it [athletic trainer/coach relationship] makes me feel more comfortable [when] they're on the same level. So, if something is like truly bothering me or something's not right, then they'll be on the same page." These student-athletes knew support would be given and they could trust both parties to do their job to help them.

Participants who perceived a negative relationship between their athletic trainer and coach had varying takes on how it affected them. Some participants agreed it resulted in having less overall social support and a more challenging experience. This type of perceived relationship was described as uncomfortable and unstable with Penny Doyle stating, "It's [team culture/dynamic] an environment where everyone is comfortable with the uncomfortable, that's our motto. Where everyone is very uncomfortable a lot." Jackie Landis shared an experience that was negative and described an environment of fear saying, "In the past you were afraid [to be honest], I felt like was going to get in trouble." This led to her and her teammates staying quite about their needs and injuries. While one participant shared her mentality has shifted by saying, "it is what it is" going on to say, "I'm use to this mentality because I mean no one wants to cry wolf. I'm chill with it [the dynamic]." While she later went on to admit the relationship needs to improve, without change she has managed to adjust expectations. What they all had in common was the feeling this type of relationship caused a lack of trust in their athletic trainers and coaches in turn leading to a lack of social support being provided for the student-athletes. Some being left some with a desire for more support.

Participants who felt a pressure to play also admitted this led to downplaying injuries to meet goals and expectations set by themselves. These student-athletes were often aware of incidents where coaches pressured athletic trainers to return athletes

to play sooner than expected. Some witnessed first-hand experiences of a coach dis-agreeing with an athletic trainers' medical decision. Incidents like these caused fear of reporting injury. Student-athletes described being worried coaches would dismiss their injury claim and others even admitted to not being truthful with their athletic trainer about injuries for fear of a coach's opinion or retribution.

The athletes who had positive perceptions felt good, reassured, and well sup-ported overall. Honesty and trust were prioritized within this context. Those who had negative perceptions felt like there were things missing, such as trust.

> It's almost like the AT was almost like forced to turn his back on injuries and stuff like that. There was a lot of lying involved on my end, in terms of I don't know, if it was just because I didn't trust like I was going to receive the help. (Rob Danner)

Those participants also expressed a want for the relationship to improve. They felt improving the relationship would help them recover from injuries, play better, and feel more secure within their team. They deemed this relationship to play a big role in their experience. Discomfort and uncomfortable were common themes. Further-more, the underlying pressure to play weakened the overall support provided by both athletic trainer and coach. There is an element of fear in how being injured is perceived by teammates and coaches. This fear creates a barrier to student-athletes receiving support.

> Well like, by your teammates, and stuff, like you don't want to feel like, like, weak or look weak, so like you may like, just like, you know, try to hide it. So, like, it doesn't seem like you're like trying to act hurt to not practicing you know. (Jordan Tanner)

Discussion

The findings above demonstrate a possible link between the quality of the athlet-ic trainer and coach relationship and the overall support received by student-athletes. Those who reported a positive athletic trainer and coach relationship also reported a more generally positive sense of overall social support within their social support network. These participants described a better overall environment that included honesty and an open-door communication policy. These participants felt less pres-sure to play while injured allowing them to seek more support from both athletic trainer and coach. These findings align with Hayden and Lynch's study (2011) that stated open communication between athletic trainer and coach allows for a more supportive and conducive environment as it pertains to injury rehabilitation but fur-thermore, that it allows for more social support all around.

Participants who described a negative athletic trainer and coach relationship were often the same participants who described a more unstable and challenging experience as a student-athlete. Lack of trust along with a feeling of being uncom-fortable was prominently reported by these participants. They elaborated by stating they did not feel supported which led to disappointment. This environment led par-ticipants to play while injured and not be truthful about injuries. This environment

lacked psychological safety. Participants did not feel they could speak freely and in fact monitored what they revealed and to whom. The perceptions of a negative athletic trainer and coach relationship all centered around injuries and pressures to play. Close to 75% of the participants revealed feeling this discussed pressure to play while injured. Pressure experienced was linked to pressure from oneself, teammates, as well as coaches. Their pressure to play despite being injured would coincide with Kroshu's (2015) study that reported 64.4% of clinicians experienced pressure to return athletes to play with women reporting more pressure from coaches compared to men. If the individuals responsible for allowing the athlete to return to sport experience pressure one can understand how an athlete might experience similar pressure. Several of the student-athletes reported being pressured to return to play despite injuries. While questionable, this practice is common. Kroshus (2015) explored pressures experienced by clinicians to return athletes to play prematurely and like our findings, Kroshus's research found the pressure to play negatively impacts student-athletes overall well-being. This further highlights the negative impact this has on social support which this research set out to discover. These participants also noted room for improvement regarding their team atmosphere. They expressed that a negative team atmosphere heightened stressors causing them to wish for a more comfortable environment. This type of environment led to less social support for these student-athletes. This is in direct opposition of the atmosphere of those with positive athletic trainer and coach relationships who described the atmosphere as comforting and allowed them to enjoy their experience.

The findings were consistent with previous research on athletic trainers and coaches being major contributors of social support for athletes. All the participants revealed they relied on both athletic trainers and coaches in some form to support them in times of need and to help them through a variety of situations. Also, student-athletes involved with this research explained ways in which they needed support from both individuals to help them get through injuries and recovery. As Yang et al. (2010) found, the need for social support increased by instances of injury. If social support was lacking when dealing with an injury, participants expressed wanting it to change and feeling disappointed. As described above, if there is an unwillingness to seek support for an injury or pressure to keep playing despite injury, this in turns means these athletes are lacking the social support that research has shown is needed during those times. The findings support the idea that a good working relationship between athletic trainer and coach, results in the student-athlete receiving maximal social support.

Implications

There are a few elements of this research study that need to be highlighted for practical considerations, as other athletic programs and departments work to improve the well-being of student-athletes.

For the individuals involved in providing social support, the key takeaway should be how much it appears athletes rely on social support from athletic trainers and coaches. More so, athletic trainers and coaches may be made aware of how they

can best support their student-athletes to make for a more supportive team environment but furthermore be held more accountable. Understanding how much their relationship impacts the social support of the student-athlete should enable them to work together to achieve the same goals. In this context, the prevalence of pressure to play while injured experienced by these student-athletes should be highly considered when athletic trainers and coaches work together. These individuals arguably spend the most time with student-athletes and a team approach has the potential to decrease said pressures and further aid in mental well-being. Perhaps most importantly, this research shows that by improving the relationship and limiting the pressures, it has the potential to increase the social support that the student-athlete can receive.

Supervisors within athletics and sports medicine should work to maintain an efficient and positive work environment between departments. Continuous education on the roles of athletic trainers within athletics may also help to improve the disconnect and misunderstandings that often exists between coaches and athletic trainers. Both departments should prioritize healthy communication and could incorporate communication workshops. Such a workshop might include learning tools for better communication, education on the art of listening in the workplace, and acting out scenarios on conflict resolution. Improvement of psychological safety should be a component of such workshops as well. Emphasis on creating a work environment were feedback from coach, student-athletes, and athletic trainers is encouraged and valued to optimize team culture.

Knowing how common it may be for student-athletes to play injured, there is potential for athletic programs to implement strategies to combat this added pressure. The first strategy should be creating an open dialogue on the matter. This can begin at the grassroots level with individual teams and athletic departments but should also be considered for incorporation into national coaching association meetings, National Athletic Trainers Association (NATA) meetings, and Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) meetings. The goal of these discussions would be for members to talk about their experiences with student-athlete pressures to play, their role in the pressure, and advocating for the student-athlete. Following the discussion, the second strategy is to create and implement workshops based on the findings of the discussion. This would include educating coaches and athletic trainers on how they contribute to the pressure, as well as educating coaches on the risks associated with student-athletes playing injured. The overall goal would be for all parties to understand the impact their words and decisions may have. Subsequently, teams, programs, and administrators should examine how to handle these pressures and discuss sustainable ways of creating an environment that does not create added pressures. These strategies should be continuous; in that, there should always be an open dialogue, as well as workshops to enlighten stakeholders on the risks associated with playing injured.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to this research study that need to be addressed. First, this study only considered the perspective of student-athletes, not looking into those

of coaches and athletic trainers. Future research should include athletic trainers and coaches as research participants. Gaining an insight into the perspectives of athletic trainers and coaches could provide additional information that may help administrators improve the experiences as well as the well-being of student-athletes. Second, these student-athletes may have close relations and interactions with their coaches or athletic trainers compared to the relations and interactions with other members of their programs. This can either skew the information shared or bias their perspectives and responses. Therefore, other members of the program, such as the strength and conditioning coaches, sports dietitian, assistant coaches, managers, etc., should be included as research respondents.

The transferability of this research, the degree in which the findings can be transferred to other contexts or settings is unknown. With only 11 student-athletes involved in this research, future research is needed to widen the pool of participants and to capture other perspectives. A larger number of participants at more than one institution may allow for generalizability. The use of quantitative research methods could be used to expand the impact of the communicative relationship between athletic trainers and coaches.

Lastly, although the researchers took great steps in making research participants anonymous, interviewing former student-athletes in future research can limit cognitive dissonance. Student-athletes may find it difficult or uncomfortable to share their perspective on the communicative relationship between coaches and athletic trainers for fear of punishment. With these limitations, there are certainly opportunities to expand upon the current research and findings to better shed light and understanding of the impacts of the athletic trainer coach relationship.

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