



Adversity and Resiliency: Athlete Experiences within U.S. College Sport

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Research regarding the benefits and detriments of the U.S. collegiate sport governance structure are mixed. Guided by Richardson's Resiliency Theory (2002), former athletes (n = 215) revealed specific themes of adversity experienced during college with the most prevalent including injury, time demands, and coach-athlete tension. Through interview, athletes noted adversity promoted their resiliency, facilitated grit/perseverance, enhanced teamwork and time management skills, and led to other forms of growth. This study extends our understanding of the long-term impacts of competitive sport participation in this context. This understanding is important for administrators seeking to maximize participant experiences and emulate, enhance, or reform the U.S. College Sport governance model.

Key words: Intercollegiate athletics, Sport for development, Sport participation

The collegiate athletics model in the United States hinges on an underlying premise that elite-level competitive sport is housed within higher education because it inherently contains educational and developmental value (Brand, 2006; Weight et al., 2015). This unique American tradition is rooted in the belief that physical activity enhances character development of its participants (Putney, 2009; Hoffman, 2020). Traditionally, athletics leaders have argued that competitive sport in the academy builds admirable traits such as physical and intellectual toughness while attracting students who value the same traits (Ingrassia, 2012; Putney, 2009). Rooted in these philosophical undertones, the U.S. intercollegiate athletics model is distinct from athletics systems in other parts of the world (Clotfelter, 2019; Ingrassia, 2012).

This unique structure of intercollegiate athletics comes with a host of drawbacks. Scholars have noted the negative influence of commercialization which can



hinder student identity development, academic success, and preparation for life after sport (Di Lu et al., 2018; Foster & Huml, 2014; Gurney et al., 2017). With suspended NCAA Bylaw 12 amateurism rules as of July 1, 2021, athletes are now able to financially benefit from their own name, image, and likeness (NIL). This dramatic shift in the fiber of NCAA governance has ushered in a new era of commercial opportunities and pressures which further undermine the “student-athlete” edifice, particularly in football and men’s basketball (Clotfelter, 2019; NCAA Student Athletes, 2021; Nocera & Strauss, 2016). NIL chances compound the already extensive commitments of athlete’s time, leaving limited opportunities for athletes to pursue their studies or high impact educational experiences such as clubs, internships, or guided research (Gaston-Gayles, 2004). Unique pressures specific to the collegiate athletic experience have also been linked to an increased risk for developing mental disorders and adversity in social, psychological, and physical spheres (Galli & Vealey, 2008; Hayden, 2018; Humphrey et al., 2000; Reardon et al., 2019).

Contrasting this research, a large body of scholarship notes beneficial aspects of athletics participation within collegiate institutions. Research suggests sport participation facilitates experiential educational which develops psychological grit, resiliency, leadership, time-management, teamwork, and empowerment (Chalfin et al., 2015; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007; Weight et al., 2014; Weight et al., 2018). Similarly, participation has been linked with positive cognitive outcomes such as critical thinking, academic achievement, logic, and reason (Gayles & Hu, 2009; Plunkett et al., 2016).

Given these two often divergent bodies of literature, we address this crucial area of sport management through retrospective interviews. We focus on the adversity and resiliency of college athletes to explore the cost-benefit of the athletics experience and by drawing on athletes from highly commercial sports of Division I football and men’s basketball ($n = 75$) and other sports and divisions ($n = 140$). Specifically, the purpose of this study was to examine former college athletes’ perceptions of adversity and the retrospective impacts of these adverse experiences through the lens of Richardson’s Resiliency Model (2002). This athletics phenomenon was explored through the following research questions:

RQ1: What types of adversity do former athletes recall experiencing through sport?

RQ2: How have experiences of adversity affected athletes in life after sport?

Theoretical Framework

Richardson’s Resiliency Model (Richardson et al., 1990; Richardson, 2002) guided the conceptualization of this study. The authors selected this theory as a frame to explore the disconnect in literature on the effects of participation in U.S. college sport. According to Luthar and Cicchetti (2000), *adversity* encompasses negative life circumstances that are known to be statistically associated with adjustment difficulties. *Resiliency* is the process of coping with disruptive, stressful, or challenging

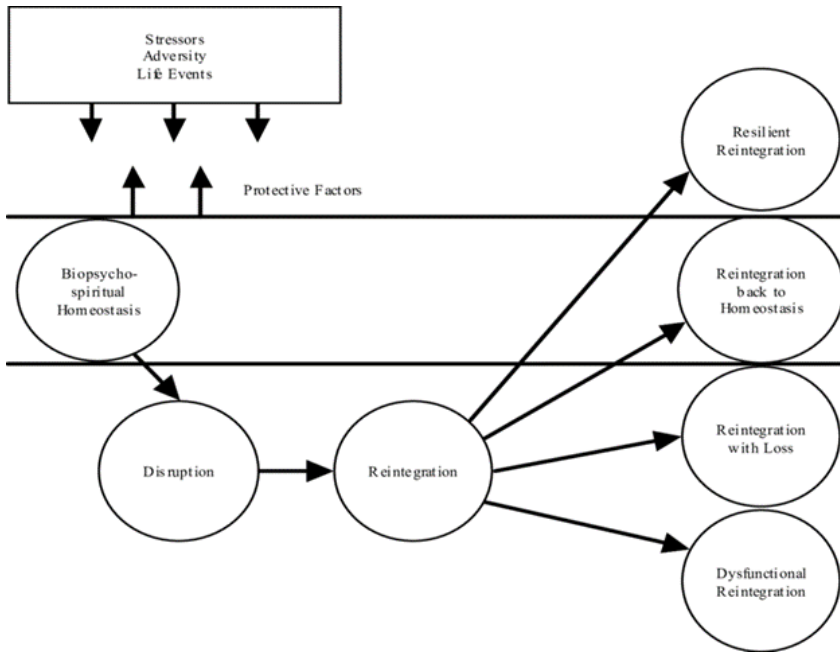
life events in a way that provides the individual with more protective and coping skills than they had prior to the disruption (Richardson et al., 1990). Richardson's Resiliency Model postulates that resilience is key in maintaining biopsychospiritual homeostasis within an individual (Richardson, 2002). Thus, humans use resilience to react to a stressor in an effort to restore this balance, with an overall goal of achieving resilient reintegration, or overcoming an obstacle after the initial adversity (Richardson, 2002).

Richardson postulates when faced with adversity, a person may feel discomfort and/or doubt. Given their individual biopsychospiritual protective factors and the envirosocial protective processes available to cope with the stressor, they may quickly bounce back to homeostasis (Richardson et al., 1990). At times, however, stressors invoke a disruption to their homeostasis which leads to disorganization (see Figure 1). After disruption to an individual's biopsychospiritual homeostasis, Richardson and colleagues (1990) postulate reintegration occurs in one of four ways: (1) resilient reintegration, (2) reintegration back to homeostasis, (3) reintegration with loss, or (4) dysfunctional reintegration (Richardson, 2002). *Resilient reintegration* demonstrates insight and growth following adversity. Individuals combat stressors through an introspective experience involving the identification and nurturing of resilient qualities. This process provides additional protective elements for individuals when facing future trials yielding growth through the adversity. Alternatively, when individuals stay in their comfort zones and seek to move past or avoid disruptions, opportunities for introspective growth through adversity is surrendered and the *reintegration back to homeostasis* simply occurs. The final two reintegrative options in the model signify loss. *Reintegration with loss* indicates people give up some elements of hope, drive, or motivation because of the stressor. Often in these cases reintegration back to homeostasis may not be an option due to permanent life changes, injury, or loss. Finally, *dysfunctional reintegration* denotes limitations in introspective skills and the utilization of destructive behaviors, substances, and other methods to cope with stressful life prompts. Generally, therapy is necessary to supplement limitations for individuals in these cases (Richardson et al., 1990; Richardson, 2002).

Scholars who have tested this model note that those who exhibit resilience are more likely to display problem solving skills, the ability to delay gratification, self-efficacy, task-orientation, psychological flexibility, the ability to bounce back from adversity, self-motivation, a strong capacity for learning, and personal introspection (Gucciardi et al., 2011; Hayden, 2018; Kumpfer, 2002; Richardson, 2002). These findings are reminiscent of previous scholarship noting the associations with athletics participation (Chalfin et al., 2015; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Weight et al., 2014; Weight et al., 2018). In the current research, we postulate these elements of resilience (and thus resilient reintegration) may emerge through the adversity and educational environment associated with collegiate athletic participation.

Figure 1.

Richardson’s resiliency model. Adapted from Richardson (2002)



While Richardson’s Resiliency Model has a long and documented history in the field of psychology (e.g. Connor & Davidson, 2003; Kumpfer, 2002), it has limited application in sport research (e.g. Galli & Vealey, 2008; Podlog & Eklund, 2006). Galli and Vealey (2008) used Richardson’s Resiliency Model in interviews with 10 current and former college athletes to explore the prevalence of adversity and how individuals reacted to these experiences. The authors found that while athletes often viewed their struggles with adversity as painful, these same experiences strengthened their ability to react in a better fashion in similar future situations. Galli and Vealey’s (2008) research is significant for two reasons: (1) it examined athletes’ adversity and resiliency experiences through Richardson’s Resiliency Model, and (2) findings suggested a link between athletics-related adversity and personal growth/improvement later in life. The current research extends this scholarship through an expanded sample and retrospective perspective on the impacts of adversity.

Podlog and Eklund (2006) noted similar results in a study examining the experiences of 12 competitive athletes encountering one of sports’ most adverse situations: recovering from an injury. Athletes noted the ways in which they had to overcome fears about returning to sport, potential reinjury, how they fit in with a team that had moved on without them, and re-examining their autonomy (Podlog & Eklund, 2006). However, the participants also highlighted that injury could be a positive force in

building their self-belief, determination, and resiliency. Results demonstrated that while emotionally difficult, injury may give athletes opportunities to set reachable goals to work toward in hope of returning to play (Podlug & Eklund, 2006). Such positive framing by the athletes suggested that resilience reflects a personal growth response despite significant obstacles that may manifest within one's life (Luthar et al., 2015; Martin-Krumm et al., 2003). Building upon these studies, we examined retrospective perceptions of adversity through sport and long-term impacts on life after sport through a broad sample of athletes. We used Richardson's Resiliency Model (2002) to categorize athlete adaptations to these stressors and their reintegration.

Literature Review

The body of research on the athlete experience in U.S. college sport provides foundational information related to issues encountered within this governance structure context. Of primary focus is the balance of academics and athletics commitments (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007; Gaston-Gayles, 2004; Gayles & Hu, 2009), and athlete rights and commercial exploitation (Clotfelter, 2019; Gurney et al., 2017; Lumpkin, 2008; Sack & Staurowsky, 2006).

Intercollegiate Athletics Experience

Academic and Athletic Time Demand Adversity

At the heart of the college athlete experience in the NCAA governance structure, are the extreme academic and athletic time demand requirements. Athletes juggle time spent between school and sport, with many choosing the latter (Gurney et al., 2017). In a study comparing time commitments of college students, athletes, and musicians from top-ranked universities, athletes spent significantly less time on academics than both comparison populations, though less time on athletics than their musician classmates (who earn credit for their music studies) spent on music (Weight et al., 2020). Pacific-12 conference athletes have reported spending an average of 50 hours per week on athletics obligations (Student-Athlete Time Demands, 2015). While 93% were satisfied with their general collegiate experience, 66% cited lack of free time as the biggest challenge of being a college athlete, followed by 61% who reported academic challenges (Student-Athlete Time Demands, 2015). Research by the NCAA contends that the average Division I athlete spends roughly 34 hours per week on athletics (NCAA, 2016). Such findings have prompted research into the athlete academic experience.

In a study of almost 2,000 first year football and men's basketball athletes, Comeaux and Harrison (2007) found athletes' time spent with faculty positively correlated with overall GPA. This was particularly true for white players, but these interactions were not as beneficial for Black players who encountered additional forms of adversity on campuses including intellectual stereotypes and racism (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007). When athletes are more integrated into their campuses—both inside and outside of athletics—they are more likely to exhibit academic motivation, find educational success, and eventually matriculate (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

However, due to strenuous time demands stemming from sport participation, such integration is often challenging (Simiyu, 2010), particularly for athletes in the most commercialized sports of football and men's basketball (Clotfelter, 2019; Gurney et al., 2017).

Coaches play pivotal roles in athletes' academic opportunities and experiences. Critics of intercollegiate athletics note that coaches may encourage athletes to enroll in less strenuous majors so they can simply maintain eligibility while dedicating more effort to athletics (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Smith & Willingham, 2015). Scholarship notes that such pressures to forego education, simply maintain eligibility, and win-at-all-costs are particularly prominent in the revenue generating sports of football and men's basketball (Gurney et al., 2017; Nocera & Strauss, 2016; Smith & Willingham, 2015). Research using Division I athletes' exit interviews and surveys by Harry (2021), however, noted a vast majority of athletes worked with coaches who were supportive of their academic endeavors. Thus, the research on coach influence on academic experiences for athletes is mixed and in need of further examination.

Athletics participation places significant amounts of stress on athletes (Gayles, 2004; Simiyu, 2010), which are examples of adversity this unique student population must overcome. In a survey of over 100 former college athletes, Plunkett and colleagues (2016) asked athletes to discuss the three biggest hinderances they faced in achieving academic-athletic balance. The respondents noted that themselves (33.3%), friends (23.4), and coaches (18%) were their top three barriers to balance. However, self (79.3%), family (38.7%), and friends (36.9%) were simultaneously viewed as the biggest facilitators of balance (Plunkett et al., 2016). Coaches, friends, and family are common sources of informational and emotional support, which are important components for building resiliency in athletes (Harry & Weight, 2021).

Commercialization and Exploitation Adversity

Discussion of the college athlete experience would not be complete without highlighting the role of commercialization. Athletes are competing in an environment that is increasingly commercialized (Clotfelter, 2019; NCAA Student Athletes, 2021). Critics of intercollegiate athletics as currently operated contend that athletics leaders operate thinly veiled commercial enterprises disguised as educational entities (Clotfelter, 2019; Gurney et al., 2017; Lumpkin, 2008). Perhaps the most contentious part of athletics commercialization is that athletes have not traditionally received direct compensation from athletics departments, conferences, or the NCAA, despite generating millions of dollars for coaches and institutions (Clotfelter, 2019; NCAA Student Athletes, 2021; Nocera & Strauss, 2016). This is particularly true of the athletes in football and men's basketball. For example, men's basketball players competing in March Madness help the NCAA bring in almost \$870 million, which is 80% of the revenue generated by the NCAA over the course of one fiscal year (NCAA, 2022). This revenue, rather than distributed back to the athletes who helped generate it, is instead dispersed across the Association and provided to member divisions, conferences, and institutions.

Increased commercialization has led scholars to argue that athletes are used as commodities, rather than treated as students (Gurney et al., 2017). Thus, athletes often encounter significant adversity related to their rights and exploitation. Exploitation is also intertwined with race. The overall Black athlete population in the NCAA is 21%; however, in the revenue-generating sports of Division I football and men's basketball, Black athletes comprise 47% and 55% of the sport populations, respectively (NCAA, 2019). Furthermore, there currently exists significant discrepancies between Black participants, Black coaching staff members, and Black leaders in administration (Lapchick, 2021; NCAA, 2019). With notable numbers of revenue sport participants identifying as Black, combined with the relative low visibility rates of Black coaches and/or administrators, it is clear how athletes of color perceive inequalities and exploitation to be contributory to adversity faced in college.

For example, Van Rheenen (2011) surveyed 581 athletes across various sports about their feelings of exploitation. Athletes were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements: (a) "ometimes I feel that I am being taken advantage of as an athlete," (b) "I give more to the university than it gives to me," and (c) "This university make too much money off its athletes, who see very little of it" (Van Rheenen, 2011). Seventy-one percent of athletes in revenue-generating sports expressed feelings of exploitation. Differences in athlete race were also visible: While 26% of white athletes noted feeling exploited, this number jumped to 63% for Black athletes. The chances a Black athlete felt exploited were nearly five times greater than the chance of a white athlete voicing a similar feeling (Van Rheenen, 2011). Feelings of exploitation are one kind of adversity athletes may encounter during their time in college important to understand when considering resiliency and reintegration.

Impact of Intercollegiate Athletics Experience

A growing body of literature has explored links between college sport participation and post-sport psychosocial and economic measures. Through survey analysis of 434 Division I athletes, Weight et al. (2016) reported that the overwhelming majority (85%) of athletes in the sample reported their athletic experience as a positive contributory factor in their overall education. Furthermore, athletics participation was linked with the development of self-reported personal characteristics including self-confidence, empowerment, time management, teamwork, empowerment, and achievement of balance (Weight et al., 2016). These findings are echoed by other scholars (Brand, 2006; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Plunkett et al., 2016), who found perseverance, balance/time management, working with a team, and dealing with criticism to be the biggest overall lessons learned through athletics participation. Thus, some scholars have noted that intercollegiate athletics allows athletes to acquire and enhance transferrable skills for life after sport (Brand, 2006; Paule & Gilson, 2010).

Such transferrable skill development may be tied to athletes' job marketability, retention, and satisfaction (Weight et al., 2016; Zwecher, 2014). For example, Weight et al. (2018) surveyed former athletes ($n = 472$) and non-athletes ($n = 520$) 10 to 40 years removed from athletics participation or college. Athletes in this sample reported higher levels of perceived job satisfaction, higher reported salary, total

work engagement, teamwork attribution, promotion rates, communication rates, and work-related dedication compared to non-athletes regardless of gender, race, graduation cohort, and industry. Supporting these findings, scholars have argued that transferrable lessons gleaned from athletics participation can be used to positively impact the life of an individual after the cessation of their athletic career (Hayden, 2018; Plunkett et al., 2016; Weight et al., 2016; Weight et al., 2018; Zwecher, 2014). Similarly, Weight et al. (2022) explored human capital resource emergence through sport found six primary knowledge, skills, attributes and other characteristics (KSAOs) the author's labelled as "The Athlete Advantage" including drive, resilience, emotional intelligence, teamwork, leadership, and confidence.

There is also literature that documents associations between participation in intercollegiate athletics and health and well-being outcomes (DeFreese et al, 2021). Participation in college sport has been linked with lower levels of health-related quality of life because "the demands of Division I athletics may result in injuries that linger into adulthood and possibly make participants incapable of staying active as they age" (Simon & Docherty, 2014; p. 1). Additionally, college sport has been linked with long-term risk of incurring a disabling physical condition (Brooks et al., 2014). In contrast, Kerr et al. (2014) compared general population norms with physical and mental health outcomes of graduated athletes (ages 18-54) at one institution ($n = 797$). Most outcomes were similar between the groups; however, athletes were less likely to have depression, bipolar, or attention deficit disorders, and more likely to exhibit alcohol dependence or disordered eating.

Building on these divergent bodies of literature on the experience and impact of participation in U.S. college sport, we utilized a retrospective approach to examine athlete perceptions of adversity and the impact of the experiences. There are few studies that collect retrospective data from athletes after their careers end. Retrospective data collection allows participants ample time for reflection and improved ability to make meaning of their previous experiences about adversity and resiliency. Additionally, with the targeted large sample of revenue sport athletes from Division I men's basketball and football, we sought to gain understanding about the differences in athlete experiences with adversity and resilience between those within and outside of highly commercialized contexts.

Methods

Given the exploratory, subjective target of the inquiry, we utilized a descriptive qualitative interview-based study design (Babbie, 2021). Semi-structured interviews lasting 30-90 minutes ($n = 215$) were conducted over three years yielding over 1,000 pages of single-spaced coded transcripts. The interviews were a part of a larger study exploring experiences of participation in college athletics. Questions utilized for this study were:

1. What are some of your bad memories or worst experiences as an athlete?
2. What did you learn from these experiences?

Interviewers were prompted to probe until they felt confident in the root of the stressors and reintegration outcomes (Richardson, 2002) specific to the stressors mentioned by the athlete interviewees.

Sample

Participants were recruited using chain referral sampling, which entails a “series of participant referrals to others who have experienced the phenomenon of interest” (Penrod et al., 2003, p. 102). Semi-structured interviews were utilized due to the researchers’ desire to obtain a deep, yet understandable sample of data in a conversational manner (Miles et al., 2020). To achieve a broad range of data collection, sample chains began from 18 distinct researchers trained in interview methods. Participants must have competed in intercollegiate athletics and be at least five years removed from their college athletic experience. Each interviewer utilized the same interview guide, and the study primary investigator reviewed each interview to ensure validity and reliability. Six interviews that included deviations from the interview protocol were not included in the final sample.

The sample of 215 former college athletes skewed toward Caucasian (72.1%, $n = 155$) men (73.49%, $n = 158$) who participated in Division I athletics (78.60%, $n = 169$) (see Table 1). The remaining participants self-identified as Black/African-American (20%, $n = 44$), Hispanic (0.47%, $n = 1$), or Pacific Islander (0.47%, $n = 1$). Participants competed in 20 distinct sports while in college (see Table 2), with the most common sports being football (20.98%, $n = 47$), baseball (15.2%, $n = 52$), and men’s basketball (13%, $n = 29$). While the vast majority of participants participated in Division I athletics, others did so at the Division II (7.44%, $n = 16$) or Division III (12.09%, $n = 26$) level. Division I football and men’s basketball athletes included (34.9% of the sample, $n = 75$). See a full listing of sample demographic data in Table 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews with participants were conducted either in person, telephone, or Zoom video conferencing depending on the interviewee’s preference. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and imported into ATLAS.ti software for analysis. An inductive approach (Cresswell, 2009) was utilized to code types of athlete adversity and perceived impacts of adversity to develop an inclusive catalogue of sport-related stressors and outcomes paired with rich examples included from the interview data. Independent researchers used memoing to develop a code-list based on emergent themes and patterns in the first round of review (Miles et al., 2020). After the two independent coders reached a level of saturation in their code lists, they compared themes and agreed upon nine adversity codes and six outcome codes to direct the next round of coding (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Next, deductive coding was utilized relative to the four types of post-stress reintegration guided by Richardson’s Resiliency Model (2002): resilient reintegration, reintegration back to homeostasis, reintegration with loss, and dysfunctional reintegration.

The large sample facilitated a rich source of varied experiences, and data saturation provided evidence of validity (Creswell, 2009). Inter-coder reliability was tested via the Coding Analysis Toolkit (CAT) add-on tool to ATLAS.ti to demonstrate reliability and validity of the coding scheme utilized. The entire dataset was independently reviewed by two coders indicating high levels of inter-coder agreement on the adversity codes ($\alpha = .927$), outcome codes ($\alpha = .941$), and reintegration codes ($\alpha = 1.000$).

Table 1
Demographic Information

| | % | <i>n</i> |
|----------------------------|-----|----------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 73% | 158 |
| Female | 27% | 57 |
| Ethnicity | | |
| White | 72% | 155 |
| Black | 21% | 44 |
| Other | 7% | 16 |
| Grad Year by Decade | | |
| 1970's | 5% | 11 |
| 1980's | 21% | 46 |
| 1990's | 30% | 64 |
| 2000's | 26% | 56 |
| 2010's | 18% | 38 |
| Sport | | |
| Football | 22% | 47 |
| Baseball | 16% | 34 |
| Men's Basketball | 13% | 29 |
| Men's Soccer | 7% | 15 |
| Women's Basketball | 7% | 15 |
| Swimming | 7% | 14 |
| Women's Soccer | 6% | 12 |
| Track and Field | 6% | 12 |
| Other | 21% | 46 |
| Division Level | | |
| NCAA Division I | 79% | 169 |
| NCAA Division II | 7% | 16 |
| NCAA Division III | 12% | 26 |
| NAIA/NJCAA | 2% | 4 |

Note: "Other" sports in order of prevalence include: W Tennis, M Tennis, Wrestling, Volleyball, Cross Country, M Lacrosse, M Golf, Rowing, W Lacrosse, Cheer, Gymnastics, Ice Hockey. There were n = 9 multi-sport athletes.

n = 215

Adversity themes included injury, balancing school and sport, coach-athlete tension, athletic failure, pressure to perform, teammate conflict, miscellaneous, feeling undervalued, and racism. Adversity effects themes included grit/perseverance, development of teamwork skills, time management, patience, depression/self-doubt, and humility.

Results

Sources of Adversity in Athletics Experiences

Participants discussed nine major categories of adversity they experienced while competing in collegiate athletics (see Table 2). Themes included injury (38.6%), balancing school with sport (37.7%), coach-athlete tension (33.5%), athletic failure (27.4%), performance pressure (17.2%), teammate conflict (8.8%), miscellaneous (8.8%), feeling undervalued (6.1%) and racism (4.2%). Many athletes cited multiple forms of adversity.

Table 2

Adversity encountered through athletics experience

| | % | <i>n</i> |
|-----------------------------------|-------|----------|
| Injury | 38.6% | 83 |
| Balancing athletics and academics | 37.7% | 81 |
| Coach-athlete tension | 33.5% | 72 |
| Athletic failure | 27.4% | 59 |
| Performance pressure | 17.2% | 37 |
| Teammate conflict | 8.8% | 19 |
| Miscellaneous | 8.8% | 19 |
| Feeling undervalued | 6.1% | 13 |
| Racism | 4.2% | 9 |

N = 215

Number of Unique Codes = 555

Injury

Injury was identified as a source of adversity during participant's collegiate athletics experience by 38.6% of respondents. Participants routinely recalled unhappiness from their injuries:

I broke both bones in my leg against NC State in 1995, which was my very last football game and it just was a major blow to me personally. I still have repercussions from that injury. It kind of ripped football away from me, so I had to deal with that sort of the psychological mess that came with that

because I'd been a football player...It was the first time in my life I was not able to play because of being hurt (White Male Division I Football 1996 Graduate)

As mentioned by this athlete, many of the injury narratives were paired with discussions of identity foreclosure related to being a high performing athlete:

Basketball was all that I had ever known. So, when you get injured, everything is taken from you. Your normal routine, your love, the practices, everything... So, you already have the emotion of being injured and having to go under the knife or having to rehab or not knowing when you're going to be able to come back and play. But then you also have that left out feeling because life goes on, you know, the sport continues, your coaches continue to play other players and you might not be included in the practice because you might have a doctor's appointment or you are in rehab. When you're in a team environment and you face that injury, it's very emotional, not just a physical injury but also emotional (White Female Division I Basketball 2001 Graduate).

Balancing School and Sport

The second most prevalent theme experienced by 37.67% of participants was related to adversity associated with balancing school and sport commitments. Participants mentioned the need to navigate extremely demanding combined stressors associated with maintaining standards in the classroom as well as on the playing field. A former Division I baseball player recalled, "Balancing hard academics and sport was not easy but it paid off in my time management skills" (White Male Division I Baseball 2014 Graduate). This sentiment was echoed by others who sought to find an equilibrium between excellence on the court and in the classroom:

Playing for a such a storied program, basketball was a huge commitment between time on the court, film, travel, and recovery...I really had to plan out my days and my weeks, and make sure there was a balance. Time management and organization were essential in being able to be successful at both athletics and academics (Black Male Division I Basketball 2005 Graduate).

Similarly, "There were semesters that are basically a blur because of how busy I was. I had a tough school schedule and I worked my butt off in lacrosse which took a lot of time (White Female Division III Lacrosse 2017 Graduate). Athletes often expressed "...there was not enough time in the day to get everything done at an acceptable level. Everything suffered because of it (Black Male Division I Soccer 2003 Graduate).

Coach-Athlete Tension

A third emergent theme of adversity experienced by 33.49% was coach-athlete tension. Roughly 1/3 of participants viewed their coach as a major determinant to the quality of their athletic experience. These relationships were described as tenuous, complicated, terrible, frustrating, bad, horrible, and infuriating, with athletes

describing hatred, abuse, regret, and disdain with regard to the power coaches held over their playing time, college experience, and athletic legacy.

[The relationship was] miserable...[My coach] is dead to me. I had three more years...I played a year, and I had three more years of eligibility...I missed out on a lot of good memories. Road trips, friendships, I lost friends from leaving. People were like 'I can't believe you're letting him get the best of you.' But I just didn't want to waste my four years of college being treated the way I was. Eight or nine guys were his favorites, and the rest of us were called names no human being ever should be called...and he didn't care (White Male Division II Baseball 1999 Graduate).

This disdain was echoed by others: "My relationship with [my coach] is very bad. I don't have any respect for him...I learned a lot about what not to do, how not to treat people, how not to put other people first before you (White Male Division I Wrestling 2009 Graduate).

Other Adversity Sources

Athletes also cited athletic failure (27.44%) as a source of adversity related to collegiate athletics. Athletes cited disappointing losses, not meeting their own expectations in practice or competition situations, or not performing as well as they were supposed to during a specific instance or generally throughout their athletic career. Often these narratives were paired with other stressors, such as pressure to perform (17.21%). A former women's tennis athlete reflected on this nexus of failure and pressure:

I definitely had my fair share in bad experiences as a collegiate athlete...at our first away match of my freshman season we were playing at Alabama and my head coach came up to me and said 'the girl you are playing really wanted your scholarship, but we gave it to you instead. So prove to us we made the right decision.' I went on the court and lost very quickly because of the pressure the coach had put on me by saying that. That was a very low point for me especially as a freshman. I transferred soon after that (White Female Division I Tennis 2014 Graduate).

Less often, athletes recalled adversity stemming from teammate conflict (8.84%) miscellaneous origins (8.84%), feeling undervalued (6.05%), and instances of racism (4.19%). Related to teammate adversity, one athlete noted, "We had very different personalities and people who we weren't necessarily super close on the team... We had to figure out that there are good things about everybody, and there are bad things about everybody" (White, Female, Division III Volleyball 2005 Graduate). This feeling was supported by another athlete who recalled getting into fights with his teammates: "At the end of the day we would have to work together regardless if we liked each other or not" (Black Male Division II Football 1991 Graduate).

Miscellaneous sources of adversity listed by 8.84% of participants. These miscellaneous forms of adversity included physical and psychological stress, homesickness, transition difficulties, and the overall experience. For example, one participant recalled the struggles associated with conditioning drills:

The worst times were winter conditioning...and fall camps, where they... not to say they tried to kill you, but they wanted to bring you as close to your breaking point as possible... they broke us down...so we would have adversity, but we just fought through it” (Black Male Division I Football 2009 Graduate).

Another participant cited the transition to college as a miscellaneous source of adversity: “I think in the beginning it was hard. I was 10-hour drive away from home. I was 1,900 miles from home and I didn’t have mom watching over me and you’re on your own (Pacific Islander Male Division I Football 1996 Graduate).

Former athletes mentioned the need to overcome adversity related to feeling undervalued as an athlete (6.05%) as noted by a soccer athlete: “I was actually recruiting bait for someone who was on my club team, so learning those things and feeling not even wanted by your coaches [was hard]. I learned to prove them wrong (Black Male Division I Soccer 1994 Graduate).

Finally, a small number of athletes reported experiencing adversity related to racism (4.19%):

A difficult experience for me was going to a college that didn’t have a lot of minorities or didn’t have a lot of people who were exposed to minorities before. There were occasionally people who had a different opinion about things and there was discrimination/racism, but it didn’t happen very often. When it did happen, it was a negative or bad experience I had. I learned how to move forward despite all of the bad encounters (Black Male Division I Football 1993 Graduate)

Another athlete noted more specific forms of adversity related to racism: “I’ve heard racial-backhanded compliments, and then there’s people wondering if you got in [name of school] because of your athletic ability, like did you just get in because your athlete?” (Black Male Division I Tennis 1981 Graduate).

Impacts of Adversity and Reintegration Outcomes

After recounting their worst experiences within intercollegiate athletics, participants were asked “what did you learn from these experiences?” Participants referenced six main themes (see Table 3) that lined up with different routes of reintegration following the athletics-related stressors. Given the time, introspection, and reflection, most athletes demonstrated evidence of ultimate resilient reintegration (98.6%, $n = 211$) in their discussion of processing these stressors. Themes of resilient reintegration included development of teamwork skills (50.7%), time management (34.4%), humility (12.1%), and the majority of narratives describing grit/perseverance (51.6%), and patience (13.5%). The final theme which included the four athletes (1.4%) which did not express elements of ultimate resilient reintegration from their athletics-related adversity was depression/self-doubt/negativity (13.5%).

Though ultimate resilient reintegration was described by the majority of participants, there were many athletes who described months or years of struggle related to their athletics-related stressors, with many describing “just getting through it,” “keeping [their] head down,” and “strategically avoid[ing] the conflict” (*homeostatic*

reintegration). Two of the four athletes who did not express ultimate resilient reintegration were within this group—ultimately moving on from their athletics experience not feeling more resilient because of it.

Others cited periods of *reintegration with loss*: “giving up my athletics dreams,” “sacrificing who I wanted to be to become who my coach wanted me to be,” “choosing athletics over academics,” and “facing the fact I’d always have pain.” Despite feelings of loss, each of these athletes ultimately cited lessons learned and growth through the adversity, but temporarily gave up elements of hope, drive, or motivation because of the experience. Finally, some athletes expressed the utilization of destructive behaviors and substances to cope with athletics-induced adversity. They cited “drinking the anxiety away,” “develop[ing] an eating disorder I still battle with today,” “developing a reliance on meds to cope with pain and stress after surgery,” and “hearing his voice berating me and feeling worthless.” The majority moved past the *dysfunctional reintegration* with time, reflection, and professional intervention, though two athletes remained in this category of reintegration.

Table 3

Adversity outcomes from athletics experience

| | % | <i>n</i> |
|-------------------------|-------|----------|
| Grit/perseverance* | 51.6% | 111 |
| Teamwork skills | 50.7% | 109 |
| Time management | 34.4% | 74 |
| Patience | 13.5% | 29 |
| Depression/self-doubt** | 13.5% | 29 |
| Humility | 12.1% | 26 |
| N = 215 | | |

Number of Unique Codes = 244

*Evidence of homeostatic reintegration (*n* = 2)

**Evidence of dysfunctional reintegration (*n* = 2)

Grit/Perseverance

The most cited takeaway stemming from adverse experiences in collegiate athletics was that of grit/perseverance mentioned by 51.6% of respondents. A former swimmer provided the following statement regarding the transferrable applicability stemming from his collegiate experience: “I’ve been looked over for jobs, missed promotions, and have had to deal with that disappointment. But swimming taught me to have a short memory and that I had to move forward as soon as possible” (White Male Division I Swimmer 2010 Graduate). Participants commonly expressed the belief that participation in college athletics placed demands that closely mimicked post-athletic professional life. A former football player noted “from waking up early

to going to sleep late to trying to weight train to trying to study...the same things apply with a 9-5 corporate job and the same disciplines that you use in your everyday life (Black Male Division I Football 2010 Graduate).

Importantly, athletes often mentioned instances of grit/perseverance as a direct impact of adversity. A former Division I football player provided the following statement regarding his experience of adversity through injury and subsequent refinement in psychological grit/perseverance:

I had a stress fracture. I break my foot second day of camp. And I'm just distraught. Because I've never been out of football... I came back on the bye week, and for some reason, they put me in the lineup and I ended up playing in the third game. All of the other incoming freshmen, they all got redshirted...I could have felt sorry for myself and tanked the season, but I just grinded. I did my rehab. I got back on the field. I was kicking butt, so they put me in the game (Black Male Division I Football 2012 Graduate).

Development of Teamwork Skills

The second most cited takeaway stemming from adverse experiences in collegiate athletics related to the development of teamwork skills, cited by 50.7% of the participants. Athletes often participated alongside teammates with different backgrounds, personalities, experiences, and goals. Consequently, they cited the ability to cooperate and get along with others as an important takeaway from college athletics. Similarly, participants cited the workplace and relationships as two major areas where teamwork skills learned via athletics are applicable. A former lacrosse player reported the following regarding her development of teamwork skills through collegiate athletics and a situation in which these skills helped her navigate conflict:

I often found myself almost being like a peacemaker/middle man in this situation knowing that taking one side over another with these strong personalities would not create unity, it would just divide. So just trying to meet in the middle and navigate through strong personalities was the best way to learn. I would say this is what I remember really preparing me for teaching, way back, just working in groups and teams growing up and in college (White Female Division I Lacrosse 2006 Graduate).

Athletes noted their ability to work with various personalities toward a unified goal. A former baseball player reflected on how teamwork developed during his college career transitioned to his post-athletics life:

Career-wise, you learn the nuances of working as a team. I have a team of people that work for me and I try to instill in them that we're one team and we should work together. Let's not go off and work individually. And it helps you. I tell the people who come to work in our group, not for me but in our organization, that there are all kinds of personalities that you have to navigate within a company or even internally with our group. So you have to figure out how to work with them, and it's the same thing as being on a team (White Male Division I Baseball 1995 Graduate).

Time Management

Another prevalently cited lesson learned through adversity was an increased ability for athletes to employ effective time-management skills (34.4%). According to a former baseball athlete, “Balancing hard academics and sport was not easy but it paid off in my time management skills” (White Male Division I Baseball 2014 Graduate). Similarly, other athletes mentioned how balancing school and sport helped create transferrable skills for use later in life: “My experience during college balancing both athletics and school ingrained this work ethic in me that I still use today to continue to get the needed work done” (White Male Division I Wrestling 2006 Graduate).

Patience

Participants cited patience (13.49%) as a result of adversity through participation in collegiate athletics. One athlete noted, “I learned how to control my frustrations and also how to be patient with the big picture” (White Female Division I Track and Field 2004 Graduate). Others echoed this sentiment: “I’ve learned that you’ve got to be patient in everything you do. Patience, man. I think from being around baseball, it instilled in me in almost everything I do” (Black Male Division I Baseball 2011 Graduate). Similarly, a former basketball player reflected on how patience was learned through adversity spurred on by injury:

I got hurt in college playing basketball, and was out about 6 weeks. The setback of not being able to play, being on crutches, and having to work my way back up to strengthen my knee was a huge learning experience for me. It was something that I had to cope with, because there was nothing I could do about it, except be patient and train over and over again so that I could get back to where I was (Black Female Division I Basketball 1991 Graduate).

Depression

Some athletes (13.49%) cited depression/self-doubt/negativity as an outcome of athletics-related adversity. One athlete noted adversity at the beginning of his career: “I was a walk on, and I kind of had some effects from that thinking maybe I’m not as worthy” (White Male Division I Soccer 1987 Graduate). Another athlete felt negative effects from the end of his career: “I feel like I had a bout of depression, where I kinda, I felt like I almost lost my identity. For the longest time it was like ‘oh yeah you play baseball’ and now ‘I used to play baseball’ (White Male Division I Baseball 2009 Graduate). This statement was echoed by a former swimmer in her transition out of sport: “It really affected me mentally and socially as well. It was a huge struggle for me and nothing really helped. I had to change my attitude and outlook on life before I was finally able to overcome my state of depression” (White Female Division I Swimming 1981 Graduate).

Humility

Finally, 12.09% of athletes identified humility as a result of adversity experi-

enced as a collegiate athlete. For example, a former lacrosse athlete stated:

I learned a little bit of humility and doing things I didn't want to do for the ultimate goal of playing and being a supportive teammate. I kinda realized I was being stubborn and selfish. So, I just had to fold and play the way my collegiate coach wanted me to play in order to be a better teammate and the player she wanted me to be" (White Female Division I Lacrosse 2006 Graduate).

Another athlete noted a similar reflection about humility in sport:

In swimming, it's a lot of work for a fraction of a second, and if you want something, you have to work for it. I swam until I was 25, 7 years of those on the US national team trying to make the Olympics. It's a brutal sport, and it truly taught me humility and perspective because things don't always work out how you planned (White Male Division I Swimming 2010 Graduate).

Discussion

This study examined former college athletes' retrospective perceptions and current impacts of reported adversity through participation in intercollegiate athletics. The use of in-depth semi-structured interviews allowed for themes to develop in an organic fashion, while providing participants flexibility and freedom to speak to themes they felt most characterized their athletic experience. This study supports previous literature suggesting links between sport participation, experienced adversity, and cultivated resiliency (Galli & Vealey, 2008). Furthermore, key lessons from athletics discussed by this sample build upon previous studies noting benefits of college athletes participation (Paule & Gilson, 2010; Plunkett et al., 2016; Simiyu, 2010; Weight et al., 2016; Weight et al., 2018; Zwecher, 2014).

Sources of Adversity

Consistent with previous literature (Galli & Vealey, 2008; Walker et al., 2007; Weinberg & Gould, 2019), injuries were a major source of adversity cited by athletes. Athletes in this sample often viewed their identity primarily as an athlete, thus, a forced and sudden inability to compete served as a disruptive event that prompted biopsychosocial disorganization (Richardson et al., 1990). Participants reported examples of adversity stemming from injury including feelings of isolation, fear of reinjury, and missing out on competition, which are supported by Podlog and Eklund (2006) and Walker et al. (2007). In a synthesis of literature related to athlete responses to injury, Walker et al. (2007) note that most studies in this area contend that when athletes employ coping skills, use social support, and maintain rehabilitation regimens, they are able to recover faster from the injury mentally and physically than athletes who do not use these tools. The development, and subsequent use, of these tools give athletes autonomy to ignite in the reintegration process described by Richardson et al. (1990).

Athletic injury inherently involves direct intervention from athletic trainers, doctors, coaches, and in some cases mental health professionals to enable reintegration (Galli & Veali, 2008; Reardon et al., 2019; Richardson et al., 1990). These support processes associated with injury within the envirosocial context of intercollegiate athletics may have been part of the reason resilient reintegration was realized for the vast majority of athletes, though this research did not explore the process of reintegration.

This research also highlights the cause and effect nature of adversity experienced and the achievement of resilient reintegration. With this in mind, those working to help athletes return to competition post-injury (i.e., coaches, trainers, administrators) should encourage athletes to spend time being introspective about growth potential through the injury to frame their experience, understand athletic identity and identity foreclosure, and help athletes develop resilient practices (Richardson, 2002). As suggested by many athletes in this sample, building such resilient practices are beneficial in athletes' sport endeavors, but also in their future roles outside of athletics.

A second theme emerged related to juggling the demands of college athletics and academics. Consistent with concerns raised by Plunket et al. (2016), athletes in this sample often found it difficult to excel academically while participating in athletics. That said, many shared that this adversity facilitated key takeaways that translated to areas outside of sports including grit/perseverance, time management, and humility. This reintegration with skills developed, lessons learned, and introspection about the stressor is consistent with resilient reintegration (Harry, 2021; Richardson, 2002). While athletes in this study and others have reported challenges with balancing school and sport during college, these intense time demands may be a key ingredient to the long-term marketability, career success, and life satisfaction of former collegiate athletes (Weight et al., 2018; Weight et al., 2022). Thus, athletics development directors and others in sport should continue to assist athletes—through programming or workshops—in forging strong time management strategies that will not only benefit them in college, but also provide support for their lives once athletic participation ends (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015).

Supporting previous literature citing destructive coaches, athlete-coach tension was another relatively common form of adversity cited by participants in this study. While positive relationships between coaches and athletes were common, over 1/3 of athletes within this study's sample mentioned coach-related stress (mirroring the prevalence of "destructive coaches" within a study conducted by Weight et al., 2020). It was also common for participants to link difficult experiences with their college coach with motivation to treat others differently in their own life. Many participants used negative memories of their past coaches as a reminder to provide better opportunities for young athletes whom they can influence, also modeling resilient reintegration (Richardson, 2002). Athletes who experienced relationship-based adversity with significant power dynamics recounted their learned abilities to be kinder, more inclusive, and determined to treat others better.

It is important to note that while coach-athlete tension may facilitate long-term resiliency, this environment should not be intentionally promoted. Furthermore, while many participants who experienced tense coach relationships used these experiences for self-betterment later in life, that is not to suggest that coaches cannot equally motivate, educate, and enrich athletes without creating a sub-optimal team environment. In fact, previous literature exploring the coach-athlete dynamic found associations between coaches who use transformative methods and increases in athlete self-efficacy belief (Weight et al., 2020). Thus, the evidence of resilient reintegration and lessons learned through coach-related stress may be a consolation effect of what could have been far greater developmental advancements (Richardson, 2002; Weight et al., 2020).

Participants also mentioned other themes of adversity, such as athletic failure (27.44%), teammate conflict (8.84%), feeling undervalued (6.05%), and racism (4.19%). All sources of adversity created the same effect of disrupting a participant's homeostatic state, and prompted them to go through the reintegrative process (Richardson, 2002). Not all forms of adversity were created equally, and no two athletes responded to their adversity in identical ways. Injury, athletic failure, and coach-athlete tension were most often mentioned by athletes who struggled to achieve resilient reintegration.

Impacts of Adversity

Supporting previous literature on the associated traits of former collegiate athletes (Hayden, 2018; Plunkett et al., 2016; Weight et al., 2016; Weight et al., 2018; Weight et al., 2022; Zwecher, 2014), participants cited grit and perseverance as an outcome of some of the stressors experienced through athletics. Narratives of grit and perseverance were mentioned with each of the categories of adversity, as athletes noted overcoming adversity through a passionate overarching focus of achieving long-term goals despite the barriers that came in their path (Duckworth et al., 2007; Hayden 2018). At times, this grit appeared to be an avoidance of introspection/growth related to adversity (signifying *homeostatic reintegration*), but generally participants recounted reflection, lessons learned, and transferrable application of the mentality strengthened through athletics-related hardship (Richardson, 2002).

Teamwork skills were cited as another adversity outcome largely due to participants who spent long hours in intense situations working toward common goals alongside individuals with different backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences (Chalfin et al., 2015; Plunkett et al., 2016; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Weight et al., 2022). Consequently, many athletes reported increased abilities to cooperate and work with others as a major takeaway from difficult athletics experiences, demonstrating resilient reintegration (Richardson, 2002).

Participants also reported time-management as a direct result of adversity experienced in collegiate athletics (Chalfin et al., 2015; Plunkett et al., 2016; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). Quotes reporting time-management skill improvement overwhelmingly bordered instances of adversity. Notably, many participants viewed quality time-management skills to be acquired largely due to adversity related to ac-

ademic/athletic balance. Athletes in this sample expressed this directly in noting that being forced to manage high levels of sport and education, set them up for success in balancing commitments after sport such as careers, family obligations, volunteering, and more. This lends support to research which cites time management as a transferrable skill often associated with former collegiate athletes (Chalfin et al., 2015; Hayden, 2018; Plunkett et al., 2016; Weight et al., 2016; Weight et al., 2018; Weight et al., 2022; Zwecher, 2014).

Additionally, several participants experienced negative implications such as depression, self-doubt, and other forms of negativity associated with adversity in collegiate athletics (Galli & Vealey, 2008; Hayden, 2018). While positive impacts of athletics (i.e., teamwork, humility, etc.) were generally realized retrospectively by the participants, many expressed bouts of struggle involving depression, self-doubt, and other kinds of negativity. Two participants noted simply not gaining any insight from their adverse experiences (*homeostatic reintegration*), and two mentioned still struggling with the adversity experienced within college describing mental health challenges and substance abuse (*dysfunctional reintegration*) (Richardson, 2002). The overall occurrence of resilient reintegration (98.6%) within the sample demonstrates evidence of envirosocial protective and supportive processes within the college sport infrastructure. Given the inherent forms of stress expressed by all participants (Galli & Vealey, 2008; Hayden, 2018; Humphrey et al., 2000; Reardon et al., 2019), these should be fortified with additional focus on mental health resources that can facilitate introspection, interpretation, and translation of adverse experiences into resilient reintegration (Richardson, 2002).

Conclusion

We examined elite athletes' perceptions of adversity and the retrospective impacts of these adverse experiences through the lens of Richardson's Resiliency Model (2002). We focused on the adversity and resiliency of college athletes to explore the cost-benefit of the experience and reconcile the contradictory literature on the impact of participation in intercollegiate athletics. All athletes in the sample reported experiencing disruptive adversity throughout their experience which we categorized into eight themes including injury, balancing athletics and academics, coach-athlete tension, athletic failure, performance pressure, teammate conflict, feeling undervalued, and racism.

The vast majority of participants recounted positive impacts of athletics (e.g. grit/perseverance, teamwork skills, time management, patience, depression/self-doubt, and humility). These athletes reintegrated from the adversity with increased resilience. We conclude the divergent bodies of U.S. college sport athlete experience literature highlight both the universal preponderance of sport adversity, and a unique organizational infrastructure of envirosocial protective and supportive processes that facilitate the development of psychological resilience. This protection and support may not be universal, with Black athletes particularly susceptible to additional sources of stress and maladaptive adversity outcomes. Given the inherent forms of adversity expressed by all participants, practitioners should amplify mental health

resources that can facilitate introspection, interpretation, and translation of adverse experiences into resilient reintegration (Richardson, 2002).

Limitations and Future Recommendations

While this study was able to collect large amounts of information, its qualitative nature also meant that we were limited by the subjectivity of the participant's recalled experiences. Furthermore, data were collected initially by a core of 18 researchers, and the chain referral sampling method meant that most participants were closely connected in some fashion to the researcher. Consequently, a large number of participants were from Division I athletics which may limit overall generalizability to other geographic areas. An additional limitation of the study is the focus on stressors and outcomes with limited exploration of the enviro-social processes that facilitated resilient reintegration. Finally, collegiate athletics participation was largely treated as an independent variable while research demonstrates significant differences in athlete experiences based on race, gender, division, and sport commercialization. Deeper exploration into the unique experiences of demographic sub-groups of athletes will add additional nuance to the generalized findings.

Despite these limitations, findings from this study provide several different opportunities for future research. Paired with available research from Richardson's Resiliency Model (1990; 2001), future studies should explore differences in the athletics enviro-social processes that yield biopsychospiritual protective factors, disruption, or disorganization that led to homeostasis maintenance or differences in reintegration. Future research should also explore whether desirable psychological traits are a product of college athletics competition, or if latent positive psychological traits allow individuals to succeed and make it to college athletics in the first place. Additionally, it would be useful to understand how reported responses of participants change as time passes.

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