

“No One’s Thriving During Football Season”: A Narrative Inquiry on the Biopsychosocial Well-Being of Collegiate Athletic Administrators and Their Partners

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Research has hinted at the effects organizational culture may have on sport employees and their families, but this relationship has primarily been explored through the experiences of the employees and has not considered the experiences of their families. Additionally, this relationship has not been directly examined from a biopsychosocial (i.e., biological, psychological, and social well-being) perspective. Thus, the purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the stories of collegiate sport administrators and their partners to construct their narratives of well-being within the context of sport. Nine dyads—a college athletic administrator and their partner—participated in narrative interviews. Following a two-step narrative analysis, two distinct narrative archetypes were constructed: *organized life around sport* and *organized life around family*. This suggests that, in contrast to much previous literature, there are some sport employees who are prioritizing nonwork life over career. The findings also suggest sport influences domains of health through non-direct changeways, which has implications for the biopsychosocial model of health. Specifically, for both archetypes, work in sport both enhanced and diminished employees’ and their partners’ biopsychosocial health, but participants focused mostly on the everyday impacts on social health. Practical implications for sport organizations include systemic changes to allow for better work-life negotiations.

Keywords: employee wellness, organizational culture, health, changeways, qualitative



Working in sport is known as being a demanding profession (Weight et al., 2021). Employees who work in sport routinely describe an organizational culture that requires atypical work hours and emphasizes presenteeism, which can lead to prioritizing work over personal obligations (Saxe et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2021). Further, research on sport employees suggests their (over)engagement can lead to work addiction (Huml et al., 2021) and work addiction has been linked to burnout (Taylor et al., 2019), which can contribute to negative physical health outcomes such as coronary heart disease, chronic pain, and chronic fatigue (Salvagioni et al., 2017). Both relationships are also impacted by work-family conflict, which suggests factors outside the organization have an important influence on these work-related experiences and may lead to employees leaving an organization. Within the college sport sector, organizations are experiencing what Weaver (2022) calls “the great resignation” (para. 1), whereby employees are leaving the industry at rates twice as high as similar industries.

For many of those employees who do stay in the industry, this conflict and balance stems from a combination of long, nontraditional hours, travel, and the stress of high-performance expectations, among other things (e.g., Graham & Dixon, 2017), and have been found to force employees to relegate personal life responsibilities to a secondary role (Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Interestingly, research has illustrated college sport employees may be making purposeful decisions to limit romantic engagements, delay starting a family, or miss family events so they can adequately devote time to their job (e.g., Saxe et al., 2023), which suggests the organizational culture within the college sport industry has an impact on employees that extends beyond themselves and their workplaces.

Kim et al. (2017) suggested scholars examine factors that influence employees’ work experience and well-being, which we understand as including factors beyond simply psychological. Importantly, previous work has largely used proxies to measure employee well-being (e.g., burnout, exploitation; Huml et al., 2021; Weight et al., 2021) and it is therefore critical to begin explicitly measuring well-being from a holistic perspective. As such, we incorporate the biopsychosocial (BPS) model, which conceptualizes holistic health as interactions between an individual’s biological, psychological, and social well-being. Further, because an employee’s health includes an analysis of their biological, psychological, and social well-being, it is necessary to understand the perceptions of the individuals who contribute to their social well-being (e.g., partners). Indeed, the work-family experiences of one partner can impact their partner’s attitudes and well-being (Radcliffe et al., 2023). Even though research has hinted at the effects an organizational culture characterized by imbalance may have on employees and their families (e.g., Saxe et al., 2023), making these dyadic considerations compelling, the examination of this relationship is notably absent from the literature. Thus, the purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the relationship stories of collegiate sport administrators and their partners to construct their narratives of well-being within the context of sport.

Literature Review

Understanding Sport Employees: Sport Identity

One factor that may reduce turnover intention and improve employee performance is a sport employee's identification with the sport organization (e.g., Oja et al., 2019; Swanson & Kent, 2015). Significantly, identification with sport can contribute to college sport employees' identification with their organization, as Oja and colleagues (2015) argue sport employees gain belonging as "quasi-fans" (p. 585). Indeed, Swanson and Kent (2015) found team *and* organizational identification predicted job commitment as well as other factors important for employee retention (i.e., satisfaction, motivation). Such social identification may enhance both sport employee and organizational performance (Oja et al., 2023). This body of work overall suggests sport employees who are highly identified with their sport identity and organizational identity may be more satisfied at work and less likely to leave the organization.

However, Oja and Zeimers (2025) caution that, while sport passion for many sport employees is a protective factor against burnout, when passion for sport becomes obsessive it may have negative outcomes impacting their nonwork life. Consequently, while there may be positive outcomes from sport and organizational identification, it may also have detrimental impacts on sport employees' social relationships. This may explain the fact that burnout occurs even in sport employees who find meaning in their work due to an overwork climate (Huml et al., 2025). The next section thus further explores the social relationships of sport employees.

Understanding Sport Employees: Social Relationships

Though much of what we understand about sport employees' well-being is understood from the examination of associated variables (e.g., turnover intent, job satisfaction; Taylor et al., 2024) there is an important line of work focusing on the social relationships of employees (e.g., work-life conflict, balance; Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Graham & Dixon, 2017). These social relationships, typically studied through the concept of work-family interface, hinge on the premise that there is a finite amount of time in a single day, thereby creating competing demands between work and personal life responsibilities of employees (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). For example, employees may face pressure at work with respect to time stemming from a rigid, inflexible schedule and pressure in their personal life with respect to time needed for family responsibilities. As such, time devoted to one role (e.g., work) can make it challenging to fulfill the time requirements of another role (e.g., personal life).

Though predominant theory (e.g., role theory, scarcity theory) suggests balance between an employee's work and life outside of work is achievable, sport scholars have shown otherwise, identifying a "culture characterized by *imbalance*" (Taylor et al., 2021, p. 305). This imbalance is also likely to impact employee satisfaction and turnover intent (Graham & Smith, 2022), as imbalance can lead to decreased employee satisfaction with their work-life interface (Saxe et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2021). Relatedly, work also notes the heightened challenges and unique experiences

for dual-career couples, which ties in directly with this study as it is critical to include the perspectives of partners in understanding the holistic employee experience (Hong et al., 2022). Importantly, including the perspectives of collegiate sport employees' partners can provide insight into exactly how these negotiations take place, and allows for a more nuanced examination of how work experiences impact familial relationships, which is missing in the literature. To fill this gap, this study includes the voices of collegiate sport administrators and their partners to holistically conceptualize well-being.

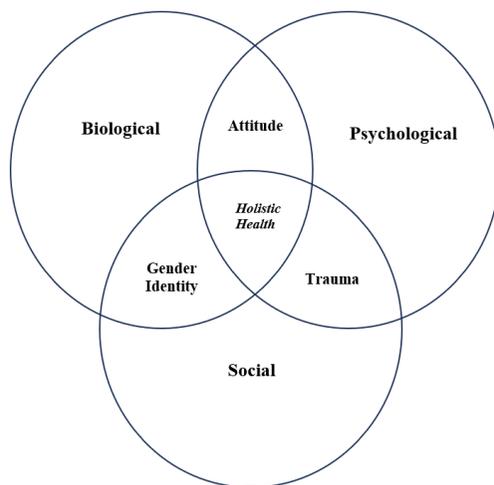
Conceptual Framework: Biopsychosocial Model of Health

The biopsychosocial (BPS) model of health underscores the biological (e.g., genetics, sex), psychological (e.g., cognition, emotion), and social (e.g., interpersonal relationships, cultural background) influences that co-create an individual's well-being (Engel & Bloch, 1992). In a departure from the medical model of care that relies on somatic data, work using the BPS seeks to understand ways in which health is influenced by both biology, and psychological and social factors, and how biology itself is also constructed by psychological and social factors (Haslam et al., 2021).

However, the BPS may be too vague, and thus unmeasurable, and traditionally does not explore how the three factors of health intersect (e.g., Karunamuni et al., 2021). Therefore, Karunamuni and colleagues (2021) argued the model is better conceptualized as individual pathways (i.e., S-->P, B-->P, etc.). However, viewing the BPS as pathways necessitates viewing the biological, psychological, and social components as distinct, measurable constructs, which makes viewing the human as a "*whole person*" not possible (Haslam, et al., 2021, p., 2; emphasis original). Therefore, Haslam et al. (2021) further conceptualized the BPS as integrated changeways between each of these elements, suggesting the elements of health are "themselves being transformed through interconnection" (p. 2). In this way, a trigger in one domain—positive change in the social domain—can lead to positive changes in the biological and psychological domain, reconstructing an individual's social identity as well as overall well-being. For example, when an employee begins working in a new athletic department, this employee may begin as simply the same person in a different environment. However, over time the employee may internalize their experiences to where they transform as a person because of the environmental and social factors influencing them (Haslam et al., 2021).

Therefore, the BPS model allows a framework for understanding the overarching factors that construct well-being, with well-being conceptualized as an individual's overall perception, satisfaction, and fulfillment within their life experience (Center for Disease Control, 2018). The BPS model is commonly viewed as a Venn diagram (see Figure 1; National Institutes of Health, 2022), wherein overlap of domains construct different aspects of well-being. For example, when the psychological domain interacts with the biological domain it can construct an individual's attitude, when the psychological domain interacts with the social domain it can construct an individual's experience of trauma, and when the social domain interacts with the biolog-

Figure 1
Example of Biopsychosocial Model domain interactions



ical domain it can construct an individual's gender identity. When all domains come together, they construct an individual's holistic well-being, which can also impact overall job satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Whelpley et al., 2023). As Whelpley et al. (2023) posit, "how these three domains overlap is what makes the BPS unique and potentially fruitful in the work environment" (p. 28).

Biopsychosocial Model of Health in Sport

The BPS model has been used to explore several phenomena within sport. For example, van Voorthuizen et al. (2022) used the BPS model to explore BPS profiles of survivors of sexual harassment and abuse (SHA) within youth sport. The results indicated biological factors (e.g., age of sport participant, sex), psychological factors (e.g., self-esteem, emotional vulnerability), and social factors (e.g., familial structure/relationships, power dynamic within the sport setting) converged to inform the BPS risk factors for experiencing SHA within sport settings (van Voorthuizen et al., 2022). The BPS model has also been used to explore the occurrence of concussions in sport (Clacy et al., 2020), return to sport following an ACL injury (Slater et al., 2022), and eSports players' well-being (Shulze et al., 2021). Specifically, Shulze and colleagues examined how a lack of sleep of esports athletes (biological factors) led to more disagreements with family (social factor) which increases individual stress of the athlete (psychological factor), showing how BPS factors do operate as direct changeways. In totality, research using the BPS model in sport settings provides support for the BPS definition of well-being, and for how the different domains of health can act as direct changeways to construct an individual's well-being. However, the BPS model has yet to be used to explore the well-being of sport employees, despite the clear social aspects of an employee's health (i.e., work-family conflict; Taylor et al., 2021).

Method

This study was grounded in a constructivist epistemological approach to narrative inquiry, wherein “narratives are socially constructed” by the researcher and participant(s) (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007, p. 151). Research that employs narrative inquiry either collects stories as data, analyzes all data using narrative methods, or both (Clandinin, 2006). As detailed later, this study specifically used narrative interviewing methods and narrative thematic analysis.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry was chosen as the methodological approach for this study for three primary reasons: (a) match of research purpose (O’Riley & Kiyimba, 2015); (b) match with conceptual framework (Tuval-Mashiach, 2017); and (c) researchers’ positionality (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). First, the focus of the research is on the narrative arc of a relationship, not just a specific moment or experience, and how major decisions (i.e., narrative turning points; Wieslander & Löfgren, 2025) in the relationship intertwined with one partner’s career in sport, which matches with a narrative methodology (O’Riley & Kiyimba, 2015). Secondly, the conceptual model of the manuscript also has a narrative foundation, so that the methodology is aligned with the conceptual frame (Tuval-Mashiach, 2017). As Engel (1997) argues in their descriptions of BPS model in practice, “narrative style facilitates vicarious participation of the listener in whatever the patient was or is experiencing” (p. 526). Finally, in a constructivist approach to narrative inquiry, the identity of the researcher influences research design (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). All authors have been professionally trained in qualitative methods with the lead author being trained in narrative therapy and therapeutic narrative interviewing, an expertise that added to the methodological approach of this work. Three members of the research team identify as White women, with two being in heterosexual long-term relationships and one being single. The lead researcher is a licensed behavioral health professional, the second author is in a long-term relationship with a college sport employee, and the third author is a former college sport employee. The fourth author identifies as a White man who is single. These identities were consistently reflected on during data analysis discussion, which further contextualized the participants’ narratives.

Participants

Participants were recruited based on purposeful criterion sampling, as specific criteria needed to be met for participation in the study (Patton, 2015). To participate in this study, participants were mid-career (minimum five years in the industry) collegiate sport administrators working at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) DI institution and in a long-term relationship with someone who does not currently work in collegiate sport administration. Prospective participants were identified through professional networks and contacted via publicly available email addresses. If they agreed to participate, they provided their partner’s email address, and all study information was also sent to their partner. Once the sport employee and their partner both agreed to participate in the study, individual consent forms were sent to each member of the dyad. Nine dyads (18 total participants) participated. See Table 1 for participant demographics.

Table 1
Summary of participant demographics

Pseudonyms	Sport Employee Job Title	Length of Time in Current Position	Gender Identity	Race/Ethnicity	Family Structure	Length of Relationship at time of interview	Number of Job Moves (During Relationship)
Jennifer Mike	Jennifer—Senior Associate Athletics Director	Two years	Female Male	Caucasian Caucasian	Married, no children	>Six years	One
Ben Natasha	Ben—Associate Athletic Director	Three years	Male Female	White White	Married, two children	>Ten years	Three
Kristene Kevin	Kristene—Director	Sixteen years	Female Male	Black White	Married, no children	>Twenty-seven years	None
Andrea Penelope	Andrea—Executive Director	One year	Female Female	White White	Married, two children	>Fourteen years	Two
Wyatt Caroline	Wyatt—Senior Athletics Director	Nine years	Male Female	White White	Married, two children	>Twenty-four years	Three
Ross Rachel	Ross-Associate Athletics Director	<1 year	Male Female	White White	Married, two children	>Ten years	Three
Craig Gail	Craig- Director of Academics	Two years	Male Female	White White	Married, one child	>Fourteen years	Two
Danny Pam	Danny-Associate Athletic Director	One and a half years	Male Female	White White	Married, two children	>Fourteen years	Four
Leyla Tiff	Leyla-Assistant Director	Seven years	Female Female	White White	Engaged, no children	>Ten years	Two

Data Collection

Borrowing from aspects of life story interview methods (Atkinson, 2007), semi-structured interviews focused on understanding the narrative arc, and narrative turning points (Wieslander & Löfgren, 2025), of each relationship. In line with previous narrative inquiries in sport management literature (e.g., Porter et al., 2024), each participant completed two virtual semi-structured interviews: one individual and one with their partner ($n = 3$ per dyad; $n = 27$ total). A semi-structured interview guide was created following both Hollingsworth and Dybdahl's (2007) and Kim's (2016) suggestions for narrative interviewing. Questions were constructed as open-ended and sought to elicit stories of experiences related to their relationships and major turning points in their relationships and in their careers, with specific attention the BPS health of participants across all stories. Interviews with employees focused on stories around their career in sport and their BPS well-being. Interviews with their partners focused on stories of how they have navigated their partner's career in sport and their own, as well as their partner's, BPS well-being. Finally, together participants explored the progression of their relationship and the stories of how career decisions and other major turning points were influenced by their relationship and their families and how these turning points impacted their BPS well-being. The average length of each interview was 55 minutes, with an average of two hours and 45 minutes per dyad. All interviews took place on virtual video-conferencing software, were transcribed verbatim and de-identified with a participant chosen or given (on participant request) pseudonym.

Data Analysis

A two-step narrative analysis was used. The first round was a narrative mode of analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995), examining "why and how things happened in the way they did" (Kim, 2016, p. 197). In this first round of coding, a relationship timeline for each dyad was constructed to identify the specific narrative turning points throughout each dyad's relationship timeline, adapting protocols from Allan et al. (2018). The research team then met to group code the relationship timelines, considering what themes were present across the stories included in each timeline.

The second round of analysis was an analysis of narratives, which seeks to arrange findings "around descriptions of themes that are common across collected stories" (Kim, 2016, p. 196). The research team first coded participant's stories based on the identified narrative turning points in the participant's relationship timelines. For example, if a move to a new state was a narrative turning point for a dyad, then all the stories that touched on the move across all three interviews were coded as that narrative turning point. Then, for each narrative turning point's category of stories, coding of the content of the stories followed Riessman's (2008) approach to narrative thematic analysis. The research team first individually open-coded the stories of each dyad. The research team then met to group code these stories with specific focus on the role of sport.

Trustworthiness

Narrative research takes the stance of “interpretation of faith” (Kim, 2016, p. 193), the belief that participants tell stories that are true to their subjective experience. In this research design specifically, the third interview proved a key trustworthiness measure. Many stories that were told in the individual interviews were re-told in the partner interviews, where one partner would fill in details the other partner had forgotten or neglected to add the first time the story was told. In this way, including the partner interview acted as a data triangulation measure, as it provided a way to validate, “the consistency of information at a different time and by different means” (Patton, 2015, p. 661).

In both phases of data analysis, the research team also shared and reflected on their interview notes. Notes taken during the interviews included both specific observations as well as the researcher’s thoughts throughout the interview to encourage critical and reflexive narrative analysis of participants’ stories. These reflections sensitized the research team to many of the unspoken aspects of storytelling, such as long pauses or fiddling with objects on their desk when telling a difficult story. Furthermore, in the third interview where each dyad was interviewed together, the interviewer was able to observe how each couple co-constructed their relationship narrative.

Additional trustworthiness measures included analytical memoing and researcher triangulation. Memoing is the process of recording reflexive notes throughout the research process that focuses on the relationship of concepts and the reasons certain data were coded in particular ways (Saldaña, 2016). Throughout the data analysis process, each member of the research team kept analytical memos to provide the basis for the group coding sessions. The group coding process was also a space for reflexive peer de-briefing, where investigator triangulation of the data was reached, as four members of the research team all provided their interpretations of the data (Patton, 2015).

Findings

Two narrative archetypes were constructed: *organized life around sport*, where dyads made major life decisions around the sport employee’s job in sport, and *organized life around family*, where the dyads made major life decisions around family. The themes (a) sport first (b) work environment, and (c) social health were constructed in the *organized life around sport* archetype, together showing how the sport employee’s career and work environments influenced their own and their partners’ BPS health. The themes (a) “right” fit, (b) career sacrifice, and (c) social health were constructed in the *organized life around family* archetype, together showing how, even though they made major life decisions to prioritize family, a career in sport still impacted everyday moments.

Organized Life Around Sport Archetype

This archetype represents relationship timelines of four dyads where the couple made major life decisions (i.e., narrative turning points) based on one partner's career in sport.

Sport First

Throughout the relationship narratives of the dyads in the sport archetype, the data suggested the sport employee's job, and career, was prioritized. Andrea and Penelope exemplified this, as the couple moved repeatedly for Andrea's career in sport, sometimes moving after only one or two years at an institution. Penelope, who is in the medical field, had to get a new state license whenever they moved, which limited her ability to find work quickly. Andrea recognized the impact of this on their family, stating "For me, a new job means throwing myself all in at it. For Penelope, she's had a rougher journey, because she doesn't have a job and that's hard." Interestingly though, Penelope cited her experience as a collegiate athlete as part of the reason why they were able to navigate Andrea's career, the multiple moves across the country, and challenges associated with her career licensure.

Some partners made career changes to support their partner's career in sport. For example, Caroline left her career, as both partners working full-time was difficult with Wyatt's career in sport. Caroline reflected on this decision:

Wyatt said from the beginning how much easier his life was with me not working, and I think that was really the big impact: it took a lot of stress off of him, off of our relationship, and things like that for me to stay at home.

Relatedly, Craig stayed in a job in athletics he disliked for the hopes he would move up in his career despite the negative impact the job had on himself and his family. His partner, Gail, reflected on the challenging times during Craig's career: "Honestly, I don't think I was very supportive... I was getting to the point where, maybe this isn't it. Maybe you're never (going to) be appreciated in this job, and maybe (you should) quit and do something else." Craig finally got a new job in sport, which was a major narrative turning point in their relationship story; however, despite this positive change with Craig's new job, Craig's career in sport continued to come first in smaller, everyday moments. Gail discussed how he will answer work calls despite being in the middle of "family time" to the point where their son has also noticed work comes first. Gail recalled her son telling her, "I don't play with daddy. I play with you, because Daddy's busy. Daddy's not around. Daddy's on the phone."

For Leyla and Tiff, who currently do not have children, this theme was also present in the smaller moments. Leyla's job in collegiate athletics administration has a lot of time demands, which Tiff understands as she also works in athletics as medical staff. To get around the time demands, Tiff often goes to work with Leyla and helps. Leyla explained,

(Tiff) is running the clock at (a sport competition) now so, she'll come in, we will eat the pregame meal together, she'll go do her job, I'll do my job. Even before, they needed somebody to do that, during COVID, that's when (my co-worker) was like, "Would your wife be interested?" and I'm like,

“Yes, she’d be great at that, that’d be fine,”...so yeah like it’s almost part of our relationship somehow.

Despite this allowing Leyla and Tiff to spend time together, this time was spent working. It is also important to note Leyla and Tiff both worked in sport and repeatedly mentioned the importance of having a partner who understood the demands and cadence of working in sport. This understanding and shared passion allowed them both to prioritize ways to integrate each other into their time at work, because they understood it may not be possible to see each other otherwise. For example, on game nights they could sit down for a meal together at 11 p.m. Despite sport coming first, they continued to adapt their relationship around their sport schedules. Thus, whether it was in the major life decisions and narrative turning points in the dyad’s relationship, or in everyday stories, sport came first.

Work Environment

Even though these couples had made specific choices to prioritize the employee’s career in sport, many sport employees still experienced negative working environments, which impacted their partner’s and their own health. Wyatt reflected on the presenteeism in sport and suggested it may come from the over-work culture in sport:

We have a bad tendency in college athletics that when you get promoted from within you never get to drop the stuff you were doing, you just take more on, and that’s been my case. Unfortunately, throughout this is, I’ve just taken more on and never dropped it.

He ended his discussion of his career path recalling his recent doctor’s visit: “I actually had an appointment with my heart doctor, and he sat me down and said, ‘Something’s got to change, like you have to change, you’re 39, and it’s not good.’” His partner, Caroline, agreed, having seen the impact Wyatt’s career has had on his overall health and wellness. Caroline even observed of Wyatt’s and his co-workers’ seasonal health saying, “No one’s thriving during football season.” Craig similarly saw a negative impact on his overall wellness after spending almost 11 years in a toxic work environment. He had gotten the job, despite him not being who his boss had wanted to hire, which had long-lasting negative impacts on their working relationship. Working in the toxic work environment created stress in his marriage, as Craig admits, “I’m not going to so (far as to) blame (my boss) for any early marital issues we had, but it certainly did not help.” Craig eventually went on anxiety medication due to the stress of working in that athletic department. Gail, also reflected on how difficult this time was on their relationship:

There has definitely been a time where we were both almost done. Craig and I both were so tired of living in (the state) and his boss (at the time) was absolutely horrendous, and he was miserable and depressed, and he just hated going to work every day, and I couldn’t stand it. It was awful.

After Craig was finally able to get a new job, Gail recalled it, “was a huge, I mean huge, success.” This change allowed for a turning point in Craig’s career that reverberated in positive consequences felt in both Craig and Gail’s well-being and their

relationship. Craig even attributed positive changes in his physical health to positive moments in his current position. He specifically noted how the father of a recruit recognized his impact on his son's positive impression of the athletic department. Craig, having a doctor's appointment scheduled for later that afternoon, said his blood pressure was the lowest it had ever been. Craig tied this instance of being recognized positively for his work directly to his positive physical health.

Andrea also discussed how her boss at her previous institution created a culture of toxic presenteeism. She spoke of one specific holiday weekend where she decided to get a cup of coffee instead of attending the baseball game. The next Monday during the morning staff meeting her boss called her out:

(He said), "I missed you at the baseball game." That's a shitty comment, like what are you talking about? So that was brutal, but I just accepted it, and I just let that become what I did. So, I wouldn't miss very much stuff.

However, in her position at a new institution, the culture seems to be much healthier. Her partner Penelope could even tell how the change in institution and position has had a positive influence on Andrea. She said, "I've never seen her...happier than she's been here." Therefore, despite the overwork culture in sport, positive work environments were a protective factor for employee's wellness.

Social Health

All the couples in this archetype discussed how the employees' careers in sport had negative impacts on the couples' social health. Gail specifically reflected on how Craig's career in sport has impacted their relationship: "Resentment, I mean, I have definitely resented him for feeling like my career is on the back burner or always plays second to his career in all the ways. Even still, sometimes I get annoyed." For Leyla and Tiff, the time demands of work in sport comes into discussions of having children. When thinking about what the time demands of a career in sport may mean for having to miss big family moments, Leyla reflected, "it might be hard for me to be like this (job in sport) is definitely worth it." With family structure being a key component of social health, Leyla's career in sport has a clear influence on the couple's social health. Influencing another aspect of social health, Wyatt's career in collegiate athletics also created challenges for him and his partner's ability to make friends and form a support group where they live. He reflected, "I mean, we go out to eat and people approach us about issues (in the athletic department). They don't care if I've got my kids there on a Sunday afternoon. They just come up and start talking and we've had a difficult time (making true friends)."

For these dyads, their social health was related to their physical and mental health. All participants discussed how the employees' careers in collegiate athletics created stress in social relationships, which manifested in mental and emotional stress that many times negatively impacted physical health, as Andrea's reflection of her inability to cope during a stressful coaching transition at work exemplified: "I drank a lot. I think I cope by drinking. That's never good...if I look back at that moment. I did not use good, healthy coping mechanisms." She even discussed how she felt guilty attending family funerals and friends' weddings as she missed work.

Overall, although a career in sport was clearly important to each dyad, having one partner working in collegiate athletic administration negatively impacted both the employee and their partners' BPS well-being.

Organized Life Around Family Archetype

This archetype represents relationship timelines of five dyads where the couple ultimately made major life decisions (i.e., narrative turning points) based on their family life.

Career Decisions

All dyads in this archetype discussed career decisions to prioritize time with their family. Several couples discussed moments when the sport employee took a step back in their career or took a decrease in pay to move to or remain in a job they believed to have better work-life integration. Pam recalled how Danny took a step back in his career in sport so they could be together: "We wanted to be closer to family potentially. (Danny) actually took a secondary role in the affiliate department. He went from being a director down to an assistant director, so he could move to (state) to be with me." Jennifer was recruited many times for director positions in other athletic departments, however, always chose to stay at her current job, because her husband, Mike, worked as an executive in his family business in his hometown, without an option to work remotely or in a different city. Jennifer reflected, "Since I've had this role, I've been headhunted a couple of times. The first one was...like triple my salary...but for our relationship, (our) community (here), it's not something I ever want to do." Kristene similarly had chances to move to another university during the many coaching changes she endured, however chose to stay, as her partner Kevin also worked at the same institution. Ross also turned down a position at his dream institution to remain at his current role and work towards promotion there. Interestingly, similar to the sport archetype, there were also instances when the partner of the sport employee made career decisions to prioritize family. For example, both Natasha and Pam had a career in collegiate sport, and specifically chose to leave their careers as they did not think having a family was feasible with both partners working in collegiate sport. Either way, our data suggested all couples in the family dyad made some type of career decision with the goal of spending more time with their family.

"Right" Fit

Even though these couples made specific decisions to prioritize family over career, the presenteeism and expectations of working in sport was still obvious in work-life negotiations. Thus, the dyads in the family archetype discussed the importance of the partner (of the sport employee) being familiar with or understanding the demands of the sport culture. Natasha and Ben met when they were both working in sport, and despite Natasha leaving the field, she has to remind herself of the time demands:

That's one thing I have forgotten, I think, as I'm further removed is like, "What do you mean they're calling you at 10 p.m., don't pick up!" And then

he's like, "But you used to do the same thing." (Like, I do remember), we were on vacation in LA with my friends, and I'm trying to set up a soccer interview from the museum and I'm always, "Wait yeah, I did do that."

Reflecting on this Natasha concluded, "I think my background in sports has really helped just like understanding it... I'm grateful I at least know where he's coming from, the long hours, and the fact that you can't always leave work at work the way other people can." Indeed, in recalling their engagement, Natasha, who was still working in college sport at the time, remembered, "I was following the (undergraduate university) tennis match" at the winery right before Ben proposed.

Although Mike never worked in sport, Jennifer discussed how his high-pressure job as an executive along with his people skills makes it easy for him to fit into her work life. Mike recalled many times when he would spend time with Jennifer's co-workers, coaches, and donors while Jennifer was working: "There's been times, we went to the (school) sports club, I got to go see (player) who played for (university)...I got to see a high school basketball coach...so you know, we got to go to that." Jennifer added, "I can see if Mike wasn't good with that and not easy with strangers, and I can see why that would be a really hard thing. But that's right, I would just pawn him off (when I was working games)." Similarly, Kevin, who does not work in sport, also prioritizes going to athletic events where his wife Kristene is working: "I love going to athletic events. I don't know anything about sports, but I love going to them." Kristene added, "He used to do that too when we were in college, he would come to the women's basketball games and sit up top and read his book." Despite differences in personalities, both Mike and Kevin were willing to attend athletic events their partners were working and adapted their own needs to those events.

Partners of sport employees were also willing to integrate family life into work. For example, Natasha recalled recently taking their children to see Ben at work:

I brought the boys, and we ate dinner and, "Look at dad with the radio with the microphone on," and my older son, (who is) four, and he went up on stage afterwards and put the headset on, it was very cute. So, it was only from six to seven. So, it's before their bedtime, so it all kind of worked out. So, I think I'll do that more this year. It's just a way that we could see him and be, I guess feel involved, in his work, instead of it being another night that daddy's away and I do bedtime by myself.

Rachel similarly discussed the importance of bringing their kids to see Ross work during a swim meet, sharing, "He wanted to be down there (by the pool) to show his support (for the team), but he wasn't just leaving me with both kids." Jennifer and Mike got married on the Saturday of a rivalry football game, and they made sure that Jennifer's co-workers still got to attend their wedding. As Jennifer recalled their wedding day:

My boss and my staff came, and they brought the (team) flag. So, they crashed our wedding, but we told them to. We were like, "Look, you're going to need drinks either way. We're going win and you're going celebrate, or we're going get our asses kicked and drink." So that was fun.

Another way couples in this archetype organized their everyday lives through sport was suggesting their health and wellness was determined by sport schedules. For example, they prepared for the fall to be difficult on themselves and their partners, while they could relax a bit in the summer when college sports were not in season. As Ben reflected on the summer months, “I’m always very happy in the summer. I do feel like that correlates with my peak mental and physical well-being.” Natasha, his partner agreed, noting she gets anxiety when football season starts up again: “Going from summer to fall and things do get busier, I get a little anxious... like the boys are back to school and Ben has been busy (with work).”

Overall, even as these couples made career decisions to prioritize family, it still took the “right” partner, who understood the demands of sport or could “fit in” to the sport world, as the sport employee still made every-day decisions that prioritized work in sport.

Social Health

Making the decision to prioritize family did seem to improve the BPS well-being of these participants. Both Mike and Jennifer commented on how being near family was important to them. For example, in discussing her relationship and mental health, Jennifer pointed to good communication with Mike, and the importance of community: “(Mike and I) usually eat dinner together... We try to do church on Sunday mornings when we have the time or we’re not traveling, and his dad and grandma go to the same church. So, we get to see some family.” Similarly, Natasha could not imagine trying to balance her own job, Ben’s career in sport, and the schedule of her children without living near both sets of grandparents. She recalled a specific moment she realized the importance of living near family:

The week after I had our first son, Ben went to (university) for a gymnastics meet. And it was one of those things where I said, “That’ll be fine.” And I had never had a baby before. So, when the baby got here, I said, “You’re not leaving,” and it was too late because the plan was already made. So, my mom and my sister came and stayed at our house for four weeks... I don’t know how I would have made it through (otherwise).

Ben added, “I am grateful for that. Her mom and her sister, who both live close by, were able to come over and they spent the night because the baby still wasn’t sleeping through the night, he was six-days old... coming back to that full circle idea of being close to our families.”

Despite the benefits of being near family and friends, many times at the cost of career moves, there were still moments when the sport employee’s social health suffered. For example, Ben has left family events early so he can go to work, and Jennifer discussed having to miss a family wedding. Though Kristene and Kevin had put their family first, both turning down jobs to stay employed at the same institution, they still saw decreases to their social health in the form of an inability to have children. Both Kristene and Kevin had prioritized their education and then their careers, albeit staying at the same institution, and, when they decided they were ready to have children, Kristene was unable to get pregnant. This all seemed to weigh on many of

the sport employees, with many participants still discussing guilt over not spending time with family and loved ones, even though they made major career decisions to prioritize family. Thus, overall, couples in this archetype still experienced diminished BPS well-being in some ways because of their career in sport, despite overall differing narrative arc than the other archetype.

Discussion

This narrative inquiry explored the relationship stories of collegiate sport administrators and their partners to construct their narratives of well-being within the context of sport. Importantly, our findings suggest that despite differences in decisions related to major narrative turning points (i.e., organizing life around sport or family), all dyads constructed everyday moments around sport, signaling an industry culture that prioritizes work over nonwork. This study extends our understanding of sport employees' holistic well-being in several ways. First, this study illustrates how the organizational culture of collegiate athletic departments influences the experiences of an employee's partner, with the partner's experiences having additional impacts on the employee. Second, as clearly demonstrated within our findings section, sport employees are recognizing, and at times prioritizing, their social health as the most salient in their everyday lives. Third, contrary to previous literature, a subset of our participants organized their lives around family, giving up opportunities for promotion to prioritize the needs of their nonwork domain. Fourth, work in sport had both BPS health benefits as well as negative impacts, suggesting *non-direct changeways* of health specifically related to sport identity.

Theoretical Implications

Importantly, by interviewing sport employees and their partners, this research illustrated the direct impacts of organizational culture on sport employee's partners, which has been hinted at in previous research (Graham & Dixon, 2017), but not explicitly studied. Partners, across both archetypes within our sample, made life-changing decisions with respect to their work and personal lives to support the careers of the sport employees. For example, partners made decisions to quit their jobs and become stay-at-home parents to shoulder more of the responsibilities of childcare and home care. Additionally, partners moved across the country, sometimes away from their support systems, so the sport employee could secure a promotion. Finally, partners often provided support to enhance the sport employee's BPS health which resulted from the negative impacts of the athletic department's culture (e.g., bringing kids to work events so the employee did not have to sacrifice family time for work obligations). Though all the partners seemed to make these decisions in collaboration with the sport employees, they expressed frustrations and sadness when discussing giving up a career they loved or leaving their family and friends who helped them manage the heavy workload while the sport employee worked.

Though sport employees and their partners discussed how an athletic department's culture had impacts on their BPS health, they recognized the impacts on their

social health most readily. This is perhaps because the impacts of social health were the most constant and evident within their everyday lives. For example, biological health seemed to fluctuate based on timing, where taking time away from work during the summer led to improvements to biological health and required overwork during football season led to decreased biological health. Similarly, psychological health was greatly impacted by the organizational culture of a department (i.e., sport employees saw decreases in anxiety and depression when they left toxic cultures). However, social health saw continued impacts from working in the sport industry, regardless of position and athletic department. This manifested in the ability to make and maintain personal friendships, resentment of the sport employees from their partners, and decisions around starting families. This occurred even in the dyads who made major life decisions around family.

Findings also expand our understanding of the way in which sport employees make decisions regarding their career, family, and well-being. Much of the previous work regarding work-family interface has suggested employees largely prioritize their career over their families (Taylor et al., 2021; Weight et al., 2021). As such, Taylor and colleagues (2021) theorized college sport employees will adjust their personal life domain to allow the prioritization of their work duties. In this way, potential incompatibilities are reduced, but all accommodations are made to the employees' personal life, suggesting a burden is placed on employees' families (Taylor et al., 2021). What is noteworthy, however, within our study's findings is data showed majority of couples (five of the nine) organized major narrative turning points in their life around family (as opposed to around work), even if that meant making decisions to not prioritize their career. These couples made conscious decisions to not pursue new career opportunities to remain close to their family or prioritize their partner's career. This finding is directly in contrast to the type of work-life adjustments Taylor and colleagues (2021) suggested college athletic employees engage in. However, even when participants organized their lives around their family, on a day-to-day basis they would place their work obligations before their family. In these instances, participants and their partners perceived a decrease in their overall BPS health because of their work, while simultaneously improving other aspects of their life by prioritizing their family. Finally, many participants in this archetype recognized the limiting factors associated with prioritizing their family (e.g., hindering their career growth/mobility). This suggests all employees did make some type of accommodations to their personal life, in accordance with previous research on the types of accommodations college sport employees make to their personal life (Taylor et al., 2021).

The participant stories also support the BPS conception of health that has already been suggested in other sport populations. This scholarship has either categorized health experiences of participants into the different BPS domains (e.g., van Voorthuizen et al., 2022) or has sought to understand the changeways of the BPS (i.e., how one domain influences the other; Shulze et al., 2021). However, the fact that participants' work-life negotiations are more nuanced than laid out in previous research further supports the need to consider sport employee well-being from a BPS

lens but exploring such negotiations as *non-direct* changeways in the co-construction of employee well-being.

Specifically, for participants in this study, identity as a sport employee (psychological) interacted with work life in sport and their familial relationships (social) and had impacts on physical health (biological). However, these interactions were neither wholly positive nor wholly negative, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of employee well-being. Previous work has suggested sport employees being highly identified with sport leads to better work experiences, such as increased work engagement, positive work attitudes, and sense of community in the workplace (Oja et al. 2015, 2023; Swanson & Kent, 2015). However, Huml and colleagues (2021) suggest there is a tipping point whereby positive work engagement turns to negative work addiction—an integration of psychological domain to social domain and back to psychological domain.

Overall, the findings of this study largely support both conceptions of health, as sport identity had both negative and positive influences on participants' holistic health. For employees in this study, their sport identity is so entrenched it became the identity of their relationship too, as both employees and their partners organized many of their day-to-day decisions (i.e., the time the partner and sport employee have dinner), their temporal understanding of their relationships (i.e., remembering major life events, such as the day they got engaged, or small life moments, such as remembering it took a long time to get cable setup after a move, because it coincided with a sporting event), and even conceptions of health itself (i.e., linking positive or negative health outcomes to sport) around sport, which ultimately enhanced aspects of their BPS well-being. For dyads in both archetypes, however, this construction perhaps further perpetuated long-term commitment to a negative work-life integration—the partner “gets it” so they always handle family chores on the weekend (positive social well-being) so the employee can work the Saturday football game, even if it means missing family events (negative social well-being).

However, the recognition and often acceptance of some of these negative BSP health impacts of working in sport may be justified by the sport employees' sport identity and passion for sport (psychological domain), as employees and their partners rarely discussed the sport employee leaving the sport industry even for the dyads who made other types of career decisions to prioritize family. This supports previous research that sport employees' sport identity, sport affinity, and passion can contribute to increased job commitment (e.g., Oja et al., 2015, 2019; Swanson & Kent, 2015). Extending previous literature, our findings suggest sport employees' partners often also identify highly with sport or have a shared passion for sport (i.e., previously worked in the industry, sport fans) or identify with their partner's job in sport (i.e., even if they are not a fan, they attend events their partner is working); such a shared identity positively influenced the dyad's relationship due to shared passion and/or shared understanding. Even so, for many couples the continued prioritization of sport in major decisions and everyday life, perhaps stemming from a shared sport identity that enhanced marital well-being, at the same time negatively influenced other aspects of health (i.e., missing family events, physical health issues) and ul-

timately did often lead to relationship tensions. This conclusion supports Oja and Zeimers' (2025) paradoxical view of sport passion in sport employees and extends this understanding to include the identity of sport employees' partners.

Similar tensions were apparent in the physical health domain. Despite some participants sharing negative physical health outcomes from the stress and overwork culture in sport, several participants noted that due to their athletic identity they understand the importance of maintaining physical health. This demonstrates that the same psychological factor (i.e., sport identity) that may lead to prioritization of work obligations (decrease in social health) could also promote positive physical health behaviors (increase in physical health).

Overall, the findings of this study suggest the BPS interactions constructing the holistic health of college sport employees were nuanced, in that the psychological domain of sport employee identity had both clear negative impacts and clear positive impacts on social and physical health of college sport employees and their partners, regardless of if the employee made major life decisions around their career in sport or around their family. These nuances complicate the theorized changeways of the BPS model of health in suggesting positive change in one domain might not lead to positive changes in all domains. This contrasts with other applications of the BPS in employee wellness and sport research, which has supported *direct* changeways (e.g., Whelpely et al., 2023). Our findings do not fully support direct BPS changeways, suggesting rather that the BPS health of sport employees is many times constructed through *non-direct* changeways due to their entrenched sport identity.

Practical Implications

There are various practical implications from this study. As the results suggest sport employees recognize social health as important to their overall well-being, on an organizational level, athletic departments and work teams should consider an employee's social health and view this facet of health as a changeway for biological and psychological health. Therefore, while resources such as health care benefits supporting physical and mental health are imperative, cultivating a healthy organizational culture that integrates an employee's family and loved ones is similarly vital for supporting employee well-being. Additionally, while sport is not an industry that operates on a traditional work schedule, sport organizations can offer employees hybrid schedules and flextime to mitigate the late night, weekend work, and frequent travel that may be required of employees.

Organizations may also benefit from forced vacation usage and required log off times to ensure employees are unplugging from work and engaging in self-care behaviors aimed at enhancing their BPS health. Participants in this study—and previous work on sport employees (e.g., Saxe et al., 2023; Weight et al., 2021)—noted a culture of presenteeism, which forced employees to forego using their vacation time or feeling as though they always needed to be available to their work. Similar to mandatory recruiting dead periods by the NCAA, sport organizations could enforce mandatory vacation time or shutdowns for employees. Though this may be challenging during season, during the off season or summer, sport organizations would be

wise to prioritize time away from work. In this way, the organization is illustrating the prioritization of time for nonwork duties (e.g., family or leisure time) to prioritize BPS well-being and decrease the negative impacts of an overwork culture. Systemic changes are needed to how, when, and where sport employees work to increase retention and improve BPS well-being.

Limitations and Future Research

No study is without limitations. Although participants demographics were representative of the demographics of Division I collegiate sport administrators (NCAA, 2023), participants were not racially or ethnically diverse. In future studies, purposefully recruiting participants with diverse backgrounds can provide more insight into how experiences of oppression and discrimination influence an employee's BPS well-being. The current study also limited the scope of social sphere to romantic partners of the employees. As other loved ones are also influential in an individual's social health, exploring the perspectives of these individuals will provide further insights. Furthermore, as findings suggest non-direct changeways of the domains of health, there may be both benefits and drawbacks to employees' sport identity, such as staying in a toxic environment while at the same time creating a shared experience with one's partner. Future studies around work-life integration would benefit from directly including measures of identity to further explore these tensions and the role sport identity plays in employee well-being.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship stories of collegiate sport administrators and their partners to construct their narratives of well-being within the context of sport. Sport was considered a fruitful context as previous literature has established the industry as having a culture that requires atypical work hours, emphasizes presenteeism, and is rife with burnout and overwork cultures (e.g., Saxe et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2024). Findings of this study suggest that for both partners who made major life decisions to prioritize career in sport and who made major life decisions to prioritize family, everyday life was many times still organized around sport. This both increased certain aspects of BPS health while at the same time negatively influencing other aspects, suggesting *non-direct* changeways. These findings are important considering the growing body of literature on employee well-being, as it suggests a more nuanced understanding of work-life integration. It is critical to better understand how to holistically support employees, and their loved ones, in the distinct and demanding nature of the sport industry to recruit and retain the best talent.

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