

Why are they leaving?: An investigation into the experience of Division I men's basketball athletes who enter the transfer portal

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Historically, transfer rules within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) have been prohibitive, limiting the autonomy of college athletes. In recent years, the NCAA introduced the transfer portal which does not require athletes to notify their current institution when they plan to transfer or necessitate they sit out a year the first time they transfer. The process and culture around transferring has changed drastically, prompting further exploration into the movement between schools and conferences. This study employed a phenomenological research design by conducting two rounds of interviews to uncover the lived experiences of Division I men's basketball athletes from one university who entered the transfer portal and left their institution following the 2021-2022 season. Two semi-structured interviews, one season apart, were conducted with three athletes, examining questions around team culture, relationships with staff and teammates, and indicators of well-being. Findings suggest it was the relationship with their coaches, or lack thereof, that severely influenced their decision to enter the transfer portal. Overall, athletes felt supported by their teammates, but that was not enough to change their experience on the team. Following their transfer, athletes confirmed the importance of their player-coach relationship in their college athlete experience, and reflected on the ever-changing environment of college basketball as a business. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Historically, transfer rules within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) have been prohibitive, limiting the autonomy of college athletes (Johnson, 2019). Previously, when pursuing a transfer to another Division I program of the same sport, the NCAA required all college sport athletes to gain permission from their current institution before transferring. Additionally, if a player was to transfer, they were ineligible for competition the entirety of their first season at their new institution (Johnson, 2019).

Recently, this process has changed. Following settlement of lawsuits such as *Battle v. NCAA* and *Farrakhan v. NCAA*, in October 2018, the NCAA were forced to eliminate the requirement for athletes to gain permission from their current institution before transferring, allowing athletes to enter a national transfer database, known as the transfer portal (Johnson, 2019). This decision not only allows greater autonomy of movement for athletes but also allows players to secure a scholarship and play immediately at their new institution. The installation of the transfer portal further enables greater communication between players and prospective programs, allowing coaches to contact players as soon as their name enters the portal. Since this ruling, there has been an uptick in the number of men's basketball players entering the portal each season, with 957 in 2019 the year it was introduced, 967 in 2020, 1,653 in 2021, 1,724 in 2023, 2,083 in 2024, and 2320 in 2025 (Salao, 2025).

Before the establishment of the transfer portal, literature started to explore the demographics of college athletes who were transferring as well as their needs during the transfer process. According to Pifer and colleagues (2021) Division I men's basketball (DIMBB) transfers from the 2012-2013 and 2016-2017 seasons occurred more frequently during coaching changes, between mid-major programs (i.e., Division I conferences outside of the following: Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big 10 Conference (Big-10), Big 12 Conference (Big-12), or Southeastern Conference (SEC)), and between schools in the same state. Further, they note between the seasons of 2012-2013 to 2016-2017, studied institutions experienced an average of 0.7 transfers per season (Pifer et al., 2021). With regards to demographics, Verburg (2022) found college athletes who transfer are more likely to have a higher athletic identity than college athletes who have not transferred. Further, Homan (2019) found college athletes who transferred indicated needing the following from support staff: establishing communications, building relationships, and facilitating early introductions, in order to enhance their experience at their new institution.

Finally, scholarship has recently enhanced our understanding of the role of a coach in the transfer process. College athletes can transfer because of "relationships, coaching change/coaching style, lack of playing time, not the right fit, homesickness" and in a more general sense, "generational differences, social media, technology" (Massengale, 2019, p. ii). Being a "players' coach" allows for positive relationships with players, where choices are allowed, rationale is given for tasks, there are limits and rules, feelings are acknowledged, there is space for self-growth and independence, feedback is accepted, harsh and demeaning criticism and language is avoided, as well as the absence of ego-involvement (Mageua & Vallerand, 2003). Whereas demanding coaches who are negative, assertive, only focus on winning, do

not accept input, and have strict rules (Mageua & Vallerand, 2003) create a barrier between themselves and their athletes.

Yet, integral to this topic, and currently unknown in sport scholarship is a comprehension in athletes' motivation of transferring, specifically since the creation of the transfer portal. Thus, a holistic investigation into why DIMBB players are entering the transfer portal and transferring is necessary to yield greater understanding of the current state of DIMBB programs. The present study explores what experiences influence DIMBB athletes' decisions to enter the transfer portal and leave their institution. Two sets of interviews, one season apart, with three DIMBB athletes who all left one institution following the 2021-2022 season, were conducted to address why these athletes left and if they were satisfied with their decision, while considering questions about team culture, and relationships with staff and teammates.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Relational Psychological Contracts

A theoretical framework that can be applied is relational psychological contracts (RPC), which details an exchange agreement between an organization and an individual (Rousseau, 1995). The term psychological contract was first coined by Argyris (1960) where he implied the exchange agreement detailed tangible resources. Later, Menninger (1958) posits these exchange agreements and relationships extend past the tangible as the intangible is also involved. Coyle-Shapiro (2008) outlined the difference between Rousseau (1989) and Levinson and colleagues (1962) takes on psychological contracts noting that Rousseau (1989) proposes obligations arise “out of a perception that a promise has been made to commit to a future action” (p. 26) and Levinson and colleagues (1962) position of obligations was that “expectations arise from needs” (p. 26). Further, Coyle-Shapiro (2008) defined Rousseau's reimagined view of the psychological contract as “an individual's beliefs concerning the mutual obligations that exist” between the employee and the employer, as well as the notion that “these obligations arise out of the belief that a promise has been made either explicitly or implicitly” and thus, “sustained through the norm of reciprocity” (p. 25). Massengale (2019) went further by suggesting positive relationships lead to positive outcomes. If coaches want players to perform at the highest level consistently, the college-athlete “must feel loved and appreciated by coaching staff, teammates and other important personnel around campus” (Massengale, 2019, p. 19), which would be considered a RPC as it deals with verbal and nonverbal communication, intangible expectations and needs, this idea of reciprocity, and feelings such as loyalty. Additionally, Coyle-Shapiro and colleagues (2019) described another variable set of resources exchanged in RPC—ideological currency, which is defined as “credible commitment to pursuing a valued cause or principle (not limited to self-interest) that are implicitly exchanged at the nexus of the individual-organization relationship” (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003, p. 574). Coyle-Shapiro (2019) used this definition to explain that certain individuals believe “the organization provides the context in which the employee can contribute directly or indirectly to the cause” (p. 151) which

can be connected to the fact that athletes want to feel valuable and make an impact on their team.

Barnhill and Turner (2013) noted college athletes are more likely to leave their institutions if they believe their psychological contract is breached. Barnhill and Turner (2013) also noted that when coaches fail to fulfill obligations or perceived promises in the eyes of college athletes, relationships are altered, trust is lowered, and athletes start to feel less confident of the outcome of their relationship with the coaches. Essentially, athletes feel a psychological contract violation, which elicits negative emotions, and thus elicits feelings that lead them to leave their team. After perceiving a breach but before athletes get to the point of leaving their team, Coyle-Shapiro and others (2019) noted they “reciprocate accordingly by reducing their effort” (p. 159) in their role. In this case, athletes might not train as hard in practice, care about attendance, or play their best during games. The higher the psychological contract violation, the higher the intentions are to leave the team and end the relationship between coach and athlete; but this has not always been the case in the past as there were obstacles that prevented the college athlete from leaving (e.g., NCAA regulations such as sitting out a year after transferring, waivers, and academic outcomes), thus forcing the college athlete to continue the relationship although they do not wish to (Barnhill and Turner, 2013). These factors, while not as prevalent currently, were present in college athletics and more specifically, would start during the recruiting process for college athletes.

The recruiting process for a prospective college athlete is meant to form genuine relationships and is different from the reality of being on the team (Massengale, 2019). This can lead to breaches and violations of the psychological contract which occurs when there is a discrepancy with what was promised and what actually happens (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). This is why coach responsibility is such an integral part in the college athlete experience and thus the RPC, especially since “poor relationships with coaching staffs can or cannot filter into personal relationships between teammates” (Massengale, 2019, p. 34). College athletes want to feel worthy and wanted, so when they feel appreciated in their teams, they are prone to sacrificing more for the team (Massengale, 2019). This cannot happen until coaches are “concerned with every aspect of the student-athlete including academics, physical, emotional, and spiritual (depending on university) well-being and to not only focus on what the student-athlete can do for them” (Massengale, 2019, p. 31). More recently, Lilly (2020) outlined the relationship between psychological contract violation and the cycle of mistrust. After the violation has occurred, the cycle of mistrust is perpetuated through “transactional cost behaviors of both the victim and the perpetrator” (Lilly, 2020, p. 35) and “can only be broken if one party exhibits specific behaviors that focus on resolving the issue rather than focusing on ‘beating’ the other party” (p. 36). Further, when athletes undergo any kind of negative experience, they are more inclined to blame the perpetrator — the coaches — for everything connected to that experience which in turn increases the level of mistrust directed towards the perpetrator. Additionally, violations should be viewed as a process that is sparked by triggers which propel individuals to be consciously aware (Lilly, 2020). This, in

turn, portrays violations and breaches as a process, rather than one-time offenses (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019). It is up to coaches to show the college athlete they care more than just about what happens on the basketball court, because while the athlete is in college, coaches fill the role of parents (Massengale, 2019) and are an integral part of college athletes' lives. Considering this theoretical framework, the current study examined how a broken RPC could lead to an athlete's desire to transfer.

Contextualization of the College Sport Landscape

As previously mentioned, there has been a substantial increase in between-institution movements for college athletes. In Division I alone, there has been a total of 34,999 total transfers between the 2020-2021 and 2022-2023 academic years (National Collegiate Athletics Association, 2024). This increase can be partially attributed to substantive legislation changes such as the creation of the transfer portal (Johnson, 2019) and name, image, and likeness (NIL; Brutlag Hosick, 2021). The transfer portal, implemented in 2018, has significantly lessened the restrictions athletes faced when transferring institutions (Johnson, 2019). Impacts of the transfer portal can also be coupled with the adoption of NIL, which occurred in 2021. College athletes are now able to profit off their personal branding, including their name, image, and likeness (Brutlag Hosick, 2021). Along with the implementation of NIL has been the rise of collectives, or organizations that help facilitate NIL deals for college athletes (Nakos, 2024). Recent reports indicate NIL collectives have and will continue to play an important role (e.g., a multi-state challenge led by *Tennessee, Florida, New York, the District of Columbia, and Virginia v. National Collegiate Athletic Association*, 2024; Skrmetti, 2024) in athlete movement as they are able to leverage recruitment of athlete talent with promise of NIL deals (Nakos, 2024).

As aforementioned, limited scholarship has explored the impact of college sport litigation policies. Further, within more mainstream journalism, the emphasis of athlete movement is clearly on Power Four conferences (ACC, Big-10, Big-12, and SEC) within the Division I level. However, these legislative outcomes have also impacted mid-major conferences. For example, Nagel (2024) reported an increase in the number of mid-major "star" basketball players entering the portal as a method to advance to Power Four conferences. In addition, sport news journals have alluded to mid-major programs acting as a steppingstone for athletes (Rhoden, 2024). Athletes can come into a mid-major program, secure a starting role in their early years, and transfer to a more competitive team within the Power Four conferences (Moore et al., 2024; Rhoden, 2024). Thus, considering recent legislation changes and acknowledgement of intercollegiate sport as a rapidly changing industry, it is essential to contextualize motivations and experiences of college athletes as they grapple with transfer decisions.

Method

Procedure

A phenomenological research design was utilized to explore the experiences of Division I men's basketball players to "interpret their experiences, how they con-

struct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Agazu et. al., 2022, p. 1500). Phenomenology consists of contextualizing, understanding the phenomenon, and clarifying the phenomenon with emphasis on staying true to the way the interviewees view their life and accepting their experiences as how they describe them (Bevan, 2014). The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of Division I men’s basketball athletes who entered the transfer portal and ultimately left their institution?
2. What experiences influenced Division I men’s basketball athletes to leave their institution?
3. In what ways has the transition to a different institution impacted the experience of Division I men’s basketball players?

By exploring the experiences of DIMBB athletes, the intention was to hone in on these experiences by examining questions around team culture, academic and social program offerings, relationships with staff and teammates, and indicators of well-being. RPC helped shape the interview guide by placing importance on the ideas of intangible and tangible needs being met, feelings of fulfillment, and an emphasis on coach-athlete behavior and relationships.

Interviews with each participant were the instrument of data collection. Individual athletes’ experiences were the main focus of the study. Thus, interviews afforded an opportunity to explore certain concepts and perspectives as well as accommodate any clarification needed, instead of focusing on how the athlete exists in their team environment (Britten, 1995; Creswell, 2013).

Participants

Criterion and purposive sampling were utilized to recruit DIMBB athletes who left the same university in a Northeast conference and transferred to three different institutions (Creswell, 2013). Potential participants were recruited through industry connections if they met the following criteria: have played men’s basketball at the Division I case institution and transferred from the original institution after the 2021-2022 season. Three players agreed to participate; all were between the ages of 20-23 and identified as Black or African American.

Data Collection

Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow for flexibility, inquiry, and follow-up questions to participants’ responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All interviews took place via Zoom to account for multiple geographic locations. Further, all interviews were conducted by the primary investigator. First, participants were asked a series of introductory questions focusing on why they chose their original university and demographic information. Next, participants were asked behavioral, knowledge, and feeling questions aimed at understanding the entirety of their experience (Agazu et. al., 2022). The first segment of questions focused on contextualizing their experience at their original institution with questions such as, “tell me about your relationships with your past teammates and coaches?”. To understand

the culture of the institution questions such as “did you perceive a difference in the culture from the time you were recruited to the time you left, and if so, how?” were asked. Finally, questions about the transition of deciding to leave and how impactful the transfer portal was in the process which involved questions like, “when and how did you know you wanted to enter the transfer portal?” were asked.

In the second round of interviews, questions were similar to that of the first round of interview questions but solely based on players’ experiences at their new institution after transferring. Questions included, “tell me about your relationships with your teammates and coaches at your current institution?” and “tell me about the culture in your current men’s basketball program?”. In addition to the questions regarding culture, relationships, and resources offered, questions about team satisfaction were asked such as, “in general, are you satisfied or happy being a part of this team?” and later probed with, “after being on this team for a season, do you feel comfortable with your decision to transfer?”. Interviews took a maximum of 31 minutes.

Data Analysis

Following the first round, interviews were transcribed verbatim using Zoom’s transcription tool and researcher assistance. This final transcript was sent to participants for member checking (Merriam, 2009). Member checking is important for both researchers and participants to increase the trustworthiness of the data by giving participants the chance to verify and confirm that their responses were accurately transcribed (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Following, the research team read and coded each interview individually, compiling key information and quotes throughout. Throughout this process, “in vivo” coding was utilized to keep participants’ language as intact as possible (Saldaña, 2015). Then, the research team met for a total of two times and conducted a thematic analysis. First, all codes from all interviews were discussed and agreed upon. From there, pattern codes were created. Here, the research team grouped codes from all interviews into emerging patterns (Saldaña, 2015). During the second meeting, the team reviewed all codes and generated them into overarching themes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This procedure was repeated following the second round of interviews. Similar research design has been used recently in the *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport* (See Alanis et al., 2024 & Elliot & Kellison, 2021), deeming this design appropriate for the current study.

Findings

The following section comprises general data reflecting the effects of the transfer portal, as well as specific themes like *player-coach relationships* and *team culture*, from the two rounds of interviews with the participants. Subthemes are also present within each of the three themes. Following, players reflect on their experiences utilizing the transfer portal in the last theme, *effects of transfer portal*. It should be mentioned that Player 1 moved laterally from a mid-major institution to another mid-major institution, Player 2 moved to a Football Championship Subdivision (FCS)

institution, and Player 3 moved up into a Power Four institution, later transferring to another Power Four program.

Player-Coach Relationship

A key theme that emerged from the data was the player-coach relationship. This theme illustrates the vitalness of these player-coach relationships and includes sub-themes of the positive and negative experiences that ultimately shaped athletes' time at their institution, as well as the transactional aspects of the player-coach relationship.

The Centrality and Weightiness of the Player-Coach Relationship

Participants noted how essential their relationship with their coaches was in their experience at their initial institution, and that unfortunately, they felt there was not a relationship with the coaching staff. As Player 1 posits, "they really didn't know much about me, and it was kind of hard to play for people like that". This lack of connection with the coaches, specifically their head coach, was felt by other players, thus making it hard for them to be on the same page:

I probably only met with him – besides, my transfer meetings – probably like twice. So, like never meeting with your head coach, and especially being the point guard, which is supposed to be like the extension of the head coach was like, 'Wow, we never meet, we never talk'. And then I know my freshman year was so hard for me to understand what he was saying, or like trying to be on the same pages as him because most of the coaches I've ever played for I've been really close with. [Player 3]

Similarly, Player 2 explained how he did not feel close with any of his coaches, especially the head coach. He describes that in a five-person coaching staff, he had real relationships with two or three of them where he could "go to them for almost anything, not everything" and regarding the head coach, he "probably wouldn't be able to go to him for as much" as the other assistant coaches. Player 1 echoed this point, even going further about how a transactional culture where coaches did not value building relationships, deteriorated the player-coach relationships:

Some people might be able to function in an environment where it is strictly business, but some people just may need help from the leadership on the team. I feel like they could have been better as a coaching staff. I think you need to build relationships with your players, just because, these people they put in trust in you — we're away from our families and y'all are the adults in our lives. So, I feel like they can improve on that — just building a relationship and establishing a more friendly culture — like welcoming.

Further, participants reported it was often hard for the coaches to distinguish between them as players and them as people. For example, it was revealed that none of the coaches showed up to their players' graduation ceremonies, an act that participants took notice of and did not appreciate.

An observation that I made is, you know we have about four or five graduates this year, and I didn't hear of any of the coaches attending any graduations or telling anybody congratulations. So, I mean, I feel like it was pretty

big, because outside of basketball, we work hard to graduate. I attended my teammates' graduations, so I feel like it was kind of a big deal, not to hear from – I mean I heard from a few people, but from the head... you know what I mean? [Player 1]

There was also a common theme of replaceability throughout. During the season coaches made it known that these players could be replaced at any time, a statement that was discouraging to players as they left their families and hometowns to play basketball for these coaches:

One thing that always kind of stuck in the back of my head, which gave me bad vibes is, at the end of every huddle, or sometimes when he [head coach] gets irritated during practice he'll always say, 'If you can't do your job, I can find somebody else to do it,' and I feel like that's not really what you should be saying to your players as from a confidence standpoint, and just as a respect standpoint as well...Some kids are dropping their whole lives, all their friends, family, just to play in [city], and for you to just say 'Yo, I can replace you whenever I need to'. It's just kind of demoralizing. [Player 2]

Lastly, the news of participants' intent to transfer was not received well. Players noted the head coach would act disinterested or begin to act defensive. In return, participants pushed farther away from the program. Player 3 detailed his experience and the sudden switch up he received from his head coach:

Like previously, me and my coach were all buddy-buddy. But then, when I decided to leave, just, a complete energy changer. Just not speaking at all... We were pretty successful, especially towards the end of the year... but at the end of the day, I don't think we were taking the necessary steps in place to be effective or be a threat. There were a lot of other distractions that were going on, and I wasn't happy with it. So, I kind of expressed this to my coaches, and when I was leaving, they kind of took it their own way. So, I was coming off aggressive – is how they took it I guess – [I'm] not aggressive at all. But, uh, they kind of took it the wrong way...the first conversation we had, and then from there, is when I kind of ultimately made my decision.

Another Chance at Player-Coach Relationships

Participants noted how integral their relationships with their coaches — again with an emphasis on their head coach — were when describing their experiences at their new institution. Boundaries and professional relationships with their coaches came in different varieties.

Player 1 had more of a genuine professional relationship with his head coach where they discussed the athlete's longevity as he mentioned, "I mean, with the head coach we really didn't even talk that much. But when we did meet, we talked about how it was going, or even like a professional option...and he'd talk about his connections in the league for me". While Player 1's experience is more professional, he does not relay any negative feelings of this professional relationship with his head coach.

Player 2 on the other hand, felt closer and more relaxed around his head coach in a more personal manner, which allowed the participant to be more comfortable as he noted,

Yeah, it was never awkward. I feel like at my last institution, I couldn't really be myself one-on-one or however many coaches I was talking to. But here I feel like I could always be myself. We'd either be cussing, you know what I'm saying, just regular lang[uage], like I'm not always professional around them. I can just be myself.

Player 2 also reminisces about the "little stuff" like when,

We'd be wrestling, making jokes, and then, when it's time to suit up and get serious, you know, he's not necessarily yelling at you during the game, he's just showing his passion and encouraging you. So, I mean all these relationships with the coaches were very intact.

Player 2's experience is a healthy balance of a personal and professional player-coach relationship, as there is a perceptiveness and care of athlete well-being which ultimately led to a positive experience for Player 2.

Player 3 gave a unique outlook as he had a different role on the team due to his injury and therefore spent a lot of time with his coaches. He felt comfortable going up to talk to coaches off the court as he said,

I had a good relationship with a couple of the coaches, and it was always easy to go up there, and I spent a lot of time with them with me being hurt. So, off the court I got a chance to socialize with them and try to get to know them as much as I could within the year I was there, but it was a good time.

Player 3 ultimately reminisced about positive surface-level interactions with his coaches even though they were not very close personally.

The Transactionality of the Player-Coach Relationship

Finally, participants brought up how they viewed their role on their respective basketball teams as transactional, and one player [Player 3] even described "the basketball world as 'one big business'" where their coach acted as the boss and the athletes were employees. The tonality of these feelings came off as matter of fact, with an acceptance of the situation rather than being upset or hopeful that he would be on a team that provided more than just a give-and-take relationship as Player 3 posits, "It's very hard to obtain a very pure relationship" with the head coach.

Additionally, players noted this transactional system affected the relationship players had with their head coach, deciding how close one is with their coach and whether the head coach will listen to the athlete. Athletes acknowledged their 'on the court' role impacted their experience; Player 3 even went so far to say, "I mean, as everyone knows, it's just about production at the end of the day". Therefore, a player who is performing the best on the court will yield a better relationship with the head coach than someone who is on the bench or injured for example, paving the way for favoritism and the idea of "one main guy" to take a front seat in the team dynamics. Player 3 had strong feelings about this topic as he mentioned that,

You'll never see too often a bench player with a good relationship with his head coach. It's always like, the best, best, player, or you know, like someone that's doing something for this person, *then* they'll have a good relationship with him. But if you're not contributing in a major way, or contributing in a key way, or if you're not contributing in a way maybe the coach wants you to, you probably won't see a relationship with that coach, and that just shows how much of a business it is because if you're doing something for that person or for that coach, then they'll hear you out.

In addition to accepting this reality, Player 3 showed an almost jaded attitude as he noted he expected the same transactional mentality to be present at his next university, "I expect the same thing where I'm going now. But it could be a 'fit' thing, I mean, I just *expect* it to be that way".

Player 1 brought up the transactional mindset in terms of how his coaches made no effort to get to know him, "I feel like I can't play for someone who doesn't know me, and I don't know anything about them. That's why I would say strictly business." He also responded similarly with Player 3's sentiment about favoritism in coaches and how production on the court equated value on the team by saying,

You know how coaches are. They pick and choose who they want to criticize. So, every coach has their favorites. But my coach is one of those people if you weren't the main person, and made a mistake, he just amplified it. So, you just had to deal with it – a lot of coaches are like that. And so, until you're that main guy, you're always getting criticized. I mean I had to trust him and so whatever decisions he made – we won by it, or we lost by it. So, it's something you have to live with. [Player 1]

While Players 1 and 3 point out this transactional mindset and a feeling of uselessness when not actively playing basketball on the court, Player 2 showed the duality of team roles as he happily shared the positive environment his coaches and teammates created at his second institution off the court which translated to connecting on the court. He even went as far as talking about criticism in a positive light, which was the first time that occurred throughout the entire interview process throughout all participants.

The coaches would just always re-emphasize at practice whenever somebody is going through it, is that 'we're correcting because we love you, and we're not telling you anything that shouldn't be said' so as long as that was in the air, I mean, the vibes were pretty good at practice, traveling, everywhere for real.

In general, Player 2 outlined an environment at his new institution filled with transparency, communication, and one where coaches were perceptive and responded to their athletes when need be.

Team Culture

While we found the player-coach relationship to be critical in an athlete's basketball experiences, this theme and subthemes discuss the influence the coach(es) had on the team culture, and how this impacted athletes' experiences. Lastly, we explore the influence of participants' teammates and their contribution to the team culture and participants' experiences.

A Winning Culture: The Necessity to Feel Useful and Valued

Participants revealed their need to feel useful and valued on their initial team, a common sentiment across all college athletics. However, with this particular team, they note their value was directly, and only, tied to their game performance, or a winning culture, “I think winning is expected at [institution]. I mean that’s why they tell you it’s strictly business, and they were consistent with it, the strictly business part” [Player 1]. As such, participants noted if you could not contribute to winning a game, you were pushed to the side. Additionally, standards to uphold a culture of winning were not equalized across all players, leading to favoritism, different courses of action for players’ missteps, and a transactional culture:

I feel like some people were treated differently than others when they came to like, the disciplinary actions, maybe acting out in practice, or maybe others talking back ... it caused a little turmoil in the locker room with guys, where they felt they couldn’t do this and be themselves in a working environment...[But it is] still a job at the end of the day. Still business at the end of the day. [Player 3]

On top of that, when injuries occurred, or players experienced less playing time, they felt pushed to the side, and were unsure of their place on the team. Player 2 summed up his experience dealing with an injury and his perceived place on the team afterward,

[There were] a few times where guys got injured – serious injuries. [Teammate] injured his shoulder, and he had surgery on it, and well, I can vouch for this, too, because I got injured, as well. But when you’re out for a significant amount of time it’s kinda like the coaches put you to the side, because they can’t really do anything with you...I was injured for about five to four months, and after I got my surgery, it was about two texts, and then after that, it went to the... not cold shoulder, but it’s just like you’re here. They’re not really acknowledging you.

In addition, Player 3, after he transferred, sustained an injury. Following his transfer, he continued to perceive diminished engagement from the coaching staff, which he attributed to his inability to participate fully due to injury. Player 3 discussed his experience by saying, “Yeah, I didn’t like going to too much of anything just because I was hurting. I really wasn’t participating. And it was my first year out there in this small town. I wasn’t looking forward to just attending events” and thus felt discouraged from team activities at times.

Moving Beyond Winning

For participants, standards and expectations were at the forefront of a positive and impactful team culture. Looking primarily at their second institution, repetitive team activities and following through with expectations set from day one by both the coaches and returning players were integral in creating a culture that all players bought into. This allowed zero room for loose interpretation and a difference in consequences if a problem were to arise, making sure everyone was held to the

same standard — even with things such as stretching. Player 2 outlined his feelings when going to practice, mentioning that he’s “pretty happy” and that it is a “good environment”. Further he posited, “everybody is criticizing you, you know what I’m saying, everybody is instructing you out of love. They’re not ever gonna say anything to steer you wrong. They’re just saying that because they love you” noting this positive culture where players felt comfortable with coach intentions and directions. Additionally, Player 2 mentions how his coaches and teammates inspired him to utilize the resources at his new institution by saying, “Yeah, I did [find the resources valuable] just because of — not the resources themselves, but just the motivation that people instilled in me, just to be the best version of myself and use those resources.” Player 3 adds,

Yeah, it’s a very tight knit team circle. Everyone is pretty much on one accord. It’s very strict, very regimented, very active, and very busy. It’s all about work, though, like it’s a pretty hard working culture, hard nose culture, blue collar culture. I think that the coach did a pretty good job of, day one, kind of setting the tone and the rules of how things are going to be and then the returning guys also kind of set that standard on, “it looks like this, we do this” like we even stretched as a team together. And if someone was out of line, we’d redo all the stretches.

Player 3 went into more detail about the team culture and how that affected his relationship with his teammates. Since values, expectations, and standards were set early on from the coaches, athletes were allowed and even encouraged to build stronger relationships with their teammates.

I think my relationship was pretty good. A lot of the stuff we did, we did it as a team, no matter what it was, and I mean kind of just by force and by nature, you’re gonna kind of gravitate towards those people ... We ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner together every day as a team, like met every day as a team together at 4:00, and we just had a lot of extracurricular activities outside of basketball that we did together that I think really helped gel the team, that it wouldn’t have gelled if we didn’t do those things together.

Team culture can be expressed and understood in different ways, one impact being a reignited feeling of belonging and love of the sport of basketball that the participants had not felt, or actively lost, at their previous institution that motivated athletes to do their best in an environment they felt more comfortable.

I feel like last year at [previous institution] I kind of woke up every day feeling like, “Why am I going to practice? Why am I doing this? I’m not having fun at all with basketball”. This year it was kind of different just because I’m more involved, playing more of my style of game, and yeah, I’m good. I feel like a piece of the team, so I feel like going to practice and working hard. I’m working on my game. I’m actually getting ready to play instead of just going through the motions. [Player 1]

Moreover, a coach’s care of an athlete as a person versus a basketball player was an integral turning point for athletes when distinguishing their team culture. Athletes mentioned recruiting based off of personality and the importance of creating a sus-

tainable culture that motivated players to win. This was recognized in ways such as coaches actively showing they value their players as more than just athletes, even when they do not have playing time — impacting more than just on-the-court performance but culture and relationships as well.

Coach [name] was a really good coach. He was a player's coach, so you know, off the court we just do little things that would amount to just *more* that really showed me that he really cares about kids and not just basketball." ... "Coach [name] recruits guys based off their personality, and sometimes it's not all just basketball. We had some guys that made an impact on the team that didn't even play. [Coach would] just encourage us at practice, and make sure everybody is doing what they need to do. [Player 2]

Teammates as a Support System

Integral to their experience at their initial institution, were their teammates. In multiple ways, they acted as participants' support systems: whether it was to destress, understand what they were going through, or ask for advice on what to do. Language such as "my brothers" and "my family" was prevalent throughout all interviews, along with the acknowledgment that all the players got along really well overall. Player 2 illustrated this by saying, "the main mental break for me was just being around my teammates [lists names of teammates] – just really hanging out with those guys off the court really let me be loose". Additionally, Player 3 spoke about his ongoing bond with his teammates, who he deemed were a part of his safe space:

My past teammates, I love them. I talk to them – most of them – as often as I can... I talk to [Teammate], a lifelong friend, I talk to [Teammate] – on the game [2k] with him pretty much every day. So, we all pretty much came to [University] at the same time, had to figure everything out at the same time... You let someone into your safe space or someone's in your safe space, automatically, you're gonna build a bond or connection with them because you're doing something that's special to you with them.

Further, there was a shared level of discomfort among the players, regarding the culture of the team as shaped by the head coaches. When it came time to make personal transfer decisions, all the players talked about it beforehand and voiced their opinions on wanting to leave, as they felt their initial institution was not the right fit for them:

My teammates, I mean, we all knew that a lot of people were gonna leave. So we talked amongst ourselves before the news came out. I mean a lot of players voiced their opinions on wanting to leave, so it wasn't surprising anyone. [Player 1]

It is important to note, participants did not mention the role of their teammates during the second interview. However, as aforementioned, participants still keep in touch with their teammates from their initial institution, marking the strength of these relationships. It could be possible that this is because participants were at their initial institution for longer than a season, providing time to strengthen these relationships.

Effects of Transfer Portal

Below highlights two subthemes that summarize participants' experiences regarding the transfer portal: *more time to play* and *a second chance and mobility*.

More Time To Play

Participants indicated the new rules of the transfer portal, specifically how they did not have to sit out a year after their first transfer, was an influential reason why they decided to transfer. They liked the idea that they could immediately begin to immerse themselves with their new team on and off the court and continue to play their sport at a high level, exemplified in the quote from Player 2 below:

Yeah, I feel like that... One year to sit out was making a lot of dudes scared of transferring. But now that you get your one free year, I feel like that's really good, because you know sometimes when mistakes happen, and you don't really know how college is your first time round as a freshman. So, like now that you get your one free year to, you know, make a better choice. I feel like that's a good look on the transfer portal.

In adjacent reasoning, Player 1 noted he knew he wanted to transfer when he was not getting enough playing time at his initial institution. He explained it felt personal as his performances were good and he knew he would have better playing time elsewhere:

I kind of wanted to leave when - it was a time when I stopped playing a lot, and it was moments where I would play well, and I would still be taken out and wouldn't be put back in. And even when I'm playing well - so I kind of felt like it was personal... I mean at that point I don't want to play for someone that personally has a problem with me when it is not about basketball anymore, because if someone was producing and you still not playing though it's - it seems like you're personally attacking that person. So probably like mid-way through conference play I knew I wanted to leave.

A Second Chance and Mobility

Participants overall noted the ease of mobility they received when entering the transfer portal. Player 2 commented that sometimes you do not find the right fit on the first try, and was grateful the transfer portal afforded him a second chance to find that "right fit" when it comes to his team and that culture:

I was just contemplating like, is this the place for me? Do they have a need for me not a want, you know, like, does this team succeed without me or with me like? I really put that into factor ... I feel like, a week before the deadline [to enter the portal] I was just contemplating. I feel like if you're contemplating on whether to stay home or not. Well, your "home" [in air quotes], then I feel like it is not home to you.

In a similar notion, participants felt comfortable at all points through the transfer process via the transfer portal. They all indicated it offered them increased mobility, and they felt in control of their ability to leave their previous institution whenever they wanted to in order to find their new home. In other words, they never felt stuck.

Specifically, Player 3, expressed he knew this process helped his ability to find the right fit, and he wanted to utilize it again to seek the best opportunities for him,

Yeah, I don't know. I thought – I don't know what the process was like before, but I know the portal kind of made me comfortable to go in. For me, knowing that me going out there, I would have some options based off me having a good freshman year, and a good sophomore year. That could be frustrating if maybe you don't play so well, and you don't have many options but for me, it was pretty calming knowing and going out there that I would still have options to go find a home and start over.

Player 1 detailed a similar experience. For him, entering the transfer portal did not increase his workload a lot, making this process very smooth and seamless for him,

It's pretty smooth just because I didn't have to search for school. Pretty much all I did was express that I wanted to leave my original school and all the coaches pretty much recruited me. They all contacted me. So, it was pretty cool.

The ease of recruitment and transfer process overall led players to feel they were in control of this process and could make the move that best suited their needs.

Discussion and Implications

Discussion

The purpose of this project was to understand the lived experiences of Division I men's basketball college athletes who transferred from one university after the 2021-2022 season. Findings alluded to the importance of the player-coach relationship whether they be positive or negative, and how a coach can impact team culture, which illuminated why DIMBB athletes were transferring. More specifically, player-coach relationships that were both personal and professional yielded higher feelings of satisfaction as well as clear lines of communication between the athlete and the head coach after transferring. Whereas player-coach relationships that were strictly professional and impersonal, left room for athletes to feel that something was missing from their college athlete experience. Additionally, when coaches made athletes feel replaceable and as if their value was tied to their on-court performance, it proved detrimental to athlete well-being as they felt basketball was strictly a business and their value was tied to their on-court performance, in turn impacting the entirety of the team culture. When some level of personal care was given to athletes after transferring, they did not adhere to this idea of basketball as a business as much (though it was still present), because they understood their coach cared about them professionally and personally, and so they felt like they were part of the team, which was not the experience they had at their original institution.

Ultimately, athletes left their institutions based on these poor player-coach relationships and not feeling valued enough on their teams. Inter-athlete relationships were not a reason for transferring as athletes saw their teammates as brothers and were even brought closer by the poor treatment of the head coach. After transferring,

athletes had a newfound sense of team culture based on not only the relationships between them and their head coach, but the set of values, rules, and accountability all athletes adhered to in their new teams. Athletes were able to feel a sense of belonging and a reignited love of basketball that was lost at their previous institution, and overall, athletes reflected on a more positive college athlete experience.

To the best of our knowledge, there is no research detailing the lived experiences of athletes who enter the transfer portal, their motivations for transferring, or an examination of their transfer experience a year after transferring. While Barnhill and Turner (2013) focus on the psychological contract breaches of college athletes and transfer intent, we are extending their work by providing a more holistic view into college athlete well-being, team culture, player-coach relationships, and the college athlete experience.

Theoretical Implications

Past literature on RPCs has primarily examined workplaces and employees which traces back to work by Argyris (1960). In general, psychological contracts have been examined in the past through many lenses, by different researchers, in many different time periods. This study examines RPC in collegiate athletic teams with the ‘work-place’ being the coaches and the ‘employees’ being the athletes.

Player-coach relationships were core to the college athlete experience, and a topic all athletes emphasized as essential. These player-coach relationships in turn explained some reasoning behind why these athletes were transferring, as they had not established good communication and positive relationships and were looking for these attributes in their new institutions, something Homan (2019) also finds. Menninger (1958) brings attention to the importance of intangible aspects in exchange agreements and relationships, which is what we saw was valued higher by the athletes (i.e., open communication, trust, loyalty, and support that was found in player-coach relationships and team culture), than tangible aspects such as academic and athletic resources (i.e., team gear, meals, new facilities) that Argyris (1950) highlights. While originally RPC refers to an employee and an employer, this study expands on this theory by viewing it through the lens of college athletics – where the college athlete is the employee and the coaches are the employers. This in turn validates the concept of RPC in college athletics, something Barnhill and Turner (2013) allude to as well. With the implementation of the transfer portal, college athletics has become a transactional environment that imitates a business-like culture, thus furthering what we know about RPC and expanding the environments it could be applied to. Players who are expected to perform at a high level need to feel valued by the coaching staff, which according to Massengale (2019) is what the RPC is. This was not the case for these athletes at their original institution. As a result, they felt the need to transfer in order to feel cherished and able to perform for their teams and for coaches. This aligns with findings from Coyle-Shapiro and colleagues (2019) regarding ideological currency and fulfillment. Athletes felt coaches were not involved and did not care about the person behind the player, something Massengale (2019) outlines. Athletes gave examples of coaches not attending graduations, not having

any communication outside practice, and coaches telling players they are replaceable. This is affirmed when Player 1 says his coaches did not attend any graduations for all graduates during his time at the university. After transferring, some athletes found a better fit when coaches took time to know the person behind the player, allowed the athlete to feel comfortable around the coaches, and overall respected them and showed their care of the athletes' well-being. When coaches take time to learn about every aspect of the college athlete rather than a transactional mindset of what the athlete can do for the coach, there is a higher chance of positive relationships, open communication, and a better college athlete experience.

Additionally, there was a discrepancy between the obligations and perceived promises that were made in line with what Rousseau (1989) outlines, where athletes, in this case, were promised care under their original team environment they are in both professionally and personally, but these obligations were not met. Even when looking at Levinson and colleagues' (1962) definition of psychological contract where needs precede expectations, athletes' needs were not met and the expectation for coaches to support athletes past what they could provide on the court was not upheld. This lack of care from coaches ties into a reduction in effort from athletes due to the violations occurred (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019), which led to a lack of motivation for athletes and loss of love for their sport. Barnhill and Turner (2013) reinforce the idea that when a psychological contract is broken, it leads to a psychological contract violation, which in turn leads to lower cognitive trust and higher intentions of leaving their team. This cycle of mistrust after the psychological contract violation coincides with findings from Lilly (2020). Since the coaches — the perpetrators of the violation — did not try to alleviate the mistrust that stemmed from the violations, the disconnect between them and the athletes created a rift that was unable to be mended. Therefore, further illustrating the importance of positive coach-athlete relationships and the necessity of clear communication and consideration of all parties involved. These violations and breaches led athletes to make the decision to leave, which unlike Barnhill and Turner note (2013), was easy and accessible due to the transfer portal. The obstacles that may have prevented college athletes from transferring in the past are now inconsequential as the transfer portal has created more mobility, freedom, and transparency in the transfer process, and thus, allows college athletes to break the psychological contracts they were in with their coaches by leaving their team and moving on to improve their college athlete experience. While Massengale (2019) talks about how coaches fill the role of parents, findings from the current project suggest teammates and team culture play a similar role as athletes described their teammates as “brothers” and “family”. The RPC can be applied to teammates as well as coaches, as athletes felt a special bond to teammates and were able to create support systems and receive intangible needs such as loyalty and trust from one another. Massengale (2019) also points out that negative relationships with coaches affect how teammates interact, therefore connecting player-coach and athlete-athlete relationships. These negative relationships can be prevented if realistic

expectations are set during the recruitment and socialization process, with constant check-ins being implemented to avoid psychological contract breaches, and coaches being cognizant to fully comprehend and acknowledge athletes' needs and expectations (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019).

Managerial Implications

Coaches and administration in Division I college athletic departments can use this research to better understand what their athletes may be going through, what their wants and needs are, and how coaches and administration can make the college athlete experience better.

Caring for the person behind the player seems like an easy feat but is often forgotten when coaches' main objective is to win games on the court. This includes actively communicating with players on and off the court, taking interest in their personal life, and creating a comfortable environment where athletes can be themselves — even if that means not being 'professional' in the traditional sense of the word. When establishing an encouraging culture in multiple facets of a college athlete's life, the athlete will want to perform better for the team and ensure a positive and sustainable college athlete experience. The transfer portal should not be something to fear or look down upon as it allows athletes more autonomy and mobility in their collegiate career and gives them a second chance when the first institution may not have been the right fit. Overall, college athletes need support that varies from athlete to athlete, and thus, coaches and administration should listen to college athletes and provide the necessary care that comes with being an athlete in Division I athletics.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study outlines the experiences of Division I men's basketball players, there are limitations. First, not all the athletes who transferred from the original institution wanted to partake in the study; what started with six athletes ended up resulting in three athletes being interviewed. With this in mind, this research study was conducted with a small sample size, one specific sport, one gender, and therefore the generalized ability of the findings is limited.

In future research, this framework could also be applied to the evaluation of coaches as interviewing more college athletes on their experiences may lead to a better way to assess coaches rather than just wins and losses. Additionally, interviewing more athletes, in different sports, and adding women to the study may prove more effective in gaining a well-rounded view on the current college athlete experience with respect to the transfer portal across the board. A third follow-up interview may prove effective to see a more longitudinal look at the effect of college athletes transferring and the college athlete experience.

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