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Student-Athlete Mental Health: University of Montana Case Study

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HONR 499 Capstone

Dr. Charles Palmer

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Student-Athlete Mental Health: University of Montana Case Study

Abstract

Research suggests that Division I college-student athletes experience higher levels of stress and other behavioral health issues than their non-athlete counterparts, with up to 20% of them suffering from depression (Sudano et al., 2017). Two studies on student athletes' well-being conducted in 2020, reported that athletes continue to report higher levels of mental health concerns (Johnson, 2022). Since the fall of 2020, rates of mental exhaustion, depression, and anxiety have improved minimally with rates remaining 1.5 to two times higher than reported before the COVID-19 pandemic (Johnson, 2022). Naomi Osaka withdrawing from the French Open in 2021 and Simone Biles withdrawing from the 2020 Tokyo Olympics to prioritize their mental health brought attention, and even some backlash towards the idea that athletics may need to withdraw from competitions to prioritize their mental health. Stanford soccer player Katie Myer taking her own life by suicide in her dorm room started a national social media campaign in the United States, advocating for mental health concerns to be addressed for collegiate athletes in 2022. The need for mental health issues to be addressed has been expressed, yet college athletes are not seeking help. When asked if they would feel comfortable seeking health from a mental health expert on their respective college campus, less than half of women's and men's National College Athletic Association (NCAA) sports participants answered they would agree or strongly agree with that statement (Johnson, 2022). The University of Montana athletic department is not immune from this phenomenon; student-athletes at the University of Montana have expressed that they too suffer from mental health issues. Yet, Grizzly Athletics offers free counseling sessions to student-athletes, while these slots regularly remain unfilled. "There is a growing awareness of the importance of mental health care in NCAA

student-athletes; however, there is a lack of literature on mental health resources in collegiate settings” (Sudano et al., 2017). The University of Montana can act as a case study for college athletic institutions similar in size. The purpose of this research is to better understand if collegiate athletes struggle with mental health, if so why, what resources would meet their needs, and how to make them helpful and accessible. The goal of the case study investigation is to unveil the reason why mental health resources go unused and find possible solutions.

Introduction

There has been a recently enhanced focus on mental health of college student-athletes (Morris et al., 2020). Awareness is necessary, but it is not sufficient to tackle the range of elite athlete mental health needs (Purcell et al., 2019). Athletes are taught, from the beginning of their athletic careers, the proper routine to maintain physical health, including attending practices and the gym to maintain peak performance; yet, they are not taught what is done to take care of mental health (Abramo, 2018). The culture of expected physical and mental toughness from athletes can work to stigmatize health-seeking behavior as a weakness (Drury, 2020). Mental health is often an ignored topic in college athletic environments today for two overarching reasons: stigma and lack of knowledge (Abramo, 2018). While several studies have examined what contributes to mental health issues at the NCAA Division I level, little to no research has been conducted looking into mental health experiences of athletes at the University of Montana (UM) and the adequacy of resources offered to address them. This study analyzes the knowledge athletes within the University of Montana Athletic Department have about possible mental health challenges they may be facing, the resources they choose to seek or not to seek, the stigmas they associate with seeking help, and the adequacy of the mental health resources offered. Student

athletes had the opportunity to fill out a Qualtrics survey of twenty-two questions surrounding the topic.

The survey focused on questions such as:

- The University of Montana athletic department has offered a limited number of free counseling sessions to student-athletes in the past. Have you ever attended these?
- Pressure is the use of persuasion, influence, or intimidation to make someone do something. Have you ever felt pressure from anyone to perform to a high standard in your sport?
- Have you ever considered dropping out of a competition because you felt too much pressure to perform athletically?
- Do you feel like you worry too much about your sport?
- Is there anything you find within Grizzly athletics to be negatively impactful to your mental health?

Participants were random (from the student-athlete population at the University of Montana) and their identities were and will remain anonymous. Student-athletes at the University of Montana could choose to take the survey and reveal as much as they wanted to about their mental health, completely voluntary without any repercussions. Their answers are combined with literature, that is drawn on for background knowledge, of differing athletic institutions. These sources work together to provide the best idea of the status of mental health at the University of Montana and other college athletic departments, identifying themes around factors that contribute to collegiate athlete mental health challenges and reluctance around seeking help.

Several ethical considerations were necessary before proceeding. Informed consent is the most important. Athletes should understand the risks and benefits of completing the Qualtrics survey before they participate. The well-being of student-athletes at the University of Montana ought to be of utmost consideration. An informative study should represent athletes of all backgrounds. The athletic department at the University of Montana does have a diverse population. However, due to the small sample size, literature is used to supplement this when needed, including diverse authors and athletes from a variety of ethnic, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds. Justice should also be taken into the utmost consideration. Athletes being punished for expressing the truth about their mental health status would be inherently unjust. Lastly, this study aims to achieve justice for these athletes by determining what could be negatively impacting their mental health; this information can hopefully be used as a step in the right direction of creating necessary changes to improve the mental health status of these athletes.

In order for athletes to get the help they need when it comes to mental health, college athletic institutions as a whole must be reformed. The stigma against athletes seeking help for their mental health and the lack of knowledge surrounding athlete mental health must be addressed. A framework that helps athletes develop psychological distress self-management skills, prepares stakeholders like coaches and high-performance sports staff to properly address athlete mental health, and highlights the need for a variety of mental health professionals to be integrated into athletic departments would most adequately address athlete mental health needs (Purcell et al., 2019). When these components are combined, they ensure that elite athletes have access to the support and intervention they may need during a potential crisis (Purcell et al., 2019). This study investigates what may be contributing to poor mental health, how to make

resources easily accessible and accurate, and how to get athletes to utilize them. The findings within this study will give the UM athletic department useful information on what athletes are facing. This will likely lead to real changes, benefitting both the athletes and the staff of the athletic department at the University of Montana.

Literature Review

The prevalence of mental health issues in college-aged students when it comes to type, security, and frequency has gained increased recognition (Scifers et al., 2018). However, student-athletes are still reluctant to seek professional help, due to stigma and lack of mental health literacy (Morris et al., 2020). This case study reviews why student-athletes may struggle with mental health, the resources they are provided with, what resources they utilize, and why they may be reluctant to seek help within the University of Montana athletic department. It attempts to explain why student-athletes at UM are not utilizing the resources they currently have, even though they have expressed concern for their mental health and pushed for access to more resources. This section reviews literature surrounding the reason student-athletes struggle with mental health, starting with the expectations associated with their performance in their respective sport, sport being tied closely to their identity, and the comparison between competitive college athletes and traditional college students. Following this, special attention is given to the problem in the status quo, why mental health has not already been addressed. The final section will review possible solutions to this issue.

Why: Expectations Associated with Performance

Coaches, families, team, peers, and parents play significant roles in the lives of elite athletes' healthy development (Baker et al., 2015, p. 25). Findings highlight that coaches play highly dichotomous roles in the development of elite athletes, ranging from deliberately

facilitating opportunities for the development of confidence, connections, and character, to emotionally abusing child athletes in the name of performance: threats, degradation, and belittlement (Baker et al., 2015, p. 25). More research needs to be conducted to understand the circumstances around the particular coaching approaches in youth elite sport to clarify the links between coaching behaviors and specific healthy and unhealthy psychosocial outcomes (Baker et al., 2015). The health of an athlete can be jeopardized when the sole focus for an athlete's participation in sport is performance (Baker et al., 2015, p. 83). To highlight a specific example of an emotionally harmful coach-athlete relationship, "Basketball practice wound down and what usually happened, happened once again. Coach lost it for the umpteenth time that week. Stopping practice he began to yell at the top of his lungs, 'Stupid f'en freshman! What an *%#%#%#@ idiot! Can't you get the damn play right or what!?' The athlete, who actually was a very talented ball player, shrunk backwards, turning bright red. His eyes began to water as he fought back tears" (Baker et al., 2015, p. 83). Athletes learn to subject themselves to anything that could help them win the most often, but ultimately this kind of behavior puts them in an environment that disempowers athletes and normalizes abuse (Baker et al., 2015). Recent statistics prove that extreme conditions provoke mental disorders and pathological states in elite athletes (Eganov et al, 2021). As soon as athletic performance became compromised, athletes reported suffering increasingly negative effects in response to their emotionally abusive coaching experiences, such as emotional upset, depressed mood, self-dislike, disordered eating, difficult interactions with friends, and engagement in rebellious behavior (Baker et al., 2015, pg. 89).

Why: Difficult Transition from High School to College without Coaching Pressures

Many individuals are at a time of high risk during their college years when they experience an onset of mental or physical health problems (Ashton & Downs, 2011, p. 228).

Academic performance, social demands, adjusting to life away from home, and financial challenges are just a few of the burdens college students must confront (Lopes Dos Santos et al., 2020). Aggressive behaviors, alcohol use, and fatigue are highly associated with symptoms of psychological distress and stress among both male and female collegiate athletes (De Souza et al., 2021). Maintaining adequate levels of vigorous physical activity (VPA) may protect against these problems in college and in the future (Ashton & Downs, 2011, p. 228). A study of 395 college students (286 females and 109 males) at two universities, showed a significant decline in VPA after the transition to college from high school (Ashton & Downs, 2011, p. 228). This decline in VPA led to a weaker athletic identity in college compared to high school (Ashton & Downs, 2011, p. 231). Viewing oneself as a non-athlete may contribute to lower engagement in VPA in college and perhaps across the lifespan (Ashton & Downs, 2011, pg. 231). Although the vast majority of college students are likely to experience some kind of negative emotions and difficulties in their lives, those who consistently engage in VPA may potentially be less affected by such problems because they experience more frequent positive emotional states, have better self-esteem, and are better able to moderate the impact of stressful events (Ashton & Downs, 2011, pg. 241). Because most people are not skilled enough to participate in sports at the college or professional level, colleges and communities should consider substantially expanding the range of recreational and club sports available and should identify ways to increase participation on these teams (Ashton & Downs, 2011, pg. 243). Expanding these sport opportunities could directly increase individuals' VPA through practices and competition, which may also help more individuals incorporate being athletic and/or healthy into their identity, thus potentially increasing their engagement in exercise and other health-related behaviors in both the present and future (Ashton & Downs, 2011, pg. 243). It is important to acknowledge that in this case

athletic activity had a positive impact on regular college students. Exercise in general can be great for one's mental health. This could further prove that pressure to perform in a competition may be what leads to negative mental health impacts, not simply the sport itself.

Why: Stresses Tied to the Unfortunate Realities of Being a Collegiate Athlete

College is already regarded as an at-risk period of life for the development of mental illnesses; however, a number of studies have suggested that certain stressors may increase an athlete's vulnerability to depression (Cox, 2015, p. 1). In a study conducted at Southern Illinois University on 950 NCAA Division I student-athletes, 33.2% experienced symptoms of depression, a rate higher than the general college population (Cox, 2015, p. 3). Additionally, 25.7% of NCAA Division I athletes did not know how or where to access mental health treatment at their university, and 44.5% had not received any mental health education from their athletic department (Cox, 2015, p. 32). Injury was a risk factor in the development of depressive symptoms, possibly at clinically significant levels, particularly during the early stages of recovery (Cox, 2015, p. 12). Strength of an athlete was linked to higher depression following a role-disrupting event (Cox, 2015, p. 13). This presented further evidence that injury can cause significant psychological stress to athletes, particularly if they identify strongly with the athlete's social role (Cox, 2015, p. 14). Development of a strong athletic identity can be a beneficial driving force for motivation and performance, but the associated cost is that its loss is felt deeply when an athlete exits their sport in ways that can be hazardous to health and well-being (Haslam et al., 2021).

Why: Athletes Being Called Amateurs, While Being Treated as Professionals

When viewing athletes from an academic standpoint, they appear as a privileged group with disproportionate advantages as opposed to their peers (Caulfield et al., 2022, p. 603).

However, when examined at a deeper level, experts have found that student-athletes are at a risk psychologically, physically, and intellectually because of their respective sports; these are all risks that undermine the ability to develop and flourish (Caulfield et al., 2022, p. 603). This reality, that student-athletes are actually at a disadvantage rather than an advantage, harshly contrasts the ways they are viewed by their classmates and the virtues voiced by universities in mission statements (Caulfield et al., 2022, p.603). Because of the funding college athletics brings to universities, it invites criticism of athletes (Caulfield et al., 2022, p. 603). The amount of money universities make from collegiate athletes incentivises them to prioritize athletic performance over their academics (Caulfield et al., 2022, p. 606). As a result, student athletes are working (on average) 10 hours per day seven days a week, with limited time to do anything else (Caulfield et al., 2022, p. 606). The median number of sleep for student-athletes across all collegiate competition divisions is 6.25 hours of sleep per night (Caulfield et al., 2022, p. 606). The pressures student-athletes are facing to perform places them under an immense amount of stress because they feel that they have inadequate amounts of time to dedicate to both their sport and their academics (Caulfield et al., 2022, p. 606). Coaches also have notable power over their athletes (Caulfield et al., 2022, p. 608). This questions if these athletes are actually amateurs, not when it comes to purely performance, but when one considers how much athletes are expected to balance at all times.

Why: A Comparison of Athletes v. Non-Athletes

A study at the University of Alwaz Branch, Iran compared the emotional intelligence and mental health between athletic and non-athletic students (Bostani & Saiiari, 2011, pg. 2259), Athletes were found to have a tendency to be more assertive, empathetic, socially responsible, flexible, have a higher impulse control, have a higher self regard, be more optimistic, have better

interpersonal relationships, and have more emotional self-awareness than non-athletes (Bostani & Saiiari, 2011, p. 2259) . They also had a higher IQ than non-athletes; but non-athletes had an average EQ (emotional quotient) that could be improved with strengthening and practice. On the non-contrary, non-athletes had a higher self-actualization and were more in touch with reality than athletes (Bostani & Saiiari, 2011, p. 2261). This higher IQ may have made athletes more aware of their mistakes, making them harder on themselves. But the limited self-actualization may have made it difficult for them to process the mistakes in an unharmed manner. Many athletes experience “mental walls,” where the stress of their sport causes them to sleep in, isolate themselves from the team, and stop doing what they enjoy (Abramo, 2018). However, both male and female elite athletes generally had better mental health across a range of health outcomes, when compared to the general student population (Grasdalsmoen et al., 2022) Many studies show that athletes show more positive personality characteristics than non-athletes. Yet, “high athletic identity has been associated with both positive outcomes, such as better athletic performance, and negative outcomes, such as overtraining and the use of performance-enhancing drugs (Chang et al., 2020).

Why: The Nature of Highly Competitive Athletics

Since 1984, the motto of the Olympic Committee has been “Faster, Higher, Stronger,” but this motto does not take into account mental health, or other challenges outside of physical athletics (Berg et al., 2020). Competitions are not won by focusing on medals, they are won by a combination of hard work, failure, tenacity, and commitment to a sport for years (Berg et al., 2020). Athletes put in hours of work every single day for years, but they only get 40 seconds of glory, or if they don’t get any glory at all because something goes wrong, they have an identity crisis because they feel like years of their life have been wasted (Berg et al., 2020). Elite athletes

struggle post-athletics because everything feels dull after the high of experiencing fame and glory (Berg et al., 2020). They feel as if their identity is tied to their athletic performance because people only recognize them from their impressive marks. “And as I was watching, I took a second to think, ‘Where do I know them from?’ Like, it was never outside the context of sports or product endorsements, and that erased a lot of humanity from them” (Berg et al., 2020).

The Problem

It is common for NCAA athletes to commit suicide because they are unable to find help coping with the stress of their sports. (Born, 2017). However, the NCAA is still not taking the actions necessary to properly combat mental health (Born, 2017). Public opinion is unlikely to convince the NCAA to take action on mental health in the same way the public was able to get the NCAA to take action on concussions because of the stigma associated with mental illness and the disparity between public support for physical injuries and public support for mental illness (Born, 2017). Without outside intervention, the NCAA is not likely to take any, let alone proactive, steps to increase mental health resources at its member institutions” (Born, 2017). The NCAA is resistant to change unless prompted by public outrage or litigation threats; even those can only be effective to a certain extent (Born, 2017). It is unlikely that student-athletes would find a valid cause of action to sue the NCAA for its failure to provide mental health resources (Born, 2017).

Solutions

Social work could be valuable for mental performance consultants and mental health care providers to host a workshop for coaches, athletic staff, and student-athletes to inform them on differences in mental health services, how they complement each other, and how they can be combined to ensure the optimal performance of a student-athlete (Beasley et al., 2022). There is

wide variability on how mental health services are provided to NCAA Division 1 student-athletes (Sudano et al., 2017). “It is important to gain access to student-athletes and reduce stigma around seeking mental health services, but it is also imperative that social workers are not marketing themselves as providing services they are not competent to perform” (Beasley et al., 2021, pg. 208). Many coaches and athletic departments have misconceptions about social work in collegiate athletic departments. Social workers working in an athletic department highlighted that interprofessional care teams need to effectively address the mental health of student-athletes (Beasley et al., 2022).

Increasing mental health education for college athletes and increasing their knowledge of accessibility of services should be a significant area of focus for athletic department administration (Cox, 2015, p. 41). Female athletes, underclassman, in-season athletes, athletes suffering from injury, and athletes who miss competition or practice due to their injuries, are all shown to be susceptible to increased depression symptoms (Cox, 2015, p. 42). Improving mental health awareness, especially within the at-risk-group, should be highly prioritized moving forward (Cox, 2015, p. 42). By failing to require athletic departments to provide any mental health education to their athletes, whether that be in terms of the factors that may increase their susceptibility to mental illness, or of the services that are available to them, administrations are potentially increasing the possibility that symptoms will go unreported and athletes will fail to receive the care that they need (Cox, 2015, p. 43). Student-athlete voices should be the directory for administration when policies and procedures are being developed each year (Smith et al., 2022)

Universities need to be aware of imbalances that may occur within athletic institutions (Caulfield et al., 2022, p. 612). Although universities make an effort to provide information

prohibiting inequalities and abuses in their handbooks, they may not provide the necessary force to remind people of all areas on campus that abuse is unacceptable (Caulfield et al., 2022, p. 612). The university should employ a wide variety of techniques such as appropriate hiring, appropriate structured reporting of abuses, and a demand for dignity and respect for all humans as a core expectation (Caulfield et al., 2022, p. 612). As more morality is expected, holistic student-athlete well-being will be more likely to occur (Caulfield et al., 2022, p. 612).

People often feel uncomfortable confronting abusive behavior, allowing it to go on for too long (Caulfield et al., 2022, p. 613). Student-athletes often are able to identify abusive behavior, so when they do it is important to take that information into account immediately (Caulfield et al., 2022, p. 613). There are insidious instances where people were not held accountable because of personal agendas or financial performance, such as Larry Nassar at Michigan State University; however the NCAA encourages taking strong stands and protecting athletes (Caulfield et al., 2022, p. 613). If the leadership within athletic institutions takes a strong stand and consistently holds people accountable for violating ethics (such as student-athlete dignity), student-athlete holistic well-being will be more likely to occur (Caulfield et al., 2022, p. 613).

In order to help student-athletes, we must understand all of the components that their identities consist of (Leimer et al., 2014, p. 133). The hectic schedules of student-athletes often makes it difficult to find personal time and the capacity to deal with issues, making seeking help an additional barrier because it is an additional activity that causes more constraints on top of team demands (Leimer et al., 2014, p. 124). When counseling services have increased consultation hours, partnered with athletic departments to create physical spaces for a counselor in or near athletic facilities, and have scheduled sessions on both weekends and weeknights for

student-athletes, there has proven to be a decrease in stress for student-athletes and has resulted in more student-athletes seeking help (Leimer et al., 2014, p. 124). Student-athletes have also identified that cost associated with counseling services is deterring (Leimer et al., 2014, p. 129). Athletic institutions should allow athletes to access this type of help without it being a financial burden (Leimer et al., 2014, p. 129).

Methodology

The purpose of the quantitative (survey yes or no questions) and qualitative (survey free-response questions and literature review) case study is to explore challenges and solutions associated with addressing possible mental health concerns within the University of Montana athletic department and all athletic institutions for that matter. This case study method was used for investigative research to inform the UM athletic department on how it can better help its student athletes. The purpose of this survey was to determine what mental health detriments student-athletes may be facing due to the pressure of their sports, what resources athletes currently use, why they may be reluctant to use the resources currently offered, and what resources or changes could be added in the future to help them succeed. The University of Montana Athletic Department as an in-depth case study acts as an example for other institutions in similar size and prominence throughout Division I athletics, or other levels of high athletic performance such as NAIA.

Qualtrics Survey

A Qualtrics survey was distributed to all approximately 330 student-athletes at the University of Montana. All athletes had the opportunity to take the survey, but were not required to do so. The questions in the survey included:

- You are invited to participate in a research project about Student-Athlete Mental Health at the University of Montana. This online survey should take about 10 minutes to complete. Participation is voluntary, and responses will be kept anonymous, to the degree permitted by the technology being used. You have the option to not respond to any questions that you choose. Participation or nonparticipation will not impact your relationship with the University of Montana. Submission of the survey will be interpreted as your informed consent to participate and that you affirm that you are at least 18 years of age. You can choose to close out of this survey and not participate. If you have any questions about the research, please contact the Principal Investigator, Abby Sherwood, via email at as163526@umconnect.umt.edu or the faculty advisor, Dr. Charles Palmer at charles.palmer@mso.umt.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the UM Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (406) 243-6672.
 - Yes
 - If the student-athletes did not consent to take the survey, then they could not access it.
- How old are you?
 - 18
 - 19
 - 20
 - 21
 - 22

- 23
- 24
- 25
- 25+
- What gender do you most closely identify with?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Non-binary
- The University of Montana athletic department has offered a limited number of free counseling sessions to student-athletes in the past. Have you ever attended these?
 - Yes
 - No
- The University of Montana athletic department currently offers a limited number of counseling sessions every semester free to student-athletes. How likely would you be to utilize these resources in the future?

	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Neutral	Likely	Very likely
Likely to utilize resources in the future	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

- If you have not attended some or all of the counseling sessions offered for free by the University of Montana athletic department in the past, what were some reasons for not attending? Check all that apply:

- I do not need to seek mental health resources
 - Not enough time/too busy
 - They are inadequate for addressing my needs
 - I am worried about confidentiality (e.g. having to put my name on a signup sheet in the training room or waiting for a counselor before my appointment)
 - I have attended all free counseling sessions offered to me from the University of Montana athletic department
 - Other, please specify:
- Check all of the mental health resources you are currently using.
 - Online counseling
 - Curry Health Center counseling
 - Private counseling
 - University of Montana athletic department counseling
 - Other. Please specify:
 - I am not seeking any mental health resources
- Pressure is the use of persuasion, influence, or intimidation to make someone do something. Have you ever felt pressure from anyone to perform to a high standard in your sport?
 - Yes
 - No
- Have you ever considered dropping out of a competition because you felt too much pressure to perform athletically?

- Yes
 - No
- Have you ever withdrawn from a competition because you felt too much pressure to perform athletically?
 - Yes
 - No
- If you have withdrawn from a competition because you felt too much pressure to perform, who did you feel this pressure from? If yes, check all that apply:
 - I have never dropped out of a competition because of pressure
 - I did not feel pressure
 - My own internal pressure from myself
 - Coaches
 - Athletic Department
 - Parents
 - Fellow Athletes
 - Teammates
 - Friends
- Have you experienced a pressure to perform so severe that it negatively impacted your academics?
 - I do not feel pressure
 - Yes
 - No

- Have you experienced a pressure to perform so severe that it negatively impacted your personal relationships, such as friends, family, or significant others?
 - No
 - Yes
- Have you developed a more negative image of yourself because you perceived yourself as not performing to your desired level of athleticism?
 - Yes
 - No
- Have you ever isolated yourself for an extended period of time after you did not perform to your desired level of athletic performance?
 - Yes
 - No
- Do you think any pressure you may be experiencing to perform negatively impacts your performance in your sport?
 - I do not feel pressure
 - Yes
 - No
- Have you ever worried about being cut from your sports team because of your level of performance?
 - Yes
 - No
- Do you think that a policy preventing you from being cut, because of your athletic performance, would reduce your stress level?

- I do not worry about being cut
 - Yes
 - No
- Do you find yourself worrying about doing well in a competition for a substantial portion of your day, even when you are not at practice or competition?
 - Yes
 - No
- Do you feel like you worry too much about your sport?
 - Yes
 - No
- Is there anything you find within Grizzly athletics to be negatively impactful to your mental health?
 - Text box for free response
- How could mental health be better addressed within Grizzly athletics, if possible?
 - Text box for free response

Survey questions have proven to be effective at determining the status of athletic mental health. (Grasdalsmoen et al., 2022). Additionally, a scale is included within the survey, so that there is clarity between precisely how much satisfaction or distaste athletes receive from attending counseling sessions within the University of Montana Athletic Department. Having a scale can ensure that both researchers and subjects know the extent to which the question is being answered (Morris et al, 2020). However, a concise, yet informative survey is necessary. Simply distributing a survey does not guarantee a high rate of response (Grasdalsmoen et al., 2022). This is why the survey is only 22 questions, mostly multiple-choice, with two questions

asking them for specific examples of the athletic department negatively impacting their mental health and feedback on how to address that. Having specific questions centers survey participant voice, which allows the researchers to listen to how they describe their experiences and engage (Austin et al., 2022).

Literature Review

Literature from a wide variety of sources is included. Varying education levels, ethnicity, age, position, and level of privilege are important to maintain diversity. This was taken into consideration. This included multiple databases such as journals of health, UWIRE, journal articles, undergraduate capstone projects, multiple college research institutions, etc. Less prestigious literature such as the undergraduate capstones and journal articles were included to uphold the diversity ethic. A diverse group of authors of different ethnicities, education, and background were also included. Key words were also used when searching for literature to use to ensure that the articles actually related to the topic at hand. These words included words such as, “academic stress,” “pressures,” “mental health,” “depression,” “overwhelmed,” “athletic departments,” “Division I,” “coaches,” “student athletes,” “collegiate athletes,” “injury,” “anxiety,” and “training.” Incorporating specific research databases and key words have been proven to yield ideal search results (Lopes Dos Santos et al., 2020). Additionally, there is a timeline for the literature collected. Only literature between 1990 and 2023 is eligible for use in this paper. This is important because the literature needs to be recent enough that it is relevant, but extensive enough that it builds upon study after study. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) criteria was used to determine if literature should have been incorporated. This is an evidence-based minimum set of items aimed at helping scientific authors to report systematic reviews and analyses, used to assess the benefits and

harms of including a source in a literature review. Since many different studies were collected, this was an important tool to determine which ones should have been included. PRISMA has been used in many studies surrounding athlete mental health (Prior et al., 2022).

Ethical Considerations

The four fundamental principles of ethics are autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice (Avasthi et al., 2013). Autonomy means that subjects will have a right to their own bodies. This study did not include the physical bodies of subjects, but it did handle the thoughts and opinions of students-athletes. Student-athletes were given a right to privacy and anonymity throughout this study, surrounding any answers provided by them. Non-maleficence means that there is an obligation to ensure subjects will not be harmed. Beneficence is the principle that researchers should maintain the welfare of their subjects. Justice simply means that the research process should be fair to the subjects. The anonymity of this study ensures that the research subjects were not and will not be harmed in any way throughout the research process. This also means that there will not be any negative impacts to their welfare because of the study. Heavy consideration was given to provide informed consent to each participant of the Qualtrics survey, hence the first question explaining the purpose of the study. Participants had to read this purpose and the limitations associated with anonymity, due to the inevitable imperfections of technology, and agree to give their informed consent form before they were able to begin the survey. Informed consent is only present when subjects are fully informed about the purpose of the study and its potential risks and benefits, and are aware that they can withdraw at any point (Comstock, 2013, p. 171). This is evident in the survey. Student-athletes did not have to fill out the survey, or answer some of the questions if they did not want to; it was completely voluntary. Athletes had the opportunity to withdraw at any point while filling out the Qualtrics survey. If we do not

explain to research subjects the procedures that they will be exposed to, we do not put them in a position where they can exercise and develop their freedom (Comstock, 2013, p. 176). I am and continue to be fully committed to my subjects exercising and developing their freedom; they need to feel comfortable enough to express the true status of their mental health, what has and is currently contributing to their status, and how the athletic department could be improved to have a more positive effect on their mental health.

We can assist and empower subjects by helping them to understand where and when they can exercise their capacities as human beings (Comstock, 2013, p. 176). I believe the best way to determine the genuine mental health status of student-athletes at the University of Montana is to make them feel empowered, like they can include the true answers to the questions asked in the Qualtrics survey. If they do not understand the scope, or the possible consequences of their answers to the survey, some may be reluctant to fill it out. If they fear that the athletic department, or their coaches or teammates will be upset with them for expressing their true feelings on the survey, they may leave them out. Qualtrics has an in-house Security Operation Center that monitors confidentiality and integrity, so data cannot be leaked. Additionally, all data is encrypted using Hypertext Transfer Protocol Secure. This helps to ensure that names, or any other data provided to Qualtrics will not be shared. The names of student-athletes were not asked for, so there is not a possibility that they could be leaked. Furthermore, an anonymous survey link was used so that the IP addresses or other technological information could not be collected from athletes that took the survey. Athletes were informed of the anonymity and that their responses were not going to be associated with their identity, when this information was shared with the athletic department, hopefully providing them with an incentive to include honest answers on the survey.

There is not any data available on the current racial demographics of the student-athlete population at the University of Montana. Approximately 330 athletes participate in at least one sport at the school, about evenly split between men and women. However, it is unknown how many are White, Asian, Hispanic, Black, etc. The student population at the University of Montana is only 21% racially ethnic, if this is reflected in the population of student-athletes at the University of Montana, then it is not incredibly diverse. The student-athlete population is said to be a diverse population, but there is not any publicly available data to prove this. Additionally, I did not have any control over who filled out my Qualtrics surveys. The people that inhabit the Western society of the United States are not impartial (Lindemann, 2006, p. 78). Instead, this society favors people whose social standing, concerns, and occupations look suspiciously like well-to-do white men (Lindemann, 2006, p. 78). The Qualtrics survey, though highly unexplainable, could have been filled out by an elite demographic in Western society, white men. Luckily, it was filled out almost evenly split by men and women. However, since I did not ask for their ethnicities, I do not have this information. This is why the literature review with a diverse inclusion of education, ethnicity, and gender among authors is highly important. Neglect of gender and other factors that determine who has power over whom means that people who want to think clearly and carefully about ethics have their work cut out for them (Lindemann, 2006 p. 83). The utmost consideration for ethics were factored into making this survey as ethical as possible.

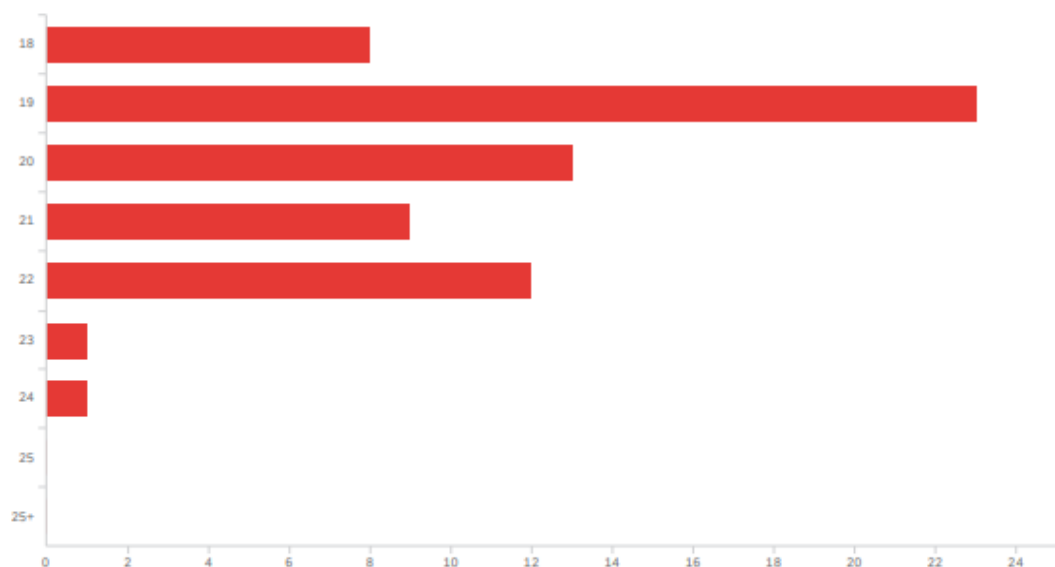
Results

Out of the 330 student-athletes at the University of Montana, 67 of them responded to the survey. 33 male athletes, 33 female athletes, and one non-binary athlete completed the survey.

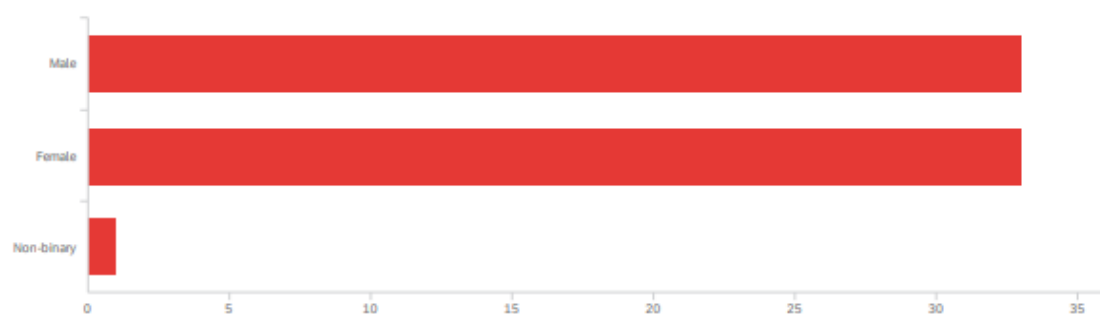
This is the entirety of the results:

Q1 - You are invited to participate in a research project about Student-Athlete Mental Health at the University of Montana. This online survey should take about 10 minutes to complete. Participation is voluntary, and responses will be kept anonymous, to the degree permitted by the technology being used. You have the option to not respond to any questions that you choose. Participation or nonparticipation will not impact your relationship with the University of Montana. Submission of the survey will be interpreted as your informed consent to participate and that you affirm that you are at least 18 years of age. You can choose to close out of this survey and not participate. If you have any questions about the research, please contact the Principal Investigator, Abby Sherwood, via email at as163526@umconnect.umt.edu or the faculty advisor, Dr. Charles Palmer at charles.palmer@mso.umt.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the UM Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (406) 243-6672.

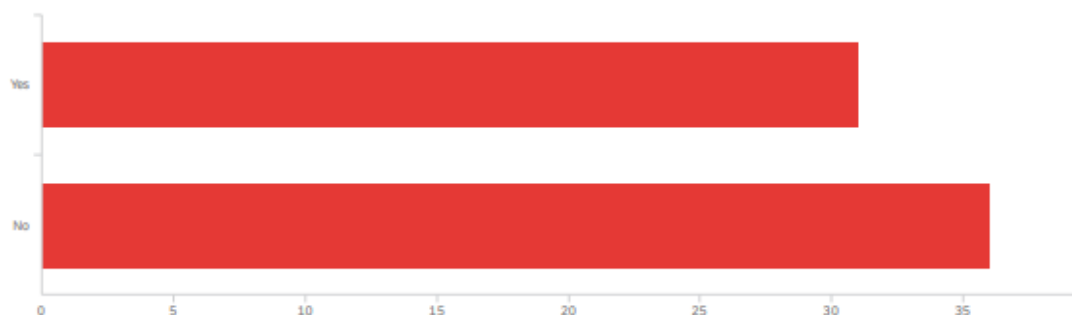
Q2 - How old are you?



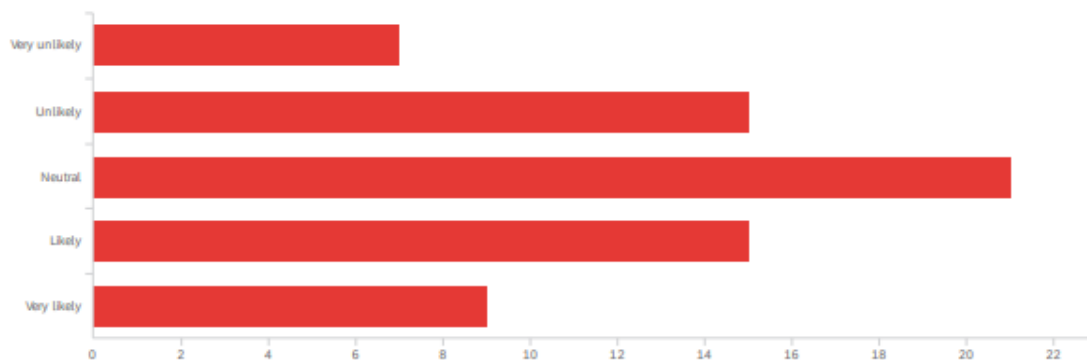
Q3 - What gender do you most closely identify with?



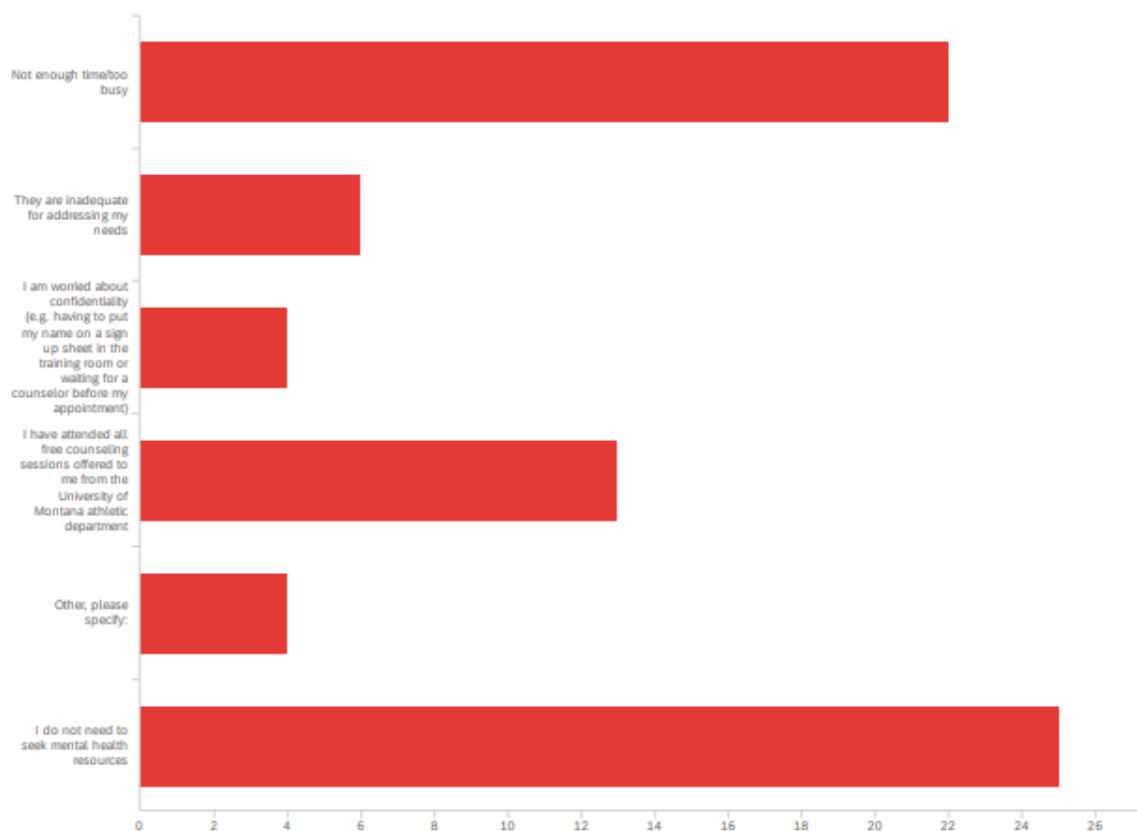
Q4 - The University of Montana athletic department has offered a limited number of free counseling sessions to student-athletes in the past. Have ever you attended these?



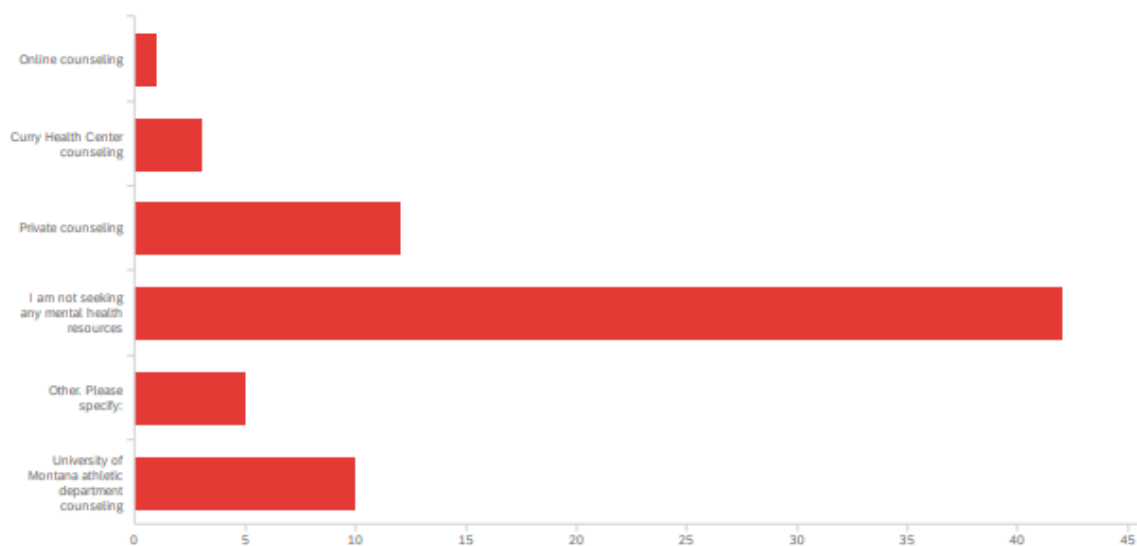
Q5 - The University of Montana athletic department currently offers a limited number of counseling sessions every semester free to student-athletes. How likely would you be to utilize these resources in the future?



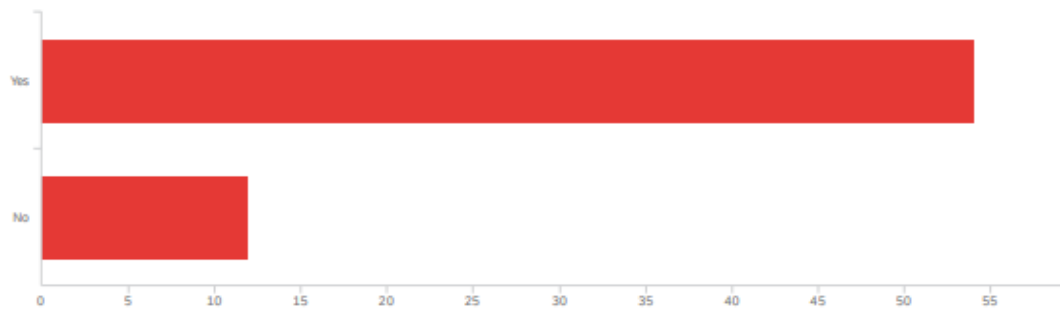
Q6 - If you have not attended some or all of the counseling sessions offered for free by the University of Montana athletic department in the past, what were some reasons for not attending? Check all that apply:



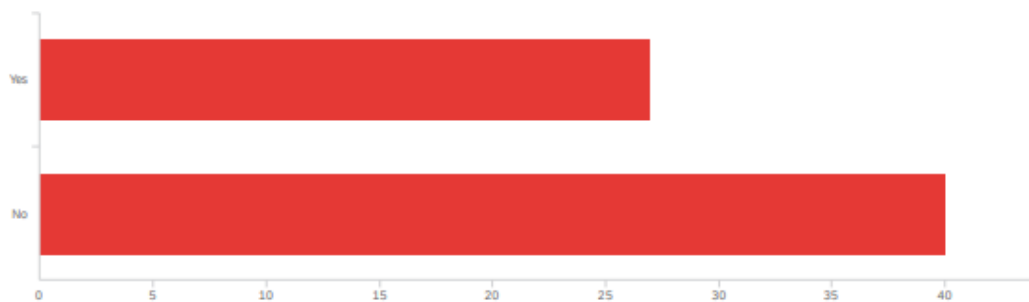
Q7 - Check all of the mental health resources you are currently using.



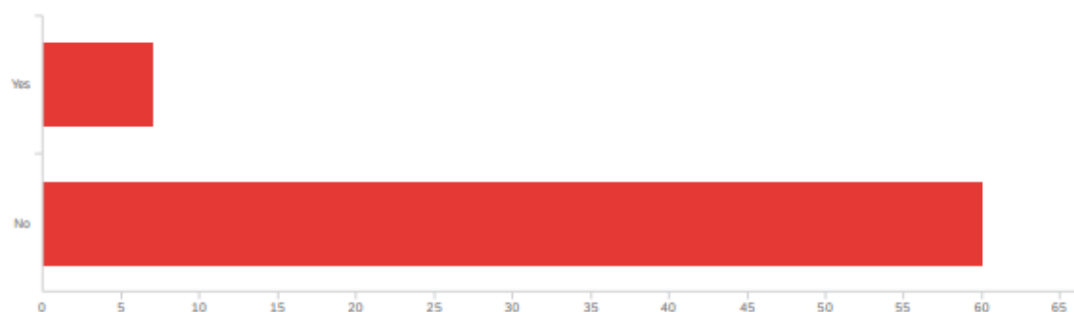
Q8 - Pressure is the use of persuasion, influence, or intimidation to make someone do something. Have you ever felt pressure from anyone to perform to a high standard in your sport?



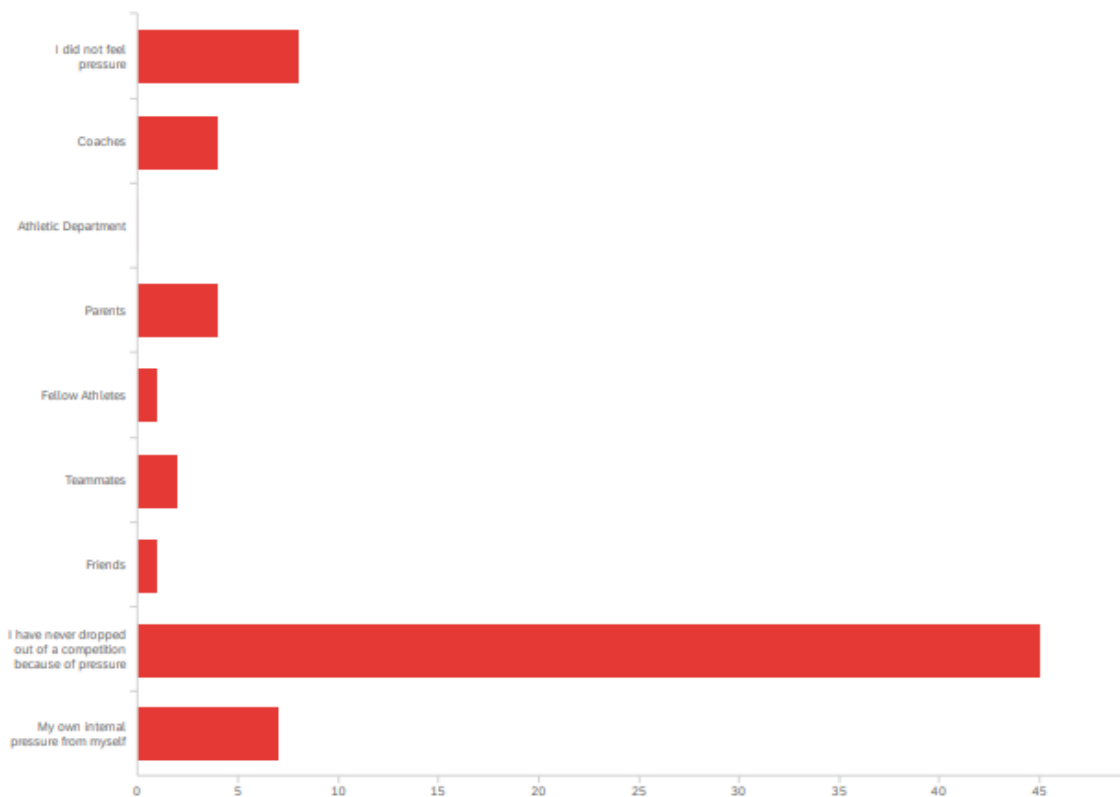
Q9 - Have you ever considered dropping out of a competition because you felt too much pressure to perform athletically?



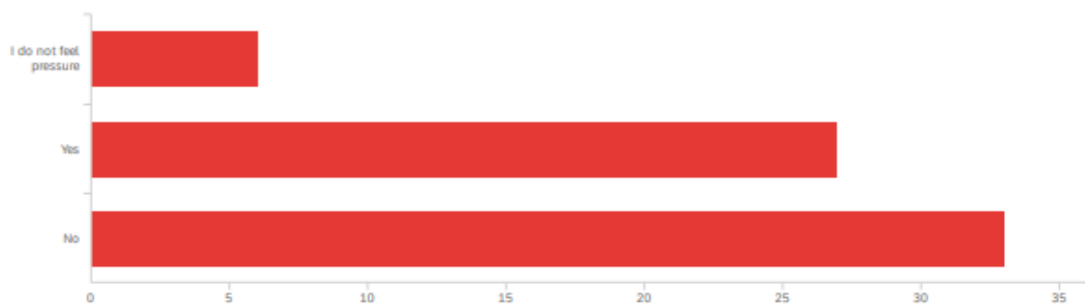
Q10 - Have you ever withdrawn from a competition because you felt too much pressure to perform athletically?



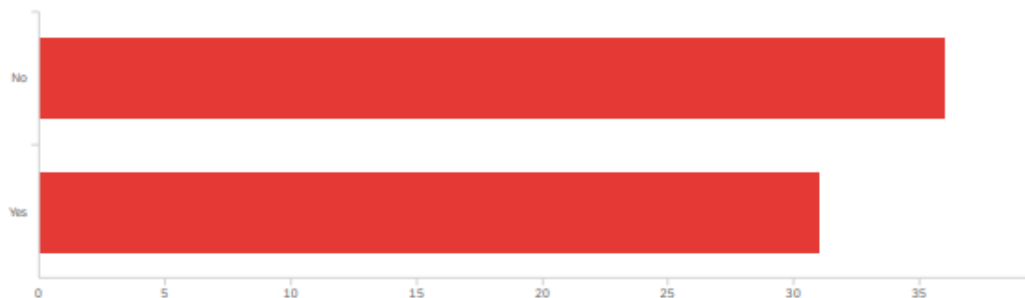
Q11 - If you have withdrawn from a competition because you felt too much pressure to perform, who did you feel this pressure from? If yes, check all that apply:



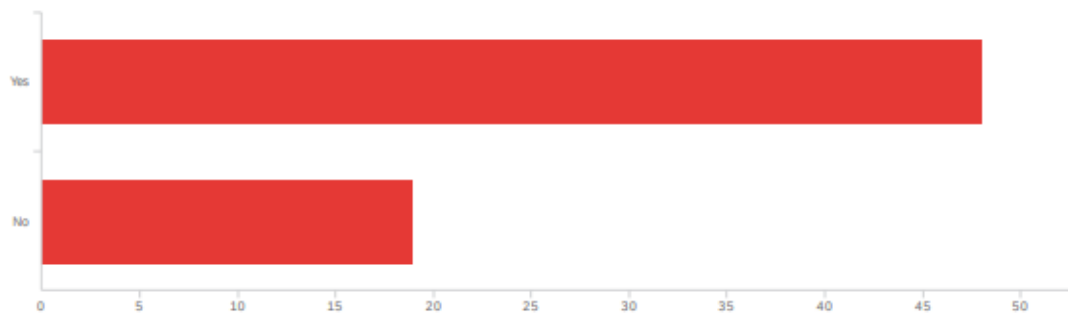
Q12 - Have you experienced a pressure to perform so severe that it negatively impacted your academics?



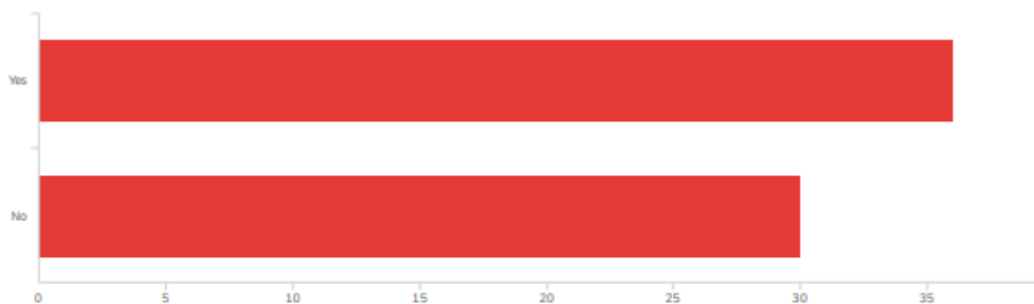
Q13 - Have you experienced a pressure to perform so severe that it negatively impacted your personal relationships, such as friends, family, or significant others?



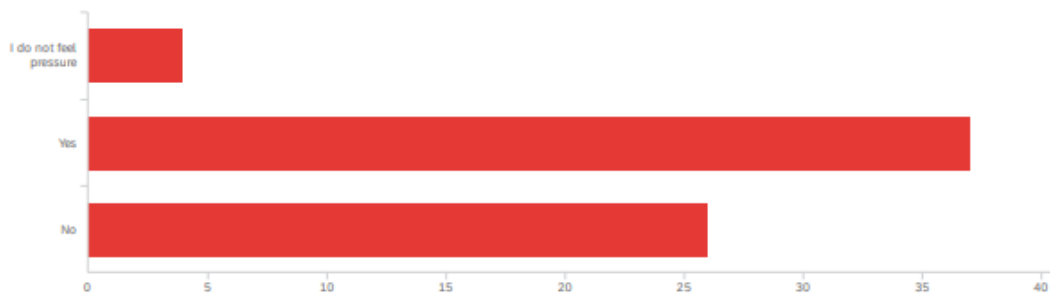
Q14 - Have you developed a more negative image of yourself because you perceived yourself as not performing to your desired level of athleticism?



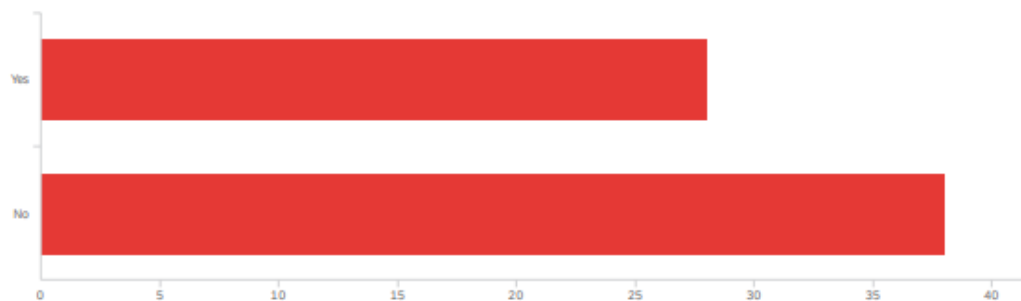
Q15 - Have you ever isolated yourself for an extended period of time after you did not perform to your desired level of athletic performance?



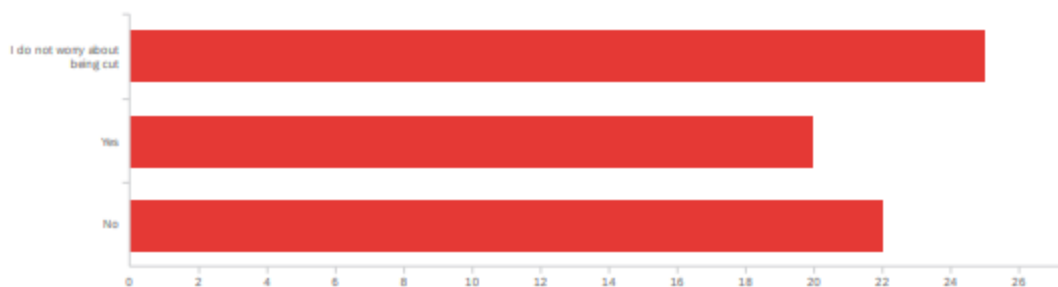
Q16 - Do you think any pressure you may be experiencing to perform negatively impacts your performance in your sport?



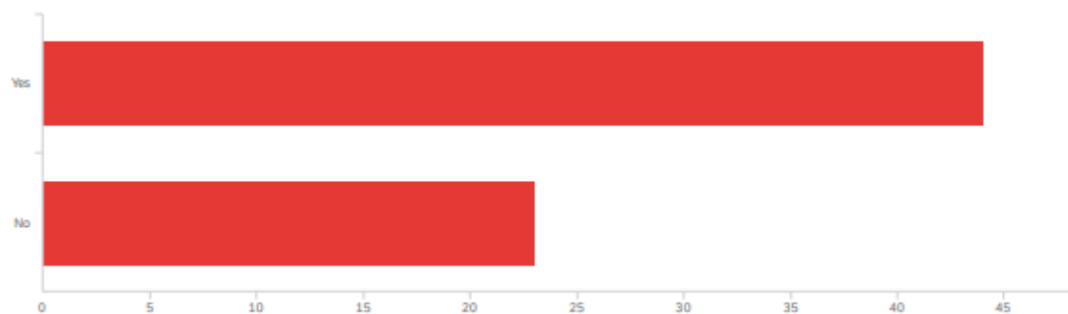
Q17 - Have you ever worried about being cut from your sports team because of your level of performance?



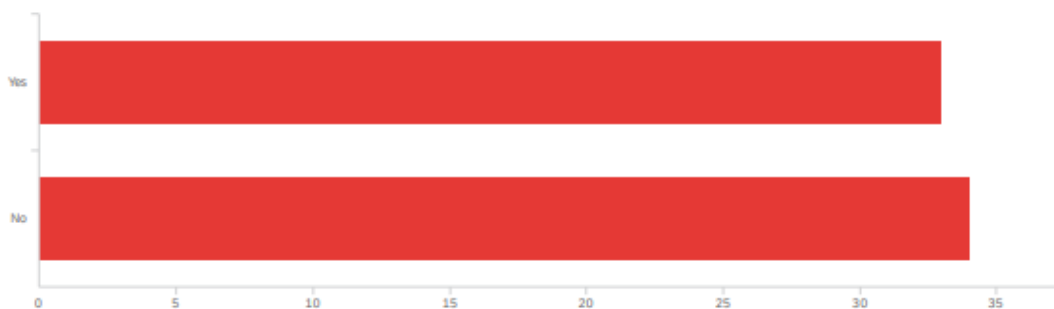
Q18 - Do you think that a policy preventing you from being cut, because of your athletic performance, would reduce your stress level?



Q19 - Do you find yourself worrying about doing well in a competition for a substantial portion of your day, even when you are not at practice or competition?



Q20 - Do you feel like you worry too much about your sport?



Q21 - Is there anything you find within Grizzly athletics to be negatively impactful to your mental health?

Is there anything you find within Grizzly athletics to be negatively impact...

No

Lack of resources to help with mental health

No

No

No

no

No

Nk

Coaches

No

No

being not understading

No

NA

Inequality of representation of each sport. Example, certain sports get their practices posted about constantly, while others barely get recognition for high performance competitions

The army like intensity

No

No

No

The weather

no

I think there should be an unlimited amount of athletic counseling sessions, as I know other universities have unlimited free sessions.

No

No

No

No

Pressure from coaches

Nature of D1 athletics

None

No

No

No

Nope

No

weighing us and ranking us

NA

No

I have had a very difficult time with Grizzly athletics for a number of reasons. The first has been that my sport does not receive enough funding so coaches are over worked and do not have the time to dedicate towards their athletes and helping us each as individuals. Second, I have spoken out about a number of things in Grizzly Athletics that have made me feel unsupported to fellow athletes, media and administration. Administration has reacted very defensively and I have had a number of meetings with the administration in which I felt they guilted me for my outspoken views and made me feel like they were inaccurate. One such issue was the lack of hiring a new coach for my sport- when I spoke out to the media, an athletic administrator called me into their office and made me feel guilty for reaching out to the media about the issue. The power dynamic in the room was very frightening for me and has made me feel like my voice at UM doesn't matter and that I am not respected as an athlete. Overall, I have not appreciated how Grizzly athletics responds defensively and with lack of transparency to athletes' complaints. I have witnessed as a leader in SAAC that when student athletes ask for more, such as an indoor track facility or more free counseling options, we are made to feel like there is not enough money or interest from athletes/UM as a whole to pursue our wishes. It often feels that athletic admin are waiting for athletes to age out and graduate, rather than addressing our concerns or needs. Another issue I see with Grizzly Athletics is their limitations on student athletes talking to the media. They do not let student athletes talk to reporters unless the reporters get their permission first, and even when reporters ask for permission, they will tell them that they cannot speak to us. This makes it impossible for us to use our voice outside of Grizzly athletics and get public support to address our needs. Most administrators and coaches are men, specifically white men, so as a female athlete I feel that I am not represented at the administrative and coaching table. I feel that I cannot go to administration to voice my concerns because in the past when I have through SAAC and individually, I have been told addressing them is impossible due to lack of funds. And talking to older male administrators is intimidating. Also, these administrators are very inaccessible. They do not have office hours and they rarely meet with teams to open up discussions about what athletes want. Another issue is that athletes who are injured are often set aside by coaches and trainers. When we are injured, we are told to take time off, with no extra mental health support offered, unless we pursue it ourselves. From there, when I have struggled mentally and expressed it to my coaches, I have been told that I "just need to find my why again" and been encouraged to push through it because it is a "normal feeling for all athletes". It wasn't until I sat down with them and told them the farthest extent of my mental health problems that they let me take some downtime from sport. I feel that initially I have not been taken seriously about my own mental health by my coaches. Another problem is the amount of time student athletes are required to dedicate to our sports. Even in the off season we are not given flexibility in workout times. As a senior, I feel extremely burnt out because I have been pushed so hard these last four years. There is almost no time for extra curriculars and we are often shamed for pursuing them by coaches because any time spent outside of sport on other activities is detrimental to your performance. I have found that being "too busy" as a student athlete means the blame is often placed on the athlete because we are not working hard enough or not focusing on our sport enough. Mental health struggles overall are treated as a weakness in sport and something to push through, rather than an injury that needs additional support, like they should be treated.

I feel like my entire life is controlled by the athletics department. I have to be there for several hours a day, report at certain times, do everything that I am told to do. I love my sport, but sometimes it can feel like I am being yanked around and forced to participate in things that I otherwise would not. I understand the importance of practice, lifting, etc. but I wish I was able to have more of a life outside of athletics.

Q22 - How could mental health be better addressed within Grizzly athletics, if possible?

How could mental health be better addressed within Grizzly athletics, if po...

More emphasis placed upon seeking help

Nothing

None

Act like they care about the athletes for once

I think its fine

No

No

I think adequate service is available. Staff can make suggestions and athletes have opportunities to initiate help if needed.

an openness and willingness to talk

I think having more options for mental health providers that don't involve going into the RATC could help. Then it would be true more private

They do a good job already

Continued free therapy for athletes. Helped me greatly.

N/A

athletics-specific psychologist (full-time)

I don't know

mental health check ins (if appropriate, from: coaches, teammates, advisors)

Nope

Could actually be addressed

None

Idk

More counselling availability

It's good

I think that when athletes are injured, they should be referred to a mental health counselor by coaches and trainers right away. They should be given it as an option and it should be discussed more openly. I also think taht more diversity at the coach and administrator levels for women and BIPOC would make me feel more safe and comfortable talking to them. When I have brought this up, I have been told there are not enough diverse applicants who apply and who are qualified for athletic positions. This might be true, but I believe it is because the qualifications and standards we have set for them is very limiting, making it difficult for diverse people to succeed in athletics. There is absolutely no discussion at upper levels as far as I have heard about making these hiring standards more equitable and addressing it as a systemic issue. I wish that Grizzly athletics cared more about my sport and provided enough funding for fair wages so my coaches could afford to work the number of hours they have to and still support us as individuals. I feel guilty for taking up the time of coaches and trainers because they get paid so little. I think that if administration showed more support for all sports, I would feel more supported and happier. Instead I feel like I am just here for Title IX compliance reasons. I think more equitable facilities between female and male sports would make me feel more valued as a female athlete too.

I honestly don't think it can. I think that high level athletics are inherently detrimental to student-athletes' mental health and there's not much that can be done about it. In my opinion, it's just too much for young adults to be expected to perform at what's essentially a professional level of sport while also balancing full academic loads and other activities such as work, family, life, everything.

I think it's fine

I think it is addressed enough, however there should be a little more advertisement for the few free counseling sessions we get.

Idk

Not that I know of

Unsure

Some care and compassion towards the athletes

More free counseling sessions

More discussion within teams about mental health check ins and taking advantage or services that are offered.

We aren't just athletes. We have personal lives

Not sure

None

No

It's all good

So far so good

N/A

na

Free counselling for more than 3 sessions

Idk

Data Analysis

In the first question that did not ask about demographics, such as age and gender, student-athletes were asked if they had ever attended one of the free counseling sessions offered by the University of Montana athletic department (question #4). 36 out of 67 athletes stated that they had not attended a counseling session. While this may not be concerning, because there is a definite possibility that athletes may not be struggling at all, it is a fact that more than half of the student-athlete population has not attended a counseling session through the athletic department. The fifth question asked the athletes how likely they would be to attend the counseling sessions in the future. The first majority of the student-athletes (21 out of 67) answered that they would be neutral. The second majorities for this question were evenly split, 15 athletes were likely and 15 athletes were unlikely to attend these sessions in the future. This means that the majority are not opposed to attending, but they are also not eager. This result seems encouraging because it shows that at least 45 athletes out of 67 are not opposed (21 neutral, 15 likely, and seven very likely) to attending counseling. However, only 22 (7+15) athletes or 32% of athletes are likely or very likely to attend. But again, this may only include the athletes who actually need the help these counseling sessions offer. The sixth question asks athletes if they have not attended the free counseling sessions offered, what the reasons for not attending are. The first majority, 25 out of 67 responded that they do not need to attend counseling sessions. This is also an encouraging statistic. Although the second majority, 22 out of 67 student-athletes, responded that the largest reason for a lack of attendance is not having enough time. This is concerning because about 32.8% of athletes need mental health services, but do not have enough time in their schedules to get the help that they need.

Question seven asked the student-athletes to check all of the mental health services they are currently using. This was an unsettling statistic. The majority, 42 athletes out of 67 responses (62.7%), answered that they are not currently seeking any mental health resources at all. This is concerning because this is the exact amount of student-athletes that revealed in question six that they do in fact need counseling sessions, since only 25 responded that they do not. While the results are not linear, because some of the athletes who do need counseling sessions responded that they do seek help, it is not encouraging that this many student-athletes are not getting the help that they need. Question eight defined pressure as the, “use of persuasion, influence, or intimidation to make someone do something” and asked the athletes if their sport made them feel a pressure to perform at a high level. 80.5% or 54 athletes responded that they do feel this pressure. Pressure is normal when talented athletes are asked to perform to the best of their abilities, which they often are at the Division I collegiate competitive level. This result is also not good or bad because pressure can be normal, and even good in some cases, as long as it is not negatively impacting mental health. Question nine asks student-athletes if they have ever considered withdrawing from an athletic competition due to any pressure they may have felt to perform athletically. 59.7% or 40 athletes responded with “no,” another encouraging statistic. This means that the majority of student-athletes at the University of Montana are not experiencing a pressure to perform so severe that it makes them want to drop out of a competition.

Question 10 asks student-athletes if they have ever actually dropped out of a competition because of their mental health. This was also a stimulating result: 89.6% or 60 athletes responded that they had not. While it is concerning that seven athletes experienced a pressure so severe that they felt like they had to physically withdraw from their sporting event, at least the majority of

athletes at the University of Montana are not experiencing this. Question 11 asked student-athletes the reasons behind dropping out, if they had done so. This continued with the same theme, where 62.5% or 45 athletes responded saying that they had never dropped out of a competition because of pressure. 11% or 8 athletes responded that they did withdraw from a competition, but not because of mental health or pressure. The largest reason athletes withdrew from competition was evenly split between the pressures from coaches and parents. Four athletes or 5.6% answered that they withdrew from a competition because of pressure from their coaches and four athletes also responded that they withdrew because of pressure from their parents. Again, while it is disheartening that there are athletes who experience this, it is reassuring that the majority are not living with that much pressure.

Question 12 asked student-athletes if they ever felt a pressure to perform well in their respective sport so severe that it negatively impacted their academics. The majority (33 out of 67) answered that they did not. However, this was not a large majority because 27 out of 67 responded that they did feel a pressure so heavily that it was hurting their academic performance. 6 people answered that they did not feel any pressure at all. While the majority of the athletes' academics are not suffering, it is concerning that slightly less than half of them struggle with academics because of a pressure that they feel due to their sport. Question 13 asked the athletes if this pressure was so severe that it negatively impacted personal relationships such as friends, family, or significant others. This had a similar response: 36 of 67 answered "yes" and 31 of 67 answered "no." Question 14 asked the student-athletes if they had developed a more negative image of themselves when they did not perform to their desired level of athleticism. 46 student-athletes did and 19 student-athletes did not. In this case, a large majority (71.64%) felt that they perceived themselves as "lesser than" due to how well they did in a competition.

Question 15 asked if athletes had isolated themselves for an extended period of time following a sports performance that was less than desired. A smaller majority (36 out of 67) answered that they did. This means that the athletes distanced themselves from people or events in their lives simply because they felt bad about their competition results.

Question 16 asked if student-athletes believed that any pressure they felt could be negatively impacting the way that they were performing in their sports. 37 out of 67 student-athletes answered that they did. This is concerning because student-athletes felt such a large amount of pressure to perform well that it actually made them perform worse. Question 17 asked student-athletes if they ever worried about being cut from their sports team because of the way they performed. The majority, 38 out of 67 student-athletes, said that they did not. Question 18 asked athletes if they felt that a policy preventing them from being cut from their sports team, due to their performance, would reduce their stress level. This question was almost evenly split between all three answers. 25 out of 67 athletes answered that they did not fear being cut, 20 of them said “yes,” and 22 of them answered, “no.” This means that a policy similar to this one would likely not benefit the majority of the student-athlete population at the University of Montana. Question 19 asked student-athletes if they felt themselves worrying about doing well in a competition for a substantial portion of their days, even when they were not at a practice or a competition. A large majority (44 out of 67 athletes, or 65.67%) answered that they did. Question 20 asked them if they felt as if they worried too much about their sport. This question was almost evenly split with 33 athletes answering “yes” and 34 athletes answering “no.”

Questions 21 and 22 were free-response questions. Question 21 asked athletes if there was anything within the athletic department at the University of Montana to be negatively impactful to their mental health. Only 44 student-athletes responded to this question. This means

that 23 athletes did not respond to the question. 29 athletes said “no,” “N/A,” or “nope.” There were 13 short-answer responses including, “lack of resources to help with mental health,” “coaches,” “being not understanding,” “inequality of representation of each sport. For example, certain sports get their practices posted about constantly, while others barely get recognition for high performance competitions,” “small amount of mental health resources,” “coaches,” “personal issues with the coach,” “the army like intensity,” “the weather,” “I think there should be an unlimited amount of athletic counseling sessions, as I know other universities have unlimited free sessions,” “Pressure from coaches,” “Nature of D1 athletic,” and “weighing us and ranking us.” There were two long-response answers that included, “I have had a very difficult time with Grizzly athletics for a number of reasons. The first has been that my sport does not receive enough funding so coaches are overworked and do not have the time to dedicate towards their athletes and helping us each as individuals. Second, I have spoken out about a number of things in Grizzly Athletics that have made me feel unsupported to fellow athletes, media and administration. Administration has reacted very defensively and I have had a number of meetings with the administration in which I felt they guilted me for my outspoken views and made me feel like they were inaccurate. One such issue was the lack of hiring a new coach for my sport- when I spoke out to the media, an athletic administrator called me into their office and made me feel guilty for reaching out to the media about the issue. The power dynamic in the room was very frightening for me and has made me feel like my voice at UM doesn't matter and that I am not respected as an athlete. Overall, I have not appreciated how Grizzly athletics responds defensively and with lack of transparency to athlete's complaints. I have witnessed as a leader in SAAC that when student athletes ask for more, such as an indoor track facility or more free counseling options, we are made to feel like there is not enough money or

interest from athletes/UM as a whole to pursue our wishes. It often feels that athletic administrators are waiting for athletes to age out and graduate, rather than addressing our concerns or needs. Another issue I see with Grizzly Athletics is their limitations on student athletes talking to the media. They do not let student athletes talk to reporters unless the reporters get their permission first, and even when reporters ask for permission, they will tell them that they cannot speak to us. This makes it impossible for us to use our voice outside of Grizzly athletics and get public support to address our needs. Most administrators and coaches are men, specifically white men, so as a female athlete I feel that I am not represented at the administrative and coaching table. I feel that I cannot go to administration to voice my concerns because in the past when I have through SAAC and individually, I have been told addressing them is impossible due to lack of funds. And talking to older male administrators is intimidating. Also, these administrators are very inaccessible. They do not have office hours and they rarely meet with teams to open up discussions about what athletes want. Another issue is that athletes who are injured are often set aside by coaches and trainers. When we are injured, we are told to take time off, with no extra mental health support offered, unless we pursue it ourselves. From there, when I have struggled mentally and expressed it to my coaches, I have been told that I "just need to find my why again" and been encouraged to push through it because it is a "normal feeling for all athletes". It wasn't until I sat down with them and told them the farthest extent of my mental health problems that they let me take some downtime from sport. I feel that initially I have not been taken seriously about my own mental health by my coaches. Another problem is the amount of time student athletes are required to dedicate to our sports. Even in the off season we are not given flexibility in workout times. As a senior, I feel extremely burnt out because I have been pushed so hard these last four years. There is almost no time for extracurriculars and

we are often shamed for pursuing them by coaches because any time spent outside of sport on other activities is detrimental to your performance. I have found that being "too busy" as a student athlete means the blame is often placed on the athlete because we are not working hard enough or not focusing on our sport enough. Mental health struggles overall are treated as a weakness in sport and something to push through, rather than an injury that needs additional support, like they should be treated" and "I feel like my entire life is controlled by the athletics department. I have to be there for several hours a day, report at certain times, do everything that I am told to do. I love my sport, but sometimes it can feel like I am being yanked around and forced to participate in things that I otherwise would not. I understand the importance of practice, lifting, etc. but I wish I was able to have more of a life outside of athletics."

Question 22 asked athletes how mental health could be better addressed within the athletic department, if possible. This question received 42 responses, 2 less than the previous question. This means that out of the 67 athletes that took the survey, 25 student-athletes chose not to respond to this question. 18 athletes responded with "no," "none," "nothing," "I think it's fine," "N/A," "nope," "it's good," "not that I know of," "it's all good," "so far so good," "they do a good job already," or some other form of negation. 7 athletes responded with "I don't know," "Idk," "unsure," "not sure," or some other form of uncertainty. There were 17 short responses including, "more emphasis placed upon seeking help," "act like they care about the athletes for once," "I think adequate service is available. Staff can make suggestions and athletes have opportunities to initiate help if needed," "an openness and willingness to talk," "I think having more options for mental health providers that don't involve going into the RATC [Rhinehart Athletic Training Center] could help. Then it would be true more private," "They do a good job already," "Continued free therapy for athletes. Helped me greatly," "athletics-specific

psychologist (full-time),” “mental health check ins (if appropriate, from: coaches, teammates, advisors),” “Could actually be addressed,” “More counseling availability,” “I think it is addressed enough, however there should be a little more advertisement for the few free counseling sessions we get,” “Some care and compassion towards the athletes,” “More free counseling sessions,” “More discussion within teams about mental health check ins and taking advantage or services that are offered,” “We aren’t just athletes. We have personal lives,” and “Free counseling for more than 3 sessions.” There were also two long responses, “I honestly don't think it can. I think that high level athletics are inherently detrimental to student-athletes' mental health and there's not much that can be done about it. In my opinion, it's just too much for young adults to be expected to perform at what's essentially a professional level of sport while also balancing full academic loads and other activities such as work, family, life, everything,” and “I think that when athletes are injured, they should be referred to a mental health counselor by coaches and trainers right away. They should be given it as an option and it should be discussed more openly. I also think that more diversity at the coach and administrator levels for women and BIPOC would make me feel more safe and comfortable talking to them. When I have brought this up, I have been told there are not enough diverse applicants who apply and who are qualified for athletic positions. This might be true, but I believe it is because the qualifications and standards we have set for them are very limiting, making it difficult for diverse people to succeed in athletics. There is absolutely no discussion at upper levels as far as I have heard about making these hiring standards more equitable and addressing it as a systemic issue. I wish that Grizzly athletics cared more about my sport and provided enough funding for fair wages so my coaches could afford to work the number of hours they have to and still support us as individuals. I feel guilty for taking up the time of coaches and trainers because they get paid

so little. I think that if the administration showed more support for all sports, I would feel more supported and happier. Instead I feel like I am just here for Title IX compliance reasons. I think more equitable facilities between female and male sports would make me feel more valued as a female athlete too.”

Interpretation of the Data

Causes for Unconcern

For most of the quantitative questions, it does not seem as if there should be heavy concern for the student-athlete population at the University of Montana. Questions four, five, six, seven, nine, 10, 11, 12, 13, 17, 18, and majority of the answers on the two quantitative questions (questions 20 and 21) showcase this. Question four shows that a little less than half of the athletes attended counseling sessions, which is not concerning because not everyone needs mental health resources. Question five shows that athletes are practically indifferent to counseling sessions; this is also not concerning because they are not showing an adamant distaste for them. Question six is partially concerning because a large number of athletes show that they do not have time to attend counseling, but more athletes revealed that they feel they do not need to attend counseling. Question seven shows that the majority of athletes are not attending any forms of counseling, which is an inconclusive result because not all athletes need to seek counseling. In question nine, most student-athletes answer that they have never considered withdrawing from a competition because of pressure. Question 10 reveals that the majority of the athletes have not physically withdrawn from a competition because of pressure. Question 11 revealed that the majority of the student-athletes do not feel enough pressure from anyone to physically withdraw from a competition.

In question 12, most student-athletes revealed that the pressure to perform does not negatively impact their mental health, although this was not an overwhelming majority. Many athletes are experiencing pressures so severe that it does negatively impact their mental health. Question 13 shows that the pressure to perform is not so severe that it is impacting personal relationships for the majority athletes. However, similar to question 12, many athletes are experiencing negative impacts on personal relationships due to pressure. This majority was also minimal. Question 17 reveals that the majority of student athletes do not worry about being cut from their sports teams due to their performance. Question 18 reveals that most athletes either do not think being cut or do not think that a policy preventing them from being cut would reduce their stress levels. Questions 20 and 21 also did not receive responses from all athletes that completed the survey and majority of the responses were “no,” or “NA” when it came to asking student-athletes if anything within the athletic department was detrimental to their mental health or if there was anything the athletic department could do to improve their mental health. Some even expressed uncertainty with responses such as, “Idk.”

Causes for Concern

There are a few responses from the majority of the student-athletes, where it shows that the majority of them may be struggling with detriments to their mental health because of a perception they have that they need to perform to a specific level of athleticism. These questions included question eight, 14, 15, 16, and 19. Question 8 gave a brief definition of pressure and asked if student-athletes were feeling pressure to perform at a high level in their sports. Overwhelmingly, 54 out of 67 athletes answered that they did. While pressure is often normalized in high performance sports, this shows that a lot of athletes are feeling pressure to some extent. Question 14 asked if athletes developed a more negative self-image due to

performing at a less than desirable level in a competition. Again, the majority of the athletes said that they did. This is concerning because it shows that the majority of athletes are tying their self-worths or their identities to performance levels.

Question 15 asked if athletes had ever isolated themselves for an extended period of time following a lower than ideal performance. Again, the majority of the athletes answered “yes.” Isolation also proves a tie between performance, self worth, and identity. These athletes should not feel so bad about themselves because of the way they performed that they are staying away from family, friends, significant others, and their daily activities. Question 16 asked if the pressure athletes were feeling negatively impacted their sports. Majority affirmed that they did. This is also not a good sign; athletes should not feel so much pressure to perform well that it practically prevents them from doing so. Question 19 asked athletes if they felt like they worried too much about their sport, even when they were not at practice or a competition. The majority of student-athletes answered that they did. Student-athletes spend almost all of their time on their sports, so to reveal that they spend too much time worrying about them, even when they are not participating in them is also concerning. Questions 21 and 22 also had many disturbing answers. While the majority of them revealed that many athletes did not worry about the status of their mental health, the responses that asked for improvement of the athletic department were examples of highly poor mental health statuses. These answers should be read thoroughly, call for significant reformation, and speak for themselves.

Conclusion

More attention has been brought to the issue of mental health in elite athletics. The literature review revealed that there are two main issues that have yet to be solved: the stigma associated with athletes pursuing help for their mental health issues and a lack of knowledge

from coaches, athletic institutions, and athletes about mental health. While several studies included in the literature review built upon why student-athletes may be struggling with mental health obstacles, it does not speak for the individual obstacles each and every individual student-athlete may be facing. While studies such as Baker and Cox examine the specific situations some athletes may be facing from various athletic institutions, the University of Montana athletic department has never conducted thorough analysis of the mental health of its own student-athletes. As mental health concerns in athletics continue to become an increasingly popular topic and discussions around their impacts continue, the University of Montana athletic department must ensure that they are moving in a way that addresses the mental health needs of its athletes. In light of the fact that students-athletes at the University of Montana are advocating for mental health resources, but they are not using the ones currently offered to them, this study aimed to provide answers. The goal of this study was uncover the mental health obstacles athletes may be facing, the causes behind negative mental health impacts student-athletes may be experiencing due to their respective sports, why these impacts are negative to them, what the athletic department can do to change and address these impacts, and why they may be reluctant to use current mental health resources within the athletic department.

The fact that majority of the student-athlete population is struggling with pressures to perform at a high level, negative self image tied to less than satisfactory performances, isolation due to less than desired performance levels, lower performances in sport because of pressures, and worrying about their sports all of the time even when they are not at practice, shows that reformation is necessary within this athletic department. Furthermore, the specific responses of athletes that gave feedback on improvement for the department and detrimental impacts to their mental health that they have already experienced also show that improvement is imperative.

The ethical considerations and methods of this case study can be replicated to perform a similar study of other competitive collegiate athletic departments. Qualtrics is a survey-method that is available to most college institutions. These survey questions could be asked to other groups of athletes at other institutions to determine the status of their mental health. The portion surrounding the mental health services currently offered at the University of Montana would need to be changed to the mental health services offered at that particular university; however, the rest could be the same. The same ethical considerations must also be applied to research subjects if this is carried out at other institutions. Informed consent, beneficence, diversity, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice are all key values that need to be upheld. Additionally, privacy and anonymity will be crucial to ensure that more mental strain is not put on this already vulnerable population if anonymity was not to be maintained. The University of Montana can serve as an important case study to other institutions, who are also struggling to meet the mental health needs of their student-athlete populations.

Further research could dive deeper into these findings. More of a qualitative study could be done to determine why student-athletes answered the way they did in the Qualtrics survey. This would require far more ethical considerations than those proposed for the University of Montana case study because it is mainly quantitative, with most of the questions being multiple-choice. Face-to-face interviews would also require more ethical considerations because it would be more difficult to keep athlete responses anonymous, but athletes should not have to face backlash for their contributions to this investigation. However, this research would be important in diving deeper into the true mental health statuses of a student-athlete population. Further research in this area can continue at the institution level, examining why institutions are unaware of what their athletes need.

Lastly, it should also be acknowledged that only 67 student-athletes responded to the survey, out of the approximately 330 student-athlete population. A survey that had a higher response rate would likely be more accurate. Additionally, more questions and free-response questions specifically could provide a more in-depth explanation. The deadline of a semester-long capstone project was absolutely a limitation. The survey was only available for a few months. Another contribution to the time restriction was the busy schedule of student-athletes. If more questions could have been asked, more information could have been obtained. Furthermore, if the athletes had more time to take the survey, the results could also be more in-depth, honest, accurate, and helpful.

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