Enhancing Student-Athlete Well-Being through Effective Leadership in College Athletics

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Abstract
For many young adults, the transition from high school to college athletics can be a challenging and intimidating process. It is common knowledge that many student-athletes struggle with finding the balance between their mental health and their academic, athletic, and social responsibilities. In fact, many student-athletes feel that their commitments are greater than a full-time job when you factor in all that is expected of them (Cutler & Dwyer, 2020). Student-athlete life balance is affected by pressures such as demanding training schedules, strict dietary guidelines, expectations on performance, and many other factors that can contribute to commitments totaling over 80 hours a week (Brown et al, 2021). Some athletes struggle to cope with the impact of this pressure more severely compared to their peers (Hong, 2018). With that, having systems in place to support student-athletes can be invaluable. Oftentimes, it is the appointed leadership, more specifically coaches and team captains, who take on the role and responsibility of fostering a positive environment that supports the well-being of their student-athletes. However, many of those within appointed leadership roles receive no formal training on how to foster a positive environment for a team.

Keywords: Student-athlete, well-being, mental health, leadership.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

With the research and literature on the topics of leadership and athletics being ever-expanding, there is a great deal available on the challenges that student-athletes face (Caulfield, 2022). There are also many proven coaching strategies and behaviors that promote athletic success. Still, there is a noticeable underrepresentation that exists regarding literature on the role of appointed leadership and the overall well-being of student-athletes. Many studies have missed the opportunity to dive into the specific ways in which appointed leadership can be formally educated to implement proven behaviors and strategies that help enhance the overall well-being of student-athletes. With that, there is an opportunity for research within this realm that helps to shine a light on the importance of better understanding the significance of appointed leadership and the well-being of student-athletes in college athletic programs.

The purpose of this research is to examine the significance of the role of appointed leadership in college athletics, concerning the well-being of student-athletes. This study utilizes the experiences and expertise of not only appointed leaders such as coaches and team captains but also the experiences and expertise of the athletes themselves. The knowledge of academics and professionals in the field of sports psychology is also called upon. It is believed that there is a great benefit that could arise in the college athletic community in seeing the importance of providing formal leadership training and resources to coaches and captains that are focused on the well-being of student-athletes. Athletic administrators and directors may also become better educated on the steps available in creating a positive environment for student-athletes to transition into college athletics. Doing so may also help to ensure that coaches and captains are better prepared to cultivate a supportive environment for student-athletes. These coaches and
captains alike will then be able to take the findings of this paper and put into action the necessary steps towards fostering the well-being of their student-athletes. Perhaps most important to note is that the student-athletes themselves will be able to recognize and relate to effective leadership strategies that in turn help to supplement their well-being, development, and growth.

As stated above, the purpose of this study is to examine the role of appointed leadership in college athletics, concerning the well-being of student-athletes. By examining some of the potential behaviors, strategies, and support systems that can be utilized by those in leadership roles, this study aims to establish and reinforce key insights into the significance of the role the appointed leaders play in the well-being and overall development of student-athletes. Ultimately, the efforts made in this study will aid the available information concerning both leadership education and the well-being of student-athletes.

**Research Question:**

- Could formal leadership training for athletes, captains, and coaches provide a better sense of well-being and support toward the mental health of student-athletes?
Chapter 2

Literature Review

There is a great deal of pressure that permeates the world of college athletics. This pressure can be self-inflicted or can come from peers, a university community, or an athletic administration. Being in a competitive environment and being expected to always put the team first can take its toll on both athletes and coaches. To help navigate this rather ambiguous balance of athletic success while also focusing on the well-being of the team, most intercollegiate athletic teams rely on the leaders of their program to help set examples and support team members. This crucial role of leadership bestows a great deal of responsibility. Over the past few decades, there has been quite an expansion in the popularity of collegiate athletics. With that boom, there has also been an increase in professionals studying the ins and outs of the field of athletics. Consequently, there is copious evidence that examines the world of leadership within college athletics and the well-being of student-athletes.

With that, this literature review will be composed of several recently conducted studies that touch upon the topics of student-athlete well-being, the role of leadership in athletics, as well the examination of the effectiveness of formal leadership training programs. In doing so, this literature review portion of the research proposal will help to provide the reader with foundational knowledge and awareness of the current findings, themes, and ideas that relate to the enhancement of student-athlete well-being and the results of effective leadership in college athletics.

Student-Athlete Well Being

One of the most common negative factors when it comes to the well-being of student-athletes is stress. Stress can be caused by a variety of reasons. Leilani Madrigal and Jamie
Robbins (2020) recently executed a study titled “Student-athlete stress: An examination in United States Collegiate Athletics”. This research was conducted to better understand the connection between stress and well-being, as well as to narrow down some of the specific stressors that most commonly contribute to the stress of a student-athlete. In this work, it was found that five areas were most consistent with causing stress in the lives of student-athletes. Those areas were injury, high-pressure games, fitness, conditioning, and playing time (Madrigal & Robbins, 2020).

A similar study out of Oregon State University focused on predicting the mental health of student-athletes. In this study, it is mentioned that stress plays a significant role in the mental well-being of student-athletes. With this, Fogaca & Gurung (2020) noted that there has recently been a significant increase in the number of college students who have been diagnosed with mental health conditions. From 2007 to 2017, reports showed a 13.6% increase in diagnosed cases of mental health-related conditions (Fogaca & Gurung, 2020). They go on to state that student-athletes may also be more prevalently faced with the challenges of higher education. Specifically, the author notes that when the process of becoming independent and coping with uncertainty is combined with the extra pressures of athletics, the results on mental health and well-being can be even more dramatic. Fogaca & Gurung state that “the average student-athlete exhibits similar or higher rates of depressive disorders than nonstudent athletes” (Fogaca & Gurung, 2020). This idea of a greater challenge toward well-being is echoed by SUNY Cortland’s Bonni Hodges. In Hodge's research titled “Collaborative Needs Assessment to Improve NCAA DIII Student-Athlete Well-Being,” she begins by sharing that “well-being issues faced by student-athletes (SAs) generally mirror the overall student population, yet the implications may be different and accessing services more problematic”. Furthermore, she shares
the common themes of anxiety, stress, and depression among student-athletes (Hodges, 2022). One unique thing that Hodge notes is that the time demands and busy schedules of student-athletes can commonly lead to factors that contribute to decreased mental well-being. She shares that misuse of alcohol and marijuana, lack of restorative sleep, as well as poor diet, can all “interfere with self-care and decrease access to existing programs and services” (Hodges, 2022). Hodge also shares a new perspective on the gap in the literature related to Division III athletics. Hodges emphasizes the importance of Division III athletics, being “the largest of the three NCAA divisions with 445 member institutions across 43 conferences”. She goes on to note that nearly 40% of all NCAA athletes compete at the DIII level (Hodges, 2022). The well-being of this large group was recently represented in a study done by the NCAA. Garver (2022) explains that out of the 37,600 athletes who participated, “the rate of reported mental distress since the onset of the pandemic was high”. Furthermore, notable findings included: sleep difficulties (over one-third), feeling sadness and a sense of loss (over one-quarter), and feelings of depression (1 in 12)” (Garver et al, 2022). Among the most pressing matters related to student-athlete well-being are the barriers that limit student-athletes from seeking help (Rensburg, 2021). In a recent study, Rensburg (2021) found that some of the barriers included peer pressure, cultural and background differences, lack of resources, and finding the time to seek help. Bullard (2021) of Rowan University concurs that “it is clear to see the need present for assisting collegiate student-athletes with modalities to cope with mental health issues, including anxiety and depression. In addition, there is a strong benefit of enhancing awareness of resources on campus to assist with… mental health” (Bullard et al, 2021). With that, utilizing proven strategies such as mindfulness training that is supported by team leaders can prove to be very rewarding to student-athletes. However,
many coaches and captains may not be very well-equipped to navigate these areas (Peterson & Olson, 2017).

**Roles of Responsibilities of Coaches and Captains**

The role of coach or captain for a collegiate athletic program can come with great responsibility. It can also be very challenging at times to navigate the decision-making process as a team leader. Regarding a focus on the leadership development of intercollegiate team captains, Christian Grandzol of Marywood University speaks to the importance of having appointed leadership. He states “the role of team captain is both similar and distinct to the role of a coach… one of the main roles of a coach is to influence individuals toward performance accomplishments. Accordingly, team captains also endeavor to influence individuals toward performance accomplishments and promote group norms”. He then provides the suggestion that “athlete relationships with team leaders other than coaches might play an equally prominent role in dynamics such as group cohesion. However, captains influence the team in a different way than the coach because they are still members of the team and considered peers (Grandzol, 2008). Regardless of title as coach or captain, there is a common truth, and that is that these leadership roles can be very challenging. In a research article last year titled “Navigating the Ethically Complex and Controversial World of College Athletics: A Humanistic Leadership Approach to Student-Athlete Well-Being”, one of the three main areas of study was “moderating the insatiable drive to win while protecting student-athlete well-being” (Caulfield et al, 2022). This article shines a light on the difficulties of a leader’s role within collegiate athletics, in that not only are these leaders expected to win, but also to teach, to set examples, and to care for up to dozens of their peers all at the same time. Specifically, we are presented with the common theme that a coach’s actions and behaviors can affect the overall well-being of a student-athlete.
The Oregon State University study mentioned above also focused more specifically on whether or not a measure of the strength of coach-athlete relationships could be used to predict student athletes' mental health outcomes such as well-being, depression, and anxiety. In this study it was expressed that “social support, especially from coaches, could have the potential of contributing to these athletes’ well-being” (Fogaca & Gurung, 2020). Around 80 student-athletes were assessed on their levels of depression, anxiety, and psychological quality of life as well as the level of their coach-athlete relationship. Upon the completion of the study, it was discovered that “both personality and coach-athlete relationships were significantly correlated to mental health outcomes” (Fogaca & Gurung, 2020). Furthermore, the study results help to provide support for the importance of the coach-athlete relationship for athletes’ well-being. With that, the authors also state a need for a larger and more diverse sample to directly confirm these findings. Hampson & Jowett (2012) found similar results in their study focused on the coach-athlete relationship. They found that “athletes who know that their coaches are close to them with long-term plans for their sporting development are more likely to feel truly integrated and thus a capable member of a team” (Hampson & Jowett, 2012).

Kao and Tsai (2016) found that student-athletes who were satisfied with their coach-athlete relationship more often in athletic programs with coaches who had higher coaching competency. Chad Doerr of James Madison offers a similar view in his research article “Mental Toughness, well-being, and Coach-created Motivational Climate within Collegiate Athletics”. In mentioning the environment and climate created by coaches, he speaks to two specific dimensions in which a coach's actions may influence the well-being of athletes. He states, “A task-involving motivational climate reinforces learning from mistakes and focusing on effort and self-improvement, whereas an ego-involving motivational climate focuses on demonstrating that
one is better than others through comparison and fixed abilities” (Doerr, 2018). He goes on to mention that “an athlete’s perception of a task-involving coach-created motivational climate fosters both well-being and performance excellence” (Doerr, 2018). Doerr also mentions that this is likely due to athletes perceiving their abilities because of the positive feedback from a coach. Areas such as trust, and internal motivation to improve (task-involving), as opposed to messages that emphasize their natural ability, promote social comparison, and praise them for success instead of effort (ego-involving) (Doerr, 2018). Doerr’s findings connect closely to research work that weighs out the relationship between ethical and abusive coaching behaviors written by Mariya A. Yukhymenko-Lescroart of the University of Illinois and Chicago and Michael E. Brown of Pennsylvania State University, found that there is a continued connection between a coach's actions and their student athlete’s well-being. The authors note that “through their leadership styles and motivational tactics, coaches impact athletes’ attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors” (Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2014). The authors then go on to suggest that “teaching coaches both what to do (ethical leadership), as well as what not to do (abusive behaviors), may pay off in terms of higher retention and graduation rates for student-athletes.” (Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2014). One thing that was unique about the findings of this research was that there was some variance in responsiveness to coaches' behavior when it comes to different sports. Witte’s study (2011) supports this idea, stating that “individual sport athletes demonstrated a higher preference for democratic behavior, positive feedback, training and instruction, situational consideration, and social support than did team sport athletes and team sport athletes preferred autocratic behavior more than athletes participating in individual sports” (Witte, 2011). These findings suggest an even greater challenge for coaches and captains who participate on multiple college sports teams.
However, this idea of sport-to-sport variance is not supported by Simons and Bird, authors of the research article “Coach-athlete relationship, social support, and sport-related well-being in NCAA Division I student-athletes”. In their article, they state that “results indicate the coach-athlete relationship and social support were both positively correlated with well-being, but there were no significant differences between sport type on any outcome variables” (Simons & Bird, 2022). However, Simons and Bird do mention finding “significantly greater levels of depressive symptoms in individual sport athletes compared to team sport athletes” (Simons & Bird, 2022). At any rate, Simons’ and Bird’s findings of a positive association between the quality of the coach-athlete relationship and sport-related well-being do connect to the common theme seen amongst the literature available on this topic. With that, there have been numerous findings on the ways coaches may be able to preserve the well-being of their student-athletes. Huang (2021) believes that “strengthening the psychological well-being education, maintaining and improving students' psychological well-being level will lay a good foundation for preventing and reducing the occurrence of university students' mental diseases and improving the efficiency of university athletes' sports training” (Huang, 2021).

**Effective Leadership Training**

The theme of team leadership being a support system for student-athletes is also mentioned in the publication “Relationships of Coaching Behaviors to Student-athlete Well-being”. In this work, there is mention of the significance of the relationship between coaching behaviors and factors addressed above such as anxiety, burn-out, self-confidence, and even willingness to cheat to win. The authors suggest the notion that there need to be improvements made toward coaching education (Roxas & Ridinger, 2016). The authors mention a formal training effort on coaching education in which Canada’s National Coaching Certification
Program utilized teaching called “Make Ethical Decisions”. This portion of the NCCP’s training was taught to coaches all over the country. The results were nearly all positive with coaches expressing that they felt more confident in decision-making and were better equipped to face tough ethical decisions related to their jobs. In fact, many coaches actually saw their participation in this training program as an opportunity to express that there was a great need for education and support regarding the ethical rights and well-being of their student-athletes (Roxas & Ridinger, 2016). One key strategy suggested by Navarro and Malvaso (2015) is to implement peer mentorship programming among captains and younger athletes. They found that this could be one effective method for helping student-athletes become future societal contributors (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015). Similarly, in an article about the impact of identity and leadership on team functioning and well-being that was recently published by experts in the fields of psychology, sports, and exercise it was found that “by nurturing a shared sense of ‘we’ and ‘us’ within the team, leaders can foster a psychologically safe environment, which in turn paves the way for an optimal team functioning and a healthier team” (Fransen et al., 2020). This need for action is echoed by the work of Simons and Bird mentioned above as well, as they recommend the potential influence of NCAA guidelines concerning coaches’ best practices in supporting mental well-being (Simons & Bird, 2022). In his work focused on the ways that leadership development can contribute to student-athlete experience, O’Brien (2018) of Central Florida University poses a call to action that “individual campuses need to develop leadership initiatives, under the established standards, that are unique to their local needs, institutional missions, and student demographics” (O’Brien, 2018). Vella (2013), has been a strong influencer towards the benefits of leadership training for coaches and captains. In her research published in the International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching, results showed that leadership training for
coaches was associated with “predictability and reliability to athlete outcomes… associated with significantly higher rates of self-reported developmental experiences of adolescent athletes” (Vella et al, 2013). Berg and Warner (2019) were able to concur in their 2019 study, noting that refined best practices and training for coaches and captains “will significantly influence future college athlete’s sport experiences and well-being” (Berg & Warner, 2019).

Overall, the general topics of college sports, leadership, and student-athlete well-being, are covered fairly well in the scope of current research and literature. With that, this research proposal will help to fill in the gaps and provide new insights connected to leadership development, student-athlete well-being, and the intercollegiate sports community.
Chapter 3
Research Methods

This study was executed qualitatively manner. Specifically, ten interviews were conducted with current and former coaches, captains, and student-athletes. Across the ten participants, there were five different NCAA-affiliated colleges and universities represented including representation at both the NCAA Division I and Division III levels. Regarding the recruiting process, the principal investigator leveraged connections made as an NCAA Division III All-American Athlete to connect with various athletic programs across the country. Taking the qualitative approach and utilizing interviews to gain insight and explore the dynamic relationship between appointed leadership and student-athlete well-being, helped to provide a first-hand account into the areas of appointed leadership and student-athlete well-being. Given the scope of the research project, it was decided that interviews would be conducted via audio or video call. Once a participant was selected and confirmed their willingness to participate, they were given a choice on whether they would like to have the interview conducted via audio or video call. All ten participants opted to utilize a video call platform. As far as protecting the identities of the participants, all details of the research intentions were disclosed, which allowed all participants to maintain confidentiality regarding their name, gender, age, university, and sport before any of the proposed interviews. Data identifiers or codes were used to protect personal information during the analysis process. In addition to this, all interview data was stored securely on a password-protected computer in the locked office of the principal investigator. Each interview process had variations regarding progression through questions and participant’s responses. With that, there was a baseline or foundational set of questions to be asked to ensure a sense of uniformity across participants. The foundational set of questions included but was not
limited to asking about the participants and team’s state of well-being, state of leadership, leadership educational experience, the leadership appointment process, perception of preparedness of appointed leadership to support student-athletes as they navigate their mental health, and more. Each interview was recorded (with clear disclosure to participants) and then transcribed for organization and documentation. Once documented and transcribed, data was examined. This was the point at which notes of any themes or repeated patterns related to appointed leadership, well-being, and the other various experiences among participants were documented. Next, the data interpretation phase began. In this phase, more detailed and structured organized sub-themes were separated. Any further key findings, notable insights, connections, and relationships that arose from the data were also noted. Next, the necessary steps to confirm a sound validation of data were executed. This was done through peer review, member checking, and combing through results even further. Once data was prepped, organized, analyzed, and had the validity confirmed, data summarization took place. This is where the picture was painted of the results and findings. A statement of important insights discovered in the research process was also formulated. Conclusions were then drawn, and any potential implications were noted based on what had been collected and analyzed. This interpretation phase is also where any questions that arose during the research process were shared.
Chapter 4

Results

In order to analyze common themes found in participants’ responses to interview questions, participants’ responses were categorized into two groups. The two groups included responses based on participants’ internal self-reflection as well as the external observations they made within their team and organization. This approach allowed the opportunity for all participants to share their reflections and experiences within themselves as well as share their thoughts and observations regarding their teammates or appointed leaders. Specifically, participants were asked to self-reflect and share on their own roles within the team, the roles of their teammates and appointed leaders, their thoughts toward well-being, and any potential opportunities they may have recognized to enhance student-athlete well-being through more effective leadership. This approach also allowed participants who had experience from every level of the team’s structure to share their experiences as an athlete, captain, and even coach within the same organization. Table 1 below represents the questions that probed the most impactful responses toward findings. Each question is paired with the common theme that was associated with participant responses.

Table 1

*Interview questions with common themes from participant responses.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question #</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Common Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>How do you perceive your role as a team leader, coach, or captain in connection to promoting a positive team culture?</td>
<td>-Leadership Role and Responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>How comfortable would you say you are in supporting athletes who are facing well-being mental health challenges?</td>
<td>- Leader Preparedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Have you personally received any formal leadership training? If yes, did this training</td>
<td>- Leader Preparedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Topic</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Can you share an experience where facing adversity in sports had an impact on your mental well-being?</td>
<td>Well-Being of Student-Athletes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Are there any specific stressors that you believe are unique to student athletes opposed to regular students that leaders could be particularly mindful of? If yes, how would you begin to address these areas?</td>
<td>Opportunities to Improve Well-Being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>How would you describe/characterize the relationship between coaches and athletes on your team?</td>
<td>Leader-Athlete Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>How would you describe/characterize the relationship between captains and athletes on your team?</td>
<td>Leader-Athlete Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>How do leaders on your team currently promote a healthy work-life balance for student athletes?</td>
<td>Leadership Experiences and Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Well-Being of Student Athletes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Can you share examples of effective communication strategies used by leaders to set performance expectations without causing unnecessary pressure?</td>
<td>Leadership Experiences and Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>What role does student-athlete well-being play on your team?</td>
<td>Well-Being of Student-Athletes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>What do you perceive to be the biggest challenges facing student athletes' positive well-being?</td>
<td>Well-Being of Student-Athletes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>How can leaders contribute to creating an environment that promotes opportunity for athletes to express their concerns without fear of judgment?</td>
<td>Leadership Experiences and Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>In your opinion, what are some of the signs of mental strain/burnout in athletes? How do you go about addressing these symptoms?</td>
<td>Leadership Experiences and Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>In your opinion, what is the responsibility of leadership in recognizing and addressing potential signs of poor well-being in student-athletes?</td>
<td>Leadership Role and Responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>In your experience, do your team leaders encourage athletes to seek any help or support when experiencing mental health or well-being challenges?</td>
<td>Leadership Experiences and Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Has there been a time in which team leadership has incorporated mindfulness or mental health</td>
<td>Leadership Experiences and Strategies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|   | training in the team’s routine? What was the  
<table>
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<th></th>
<th>impact of this on your student-athletes?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>What are some of the ways that you have addressed student athlete’s well-being/mental health concerns?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Has there been a time in which you or another leader on the team has provided support to an athlete during a challenging time in either sports or their personal life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>How do you think formal leadership training for your coaches, captains and team would impact the mental well-being of your athletes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>What sort of developmental leadership programs or initiatives would you find to be beneficial for your student-athletes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Are there any resources currently available at your school to aid in the support of the mental health of student athletes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Are there any untapped resources at your institution that could be leveraged to help support the mental health of student-athletes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>How can your appointed leaders better address the mental health needs of athletes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>How can you support your team leaders to assist in the betterment of student-athlete well-being?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responses were then reviewed, and common themes were further analyzed and broken down into specific sub-themes that were present in participant responses. This breakdown of common themes to specific sub-themes is represented in Table 2 below. This approach allowed for a deeper evaluation of the related areas between appointed leadership and the overall well-being of student-athletes.
Table 2
*Common themes deconstructed into specific sub-themes based on participant responses.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Theme</th>
<th>Specific Sub Themes Discovered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Well-Being of Student-Athletes</td>
<td>-Impact of well-being on the team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Negative factors affecting well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Positive factors affecting well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Role and Responsibility</td>
<td>-Coach responsibilities to well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Captain responsibilities to well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Athlete responsibilities to well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader-Athlete Relationship</td>
<td>-Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader Preparedness</td>
<td>-Training/education received</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Knowledge of resources available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Experiences and Strategies</td>
<td>-Qualities of effective leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Ability to recognize and react to well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Qualities of non-effective leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to Improve Well-Being</td>
<td>-Training sessions, workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Conversations on mental-health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Check-ins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter 5**

**Discussion**

**Well-Being of Student-Athletes**

When it came to discussing the well-being of student-athletes, there was a unanimous expression from participants on the importance of student-athlete well-being within their teams. Several participants voiced that student-athlete well-being is one of if not the number one priority of coaches within the organization. When asked “What role does student-athlete well-being play on your team?”, Participants expressed that the well-being of even a small portion of the team can have a monumental effect on the rest of the group. Participant #5 shared the observation that well-being can essentially be “contagious”. Specifically, they mentioned that they noticed that if there is a portion of their team who is excited to practice, go to class, train,
and have fun then the other athletes on the team are more apt to buy into the same thought process. With that, they also mentioned that a negative state of well-being can similarly affect the team. For instance, if student-athletes are struggling with the balance of all their responsibilities, a negative mindset can occur that affects the team’s mood or dynamic in a similar way to what is mentioned above. In some cases, groups of athletes can become reluctant to want to practice, attend class, participate in competitions, and more. This was closely aligned with what was shared by Participant #6 as well. When asked the same question above, Participant #6 said the following:

“Someone with poor well-being who’s not taking care of themselves physically or mentally… that can spread. But, someone who is doing the right things and taking care of their well-being mentally and physically, that spreads as well. Well-being can absolutely be contagious…If they (student-athletes) are seeing people around them take care of themselves and lifting up their teammates, then they're more likely to follow suit. But, if they see that the general well-being of people on the team is poor, or it's nonchalant and not caring, that kind of thing spreads as well. It's super important because if people aren't taking care of themselves whether it’s in or out of the athletic environment, then the wheels are going to fall off. So, well-being is up there with the most important aspects of a team.”

As participants shared more about their experiences with student-athlete well-being, several themes arose regarding the challenges facing the well-being of student-athletes. According to participants, some of the most common challenges facing student-athlete well-being were workload, pressure, and time. Regarding workload, a coaching participant shared that there is a great deal of time demanded from student-athletes. They stated that some days athletes can have several hours of team workouts, film sessions, and travel to competitions that all
require the full attention of their athletes. Additional results indicated that student-athletes share
many of the same stressors as their non-athlete peers. Grades, social life, finances, family
matters, and more were all mentioned as common stressors amongst both athletes and non-
athletes. However, it was apparent that student-athletes have many additional stressors in their
lives that are unique when compared to non-athlete students at the same college or university.
Participant #4 shared the following regarding this unique aspect of the student-athlete life:

"Understanding that, we have performance in our head at all times. Right? Everything
about a student-athlete is about performing, whether it’s in the classroom, whether it’s in the
gym, on the field, or on the mat, etc. Being a student-athlete, there are higher standards that are
expected. The average student doesn’t have that. The average student has to pass that same exam
that the student-athlete would have to pass. But then they don’t have to go spend four or more
additional hours trying to master a craft”

Participant #7 echoed a similar point:

"Every student is worried about their grades, staying in school, and keeping up with
deadlines. But as an athlete, you’re worried about so much more. You’re worried about
performance. You’re worried about your health, physically. You’re worried about practice every
day because you know what it takes to be able to even get time in the lineup... It’s such a higher
level of competition. You’re not only competing with the athletes from other schools, but you’re
also competing with your peers for a spot within your own team.”

The pressure of playing time and competing with teammates who are often close friends
was echoed by other participants as well. Participant #2 shared a coach’s perspective on the toll
that something like this can have on student-athletes. They mentioned seeing a major decline in
the well-being of one of their student-athletes this past season after they lost the starting spot on
their team. Participant #2 expressed that it can be common for student-athletes to associate their identities solely with their athletic performance and that this can have a great impact on the mental health of young athletes. Participant #2 shared a similar view in mentioning that many of their athletes define themselves by their results in competition. Furthermore, it was shared that in Participant #2’s experience, student-athletes who attached their worth to a placement, win, or loss tended to be more susceptible to negative trends in their well-being.

Though there are many challenges within the student-athlete lifestyle, it is important to note that there are also unique aspects to student-athlete life that have a positive impact on their well-being. For instance, Participant #7 shared that being a part of a college athletic team can be a saving grace when it comes to positively impacting the well-being of some athletes. In their case, they stated that the commitments required to be a student-athlete helped to provide structure to the other factors of their life such as school, time with family and friends, and work. In essence, it forced them to learn to be able to manage their time to be able to make it all work. It was stated several times amongst respondents that participation in athletics also allows many of these young athletes to escape the stressors of their everyday lives. In cases where positive and environments are fostered, student-athletes can be surrounded by excellent support systems made up of teammates and team leadership.

**Appointed Leadership Role & Responsibility**

Across the board, participants shared that there is a great deal of responsibility regarding student-athlete well-being when it comes to the role of coaches and captains. To best dissect this sub-theme, it is important to separate roles and responsibilities between coach and captain. Participants expressed that the greatest deal of responsibility towards a student-athlete’s well-being lies with the coach. This is because the role of the coach is the only position within college
athletics where a leader is financially compensated for their efforts. With that, there is a clear obligation for a coach to be able to take care of their athletes and to foster an environment that promotes positive well-being. Participants also pointed out that the coach is often the one who establishes and directs the team’s culture across the board. There is also a portion of shared responsibility among team captains. The overall perspective on the responsibility of team captains varied among participants. Participant #3 stated that they believed that team captains are an extension of the coaching staff and that they are just as responsible when it comes to the impact and well-being of the team. Participant #6 stated the following regarding the responsibility of being a team captain:

“Captains have a really hard job. Because they have to balance all the same things that the non-captains of the team balance, but they also have to stand out in a way that gets them recognized, respected, and noticed by their peers and their coaches. So, to me, captains are the bridges between all the student-athletes and the coaching staff. And captains need to advocate for the other athletes as well. They can empathize with the guys around them and whatnot because they are going through the same things. Ultimately, captains have a fine line to walk and it can add lots of additional stress.”

Another participant expressed the belief that the team captain’s responsibility varies from that of the coaches because they spend the most time with the team. For example, in a college setting, the coaches often spend time with athletes at events team meetings, workouts, practices, etc. However, a captain spends time with the other athletes nearly every second of their lives. Participant #1 shared they treated their captainship as a "full-time job”. They called on the fact that captains spend time with their teammates in the dorms, the dining hall, the library, the classroom, at social events, and much more. Essentially, it was shared that there are little to no
days off when it comes to taking on the role and responsibility of being a team captain. It was also discovered that in many cases, captains are held to a higher standard than the other athletes. Participant #3 shared coaches’ perspectives on what they expect from their captains:

“That leadership role is big. Captains are the guys that the team looks up to at the end of the day. And you want good captains who do all the right things, whether it’s going to class or eating right. They're doing all the right things outside of practice. They are guys who you would trust to be the face of your program. They're essentially in charge of fostering the culture of your team. Ultimately, you want guys who they (other student-athletes) can look up to about doing all the right things and building a good culture.”

Participant #9 shared some key insights regarding the expectations and roles of captains. They expressed that taking on a leadership role like a captainship can be very challenging because captains are not only expected to balance the many stressors of being a student-athlete themselves, but they are also expected to be responsible and care for the well-being of their peers. One aspect that can help this balance of responsibility for appointed leaders is for student-athletes to take on ownership of their personal well-being. Participant #10, shared a student-athlete’s perspective and called attention to the need for other student-athletes to do the best they can to advocate for themselves if they are struggling. Participant #10 also shared from their own experience that in many times of struggle, it can be easier to look outward and try to blame appointed leaders for challenges when the fact of the matter is that there is still a responsibility to be taken internally for many student-athletes to take some initiative.

All in all, participant responses reflected the fact that there is a shared responsibility between both coaches and captains to be able to set an example, foster a supportive team environment as well be able to recognize and react to any potential well-being challenges.
Leader-Athlete Relationship

In mentioning the responsibility of appointed leadership above, participants also expressed the significance of the relationships between appointed leaders and student-athletes. Specifically, three main relationships were present amongst all teams: the coach-athlete relationship, the captain-athlete relationship, and the coach-captain relationship. It was apparent in each interview that each of these relationships played a major role in connection to the well-being of student-athletes. When asked to describe the relationship between coaches, captains, and student-athletes, Participant #2 stated that coaches and captains can often take on a parental or family-like role for their student-athletes. Specifically for many young athletes, the transition into college is one of the first times that they are away from home, away from their families, and are responsible for themselves. Participant #2 stated that in making this transition to a new environment, it is often the relationships between teammates, coaches, and captains that are first to develop and are the most vital. Among the various shared experiences by participants, it was further discovered that communication, trust, and presence were three of the most crucial components of sound relationships between leadership and student-athletes.

About the communication, participants conveyed that having an open line from leader to athlete was something that could greatly strengthen a leader-athlete relationship. It was mentioned that leaders who regularly communicated expectations and feedback were more favorable to student-athletes. Ultimately, having clear lines of communication is what helps to build trust between student-athletes and their leaders. Participant #7 shared that in times of struggle with well-being, student-athletes are more apt to speak up about their troubles if they have a leader that they can trust and confide in. Specifically, Participant #7 also noted that if there is a lack of trust present in the leader-athlete relationship, then students can be fearful and
reluctant to reach out for help or even open up when questioned by leaders on the team. Lastly, presence was mentioned as a key relationship builder for leaders and student-athletes. Participant #3 shared that when their incoming athletes first move on campus, one of the ways that they try to establish a presence in their student-athlete’s lives is to have the entire coaching staff and captains on campus at the first-year dorms to help their players move in. Other participants stated that having coaches and captains who are present on campus helps to provide an immediate resource for student-athletes to utilize. Participant #9 mentioned how having coaches present and accessible before and after practice was something that aided immensely in their development of relationships with team leadership.

In addition to the three crucial components mentioned above, having a diverse group of leaders was a unique discovery that was shared by participants. In essence, it was found that having several leaders with various backgrounds, communication styles, athletic principles, etc. allows the opportunity for student-athletes to gravitate more toward leaders with whom they feel most comfortable. Participants shared that student-athletes are all unique individuals and that students may connect with or resonate better with different styles of leadership. For example, Participant #9 asserted that having coaches and captains of different ages can be a good thing because it allows student-athletes to make trusting connections with whomever they feel most comfortable with. Participant #5 shared that having a diverse leadership group can also strengthen the leader-athlete relationship because there can be a greater opportunity for a broad range of strengths to be represented across the leadership group. For instance, they shared that on their current team, the head coach of the program is the more technical leader. They are very knowledgeable about the sport and how to run a practice and prepare for a competition. However, they can struggle at times to show empathy towards athletes. With that, however, the
associate head coach of the program is less knowledgeable when it comes to the technical aspects of the sport but is often much more comfortable connecting with and empathizing with the athletes. It was also shared that both the head coach and associate head coach have different styles of feedback. Participant #5 expressed that some athletes would rather be dealt with more bluntly and directly as opposed to being supported in a more soft-spoken role. When speaking about diversity in leadership, another participant shared that having multiple leaders with different backgrounds and styles can give student-athletes options to find their best fit. Another coaching participant recognized that having upwards of twenty to thirty student-athletes on a team comes with the caveat that not every single athlete may love their head coach. In fact, they addressed that it was perfectly okay for them if a student-athlete connects more closely to an assistant coach over them. Furthermore, this participant shared that having multiple coaches and captains available they believed that it gives a greater opportunity for student-athletes to create and develop key relationships with their appointed leadership.

**Leader Preparedness**

As the relationships mentioned above were closely connected to student-athlete well-being, it was also important to gauge leader preparedness to be able to support student-athlete well-being when challenges do arise. Training and education received and knowledge of resources available at their college or university were both areas of inquiry towards participants.

Regarding formal training for leaders, there was a noticeable lack of education for both coaches and captains. None of the captain participants who were interviewed received any formal leadership training. There were only two coaches who participated who received any form of leadership training. Although both participants were associated with different NCAA programs from one another, they each had the opportunity to travel and participate in a national
coach’s association leadership academy for their sport. Both participants expressed that there were portions of the academy that had a specific focus on student-athlete mental health and well-being. Both participants also expressed that the training and education they received was extremely valuable. One participant had the following to say about their experience with the formal leadership training at the leadership academy they attended:

“We were paired with a mentor, a coach who’s been either through the leadership program themselves or has been coaching for a very long time. We talked about everything, whether it was how to run a program, how to best support your athletes, or how to work with other coaches and athletic departments. It was a good eye-opener to hear from different coaches and how they approach working with their student-athletes. Because everybody’s different. I got to pick up some great leadership skills from there. And I took a bunch of notes while there, and it’s something that I can look through whenever I need it. Or go back and say, “You know, coach... explained this really well in his philosophy about how he best forms relationships with student-athletes.” It was a rewarding experience, and I recommend it to any coach If there’s something within their sport to attend like a leadership academy like that, they should.”

The second sub-theme of leader preparedness was knowledge of resources available on campus. When asked about potential resources available on campus that could assist student-athletes with their well-being, every participant was well-versed in the various resources available on their campuses. Many of the resources included counseling services, dietitians, mental health professionals, and in the case of some programs, an on-site mental performance coach. It was apparent that most participants were aware of the places where they could help direct student-athletes if they were more comfortable talking to trained professionals in the areas
of mental health or if the challenges they were facing were beyond the capabilities of coaches and captains.

An additional component of leader preparedness is the ability to recognize well-being struggles and react appropriately. One of the most challenging parts of the responsibility of appointed leadership is being able to recognize the behaviors of student-athletes who may be struggling. Participants noted that in some cases student-athletes will not say anything or they will be closed off if they do not feel comfortable discussing their struggles with appointed leadership. To learn more about the signs of poor well-being, participants were asked the question “What are some of the signs of mental strain/burnout in student-athletes?” There were various factors that participants were able to share. By watching the behavior of student-athletes, coaches can pick up on subtle signs such as body language, timeliness, overall mood, level of engagement, and more. One participant said the following:

“It can be very difficult to pick up on. A lot of times there's an attitude in how they (student-athletes) approach every day. It could be something as simple as noticing if they are smiling and laughing and talking when they come into practice. Another factor is their timeliness. Are they willing to be there on time or for extra time? I think another big factor is just the effort they put into their training. That can be a sign as well”.

Another participant shared their thoughts on recognizing signs of poor well-being:

“The biggest thing you can pick up on is a change in behavior. If someone's usually more outgoing and always laughing and you then see that attitude changing, that's a clear indicator. Or even small telltale signs like they're a great student, and their grades are dropping, or they're starting to care less about classes, and they're putting off homework because they either don't care or it's not as important to them at that time. A big part of it is being able to know your
teammates and your friends close enough to pick up those signs and if they need help, to get it for them”.

It was apparent among the participants that there was no black-and-white checklist to determine if a student-athlete is struggling with their mental health or well-being, however, participants did describe of the subtle hints above that can help leaders to be able to support student-athletes.

**Opportunities to Improve Well-Being**

By taking into account the years of experiences shared by participants across hours of interviews, there were some areas in which potential opportunities to improve student-athlete well-being arose. Some of these have been mentioned thus far. Strategies like having a diverse coaching staff and captain representation were proven by participants to be positively related to the well-being of student-athletes. In addition to this, having leadership focus on communication, trust, and presence among athletes could also prove to be beneficial to the well-being of collegiate athletic teams.

Another potential opportunity is to provide training opportunities for coaches, captains, and student-athletes. In asking participants what sort of leadership or developmental opportunities there were to help better prepare leaders to address student-athlete well-being there were many recommendations to have training sessions that included the entire team with all appointed leaders present. Participants shared that being able to recognize and react to potential signs of poor well-being would be extremely beneficial to the team as a whole. It is important to note that one participant did express a warning that having too formal of training could have an adverse effect in the sense that it could restrict leaders from expressing themselves and leading freely based on their instincts. Specifically, they said the following:
“In a sense, once you regulate training and you formalize it, you really can take away a lot of variables from what made a person a good captain in the first place. Maybe awareness training is more fitting. There are lots of leadership courses centered around noticing signs in people and noticing when they’re outside of their normal routine or whatnot.”

Still, they did believe in the importance of helping coaches, captains, and teammates recognize the signs of potential poor well-being in student-athletes.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study used a qualitative approach to investigate the relationship between appointed leadership and student-athlete well-being. In doing so, the knowledge and expertise of coaches, captains, and student-athletes was called upon. Their shared experiences and self-reflection assisted in recognizing the importance of student-athlete well-being, the factors that affect it, and how coaches and captains can be more effective in positively impacting student-athlete well-being within their teams. Although this study has taken the opportunity to explore key aspects of appointed leadership’s connection to student-athlete well-being, there is still a great opportunity to dive deeper into the more complex aspects of sports psychology, mental health, and student-athlete well-being. After all, any of the ways that leaders can more effectively manage student-athlete well-being will be of great significance to the lives of the many young men and women competing in collegiate sports.
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We hereby recommend that the thesis of Jake Peavey entitled *Enhancing Student-Athlete Well-being Through Effective Leadership in College Athletics* be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master in Leadership Studies.