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Stress and Adjustment Among Student Athletes

Transitioning to University from High School

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Student athletes at the university level struggle to balance their time between sports and academics. According to Downey (2005), student athletes who are transitioning from high school often have difficulty adjusting to the social, personal, and emotional situations of university. Compared to other students transitioning to university from high school, student athletes must deal with increased expectations and workloads in both academic and sport performance as well as the added pressure to meet the expectations of others such as their coaches or teammates (Wilson & Pritchard, 2005). These extensive time demands and social issues result in a buildup of stress among student athletes. While there are many financial, self-satisfaction, and physical advantages to being a student athlete, there are many disadvantages as well. Student athletes encounter more time management, social, and academic related stress than non-athletes because of their high self-expectations during the transition from high school to university.

The expectation of a high school athlete entering university is that they will continue dominating their sport at the university level. However, this expectation is not achieved by the majority of student athletes. Stress develops quickly when student athletes realize that they are competing with other athletes from across the country who may have similar or higher skill levels than themselves (Papanikolaou, Nikolaidis, Patsiaouras, & Alexopoulos, 2003). Although some freshman will achieve great success in their first year, the possibility of “red shirting” or not participating in competition is constantly on the mind of most students. The possibility of no longer being one of the university’s elite athletes is a source of tremendous anxiety.

Proper time management is crucial in regulating stress among college students. Attending daily practices and work-out sessions as well as getting the proper amount of sleep are
essential if one wants to succeed in university sports. Accomplishing this while maintaining a certain academic average is extremely challenging for most students attempting to complete a full term of classes while participating in their sport. Stress among student athletes is directly correlated with missing classes for athletics reasons (Wilson & Pritchard, 2005). It is nearly impossible for student athletes to catch up in the classes they miss during their competitive sport season. To avoid falling behind, student athletes must sacrifice their social life and devote their free time to academics, which often includes studying while traveling or cutting back on the number of classes one enrolls in. Although many of these students are able to balance their time, some do not have the motivation necessary to do so. Falling behind and having no time to catch up results in missed assignments and poor grades, which may result in being removed from their sport. This is a distressing threat for student-athletes.

There are numerous social issues that increase the stress of college athletes. When student athletes transition from high school, they often expect that they will receive special treatment from their coaches, professors, and other students at the university. However, professors and students are more likely to stereotype student athletes negatively and expect them to perform poorly academically; they may make verbal degrading comments and treat them as if they are “dumb jocks” (Alexander, 2008). Although there are cases in which a student athlete is almost famous and destined for a career in professional sports, most student athletes are not treated any better than regular, academic students or are stereotyped as worse students. This false expectation of student athletes who expect to be “the school star” often leads to feelings of failure, resulting in lower self confidence and increased stress.

Student athletes in their first year of university often become frustrated with the sport they play because they feel as if their coaches do not give them the opportunity to prove how
good they are. Most of these athletes are accustomed to being the “team star” as they were in high school and do not know how it feels to sit on the bench and watch their teammates play (Papanikolaou, et al. 2003). There is a period of adjustment necessary for students who are trying to become successful athletes at the university level which is often frustrating. This frustration can grow over time until, eventually, it is all one can think about. If the athlete is not patient, his or her inability to prove they can excel athletically leads to frustration followed by stress.

For many student athletes, their freshmen year is the first time they are forced to consider that they may not have a future career in sports. Students are forced to accept the reality that only the most elite will have a career in professional sports. When enrolling in university, most athletes have less motivation to obtain a degree than regular students (Lucas & Lovaglia, 2002). Once these students realize that getting an education is important, it is often very difficult to improve their grades. This realization forces students to put more time and effort into their schoolwork than they were previously accustomed to, which promotes the development of stress.

Academic, time management, and social stressors are higher among student athletes than among scholarly students during the transition from high school to university. Trying to meet personal expectations as well as the expectations of others is often overwhelming for these young athletes. Although participating in sports at university can be an enriching experience, it may also cause a large degree of stress. According to Papanikolaou et al. (2003), the transition to university much different from what student athletes expect. The reality for student athletes that university life is more difficult than expected is quite distressing. Playing sports in university is not just fun and games; it is a stressful and turbulent experience.
References


