

Research Article

Student-Athlete Burnout: A Division I Women's Soccer Coach's Perspective

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Abstract: With numerous unique physical, mental, psychological, and emotional challenges associated with being a university-level student-athlete, it can be assumed that student-athletes may be at great risk of mental health conditions such as burnout. Burnout results from the interaction of three different elements: physical or emotional exhaustion, sport devaluation, and reduced athletic accomplishment. This study sought to answer the following research questions: (1) *Why do student-athletes experience burnout in their sport?*, and (2) *What can be done to avoid burnout?* using standard qualitative interviewing techniques of a Division I Women's Soccer coach. There were two prominent themes answering research question 1: *Perfection and Performative Social Media* and *It's a Job and Coach is the Boss*. There were three prominent themes identified answering research question 2: *Parental Influence*, *De-Professionalize Amateur Sport*, and *Value Athletes' Time*. Where this work differs from other qualitative studies regarding athlete burnout, is that it explores the perceptions and opinions of a coach. The coach interviewed for this study clearly expressed concerns for his student-athletes and their holistic well-being. In addition to a continuation of scholarship through the student-athletes lens, more research conducted exploring the perspectives of coaches, parents, and institutional administrators in pursuit of solutions to mitigating the effect of burnout on student-athletes is of value.

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1. Introduction

Thankfully, more attention and research are being conducted in the areas of psychological well-being and mental health conditions in sport (BaniAsadi & Salehian, 2021; Ajilchi, Mohebi, Zarei, & Kisely, 2022; Moore & Pennington, 2021). With numerous unique physical, mental, psychological, and emotional challenges associated with being a university-level student-athlete, it can be assumed that student-athletes may be at great risk of mental health conditions. This assumption is made by the knowledge that symptoms of burnout has measurably risen over the past twenty years (Madigan, Olsson, Hill, Curran, 2022). Concerningly, scholars have discovered that observed student-athletes' average levels of perceived athletic accomplishment have reduced along with their perceived value of their sport (Madigan, et al., 2022). Student-athletes face various academic and social demands (e.g., course work, certifications, unique social milieu) and must meet the constant challenge of maintaining a desired level of performance in both sport and academic contexts (Miller & Kerr, 2002; Gustafsson, Hassmén, Kenttä, & Johansson, 2008) in addition to their sport-related stressors (Dubuc-Charbonneau, Durand-Bush, & Forneris, 2014). Factors such as pressure to succeed, extensive travelling,

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and intense training schedules often cause stress and overshadow the positive outcomes associated with their sport participation (Gould & Whitley, 2009; Dubuc-Charbonneau, Durand-Bush, & Forneris, 2014). Such positive outcomes associated with sport participation includes the fact that student-athletes generally do have higher levels of psychological well-being than their non-sporting university contemporaries (Pacewicz, Mellano, & Smith, 2019; Aries, McCarthy, Salovey, & Banaji, 2004). The challenge for coaches and university academic and athletic administrators is to limit the negative aspects of being a student-athlete and emphasize the positive potentials from university-level sport participation. Such an effort is underway in the study of multiple coaching theories aligned with student success off the field (Cummings, Ayisire, Pusch, & Pennington, 2020).

The academic field of coaching philosophy is a well-documented area of study in athletics and sport pedagogy scholarship (Harmon, et al., 2019; Evans, et al., 2021; Amado, et al., 2021). Among the numerous areas of scholarship for coaching improvement are foci of increasing athletes' sports performance (Esser & Pennington, 2018; Pennington, 2020; Conley & Pennington, 2022), improving athletes' sports nutrition practice (Pennington, 2018a), enhancing sleep for athletic performance (Pennington, 2018b), and even the social development of student-athletes (Pennington & Sinelnikov, 2018). It is perhaps somewhat unsurprising - given the energy devoted to 'the quest for perfection' - that student-athletes instinctively feel the intensity surrounding their productivity and success. Perhaps this intensity and pressure is yet another factor leading to general *burnout* among such a large fraction of university student-athletes.

1.1. Burnout

Burnout results from the interaction of three different elements: physical or emotional exhaustion, sport devaluation, and reduced athletic accomplishment (Raedeke, 1997). "Emotional and physical exhaustion can be characterized by feelings of fatigue related to sport performance, training, and competition. Sport devaluation occurs when an athlete no longer views the sport context as worth the current level of personal investment. The impact of these two factors can lead to reduced athletic accomplishment because of the impact on personal motivation and morale" (Judge, Bell, Theodore, Simon, & Bellar, 2012, pg. 231). Burnout has observable psychological, behavioral, and physical effects (Raedeke, Lunney, & Venables, 2002), with the most common effects reported as decreased performance, psychological distress (Gustafsson, Kenttä, & Hassmén, 2011), feelings of helplessness, and lack of enjoyment (Lemyre, Treasure, & Roberts, 2006; Struhar, 2003 in Judge, et al., 2012).

Burnout has been explored at multiple Divisions of university athletics and revealed numerous complex factors leading to student-athlete burnout. Interestingly, it was found that (in addition to their self-applied perfectionism) when athletes perceive their coaches to be more perfectionistic, the athlete is more likely to experience burnout (Olsson, Madigan, Hill, & Grugan, 2021). Learning that the coach - intentionally, or unintentionally - driving the student-athletes toward 'perfection' largely can lead to student-athlete burnout, the researchers sought to explore a coach's perspective on the subject of burnout in their student-athletes. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions: (1) *Why do student-athletes experience burnout in their sport?*, and (2) *What can be done to avoid burnout?*

1.2. Setting and Participant

This study took place at Tarleton State University, in Texas of United States. Tarleton State University hosts 14,000+ students and more than 1,200 faculty and staff in five locations in Texas (Stephenville, Fort Worth, Waco, Midlothian, and RELLIS Academic Alliance in Bryan) and online (Tarleton State University, 2021). Tarleton offers two associates, 73 bachelors, 30 masters, and two doctorate degrees. Tarleton has historically

been known as a teaching institution but was classified in 2022 as an R2 for high research activity by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. Tarleton has also recently transitioned from Division II athletics to Division I athletics competing in the Western Athletics Conferences (WAC) effective Fall 2021.

The participant agreeing to be interviewed for this study was Pete Cuadrado, a two-time Division I Conference Coach of the Year and NCAA Tournament head coach. Cuadrado was named the head coach of the first women's soccer program in Tarleton State University history. The program is set to begin playing in Fall 2022. Before arriving at Tarleton, Cuadrado spent nine seasons as the head women's soccer coach at the University of Wyoming, where he is the school's all-time winningest coach. Cuadrado has been a head coach for the last 18 seasons between Wyoming and North Dakota State. He led North Dakota State from Division II transition into NCAA Division I in 2003 – Tarleton State University underwent in the 2021-2022 academic years. Cuadrado has three regular season conference championships and two “coach of the year” awards. He has coached three defensive player of the year winners, 51 all-conference selections, 15 all-region selections, 88 conference all-academic recipients, and 17 NSCAA team academic awards. Cuadrado started his coaching career at Valparaiso University as an assistant; he then spent two years at Illinois State before landing his first head coaching job at North Dakota State. Throughout his time coaching he has been active in the Olympic Development Program (ODP). Cuadrado also has his USSF National “B” Coaching License, National Goalkeeping License and National Youth License ([Tarleton State University Athletics, n.d.](#)).

Cuadrado was selected for interview based upon his success at multiple universities and across Divisions, as well as his reputation for being an advocate for student-athlete holistic development and emotional well-being. Furthermore, Cuadrado was selected for interview because he has acknowledged that burnout is a significant issue in need of solutions and has been an issue at all his coaching experiences – across states, institutions, and Divisions of competition.

2. Materials and Methods

The study was conducted using standard qualitative interviewing techniques for data collection and analysis. The second author collected data during a series of two in-depth, semi structured interviews with the participant in Spring of 2022. Interview duration was roughly 90 minutes each, and the interviews took place in the participant's field-house office. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data were coded and categorized, and key themes were identified by employing analytic induction and constant comparison ([Goetz & LeCompte, 1984](#)). Codes and categories were driven by the two research questions the authors were attempting to answer and the theoretical perspective that guided the study. In addition, trustworthiness was ensured by regularly performing member checks, examining the data for discrepant cases ([Goetz & LeCompte, 1984](#)), and sharing a draft of this manuscript with the participant so he could provide feedback as to its accuracy. After reading the final draft of the manuscript, the participant indicated that author's interpretations of interview were accurate.

3. Results

Research Question 1: In answering research question 1, “*Why do student-athletes experience burnout in their sport*”, the interviews were coded for thematic consistency. There were two prominent themes identified by employing analytic induction and constant comparison ([Goetz & LeCompte, 1984](#)): (1) *Perfection and Performative Social Media* and (2) *It's a Job and Coach is the Boss*.

(1) Perfection and Performative Social Media

Cuadrado provided thoughtful insights as to his perspectives of the burnout phenomenon. Among many likely other factors, Cuadrado attributes the cause of burnout to a prominent theme previously revealed and explored in previous literature: perfectionism (Olsson, Madigan, Hill, & Grugan, 2021).

“As a coach, you feel if you’re not doing what everyone else is doing, you’re falling behind... Student-athletes are perfectionists. They bring it on themselves, and I think we put [the pursuit of perfectionism] on them”.

Cuadrado continued his remarks regarding perfectionism in the modern age:

“Everything we do is so public and online. You can watch it on ESPN + now. It’s so accessible - we put our starting lineups on Twitter and Instagram and all this garbage. It’s unbelievable how much is out there that they feel the pressure of”.

Alluding to another theme to be soon-discussed, Cuadrado expresses that perfectionism, the public eye, and parental activities all cohabitate to yield possible burnout when observed through the public eye of social media.

“[Lack of sport success] is hard to swallow as a parent because social media perpetuates a ‘everybody’s happy and everybody lives a perfect life’ myth. The number one way to be depressed is to live on social media and read some stuff I’ve seen like, ‘I scored this goal. I made that basket. I scored a touchdown. I made the A-team’”.

(2) It’s a Job and Coach is the Boss

Within the context of his interview, Cuadrado also attributes the cause of burnout to the nature of college sport as like a professional job. In particular, Cuadrado stresses the time commitment required to play Division I sport.

“With Division I athletes, it’s a 9–10-month commitment and so few have joy for the game 12 months a year... Believe it or not, I actually preach it’s okay if you view this as a job, because at the end of the day, we’re judged on results at this level”.

Cuadrado acknowledges the nature of the commitment is in-part a function of the expectations placed upon athletes by the coaching staff:

“We put those demands on them as coaches... They train two hours a day. Then they’re spending 30-45 minutes in the training room before training. Sometimes 30-60 minutes afterwards. We ask them to watch film up to three hours a week”.

Cuadrado continues detailing the numerous other commitments student-athletes balance:

“There are meetings on top of that. They’re meeting with their academic advisors. Then if we’re on the road, ... often, we’re home after midnight on Sunday. And then they do it again... So, they could literally be in town three days a week if we’re on the road”.

Research Question 2: In answering research question 2, “What can be done to avoid burnout”, the interviews were coded for thematic consistency. There were three prominent themes identified by employing analytic induction and constant comparison (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984): (1) Parental Influence, (2) De-Professionalize Amateur Sport, and (3) Value Athletes’ Time.

(1) Parental Influence

As both a high-level head coach and a parent of a young student-athlete, Cuadrado offered an interesting perspective on the role a parent can/should take when confronted with a child’s burnout and desire to quit:

“[Parents] have to realize it’s not about me. [Parents] don’t need to push sports on them, nor do we need to make it about ourselves as, as adults say, ‘Well, I spent the

months and years driving you there, you're gonna play" ... It's my job as a parent to say, "well, it just one bad day", then keep going. ... I think that's our jobs to understand what a commitment is, but not go overboard with that".

Naturally, parental involvement is a large factor in elite athletics – in fact, many student-athletes have their parents to thank for their university-sport opportunity. This leads to new and different responsibilities for parents to recognize:

"If you're gonna be an elite athlete, [responsibility] falls on the parents as much as it does the student athletes, because [parents] have invested so much money, time, miles in cars and planes seventh grade and beyond. You could spend \$10 to \$15,000 a year when you add up medical bills, travel gear, coaches. There's such a time commitment from the parents. The problem is the parents view it as now they'll get the investment back in college with scholarships or a notoriety thing."

This leads to Cuadrado expressing further observations and suggestions for parents to consider:

"The problem is when parents [press their child], "you need to play over this person" Or "why didn't you play? What did the coach say?" ... Parents, just stick to a supportive role and not another demanding role".

(2) De-Professionalize Amateur Sport

Youth athletes should be encouraged to have fun when they played sports (Pennington, 2017). One may point to the changing demands at the youth level as the fulcrum of less fun an increased sport-related burnout at the university-level. Comments regarding his youth daughter and her experiences in youth sport:

"It's crazy for that age group (U12) that they're lifting and conditioning, but everybody's doing it. So, we're all living in the same society where that's the demands at that age... It's really sad what we've done to sports; we've made it professional when it's not. We've put that pressure on them. I hate to say we coach a children's game, even at the Division I level. Adults make it difficult".

How does Cuadrado reduce the professionalize effect in his student-athletes? He creates space between them and their sport.

"I encourage, after the season, to take time off; don't play soccer, miss the game. I want them to miss [soccer]. When we're done with classes, take May off... if you wanna play, play basketball, if you wanna go for a run, go for a run, but not following and agenda. I think they have to have at least a couple months off to combat [burnout] a little bit".

(3) Value Athletes' Time

The theme Value Athletes' Time results from expression of effort made by Cuadrado to counteract the increasing reality that sport is their job phenomenon revealed in the earlier theme "It's a Job and Coach is the Boss". Cuadrado discusses,

"I'm a very big proponent on valuing their time as much as I value my time - even more sometimes. When we're done [training], instead of heading to the weight room - which for us you have to get in a car and drive there or at least walk and it's a long way away - I have the strength coach come to them. If somebody wants to meet with our team, they come at the end of practice. However, much we can value that time, the better. Sleep too; value their sleep."

Because being a student-athlete is essentially a full-time job [see above theme], Cuadrado details ways in which he creates time for his athletes:

"We lift on the field after training sessions during season because we're so busy during the season. I make things as compact as possible...And understanding the time demands that they have. [For example], if we're traveling cut [study hours] in half..."

if you're above a 3.0 GPA you don't have mandatory hours... it kind of gives 'em a little bit of their life back".

4. Discussion

In results pertaining to research question one, the theme of perfectionism was prominently featured. Perfectionism is a personality trait characterized by excessively high personal standards and overly critical evaluations (Frost et al., 1990). Literature exploring the link between perfectionism and burnout has suggested that perfectionism is a good predictor for student-athlete burnout and internalized pressure to perform (Olsson, et al., 2021). When the coach recognized this internal pressure within athletes and the external pressures (i.e., from coaches, parents, social media, etcetera), the coach has a better opportunity to adjust coaching styles, expectations, and activities to limit the negative effect of perfectionism; this could include suggesting that student-athletes avoid content on the television sports network ESPN and SportsCenter altogether, as studies have expressed that content on said program could exacerbate feelings of pressure and even poor sportsmanship from viewers in the pursuit of victory (Pennington., 2018d).

In results pertaining to research question two, the theme of parental involvement was prominently featured. The mild suggestion of limiting parental involvement in their university student-athlete's sporting experiences is difficult because the parent was such an integral and meaningful support figure in getting the student-athlete to that point. Parents have rights to their children's opportunities, experiences, and successes. Studies have suggested that parents can support students, and limit the effects of burnout, when all parties have the same expectations and definitions of success (Sorkkila, Aunola, & Ryba, 2017). To echo Cuadrado's advice to parents of student-athletes, the authors recommend that all parties involved recognize the amateur nature of university sport by honoring all other time commitments in the student-athlete's life, hold reasonable expectations for the sporting experiences, and support the student's decision-making authority – intervening with wisdom, compassion, and understanding when decisions are not in-line with parental desires.

This work is not the first to pursue the underlying reasons for student-athlete burnout in university-level sport. Where this work differs from other qualitative studies regarding athlete burnout, is in that it explores the perceptions and opinions of a coach. The participating coach was selected for interview because he has acknowledged that burnout is a significant issue in need of solutions, and he has practical suggestions of value. The coach interviewed for this study clearly expressed concerns for his student-athletes and their holistic well-being. He points out that winning – and even the sport, itself – is not the student-athlete's main purpose in college or life. A perspective of this nature is encouraging, as research has well-documented the potentially harmful effects of sport on athlete character and balancing personal decision making (Pennington, 2017; Pennington, 2018c; Pennington, et al., 2018; Pennington, 2019a; Pennington, 2019b). Regarding athlete-first holistic development and well-being, this study echoes some similar sentiments from coach interview studies in the past (Pennington, Brock, & McEntyre, 2020) which quoted coaches expressing altruistic meanings and purposes of sport in higher education (Thomas, Hewson, & Pennington, 2019). These sentiments have had the student athletes' best interest at-heart, but practically, are difficult to execute in the 'win-at-all-cost' setting of intense Division I sport. For example, in studies exploring the concept of academic clustering in Division I, II, and III sport (Brock, Pennington, & McEntyre, 2021), it has been revealed that coaches are often well-aware that their athletes are engaged in sport and academic majors for the 'wrong reasons' and against the philosophical mission of the institution and/or the NCAA. Nevertheless, coaches, athletes, and even administrators have been known to 'look the other way' when winning is occurring at an acceptable rate and if the sport is positively affecting institutional enrollment and recruiting efforts (Pennington & Brock, 2022). Fortunately, the track

record of the coach interviewed for this study suggests that his coaching philosophies are not hollow words, rather meaningful goals for student-athlete success, emotional well-being, and reduced likelihood of burnout.

5. Conclusions

A recent meta-analysis conducted by Li and colleagues (2019) suggested that there is some evidence showing that mindfulness was negatively associated with athlete burnout (i.e., consciously and thoughtfully mentally considering the effects of sports participation and likelihood of experiencing burnout). However, given the small number of interventions and qualitative studies, there is limited evidence on whether mindfulness inventories are useful in preventing athlete burnout (Li, Zhu, Zhang, Gustafsson, & Chen, 2019). More studies are needed to corroborate these findings. Many studies have sought the perspectives of student-athletes; the authors respectfully suggest that - in addition to a continuation of scholarship through the student-athletes lens - more research conducted exploring the perspectives of coaches, parents, and institutional administrators in pursuit of solutions to mitigating the effect of burnout on student-athletes is of value.

Finally, the authors leave the reader with the following quote from Cuadrado as to emphasize the importance of grace and understanding for student-athletes who experience burnout and other emotional, psychological, and mental health conditions: "It's amazing how many directions student-athletes are pulled between academics, family, social life, the sport, and faith. Financially, they may need to have jobs. Some are walk-ons. There's just so many things that are pulling for their time...". As faculty who have student-athletes under our care, let us consider these unique stressors and accommodate appropriately.

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