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NCAA DI Student-Athletes' Understanding of and Attitudes Toward Mental Performance Services

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ABSTRACT

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (DI) student-athletes have high physical and psychological demands related to their sport. To address these demands, the NCAA has focused on disseminating information and advocating for more resources to help student-athletes improve their psychological well-being. However, most, if not all the information provided by the NCAA has focused on mental health resources, with little discussion about mental performance services. In fact, the 2023 Transformational Committee Report did *not* list mental performance services as a key resource for student-athletes, meaning that student-athletes likely have limited knowledge about the services or access to a mental performance consultant (MPC) that could help them with various performance challenges. Furthermore, few, if any, qualitative studies examine student-athletes to understand what they know and how they feel about these services. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to learn about NCAA DI student-athletes' understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted with nine NCAA DI student-athletes (6 females, 3 males). Thematic analysis procedures were followed, and two themes were constructed: (a) knowledge of services and characteristics desired of professionals, and (b) a general unawareness of mental performance services. In response to these results and recent NCAA statements, it is suggested that the NCAA consider disseminating more resources and information about mental performance services and advocate for hiring a professional on a full-time, part-time, or contract basis to assist in meeting student-athlete mental performance needs.

Keywords: mental performance services, collegiate sport, student-athletes, qualitative exploration

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1. Introduction

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division (DI) student-athletes are tasked with managing academic, sport, and social responsibilities (NCAA, n.d.) and often experience performance pressures that come with playing at the DI level (Lopes Dos Santos et al., 2020). An important service that may help student-athletes manage their responsibilities while coping with these performance pressures is mental performance services. Mental performance services are designed to assist student-athletes with psychological challenges affiliated with performance (McHenry et al., 2022). Some of those services include, "dealing with pressure, building confidence, communicating with coaches, communicating with teammates, dealing with personal issues, managing anxiety, and managing emotions during competition" (Wrisberg et al., 2009, p. 481-482). Mental performance services are delivered by a mental performance consultant (MPC) who has educational training in both kinesiology, sport science, and sport psychology (Jones et al., 2022; McHenry et al., 2022). MPCs engage in intensive academic and applied training practices to prepare for their work with athletes and are tasked with training athletes to regulate mental skills, their responses in their unique sport environment, and specific strategies to meet the mental demands of sport (McHenry et al., 2022). Previous researchers have revealed that collegiate student-athletes hold positive attitudes toward mental performance services and believed utilizing an MPC could ultimately help them improve their sport performance (Wrisberg et al., 2009) while allowing them to develop strategies that could be implemented in all facets of sports training and competition (Green et al., 2012).

2. Emphasis on Mental Health in the NCAA

Despite the benefit that mental performance services present to student-athletes, the NCAA has largely focused on disseminating information about and encouraging the implementation of mental health services. Over the last 9 years, there has been an increase in the number of licensed mental health providers (LMHPs) hired to meet student-athletes' mental health needs within NCAA DI athletic departments (Jones et al., 2022; NCAA, 2024). LMHPs can assist student-athletes with personal and emotional problems in addition to helping them with clinical mental health issues such as depression, substance abuse, and eating disorders (Donohue et al., 2004). In 2016, the NCAA created a mental health initiative and called on NCAA athletic administrators and their athletic departments to hire more LMHPs, which led to increases in the hiring of psychological providers (Jones et al., 2022; NCAA, 2024). In 2024, the original 2016 initiative was updated and heavily emphasizes the presence of mental health risks, the environmental effects on the student-athletes, and the need for more LMHPs and mental health screenings in athletic departments, which is positive in helping to better support student-athletes (NCAA, 2024). However, there was no emphasis on, or information included within the updated initiative about mental performance services. Furthermore, on January 3, 2023, the NCAA Transformational Committee published a report highlighting areas the NCAA was focusing their attention towards to improve resources and opportunities for student-athletes. An area heavily emphasized within the report was ensuring student- athletes' mental health needs are met (NCAA, 2023). Unfortunately, mental performance services were not included as a necessary resource in the report, missing a valuable service that could complement mental health resources and benefit student-athletes (NCAA, 2023).

3. Current NCAA DI Services

Although MPCs can assist student-athletes with various performance challenges, there are only *some* employed full-time within NCAA DI athletics (Jones et al., 2022). Jones and colleagues (2022) conducted a content analysis examining the number of psychological professionals employed within NCAA DI athletic departments, discovering that out of 253 NCAA DI departments, only 65 (25.7%) athletic departments employed psychological professionals. They found that only 23 of 99 total providers (23.2%) employed within these 65 NCAA DI athletic departments were MPCs (Jones et al., 2022). Many NCAA DI athletic departments *may* be relying on LMHPs to meet the mental health and mental performance needs of student-athletes. In fact, in a presentation delivered at the 2022 Association for Applied Sport Psychology Conference revealed that professionals (i.e., Licensed Sport Psychology Professionals, LMHPs) working in NCAA DI athletic departments must prioritize the mental health of student-athletes, leaving individuals experiencing mental performance challenges with potentially limited or no access to a professional trained to combat these issues (Eckenrod et al., 2022). Although it is excellent that more NCAA DI athletic departments are hiring LMHPs, they are also missing an opportunity to provide student-athletes with mental performance services that could help improve both their performance and well-being.

3. Purpose and Aim of the Present Study

To bring attention to the value and importance of mental performance services, it is essential that more research is done to better understand individuals' understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services. Gathering this information could shed light on what athletic departments, their staff, and their athletes know about the services and the attitudes that are held about them. Over the last 18 years, there have been some quantitative studies conducted to learn about how student-athletes at varying levels (i.e., high school and college athletes) perceive and react to mental performance services (Wrisberg et al., 2009; Zakrajsek & Zizzi, 2007). However, few studies to date have qualitatively explored student-athletes' perceptions of and/or attitudes toward mental performance services nor have researchers solely studied individuals at NCAA DI institutions that do not employ an MPC in their athletic department. The purpose of this study was to learn about NCAA DI student-athletes' understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services at institutions where they did not have access to an MPC to learn about what they knew of these services, the attitudes they held about them, and what they would want out of the services if they were available.

4. Methods

4.1 Research Parading

When utilizing qualitative research methodology, it is essential that a research paradigm is selected that connects to the approach and purpose of the study, while underpinning the work. A constructivist paradigm was selected as its principals best align with the study purpose, which was to learn about student-athletes' understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services. Constructivist ontology operates under the notion that there is more than one reality and that individuals' realities are constructed based

on their experiences in the social world and how they interpret their lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Constructivist epistemology focuses on understanding what student-athletes know and how they learned about mental performance services (Merriam, 2009). To develop their story, co-construction occurred when the researcher interacted with NCAA DI student-athletes and asked them questions about their understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services. The participants answered the questions, and the primary researcher asked follow-up questions to gain further clarification about participant responses, which allowed for co-construction to occur (Lincoln et al., 2011). Using this approach allowed for rich, descriptive information to be gathered about student-athletes' experiences in the social world that influenced their knowledge of and attitudes toward mental performance services (Merriam, 2009).

4.2 The Interpretive Interview

A semi-structured interpretive interview approach was used, allowing the researcher to gather detailed and descriptive data from NCAA DI student-athletes to better comprehend their understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services (Stringer, 1999). An interpretive interview approach is designed to be flexible, relational, interpersonal, and exploratory in nature (Seidman, 2006). Using this approach required the researcher to (a) explore participants' experiences related to mental performance services, (b) be flexible while engaging with the participant by attending to their responses and asking following up questions, and (c) continue building a connection with the individual as the participants spent time with the primary researcher (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012). To meet these guidelines, the researcher developed a semi-structured interview guide where open-ended questions were created that focused on gathering background information about student-athletes sport experience (e.g., "How did you first get involved in [state the sport they are involved in]?") before asking them questions about their understanding of (e.g., "In your own words, could you please define mental performance services?") and attitudes toward mental performance services (e.g., "How do you feel student-athletes could benefit from having mental performance services available to them?"). The semi-structured nature of the interview guide, which aligns with the interpretive interview approach, allowed the primary researcher to ask detailed questions while following up with probing questions, which are designed to gather more information about a specific topic and/or experience (Stringer, 1999). The same semi-structured interview guide was used with all student-athletes so that the researchers could look across all participants to make comparisons and establish commonalities and differences between their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

4.3 Participant Criteria, Recruitment, and Demographic Information

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, individuals were recruited to participate within this study. NCAA DI student-athletes who were at least 18 years of age and attended an NCAA DI university that does not employ an MPC were recruited to participate. Participants were recruited across campuses through recruitment flyers, speaking in a variety of college courses where information was provided about the study, and through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is when participants refer others to the research, which in this case, student-athletes who participated in an interview shared the study information with others, which helped in getting more participants (Naderifar et al., 2017). When student-

athletes contacted the primary researcher, the researcher asked if they were at least 18 years of age and a member of an NCAA DI athletic team before proceeding with scheduling the interview. All student-athletes that reached out to the primary researcher met the requirements for the study, signed an informed consent form, and gave verbal consent before the interview process began.

Ten participants engaged in semi-structured one-on-one interviews, however, only nine were included in the thematic analysis procedures. One participant was excluded due to their past experience at a different NCAA DI athletic institution where they had access to mental performance services. Researchers found that "typically 6-7 interviews will capture the majority of themes" (Guest et al., 2020, p. 13). Participants ranged between 19 and 23 years old (M = 20.67*; SD* =1.15*)* and their years participating in their primary sport ranged from 7 to 17 years *(*M = 12.89*; SD* =3.66*)*. Six student-athletes self-identified as female and three student-athletes self-identified as male, and four different sports were represented including basketball, soccer, track and field, and softball. Of the nine participants, three self-identified as Caucasian, two self-identified as African American, two self-identified as mixed-race (Caucasian and Asian; Caucasian and African American), and one self-identified as 'other'.

4.4 Pre-and-Post Data Collection Procedures

Prior to beginning data collection, a bracketing interview was conducted where the second author interviewed the first author using the interview guide. This was done to help in identifying any existing bias and beliefs the primary researcher held related to the study, mental performance services, and/or questions outlined in the interview guide. It was essential that any biases and/or beliefs held were identified as this increased the researchers' awareness to ensure they did not interfere with probing questions were asked, which could impact student-athletes' responses (Tufford & Newman, 2012). The first author has a BS in Kinesiology and currently works as a representative with a church outreach program at a university. The second author holds a PhD and has the Certified Mental Performance Consultant (CMPC) credential endorsed by the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP). The second author is a female faculty member in sport psychology and has previous experiences with qualitative research. The first author was a high school athlete, and the second author was a previous college athlete at the Division II level. Overall, the authors believed that NCAA DI student-athletes would feel mental performance services are needed yet, may be unsure as to how they differ from mental health services.

Following the bracketing interview, adjustments were made to the wording of two questions, and the question order was restructured. Once the adjustments to the interview guide were approved by the IRB, the primary researcher engaged in a pilot interview with an NCAA DI student-athlete meeting the participant criteria. The pilot interview served to learn how participants would understand, interpret, and answer the questions from the interview guide (Barriball & While, 1994). Following the pilot interview, the audio recording was sent to the second author to listen to determine if any additional changes needed to be made to the interview guide based on the participants' responses to the questions. No additional changes were made to the interview guide, and participant recruitment began.

Prior to the start of each interview, participants were required to read and sign an informed consent form. Interviews were conducted either in-person (*n=1*) or via phone call (*n=9*) and were audio-recorded using both a tape recorder and QuickTime Player on an Apple Laptop to ensure accurate and usable audio recording for each interview. There was no difference in content based on the interview mode (Fusch & Ness, 2015). At the beginning of each interview, the participant was informed of the audio recording and verbally consented to participate in an audio-recorded interview prior to the device being turned on. Before turning the device on, the researcher explained how any identifying information would not be included and would be changed to a pseudonym and/or non-identifying phrase. The length of each interview, and the resulting audio recording, ranged from 10.90 minutes to 33.07 minutes *(M* = 20.43*; SD* =7.10*).* Following the collection of all participant interviews, each audio recording was sent to a transcription company, titled Rev, and transcribed verbatim. After the transcription process was completed, each transcript was thoroughly read through by the primary researcher to ensure all the information was there and to de-identify any existing information that was still present. Following this process, each transcript was individually sent via email to each participant for member-checking. Member checking allows participants to review their statements, alter the phrasing, and add context where they see fit (Cho & Trent, 2006; Patton, 2015). Participants were given 14 days to review their transcripts and provide any feedback. No feedback was received, and pseudonyms were assigned to each participant.

5. Data Analysis and Triangulation

Following the completion of data collection, interview transcription, and the 14-day member checking window, thematic analysis procedures were conducted to identify patterns and better understand commonalities and differences across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Popularized by Clarke and Braun (2013), the six phases of thematic analysis include (a) gaining familiarity with the data, (b) coding, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing the themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) writing up the themes. First, the researchers independently read through the transcripts, making note of anything that stood out. During this process, a researcher journal was utilized for note taking about the interviews, highlighting any commonalities and/or differences, and keeping biases in check by making note of moments where the primary researchers' biases/beliefs came to mind (Birks et al., 2008). During phase two, data coding began, in which an inductive approach was followed, meaning, the participants' words were used as the codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In phase three, the researchers reviewed the individually generated codes and began highlighting commonalities across participant responses. During this phase, the researchers began developing themes and subthemes based on the common codes generated across participants. In phase four, themes and subthemes were collectively reviewed, and the researchers continued to develop and refine the thematic structure. Lastly, during phases five and six, the themes and subthemes were defined, and quotes were found to support the themes and subthemes. After finalizing the thematic structure, the themes and subthemes were written up to be produced for publication purposes.

To verify findings, the process of triangulation was employed requiring the use of multiple viewpoints to ensure consistent findings across a variety of materials (Stake, 2005). Within this study, the primary and secondary researchers, in addition to the researcher journal,

served as the three elements to triangulate the data. The second author served as a critical friend, which required them to engage in the six phases of the thematic analysis procedures to help ensure the primary researcher's biases did not influence the collection, analysis, or findings generated (Foulger, 2010). Using a critical friend also helped in providing different perspectives on the data in addition to the researcher journal (the third source of triangulation) where the primary researcher made note of anything that stood out in the interviews including commonalities and differences in addition to moments where they noticed thoughts related to their beliefs about the topic (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Contextual Information about Participants' Sport Background and Involvement

At the start of the interview, participants provided information about how they first got involved in sport and individuals that influenced their experience. Before diving into the findings from this research, first, we must understand background information about participants' involvement in sport. Participants discussed three factors that influenced their sport participation that included (a) family influence, (b) increased demand as a DI athlete, and (c) community aspect of sport.

Family Influence

Student-athletes are often drawn to sport participation in several ways, and at the beginning of the interview, participants shared the role family members played in their participation in athletics. While some athletes experienced encouragement from family members to participate, other athletes—with family who served as coaches or had an extensive background in a specific sport—experienced pressure to participate. For example, Alex explained how his mom enjoyed running and believed he would too, so the next thing he knew, "she was putting me in a running club". Alex's experience focused more on his mom's positive experience in sport, which is a bit different from other participants, like Jenny, who engaged in sport for a different reason. Jenny shared that her "parents wanted me and my brother to do sports growing up", which is why she got involved in her sport. George experienced something similar and said, "When you're a kid, your parents just throw you into sports, that's kind of how I got started playing". Responses like Alex's, George's, and Jenny's show how parents placing their kids into sports influenced their collegiate sport trajectory. Other participants experienced pressure to engage in sports because their parents played or were coaches. For example, Ryan explained how his "dad was a high school basketball coach…so I really grew up playing basketball". Similarly, Jessica shared that her "mom and dad actually played basketball in college" and followed that up stating how her "mom and dad coached basketball at my high school" therefore, she felt the need to play. Overall, seven student-athletes within this study experienced some form of family influence that played a role in their sport participation.

Increased Demand as a DI Athlete

There is a difference between high school and collegiate sport in many ways. The change in environment, responsibilities, and intensity of athletics in NCAA DI sports proved difficult for participants either at the outset of change or as a barrier to their performance. One major balancing act participants faced was the physical demand of collegiate sports. Thomas highlighted this and said, "I'm doing much more intense workouts than I did in high school" while George echoed this sentiment stating that "it's a lot quicker [the sport speed], a lot

faster, practice is just more intense". Another balancing act that proved challenging was the responsibilities and pressures that come with being a student and athlete at the DI level. Jessica elaborated on this and said:

> So, it can get very hard. It's very mentally challenging. You got everyone screaming at you at all different angles, and all for the good. They want you, just to do better, but it's a demanding sport, as well, on your body. And so, it can be very challenging and hard.

Alex agreed with Jessica's description of demands sharing that there is "more pressure" at the collegiate level while Sarah echoed her response and added that collegiate sport is "way more demanding".

In addition to balancing responsibilities related to the physical demand, participants discussed challenges in balancing their academic and social lives along with their sport responsibilities. For example, George shared that he "struggled balancing everything [academic, sport, and social responsibilities]". Some participants discussed having limited time to connect with others outside of academic and sport responsibilities. Sarah explained that "we [her and her teammates] don't really have time to do that [on being involved in other activities]. So, it's hard to make friends socially outside of the team and maybe other sports". Ryan further supported Sarah's claim, stating that collegiate sport is "a lot more of a time commitment", which impacted his ability to engage in other activities.

Community Aspect of Sport

The support network student-athletes had was a primary influence on their initiation and continuation in NCAA DI athletics. Student-athletes reported feeling comfort and accountability while receiving support from their team, which helped increase enjoyment in their sport. When talking about their sport experience, student-athletes often highlighted their team relationships, interactions, and experiences that led to their positive sport experience. Jessica highlighted this stating:

My highlights have definitely been just going on trips with them [teammates], making such a great connection with them [teammates and coaches]. And it's so much different than a friendship to me because you're going through, I guess you would say, hardships with them [teammates], but you're also with them at the really good times. So, you create these awesome bonds that you'll remember for the rest of your life.

The community surrounding an athlete, as implied by Jessica, played a large role in the support that they feel. Although community can have a positive influence on the experience of a student-athlete, it can also have a negative impact. Bailey elaborated on this by saying:

My overall experience there [at DI university] in terms of athletics was not very good. When I was a player on the team, the coaches were not good people and after I decided to enter the portal, my coaches didn't help me even try to find a new school at all.

The quality of coaching and team relationships, as supported by participants' opinions and experiences, largely impacted athletes and their performance. One way that athletes were positively impacted physically and psychologically was related to strong teammate relationships. Lauren supported this sentiment stating, "our teammates are great; my teammates are great. Just being around them obviously makes me feel better [physically and mentally]". In support of Lauren's comments, George shared that "you can't accomplish

things individually [in sport and academics] unless you have your other teammates and your people out there with you".

6. Results

As a result of thematic analysis procedures, two themes were constructed: (a) information about mental performance services and characteristics desired of MPCs, and (b) factors influencing student-athletes' knowledge of mental performance services. All names associated with quotes are pseudonyms that the researchers selected for each participant.

Theme 1: Information About Mental Performance Services and Characteristics Desired of MPCs

Participants acknowledged the importance of psychological support and the need for these services related to sport performance; however, most had limited knowledge about mental performance services. Participants' responses led to the development of three sub-themes: (a) student athletes' acknowledgment of the need for mental performance services, (b) desired characteristics of a psychological provider, and (c) confusion between mental performance and mental health.

Students-Athletes' Acknowledgement of the Need for Mental Performance Services

Participants shared the physical and psychological challenges in balancing responsibilities and engaging in sport at the highest level of collegiate. Student-athletes believed they needed more psychological and performance resources in their athletic department to better support them in managing responsibilities and pressures. When asked about what they knew about mental performance services, most participants did not know much but acknowledged the potential benefits of having the services available. For example, Jenny talked about how student-athletes have a lot going on and shared how important "the mental game was," but she also stated that "everything is really hard [balancing school and sport] and you never know what's going on with their personal lives". Ultimately, Jenny's acknowledgment of the mental challenges within sport while also acknowledging the necessary mental side of performance suggests a need for psychological services. Thomas expanded on Jenny's discussion and shared how "we feel like sometimes we can get in our head, and we start doubting ourselves and we might start comparing ourselves to others and why isn't this happening for us when we're putting the same amount of work" and acknowledged that having services [mental performance services] to help would be "beneficial".

Because student-athletes shared how they often "get in their own heads" they believed having mental performance services available would help them with this challenge. For instance, Alex said, "I feel like a good sports psychologist could help to not having those barriers [mental challenges] in the head". Jessica believed it was the universities' responsibility to provide mental performance services and said:

I do feel like mental health performances [referring to mental performance services] should be more available to student athletes, and I think it is a very big part [of the athletic experience]. Because I feel like sometimes, student athletes are getting shoved under the rug [not having their needs met].

George acknowledged how mental performance services could be a beneficial resource to student-athletes saying, "there are people that desperately need it [mental performance

services], and I think it's a good thing to have. Good's probably not even a good term. I think it's great to have". He continued his discussion and stated, "that there's a lot of people that would use [mental performance service] just if it's there".

Desired Characteristics of Psychological Providers

Through the analysis of participants' experiences, participants acknowledged the desire for mental performance services based on their specific needs and challenges and believed these services could positively impact their sport performance and experiences. When discussing the needs of student-athletes, participants shared characteristics they believed an MPC should have. For example, Jenny believed an MPC should be "approachable" while being held "accountable and having sufficient motivation". Sarah shared that the provider should be "trustworthy and loyal and be focused on people as individuals". Similarly, Ryan stated, "they [the MPC] need to be very understanding, empathetic, and just come at it [delivering mental performance services] from all different angles to where they can try to understand what the person's feeling".

Participants desired for an MPC to be trustworthy, motivated, accountable, person-focused, and approachable but they also preferred the professional to have sport experience. Bailey explained this stating, "I just feel like if you've gone through experiences [being an athlete] and know how to deal with it and think you could help other people [when discussing characteristics of an MPC]". Alex echoed Bailey's sentiments, explaining how she would prefer seeing an MPC who "had a background of sports". Overall, MPC characteristics could potentially play a role in the likelihood of student-athletes seeking out the services, if available to them.

Confusion Between Mental Performance and Mental Health

Echoed throughout participant discussions was confusion between mental performance and mental health services. Participants often used mental performance and mental health synonymously when discussing the services. For example, when asked about available mental performance services at their current institution, Lauren responded "we have a mental health coach for our team, and our coaches are mental health certified. I don't know what that means, but they just tell us to go see our advisor if we need any help". Ryan further demonstrated this uncertainty when he explained that when he thinks of mental performance, he "thinks of mental health. If I have problems with my mental health, there are services that I could go to and help me get back to where I need to be to perform where I could". Most participant responses—when asked to explain mental performance services—were vague or they defined mental health rather than mental performance. For instance, Thomas described mental performance services as "making sure that you are okay or aren't depressed or have mental stuff going on". George, on the other hand, described mental performance services as "varying from anything, issues that you're dealing with at home, issues that you're dealing with in the classroom, issues that you're dealing with your family, girlfriend, it doesn't matter". Other participants, namely, Sarah, Jessica, Jenny, and Alex, utilized the phrase "mental health" several times within their respective interviews when discussing mental performance services. Overall, there seemed to be confusion as to what mental performance services entail and when asked to discuss them, participants often described mental health services.

Theme 2: Factors Influencing Student-Athletes' Knowledge of Mental Performance Services

There seemed to be an unawareness of mental performance services, what they entail, and how utilizing them could be beneficial. In order to successfully optimize these services, this unawareness and its related effects need to be addressed. Based on participant responses, three sub-themes were constructed: (a) stigma associated with psychological services, (b) lack of information presented by coaching staff about existing psychological resources, and (c) insufficient resources at current institution.

Stigma Associated with Psychological Services

Participants discussed the stigma and stereotypes associated with psychological services, which they believe influence their openness to seek out and participate in them. Nearly all participants highlighted a distinction between 'mentally weak' and 'mentally strong.' For example, Lauren said, "I guess in terms of sports, I guess that you could say they [student-athletes] would think that they're perceived as being weak and they probably wouldn't want to seek it out [any psychological services, including mental performance services if they were available] because of that". Sarah supported Lauren's comments stating that "all athletes want to prove how strong they are physically and mentally, so if someone looks like they need help or they want help [seeking psychological services, including mental performance services], then it's like they're not as strong as they want people to think that they are".

Participants' responses reflected that student-athletes tend to believe that they must consistently demonstrate themes of strength and confidence in their ability. Alex clarified this statement and said, "We always have to perform, we always have to show how strong we are," which led student-athletes not to seek assistance when experiencing challenges. Athletes' determination of being 'mentally weak' or 'mentally strong' seems to lie in their ability to cope with struggle and/or challenges by themselves. Bailey shared how she feared the opinions of others, stating if you seek help, "you're perceived as weak for being either low confidence or for whatever reason it is that you're going to see them [an MPC or an LMHP]".

Lack of Information Presented by Coaching Staff about Existing Psychological Resources

Student-athletes acknowledged the importance of the coaching staff in providing them with sport and athletic department resource information. Participants argued that coaching staff did not provide them with much, if any, information about mental performance services, or any psychological services for that matter, and had few, if any, conversations on this topic. Jessica supported this explaining how "it's really just not even talked about really [any psychological services], other than between the team, maybe here and there. But it's really not talked about. They're great people [the coaching staff], and they're very loving. It's just not talked about [psychological services]. It's hidden". Similar to Jessica's opinion, Bailey explained how "they've [the coaching staff] told me about her [the LMHP who works in the athletic department] and who she is, but they haven't really done anything [encouraged or provided resources/information about the provider]". Furthermore, most of the information that participants had about psychological services was vague. For example, George said:

The only one that I know of, which I know for a fact that I don't know of everything that we have [psychological resources], because I'm sure there's a lot of things that we have that I don't know of, but the one thing that I do know of is that Ms., I believe her name is [Professional's Name], and I assume she still works here.

Based on participants' responses, their coaching staff provided information about where to find the resources but never fully explained what the services entailed. Ryan echoed this sentiment explaining that "they've told us about these people [psychological providers at the university] or places we could go [centers on campus] to if we're ever struggling mentally. I can't think of the exact names, but we've definitely heard where and who to go to if that's ever a problem for us". With limited information, student-athletes are often uncertain about the resources available to them.

Lauren shared that "a lot of the times you don't know [when discussing why mental health declines in athletes], and a lot of student-athletes don't even know what it is [psychological resources, including mental health and mental performance]. So, I think it's important for them to be educated and informed and have a person like that [an MPC], that tells them what it is and can help them with it.

Insufficient Resources at Current Institution

Participants acknowledged having insufficient resources to meet the varying needs of student-athletes at their respective institutions. To support this claim, Sarah, when asked about current opportunities to participate in mental performance services, responded "Current opportunities? I don't really know of any". She expanded on her discussion and highlighted the accessibility of psychological services at her current institution stating, "I think that there are just other sports that they're bigger priorities in a sense and they also get funded more [more money allocated to them from the athletic department], so they may get access to mental performance coaches and services and stuff". Several participants acknowledged that their athletic department only employs one mental health professional. Bailey reported "we have one sports psychologist, or I think that's what her title is". Similarly, George said "I know [Professional's name], I believe, is a lady that has come and talked to us". Both student-athlete responses identify the awareness of the employment of a singular mental health professional within their institution.

Having only one psychological professional accessible impacted student-athletes' utilization of services. Jessica said, "we do have a mental... she's a therapist, mental health lady, but she only comes in maybe once every two months. And even when we're in the season, it wasn't that much". In addition to highlighting the limited resources available to student-athletes, participants believed engaging in psychological services should be mandatory, but acknowledged that in their current support staff structure, it could not be done. Ryan said:

I think if there was a mandatory time for anyone to go, if they made it mandatory [seeing psychological providers] for everyone to check up at a certain amount of, every certain few weeks or something like that, and just to see where everyone's at mentally throughout the season, because it [athletics] can take a toll on your body and mental and your health throughout the year.

Jessica echoed Ryan's sentiments saying, "so why not make us be required to go and meet with a mental health performance service at least maybe once a month, or once a week, or whatever those things are?". Overall, student-athletes reported having limited access to their psychological professional on staff and acknowledged wanting more resources so they could access a professional more consistently to meet their needs.

7. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to learn about NCAA DI student-athletes' understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services. Although researchers have previously examined student-athletes' perceptions of mental performance services, to our knowledge, no study to date has qualitatively explored NCAA DI student-athletes' understanding of and attitudes toward services in which they did not have access to an MPC. Based on participant responses, the researchers revealed that student-athletes were uncertain about what mental performance services entailed, but they believed having an MPC available would be beneficial. Participants also outlined characteristics they would want the MPC to have if they were to work with one.

Nearly all participants identified the need for psychological services to be available, especially at the NCAA DI level. Student-athletes acknowledged different barriers when trying to perform at the highest level that included managing stress, balancing responsibilities, and increasing sport training load. These findings are consistent with Bemiller and Wrisberg (2011) who found that student-athletes face pressures to perform when participating in collegiate sport, which ultimately impacts their psychological health and well-being. Participants believed having an MPC available could help in mitigating those barriers/challenges, which could lead to performance and academic improvements.

Although student-athletes believed having an MPC available would be beneficial, most were unsure what mental performance services entailed, with many of them referring to mental performance and mental health synonymously. Their lack of understanding and confusion between mental performance and mental health could be due to not having access to educational information about mental performance services and there not being an MPC on staff in their athletic department. This finding is consistent with other research conducted with assistant coaches (Eckenrod et al., 2023), student-athletes (Wrisberg et al., 2009), and support staff (Zakrajsek et al., 2018) who revealed that there is, at times, confusion between mental performance and mental health services. Furthermore, most of the literature concerning psychological services in sport emphasizes mental health services and often provides little, if any, information regarding mental performance services (NCAA, 2024).

Contributing to this confusion, most participants acknowledged that their athletic department employed an LMHP. Because student-athletes only had access to an LMHP, this may explain why they often confused mental performance and mental health services or viewed them as the same. Although participants knew there was a psychological provider on staff, most had limited interactions with them and were not fully aware of the work they do for the athletic department. Therefore, to better inform and meet student-athletes' psychological needs, it is recommended that NCAA athletic departments provide more

education and information about the LMHP and the services they provide. To disseminate this information, athletic departments are encouraged to hold departmental seminars to highlight the LMHP and their work while distributing flyers and/or information sheets to their coaching staff to educate about the providers available to their student-athletes and the services they deliver.

To continue expanding resources and increasing mental performance service opportunities for student-athletes, it is encouraged that, if financially feasible, athletic departments that do not employ an MPC allocate resources to hire one. Having both an MPC and LMHP could allow for more student-athletes' differing (mental performance and mental health) psychological needs to be met. With the NCAA Transformational Committee Report (NCAA, 2023) emphasizing the physical and psychological needs of student-athletes, hiring an MPC could help in addressing this request and providing necessary support to the student-athlete community. The addition of mental performance services to NCAA DI athletic institutions could potentially widen the degree of care for student-athletes while also reducing the burden on other psychological professionals and support staff (Jones et al., 2022). However, if the athletic department does not have the financial resources to hire a full-time MPC, it is recommended that one is hired on a part-time or contracted basis to help in meeting student-athletes' mental performance needs.

Although participants did not have access to mental performance services, they did report a stigma associated with student-athletes seeking psychological assistance. This potentially served as a factor affecting participants' limited interactions with the LMHP working within their athletic department. This finding is consistent with previous research where it was revealed that stigma was still associated with seeking mental performance and/or mental health services (Van Raalte et al., 1992; Wrisberg et al., 2009). However, researchers have found that if student-athletes had previous, positive exposure to psychological services, they were more willing to utilize them in the future, due to comfortability with the provider, and the stigma once associated with the services often declining (Wrisberg et al., 2009; Zakrajsek & Blanton, 2017).

To increase exposure, education, and opportunity, another step must be taken in addition to the athletic department providing information to highlight services. Donohue and colleagues (2004) encouraged providers to better explain their services, delineate between mental performance and mental health, and provide examples of when an individual would need to see an MPC compared to an LMHP. Therefore, it is encouraged that providers, whether they are MPCs, LMHPs, or both allocate time to meet with coaches and support staff (e.g., athletic trainers, strength and conditioning coaches) to educate them about their services and how they could assist student-athletes. Sharing this information could help coaches and support staff better understand what the services entail and could lead them to be more willing to refer student-athletes to them. As revealed by Green and colleagues (2012), student-athletes are more open and willing to seek services when a coach or an athletic department stakeholder endorses the provider.

Limitations, Future Directions, and Conclusion

One limitation of the current study was that the student-athletes who participated in this research were all from one NCAA DI institution. Therefore, they all had access to the

same information and resources, which may be why they all had limited knowledge about mental performance services. Another limitation of this research was that only four interscholastic sports were represented among the participants. Due to the timeframe of the data collection (which occurred in the spring), this may have impacted why only certain sports were represented in this research. Future researchers should consider interviewing student-athletes at universities that employ both an MPC and LMHP to learn about their perceptions of, attitudes towards, and experiences with these professionals. Furthermore, future researchers should consider having student-athletes who utilize MPCs assess service effectiveness and potential impacts on psychological well-being and performance.

Based on the findings of this research, collegiate student-athletes are uncertain as to what mental performance services entail yet, they believe that having access to an MPC could be beneficial in helping them manage the pressures and responsibilities of being an NCAA DI athlete. In fact, participants shared characteristics they believed would be helpful for an MPC to have if they desired to work with student-athletes. Even though student-athletes believed mental performance services could be valuable, they were uncertain as to how they differed from mental health services. Therefore, more resources and information are needed to better inform coaches, support staff, and student-athletes about mental performance services and how they differ from mental health. Lastly, with only 23.2% of NCAA DI institutions employing an MPC (Jones et al., 2022), athletic departments are encouraged to examine the possibility of hiring more MPCs to better meet the mental performance needs of student-athletes.

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