



**UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF FAMILY
MEMBERS IN RELATION TO ACC STUDENT-
ATHLETE MENTAL HEALTH**

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OVERVIEW AND PURPOSE

Student-athletes (SAs) are less likely than the regular student population to admit to mental health issues (Wolanin et al., 2015) and are less likely to seek out mental health care (Edwards & Froehle, 2023). Little is known about parents' understanding of the mental health resources provided by college athletic departments, despite a majority of SAs reporting receiving emotional support from parents (Lowe et al., 2018).

Research Questions:

RQ1: What are parents' perceptions of their SA's mental health, and what sources of stress do they identify as most salient?

RQ2: How aware are parents of the mental health services provided by the university and athletics department?

RQ3: How informed are parents about the mental health resources available through the university and athletics department, and what strategies can improve communication about these resources?

MAJOR FINDINGS

Survey

1. Parents identified many of the same mental health concerns as NCAA SAs, with a heightened level of concern overall. Key concerns, such as mental exhaustion and anxiety, were more pronounced among parents.
2. Parents echoed SAs' concerns about factors negatively impacting mental health, particularly academic pressures and future planning. However, parents reported higher levels of concern, regarding sport-specific issues like relationships with coaches, playing time, team environment, and injuries.
3. While the majority of parents believed their SA knew where to access mental health services, fewer felt that coaches took SA's mental health seriously and that mental health was prioritized by the athletic department.
4. Open-ended survey responses provided additional insight with two overarching themes: **1) lack of privacy & confidentiality**; and **2) concern over negative perceptions of seeking help, especially with coaches.**

FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS:

"I think her fear there, to be quite honest, was, it's tied to the university. And if I go in there and speak to the sports psychologist, I know it's confidential. I understand all that, but I think the fear in her mind at that time was, I want nothing to prevent me from getting on the field. And if this somehow gets back to my coaching staff, could it interfere with me playing?"



Focus Groups

5. Most parents had little to no knowledge of mental health resources before their child attended college, as the focus during recruitment was more on facilities and the overall experience. Reflecting back, parents expressed that they would ask more questions about mental health support, recognizing its importance in their child's well-being.
6. Student-athletes often avoid mental health services due to trust issues, fearing that seeking help might be reported to coaches and impact their playing time. Additionally, stigma within team culture, a lack of personalized support from coaches, and a preference for sport psychologists over general therapists contribute to the underuse of all possible mental health resources.
7. Student-athletes face mental health challenges balancing academics, sports, and social life, especially when dealing with injuries, competition, and the pressures of elite-level performance. Negative coach relationships and the transition from standout athlete in high school to one among many further intensify these struggles.
8. NIL legislation has created jealousy and animosity among student-athletes. The transfer portal further complicates relationships, making it harder to build strong bonds when teammates frequently come and go, turning college sports into more of a business than a team experience.

METHODS

SURVEY

Two ACC universities provided parent /guardian emails of current SAs. The online survey included perceptions of mental health support, perceptions of their SA's well-being, sources of negative impact on their SA's mental well-being, use of mental health services, and awareness of mental health services offered by the athletic department. Comparisons with the [2022-2023 NCAA SA Mental Health Report](#) (Division I) were reported where applicable. An open-ended question was included to add additional insights.

University #1 Response Rate

360 sent from April 4 – 26 2024
(included two reminders)

99 attempted (27.5%), 73
completed (20.3%)

61 valid and used for analysis
(17%)

University #2 Response Rate

503 sent from February 25 –
March 10, 2024 (included two
reminders)

164 started (32.6%), 132 finished
(26.2%)

117 valid and used for analysis
(23.2%)

OVERALL - 863 SENT; 178
USED FOR ANALYSIS (20.2%)

Before combining the two data sets, we conducted statistical tests to ensure there were no significant differences (confidence level of 95%) between frequencies and means between parent responses at each university. There were very few differences (only one item on the entire survey), therefore the data was combined.



QUALITATIVE

Focus group participants were recruited based on those who indicated interest in the survey. A total of 18 parents participated in focus groups/individual interviews. The semi-structured questions asked parents about knowledge of mental health services during their child’s recruitment (prior to attending) and their current knowledge of these same services. Questions also asked about perceived barriers to resources to mental health services, and perceptions of issues facing SA mental health.

SURVEY RESULTS

DEMOGRAPHICS

The student-athletes in this study were evenly distributed in terms of the number of years they had participated in sports at the university. The study encompassed 20 different sports, with men’s baseball and football having the highest representation. The majority of parents were mothers (68%). A significant portion of parents communicated with their student-athletes weekly or more, with 92% engaging in phone calls and 62% in video calls. Additionally, 72% of parents visited their student-athletes in person at least once a month.

PERCEPTIONS OF WELLBEING

Parents view being *exhausted* and *overwhelmed* as the main detriments to their SAs well-being. In nearly every case, parents had a greater concern for their SA, compared to the NCAA self-reported SA data.

Mental Health Concerns (including NCAA comparisons)

(percentage of participants who responded “agree” or strongly agree”)

Mental Health Concern	Men's Sport		Women's Sport	
	NCAA SA	Parents	NCAA SA	Parents
Felt mentally exhausted	16%	33%	35%	43%
Felt overwhelming anxiety	9%	28%	29%	45%
Felt a sense of loss	5%	10%	8%	23%
Experienced sleep difficulties	17%	23%	28%	37%
Felt sad	7%	15%	17%	33%
Felt hopeless	4%	13%	8%	20%
Felt so depressed it is difficult to function	3%	6%	7%	12%
Felt overwhelmed by all that they have to do	17%	35%	44%	49%
Felt lonely	8%	11%	13%	17%
Felt overwhelming anger	6%	2%	7%	14%

FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS:

“The decision and timing and all of that had to be done like that, it was just so quick. And I don't even think you have enough to really make an educated decision, because everything just happened so fast. And you think about it, a decision was just made off what we were shown, just the glitz and glam- which is what the kid really wants to see.”

“They're not relatable enough. It doesn't make me feel like they are making my child important, they're just a number. Like I said, everything is just a business. And no parent should have to feel that way, even though it is.”

“I get the feeling there's a little bit of a machismo approach on the team, and so I'm not sure how well it'd be looked at to use psychology services, and that's a little disappointing to me as a parent. But I think that's just the culture of the team, and his dad and I just kind of kept to ourselves.”

SOURCES OF STRESS

Academics and **planning** were identified as the leading sources of stress perceived by parents. However, sport-specific factors such as **injuries**, **playing time**, **coaches**, and **team environments** were also frequently cited as significant contributors to stress. Parents may be a key part of helping with stress due to **injuries**. In every case (except family worries), parents had a greater concern compared to NCAA SA data. The data also shows that parents of women's sports view team environment and coach relationships as higher sources of stress.



*items that were overall scale mean



Sources of Stress (including NCAA comparisons)

(percentage of participants who responded “agree” or strongly agree”)

Stress Factor	Men's Sport		Women's Sport	
	NCAA SA	Parents	NCAA SA	Parents
Academic worries	30%	54%	45%	51%
Planning for the future	25%	42%	40%	55%
Financial worries	23%	31%	25%	27%
Coach relationship	14%	30%	20%	54%
Playing time	17%	38%	22%	49%
Team environment	10%	18%	20%	40%
Family worries	15%	9%	19%	4%
COVID-19 health concerns	N/A	6%	N/A	11%
Personal experiences of racism or racial trauma	N/A	8%	N/A	10%
Identity-based discrimination	N/A	9%	N/A	6%
Political disagreements with family/friends	N/A	3%	N/A	0%
Campus climate	N/A	10%	N/A	7%
Injury(ies)	N/A	38%	N/A	47%

FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS:

“My son confirmed that he has not used the mental health services yet from the athletic program. Instead, he has reached out to his high school coach, brother, roommates/teammates, and us. He feels that nothing that dramatic has happened yet that he needed them.”

“They feel really disposable – becoming much more of a business. It used to be 4 years - these are your teammates for the next 4 years, but the transfer portal means teammates are always coming and going and it is harder to form bonds and social relationships when people are consistently new. Expectations need to be reset. Bouncing around all around.”

“It goes back to the culture of the university she's at. It's frowned upon to talk about mental health issues, I believe that. So there is a little sense of fear from administrative coaching that we don't really deal with this, like we're here to play our sport and that's our goal here.”



AWARENESS OF SERVICES

While the majority of parents believed their SA knew where to access mental health services, fewer felt that coaches took SA's mental health seriously and that mental health was prioritized by the athletic department.

Awareness (including NCAA comparisons)

(percentage of participants who responded “agree” or strongly agree”)

	Men's Sport		Women's Sport	
	NCAA SA	Parents	NCAA SA	Parents
My student-athlete knows where to go on campus if they have a mental health concern.	67%	82%	72%	77%
My student-athlete would feel comfortable seeking support from mental health providers within the athletic department.	51%	68%	49%	59%
I feel that their coaches take the mental health of my student-athlete seriously.	70%	63%	59%	46%
I feel that my student-athlete's mental health is a priority to the athletic department.	59%	58%	47%	46%
I know how to help my student-athlete if they are experiencing a mental health issue.	N/A	79%	N/A	73%
My student-athlete would feel comfortable seeking support from mental health providers outside of the athletic department.	N/A	69%	N/A	77%

FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS:

“You go from going to a meet, and you're doing something the whole time, to maybe not even competing at all. And I think that is a hard shift, and it can be really rough, especially not knowing what's happening. And then feeling like my teammate didn't make the line up, so I got her spot. It's just sort of an awkward thing how you get lined up, is because somebody else isn't for one reason or another.”

“I think there's a lot more coming with all the money and these teams that just show up and have 20 or 30 new people. People don't have respect, they haven't grown, developed, or matured together. They think if he makes me mad, it's only going to be for a year, so I might as well just treat him badly, cause I'm jealous. I think it changes the dynamics of human interaction and relationships.”

“If you don't get all the play time, that has to be the stress for a lot of players when you're on such large rosters, and only a limited number of people play. So, staying motivated to stay on the team and trying to give it your all every day is an area of mental health.”



QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

KNOWLEDGE OF MH RESOURCES PRIOR TO ATTENDING:

Most parents had little to no knowledge of mental health resources before their child attended college, as the focus during recruitment was more on facilities and the overall experience. When reflecting, parents expressed that they would ask more questions about mental health support, recognizing its importance in their child's well-being.

- » “When you are looking at the holistic part of everything, I think that [mental health] can get overlooked. If it was mentioned, I don't remember. That is not something that stuck out to me in any of his visits.”

SUCCESSFUL MH PROGRAMS/SERVICES:

Successful mental health programs often feature guest speakers and emphasize community involvement, like team bonding activities and giving back through nonprofit events. However, parents are often not aware of some of these resources that may alleviate their concerns.

- » “The happiest people are those that give. And I just think the sports programs that do things for the community as a team to give back, I would really enforce that because man does that make people feel good mentally.”
- » “I think a sports psychologist should be part of every team, especially D1. And I don't think these kids should be afraid to talk to them. We're still in that big stigma where kids aren't comfortable asking for help, or they're worried about their friends knowing, or their teammates or their parents. They don't want their parents or coach to know.”

WHY SAs DON'T TAKE ADVANTAGE OF SERVICES:

Student-athletes often avoid mental health services due to trust issues, fearing that seeking help might be reported to coaches and impact their playing time. Additionally, stigma within team culture, a lack of personalized support from coaches, and a preference for sport-specific psychologists over general therapists contribute to the underuse of all possible mental health resources.

- » “And that tells me that a lot of times these coaches don't want to deal with this stuff, they don't want to confront these kids, they don't want to ask these kids how they're doing, and they don't make a lot of effort towards them in a personal way. So many of them are so afraid of stepping outside the coaching box with these kids that I think a lot of times if some of them knew how to do it a little better, it'd make a huge difference in the culture and the lack of toxicity, and just the whole demeanor of these athletic programs. It makes a difference.”



TRIGGERS/ISSUES SAs FACE:

Student-athletes face mental health challenges balancing academics, sports, and social life, especially when dealing with injuries, competition, and the pressures of elite-level performance. Negative coach relationships and the transition from standout athlete in high school to one among many further intensify these struggles.

- » “You have to meet certain benchmarks before you're ever allowed to go back out there to compete, and it's a very arduous process in order for that to happen. That takes a toll mentally, trying to get back out on the field to compete after an injury, going through all the rehab, and watching your teammates compete while you can't. You don't know how to deal with it, so this is a brand-new situation for you to navigate.”

NEW LEGISLATION NEGATIVELY IMPACTING SAs

NIL legislation has created jealousy and animosity among SAs. The transfer portal further complicates relationships, making it harder to build strong bonds when teammates frequently come and go, turning college sports into more of a business than a team experience.

- » “I think the team dynamic is huge, and if you don't find your people or it doesn't feel right, kids are afraid to make a change. And I don't like the transfer portal jumping around, I think it's really become a problem, building team unity and all that kind of stuff, but unfortunately it is what it is. I think NIL is going to become another poison.”
- » “Now you're also trying to compete for a spot to get as much of that NIL money as you possibly can, so jealousy is definitely going to come into play. Being jealous of that individual. And it's going to come down to what kind of teammate that person is. Are they arrogant? Are they throwing that back into the face of their teammates? How are they handling that 'new fame'?”

IMPORTANCE OF ECOSYSTEM (BEYOND TRADITIONAL SERVICES) TO SUPPORT MH

The support ecosystem for mental health extends beyond traditional services, with chaplains, friends, teammates, and other trusted individuals playing vital roles, as seen when SAs seek comfort and guidance from personal connections rather than formal mental health resources.

- » “But I think he found a really good connection with the school's chaplain. And not that we're not religious in any way shape or form, but he just really connected with this guy. And I think when my son wants to talk to someone, that's who he would go to in the 1st instance, it would be that guy. He's not part of the mental health team, but if you look at it inclusively, I guess you could say that he is.”

SOLUTIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Include sports psychologists as part of the recruiting process

- ◇ Show a commitment to mental health. Can help with barriers to knowing who to contact and may ease parental worry.

2 Create a mental health information sheet that can be distributed to parents

- ◇ Better educate parents about the mental health processes for SAs and the resources available during the recruitment process. While parents are generally informed about physical health screenings, many feel less informed about mental health screenings.
- ◇ Nearly half of parents perceive that Athletic Departments and coaches are not taking mental health seriously. If departments are addressing mental health, they need to clearly communicate the resources available and demonstrate authenticity through meaningful actions.

3 Enhance communication

- ◇ Continued communication with parents throughout the SA's playing career needs to be enhanced. Many parents feel uninformed about available resources and programs.
- ◇ Improved communication would reduce uncertainty, provide clarity, and empower parents to better support their SA's mental health.



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