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# "Just Trying to Keep My Head Above Water": Division I Freshman Female Athletes' Experience of Their First Semester

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“Just Trying to Keep My Head Above Water”

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Division I Freshman Female Athletes' Experience of Their First Semester

Aslynn Halvorson

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## Introduction

For many student-athletes going to college means traveling further away from home than the average student to a place where there is little family support in addition to new social structures and cultural experiences. These factors combined with the pressures from athletic obligations might lead student-athletes to develop unhealthy coping behaviors. These unhealthy behaviors can include alcohol and tobacco use, eating disorders, and participating in high-risk behaviors such as risky sexual behaviors. In fact, Weiss (1999) suggests that athletes may even participate in more high risk behaviors and utilize more negative coping strategies than non-athletes. These high risk behaviors and negative coping strategies also appear to amplify as athletes transition from high school to college (Hildebrand, Johnson, & Bogle, 2001).

There is very little literature available related to the transition of student-athletes from high school to college. What exists focuses almost exclusively on male student-athletes using methods such as observation of practices, literature reviews, and questionnaires. None of the reviewed literature mentioned direct interviews with student-athletes in question.

According to the NCAA Gender Equality Report for 2004-2010, female athletes were 52.6% of the 11,730 Division I athletes. With over half of of the NCAA Division I college athletes being female, it brings to question why more research on female athletes is not being done in the post-Title IX era of atheltics. More importantly, American women have been found to be more than twice as likely to develop depression than American men, with one in five expected to develop depression over their lifetime (Demissie et al., 2011). These odds may put female student-athletes at an increased risk of developing negative coping behaviors and associated depression during their transition from high school to college.

### **My Story: Why This Research?**

As a college athlete myself at a major Division I University, this project had great personal significance to me. In October of 2010 I was diagnosed with situational depression brought on by poor coping behaviors and increased stress due to the increased demands of being a high-level athlete and trying to keep up with new and changing academic standards. I was away from home and knew nobody on campus except my coach and a few teammates; then, I was redshirted for half my freshman and sophomore season. This created unintentional segregation from my team. After working with a sport psychology consultant and our team therapist, I was able to learn how to deal with the demands placed on me. I have since been able to flourish in college, both academically and athletically. But, after my own personal experience I begin to wonder how many other athletes were also going through similar experiences. I also wanted to know from those who did not have these struggles what they were doing differently in terms of coping behaviors.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of female Division I student-athletes related to transition from high school to college as well as the coping strategies they use..

### **Methodology**

#### *Co-Participants*

Six first-year female Division I student-athletes from the same university were asked to participate in this study. Selection criteria included that the co-participants were: (a) at least 18 years of age; (b), listed on the roster of their teams for the 2011-2012 season; and (c) enrolled in at least 12 credit hours of course work during the Fall semester of 2011. The first co-participant

was identified by a friend of the student researcher; all other co-participants were identified employing snowball sampling (Patton, 2001).

#### Demographic Information

<b>CP #</b>	<b>Sport <i>Team vs. Individual</i></b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>In-State or Out- of-State</b>	<b>Scholarship?</b>	<b>First in Family to Attend College?</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Fall 2011 GPA</b>
CP1	Team	18	Biracial	Out	Yes	No	Non-Science	3.8
CP2	Team/Individual	19	Caucasian	In	Yes	No	Science	3.2
CP3	Team/Individual	18	Caucasian	Out	Yes	No	Non-Science	3.4
CP4	Team/Individual	19	Black	Out	Yes	No	Non-Science	3.4
CP5	Team/Individual	19	Caucasian	Out	Yes	No	Non-Science	3.81
CP6	Team/Individual	19	Caucasian	In	Yes	No	Non-Science	3.0

#### *Interview and Procedures*

Utilizing a qualitative semi-structured interview guide (Patton, 2001) developed by the student researcher and her faculty advisor, the student researcher interviewed six first-year female student-athletes (average age: 18.7 years; average Fall 2011 GPA: 3.44) about their background as well as their academic, athletic, financial, social and coping experiences during their first year of college. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the student researcher. Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes.

The interview guide was developed utilizing questions raised in literature about coping styles and behaviors as well as negative and high-risk behaviors, the Goldberg Depression Test, and personal experience with and observation of other student-athletes by the student researcher. The student researcher also answered the questions on the interview guide in a bracketing interview conducted prior to co-participant interviews. She also completed two pilot interviews with other student-athletes to verify the effectiveness of the interview guide and to control for researcher bias.

### *Analysis*

Both the student researcher and her faculty advisor independently read through the transcripts multiple times to get a sense of each co-participant's life. Then, the student researcher and her advisor independently performed a content analysis and open coding of the transcripts. They produced both higher-order and lower-order themes related to coping strategies used by co-participants during their first semester at college (Patton, 2001). They then met multiple times to discuss their findings and come to consensus on the major themes contained in co-participant interviews.

## **Results**

### *First-Semester Academic Experiences*

For all co-participants, the primary reason given for choosing the university was because of family support and proximity to their family or hometown. The second most frequent reason for choosing the university was due to athletics and academics, combined. Many stated that the reason for coming was a strong "family connection" with the team, good rapport with the coaches, and the potential to be successful academically in their given program.

As predicted in the literature, four out of the six student-athletes reported being unusually anxious or "down" since starting college. However, unlike diagnosable anxiety and depression, the student-athletes could readily identify the cause of their anxiety or depression. The most frequent causes of reported anxiety and depression were academic stress or homesickness.

As far as study habits, all of the student-athletes were required to attend study hall at the athlete academic center for between four and eight hours a week regardless of GPA. Half the co-participants preferred to study in the athlete academic center because it "offered" fewer distractions, while the other half preferred to study at home for the same reason. Interestingly,

the co-participant who studied the greatest amount of hours per week (CP # 5; N = 15-16 hours/week) had the highest GPA.

### *First-Semester Athletic Experiences*

All co-participants had been awarded some type of athletic award or honor prior to attending the university; these included winning State Championships and Coaches awards as well as newspaper accolades and National Records. This is not surprising because at the Division I level most of the student-athletes are highly trained and have been a sport participant for many years. Since these student-athletes came from a high-level (e.g., Division I) school in one of the major conferences, this level of athletic prowess is to be expected.

For these student-athletes, teams were seen as “extended families”. All co-participants reported close relationships with both their teammates and coaches. Because of this “family” support, criticism by coaches – about co-participants’ work ethic or performance – appeared to motivate them to correct the problem and move on (Anshel, Jubenville, & Sutarso, 2009). Interestingly, despite reporting a close family-like bond, many co-participants believed that instead of getting social support from their teammates, they themselves should serve as a support system for the team. Rather than receiving direct support, they felt the need to “figure things out” on their own and also provide energy and encouragement to other team members. One first-year student-athlete (CP# 3) described the need to be a leader on the team, while others described the need to follow their Seniors.

These student-athletes also reported similar emotional experiences in both practice and competitive situations. Prior to their first competitions at this level, co-participants described feeling anxious, introverted and quieter than normal. Athletic mistakes - made either in practice or competition - created feelings of both frustration and self-disappointment. Interestingly, all of

the student-athletes interviewed had experienced some injury or illness that had taken them out of play or practice for an extended period of time. In fact, two are currently injured to the extent that it has altered their sport performance.

All co-participants reported some negative emotional reaction (usually fear and disappointment) to pain during practice or competition. However, co-participants coped by choosing to “push through the pain” and complete the task. This was unless the pain was considered severe enough to prevent further participation in the future. Co-participants then chose to sit out or to modify their practice. Even then, they reported trying to finish a competition (Coakley, 2011).

Four out of six co-participants described not being satisfied with their athletic performance. Even the two co-participants who described being satisfied qualified their satisfaction by saying, “I would like to get better as the season goes on”. This response can be seen as both a negative and positive influence, with the positive factor being that these athletes are highly motivated people who have a great drive to succeed and better themselves; the downside is that these athletes could become unhappy when they do not succeed. At this point, they may become frustrated and lose self efficacy – the situation-specific form of self-confidence (Bandura, 1982).

#### *First Semester Financial Experiences*

Five of six co-participants were receiving athletic scholarships (based on sport performance) and three of the six were also receiving academic scholarships. Overall, all of the student-athletes interviewed were receiving some sort of financial aid or scholarship towards their education. However, even though all of the co-participants were receiving either an athletic or academic scholarship, five of six described feeling like they had “stretch their funds” to

survive/meet their basic needs. None of the athletes reported having to work to provide for themselves or someone else.

### *First-Semester Coping Strategies*

Co-participants utilized several different coping strategies to manage their transitions from high school to college. Most were positive in nature. For example, close relationships with family and friends helped co-participants the most during their transition to the university, regardless of whether the friends were athletes or non-athletes and whether the home environment was “traditional” (e.g., living with both parents and potentially siblings) or “non-traditional” (e.g., single parent, divorced, separated parents, step-siblings, half-siblings, etc.). Romantic relationships –whether long-distance or in town – also helped five of six student-athletes cope with first-semester stressors. In terms of negative behaviors, two of six co-participants reported drinking alcohol to cope; however, they reported that they did this with friends and teammates for social reasons, not to cope with stressful situations.

When confronted with negative situations both in and out of their control, co-participants utilized mental training techniques such as problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and positive self-talk to work through the situation (Allen, Greenlees, & Jones, 2011; Anshel, 2001). Co-participants also described utilizing an intense focus, positive self-talk, and “bouncing back” when mistakes were made (Weinberg & Gould, 2011). These strategies helped co-participants bring themselves back to an emotional state where they could try to fix the mistake or move on versus dwelling on it (Allen, Greenlees, & Jones, 2011; Weinberg & Gould, 2011). In addition, some co-participants used food to cope (e.g., sugary or fatty/crunchy foods) while others used exercise to cope (e.g., running).

## Conclusions

Although this study is limited in its conclusions based on initial interviews with only six first-semester female Division I student-athletes, it appears that these student-athletes utilized a variety of coping strategies to deal with both academic and athletic stressors in their first semester. Those student-athletes in this study who utilized positive coping skills that they learned via sport participation - such as positive self-talk, problem-focused and emotion-focused coping – seemed to be the most well-adjusted to the university environment. Other major findings include:

- While these student-athletes experienced being homesick and added pressure because of self-reported athletic, gender and racial identities, it appears that the “extended family” structure of their team provided social support that moderated the development of unhealthy coping behaviors.
- Student-athletes in this study reported engaging in occasional drinking, eating, and exercise (the last two to cope); however, unlike Weiss (1999) predicted, they did not engage in “high-risk” behaviors nor did they appear to utilize more negative coping strategies than non-athletes, although we did not interview non-athletes for this study.
- While some co-participants reported feeling “down”, none appeared to meet the criteria for full-blown depression according to the DSM-IV (APA), even though one in five U.S. adult females are expected to develop depression over their lifetime (Demissie et al., 2011).

### *Areas for Further Research*

Additional research should be conducted with:

- first-semester female student-athletes from another university other than the one used in this study.
- first-semester male Division I student-athletes at a variety of institutions.
- first-semester Division II and Division III male and female student-athletes.

### **Post-Script**

After the original six interviews were conducted, an additional three interviews were completed to further evaluate the Division I female student-athlete first-year experience. Interestingly, results from these interviews were drastically different from the previous six interviews - many more negative coping behaviors were reported by the additional three co-participants. The same selection criteria were used for these co-participants, including that the co-participants be: (a) at least 18 years of age; (b), listed on the roster of their teams for the 2011-2012 season; and (c) enrolled in at least 12 credit hours of course work during the Fall semester of 2011. These participants were identified by the previous six co-participants as well as the selected team's senior captains.

### Demographic Information

<b>CP #</b>	<b>Sport</b> <i>Team vs.</i> <i>Individual</i>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>In- State or Out- of- State</b>	<b>Scholarship?</b>	<b>First in Family to Attend College?</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Fall 2011 GPA</b>
CP7	Team/Individual	19	Caucasian	Out	No	No	Undecided	3.4
CP8	Team/Individual	19	Caucasian	Out	No	No	Non- Science	3.4
CP9	Team/Individual	19	Caucasian	Out	Yes	Yes	Science	3.52

### *Results from Additional Interviews*

These additional three co-participants (average age: 19 years; average Fall 2011 GPA: 4.44) have had more negative experiences with their transition from high school to college. Academically, these three co-participants studied about the same as the other group of participants and had similar GPAs; however, all three reported difficulty with studying and being academically successful, either due to what they felt were poor test-taking skills, being easily distracted, or becoming easily overwhelmed between balancing academic and athletic life. All three also chose the school strictly based off of athletics and team chemistry. It is also interesting to note that one of the co-participants (CP9) is a first-generation college student.

As for athletic experiences, like the others, all three athletes had earned some sort of award or honor in either high school or college. They also reported having a “family” bond with their teammates. However, unlike the others, all three co-participants reported having a tenuous relationship with their coaches, with two of the co-participants reporting being “scared” of their coach, and the other feeling that “everything was her fault” when something went wrong at practice or a competition. The three also reported being overwhelmed often during a practice or competition, and, then, no longer being able to compete or practice. This feeling of being overwhelmed and then panicking also occurred when they made a mistake or were in pain in practice or competition. When this occurred, they reported feeling as though they could not stop their activity due to pressure from their coaches or other teammates. One of the co-participants reported sustaining a season-ending knee injury as well.

Financially, two of the three co-participants were on no type of scholarship and relied solely on their families for financial support for school tuition, living arrangements, and other expenses. The third participant who was on scholarship; however, she stated that she felt her

scholarship was often held over her head and used to manipulate her athletically in an attempt to threaten her to improve her performance.

Finally, while all three co-participants appeared to have some concept of how to use effective coping strategies such as positive self-talk, none used them effectively in their daily lives or in athletics. All three reported drinking alcohol with friends or teammates to cope; one reported feeling forced to drink by her teammates. All three also reported using food to cope, with one reporting going on a week-long sweets binge when she got incredibly stressed. Most disturbingly, one of these last three co-participants reported “cutting” to make herself feel better; she revealed this once the tape recorder was turned off and the interview was ended. One participant also reported having been diagnosed with depression in high school before coming to college.

All three co-participants reported having close family relationships, but they also appeared to have a lot of discord within those relationships. Each came from a non-traditional family configuration. Friend relationships also seemed to be distant for these participants, with one reporting having many friends, but no close friends she would confide in. The other two reported having close friends, but they were out-of-state and hard to stay in contact with.

#### *Conclusions for CP7-CP9*

For Co-participants 1-6, the most beneficial factors that eased their transition from high school to college were the application of positive coping strategies learned through sport, close relationships and support from family and friends, and the new family bond found within their team and coaches. However, for Co-participants 7-9, all of these areas seemed to be in some level of conflict.

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