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**AN INVESTIGATION INTO HOW THE INTENSE NATURE
OF YOUTH SPORT PARTICIPATION INFLUENCES
WOMEN'S COLLEGIATE BASKETBALL PLAYER'S
EXPERIENCES OF BURNOUT**

BY

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**B.S., FAMILY & CHILD STUDIES AND PSYCHOLOGY,
UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, 2021**

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Science
Physical Education**

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

August, 2023

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I heartily acknowledge Dr. Edward Horne, my advisor and dissertation chair, for continuing to encourage me through the years of classroom teachings and the long number of months writing and rewriting these chapters. His guidance and professional style will remain with me as I continue my career.

I also thank my committee members, Dr. Ashely Martin-Cuellar and Dr. Todd Seidler, for their valuable recommendations pertaining to this study and assistance in my professional development.

And finally to my family, your love is the greatest gift of all.

An Investigation into How the Intense Nature of Youth Sport Participation Influences Women's Collegiate Basketball Player's Experiences of Burnout

By

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ABSTRACT

One area of athlete well-being garnering increasing attention is athletes' experience of burnout (Gould & Whitley, 2009). According to Coakley (1992), burnout is a social phenomenon grounded in a set of social relations through which young athletes become disempowered in their sport participation that can lead to fatigue and dropout. Therefore, efforts to reduce athletes' likelihood of experiencing burnout are important. Often overlooked in the college athlete literature are the experiences of college athletes in youth sport. Yet almost all college athletes participate in competitive youth sport. Therefore, in seeking to further our understanding of college athletes' burnout experience, it is important to understand how college athletes suffering from burnout may have been impacted by their youth sport experiences. The purpose of this study then, was to examine the intense youth sport experience of current and former college athletes to determine how youth sport experiences influence experiences of burnout at the collegiate level. The study is guided by the concept of burnout, and the burnout literature, in addition to Côté's (1999) sport development model, which outlines the stages of youth athlete development and participation. The study sort to answer the following research questions: (RQ1) What are the lived experiences of current and former women's college basketball players with burnout in

youth and college sport? (RQ2) How do college women basketball players believe their current experiences with burnout are influenced by their experiences of burnout as youth athletes? (RQ3) How do women's college basketball players believe the impact of the social systems for youth and college sports contribute to burnout? Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with current and former women's college basketball players. Findings suggest women's college basketball players experiencing symptoms of burnout are influenced by their youth sport experiences, in some cases also experiencing some symptoms of burnout as youth athletes. Findings, therefore, provide an important contribution to our understanding of college athletes' experiences of burnout by highlighting the influence of the often-overlooked youth sport experience of college athletes. Implications for athletic department administrators, as well as youth sport providers for addressing burnout are introduced.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

College athletes' entrance into sport does not happen simultaneously with the start of their college careers. Rather, college athletes arrive on campus having already dedicated years to developing the requisite sporting skills for competing at the collegiate level. Developing requisite sport skills for advancing to the collegiate level, requires yearslong dedicated practice (Ericsson et al., 1993). Therefore, most college athletes spend more years training and competing in the youth sport environment than they do in the college setting. Yet, studies examining the sporting experiences of college athletes often overlook the years athletes spend participating in youth sport (e.g., Melendez, 2006; Merkel, 2013). As the collegiate athlete experience remains a relatively new area of research, this gap is not surprising. To date, only a handful of studies have examined both the youth sport and collegiate sport experience (e.g., Chou et al., 2022; Martin & Ewing, 2017). Therefore, to improve our understanding of college athletes' sporting experience, it is important to also account for the years of dedicated practice spent in the youth sport arena.

The college sport setting is highly professionalized. Although traditionally considered an amateur sport setting, college athletes spend extensive amounts of time training, traveling, and competing during their collegiate career (Foo et al., 2021). The training regimens of collegiate athletes are comparable to those of professional athletes. The same can also be said of the youth sport setting. According to Gould (2009), a prominent youth sport scholar, the allure of competing at the collegiate and/or elite levels of sport has contributed to the professionalization of youth sport. Youth sport for many, is a serious endeavor. In the United States alone, the youth sport industry is worth an estimated

\$15billion (Gregory, 2017). The development of a \$15billion industry has been led, in part, by parents' desire for their children to earn a college scholarship (Myer et al., 2016). Parents today are spending as much as 10% of their annual household income on their children's sport participation and development (Baxter-Jones & Maffuli, 2003; Horne et al., 2022). Unsurprisingly, children are spending increasing amounts of their childhood in the sporting environment (Malina & Cumming, 2003).

The desire to earn a college sport scholarship, by spending increasing amounts of time in the youth sport environment, has led to more athletes engaging in early specialization (McKay et al., 2019). Whereby, athletes engage in intense training year-round in just one or two sports before recommended (Jayanthi et al., 2013). This is not without consequences. Athletes intensely focusing on one or two sports throughout their childhood have been found to be at greater risk of suffering from overuse injuries (DiFiori et al., 2014), burnout (Vitali et al., 2015), dropout (Myer, 2015), and the development of a unidimensional identity (Coakley, 1992; Harris & Watson, 2014). Although attrition rates in youth sport are undoubtedly a cause for concern (Balish et al., 2014), we know that hundreds of thousands of athletes do not dropout, and advance to the collegiate level (NCAA, 2021). Of the hundreds of thousands of athletes who do advance, it is probable that many of those athletes may have suffered from overuse injuries, burnout, or the development of unidimensional identity.

The purpose of this study then, was to examine the intense youth sport experience of current and former college athletes by examining college athletes' intense youth sport experiences, and how these experiences have shaped and continue to influence their college sport careers. Specifically, the study focuses on athletes' experiences of burnout, both in youth sport and in their collegiate careers. This is important, as it addresses an often-

overlooked aspect of college athletes' sporting experiences, their youth sport participation. Further, awareness, and concern for college athletes' well-being is becoming increasingly prevalent. Therefore, this study can shed further light on this salient concern, and inform relevant stakeholders (i.e., teammates, coaches, athletic departments), and the existing mechanisms in place on college campuses for improving athlete well-being by addressing athlete burnout, and ultimately, improving the college athlete experience.

Chapter 2

Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks

Increasing attention is being paid to the well-being of college athletes. Evidenced by athletes being more vocal in drawing attention to issues of mental health (Cassilo & Kluch, 2021), greater efforts being made by universities and their athletic departments to provide programs and mechanisms for addressing issues of athlete well-being beyond sport (Moreland et al., 2017; Wolanin et al., 2015), and an increased focus on athlete well-being in the academic literature (Berg & Warner, 2019; Kidd et al., 2018; Marx et al., 2008). One area of athlete well-being garnering increasing attention in the literature is athlete burnout (Gould & Whitley, 2009). Although increasingly researched, no one universally accepted definition of burnout exists. According to Raedeke & Smith's (2001, p. 283) popular definition, burnout is "a psychological syndrome of emotional/physical exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment, and sport devaluation." Although widely used, the definition has drawn criticism. For instance, Coakley (1992) argues that such definitions of burnout place the emphasis squarely on the individual, excluding burnout affects caused by the social organization of sport. Instead, Coakley (1992, p. 272-72) defines burnout as "a social phenomenon grounded in a set of social relations through which young athletes become disempowered to the point of realizing that sport participation has become a developmental dead-end for them and that they no longer have any meaningful control over important parts of their lives."

Regardless of how academics define burnout, there is broad agreement in literature supporting the notion that elite athletes suffer from burnout (Gould & Whitley, 2009). However, the research determining the prevalence of burnout among athletes is inconsistent.

For instance, in studying elite swimmers Raedeke (1997) estimated that 3% of athletes experience burnout. Whereas Silva's (1990) investigation of Atlantic Coast Conference athletes determined 66% of athletes experienced overtraining (a symptom of burnout) with almost 50% of athletes considering it a bad experience. More recently, Gustafsson et al. (2007) found 9% of female athletes and 2-6% of male athletes experienced symptoms of burnout in their study of 980 elite youth athletes.

The study sought to understand collegiate athletes' experiences of burnout as they progressed through the sport system, Coakley's (1992) definition is preferable. Therefore, to meet the study's purpose, the study was guided by Coakley's conceptualization of burnout, specifically his unidimensional identity development and external control model (1992). Further, the study was guided by Côté's (1999) sport development model, which outlines the stages of youth athlete development and participation.

Unidimensional Identity Development and External Control Model

Our identity shapes who we are, what we do, and who surrounds us. A person's identity is rooted in one's characteristics or one's values (Hitlin, 2003). Once something is unidimensional, it consists of just one dimension or made up of one aspect (Sam, 2015). When someone has a unidimensional identity, and specifically an athletic identity, it means sport consumes their identity. This can be common for elite athletes, and athletes who have devoted a significant number of years to their sport participation. The sport in which people play has an important role in shaping their sense of self. One facet of people's self-identity is that they belong to a certain group. Thus, they have a sense of themselves as a being. Unidimensional models are based on the implicit assumption that change in cultural identity takes place along a single continuum over the course of time. (Ryder, 2000). If this

continuum stems from a young age it can influence one of the most critical times in finding one's self-identity. This can be true of athletes who have spent enough years in the sport environment to develop a Division I level skill-set. This can be problematic, as adolescents with a dominant athletic identity (i.e., unidimensional identity) may suffer burnout, especially under conditions when they do not achieve what was expected of them, or when they lack control over their sporting journey (Coakley, 1992; Martin & Horn, 2013). Further, the occurrence of burnout in the athletic setting has been proposed to result in a number of negative outcomes including decreased performance, interpersonal difficulties as well as psychological or physical withdrawal from participation in some cases (Smith, 1986; Vealey & Chase, 2016).

Coakley (1992) contends that although stress contributes to athlete burnout, it is not the cause. Rather, stress is a symptom of burnout. According to Coakley, burnout is caused by sport's social structuring (i.e., external controls), which in its current commercialized and professionalized form (Gould, 2009), restricts athletes' control over their decision making. Instead, influential adults such as parents and coaches, as well as the sport organizations athletes are associated with, make decisions regarding athletes' participation and development on athletes' behalf. Adults, who prioritize the pursuit of collegiate scholarships and/or professional sporting careers (Hedstrom, 2004). Coakley (1992) argues, the lack of control athletes experience and the increased pressure of pursuing elite levels of sport, contributes to the development of a sport-centered identity. This can contribute to burnout, as the lack of alternative identities can cause athletes to leave sport, and/or endure stress-like symptoms consistent with burnout.

Burnout in College Athletes

We know a large number of college athletes experience burnout. Of the roughly 480,000 athletes competing at the collegiate level, it is estimated approximately 10% experience burnout (NCAA, 2021). Given burnouts' prevalence, it is vital universities are not only aware of the burnout, but also how to manage burnout. Recognizing what burnout looks like in high achievers and ensuring coaches and campus leaders have strategies to care for and help empower these individuals is what more universities should have in place to help their student athletes' individual well-being (Dubuc-Charbonneau et al. 2015). Promoting awareness and furthering the research on athlete's burnout could benefit the student-athletes, teams, coaches, and sports administration programs.

Burnout in Youth Sport Athletes

Youth sports have become highly competitive. Although adolescents participate in sports to have fun, improve, and learn new skills (Maina & Cumming, 2003), the growing trend of early specialization and professionalization of youth sports is extracting the fun and enjoyment out of youth sport for many participants (Coakley, 2009; Gould, 2009). The push for early specialization has been driven, in part, by youth sport organizations demanding athletes make larger commitments to their organization by focusing on just one or two sports and participating in them year-round (Myer et al., 2015). Parents support this choice, in the hopes it may lead to a college scholarship (Hedstrom, 2004). Specifically, according to a recent study of NCAA Division I athletes (Swindell, 2019), 17.4% of athletes specialized before the age of 12. This is problematic, as Côté's (1999) well-established sport development model suggests athletes specialize between the ages of 13-15.

Academics have raised concerns regarding early specialization, as it has been found that prolonged participation in only one or two sports at the exclusion of others, leads to increased levels of stress and burnout in athletes (Malina, 2010). Early specializing youth athletes are also known to experience overstress, overtraining, and staleness (Vealey & Chase, 2016). If these factors continue burnout is much more likely for these youth athletes in their future athletic careers. Burnout at a young age may lead to a change of sports or no sports altogether but for those who make it to the collegiate level, burnout can become a problem. Research in early sport specialization has focused more on adolescent repercussions rather than the longevity of collegiate athletes who specialized early on. With different pressures in adolescent athletic life as well as their personal life, burnout may start earlier due to the long-term dedication and time to one sport. Research also shows females typically specialize two years earlier than males because of their earlier maturation (Vealey & Chase, 2016).

Sport Development Model

The development model of sports participation framework was developed by Côté (1999) and lays out the developmental stages of athlete development, from athletes' first introduction to sport, through to the latter years of their youth sport experience. According to Côté (1999), there are three stages of sport involvement. The first stage occurs between the ages of 6 and 13. During this stage, athletes are introduced to a multitude of sports. Through this initial exposure, athletes and their parents find means for furthering participants engagement with their sport. Parents play a critical role during this phase of development, with coaches' role taking a backseat to those of parents. The second stage occurs between the ages of 13 and 15, and is called the specializing stage. Here, athletes narrow their focus to

just one or two sports, in which they participate all-year round. It is also during this stage, that athletes may reduce their participation in other extracurricular activities, in order to devote more time to their sporting pursuits. During the specialization phase, coaches play an increasingly important role, which parents are still depended upon for providing their athlete with the opportunities necessary for development. The third and final stage of Côté's (1999) sport development model is the investment stage. This typically occurs between the age of 15 and 18. At these ages, athletes focus on building elite skills in just one sport. Their commitment to their sport grows beyond the commitments required during the specializing stage. It is during the investment stage athletes start to turn their attention to competing at the next level (i.e., college and/or professional sports). Parents play a far smaller role during this phase than in the previous two phases. Rather, coaches, in the investment stage start to become the key facilitator of athletes' development.

Although sports differ according to recommended age of specialization (i.e., early or late), the sport development model (Côté's, 1999) provides an accurate outline of the pathway undertaken by most athletes, while delineating important others' roles (parents and coaches).

Research Questions

This study examined the intense youth sport experience of current and former college athletes to determine how youth sport experiences influence experiences of burnout at the collegiate level. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed: (RQ1) What are the lived experiences of current and former women's college basketball players with burnout in youth and college sport? (RQ2) How do college women basketball players believe their current experiences with burnout are influenced by their experiences of burnout as

youth athletes? (RQ3) How do women's college basketball players believe the impact of the social systems for youth and college sports contribute to burnout?

Chapter 3

Methodology

Research Background

Current and former Southwestern, United States based women's D1 basketball players make an appropriate context for examining unidimensional identity and the development model of sports participation framework as they relate to early sport specialization and burnout. The U.S. census bureau (2019) found more than 40 percent of the region's population in 2016 was Hispanic or Latino, compared to about 18 percent of the United States overall. Providing a diverse population to study. While women's basketball popularity has increased in recent years, evidenced by the growing attention and exposure of the WNBA, little research has been conducted on collegiate women's basketball.

Further evidence of the growth of women's basketball is the Amateur Athletics Union (AAU). The AAU is a private basketball organization and league, and not associated with the school system. Therefore, participants tend to play in AAU leagues in addition to representing their schools, leading to basketball players spending increasing amounts of time in the sporting environment. In fact, it could be argued that most women's college basketball players participated in private youth basketball leagues, leading organizations such as the AAU to be a necessary pathway to women's collegiate basketball.

Therefore, the diversity of the Southwest's population, and the intense nature of girl's youth basketball make basketball an ideal context for investigating the relationship between burnout in youth and collegiate sport experiences.

Participants

The study examined the college and youth sport experiences of current and former women's college basketball players. To be included in the study, participants must have played at least one full year of college basketball. Former college basketball players who did not complete a full year of college basketball were not included in the study as they may not have sufficient experience to contribute to the college sport component of the study.

A purposive sampling technique using the researcher's personal and professional networks was initially utilized to recruit participants meeting the inclusion criterion. Purposive sampling was used to ensure participants are able to provide accurate information addressing the study's purpose (Creswell, 2013). Snowball sampling was also adopted, whereby successfully recruited participants connect the researcher with peers they know who meet the inclusion criteria.

Data Collection

Recruitment was conducted by direct solicitation and through previously interviewed participants' referrals. During the recruitment process, the purpose of the study was provided, and consent to participate retrieved. Interview protocols were informed by the previously identified frameworks and, following Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) recommendation, probing questions were included to illicit deeper insight into participants' experiences.

Data Analysis

The ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpinned the study were relativism (multiple realities exist and are context dependent) and constructivism (knowledge is constructed based on people's comprehension of their reality) respectively (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Nine semi-structured interviews were completed and on average lasted

approximately 30 minutes. Audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed through an outside transcription agency. Researcher one conducted the data analysis using deductive and inductive coding techniques. Deductive coding was used to develop theoretical categories connecting the data to the frameworks guiding the study (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014), while inductive coding was adopted to ensure the researcher is mindful of potential new categories that could extend theoretical understanding of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). To ensure reliability in the coding process, the researcher met with another researcher (i.e., advisor) on multiple occasions throughout the coding process to reduce researcher bias, and to interpret the data to ensure the credibility of findings (Barbour, 2014; Gerdes & Conn, 2001). Further, to enhance trustworthiness, member checking was utilized (Carlson, 2010), whereby study participants verified transcripts and study interpretations.

Themes emerged following reading each interview transcript and finding meaningful passages, comparing, and labeling those passages among participants' answers. Then relating the themes to known concepts and finalizing the themes that emerge (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). After coding the data, five major themes arose. Those themes include sampling, specialization, youth burnout, transition to college, and college burnout. These themes emerged due to the commonalities between participants' answers.

Chapter 4

Results

Age	Number of Participants (N)	% of Participants
Less than 25	7	77.8
Between 25-30	1	11.1
More than 30	1	11.1
Ethnicity		
African American	3	33.4
White	4	44.4
Multiracial	2	22.2

Table 1

A total of nine female participants were interviewed for the current research.

Participants were between the ages of 18 and 35. Ethnicities included African American, White, and Multiracial. The foundation of the interview questions consisted of their youth and college sport experiences.

Sampling

All participants were introduced to basketball by the age of eight, with several participants playing from the age of five. Which some saw as problematic for their chances of burning out, as Luran mentioned: “I don’t regret starting to play at a young age, but it didn’t leave much space for anything but basketball. I could see it leading to burnout faster by starting so young.” Participants’ introduction to basketball was often made through family members, especially parents. For example, after stating that she started playing basketball at the age of five, Desiree explained: “Well, my parents introduced me to basketball. They are both very athletic, so I think naturally they assumed I was going to be too.” For some participants, parental influence went beyond introducing them to the sport. In some instances

basketball was their family's sport. This was true of Michelle's introduction to basketball, who stated:

I grew up around basketball. All my family played, and my dad coached so it was something I just did. I used to watch him coach and this made me feel proud, so I wanted to be a great student for him to teach.

The notion of basketball being a family sport led to some participants to spend time playing with their family and greater family bonds as a consequence of playing basketball, as Amanda detailed: "I just grew up in a basketball family and ended up liking the game. We'd go to the gym, just shoot and play around and stuff. And my dad was a _____ legend, so it kind of made me want to play more." Although parents were the main initial influence for participants, they weren't the only means of introduction to basketball. Two athletes were introduced to basketball through friends, as Amelia discussed: "Basketball started with friends at first. It was something we did as kids because my neighbor had a basketball hoop in her front yard.

In addition to starting very young, it was clear that parental figures were participants' the main reason for first playing basketball. And as several participants described their families as basketball families, it was clear that this created a strong connection to the sport.

Specialization

As players' skills began to develop, so did their commitment to the game. This was true of Brittany, who explained:

It was probably in sixth grade that I started taking basketball more seriously. I remember trying out for teams and realizing how much room for improvement I had. So, I would say it's about this time when I realized if I wanted to get good and I needed to put in some serious effort.

Brittany wasn't the only participant who expressed a perceived need to take basketball more seriously, Amanda shared similar sentiments, "I started taking it more seriously around, I

would say, middle school. But when I, once I got to seventh or eighth grade, I started developing more and I started to realize like I was actually good.”

In taking their basketball more seriously, some participants made the decision to focus on just one sport, basketball. As described by Amelia: “I think it was around high school I really picked basketball. I would say I started to specialize in basketball in middle school, but high school is when I quit track altogether and just focused on basketball.” When asking participants why they began to specialize a leading factor was to get an athletic scholarship for college. Megan explained that in order to get an athletic scholarship she needed to play for a club basketball team, “It was kind of expected because I put myself through so many years, it was kind of, like an obvious thing, we are doing club circuit basketball.” When probed as to why, she explained: “Because everybody there wanted to get a scholarship to play, so yeah, it was kind of like an unthinkable pressure or expectation that I was totally into. But yeah, there was definitely some sort of expectation there.”

Once the reality was formed that playing Division I college basketball was perceived as a possibility, participants appeared to specialize. Some, like Amanda illuminated: “I always wanted to play college basketball, but I never knew how good I was. So, once I got those big offers, I was like ‘I’m gonna keep doing this,’ and take it more seriously.” With new incentives these athletes set goals and aspirations for themselves with one focus in mind, to play college basketball.

Youth Burnout

Athletes first described experiencing burnout in the specialization stage of their development. At this point, they had been playing basketball for several years, and they were now treating their participation more seriously, and with a purpose. All but one participant

experienced burnout at this stage. Lauran was one such athlete to first experience burnout at this stage, she said: “Burnout did occur for me while playing in my youth. By the time I was 13, I felt like I had been doing the same thing for so long.” Michelle’s experiences were comparable. Michelle explained: “I experienced genuine burnout. Probably because things started to become more serious and less fun. But I persisted and that feeling faded.” By this stage, most of the participants were now playing basketball year-round and their club basketball participation was playing an increasingly large role. For instance, Amelia described:

I really started to struggle with why I was playing when I got to middle school. Again, maybe it was because I was playing club, so basketball was now year-round, but I just started to wonder why I kept playing. I think club basketball was more serious and that made me think of it more as a job rather than a fun after-school activity.

With an increase in time spent playing basketball, athletes started to experience burnout for the first time. Clearly, as inclusion required participation at the collegiate level, no one interviewed dropped out of basketball at this stage, however, all but one experienced burnout.

Transition to College

As participants described their transition from high school to their freshman year in college, no athletes mentioned experiencing burnout. Rather, given the magnitude of transitioning from high school to college, participants expressed excitement at the significant life change they were embarking on and the fulfillment of their dream of playing college basketball. As Desiree mentioned:

Now college was completely different. It was a hard transition. School became much more difficult which had a big impact on me. Practices were longer. Travel was much farther than before. I knew almost instantly after my first college practice that this was going to be a different kind of basketball.

Entering college and college basketball was a shock to athletes' established routine and basketball participation. This may explain why athletes did not experience symptoms of burnout during this transition. Instead, they were excited about starting their collegiate careers and for new surroundings, as Amelia detailed: "I didn't experience burnout when I started playing college basketball. Because I was new. It was a fresh experience and I was excited to now be playing somewhere I had always dreamed of." Desiree had a similar experience, "Burnout didn't happen at first. As I was finishing up high school, I was very excited for the next step which was college." And finally, as Rebecca stated simply: "No one I knew experienced burnout in their first year of playing." At this point, there was bliss in ignorance for at first there was not much awareness of the pressures that were to come for many in the college setting.

College Burnout

As the novelty of their freshman year faded, participants' struggle with burnout returned, although their place on a college campus created a new set of challenges participants hadn't faced in youth sport. As Michelle stated matter-of-factly: "The level of love I had for the game dropped tremendously after my first year of college." In describing their experiences of burnout at the collegiate level, it was clear that athletes' lack of autonomy and control over their basketball participation was a contributing factor. Participants described how it became challenging for them to see basketball as something they wanted to do, rather than something they were compelled to do. Which, Amelia illustrated: "As burnout set in, I knew dropping out was never an option because I had to make myself and my family proud." For Desiree, it got to the point where she was close to dropping out: "Burnout for me was the point at which I considered no longer playing and

found it extremely hard to be motivated to show up. At that point in college, this was exactly how I was feeling.” With a common theme of burnout arising in college, the last few years of college are when participants expressed feeling the strongest symptoms of burnout. However, they decided to keep playing to maintain their scholarship and to appease influential others in their lives. Amanda explained:

Yeah, I just never wanted to quit. Like, I've never really been a quitter, so I was just like, yeah, I'm just going to push through. And my parents have always been hard on me, so I just knew if I would've quit, they would probably be mad.

Amanda was not the only participant who mentioned how the influence of the family members contributed to their decision to continue playing basketball in college. Amelia felt similar pressures, in addition to the pressures of her own expectations: “Once I was there and the burnout started to occur, I knew dropping out was never an option for I had to make myself and my family proud.” Almost all participants experienced external pressures from family members, parents, and/or coaches. Megan felt the pressure she felt compared to work like pressure, rather than play that sport is often considered to be: “It was hard to be a student and an athlete. The pressure quickly turned from me achieving my goal to a job that I knew I was going to feel like work for the next few years.” Many participants felt the pressure of performing as a Division I college athlete. Although the pressure and strain were not enough for athletes to drop out, they were looking forward to the day they would be done. As Amanda explained: “Towards the end of my career I had two knee injuries, and my coach just lost confidence in me. So, I was kind of ready for college to be done.” It was also at this stage, athletes became aware of opportunities outside of basketball. As evidence by Rebecca: “As time progressed, I definitely started to feel as though basketball was not everything.” A

sentiment shared by Luran: “By the time I began realizing the opportunities that school provided me with, I realized there was a life outside of basketball.”

Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the intense youth sport experience of current and former women's college basketball players to determine how youth sport experiences influence experiences of burnout at the collegiate level. Findings suggest women's college basketball players can experience burnout long before reaching the collegiate level. Most participants expressed feeling burnt out as youth athletes, which was not particularly surprising given how early participants reported being introduced by basketball. Further, the novelty of entering the college basketball setting subsumed pre-existing feelings of burnout, which returned once the novelty of their new sport setting wore off. Although participants experienced chronic burnout, they attributed their sustained participation to sunk costs, and external drivers such as parental expectations and scholarship requirements.

The extant college athlete burnout literature overwhelmingly focuses on college athletes' experiences at just the collegiate level (DeFreese & Smith, 2013; Crowell & Madigan, 2022). But, as findings from the current study demonstrate, consideration of just college athletes' collegiate careers is insufficient. College athletes appear to experience burnout long before they arrive on campus. This is important. First, because it demonstrates the need to be mindful of how youth sport experiences of burnout may shape and influence athletes' experiences of burnout at the collegiate level. Burnout is known to exist in youth sport settings (see Harris & Watson, 2014; Jowett et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2021), and at the collegiate level (see Gould & Whitley, 2009). It should not be surprising then, for current and former college athletes to experience burnout at both levels. Second, the study provides

an important contribution to our understanding of college athletes' experiences of burnout as they suggest college athletes' experiences of burnout may be more chronic in nature. If college athletes have been burdened with symptoms of burnout for years prior to experiencing it at the collegiate level, researchers' extant efforts geared towards prevention and elimination of athlete burnout (e.g. Gould & Whitley, 2009; Gustafsson et al., 2011) may be utopian. Burnout may be unavoidable and just a component of the years spent advancing to elite levels of sport.

Participants also did not describe experiencing persistent burnout from their first exposure to burnout through to their college experience. Which aligns with previous research showing athletes experience different strains of burnout and severities (Gustafsson et al., 2007; Gould et al., 1997), with some athletes experiencing burnout for a short period of time before recovering (Gould & Whitley, 2009). Interestingly, no participants described experiencing burnout as they completed their transition from high school into college. Once athletes were settled in their new surroundings, however, and the novelty of college basketball wore off, burnout crept back into athletes' sport experiences. This makes sense. Athletes experience a significant life change when they enter college, including in their sport lives (Miller & Buttell, 2018). Making it to college basketball represents fulfillment of a life goal for athletes, many of whom have spent years aspiring to play college basketball (Houle & Kluck, 2015). The initial excitement athletes experience may suppress or consume their burnout symptoms. But once they've found their role within the team and settled into the routine of class and basketball, their basketball participation mimics that of their youth sport basketball participation. Understanding how feelings of burnout subside during this transition is important and may explain why the youth sport experience has been overlooked in the

extant college athlete literature. If athletes only report experiencing symptoms of burnout years into their collegiate careers, one might assume burnout is a consequence of the collegiate experience rather than a continuation of experiences previously endured but suppressed by the novelty of transitioning to college basketball.

Participants expressed the years of playing basketball in their youth could be a leading factor in why they experienced burnout in college. Associating the feeling of burnout they once felt in their youth to the same feeling in college. While burnout was stronger and more overwhelming in college, pressure from different sources could also be why dropout did not occur. There was a sense of pressure to keep their scholarship, to please, and perform throughout their college careers. Parental pressures can have a lasting effect on children, but research has found parental pressure can more than double for children who are playing organized sports (Dorsch et al., 2016). A few participants expressed the pressures coaches place on them as well. Too much pressure on one athlete from a coach could lead to a sense of defeat and failure (Cowden et al., 2014). Scholarships were the greatest incentive for the participants to continue basketball even when experiencing burnout.

Starting and having a constant continuation of basketball from adolescence to college sports was a defining moment in these participants' unidimensional identities. From a young age, findings suggest that playing basketball had a large impact on their overall identity. From then on basketball was their only identity. Some explained they tried to do different things to expand their identities but were unable to due to the hours spent playing basketball. Another key factor was the social systems around them were also basketball-forward. Most were unsure who they would be today if basketball was not in their life. With the lack of alternative identities and control Coakley (1992) studied, this may be why burnout began and

continued to during different phases of the participant's basketball careers. Former players who were interviewed shared that even though their days of college basketball were over, they were still involved in basketball in some shape or form. Bringing even more attention to the power that unidimensional sports identity can have.

Practical Implications

The findings from this study offer multiple practical implications. As the study discovered athletes do not appear burnout upon arrival at college. Administrators, coaches, and support staff assume burnout is not a pre-existing condition. But when they start to see it, they assume it is a consequence of actions and events that have taken place in college. Therefore, existing remedies failing to recognize the longevity of athletes' experience with burnout by only addressing their experiences as college athletes are likely insufficient. The study's findings then make an important contribution to the extant literature on the college athlete experience, especially as it pertains to burnout. In the short-run, without drastic changes to the youth sport system, efforts by collegiate administrators, coaches, and support staff may be better purposed by efforts to facilitate coping and limiting burnout.

Being aware of these common times when burnout is occurring could help coaches be more mindful of the burnout their players could be experiencing. Becoming knowledgeable of how athletes' youth years could affect them could hopefully stop or lessen the feeling of burnout. Participants stated that they have some belief that the many years spent dedicated to basketball in their youth could have a significant impact on the burnout they faced in college. Starting basketball at 5 and 6 years old, by the time these participants began college they had been playing for 12 to 13 years. This should be highlighted to coaches as a reminder that

years of dedication have been given to this sport. With any sort of repetition, burnout can arise especially among athletes.

Theoretical Implications

Most participants started playing basketball at the median age of 6 years old with the familial influence. The participants shared that parental involvement was a key part in first playing basketball. In line with Côté's (1999) sport development model, in the first stage, parents have a large role with their child and what sport/sports they are participating in. For most, they mirrored their parents by following their love of the sport of basketball. It's fair to assume that parents had a great impact on what sport their child was going to play throughout their adolescence. In the specializing stage, participants narrowed their focus to basketball if they had not already done so. Participating year-round had them dedicating the majority of their time to basketball. Coaches began to be a greater guide in expanding technical skills. Lastly, our findings suggested that most of our participants followed the investment stage in terms of this age range turning their attention to the next level, which was college basketball.

Findings suggest that Coakley (1992) theory of external factors being a contributor to burnout was present in this study. In college, a sense of independence occurs but for these athletes, parents, coaches, and even the athletic administration at the universities had an influence on them. Each telling them to pursue basketball for different reasons. Creating an environment where the athletes lack control and have increased pressure to pursue basketball.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations in this study. First, only one sport was included in this study. Sport-specific differences exist (Smith et.al., 1990), therefore, findings from this study may not align with burnout with youth and collegiate athletes of another sport. Future

research should examine different collegiate sports in order to determine if experiences differ according to sport-specific factors.

Second, participants were only recruited from one region of the U.S, with some participants being on the same collegiate team. Therefore, their experiences might be a consequence of the region and institution they represent. In looking to expand upon this study's findings, it may be useful for future studies to limit the number of participants from one institution.

Third, the number of participants in future research should be increased to have more accreditation around the findings. Along with how many interviews, interview length time could have been longer...

Despite these limitations, this study is one of the first to investigate the intense youth sport experience of current and former college athletes to determine how youth sport experiences influence experiences of burnout at the collegiate level. We hope this research will contribute to future research around youth and collegiate burnout to ultimately inform athletes, coaches, and athletic departments.

Conclusion

In conclusion, participants having experienced burnout during their collegiate careers also experienced at least some symptoms of burnout as youth athletes. Responding to RQ1, all but one participant experienced youth sport burnout. Regarding collegiate basketball experiences, all participants expressed they felt burnout. Qualitative data found that each participant had feelings of burnout around similar life stages. Considering RQ2, findings suggest that participants had some association of youth burnout correlating to college burnout. While there were different challenges and stressors in both youth and college

basketball, the years spent playing during their youth did play a factor in experiencing burnout in college. Finally, in answering RQ3 it appears that social systems impacted youth and college basketball participants. A few of these social systems highlighted by the participants were familial, peers, coaching staff, and academic institutions. Each social system had some sort of implication that contributed to participants' burnout during their youth and at the collegiate level.

The study's findings suggest existing interventions and mechanisms used at the collegiate level by athletic departments to assuage experiences of burnout although necessary, are insufficient. Therefore, this study could provide an important contribution to our understanding of college athletes' experiences of burnout and inform existing programs within college athletic departments of how to better address the issue of burnout in their athletes. Further, given the study's findings, it is important to consider how to address instances of burnout in the youth sport setting.

Appendix

Interview Script

(5-10mins):

Intro- Greetings, with your permission, I'd like to record this meeting. The recording will only be used to help us in this research.

- We are investigating current and former student-athletes' youth sport experience ((ie. Early specialization), and collegiate experience, and if throughout one's athletic career ever experience burnout. The goal today is to develop a deeper understanding of how playing youth sport/ sports might influence unidimensional identity and burnout of basketball.
- Please introduce yourself, age, ethnicity, and athletic background (have you played college basketball for a year or more?)
- What is your definition of burnout in sports?

(35-45 mins):

- Youth Sport Specialization
 - Tell me about your youth sport experience and your personal specialization process.
 - At what age did you specialize? Why did you specialize?
 - When you first started playing basketball, was it your decision or someone else's?
 - Did they themselves play basketball?
 - Did they recommend or encourage you to play basketball?
 - Did you quit non-sport activities as well as sport activities?
 - Did you play competitive club basketball?
 - Did you ever feel burnt out in basketball during your youth?
 - How do you feel specializing in your youth influenced your athletic identity throughout your athletic career?
- College Basketball
 - Describe the pathway you took through sport to reach Division I basketball.
 - How old were you?
 - What factors influenced your decision?
 - Do you feel that basketball is part of your identity today?
 - How long have you been playing college basketball

- How long have you been/did play college basketball?
- Have you had the feeling of burnout during your playing time in college?
- Athletic Identity (Unidimensional)
 - Building from what you've mentioned already, how would you have described your athletic identity currently or for former athletes at the time of your graduation?
 - Strong athletic identity, weak athletic identity
 - How was it influenced/developed?
 - Did you expect to experience any changes in your athletic identity as you retired?
 - How so?
 - How do you feel others perceived your identity at the time?

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