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Jenny L. Toonstra
Bowling Green State University

Andrea E. Cripps
Bowling Green State University

Lauren R. Meyers
Bowling Green State University

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The Impact of Multiple Concussions on the Lives of Student-Athletes

Jenny L. Toonstra, PhD, ATC, AT; Andrea E. Cripps, PhD, ATC, LAT; Lauren R. Meyers
Bowling Green State University, School of Human Movement, Sport, & Leisure Studies

OBJECTIVE

Research suggests a link between multiple concussions and long-term negative behavioral, emotional, and cognitive outcomes. However, there is insufficient evidence to understand the link between these outcomes and concussions from the student-athletes' perspective. This population is unique in that the consequences of multiple concussions not only impacts their status as an athlete but may also have implications for academic competence and social relationships. The purpose of this study is to understand the meanings and lived experiences of student-athletes that have suffered multiple concussions.

DESIGN and SETTING

This was a qualitative study that employed an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA). The study took place on a Division I University campus.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants included current and former student-athletes. Participants were included if they had suffered >1 diagnosed concussion during their athletic career and could speak and understand the English language. Participants were recruited until data saturation was reached. Perspectives of participants were obtained through semi-structured interviews utilizing an interview guide developed from the literature.

METHODS

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. To better understand their lived experiences, a data analysis approach that encourages reflection and interpretation was used. Significant statements (direct quotes) were selected from transcripts, duplicate statements were removed, and formulated

meanings were assigned to each significant statement. Finally, formulated meanings were clustered into themes. Themes were distributed to participants for their feedback as a means of validating the findings.

RESULTS

A total of 13 student-athletes participated in the study. They reported an average of 3 diagnosed concussions (range 2-6). A total of 6 themes emerged from the data: 1) Persistent symptoms, 2) Experiences with academic accommodations, 2) Lack of medical coverage leading to self-diagnoses and improper care, 4) Loss of identity as an athlete, 5) Positive and negative impact(s) on social relationships, and 6) Concussions being perceived differently from other sports-related injuries. Surprisingly, many participants reported persistent symptoms, including difficulty concentrating, memory deficits, sensitivity to light, irritability, and depression. Several participants had positive experiences with academic accommodations, but many reported that they were not provided any accommodations/cognitive rest following their diagnoses, which negatively impacted their academics. Furthermore, while many student-athletes stated they had a supportive social network, many participants also noted they were viewed as a liability by coaches, teammates, and parents.

CONCLUSION

Student-athletes suffering from multiple concussions identified a variety of both positive and negative aspects related to academics, athletics and social experiences. It is clear there is a need for continued education of parents, teachers, coaches, teammates and medical providers on all facets of the recovery following a concussion. Further research is needed to understand the long-term

consequences of multiple concussions regarding the prevalence and severity of self-reported symptoms and their potential

impacts on academics, athletics, and social experiences.

KEY WORDS: *Concussion, Qualitative, Recovery*