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AN ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUALS PERCEPTION TOWARDS TEAM GRIT

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THESIS

**AN ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUALS' PERCEPTION
TOWARDS TEAM GRIT**

by

Nathaniel Albia, Lance R. Bell, and Samantha A. Himlin

June 2022

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Throughout a regular season, there is no doubt that sports teams experience setbacks. Overcoming these setbacks and remaining mentally and physically focused on the championship requires grit; not only in each individual, but the team as a whole. In order to analyze grit at a team or organizational level, this study will focus on analyzing individual's perceptions of their own team's grit. It will examine three NCAA Division One Athletic teams in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The teams include a mix of men's and women's varsity sports, in order to gain diversity of perspectives. The focus groups use an interview guide for all three sports teams. Data analysis will occur using a variety of qualitative coding techniques that will be grouped into themes for each case and across all three cases to answer our research question. This study will further our understanding of team grit by gathering individuals' perceptions of their team dynamics, which will contribute to the research of grit at a higher level of analysis.

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I.   INTRODUCTION

Division One (D1) is the most elite level of collegiate sports. There are about three hundred and fifty D1 teams in the U.S., with about one hundred seventy five thousand individuals competing at this level each year. Less than 2% of high school athletes make it to this stage of competition. These teams are composed of some of the most talented and competitive individuals the country has to offer. Therefore, it is logical to assume that high levels of grit, determination and resilience exist within them. But what makes one team grittier than the next? Why do we see some perfect-record teams flounder in the big game against a team they should have beaten by a large margin? Or watch the Cinderella story unfold as the lowly seeded basketball team causes multiple upsets at the NCAA Tournament, fondly referred to as, "The Big Dance"? We believe the answer to these questions could be related to the level of grit that each team has.

Winning the championship is the moment that will justify the success of a season. A D1 team plays anywhere from thirty to over fifty games in a season, depending on the sport. This means they have to go through many trials and tribulations before they can reach that pinnacle game. Teams that can experience tough losses, setbacks and hardships during the season, but ultimately come out on top to secure the big wins are labeled as gritty. Grit is something every team would love to have, yet some have more than others. There is no argument that it is an impactful and positive trait. Ideally, if a coach could recognize that their team lacked grit, they would want to implement a plan to add some, somehow.

We believe that the answer to the question of "What makes a team gritty?" can be discovered by analyzing the individuals on that team. More specifically, the purpose of this study is to analyze and comprehend how an individual on a team perceives their team's grittiness. The study will examine three NCAA, D1 athletic teams in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. These teams will include a mix of men and women's varsity sports, in order to gain diversity of perspectives. Through this study, we can ultimately contribute to the understanding of organizational grit on a deeper level, and possibly give future teams the tools to enhance their own level of grit.

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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Department of the Army argued that "a Gritty organization may be one that shows passion and perseverance for long-term goals despite failure, setbacks, plateaus *and* turnover in leadership and membership." (Department of the Army. 2015, p. 14). This definition from this study can be paralleled with our study of teams, as their long-term goal is the championship, and their failures in between are lost individual games, player injuries or other team challenges. The idea of team, or organizational grit is an emerging concept, and therefore lacks a large amount of published literature on the topic itself. For this study, the words "team" and "organization" should be interpreted as interchangeable. This chapter aims to highlight the literature and research that has been completed about organizational grit. It is necessary to link grit between the individual and the organization to understand how it ultimately becomes the natural culture of the organization, upheld by each member. In order to make this connection, one must first understand the definition of grit at the individual level.

Grit is defined as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals…working strenuously toward challenges…despite failure…" (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087). What can grit do for one person? In their study, Duckworth and her team built a grit instrument designed to measure an individual's level of grit, they named it the "Grit Scale"(p.1089). The researchers then compared the scores on this scale with other measures of accomplishment such as IQ scores (p. 1089). The study showed that grittier individuals produced higher SAT, IQ and GPA scores (p. 1093). Duckworth et al. suggested their findings meant that grit was as important to high achievements as having a high IQ (p. 1089). This relationship that was found in this specific study between individual grit and academic success is relatable to our study, as we believe that grit enhances a team's performance. Here we are paralleling high achievements in two areas, academia and athletics, both fields that demand perseverance and passion in order to achieve success.

In her 2016 book, through continued use of the Grit Scale, Duckworth is able to demonstrate how year after year starting in 2004, the scores on the grit scale were able to predict who would quit the basic training designed for the candidates selected to attend The

United States Military Academy at West Point (Duckworth, 2016, p. 10). This discovery is fascinating, because a service academy like West Point maintains a process of sifting through over fourteen thousand applicants per year to come up with around twelve hundred members that will enter the training, yet the institution had no way of knowing who would remain, and see their appointment through to graduation. The scores they used in the application included SAT, GPA and physical fitness test results, but no matter how high or low, none of these were reliable predictors that the student would stay or leave (p. 3-5).

Luning (2019) identifies more relationships discovered between grit and success as observed by the authors' Department of the Army (2015), Duckworth (2016), and Lee and Duckworth (2018). Luning states that these authors "posit that gritty teams and organizations are those that are more successful" (Raver-Luning, 2019, p. 5). Duckworth and Peterson (2007) suggest that grit is essential to success in any domain and a common trait among successful leaders, but their scope does not move beyond the individual grit level. A deeper understanding of organizational grit can contribute to the conversation of its role within organizational success (Raver-Luning 2019, p. 23).

Raver-Luning (2019, p.30-31) reviews the various metrics for organizational success as determined by Hamann et al. in 2013, Richard, Devinney, Yip, and Johnson in 2009, McCann in 2004, Cameron and Whetten in 1983, Collins & Porras in 2002, Denison & Mishra in 1995, and Maltz et al. in 2003. Raver Luning cites Hamann, Schiemann, Bellora, and Guenther (2013) in her description of "the OP [Organizational Performance] construct refers to the phenomenon in which some organizations are more successful than others" (p. 31). Raver Luning states that "others utilize the lens of organizational effectiveness to assess more subjective measures of organizational success (McCann, 2004)" and that "Cameron and Whetten (1983) argued that organizational effectiveness is the ultimate outcome assessment in any organizational study" (p. 31). Raver Luning uses Collins & Porras (2002), Denison & Mishra (1995), and Maltz et al. (2003) as examples of "another assessment of organizational success, comes from a combination of both financial measures of performance and more subjective measures of effectiveness" (p. 31) For the purposes of our study, and because one of the long-term goals in exploring the concept of

organizational grit is to better quantify its tenets if possible, there is benefit to incorporating some form of subjective measure in our data analysis.

In her 2016 book, Duckworth moves briefly from the individual and focuses on grit at an organizational level in a chapter titled "Culture of Grit" (Duckworth, 2016, p. 243). She states that a gritty culture will in turn produce gritty people (p. 245). The culture she's referring to in this chapter is the Seattle Seahawks NFL team. The coach of this team mentions that building grit is "all we do… We help people be great competitors. We teach them how to persevere. We unleash their passion." The shared "norms and values" of a team or organization are what creates the culture (p. 245).

The correlation between general success due to grittiness is exactly why grit is a positive trait within a team, as it could lead them to victories. The association between self-control and grit, presented by Duckworth and Gross in *Self Control and Grit*, and their relationship to goals and actions allowed a conceptualization of grit at the organizational and team level (Duckworth, A. L., & Gross, J. J., 2014). These associations to goals and actions are used in our methodology and are discussed in our observations. It became obvious to us in our study that each individual on all teams were focused on the goal of winning. It should also be noted that for our study, we observed individuals over the course of one season, not multiple years, as Duckworth et al. write is necessary to see an individual's true grittiness. However, we argue that we were able to gain an understanding of an individual's perception of their team's grittiness through detailed focus groups and individual surveys.

A very recent study published in 2021 interviewed 14 military officers and attempted to find what they perceived "may be a culture of organizational grit" in their specific services and teams (Luning, C. R., Attoh, P. A., Gong, T., & Fox, J. T. , 2021, p. 1). Military organizations can be paralleled to highly competitive sports teams. They aim for cohesion displayed by one uniform, and on the largest scale, they support the common mission of the United States to the extent of giving their life for their country. Themes that developed from these interviews are in line with previous studies of grit at an individual level. The themes discovered and identified relative to the research question, "What do U.S. military officers perceive as a culture of organizational grit?" were professional pride,

team unity, resilience-determination, mission accomplishment, core values, growth mindset, and deliberate practice (Luning et al., 2021, p. 11.) It is easy to see how these themes easily translate to college sports teams even though all subjects were senior military officers speaking about their own unit.

In the study, professional pride was defined as passion for work at the command, and upholding high standards. Members explained joining the organization and being confronted with high standards on day one, and thus felt pressure to work and keep up at that level, ultimately, this would result in individual self-fulfillment and job satisfaction, and continue in a loop to follow back towards high standards for the organization. One member noted that at less successful commands, individual job satisfaction was low, and then traced the circle in the opposite direction; meaning low standards in an organization meant low job satisfaction from the individuals, which equaled more low standards. Professional pride is pertinent to our study as low performing teams, or teams who lose a lot, can be paralleled with low performing commands or organizations that are not accomplishing their mission. An anecdote to note this can be seen in the Major League of Baseball. The New York Yankees have the most championships won of any franchise, with second place coming in at 18 less championships than them. Before they started winning, they had high standards starting with their appearance. Since 1973, and to this day, they are the only team in baseball to not allow facial hair of any sort other than a mustache. Many famous players who transferred to the team cut their hair and shaved in order to meet the professional pride the Yankees organization had set in place, and confronted them with one day one (Quattrucci, 2020). The final note on professional pride in this study was the role of the leader of an organization. A subject interviewed in the study mentioned the commander of an organization as the driver of these aforementioned high standards. Meaning to sustain professional pride, the leader of the organization, (in our study, the coach), played a key role in reinforcing expectations. This concept mirrored observations made by Duckworth, when she interviewed sports teams coaches. After the interviews, she concluded that coaches set the tone for their team to follow and grit on their teams had potential for a snowball effect where one's grit enhanced another's. These observations led

to an understanding of organizational grit as a cultural component of an organization (Duckworth, A. L., 2016).

Team Unity was the next theme that emerged from the interviews. Teamwork was valued highly by the individuals as a component to organizational grit. The teamwork mentioned by a member of the study meant that one's actions were all-inclusive, versus only benefiting their specific department, or position. The individual's commitment to the overall goal is as important as every individual aiming for that goal, and working with others to ensure synchronization. For our own study, we can parallel team unity to the dynamic of individual positions on teams and the necessity of each player to work in their specific role for the betterment of the team. For example, if a center on the basketball team only focused on being the best post player, and not setting their point guard up for the three point shot, the team would suffer. This is self-sacrificial in nature, to focus less on oneself and more on the team, or in the same thought, make oneself better, to make the team better.

The Resilience-determination theme identified in the study is arguably the most important one in regards to our own study. The theme of resilience-determination came about when the individuals were asked what they perceived as a culture of grit. The common response was along the lines of "when something goes wrong and things get hard, you push through and get the mission done." More here on resilience.
While we saw this theme emerge during our own research, the lack of connection between grit and the resilient personality trait has been argued through the use of meta-analytic data and grit was seen to impede resilient outcomes in certain situations (Powley, E., Caza, B., Caza, A., 2020, p. 3)

Mission accomplishment was seen as a direct tie to "a foundational cultural element of the military" (Luning et al., 2021, p. 14). As members of the military, the interviewees saw mission as a constant shifting phenomenon that was dependent on the current situation. This view of mission as a time and duty specific aspect is common in the military because the battlefield is constantly changing. This "moving target" phenomenon is not the same for all organizations. Lee and Duckworth found during a study of organizational grit in healthcare organizations that identifying an organization's single mission is the key first step because "if an organization declares that it has multiple missions, and can't prioritize

them, it will have difficulty making good strategic choices" (Lee, T. H., & Duckworth, A. L. , 2018, p 102). Once an organization has identified its mission, Fairhurst, Jordan, and Neuwirth found through their study that an organization will use a mission statement to shape culture, while the members of the organization use it as a measuring technique of the organization's credibility (Fairhurst, G. T., Jordan, J. M., & Neuwirth, K. , 1997). This takeaway from Fairhurst et al. was something that became evident during our focus groups when we heard what the players viewed their mission as, versus what the coaches said the mission of the team was. All three teams' group of players could not provide a clear mission statement. It was simpler to them, "to win," was often repeated in one way or another, but no daily affirmation of how they would go about "winning" was actually written down. According to Drucker, an organization is made up of individuals who have their own goals and incentives; so for an organization to operate effectively, the organization's mission statement must be clear (Drucker, P. F. , 1992). While a clear mission may be what helps bring about team unity, can a single mission be tied to the sole purpose of an organization? Also, if the teams' knew they wanted to win a championship, did they have to write that down?

Collis and Rukstad would argue that an organization's mission is its central purpose for existence (Collis, D. J., & Rukstad, M. G., 2008).

Core values were echoed by multiple interviewees as "what helped units stay focused on a particular goal and overcome obstacles" (Luning et al., 2021, p. 15). When these core values were shared across the organization, a stronger relationship emerged. Gittel, Cameron, Lim and Rivas (2006) found that in airlines following 9/11, resilience was tied to a strong employee relationship (Gittel et al., 2006).

Growth Mindset was found to be most associated with the culture of the organization (Luning et al., 2021, p. 16). Raver Luning cites Dweck's 2016 work in her description of the definition of growth mindset as "the belief that abilities can be cultivated" (p. 36). Raver-Luning expanded on Dweck and Murphy's 2010 research that applied this definition to the organizational level and included insight from Delaney's 2014 work by stating that "organizational growth mindset manifested itself as a cultural element of the organization that then led to a greater sense of trust, engagement, and innovation

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among members" (Luning 2019, p. 36). Whether or not there is a relationship between these traits of growth mindset and either cohesion or organizational grit (or neither) remains to be answered. Raver-Luning cites Lee and Duckworth (2018), offering that "gritty organizations cultivate and promote a growth mindset within the organization" and that Lee and Duckworth "proposed that organizational growth mindset may contribute to an organization's ability to adapt to challenges and overcome setbacks" (2019, p. 36). Research on individuals' perspectives of this adversity could contribute to the exploration of the potential relationship between growth mindset and organizational grit.

Raver-Luning describes Fontaine's 2017 historical case study which "utilized Duckworth's (2016) concepts regarding how one grows grit in individuals through developing interest, practice, purpose, and hope in a particular goal, to show how Field Marshall Viscount William Slim, a British Army Officer during WWII, brought forth those elements at an organizational level among his subordinates to achieve the unit's mission" (Raver-Luning, 2019, p. 20). It is debatable, however, if the "culture of grit" (Raver-Luning, 2019, p. 21) observed in this case study was the product of Slim's leadership or if his leadership was a product of the culture. It does allow for insight into the role of leadership in culture and its potential role in organizational grit.

Deliberate practice, while military focused in Luning et al.'s (2021) study, tied all the aforementioned themes together. The main attribute that came out of the interviews was that of cohesion. An important distinction to note is the potential differences and similarities between organizational grit and cohesion. Luning describes cohesion utilizing the 2003 work of Beal et al.: "Cohesion emerged to explain the forces that create a bond among members of a group (Beal et al., 2003); the theoretical implication is that greater cohesion leads to better group performance." Cohesion inherently pertains to the group level and doesn't lend itself to the same limitations as grit on the individual level. However, Luning et al. identified through the works of Cartwright in 1968 and Evans & Jarvis in 1980 that "cohesion is considered a group phenomenon but primarily examined as an aggregate of levels of attraction of individual members" (Luning et al., 2021, p. 7). Luning references Beal et al. (2003), Dobbins & Zaccaro (1986), and Severt & Estrada (2015) in her claim that "there have been various definitions of cohesion, though many maintain that

it is multidimensional and composed of at least aspects of social cohesion (interpersonal bonds between members) and task cohesion (shared commitment to team tasks)" (Luning et al., 2021, p. 6). The gaps in literature in cohesion through the lens of a team or organizational setting as denoted by Luning et al. (2021, p. 7), as well as the current stage of development of the concept of organizational grit require their consideration to be separate.

The themes covered by Luning, Attoh, Gong, and Fox were important to our research as we developed our methodology and throughout our observations. Although this study was done with a military focus, the outcomes of our study with sports teams showed a close correlation.

Research on organizational grit is relatively limited as it is still in the conceptual phase. The comparison of organizations' success against one another could potentially be attributed to organizational grit, at least to some degree. Luning (2019) has set the foundation to explore the concept of organizational grit: "Five themes emerged to answer the overarching question, those themes include: hard work and determination, fighting through the daily grind, resilience, competitive spirit with internal and external aspects to the theme, and organizational sense of self" (Luning, 2019, pp.304-305). However, its exploration is still undeveloped and this study hopes to contribute to it.

III. METHODOLOGY

Grit is an emerging topic at the organizational level. This study was conducted as a multiple case study in which we looked at three National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division 1 varsity teams. Yin (2018) discusses the use of theoretical replication to select cases that provide contrasting results. Contrasting results demonstrate a difference in findings and develop continued supporting evidence for a theory (Luning, 2019). It is for these reasons that we chose the methodology we did when evaluating what teams to study. Accordingly, teams were chosen based on reasons such as their sport dynamic, gender, winningness, and team size.

A. SAMPLE

The teams in this study included Men's Wrestling, Men's Water Polo, and Women's Basketball. While we utilized theoretical replication when selecting our cases (teams), convincing coaches to participate was a challenge. The three teams we conducted the full sequence of methodology on were not the first three teams contacted. Coaching staff seemed to be uninclined to participate for a variety of reasons ranging from lack of time to personal reasons such as, "I am [the] only one to measure these things." Ultimately, the only team who's coaching staff participated in our study was water polo.

At the time of this study, the wrestling team roster sat at 49 athletes. Members of the team had backgrounds spread all over the United States from Alaska to California to New York. The team's makeup consisted of 32.7% Freshmen, 26.5% Sophomore, 16.3% Juniors, and 24.5% Seniors. Wrestling was our largest qualitative sample size with a total of five focus groups.

Men's Water Polo's roster consisted of 36 athletes. Of those 36, 27.8% were Freshmen, 25% Sophomores, 33.3% Juniors, and 13.9% Seniors. 23 of the 36 athletes on the Men's Water Polo were from California. The remaining players were from Maryland (4), Connecticut (3), Pennsylvania (2), Texas (1), Hawaii (1), Washington (1), and Illinois (1).

Women's Basketball was our smallest sample size of 11 athletes. 9% of those were Freshmen, 36.4% Sophomores, 27.3% Juniors, and 27.3% Seniors. Geographically, the basketball team members were entirely from Eastern and Midwestern States. Although the team was smaller on roster, the entire team participated in our data collection.

B.   DATA COLLECTION

Data collection consisted of an individual questionnaire followed by focus groups. Focus groups were ultimately split up by coaching staff, players, and seniority. It should be mentioned that we did not separate the players by seniority until after the focus group with the Men's Water Polo team. We realized that there was a strong dynamic between upperclassmen (Seniors and Juniors) and lowerclassmen (Sophomores and Freshmen) which resulted in a lack of input from junior members, which was not our desired outcome. Based on these lessons learned during the Men's Water Polo focus group, we conducted two separate focus groups, based on seniority, for the Women's Basketball team.

1.   Informed Consent

Participants were given an informed consent form prior to the questionnaire and focus groups. Participants were explained that the purpose of the study was to understand what individuals within the team perceived to comprise the teams' grit, or lack thereof, and if there was a correlation to the team's performance. Participation was noted as strictly voluntary and was repeated throughout the process along with the right to withdrawal from the study at any time. Potential beneficial outcomes were expressed in how grit and resilience of a team could determine various performance metrics and ultimately develop an instrument to measure grit in order to help organizations understand where to develop their team/organization to increase performance.

2.   Questionnaire

Questions were divided into sections that included team/organizational grit, individual grit, individual resilience, individual positive psychological capital (PsyCap), team PsyCap, cohesion, and demographics. The questionnaire completion time was designed to be approximately 30 minutes with a total of approximately 145 questions

regarding the participant's demographics, noncognitive abilities and traits, as well as the team and its performance.

3.   Focus Groups

As stated previously, the focus groups were split up by coaching staff and players. One take away from the format of the water polo focus group, that we took forward into the Women's Basketball focus group, was to split up the players into groups based on seniority. Similar to (Luning et al., 2021), as a semi-structured interview process, the questions were expanded upon as participants responded and connections were made to other focus groups.

C.   DATA ANALYSIS

Data Analysis was conducted by way of the five-spiral method. The five spirals included managing and organizing data, reading and memoing emergent ideas, describing and classifying codes into themes, developing interpretations, and representing and visualizing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study conducted the first three spirals relative to each team and then following the cross-team synthesis, the fourth spiral was completed. The data was organized and managed by audio recordings into transcripts and storing files in a restricted database. Emergent ideas were memoed and read by the research team throughout the study. Coding from the focus group transcripts were done using descriptive, in vivo, and holistic coding methods (Miles et al., 2014). These codes were then developed into themes via a code mapping process. Through these themes, interpretations were able to be developed.

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IV.   RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Through our methodology we saw three themes emerge relative to the research question: "What do team members perceive comprises team grit?" Themes included unity or togetherness, hard work and determination, and competitive spirit. Results and findings are broken down by athletic team and the associated codes of each team that were grouped into themes.

A.   WRESTLING

Emergent themes are listed by subheading with grouped codes listed by number of occurrences specific to each Focus Group. Themes are then defined using relative Focus Group data.

1.   Unity/Togetherness

a. Team: 43 (Group 1), 72 (Group 2), 60 (Group 3), 52 (Group 4), 29 (Group 5)

b. Culture: 5 (Group 1), 8 (Group 3)

c. Lead/Leadership: 6 (Group 1), 4 (Group 2), 1 (Group 3), 5 (Group 4), 2 (Group 5)

d. Each Other: 6 (Group 1), 3 (Group 2), 3 (Group 3), 7 (Group 4), 3 (Group 5)

e. Coach: 27 (Group 1), 35 (Group 2), 50 (Group 3), 26 (Group 4), 14 (Group 5)

f. Together: 3 (Group 1), 4 (Group 2), 7 (Group 3), 3 (Group 4), 10 (Group 5)

g. Opportunity: 7 (Group 1), 5 (Group 3)

The theme of unity or togetherness emerged relative to questions centered on the team's mission and leadership. When asked to define the central purpose and subsequently the coach's effect on that purpose, Wrestlers No. 2 and No. 3 from Group 1 offered the

comparison between winning and improvement, as well as the impact of leadership on culture:

> Wrestler No. 2: I think the central purpose for us is to win every match we're in, but winning to me isn't necessarily getting your hand raised. I think it is more a component of did you perform the way you wanted to perform, and did you get better? I think that's the way kind of a lot of kids on the team look at the performances because you can always take something positive out of your match if you did those.
>
> So I think that's a very big thing for our team. It's just to go out and let it fly and just have fun but also get better. That's the one thing our coach and our captain and pretty much everyone on the team has bought into. I think that buying-in process and having everybody aboard on that is big.
>
> Wrestler No. 3: I would say the team culture definitely changed. I don't know about purpose because I feel that the guys on the team are all very like-minded. They all strive for similar things. We want to win every match we are in obviously, and we want to get better at everything. But we also definitely pride ourselves on the type of people we have on the team. And the fact that the – you can turn to the person to your right or to your left at the lockers and rely on them for things. And I think while it might not be our central mission, I think a side effect of trying to get better every day is that we develop good people and we hold ourselves to those standards for sure.

Wrestler No. 3 from Group 1 also discussed how opportunities to bond are generated from setbacks:

> …from a social standpoint for the team, last season we were given a lot more opportunity to be around each other, to interact with each other, not only in wrestling environments but other environments as well, like football games and things like that. And that was definitely lacking this season. And what's interesting is that we definitely had less opportunities to bond together, but as I say, like humans thrive in hard times, so the opportunities that we were given to bond with each other were almost compounded. Like we spent most of the elongated winter break here. And the people that stayed were given an opportunity to really get to know each other and to be a lot closer to each other. So the opportunities that we were given to work together as a team were fewer, but they were greater, if that makes sense.

The theme of unity and togetherness also emerged relative to the question, "How do you stay motivated daily?" In response, Wrestler 5 of Group 5 described how team bonds keep teammates motivated:

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I mean on the weekends you hang out with the team. You go to class, and you have wrestlers that are in your class. You help each other out with anything that happens. During lunch we are either lifting or eating together. So off the mat, you know, you sweat and bleed with another guy, so it is a bonding there.

2. Hard Work/Determination

a. Push: 2 (Group 1), 3 (Group 2), 8 (Group 3), 2 (Group 4), 2 (Group 5)

b. COVID: 9 (Group 1), 8 (Group 2), 17 (Group 3), 3 (Group 4), 2 (Group 5)

c. Train: 4 (Group 1), 3 (Group 2), 12 (Group 3), 5 (Group 4), 3 (Group 5)

The theme of hard work and determination emerged relative to the questions centered on staying motivated as well as those centered on encountering and overcoming hardships or setbacks. Each focus group mentioned the hardship created by the impact of COVID-19, particularly a division within the team to be discussed and compared with the Water Polo team in the following chapter. Given this context, the limited ability to train was discussed as a contributing factor to this internal division by participants in Group 4:

Unidentified Wrestler: Like it took awhile to get back together as a team because we were, like, divided because the guys that went home, we got to do what we want, but the guys here stayed training.

Unidentified Wrestler: And he [coach] would say, "If you want to be here and train, I am not holding you against your will. I only want you here if you really do want to be here."

Wrestler No. 9: I feel like even though we and they were all back together now, there is still definitely a division between the people that went home or not. Like if you do come and train hard, there is still, like, this thing that you went home. It is like you didn't want to stay.

The theme of hard work and determination also emerged relative to the question, "How did your determination waiver when you encountered hardship?" Wrestler 7 of Group 2 described the heightened sense of resolve exclusive to the group of wrestlers that were not allowed to go home on winter break as a result of COVID-19 mitigations:

So we went from 50 to, like, almost 25 give or take. But roughly half the team went home for Christmas, and some – very few people – like our coach had to make the decision where he had to pick the top 25 guys that he was

willing to have stay. And then he left it up to those additional individuals to come to him if they wanted to and try to justify why they should stay, but there wasn't hardly anyone there, maybe only like four more people that said, "I want to stay."

And so for that core group of 25 or so individuals that we had, I think within that group, to me it felt like our resolve kind of hardened with each phase, which was another, like, tightening the screw, like "All right. We are dealing with this now. We are going to keep pressing forward."

Attribution of the theme of hard work and determination may not apply to the team or organizational level, particularly with the sport of wrestling. The motivation to work hard may not be based on organizational interests but personal ones, as discussed by an unidentified wrestler from Group 3:

> Unidentified Wrestler**:** Like you push yourself because I mean going at it like battling, like physically demanding sport every day, it is all about getting your hand raised at the end of the day in tournaments or matches, it is worth it. So I think that's what motivates people, just like you have done it your whole life, you got to keep pushing so –
>
> Moderator**:** Do you think like – are you, when you are playing and you are staying motivated to get better, is it because it is about you and you are going to get your hand raised, or is there a thought of, like, this also helps for my team?
>
> Unidentified Wrestler: I am sure if you ask, like, a lot of wrestlers, I would say for the most part it is for yourself.
>
> But in doing that, you make your team better because if you are pushing yourself to be better every day, you are making your drill partner better and you are making the team better as a whole. But like going in for extra workouts or pushing yourself on, like, an off day, I don't think – well, at least for me, it is not like I am making my team better by going hard right now. It is more like I am making myself better, which if I am making myself better, at the end of the day, I will win more matches, which is going to contribute to the team. So kind of an indirect correlation, but yeah, to answer your question, I would say, like self.

3.   **Competitive Spirit**

   a.   Competition/Competitive/Compete: 11 (Group 1), 17 (Group 2), 12 (Group 3), 13 (Group 4), 17 (Group 5)

   b.   Goal: 1 (Group 1), 19 (Group 2), 5 (Group 3), 4 (Group 4), 14 (Group 5)

c. Mission: 1 (Group 1), 2 (Group 5)

d. Perform: 4 (Group 1), 3 (Group 2), 1 (Group 3), 4 (Group 5)

e. Win/Winning: 4 (Group 1), 35 (Group 2), 6 (Group 3), 3 (Group 4), 11 (Group 5)

The theme of competitive spirit emerged relative to questions centered on defining the team's central purpose, as well as unprompted discussion about leadership's impact on that purpose and the culture of the team. Wrestlers No. 7 and 71 from Group 2 discussed the integral role of competitive spirit to the central purpose of the team, which they cited as "winning" but ceded that the definition of winning may differ depending on perspective:

> Wrestler No. 71: Yeah I'd probably just say like – I would agree and say winning, but winning looks differently for each person on the team, I think, not just like an individualistic winning. But, you know, if you are like the starter, then maybe winning does just mean winning, like winning your match. But if you are the guy, the backup guy, then you're obviously not going to be wrestling, but you want your team to win, so getting the guy ready and, like, making sure that you are available all the time, right. Like that's completely unacceptable for you to not help the guy be ready, you know. That's totally unacceptable if you tell someone that you are going to wrestle with him and you don't show up. It is kind of like a sin to the team.

> And then probably the biggest sin is not making weight because then you just took that spot and just forfeited that weight class essentially for the other team, which is just completely unacceptable. And then, yeah, like and then also, like winning every day, like not only in practice, like you are trying to, like get better every day, like you are trying to – like your coaches are telling you the areas you are not doing, the areas that you can improve in, and they are showing you how to get better in that area, like helping you figure it out.

> But also, like, we play dodgeball, and everyone is trying to win. Our coach is trying to win. It was like we are playing another game. He keeps saying, like, "another round, another round." Like today we played dodgeball for two hours because he just wanted to win a game. Yeah, like we are a bunch of competitive dudes just trying to, like, win.

> Wrestler No. 7: I would say if you can put it down, it's either like the competitive mindset or winning because those both kind of feed into each other. But winning, like he said, winning can take place in different forms too. So like you can lose a match in theory and still be a win for the team overall. Like there are ways that you can lose and still elevate the performance of the rest of the team.

Like if you are going up against a guy you are expected not to even have a close match with on paper, but you go out there and you fight and you make it competitive, you can still lose, but you are bringing the energy into the bench because the team is now invested and, like, chipping in and trying to encourage you guys to, you know, keep pushing forward. And that can elevate the rest of the bench. That takes away team points that the other team maybe expected to get in bonus points, and that just fuels the momentum and the dual where the next guy can come in and try to capitalize on that and get a win.

The theme of competitive spirit also emerged relative to overcoming setbacks and staying motivated. Wrestler No. 5 from Group 5 discussed the application of competitive spirit to the practice room, with possible overlap into the theme of hard work and determination:

So there was that monotonous process of, like, kind of struggle, but it only brought us together more. And then we knew that we were getting better. We could feel it. We could tell that our level of how we were performing inside the room was going to show, and it did. We just knew that we were getting better because we were feeling better. We had the confidence from our coaches, and it just brought us together. And then when that level of just stayed and when the other guys came back, it just mixed together, and it just brought us up to a whole nother level. And I think it continues to climb.

And I know right now, like the practice room is an amazing place right now. The competitive brings out, like, the best of us. It brings out the best of everybody. And so, yeah, you may have, like, a bad day, but the next day you bounce right back. And it may be one of our best days like that week after the worse day. It could become the best day right after, and so then the energy keeps climbing. And I could tell, like, during practice there is just a new sense of, like, energy than it was, like, over Christmas or before.

B.   WATER POLO

Emergent themes are listed by subheading with grouped codes listed by number of occurrences specific to each Focus Group. Themes are then defined using relative Focus Group data.

1.   Unity/Togetherness

a. (The) Team: 53 (Players), 33 (Coaches)

b. Out(side): 13 (Players), 4 (Coaches)

c. Lead(ing): 2 (Players), 7 (Coaches)

The theme of unity and togetherness appeared in both the players' and coaches' focus groups. Players constantly referred to the Water Polo team as "the team" or "our team." Players 18 and 9 identified that the goal of the team wasn't just the sport but leading and being there for one another outside the pool as well.

> PLAYER NO. 18: … I think picking up other things, like being an ambassador for (the team) at the school and representing out of the pool as well as in the pool is a large mission for a lot of us here because … you are representing for your team.

> PLAYER NO. 9: I think there is pretty solid understanding between the team and the players that there is more than water polo going forward and our careers and what do we want to accomplish as men doing what we want to do. That's why I think being there for each other and, as has been mentioned, basically trying to be the best versions of ourselves possible is really a big factor…

Other players, like Player 19, identified that the best way to unify the team and be there for your teammates was to grow where you are planted and bring your strengths into the locker room to help the team.

> PLAYER NO. 19: Being a part of a team this big, it's also really important to find your goal, and then can you be the best you can be within that role? That's not to say you can't improve and maybe even transition to something else, a starting role, per se, if you are not, but at the same time, be cognizant of where you lie within the team rankings. Like maybe you are not a starter, but are you doing well in the classroom? Are you doing well outside of the pool in other ways? Are you doing well in the weight room? Are you basically a positive or a negative for the team and the team culture? And are you doing everything you can to be the best that you can be within that role?

While many players expressed unity and togetherness as a team, one player did bring up a division between upperclassmen (juniors and seniors) and underclassmen (sophomores and freshmen).

> PLAYER NO. 25: Oh, yeah, no, the upper class didn't like the younger class, the lower class, for pretty much like every year except -- well, every year … I think it always kind of happens the same way though because the underclassmen come in and kind of rub a lot of the upper class the wrong way. And then after awhile, like throughout the season or throughout the

year, they kind of acclimate a little bit better, and it kind of just mellows out. There is always a couple of people in every class.

This statement by Player 25 caused a visible shift of body positions. One player, Player 19, who had previously just been speaking of team unity, quickly spoke up in an attempt to diffuse the tension that was now visible in the room.

PLAYER NO. 19: … you get new guys coming in as freshmen that are extremely successful in high school, and the upper class have had time to really bond and see what that mission is … you get incoming freshmen that don't really align their beliefs the same way as senior members. And I think you see a lot better relationship as time goes on throughout the season, but early on you have to work through those kinks, almost like molding the freshmen into what we are really about as a team and what our mission is and what we believe in.

The coaching staff echoed the players sentiment that leadership in the pool was just as important as out of the pool when bringing the team together.

COACH NO. 1: I think the simple mission is to prepare young men to lead in all experiences … but being that embodies teamwork, embodies that winning attitude … The water polo team is really a little bit like … a small unit. And how do you get that unit to work cohesively to achieve individual goals? … whether it be working out in the pool, whether it be shooting, whether it be whatever it is, tactics, it is about getting the team to work together for a common good.

COACH NO. 2: I would say be the best version of yourself wherever you are at, whether it is in the pool, outside the pool leading, inside the pool leading by example, whatever. We are looking for you to be the best you can be at that particular time.

One coach spoke on the aspect of recruiting the right people to facilitate cohesion and unity:

COACH NO. 3: You have to make sure that the locker room is tight and you are making good decisions and also support each other. And I think the recruiting process … is about bringing in the right guys … there are a lot of guys we play with, play against, that would never fit in our locker room. Yeah, they are good players and all that, but not the right kind of people that we want.

While the coaches attempted to facilitate unity from the start with the recruiting process, there was an apparent "feeling out" phase the team went through every year. This

finding led to a discussion question we will discuss – Can you create unity in an organization by being selective of who is in it?

2. Hard Work/Determination

  a. Push(ing): 7 (Players), 2 (Coaches)

  b. Hard: 12 (Players), 16 (Coaches)

  c. Overcome(came): 5 (Coaches)

  d. Work(ing): 17 (Players), 7 (Coaches)

The theme of hard work and determination was evident in our focus groups. Hard work at the start of the season was tied to the extrinsic motivation of winning games. However, as the season progressed, the player's outlook shifted from winning games or earning play time to an intrinsic nature of self-improvement, both in-season as well as the off-season. Players 18 and 30 spoke on what they saw during the season.

> PLAYER NO. 18: … for the guys that aren't going to be getting big minutes in big games, you still have to have a reason why you are pushing yourself, whether that's to, like, push your teammates … if you are not doing stuff in the pool, there is still a mission for you to contribute to.

> PLAYER NO. 30: … we have a mindset of taking everything seriously or taking every aspect seriously and working hard in every little thing that we do. That was definitely something I strived for. And whether it is passing or swimming or shooting, you know people are trying to get better.

Multiple players referenced that hard work was not only reserved for during the season but in the off-season as well. Just two weeks out of the season, Player 10 spoke on his view of hard work and determination within the team compared to other D1 varsity teams at their university.

> PLAYER NO. 10: … our season ended a few weeks ago … but I have seen, like, a culture of people kind of taking it on themselves to get better … I will go into a weight room during a free period or after school, and every time there is always at least one of the water polo players in there. And I don't really see that with other teams. You don't go into the weight room during a random fourth period and see people in there that often, but there is almost always someone from water polo. So I think that's a pretty cool thing our team has that. Now it is the off-season, everyone is taking it upon

themselves to improve what they need improve so we can come back stronger next year.

Hard work and determination came up among the coaches in a different aspect than the players. The coaches saw hard work as an extrinsic motivator in the aspect that the reason you put out and work hard is not necessarily for yourself and because you enjoy it, but you do it for the team. As for determination, the coaches had a more intrinsic view of wanting their players to be determined to not be mediocre:

> COACH NO. 1: The only way players will get better is by pushing each other. If they are content with where they are, they should go find another sport.

> COACH NO. 3: I think as human beings ... we strive every day to be a better person. If you are happy not playing, you shouldn't be on the team. If you are happy with mediocrity in any aspect of your life, you will have a pretty boring and miserable life … everything we do when we wake up, we will strive to do something better … Whether it be on social media, recruiting, planning, whatever it is … Every day something new happens or a new challenge, and I hope our guys just have that mind-set.

One of the coaches identified a particular game where the team had developed a false sense of confidence in the work they had been putting in. This overconfidence developed into complacency that ultimately lost them an important game:

> COACH NO. 3: (That game) was a huge kick in the rear end. I don't think I prepared well enough for it and the other team prepared well enough for it, and I think that really was kind of a wake-up moment. We got beat pretty bad. They controlled us. You could see our faces during the game and after the game, like "What's going on here?" I think we all had an expectation of winning that game. It's one thing to throw your hats in the water and actually play, and I think we learned a lot that game in terms of preparation. And we are going to school all day, and they're sitting in a hotel resting for a game. And there was a lot to be learned that night, and I think we had a lot of team meetings afterwards, and the guys had a lot of meetings about, all right, we are not as good as we think we are. And that was a really kind of a wake-up moment for the whole team.

The loss of that game in particular appeared to create a shift in the team's mindset previously mentioned. One question that came out of these findings was—Do intrinsic or extrinsic motivators generate buy-in when evaluating hard work and determination?

3. Competitive Spirit

a. Win(ing): 6 (Players), 22 (Coaches)
b. Perform(ance): 7 (Coaches)
c. Compete(ion): 13 (Players), 9 (Coaches)
d. Better: 13 (Players), 17 (Coaches)

Mission accomplishment was directly tied to the water polo team's competitive spirit. When talking to the players, Player 25 and 18 had the following to say about the teams mission:

> PLAYER NO.25: Well, for the future I don't know, but for this past season, the only goal is just to win a championship.

> PLAYER NO. 18: … So obviously, like, as a team, our main mission is going to be to win, to deliver a championship…

This primary mission of winning was rooted heavily in the team's competitive nature. As a team with a large roster and small number of players in the water at one time, competition was not only reserved for opposing teams, but within the team as well. Player 9 discussed this inner-team competition and how it has actually been of benefit to the team.

> PLAYER NO. 9: So obviously there is going to be competition on the team, especially on this team, I think. That is all dependent on position, like the centers competing against each other for the top spot or, like, the lefties. And I think in a way it is a good form of competition though because the other person knows you are trying to get his spot, so they are going to work twice as hard, and you are going to work twice as hard. So I think it is a good atmosphere for benefiting each other.

When asked if winning has always been the sole mission of the team or if the team's mission has changed over the years, one of the seniors spoke up and said:

> PLAYER NO. 25: So freshman year, our goal was to get above a 500 record because that hadn't been done in years. Sophomore year, it was, develop the younger players, develop just the one class below you because we had a class above -- or two classes above … Junior year, it was trying to win a conference championship. Fell short on that. Senior year, the same thing.

While the coaches saw bringing the team together and developing them individually as the mission, they did have an interesting view towards winning:

COACH NO. 3: …it's a very unique situation in how we measure ourselves. We are college coaches, and the mission of most coaches is to win, but here you are measured on two different things: winning and how you can perform outside the classroom … our opponents don't see that. It is all winning and losing. That's how other schools look at it … our roles as leaders and developing young men and woman to be future leaders of the country and come to be the best version of themselves, unfortunately we are playing against certain coaches that that doesn't factor into it. It is winning, and that's it.

UNIDENTIFIED COACH: At the end of the day, we are measured by winning or losing. That's our department. As much as we want to say the right mantra, you can look at developing all the kids you want, if you are not winning, you are out.

For the players, the mission of winning was used to breed a competitive spirit within the team. For the coaches, winning wasn't the primary mission, but it was a requirement to keep the job. One coach came up with the mantra, "It is all about having fun, and the key to having fun is winning." He went on to say:

COACH NO 3: Yeah, we have one goal, to win a championship here, but we also have a goal to not get in trouble, not be upset, and to make good decisions. And I have been involved in a lot of teams that won championships, and I wasn't having fun. It is about having a climate environment and we are all getting along; we understand the difficulties that go through a season. But my main goal every year is to enjoy it, to enjoy the ride.

When discussing competition within the team, the coaches saw it as essential to their mission of player development:

COACH NO. 2: I think there … needs to be competition … but people need to know that … there is somebody that has got my back if I get hurt, et cetera, but hopefully it is not a cutthroat-type competition. We just want it to be that if some guy is playing better, then maybe he is going to get the nod that game. If another guy is not having a good day, then the other guys will step in. And that's what you would like. You would like it to be competitive.

The team viewed competition to win as the mission of the team, while the coaches saw competition as an element of their mission for the team. These two views of the competitive spirit of Men's Water Polo brought about the question – Does internal or

external competition (within the team or opponent focused) contribute more to an organization's competitive spirit?

4. Notable Findings

a. Culture: 2 (Players), 7 (Coaches)

b. Frustration(ing): 6 (Players)

c. Identity: 4 (Players)

d. Play(ing): 37 (Players), 22 (Coaches)

e. Time: 30 (Players), 24 (Coaches)

While we were able to distinguish the themes of unity or togetherness, hard work and determination, and competitive spirit, there were a number of codes that we were unable to group, but felt that they were notable findings. One item of consideration was that at the time of conducting these focus groups, the water polo team had just come off a major loss weeks prior. This loss had frustrated a number of the players, leading to a questioning of the team's identity:

> PLAYER NO. 9: I think one of the frustrating parts of this season was trying to find an identity for the team, like what type of team we were. And, like, throughout the season we struggled with a lot of things, like finishing on a man-up play, advantage play or shooting, or whether it is defense, I think we were struggling this past season to find that sort of identity of who we were, what we could do well.

> PLAYER NO. 17: I think part of our problem was we never actually established a team mission. But I think there is a mission … in the pool and out of the pool, (but) I don't think we have ever in my time here, my three years here, ever written down a mission statement, which I think contributed to our lack of identity, like the player brought up. So I think that's part of the problem.

While some felt the team lacked an identity as a whole, others tied their personal identity and team worth to the amount of playing time they saw in the pool.

> PLAYER NO. 10: So it is kind of a more personally, but I know a lot of guys who kind of don't play as much have had this issue is we have a huge team, and there is not enough pool space. So some days, like -- I mean it makes sense the better players are going to get a lot of the reps, but sometimes, you know, it still hurts when you are not getting those chances

in practice and you feel like you are not getting better. So some of us on kind of the lower half of the team, at least playing time-wise, like that was kind of tough during the season sometimes to stick through it, I guess.

The team was split during practice into two sides of the pool. The pools, while connected, are described as the upper (starters) and lower (non-starters) pool. Each pool had its own culture and dynamics. This division was explained by Player 27:

PLAYER NO. 27: … it kind of gets a little different once you get down there because guys are down there who, actually are trying to get better or make each other better to get over to the other pool, and then you can also see there is some guys that just, like, accepted their fate that they are going to be down there and who maybe, don't play as much, and so I don't think their drive is as much to go up into the other pool. And that hurts the other members of the team who are also down there because when they see someone who is not putting out on all, the leg sets or whatever is going on down there, then they are like, oh, I guess this is kind of a joke, and maybe I don't need to put out as much … the guys that aren't trying as much aren't pushing the rest of the team down there. The coaches always talking about how (the lower pool) is the place where there's supposed to be the most competition and stuff, and that's supposed to be the development area, where you guys are just going at it all the time, trying to move up into the next pool. And, yeah, that's, like, there for a lot of the guys, but for some of the guys it isn't.

For the coaches, the aspect of team culture came up throughout the focus group. There was a desire for a competitive and hardworking culture on the team however, they wanted to avoid the expectation of being mistake free. One coach, when talking about the importance of the team's competitive spirit, said:

COACH NO. 2: We are hoping that we can make some good strides in the off-season so we have plenty of guys … But if it goes to the other side where it becomes unhealthy to where they are just so scared that if they screw up, they have lost their one and only chance, that's something that we need to make sure they don't feel like.

In an attempt to foster a positive culture on the team, the coaches discussed how it starts with them being vulnerable to accepting criticism so the players learn to accept it from others. One coach brought up a particular example in another coach present:

UNIDENTIFIED COACH: You are very vulnerable, which is a big thing. You are showing the way you are looking to improve, and you are getting ideas from here or (there) and you have everybody doing that. And I think

now the video sessions, which at first I was like "Ahh, you know, whatever," but we don't have time to show all these compliments and stuff. We have to go after what's wrong. And I think they've embraced that. They started looking at that. And they are going after and seeing things and bringing ideas back to us too, which has been great, new plays that they are seeing other people do. And I think they are hitting the weight room harder. Guys are in there swimming and, you know, so I think they are striving to improve. And we are looking forward to a good off-season, which is -- when we were first here, people weren't showing up for volunteer days and different things like that.

While the coaching staff focused on creating a positive culture on the team, team dynamics of starters vs non-starters and associated player frustrations seemed to impact cohesion. This finding brought about the question – Does having two distinct skill levels (A and B team) in an organization impact cohesiveness of the organization as a whole?

C.   BASKETBALL

Emergent themes are listed by subheading with grouped codes listed by number of occurrences specific to each Focus Group. Themes are then defined using relative Focus Group data.

1.   Unity/Togetherness

- a.   Each Other - 12 (players)
- b.   Everyone - 4 (players)
- c.   Team - 19 (players)
- d.   Together - 7 (players)

The players in this focus group consistently mentioned the importance of being together and/or doing things to make the whole team better. Mentioning "team" 19 times is highly notable. When asked about hardships, they stated that they turned to each other to help them get through the challenges they were presented with personally, or as a whole.

> PLAYER NO 1: We have a tendency to go internal with hardships. I've seen a lot of growth from our team in regard to going internal, like we've become more verbal towards each other, whether it is personal hardship or team struggles, confiding in each other…

These players started their season in August, with regular conference games not starting until December. It is logical to assume that unity and togetherness would grow over time after the initial meeting for preseason.

> PLAYER NO 5: …I've seen a lot of growth. In the beginning it was all like "I, I, I, what can I do?" But if we talk to each other and lean on each other and try to bring someone else out of a funk, it brings you out of it as well.

> PLAYER NO 6: After a bad game, our Coach put us down for a little, but we brought each other up, we stuck together, there were tough practices, but we were all in it together so it made things a lot easier.

> PLAYER NO 1: Specifically the hard practices following the bad loss, I think the response, every person made an effort to do their part to the best of their ability, and as a whole we became better…

2. Hard Work/Determination

a. Grow - 4 (players)

b. Accountable - 5 (players)

c. Focus - 6 (players)

Though the coaches did not participate in a focus group for this team, they were mentioned by the players in regards to instilling a theme of hard work and determination.

> PLAYER NO 5: He [the coach] shows us tough love, he gets on us hard holds us accountable, but we know that he loves us and trusts us, so we want to go harder for him.

> PLAYER NO 5: …We always say it does not matter what we're doing now as long as we're growing to get better to accomplish our mission.

> PLAYER NO 1: The past seasons, I didn't see this, but our new coaching staff puts an effort into each player's development. Making sure every player is the best they can be throughout the season, and believing in each player.

"Individual sessions" meant practice sessions 1 on 1, player to coach, outside of regularly scheduled team practice time.

> PLAYER NO 3: This year we still do individual sessions with our coaches during the season, not just outside the season. Even during practice there is more of a positional focus. Our coach likes to incorporate that.

3. Competitive Spirit

a. Win - 11
b. Championship - 4
c. Better - 7
d. Improve - 3

On a smaller team of 13 members, competitive spirit seemed to lack more than the other two teams that had twice or triple the size of players.

> PLAYER NO 4: … Each person wants to win that spot but you're competing to make yourself and your teammates better.

> PLAYER NO 4: He [the coach] is super competitive, so that combined with love for the team, we don't want to disappoint him.

> PLAYER NO 5: Outside of practice, on our own, individuals put in extra work, to improve themselves.

> PLAYER NO 1: …And so, it was an internal focus, but everyone was determined to do their job to the best of their ability. And when everyone performs their role to the best of their ability, we were able to see improvement…

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V.   DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to further our understanding of team grit by gathering individual's perceptions of their team dynamic which would contribute to the research of grit at the higher level of analysis. The themes of Unity/Togetherness, Hard Work/ Determination, and Competitive Spirit that emerged in this study were in line with what Luning et al. (2021) saw in their study of Military Officers a part of military organizations.

When evaluating our data, we found a higher number completed the questionnaire than showed up for the focus groups. Unlike previous case studies that used a similar format, like Luning (2019), we saw a much higher standard deviation in our responses. There appeared to be a sense of survey fatigue that was confirmed by the participants during the focus groups. While there were participants who appeared to have taken the questionnaire thoughtfully in the time expected, there were a number of participants that either rushed through it or left the survey open over multiple days before submitting.

Focus groups were where we saw the largest disparity between the different athletic organizations. The dynamics of individualized performance, team size, gender, and overall team record all made an impact on our overall findings. The composition of the focus groups for each team varied: five focus groups were held with the men's wrestling team with members divided by class (freshman-senior, and one group of underclassmen); two focus group was held with the men's water polo team, one with all players and one with the coaches; and two focus groups were held with the women's basketball team with members divided by upperclassmen status (juniors with seniors, freshmen with sophomores).

The qualitative data from these focus groups built upon what Luning (2019) learned from using literal replication sampling logic (selecting teams with similar criteria), and instead utilized theoretical replication by selecting teams that would provide contrasting viewpoints through team structure/size, dynamics of individual and team sports, gender, and overall win record.

A. WRESTLING

As an individualized sport, wrestling provided several unique perspectives. Team members viewed their sport with a focus on individual accomplishment to contribute to team success. Insight regarding the tenets of organizational grit could be drawn from the organizational structure of the wrestling program. A moderator previously conducted each of the focus groups for the wrestling team, so the insights and observations drawn were exclusively from written, historical data (as opposed to the water polo and basketball teams which were conducted by the present research team). Additionally, the focus groups were conducted separately by class, which was altered for subsequent focus groups with the water polo and basketball teams.

Resilience-determination as established as a theme by Raver-Luning et al. in her study of U.S. military officers could be explored through the discussion of two themes that emerged from this study: hard work and determination, and competitive spirit. Resilience requires adversity as it is a measure of how a team overcomes hardships or setbacks. Particularly, these themes emerged relative to questions centered on overcoming setbacks, which may indicate a relationship between hard work, competitive spirit, and resilience-determination. Can these concepts be categorized as tenets of organizational grit, or is there a completely different concept that deserves its own exploration?

When asked about hardships, each wrestling team focus group mentioned the effects of COVID-19 on restrictions to training and the uncertainty of the season. The length and timing of the wrestling season combined with dynamic guidance regarding the COVID-19 virus forced leadership to adapt and make some unorthodox decisions. For example, the wrestling team wasn't allowed to practice with their coaches for part of the season. Focus group members noted that a lot of improvements to wrestling technique are achieved from wrestling with coaches. Given the winter break mid-season and the necessity to maintain accurate contact tracing, a decision was made to keep half the team (starters and those who were strongly competing for a starting spot) on campus through the winter break to practice while the other half was able to go to their respective homes. The shared experiences of those that stayed on campus resulted in boundaries and division within the team once wrestlers that went home for winter break were reintroduced to the team.

The effect of division between these two groups (those that stayed on campus during winter break and those that went home) lends itself to discussion of the theme of unity and togetherness, as well as the organizational grit tenet of organizational sense of self as established by Raver-Luning et al. Along with the individualistic nature of the sport of wrestling, the decision of those that chose to or were chosen to stay can be considered with regards to team identity and how it is defined in this context compared to the other teams participating in the study. Team members that were reintroduced after the winter break didn't have the same sense of belonging to the group as those that stayed behind and focused solely on wrestling. The resulting division may have had an effect on how individuals perceived the goals and relationships of the team.

Another aspect of the team's perceived hardship to consider is the unfamiliarity and unique quality of the COVID-mitigated environment. Future studies will likely be unable to replicate the conditions or context in which these focus groups were conducted. Had the global pandemic and resulting restrictions on practice and everyday life been a non-issue, it is possible that different themes may have emerged relative to questions centered on hardship or setbacks. Team members had different perspectives on opportunities to bond and foster a sense of organizational self or team identity that was clearly affected by whether they stayed with the team over winter break.

Like the other teams, focus group members identified "winning" as the team's mission, or central purpose. As reported in our findings section, individuals viewed the definition of winning as dependent on their individual perspective. This could be related to the nature of the sport of wrestling compared to team sports that require everyone on the team to either win or lose. Additionally, status of the team member (starter vs. back-up) may have affected their personal concept of winning. The idea of winning defined as constant improvement is consistent with the growth mindset as part of a culture of organizational grit, in that challenges are viewed as opportunities and losses don't necessarily hinder the team's progress (especially if competitive spirit is shown in a loss).

The emergent theme of unity and togetherness highlighted leadership's significant impact on culture. Of note, the concept of cohesion (distinct from organizational grit), while not taken into account for the purposes of this study, may play a part in the theme of

unity and togetherness or vice versa. The impact of leadership was discussed with each focus group, with a particular emphasis on the head coach and a distinct question regarding the team captain. Some focus groups brought the topic of leadership up naturally while others were prompted with the predetermined focus group questions, and may not have directed the conversation toward leadership without prompting. Contributions were not always distinguished between head coach, team captain, or other leadership, sometimes attributed to leadership in general or a group of leaders rather than an individual. The wrestling team hired a new coach at the beginning of the season of this study, and multiple focus group members noted a change in team culture as a result of this coaching change. The team captain position as it applies to the individualistic sport of wrestling is a factor to be considered and compared to other teams whose performance requires multiple participants.

B. WATER POLO

When assessing the water polo team's unity, a question emerged from the data – Can you create unity in an organization by being selective of who is in it? The coaches found this to be the case when discussing their recruiting process however, the findings show that the coaches may not have been successful in this task at the organizational level. The division on the team at the upper/underclass level and the starter/non-starter level had a visible impact on the players at the focus group. Luning et al. (2021) discusses how unity in a military command leads to command success. So what did successful commands have in common? There was an aspect of professional pride. Similar to the wrestling team, the water polo team players who were non-starters in the "lower" pool didn't have the same sense of belonging to the team. So, can you create unity in an organization by being selective of who's in it? While the starters and upperclass had a sense of belonging and unity within the team, underclass and those who were on the lower end of the roster lacked that bond. There appears to be a point of diminishing returns in that if the team's or organization's size expands to the point where people do not have a clear position and sense of worth, they will not have the level of pride to build organizational unity.

Hard work and determination was seen to be a direct link to an organization's success throughout this study. The water polo coaches spoke to the lack of commitment that they saw during the previous year's off-season and how it wasn't until after a surprise loss that the team really turned inward. So, do intrinsic or extrinsic motivators generate buy-in when evaluating hard work and determination? At the individual level? At the organizational level? Initially in the season, extrinsic motivation of winning a championship was at the forefront of the team. However, as the season progressed, the team mirrored Luning (2019) Case 4, Frontline 3's motivation to meet goals of self, creating a shift to intrinsic motivation. As an organization, the water polo team failed at the start of the year with their motivation focused solely on winning. As the season went on, the players began to identify where they could improve at the individual level which in turn benefited the organization as a whole. For the water polo team, intrinsic motivations were what ultimately created individual buy-in and worked towards the coaches' expressed mission of developing the individuals.

Throughout their season, the water polo team experienced both internal and external competition as an organization. Internal competition was experienced when determining who was going to be in the upper pool vs the lower pool. External competition was focused on making it to a championship. Does internal or external competition (within the team or opponent focused) contribute more to an organization's competitive spirit? For the players, internal competition was expressed as a positive by both players and coaches; however, it appeared to create a division within the team and impact unity. An executive from Case 1 in Luning's (2019) study answered that why their organization had been successful was due to the willingness to outwork their competition. The organization had a common purpose of outworking their competition on the individual level to be the best they can. When an individual failed, the outlook was that they weren't failing themselves, but the organization as a whole. This outlook was different from what players on the water polo team expressed. The internal competition within the team seemed to consume the players to the point of impacting cohesiveness. While some internal competition is healthy to an organization, an organization's competitive spirit must be aligned to a common purpose.

One question that came out as a notable finding in this study was – Does having two distinct skill levels (A and B team) in an organization impact cohesiveness of the organization as a whole? Denison and Mishra (1995) discuss how the cultural characteristic of involvement centers on the idea that an environment where members have a sense of ownership and responsibility leads to a successful organization (Luning 2019). The size of the team compared to the number in the pool at once playing was the biggest impact to the team's cohesiveness. In this study, a smaller basketball team expressed cohesion and unity as their focus.

C.   BASKETBALL

Studying each team, it was obvious they had one main goal in mind; to win. They did not put so much emphasis on winning each preseason or regular game. They wanted to win the championship, and if the Basketball team felt that they were taking steps towards accomplishing that goal, they felt satisfied with their day-to-day efforts, and held each other to a high standard. The basketball team was strongly focused on being a team, and doing what was best for the organization as a whole. Overall, we believe this strengthened their unity/togetherness, but weakened their internal competitiveness.

The women's basketball team was the smallest of all three studied, we believe this contributed to the team with the strongest sense of unity/togetherness theme. A team with less than fifteen members allows little space for small groups to form. All members are forced to be close for many days in a season, and know each other on an intimate level. A natural transition period was noticed in the focus group from preseason to regular season competition. The team members are physically away from each other before pre-season, and they return to long practices and conditioning.

The upperclassmen focus group of the women's basketball team did not state a mission statement for the team. They stated their goal was to win their league championship. The league championship as a goal is unique in that it did not actually require a winning record to win. At the end of the season, each team would be ranked, and play in the league championship tournament. Of course the top seeded team would be expected to win the tournament, but this is not a guarantee. This is important because it

meant that the team could experience losses without losing their trajectory towards accomplishing their goal of winning the championship. They could turn their losses into learning opportunities, and move on to the next regular season game with another chance to win. They could also focus their work in practice on weaknesses exemplified in a lost game. Taking losses in stride towards the ultimate goal keeps a team working hard and passionately, with courage. If they were to hit a certain number of losses that would take them out of the running for the championship, we do not believe they would have the same level of grit throughout the season.

A continued theme with this team was capitalizing on their shortcomings. They let team and individual losses fuel their fire to get better. Each member of the team saw their own position as a competition for playing time. If they had the starting spot, they felt a pressure to fight to keep it. Their personal fight would make the team better.

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VI. CONCLUSION

The novel concept of organizational grit is one that deserves exploration. Teams and organizations alike could benefit from a better understanding of what factors contribute to team grit and its factor in team success. Additionally, division one collegiate athletic teams serve as a natural point of exploration of this concept, providing a wide variety of perspectives across different sports and genders. Perception from within a team can provide insight into a more refined definition of organizational grit. This study aimed to further the understanding of team grit by analyzing qualitative data gained from focus groups held with three NCAA division one varsity athletic teams in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States relevant to the research question, "What do team members perceive comprises team grit?"

The literature on team or organizational grit is relatively limited compared to the extensive research on grit at the individual level. Individual grit has been shown to be a contributing factor, essential even, to individual success. The role of organizational grit within organizational success is worth exploring and requires a deeper understanding of the concept itself. One way to contribute to the understanding of organizational grit is to gain perspective on how team members perceive team grit. Qualitative data analysis provides part of the subjective component of the measurement of the tenets that comprise organizational grit.

Themes of unity and togetherness, hard work and determination, and competitive spirit align at least somewhat with the tenets of organizational grit as established by Raver Luning et al. (2021); organizational sense of self, hard work and determination, and external/internal competitive spirit. Unity and togetherness included the grouped codes of team, culture, lead/leadership, each other, coach, together, everyone, out(side), and opportunity. Additionally, cohesion may be a factor in this theme, or vice versa. Hard work and determination included the grouped codes of push, COVID, train, better, hard, overcame(came), work, grow, accountable, and focus. Competitive spirit included the grouped codes of competition (competitive, compete), goal, mission, perform, win(ning), championship, better, and improve. Common codes among three different sports teams

suggest some validity in previous research and emergent themes. That being said, the research done in this study was relatively limited in its scope with focus groups occurring at only one time for each team.

The various compositions of the teams we studied as well as the context surrounding each focus group lends itself to a wide range of discussion. For the purposes of this study, discussion centered on emergent themes relative to focus group questions. The conversation regarding the role of unity and togetherness, hard work and determination, and competitive spirit towards the concept of organizational grit could strengthen the framework for further quantification of the tenets of organizational grit.

Future research could utilize focus groups occurring at more than one point during the season to see if the perception of team grit changes over time or due to significant events. Additionally, similar methodology on a wider scale could further the conceptualization of organizational or team grit. Factors unique to team environments, such as location, length of season, and particular sport could be identified and taken into consideration with regards to their impact on the study or relevance to the research question.

Overall, this study stands to continue the on-going conceptualization of organizational or team grit. While the quantification of its tenets may be a distant goal, the qualitative data analysis provided by this study could contribute to that end by including a subjective metric. With a better understanding of how team members perceive team grit, teams and organizations can improve organizational performance tailored to the perspective of its members.

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