

The Freshman Athlete's Transition: Athletic and Academic Stressors

Janice Roberts-Wilbur, Ph.D.
Athletic Counselor/Sports Psychologist
Washington State University

and

Michael Wilbur, Ed.D.
Visiting Scholar
Washington State University

and

Joseph R. Morris, Ph.D.
Director, Counseling Psychology Program
Western Michigan University

Abstract

This article discusses the high levels of stress experienced by many freshmen student-athletes. Specific athletic and academic stressors, along with self-defeating coping behaviors, are presented to exemplify how stress conditions may, in part, explain some student-athletes' poor athletic/academic performance and transition to college.

The Freshman Athlete Transition: Athletic and Academic Stressors

While the freshman year of college is typically one of adjustment for most students, student-athletes have been identified as a population having special needs and unusual pressures (Berry & Sorensen, 1981; Harrison, 1981; Johnson & Renwick, 1983; Lude, 1983; Remer, Tongate & Watson, 1978; Schubert & Schubert, 1983).

Most likely, student-athletes are more similar to other college students than they are different from them. However, more attention has been given to the poor academic performance, and low graduation rate, of student-athletes than has been given to the academic performance of other college students (Edwards, 1983; Meggysey, 1983; Spivey & Jones, 1975; Wittmer, Bostic & Waters, 1981). Concomitantly, numerous reasons also are mentioned when explaining the poor academic performance of student-athletes. Such explanations include the use of questionable recruiting practices and eligibility criteria for student-athletes' enrollment in college, the admission of academically unqualified and underprepared student-athletes, the excessive time commitment required of student-athletes for

participation in intercollegiate sports, and the general finding by the Carnegie Foundation that more and more young people, including student-athletes, emerge from high school prepared neither for work nor college.

The NCAA has acknowledged the dilemma by passing Rule 5-1-(j), designed to address the admission of academically unqualified and underprepared students and to ensure the academic progress and graduation of student-athletes. It is our contention, however, that the complexity of these related issues in intercollegiate athletics, and the attention given them, creates exceptional pressures for student-athletes to excel in the academic environment, as well as to perform to their greatest athletic potential in a society that applauds winning.

Thus, the purpose of this article is to discuss the impact of such pressures on freshmen athletes and to delineate specific stressors that make the athletic and academic transition particularly difficult for most freshmen student-athletes.

Hans Selye (1956, 1974) defines stress as the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it, and concludes that any major change in one's life can lead to stress. Barrow and Prosen (1981) describe several types of conditions known to produce emotional stress, which include emotional disruption stimulated by change, threat, frustration, or conflict. More specifically, they purport that when a person's self-esteem is perceived to be under attack, when the attainment of a desired goal is blocked, or when one is faced with a decision-making dilemma, the person experiences stress that is psychologically disruptive.

While stress is an ongoing part of everyday life and therefore cannot be avoided, it is also generally agreed that overly high and/or prolonged levels of stress may produce undesirable consequences (Barrow & Prosen, 1981; Selye, 1956, 1974). Holmes and Rahe (1967), for example, conclude that a score of 250 or more on *The Social Readjustment Scale* (Holmes & Rahe, 1967) indicates a high level of stress and major life crisis. Given the contention that high levels of stress are not conducive to the rational, systematic thought that mental and physical tasks demand (Cohen, 1978; Wine, 1971), it seems reasonable to assume that stress and its effects may interfere with, and in part explain, the academic and athletic performance of student-athletes. Although we have collected preliminary, unpublished data which indicate high-level stress scores for student-athletes, such as the scores of 250 or more suggested by Holmes and Rahe (1967), the information presented in this article is based on our personal experiences and observations, and a model of stress developed while working with three Division I football programs over a four-year period. The information and model relate most specifically to the experience of student-athletes who participate in a revenue-producing sport, but we also believe it is applicable to student-athletes in general.

Our focus is the specific conditions that create stress for student-athletes (change, threat, frustration, and conflict) and how their inability to cope effectively with such conditions results in self-defeating behaviors (fight or flight) related to poor academic and/or athletic performance. While it is beyond the scope of this article to provide specific suggestions to help freshmen student-athletes cope effectively with the stress, the discussion of our personal observations, experience, and model of stress may do so indirectly by facilitating the awareness and understanding of those who come in contact or work with student-athletes.

It is our further belief that student-athletes, unlike other freshmen, are in the position of making a dual transition during their freshman year. Although most freshmen may expect college life to be a continuation of their high school experience, the academic demands of college are very different from what most freshmen expect. Freshmen athletes, however, not only are expected to make the academic transition from high school to college, they are also required to successfully negotiate the athletic transition. Consequently, we believe student-athletes are, more often than not, unprepared for the overall experience of the dual transition and its concomitant emotional impact.

The required transition in both academics and athletics also may be equivalent to doubling the impact of student-athletes' self-defeating and ineffective coping behaviors in response to specific stress conditions.

The Athletic/Academic Transition

While most freshmen athletes are accustomed to special consideration in high school and have had this special treatment reinforced during the college recruitment process, the reality of their freshman college year is that few will have the opportunity to participate, and even fewer will come close to maintaining the "star" status of their high school years. Thus, even though the athletic transition from high school to college is seldom mentioned, it involves change, threat, frustration, and conflict for most freshman athletes and is a major source of stress.

Likewise, the academic transition may be particularly difficult for freshmen student-athletes. Many enter college not only underprepared for this level of work, but also unaware of how college-level work differs from high school. As mentioned, they often erroneously assume that college is a continuation of their academic experience in high school. For example, many athletes assume that the same amount of time and energy devoted to studying in high school will result in the same grades in college, that they will receive special treatment in the classroom because they are athletes, or that their academic performance is less important than their athletic performance. Also, many enter college unmotivated and disinterested in their classes because they were not expected or encouraged to achieve academically

during high school. Finally, many freshman athletes fail to understand or accept the importance of education, often due to their unrealistic expectations and plans for a career in professional athletics.

In addition to these general statements, the following discussion of our experience and observations relates to four specific stress conditions encountered by most freshman athletes in their athletic/academic transition from high school to college. More specifically, the stress conditions of change, threat, frustration, and conflict are presented as significant aspects of student-athletes' transition. Fight and flight responses to conditions of stress are also discussed in terms of student-athletes' ineffective coping mechanisms and self-defeating behaviors. Examples provided in each of these areas are not meant to be inclusive, but represent our most typical and frequent observations and experiences with freshmen student-athletes.

Change

Contextually, almost everything changes when freshmen athletes arrive on the college campus. Not only are they away from parents, siblings, and friends, they also experience changes in where they live, who they live with, the food they eat, and the room and bed in which they sleep. Some athletes experience moving from a rural or suburban neighborhood to an urban area, or vice versa. For many athletes it also may be the first time they have lived, studied, or participated athletically in an integrated and/or segregated environment. Although these contextual or structural changes may seem minor, adjustment is required and stress may be experienced by the student-athlete.

As briefly mentioned earlier, a significant athletic change experienced by average freshman athletes is the loss of their "star" status. It is important to recognize that the loss of this status also means that, for the first time in four to eight years, they no longer receive the attention they are accustomed to receiving from fans, fellow students, friends, family, hometown communities, and coaches. Regardless of the reality, most freshmen athletes continue to think of themselves as the exception to this situation, and thus expect to participate athletically during their freshman year. When this does not occur, most freshmen have difficulty responding to the stress that this change in their status creates. Although this change may not likewise appear to be a small transition, the experience of not traveling with their team, not participating in their sport, or not dressing for an athletic event is unsurmountable for some athletes, and difficult for most.

Related to the change in their athletic status, most athletes also experience changes in relationships with others as well as others' perceptions of them. Most college athletes have received special treatment from high school coaches and they typically expect similar treatment from college coaches. This notion is often reinforced by the attention given them during the recruiting process and they are unprepared for the limited contact they have

with the head coach once they arrive on the college campus. Most tend to personalize this change because they do not realize or understand the amount of time expended by coaches in other, related activities that prevent personal interaction with their athletes.

Finally, many freshmen athletes who expect college to be a continuation of their high school experience are surprised and shocked at the realization that some professors and students think less, rather than more, of them because they are athletes. Athletes who arrive on campus expecting special treatment and acceptance as important members of the academic community or student body often become aware for the first time that they are perceived by others as a "dumb jock," not as someone to be looked up to.

As indicated by Hans Selye (1956, 1974), any major change in one's life can lead to stress. Considering that the changes mentioned are not inclusive or may not be the most significant transitions required of freshmen athletes, it would seem appropriate to assume that such changes create stress for most, if not all, freshmen student-athletes.

Threat

As stated, Barrow and Prosen (1981) believe people experience psychologically disruptive stress when their self-esteem is perceived to be under attack or when the attainment of a desired goal is blocked.

Although student-athletes are familiar with performing, they also are accustomed to doing so at high levels of skill or expertise and typically are not comfortable performing poorly in front of others. Consequently, tasks such as reading, writing, taking notes and tests, or speaking in class are often threatening, generate feelings of inadequacy, and create emotional distress for many academically underprepared student-athletes.

Even though the reality is that many freshmen student-athletes enter college lacking in some of the basic skills necessary for college-level work, poor time-management skills also may contribute to athletes' feelings of inadequacy and the perceived threat of the classroom to their self-esteem.

For example, it is estimated that football players devote between 45 to 49 hours per week to their sport during season, and when travel time is included the average time commitment expands to 60 hours per week. In concert with the time demanded for athletic participation, it is also estimated that a student should expect to study two hours outside of class for every hour spent in class. Obviously, time is a dynamic variable and of the essence. Without good time-management skills, most academic work will not be completed and becomes a source of threat and inadequacy for many student-athletes. In such instances, almost everything about the classroom may threaten their self-esteem.

In addition to student-athletes' academic unpreparedness and poor time-management skills, Roberts-Wilber and Wilbur (1983) believe that most student-athletes have never learned, or been taught, the student role. Thus,

they often lack important or necessary skills, such as how to study for a test, how to take notes, how to behave in a college classroom, and how to approach and ask for help from a professor. Not knowing the student role, or "academic game," therefore may be an additional factor that intensifies student-athletes' feelings of inadequacy and the classroom's threat to their self-esteem.

A number of athletic transitions also occur during the freshman year which may threaten athletes' self-esteem and prevent their goal attainment.

In addition to losing their "star" status, athletes also quickly learn that they are replaceable, expendable, subject to a serious injury that might end their athletic career, and that they are competing against other athletes who are as good or better than themselves. For the first time in their athletic lives, they also may be forced to deal with their physical equity, or limitations, in comparison to other athletes, and this may occur at a time when many are unprepared to accept the reality.

This is particularly true for many freshmen who are planning a professional athletic career, or who have little identity beyond that of an athlete. Unfortunately, an image is often portrayed to student-athletes that a lucrative professional career is theirs for the taking. While a few star athletes sign million-dollar contracts and realize their dreams of becoming professional athletes, the overwhelming majority (92 percent) never become professional athletes and must face the reality of "life after athletics" at the conclusion of their athletic eligibility (Meggysey, 1983).

The overall realization and experience of these factors often place student-athletes in a position of feeling physically and emotionally exhausted and vulnerable. In this context, even a minor failure or injury may provide a major assault and threat to their self-esteem.

Frustration

Many of the factors that are perceived to threaten student-athletes' self-esteem and block their goal attainment also create frustration. Additionally, most freshmen athletes are verbal about these frustrations. It is common to hear them complain about everything, from coaches, to being treated unfairly and like children, to the food they eat. Many find themselves in positions where they have no money for entertainment (and in some cases, no money for laundry soap, classroom supplies, or personal hygiene products such as toothpaste, shampoo, razors, soap, and clothing), no personal transportation, and no financial means to visit their homes and families. This position is especially frustrating when it is in direct contrast to many athletes' *a priori* expectations that they will receive material perks and benefits for being college athletes, e.g., automobiles, money, and clothes.

Freshmen athletes also express their frustration about not being given the opportunity to demonstrate and prove their athletic ability. Being "red-shirted" their freshman year is a reality for most and means they will have to

wait an additional year before having the opportunity to prove themselves athletically. Waiting the additional year to participate often intensifies the frustration because it not only prevents their short-term goal of being a "star" college athlete, the red-shirt year also blocks their idealized, long-term goal of becoming a professional athlete.

On the academic side, as mentioned, most freshmen enter college with unrealistic expectations, unaware of how it differs from high school. For example, many freshmen athletes become frustrated when they realize that they are expected to attend classes, write papers, take examinations, and read textbooks to remain eligible for participation in their sport. Many athletes also experience the demands of academics as frustrating because they are activities that they do not enjoy and, in some cases, are not prepared to perform.

For those athletes who have limited goals and a primary focus on athletics, the importance of an education is not usually realized, and academic requirements are commonly experienced as frustrating distractions from the time demands of their sports.

It is our belief that frustrations such as these intensify the stress experienced by many freshmen student-athletes and further impeded their transition to college life and the attainment of their academic/athletic goals.

Conflict

Although the frustrations, threats, and changes experienced by athletes may be expressed through interpersonal conflicts with their head coaches, friends, family, peers, and roommates, our observation is that most freshmen athletes also experience an intrapersonal conflict during their first semester of college.

The internal, or intrapersonal, conflict is related to their initial decision to participate at the college they are attending, and the dilemma that is created by the questioning of their original decision. Due to the nature of the recruiting process, and the concomitant pressures from coaches, family, and friends, the decision-making process of athletes is often limited and distorted during the time that the initial decision is made. Therefore, until their first semester of college, many do not understand the importance of magnitude of the decision that others have influenced, persuaded, or helped them make. Consequently, they question their decision to attend the particular college, and, in so doing, experience all of the internal conflict that accompanies making a major life decision.

For many, the first semester of college is the time they actually make the decision to attend the college at which they are already enrolled. Because the reality of being a student-athlete and the transition to college is different from and more difficult than most athletes expect, many also conclude that the solution to their negative feelings and dissonance is simply to transfer to another university. These athletes typically attribute their experience to the

particular college they are attending and believe transferring will solve their dilemma; i.e., that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. Although, in most cases, student-athletes remain with their initial decision, some do transfer and a few decide to drop out of their college and sport altogether.

One of the major conflicts with which all athletes struggle, however, is how to do both: how to participate in their sport *and* meet their academic demands and requirements. This conflict is fraught with daily decisions and often results in a significant amount of stress.

While the athletic portion of the student-athlete's life is structured to the point that many complain they are treated like children, the remainder of their time, outside of sports, is typically not structured. Thus, they are in a position of making many decisions about their extracurricular activities and time commitments. Although student-athletes are accustomed to the structure and coaching in the athletic realm, many have not had the opportunity to take responsibility for themselves in other aspects of their lives.

Complicating the decisions that all freshmen make in regard to friends, drugs, alcohol, partying, and sexual activity, athletes are often caught in conflict and peer pressure to live up to the "dumb jock" stereotype. Unfortunately, this stereotype often includes excessive sexual activity, physical fighting, partying, the misuse or abuse of alcohol and drugs, and not doing well in the classroom. Thus, for many athletes, to do well academically they are frequently required to withstand peer pressure and their desire to be accepted as "one of the boys," which may create additional conflict and emotional distress.

Self-Defeating Coping Behaviors

It is our observation that most student-athletes are both unaware of and unprepared to cope with the stress created by the change, threats, frustrations, and conflicts of their freshman college year. It is our further experience that their emotional response and inability to cope effectively with such stress conditions negatively affects their academic and athletic performance.

Coping is what people do to protect themselves from negative physical or psychological consequences resulting from a pile-up of demands (McCubbin, Needle & Wilson, 1985). Unfortunately, ineffective coping can also be a source of strain that adds to, rather than reduces, the amount of stress an individual is forced to deal with.

Since most freshmen athletes are 18 years of age, it may not be surprising to find that many are not aware of or do not effectively cope when confronted with an inordinate amount of stress. However, they are often aware of feelings such as loneliness, homesickness, discouragement, self-doubt, and a

general feeling that no one cares about them. These feelings, in combination with the young athletes' limited life experience and ability to cope with such stressors, are often expressed through self-defeating behaviors which typically increase the level of stress rather than diminishing it. Consequently, the self-defeating behaviors, and concomitant feelings, create more stress and make it more difficult to be productive in or out of the classroom.

According to Barrow and Prosen (1981) and Selye (1956, 1974), people initially respond to stressors with a "fight" or "flight" response, followed by a stage of resistance or adaptation, during which physical and/or psychological malfunctioning may occur. Freshmen athletes often expend a significant amount of time and energy attempting to change or resist people, events, and things over which they have no control. They may flee from stressors in their lives through avoidance and escape behaviors: alcohol and drug misuse, sexual activity, not attending classes, excessive sleeping, transferring or dropping out, and partying. Freshmen athletes' responses to stress conditions, therefore, appear to be limited to the "fight or flight" responses suggested by Barrow and Prosen (1981) and Selye (1956, 1974).

Fight Responses

The fight response among student-athletes is more common in the athletic realm than it is in the academic one. Examples of the fight response include verbal arguments and disagreements with coaches and, to a lesser extent, complaining about the coaching staff, teammates, training-table, practice, workouts or weight-lifting, etc. More extreme fight responses often occur during the athletes' free time, outside the athletic realm, and are exemplified by physical fights at bars or parties, and damage to personal belongings of others, dormitory furniture, doors, and community property in general. Athletes who cope with stress in this manner are typically labeled by the coaching staff as being recruiting disappointments, troublemakers, renegades, mavericks, poor practice or game-players, and as having bad attitudes.

Even though attention and some relief from stress may be obtained through such self-defeating behaviors, the consequences are usually negative and punitive, and the student-athlete's stress and feelings of inadequacy are intensified.

Flight Responses

The flight response is typically more pervasive among athletes than the fight response, and it is particularly apparent in the academic realm. At some point, almost all freshmen athletes cope with their fears of failure and academic inadequacy by simply avoiding anything related to the classroom. Examples include not attending class, going to class late, not studying, not attending study-table, not doing or turning in assignments, and withdrawing from classes. More extreme examples of the flight response consist of excessive drinking, partying, television watching, sleeping, and withdrawal

into themselves. Some athletes avoid or escape the stressors by transferring, quitting their sport, or dropping out of college altogether.

Student-athletes often mask their feelings of inadequacy and flight responses by acting "as if" they do not care about academic performance, not attempting to succeed academically, complaining about professors and classes, and distorting—to themselves and others—how well they are doing academically. The low graduation rate of college athletes, as well as the number of freshmen football players who are below a 2.0 overall grade-point average at the conclusion of their freshman year, further exemplifies the ineffectiveness of this coping behavior for most athletes.

As a result of their self-defeating avoidance behaviors, many student-athletes get themselves into an academic "hole" from which they do not escape. In the process of avoiding the stressors through flight responses, many athletes thus jeopardize their academic and athletic careers.

Summary

The article discusses the impact of high-level stress conditions on the academic and athletic performance of student-athletes during their first year of college. Specific athletic and academic stressors are presented to provide readers with information that may facilitate their ability to identify and understand athletes who are particularly ineffective in coping with stress and experiencing difficulty in the academic/athletic transition to college.

A more general intent is to reframe the perceptions others may have about the self-defeating behaviors manifested by many freshmen athletes. If we, and others, understand that high-level stress conditions may be related to the dismal academic performances and self-defeating behaviors of freshmen athletes, perhaps we also will be in a position to develop the support programs and systems to facilitate their ability to cope with the stress and transition to college. Such understanding is the first step in enhancing student-athletes' academic and athletic performance.

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