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NCAA DI Student-Athletes' Understanding of and Attitudes Toward Mental Performance Services

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NCAA DI Student-Athletes' Understanding of and Attitudes Toward Mental Performance
Services

by

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ABSTRACT

Mental performance services are designed to assist student-athletes with psychological challenges affiliated with performance (McHenry et al., 2022). Currently, only 65 NCAA DI athletic institutions employ a psychological provider, with only 23.2% of those being mental performance consultants (MPCs; Jones et al., 2022). As student athletes are aware of the mental demand of sport (Bemiller & Wrisberg, 2011) and the NCAA begins to bring awareness to the importance of the mental well-being of the athlete (NCAA Transformational Committee, 2023), it is important to understand student athletes' attitudes toward these services. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to learn about NCAA DI athletes' understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services. Nine NCAA DI student-athletes (6 females, 3 males) participated in semi-structured interviews where information was gathered about their sport background, their understanding of mental performance services, and their attitudes toward these services. Using thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2019) three themes were constructed based on participants' responses: (a) influences and experiences of participation in NCAA DI athletics, (b) knowledge of services and characteristics desired of professionals, and (c) a general unawareness of mental performance services. In response to these results and recent NCAA statements, it is suggested that the NCAA educate and disseminate more information about mental performance services and athletic departments consider allocating resources and hiring more MPCs either full-time, part-time, or on a contracted basis to meet student-athletes' needs.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my undergraduate thesis to my parents, Bob and Robyn Rudisill, who have done nothing but support me in my academic journey at the University of Southern Mississippi. I love y'all, and I could not be more thankful for all that you have done and continue to do for me.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIMS	Athletic Identity Measurement Scale
ATSPPH	Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Short Form
ATSPPHS	Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale
ATSSPCQ	Attitudes Toward Sport Psychology Consultation Questionnaire
DI	Division I
EAC-B	Expectations About Counseling Brief Form
GRSC-A	Gender Role Conflict-Athletic Identity
LMHPs	Licensed Mental Health Professional
MPC	Mental Performance Consultant
NCAA	National Collegiate Athletic Association
SPA-R	Sport Psychology Attitudes Revised

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division (DI) student-athletes are tasked with managing academic, sport, and social responsibilities (NCAA, n.d.). This can cause student-athletes to experience stress as they attempt to balance many different responsibilities. In addition to managing these responsibilities, student-athletes often experience performance pressures that come with playing at the highest collegiate level of sport (Bemiller & Wrisberg, 2011). An important service that may help student-athletes manage their responsibilities while coping with performance pressures is mental performance services. Mental performance services are designed to assist student-athletes with psychological challenges affiliated with performance (McHenry et al., 2022). Some of those services include building confidence, managing anxiety and performance pressures, enhancing focus, and building cohesion within a team (Wrisberg et al., 2009). A professional that is trained to deliver mental performance services is a mental performance consultant (MPC) who has educational training in kinesiology and psychology (Jones et al., 2022; McHenry et al., 2022).

Although MPCs can assist student-athletes with various performance challenges, few are employed full-time within NCAA DI athletics (Jones et al., 2022). Jones and colleagues (2022) conducted a content analysis that examined the number of psychological professionals employed within NCAA DI athletics. They found that only 23 of 99 providers (23.2%) employed within NCAA DI athletic departments were MPCs (Jones et al., 2022). This number has declined over the last 10 years, when Hayden and colleagues (2013) last conducted a content analysis and found that 51 of 120 providers (48%) were MPCs working at the NCAA DI level. These numbers are concerning as it

illustrates that the number of MPCs within DI athletics are declining, which means many NCAA DI student-athletes are not having their mental performance needs met. Yet, over the last 7 years, there has been an increase in the number of licensed mental health providers hired to meet student-athletes' mental health needs in NCAA DI athletic departments (Jones et al., 2022). In 2016, the NCAA created a mental health initiative and called on NCAA athletic departments to hire more licensed mental health providers, but unfortunately, these increases did not occur for MPCs (NCAA, 2016). In actuality, many NCAA DI athletic departments are relying on licensed mental health providers (LMHPs) to meet the mental health and mental performance needs of student-athletes (Jones et al., 2022). During interviews with mental health practitioners, Eckenrod and colleagues (2022) revealed that LMHPs working in NCAA DI athletic departments often have little to no mental performance training and must first address individuals experiencing mental health challenges before their work in the mental performance realm. In short, these providers must prioritize the mental health of student-athletes, leaving many individuals experiencing mental performance challenges with no access to a professional trained to combat these issues (Eckenrod et al., 2022). Although it is excellent that more NCAA DI athletic departments are hiring LMHPs, they are missing an opportunity to provide student-athletes with mental performance services that could help improve both their performance and well-being.

On January 3, 2023, the NCAA Transformational Committee published a report highlighting areas of focus for the association. One area heavily emphasized was ensuring student-athletes' mental health needs are met (NCAA, 2023). Unfortunately, mental performance services were not mentioned as a committee priority. The NCAA is

continuing to ignore an important service that could benefit student-athletes and a professional that could serve as a member of the holistic student-athlete benefit model (NCAA, 2023). With mental performance services continually being excluded as an important resource, it is essential that more research is done to better understand individuals' perceptions, attitudes, understanding, and experiences with the services. Gathering this information could help in persuading the NCAA and DI athletic departments that do not employ an MPC to hire one to meet student-athletes' mental performance needs. Over the last 15 years, there have been some quantitative studies conducted to learn about how student-athletes at varying levels (i.e., high school and college athletes) perceive and react to mental performance services (see Wrisberg et al., 2009; Zakrajsek et al., 2007).

Overall, student-athletes held positive attitudes toward mental performance services and believed utilizing an MPC could ultimately help them improve their sport performance (Wrisberg et al., 2009). Although there have been some studies done in this realm, few studies to date have qualitatively explored student-athletes' understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services nor have researchers solely studied individuals at a NCAA DI institution that does not employ an MPC in their athletic department. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore NCAA DI student athletes' understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services at an institution that does not employ an MPC as a member of their athletic department support staff. It is hypothesized that student-athletes will have positive attitudes toward mental performance services but will be uncertain as to what mental performance services entail since they do not have access to an MPC. Gathering this information could help in

advocating for the hiring of more MPCs to meet the mental performance needs of student-athletes, especially if they hold positive attitudes toward the services and believe MPCs could be an asset to the athletic department support staff.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Most of the available literature pertaining to attitudes, perceptions, and understanding of mental performance services lies primarily within the realm of NCAA DI athletics. However, research on this topic has been relatively sparse throughout the past 30 years. Between 1992 (Van Raalte et al.) and 2022 (Jones et al.), to the researcher's knowledge, only nine research studies have examined the prevalence and usefulness of mental performance services. While observations have been made that mental performance services are being offered by a select number of athletic institutions, information pertaining to the understanding of and attitudes held by student-athletes is majorly under researched. This work began in the early 1990s when Van Raalte and colleagues (1992) explored the perceptions of athletes from two separate NCAA Division II universities. Within this study, 111 football players across the two NCAA Division II athletic institutions, were asked about their perceptions of ability based on their history with mental performance services. Researchers also asked participants to rank mental performance staff by their perceptive role along with their perceived impact (Van Raalte et al., 1992). Overall, Van Raalte and colleagues (1992) found that few participants had experiences with mental performance services, and they believed using those services may lead to athletes losing respect from their teammates. Additionally, these football athletes ranked providers low, which is likely due to their lack of experience and the stigma surrounding the utilization of services.

Almost ten years after Van Raalte and colleagues' (1992) study with NCAA DII football players, Blom and colleagues (2003) continued this research and examined high school athletes' perceptions of and preferences toward mental performance services.

Blom and colleagues (2003) took a qualitative approach and conducted focus groups with 65 varsity athletes who were asked to complete a background questionnaire prior to engage in focus groups that last between 30-45 minutes. Researchers revealed that these athletes held a higher degree of derogatory stigma towards mental performance services and it was more prevalent in male athletes compared to female athletes. Blom and colleagues' (2003) utilization of focus groups, containing 3-5 athletes in each group, may have affected the bias in participants' responses. Moreover, it can be concluded that while levels of stigma were exceedingly high within this population, almost all athletes acknowledged the need for and benefits of mental services for athletes, coaching staff, and individuals outside of the realm of sport (Blom et al., 2003).

Shortly after Blom and colleagues' (2003) study was conducted, Donahue and colleagues (2004) continued their exploration and quantitatively examined NCAA DI student-athletes compared to recreational athletes' perceptions. In 2004, Donahue and colleagues examined perceptions of sport psychology services. Approximately 124 athletes, 61 NCAA DI athletes and 63 recreational athletes agreed to participate in the study and were asked to complete a 50-item survey titled—Attitudes Toward Sport Psychology Consultation Questionnaire (ATSSPCQ)—that examined student-athletes' confidence in sport psychology consultations, personal openness to services, stigma tolerance, and cultural barriers to using services (Donahue et al., 2004). A unique aspect of this research was that Donahue and colleagues (2004) utilized specific scoring mechanisms determined by their background and experiences with sport, sport psychology interventions, and their individual coping skills. Alongside the ATSSPCQ survey, Donahue and colleagues (2004) randomly assigned each participant to one of two

interventions—a discussion of experience within sport or a discussion pertaining to sport psychology benefits. Interestingly, participating in a discussion pertaining to sport psychology benefits led to higher acknowledgement of the need for psychological services and higher confidence in the effectiveness of sport psychology consultations within the specific athletic population (Donahue et al., 2004). While reviewing benefits and delineating sport psychology services proved to be more effective in positively affecting athletes' opinions of mental services, Donahue and colleagues (2004) determined that this intervention is not entirely sufficient in preparing, educating, and persuading athletes to engage in help-seeking behaviors.

Martin (2005) continued this work and explored high school athletes' perceptions of the benefits and willingness to utilize mental performance services. Within Martin's (2005) study, 793 student-athletes (362 high school athletes, 431 collegiate athletes) agreed to participate and completed a version of the ATSSPCQ referred to as the SPA-R—Sport Psychology Attitudes Revised (SPA-R). The SPA-R assessed stigma tolerance, openness, cultural factors, and confidence in intervention methods of participating individuals (Martin, 2005). Martin's (2005) research showed delineation in opinions by gender in solely stigma tolerance and cultural preferences, finding that males were most likely to stigmatize and avoid sport psychology services. Furthermore, the researcher revealed that previous experience with psychological services in sport was not only increasing, in comparison to previous years, due to a higher number of providers, but also had an effect on confidence in mental performance services and openness of the athletes (Martin, 2005). In the same year, Watson (2005) published an article detailing help-seeking behaviors of NCAA DI athletes compared to non-athletes. Within Watson's

(2005) study, 135 NCAA DI student-athletes and 132 non-athletes were instructed to complete three surveys: The Expectations About Counseling Brief Form (EAC-B), The Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPHS), and a demographic questionnaire. The EAC-B examines participants' expectations of services through commitment, factors contributing to facilitation, expertise of the professional delivering these services, and nurturance. In contrast, the ATSPPHS measures the positive or negative attitudes that an individual has toward services (Watson, 2005). Watson (2005) discovered a smaller percentage of student athletes were less likely to engage in student counseling services compared to their non-athlete peers due to stigma presence and a lack of understanding from individuals outside of the sport world.

Several years later, Wrisberg and colleagues (2009) continued this research and assessed student-athletes' perceptions of and likelihood of participating in mental skills training. 2,440 NCAA DI student-athletes completed an online survey that asked questions to learn about their understanding of, perceptions of, and likelihood of participating in mental skills training. Past experiences with mental skills training, openness, cultural preferences, awareness of stigma, and several other factors were surveyed and given quantitative values for analysis (Wrisberg et al., 2009). Wrisberg and colleagues (2009) found that gender and cultural differences served as barriers to utilization of mental performance services. They determined that female athletes were more likely to utilize mental performance services and less likely to stigmatize these services (Wrisberg et al., 2009). Moreover, participants with previous experiences with mental performance services had higher levels of willingness to participate and better

perceptions of the effectiveness of interventions than participants with little to no experience with these services (Wrisberg et al., 2009).

Expanding on components of previous survey research, Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt (2010) utilized a self-report instrument examining gender identity, athletic identity, and attitudes toward seeking psychological assistance from a large pool of high-school football players. This research included 179 participants from two athletic institutions in the same competitive level that varied in age and cultural backgrounds (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2010). Several self-report measures were utilized that include Gender Role Conflict-Athletic Identity (GRSC-A), The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), and The Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Short Form (ATSPPH; Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2010). Despite common belief and data supported in other studies, this research showed no correlation between the population of student-athletes and their under-utilization of psychological services. Furthermore, gender role conflict in male athletes was shown to have a negative effect on openness to engage in services due to both confidentiality concerns and traditional stereotypes previously revealed (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2010; Wrisberg et al., 2009).

Green and colleagues (2012) continued the work of Wrisberg and colleagues (2009) and examined professional rugby players' attitudes toward sport psychology consulting and their view of psychology's role in the world of sport. Eleven professional rugby players from six different organizations participated in semi-structured interviews to gain a better understanding of their attitudes toward services (Green et al., 2012). Researchers found that these athletes had some awareness of the benefits of sport psychology services, and that both the attitudes held by teammates, coaching staff, and

significant others and previous experience with services were likely to influence their participation in the services (Green et al., 2012). It is important to note that the necessity of building rapport as a researcher—as seen in Green and colleagues’ approach—can directly correlate to the necessity of building rapport and embodying desired characteristics of a provider as a MPC for athletic populations. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that while all athletes acknowledged the potential benefit of improving mental skills and expressed positive attitudes toward sport psychology services, only one participant actively utilized the available resources (Green et al., 2012).

A review of literature over the last 30 years revealed that stigma related to services impacts student-athletes’ utilization at the youth, recreational, collegiate, and professional level (Donahue et al., 2004; Green et al., 2012; Martin, 2005; Watson, 2005; Wrisberg et al., 2009). With the little research conducted in this realm, there is a need for more work to be done to better understand student-athletes’ knowledge of an attitudes toward mental performance services. The little work that has been done predominantly utilized a quantitative methodological approach, which only provides a snapshot of what athletes perceive and know about mental performance services. Therefore, it was essential that a qualitative study be conducted to learn about collegiate athletes’ understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services. As stated before, within the NCAA, we have seen an increase in LMHPs being hired to help student-athletes’ with mental health challenges. Unfortunately, the number of MPCs employed in NCAA DI athletic departments has declined over the last nine years (Hayden et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2022). With the pressure to perform and the stakes higher than ever for NCAA DI student-athletes (e.g., NIL pressures), it is essential that we learn about their

understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services so we can better educate all parties involved within the athletic department (e.g., athletic administrators, coaches, support staff, student-athletes) about the benefits of the services, which could ultimately lead to the potential hiring of more MPCs.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

Qualitative Research

The purpose of this study was to learn about NCAA DI student-athletes' understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services. To learn about their understanding and attitudes, qualitative methods were used as they allow researchers to better understand the meaning behind experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Using this methodology allowed the researcher to be the instrument that collects the data rather than a survey instrument or questionnaire. As highlighted above, there have been some studies done that examined student-athletes' understanding of and attitudes toward services. However, to the researcher's knowledge, few studies to date took a qualitative approach, using the researcher as the instrument to gather descriptive, detailed information about student-athletes' understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services. This is why a qualitative methodological approach was adopted for this project.

Since the researcher was interested in learning about individuals' understanding of and attitudes towards a particular service, this aligned with the goals of qualitative research, which are focused on understanding how an experience an individual has influence the way they view or interpret a situation or phenomenon. In this case, it was learning about their understanding of and attitudes about mental performance services, which would stem from a potential interaction, experience, and/or situation they had previously encountered (Merriam, 2009).

Research Paradigm

When utilizing qualitative research methods, a research paradigm that connects to the approach the researcher adopts must be selected. In qualitative research, a paradigm is

considered a “lens” that the researcher adopts to help organize their understanding, beliefs, and how those could influence the data collection and analysis procedures (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Although there are many different paradigms a researcher can choose from, one paradigm seemed to best align with this research that aimed to learn about NCAA DI student-athletes’ understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services. A constructivist paradigm was selected as its principals best align with the study purpose. A constructivist paradigm operates under the notion that there is more than one reality and that individuals’ realities are constructed based on their experiences in the social world and how they interpret those lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To learn about individuals’ experiences, co-construction must occur, which means that the researcher and the participants interact to help paint a clearer picture of their world view. In the case of this research, the researcher interacted with NCAA DI student-athletes and asked them questions to learn about their understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services. The participants, by answering questions, and the researcher, as the instrument asking them, worked together in allowing the co-construction of meaning to occur (Lincoln et al., 2011).

The Interpretive Interview

Open-ended interview questions were required to help the researcher engage in meaningful conversation with the participants about their understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). More specifically, a semi-structured interpretive interview approach was used to gather this data. Using this approach allowed the researcher to gather detailed and descriptive data from participants to better comprehend their understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance

services (Longhurst, 2003). Using this approach required the researcher to (a) explore participants' experiences, (b) be flexible while engaging with the participant, and (c) build a connection with the individual (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012). To meet these requests, the researcher developed a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A) where open-ended questions were included that focused on gathering background information about student-athletes sport experience before asking them questions about their understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services. The semi-structured nature of the interview guide, which aligns with the interpretive interview approach, allowed the researcher to ask detailed questions while also following up with probing questions, which are designed to get more information about a specific topic or experience (Sringer, 1999). The same semi-structured interview guide was used for all interviews so that the researcher could look across all participants to make comparisons and establish commonalities and differences between their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Participant Criteria, Recruitment, and Demographic Information

Prior to participant recruitment, IRB approval (see Appendix B) was obtained. Following IRB approval, individuals were recruited to participate within this study. NCAA DI student-athletes who were at least 18 years of age and who attended a university that does not employ an MPC were recruited to participate. While there was no current access to an MPC who solely provides mental performance services, this NCAA DI institution employed a LMHP. Participants were recruited randomly across campus through recruitment flyers (see Appendix C), speaking in a variety of college courses where information was provided about the study, and through snowball sampling.

Snowball sampling is when participants refer others to the research due to limited access to this population by the researcher (Naderifar et al., 2017). When student-athletes made contact with the researcher, she confirmed that they were an athlete at the institution and over the age of 18 before sending them information about the study. No participant was turned away as they all met these requirements.

A pre-scripted email response thread (see Appendix D) was utilized as the study information communication method. Ten participants engaged in semi-structured one-on-one interviews. However, only 9 were included in the thematic analysis procedures. One participant was excluded due to past experience at an NCAA DI athletic institution that provided access to mental performance services for student-athletes. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 23 ($M = 20.67$; $SD = 1.15$) and their years participating within their primary sport ranged from 7 to 17 ($M = 12.89$; $SD = 3.66$). The participants included six student-athletes that self-identified as female and three student-athletes that self-identified as male. Four different sports were represented that included basketball, soccer, track and field, and softball. Of the nine participants, three self-identified as Caucasian, two self-identified as African-American, two self-identified as mixed-race (Caucasian and Asian; Caucasian and African American), and one self-identified as 'other'.

Pre-and-Post Data Collection Procedures

Prior to beginning data collection, my thesis advisor and I, the researcher, participated in a bracketing interview to assist in identifying any existing bias within myself and the interview guide. Without identification, this bias could potentially affect participants' responses and the researchers' probing questions during data collection (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Following the bracketing interview adjustments were made

to the wording of two questions, and the question order was restructured. Once the adjustments to the interview guide were complete, the researcher engaged in a pilot interview with an NCAA DI student-athlete meeting the same criteria as participants within this study. The pilot interview served to identify how participants would understand, interpret, and answer the questions from the interview guide (Barriball & While, 1994). Following the pilot interview, my thesis advisor and I listened to the audio-recording to see if any additional changes need to be made based on the participants' responses to the questions. Following this process, no additional changes were made to the interview guide, and participant recruitment began.

Prior to each interview, participants were required to read and sign an informed consent (see Appendix E). Interviews were conducted either in-person ($n=1$) or by phone call ($n=9$) and were audio-recorded using both a tape recorder and QuickTime Player on an Apple Laptop to ensure accurate and usable audio-recording for each interview. At the beginning of each interview, the participant was informed of the audio-recording and consented to it prior to the device being turned on. Before turning the device on, the researcher explained how any identifying information would not be included and would be changed to a pseudonym or phrase. The length of each interview, and the resulting audio recording, ranged from a length of 10.90 minutes to 33.07 minutes ($M = 20.43$; $SD = 7.10$). Following the collection of all participant interviews, each audio-recording was sent to a transcription company, titled Rev, and transcribed verbatim. When I received the transcription back from Rev, I carefully read through each transcript to ensure all the information was there and to de-identify any existing information that was still present. Following this process, each transcript was sent via email to each participant for member-

checking (see Appendix D). Member checking allows participants to review their statements, alter phrasing, and add context where they see fit (Cho & Trent, 2016; Patton, 2015). Participants were given 14 days to review their transcripts and provide any feedback. No feedback was received. Before beginning data analysis, my thesis advisor and I assigned pseudonyms to each participant.

Data Analysis and Triangulation

Following the completion of data collection, interview transcription, and the 14-day member checking window, thematic analysis procedures were adopted to identify patterns between participants and better understand commonalities and differences across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Popularized by Clarke and Braun (2013), the six phases of conducting a thematic analysis include (a) familiarization, (b) coding, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing the themes, (e) defining themes, and (f) writing up the themes. First, my thesis advisor and I individually read through the transcripts, making note of anything that stood out to us. During this process, I used a researcher journal where I took notes about the interviews, highlighted any commonalities and/or differences I was seeing, and kept my biases in check (Birks et al., 2008). During phase two, my thesis advisor and I began coding data in which we followed an inductive approach, meaning, we coded using the participants words within the code (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After completing phase two, we engaged in phase three, which required us to look through the codes we individually generated and begin highlighting commonalities across participants. During this phase, my thesis advisor and I met to develop themes and subthemes depicting similarities between participants. In phase four, we collectively reviewed themes and subthemes and continued to refine the thematic

structure. Lastly, during phases five and six, we defined the themes and subthemes and I found quotes to support the themes and subthemes. After finalizing the thematic structure (see Appendix F), I began writing up the themes and subthemes, which will be produced for publication purposes.

To verify findings, the process of triangulation was engaged in which is employing multiple viewpoints to ensure consistent research findings across a variety of materials (Stake, 2005). Within this research study, my thesis advisor, my researcher journal, and I served as the three elements to triangulate the data. My thesis advisor served as my critical friend, where she engaged in the six phases of the thematic analysis procedures to help ensure my biases did not influence the collection, analysis, or reporting of findings (Foulger, 2010). Additionally, using a critical friend helped to provide different perspectives on the data in addition to my researcher journal where I made note of anything that stood out in the interviews including commonalities and differences I noticed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Following thematic analysis of all interview transcriptions, three themes were constructed: (a) influences and experiences of collegiate athletes' participation in NCAA DI athletics, (b) knowledge of mental performance services and characteristics desired of MPCs, and (c) unawareness of mental performance services. All names associated with quotes are randomized pseudonyms my thesis advisor and I selected for each participant.

Theme 1: Influences and Experiences of Collegiate Athletes' Participation in NCAA DI Athletics

As a result of analyzing participant interviews, the first theme constructed focuses on the influences and experiences of collegiate athletes' participation in NCAA DI athletics. Based on the responses of each student-athlete, a number of factors affected their participation with sport, both initially and collegiately. Based on the similar responses gathered from each participant three sub-themes were created: (a) family influence, (b) balancing responsibilities, and (c) community aspect of sport.

Family Influence

Athletes are often drawn to sport participation in a number of different ways, and within this study, participants shared the role family members played in their participation in athletics. While some athletes experienced encouragement from family members to participate, other athletes—with family who served as coaches or had an extensive background in a specific sport—experienced a pressure to participate. For example, Alex explained how his mom enjoyed running and believed he would too, so the next thing he knew, “she was putting me in a running club”. Alex's experience focused more on his mom's positive experience in sport, which is a bit different from

other participants, like Jenny, who engaged in sport for a different reason. Jenny shared that her “parents wanted me, my brother to do sports growing up”, which is why she got involved in her sport. George experienced something similar and said, “when you’re a kid, your parents just throw you into sports, that’s kind of how I got started playing.” Responses like Alex’s, George’s, and Jenny’s show how parents placing their kids into sports influences their collegiate trajectory. On the flip side, some participants experienced a pressure to follow in their parents’ sport footsteps. For example, Ryan explained how his “dad was a high school basketball coach...so I really grew up playing basketball.” Similarly, Jessica shared that her “mom and dad actually played basketball in college” and followed that up stating how her “mom and dad coached basketball at my high school.” Therefore, she felt the need to play. Ryan and Jessica both experienced increased internal, unintentional pressure to participate because of their parents’ previous or current involvement in the sport. Overall, the majority of student-athletes within this study experienced some form of family influence toward their eventual participation in NCAA DI athletics.

Balancing Responsibilities

Needless to say, there is a difference in high school and collegiate sport in many ways. The change in environment, responsibilities, and intensity of athletics in NCAA DI sports proved difficult for the participants either at the outset of change or as a barrier to their performance. One major balancing act participants explained was the physical demand of collegiate sports. Thomas highlighted this and said, “I’m doing much more intense workouts than I did in high school” while George echoed this sentiment stating that “it’s a lot quicker [the sport speed], a lot faster, practice is just more intense.”

Another balancing act that proved challenging was the responsibilities and pressures that come with being a student and athlete at the DI level. Jessica elaborated on this and said:

So, it can get very hard. It's very mentally challenging. You got everyone screaming at you all different angles, and all for the good. They want you, just do better, but it's a demanding sport, as well, on your body. And so, it can be very challenging and hard.

Alex agreed with Jessica's description of demands sharing that there is "more pressure" at the collegiate level while Sarah echoed his response and added that collegiate sport is "way more demanding."

In addition to balancing responsibilities related to physical demand, participants discussed challenges in balancing their academic and social lives in addition to their sport responsibilities. For example, George shared that he "struggled balancing everything [academic, sport, and social responsibilities] at first." Some participants went on to say how they had limited time to connect with others outside of academic and sport responsibilities. Sarah explained that "we [she and her teammates] don't really have time to do that [on being involved]. So, it's hard to make friends socially outside of the team and maybe other sports." Ryan further supported Sarah's claim, stating that collegiate sport is "a lot more of a time commitment", which leads to limited time to engage in other activities. Overall, becoming a collegiate athlete meant an increase in not just physical demands and responsibilities related to sport but also academic and social requirements.

Community Aspect of Sport

The perception of athletes toward the community and support system that they had available to them was a primary influence of participants' initiation and continuation in NCAA DI athletics. Student-athletes reported feeling comfort and accountability while receiving support from their team, which helped increase enjoyment in their sport. When talking about their sport experience, student-athletes often highlighted their team relationships, interactions, and experiences that led to their positive sport experience.

Jessica shared her positive experiences stating:

My highlights have definitely been just going on trips with them [teammates], making such a great connection with them [teammates and coaches]. And it's so much different than a friendship to me because you're going through, I guess you would say, hardships with them [teammates], but you're also with them at the really good times. So, you create these awesome bonds that you'll remember for the rest of your life.

The community surrounding an athlete, as implied by Jessica, plays a large role in the support that they feel. Although community can have a positive impact on the experience of a student-athlete, it can also have a negative impact. Bailey elaborated on this said:

But my overall experience there [at DI university] in terms of athletics was not very good. When I was a player on the team, the coaches were not good people and after I decided to enter the portal, my coaches didn't help me even try to find a new school at all.

The quality of coaching and team relationships, as supported by participants' opinions and experiences, largely impacted athletes and their physical and mental performance.

One way that athletes were positively impacted physically and mentally was related to strong teammate relationships. Lauren highlighted this stating, “our teammates are great; my teammates are great. Just being around them obviously makes me feel better [physically and mentally].” In support of Lauren’s comments, George shared that “you can’t accomplish things individually [in sport and academics] unless you have your other teammates and your people out there with you.” Community plays an important role in student-athletes’ experiences and could, ultimately, make or break their collegiate academic and sport career.

Theme 2: Knowledge of Mental Performance Services and Characteristics Desired of MPCs

Participants acknowledged the importance of psychological support and the need for these services related to sport performance. Although participants acknowledged the need for a psychological professional solely focused on sport performance, most had little knowledge or understanding of mental performance services. Participants’ responses led to the development of three sub-themes: (a) student athletes’ acknowledgment of the benefits of mental performance services, (b) desired characteristics of an MPC, and (c) confusion between mental performance and mental health.

Students-Athletes’ Acknowledgement of the Benefits of Mental Performance Services

Student-athletes shared the physical and mental challenges in balancing responsibilities and engaging in sport at the highest collegiate level. These challenges led student-athletes to acknowledge the need for more support staff to meet the psychological demands of sport. To further discuss this topic, participants were asked about their perceptions of mental performance services, and the majority of student-athletes had

positive opinions on the potential benefit of these services. For example, Jenny talked about how student-athletes have a lot going on and shared how important “the mental game was,” but she also states that “everything is really hard [balancing school and sport] and you never know what’s going on with their personal lives.” Expanding on Jenny’s discussion, Thomas shared how athletes “feel like sometimes we can get in our head, and we start doubting ourselves and we might start comparing ourselves to others, and why isn’t this happening for us when we’re putting the same amount of work” and acknowledged that having services to help would be “beneficial.”

Because student-athletes shared how they often “get in their own heads,” they believed having mental performance services available would help them with this challenge. For instance, Alex said, ‘I feel like a good sports psychologist could help to not having those barriers [mental challenges] in the head.’ With participants acknowledging the benefits, Jessica believed it was the universities’ responsibility to provide mental performance services and said:

I do feel like mental health performances [referring to mental performance services] should be more available to student athletes, and I think it is a very big part [of the athletic experience] . Because I feel like sometimes, student athletes are getting shoved under the rug.

Within her statement, Jessica identifies the importance of mental support for athletes and the lack of support that athletes currently receive. George’s further acknowledgment of the collegiate athlete’s psychological struggle and of the benefit that mental performance services could potentially provide is demonstrated when he stated, “there's people that desperately need it [mental performance services], and I think it's a good thing to have.

Good's probably not even a good term. I think it's great to have. He followed up by stating, “that there's a lot of people that would use [mental performance service] just if it's there.” He identifies not only the student’s awareness of the need for these services, but also how his university does not have them available.

Desired Characteristics of MPC

Participants in this study acknowledged the need for mental performance services and believed having them could positively impact student-athletes’ experiences. When discussing the needs, participants shared characteristics they believed an MPC should have. For example, Jenny believed an MPC should be “approachable” while being held “accountable and having sufficient “motivation.” Sarah shared that the provider being “trustworthy and loyal and being focused on people as individuals” was most important to her if she were to seek out an MPC. Similarly, Ryan stated, “they [the MPC] need to be very understanding, empathetic, and just come at it from all different angles to where they can try to understand what the person's feeling.”

Participants desired for an MPC to be trustworthy, motivated, accountable, person-focused, and approachable but they also preferred they have sport experience. Bailey explained this stating, “I just feel like if you've gone through experiences and know how to deal with it and think you could help other people [when discussing characteristics of an MPC]”. Alex echoed Bailey’s sentiments, explaining how she preferred an MPC who “had a background of sports.” Student-athletes continued to reiterate the importance of an MPC being relatable, understanding, and approachable as they felt having these qualities would make them more comfortable in seeking assistance.

Overall, MPC characteristics could potentially play a role in the likelihood of student-athletes seeking out the services.

Confusion Between Mental Performance and Mental Health

Echoed throughout participant discussions was confusion between mental performance and mental health services. Student-athletes often used mental performance and mental health synonymously when discussing the services. This inconsistency is likely due to a lack of information and limited exposure to mental performance services. For example, when asked about available mental performance services at their current institution, Lauren responded “we have a mental health coach for our team, and our coaches are mental health certified. I don't know what that means, but they just tell us to go see our advisor if we need any help.” This illustrates the uncertainty of how mental performance services differ from mental health. Ryan further demonstrated this uncertainty when he explained that when he thinks of mental performance, he “thinks of mental health. If I have problems with my mental health, there's services that I could go to and help me get back to where I need to be to perform where I could.” Most participant responses—when asked to explain mental performance services—were vague or defined mental health rather than mental performance. To further support this point, Thomas described mental performance services as “making sure that you are okay, or aren't depressed or have mental stuff going on.” George, on the other hand described them as “varying from anything, issues that you're dealing with at home, issues that you're dealing with in the classroom, issues that you're dealing with your family, girlfriend, it doesn't matter.” Other participants, namely, Sarah, Jessica, Jenny, and Alex, utilize the phrase “mental health” several times within their respective interviews when discussing mental

performance services. Overall, there was confusion as to what mental performance services entail and when asked to discuss them, participants often described them as mental health services.

Theme 3: Unawareness of Mental Performance Services

Based on participants' responses, there is an overwhelming lack of knowledge about mental performance services, what they entail, and how they could be useful.

Participant responses related to mental performance service led to four sub-themes being constructed: (a) stigma associated with mental performance, (b) lack of information and conversations from coaching staff about available resources, (c) more emphasis on mental health, and (d) insufficient resources at current institution.

Stigma Associated with Mental Performance

Presently, there are several factors that student-athletes cited that prevented them from engaging in help-seeking behaviors. The presence of stigma and stereotypes associated with mental performance services influenced student-athletes' openness to seek out and participate in these services. While the majority of participants initially saw mental performance as beneficial to the well-being of student-athletes, almost all of the participants also identified common stigmas to help-seeking behaviors that, aware of or not, impacted their perception of these services. The most commonly mentioned stigma toward mental performance services was the distinction between 'mentally weak' and 'mentally strong.' For example, Lauren said, "I guess in terms of sports, I guess that you could say they would think that they're perceived as being weak and they probably wouldn't want to seek it out because of that." Lauren's statement is further supported by Sarah when she explains that "all athletes want to prove how strong they are physically

and mentally. So, if someone looks like they need help or they want help [seeking mental performance services], then it's like they're not as strong as they want people to think that they are.”

Based on participant responses, athletes' determination of being 'mentally weak' or 'mentally strong' seem to lie in their ability to cope with struggle and/or challenges by themselves. Alex clarified this statement and said, “We always have to perform, we always have to show how strong we are,” which leads student-athletes not to seek assistance when experiencing challenges. Bailey shared how she feared the opinions of others, stating if you seek help, “you're perceived as weak for being either low confidence or for whatever reason it is that you're going to see them [an MPC].” Based on participants' perceptions and experiences, it seems as though a stigma is still associated with the seeking out and utilizing mental performance services, which is a contributing factor as to why more student-athletes said they would not engage in the services, if they were available.

Lack of Information and Conversations from Coaching Staff about Available Resources

The relationship between coaching staff and student-athletes contributes greatly to their participation in NCAA DI athletics. And as we know from previous research, coaches influence rates of participation. Therefore, it can be assumed they also influence opinions toward mental performance services and stigmas. With these participants, they reported having received little information and a lack of conversation about mental performance services from their coaching staff. Jessica further illustrated this when she explained how “it's really just not even talked about really [mental performance services],

other than between the team, maybe here and there. But it's really not talked about. They're great people [the coaching staff], and they're very loving. It's just not talked about. It's hidden.” Similar to Jessica’s opinion, Bailey explained how “they’ve told me about her [the LMHP] and who she is, but they haven’t really done anything [encouraged or provided resources about the provider].” Furthermore, the majority of information that student-athletes who participated within the study had pertaining to mental performance services was vague. To further support the lack of information provided to student-athletes, George shared how:

The only one that I know of, which I know for a fact that I don't know of everything that we have [psychological resources], because I'm sure there's a lot of things that we have that I don't know of, but the one thing that I do know of is that Ms., I believe her name is [Professional’s Name], and I assume she still works here.

Based on participants’ responses, their coaching staff provided information about where to find the resources but never fully explained what they entailed. Ryan echoed this sentiment explaining that “they've told us about these people [psychological providers] or places we could go [centers on campus] to if we're ever struggling mentally. I can't think of the exact names, but we've definitely heard where and who to go to if that's ever a problem for us.” With limited information provided, student-athletes are often uncertain about the resources, which, in some cases, leads them to avoid the services completely. Lauren shared that “a lot of the times you don't know, and a lot of student athletes don't even know what it is [mental performance services]. So, I think it's

important for them to be educated and informed and have a person like that [an MPC], that tells them what it is and can help them with it .”

More Emphasis on Mental Health

When asked about mental performance services, student-athletes focused most of their attention towards mental health services and in some cases, used the term mental health in the place of mental performance. For example, when prompted about the benefits of mental performance services, Jessica responded, “something that would know about people's mental health and know how to help them is what I would think.”

Participants continually referenced ‘mental health’ as important to address. Lauren supported this sentiment saying, “because you're expected to hold yourself at certain standards, I think it's easy for mental health in student athletes to decline really quickly”, while Sarah refers to the fact that “we don’t really have much concerning mental health” when discussing resources available to student-athletes. Sarah later mentions:

I think it could really help athletes with their mental health because a lot of the effects of athletes being maybe depressed or sad or anxious about stuff comes from their sports because their lives revolve around it.

Mental performance services pertain solely to the athlete and their performance related to sport; while anxiety and depression may affect performance, they are issues dealt with and treated by LMHPs. While mental health does affect the student-athlete, Sarah’s dependence and emphasis on mental health identifies a lack of information between the differing services for student-athletes. When referencing her openness to participation within mental performance services, Bailey explained how “I've also seen counselors and therapists for non-athletics related reasons”, referencing mental health

therapies and treatments in the context of mental performance services and athletics. This statement pertaining to the confusion between services may potentially lead to a lack of openness in participation due to a lack of understanding.

Insufficient Resources at Current Institution

Participants acknowledged having insufficient resources to meet the varying needs of student-athletes at their respective institution. To support this claim, Sarah, when asked about current opportunities to participate in mental performance services, responded “current opportunities? I don’t really know of any.” She went on later to introduce an interesting perspective on the accessibility of psychological services at her current institution stating, “I think that there's just other sports that they're bigger priorities in a sense and they also get funded more, so they get more access to mental performance coaches and services and stuff.” Essentially, Sarah shared how certain sports have more opportunities to access different resources, which is why she believes the current resources are insufficient and therefore, more are needed to meet all student-athletes’ needs. Furthermore, several participants brought attention to the fact that their current athletic institution only employs one mental health professional. Bailey discussed “we have one sports psychologist, or I think that's what her title is.” Similarly, George explains “I know [Professional’s name], I believe, is a lady that has come and talked to us.” Both of these student-athlete responses identify the awareness of employment of a singular mental health professional within their institution. While this institution employs more resources than 188 other NCAA DI athletic institutions who provide no permanent psychological support staff for student-athletes, a singular individual cannot,

as Sarah stated, “equally divide their time or provide adequate care to, such a large variety of athletes alone” (Jones et al., 2022).

Jessica further supported this notion by talking about the limited opportunity to see the psychological professional in the athletic department. Jessica said, “we do have a mental... she’s a therapist, mental health lady, but she only comes in maybe once every two months. And even when we’re in the season, it wasn’t that much.” In addition to highlighting the limited resources available to student-athletes, participants believed engaging in psychological services should be mandatory, but acknowledged that with the current support staff structure, it could not be done. Ryan said:

I think if there was a mandatory time for anyone to go, if they made it mandatory for everyone to check up at a certain amount of, every certain few weeks or something like that, and just to see where everyone’s at mentally throughout the season, because it [athletics] can take a toll on your body and mental and your health throughout the year.

Within this dialogue, Ryan addresses the necessity of psychological services for student-athletes.. By mandating and encouraging psychological services for their student-athletes, coaches negate current stigmas and avoidances of these services. The perspective of requiring student-athletes to engage in psychological services is further discussed by Jessica who stated, “so why not make us be required to go and meet with a mental health performance service at least maybe once a month, or once a week, or whatever those things are?”. The idea of requiring mental performance and/or mental health services for these athletes examines the intersection between coach encouragement and information-provision, athlete openness, and the resources available at the current institution to

provide these services. As there are insufficient resources at the participants' current institution, the athletic department may unintentionally be creating barriers to student access to mental performance services.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to learn about NCAA DI student-athletes' understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services. Although researchers have previously examined student-athletes' perceptions of mental performance services, to our knowledge, no study to date qualitatively explored NCAA DI student-athletes' who did not have access to an MPC understanding of and attitudes toward services. From these interviews, researchers revealed that student-athletes believe there is a need for having MPCs available but reported being unaware of what MPCs did, yet they shared the little information they did have about mental performance services and outlined essential characteristics they would want MPCs to have.

The majority of participants within this study identified the need for psychological support, especially at the NCAA DI level. Participants acknowledged many different barriers when trying to perform at the highest level that included managing stress, balancing responsibilities, and increasing sport training load. The findings are consistent with Bemiller and Wrisberg (2011) who found that student-athletes face many different pressures to perform at the highest level, which ultimately impacts their psychological health and well-being. Participants believed having an MPC available could help in mitigating those barriers/challenges, which could help them in improving their sport and academic performance.

Although student-athletes believed having an MPC available would be beneficial, most reported they were unsure what mental performance services entailed, with many of them referring to mental performance and mental health synonymously. Their lack of understanding and confusion between mental performance and mental health could be

due to not having access to educational information about mental performance services and there not being an MPC on staff in their athletic department. This finding is consistent with other research that has been done in that individuals, whether they are coaches (Eckenrod et al., 2023), student-athletes (Van Raalte et al., 1992), or support staff (Zakrajsek et al., 2018) can experience confusion between mental performance and mental health services.

Although student-athletes reported being unsure as to what mental performance services entailed, most did acknowledge that their athletic department employed an LMHP. Because they only had access to an LMHP, this may explain why they often confused mental performance and mental health services or viewed them as the same. Even though participants knew there was a provider on staff, most had minimal interactions with them and were not fully aware of the work they do for the athletic department. Therefore, it is encouraged that the athletic department provide more education and information about the work of the LMHP through departmental seminars at the beginning of each academic semester or by distributing flyers to their coaching staffs to educate about mental health services student-athletes have access to. Additionally, it is recommended that information be highlighted to clarify the services LMHPs do not provide. This would be a time to highlight the differences between mental performance and mental health services so that individuals had information about how the services differed and how each service could benefit them specifically.

However, if financially feasible, athletic departments that do not employ an MPC are encouraged to allocate resources to hire one to meet the mental performance needs of student-athletes. Having both an MPC and LMHP could allow for more student-athletes'

differing psychological needs to be met. With the NCAA Transformational Committee (NCAA, 2023), making a large push to better meet the physical and psychological needs of student-athletes, hiring an MPC could help in addressing this request. However, if the athletic department does not have the financial resources to hire a full-time MPC, it is recommended that one is hired on a part-time basis. If hiring an individual part-time is not an option, Athletic Administrators should consider finding an MPC locally or virtually, on a contract basis to assist with the mental performance needs of their student-athletes.

With the participants not having access to an MPC, it seems obvious why they had limited knowledge about their services. However, student-athletes reported that they had few interactions with the LMHP that was employed in their athletic department, as they felt there was a stigma attached to seeking psychological assistance. This finding is consistent with previous researchers who revealed that a stigma was still associated with seeking mental performance and/or mental health services (Van Raalte et al., 1992; Wrisberg et al., 2009). However, researchers have found that if student-athletes had previous exposure to psychological services, they were more willing to utilize them in the future and the stigma once associated with the services often declined (Wrisberg et al., 2009).

To increase exposure, education, and opportunity, another step must be taken in addition to the athletic department providing information to better expose student-athletes to the services. Donahue and colleagues (2004) encouraged providers to better explain their services, delineate between mental performance and mental health, and provide examples of when an individual would need to see an MPC compared to an LMHP.

Therefore, it encouraged that providers, whether they are MPCs, LMHPs, or both allocate time to meet with coaches and support staff (e.g., athletic trainers) to educate them about their services and how they could assist student-athletes. Sharing this information could help coaches and support staff better understand what the services entail and could lead them to be more willing to refer student-athletes to an MPC, LMHP, or both. As revealed by Green and colleagues (2012), student-athletes are more open and willing to seek services when a coach or an athletic department stakeholder endorses the providers.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of the current study was the student-athletes that were recruited and participated in this research were from the same institution. Therefore, they all had access to the same information and resources, which may be why they all had limited knowledge about mental performance services. Another limitation of this research was that only four interscholastic sports were represented across the participants. Due to the timeframe of the data collection, this may have impacted the student-athletes in certain sports availability to participate in this study. Future researchers should consider interviewing student-athletes at universities that employ both an MPC and LMHP to learn about their perceptions of, attitudes towards, and experiences with these professionals. Furthermore, future researchers should consider having student-athletes who utilize MPCs assess service effectiveness and potential impacts on psychological well-being and performance.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the current study, student-athletes are uncertain as to what mental performance services entail. However, student-athletes believed that having

access to mental performance services could be beneficial in helping them manage the pressures and responsibilities of being an NCAA DI athlete. More resources and information are needed to better inform coaches, support staff, and student-athletes about mental performance services and how they differ from mental health. Lastly, with only 23.6% of NCAA DI institutions employing a full-time MPC, athletic departments are encouraged to examine the possibility of hiring more MPCs to better meet the mental performance needs of student-athletes.

APPENDIX A: Interview Guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE

NCAA DI Student-Athletes Understanding of and Attitudes Towards Mental Performance Services

Introduction:

- Greetings
- Informed Consent
- Permission for Recording

Background Questions:

First, I would like to ask you about your sport history and current role in your collegiate sport.

1. How did you first get involved in [state the sport they are involved in]?
2. What has your experience been like playing [state the sport they are involved in] at the collegiate level?
3. What have been some highlights of your collegiate career?
 - a. Could you please share some areas of difficulty you experienced during your collegiate career?

Understanding of Mental Performance Services:

4. First, I would like to learn about your current understanding of mental performance services. In your own words, could you please define mental performance services?
5. What, if any, information has been provided to you by your athletic department about mental performance services?
6. What experiences have you had with mental performance services?
7. What do you believe is the role of a professional delivering mental performance services?
 - a. What characteristics do you believe are necessary for someone to have who is delivering mental performance services?
 - b. What educational training do you believe is necessary for someone delivering mental performance services?

Attitudes Towards Mental Performance Services:

In this last section of the interview guide, I would like to gain an understanding of your attitudes toward mental performance services.

8. What attitudes do you hold towards mental performance services?
9. What opportunities at your current institution do you have to engage in mental performance services?
10. How do you feel student-athletes could benefit from having mental performance services available to them?
 - a. Are there any drawbacks to having mental performance services available to student-athletes?

11. How do your coaches influence your attitudes towards mental performance services?
12. How do your teammates influence your attitudes toward mental performance services?
13. How do athletic department support staff members (e.g., athletic trainers, strength and conditioning coaches) influence your attitudes toward mental performance services?
14. What, if any, stigmas do you feel are associated with mental performance services?
15. Is there anything else you would like to add to what we have talked about today?

16.

Demographics:

- Age
- Gender Identification
- Race
- Primary Sport
- Years Playing Primary Sport
- Academic Major
- Email Address

APPENDIX B: IRB Approval

Office of
Research Integrity



118 COLLEGE DRIVE #5116 • HATTIESBURG, MS | 601.266.6756 | WWW.USM.EDU/ORI

NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident submission on InfoEd IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 23-0055
PROJECT TITLE: NCAA DI Student-Athletes' Understanding of and Attitudes Toward Mental Performance Services
SCHOOL/PROGRAM: Kinesiology
RESEARCHERS: PI: Allison Rudisill
Investigators: Rudisill, Allison~Eckenrod, Morgan~
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved
CATEGORY: Expedited Category
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 13-Feb-2023 to 12-Feb-2024

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Donald Sacco".

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

APPENDIX C: Recruitment Flyer

The School of
Kinesiology
& **Nutrition**

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Participate in a voluntary research study to learn student-athletes' understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services.

This will be a qualitative interview lasting approximately 30-45 minutes.

This protocol has been approved by the USM IRB (#23-0055).

REQUIREMENTS:

- Division 1 student-athlete at USM
- Age 18 or older

BENEFITS:

- Gift-card for participation

CONTACT: allison.rudisill@usm.edu
(901)378-2911

APPENDIX D: Participation Emails

Participation Recruitment Email

Dear NCAA DI Student-Athlete,

My name is Allie Rudisill and I am a Junior Exercise Science major in the Honor's College at the University of Southern Mississippi. I am reaching out to ask if you will consider participating in my Honor's Thesis project that is focused on understanding NCAA DI student-athletes' understanding of and attitudes towards mental performance services. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and all information will be held in strict confidence. In other words, no references will be made in oral or written reports that could link your participation to the study. Additionally, this study has been approved by the University of Southern Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (protocol number).

I would greatly appreciate your participation. If you are willing to participate in the interview, please respond to this email and we will organize a time that is best for you. I anticipate the interview taking 30-45 minutes and can be conducted in-person or by telephone. If you agree to participate, you will receive a \$25.00 electronic gift card following the completion of the interview.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to email me (Allison.Rudisill@usm.edu) or my Honor's Thesis Advisor, Dr. Eckenrod (Morgan.Eckenrod@usm.edu). I look forward to hearing from you and learning more about your understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services.

Best,
Allie Rudisill

Email After Being Contacted Off of Flyer

Dear _____,

I received your email expressing interest in participating in my honor's thesis study that is focused on understanding NCAA DI student-athletes' understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services. Thank you for reaching out!

I am contacting you to see if we could schedule a date and time for us to speak about your understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services. I anticipate the interview taking 30-45 minutes and it can be done in-person or by telephone, please let me know in your return email which method you would prefer. Once the interview is completed, a \$25.00 electronic gift card will be emailed to you.

In the meantime, if you have any questions, please do not hesitate to email me (Allison.Rudisill@usm.edu) or my Honor's Thesis Advisor, Dr. Eckenrod (Morgan.Eckenrod@usm.edu). I look forward to speaking with you.

Best,
Allie Rudisill

Transcription Follow-Up Email

Dear _____,

My name is Allie Rudisill and I am reaching out to inform you that your interview about your understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services has been transcribed; see attached! I invite you to read through your transcript to double check that everything that was transcribed is in line with the information you shared with me. Please let me know which spots, if any within the interview need more clarification or do not seem to fit well with what you remembered providing me. This procedure is done to ensure that we are upholding the integrity of your story.

If no response is received following a two-week period, the interview transcription will be analyzed as-is. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me (Allison.Rudisill@usm.edu) or my Honor's Thesis Advisor, Dr. Eckenrod (Morgan.Eckenrod@usm.edu).

Thank you again for participating in this study!

Sincerely,
Allie Rudisill

APPENDIX E: Informed Consent



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD STANDARD (SIGNED) INFORMED CONSENT

STANDARD (SIGNED) INFORMED CONSENT PROCEDURES

This completed document must be signed by each consenting research participant

- The Project Information and Research Description sections of this form should be completed by the Principal Investigator before submitting this form for IRB approval.
- Signed copies of the consent form should be provided to all participants.

Last Edited December 7th, 2022

Today's Date: March 21, 2023		
PROJECT INFORMATION		
Project Title: NCAA DI Student-Athletes' Understanding of and Attitudes Toward Mental Performance Services		
Protocol Number: 23-0055		
Principal Investigator: Allison Rudisill	Phone: (901)378-2911	Email: Allison.rudisill@usm.edu
College: Education and Human Sciences	School and Program: Kinesiology and Nutrition	
RESEARCH DESCRIPTION		
<p>1. Purpose:</p> <p>As a NCAA DI student-athlete, you have access to a variety of athletic department resources to aid in your sport performance and psychological well-being. Although every NCAA DI athletic department has at least an athletic trainer and strength and conditioning coach, some athletic departments have additional resources such as, mental performance consultants. Although some researchers have quantitatively examined NCAA student-athletes' attitudes toward mental performance services, there has yet to be a qualitative study that explores NCAA DI student-athletes understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services. Therefore, I am inviting you to participate in a research study designed to learn about NCAA DI student-athletes' understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services.</p> <p>2. Description of Study:</p> <p>If you consent to participate in this study, I will contact you via email to set up an interview at a time that is convenient for you that will last approximately 30-45 minutes. You will be asked questions demographic information, how you became involved in sport, your experiences as a NCAA DI athlete, and your understanding of and attitudes towards mental performance services. The interview will be audio-recorded to allow myself and my Honor's Thesis Advisor to qualitatively analyze the themes from your interview. Before beginning analysis procedures, I will send your transcribed interview back to you to review to ensure what you shared with me during the interview is captured in your transcript. The results of this study will be used to inform the field of sport psychology as well as the sport psychology national organization (the Association for Applied Sport Psychology) and the</p>		

NCAA about NCAA DI student-athletes' understanding of and attitudes toward mental performance services.

3. **Benefits:**

You may not directly benefit from your participation in this research; however, the information you provide in this study will be valuable for mental performance consultants, NCAA DI student-athletes, and NCAA DI athletic administrators. Your participation will also increase the existing body of knowledge on NCAA DI student-athletes and mental performance services. Participants will receive a \$25.00 gift card for their participation in this study.

4. **Risks:**

The risks related to your participation in this study are no greater than those you would encounter in daily activities.

5. **Confidentiality:**

All information and transcripts will be kept confidential. I will ask you to select a pseudonym (fake name) and your real name will not be used in the interview transcripts or when reporting the results. Only the researchers involved in the study will have access to your recorded interview. The interview recordings will be erased once they are transcribed. I will also keep your informed consent form in a locked filing cabinet in my Honor's Thesis Advisor's office. If you wish to opt out from the study, your data and information will be destroyed.

6. **Alternative Procedures:**

There are no alternatives to participation that will be presented in this study.

7. **Participant's Assurance:**

This project and this consent form have been reviewed by USM's Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5125, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, 601-266-5997.

Any questions about this research project should be directed to the Principal Investigator using the contact information provided above.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Participant's Name: _____

I hereby consent to participate in this research project. All research procedures and their purpose were explained to me, and I had the opportunity to ask questions about both the procedures and their purpose. I received information about all expected benefits, risks, inconveniences, or discomforts, and I had the opportunity to ask questions about them. I understand my participation in the project is completely voluntary and that I may withdraw from the project at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits. I

understand extent to which my personal information will be kept confidential. As the research proceeds, I understand that any new information that emerges and that might be relevant to my willingness to participation will be provided to me.

Research Participant

Person Explaining the Study

Date

Date

APPENDIX F: Themes and Subthemes

1. Influences and Experiences of Collegiate Athletes' Participation in NCAA DI

Athletics

- a. *Family Influence*
- b. *Balancing Responsibilities*
- c. *Community Aspect of Sport (Recruitment Process, Accountability, Comfort, etc.)*

2. Knowledge of Mental Performance Services and Characteristics Desired of MPCs

- a. *Students-Athletes Acknowledgement of the Benefits of Mental Performance Services*
- b. *Desired Characteristics of MPC*
- c. *Confusion Between Mental Performance and Mental Health*

3. Unawareness of Mental Performance Services

- a. *Stigma Associated with Mental Performance*
- b. *Lack of Information and Conversations from Coaching Staff about Available Resources*
- c. *More Emphasis on Mental Health*
- d. *Insufficient Resources at Current Institution*

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