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Spring 2008

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Barros, Lia M., "College Athletes Having More than Just a Sip" (2008). *Inquiry Journal*. 1.
https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry_2008/1

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research article

College Athletes Having More than Just a Sip

—Lia M. Barros (Edited by Jennifer Lee)

Due to my love for soccer and school I have always focused on my grades, performance, and health. Therefore, I never fully understood why so many athletes participated in what I perceived to be heavy, or binge, drinking. During my four years of college I was a member of the University's women's soccer team. I was always an advocate for voicing the negative effects of alcohol on both health and performance but had not publicly spoken out on the subject. Not until my junior year, when I lost an athlete peer to alcohol, did I realize the severity of the problem.



The author in action on the soccer field

I was a nursing major and saw research for my senior honors thesis as an opportunity to better understand why a group, so centered on health and performance, could practice such negative health behaviors. Furthermore, I wanted to add to the paucity of qualitative research done on college athletes and their alcohol-related issues, in hopes of helping college nurses deal more effectively with this problem. My passion for both nursing and athletics motivates me to support and advocate for the health of this unique population of students.

The lives of college athletes are quite different from those of non-athletes (Beck, Martens, Royland & Watson, 2005). Due to the physical demands placed on them and the important relationship between health and performance, one might assume they would consume less alcohol than their non-athlete peers. However, several large scale, quantitative, national studies, involving over 10,000 intercollegiate athletes, have shown that college athletes are a population at risk for both engaging in heavy alcohol consumption and experiencing alcohol-related problems (Leichliter, Meilman, Presley & Cashin, 1998; Nelson & Welsher, 2001). In fact, college athletes consume more alcohol per week, binge drink more frequently, and experience more alcohol-related consequences than their non-athlete peers. According to the studies, 29% of men and 24% of women had engaged in binge drinking three or more times in the previous two weeks, compared with 18% of men and 15% of women students who were non-athletes (Leichliter, Meilman, Presley & Cashin, 1998; Nelson & Welsher, 2001; Beck, Martens, Royland & Watson, 2005).

While quantitative studies are abundant, qualitative studies are not. Qualitative research employs a subjective approach, which is useful in examining perceptions and giving them meaning. Therefore, I decided on a qualitative research study to explore college athletes' perceptions of their susceptibility to alcohol use as well as and compared to the susceptibility of non-athletes.

The informants for this study were athletes at a public university in northern New England. I interviewed them in two groups, separating the men from the women to eliminate possible tension between the genders and to promote open expression of perceptions. The most significant difference I found between the two gender groups was the almost comical, lackadaisical attitude of the women when sharing stories of excessive binge drinking and related, serious consequences. Their ignorance of the severity of this topic proved, troublingly, to be one of the most significant findings of my research.

Methodology and Data Collection

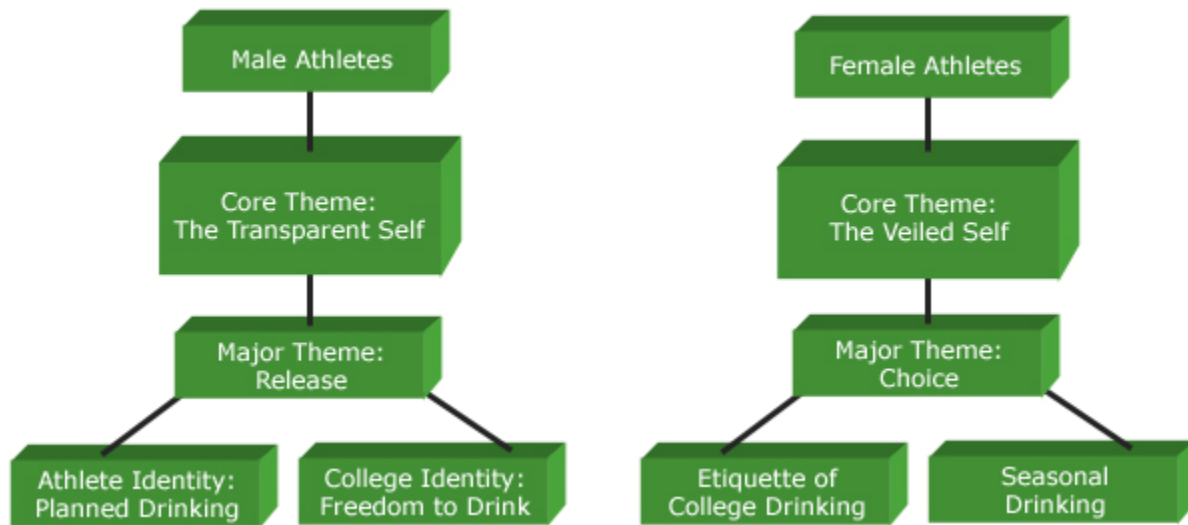
I attempted to recruit athletes from a variety of varsity sports and succeeded in the group of seven women athletes. The six male athletes, however, all played the same sport, which may have actually contributed to their ease during the interviews. A comfortable, familiar setting and atmosphere are essential for the participants to feel safe in expressing their real feelings and opinions. I chose, therefore, a room in the college athletic facility where the athletes could gather in a circle around a table, creating an equal and open arrangement.

I conducted a one hour and a half open-ended, semi-structured interview with each group. This type of interview is non-threatening and allows informal conversation to develop from open-ended questions. I audio-taped the interviews and, in addition, took notes on emotions expressed, common words or terms used, and my own reactions.

I began each interview with the primary research question, "What are your perceptions of college athletes' drinking?" Later, I asked additional questions about specific aspects of this subject and about the alcohol use of non-athlete peers ([Appendix A](#)). The interview, however, developed mainly through informal conversation and discussion. Such open-ended interviews allow the researcher to follow the participants' lead and then ask clarifying questions (Streubert & Carpenter, 2006).

After the interviews were finished, I transcribed the audiotapes; then carefully and systematically examined the transcriptions and my notes from each group, seeking answers to the question, "How do student athletes perceive their susceptibility to alcohol use and abuse?" I listened for repeated words, opinions and ideas, and how they were expressed. My notes taken during the interviews followed the emotions and demeanor among the participants as they talked. This analysis of the group's conversation allowed me to arrange patterns and subjects into themes, and to look for the relationships among them.

From this process of examination and categorization, I made a schematic representation, or working model, for each group. At the top of the model is the core theme that emerged in each group. The core theme is the basic reason, as I saw it, for why the participants responded as they did. A major theme, supporting the core theme, expresses the group's main belief about alcohol use by student athletes and non-athletes. Two sub-themes at the bottom are principle parts of the major theme. In this way I could see the significance of my data and make it easier to share with nurses and others dealing with this problem.



From the Guys' Perspective

From statements made by the male participants emerged the core theme of the transparent self: the men openly expressed both emotions and opinions while directly speaking about an athlete's greater susceptibility to alcohol use. Informant 3 is a good example:

"I think that we [college athletes] do have a higher risk just because even in high school and growing up the kids that are on the football team or the soccer team or the baseball team, those are the cool kids and they go out and get drunk and go to parties and have a good time. Traditionally that is the way it is and it starts young and when you go to college it carries over." [Informant 3]

He directly states his perception about the prevalence of alcohol use by athletes in high school as well as college and openly sees it as a "tradition."

The male athletes spoke repeatedly of the stress and regimented life of college athletics and how it increases their susceptibility to using alcohol as a release, the major theme of their group. Informant 1 vividly expresses the stresses of his life as an athlete and believes seeking release through drinking is understandable, even justified:

"Other than a sense of blowing off some steam, I think it is a lot mentally. Like f-coach, I am going to go out and have a couple drinks tonight, maybe that does help release that stress... the stress of being a collegiate athlete and trying to balance your class work, losing games, having coaches yell at you, and all that. I think that makes it a lot easier to want to go out on Saturday nights and blow off some steam." [Informant 1]

As part of this major theme of release, the male athletes spoke about their two identities. According to them, they are not student athletes but a college student *and* an athlete—two separate entities, the sub-themes of their group.

The athlete identity leads to planned drinking. Due to the strict regimen created by the requirements of athletic life, only on designated days per week is alcohol consumption allowed. This leads to binge drinking on those days to compensate for the days when drinking is not allowed. One athlete clearly expresses this:

"[athletes] are less [likely to become alcoholics]'cause we have such a strict regiment of workouts. You can't be getting drunk on a Sunday if we have a Monday morning practice. That would hold us back from drinking more nights a week. But maybe the nights we do have off we would be more inclined to binge drink because we don't have very many nights to drink." [Informant 6]

The athletes saw the college student identity as being distinguished from the athlete identity solely by the freedom to drink. They spoke about their desire to be "a normal college student." Having the freedom and time to drink was, as the athletes perceived it, the central characteristic of the non-athlete college student. Therefore, their own college student identity is achieved through taking the freedom to drink and, furthermore, drink heavily. One informant expresses this connection between drinking and being "like everyone else":

"It does kinda feel good to say, 'I am like everyone else' though, and I can go and drink and not have to worry. In a sense it is like that. We are like everyone else and go out and have a good time and just kinda get away from the norm of what we have been doing that week." [Informant 4]

While the male athletes presented a transparent self, acknowledging the excessive alcohol use among college athletes, the female athletes were disturbingly different.

From the Gals' Perspective

Contrary to the male participants, the core theme of the veiled self emerged for the female informants. Their perceptions that alcohol use is *not* a problem was inconsistent with the personal experiences they related. They hid, in a way, behind a veil of rationalizations to justify what they saw as not a problem and to disconnect themselves from the subject of alcohol use. When asked if alcohol had any effects on an athlete's performance, one informant demonstrates this disconnectedness:

"No! I mean if I never ever drank alcohol, ever I would probably be a really, really great runner you know? But that is like if I never ever smoked weed I would also be in even better shape. But that is unrealistic." [Informant 1]

Informant 1 clearly states that alcohol use among college athletes is not excessive, but then inconsistently supports her perceptions with contradictory examples.

Another informant shares this concept of the veiled self when she states,

*"It's a problem, but it's not a problem. It is very normalized...Sometimes I would play best in the fall in the off season when I would go out and drink the night before. It's like ok I went out, I need to kick my own butt. I need to compensate for that. So it almost makes you **stronger**."* [Informant 4]

Informant 4, while recognizing negative alcohol-related consequences as troubling, does not see binge drinking as a problem because she feels our society has made it a *normal* characteristic of the college culture. Furthermore, she sees this aspect of the college culture as an actual strength in her overall performance as an athlete.

Female participants spoke often of the personal choice to use alcohol or not, the major theme of their group. They felt that alcohol use is a personal choice, and, therefore, its use among college athletes is independent of their athletic participation. One informant states,

"I think it is just the person. I grew up differently than the rest of you people. I drank in high school 'cause it was there. Every night, it was always there. I had an ID at 15 and then I came to college and it wasn't worth it. It isn't worth it for me to drink in college. I don't like to go out with people who are puking out my car. That isn't fun. I think it is just a personal experience and what your view of drinking is, and like I don't think it really has anything to do with the athletic aspect." [Informant 5]

Informant 5 directly comments on the disconnectedness between her personal choice to use alcohol and her athletic participation. In addition, she exhibits the core theme of the veiled self as she describes her youthful, excessive use of alcohol, yet stands by the belief that alcohol use and its harms are personal choices to be made by college athletes.

The women athletes felt that when they did choose to use alcohol, it was to a lesser degree than their non-athlete peers because of the etiquette of college drinking and seasonal drinking, the two sub-themes of their group. The acceptance and rationalization of alcohol abuse is based on unwritten rules of an etiquette of college drinking. Binge drinking and related consequences were acceptable if they fell within a perceived maturity level of each age group. Informant 3 expresses these levels:

"Like freshman year I would black out and that was my issue but then as you get older and other people are looking up to you, and as a captain blacking out, even though I could do that and play the next weekend and it wouldn't affect me, I know it would affect some other freshman and now I am a role model to them. So THAT for me made it not ok." [Informant 3]



One glass is often not enough. (Photo courtesy Casey Carroll)

It is notable that she confesses to alcohol use and its harmful consequences, but sees its use among college athletes as a *controllable* problem.

The women felt that college athletes are less susceptible to alcohol use due to the cycle of drinking that results from their seasonal schedule. They identified seasonal drinking as an inhibiting factor to consistent alcohol consumption. They reasoned that athletes are less at risk for *consistent* alcohol abuse than are non-athletes. For Informant 3, it's all right to drink "in excess" during the off months:

"I think athletes go through cycles more, like there will be three months in season we'll be really fit and focused and alcohol won't be a big issue and then season is over and it's like get drunk. And it's in excess in certain months." [Informant 3]

She apparently does not see the significant harm excessive drinking during the off season can have on her performance during the athletic season. She, along with others in her group, feels that the athletic schedule and its non-drinking requirements *prevent* them from excessive drinking all year long.

What Can this Mean for College Nurses and Athletes?

I was overwhelmed by the disturbing and surprising responses I heard. The significant differences between the gender groups left me puzzled. Since both groups were college athletes, I had expected their experiences and views would be similar. Yet they weren't, and it surprised me that it was the women who disturbed me the most. They seemed to concur that alcohol use among athletes was *not* a prevalent problem but then shared personal experiences of binge drinking leading to blacking out, peeing on couches, and loss of memory. Most disconcertingly, they seemed to justify and rationalize their personal alcohol use by their status as college students.

The male group, by contrast, acknowledged that alcohol use *was* a problem, one that was more prevalent among college athletes than non-athletes. They saw alcohol use as a release from the stress of college athletics. More intriguingly, they felt that taking the freedom to drink was how they maintained their identity of college student along with their other identity of college athlete.

While each group had distinct differences, both genders referenced the college and athletic life as reasons for alcohol use. All participants shared anecdotes of excessive alcohol use and its negative consequences. However, the most potent finding was that, despite their recognition of alcohol use among athletes, neither group connected the seriousness of excessive alcohol use to alcoholism. Both genders demonstrated disconnectedness between themselves and the negative consequences of binge drinking, such as decreased athletic performance, addiction, physical injury, or even death.

The perceptions shared and insight gained in this study can be useful for nurses and other college personnel when helping athletes deal with drinking. When nurses are aware of college athletes' perceptions about drinking and college life, they can better understand the problem and design effective strategies to educate athletes on the seriousness of drinking and its negative consequences. Furthermore, these strategies should be gender specific, taking into account the genders' differing views of college stresses and identity in conjunction with drinking.

College nurses cannot deal with this problem alone. They should promote solutions that involve coaches, alumni, teammates, and other healthcare professionals. They should be the catalysts for and connections among treatment teams that can fully support college athletes.

For the college athletes themselves, this study implies that they need to be aware of the role alcohol plays in their college life along with its possible long-term detrimental consequences. Women athletes especially need to recognize their disconnected thinking about alcohol use. All college athletes should realize that they need support and guidance in coping with the stress of balancing academics, athletics, and the college environment.

I hope this study has given a voice to student athletes, and that it will be listened to. Future research along these lines is needed in order to design and implement more effective interventions and treatments for what is becoming an epidemic on college campuses.

I would like to thank the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research and its donors for supporting me in my pursuit of undergraduate research experience. I am very grateful to Dr. Carol Williams-Barnard for her guidance, dedication and support and to my mentor Dr. Pamela DiNapoli for fostering my interest in this area of study and helping me to develop my project.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Guiding Questions

To be used only to probe for information. Informal conversation and exploration of the perceptions is preferred.

- What are your perceptions about college athletes drinking more than college non-athletes?
- If you perceive athletes being at a higher risk for alcohol use, why?
- Can you describe your idea of what binge drinking means?
- What are your perceptions of participating in binge drinking leading to alcohol addiction?
- Have you read the statistics on binge drinking leading to alcohol abuse? And if so, do you perceive that a problem for college athletes?
- Knowing the statistics about the connection of binge drinking and alcohol addiction, what are your perceptions about college athletes being more susceptible to alcohol addiction?
- In what way do you perceive alcohol may affect athletes' participation in college athletics?
- How would you describe what college athletes gain from participating in the use of alcohol?
- What advice would you offer to other college athletes who might consider alcohol use?
- Is there any other information you would like to share that we have not already discussed?

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Author Bio

*Lia Barros combined her two passions, soccer and nursing, while attending the University of New Hampshire. When she graduated in May 2007 with a B.S. in nursing and an honors designation from the University Honors Program, she was the first student athlete in four years to graduate from that program. As a senior, Lia also received the prestigious Nursing Departmental Scholar Award, which is given to only one student each year. Lia's hometown is Sammamish, Washington, and she is currently working as a registered nurse at the University of Washington Medical Center. After graduation she spent a month in a small town in Brazil volunteering in an educational institute for underprivileged children. Beginning in her junior year at UNH, Lia researched the neurological development of adolescents and their susceptibility to alcohol. She "thoroughly enjoyed" the research for her senior thesis and the feeling of being "capable of such professionalism." It wasn't all enjoyable, however, since she had to play the hours of interview tapes on her car's tape player in order to transcribe them. She chose to publish in *Inquiry* because "as a young author and researcher, I felt my findings would be most important for those they affected."*

Mentor Bios

Dr. Pamela P. DiNapoli, RN, CNL is an associate professor in the Department of Nursing at the University of New Hampshire, where she has been for eight years. Her research interests are in the field of adolescent health risk behavior, and she teaches courses in maternal/child nursing and nursing theory. Dr. DiNapoli, an experienced mentor of students, said that supervising Lia's research gave her "a better understanding of the culture of alcohol use by athletes at UNH." Lia's research led to questions for other student researchers to follow up on. Mentoring Lia, said Dr. DiNapoli, helped her "respect Lia as a persistent researcher."

Dr. Carol Williams-Barnard, PhD, RN also found Lia to be a "intelligent, insightful, and an enthusiastic honors student who conducted a research study relevant to the discipline of college nursing. Her findings shed light on the complex nature of college athletes' perception of susceptibility to alcohol use. Dr. Williams-Barnard is an associate professor in the Department of Nursing at the University of New Hampshire, where she

has taught for thirty years. She is the Nursing Coordinator for the Honors-in-Major and Honors liaison to the University Honors Program. Dr. Williams-Barnard teaches the specialty of psychiatric-mental health nursing in both the classroom / clinical settings, and facilitates undergraduate honors seminars. Her research interests focus on the concept of presence in nursing education and practice, especially the partnership between the nursing student and practicing nurse.