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“The Game Was Ruined For Me There:” Examining the Mental Health Byproducts of the Transfer Portal and NIL on Student-Athletes

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“The Game Was Ruined For Me There:” Examining the Mental Health Byproducts of the Transfer Portal and NIL on Student-Athletes

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ABSTRACT

Two rule changes have brought seismic shifts to collegiate sports in the United States — the right for college athletes to monetize their Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL), and the Transfer Portal for athletes looking to switch schools. Qualitative interviews with 16 college athletes explored the mental health byproducts of these new athlete opportunities. The interviews suggest that many athletes are hesitant to participate in NIL due to a lack of guidance. The study also found that college athletes believe entering the Transfer Portal to be a highly stressful experience, comparing the process to being recruited out of high school. However, the accessibility of the Transfer Portal also helps students leave situations that negatively impact their mental health faster and easier than before. Since college athletes are a highly at-risk demographic for mental health issues, their first-hand perspective can help on-campus staff and administrators have a better understanding of what is needed to give collegiate athletes the best possible experience to learn and develop as students and citizens.

Keywords: College Athletes, Mental Health, NIL, Transfer Portal

In the lounge where spectators and recruits meet for football games, a crowd gathered on a warm April afternoon to discuss an important byproduct of high-pressure collegiate sports — the pressures that college athletes face when competing for their school. The first-ever Athletics Mental Health Symposium (2023) at Southern East Coast University (fictitious name of an NCAA Division 1 Group of Five conference school used to protect anonymity of interview subjects) attracted dozens of athletes, including most of the football teams from two neighboring universities. These elite athletes fixed their eyes on the front of the room, where former Dallas Cowboy Tra Battle stood to tell his story. Battle is an advocate for mental health among college athletes, having played football for the University of Georgia before spending five years in the National Football League. Battle’s work as a public speaker focuses on a mental health crisis he experienced while retiring from football. With the vast majority of those in the room preparing to make the same transition, the audience of future former college athletes hung on his every word.

In his football career, Battle excelled all four years of college and reached the pinnacle of the sport by being signed to the NFL. After bouncing around teams and leagues for four years, Battle found himself at the end of his athletic career, which can be a highly strenuous crossroads. Battle was consumed with the anxiety of figuring out what came next. He felt lost, and eventually contemplated suicide, saying: “If I go out right now, I could still go out a winner. So, I drove to a bridge” (Blankenship, 2022, para. 1). As Battle waited at the Athens, Georgia, bridge to take his own life, he experienced a moment of clarity, realizing there was someone who he could turn to — his University of Georgia football coach, Mark Richt. Richt answered the phone and was able to talk Battle out of crisis before bringing him to his home, where the two prayed and comforted each other.

Battle is one of many former collegiate athletes who have experienced a serious mental health crisis at some point in their career, a problem that has begun to attract the attention of university athletic departments. He also is one of many people attempting to break the stigma of talking about it, especially among athletes. The planning team behind Southern East Coast University’s symposium are among those trying to accomplish this goal, including central figure Brian Williams, Ph.D., an associate professor of public policy at the University of Virginia who created a series of
mental health seminars to address mental health issues with college students. During the symposium’s planning, Williams endured the additional struggle of responding after the November 2022 shooting of three University of Virginia football players by a former teammate (Watson & Hanna, 2023). This tragic event raised additional questions about the mental well-being of college athletes, making it clear that college athletes are at just as much risk for mental health crises as anyone else on campus.

Another stressor adding to the mental health crisis among college athletes involves two landscape-shifting rule changes from the NCAA: Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) and the Transfer Portal, both heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic (Blinder 2020, 2021; Zagoria & Ingemi, 2021). This new landscape combined with the challenges college athletes already face suggest that college athlete mental health is more relevant than ever. Southern East Coast University’s executive senior associate athletic director for internal operations and college athlete welfare also was integral in making the symposium happen. “Students come into programs asking for a lot now and having high expectations,” the administrator said. “They see other schools with better gear, better facilities on social media, or they feel like they’re not playing enough. For a lot of players, transferring can work out and they get more money or more playing time. But for some guys, it just doesn’t work out.”

The assistant athletic director’s statement about the changing attitudes of college athletes aligns with the changing policies of the NCAA. With NIL, college athletes can monetize their personal brand and get paid for their skills at the collegiate level. The Transfer Portal provides college athletes more flexibility to switch schools to compete collegiately. There has been a surge in transfers between schools, with some college athletes reporting experiencing psychological challenges in the program they are leaving.

Mental health challenges can arise from an array of pressures that collegiate athletes face, from stress at home, to injuries and other performance-related issues, to challenges juggling school and sport. College athletes have long been an at-risk population of students for mental health crises (Weber, 2023), and the workload continues to increase as expectations grow. Currently, active college athletes now face the stress of being the earliest groups of college athletes to experience NIL and the Transfer Portal, both of which have shifted the landscape of the NCAA. Relying on a purposive sample of NCAA Division 1 college athlete interviews, this study sought to explore the relationship between NIL and the Transfer Portal and athlete stress. This study will analyze, through interviews with college athletes themselves, how these competitors feel about the recent changes within the NCAA. College athletes’ perspective on this topic is vital, as it can inform strategies for coaches and administrators to handle new challenges.

Review of Literature

Name, Image, and Likeness

Academic discussion surrounding monetization of college athletes’ name, image, and likeness (NIL) is a component of the larger discourse surrounding paying college athletes (Walsh, 2021). This issue became a focal point on June 21, 2021, when the Supreme Court made the unanimous decision to allow college athletes to monetize their personal brand, paving the way for college athletes to obtain sponsorships and endorsement deals (Liptak & Blinder, 2021). Opinions regarding college athletes being paid are polarized, but personal justifications as to why or why not vary. Those who oppose it often will point to the fact that athletes are compensated through education (Boor, 2007), with college athlete funding sometimes totaling more than $400,000 in scholarships, often holding the foundational belief that college sports are amateur athletics with value in maintaining a distinction between professional and amateur sports (Sellers, 2023). On the other side of this argument, those who support paying college athletes have long argued the line between amateur and professional athletes has become blurred as the expectations of college athletes rise higher and higher, with some athletes practicing for 40 hours a week or more (Stephenson, 2022). However, there are arguments that sport fans do still place a sentimental value on amateur sports, believing that paying the athletes will corrupt the process of college athletics and make it redundant as an alternative to professional sports (Walsh, 2021).

Rather than asking whether NCAA athletes should be paid at all, discourse surrounding NIL asks: “Who should pay college athletes?” (Walsh, 2021, p. 82). In 2019, the California State Senate
passed the *Fair Pay to Play Act*, which prohibited the NCAA from restricting college athletes’ ability to monetize and profit from their name, image, and likeness. For decades, the NCAA had highly restrictive rules in place that would prevent players from profiting from their personal brand in any way, enforcing steep penalties for even just accepting a gift from a fan or taking payment for an autograph (Olson, 2015).

A common misconception surrounding NCAA football is that every player receives full payment for their educational expenses. In fact, players without scholarships, known as walk-ons, comprise 46% of NCAA college football players (Sportsengine, 2018). Financial precarity among college athletes is a common occurrence, as the demanding schedule combined with the restrictions of the NCAA makes even getting basic needs met as a non-scholarship athlete very difficult (Reader, Gordon, & Christensen, 2022). In 2021, after California’s *Fair Pay to Play* act took effect, many states began passing similar laws, to not deter high-level recruits from attending universities in their state (Tucker, 2022).

Prior to 2021, the highest profile court case related to NIL was *O’Bannon v. NCAA* in 2015. The inception of the case occurred when Ed O’Bannon, former UCLA basketball star, saw his likeness depicted in *EA’s NCAA Basketball ’09* video game and realized he was not receiving any residual payment for this use of his personal brand, decades after his time as an NCAA athlete (Rhoden, 2018). O’Bannon became the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit against the NCAA in which he and several other athletes were awarded nearly $60 million in damages. The case never reached the Supreme Court, as they denied the NCAA’s appeal, while also ensuring that the case would not reach a high enough court to force the NCAA to change their policy (Walsh, 2021).

More than 10 years later, O’Bannon’s argument would finally get the chance to be argued before the highest court in the land, as 2021’s *Alston v. NCAA* was heavily informed by the arguments used by O’Bannon’s legal team (Rhoden, 2018). The court unanimously ruled in favor of Alston, stating that the NCAA’s eligibility rules had violated antitrust laws for decades and that college athletes are legally entitled to their right to monetize their personal brand. This ruling is viewed as a compromise with those demanding direct pay-for-play, as it lifts a highly oppressive and unpopular restriction without putting the responsibility of paying players on the NCAA itself (Mullaney, 2021). With the leverage of being college athletes, NIL endorsements are a massive opportunity for both athletes and business owners (Perloff, 2022).

Within days of the Alston ruling, the world of NIL became a hub of creativity, entrepreneurship, and, as University of Alabama football head coach Nick Saban said, “ungodly sums of money.” (Bieler, 2021, para. 3). A key caveat to understanding NIL is that educational institutions are strictly prohibited from arranging endorsement deals between college athletes and third parties. This means the responsibility of finding these deals lies on the business owners and often the athletes themselves, incentivizing both sides to get creative with how they approach this venture (DeBarros, 2022).

The NCAA’s attitude toward the new NIL policy has been hands-off, pointedly refusing to implement some sort of league-wide policy and instead putting all the responsibility on states as well as individual colleges and universities. This caused great confusion, as players, coaches, and administrators all were under the impression that there would be a system or a representative to guide them through these deals (Perloff, 2022). Instead, they were met with a Wild West-style deal landscape where there was little understanding of the value of these endorsements and influencer deals, and all sides were left to figure it out for themselves. The landscape of NIL can be described as “top-heavy,” with big superstar quarterbacks like Bryce Young and Bo Nix immediately cashing in on endorsement deals that reportedly reached near seven-figure sums (Bieler, 2021, para. 6).

While athletes have enjoyed their fair share of success signing endorsement deals with large corporations, small businesses are a massive beneficiary of NIL as well. Nebraska-based HVAC company SOS Heating & Cooling made waves in 2022 for their exclusive partnership with Nebraska freshman WR Decoldest Crawford (Sam, 2022). The company went viral online after posting a 30-second TV commercial featuring Crawford, with the ad being viewed more than 5.3 million times and being covered by *USA Today*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *The Athletic* (Escarpio, 2022).

Despite the positivity surrounding these creative endorsement deals, much discord has surrounded these professional-sized NIL contracts. Many critics of NIL question the optics of students like Armando Bacot, a center for the University of North Carolina Men’s Basketball team, arriving at practice in a Carolina Blue Audi with an NBA superstar-like presence (Schoenfield, 2023). The belief is that it could cause tension between teammates who earn significantly less and
could potentially be disheartening to athletes who are members of smaller, less popular teams who have less leverage than members of popular sports teams. While it is worth considering the social implications of NIL, this perspective fails to see the massive benefits that athletes outside the top 1% are reaping from NIL (Stephenson, 2022).

While it’s certainly more eye-catching to focus on the seven-figure earners in the NCAA, it misses the bigger picture of who else is being helped by this policy direction. While walk-on players may not be able to leverage their brand as much as scholarship players, they still have the same opportunities to make life-changing money, which doesn’t necessarily have to be a large sum, especially in instances where a mere $100 can ensure basic needs are met. While there could be potential negative consequences of NIL, impoverished college athletes being able to have their basic needs met means better athletic and academic performance, as well as improved overall mental health (Stephenson, 2022).

The Transfer Portal

In tandem with the advent of NIL in the NCAA, another rule change that caused seismic changes to the foundation of college sports was the popularization of the Transfer Portal. The online tool was launched in 2018 and intended to bridge the gap between transferring athletes, recruiters, and coaches. The portal is an online database viewable by coaches and staff that allows players to have a compliance officer declare their desire to transfer from an institution (NCAA, 2022). In April 2021, just months before the NIL rule change came into effect, the NCAA adopted a rule that allowed athletes to transfer once without having to redshirt for a year, becoming immediately eligible for competition upon their arrival at their new institution (Fuller, 2023).

Prior to this rule change, college athletes arriving at their new university were required to sit out a year to gain eligibility. Redshirting is a longstanding practice in collegiate sports and refers to a period in which an athlete’s participation is suspended in order to gain an extra year of eligibility. Under the new rules established in 2021, college athletes are given the ability to transfer once without redshirting, opening the door for them to transfer again if they’re willing to redshirt. Graduate transfers also have a one-time transfer exception, meaning athletes who graduate from their institution also can sit out. This means a college athlete could potentially transfer three times and attend four different universities in their five years of athletic eligibility. Beginning in the 2023–24 season, college athletes are required to have a documented reason, such as a physical or mental health concern, to transfer (Parks, 2023).

Like NIL, the immediate aftermath of the transfer portal was described by many as “chaos.” (Nakos, 2023). Transfer numbers exploded, and the year following the rule change in 2021, the number of students entering the portal grew from 6,703 to 9,570. During the 2019–20 football season, 1,695 D1 FBS players entered the transfer portal. After the rule change, that number nearly doubled to 3,085, with 20.9% of starting players in the 2021 season being transfers (NCAA, 2023).

These transfer numbers have had a massive logistical impact on administrators and coaches alike (McCarthy, 2022), who have described feeling pressure to keep athletes happy in present day, with less of a focus on the long term. Coaches are now expected to recruit high school players while also keeping their current crop of players happy. WVU baseball head coach Randy Mazey gave insight to this, saying, “Roster management is no stranger to the world of college baseball, but it’s taken on a whole new level with the transfer portal. You no longer are trying to build a program. You just have to build a team one year at a time.” (Callihan, 2022, para. 4)

This immense pressure to build a team one year at a time clearly puts additional stress on coaches, but other components of college sports programs have started to feel the pressure as well. Athletic training and medical staff have been overwhelmed by the revolving door of transfers some teams have experienced, as each player who comes and goes from the university must complete a physical and have their medical records examined (McCarthy, 2022).

Increased competition from the transfer portal also has been brought up as a stressor for college students. NIL earnings also are consistently cited as a factor for students transferring, as they want to go to a team that can maximize their earning potential (Nakos, 2023). It’s clear from the perspectives of coaches and administrators that they view this as a shift in leverage, and that athletes have more control over their college careers than ever before. With all these changes occurring
during a nationwide crisis in mental health, especially among college students, it is necessary to examine the mental health byproducts of such a shift in operational structure.

**College Athlete Mental Health**

Research has identified signs that the mental health of college athletes is being compromised (Stamatis et al., 2020). The NCAA has conducted studies on college athlete wellness, with the most recent results coming from surveys conducted in the Fall of 2021, where 9,908 athletes responded to a survey that consisted of questions about anxiety, academic performance, and mental health concerns. These surveys, combined with stories about college athletes failing to have their basic needs met, reveal a lot of information about the state of mental health among NCAA athletes. When asked if they’ve felt overwhelmed by all they had to do in the last month, 78% of men and 94% of women responded “yes,” and when asked what the top factors contributing their mental health were, 44% answered academic concerns, 37% said planning for the future, and 26% said financial concerns (NCAA, 2021). In fact, many college athletes also said they struggle with stressors such as poverty and food insecurity, with 86% of respondents reportedly living beneath the federal poverty line (DeWitt, 2021).

With mental health clearly highlighted as a problematic issue in the NCAA, much of the scholarship about the topic focuses on best practices and methods to increase positive mental well-being among college athletes. Research by Stamatis et al. (2020) suggests that NCAA’s mental health practices should include proactive training of mental toughness and self-compassion. Organizational policies and practices contribute greatly to the mental health of a college sports team. College athletes are a highly diverse population, and it has been found that college athletes of color and queer-spectrum athletes are at even greater risk of poor mental health. As 39.5% of NCAA athletes are students of color, this makes them a particularly vulnerable population in college sports (Kroshus, 2023).

A suggestion made at the NCAA Summit on Diverse College Athlete Mental Health and Well-Being is that having a diverse staff and hiring practices can contribute to positive mental well-being, as discriminatory practices heavily contribute to poor mental health. Having a system in place in which discrimination can be reported and accounted for also contributes greatly to improving mental health (Kroshus, 2023).

A stress point commonly found among college athletes is feeling the need to fit the ‘athlete’ identity, as well as anxiety about transitioning away from sport (Kroshus, 2023). For college athletes of color, issues such as discrimination, microaggressions, and pressure stemming from the intersection of race, gender, and sport can add to their anxiety (Collins, 2022). Lack of career maturity has been cited as a point of frustration among former college athletes. NIL serves these athletes by providing them with skills and professional experience through their endorsement deals. Athletes who participate in NIL learn promotional tactics, content production skills, and gain experience marketing themselves, which are vital skills in the professional world (Johnson, 2022).

To test the link between college athlete mental health and these new opportunities provided, 16 Southern East Coast University college athletes were interviewed (with little institutional involvement) about NIL, the transfer portal, and mental health. This provided insight into their general well-being, as well as how they have coped with the NCAA rule changes on top of the general stress that college athletes have always faced. This exploratory study is guided by a single research question.

**RQ1**: How has NIL and the Transfer Portal impacted the mental health and well-being of college athletes?

**Method**

This exploratory research study used qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews, aimed at gauging mental health stressors college athletes face, particularly connected to the new opportunities afforded by NIL and the Transfer Portal. The interviews looked for patterns within responses about this new landscape for collegiate sports, and how it affects its labor force, athletes. Using semi-structured interviews maximized the athletes’ ability to express themselves while maintaining the
structure of the questions, to analyze the similarities and differences between each interviewee’s responses.

Data Collection and Procedure

The interviews were conducted in a combination of settings, with eight athletes being interviewed remotely over zoom and the other eight being interviewed in person privately in their respective athletic facility. The interviews were recorded, either in audio or video form, depending on the interview format. Interview audio and written transcripts were stored on a private, secure server with the names, ages, and sports of the athletes deidentified to protect the confidentiality of the interview. These interview subjects were recruited through the Office of Student Athlete Welfare and the Office of Sports Information.

Interviews were conducted both in person and over Zoom, with the in-person interviews taking place at the university’s football practice facility. These subjects were recruited in person on the fly, meaning there was no opportunity for background research prior to the interviews, resulting in interviews with six of the football players interviewed being somewhat shorter than the others. The remaining interview subjects were recruited via email using contact information provided by assisting staff and faculty. The players were cold contacted to gauge interest and asked to provide their availability for the meeting in a follow up email. Some potential interviewees initially responded with interest but were either unavailable before the end of the semester or simply stopped responding to emails. Those who did respond received scheduled zoom links upon agreeing to a meeting time, with interviews being rescheduled as needed, and some being scheduled over a month in advance.

Instrumentation

Prior to the beginning of the study, a review of literature on NIL, the Transfer Portal, and college athlete mental health was conducted to have a fully informed and researched interview-methodology. This is essential to the interview process, as interviews have a distinct advantage over other qualitative methods because of the ability to research participants prior to the study (Adhabi, et al. 2017). This was also done to determine what the under-researched areas of the topic are as well as what are the most important aspects of these new NCAA mental wellness policies. These interviews were all conducted and transcribed by the principal researcher, to maintain consistency and protect identity throughout the study. The eight-item questionnaire given to the college athletes was designed with the goal of revealing recurring themes and patterns across the participants’ responses. The questions were developed early into the project during the literature review phase and were heavily informed by the background information gained during that process. These questions also were reviewed by the institution’s Human Subjects Committee.

Sample

Sixteen college athletes from an NCAA Division 1 university participated in the interview, representing a variety of demographics and sporting backgrounds. They were recruited using a convenience sample provided by administrative involvement, with the interviews still being entirely voluntary. Those recruited virtually were contacted from an email list provided by a university professor. Ultimately, the breakdown of the athletes interviewed by gender and sport was eight male football players, four female field hockey players, two female swimmers, and two female rowers. Each athlete had a range of knowledge and experience with NIL and the Transfer Portal as well, with seven athletes saying they had experience monetizing their personal brand, and four having experience transferring from a university. It’s important to note, however, that of those four athletes who transferred to the university, only one of them was an undergraduate transfer, with two being graduate and one junior college transfer.
**Data Analysis**

A directed content analysis of the data collected was conducted to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within the data (Assaroudi, 2018). There are multiple steps to directed content analysis, with this study’s beginning at the organization stage (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Data from each interview was analyzed by the primary researcher, with each response being examined for recurrent themes, resulting in a list of emergent themes from each individual interview. From these lists, commonalities were identified, and a consensus was reached across all of the interviewees. The consensus of each of these themes will comprise the results of the study, allowing us to generate a composite profile of college athletes and how they cope with mental health issues during the post-NIL, post-transfer portal era NCAA.

**Results**

Sixteen interviews with college athletes yielded nearly six hours of interview audio which were analyzed using grounded theory and directed content analysis. Following review of the data by the primary researcher, the following themes emerged repeatedly in the interview data.

**Lack of Guidance Causing Disinterest from College Athletes to Participate in NIL**

The first topic of discussion in each interview was that of NIL, the athlete’s personal experience with it, and their impression of how it is being handled by the NCAA. Of the 16 college athletes interviewed throughout the study, six of them had participated in NIL-related enterprises in the past year. No pattern relating to respective sports played was detected that suggests revenue sports are participating in NIL more or less than non-revenue sports. The six athletes who said they had not participated in NIL came from a variety of backgrounds and gave varying justifications as to why they had not participated, mainly stemming from a lack of time or energy, as well as a lack of knowledge in NIL and a fear of being taken advantage of.

A male football player in his junior year expressed his lack of interest in NIL by saying his primary focus is on his actual on-field performance, suggesting he was looking past his college career to focus on maximizing his potential of going to the NFL. The topic of playing professionally came up frequently among football players, with a sophomore player sharing the junior’s lack of interest, expanding on his NIL view by saying he believes players that are too focused on money causes them to become complacent, saying:

> People not going as hard. A lot of people don't even got to go to NFL, sh*t like that. 'Cause they rich before they even get it. Before they even make it to the point they wanted to be, they already getting rich now. Making more than people who work regular jobs.

Participants who came from non-revenue sports, namely field hockey and rowing, also reported disinterest in NIL, stemming from a perceived lack of public interest in their respective sports. The idea that success with NIL is linked to the sport’s popularity came up when a sophomore field hockey player interviewed said:

> It's not as popular in my team, but because we're not that popular of a sport compared to a lot of other sports. So it's not a popular thing that a lot of us do because there's not really much opportunity within it for us with places.

This quote is indicative of a narrow perspective on the affordances of NIL and also indicative of a lack of guidance on NIL policy and practices on campuses. This is a theme that emerged repeatedly during interviews with both college athletes and administrators – a general lack of communication from the NCAA, the highest level of governance within Division 1 Collegiate sports. In the months leading up to restrictions on NIL being lifted, the majority of coaches, administrators, and students believed the NCAA would provide some kind of guidance and were then somewhat surprised to see it take a more “hands-off” approach, creating an environment where universities were left to figure out the rules for themselves.

This lack of centralized authority led to confusion in navigating the new role of NIL, with college athletes having a vast array of expectations regarding their potential success monetizing their personal brand. This topic is where there was a clear difference between revenue and non-revenue athletes, in which several non-revenue athletes connected their sports’ lack of popularity to
their success with NIL, whether positive or negative. Revenue athletes also discussed money more frequently, whereas non-revenue athletes spoke in terms of the gifts, promotional items, and social media engagement opportunities they received from NIL.

**Stress of the Transfer Portal**

As the interviews progressed, the Transfer Portal became a polarizing topic of conversation. Only four out of the 16 college athletes interviewed had experience transferring, with only one undergraduate transfer who benefitted from the rule change allowing undergraduates to immediately join the teams they transfer to. The other three were graduate transfers who would've been able to join their team immediately regardless, with two coming from four-year universities and the other coming from a two-year junior college. Regardless, every student was able to lend perspective on the transfer process based on their teammate’s experiences, and it can be concluded the Transfer Portal is a highly stressful experience fraught with uncertainty that many students directly compared to being recruited for the first time in their senior year of high school.

Those who had experience transferring recounted their experiences, with a female graduate student rower saying she kept her program as quiet as possible based on first-hand accounts from her friends, saying:

I didn't want to talk about it because I didn't want that drama. There is always drama that comes with it. And even though I was having issues with the team, it was just the amount that we were training and it was really hard on me mentally. I also wasn't doing well in classes, I had that kind of excuse, I guess, to say that it was my personal reasons and I wasn't on scholarship or anything. I wasn't recruited so it's an entirely different situation.

The drama this college athlete refers to was alluded to by several other interviewees as well, seemingly indicating that using the transfer portal to leave your respective team as an undergraduate creates interpersonal conflict among teammates. This sentiment was further explored in interviews with field hockey players, in which all three of those interviewed recounted a story of one of their teammates leaving East Coast University, a Division 1 Group of 5 school, in favor of a Power 5 conference school. The interviewees felt personally insulted by the move, and noted that the transferring player was isolated from the team and coaches in the weeks following their announcement to move. Other interviewees alluded to potentially having negative perceptions of college athletes who had used the portal, believing it could potentially be used as a way to quit in the face of adversity, with one football player saying:

I mean you're a freshman, stuff is not going to go right, you're still trying to figure things out. So might as well try to stay and figure things out. At least fight for something instead of giving up easily. This is giving guys such an easy option just to leave if something's not going away.

A football player who joined Southern East Coast using his graduate transfer echoed this feeling while speaking on the general stress of being in the portal, saying the fact that there were record-breaking numbers of transfers in the portal made him anxious and hesitant to enter, but felt relief when he saw coaches begin to send him direct messages on Twitter, which he said was the most common tool recruiters used to contact players. This college athlete lent his perspective as a graduate transfer and shared some comments coaches had made to him during the process, saying:

It's scary because a lot of coaches were telling me, they say, ‘Yeah I'm glad I'm picking you. I'm picking you because you're a senior. You have more experience on the field. And also with the younger guys is showing that they had a commitment,’ because you do see a bunch of guys hopping from one school to the next school, changing three different schools in a matter of three different years, which shows no loyalty… how would you know if you're a freshman and you want to transfer just because stuff is not going right? I mean, you're a freshman, stuff is not going to go right. You're still trying to figure things out. So, you might as well try to stay and figure things out. At least fight for something instead of giving up easily. This is giving guys such an easy option just to leave if something's not going away.

While some interviewees gave valuable speculation on the perceptions of the Transfer Portal, those who had firsthand experience being in it spoke to where the stress stems from, as well as what factors go into the decision. A senior football player said the city where Southern East Coast University is
located is very demographically similar to his hometown, that he had family nearby, and that finding a place where he felt comfortable took precedence over football-related factors. He also added that while there’s stress surrounding the uncertainty of not knowing where you’ll end up or if you’ll even be able to continue playing at the same level you were before, the real stress comes from navigating inauthentic and dishonest recruiting practices, saying:

And I feel like the recruiting process is a very stressful thing. A lot of athletes don't really talk about it, but the recruiting process and trying to figure out what is and what is not real throughout that process, I just couldn't go through it again.

A theme that began to emerge during background interviews with administrators is the idea that the Transfer Portal works well for some people and not as well for others, and it completely depends on the individual person’s situation at their current school and their reasons for transferring. The two graduate transfer football players came from significantly larger schools in Power 5 conferences, where they were reserve players now coming to the Group of 5 university seeking starter-level playing time. These two transfers were both in unique situations when they were interviewed (with one just arriving that semester and having not yet played there, and the other on the verge of graduating who went on to play professional football), both of whom spoke positively about their experience in the portal. All interviewees who spoke about the Transfer Portal expressed the sentiment that it “works for some people and doesn’t for others.” In the case of it not working for others, students could potentially be stuck in the Transfer Portal and not recruited to any school, forcing them to either drop down a division or ask their previous school to take them back. This is a big career risk and the college athletes interviewed expressed that this would be the worst-case scenario of entering the portal.

Mental Health in the New Era of the NCAA

More so than NIL, the Transfer Portal led to mental health and wellness becoming a recurrent background topic, and it is clear that the new rules in the NCAA contribute to shifting perceptions of mental health among college athletes and the world at large. College athletes now are more vocal about their mental wellbeing and their needs, and it is clear from background research with administrators that there has been a shift in attitudes regarding what college athletes are willing to ask for and express to their coaching staff. The Transfer Portal has added a layer of accountability to collegiate sports, with college teams that have toxic coaching staffs and cultures at risk of losing their best players.

A sophomore female field hockey player who was interviewed transferred to Southern East Coast immediately following her freshman year to escape toxic culture at her previous school, whose administration was exposed for its role in a nationwide systemic sexual assault scandal. As she shared about her experience within the toxic culture created there, she said toxic attitudes were cultivated at the top of the athletic administrative structure and trickled down to the coaching staff, including how they constantly made inappropriate comments about her and her teammate’s bodies. This behavior continued to escalate until pressure from the coaching staff caused one of her teammates to develop an eating disorder that led to a four-month hospitalization. This was the final straw that led to her transfer decision, she said. Speaking about her former school she said:

But it just became not worth it for me anymore and then when my best friend who is my teammate now, [redacted] had left, and then my other friend, [redacted] had also left who's at [redacted], who also had a problem coach. The decision was, it was really easy for me to leave. I wasn't upset about it. It wasn't, it just was what needed to happen. So, long story short, a lot of people that have chosen to stay there say, all my friends are here and stuff and that's fine if they put that ahead of the love of the game, but I truly loved playing field hockey and really enjoyed it and the game was ruined for me there.

Discussion

This qualitative research study sought to uncover potential mental health byproducts of recent massive rule changes in the NCAA, the Transfer Portal, and NIL. To do this, 16 college athletes representing four sports (football, field hockey, swimming, and rowing) were interviewed using an eight-question semi-structured model designed using the basis of knowledge gathered during the
literature review. This study contributes to a greater understanding and focus on mental health among college athletes in the wake of these changes, as well as gives valuable information that could inform best practices at universities with regard to guiding students, coaches, and administrators through this new aspect of collegiate athletics.

From there, nearly six hours of interview audio were recorded and transcribed, totaling 107 pages of data. The qualitative data were then analyzed for emergent themes. Six emerged, each relating to NIL, the Transfer Portal, and college athlete mental wellness. These themes then were used as the basis for a directed content analysis in which the interview data were segmented and sorted into themes with quotes to exemplify each one.

After a thematic content analysis of the data, numerous themes emerged regarding the mental health byproducts of NIL and the Transfer Portal among college athletes. A key finding relating to NIL is that college athletes are hesitant to participate in NIL for a number of personal reasons that all stem from a general lack of guidance from the NCAA due to their “hands-off” approach to NIL. That lack of guidance fuels students’ anxieties about being scammed or taken advantage of, and discourages them from seeking out NIL opportunities entirely, as several interviewees claimed they had no interest in partaking in NIL.

Based on the interviews, there is a clear need for some kind of centralized guidance from the NCAA, as administrators also indicated they too struggle to navigate the system at times. The NCAA’s attitude toward NIL policy clearly is fueling some of the confusion, but they’ve continued to press forward allowing schools to figure it out for themselves. This indicates that students hesitant to participate may be waiting for guidance from some kind of authoritative figure, and since it likely won’t come from the highest level of the NCAA, it will need to come in the form of an educational on-campus intervention organized by athletic administration. While on-campus intervention does occur at Southern East Coast, the interviewees indicated it is either not informative enough or not persistent enough. College athletes should receive routine motivation from their universities to participate in NIL, as it builds valuable marketing, branding, and networking skills.

It also is apparent from the data that being in the Transfer Portal is a highly stressful experience, as many athletes compared the uncertainty felt before being contacted by their new team to being recruited out of high school. Regardless, it’s clear that the Transfer Portal has been a net positive for the mental health of college athletes, as it can be used to quickly and easily remove oneself from a toxic or incompatible situation.

Excessive transfers by undergraduate college athletes were frequently cited by those interviewed, with some expressing that anything more than one transfer as an undergraduate and one as a graduate likely is excessive and impulsive decision-making. The graduate and junior college transfers lend some perspective to graduate transfers and how they contrast with undergraduate transfers in terms of their perception by coaches and administration. The assistant athletic director spoke about this in the background interview, saying that athletes who graduate from his home university should feel free to transfer wherever they want, but only once they’ve finished their duties and graduated. The graduate and junior college transfer players said that because of this perception, they feel they received very little pushback from their coaches. One player, who used their graduate transfer to leave an ACC school to get more playing time as a starter, said the coaching staff was supportive of their decision to transfer and that they even helped identify potential landing schools.

Developing best practices related to the Transfer Portal seemingly falls squarely on the shoulders of the coaches and recruiters responsible for directing the flow of traffic in the portal. Based on interviews with college athletes who used the transfer portal, coaches and administrators clearly contribute to the perception of those in the portal, and in some cases, negatively contribute to the social impacts the college athlete leaving has on the team. Take for example the field hockey players who spoke about their transferring teammate, who recounted how the team’s coaching staff went behind the transferring student’s back to tell the rest of the team about it. This story makes it clear that some sort of communication protocol should be in place in order to protect the transferring athlete from any potential bullying and isolation that may follow.

Limitations

Limitations to this qualitative study can be identified as sampling just one school, a small sample size at 16, a lack of full representation among all sports, the fact that the interviews did not
have any follow up, and that opinions on this issue are likely to evolve over time. A major limitation to this study was recruiting college athletes who were willing to be interviewed to express their private feelings about mental health. While this was somewhat expected, highly valuable firsthand accounts still were obtained. In the future, an additional study that adds more quantitative information could be vital for the development of further studies. While interviews allow for more personal expression, it is possible that an anonymous and depersonalized survey would yield greater results, specifically on the topic of mental health and wellness. Since 2020 the NCAA has conducted an annual study about mental health that includes some vital information, such as the fact that 61% of transferring female athletes cited mental health as the primary reason for transferring. However, a study independent of the NCAA could provide valuable information about views on administration and coaching that students otherwise likely would keep private.

Conclusion

In this qualitative research study, 16 college athletes at Southern East Coast University were interviewed to gain information about the mental health implications that NIL and the Transfer Portal have had among a population of students that already are at immense risk for mental health crises (Weber, 2023). The interviews suggested there is a clear lack of guidance from the NCAA that trickles down to campus administration and renders them unable to provide sufficient guidance. College athletes who are hesitant to participate due to lack of comprehensive guidance from an authoritative source are missing out on valuable opportunities to build career skills, and this lack of guidance is a clear source of frustration and confusion among college athletes. Universities should want their students to participate in NIL for a number of reasons; it helps college athletes financially when it’s often difficult for them to find work during the season and it’s good publicity for the university for its athletes to engage with their communities and build entrepreneurial skills, thus setting them up for success in their future careers. In addition, the Transfer Portal has added a new dimension to interpersonal relationships between college athletes and coaches that is worth exploring further, as the findings suggested that a lack of communication protocol for announcing an impending transfer was found to be a source of stress for outgoing transferring college athletes.

The findings of this study indicate that the added mobility gained from the Transfer Portal as well as the added influencer role and financial independence opportunities from NIL has had an impact on mental health among college athletes that necessitates further study. The topic of mental health looms over collegiate sports, as it becomes continuously more difficult to ignore the immense, crushing stress and potential mental health issues that unfortunately have become impossible for college athletes to avoid. Both tragic and uplifting outcomes can be found among fairly recent incidents, such as the tragic 2022 University of Virginia football shooting and the uplifting outcome of Tra Battle’s mental health crisis. Being a college athlete should not be a traumatic experience, and studies like this one contribute to moving collegiate athletes toward a future where exploring new opportunities such as NIL and the Transfer Portal can be a more positive experience.

References


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