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Voluntary Early Retirement from Sport: The Lived Experiences of Former NCAA Division III Student-Athletes

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A B S T R A C T

Intercollegiate athletics offer amateur athletes an approximately four-year window to pursue their athletic careers (Hodges & Darvin, 2022). While many athletes complete their full eligibility, some choose to retire early (Zvosec & Bass, 2022). At the NCAA Division III level, motivations for early retirement remain unclear, and the experiences of former student-athletes often are overlooked (Hodges & Darvin, 2022; Zvosec & Bass, 2022). Despite Division III's large athlete population, research seldom delves into their experiences. This study aims to explore why former Division III athletes voluntarily leave their sport. Transitioning out of collegiate sports poses significant challenges, affecting athletes' identities, career goals, and well-being. The Theory of Work Adjustment (TWA) offers a framework for understanding this transition (Hesketh & Griffin, 2005). TWA emphasizes aligning individual skills, values, and environmental requirements, providing insights into how athletes experience this phenomenon (Camire et al., 2012). Semi-structured interviews with 15 early retirees revealed factors influencing their decision, including controlling coaching behavior, a win-at-all-costs culture, lack of support, and burnout. This study sheds light on the Division III student-athlete experience, informing coaches, administrators, and institutions.

Keywords: Burnout, College Sport, Mental Health, Student-Athlete, Theory of Work Adjustment

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division III level of competition accounts for roughly 40% of NCAA participant membership, with roughly 200,000 of the total 500,000 NCAA student-athletes competing at this level of play (NCAA, 2020). Despite the large proportion of NCAA Division III participants, student-athlete experiences for this level of play are largely unknown. While previous investigations have been conducted in order to determine a range of those student-athlete experiences, they have fallen short of examining which aspects or experiences would lead to early sport retirement for a variety of student-athletes (e.g., Zvosec & Bass, 2022; Huml et al., 2014; Maslen, 2015; Sherman, 2002; Stokowski, 2019). The large proportion of student-athletes represented within this NCAA division support the importance of additional inquiry into the wide range of experiences at this level. Therefore, the current investigation aimed to fill a gap in the previous literature through an investigation of the lived experiences of former NCAA Division III student-athletes who have engaged in voluntary early retirement from intercollegiate sport. For the purposes of the current study, early retirement from collegiate sports is linked to active student athletes who quit with remaining NCAA eligibility, but not due to injury or team removal.

Previous investigations concerned with the student-athlete experience have uncovered both positive and negative outcomes for that population (Bang et al., 2024; Maslen, 2015; Sherman, 2002; Stokowski, 2019). Findings suggest several positive aspects of sport involvement including: (1) competitive environments, (2) social relationships with teammates and coaches, (3) leadership skill development, (4) time management development, (5) reassuring work ethic mentality, (6) positive self-esteem, and (6) cognitive development (Bang et al., 2024; Maslen, 2015; Sherman, 2002; Stokowski, 2019). Regardless of age, participating in sport has been found to provide athletes with increased skills in time management, leadership, and team work (Stokowski, 2019).

For example, according to Maslen (2015), youth who play sports have higher levels of social support, and that sense of community created with teammates, coaches, and family members incubates the perfect setting for critical self-esteem development. Sport participation also provides athletes improved self-esteem and sustained involvement has been shown to reduce depressive symptoms (Bang et al., 2024).

That being said, previous research also has uncovered the negative experiences of student-athletes in these same environments (Sherman, 2002; Stokowski, 2019). Some of these negative participation experiences include: (1) injuries, (2) time-management conflicts, (3) coaching issues, (4) work-life balance, (5) academic demands, and (6) the life after sport transition (Sherman, 2002; Stokowski et al., 2019). These negative experiences call into question the programming and protocol that colleges and universities have put in place to shape their student-athletes into well-rounded individuals; student-athletes who leave their institution ready to begin a career once their collegiate athletic career comes to an end (Berg & Warner, 2019). To that point, while student-athletes are expected to perform well academically while training at an elite level, when their academic endeavors and opportunities are compromised in this environment, issues may ensue (Berg & Warner, 2019). Although researchers have examined these negative experiences for former student-athletes and the life after sport transition (e.g. Stokowski, 2019), these experiences have not been investigated as potential motivation for voluntary early retirement across a variety of sports.

The NCAA has previously realized the importance of providing guidance and support services to student-athletes, and in the 1990's began requiring that member institutions provide academic development resources (Meyer, 2005; Nite, 2012). Although Division I institutions began to implement these services in a more robust manner to assist their student-athletes, the lower Divisions (i.e. II and III) have historically struggled to implement similar changes (Nite, 2012). According to previous scholarship, athletic departments should have an obligation to support student-athletes physically, mentally, and socially (Adler & Adler, 1991; Killeya-Jones, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2003; Nite, 2012; Settles, et al., 2007; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). While the implementation of support services for student-athletes is ideal, it has been determined that the execution of that goal is largely unsuccessful and at times a lack of financial funds to support staff at the lower-level NCAA division II and III institutions has been cited as a key barrier (Nite, 2012).

Beyond that, when colleges and universities do not or cannot provide student-athletes with proper resources and career development, student-athletes may graduate without having a clear career purpose (Berg & Warner, 2019). According to Stokowski (2019), student-athletes often approach the end of their athletic career with a sense of fear and freedom. For some, the end of an athletic career means the feeling of loss, for others a sense of fear of what will come next (Stokowski, 2019). Overall, Stokowski (2019) concluded that roughly 57.3% of the student-athletes recalled that their experiences adapting to life after sport were negative. Based on these negative associations with transition out of sport, voluntary early retirement from sport may carry similar traumatic experiences and is likely not an easy or simple decision to make for a student-athlete.

Grounded within the previous research and based on the gaps that remain, the current study sought to determine the rationale for why former NCAA Division III student-athletes from a variety of sports would engage in voluntary early retirement. This study was guided by a phenomenological approach as the common lived experiences of the phenomenon of early sport retirement were under investigation for this specific population of student-athletes (Creswell, 2013; Darvin, 2020). These common lived themes drawn from the participant experiences will provide parents, coaches, and administrators with a higher level of insight regarding the unique NCAA Division III student-athlete experience. In order to accomplish this task, the current study was led by the following research question:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of NCAA Division III student-athletes who have engaged in voluntary early retirement from their sport?

Review of Literature

Division III Athletics

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is structured into three divisions – Division I, Division II, and Division III – primarily differentiated by the level of competition and scholarship offerings. Notably, Division III, lacking athletic scholarships, stands as the largest division with 433 member institutions (NCAA, 2023). Marking its 50th year of competition in the 2023-2024 season post the NCAA's 1973 reorganization (NCAA, 2023), Division III has experienced notable growth, visibility, and popularity extending beyond its highest levels (Katz et al., 2017). Previous research highlights Division III's significant community role (Katz & Clopton, 2014) and its lasting impact on athletes' career and workplace development (Hood, 2023). Unlike Division I, Division III prioritizes student-athletes' holistic academic and athletic experiences over entertainment production, aiming to provide a competitive sports environment that complements academic pursuits (Katz et al., 2015; NCAA, 2023).

Despite Division I's substantial revenue generation, Division III institutions typically garner fewer financial resources, aligning more closely with the traditional collegiate sports ethos (NCAA, 2021; Stokowski et al., 2022). However, concerns have arisen regarding Division III's potential drift toward commercialized values akin to Division I (Katz et al., 2015), raising increased pressures on Division III athletes (Berg & Warner, 2019; Fetherman & Grossman, 2018). These athletes navigate academic conflicts, work-life balance challenges, and coach relationships, impacting their overall sports participation experiences (Fetherman & Grossman, 2018; Hazzaa et al., 2018; Raabe, 2017; Saffici, 2012). Consequently, a deeper exploration of the dynamics shaping Division III athletics is essential to ensure a balanced and supportive environment for student-athletes pursuing their academic and athletic aspirations while addressing the growing pressures and challenges they face within the evolving landscape of collegiate sports.

Division III Student-Athlete Experiences

Academic Conflicts

Participation as a student-athlete throughout a higher education experience often generates a level of tension in achieving academic success (Hazzaa et al., 2018; Saffici, 2012). The NCAA and schools nationwide hold strong mission statements saying that academics come first and athletes are students first; however, schools often do not consistently abide by this language, as their actions emphasize athletics over academics (Hazzaa et al., 2018). The NCAA mandates that student-athletes should be limited to 20 hours of athletic commitments per week, but it is not uncommon for student-athletes to spend roughly 30-40 hours per week on their athletic endeavors (Saffici, 2012). Beyond that, at times athletic programs encourage athletes to take "easy courses" and commit to "easier" majors in order to avoid conflict between their academic demands and athletic success (Saffici, 2012). These processes also can lead to a phenomenon known as 'academic clustering' in which athletes are advised to declare for majors that tend to conflict less with their athletic requirements (Killebrew, 2020; Paule-Koba, 2019). Academic clustering often has been found to more frequently impact athletes of color and first-generation athletes, which serves to continue to marginalize these specific populations of athletes (Houston & Barber, 2017; Killebrew, 2020). Specifically, previous research has determined that as many as one-third of student-athletes will have a misalignment between their academic major and their career aspirations (Paule-Koba, 2019).

When student-athletes must miss classes and other career advancing opportunities without proper flexibility with their collegiate program, this often develops into a major conflict of interest (Comeaux & Crandall, 2019). Further, previous research also has determined that obstacles such as university control, differences in attitudes between coaches and academic staff, and resource constraints impede the implementation and effectiveness of college/university programming that could assist this population (Ishaq & Bass, 2019). While time spent as a student-athlete clearly involves a level of commitment and a possible compromise of time, it has been determined that

athletics should be flexible and work around an athletes' academic opportunities and obligations (Comeaux & Crandall, 2019). Overall, when a student-athlete feels as though they do not have time to achieve success within their academic endeavors while participating in sport, more robust accommodations likely are needed to be provided by departments and institutions (Hazzaa et al., 2018). Additionally, it is important that institutions work to foster relationships between athletics and campus resources to enhance the academic experience for student-athletes (Ishaq & Bass, 2019; Ruben & Moses, 2017).

Work-Life Balance

Previous research has determined that student-athletes often experience increased responsibilities and lower levels of leisure time when compared with their non-athlete student counterparts (Fetherman & Grossman, 2018). While teammates often become a source of friendships, when student-athletes feel that their sport experience makes-up the majority of their collegiate experience, they are more likely to become discouraged and discontinue their participation (Berg & Warner, 2019). To that end, when athletes are over-trained and not given enough time to disengage from athletics, the sport often will take on many of the same characteristics of a career or job rather than an enjoyable extra-curricular experience (Berg & Warner, 2019).

Similar to the traditional college student, student-athletes also experience many diverse situations (e.g. family commitments, family illness, family death) that often require their attention/presence while not being afforded the same flexibility to navigate these experiences (Berg & Warner, 2019; Fetherman & Grossman, 2018). When athletic teams/departments are not flexible and understanding of a student-athletes' outside obligations, that athlete may then encounter a lack of a work-life balance (Berg & Warner, 2019). These situations alone can cause athletes to leave their sport even if they initially did not want to end their participation. That being said, it has been suggested that generating a culture where athletes feel comfortable going to coaches/administrators about life outside of sport situations can serve as a positive practice and offset the work-life balance tensions (Raabe & Zakrajsek, 2017).

Coach-to-Athlete Relationship

The coach-to-athlete relationship plays an important role in the student-athlete experience (Raabe, 2017). According to Vealey et al.'s (1998), athletes experiencing high levels of burnout described their coaches as being less empathetic, more autocratic, prone to communicating dispraise, and placing an emphasis on winning rather than improvement. Aside from teammates, a coach is an individual who spends the most time with the student-athletes and typically maintains a high rate of influence over the student-athlete (Raabe, 2017). To that point, serving as a coach is very similar to those serving in more traditional management roles (Lafrenière et al., 2011). If a coach does not promote a positive culture and athletes fear or dislike their coach, then that can negatively impact those athletes (Barcza-Renner, 2016; Lafrenière et al., 2011). For example, work by Barcza-Renner (2016) examined burnout for autonomous and motivated athletes who experienced controlling coaching behaviors and findings revealed that athlete-perceived controlling coach behaviors were associated with athlete burnout.

It has been determined that feelings of reciprocal respect, trust, and communication have been factors that help establish healthy coach-athlete relationships, while feelings of mistrust, dominance, and a lack of respect are factors in debilitating a coach-athlete relationship (Lafrenière et al., 2011). According to Lafrenière et al., (2011), harmonious passion for coaching positively predicted supportive behaviors toward athletes, while obsessive passion for coaching predicted controlling behaviors. In other words, while it is important for a coach to be passionate about their profession, when the sport, their job, and winning takes precedence over other important social factors such as the coach-to-athlete relationship along with caring for the well-being of the student-athlete, athletes often become unhappy with their experiences (Lafrenière et al., 2011). Additionally, according to Sherman (2002), as reported on by high school athletes, coaches who maintained character traits or actions such as fun, nice, understanding, positive encouragement, and being highly knowledgeable were well-liked by their players. In contrast, coaches who were

disliked were reported as maintaining traits or actions such as being negative with players, displaying low levels of encouragement, yelling at players, poor coaching skills, and acting in a manner that was too strict (Sherman, 2002). These coaches who were disliked often resulted in lower levels of enjoyment by the players and may arguably contribute to early retirement (Sherman, 2002).

While these general areas of the student-athlete experience previously have been explored, there remains a gap in understanding the overall experiences of this population of student-athletes who compete at the Division III level. It is suggested, based on the previous literature, that these experiences can contribute to potential negative experiences of students-athletes (e.g., Fetherman & Grossman, 2018; Hazzaa et al., 2018; Raabe, 2017; Saffici, 2012), but it remains less clear what the outcomes are for those athletes who may encounter these obstacles during their playing careers. As a result, the current study sought to fill this gap in the previous literature and expand our understanding of how Division III student-athletes experience their time competing in their sport as well as their rationale for voluntarily retiring from their sport prior to exhausting their full four years of eligibility.

Theoretical Framework

Transitioning out of collegiate sports presents a significant challenge for NCAA student-athletes, impacting various facets of their lives including their identity, career aspirations, and overall well-being. For that reason, further understanding the process of retiring early among student-athletes requires a nuanced examination that encompasses both psychological and sociological perspectives (McElveen & Ibele, 2019; Weiss & Robinson, 2013). To address this, the Theory of Work Adjustment (TWA) offers a valuable framework for understanding and facilitating the decision process. Developed by Lofquist and Dawis (1969), TWA emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between individuals and their work environments, focusing on the alignment of individual skills, values, and environmental requirements (Hesketh et al., 2005). In the context of NCAA student-athletes, TWA underscores the importance of the work environment reinforcing individuals' values, which is particularly relevant for student-athletes transitioning voluntarily out of collegiate sports early, who may seek alternative environments that align with their own individual values of competition, camaraderie, and personal development, rather than those of upper leadership (Camire et al., 2012; MacLean & Hamm, 2008).

Furthermore, TWA's focus on satisfaction and satisfactoriness as indicators of successful work relationships is pertinent to NCAA student-athletes navigating post-athletic careers, specifically when those decisions are made prematurely (Weiss & Robinson, 2013). In the context of student athletes, the application of TWA suggests that the decision to voluntarily retire from a sport early may be influenced by the alignment between the athlete's personal characteristics, such as skills, interests, and values, and the demands and rewards associated with participating in the sport (Garcia et al., 2023). Research has shown that when student-athletes perceive a lack of fit between their own attributes and the requirements of the sport, they may experience decreased satisfaction and effectiveness, ultimately leading to a higher likelihood of retiring early. Satisfaction, representing individual well-being, encompasses factors such as fulfillment and engagement in post-sport endeavors, while satisfactoriness denotes the ability to meet the requirements of the new environment (Hesketh et al., 2005).

Moreover, the decision to voluntarily retire from a sport early also can be understood through the lens of athlete identity development (Huml et al., 2019). Student athletes often invest significant time and effort into their sport, and their athletic identity becomes a central aspect of their self-concept (Garcia et al., 2023; Love & Rufer, 2021). Therefore, retiring from a sport can pose a threat to their identity and lead to feelings of loss, confusion, and even stigma (Garcia et al., 2023). This struggle to reconcile their athletic identity with the decision to retire early may exacerbate the psychological distress associated with early sport withdrawal. Similarly, satisfaction in post-athletic careers may be influenced by the extent to which these careers align with athletes' personal values and goals (Borak et al., 2022). By considering both satisfaction and satisfactoriness within the TWA framework, researchers and practitioners can better understand the factors contributing to not only the decision and rationale for early retirement, but also assist

institutions with ensuring successful transitions for NCAA student-athletes as they navigate the complexities of post-playing life.

Methods

Research Design

As previously stated, the purpose of this study was to identify the factors that impacted NCAA Division III student-athletes, and ultimately contributed to their decision to voluntarily retire from their sport. This study incorporated a qualitative design, specifically using a phenomenological approach. Qualitative research is defined as a research process that uses inductive data analysis to learn about the meaning that participants hold regarding a problem or issue through the identification of patterns or themes (Lewis, 2015). Phenomenological approaches are concerned with the lived experiences of several individuals who shared familiarities with a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Data was collected through the use of semi-structured interview conversations with former NCAA Division III student-athletes who have voluntarily quit their sport. Utilizing a semi-structured interview guide fulfills the qualitative design as it gives more power to the participant to describe their experiences and talk about the individual experiences that caused them specifically to retire from sport (Creswell, 2013).

Phenomenological Design

The current study utilized a phenomenological design. Specifically, phenomenology is a qualitative method and umbrella term that embodies a philosophical movement as well as a range of research approaches (Kafle, 2011). Phenomenology is largely concerned with focusing on an individual's perception(s) of the world in which they live as well as the meaning and interpretations of those perceptions (Langdridge, 2007). According to Creswell (2013), "The purpose of [a] phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specific, and identify how phenomena are perceived by the individuals in a situation" (p. 300). In addition, within studies that are concerned with human experiences, a phenomenological approach works to "gather deep information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions, and participant observations, and subsequently, representing it from the perspective of the participant(s)" (Creswell, 2013, p. 300). The phenomenon under investigation is the process of early, voluntary retirement from their collegiate sport by former NCAA student-athletes.

Sample

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were recruited for the study. Participants were found using snowball sampling procedures, a common approach with phenomenological research (Creswell, 2013). A total of 15 former NCAA Division III student-athletes participated in this study. The sample consisted of 12 women and 3 men who had experiences in multiple sports including baseball, cross country, track & field, ice hockey, swimming & diving, soccer, and lacrosse. Participants were recruited from three institutions in the northeast United States. Interview length across all interviews ranged from 30-50 minutes total. Participant names have been replaced by participant numbers to further assist with confidentiality. Additional demographic data is provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participant	Sex	Age	Sport	Total Years Playing	Years Played at NCAA Level	Years Removed From NCAA Sport
P1	F	19	Cross Country/T&F	5	1	1
P2	M	21	Baseball	18	2	2
P3	M	22	Soccer	12	3	1.5
P4	F	20	Track & Field	7	1	1
P5	F	20	Track & Field	7	1	1
P6	F	23	Ice Hockey	16	2	2.5
P7	F	21	Swimming	19	1	3
P8	F	22	Ice Hockey	19	3	1
P9	F	20	Soccer	15	1	0
P10	F	21	Soccer	16-17	1	3
P11	F	21	Soccer	16	1	3
P12	M	20	Baseball	14	1.5	1
P13	F	20	Lacrosse	10	1	2
P14	F	21	Lacrosse	12	1	3
P15	F	21	Lacrosse	13	3	1

Data Collection and Interview Protocol

Participants took part in face-to-face interviews during which they described their athletic experiences throughout their life, but specifically in college. An interview protocol was established prior to the interviews that included questions about various topics a typical collegiate athlete would experience, which was based off previous literature as well as consultation with several former NCAA student-athletes and one coach (Creswell, 2013). In adherence to the suggestions of Castillo-Montoya (2016) regarding the interview protocol refinement process, prior to conducting interviews with participants, the interview guide was provided individuals from similar populations to judge the clarity and overall understanding of the questions. Feedback was provided and assessed, which led to several edits to the interview protocol ahead of data collection procedures.

The finalized interview protocol employed a semi-structured interview design with questions such as: (1) please describe how you initially began participating in your sport, (2) please describe any positive and negative experiences during your sport participation in the intercollegiate setting, (3) please describe the relationship you had with your college coach/coach(es), (4) please describe the culture of the college team you were a member of, and (5) describe the value of college sport participation to your life. Demographic information also was collected at the start of each interview.

Data Analysis

After interviews were conducted, the data was transcribed through a third-party transcription company, and the written interview conversations were reviewed by the researchers to determine themes. This analysis strategy incorporated the recommendation of Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) for phenomenological inquiry by using a three-step process to develop emergent themes. The process is depicted in Figure 1. The three steps included (1) reading the interviews several times and recording observations, (2) taking notes and converging them into emergent themes, and (3) seeking relationships and clustering themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The overall process was cyclical and often required moving back within previous steps multiple times. This analysis

process follows similar work in the sport field that engaged with phenomenological inquiry (Darvin et al., 2019).

Figure 1
Steps in the Interpretive Analysis Approach
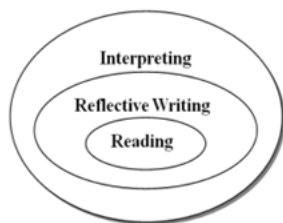
Trustworthiness

There were several ways in which trustworthiness was accomplished including credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Credibility was established through having recorded transcriptions of the interview conversations using REV and the extensive notetaking process of deciphering each interview process and determining codes, which later would be examined into themes and sub themes. Transferability was established through the thick quotes provided and the number of quotes provided under each theme and sub-theme. Dependability was established through the explanation of the method section and how the process of the interviews would go. Lastly, conformability was established through the purchases of the REV transcriptions, the interview guide, and table with the participant information.

Background of the Researchers

To thoroughly delve into this topic of research and interpretations of participant experiences, we must establish the expertise of the research team. One of the researchers identifies as a male with four years of experience as an NCAA student-athlete while the other researcher identifies as a female with experience as an NCAA student-athlete, coach, and administrator. Both researchers competed at the NCAA Division III level of competition in three different sports, providing them with an avenue to relate to a variety of former NCAA Division III student-athletes.

Results

Several themes were present in the reasoning for why collegiate athletes retired from their sport before their four years were up. The following content will elaborate on the themes of: (1) Controlling Coaching Behavior, (2) Win-at-all-costs Environment, (3) Lack of Resources and Support, and (4) Burnout.

Table 2
Theme Development

Codes	Theme
• Negative experiences with coaching staff • Sport should come before personal and/or other professional goals • Unsupportive coaches • Lack of care for players if not benefiting coach directly (winning) • Trying to dictate academic major • Would not take input from players	**Controlling Coaching Behaviors**
• Lack of personal time • A DIVISION III environment with a DI or professional sport culture • Pushing athletes to play while injured • Punishing athletes for game mistakes on a long-term basis • Recruiting inaccuracies regarding playing time • Treated like scholarship players but no scholarship funding	**Win-at-all-costs Environment**
• Mental health issues when unaddressed • Athletic department did not provide consistent resources to assist with academics • Lack of tutors available in the evenings post game or practice times • Nutrition assistance was non-existent • Struggled to maintain the priorities of the coach with academic and personal involvements outside of sport	**Lack of Resources and Support**
• Emotional exhaustion from sport time commitments • Constantly dealing with injury but limited resources provided to assist in healing • Game travel by bus solely even when going many hours away • Sport specialization and playing for so many years	**Burnout**

Controlling Coaching Behavior

Throughout the interview process, it was clear that many of the participants had negative experiences with their collegiate coaches. The coach plays a significant role in the student-athlete experience as coaches are the main resource for an athlete and spend the most time with that athlete on a given campus (Raabe, 2017). P9, a former soccer player, recalled of her coach: "She was definitely more of soccer came first. Didn't care about school… you were an athlete before you were a student and she didn't like team chemistry and bonding." P10, a former soccer player, had similar experiences:

> No. I didn't feel comfortable with [my coach] at all. If anything, [my coach] was just a really big source of negativity. [Coach] wasn't supportive of school. [Coach] asked me multiple times to change my major or drop out of the Honors Program because I wasn't prepared for soccer practice. I had too much homework. I got in a lot of trouble actually [my] first semester freshman year because [my professor] wanted me to go to [on an engagement trip], but my coach wouldn't let me…I can't remember us having a designated study hall. We didn't have that. I guess, in that sense, I feel like teams should have that, but that kind of just shows you, she didn't really value that for us. So, I think it was more on her than the school because I know other teams [did] have [study hall] requirements.

P15, a former lacrosse player, also had similar experiences with coaches being unsupportive: "[if you missed] a couple of practices because you have classes or if you're in a certain major, she kind of [made] you go to a different major. I know that happened to another girl on our team that she kind of forced her to [switch majors]. [That player also] ended up quitting."

P2, a former baseball player, described his experiences with additional measures of negative coach behavior:

…there was this factor of the coach just wanting to win and caring about his record and his reputation rather than caring about his players. It's just the fact of him holding things against me that I couldn't control…there was very little praise. Even if you were working hard, it would be what you were doing wrong, not encouraging what you were doing right, in a sense. It pushed a lot of us away.

Previous findings have determined that a negative relationship with a coach can have a negative impact on the overall happiness of the student-athlete (Lafrenière, 2011). P12, a former baseball player, felt similarly: "I think [our coach] cared about [some] of his players, but I don't think he genuinely cared about all of them. I think he just wanted to win and he wanted it to look good for him." P8, a former ice hockey player, talked about her experiences trying to study abroad and the lack of flexibility her coach showed toward her:

It ended up working out, but I don't think he liked it because I was away and I wasn't focusing on hockey, and obviously, I came back like two weeks before preseason, and I was severely out of shape. I'm not going to lie about it, when I studied abroad all I did was have fun, so I think he was pretty pissed about it, but he tells everyone [that you can have a chance to study abroad] to get them to come here. [During recruiting] coach is like, 'One of our athletes got to study abroad, so come here because you get the opportunity to do that,' but he wasn't really too happy that I did that, at least afterwards, because I was trying to find a place to stay because I couldn't live in the dorms and he was like, 'Well if she can't find a spot I don't care. She can go home.'

P5, a former track athlete, had similar experiences with a coach displaying low levels of flexibility, encouragement, or understanding. P5 recalled:

…when I tried to switch from pentathlon to one or two events, hurdles, high jump, the coaches were like, 'If you are thinking about switching, you might as well quit now because we don't need that type of energy.' So, they were a big influence on me quitting. I [thought], well if they don't want to respect my decision to want to switch based on my experiences, then I don't want to be a part of this.

Athletes went on to talk about the control their coaches attempted to maintain over their family or academic commitments. For example, P2 recalled:

I had a few issues with family that I had to go home for... when I would tell [coach] because out of respect and just professionalism, he would try and convince me not to go and say it wasn't that important because it's already happened or I can't do anything to change it, which wasn't right in my opinion. It was held against me for the following year by not being able to travel with the team, by not being able to continue with the team, workout with the team, anything like that. And that's when I got fed up and ended up quitting. There were other individuals on the team that had done a lot worse things than myself that were not pushed aside just because he thought maybe they were a better benefit to the team or anything like that.

P10 felt as if she was being punished similar to P2, but based on academic commitments:

I understand... I shouldn't get special treatment in the sense that like, 'Oh my schedule is harder than somebody else's. I get to miss practice.' But don't tell me that I'm not prepared for practice because I have too much homework. Because that's kind of ridiculous. I don't know, I felt definitely [the coaches] would hold it against me for trying to be a better student.

The controlling behavior of the head coach also manifested itself in negative communication tactics. P8 described her experience: "… it wasn't consistent. He wouldn't even say what we did wrong. He was just like, 'That was stupid. If you do that ever again you're not playing.' And we [the team] would be like, 'What did we do wrong?' And [the coach] just wouldn't answer us."

P4, a track and field athlete, had similar experiences with difficulties communicating with coaches:

I would feel comfortable talking about my performances and what I could do to be better, but I did not feel comfortable going to them to talk about injuries. There was a lot of positivity if something good happened, but if maybe a race wasn't as good, they weren't. They weren't positive at all…there was no feedback. Sometimes they wouldn't even say anything.

P15 also experienced this: "I think after how the season's been going since freshman year, I think [the coach] definitely took it hard when we would lose and even when we lost the [conference championship] she did not talk to us after losing. She kind of just ignored us, didn't send a text

message out to the team or anything." Athletes also believed the communication with the coach and the athletic trainers could be improved as well. P4 talked about this topic by saying:

> The coaches wanted me to be back and the trainers wanted me to rest. And they couldn't find a middle ground. I think they could definitely have a meeting with the athlete, the trainer, and head coach, to all be in the same room, all discussing. It's not like the trainer telling the athlete and athlete has to go talk to the coach. That was always... things got lost in translation, for sure.

The insights provided by the interviewees highlight a prevalent issue within collegiate athletics: negative experiences with coaches. These experiences, ranging from a lack of support for academic pursuits to controlling behaviors impacting personal and family commitments, emphasize the significant influence coaches wield over student-athletes. The detrimental effects of such negative relationships on athlete happiness and well-being cannot be overstated. The findings emphasize the pivotal role coaches play in shaping the overall athlete experience. Moreover, the need for improved communication, flexibility, and understanding between coaches, athletes, and support staff emerged as a crucial aspect for fostering a positive and supportive athletic environment. Ultimately, addressing these issues is essential for promoting the holistic development and successful retention of student-athletes.

Win-at-all-costs Environment

The second theme was the concept of winning at all costs. Previous research has indicated that winning-at-all-costs in intercollegiate sport can lend itself to unethical behavior and a sense of burnout among participants (Darvin, 2020). P3, a former soccer player, described this within his playing experiences prior to college:

> [I thought for Division III]…it'll be fun and it'll obviously be competitive, but I'll still be able to go out, have my freedom, which, that wasn't exactly the case [once I got to college], and each year it got more and more strict. It's extremely strict. People would joke that we were playing for Barcelona, which is one of the best teams in the world.

P12 also talked about the ways in which players were punished for poor performances, which amplifies the winning-at-all-costs mentality within the Division III level: "One of the guys let up a breakaway and he was starting every game for the last, I think four games, and [after that play] he hadn't played since." P6, a former ice hockey player, felt similarly about the strict winning mentality for their team: "My year it was just the win, we weren't winning either, so it was just very focused on what can we do to get us to win." P8 felt similar by saying:

> At this point in college, I've been playing for so long that I kind of just wanted to play. If I really want it to be in a strict, winning environment, I would have tried going to DI. But in going to D3, I know I'm not going to a professional league or career after this. I was just trying to, not just have fun, but just be in a friendlier environment.

P9 talked about the winning mentality regarding playing time and injuries: "[coach would start] her 11 starters whether [they] were hurt or not. You're playing constantly and she had a bench of at least twenty to twenty-five [players] and did not use them. If you were on the floor injured [and you were a starter] you were staying in."

A lack of game-time participation and opportunities were common reasons why athletes were unsatisfied and ultimately decided to voluntarily leave the sport. P3 recalled:

> [Coach] definitely didn't give players fair opportunities. One of my best friends, this kid was always the hardest worker in practice for two years, always, and then never played. I don't think he played a single game in his two years that he played. I think most people have a similar experience where they either quit because they weren't getting an opportunity to play and they had been on the team for a year or two and they just literally were not getting any chances, or kids that just... It was just that plus it was too strict and they wanted more freedom.

P12 described his lack of opportunities as well:

> I never got a chance to play at all. He didn't even put me in for one inning. I never got a chance at all. I was a pitcher and I was also a third baseman. And when I got recruited here, he said you're going to do both. And that was also a factor in picking [this school because I was able to both hit and pitch. I got here. He said you're pitching, you're not hitting.

P12 also described his lack of involvement and recognition as a reason for quitting by saying:

Honestly, he didn't really pay attention [to me] or my progress because there's so many kids on the team. So he only paid attention to kids he knew were going to play. My coach didn't even let me work out with the team. He didn't let me practice with the team. Sometimes I didn't travel with the team. Maybe once or twice in my entire college career. So, I wasn't really involved with the team, which is another reason why I quit because that shouldn't be allowed. You shouldn't be able to recruit someone to the school and do that to them. The main reason I quit is because I didn't get playing time. I figured I'd never get playing time based on what other people went through. And I just didn't want to waste all my time in college. I wanted to enjoy college, I wanted to make friends. I wanted to go out and enjoy myself. I wanted to focus on the academics. So that's why I quit pretty much.

P11, a former soccer player, had similar experiences:

In my own experience, I was recruited as a center midfielder. As soon as I got there, I was first told I would be playing outside forward, and then it switched to outside wing, and then it went back to outside forward to eventually I was playing defense in practice drills, which was not what I was doing at all. I hadn't played defense since sixth grade, so I don't really think I got my chance to show what I could do.

P11 would also go on to talk about her experience of not getting the right opportunity:

I think I had that conversation with her when I went in to quit, because what the conversation was, was I had just been put in defense during practice. I was like, 'What's going on? I'm not a defender. I was recruited as a center midfielder.' She was like, 'Well, now I see you as this kind of player,' or, 'I see you as,' specifically she was like, 'a practice player,' where I'm going to go where she needs me. That's where I ended up being by my sophomore year. So before that, I didn't really get the chance. Especially in games. I was never put in as center midfielder. She had two or three girls that she would put there, but yeah. I definitely didn't really get that opportunity.

P11 also went on to say:

I think the same people started and it's tricky. That makes me think of there was one weekend that she pulled me aside, me and three other girls, and she was like, 'Get some extra hours of conditioning in this week because there's going to be some minutes out on the wing. I want to put you three out there. Get some time in. You're going in.' Then the game came, and she put in a whole different person that wasn't even involved with the three of us. So it was, what was the point of telling us that and giving us that information? It was more or less like, 'I don't really care what you're doing in the off hours, but I'm going to play who I want anyways,' kind of thing.

P10 talked about the negative effect that the win-at-all-costs team culture had on her and her teammates:

It backfired on [the coach] because no one wanted to play anymore. She would beat the starters into the ground because she would choose them during preseason. If you got chosen then, that was it. There was no real accountability for the starters. You couldn't really progress. It was definitely competitive towards each other. The people who didn't play always felt on edge because we always felt like we had something to prove more so than everyone. Which is true for any person that's not a starter. But just feeling like you're playing and there's nothing that can be done. You either would give up or just feel so weird, I didn't feel like myself ever. I would dread going to practice.

Another component of winning-at-all-costs became evident within the scope of injuries. P10 recalled:

There were definitely some players that [coach] didn't care how hurt they were because there were some starters that could barely be walking after and she would be like, 'Well you're fine.' But then if someone [coach] didn't care about hurt their toe, [coach] would be like, 'Oh well you're hurting, you can't play.'

P11 had this to add:

I think there were certain people that once they were injured, they didn't really have a chance to come back kind of thing, but [the head coaches] star players, if they were injured, they were getting whatever they needed so they could get back on the field. They were playing as soon as they were cleared kind of thing, but others, if they got hurt and they weren't a star or

> they weren't getting subbed in first or second round, it was like, 'We'll get you better, but we're not going to rush to get you back in the game.'

The theme of "winning at all costs" within collegiate athletics emerged as a significant concern. These narratives depict a culture wherein the pursuit of winning often takes precedence over athlete well-being, fair opportunities, and ethical conduct. Instances of strict adherence to winning, regardless of the toll on athletes' physical and mental health, underscore the detrimental effects of such a mindset. Athletes' accounts of feeling marginalized, overlooked, and disregarded based on their performance or injuries paint a troubling picture of an environment where individual worth is often measured solely by athletic success.

The accounts of athletes facing limited playing time, inconsistent opportunities, and arbitrary position changes further illustrate the challenges inherent in a win-focused culture. Such experiences not only erode athletes' passion for their sport but also contribute to feelings of disillusionment, dissatisfaction, and ultimately, voluntary departure from the team or sport altogether. Additionally, the disparity in treatment between star players and others when it came to injuries revealed a concerning lack of equity and fairness within the athletic program. Overall, enhancing communication, promoting fairness and inclusivity, and prioritizing athlete welfare over winning are essential steps toward cultivating a healthier and more sustainable collegiate athletic culture.

Lack of Resources and Support

The third theme that emerged revolved around a lack of proper outlets and resources available to Division III student-athletes. Largely the participants expressed a lack of support in order for them to productively work through their concerns, problems, and/or feelings regarding their experiences. Providing social support is especially necessary for college athletes, as they have been shown to face greater stress due to their sport participation (Beauchemin, 2014; Berg & Warner, 2019; Cranmer, 2018). P7, a former swimmer, discussed the difficulty of seeking assistance:

> I've had experiences on the team where somebody needs help, but they aren't able to get the help that they need because no one is really listening or recommending resources. It almost becomes a team drama rather than an individualized issue. I think it's more of a comfort aspect. Typically, athletes want to look strong. I think admitting to any mental health issue, any family issue, is kind of making them look weak in a sense and that's not for everybody. I definitely think that's an issue.

P6 talked about how she was dealing with personal issues off the ice and how she didn't feel comfortable reaching out to anyone:

> [Coach] was not very involved in our personal lives. It was only hockey, and I had a lot going on in my personal life. So, it was very hard to just completely forget about everything and go play hockey and have [coach] be totally cold. He told me, 'I have 25 players to worry about, I can't be concerned with all of your personal lives off the ice.' So, he was very distant, I was never comfortable going to him and finally I went to him and I was like this is what's been going on, this is why I've been having trouble. And he literally was just like, 'Oh well I can't be worried about you when I have everyone else to worry about playing.' And I was like, 'okay.'

P10 discussed how she received help from a professor instead of the athletic department by saying:

> I didn't go to anybody when I was struggling a lot with it. I talked to... I turned to professors more, some of my professors that could tell. Like I had one lab class that I would do really great on the quizzes that we had, but my lab reports weren't good because you could tell I was rushing and [my professor] was like, 'You should come to office hours.' And I was like, 'I can't, I don't have time.' And then that's when I started to talk to [my professor] more about it.

Division III student-athletes could benefit from more proactive approaches from athletic departments and coaches to better check up on athletes and make athletes aware of the various outlets that are available to them. This concept is exemplified by the comments from P15, as she felt there was nobody to turn to:

> The stress of [my coach] and just lacrosse in general, I feel like we kind of didn't really get a pathway to people who could help us out because we didn't feel comfortable talking to [our coach] for help. So, we didn't know what to do. And then I think also just being somebody you're able to go talk to. If you had a situation and a response back or even a checkup, that would be something that I would want, but it just didn't happen.

P11 mentioned that there was no effective process in place for checking in on players: "I know that some people were probably in a worse spot than I was, but it didn't really seem like coach reached out to us and was like, 'Hey. Everything okay? How we doing?' There was no checking up on the players, and I think that that should be pushed more for the coaches to do that."

> P15 had similar recollections:
> Yeah, I think [our coach] kind of said she cared, but when you did try to go talk to her she would say something and then nothing will ever happen, or she just isn't a person you would be able to go up to and talk to. She wouldn't check in on you to see if you're doing fine if something happened or anything.

P5 discussed the importance of recognizing when athletes may need help:

> I don't know about other coaches, but coaches should be better able to deal with people that are having some mental... not breakdown, but mental blockage or something like that. Because that was one of the reasons I left was because [the coaches] didn't recognize that I needed help. But there are other resources on campus, but I think it would help a lot if the coaches could recognize it as well.

P6 mentioned that her outcome may have been different if there was someone who checked in with her/understood her problems by saying: "Yeah, I guess my wrist is very messed up too but the main reason I quit was just because it was too much mentally. But if I had that one person who was like "hey, it's okay, we get it." Yeah, it would've been a lot different."

> P11 talked about the importance of having someone to talk to:
> Yeah. I think it is very important because had I not been able to talk to the assistant coach, the assistant coach was the one who said, 'I see what's going on and I feel for you. You're not wrong. This is what's happening at practice.' So, I don't think if I had her, I don't know if I really would have quit as soon as I did or if I would have felt as good about quitting as I did. So, I definitely think it's important to have someone to talk to.

P14, a former lacrosse player, recalled how it could be beneficial to have support staff for Division III athletes to turn to when they need to talk:

> …because even for me, I knew I was going to tell them I did not want to play anymore. But some kids I feel like definitely it's harder. And if you don't have a coach you can talk to, for example I would never have gone and talked to my coach and right away freshman year I didn't have anyone that I could've gone and talked to, so I feel like even if the athletics department had someone like that, that'd be super cool. That's a cool thing to have. Especially for someone is a freshman.

The theme of a lack of proper outlets and resources available to Division III student-athletes revealed a critical gap in the support system for these participants. The insights shared by former athletes illustrated the challenges they faced in seeking assistance and addressing personal issues within their athletic environments. The reluctance to discuss mental health or personal struggles due to perceived stigma or lack of receptiveness from coaches highlights a concerning trend in collegiate athletics. Instead of finding solace or guidance within their teams, athletes often turned to other sources, such as professors, for support.

Burnout

The final theme that emerged was athlete burnout. An athlete may become emotionally exhausted from dealing with continual stresses of competition, training, and other demands from their time, which in turn can cause early retirement from sport (Raedeke, 1997). One major stressor and component of burnout for the participants was dealing with injuries. P4 experienced tough times with an injury and the overall magnitude of the injury was too much for her to handle:

> Yeah, so I have damage to my labrum in my right hip, and I would always have the cracking and popping of it. So, they sent me to go get x-rays and a cat scan, and they basically

concluded that I was going to either have to have a lot of PT every week or surgery, and I just thought it was a little too much. I really had to step off, for my own mental health, physical health, all of that. It would have been too much.

P1 dealt with an injury for a while:

It's just an old injury that just sometimes gets more irritated. Normally, I just ice it and get the swelling down and it's fine. They're like... 'Do you want me to fix the problem or do you want to just keep putting a Band-Aid on it?' I was, 'Okay. We can try to fix it, obviously.' And [what the staff tried to do] just made [my injury] 10 times worse and... I wish I'd just got that bag of ice.

P15 had several injuries she was battling with:

Yeah, definitely with a lot of my injuries. I've had two knee surgeries. I've had tendonitis and bursitis in my hips and I broke my whole thumb last season. So, there's a lot of injuries that happen. And then just the coaching staff in college definitely made it not a memorable time.

Along with injuries, several participants felt that they did not have enough time to fit their academic obligations in with their limited schedules. P13, a former lacrosse player, had this to say about the time demands of being an athlete:

It was very, very tiring. It was really hard to keep up with. I was really concerned about my schoolwork, I was nervous that I wasn't going to have enough time with all the practices, and lifts, and mandatory study hall, and it was just a lot. I think it was a balance. I wouldn't say [I had a balance] because school was obviously the top priority, and she would always emphasize that, and if we had class it was fine, we could miss practice. She worked around that stuff, but at the same time, it was so rigorous that it was very hard to have school be a top priority [without other resources]. Obviously, we had study hall, but I don't know, it was just hard, really hard.

P1, a former cross country athlete, felt as if she was always pressed for time to get her academic obligations taken care of:

But I felt like I was constantly missing review sessions and study times. I constantly felt like I was underprepared for exams and assignments, and I just felt really behind. I didn't even notice how much it was until at the end of track, when I got sick and I couldn't participate, all of my grades went up and I had mono.

P8 talked about the struggle of her schedule: "I actually would be late a couple times a week because upperclassmen, you know you can only have selected times, and then I used to get tutored so I would try to fit that in as well. Then I would be late to practice some days, and [coach] also didn't like that." P8 also had this to say: "… just the stress I guess, trying to do school and sports. I did five years of high school, so I'm a year older, so mine is more like trying to get ready to graduate and have that resume."

The participants also struggled with the lack of social time they had due to playing a varsity sport. P11 felt as if there should have been a better balance with athletics and a social life:

Yeah, I mean that first semester coming in as a freshman, you don't have any friends and up until November 1st or 2nd, we weren't allowed to go out or do anything because we had the dry season. To be honest, it was depressing because it was soccer five, six days a week and then you had school and after that, there was no time to really let loose or just blow off some steam kind of thing. So, I think it just, yeah, wasn't too fun at first. I do think it's important. We are in college and most of us came to college to have a little bit of fun, too. I didn't really get that until November 1st or 2nd that first year. I didn't really know what to do with myself and by then everyone has their clique's kind of thing. Everyone really knows their friends, so it was really hard to just shift from not being able to do anything and then trying to figure out how to balance it all. I think you should let the athlete let loose [more]. [Student-athletes] should have a night every now and then to just relax because I don't think D 3 soccer should be everything you do or D3 sports in general.

P12 felt that he did not find his true friends:

Another negative is just it takes away a lot of time from your social life and from your school life. So it's basically baseball, baseball, baseball or whatever sport you play. I think if I had more friends on the team and that's who I hung out with outside of baseball too. I might've stayed on the team. But a big reason for me for leaving was that I didn't really hang out with a

lot of kids on the team. And so I didn't have those friends and I wanted friends. In college, I was a sophomore, and I just want real friends, you know?

Central to the theme of burnout was the overwhelming burden imposed by continual physical and time demands, particularly exacerbated by the prevalence of injuries among participants. Moreover, balancing athletic commitments with academic responsibilities proved to be a significant source of stress for many athletes, with limited time and resources which hindered their ability to prioritize academic success for life after sport. Additionally, the lack of social time and opportunities for personal growth outside of athletics further compounds the challenges faced by student-athletes, highlighting the need for a more balanced approach to collegiate athletics that fosters holistic well-being.

Summary Narrative and Discussion

The themes that emerged as rationale for early retirement from NCAA Division III sport included: (1) controlling coaching behavior, (2) winning-at-all-costs environments, (3) a lack of resources and support, and (4) burnout. This study adds to the previous literature on student-athlete experience for several reasons. First, this study further fills a significant gap as it was the first to examine NCAA Division III student-athletes in this capacity of early retirement (Zvosec & Bass, 2022). Second, although previous studies exist on athlete burnout and transition, the emergent themes of a lack of resources and winning-at-all-costs environments are new additions to this line of inquiry. Additionally, based on these findings it became evident that the student-athletes did not quit on the basis of one particular event, as several factors often contributed to this highly difficult decision and transition out of sport.

The first theme that emerged was controlling coaching behavior. This theme included athletes who felt their coach's behavior or communication style negatively impacted their experience. The controlling coaching behavior included experiences by the student-athletes where athletic participation was valued over all other aspects of a college career, communication issues, team culture issues, and limited flexibility for any family/academic issues, hardships, or concerns. Student-athletes felt as if their coach made the athletes place their sport as the most important aspect of their collegiate experience. Beyond that, it was clear that many of the student-athletes did not feel comfortable going to their coach to discuss personal or academic struggles. Team bonding activities were kept at a minimum for some athletes and they felt as if their coach was unsupportive of them having a social life balance. Other athletes had family or academic obligations that they had to take care of and they felt as if they were punished by their coach or were not supported to make specific accommodations.

The second theme that emerged was a winning-at-all-costs environment. The winning at all cost's environments led, (1) to recollections of a Division I mentality within the Division III level of play, (2) limited or zero playing time offered to non-starters, (3) sustained injury problems, and (4) placing an emphasis on athletics over every other aspect of the participants' life. Participants felt as though their sport experience was all-consuming, and that winning was the only outcome that was prioritized by coaches and staff members regardless of the level of play. Participants often compared their sport experience to the Division I level of play, while they had originally anticipated that the Division III level would provide them with more balance in their personal lives and academic pursuits. Instead, their sport experiences appeared to take away from their academic and professional endeavors, with little resourcing to assist in balancing success in those aspects along with the expectations of high-level playing performance (Davis et al., 2022). Participants also frequently felt as if they were not given the proper opportunities to play and that coaches repeatedly played the same athletes instead of utilizing a majority of their recruited roster. Injuries were an additional aspect of this theme, as participants recalled that starters were regularly pushed to play through those injuries.

The third theme that emerged was a lack of resources and support. Participants frequently felt as though they could not rely on coaches to talk with them about their personal lives and recalled a real need for a resources or neutral party that they could talk to. Participants expressed that mental health issues were a major concern within athletics and that athletes need someone who they feel comfortable talking to about their mental struggles and experiences. Without this support structure in place, the participants recalled feeling isolated, and often believed that they should retire from

sport to alleviate some of their stress. Participants also recalled that their academic and career goals were not given priority in part due to a lack of resources offered by the department. The absence of proactive measures from athletic departments and coaches to address the holistic well-being of student-athletes underscores the need for a more comprehensive support system within Division III athletics. Implementing strategies for regular check-ins, fostering open communication channels, and providing accessible resources for mental health and personal development are essential steps towards creating a more supportive and inclusive environment for Division III student-athletes. Such initiatives would not only enhance the overall experience of student-athletes but also contribute to their overall well-being and success both on and off the field.

The final theme that emerged was burnout. The experiences with burnout included recurring struggles with time-management, injury, sport pressures, and a lack of a social-life balance. In many instances it became evident that burnout resulted from continuous struggles with a variety of numerous concerns, that on an individual level may not have had the same impacts. Participants felt that their sport, even at the NCAA Division III level, took up a large amount of their time and they struggled with balancing their life schedule. Several participants were dealing with nagging injuries that and others developed injuries for the first time while in college. Those athletes felt their injury status was beginning to be too much and they wanted to step away from their sport to rest their bodies and help their mental health. Participants recalled their desire to have additional social opportunities outside of the team environments. Given that athletics took up a large amount of their time, they felt as if they wanted more time to enjoy other aspects of college life. Addressing athlete burnout necessitates comprehensive support systems that prioritize athlete welfare, provide adequate resources for injury prevention and management, and promote a healthy balance between athletic pursuits and personal development (Huml et al., 2019). By addressing these underlying issues, collegiate athletic programs can better support the overall well-being and success of their student-athletes.

Overall, these emergent themes add to the previous literature concerned with student-athlete experiences. Previous literature has examined the critical influence a coach has on the sport experience and development of student-athletes (Raabe, 2017; Singer, 2001). These findings suggest that if coaches can provide higher quality support for their student-athletes, then this may be increased satisfaction and sustained participation. Beyond that, while previous studies have examined why women athletes quit their sport based on coaching behavior, this study provides both women's and men's perspectives (Sherman, 2002).

Additionally, while the winning-at-all-costs environments described by the participants has been previously linked to undesirable outcomes within the sport industry (e.g., Darvin, 2020; Gearity, 2010), it has not been specifically linked to voluntary early retirement from sport. Similar to previous findings, within the current study, findings revealed that student-athletes did not have enough time for their academic pursuits and other social endeavors based on the intensity and emphasis placed on practice and competition (Carter, 2017; Jacobs, 2015). Often, student-athletes are pressured to believe that their sport involvement should be given their top priority and attention, while academics and social balance should come second (Saffici, 2012). Beyond that, our findings also aligned with previous studies that suggest coaches and athletic trainers are not always in agreement on injury recovery protocol, especially for the top performers (e.g. Robbins, 2001). Similar to findings within the current study, student-athletes recalled that starters were more likely to be pushed through recovery too quickly (Robbins, 2001).

While previous research also has examined the resources that are available to student-athletes, this has largely focused on the NCAA DI level of play (e.g., Hazzaa, 2018; Nite, 2012) not on the Division III level. The current findings suggest that NCAA Division III departments are severely lacking in academic and athlete development resources for their student-athletes, and the participants believed additional efforts should be placed into the development of academic and mental health services. Previous studies also have shown that athletes believe more could be done to support them within their academic endeavors (Hazzaa, 2018; Nite, 2012). Our findings for Division III student-athlete early retirement rationale also align with previous research that suggests student-athletes have a very different lifestyle compared to their non-athlete student counterparts (Gayles, 2009). This would further support the notion that athletic programs and institutions need to recognize the unique challenges student-athletes at all NCAA Divisions will

face and work to better accommodate and support these individuals (Gayles, 2009; Howard-Hamilton, 2001). Overall, student-athletes should feel they are prepared for the transition to life after sport once they have graduated school. Similar to previous findings, it would appear that based on these emergent themes, Division III student-athletes also struggle with this transition and the preparation is not being provided to them (Zvosec & Bass, 2022; Hodges & Darvin, 2022; Davis et al., 2022; Stokowski, 2019).

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the experiences of NCAA Division III student-athletes and their decisions to retire from collegiate sports prematurely. These findings can be interpreted through the lens of the Theory of Work Adjustment (TWA) to deepen our understanding of the challenges faced by student-athletes during their transition out of sport. Firstly, the emergent themes of controlling coaching behavior and a winning-at-all-costs environment align with TWA's emphasis on the importance of the work environment in reinforcing individuals' values (MacLean & Hamm, 2008). Student-athletes' perceptions of coaches prioritizing athletic participation over other aspects of their collegiate experience and creating an all-consuming, competitive environment highlight the disconnect between athletes' personal values and the values embedded within their sports environments. Such discordance can contribute to dissatisfaction and ultimately impact the decision to retire from sport prematurely (Hesketh et al., 2005).

Furthermore, the theme of a lack of resources and support resonates with TWA's focus on environmental requirements and the availability of resources necessary for successful work adjustment (Lofquist & Dawis, 1969). Student-athletes' experiences of feeling isolated and unsupported, particularly in addressing mental health issues, underscore the significance of a supportive work environment in facilitating successful transitions. The absence of resources and support structures within collegiate athletics departments may hinder student-athletes' ability to effectively balance their athletic and academic pursuits, leading to dissatisfaction and potentially influencing their decision to retire from sport (Hesketh et al., 2005).

Moreover, the theme of burnout aligns with TWA's focus on satisfaction and satisfactoriness as indicators of successful work relationships. Student-athletes' experiences of recurrent struggles with time management, injuries, and sport pressures reflect the challenges they face in achieving both satisfaction and satisfactoriness in their athletic endeavors (Hesketh & Griffin, 2005). Burnout resulting from the intense demands of collegiate sports can significantly impact student-athletes' overall well-being and satisfaction with their athletic experiences, contributing to their decisions to retire prematurely (Hesketh et al., 2005).

In addition to informing interpretations of participants' experiences, these findings also contribute to the refinement of the Theory of Work Adjustment (TWA). By highlighting the specific challenges faced by NCAA Division III student-athletes during their transition out of their collegiate sport, this study expands our understanding of the environmental factors that influence work adjustment processes. The identification of themes such as controlling coaching behavior, winning-at-all-costs environments, a lack of resources and support, and burnout provides empirical evidence to further substantiate the relevance of TWA in understanding and addressing the needs of student-athletes transitioning out of sport. Integrating these findings into the theoretical framework of TWA enhances its applicability in guiding interventions and support services aimed at facilitating successful transitions for NCAA student-athletes across all divisions.

Practical Implications

There are several practical implications that result from these findings. In general, these findings can assist athletic departments, coaches, and institutions in better understanding and accommodating the unique needs of NCAA Division III student-athletes. First, NCAA Division III institutions must seek to provide their student-athletes with resources that focus specifically on preparing them for life after sport, not only in terms of their career and professional readiness, but also their personal and physical well-being once sport concludes (Davis et al., 2022; Rubin et al.,

2021). While several NCAA DI institutions have begun instituting athlete-development programming over the previous few years, Division III institutions typically lack the initial resources for such programming and should therefore attempt to prioritize these initiatives in the future. For example, Boston University created a leadership and career development division of their athletic department that has assisted roughly 600 student-athletes with leadership and life skills training (Maddahi, 2018). Additionally, several DI schools have begun piloting and incorporating additional financial literacy training for student-athletes to assist with name, image, and likeness changes (Rubin et al., 2021). Incorporating programs at the Division III level that are similar to what has been provided to DI athletes would be incredibly beneficial and would provide Division III student-athletes with exposure to careers and planning beyond their athletic participation.

Findings of the current study also revealed that institutions and athletic departments should seek to invest in appropriate levels of access to mental health professionals for both student-athletes and coaches. These findings align with previous research concerned specifically with Division III student-athletes and mental health. According to Valster et al., (2022), while women student-athletes are more likely to self-report a prevalence of mental health distress compared to men, this also calls into question the availability of self-reporting and consistent help offered to all student-athletes on Division III campuses. To better assist Division III student-athletes, these services should be consistently offered while also being catered specifically to the student-athlete experience, team dynamics, sport-life balance, and coach communication (Stokowski et al., 2022; Valster et al., 2022). In regard to coaches, departments should incorporate trainings that will assist coaches in recognizing and assisting student-athletes with mental health and life outside of sport challenges. While the NCAA provides a guideline for common student-athlete challenges along with resources coaches can use (e.g., helping student-athletes resources on NCAA.org), departments should work to create more structured programs through the utilization of these general guides.

Beyond that, the winning-at-all-costs structure that is relatively rampant within intercollegiate athletics should be reevaluated within athletic departments, including within the NCAA Division III level of play. Given that previous findings also have revealed the potentially damaging outcomes of such an environment and culture, the evaluation process of coaching within the Division III level also may require a shift. In other words, if coaches within the Division III level of play are evaluated based on their win-loss records rather than the other aspects of their job, coaches may continue to implement practices that alienate their student-athletes and result in voluntary early retirement. Instead, Division III athletic departments should seek to develop more holistic evaluation processes for coaches that encourage well-rounded development and success of student-athletes beyond the season records.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study brought several important themes to light regarding the rationale for early retirement from sport, there were still limitations, which opens up future research opportunities. First, 15 former student-athletes were involved in this study, and while these participants accounted for a wide range of college sports, they did not represent the full scope of athletic participation opportunities or the entire scope of Division III athletics. Additional institutions and regions should be included in future research. Beyond that, of the 15 participants who were interviewed, 12 were women and 3 were men. Acquiring additional insight from the perspective of former men student-athletes would be important in future studies. Similarly, most participants within the study identified as White, and the voices of more diverse groups were not accounted for. Research could examine the experiences across multiple races and ethnicities.

The participants also were only at the Division III level, and future studies should aim to gain perspectives from athletes who have voluntarily quit their sports across all NCAA divisions of play. Future research also should seek to investigate voluntary early sport retirement from the perspectives of coaches, parents, and administrators. To that end, all three researchers within the study did identify as former student-athletes, and while this assisted with the analysis procedures and building rapport, it also may have generated some bias in the interpretations. It is important to provide other stakeholders with an opportunity to express their experiences with this phenomenon

from the perspectives of folks who may not be as connected directly with the student-athlete experience.

Additional limitations relate to the practical implications of the study outcomes. Several proposed solutions necessitate extra resources, which current Division III institutions may not have readily available. As a result, subsequent research could explore the ramifications of return on investment for the student-athlete demographic in terms of charitable contributions and fundraising efforts. If student-athletes graduate with enriching and supportive experiences, they may be inclined to contribute back to their alma mater through donations, thereby potentially alleviating resource constraints for future initiatives.

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