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## **Athletic Identity During Covid-19**

Summer Ramundo

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# Athletic Identity During COVID-19

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### **Abstract**

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected people in many different ways. With the shutdown of the entire country, many people lost their jobs, people became infected with the virus, major events were cancelled, and sports were shut down. In specific, collegiate athletics were cancelled indefinitely. Student-athletes across the country lost their sports' seasons. Being an athlete is a role that students tie to their identity, and with the loss of their seasons, student-athletes faced athletic identity loss. Through 6 interviews with Johnson & Wales student-athletes, this study aims to investigate how the cancellation of sports' seasons due to Covid-19 affected the athletic identity of collegiate athletes. This thesis suggests that athletic identity plays a significant role in collegiate student-athletes' well-being, and the loss of athletic identity can lead to negative effects on mental health.

## Introduction

With the occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic, many people have been affected in different ways. The Covid-19 pandemic began in November of 2019 when the first outbreak in Wuhan, China was reported. It then spread throughout the United States, causing a shutdown of the country in March of 2020. Government officials began urging people to stay at home. Through this time, many people lost their jobs, people were getting infected with Covid-19, major events were being cancelled, and sports were shut down. Overall, there was a sadness that crept throughout the American and world population as people were forced to stay inside and not experience the joys of life.

The Covid-19 pandemic affected specific groups in certain ways. Collegiate student-athletes, in particular, were faced with the cancellation of their sport's season. Athletics are extremely important in a student-athlete's life as they provide social connection, promote good mental health, and form part of a student-athlete's identity (Cieslak II, 2004). Student-athletes form strong social connections with each other as they share similar values and interests. The majority of collegiate student-athletes spend nearly every day with their teammates whether it be for practices, lifts, games, or outside of sport. These bonds become stronger through repetition and seeing one another every day, so, when the pandemic hit, student-athletes lost the social connection that they had had daily for years. In addition, athletics promote good mental health for student-athletes as it provides them an outlet away from the stresses of school and everyday life. When the Covid-19 pandemic forced sports to shut down, student-athletes lost this outlet. Identity, too, is connected to athletics as student-athletes take on the role of being an athlete. Being an athlete, then, becomes tied to the core of the person. When sports' seasons were cancelled, this athletic identity is lost, leaving student-athletes with identity loss (Cieslak II,

2004). Identity loss, as well, can play a role in a student athlete's mental health and its potential decline when disengaging from their respective sport. Whether it be graduation or a career-ending injury, many student athletes suffer with the end of their career in sports and face identity loss. Most athletes' identities are tied to the sport they play as they dedicate so much of their time to it. Research states that athletic identity is very complex and multidimensional, which implies that the loss of athletics would have a negative impact on the mental health of student athletes (Van Lone et al., 2017).

Many student-athletes across all divisions across the country have had their sport's season cancelled due to safety concerns and uncertainty about the coronavirus. Colleges did not want to allow for their student-athletes to be susceptible to catching the coronavirus through travel and interaction with other universities' student-athletes. The cancellation of seasons began in the spring of 2020 with sports such as baseball, softball, men's and women's lacrosse, and many more. With the abrupt cancellation of seasons, many student-athletes lost the one outlet or safe space that they had. Much of the research conducted on collegiate student-athletes who lost their seasons to Covid-19 confirms that there was a negative impact on mental health and well-being. According to Davies and LoGalbo, student-athletes are aware of the potential impacts that Covid-19 could have on their mental health (2021). Through this awareness, college athletes have begun to pay more attention to their mental health, in general, and have acknowledged that there is a need for more psychosocial support in times of crisis (Schary & Lundqvist, 2021). A study in Canada, as well, found something similar, providing insight into what kinds of resources would be helpful to high school student-athletes (Shepherd et al., 2021). However, not all collegiate student-athletes are being offered the type of support that they need through these difficult times. In fact, collegiate athletes reported higher levels of mental distress due to lack of

such resources and facilities (Bullard, 2020). Bullard also concluded that collegiate student-athletes reported experiences of decreased levels of motivation, increased feelings of stress, and increased feelings of helplessness (2020). Another study conducted with high school student athletes reported similar findings. They found that those who played sports during the pandemic were less likely to report symptoms of depression and anxiety as well as have higher levels of physical activity and quality of life scores than those who had their seasons cancelled (McGuine et al., 2021).

This research examines the connection between athletic identity loss and the cancellation of collegiate sports' seasons due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Much of the previous research focuses on the pandemic's effects on the mental health of student athletes, however, it does not examine the impact of athletic identity loss. Therefore, this research connects these two variables.



## **Literature Review**

Literature surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on the mental health of collegiate and high school student-athletes highlights different areas such as increases in anxiety and depression and resources to offer to student-athletes. Much of the research within this area focuses on how schools can offer better programs and resources to student-athletes affected by Covid-19 both mentally and physically. However, most of this research is limited by geography, examining student-athletes in one area or at one school, as well as by the inability to determine if the increase in self-reports of anxiety was due to the pandemic alone.

### **High School Sports**

In a study conducted by Shepard et al. in Canada, 166 high school athletes participated in interviews both over Zoom and by phone call. Researchers aimed to collect data on the way that the experiences of these high school athletes involved physical activity, mental health and social connections during the pandemic (Shepherd et al., 2021). Shepard et al. were able to conclude that interactions between these factors could provide insight into what resources could be helpful to other student-athletes during this time (Shepherd et al., 2021).

Another study that was conducted including high school student-athletes was done by McGuine et al. Researchers wanted to investigate the impact of playing a sport during the Covid-19 pandemic and how it would affect the health of student-athletes (2021). During the study, 559 high school athletes from 44 different high schools were asked to complete the General Anxiety Disorder-7 item questionnaire and the Patient Health Questionnaire-9. They found that those who played sports during the pandemic were less likely to report symptoms of depression and anxiety as well as have higher levels of physical activity and quality of life scores than those who had their seasons cancelled (McGuine et al., 2021).

## Collegiate Sports

Several studies have been conducted within collegiate sports throughout NCAA Division I, II, and III schools, analyzing how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted student-athletes' mental health. One study conducted by Davies and LoGalbo investigated student-athletes' experiences during the pandemic and their attitudes about the virus and returning to sport (2021). A sample of 245 collegiate varsity athletes across NCAA sports and divisions between August and October 2020 completed an online survey about their views on topics such as the virus, the vaccine, and returning to sport. Researchers found that mental health, cancelled seasons, and academic progress were rated top three Covid-related concerns. They concluded that athletes are concerned about the pandemic's impact on their mental and physical health but are eager to return to sport (Davies & LoGalbo, 2021). This study shows that student-athletes have acknowledged that the pandemic could have negative impacts on their mental health; however, does not tell us whether or not the pandemic has had an impact.

Findings in another study conducted in 2021 by Schary and Lundqvist, concluded as well that there is a need for psychosocial support in times of crisis for collegiate student-athletes. These researchers studied 99 Division I athletes by conducting assessments of mental health, quality of life, anxiety, depression, and sleep problems (Schary & Lundqvist, 2021). It was determined that social well-being was lower in students who were closer to graduation; however, these results were limited as majority of the student-athletes studied were male and white (Schary & Lundqvist, 2021).

Furthermore, another study conducted surrounding the effects of Covid-19 in Division I athletes was done by Sanborn et al. in 2021 at a Midwestern university. They wanted to further understand the anxiety specific to Covid-19 in student-athletes and hypothesized that the

pandemic would lead to greater psychological symptoms (Sanborn et al., 2021). Using the Covid Anxiety Scale (Lee, 2020) and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995); (Psychology Foundation of Australia, 2011), they surveyed 482 NCAA DI athletes (Sanborn et al., 2021). However, these researchers' findings did not match what they hypothesized. In fact, they concluded that anxiety specific to Covid-19 was low in student-athletes at this particular university, and the reasoning behind it was unclear (Sanborn et al., 2021).

Finally, there was another study conducted in 2020 by Bullard within a Division III collegiate conference known as the NJAC. The researcher used a demographic questionnaire as well as the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 questionnaire (Jordan et al, 2017) and the Covid-19 Anxiety Scale (Lee, 2020) to survey 682 student-athletes within this conference (Bullard, 2020). She found that female student-athletes were more likely to respond to having experienced symptoms on the CAS scale, and that findings with the GAD-7 suggest that both men and women among all academic years have experienced some level of anxiety during the pandemic. Bullard concluded that an increase in mental distress was associated with the lack of resources and available facilities to train (2020). It was also noted that the student-athletes' experiences decreased levels of motivation, increased feelings of stress, and increased feelings of helplessness (Bullard, 2020).

The majority of these studies are limited by their populations as only student-athletes within one division, conference, or university were surveyed. The studies also focus on how the pandemic itself has led to an increase in anxiety and depression as well as a decrease in overall well-being. Therefore, the conclusions that these researchers have come to involve resources for high school and collegiate athletes to utilize in order to lessen the effects of Covid-19.

## **Identity Loss in Student Athletes**

Other research investigates the connection between identity loss within student athletes whose career in sports have come to an end. One study conducted by Van Lone et al. in 2017 investigated the effects of college athletes disengagement from sports in order to create resource programs in support of these athletes and their identity loss. The researchers surveyed 250 collegiate student athletes during both the fall and spring semester (Van Lone et al., 2017). Those surveyed in the fall were given a demographic questionnaire and the Multidimensional Athletic Identity and Engagement Scale (MAIES), whereas the athletes surveyed in the spring were given those two measures as well as the Athletic Identity Questionnaire (Anderson, 2004), the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer et al., 1993), the Public-Private Athletic Identity Scale (Nasco & Webb, 2006), Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being (Ryff, 1989), and the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale-Form C (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960; Van Lone et al., 2017). The research showed that athletic identity is a multidimensional construct that is very complex, which allowed for them to create a better tool to measure it – the MAIES (Van Lone et al., 2017). This implies that because athletic identity is multidimensional and complex, losing athletics would have negative effects on a student athlete's mental health.

In another research study conducted by Stellefson et al. in 2020, researchers examined how effectiveness of the Life After Sports Transition (LAST) online course for collegiate student athletes. The LAST course was created in order to help collegiate athletes adjust and disengage from athletics upon graduation. Researchers utilized a pretest-posttest design, in which they measured athletic identity, psychological well-being, and self-reflection and insight, in order to see a before and after of the course (Stellefson et al., 2020). They studied 182 student-athletes in 2018 who were invited to enroll in the online course and found that the LAST course led to a

decline in athletic identity; however, it was statistically insignificant. The researchers found that while the course provides student-athletes an educational tool upon graduation, the effectiveness of this course proved to be statistically insignificant (Stellefson et al., 2020). Therefore, resources for identity loss in student athletes are slim and potentially ineffective.

## **Athletic Identity**

### **Definition Of Athletic Identity**

Athletic identity, just like identity, is one's self-organization based on the influences of one's environment and the people in it. People attach self-composed meanings to themselves based on the roles in which they play during their lifetime, which, in this case, would be an athletic role. The label of athlete becomes a part of a person's identity and a part of who they are. This identity, then, becomes how a person measures and defines themselves. Athletic identity, then, can be defined as "the degree of importance, strength and exclusivity an individual attaches to the athletic role as it is maintained by the individual and influenced by the environment" (Cieslak II, 2004, p. 32). The first piece is self-description, which is a subjective measure, then through self-evaluation, the objective measure (Cieslak II, 2004). In other words, we describe ourselves through self-description, and then, measure our self-esteem and self-worth through self-evaluation. Athletes, just as any other identity, such as academic, religious, friendship, or romantic, define themselves and their self-esteem and self-worth based on roles, attributes, and behaviors that are related to being an athlete (Cieslak II, 2004).

A majority of college athletes have spent most of their lives playing sports. Therefore, their athletic identity has been reinforced throughout years and years of playing. Athletes spend many hours a week practicing, preparing, and playing games, maintaining a steady schedule that is followed over and over again for seasons. Athletes spend much of their time and energy indirectly preparing for season as well through nutrition and exercise. A lot of areas in their lives are attached to sports. Schedule and routine play a major role within identity. Repetition of a routine reinforces the athletic lifestyle and can influence the degree in which athletes identify

with their sport. The more an athlete dedicates to their respective sport, the more they are going to identify themselves and their identity with it.

Furthermore, athletic identity is also reinforced through social support. Athletes are surrounded by many people in their lives that connect them with their respective sports. Parents and friends display this behavior by attending games, practices, and being there throughout the college recruitment process (Cieslak II, 2004). Athletes are also surrounded by teammates who share the same values, goals, and athletic identity. These types of relationships alone are extremely powerful as they directly connect an athlete to their athletic identity and continuously reinforce it day in and day out.

### **Measurement of Athletic Identity**

In order to measure athletic identity, many researchers utilize the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001). This scale utilizes a 7-item series of both positive and negative statements that are associated with athletic identity such as “I consider myself an athlete”, “Most of my friends are athletes”, and “I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in sports” (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001). The AIMS influenced the questions constructed for this research project’s interview as seen in Appendix C. As previously mentioned, the more an individual associates their identity with being an athlete, the stronger their athletic identity. This concept was used in creating the questions for the interview in order to understand if each participant related their own identity to being an athlete.

### **Athletic Identity and Injury**

Although this study does not involve an examination of athletic injury, it can prove important to understand how an athlete’s identity is affected through the loss of a season due to injury. Past research has examined the relationship between the strength and exclusivity of

athletic identity and athletic injuries as well as the reactions that athletes have had to these injuries. According to Brewer (1993), cognitive models of stress indicate that those who identify with specific social roles are susceptible to depression as a result of a traumatic episode such as an athlete suffering from an injury (Cieslak II, 2004).

A study conducted by Brewer in 1993 had 109 student non-athletes who completed the AIMS and the Profile of Mood States State – depression subscale. They were divided into a hypothesized injury group and a control group. Brewer reported that the study showed a positive relationship between athletic identity and depressive reactions of the hypothesized injury group but not within the control group. Therefore, it could be concluded that athletes face a “specific vulnerability” when it comes to suffering a depressive episode in reaction to a career-ending injury (Brewer, 1993, p. 348).

### **Identity Foreclosure**

However, this type of athletic identity can put athletes in a vulnerable place and at risk of identity foreclosure, which is a lack of psychosocial development. It is a concern that based on the strength and exclusivity within the athlete role can result in a lack of participation in other activities and areas of life (Cieslak II, 2004). “It is possible that the demands of sport participation and the restrictive, sheltered nature of the competitive sport environment discourage student-athletes from exploring alternative identities” (Good et al., 1993, p.7). The demands of athletics can result in a lack of exploration of other areas in life as athletes dedicate much of their time and energy to sports.

In a research study conducted by Good, Brewer, Petitpas, Van Raatle, and Mahar in 1993, they investigated the relationship between athletic identity, sport participation, and identity foreclosure. The participants included 502 students from various universities within the northeast



region of the United States and was composed of intercollegiate athletes, intramural athletes, and student non-athletes. Researchers concluded that non-athletes experienced significantly less identity foreclosure whereas intramural and intercollegiate athletes faced no identity development beyond athletics. In addition, level of sports participation had an influence on the degree of athletic identity and identity foreclosure.

## Identity Loss

With identity as well as athletic identity can come identity loss. Identity loss comes when there is a loss of a role within a person's life that they attached themselves and their identity to. If an individual focuses their self-identity on the role of being an athlete, any event that takes away a sports' season such as injury or the pandemic may threaten their identity as well as lead to negative emotional and psychological reactions (Green & Weinberg, 2001). Much of the research surrounding athletic identity loss, if not all, pertains to injury. It can prove to be important to study and examine this literature in order to understand athletic identity loss.

According to Green and Weinberg, emotional and psychological reactions can be produced from the trauma of injury (2001). The extent of these reactions can vary from person to person based on many different factors such as their perception of loss, however, athletes are still vulnerable to psychological reactions such as anxiety, depression, fear, and loss of self-esteem (Green & Weinberg, 2001). Cieslak II wrote in another article, "According to Brewer (1993), cognitive models of stress suggest that individuals with specific cognitive vulnerabilities (e.g., patterns of self-identification with social roles) are susceptible to depression as a result of a traumatic episode (e.g., sport injury) in life but not if such an episode does not occur" (2004). In layman's terms, when a person identifies strongly with or centers themselves around being an athlete, they become extremely susceptible to identity loss among other negative psychological and emotional effects due to events such as injury, or in the case of this research study, the pandemic.

In four studies conducted by Brewer in 1993, researchers aimed to test the hypothesis that students who had a strong identification with the athlete role are more likely to have a depressive reaction to an athletic injury than those who do not identify as an athlete. Brewer found that with

a strong, exclusive identification with the athletic role was correlated with a depressive reaction to a trauma related to sport, such as an injury (1993). However, these results are not just specific to athletic injury. They can be applied to any other “identity-disrupting events”, which can include the Covid-19 pandemic that canceled recent athletes’ seasons.

Furthermore, another study conducted by Green and Weinberg, was aimed at looking at the relationship between coping skills and social support and an individual’s psychological reaction to injury (2001). Thirty participants were recruited for this study who had endured an injury that resulted in them ceasing physical exercise or sports. They completed a demographic questionnaire, the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), the Athletic Coping Skills Inventory (ACSI), the Profile of Mood States (POMS), the Physical Self-Perception Profile (PSPP), and the Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ). Green and Weinberg concluded that higher levels of coping skills and social support were related to lower levels of mood disturbance, or an emotional reaction to athletic injury (2001). This study offers an interesting point that may go on to influence my research project. Coping skills and social support may impact the severity of a student athlete’s emotional reaction to the pandemic canceling their season.

Through these past research studies, it can be concluded that an event that impacts athletic identity such as an injury or the cancellation of a sport’s season will have a negative psychological and emotional impact on student athletes. The severity and way in which this trauma impacts each student athlete will vary based on many factors, including their perception of loss, the coping skills that they have, and the amount of social support that they have. However, based on the previous research, a negative impact on self-esteem, mood disturbance, and depression are all possible effects of any athletic identity-disrupting events.

## **Methodology**

For this research project, I chose the route of qualitative research. Initially, emails were drafted to each sports' coach, as shown in Appendix A, in order to recruit participants for the study. These emails explained what the research project was about and invited coaches to reach out to players who were active during the season sports were cancelled and who would be interested in participating within the study. As student athletes began to show interest, we scheduled them each for approximately 15-to-30-minute interviews whether in person or via a Zoom call. Each participant received a copy of the consent form as shown in Appendix B, which also detailed the purpose of the study as well as benefits, risks, resources, and participant rights. During the interview, each participant was asked a series of ten questions, as seen in Appendix C, and some follow-up questions, so Dr. Mosko and I could understand their personal experience with the loss of their season during the pandemic and the effect that it had on each of the student athletes. Each interview was audio recorded with the participants' permission.

Following each interview, we transcribed the interview, removing any personal indicators in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. We interviewed five Johnson & Wales University student athletes ranging from ages 20 to 25. After all the interviews were conducted and transcribed, we individually analyzed each transcript to find important themes, key words, and patterns between all the transcriptions. We then met to discuss what we each found and were able to make conclusions based on the findings.

## **Limitations**

There are some limitations that need to be discussed when looking at the findings of this study. As previously mentioned, much of the research that has been conducted within this field of study is regional and limited to small populations (Bullard, 2020; Shepherd et al., 2021). In

the same way, this study is limited to the student-athlete population at Johnson & Wales University as only this group has been interviewed. Any generalizations from this study would only apply to similar student-athletes who attend similar universities to Johnson & Wales, which is a smaller Division III university.

In addition to the geographical limitations, there can also be confounding variables that could play a role in the experiences of each student athlete. Every person had a different experience during the pandemic, so it is difficult to assume that every student-athlete underwent the same experience. Some student-athletes may have underlying mental health issues that could have affected them during the pandemic as well. The interviews only captured a small picture of what each student-athlete went through during Covid-19, so it is difficult to pinpoint one exact factor that caused their anxiety, depression, identity loss etc. We can only conclude that there is a relationship and connection between athletic identity loss and Covid-19 cancelling sports seasons.

## **Analysis**

As discussed in Chapter 5, following the interviews, each recording was transcribed. Once all the interviews were completed and each transcription was finished, analysis could begin. Both researchers independently read each interview transcription, highlighting any words, phrases, or themes that appeared in multiple different transcripts. We also made both direct and indirect connections. Direct connections were themes or patterns that were mentioned by more than one participant. Indirect connections were themes or patterns that were not necessarily stated by participants but were underlying within their responses.

Following the independent analysis, we met to discuss our own findings. Through this comparison, we were able to come up with a list of key words, direct connections, and indirect connections that were seen throughout multiple participants' interviews. We then drew conclusions based on these findings and highlighted the ones that related specifically to athletic identity and identity loss.

## Findings

Through the analysis of the interview transcriptions, key words, themes, and patterns were highlighted. Many of the findings of this research study are consistent with previous research done by Brewer (1993) and Green and Weinberg (2001) that looked at the way that injury impacts the athletic identity of student-athletes. Johnson & Wales student-athletes experienced similar negative emotional responses to their seasons being cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic, however, their resiliency was what was most interesting about the findings of this study.

### **Athletic Identity Loss**

Each participant recalled a different experience following their athletic season being cancelled, however, there were many commonalities that tied them all together. Athletic identity stems from an individual attaching their identity and centering themselves around their athletic role, including routine, experiences, social circles, self-worth, and self-esteem (Cieslak II, 2004); (Green & Weinberg, 2001). All of the student-athletes interviewed recalled going from a jam-packed athletic schedule with classes, lifts, practices, and games to being completely stripped of this routine that they had become accustomed to throughout their middle school, high school, and collegiate careers. In fact, many described not knowing what to do with themselves once they received the news and struggled to regain motivation to try something new for the beginning weeks of the pandemic lockdown.

Almost all of the participants also described feelings of worthlessness and a negative impact on their self-worth and self-esteem as athletics and performance was the only way they knew how to value themselves. One participant recalled the way that they placed value on themselves through their athletic performance, as can be seen in the following extract:

It's unfair but I would always say, I would put my value as how I was competing. So if I was playing well I would view myself in a good light... but if you're not playing at all, your self-worth goes down, because you're not doing what you're used to doing and you're not performing.

It can also be noted that many of the participants sought motivation to live their lives and complete daily responsibilities through their respective sports and their teammates. Without sports or seeing their teammates regularly, many of the participants lost motivation to do schoolwork or to participate in other activities during the pandemic.

### **Emotional Responses and Coping**

Another connection between all of the participants' responses was their negative emotional response to finding out their seasons were cancelled. Many recalled feelings of depression, anxiety, sadness, frustration, and disbelief. A couple remembered immediately starting to cry after hearing the news. One participant stated, "I immediately started crying...it was heartbreaking."

These emotions for some of the student-athletes we interviewed appeared to last for a period of time during the pandemic and affected the way that they attempted to cope with these emotions. Some stated that they had trouble coping right away while others found comfort in their family members – the only people that they were permitted to see during the lockdown. One participant recalled how they tried to cope but struggled with depression in the beginning of the pandemic, as shown in this extract:

I got really depressed... Um, I didn't really do a good job. I kind of um I know we were in isolation but I isolated myself more and I kind of just cut myself off from everything I had you know loved.



However, other participants, coped through spending time with their immediate family, surrounding themselves with a support system during this time. Another participant described how they coped by spending time with family by doing different activities, as can be seen in this extract:

I just kinda hung out w/ my family, like invited them to go on walks. Like we would go walk by the beach or walk at the boardwalk near our house. Just try to like do something different, every once in a while so it's not always the same stuff, so it doesn't get boring.

### **Self-Reflection**

Many participants, however, underwent a time of self-reflection where they assessed what they were going to do with their lives with the absence of their respective sports. A majority of them recalled a time when they began to realize that sports are not everything, and that they are more than just an athlete. One athlete spoke about how the feeling of worthlessness pushed her to take a look at their life and reassess.

I think um that feeling of like worthlessness because...I didn't have [my sport] anymore kind of changed how I felt about a lot of other things that I was doing especially school. It made me realize that like it's not just here for softball but I'm here for a degree and obviously I love culinary science my major um and I really gotta focus on that as well not just [my sport] and I can...I can make my life worthwhile after I graduate. That made me change that kind of idea of softball is everything.

Other athletes reinvented themselves by picking up new hobbies or activities to do other than sports during the pandemic. One participant learned how to knit and crochet while others

began crafting masks and scrunchies. As previously stated, one student-athlete went on walks with their family and tried out new activities with them. One student-athlete recalled:

I learned how to uh sew over quarantine um we have a sewing machine and I taught myself. And I started making scrunchies and that became a hobby. I actually sell them now so kind of grew that.

These participants pushed past the identity foreclosure they were facing by redefining who they were through self-reflection.

### **Personal Connections**

The loss of physical interaction with teammates was unanimously the hardest part about sports being cancelled. The relationships that had formed with teammates as well as with other athletes were described as family-like by some of the participants. As mentioned previously, not being able to see teammates after spending time with them nearly every single day was the most difficult part of the pandemic cancelling seasons. The loss of personal connection and not being with teammates physically affected the participants the most. One participant recalled a Zoom meeting with the team feeling isolating.

...when coach told us about our season we had a Zoom. And everybody's like crying on the Zoom, and the hardest part was to not be able to like console your teammates or to like be there for one another because that's how that's what we used to do. Like if anybody cause like at the end of a season, if we're done, everybody's crying, everybody's around they're consoling one another but on Zoom you're sitting there awkwardly just bawling your eyes out.

In addition to the feeling of isolation from being unable to see teammates, most of the participants were informed that they lost their seasons through either text or GroupMe. This impersonal notification could have also added to the feeling of isolation.

## Conclusion

The participants in this study all had unique, personal experiences when dealing with the loss of their seasons, however, there were many common themes and patterns that can be seen throughout their interview responses. They each experienced athletic identity loss almost immediately after finding out their seasons were canceled. They all experienced a negative emotional response to their seasons being canceled. Some of the participants struggled to cope with this loss while others learned to lean on their family for social and emotional support. The majority of the participants underwent a period of self-reflection where they reinvented themselves. Finally, they all found that being disconnected from their teammates was the most difficult part of the experience.

It can be concluded that, although each athlete had their own separate experience, they all experienced athletic identity loss. This can be seen through their negative emotional response, the sudden change in their athletic routines, the disruption of their social circles, and the negative impact on their self-worth and self-esteem. This form of identity loss seemed to affect most of the participants throughout the beginning of the pandemic as many recalled the feelings of worthlessness, isolation, and just being unable to find motivation to carry out their other responsibilities.

Some of the participants were able to eventually find ways to cope. A few of the participants relied on emotional support from their families, who were the only people they were allowed to see during lockdown. However, others had to hit rock bottom before they were able to make adjustments to the way they were feeling and reacting to the loss of their respective sports' seasons.

However, collectively, all the participants underwent a time of self-reflection, showing resiliency to the negative experience. As mentioned, the majority of individuals who attach their identity to being an athlete experience identity foreclosure (Cieslak II, 2004). Although, the athletes' responses in their interviews showed that they worked past identity foreclosure and were able to pick up new hobbies and try new things other than sports. Participants recalled learning to knit, sew, and crochet as well as going on walks with family members and trying new activities with them. It can be assumed that the effects of the athletic identity loss did not last the entirety of the pandemic and that the participants were able to overcome the negative impacts that they initially experienced.

It can also be concluded that, despite the powerful hold athletic identity had on the participants, being part of a team and being a teammate held just as much importance to them. Each participant stated that not being able to see their teammates and not being able to console their teammates was the worst aspect of losing their seasons. This goes to show how strong and powerful human connection is. Playing a sport is not just about the individual connection, but it is about the personal connection as well.

From this study, it is important to understand that, despite the participants experiencing athletic identity loss, they were able to overcome the negative effects that it had on them. The purpose of this study was to understand how the cancellation of sports seasons affected the mental health of student-athletes at Johnson & Wales University and how it affected their athletic identity. It can be concluded that the participants' mental health declined in relation to their athletic identity loss. However, there was an unexpected period of self-reflection and self-reinvention that took place that cause the participants' mental health to trend upward. This shows the resiliency of these participants as well as the resiliency of the human mind.

## Appendix A

Hello Coach [Name],

My name is Summer Ramundo, and I, as well as my faculty mentor, Dr. Mosko, are conducting research regarding athletic identity and the Covid-19 pandemic. We are looking for approximately 6 student athletes to participate in a 30-minute interview either on campus in John Hazen White or via Zoom. The interview will consist of questions relating to the pandemic cancelling sports' seasons, athletic identity, and mental health. All interviews will be recorded for research purposes and deleted following the project. This study has been reviewed and approved by the JWU IRB.

We ask if you would circulate this email to student-athletes who were on the team during either the 2020 or 2021 seasons that were cancelled and you think might be interested in sharing their experiences. Those who are interested can respond directly to either myself or Dr. Mosko using the emails below.

If interested, each athlete will receive additional information on the study, and will undergo a formal consent process on the day of the interview, which will review the purpose and scope of our research project as well as their rights as a participant.

If you or your athletes have any questions about the research project, or are interested in participating, they can reach out to either myself, Summer Ramundo, at [j02204107@jwu.edu](mailto:j02204107@jwu.edu) or Dr. Mosko at [jmosko@jwu.edu](mailto:jmosko@jwu.edu).

We thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,  
Summer Ramundo  
Jonathan E. Mosko, PhD  
JWU Department of Social Science

**Appendix B**  
**Informed Consent Form**  
**Consent to Participate in a Research Study**  
**Johnson & Wales University**

**Investigators: Athletic Identity During Covid-19**

<b>Name:</b> <u>Summer Ramundo</u>	<b>Dept:</b> <u>N/A</u>	<b>Phone:</b> <u>201-621-1115</u>
	<u>Social</u>	
<b>Name:</b> <u>Dr. Jonathan Mosko</u>	<b>Dept:</b> <u>Sciences</u>	<b>Phone:</b> <u>401-598-1425</u>

**Introduction**

- You are being asked to be in a research study about athletic identity during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you were a student athlete at Johnson & Wales University at the time when sports' seasons were cancelled due to Covid.
- Please read this form. You may also request that the form be read to you. The purpose of this form is to give you information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document that choice.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate.
- Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.

**Why is this study being done? What is the purpose of this study?**

- The purpose of the study is in order to better understand the effects that the cancellation of collegiate sports' seasons has had on the athletic identity and the mental health of student athletes at Johnson & Wales University.
- Ultimately, this research may be presented within an honors thesis paper and within a scholarly journal article.

**What will I be asked to do?**

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a 30-minute interview session, answering questions pertaining to your sport season being cancelled. In order to ensure that we understand you as clearly as possible, the interviewers will be taking notes and (with your permission) making an audio recording of your responses.

**What are the risks and/or discomforts of being in this study?**

- The study has the following risks. First, This study may bring up feelings of anxiety or depression as you will be asked to discuss the emotions connected to the cancellation of your sport's season. Second, depending on your experiences, some of the questions may lead to emotional distress. If any of the questions are too difficult to answer, you can choose to skip them. Should any of these emotions arise, and should you wish to speak with a professional, the researchers will provide you with resources, such as:

**Johnson & Wales Counseling Services: 401-598-1016**

National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-273-8255

**What are the benefits of being in this study?**

- Although there may be no direct benefits to you as a result of taking part in this study, the results may indirectly benefit you as you may indirectly feel pride in being a part of an advancement in the research about the topic of mental health and athletic identity during the Covid-19 pandemic. Not much information is known about college student-athletes' experiences during this time period, so you will be helping the Psychology community to better understand how the pandemic has affected college student athletes.

**Will I be compensated for participating in this study?**

- You will not receive payment or compensation for participating in this study.

**How will my privacy be protected? How will my data be kept confidential?**

- This study is anonymous. We will not be collecting or retaining any information about your identity within the records of this study.
- The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. All written notes and transcripts will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the case of paper records, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password-protected file. All recordings and information taken during the interview will be protected by the primary investigator and will be destroyed at the end of the study, in accordance with state and federal regulations. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you unless you provide additional consent.

**May I refuse to participate in the study?**

- Yes. The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you.
- You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* without affecting your relationship with the investigators of this study or Johnson & Wales University.
- You have the right to decline to answer any single question, and you have the right to request that the researcher not use any of your data.
- If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.

**What if I decide I no longer want to participate in the study? May I withdraw?**

- You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason.
- If you choose to withdraw from the research study there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- If you are not satisfied with the way in which this study was conducted, you may convey your concerns to the chair of the JWU IRB at [institutionalreviewboard@jwu.edu](mailto:institutionalreviewboard@jwu.edu) or 401-598-1467.



**What are my rights as a research participant?**

- You will be informed of any significant findings developed during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to participate in the research.
- If you sustain an injury while participating in this study, your participation may be ended.
- If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator(s), you may contact the chair of the JWU IRB at [institutionalreviewboard@jwu.edu](mailto:institutionalreviewboard@jwu.edu) or 401-598-1467.

**Whom may I contact with questions?**

- For more information regarding this study, please contact the principal investigator, Summer Ramundo, at [j02204107@jwu.edu](mailto:j02204107@jwu.edu).
- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research-related injury, please contact the chair of the JWU IRB at [institutionalreviewboard@jwu.edu](mailto:institutionalreviewboard@jwu.edu) or 401-598-1467.
- If you have any concerns or problems that you believe occurred as a result of your participation, you may report them to the chair of the JWU IRB at [institutionalreviewboard@jwu.edu](mailto:institutionalreviewboard@jwu.edu) or 401-598-1467

**Will I receive a copy of this consent form?**

- You will be given a copy of this consent form as a paper copy.

**Will I be informed of the findings from this study?**

- If you would like, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to you.  
Would you like a summary of the results sent to you? \_\_\_\_\_Yes \_\_\_\_\_No

Participant's Statement

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily. My signature below indicates:

- I understand the information;
- I consent to participate in this study;
- I am 18 years of age or older.

*You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature or  
Legally authorized representative

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name

Researcher's Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal Investigator's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name

**Addition for Consent to Audio Recording/Video Recording and Transcription**

The study involves the audio recording of the interviews. Neither the name nor other identifying information about the participant will be associated with the recordings or with the transcript. Only the researchers will listen to or view the recordings.

The recordings will be transcribed by the researchers. Once the transcription is checked for accuracy, the recordings will be erased and destroyed. Interview transcripts may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in presentations or written documents that result from the study; however, neither the name or any other identifying information (such as voice or picture) of the participant will be used in such presentations or documents. Further, immediately following the interview, the participant will be given the opportunity to have the recordings destroyed, either in whole or in part.

-----  
**Please check one of each of these pairs of options.**

Recording the Interview

- I consent to having my interview recorded.
- I do not consent to having my interview recorded.

Transcription of Interview

- I consent to having my recorded interview transcribed into written form.
- I do not consent to having my recorded interview transcribed into written form.

Use of Transcriptions

- I consent to the use of the written transcription of my interview in presentations and written documents resulting from the study, provided that neither my name nor other identifying information will be associated with the transcript.
- I do not consent to the use of the written transcription of my interview in presentations or written documents resulting from the study.

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I hereby agree to abide by the participant's instructions as indicated above.

Signature of Principal Investigator \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix C**  
**Interview Questions**

1. What year are you at Johnson & Wales?
2. How did you find out your season was cancelled?
3. Can you recall your reaction when you found out your season was cancelled?
4. What was your athletic routine like prior to the pandemic (practices, games, classes, lifts, etc.)?
5. What was your routine like after your season was cancelled?
6. How did these changes make you feel (anxious, depressed, lonely, relieved, happy, sad, etc.), and how did you choose to cope with them?
7. Did your attitude about yourself change when you were not able to have a season, if so how?
8. Have those emotions/attitudes lessened/changed now that sports' seasons have resumed?
9. Did you participate in any other activities besides sports during the pandemic?
10. What was the worst part about having your season cancelled (not playing games, not seeing teammates as often, not having something to do outside of class, online class, etc.)?

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