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Exploration in Mental Performance for Division 1 SEC College Football Student Athletes

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OTD 8494: Doctoral Capstone Literature Review and Needs Assessment

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Abstract

The stigma surrounding mental health in sports has made intervention difficult. “There is a need for various actors to provide more effective strategies to overcome the stigma that surrounds mental illness, increase mental health literacy in the athlete/coach community, and address athlete-specific barriers to seeking treatment for mental illness” (Castadelli-Maia et.al 2019). The athletes in the football program at the University of Tennessee face more pressure today than ever in history. They have their class schedule, practice and training every day, and meetings with their position coaches. Now, with the introduction of name, image, and likeness (NIL) allowing players to profit off their name, companies are paying players, and they expect them to perform at a level to justify their investment. This capstone experience wanted to lay the foundation for high level athlete mental health and to advocate for a licensed occupational therapist to be added to a training staff. While the literature on mental health intervention in high level athletes is very scarce because of how new it is, this survey showed that more attention towards this topic is needed. Moving forward, mental health intervention in high level athletes needs more funding for longitudinal studies and improved access to mental health screenings. This will be the start to breaking the stigma surrounding mental health in sports and allowing athletes to trust that they have the necessary tools to address their mental health concerns during their time at the university and when they move to the next chapter in their career.

Keywords: *mental health, high level athletes, stigma*

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Introduction

The University of Tennessee is a public research institution located in Knoxville, Tennessee. The football program at the University of Tennessee has brought the university and its fans a lot of success over the years. While the most recent national championship was in the late 1990's, the program has begun to turn around and momentum is building for the possibility of a successful 2022-2023 campaign. The student-athletes in the program's ages range from 18-23 and there are 20 different states represented on the roster. It is sometimes hard to remember that these student athletes are still young in their maturation, and they are being put into a situation where they always have eyes on them. A typical college student has challenges when beginning their college journey. "The college years are a period of time when young adults experience a significant amount of change and a variety of novel challenges. Academic performance, social demands, adjusting to life away from home, and financial challenges are just a few of the burden's college students must confront" (Moreland et.al 2018). The student athletes in the football program face added challenges due to their demands and the media attention in their sport. The student athletes are required to attend their classes, practices and training daily, and will be asked to do interviews with podcasts and local tv and radio stations almost every week.

All these athletes have high aspirations when coming to a school like Tennessee. Nationally televised games against top teams in the Southeastern Conference (SEC) can allow the student athletes to be noticed by NFL teams with the hope of hearing their name called in April at the annual NFL Draft. While the student athletes have all the medical support they need in the football program from athletic trainers and team physicians, there is one area of their health that is under addressed. That area is the student athlete's mental health.

The University of Tennessee has a graduate sport psychology and pre-occupational therapy undergraduate program, but their faculty does not work directly with the football program. Instead, the football program has an individual with the title, “Director of Life Skills Development,” that attempts to encompass what the role of a sport psychologist or an occupational therapist would do. Unfortunately, that is not giving the student athletes all the tools they need to be successful mentally at Tennessee. Athlete mental health is a major resource for the whole athletic career and life post-athletic career (Henriksen 2020). The growth of the individual mentally should resemble the same trajectory as their growth as an athlete on the field, but without the right support pieces, that will not happen.

This capstone experience focused on bringing awareness to the mental health of the football student athletes at the University of Tennessee, implementing individualized mental health education and intervention for specific athletes, and to advocate for the addition of a licensed occupational therapist to the training/medical staff to allow for a comprehensive approach to the student athlete’s health. My mentor for this capstone experience was an experienced coach that had over 10 years of experience coaching division 1 football student athletes and wanted to learn more about occupational therapy and its role in sports. He has spent time with various SEC, ACC, and Mountain West programs and was tasked with establishing sports science technology, Catapult, at the schools that he was employed by. He had grown up with the idea of “winning at all costs,” but was quickly beginning to realize that that cost could mean health disruptions later in life. His expertise with the sports science data collection made the project take a turn that will be discussed in the Unexpected Learning Outcomes section. This sports science technology gave data on player load, which could be translated to the stress put on the body during an activity. His willingness to listen and learn about the principles of

occupational therapy truly made this a beneficial experience for the student athletes and the members of the coaching staff.

With the assistance of a faculty mentor at Nova Southeastern University, I was able to design a short, 6-question survey with questions that targeted when the athletes felt mentally drained during the duration of their day and how they go about recovering to prepare for the next day of activity. These questions were designed using principles from the Person-Environment-Occupation-Performance (PEOP) model and the Model of Human Occupation (MOHO).

Literature Review

Definition of Mental Performance

The overall research for this topic of mental performance in collegiate sports is scarce and much of the research that was found did not directly test various mental health interventions on the impact of mental performance in high level college athletes. Instead, finding individuals who specialize in mental performance was the route that seemed to give the most accurate definition. A prominent individual, like mental performance consultant Donovan Martin, defines the word as “refers to the internal conscious and subconscious activities that impact athlete’s external actions.” Having an individual to discuss this term with the athlete can help the athletes begin to take control of their mental health, which can lead to positive mental performance in their respective sport. Tailoring a program to focus on mental performance for the players at the University of Tennessee will give them a unique advantage over other schools in the Southeastern Conference (SEC), as well as the other division 1 college football programs.

State of the University

The literature surrounding athlete mental health intervention and the stigma of mental health in college/professional athletics is not to the level it needs to be for significant change. The stigma surrounding mental health in athletics is a top-down problem. Governing boards, upper management and athletic departments must improve their approach to mental health. For some schools, money can be attributed to the lack of mental health resources, which is a challenge. For others, like the University of Tennessee, the money is not the issue, it is the willingness to put an emphasis on the mental health of their student athletes. Institutions like the University of Tennessee could be at the forefront of mental health research and intervention with their athletic teams, but they need evidence that supports the need for this addition.

Students vs. Student Athletes

At some schools, there is a noticeable difference between students and student athletes. The size and stature of some of the student athletes make them stand out compared to the students at the university. With that said, there is never a competition when it comes to either of these populations' mental health. Establishing a school-wide mental health intervention plan can allow all populations to benefit. First, there needs to be a noticeable percentage of student athletes that display signs and/or symptoms of anxiety, depression, or other psychosocial conditions that a mental health intervention could target. While this study did not target student athletes in particular, the results showed a tremendous need for mental health intervention. "Based on the 2019 National College Health Assessment survey from the American College Health Association (ACHA) consisting of 67,972 participants, 27.8% of college students reported anxiety, and 20.2% reported experiencing depression which negatively affected their academic performance" (Moreland et.al 2018). While this study specifically examined students,

the results show a need for mental health intervention throughout the student population, which would include student athletes.

Role of Occupational Therapy

An occupational therapist has a vast range of skills that could be used in the setting of sports. The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process, 4th edition (OTPF4) outlines the parameters of occupational therapy practice and what services can be provided to various populations (AOTA, 2020). With a population like athletes, this type of intervention must be evidence-based. Examining credible research studies, as well as, athlete testimonials can allow occupational therapists to justify their role in the mental health intervention in sports.

Examining a recent systematic review focused on athletes that completed by Sonora Gennarelli, it was concluded that the addition of psychosocial rehabilitation can help facilitate rehabilitation from a musculoskeletal injury. “These interventions facilitated positive mood changes, pain management, exercise compliance, and rehabilitation adherence” (Gennarelli et. al 2020). The International Olympic Committee (IOC) states, “Pain management should be based on the physiological, anatomical, and psychosocial influences on the individual's pain and is not equivalent to injury management, which focuses on musculoskeletal recovery and return-to-play.” Both the study and the statement by the IOC show that psychosocial intervention is something that can cause positive results. This, in turn, can be a justification of occupational therapy intervention in division 1 college football student athletes.

Needs Assessment

Following observation and discussion with my mentor, we formulated a list of four needs that would benefit the football program at the University of Tennessee. We wanted to make sure

that we came up with a list of needs that would emphasize how important the data from this project would be because of the nature of the sport. Football, whether it be college or professional, is grueling and demanding on the athletes both mentally and physically. While there are many doctors, athletic trainers, and massage therapists, there are not many medical professionals that look at the mental health of the athlete. Three of the needs we discussed were going to be completed during this capstone and the fourth was a long-term plan that would be a goal based upon the success of the capstone experience. The first need that was identified was increased access to mental health screenings and evaluation for the football student athletes. There were no mental health screenings when the players enter the program as true freshman, which makes identifying and addressing mental health disturbances difficult if they arise later in their careers.

The second need for the football program that was identified was individualized mental health programs for the student athletes who stated they did not feel recovered for classes or practice the following day. With the rigor of the football training and practice schedule and the class schedule the student athletes are faced with, daily recovery is imperative. While having access to the mental health screenings and evaluations is important, having a general program for all the athletes will not be beneficial. My mentor and I talked about the similarities between a training program for specific position groups and the individualized mental health program for the athletes. The individualizing of the mental health programs would allow the student athletes to not feel generalized and to target specific areas that they specifically responded to during the survey.

The next need that was identified for the program was specifically my mentor's idea and it is necessary for all coaching and training staffs if the stigma surrounding mental health is to be

broken. That need was mental health education for the coaching and training staff, and more specifically, education regarding mental health screening. Every coach across the country, professional or college, has different philosophies and coaching styles. This can make it difficult because some of those coaches are very old school and do not see mental health as a priority. Fortunately, the coaching staff at the University of Tennessee is a younger staff that is willing to use any type of information given to them to improve the team. My mentor and I wanted to maximize the short period of time to present the data and benefits with the coaches, so the entire coaching staff would not be present for this final presentation.

The last need, and more of a long-term need, was the addition of a licensed occupational therapist to the training staff with the football program at the University of Tennessee. While this was an identified need for this football program at this university, it could be argued that a need for an occupational therapist on the training staff could be found at a majority of the college and professional teams in the country. With occupational therapy only beginning to make its way into sports, the proactive institutions or franchises are going to be a step ahead in treating their athletes. An occupational therapist does not need to just be involved in the mental health side of sports. An occupational therapist can bring a variety of skills to the table and that can be an asset to a school or franchise with a tight budget. Allowing the occupational therapist to have independence over the mental health intervention, much like Tennessee did, but also to be involved in the training of the athletes will advocate to individuals who are unfamiliar to the profession how diverse and multifaceted the profession is.

Goals and Objectives Achieved

After the needs for the football program at the University of Tennessee were found, the goals and objectives of the capstone experience were formulated. The original purpose of this capstone experience with the student athletes at the University of Tennessee was to promote the importance of athlete mental health through individualized mental health education and intervention. With the help of both of my capstone mentor, this original purpose transformed into three goals that encompassed the importance of student athlete mental health, but also advocated for occupational therapy in the sports world.

The first goal of this capstone experience was to individualize mental health plans for student-athletes who felt they were not prepared for their class schedule and the next day of practice and training. These individualized mental health plans would be designed and given to athletes based upon the responses to the short, 6-question survey. While the original goal was to give all the student athletes in the program an individualized program, there would be insufficient time to complete and analyze all that data. Instead, the programs would be designed for the student athletes who specifically mentioned feeling mentally drained for multiple days. This would include feeling mentally drained for classes and practice. With the student athletes facing more pressure today than an history due to the media attention and name, image, and likeness allowing players to profit off their name, it felt very necessary to individualize these mental health programs to discuss those topics. Particularly with NIL, added pressure of performing to justify the amount of money the athlete receives can impact mental health.

The second goal for this capstone experience was to advocate for the hire of a licensed occupational therapist to the training staff at the University of Tennessee. While this would be a long-term project due to the budget, the foundation was built during this capstone experience.

Administering the survey was the initial step in completing this goal. The questions were designed to specifically target mental health during the training period and to understand how the athletes recovered after a long day of classes and practice. The analysis of the responses was the second phase of this goal. If the responses were given and no analysis and action was taken, then the staff would've questioned the importance and role of occupational therapy. A thorough analysis and individualized plan for the players who were targeted showed that the data was used to benefit the players and, therefore, used to benefit the program. Lastly, presenting the findings after implementing the individualized plans, the staff was able to visually see the changes that happened. The coaching staff at Tennessee are very visual learners and the short presentation of the data helped them understand just how important occupational therapy was to the improvement of the players mental health over a 16-week period.

The last goal of this capstone experience was to discuss the stigma surrounding mental health with the student athletes in the football program. "Elite athletes often believe mental health symptoms and disorders are a sign of weakness, or report stigma associated with mental health symptoms and disorders. They also report a lack of knowledge and understanding of mental health symptoms and disorders" (Castaldelli-Maia, J. M. p. 6). This was the case with our players, and I thought the best way to achieve this goal was by establishing a relationship with the student athletes. Talking to the student athletes about their class schedules, their weekends, or just how they are feeling helped them to trust that I had their best interest in mind. The student athletes were able to feel comfortable expressing if there were any changes in their mental health after that and I was able to get great responses when I ran my survey with the 122 student athletes in July.

The 16-week program was designed based off these goals and were to be completed through the establishment of a mental health survey, data analysis and presentation. Completing two of the three goals set at the beginning of this capstone was a success. Establishing trust with the student athletes was my priority when I initially stepped on campus at the University of Tennessee. I was able to complete that goal, but it wasn't without adversity. A student occupational therapist like myself coming into a program and immediately starting a new project can be difficult. There was scrutiny because of unfamiliarity with occupational therapy as a profession. That was a challenge, but the data was able to show that the intervention did generate positive results and justified the need to continue mental health screenings and intervention moving forward. The idea behind this project is to set a foundation for professionals to build off to match the uniqueness of the player's position, with their program that can give them the tools to address their mental health as they move through their careers.

Unplanned Learning Opportunities

With no occupational therapist on staff at Tennessee, I had to use the occupational therapist lens to find some learning opportunities that were unplanned. One of those unplanned learning opportunities was the use of vision training for specific position groups. I was able to take our quarterbacks and wide receivers through vision training during my time working with them and I did not expect to be able to do that, nor hear about the benefits that the players noticed following two weeks of the training. The wide receivers stated they noticed a difference when visually tracking the football coming out of the quarterback's hand and the quarterbacks said they were able to pick up a defensive scheme slightly faster than they were before the training.

Another unplanned learning activity was the use of Catapult sports science data to justify the use of the individualized mental health intervention. I have had experience with Catapult before, but I did not expect my mentor to be so willing to try to establish a correlation between the data and the player's mental health. The use of sports science data is becoming crucial to many professional franchises and universities in the country. To establish a correlation that could give the sports science data, but also mental health implications would be another way occupational therapy could establish itself in sports. This is an idea for a long-term study that could be completed at the University of Tennessee because of the willingness of my mentor to look for a correlation.

Summary

Occupational therapy offers a unique therapeutic lens in the world of sports and in the game of football. For years, the profession has been confined to hospitals, outpatient facilities and care facilities. As the awareness on mental health intervention and the benefits of an occupational therapist on a training staff continues to grow, there will be more applicable research to justify the hiring of a licensed occupational therapist in sports. The 6-question survey that was created analyzed mental health and recovery for the football athletes at the University of Tennessee. The survey was given a total of three times throughout the 16-week capstone experience. The first time it was administered was in week 6 and 96 total athletes were surveyed. This was the end of spring football and the freshman had not yet arrived for the summer training and class cycle. These results showed that 71% of the players would go home and sleep post-practice and that four players said they felt mentally exhausted for multiple days following a practice. These four players were given mental health education, which included a 30-minute

discussion on Monday's that would help them prepare for the week and allow them to start to develop tools to address their mental health.

The new group of freshmen arrived in early June and that was the second time the survey was run. The answers were very scattered because of the newness to the program, but one athlete did have an interest in mental health education. He was added to the group of four that had been identified from the initial survey and his results, particularly with his sleep, were evident.

Lastly, all 122 athletes were surveyed in July and mental health education was given to all players who said they felt mentally drained post-practice. The total number of players that said they felt mentally drained was 71, which was noticeably high. With that said, the training and practices were very intense. After 2-weeks of mental health education, 56 of those players stated they felt increased productivity and focus for their classes, while also feeling rested for the next day's practice.

Recommendations

Moving forward, having an initial screening for the new student athletes can lay the foundation for great mental health throughout the program. Providing education to new student athletes on the importance of mental health and how they can improve their mental health can give them the tools to combat any mental health disturbances as they move through their careers. Having an occupational therapist to perform these screenings would be ideal because of the need to explain various terms and to help the athletes understand why this data was important and what it was going to be used for. Having an occupational therapist that has a background in sports can also establish trust with the players, so that they can feel like they can open up in the small group meetings. Allowing the athletes to direct the conversation on a topic like mental health should help to bring a more diverse conversation because they are from different areas,

have different beliefs on mental health and can give feedback to others based on experience they have.

Limitations

Limitations to this capstone project were the amount of time spent with the athletes. With the schedule of the student athletes being so full, there was very little time to sit down with the athletes and discuss the importance of mental health. Fortunately, my mentor was able to assist in this process, but this may not be the case for other programs or franchises. Establishing a relationship with the head coach or a member of the training staff can assist in this process and allow the student or registered occupational therapist to have the time they need to gather the data or just continue the conversation regarding the student athlete's mental health.

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Appendix

Exploration in Mental Performance for Division 1 SEC College Football Student Athletes

University of Tennessee Football Questionnaire

1. What is mental performance and how does it impact your play on the field?
 - Mental performance is the “state of wellbeing of the athlete.” This means the athlete is functioning mentally at their optimal performance level. This optimal mental level will lead to physical and mental ability to make the plays needed to be successful on the field.
2. How do you think that mental performance can impact your performance on the field?
 - a. Positively
 - b. Negatively
 - c. Not at all
3. What activities can help you feel recharged after a day of practice?

Here are a few options to get you started

 - Video games
 - Walks
 - Hanging out with friends
 - Calling family
 - Sleeping
 - Reading
4. During practice, when would you typically feel mentally drained?
 - Pre-practice
 - Middle of practice
 - End of practice
5. Are there specific drills that are difficult to perform if you feel mentally drained?
 - Yes, if so, which drills
 - No
6. What time of day do you feel the most mental state of wellbeing?
 - a. Is this an everyday occurrence?
 - Yes
 - No

