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## **Examining Stress and Performance Anxiety as Predicting Factors of Athletic Burnout in Collegiate Student-Athletes**

**Drew Barnard<sup>1</sup>**

In the past, burnout has been a popular topic for research. However, within the realm of athletics, a majority of such research has been focused on coaches, athletic department staff, and athletic trainers. The purpose of this study was to assess potential contributing factors of burnout among student-athletes at Lindenwood University, an institution with National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) Division II and Student-Life athletic programs. Completion of four questionnaires was required in this study; a Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, 1983), a Self-Rated Anxiety Scale (Zung, 1979), a Modified Burnout Questionnaire (Harris, 2005), and a Demographic Questionnaire. The student-athletes who participated in this study compete in various sports at the NCAA Division II and Student-Life Sport levels. A multiple regression analysis was used upon the completion of data collection to determine if stress and performance anxiety were contributing factors in predicting athletic burnout. Based on previous burnout-related research it was hypothesized that stress and anxiety would be significant contributing factors to athletic burnout and would be able to be recognized by individuals involved in athletics as predicting factors in athletic burnout. Based on the significant results of this study, the results of this study can be used as part of a proactive educational resource for coaches and athletic department staff to utilize.

*Keywords:* stress, anxiety, burnout, collegiate student-athlete

In 1974, Freudenberger established burnout to be a state of failure, physical exhaustion, and/or emotional exhaustion due to a deficit of energy, strength, or resources generally encountered when working with excessively needy and emotional peers. Maslach (1976) offered a similar definition when he defined burnout; he preferred to view burnout in terms of the absence of concern or care for co-workers as a result of job related stress. Regardless of the professional behind the given definition and the year in which burnout was defined, or re-defined in some instances, there are five general categories in which burnout symptoms may be classified. These categories include: physical symptoms, emotional symptoms, behavioral

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symptoms, interpersonal symptoms, and attitudinal symptoms (Kahill, 1988). Due to the fact that burnout can be experienced in such a wide variety of ways, the intensity of these symptoms may vary depending on the severity of burnout being experienced. Nonetheless, burnout had collectively been qualified as having physical symptoms such as fatigue, physical depletion/atrophy, exhaustion, difficulty sleeping, headaches, and illness.

Within the category of emotional symptoms individuals experiencing burnout could become irritable, depressed, have feelings of increased anxiety, guilt, and helplessness. Rigid dependency upon rules, absenteeism/withdrawal, alcohol and drug consumption, as well as over indulgence in food and tobacco products are all common behavioral symptoms experienced during periods of burnout (Maslach, 1976). The fourth category of symptoms not only affects the individual who is experiencing burnout but also affects the people in his or her life and has been deemed the interpersonal symptoms these symptoms include impersonal communication practices, difficulty focusing, attempted withdrawal, and potentially verbal and non-verbal forms of violence. The final category given to classify symptoms of burnout belongs to attitudinal symptoms where it is not uncommon for individuals to develop a generally defensive and negative attitude, callousness towards others, lacking desire, and a lost sense of enjoyment (Maslach, 1976).

As examined through previous research and literature created by Freudenberger (1974), and Maslach (1976), the early stages of burnout related research were mainly focused in the workplace and investigated burnout factors in a variety of careers such as teachers, police officers, physicians, and lawyers, to name a few. It would not be until the mid-1980s when burnout would eventually begin to be examined in association with athletics. Later research would begin to pave the way into athletic burnout related research by first examining levels of

burnout found in coaches, athletic trainers, and officials, respectively (see for example, Caccesse & Mayerberg, 1984; Capel, 1986; Capel, Sisley, & Desertrain, 1987). Even as burnout became a topic of growing interest in the realm of athletics, a majority of the studies conducted would remain focused on burnout rates in athletic staff instead of on the majority of athletes, with the exception of a few available studies that focused on levels of burnout found in different adolescent and collegiate sports (Coakley, 1992; Judge, Bell, Theodore, Simon, & Bellar, 2012).

Walter, Van Lunen, Walker, Ismaeli, and Onate (2009) conducted a study of athletic training education program directors that would examine emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment researchers. Although the results from this study indicated low levels of burnout in depersonalization and personal accomplishment, program directors did report having moderate levels of emotional exhaustion and it was lightly suggested these moderate levels were contributed to in part by the extensive list of day-to-day responsibilities integrated in this profession (Walter et al., 2009). Similar to the superior time management skills required by these professionals in order to perform at work every day, collegiate student-athletes must also be able to manage their time between attending class, completing coursework assignments, fulfilling athletic related obligations (such as practice, home and away games, and conditioning), and attempting to have a normal social life while still taking care of themselves and doing things like getting an adequate amount of sleep each night. Understandably, this can be quite an overwhelming task and can very easily create new environmental stress factors for the athlete to have to learn to cope with. A study conducted by Kristiansen, Murphy, & Roberts (2012) further emphasized the additional stresses placed on athletes, the vast array of responsibilities entrusted in today's athletes, and ultimately the importance of providing a healthy, supportive, and functional atmosphere within athletics. They

found that the stress factors stem from travel related issues, conflict between teammates, financial concerns, or coaching complications, being exposed to such things on a day-to-day basis can take a serious toll on athletes and may very well cause the athlete to experience burnout in the future.

In addition to the influence stress factors have in determining and assessing burnout levels, past research related to anxiety and coping strategies used to aid athletes in dealing with adversity also proves to be relevant and influential in the process of defining and assessing athletic burnout. Goodger, Gorely, Lavalle, and Harwood created a systematic review for burnout in sport and found increased stress levels and high trait anxiety to be related to higher levels of burnout, depending on individual coping skills and ability to effectively perform in times of adversity (as cited in Gould & Whitley, 2009).

In an examination of burnout among adolescent athletes Coakley (1992) challenges readers to think outside the box by proposing that burnout in athletes may be rooted much deeper than chronic stress, coping abilities, and so forth. Coakley (1992) admitted that stress is most certainly a factor of burnout and briefly explains the standard clinical symptoms of burnout and how an athlete's insecurities can adversely affect his or her performance causing the athlete to seclude themselves, socially and emotionally, from the people around them due to their inability to meet the performance goals they had set for themselves. The influence stress and anxiety can have on an athlete experiencing athletic burnout is evident in certain individual circumstances and research articles. However, I could not find any published research available that involved testing levels of stress and anxiety in relation to burnout that had been conducted using the same athlete participants for both dependent measures.

The present study investigated the relationship between predicting factors of burnout, such as stress and anxiety, and feelings of athletic burnout in collegiate student-athletes. Collegiate student-athletes are exposed to a great deal of chronic stress when factors such as a hectic schedule, increased responsibility, and extracurricular obligations in athletics are taken into consideration. The purpose behind this study was to determine if specific contributing factors of burnout, such as stress and anxiety, could be identified as predicting factors of athletic burnout in collegiate student-athletes. As a result of an increased awareness (due to participation in this study or further education) regarding athletic burnout and the factors that contribute to its progression, developing young adults involved in collegiate athletics could find additional benefits such as coping skills and strategies that can be used to better their future state of mental and physical well being. It was hypothesized that stress and anxiety will be significant contributing factors to athletic burnout and would be able to be recognized by individuals involved in athletics as predicting factors in athletic burnout.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The principal investigator surveyed 25 participants from the Lindenwood University Athletic Department. Participants did not receive any compensation for participating in the study. Nineteen of the participants were female and six of the participants were male. Of the participants, 2 were Asian/Pacific Islander, no participants were American Indian/Native Alaskan, 6 were Black, Non-Hispanic, 12 were White, Non-Hispanic, 5 were Hispanic, and no participants were Non-Residents/Aliens to the United States. The age range of participants fell between 19 and 25 years old, with a mean age of 21.36. All participants were full-time students. The mean number of credit hours participants' were enrolled in was 15.48, with all participants

ranging between 9 and 19 credit hours. The average number of years playing competitive sports was 9.28, with the range varying from 2 years to 16 years of experience. The average number of hours fulfilling sport-related obligations ranged from 10 to 30, and because it was an open ended question qualitative answers, such as “Too many” and “Depends” were also given. Of the 25 participants, none were freshmen, 6 were sophomores, 6 were juniors, 10 were seniors, and 3 claimed other as their class status. Fourteen of the twenty-five participants participated in NCAA Division II athletics, and the remaining 11 participants participated in Lindenwood University sponsored Student Life Sports, respectively.

### **Materials**

Participants were given two informed consent forms to read, sign, and understand before starting the surveys (see Appendix A); one copy was for the participant to keep for his or her records and one copy was to be kept by the principal investigator, This was both parties would have the appropriate paperwork on hand. Participants were given a single packet of materials, which included four surveys, during the experiment. The first survey to be completed was the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, 1983) measuring the participants’ feelings and thoughts during the last month based on the participants’ answers to 14 questions (see Appendix B). The next survey was the Self-Rating Anxiety Scale (Zung, 1971) which measured participants’ levels of anxiety over the previous few days leading up to the survey based on the answers given to the 20 questions included in the survey (see Appendix C). The third survey was the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (Harris, 2005), which was modified by the principal investigator to apply to all sports instead of strictly swimming as it did in its original form. The Athlete Burnout Questionnaire consisted of 15 questions measuring participants’ feelings toward their sport (see Appendix D).

The final survey in the materials packet was the demographic questionnaire consisting of eight questions. The questions included age, gender, ethnicity, the number of years the participant has been playing competitive sports, the average number of hours per week the participant spent fulfilling sport-related obligations, the participants year in school, the number of credit hours the participant was currently enrolled in, and the division level at which the participant competed at (see Appendix E). The final form given to participants was the feedback letter which thanked them for their participation, described the purpose of the study, assured them that no identifying information would be linked with any findings, and told them to contact the principal investigator if they had any questions or concerns regarding the study (see Appendix F).

The principal investigator provided pens and pencils for each participant to complete the consent forms and surveys. The room in which the research was conducted was well lit and included two tables and two chairs to accommodate for the principal investigator and one participant at a time.

### **Procedure**

Once a participant arrived, he or she was greeted and then asked to read and sign two copies of the informed consent form. The participant kept one copy and the principal investigator kept one copy. The informed consent form ensured that all participant information would be kept confidential and that the principal investigator's only interest was in the aggregate results of the study, and not in any individual results. The principal investigator informed the participant that he or she was not obligated to answer any question he or she felt uncomfortable answering, and would not be penalized for not completing our study.



After signing the informed consent form, the participant was given a packet of materials consisting of four surveys and asked to complete them in order. The first survey to be completed was the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, 1983). Following the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, 1983) was the Self-Rating Anxiety Scale (Zung, 1971). The third survey in the packet of materials was a modified version of the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (Harris, 2005). The final survey participants were asked to complete was an eight question demographic questionnaire.

Upon completion of the four surveys in the materials packet, the participant was given the feedback letter and debriefed by the principal investigator. The principal investigator took this time to explain to the participant that any questions he or she may have are welcome and that the principal investigator's contact information was located at the bottom of the feedback letter in case he or she had any future questions, concerns, or would like to receive the aggregate results of the study. After debriefing the participant, the principal investigator provided the participant with a feedback letter and thanked the participant for their participation in the study.

### **Results**

In order to determine if stress and performance anxiety are contributing factors of athletic burnout in collegiate student-athletes, a multiple regression analysis was conducted with SPSS computer software and results indicated that stress and anxiety were contributing factors of athletic burnout in this specific population of collegiate student-athletes,  $F(2, 22) = 3.864, p < .001$ . Significant correlations were found between stress and burnout, as well as between anxiety and burnout, but not between stress and anxiety (stress/burnout = .380, anxiety/burnout = .412, stress/anxiety = .210). These correlations indicate that stress and anxiety are both individual contributing factors of athletic burnout but are not contributing factors of one another; meaning that higher levels of stress correlate with higher levels of athletic burnout, and that higher levels

of anxiety correlate with higher levels of athletic burnout, but higher levels of stress do not correlate with higher levels of anxiety and vice versa. The most numerically significant correlation was found between gender and stress levels, which indicated that within this population of participants that female student-athletes were more likely to possess higher levels of stress (gender/stress = .664). Results of the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, 1983) were as follows,  $M = 39.96$ ,  $SD = 7.743$ . Results of the Self-Rating Anxiety Scale (Zung, 1971) were as follows,  $M = 37.44$ ,  $SD = 6.312$ . Results of the Modified Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (Harris, 2005) were as follows,  $M = 43.92$ ,  $SD = 12.754$ .

### **Discussion**

It was hypothesized that stress and anxiety would be significant contributing factors of athletic burnout in collegiate student-athletes. I found that stress and anxiety were significant contributing factors to athletic burnout. Although the present study produced compelling results a few limitations were discovered while conducting the study. To correct for the limitations found during this study future research studies could repeat this research study at various universities with different academic and athletic demands across the country, conduct longitudinal studies involving both teams and individuals, create studies that focus on identifying specific behaviors that predispose athletes to burnout, examine burnout levels in individual sports vs. team sports, and/or conduct in-season and post-season research to compare data.

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## Appendix A

### Informed Consent Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (print name), understand that I will be taking part in a research project that requires me to complete four surveys; one which tests for my level stress, one which tests for my level of anxiety, one which tests for my level of athletic-burnout, and one which requires me to provide demographic information about myself. By signing this informed consent letter I verify that I am currently participating, or used to participate, in school sponsored athletics at Lindenwood University. I understand that I should be able to complete this project in less than 30 minutes. I am aware that I am free to skip any questions at any time. I am also aware that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary and that I may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. I should not incur any penalty or prejudice because I cannot complete the study. I understand that the information obtained from my responses will be analyzed only as part of aggregate data and that all identifying information will be absent from the data in order to ensure anonymity. I am also aware that my responses will be kept confidential, (none of my parents, professors, coaches, athletic trainers, or teammates will be informed in any way of my responses to these surveys), and that data obtained from this study will only be available for research and educational purposes. I understand that any questions I may have regarding this study shall be answered by the principal investigator to my satisfaction. Finally, I verify that I am at least 18 years of age and am legally able to give consent.

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Participant's Signature

Date

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Researcher's Signature

Date

#### **Student Researcher's Contact Information**

Drew Barnard

Principal Investigator

(317) 459-9694

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#### **Supervisor's Contact Information**

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Course Instructor

(636) 949-4371

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## Appendix B

### Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, 1983)

#### INSTRUCTIONS:

The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during THE LAST MONTH. In each case, you will be asked to indicate your response by circling the number representing HOW OFTEN you felt or thought a certain way. Although some of the questions are similar, there are differences between them and you should treat each one as a separate question. The best approach is to answer fairly quickly. That is, don't try to count up the number of times you felt a particular way, but rather indicate the alternative that seems like a reasonable estimate.

1-Almost never    2-Rarely    3-Sometimes    4-Frequently    5-Almost always

1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?

1    2    3    4    5

2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?

1    2    3    4    5

3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?

1    2    3    4    5

4. In the last month, how often have you dealt successfully with day-to-day problems and annoyances?

1    2    3    4    5

5. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were effectively coping with important changes that were occurring in your life?

1    2    3    4    5

6. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?

1    2    3    4    5

7. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?

1    2    3    4    5

8. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?

1 2 3 4 5

9. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?

1 2 3 4 5

10. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?

1 2 3 4 5

11. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that happened that were outside of your control?

1 2 3 4 5

12. In the last month, how often have you found yourself thinking about things that you have to accomplish?

1 2 3 4 5

13. In the last month, how often have you been able to control the way you spend your time?

1 2 3 4 5

14. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

1 2 3 4 5

## Appendix C

### Self-Rating Anxiety Scale (Zung, 1971)

For each item below, please circle the number 1 through 4 that best describes how often you felt or behaved this way during the past several days.

**1**–A little of the time **2**–Some of the time **3**–A good part of the time **4**–Most of the time

1. I feel more nervous and anxious than usual.

1      2      3      4

2. I feel afraid for no reason at all.

1      2      3      4

3. I get upset easily or feel panicky.

1      2      3      4

4. I feel like I'm falling apart and going to pieces.

1      2      3      4

5. I feel that everything is all right and nothing bad will happen.

1      2      3      4

6. My arms and legs shake and tremble.

1      2      3      4

7. I am bothered by headaches neck and back pain.

1      2      3      4

8. I feel weak and get tired easily.

1      2      3      4

9. I feel calm and can sit still easily.

1      2      3      4

10. I can feel my heart beating fast.

1      2      3      4

11. I am bothered by dizzy spells.

1      2      3      4

12. I have fainting spells or feel like it.

1      2      3      4

13. I can breathe in and out easily.

1      2      3      4

14. I get feelings of numbness and tingling in my fingers & toes.

1      2      3      4

15. I am bothered by stomachaches or indigestion.

1      2      3      4

16. I have to empty my bladder often.

1      2      3      4

17. My hands are usually dry and warm.

1      2      3      4

18. My face gets hot and blushes.

1      2      3      4

19. I fall asleep easily and get a good night's rest.

1      2      3      4

20. I have nightmares.

1      2      3      4



## Appendix D

### Modified Version of the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (Harris, 2005)

Please read each statement carefully and decide if you ever feel this way about your current sport participation. Your current sport participation includes all the training you have completed during this season. Please indicate how often you have had this feeling or thought this season by circling a number 1 to 5, where 1 means "I almost never feel this way" and 5 means "I feel that way most of the time." There are no right or wrong answers, so please answer each question as honestly as you can. Please make sure you answer all items. If you have any questions, feel free to ask.

1-Almost never    2-Rarely    3-Sometimes    4-Frequently    5-Almost always

1. I'm accomplishing many worthwhile things in my sport.

1    2    3    4    5

2. I feel so tired from my training that I have trouble finding energy to do other things.

1    2    3    4    5

3. The effort I spend in my sport would be better spent doing other things.

1    2    3    4    5

4. I feel overly tired from my athletic participation.

1    2    3    4    5

5. I am not achieving much in athletics.

1    2    3    4    5

6. I do not currently care as much about my athletic performance as much as I used to.

1    2    3    4    5

7. I am not performing up to my ability in my sport.

1    2    3    4    5

8. I feel “wiped out” from playing my sport.

1 2 3 4 5

9. I’m not into my sport like I used to be.

1 2 3 4 5

10. I feel physically worn out from my sport.

1 2 3 4 5

11. I feel less concerned about being successful in my sport than I used to.

1 2 3 4 5

12. I am exhausted by the mental and physical demands of my sport.

1 2 3 4 5

13. It seems that no matter what I do, I don’t perform as well as I think I should.

1 2 3 4 5

14. I feel successful at my sport.

1 2 3 4 5

15. I have negative feelings towards my sport.

1 2 3 4 5

## Appendix E

### Demographic Questionnaire:

Please respond to the following questions to the best of your ability. *You may choose to decline to answer any of the following questions.* Your answers will remain anonymous.

1. **Age:** \_\_\_\_\_ (years)
2. **Gender** (circle one):    Male            Female
3. **What is your ethnicity?** (circle one)
  - a. Asian/Pacific Islander
  - b. American Indian/Native Alaskan
  - c. Black, Non-Hispanic
  - d. White, Non Hispanic
  - e. Hispanic
  - f. Non-Resident/Alien
4. **Number of years playing competitively:** \_\_\_\_\_
5. **Average number of hours per week spent completing sport-related obligations?**  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. **What year in school are you currently in?** (circle one):
  - a. Freshman
  - b. Sophomore
  - c. Junior
  - d. Senior
  - e. Other (please explain): \_\_\_\_\_
7. **Number of credit hours you are currently enrolled in:** \_\_\_\_\_
8. **What division level do you compete at?** (circle one):
  - a. NCAA Division II
  - b. Student Life Sports

## Appendix F

### Feedback Letter

Thank you for participating in my study. The present study was conducted in order to determine if contributing factors to burnout, such as stress and anxiety, may be predicted when considering athletic burnout. I hypothesized that stress and anxiety would be significant contributing factors to athletic burnout and would be recognized as predicting factors in athletic burnout. I came to this hypothesis because, taking into account the hectic schedules, increased responsibilities, and extra curricular obligations in athletics, I believe collegiate student-athletes are exposed to a great deal of stress on a daily basis. I believe it would be very beneficial for the mental and physical well being of these developing young adults if the awareness of potential athletic burnout and the factors associated with athletic burnout were to be increased. I believe that this study could further investigate the relationship between predicting factors of burnout, such as stress and anxiety, and feelings of athletic burnout in collegiate student-athletes. If found significant, I would like to present the aggregate results of my study to coaches and athletic department staff in the form of a proactive and educational resource. Under the circumstances that I am able to present the results of my study, I assure you that participant confidentiality will be upheld and there will not be any identifying information of any kind included in the presentation.

Please note that I am not interested in your individual results; rather, I am only interested in the overall findings based on aggregate data. No identifying information about you will be associated with any of the findings, nor will it be possible for me to trace your responses to any of the questions proposed in this study on an individual basis.

If you are interested in obtaining the final results of this study based on aggregate data, or if you have any questions or concerns regarding any portion of this study, please do not hesitate to contact me. My contact information is found at the bottom of this letter.

Thank you again for your valuable contribution to this study.

Sincerely,

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