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Burnout and Years of Sports Competition: Is There a Correlation?

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Abstract Athlete burnout, a phenomenon that has been studied in previous research, is a concern in terms of athletes' health and well-being. Further, it is assumed by many sport coaches that the longer athletes compete in a sport, the greater chance for athlete burnout and the potential negative health consequences they could incur. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to determine the correlation between years of sport competition and an athletes' level of burnout on the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) subscales of Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Depersonalization (DP), and Personal Accomplishment (PA). The study was limited to female athletes at a Division I institution in the southeastern United States and included 99 participants. Ages ranged from 19 to 24 (M = 19.8) and participants were current members of the basketball (n=15), cross country (n=8), soccer (n=29), softball (n=17), tennis (n=3), track and field (n=19), and volleyball (n=17) teams. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlations. Each burnout subscale was analyzed separately with years of sport competition. Results indicated no significant ($p<.05$) correlations between years of sport competition and EE ($p=.038$), DP ($p=.029$), or PA ($p=-.062$). Prior research has examined intensive training and its effects on young athletes and concluded there are concerns about intense training and psychological injury [13]. This finding contrasts with the findings in this study for the measured scale. Therefore, based upon prior research and the results of the current study, future research should continue to examine the impact of years of competition and burnout in order to truly understand its effects on athletes.

Keywords Athletes, Burnout, Attrition

1. Introduction

Coach and athlete burnout is a phenomenon that has been explored in a number of studies and settings. Burnout descriptions and definitions appear in various studies, position papers, and book chapters [2, 18, 25, 27]. However, one of the most cited definitions describes burnout as a psychological, physical, and emotional withdraw from an enjoyable activity as a result of excessive stress [25]. Stress is viewed as a mismatch between the perceived demands of a situation and one's perceived resources and capabilities for meeting those demands [11, 25]. Therefore, when the demands of an individuals' circumstances outweigh the ability to handle the situation, the result could lead to maladaptive stress patterns [7, 10]. Consequences linked to stress and burnout include illness, injury, and drop out (of athletes and/or coaches) [21].

Prior research has determined younger, less experienced athletic coaches tend to have higher levels of perceived burnout than more experienced coaches [10]. Such findings could be attributed to young coaches' lack of coping skills or simply because young coaches leave the profession when the stressors become too demanding [10]. However, when it comes to athletes and their level of experienced burnout, the notion is much different. It is assumed by many sport coaches that the longer an athlete competes in a sport, the greater chance for athlete burnout and the potential negative health consequences [6].

Research studies have also examined athlete and coach burnout based upon gender. Many of these studies indicated female coaches [9, 10] experienced higher levels of perceived burnout than their male counterparts. However, studies conducted on gender and athletes' burnout typically viewed females rather than comparing both genders [5]. Still other studies have examined collegiate athlete stressors [26], passion and coping strategies [23], and reasons why athletes quit or considered quitting their collegiate sport [1, 2, 25, 26].

Bradford and Keshock (2010) sampled of 88 female Division I athletes in the Southeastern United States and determined issues related to attrition in female collegiate athletes were lack of free time, a feeling of being overextended, lack of playing time, sports injuries and the lack of joy in sport participation. These potential reasons for discontinuing sport participation are not novel, but do raise the question about athlete burnout and its relationship to the number of years athletes have competed in sport because of

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the extensive training and the physical and emotional demands placed on the athletes in these settings.

With so many factors potentially impacting athletes' propensity for sport burnout, the current study aims to better understand if and how years of sport competition influences sport burnout. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to determine the correlation between years of sport competition and a female athlete's perceived level of burnout on the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) subscales of Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Depersonalization (DP), and Personal Accomplishment (PA).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The study was limited to female athletes at a Division I institution in the Southeastern United States. The number of female athletes who completed the survey was 99. Ages of participants ranged from 19 to 24 (M= 19.8) and participants were current members of the intercollegiate basketball (n=15), cross country (n=8), soccer (n=29), softball (n=17), tennis (n=3), track and field (n=19), and volleyball (n=17) teams.

2.2. Instrument

Athlete burnout was determined by participants' scores on the MBI. Researchers received permission to use the MBI instrument from the publisher, Consulting Psychologist Press (CPP). Descriptive data questions such as age, year in school, head coaches' gender, whether or not the athlete was on an athletic scholarship, and sport team affiliation were collected from participants.

Christina Maslach developed the MBI and is recognized as one of the leading researchers and authorities on burnout [10, 18]. Further, research conducted by Maslach and colleagues identified the major components of burnout and their extensive work has provided a more fully developed conceptualization of burnout [8, 14, 15, 16].

The MBI uses a Likert-type scale and is separated into three subscales: Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Depersonalization (DP), and Personal Accomplishment (PA). The MBI is an established instrument for yielding quantitative data on burnout based on nominal-ordinal scales [9, 10, 20, 28]. Reliability coefficients for the subscales have been reported as follows: EE (r = .90), DP (r = .79), and PA(r = .71). Also, the standard error of measurement for each subscale was reported as 3.80 for EE, 3.16 for DP, and 3.73 for PA [17].

MBI scores on the subscales are used to determine participants' level of burnout. Participants receive a separate score on each of the subscales of burnout (EE, DP, and PA) and scores are not combined into a single, aggregate score.

Scoring on EE subscale is based on nine items outlined in the MBI scoring key [28]. Emotional Exhaustion refers to a tired fatigued feeling that develops as an individual's emotional energies are drained over time [17]. The DP subscale score is based on five items on the MBI. Depersonalization is characterized by a decrease in positive feelings in the workplace such as when athletes, display signs of a cold or distant attitude, or emotionally distance themselves from their coaches and/or teammates [16]. Finally, the PA score is based on the remaining eight items. Higher scores for the EE and DP subscales suggest higher degrees of experienced burnout of participants while lower mean scores on the PA subscale represent higher degrees of experienced burnout [17, 27]. Feelings of low personal accomplishment from one's job or competitive sport are characterized by the PA subscale. An example is when players determine they are no longer contributing to individual or team success and development, feelings of profound disappointment can occur [17].

2.3. Procedure

Prior to the start of the current study, the researchers gained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from the investigators institution of higher learning. Athletes who participated were members of the women's basketball, cross country, golf, soccer, softball, track and field, and volleyball teams at a Division I university in the Southeastern United States. Head coaches of the selected sports teams were contacted prior to the study to request their team's participation. Once coaches gave permission, researchers met with each team individually and were responsible for monitoring the completion the instrument and descriptive data questionnaire. Participants were informed of their right not to consent, to withdraw, and that all responses would remain confidential.

2.4. Statistical Analysis

All data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and participants whose MBI responses deviated from the accepted range of the instrument scale (0-6) were eliminated. Moreover, participants who provided incomplete information on the descriptive data were excluded from further analysis. However, there were no participants eliminated from the current study.

2.5. Results

There were 99 participants in the current study. Table 1 illustrates the demographics characteristics of the sample. Pearson correlations were used to determine the correlation between years of sport competition and a female athlete's level of burnout on the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) subscales. Each burnout subscale was analyzed separately with years of sport competition. No significant ($p<.05$) correlations between years of sport competition and EE ($p=.038$), DP ($p=.029$), or PA ($p=-.062$) were found. Although no significant findings related to the research question were found, there were other findings of interest.

Team sport participants were identified has having higher levels of burnout on the MBI subscales of EE, and PA.

Thirty-five team (47.3%) sport participants (n = 74) were coded as high on the EE subscale, and 38 (51.4%) on the PA subscale as compared to only 8 (32%) individual sport participants (n = 25) being coded as high on the EE and 8 (32%) on the PA subscales.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Sample

Variable	N	%
Sport Type		
Individual	25	25.3
Team	74	74.7
Athletic Scholarship		
Yes	84	84.8
No	15	15.2
Year in School		
Freshman	39	39.4
Sophomore	21	21.2
Junior	23	23.2
Senior	13	13.1
5th Year Senior	3	3.0
Gender of Coach		
Same as Players	37	37.4
Opposite Gender	62	62.6

Another finding indicated scholarship athletes were coded as having higher levels of burnout on the subscales of EE and DP than those who were not on scholarship. However, non-scholarship athletes scored higher on the PA subscale. Thirty-seven (44%) scholarship athletes (n = 84) were coded as high on the EE subscale, 11(13.1%) on the DP, and 38 (45.2%) as compared to 6 (40%) non-scholarship athletes (n=15) on the EE subscale, 1 (6.7%) on DP and 8 (53.3%) on PA.

Finally, results revealed 41.9% (n=26) of players who had coaches of the opposite gender (n = 62) scored lower on the EE subscale than those (45.9%; n = 17) coached by the same gender (n = 37). Moreover, more athletes coached by the opposite gender were coded as having a high level of perceived burnout on the DP (12.9%, n = 8), and PA subscales (48.4%, n = 30) compared to the athletes coached by the same gender (DP: 10.8%, n = 4; PA: 43.2%, n = 16).

2.6. Discussion

The findings indicate that years of sport competition are not correlated with levels of burnout and female Division I collegiate athletes. Prior research has examined intensive training and effects on young athletes and concluded there are concerns about intense training and psychological injury [13] and potential overuse injuries [4]. The current study did not examine the prevalence of overuse injuries, but the results of the current study do not support the conclusion relating to psychological injury.

The current study did, however, reveal findings which should be examined further. More research studies might examine the effects of team sport versus individual sport participation as it relates to female athlete burnout. Also, the current study did identify individuals on athletic scholarships experienced high levels of burnout on the EE and DP subscales. Future research could examine the prevalence of these results and qualitatively interview participants to truly understand the differences and similarities in pressures experienced by scholarship and non-scholarship female intercollegiate athletes.

The notion of athlete burnout based upon a coach's leadership style has been researched in prior studies, but athlete burnout as it relates to a players' and coaches' gender could offer more insight into the burnout phenomenon. That is, are athletes more prone to burnout when playing for a coach of the same or opposite gender?

3. Conclusions

Based upon the review of the literature and the results of the current study, future research should continue to study the effects of years of competition and burnout with other, possibly larger samples. Further, research should determine if young athletes are indeed ready for sports participation at a young age as this could be a determining factor in burnout and attrition of athletes.

DiFiori et al. (2014) noted there are four factors that determine if a child is ready for sport participation, these include: a) sport-related skill; b) knowledge about the sport; c) motivation; and d) socialization. Authors also noted, chronological age is not the best indicator of when individuals should begin sport participation. This is because child development markers or milestones and motor skills typically develop at different rates [4]. Females tend to reach their peak height and body mass at about age 15 as compared to males who may experience increases past age 18 [4]. Un-fortunately, sports is a big business and people must recognize that coaches, parents, club team organizations, etc. have a financial interest in youth sport participation so it is possible these interests are pushing children to begin competing in sports before they are mentally and physically ready.

The signs and symptoms of burnout are well documented, but how could athletes better handle the stressors associated with sports? Gould, Tuffey, Udry, and Loehr (1996) interviewed burned-out tennis players and asked what advice they would give other players to help avoid burnout. They recommended players: a) play for their own reasons; b) try to make the game fun; c) balance tennis and other things; and d) take time off and relax [6]. Schellenberg, Gaudreau, and Crocker (2013) suggested that task oriented strategies such as effort exertion, control of thoughts, and logical analysis may help collegiate athletes when they are striving for desired goals. This could enable athletes to confront the demands which may slow goal progress and could help athletes experience more positive and fewer negative outcomes as they relate to stress [23].

Unfortunately, all stressors associated with sport are not

internal. That is, external sources such as coaches, parents, sport organizations, etc. place many demands on athletes that could potentially lead to burnout. Tabei, Fletcher and Goodger (2012) note that athletes tend to have little, if any, power to effect long-term change in sport. Therefore, if burnout and attrition in athletes are to be lowered or alleviated, then there needs to be fundamental changes in sport organizations and the organizational environment [26]. More specifically, those in power within organizations (coaches, trainers, and managers) as well as parents should be aware of the potential stressors, etc. they place on athletes which can affect their physical and emotional well-being.

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