Introduction

Within collegiate athletics, there has been an increasing emphasis on the mental health of student-athletes. NCAA teams across the country are hiring full-time sports performance coaches and psychologists due to the correlation between improved mental performance and athletic performance (Weit, 2018). Athletes are characterized and defined by their powerful willpower to overcome physical barriers, hence the term “Mind over Matter.” Yet the mental aspect of sports has just now recently become a priority. The noticeable shift in priorities has created a shift from the “just push through mentality” of sports to “Our Minds Matter” approach. The “Minds Matter” approach to sports addresses the psychological traumas that athletes endure as they compete at high levels instead of promoting a culture of pushing through.

The athletic department at Duquesne University is working to incorporate mental health and performance into the training regimen of their athletic teams but where are student-athletes getting mental health services now, is it effective, what resources can the athletic department provide as they adapt to the growing demand? This research is designed to review the current mental health services, their effectiveness, and share the stories of athletes that have struggled with the system in order to get the psychological care that they need.

Based on preliminary research interviews prior to data collection the following research question was formed.

**Question:** “Do student-athletes prefer seeking mental health counseling from athletic support staff as opposed to seeking services from the counseling and well-being center on campus and if so why?”

Methods

Data was collected using surveys and interviews. The survey was constructed and procured through the online system Qualtrics. The data collected from the interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis and organized into a thematic map.

**Sample selection and size:** Participants must be a student-athlete at Duquesne, and speakers of English. Our goal was to have 40 participants participate in the Qualtrics Survey, with at least one athlete from each sport. For the interviews, the goal was to obtain at least 5-10 participants.

**Instruments:** Participants completed the 8 question survey using Qualtrics software. The survey took less than 5 minutes to complete.

A select number of participants participated in a 10 question in-person interview. The time of the interview varied depending on the length of the answers. Extensive notes were taken during the interview and were used in the construction of the thematic map.

**Thematic Analysis:** Thematic analysis was used in order to present the data collected during the interviews. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within data (Braun, 2006). A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question. The theme extracted from the thematic analysis aided the researchers in the formulation of the research question.

Data Analysis

**Thematic Analysis: Figure #1**

**Question 1:** “After a season-ending or limiting injury, rank how comfortable you feel going to the following individuals for emotional support?”

**Question 2:** “How comfortable do you feel speaking to the following individuals about your mental health?”

**Question 3:** Rank in order who you would go to for support in a time of emotional distress

**Question 4:** “Do you feel like the counseling and wellbeing center is a safe space for you to go to for mental health care services?”

**Question 5:** “Do you feel like the counseling and wellbeing center is a safe space for you to go to for mental health care services?”

**Question 6:** Have you been to the counseling center on campus? If so, how effective were the services provided, select one of the options below? If you have not been to the counseling center skip this question

**Question 7:** How likely are you to recommend seeking mental health care services to your teammates if you notice a difference in their mental health?

Results

Interviews:

Six interviews with student-athletes from various athletics on both men’s and women’s athletic teams at Duquesne were recorded. The themes included: accessibility issues, support systems, and the needs that they identified (Figure #1). Two of the athletes interviewed went to seek help from the athletic department and counseling center to seek help but felt that it was inadequate or inaccessible. There was a feeling of being misunderstood and both experienced difficulties getting to appointments that were off-campus. Athletes made statements such as “We need more accessible sports psychology help, we need it to be as easy to go to a doctor as it is to go to a psychologist” (women’s lacrosse athlete) and “We have a nutritionist we should have a mental health person” (men’s soccer athlete). An important takeaway from the interviews was that athletes that had no experience with the mental health services provided at Duquesne did not know where to seek help. Many athletes expressed their dependency on the training room staff to help with their physical and mental ailments. “I think they put too much responsibility on the AT’s, he was my driver, fitness coach, AT and my person to come to when I had an issue,” (women’s tennis athlete). There was a sense that they were preventing their athletic trainers from doing their job.

Data:

25 Athletes participated in the study 91% were female as expected due to the ratio of men’s teams to women’s teams at Duquesne. A majority of student-athletes felt comfortable seeking help and speaking to their teammates and athletic trainers about their mental health. 69.5% of participants were the most comfortable going to their teammate while 30.5% felt extremely comfortable seeking help from their athletic trainers.

The counseling center is perceived to be a safe space however, the athletes that did seek services from the counseling center 67% stated that it was moderately effective, slightly effective or not effective at all.

There was little observed stigma around mental health due to 50% of individuals feeling like the wellbeing center is a safe space and 72% of athletes are likely to refer a friend to mental health care services if they see a change in their teammate’s mental health. 37.5% of athletes would strongly disagree with the statement “I would feel worse about myself if I made the choice to seek professional help from a psychologist and 75% of participants would not feel judged by their teammates if they sought outside professional help from a psychologist.

Conclusion

The Minds Of Duquesne Athletes Matter: Based on the results from the data and interviews Duquesne athletes prefer to seek mental health services from their athletic trainers, and friends over the counseling center. From the thematic map formed from the interviews, the overall conclusion appeared to be that the athletic training staff has been serving as the primary support for athletes seeking mental health services but there are still necessary logistical barriers preventing athletes from getting the proper care that they need. It is still unclear why athletes prefer to seek help from friends over a counselor or psychologist, this may be due to the rapport and trust that is typically built in a team setting. Overall there was a general feeling that the physical bodies of athletes at Duquesne are well taken care of but the care for their mental wellness has not been provided with the same support.

There are services that are provided to athletes however they appear to lack effectiveness based on student reports. Athletes at Duquesne would benefit greatly from mental health care that includes team therapy sessions, an in house psychologist, and mental check-ins. Having an in-house sports psychologist would make it easier for athletes to get the help that they will need without the logistical barriers that were expressed.

Bibliography