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Nikki Owens

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An Exploration of Student Athletes Perception on the Athletic Trainer/Coach  
Relationship

Nikki Owens

A Thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Science

Sport and Recreation Leadership

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## **Abstract**

The goal of this study was to explore how the athletic trainer and coach relationship impacts the social support provided to Division I intercollegiate student—athletes. Through a qualitative-case study design, eleven participants were recruited and interviewed for the study. Criterion for inclusion included all NCAA sports at the university. This included males and females in various years of school and sport. After the completion of data analysis, four main themes were developed. These themes included social support, positive impact, negative impact, and unforeseen findings. Seven of the eleven student—athletes reported feeling that there was a direct relationship between the athletic trainer and coach and the social support received. This filled the gap in the literature and provided a basis for future research. The findings show how a positive communicative relationship allows for student—athletes to not only receive more social support but to create more enjoyable experiences. The research highlighted the importance of social support in the lives of student—athletes as it influenced both physical and mental well-being. Athletic departments should understand the impact the athletic trainer and coach relationship has not only on student—athletes but the dynamic of an athletic team or department. Future considerations should include prioritizing effective communication and making social support a topic of discussion within athletics.

## Introduction

Each year it is estimated that around 12,500 injuries happen in collegiate sports. (Thomas, 2017). In another study it was revealed that around 90% of student—athletes reported some kind of sport related injury and over half (54%) of those athletes reported that they played while injured. (At Your Own Risk, 2019). These numbers come from several organizations that use an Injury Surveillance System (ISS) (Thomas, 2017). This system has been in operation since 1998. The ISS breaks down the statistic by sport type and year, as well as comparing statistics of men and women. For example, cheerleading is often the most dangerous sport for females with the sport accounting for 70.5% of catastrophic injuries. Football accounts for the most dangerous sport in males with an estimated 36 injuries per 1,000 male athletes. (Thomas, 2017). Dealing with an athletic injury has been found to not only create physical challenges, but also emotional and psychological. This distress can lead to anxiety depression and mood disturbances especially for competitive athletes facing serious or career ending injuries. (Yang, et al., 2010) The responsibility of not treating those injuries and the fall out of those injuries most commonly falls on the athletic trainer.

To become an athletic trainer, one must graduate from an accredited baccalaureate or master's program and must pass their Board of Certification (BOC) exam (Raab, Wolfe, Gould, & Piland, 2011). Raab, Wolfe, Gould, and Piland (2011) found that care, communication, commitment, integrity and knowledge were five constructs associated with being a quality athletic trainer. Of these five constructs, care and communication are imperative for athletic trainers. (Henry, Schneider, & Stier, 2009). Ethical qualities such as honesty, trustworthiness, and high ethical standards were also listed as desirable

characteristics of an athletic trainer (Henry et al., 2009). While it is the responsibility of the athletic trainer to care for and treat patients' immediate injuries and illnesses, it is also noted that the athletic trainer must be able to go beyond that. Athletic trainers were described as often playing many roles such as counselor, therapist, and psychologist. (Henry et al., 2009). Athletic trainers are helping their patients with physical obstacles in addition to emotional and psychological ones as well. Their profession requires that they display empathy and show a desire for long-term care. (Raab et al., 2011).

Communication was deemed one of the most important qualities of being an athletic trainer. (Raab et al., 2011; Henry et al., 2009). This involves communication to all of the members of the sports medicine team. A quality athletic trainer has the ability to properly interact with a variety of individuals. (Henry et al., 2009). This includes the tone and attitude used in communication with these individuals. The skillset of the athletic trainer means little if they cannot properly convey their actions or decision making (Raab et al., 2011).

It is equally important for coaches to build positive interpersonal relationships. Cote and Gilbert (2009) stated that coaches work with many different individuals such as athletes, assistant coaches, parents, and other professionals in the athletics world. Coaches deal with numerous professionals in their field and it is recommended that they continue to develop their interpersonal skills. By doing so, coaches will be able to effectively communicate with each individual (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Mench and Mitchell (2005) highlighted the importance of the coach's role on the sports medicine team. These authors emphasized the amount of time coaches spend with athletic trainers

and discussed how they contribute to the knowledge athletic trainers have about their employment setting, as well as the ability to either make that job easier or harder.

Cote and Gilbert (2009) discussed the effect coaches have on athletes. These researchers in their findings, concluded that coaches have an immense impact on athlete's competence, confidence, connection, character. Given the amount of time spent with athletes, coaches have more of an impact than just performance. It is important for coaches to create an optimal learning environment for athletes, so that they feel supported and can gain self-confidence. The knowledge and behavior a coach exhibits have been found to have a direct effect on the psychological profile of a student—athlete. (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Rosenfeld (1989) found that coaches were linked to the main source of support that required expertise. This included factors such as technical appreciation and technical challenge. (Rosenfeld,1989). Student—athletes believe that coaches have an influence not only on their performance but their emotional and mental health (Thurston, 2017).

Akin to athletic trainers, coaches too have duties and responsibilities that go above and beyond the job description. Often times coaches may play the role of not only the head coach but communicator, educator, and self-esteem builder all which help to shape the student-athlete (Thurston, 2017). Podlog and Dionigi (2010) found that coaches have the potential to be more in touch with athletes and the specific stressors they face as a student—athlete. This allows them to be able to provide the most appropriate support. Coaches and athletic trainers play vital roles in the lives of their student—athletes and vice versa. Division I college athletics is a complex organization made up of many different individuals, departments, parties, etc. One vital aspect of athletics is the sports

medicine team. This team is made up of the team physician, athletic trainers, nutritionists, physical therapists, and potentially more. The coaches, athletes, and sports medicine team must all work together on a daily basis (Prentice, 2015).

How the athletic trainer and coach work together, is vital to the student—athlete. The two parties must be on the same page in order to best serve the athlete. According to Chichirez and Purcarea (2018) “efficacy of communication is dependent on what relationship is established between the two partners, and the relationship in turn, depends on the personality of each one of them” (p.122). If this relationship is negative it could potentially affect the well-being of the athlete. The athletic trainer’s goal is to provide medical care to the student--athlete but the coach’s main goal is often wining. The different goals of the individuals may collide. If the coach does not trust the athletic trainer to do his or her job or if the athletic trainer doesn’t provide good communication to the coach, then what happens to the athlete?

### **Statement of Problem**

Coaches and athletic trainers are two individuals whose job is centered around the student—athlete. The relationship between the two professions and how it may impact the student athlete has limited research. If the two do not get along a student—athlete may feel pressured to hide injuries that could in turn put their health at risk. The athletic trainer may feel pressure from a coach that could impact the decisions they make as a health care professional. Disagreements and conflict between the two may put the student—athlete at unease or feel distrust for one or both of the individuals. This research fills the gap on how the student—athlete perceives the relationship and how that relationship may have impacted the social support provided.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore how the athletic trainer/coach relationship impacts social support through the perception of Division I intercollegiate student—athletes.

### **Significance of Study**

The literature currently addresses perceptions by the athletic trainer, the coach, and even the student—athlete. It does not however, present information on the student—athletes' perception on the relationship between the coach/athletic trainer and does not address whether or not that relationship impacts the social support they receive. By exploring this area of research, it may help both athletic trainers and coaches understand how their relationship impacts the student athlete. This information may provide insight for them to consider their relationship as a priority to better serve the student—athlete. This could improve student—athlete care overall which would align with the goal of the NCAA as well as the Intercollegiate council For Sports Medicine (ICSM) which states that the physical and mental health and well-being of athletes should be a top priority. (“NCAA Well Being,” 2020). Also, this research can improve working relationships in the athletics department. By shedding light on this topic, it can open the door for further research on what impacts student—athletes' well-being as well as interpersonal relationships in sports medicine.

### **Exploratory Questions**

- How does the student—athlete perceive the communicative relationship between the athletic trainer and coach?

- How does the student—athlete feel this relationship affected the social support they received?

### **Definition of Terms**

#### Athletic Trainer

“Athletic trainers (ATs) are highly qualified, multi-skilled health care professionals who collaborate with physicians to provide preventative services, emergency care, clinical diagnosis, therapeutic intervention and rehabilitation of injuries and medical conditions. Athletic trainers work under the direction of a physician as prescribed by state licensure statutes” (“Athletic Training, 2019”).

#### Communicative Relationship

This describes the relationship between two individuals based solely on the communication that takes place between them. This relationship is dependent on how they communicate and to what degree they communicate.

### **Review of Literature**

The current literature presents good evidence on the importance of communication in the workplace. Athletic trainers need to have good communication in order to be successful in their job and the same goes for coaches. Study after study shows how communication is key to effective performance. If communication is lacking or is negative, then work performance may decrease or become inefficient. There are numerous examples of good and bad communication in the previous research and get an idea of the relationship between the athletic trainer and coach, but previous research has not directly addressed ways in which communication impacts the student athlete. Given this gap in the literature, it is the intention of this study to determine how the athletic

training care of a student—athlete is impacted by the relationship between coach and athletic trainer.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The social support theory describes a relationship in which there is a provider and a recipient (Rosenfeld, Richman, & Hardy, 1989). This relationship can involve a system of personal ties whose purpose is to meet the needs of the recipient with the goal of improving well-being. Most often the social support is aimed at dealing with stress (Rosenfeld et al., 1989). Social support is a complex concept that incorporates eight separate types of support: (a) emotional support; (b) listening support; (c) emotional challenge; (d) reality confirmation support; (e) task appreciation; (f) task challenge; (g) tangible assistance; (h) personal assistance (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001).

Emotional support is the perception the provider is acting in a caring or comforting manner. Listening support is the perception that the provider is listening in a nonjudgmental way. Emotional challenge is how the recipient perceives the challenge the provider gives to evaluate his or her attitudes, values, and feelings. Reality confirmation support is when the provider confirms the recipient's perspective of a situation. Task appreciation is how the provider acknowledges efforts made by the recipient. Task challenge is described as perceived challenge of the recipient's way of thinking about an activity in order to motivate him/her to great involvement. Tangible assistance is providing financial assistance or products and or gifts to the recipient. Personal assistance is providing a service to the recipient. (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001). These eight types can be categorized into three main categories: informational, emotional, and tangible (Burton, n.d.).

The degree of social support provided can be influenced by the relationship between the recipient and provider. The recipient-provider relationship as well as how the recipient perceives the support are all factors that determine if the support offered is positive or negative (Hupcey & Morse, 1997). According to Hupcey and Morse (1997) “The unique aspect of social support is that the action must be given by someone who has a personal relationship with the recipient” (p. 170). Other factors that may influence social support include how the type of support provided matches up with the type of support received as well as, when the support is provided. Because social support is based off of perceptions, the accuracy of what is actually received is up for debate. Previous researchers have stated that participants or respondents may be unable to accurately described the support they received even when given pre-selected categories (Hupcey & Morse, 1997). This provides explanation for the deep complexity that is the social support theory.

A more precise definition of social support in the context of sport was described as “an athlete’s appraisal of the support that might be available to them from their social support network and how satisfied they were with that support” (Yang, p. 374, 2010). Rosenfeld (1989) used the social support theory to uncover those within the social support network of student—athletes. Coaches, teammates, family and friends were listed as the top sources (Rosenfeld et al., 1989). Family and friends were found to be who student—a athletes rely on most often for their social support, with no difference being found between men and women (Yang, Peek-Asa, Lowe, Heiden, & Foster, 2010). It was noted that coaches were highly rated specifically in technical support of the athlete but rarely provided emotional or social support. (Rosenfeld et al., 1989; Robbins, Rosenfeld,

2001). While coaches may lack this type of support for the athlete it was suggested by Henry, Schneider, and Stier (2009) that athletic trainers can provide this type of support. Robbins and Rosenfeld's (2001) research found that athletic injuries put the student—athlete in a need for social support to get through it. An athletic injury was found to cause a variety of emotions for the student-athlete such as stress, anger, anxiety and frustration. (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001). During the rehabilitation process student—athletes reported a higher level of satisfaction of social support with their athletic trainers compared to their coaches. (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001). When looking at pre-and-post injury social support sources, it was found that post injury coaches, athletic trainers and physicians were relied on more (Yang et al., 2010). The reliance on athletic trainer's for social support post injury jumped 24% when compared to pre-injury. Athletic trainers were the source that increased the most when comparing pre-and-post injury. This reveals the key role they play in student—athletes lives post injury (Yang et al., 2010). This social support during injury was found to positively influence the recovery process in both physical and psychological aspects for athletes. The athletes involved in the study who reported being satisfied with social support from their athletic trainers were less likely to experience symptoms of depression and anxiety during recovery compared to those who reported less satisfaction with social support from athletic trainers. (Yang, 2014).

It has been stated that social support is a factor that should be of importance to those involved in an athlete's care (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001). Given the vital role athletic trainers and coaches play in the life of a student—athlete, the social support theory will be used to guide this research. Hayden and Lynch (2011) support the idea that

athletic trainers and coaches work very closely together. They are two individuals who must work together in order to fulfil their responsibilities (Hayden & Lynch, 2011). Social support theory stipulates that close and caring relationships are linked with improved health and wellbeing (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Research has shown that athletic trainer and coach are both prominent individuals in the lives of student—athletes who rely on them both for social support (Rosenfeld et al., 1989; Robbins, Rosenfeld, 2001; Yang et al., 2010). There is evidence to support the notion that social support impacts physical health. In a study comparing groups with differing levels of social interactions they found that those who engages in less social integration had higher mortality rates from various causes. (Uchino, Uno, & Holt-Lunstad, 1999). The NCAA emphasizes the importance of well-being of student athletes, validating the need for the research. The current research does not explain how the relationship between two providers of the same recipient may influence support provided. This research explores the student—athlete perceptions of the athletic trainer coach relationship and in turn shed a light on if their communicative relationship affected the social support received.

### **Communication and Teamwork in Health Care**

A meta-analysis study was conducted by Weaver (2014) that included research from 2000-2012. The purpose was to provide an updated review of the current state of team-training science and practice in acute care settings. The systematic review discusses communication and teamwork as crucial parts to a safe health care system and notes that communication problems are a major contributing factor in malpractice claims and adverse events (Weaver, 2014). For this reason, it was important to discuss effective team training that addresses these communication issues. Overall, the synthesis found that

proper team-training can have a positive impact on the healthcare system which in turn can create better clinical processes and patient outcomes. (Weaver, 2014).

Similar to Weaver's (2014) research, Chichirez and Purcarea (2018) examined communication, specifically interpersonal communication within the healthcare segment. Their findings found a link between communication and work performance and stated that the efficacy of communication is dependent on the kind of relationship that exists between athletic trainer and coach. A significant finding from both of these two studies is that communication is a crucial clinical skill that can have positive effects on those involved and should be a high priority to those who work in the health care professions (Chichirez & Purcărea, 2018; Weaver, 2014).

According to the theory proposed by Hayden (2011), the athletic trainer and coach relationship is vital in an athlete's return to play. It is proposed that athletic trainers have a specific role in helping coaches facilitate an athlete's return to play. (Hayden, 2011). Meaning that, when an athlete is in their final stage of rehabilitation, it is up to the athletic trainer to help the coach navigate how the athlete returns to play, as well as help that athlete to do so in a positive and healthy manner. This includes providing insight and suggestions for how to integrate them into practice. Due to the athletic trainer's medical and expert knowledge on injuries and rehabilitation, it is vital for the coach to understand this, so they can allow the athlete to return well (Hayden, 2011.) If this relationship is strained, which is possible given the research previously discussed, it could have a negative impact on the athlete's well-being.

Athletic training is a profession in the healthcare field that is known to require quality communication in order to succeed (Raab et al., 2011). The profession involves

working with many different professionals of the sports medicine team such as the coach, team physician, nutritionist, and athletic trainer (Prentice, 2015). Perhaps, the most crucial relationship is the one with the coach (Hayden, 2011). All of these individuals must work together and effectively communicate to properly serve the student—athlete (Chichirez & Purcărea, 2018; Weaver, 2014). However, working in such a close network will involve interpersonal conflict as Scott (2014) suggests. Conflict is inevitable with many individuals working closely together. With workplace conflict being unavoidable, it is suggested that individuals constantly work toward more positive interpersonal relationships. (Chichirez & Purcărea, 2018). If such conflicts are not addressed it may lead to in disruptions, anger, fear, aggressiveness, and retaliation. (Scott, 2014). It may be suggested that coaches and athletic trainers partake in team training to continuously work on their communication (Chichirez & Purcărea, 2018). With a more positive communication in the work place the athletic trainer and coach could improve the role they play in the return to play process and better serve the student athlete (Hayden, 2011).

<b>Title</b>	<b>Authors/ Year</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Instruments</b>	<b>Procedures</b>	<b>Results</b>
Team-training in healthcare: a narrative synthesis of the literature	Weaver 2014	Provide an updated review of the current state of team-training science and practice in acute care settings.	n/a	n/a	Pub-med search for review articles examining team training interventions	Team-training positively impacts health care team processes and patient outcomes.
Interpersonal Communication in Health Care	Chichirez and Purcărea 2018		n/a	n/a	na	In the healthcare system communication is a therapeutic technique, clinical skill that creates fundamental relationships that can provide benefits to those involved. High communicative skills must be a priority in health professionals
The Role of AT's in Helping Coaches to facilitate Return to Play	Hayden 2011		n/a	n/a	na	AT's are in unique position to provide coaches with recommendations about the most effective way for athletes to re-enter sports. AT's help coaches understand injuries, competence, and autonomy.
Contemporary Leadership in Sport Organizations	Scott 2014		na	na	na	Interpersonal conflict-conflict is inevitable when you have so many individuals working together. However, it is important to address these conflicts and work toward more positive interpersonal relationships in the work place because if the conflicts are not addressed it can result in disruptions, anger, fear, aggressiveness, and retaliation.

## **Coach's Perception of Athletic Trainers**

Adam's (2014) found that high school coaches reported having positive relationships with their athletic trainers and described athletic trainers as valuable member of an athletic program. (Adam, 2014). This positive perception of athletic trainers can be credited to the coach's full understanding of the roles and duties of an athletic trainer. This refuted previous findings that stated coaches have a very limited understanding of the roles of an athletic trainer. Using a Likert-type scale the coaches summarized their relationship with their athletic trainer as honest, respectful, and helpful. The author found that a good working relationship between coach and athletic trainer that involves good communication is important to provide the proper care to student—athletes, specifically at the secondary school setting. Adams (2014) research found that:

Communication must be cooperative: the coach should and must respect the medical decisions made by the athletic trainer, and the athletic trainer needs to be considerate of the non-medical decisions of the coach as long as they are in the best interest of the student—athlete. (p.475)

This study was limited in its small sample size of only 38 secondary school head football coaches. Due to the small sample, size findings cannot be generalized to the entire population. This study also only examined the coach's perspective leaving out the AT perspective or even the student athlete perspective (Adams, 2014).

Similar to Adams (2014) article, Mench and Mitchell (2005) conducted a study interviewing both high school basketball coaches and their respective athletic trainers. The goal of this study was to examine the coach's perspective of the athletic trainer in the high school setting in addition to gaining information from athletic trainers themselves.

Twenty high school basketball coaches were interviewed. Much like the results of Adams (2014) many of the coaches did not understand the qualifications of an athletic trainer and were unaware of the credentials of their athletic trainer. Furthermore, Ten of the twenty coaches incorrectly identified the supervisor of the athletic trainer, two of which believed they were the supervisor of the athletic trainer. In terms of communication, all 20 stated that It was important to have a good working relationship. (Mench and Mitchell 2005). This statement aligns with previous research (Chichirez and Purcărea, 2018) that communication is vital in the workplace and healthcare.

Larson (2015) conducted a research study with the purpose of determining head coach's satisfaction with athletic training services. This study examined the satisfaction among the three NCAA divisions. 56 head coaches were included in the study, and each completed a 45-item questionnaire. The study found that coaches who had a full-time athletic trainer assigned to their sport reported higher levels of satisfaction with their athletic trainer compared to the coaches who did not have a specific athletic trainer assigned to their sport. The coaches who did not have a designated athletic trainer assigned to their sport claimed a disconnect in their communication and trouble with athletes reporting different information to different athletic trainers. This can be attributed to the fact that without one specific athletic trainer to the sport the coaches have to seek out different information from different people. They may also feel a sense of distrust without having one person to rely on. Coaches of male teams reported high levels of satisfaction compared to coaches of female teams. This was believed to be attributed to the fact that male sports are usually high risk and therefore have more interaction and a better relationship with the athletic trainer. (Larson, 2015).

Title	Authors/ Year	Purpose	Participants	Instruments	Procedures	Results
The Secondary School Football Coach's Relationship with the Athletic Trainer and Perspectives on Exertional Heat Stroke	Adams 2014	Examine secondary school football coach's perceived knowledge of EHS and their professional relationship with their AT's	38 high school football coaches. 37 men 1 woman	Open ended questions	Participants directed to interview questions via email. Online interview had 3 phases. 39 questions answered	High school coaches reported having positive relationships with their athletic trainers and described athletic trainers as valuable member of an athletic program.
Competing Perspectives During Organizational Socialization on the Role of Certified Athletic Trainers in High School Settings	Mench and Mitchell 2005	Examine perspective of high school coaches and ATC's toward the ATC's role in the high school setting	20 high school varsity basketball coaches from 10 high schools and the AT's assigned to the teams	Open ended questions	Semi structured interviews	All participants valued good communication but results showed a lack of it between the two. Coaches could not accurately described AT job and responsibilities. This hindered coaches ability to benefit from medical services provided by AT. A
NCAA Head Coaches' Satisfaction with Athletic Training Services	Larson 2015	Determine the level of satisfaction that head coaches have with those providing AT services. Satisfaction based off of professionalism, communication, knowledge/ability, accessibility as well as overall satisfaction among three divisions.	Convenience sample of 40 head coaches from central NY Division I, II, and III. 28 male 16 female.	Questionnaire consisting of 45 items.	Survey packet distributed to each head coach. Survey took approximately 5-10 minutes. Researcher was available during time of completion.	No difference for overall satisfaction among the three divisions. Head coaches with designated AT had higher levels of satisfaction. Head coaches with full time AT's knowledge/ability than GA AT's. Coaches of male teams ore satisfied overall with professionalism then coaches of female teams.

### **Athletic Trainer's Perception of Coaches**

Goodman and Mensch (2010) examined the reasons that female AT's decide to leave and stay in the NCAA Division 1 football bowl subdivision setting. This was a grounded theory approach consisting of analyzed interviews of 23 female athletic trainers. The main reasons that these athletic trainers persisted involved increased autonomy, positive social support, enjoyment of job, and kinship responsibility (Goodman & Mensch, 2010). Reasons for leaving involved life balance issues, role conflict and role overload and kinship responsibility. One aspect of role conflict consisted of conflict with the coaching staff. This involved the overall feeling that coaches pitted themselves against the athletic trainers. It also involved a difficult working relationship and unrealistic expectations from coaches. Some participants in the study revealed that their conflict from coaches involved coaches trying to tell them how to do their job or questioning their decisions. Other factors contributing to conflict were coaches having complete control of the schedule which effected the athletic trainers schedule and life outside of work. Limitations to this study include the lack of male perception and a small sample size that only addresses one setting in the field of athletic training (Goodman and Mensch, 2010).

Mazerolle (2013) conducted a similar study to that of Goodman and Mensch (2010), which examined the contributing factors and strategies contributing to work-life balance of female athletic trainers in NCAA Division I setting. Twenty-seven female athletic trainers in the Division I setting were recruited to partake in the study. The 27 participants completed Question Pro, an online interview service. Three main themes were found as factors influencing work life balance (WLB) issues. Hours worked and

traveled, inflexibility and lack of control over schedules, and communications with coaches. The relationship between the athletic trainer and coach was discovered to be a key enabler regarding issues of WLB for the athletic trainer. One participant was quoted saying “the type of coaching staff you have will dictate your quality of life as an athletic trainer” (Mazerolle, 2013, p. 215). In connection with the Goodman Mensch study, many athletic trainers noted that the coach’s control of scheduling affected their job as an athletic trainer. The participants noted that coaches often changed the schedule without regard to the athletic trainer and often did so with very little notice. The studies research coincided with that of previous findings that found lack of communication with coaches makes the job of an athletic trainer more difficult and in turn affects the life of an athletic trainer. These were contributing factors for those athletic trainers that left their job (Mazerolle, 2013).

The following studies look more in depth into the relationship between the coach and athletic trainer specifically in regard to the pressure a clinician may receive to prematurely return a collegiate athlete. This study also specifically looks at the pressure athletic trainers have to return athletes to play after receiving a concussion. Kroshus’ (2015) study sampled 789 athletic trainers and 111 team from 530 institutions physicians using a web-based survey. The study observed that 64.4% of clinicians experienced pressure to return the athlete to play. 53.7% experienced pressure from coaches and 6% reported feeling pressure from other clinicians. These clinicians reported more pressure from coaches when their departments were under the supervisory purview of the athletic department rather than a medical institution. Furthermore, female clinicians reported more pressure from coaches than males did. (Kroshus, 2015). The findings are

consistent with previous findings that found the degree of pressure is related to the collegiate setting (Division I, II, III). Like the previous studies of (Chichirez and Purcărea, 2018) and (Weaver, 2014) communication between the two parties was noted as being important to facilitate a better relationship. Communication from the athletic trainers to the coach about the concussion protocol and education on how concussion recovery works was also noted as being important to reduce the pressure (Kroshus 2015).

Burnout is a prominent concern in many health professions and has often been seen in athletic training with up to 30% experiencing burnout. In DeFreese and Mihalik's (2016) study they explored the possible factors that influence social interactions on the relationships between burnout and perceived stress as well as burnout and workload incongruence. One hundred and fifty-four athletic trainers were interviewed via a computer-based survey during fall sports season. It was found that perceptions of stress and social support drive the overall athletic trainer burnout experience whereas workload incongruence and negative social interactions are more so linked with individual burnout experiences. Athletic trainers work with many different individuals during the course of a day (student athletes, coaches, physicians, athletic directors etc.) and so more specific research should be conducted to investigate which parties contribute to the negative social interactions. Negative interactions included examples such as, unwarranted advice, insensitive behavior, failure to be given help, and neglect or rejection from coworkers. Limitations for the study included not comparing burnout amount common setting in athletic training (e.g., collegiate, secondary school, hospital, clinic). It was suggested that research should be done on non-practicing athletic trainers instead of just practicing

athletic training professionals. Also, the cross-sectional study designs do not permit the ability to draw causal conclusions (DeFreese & Mihalik, 2016).

From previous research discussed there have been multiple instances of coaches doing some, if not all of the above negative interactions listed. From that information a connection can be made that coaches could be responsible for some of the negative social interactions reported in the study and in turn be contributing factors for athletic training burnout. Finding ways to minimize and prevent high burnout levels in the athletic training profession it will undoubtedly improve the wellbeing of athletic trainers. This improvement on their wellbeing has been said to create better care to the student—athletes. Furthermore Defreese & Mihalik stated:

“Like coaches AT’s represent social actors with the potential to affect athletes’ psychological health and wellbeing. Accordingly, deterring AT burnout resulting from stress, dissatisfaction with work demands, or negative social interactions could ultimately deter athlete burnout as well. This represents a potentially fruitful future research direction (p. 33).

In a broader, study that looked in burnout in athletic trainers employed in any NCAA institution. The goal was to study the relationship between personal and environmental characteristics contributing to burnout among certified athletic trainers. Of the environmental characteristics assessed in the study, it was found that pressure from coaches to clear athletes to play was a major factor. This coincides with Kroshu’s (2015) article about the pressures athletic trainers receive from coaches. The athletic trainers that perceived this pressure from coaches were more likely to experience emotional exhaustion and depersonalization which is the state in which someone loses all sense of

identity. Furthermore, it was found that a negative relationship between the coach and athletic trainer predisposed that athletic trainer to burnout. Along with the pressure to return athletes to play, athletic trainers in the study also reported factors such as downplay of the importance of the athletic trainer by the coach, not receiving positive feedback from coaches, and having no input in team decisions. The authors concluded that having a positive working relationship between coach and athletic trainer was imperative to helping decrease burnout in athletic trainers. It is recommended that in order to have a good coach -athletic trainer relationship, the coach must properly understand the role and duties of an athletic trainer. (Kania, 2009) This supports Hayden's (2011) study regarding the importance of the athletic trainer's role in helping coaches return athletes to play. This should strengthen the relationship and allow the two parties to work together to create a positive effect on both coach as well as athletic trainer. Further research recommendations for the study included looking into ways to improve the workplace environment for athletic trainers. (Kania 2009).

The above articles all support Scotts (2014) idea on workplace conflict and the monumental issues and disruptions that occur if those conflicts go unresolved. This also supports Chichirez and Purcărea, (2018) and Weaver's (2014) studies. Both stated that communication is key in the workplace and needs to be worked on in order to increase work performance.

title	Authors/ Year	Purpose	Participants	Instruments	Procedures	Results
Retention and Attrition Factors for Female Certified AT's in NCAA Division I Football	Goodman and Mensch 2010	Gain insight into factors and circumstances affecting female AT's decisions to persist in or leave Division I football bowl subdivision setting	23 women who are current full-time AT's	open ended questions/ interview	Semi structured interviews transcribed verbatim analyzed via grounded theory approach.	Reasons to persist involved increased autonomy, increased social support, enjoyment of job fit, and kinship responsibility. Reasons to leave included, life balance issues, role conflict and role overload, kinship responsibility. Subfactors of leaving included conflict with coach/supervisor and decreased autonomy.
Experiences of Work-Life Conflict for the Athletic Trainer Employed Outside the NCAA Division I Clinical Setting	Mazerolle 2013	Investigate experiences of work life balance among AT's working in non Division I collegiate setting and identify factors that contribute to fulfillment of work life balance in this setting	244 participant's completed phase 1, 13 completed phase 2.	Phase 1- web based survey measuring work life balance and work family conflict. Phase 2- Consisted of an interview	Mixed methods research design.	Qualitative analysis revealed that job demands and staffing issues negatively affect WLC and organizational and personal demands positively affect WLC.
Pressure on Sports Medicine Clinicians to Prematurely Return Collegiate Athletes to Play After Concussion	Kroshus' 2015	Quantify the extent to which clinicians in sports medicine environment experience pressure when caring for concussed athletes and if this pressure varies by the supervisory structure of the institutions sports medicine department, clinicians sex, and other factors	789 athletic trainers, 111 team physicians from 530 institutions	Qualtrics web based survey	Contacted via email through a distribution services provided by NCAA sport science institute as part of broader study of collegiate concussion management. Participants invited to complete web based survey and send reminder emails at 3 week intervals.	More than half of sports medicine clinicians experienced pressure from coaches and athletes to prematurely return after concussion. Females experiences greater pressure from coaches than male clinicians. Clinicians who worked at schools where sports medicine reported to athletes experienced greater pressure from coaches compared to schools who report to independent medical institution.

Work Based Social Interactions Perceived Stress and Workload Incongruence as Antecedents of Athletic Trainer Burnout	DeFreese 2016	Examine potential effects of social interactions on the relationships between burnout and perceived stress and burnout and workload incongruence in AT's.	154 Athletic Trainers	Self report assessments via secure email link.	Online survey used. Survey completed during fall sports season and could take more than 1 sitting to complete survey.	Perceived stress, workload incongruence and social support predicted global burnout in athletic trainers. Work load incongruence and negative social interactions were associated with specific burnout dimensions.
Personal and Environmental Characteristics Predicting Burnout Among Certified Athletic Trainers at NCAA Institutions	Kania 2009	Examine relationship between selected personal and environmental characteristics and burnout among certified athletic trainers	206 athletic trainers employee at NCAA institutions	Demographic Survey and Maslach Burnout Inventory-Human Services Survey	Participants were recruited through electronic discussion list for athletic trainers and through direct emails. Participants instructed to complete study materials in convenient location and return them to author within 2 weeks. Incomplete surveys not accepted.	Only 32% reported burnout. Stress level predictive of burnout. Pressure from coach to medically clear an athlete predictive of burnout.

3

<sup>3</sup> Table 3

*Student—athlete perceptions of coaches/athletic trainers*

In a 2005 study conducted by Unruh, 325 athletes from 20 institutions both Division I and Division II were surveyed to assess the satisfaction they had with their athletic trainer. This study looked at male vs female perspectives as well as the difference between high- and low-profile sports. This would be comparing sports like football to golf. This study found that overall that athletes in high profile sports reported a higher level of satisfaction with their athletic trainer (Unruh, Unruh, Moorman, & Seshadri, 2005). Furthermore, female athletes reported higher levels of satisfaction with their athletic trainer compared to males (Unruh et al., 2005). High levels of satisfaction meant receiving adequate support. (Unruh et al., 2005). It is known that after an injury high levels of support is especially necessary and when the levels of satisfaction are at their highest (Robbins & Rosenfield, 2001). Athletic trainers received high levels of satisfaction from student—athletes in reference to the support they provided by listening. (Robbins & Rosenfield, 2001). This aligns with Henry (2009) who noted that athletic trainers often play the part of a therapist. From this research it can be said that “satisfaction” with athletic trainers encompasses many different areas (Henry et al., 2009 ; Robbins & Rosenfield, 2009; Unruh et al., 2005)

It was previously mentioned that coaches have an immense impact on the student—athlete and can influence more than just performance (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). This is due to the length of time that a coach will spend with a student—athlete. According to a 2016 article by Noble, Vermillion and Foster (2016) student-athletes perceive their coaches positively. The student athletes involved in the study attended a Division I University. One hundred and forty-three surveys were collected and consisted

of more female participants. No differences of perceptions were found based on gender or sport. (Noble, Vermillion, & Foster, 2016). Positive perceptions from student athletes was attributed to a supportive environment facilitated by their coaches. (Unruh et al., 2005). Robbins & Rosenfield (2001) also found that student—athletes received support from their coaches, but the support was specific to task challenge support, serving more as technical advisors. This support diminished when an athlete was injured as coaches felt no need to provide this support as they were no longer practicing (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001). Student—athletes also reported a lack of emotional support from their coaches and while they did receive this support from other entities some expressed wanting this support from their coaches as well (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 20).

Title	Authors/ Year	Purpose	Participants	Instruments	Procedures	Results
Collegiate Student-Athletes Satisfaction with Athletic Trainers	Unruh 2005	Evaluate satisfaction collegiate student athletes had with their athletic trainers and the athletic training services provided at their institutions	325 student athletes from 20 programs	Modified survey previously used by Unruh. Questionnaire comprised of 35 questions along a liker type scale	Letter was sent to head athletic trainer at each institution. Only programs whose AT's agreed to participate were included in the study. Questionnaires were then administered to the athletes by site administrator. Systematic stratified random sample of 2 people per team were chosen. participation was voluntary.	Female athletes and athletes in high profile sports demonstrated greater satisfaction with their athletic trainer. Competitive level did not have significant influence on satisfaction.
Coaching Environments and Student Athletes Perceptions of Support and Climate.	Noble, Vermillion and Foster 2016	Examine Division I student athlete's perception of coaching environments regarding how well the coach promote an atmosphere where student athletes feel there is autonomy-supportive climate.	143 student athletes from Division I athletic department.	Sport Climate Questionnaire. SCQ.	Athletic department administered surveys for internally collected, NCAA mandated, data management. Surveys were completed during study time or in athletic academic services. Coaches not in attendance during completion.	Overall favorable view of coach's ability to provide autonomy was found.

4

<sup>4</sup> Table 4

## **Methods**

### **Reflexivity**

Nikki Owens is a critical social science researcher (Neuman, 2014). Her approach to social science is to uncover truths to better educate the world and change conditions to improve life. As an athletic trainer herself, Nikki intends to explore the stories of these athletes to better understand the perceptions athletes have on the communicative relationship between the athletic trainer and coach. Through this study, she will hear and listen to the stories presented and in turn discover a clear understanding of how athletic trainers and coaches interact. Based off the results of the study, hopes to improve the relationship and create a better dynamic for athletic trainer, coach, and student athlete if need be.

### **Research Design**

This study was conducted using a qualitative-case study design via interviews of eleven Division I collegiate student—athletes. Given the nature of the research paper, qualitative research will help answer the proposed questions. Social support is a complex process and the use of qualitative methodology has been noted as the best means to gain a better understand of social support in the world of athletics and its role in injury and rehabilitation (de Groot et al., 2018). A case study design will be appropriate and will provide the opportunity to extensively engage with participants on a personal level in their natural setting. This will allow the participants to share and explain their experience as student—athletes and their perception on the matter. Furthermore, this allows the interviewer to focus on understanding and gather insight to the topic at hand. While there are multiple types of case study designs, for this research study, we will be using an

exploratory case study design. This type of study is used when the situations being evaluated do not have any set outcomes (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

A case study design is an in-depth analysis of an individual unit to further comprehend a subject matter. A case study is a study of the intricacy of a single case to the point of understanding that case's activity within important circumstances(s) (Baxter & Jack, 2008). A case study design for this study will be useful because it explicitly examines a single case that is capable of providing reliable information about the broader class (i.e. intercollegiate athletic departments).

### **Research Procedures**

The participants for this study were purposefully chosen due to their experiences with athletics. As a means of convenience, the principle investigator, who is an athletic trainer, solicited email addresses of student—athletes interested in being research participants. To begin, the primary investigator reached out to the athletic trainers at a mid-size university in the Eastern part of the United States and had them distribute an email message that asked student—athletes to reach out if interested in the study. Other means of recruitment involved reaching out to professors in the Sport and Recreation Management program, a typical major of student—athletes, to again distribute an email to the student—athletes in their classes asking for participation. The primary investigator also used her time as a teaching assistant to contact former and current student—athletes. Lastly, the primary investigator was able to solicit email addresses from student—athletes she worked with after working several athletics camps over the summer (2019).

After 11 interviews had taken place, conceptual saturation had been reached and it was decided to stop interviewing. Criterion for inclusion included all NCAA sports at the

university. Both males and females were included in the study and were intentionally chosen to attempt to keep the demographics even. Seven females and four males were interviewed for the study. These participants were members of football, volleyball, basketball, field hockey, soccer, and lacrosse and were varied in year in school as well as academic major and age. Without intention, many of the participants involved are pursuing a degree in sport management. The primary investigator did not ask about ethnicity or cultural background.

Questions for the interviews were developed by the primary investigator after looking at a previous study conducted by Alexander (2013). This was a thesis conducted to explore coaches' experiences with athletic trainers while also studying the coach's knowledge of athletic trainers' and their roles and responsibilities at the NCAA Division I level. The similar nature of the research led to the primary researcher using the questions as a basis. Questions were modified as well as new questions added in order to align with the purpose of the study. Feedback from the committee and advisor was taken into consideration before finalizing questions. Two members of the committee have a background in qualitative research which led to rephrasing of some questions in order to better conduct the interviews. Another member of the committee suggested comparing upperclassman and underclassman responses, this led to asking every participant to state their year in school as part of the demographic section.

After the first interview, some of the questions were altered to fit better with the student—athletes' experiences. Questions pertaining to social support were sectioned together and made as a second part of the interview. The first part consisted of questions asking about their perception of the relationship and experiences they've had with the

relationship. This allowed for the following participants to better understand the questions and allowed for easy flow of the interview. After two interviews, the social support definition was added into the interview script. This was inserted prior to questions about social support so that participants understood the relation of social support to the research and could better answer questions about social support.

All interviews were audio recorded for transcription purposes while the primary investigator took notes. Notes consisted of the participants including demeanor, key words, phrases, and other observations made. These notes allowed the primary investigator to go back and remember interviews and specifics while in the analysis phase. As mentioned, the interviews were semi structured in nature. Follow up questions were asked during an interview when more clarification was needed or to probe into a specific answer given. Again, the purpose of the research was kept in mind to limit off topic conversation.

After each interview, the audio recordings were downloaded into Otter.ai, a website providing speech to text transcription. From there, the primary investigator double checked the transcription by listening to the audio and matching it with the text. After the transcription was confirmed as being correct, the interviews were imported into NVivo 12. From there, coding began. All audio recordings were kept on one laptop with encryption placed on the files. The only person with access to the interviews was the primary investigator. All demographic information was kept on an encrypted excel sheet.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed using a constant comparison approach. This allowed the researcher to constantly compare the contents of the interview while simultaneously

conducting interviews to find and examine themes. Once all interviews were conducted, the open coding process began. The process involved three steps: open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Each transcript was read through multiple times to ensure a complete understanding of the content while also identifying common phrases and words that reoccurred across transcripts. Axial coding involved organizing the initial nodes/codes and clustering together repetitive themes to create overarching themes. After all themes had been developed, selective coding began. This involved further condensing themes into core and sub themes. Validity and reliability of the study was important and thus, trustworthiness was a priority throughout the process.

### **Trustworthiness**

In order to increase trustworthiness of the data, data source triangulation was incorporated. This involves comparing the data to confirm authentication. It is a form of cross-validation to yield more accurate findings. Typically, there are three points in order to triangulate the data (Oliver-Hoyo & Allen, 2006). In order to triangulate this data, the primary researcher interviewed multiple student—athletes at different points in both their academic careers, as well as athletic seasons. The interview process was completed during the fall semester of 2019 from August till October. This allowed for different experiences and perceptions at different points to be recorded and analyzed.

Further triangulation was used in the data analysis processes. Findings by the primary investigator were shared with the thesis advisor throughout the entire process. This allowed for feedback and different interpretations to be heard and utilized during analysis. After findings were completed, the primary investigator reached back out to participants and asked them to review the findings and provide feedback. This created the

third point of data source triangulation. The purpose of this was to ensure that the findings being presented aligned with the statements made from the participants. All feedback given was positive and agreed with the current findings, so nothing was changed.

The data addressed the intended focus of research study. The focus was to explore how the communicative relationship between athletic trainers and coaches may influence social support perceived by student—athletes. To enhance trustworthiness the primary researcher made it a priority to purposefully sample research participants who have expertise and are capable of providing insight to the communicative relationship between athletic trainers and coaches. In other words, the data and the findings align well with the intended purpose and exploratory questions of this study.

Transferability pertains to the degree in which the findings can be transferred to other contexts or settings. The transferability of this research study is reliable because other Division I athletic programs have a very similar set up as the sample used at this specific Division I athletic program. Generally, there is at least one athletic trainer assigned to every sports team who works closely with both student—athletes and the coaching staff. If this study were to be repeated at another institution similar to the one studied, it is assumed that similar results would be found.

The researcher is an Athletic Trainer and is therefore closely related to the research however the researcher proceeded with semi structured interviews and only recorded answers that were given. Potential bias from the researcher was kept at a minimum by maintaining professionalism and transparency throughout the course of the research. In addition, it was made a point to not guide the participants narrative.

Questions were kept open ended and meant to only explore the student—athlete's perspectives. Both positive and negative experiences were asked about both coaches and athletic trainers. When asking about social support received, it was separated into social support from coaches and social support from athletic trainers as well. A third question was asked to determine how they perceived social support from the both of them together. This allowed for the perspective of each party involved. The researcher also made it a point to ask about negative and positive social support received and if they felt they needed more of any specific type. This was included to highlight that while student—athletes may be receiving social support; they may be lacking a specific type that they wish they had.

While this study was conducted at a single institution the research design could be copied to be conducted at other institutions. In fact, it would be encouraged to conduct this study at multiple institutions to better understand the experience of the student—athletes. In addition, it would prove weather what is found at this institution, is common or in fact specific to the athletics department studied. The research found would have wide variability given the different experiences at different institutions.

### **Findings**

The goal of this study was to answer the exploratory questions. The first question was aimed at discovering how student—athletes perceive the communicative-relationship between athletic trainer and head coach. The below findings show how each of the participants in the study explain this communicative relationship. From their perspective they were able to describe how these two communicate and the extent to their communication. More so, these participants were able to describe how they perceived this

relationship and whether or not it was negative or positive. Their answers allowed for the discovery of the exploratory question.

The second exploratory question asked about how and if these student—athletes felt that communicative-relationship affected them. Almost all of the student—athletes took a stance on this and described the ways in which they were affected. Participants explained how not only their social support was impacted but also their overall experience as a student—athlete. By answering the exploratory questions, the primary researcher was able to meet the goals intended for the study in order to provide more evidence and research in current literature.

After second order coding was completed, there were 14 themes. These 14 themes were developed after condensing the first order themes. After analyzing the second order themes and further condensing the codes into overarching codes and main themes, four main themes were developed. These themes include concepts that were determined based off of the interviews conducted and purpose of the study in mind. The four main themes include the social support received, positive impact of athletic trainer and coach relationship, and negative impact of athletic trainer coach relationship, and themes that have been labeled unforeseen findings. All of the following themes mentioned above are based off the most prominent findings in the data set. Any topic discussed by four or more participants or mentioned more than 4 times by one single participant were noted as prominent. Seven of the 11 participants involved in the study directly stated that they believed the athletic trainer and coach's relationship did impact the social support received. The other four participants either believed that there was no direct correlation or

did not specifically address the topic. These themes are discussed in more depth in the following paragraphs.

### **Social Support**

The participants described social support as a relationship with an individual that involves communication and support. The person providing the support is described as someone always being there for them no matter what. This involves matters of athletics and also encompasses other aspects of life such as academics, mental health, and personal matters. It was also noted as being important in the life of a student—athletes to help them handle their experience.

“Social Support to me means like, helping somebody through, like, whatever the situation is. Whether it's like they're struggling with handling playing time, like your injuries or schoolwork, stuff at home, mental health issues, whatever the case may be, like, I feel like social support is like, AT coach, whatever, like if they're willing to actually help you on a level that's like, besides football, or football included”. Rob Danner

“Social support means a lot; I think it's a little bit underrated. But I think social support can make or break a student athletes experience. You know, if you don't have it, or if it's not good, or if you don't feel comfortable, you can be miserable”. Penny Doyle

Social support perceived was analyzed in three different ways. The social support perceived by athletic trainers, the social support received by coaches, and how the student—athlete felt the athletic trainer and coach’s relationship impacted their social

support as a whole which is discussed in the following two themes. This section focused on the social support received by the two individuals.

### *Social Support from Athletic Trainers*

It was obvious that the participants felt and received social support from their athletic trainers. Types of social support they received included listening, emotional, informational, task challenge and mental health support. Listening was the most prominent form of social support received by athletic trainers with student—athletes reporting that they could vent to their athletic trainer and go to them with any problems they might be facing to talk to them about it. Many participants noted that they could walk into the office and just tell them anything. Even if the participant did not start the conversation, they said that as soon as they walked in their athletic trainers would check in on them and ask them how they were. Whether the issue was how they felt about an injury or just going in to talk about how their day went, they felt their respective athletic trainers would listen to them.

“I wasn't like healing as fast and I had to be so patient. So, there were plenty of times where I'd walk into my athletic trainer's office and just like vent and cry and like, just really be like, like, exposed”. Mary Walsh

“Like, you just talked to them about anything really. They look out for you ask how you are doing, like day to day”. Eric Dean

Several of the participants that described their athletic trainer as attentive and caring which describes that of emotional support. They explained that their athletic trainers were often quick to check in and make sure things were okay. Athletic trainers that were described as overly attentive and caring were also described as being

individuals that the student—athletes trusted. Emotional support was also described as being provided when student—athlete and athletic trainer were having deep discussions. This was provided most often in the athletic training room where student—athletes could be more vulnerable. They felt this support differed from what was given outside the athletic training room and what was given on the field. In addition, this emotional support was provided during times of struggle for the student—athletes. Helping them deal with how to handle not playing and being hurt. It could be said that this type of social support might be similar to mental health support. As both are support in how to handle the mind and mental struggles.

“And they try to ask you like how's the injury feeling? Or How do you feel about the injury, like happening? Like, what was going through your mind? What can I say like the frustration you're feeling about the injury” Tim Stiles

“And when you're in the training room might be like more like, like, emotional, I guess, because you can kind of get like, deep in there, I guess” Kelly Zion

With athletic trainers being health care providers, it made sense that informational support was discussed. Their job is to provide medical care and serve the student—athlete so if they are doing their job well, they should provide student—athletes with the information to take care of their bodies and improve their health. When participants described informational support, they noted receiving information to take care of themselves. When worried about which medications to take or what to do to take care of an injury they said they could call or talk to their athletic trainer to find out. Other forms of this support included providing advice on life decisions and solutions for problems.

“And so, you can definitely, I feel like express more than you might express to a coach in that sense, because they have more to say about it”. Kiley Smith

“Actually like, a week ago, I was like having really odd stomach pains. And I called our trainer. And she was like, try this, this and this, check back with me in the morning at practice, to see how things go” Alison Wall

Task challenge was actually not one of the specific forms of social support listed often for athletic trainers. Whether that is because task challenge was left for the coaches or another reason it is unknown. The participant that did speak of task challenge, stated that it was the support in which the athletic trainer pushed them to do better. They felt this was a very different type of support than the support they got inside of the athletic training room.

“But when you're out on the field, it's kind of more like, I guess, I think you said like, challenging, like social support, like how like push you like do better, like go outside your limits, because like they know what you can do” Kelly Zion

Open communication was also prominent in regard to the social support they received. Participants noted that their social support was good because they were able to be open and honest with their athletic trainers so that they could receive all support necessary. While the forms of social support that can be provided by athletic trainers may involve more than what was mentioned above, or less, these were the forms specifically mentioned by the involved participants. Athletic trainers were described as individuals who listened to their student athletes while also being able to provide assistance in their health and personal life.

“You can just really be like, like, exposed, Like, just very, like transparent and open and honest with her”. Mary Walsh

Mental Health was commonly discussed when participants mentioned receiving social support from their athletic trainers. Recent research has shown that student—athletes often turn to athletic trainers as an outlet for mental health. Given all of the support that athletic trainers provide, medically, it seems that these student—athletes also lean on them to help with their mental health along with physical health. This support was described as athletic trainers wanting to take care of their minds as well as their bodies. Furthermore, student—athlete that suffer with mental illness said that their athletic trainers knew to check up on them more but did not treat them differently.

“And I think our trainers do a good job asking kind of about, like, our bodies, our like minds, like how like, focused are we stuff like that.” Kiley Smith

“Because even though the athletic trainers help with injuries and stuff like that, they're still also there to help talk about anxiety and depression and stuff like that”. Tim Stiles

### ***Social Support Lacking from Athletic Trainers***

During the interviews the participants were asked whether there was a form of social support they did not receive or wanted more of. The reason this why this question as included was to explore if there are types of social support student—athletes may not receive. The most common response to this question involved the AT not having the student—athletes back. This included feeling like their athletic trainer was not supporting them enough. Participants noted wanting the athletic trainer to stick up for them more specifically in regard to speaking with the coach.

“there were definitely times where I think I had to advocate for myself more than I would have liked. And I think overall, it's like, you kind of learn to advocate for yourself.” Penny Doyle

“because our last trainer was really well like did, she advocated for us, like a lot. And right now, she needs to step up a little bit more on that end.” Tina Ross

### *Social Support from Coaches*

As was done with athletic trainers, the participants were asked to describe social support they received from their coach. The most discussed form of social support provided by coaches was informational. Given the nature of a coaches' job, this makes sense. This informational support was described as providing advice both on and off the field. Providing the information to improve their performance as well as advice on life choices. Participants noted feeling good about being able to receive life advice along with advice about sport. A notable finding was that coaches were often providing the information for student—athletes to receive mental health support. In this regard, they were not necessarily providing mental health support directly, but giving the participants the information to receive the help from the proper individuals. With the prevalence of mental health on the rise and the importance of students receiving help these findings are encouraging.

“The support I have received is like when they're willing to help. Just make sure that you're doing the right thing, like actually coaching you up and show you that you can be doing this better.” Tim Stiles

“And I me is getting older, would turn to the coaches for support of like life, big life or bigger life decisions or things that you can talk to your friends about. But they have more input on just being older too.” Kiley Smith

Similar to athletic trainers, coaches were listed as someone in their support network that listened to them. Coaches were described as individuals that they could talk to about anything and someone participants could count on. Participants felt they could discuss athletics but also academics, health, and personal life. They described an open-door policy where they knew they could just walk in and chat and talk about their day. This allowed students to release how they felt.

"I came in and I was injured. And that was like really hard because I couldn't play, and I got that just made me very homesick and I would talk to her". Alison Wall

“And they're very understanding, they're very patient.” Mary Walsh

Task challenge social support was provided by coaches more so than athletic trainers. As a reminder, task challenge is support involving challenging a recipient's way of thinking. Participants mentioned coaches pushing them and encouraging them to improve. Like previously mentioned, this also was provided on the field and off the field. Coaches were described as making student—athletes think about their decision and actions and pushing them explore different options.

“She encouraged me to talk to a sports psychologist which made all the difference in the world. And she really like, pushed me to get outside of my comfort zone”. Alison Wall

“The support I have received is like when they're willing to help. Just make sure that you're doing the right thing, like actually coaching you up and show you that you can be doing this better.” Tim Stiles

Overall, coaches were noted as providing a multitude of support for their student—athletes and are able to provide support that goes beyond support involving their sport. Much like the research shows, participants said that their coaches were there for them in times of need and were there for them beyond the roles of a what a typical coach does. Coaches become sounding boards, advice givers, and often times mentors for these young student athletes.

“So, like, whether it's like taking a class, or I'm really stressed out about this, or making sure my GPA is good. And it's like a lot of like, academic support also, or like career interest”. Mary Walsh

#### *Social Support Lacking From Coaches*

When participants were asked about which social support, they wish they had more of from coaches it tended to involve more consistency. Participants noted that they did receive social support, but it was often inconsistently given. This inconsistency was described in two ways. The first being one individual stating that they felt support sometimes but not all the time. The second was described as inconsistency amongst the team. By that participants meant they noticed that some of their team members received a lot of support while others received little to none. When asked to explain their perception they noted that it could be due to coaches being closer to some players or older players being more comfortable with coaches to receive more support.

“Uhm it's been good and bad. There's been times where I felt like he's been supporting me, there's been times I felt like the opposite.” Rob Danner

“But I do know that like, some of my teammates don't feel as comfortable going and like talking to our coaches. I, I will say, I think for some people, he does reach out a lot more than he does for others.” Jackie Landis

### ***Student—Athlete’s Perception of Relationship Between AT and Coach***

The purpose of the study was to understand how the relationship between the athletic trainer and coach impacted the social support received by student—athletes. To better understand this, we wanted to first examine the social support received by each individually. Then the participants were asked how they felt the relationship impacted overall social support received. Seven of the 11 student athletes felt that the relationship between the two, directly influenced the social support they received. This was attributed to a previous question where they were asked to describe the athletic trainers and coach’s relationship from their perspective. From here, the data was analyzed to understand if there was a negative or positive influence from the relationship.

#### **Positive**

Participants perceived that a positive communicative relationship between their athletic trainer and coach, positively influenced their social support. More specifically, it was found that participants that noted a positive communicative relationship attributed it to open communication and a good understanding between the two of them. Participants noted that the way the two communicated demonstrated respect and trust towards each other. Student—athletes noted that while they do not see everything, they knew meetings

took place and the right things were communicated which trickled down to efficient practices and player return.

“I think they do pretty well. I know that every day they, the head AT, will print out like a sheet of like everybody that we need to kind of look out for that's like injuries or like has like something bother them for a while or even like sick. I know that they talked about it pretty well, it looks like they have a good relationship.” Eric Dean

Due to the relationship described above, participants explained that it made them feel an overall sense of support from both parties. The trust they saw between the athletic trainer and coach, made them trust their athletic trainer and coach more. Participants used words like feeling secure and safe because of the relationship that they had. They knew support would be given.

“Um, I would definitely say now, it makes you enjoy the experience a lot more, because you feel like you have somebody that like, cares about, like, what's going on, on both sides.” Jackie Landis

Furthermore, this positive relationship allowed for student—athletes to feel more comfortable when dealing with an injury. Knowing that communication was going to take place, the student—athletes were able to honestly speak about injures so that they could receive the adequate support. They could see that the athletic trainer and coach were both working together and were putting their health above all else. There was less pressure felt from coaches and this allowed for an easier flow of communication.

Student—athletes felt they could be more open with both parties.

“Uhm, I mean, it makes me feel more comfortable about like they're on the same level. So, if something is like truly bothering me, or like, something's not right, then they'll be on the same page”. Eric Dean

### **Negative**

Student—athletes that perceived a more negative communicative relationship between their athletic trainer and coach, also reported having less overall social support and a more challenging experience. A negative communicative relationship was described as seeing negative interactions between their athletic trainer and coach. These negative interactions were linked with two prominent causes: a lack of communication between the athletic trainer and coach, or disagreement on whether the student—athlete can play or not due to an injury. Lack of communication was almost always in regard to the status of a player’s health. A common theme was athletic trainers not relaying enough information to the coaches about a player’s health and status of play. Disagreements about whether a student—athlete could participate or not was the prominent cause of negative interactions seen.

“So, when there was like less communication, or the communication wasn't as like fluid, you could definitely tell the difference between, like us saying how we felt, or to the coach or our trainer, and it not like translating.” Kiley Smith

These negative communicative-relationships were found to negatively impact the overall social support received by the student—athlete. Reasons being were listed as the social support being inconsistent from both parties. Describing the situation as uncomfortable, and unstable. Student—athletes also went on to say this relationship caused a lack of trust in athletic trainers and coaches, resulting in no social support being

provided for the student—athlete. Participants saw the lack of communication and had to deal with the trickle-down effect of that. If their athletic trainers didn't communicate with coaches about injuries, they felt disappointment and suffered.

“I think it's just like, it's just a very, it's an environment where you like, everyone's, like, be as comfortable, like, be comfortable with the uncomfortable kind of a thing like that is our Moto, whatever. But like, we're very uncomfortable a lot.” Penny Doyle

This lack of social support from their athletic trainers and coaches, impacted their overall wellbeing. Coaches were seen pressuring athletic trainers to return players too soon. Student—athletes saw this and saw that this was hurting the health of themselves and their teammates. This also caused fear of reporting an injury because they were worried the coach would dismiss them. Instead of being honest, participants admitted to lying or covering up injuries so that they could continue to play.

“It's almost like they like the AT was almost like forced to turn his back on, like injuries and stuff like that. There was a lot of lying involved on my end, in terms of I don't know, if it was just because I didn't trust like that, I was actually going to receive the help” Rob Danner

### **Unforeseen Findings**

As part of the interview process, the primary investigator wanted to understand the dynamic between the athletic trainer and coach. Upon questioning, it became apparent that there were reoccurring themes that became prominent but were not part of the purpose of the research. The following themes were worth discussing as they could be

areas of further research and exploration. These themes included: pressure to hide an injury, and the involvement of the strength and conditioning coach.

### ***Pressure to Hide an Injury***

In an effort to understand the athletic trainer and coach's relationship, the primary investigator asked whether the participant ever felt pressure to hide an injury. It was found that 8 of the 11 student athletes reported feeling pressure to play despite injury at one point or another during their time as a student—athlete. If this pressure did not come from the coach, it was reported as being pressure from one's self or from teammates. Participants noted feeling the need to play though an injury due to pressures to play in an important game or feeling like their teammates were counting on them. Internal pressure was described as the feeling of wanting to play no matter what. These participants said that they were competitive and downplaying an injury in order to meet their own goals.

“Well like, by your teammates, and stuff, like you don't want to feel like, like, weak or look weak, so like you may like, just like, you know, try to hide it. So, like, it doesn't seem like you're like trying to like, act like you're hurt to not practicing you know.” Jordan Tanner

“I don't know. So, it's a little bit of both like, you know, me wanting to be out there but also afraid of how the coaches would perceive me being hurt.” Rob Danner

### ***Strength and Conditioning Coach***

Lastly, one of the more surprising finds within the data was the discussion of strength and conditioning coaches by the participants. When asking about how the student—athlete perceived the athletic trainer and coach's relationship, their answer

involved also discussing the strength and conditioning coach. Participants described the relationship as a triangle between the athletic trainer, coach, and strength and conditioning coach. When analyzing the data this actually made sense because strength and conditioning coaches work very closely with the athletic trainer in areas such as rehabilitation and maintaining conditioning of the student—athletes. Often times instead of negative interactions between the coach and athletic trainer, it was the strength and conditioning coach and athletic trainer. Participants described most disagreements involving their ability to participate in lifting sessions due to injuries. Other participants just noted how much the two worked together when dealing with injured athletes and the importance for them to communicate. Whether describing this relationship as negative or positive, it was found that student—athletes perceive the strength and conditioning coach to have a significant impact on the team dynamic and relationship of the athletic trainer and coach.

“I feel like it's less about the coach. It's more about the athletic trainer, and then our trainer in the workout like, because coach just wants to know if we can go or not, basically.” Tina Ross

“And then also, I kind of off track. But like, it is like a triangle between like athletic trainers’ strength and coach because like, like, that's kind of been like an awkward triangle, like between our team. And I feel like that could be a lot better.” Kelly Zion

### **Discussion**

Social support theory is a concept that describes a relationship between someone who provides support and someone who receives it (Rosenfeld et al., 1989). The sort of

support that is given and received involves eight different types classified into three main categories, informational, emotional, and tangible (Burton, n.d.). Previous studies have found that athletes receive a significant amount of social support from their athletic trainers and coaches (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001). This provided a basis for using the social support theory as the theoretical framework for this research. Data was analyzed through the lens of both the exploratory questions as well as the social support theory and the findings will be described in relation to said theory in this discussion. Knowing that athletic trainers and coaches are two common members of athlete's social support network<sup>5</sup>, the primary research used this to understand how the relationship between two providers impacted overall support received.

The goal of this study was to explore experiences of student—athletes and to understand their perception of the athletic trainer-coach relationship. These findings help athletic trainers and coaches understand how their relationship and communication may influence the student—athletes experience. Also, this research provides insight on the social support network and how those providing support should prioritize positive communicative relationships. Previous research has not extensively explored both the athletic trainer and coach relationship as well as its potential impact on athletes. Based upon the findings of this research, there is evidence to support the idea that there is in fact an impact and that impact depends on the status of the relationship.

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<sup>5</sup> Social Support Network describes the many individuals that are providing social support for one individual. Those in the social support network can include, family, friends, coworkers, teammates, coaches, mentors, etc. (Hupcey,1998)

## **Social Support**

During the interview, participants were asked to describe social support. Their own definitions of social support aligned with the definition described in the current literature (Rosenfeld et al., 1989). Participants agreed that someone providing social support does so in a variety of situations. This individual provides support regardless of the reason and is consistent in their ability to give such support. These participants also commented on their personal relationship with those providing support and noted how that relationship tended to impact the support they received. When participants lacked a positive relationship with a coach or athletic trainer, they then lacked support. This lack of support led to a more challenging experience as a student—athlete. Participants explained frustrations with not having support and disappointment. This lack of support was also linked with decrease in performance and feeling uncomfortable.

In the context of social support there are eight specific forms; emotional support, listening support, emotional challenge, reality confirmation support, task appreciation, task challenge, tangible assistance, personal assistance. (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001).

This research focuses not on all eight, but on emotional, listening, emotional challenge, and task challenge. These were the common types of support discussed when participants were asked to describe the support they have received from athletic trainers and coaches.

Robbins and Rosenfeld (2001) stated that coaches rarely provide emotional support rather they provide more technical support. Our findings support this notion as the most common type of support provided by coaches was informational followed by listening and task challenge. These participants did state however, that they felt they

could go to their coaches even if it involved non-sport related issues. More often than not, coaches provided support that went beyond just help in their sport. Previous studies had shown athletic trainers being the ones providing more emotional support for athletes (Henry et al., 2009). Our findings support this as, emotional support was the second most common form of support provided. This is encouraging as emotional support is important and needed specifically when athletes are dealing with and recovering from injuries (de Groot et al., 2018). Hupcey & Morse (1997) stated that certain forms of support may be better provided by certain individuals. Emotional support being a form that might be better provided by the individual who has a better relationship with the recipient. In time of injury, emotional support may be better provided by the athletic trainer. However, the participant may still wish to receive such support from the coaching staff.

Listening support and mental health support were also the top forms of support provided. Mental health support is not specifically mentioned in the literature regarding social support and so it is unknown how this exactly fits in. Emotional support is described as the perception that a provider is acting in a caring or comforting manner (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001). With this definition, if the athletic trainer or coach is providing care and comforting the student—athlete specifically in regard to their mental health, it could be said that mental health support falls under emotional support.

What our research does show is how coaches and athletics trainers provide some of the same forms of support such as listening and task challenge, but offer individualized support given the different natures of their jobs. This is unlike previous literature that stated that coaches do not provide listening support to their athletes (de Groot, 2008). With the growing stressors in student—athletes' lives, it is possible that over time

coaches have learned to provide more listening support in order to better meet the needs of their athletes.

Our findings on social support were consistent with the research on athletic trainers and coaches being major contributors of social support for athletes. All of the participants revealed that they relied on both athletic trainers and coaches in some form to support them in times of need and to help them through a variety of situations. Our participants explained that when dealing with injury they needed support from athletic trainers and coaches more, to help them get through it. As Yang et al., (2010) found, the need for social support was increased by instance of injury. If social support was lacking when dealing with an injury, participants expressed wanting it to change and feeling disappointed. This further emphasizes the need for both athletic trainers and coaches to work together in a positive manner so that they can contribute to the health of their athletes.

The relationship between recipient and provider has been revealed as a vital aspect to both the amount and type of social support that can provided by members of the social support network (Hupcey & Morse, 1997). This became evident as the primary investigator noticed that upperclassman seemed to have more insight and overall more to say about the athletic trainer coach relationship compared with underclassman.

Upperclassman stated that as time went on, they got more open and comfortable with both their athletic trainer and coaches. These participants were able to elaborate more on the athletic trainer and coach relationship as well as their personal experiences with the two individuals. In addition, these participants were able to articulate the social support they have received and elaborate on the social support they have not received. Berg and

Waner (2019) noted the importance of social support early on in a student—athletes' career, given the immense change they go through from high school to college. Having a lack of social support at this stage could negatively impact the experience from an early stage.

Understanding how the relationship between athletic trainer and coach influenced overall social support received was the gap in the literature that was previously mentioned. The findings show that within this group of students—athletes, the relationship between the athletic trainer and coach influenced the social support a significant amount. A positive athletic trainer and coach relationship allowed for more social support and a better overall environment for these student—athletes. A negative athletic trainer and coach relationship resulted in inconsistent social support and created a more challenging experience for the student—athlete. Hayden and Lynch (2011) revealed that athletic trainers and coaches need to work together in order to meet their responsibilities. This study has shown what may happen when they do not. With the goal of social support being to improve the recipient's well-being, we can see the importance of the athletic trainer and coach relationship. Their actions towards each other have direct impacts on the people they are supposed to help and serve. Making the physical and mental well-being of student—athletes a top priority is goal of the NCAA ("NCAA Well Being," 2020). Thus, these findings further highlight the importance of the dynamics of the relationship between athletic trainer and coach.

### **Communication**

Athletic training is a health care profession that requires individuals to communicate efficiently (Raab et al., 2011). This was made evident in the findings of this

study as 10 of the 11 participants talked about how well their athletic trainer and coach communicated, and the other participant noted the lack of communication between their athletic trainer and head coach. When lack of communication was discussed, the blame almost always fell on that of the athletic trainer. The findings from Hayden's (2012) study support the importance of the relationship between athletic trainer and coach, when returning a player to participation after an injury. This study supported the literature in this aspect because student—athletes credited a successful return to sport from the support of both athletic trainer and coach. If coach and athletic trainer disagreed on this return to play, the participant felt frustrated and conflicted. They then felt pressures to return to their sport despite being injured. This further supports what Chichirez and Purcarea (2018) stated about the efficacy of communication being dependent on the relationship that exists between two parties. When negative interactions were seen by the participants, it almost always was due to communication struggles between the two. Participants that described the relationship as positive, gave reasons such as good communication and good understanding between the two. The status of communication in a working relationship should be prioritized and continuously worked on.

While this research was not intended to look into the strength and conditioning coaches' impact on the athletic trainer and coach's relationship, a few of the participants noted the strength and conditioning coach as playing a vital role in the dynamics of the team. Multiple participants spoke about the coach, AT, and strength coach as being a triangle that all need to work together to serve the student—athlete. Strength and conditioning coaches typically have two primary functions, to improve overall performance of the athlete and to help with injury prevention (Suprak, 2004). Injury

prevention is also a primary role of the athletic trainer. With the similarities in roles, it is understandable how the strength and conditioning coaches' role would impact the dynamic of the team and the relationship between athletic trainer and coach. Because both of the individuals serve the student—athlete, it is vital that they communicate. However, it has been found that more often than not, the athletic trainer and strength coach are alienated do not work enough together (Suprak, 2004).

Our findings support this idea as those who spoke about the strength and conditioning coach often stated that there were disagreements between them and athletic trainer in regard to work outs. Similar to that of athletic trainer and coach, if there is a failure to communicate, the student—athlete has the potential to be negatively impacted (Suprak, 2004). This study did not explore the social support that may or may not be provided by strength and conditioning coaches, but a previous study revealed similar to coaches and athletic trainers, strength and condition coaches have had to broaden their roles in recent years to better serve student—athletes. This study also found that task challenge is commonly provided by these individuals and is at its highest level with injured athletes (Judge, et al., 2012).

Another aspect of the findings that became evident early on in the interview process was the amount of pressure that student—athletes felt to play despite injury on a regular basis. Eight of the 11 student—athletes reported pressure from a coach, teammates, or themselves highlighting the prevalence of the pressure that participants must deal with. Kroshus (2015) explored the pressures that clinicians face to return athletes to play prematurely. Our findings show the pressure that student—athletes feel directly. Playing with an injury not only puts the student—athlete at risk for re-injury, but

the risk of suffering another perhaps more severe injury. Furthermore, it has been found that injured athletes are at severe risk for depression, anxiety, and lower self-esteem (O'Connell & Manschreck, 2012).

The need to play through an injury shows a lack of social support being provided from someone within the social support network. Social support has been found to be received more from athletic trainers during injury, and this could be due to the pressures that coaches are putting on players to play, despite injury (Rosenfeld, 2001). In a previous study it was found that although coaches were never explicitly supporting playing through an injury, the athlete felt pressure via implicit messages valuing the ability to play while injured (Kroshus, et al., 2015). Teammates were listed as another source of pressure to play despite injury (Kroshus, et al., 2015). Due to the competitive nature of sports, players may feel obligations to their teammates. Teammates have been listed as members of student—athlete social support network but are not typically providing emotional support or emotional challenge support. This again highlights competition between athletes fighting for positions on the team (Rosenfeld et al., 1989).

To summarize, athletic trainers and coaches are influential providers of social support in the lives of student—athletes. Our findings suggest that the relationship between athletic trainer and coach influences the level of social support that student—athletes receive. Because athletic trainer and coach are members of the social support network for a student—athlete, a negative or positive relationship between those providers directly impacts them. Participants in this study reflected on just how much that relationship impacted them and the overall experience they had. To improve the well-being of the student—athlete, communication between athletic trainer and coach should

be positive. It should be worked on continuously. In doing so, the student—athlete will receive more social support which may correlate to improved physical and psychological well-being. Supervisors within athletics and sports medicine need to maintain an efficient and positive work environment between departments. Incorporating communication workshops is one way to try and improve work dynamics. Continuous education on the roles of athletic trainers within athletics may also help to improve the disconnect and misunderstandings that often exists between coaches and athletic trainers.

### **Limitations / Future Research**

A potential limitation of this study includes getting only student—athlete's perceptions. The goal of this study is to see their view and understand how the communicative relationship between athletic trainers and coaches may affect the student—athletes. However, this leaves out the views of athletic trainers and coaches. A goal of future research could include interviewing athletic trainers and coaches to understand their perceptions on the matter. Asking both athletic trainer and coaches about their perceptions of their relationship could provide more insight to the subject. After hearing about student—athletes' perspective and understand their side, it could be useful to take that knowledge and probe deeper by then questioning athletic trainer and coaches.

Student—athletes may have a stronger relationship with their coaches or athletic trainers compared to their relationship with the other, which may skew the information they present. They are presenting their personal view on the situation which makes their information subjective. Generalizations should not be made from this research given the nature of the research study. The case study design only presents a view of these participants at this university. The use of a qualitative design also limited the number of

participants included in the study. With only 11 students—athletes participating, it only depicts a small pool at one institution. Future research could widen the pool of participants to capture several universities. This would increase not only the population size but the diversify the responses received. This would increase the reliability of the research and allow for more generalized results. This study utilized a qualitative case study design to understand the perspective and explanations given by participants however, a quantitative study could be the next step to capture that larger audience and allow for more specific results.

The use of current student—athletes may also possess limitations as participants may feel uncomfortable making comments about their coaches or athletic trainers for fear of punishment or repercussions. The primary investigator took steps to make participants as comfortable as possible by giving them pseudonyms as well as not informing anyone in the athletics department of their participations. During the interview process none of the participants expressed being fearful or worried which was taken as a positive sign.

This research study was conducted by an insider researcher (athletic trainer) which enhanced the depth and breadth of understanding; however, an argument could be made that an outsider researcher could present a different perspective. Future studies may opt to use an outside researcher in an attempt to limit bias.

As discussed, the strength and conditioning coach was a topic mentioned several times which was unforeseen by the primary investigator. In future studies perhaps more questions could be asked to understand the dynamic between the athletic trainer, head coach, and strength and conditioning coach to further understand its implications on the student—athletes.

Another aspect that could be considered for future research was the prevalence of pressure that student—athletes feel to participate despite injury. Digging deeper into participants experiences with this could help to understand how to address this issue. Perhaps even interviewing athletic trainer and coaches on this issue to understand their perspective.

### **Conclusion**

There are a few elements of this study that should be highlighted for practical consideration, as other athletic departments work to improve the well-being of student—athletes (“NCAA Well Being,” 2020). First, the communicative relationship between athletic trainer and head coach has the potential to directly impact the experience of student athletes. Student—athletes are very perceptive of this relationship and can see when communication is lacking. Our study revealed the repercussions of a poor communicative relationships and the benefits of positive communicative relationships. Moving forward, the athletics department as a whole should emphasize good professional relationships in order to maintain a positive working environment. Way to do so may include educational workshops on the proper ways to communicate. As tensions often arise between coach and athletic trainer because of power struggles, understanding role delineation may be a priority in the athletics department to aid in the decision-making process.

Second, our study stressed the importance of social support in the life of student—athletes. When athletic trainer and coach have constant communication, the student—athlete is able to receive more social support. Well-rounded social support allows them to enjoy their experience and excel as a student and as an athlete. Increased

social support will improve physical and psychological well-being and will also support the goals of the NCAA and ICSM (“NCAA Well Being,” 2020). Student—athletes struggling to receive adequate support noted the many challenges they faced because of that lack of support. In order to create a cohesive and comfortable team dynamic, athletic trainer and coach must work together to provide adequate support and care. This requires a positive communicative relationship so that they are both on the same page when caring for their athletes.

## Appendix A

### Consent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Nikki Owens from James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to explore how the student athlete perceptions of the relationship between the athletic trainer and the head coach of a Division I athletics program affects social support. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her master thesis.

### Research Procedures

This study consists an interview that will be conducted either in person, over the phone, or through Skype. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to your perception of the relationship between your athletic trainer and head coach and how it affected you. Responses will be audio recorded.

### Time Required

Participation in this study will require at least 30 minutes of your time.

### Risks

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

### Benefits

There are no direct benefits to the participant upon completion of this study.

### Confidentiality

The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up with individual respondents with their answers (including audio recordings) will be destroyed.

### Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

### Questions about the Study

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Nikki Owens  
 Sport and Recreation Leadership  
 James Madison University  
[owensnl@jmu.edu](mailto:owensnl@jmu.edu)  
 (609)-221-3151

Emeka Anaza  
 The Hart School  
 James Madison University  
[anazaea@jmu.edu](mailto:anazaea@jmu.edu)

#### Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject

Dr. Taimi Castle  
 Chair, Institutional Review Board  
 James Madison University  
 (540) 568-5929  
[castletl@jmu.edu](mailto:castletl@jmu.edu)

#### Giving of Consent

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

I give consent to be (*video/audio*) recorded during my interview. \_\_\_\_\_ (initials)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of Participant (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of Participant (Signed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of Researcher (Signed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

*This study has been approved by the IRB, protocol # 19-1030*

## Appendix B

### Interview Abstract/ Sample Questions

Name, Age, Gender, Sport, Year in school, Major

1. How do you perceive the relationship between your athletic trainer and coach?
2. Can you describe a time you witnessed a positive interaction between your athletic trainer and coach?
  - If a positive relationship was witnessed, what qualities would you attribute to that?
3. Can you describe a time you witness a negative interaction between your athletic trainer and coach?
  - If a negative interaction was witnessed, how was that situation resolved?
4. How did the relationship between your athletic trainer and coach make you feel?
5. Describe how the relationship between your athletic trainer and coach may have influence on your behavior or experience as a student-athlete
6. What does social support mean to you?
7. How would you say that the relationship affected the social support you received?
8. Have you ever been pressured by a coach to hide an injury?
  - If so, please describe that experience.
9. Did you ever receive medical advice from a coach that went against your athletic trainers wishes?
  - If yes, please describe that experience.
10. Looking back on the experience is there anything you feel you could have done to change the experience?

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