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# Relationship Between Athletic and Academic Success: A Pilot Study

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# **Relationship Between Athletic and Academic Success: A Pilot Study**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to reveal that a competitive sports culture exists in the United States, and due to this sports culture and competitive disposition, student athletes are more motivated in academic endeavors. Previous research describes sports cultures; however, the current study investigated the factors impacting academic motivation and sport motivation. Furthermore, the interrelationship of these two factors was assessed. A qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with four high school varsity student athletes (two male; two female), was used as the tool in attempts to support these claims. The research hypothesis suggested that high school students who participate in the equivalent of college non-revenue sports, have a competitive disposition which also motivates them to perform well in school.

## **Chapter 1. Introduction to the Study**

A competitive sports culture exists in the United States which is well documented in both scholarly and lay publications. Although there is prior research evaluating sports cultures, this study was designed to evaluate factors motivating academic success coupled in high school varsity athletes.

Researches such as Phillips, Schafer, Chambers, etc., whose research is explained in the literature review, all did their research in between the years of 1970 to 1991. The literature provides insight into the relationship between sport participation and academic success, however these findings are dated and lack a direct link of sports competitiveness and academic motivation. These researchers focus on the notion of cultural influences, which Philips and Schafer coined as the “athletic-subculture,” to explain why athletes perform better than comparable non-athletes in academics. The literature begins to suggest that athletes have motivation beyond just sports and in turn, perform well in school; however, they do not focus on the reasons beyond sports eligibility and cultural pressure.

The theory of an athletic-subculture was further supported in the mid-1990’s, when a California research study implemented “Promoting Achievement in School Through Sports”, otherwise known as the PASS program. This study used sports in the school curriculum in an effort to improve academic achievement. Overall, the study revealed strong numerical evidence that sports participation in school does in fact show promising results for improving students’ academics (i.e. grades).

All of these prior research studies investigated the influences that sports eligibility and team/coach/parent pressure play a role in the academic success of athletes. Although

that is not debated in this new research, rather it is further supported; this study also wants to show self motivation of the athlete his/herself impacts academic success as well.

### Research Hypothesis.

This study addresses the hypothesis: High school students who participate in the equivalent of college non-revenue sports, have a competitive disposition which also motivates them to do well in school. The goal of this study is to show evidence that students athletes acknowledge the link in their sports competitiveness to motivation in their academic endeavors.

This study assumes that the notion of an athletic sub-culture is an accurate one and is still present in today's society. Since the study involves only four subjects: two males and two females who participate in High School Varsity sports other than football and basketball, it has limited results. The chance for answers to vary, may also be limited, due to participation size.

## Chapter 2. Review of Literature

### *The “Athletic Subculture” of the Past*

Research has shed light on the notion “that athletes tend to exceed comparable non-athletes in their achievement of educational goals” (Phillips, 1971, p. 328). Although this research was performed in the late 1960’s and focused solely on boys, the theoretical concepts of Phillips and Schafer’s study, seem to remain true today. The theory that athletes excel in academic endeavors as well as athletic ones, was described as the direct result of the cultural influence imposed by team members, coaches, and the overall sports culture formed by sports teams (REF). Schafer (YR) indicated “athletes are less likely to be deviant than comparable non-athletes,” and argued that “there must be some influences in athletics that deter boys from engaging in delinquent behavior”. In a second study on student athletes by Schafer (YR), results support the earlier findings, whereby he defined delinquency to be smoking, drinking, maintaining late hours, wearing beards or long hair, breaking laws, or disrupting the community (Schafer, 1969, p. 41). Schafer further concluded that playing sports influences students to see school as a positive experience deterring them from rebelling against it (Schafer, 1969, p. 42). Together, Phillips and Schafer argued that the influence is due to the “subculture” that exists in the world of sports.

Although Phillips and Schafer’s research did not have strong conclusive data, they reported that athletes tended to befriend other athletes, and that athletes overall were “more positive in educational attitudes, aspirations, and behaviors” (Phillips, 1971, p. 331), leading them to have had “greater exposure to pro-educational influences” (Phillips, 1971, p. 331). They further reported that both teachers and counselors encouraged

athletes to go on to college, and concluded that these combined findings indicate that student athletes receive rewards and support in school, which in turn lead them to “develop a pro-school subculture” (Phillips, 1971, p. 333). In summary, Phillips and Schafer argued that athletes are faced with the influence of their teammates, coaches, teachers, and counselors to perform well in school and due to this influence, perform better academically than their comparable non-athlete peers.

*The Athletic Sub-Culture: A Trend Which Remained in the 1990s*

Twenty years following Phillip and Schafer’s research, trends of student athletes doing well in school was noted by another researcher. Chambers (1991), in a review of the effect of students’ participation in sports, concluded “academic achievement can be fostered through sports” (p. 418). He linked this fostering of academic achievement to the influences of coaches as well as the heightened self-esteem which he found was a result of playing sports. Chambers noted that in most cases of his review of empirical research, students who played sports experienced fun, which lessened feelings of stress and anxiety (Chambers, 1991). He went on to state that this fulfillment leads to “a greater perceived competence and control” (Chambers, 1991, p. 417), and that this self-esteem and feeling of competence aids student athletes in academic endeavors as well. Furthermore, Chambers commented that athletes “perceive [their coaches as] significant influence[s]” (Chambers, 1991, p. 418) on their future goals, and is why he concluded that coaches played large roles in student academic achievement. Although Chambers did not use the term “athletic sub-culture” that Phillips and Schafer used throughout their research, his work shares the underlying theme of coach influence on athletes which results in better

academic achievement, and adds to the notion of heightened self-esteem due to sports participation as a positive influence on academics success.

### *The Re-appearance of the Term “Sports Culture”*

In the 1990s, a new program known as Promoting Achievement in School through Sport (PASS) was added to the curriculum of several California high schools over a four-year period. The program was a year-long intervention that used sports in an effort to improve academic achievement. The rationale behind the study was based on the American Sports Institute’s (ASI) position that there are positive aspects of the sports culture which can provide a feeling of meaning and self-worth in students, which in turn, will provide an environment in which students want to be in school, want to learn, and ultimately enhance learning (Promoting achievement in school through sport, 1996). This view contradicted the traditional notion of the time that at best, sports should take a back seat to academics, or at worst that sports may impede academic success if they take priority over academics (Promoting achievement in school through sport, 1996). The notion of a positive sports culture was the sole basis for this program despite the latter opinion, and indeed had promising results.

The program had an integrated curriculum whose interdisciplinary aspects included language arts, social studies, philosophy, and physical education. It focused on self-esteem, responsibility and leadership, all aspects seen by the ASI to be derived from sports participation. The program results revealed 47% more PASS students improved their grades than students in the control group, with twice as many PASS students increasing their GPA by a full point (Promoting achievement in school through sport,



1996). These results, although strong, raise some questions: Did the control group students and PASS program participants get tested on the same materials? and What were the differences in the academic curriculum based classes? Despite these questions, results from the PASS program support the case that a positive sports culture can improve academic achievement.

### *Motivation and Self-Determination Theory*

If athletes do in fact perform well in school, in comparison to their non-athlete counterparts, what motivates them to do so? This key question about motivation is a large part of what the current study investigated. Motivation has many types and these types have many components, as described by Vansteenkiste, Lens, and Deci (2006) in their review of academic motivation. Controlled motivation, one component of motivation, was defined by Vansteenkiste et al. (2006) as “involve[ing] the experience of being pressured or coerced” (p. 19). This component of motivation falls under extrinsic motivation, defined as participating in an activity to reach an outcome that is separate from the activity itself (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006.). This being said, one could argue student athletes do well in academic endeavors, not for the sake of education, but rather to reach an outcome that is separate from academics altogether -- sports eligibility.

As concluded by researchers Schafer (1969 & 1971), Phillips (1971), and Chambers (1991), coaches and teammates highly encourage/influence academic success in fellow athletes. Since the goal of doing well in school is to live up to the high standards set for them by these external influences, athletes are, by definition extrinsically motivated. The self-determination theory (SDT) states “that the social

environment can quite easily trigger [internal and external] controlling processes that reside within individuals and can regulate their behavior” (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006, p. 22). Simply stated, SDT says that a social group can influence a member’s behavior; and by this definition Schafer (YR), Philips (YR), and Chambers (YR) claimed sports teams to be the social group and success in academics to be the regulated behavior.

Another point which can be derived from the notion of extrinsic motivation linking academics to athletics is sports eligibility. “It is likely that the self-identity of athletes who have a high degree of psychological investment in sport participation changes in response to events that threaten their involvement in sport[s]” (Brewer et al., 1999, p. 150). One such threat is poor grades, which result in a person being ineligible to play a sport. Through their research, Brewer et al. (2006) found that athletes have better lifestyle management to maintain their roles/identities as athletes. Brewer et al. (2006) conclude that athletes maintain good grades to ensure their continuation in sport, which overall maintains their self-identity.

Since there are grade requirements to participate in high school sports, it can be argued that success in school is achieved to attain permission to play sports, not solely for learning. Due to schools enforcing such rules, athletes are more motivated to do well in school, so as to be eligible to play (i.e., rewarded for their good grades). The pressure of teammates and coaches to keep grades high enough to be eligible to play a sport, also known as controlled motivation, and the goal of being rewarded with the eligibility to play a sport, also known as extrinsic motivation, are therefore both key aspects to athletic academic success. Vansteenkiste et al. (2006) state “when people are able to foresee the personal relevance of an activity for themselves, they are likely to identify with its

importance, so they will engage in the activity quite willingly” (p. 21). In the athletic perspective, as stated above, good grades in school directly affect whether a person can participate in sports. Therefore, from Vansteenkiste et al.’s (2006) viewpoint student athletes will engage in academics willingly.

### *The Hierarchical Model of Motivation*

Similar to Vansteenkiste et al. (2006), Vallerand’s (2000) study on SDT and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation led him to make links between environmental influences and motivated outcomes. Vallerand viewed motivation as a hierarchy of different components and factors. He linked his model in a “causal sequence: the environment (social factors) influences perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness (need satisfaction in SDT) that in turn influences motivation that in turn leads to outcomes” (Vallerand, 2000, p. 315). Applying this theory to athletes and academics, the sports culture has influence over athletes, and since their academic success is highly related to their eligibility to play sports in turn influences athletes to be motivated in school and therefore leads to better grades. Although Vallerand (2006) did not specifically link his findings to student athletes, his model shows how Schafer (1969 & 1971), Phillips (1971), and Chambers (1991) could have come to their conclusions about athlete motivation in school due to the sports culture.

### *Perceived Reasons for Sports Participation Enhancing Academic Success*

“Participation in sport may lead to experiences, attitudes, self-perceptions, and treatment that enhance the academic role for the following reasons: (1) if one is

participating in sport there may be an increased interest in the school, including academic activities; (2) to maintain athletic eligibility the athlete is motivated to perform at a higher academic level; (3) athletic success may lead to a heightened sense of worth that spills over into academic achievement; (4) coaches, teachers, and parents take a personal interest in athletes, including their classroom performance; (5) athletic participation may lead to membership in the elite peer groups and an orientation toward academic success; and (6) the athlete may have the hope or expectation of participating in athletics in college” (Snyder, 1990, p. 390). Looking at these six perceived influences for academic success in athletes, the notions of coach/parental pressure and influence, positive relationship with the school due to sport, heightened sense of self-esteem, and pressure due to eligibility requirements are all repeats of prior mentioned research. This repetition of reasons provides a strong basis for its validity, and is the basis for this work.

In Snyder and Spreitzer’s study (1990), the six key concepts noted above were investigated in their work. They surveyed 11,995 male seniors from 1,100 public and private high schools, using the control variables of socioeconomic status, parent-adolescent relations, and cognitive development, all explicitly defined in their study. Prior to their study, Snyder and Spreitzer (1990) had found other research that claimed that student athletes performed equally as well as or better than their non-athlete peers in high school. From these findings, they questioned why is it that athletes succeed in school, and based their study on this question. They believed it to be the six factors described above, and constructed their survey to evaluate the impact of these factors on student athlete behaviors. The results supported their prior findings that athletes do equal or better in school than their non-athlete counterparts (REF). They also stated that

“sports, attitudes, self-perceptions, and treatment of athletes” (Snyder & Spritzer, 1990, p. 397) were the reasons for academic success. Although the findings could not be narrowed down to list the six reasons as specific causes for the academic achievement, Snyder and Spreitzer’s (1990) study provides a foundation for this study to investigate the six factors in greater detail.

Overall, research of the past has shed some light onto reasons student athletes perform better in academic endeavors than their comparable non-athletes. Most of the studies mentioned above simply rely on the notion of coach/team/parent pressure and sports eligibility as the basis for athletes excelling in academics. These notions will not be debated in this new study; however the factor of self motivation will be brought to the fore-front, in an attempt to link sports competitiveness and motivation in academic endeavors.

### **Chapter 3. The Research Procedures**

The study was conducted at a public High School in a middle-class Massachusetts' town. The student population at the high school was 2,105, with only 10% of the students coming from ethnically diverse backgrounds. The study sample was two female and two male varsity student athletes, of any ethnicity, whom play the high school equivalent of college non-revenue sports (i.e. any sport other than men's and women's basketball or football). The participants needed to be enrolled in the high school, as well as on a varsity sports team roster.

Flyers describing the study were distributed to all varsity sports teams, except for the basketball and football teams, as well as placed in the hallways of the school. The flyer explained, "A University of Connecticut student research study is looking for High School student Varsity athletes to volunteer to participate in research. Participation will entail an in-person interview (about 30 minutes long) revolving around attitudes towards sports and academics." The flyer also included that the "volunteers must be student athletes who are on a varsity sports team other than men's and women's basketball or football," and identified the contact information of the investigator for those interested in participating.

#### *Subject Selection*

Four male and seven female potential subjects, responded to the flyer (four males and seven females). Two male and two female subjects were randomly selected from the applicant pool. Those students selected from the applicant pool, accompanied by a parent/guardian, met in person with the student investigator to review the consent form.

There were two meetings set up after school during the same evening, on the school grounds, for the females and their parents then the males and their parents to meet with the investigator. The meetings were separated by gender solely for convenience; the selected groupings served no other purpose.

At these meetings, the consent forms were read to the potential participants and their parent(s)/guardian(s), by the student investigator. The participants and their parent(s)/guardian(s) were allowed throughout the meeting to ask any questions, or bring up any concerns. One concern a particular parent had was about the questions being asked to his/her son/daughter. The parent was told that the questions could not be given in advance to either the participant or the person of consent, for it could potentially flaw the participant's responses. However, the investigator was able to adequately ensure the questions were solely based around personal opinion of attitudes on sports and academics, and were non-invasive. After any and all questions/concerns were addressed, the parents/guardians, participants, and student investigator signed and dated the consent forms, which were immediately locked up to maintain confidentiality.

#### *Semi-structured interview session*

Each participant met with the investigator in a private room in the sports office at the High School. The subjects each underwent a thirty-minute semi-structured interview, during which time they were asked six demographic and preliminary questions, followed by eleven questions specific to the athletic and academic characteristics of the subject. The interviews were audiotaped, then coded following completion of the four interviews. All names were replaced with pseudonyms to maintain participant confidentiality; and after transcription, all voice files were immediately destroyed.

Once all of the data collected was completed and filed, the interviews were examined for broad themes throughout all four participants' responses. From these major themes, more specific themes were formed. Lastly, using these commonalities, results of the study were examined and conclusions determined.



## **Chapter 4. Results**

### *Subject Backgrounds*

The goal of this study was to determine if students athletes acknowledge the link in their sports competitiveness to motivation in their academic endeavors. Four students were randomly selected from the population of varsity student athletes at a high school New England. The females were seniors, one eighteen and one seventeen years old. During the report of these findings, the eighteen year old female will be known as Jane, and the seventeen year old female Mary. The male participants, one senior and one junior, were both seventeen years old; the senior will be referred to as Bob, and the junior as Mike.

All four students explained their sports participation during the preliminary questions of the interview: Mary played softball for five years for the high school team and nine years total, and volleyball for two years on the high school team. Jane played varsity lacrosse for three years, with five years of total lacrosse participation. Bob wrestled for two years on the high school team, recalled being in a youth league for a short time when he was younger, and was on the varsity spring track team for one year. Mike played varsity soccer for three years, participated in soccer for eleven years in total, and has been running on the varsity winter and spring track team for one year. As shown from this data, all four participants are active athletes in high school; however, Mary and Mike stand out as life-long active athletes.

After each of the subjects answered the preliminary questions, they were asked several personal opinion questions about their sport competitiveness, academic grade

competitiveness, personal and parent/guardian/coach pressure, and both sport and academic motivation. When observing and comparing the data, trends were evident.

### *Competition-Based Question Responses*

When asked “Do you think you are a competitive person in sports?” Mary, Mike, and Jane each responded with an unwavering “yes.” These three participants further explained, in similar words, that they do not like to lose.

Mary further stated, “I want to be better than the person I am competing against.”

Although Bob responded, “fairly competitive” to the question, he further explained, “I’m just out there to have a good time,” showing a less competitive attitude about sports participation.

Investigating Bob’s background reveals that he only has two years as a high school athlete, and did not fervently participate in sports during his youth. Since there are limited subjects, and there are no other participants with a similar sports background to Bob, no clear statement linking years of participation in sports to competitive disposition in sports can be made from these responses,

Continuing with the theme of competition, each participant was asked if he/she considered him/herself a “naturally competitive person.” Both Mary and Mike gave another resolute “yes” as their answer.

Mary furthered her response and stated, “it doesn’t matter if I’m playing sports, or a board game, or...just anything, I don’t want to lose.”

Mike simply said, “I don’t like to lose,” and laughed aloud.

Bob, on the other hand firmly stated, “no,” and when prompted to explain responded, “I got to find a reason to go out and prove myself.”

Lastly, unlike the other three answers, Jane answered the question vaguely, stating “Umm, to an extent yeah.” However, when Jane was asked if there were any specific reasons why, she did not have any reason and simply claimed, “No, I’m just naturally competitive,” making her answer appear very unsure.

Probing the idea of competitiveness one final time, as well as bringing the topic of academics into the interview, the subjects were asked: “Do you think you are a competitive person with your grades?” Once again, both Mary and Mike responded in a similar fashion, and differed from the other two participants. Mary and Mike’s answers both mentioned competing against other students in their lives, siblings and friends respectively. Mary mentioned being competitive with grades in order to stay at “the top of [the] class.” Conversely, Bob and Jane both hesitated and stated “not really,” and “...a little bit, not too much,” respectively. The hesitation and uncertainty in their voices and answers seemed to show they analyzed the question before answering, whereas the certainty and explanations Mary and Mike gave seemed to reveal certainty in their responses.

Examining the questions based on competitiveness, a theme of global competitiveness became apparent. Two of the participants consistently stated that they were competitive with themselves and others regardless of the domain – sport or academics. However, the data raises the questions: Does sports participation at a young age lead to competitive people? Although this study does not directly address that question, and does not have adequate sample size to determine potential answers to this

question, the data suggests a possible connection between early sport participation and global competitiveness.

### *Academics and External Pressure*

Although all four subjects, during the preliminary questions, answered that they all have never been ineligible to participate on a high school team due to poor grades, they all wavered when asked if they were happy with the grades they received in school. Mary, Mike, and Jane all answered by saying that they are happy most of the time, with Mary and Mike further explaining that sometimes they struggle to remain content with their grades.

Unlike his peers, Bob answered, “no...I feel I try hard, but it doesn’t pay off, so no.”

Although all four participants did not express adamant and consistent contentment with their grades, none have been academically ineligible to play sports. Therefore, these student athletes may have set high standards for themselves as students. Also, Mary had previously mentioned competing with grades in order to stay at the top of her class, which implies that her grades are good. This shows further evidence that Mary demands much of herself as it relates to her grades.

Additional queries regarding external pressure to do well in school, the question “Do you consider yourself motivated to do well in school?” received mixed responses. Mary and Mike replied with answers hinting at external motivation as a factor, while Bob and Jane backed their answers with internal motivation as the driving force.

Mary said, “it has always been in my family that academics come before

anything.”

This reveals that Mary is motivated to perform well in school, because her parents stress education as more important than sport participation. Along with Mary, Mike’s response showed evidence of external motivation.

He claimed he was motivated to do well in school “at times” and when asked why explained, “parents, coaches...to be able to play sports.”

This response supports prior research which stated that athletes are motivated to do well in school in order to stay eligible to participate in sports. It is important to note that he was the only one of the four subjects to discuss sports eligibility as a reason to be motivated academically. Overall, this variation in responses shows that there are many reasons that drive student athletes to succeed academically other than simply sports eligibility.

Further assessment of the student athletes’ attitudes regarding sport participation and academic success, subjects were asked: “Have your coaches or teammates ever talked to you about your grades in school?” Both Bob and Jane responded “no,” while Mary and Mike’s answers varied. Mike explained that he had struggled with Chemistry in the past, and his coach was “helping [him] out” because the coach was also a science teacher at the school. This raises the question of how the coach discovered Mike’s academic struggles: did he/she check Mike’s report card, or did his/her colleague let him know one of his player’s was struggling academically? Regardless of the reason, there was coach involvement in a player’s academics.

Lastly, Mary’s answer to the question regarding coach/teammate involvement in academics was interesting. Mary reported that every time a progress report or report card

was distributed, she would have to check in with her softball coach, as did every player on her team. This reveals a formalized process whereby the coach was involved in his/her student's academic career. The response provides evidence of social pressures to do well and live up to the coach's expectations.

Mary stated in her answer that she herself has "talked to some girls who have been academically ineligible to see what [she could] do to help them stay on top."

Both Mike and Mary's responses reveal cases of positive coach or teammate involvement, and possible pressure, on academic performance. However, it is interesting that Mary, who plays on the varsity softball team, was the only subject whose coach systematically evaluated her grades, even though she is not in danger of ineligibility. It may be assumed from this single occurrence, that the school does not have a specific policy for coaches to evaluate athletes. Therefore, other coaches may only worry and pressure those students who are close to ineligibility. If this is the case, one could argue, in this school at least, that only athletes who are struggling with academics are faced with external pressure from coaches to perform well in school, for they are the only ones being spoken to by coaches about their grades. This theory, however, could only be investigated further and stated with more exactness, if all coaches in the school system were questioned about their involvement in their student athletes' academics.

In an attempt to further understand the concept of coach pressure, and potential parental involvement, subjects were asked if they felt pressured by parents, guardians, or coaches to improve their academic standing. All participants, except Mike, responded "no."

Mary supplemented her response by stating, “it’s never been an issue...I’m sure if my grades were and issue I would have that pressure.”

In light of the fact that both Bob and Jane were never approached by coaches or teammates about improving their grades and Mary provided her grades to the coach and helped others on her team, it appears that all three were academically successful. This assumption was made based on never being ineligible to play, never being addressed regarding academic concerns from coaches, and not feeling pressured to improve academically. Although this assumption is supported by multiple responses to different questions, no absolute conclusion that the majority of student athletes are academically successful can be made from this pilot study.

As mentioned above, Mike gave a different answer to the question of feeling external pressure to improve academically. Mike responded, “yeah” to the question, and when asked “how?” by the interviewer,

he stated, “I know that they just want me to do better in high school, so I can get into a good college.”

It is important to note that Mike did not mention sports eligibility in his answer, rather he focuses on future academic success as the reason for the perceived pressure from his parents and coach(es). This differs from his previous answer to an earlier question where he stated he felt motivated to do well in school because of “parents, coaches [and sports eligibility].” These discrepancies in Mike’s responses to questions show he may not be sure exactly what motivates him to perform well in school, or that they all (competitive nature, cultural pressure, sports eligibility, and perceived future success due to academic achievement) play a role in the motivation of athletes to succeed in academics.

### *Academics and Internal Pressure and Motivation*

The role that personal pressure plays in motivating the student athlete was a focus of the current research. The subjects were asked if they felt they put pressure on themselves to perform well in school. All four participants answered with a resounding “yes.” When asked to further respond with rationale for this belief,

Mary stated, “ I want to go to college, do well,”

Bob replied, “...you need to get a good education and get the grades necessary to succeed,”

Mike answered, “because I want to get into a good college for my parents,” and

Jane said, “I want to do well in life.”

Mary, Bob, and Jane all provided reasons related to being personally successful for themselves, while Mike mentioned wanting to make his parents proud. Mike’s response implies that he feels pressure to do well in school to go to a good college and live up to his parents’ expectations. Mike admitted to feeling pressured by his parents to succeed academically in prior responses, and now also states he places pressure on himself but for external reasons. Although there is the external pressure component, Mike made it clear he knew his parents were concerned for his best long-term interests. Lastly, when examining Mike’s response he never mentioned pressuring himself to do well in school to stay eligible to play sports. This variance in Mike’s responses makes it difficult to fully understand why he places pressure on himself to succeed academically. The other three participants, who had answered that they put pressure on themselves to perform well in school to succeed in the future, never mentioned sports eligibility in their responses.



Also, previous responses from Mary and Jane reported considering themselves naturally competitive in general. Although this does not address information to support or decline the hypothesis of this study, it does provide evidence to disprove the theory of prior research which states that, “to maintain athletic eligibility the athlete is motivated to perform at a higher academic level”(Snyder, 1990, p. 390).

A second question on factors associated with internal pressure, the subjects were asked: “Do you feel you put pressure on yourself to do well in sports?” In response, Mary, Mike, and Jane all stated a resolute “yes.”

Mary answered, “I want to be like one of the best in the things I do.” When considering her response, Mary made it not just a sports specific comment, further supporting her claim of being a “naturally competitive person” in general.

Similarly, Mike’s response, “because I don’t like to lose...” also adds to the theory of him being a naturally competitive person.

Bob responded differently from the other student athletes, once again. When asked the question, Bob replied, “nah, as long as I am trying my hardest...or as long as I am trying, that’s good enough for me.” In concert with Bob’s previous responses, he did not claim to be very competitive in sports or grades, and does not see himself as naturally competitive. As mentioned previously, Bob has the least sports experience, and also did not play sports significantly as a youth. In comparison to the other athletes, not only does he have less years of sports participation, he has less of a competitive disposition. There is no definitive link between sports participation and competitive nature that can be made from these responses, however it is a theme worth noting in this study.

### *Comparing and Linking Academics and Sports*

As the final elements of the interview, all four subjects were asked questions comparing academics and sports, as well as asking the participants about their perception of how sports participation affects their academic endeavors. These questions were kept until the end of the interview to make sure they would not bias previous answers.

First, each participant was asked: “Do you feel more motivated to do well in sports or in school?” Mary, Bob, and Jane answered in ways which revealed they felt academics would help them succeed in life, and therefore made school their main priority.

Jane explained, “sports is only for a season and knowledge is important to have to succeed in life.”

While these three subjects answered school, Mike responded, “sports,” and when asked why stated, “I’m not really sure.” This answer was unexpected, since Mike continuously stated feeling external and internal pressure to do well in school. This response, although vague in reasoning, may support the claim that Mike strives in school in order to stay eligible to play soccer and run track. If that is the case, this component of motivation falls under extrinsic motivation, defined as participating in an activity to reach an outcome that is separate from the activity itself (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006.).

Lastly, questions evaluating what effect sports participation had on academic achievements were posed to each subject. Subjects were asked if they felt participating in sports hindered, helped, or had no effect on academic endeavors. All four participants mentioned it takes time away from studying and school work; Mary, Bob, and Mike stated that this reason was negative, while Jane explained it as a positive.

In Bob's answer he explained "time for sports [means] less time to do schoolwork," however Jane explained this time crunch "helps because [she has] to do more time management" and that it forces her to not procrastinate.

Mary, however, strayed from her previous types of responses and mentioned, "a little bit of both" when asked if she felt it hindered or helped. She mentioned her grades tend to drop a little when she is in her sports season, yet said "I do not want to be anywhere near academically ineligible." This response reveals Mary considers sports eligibility as a motivating factor to do well in academics. In prior answers Mary stated that she was motivated to do well in school to succeed in her future; however, it is in this response where she hints to the notion that she is also motivated due to sports eligibility.

### *Summary*

In summary, the responses of the four subjects varied; supporting and straying from previous literature and the hypothesis of this study on the matter of student athletes' motivations for academic success. Both Mary and Mike mentioned sports eligibility as being a motivation factor, while Mary, Bob, and Jane mentioned wanting to succeed in life as a means of motivation in academics. Lastly, Mary, Mike, and Jane all categorized themselves as competitive people, while Bob, the subject with the least sport participation in his background, reported that he was not that competitive of a person.

## **Chapter 5. Summary and Conclusions**

High school students who participate in the equivalent of college non-revenue sports, have a competitive disposition which also motivates them to do well in school. This statement, the hypothesis of this study, was framed to understand the reasons behind student athletes' motivation in their academic endeavors. The goal of this study was to determine if student athletes acknowledge the link between their sports competitiveness and their motivation in their academic endeavors.

Previous research on this topic mainly focused on sports eligibility and external factors as the primary reasons for student athlete success in academics. However, the current study sought to determine sources of internal pressure, competitive disposition, and motivation that impacted student athletes' academic performance.

The four subjects' responses varied with three student athletes' reporting similar themes. The three athletes consider themselves to have a competitive disposition which motivates them to do well in school, however the link of the two concepts was weak. The factors motivating academic success in student athletes are clearly evident and no direct acknowledgement of the link between sports competitiveness to academic achievement was made by the subjects.

Subjects who participated in sport a majority of their lives (three out of the four participants) stated that they are competitive in sports and do consider themselves naturally competitive people. Two of those subjects stated that they compete with siblings and friends when it comes to grades. Although there can be no clear conclusion made from this information, it raises the question of why those students, who had

participated in sports a majority of their lives, were so competitive. This theme, of competitive dispositions in student athletes causing them to be motivated in school as well as sports, deviates from past research. Primarily, previous research focused on sports eligibility, external pressure, and self-esteem boosts from sports participation contributing to a heightened sense of competency as the key reasons for the academic success of student athletes. The concept of competitive disposition raises new questions such as: Does sports participation at a young age create a competitive disposition in people? Or, do naturally competitive people join sports at an early age as an effect of their competitive nature?

Yet, the outcomes of this study also supported prior research related to student athletes. Two of the four subjects reported being motivated in academics in order to remain eligible to play sports. However, three of the four participants denied feeling pressured by external sources to perform well in school, and all four stated that they put pressure on themselves to perform well academically. These responses suggest that it is not just external/cultural pressure along with eligibility requirements that motivate student athletes. Three of the four participants stated that future success in life motivated them to excel academically, which was never mentioned as a motivating factor in previous research.

In summary, competitive nature, cultural pressure, sports eligibility, and perceived future success due to academic achievement, were reported by several of the participants as reasons underlying their academic motivation. The limited number of participants in the study is a limitation; however, the importance of years of sports participation impacting competitive disposition is one element that should be evaluated

more fully. Overall, this study supports previous works suggesting that the academic motivation of student athletes arises from various sources, both internal and external. Future research is necessary to evaluate the elements reported by the current pilot subjects.

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