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A Qualitative Analysis of Student-Athletes' Experiences During COVID-19: "It's hard to feel like an athlete"

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The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the behavioral health of student-athletes on several fronts. Key elements of the student-athlete experience such as social connectedness and competitive sporting events have been altered or eliminated. While the impact of the pandemic on behavioral health has been reported within the general population, less is known about the lived experience of high-level athletes.

PURPOSE: We sought to use qualitative methodologies to explore the impact of COVID-19 on student-athlete identity. **METHODS:** An online survey was sent to 884 Division 1 athletes. A free response question asked participants to "tell the story of their COVID-19 experience" including the impact on their sense of self-identity as a student-athlete. Qualitative responses were analyzed in NVIVO software by inductive coding, following a grounded theory approach with iteration and constant comparison. Responses were dual coded in sets of 10, with reconciliation and iteration of the codebook until thematic saturation was reached. **RESULTS:** 47 participants provided a free-response answer (5% response rate). Qualitative analysis revealed 5 primary domains pertaining to the impact of COVID-19 on athletes' experiences: 1) Behavioral, 2) Emotional, 3) Cognitive, 4) Social, and 5) Identity. 29 underlying themes including Motivation, Disorientation, Isolation, Frustration, Impact on Mental Health, Motivation, Perspective, Identity Loss, and Identity Conflict were identified. The most prevalent themes included the behavioral and emotional impacts of the pandemic on athletes' sense of self. **CONCLUSION:** COVID-19 had a significant impact on student-athlete identity. In this cohort of Division 1 collegiate athletes, their experiences and narratives revealed common domains that could be used to help student-athletes cope with uncertainties related to the pandemic and return to high level performance.

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