

RITUALS, ROUTINES AND RELATIONSHIPS: HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETES AND COACHES IN FLUX

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“What you do for yourself, any gesture of kindness, any gesture of gentleness, any gesture of honesty and clear seeing toward yourself, will affect how you experience your world. In fact, it will transform how you experience the world. What you do for yourself, you’re doing for others, and what you do for others, you’re doing for yourself.” — Pema Chödrön, [Comfortable with Uncertainty: 108 Teachings on Cultivating Fearlessness and Compassion](#)

COVID-19 has had an economic and emotional impact on youth sports. To bring to light the lived experiences of high school athletes during the pandemic, we asked athletic directors and coaches across the country to connect us to students to hear their stories. Students voluntarily shared the impacts of the pandemic on their lives including cancelled practices, training sessions, team meetings, and entire seasons of competition. Overall, we sought to learn how students met their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual needs.

Students voluntarily shared their stories, offering us a sense of how athletics and their team experiences have impacted their lives in the past months and how they each were responding to remote learning and the cancellation of spring sports. Through surveys, interviews, and informal conversations, our first goal was to examine the question “*What were the reasons for being an athlete?*”

The high school student-athletes, male and female alike, referenced the joy from playing sports, the positive impact on their health, the camaraderie, the art of competition and the interaction with teammates that ultimately lead to lifelong friendships. One male tenth grader said, “I am inherently competitive as a person, and I enjoy pushing myself to my absolute limits every day at practice. I also developed amazing friendships with many of my teammates.” A female senior reported, “I love to support other teams in their sports and I love being a small part of a huge track and field team because although it’s an individual sport, you need every piece of the puzzle for it to work.” And, another freshman athlete wrote, the “main reason is because I love the community that goes along with school sports. The teams are like families.”

It was clear from the athletes’ responses that they loved their sport, but it was the human connection and relationships that were “thick in their memories.” Our next line of questioning asked athletes what rituals and routines they kept and what new practices were emerging. We found that many seemed to be internalizing their motivation, finding it intrinsically, in the face of their fear of losing their edge amongst their competition. This supports our finding that 62 percent of students said that school closures did not affect their motivation to succeed. Without the structure of the school day, established practice times with teammates and coaching accountability, it became each individual’s responsibility to schedule their day, incorporate their training sessions and develop new structures and habits.

This process turned out to be an area of growth for many athletes referencing the additional space and time they had to think and be at choice for how to spend their days. *Do I get up early and do my workout or do I sleep in? Do I stop playing video games so I can go to bed at a reasonable hour and get up for my workout? Do I reach out to my coach or teammates for a new workout plan?*

We also queried students about their resources. *How were they communicating with family members and coaches, if at all?* We found that support from family, including shared workouts and general presence, were major factors in why motivation was maintained. One rising senior baseball player commented on this dynamic: while he would “work on his hitting daily,” his father would film his sessions to be critiqued after practice. His mother would even travel to the batting cages with him, and although she did not throw him pitches, she would be nearby walking their dog. The sheer presence of his parents helped maintain his drive and focus.

Improvement in motivation was driven by the threat of declining performance or the perception that their competition was also working hard and so they wanted to be ready when competition resumed to normalcy. One female sophomore stated, “Interestingly enough, training during the COVID-19 pandemic has become a great distraction from my teenage world seemingly falling apart. While the pandemic has taken a toll on my mental health, I’ve found much pleasure in maintaining physical form ...

So I started working out and doing my own practices, just in case we went back to school and I still had a track season. It was hard for me in the beginning because I was mentally struggling with the fact I could only see my household family. I am really an extrovert so it was hard.”

Additional creative alternatives such as cycling with family, online competitions on erg rowing machines, and weight workouts in the driveway that would even make NFL Hall of Famer, Terrell “T.O.” Owens proud were also named as important weekly experiences. Unfortunately, what could not be replicated was the social interaction.

To bridge this gap many coaches sent out work out videos, scheduled team Zoom calls, and emailed fitness plans to resource athletes at home. Team captains, or self-proclaimed leaders on clubs and teams created group chats to keep communication going while beginning to integrate new athletes that would be enrolled in the following year.

Again, what could not be replicated was the social interaction. Many athletes mourned the loss of their team connection. Their sport was much more than just wins and losses. The student writing was expressive and passionate about what a powerful place their sports had in their lives. One junior athlete on crew said, “I want to say I was devastated, but that’s a little over-dramatic. Right? But, it was that one thing I could finally look forward to, and I just didn’t have it anymore, because we’re all so close to each other in the boats and it would spread the virus. And, that kind of like destroyed my kind of soul, because now the only way to workout would be on the machine at home. *It lacks that team bonding type of aspect that I would get being at the boathouse with just friends.* And, for lack of better terms, it really just sucked! ”

As educators, we aspire to help students find their intellectual passions and pursuits, to grow their range of curiosity each year, and yet we found, in many of the reported experiences of those surveyed and interviewed, regardless of perceived academic success, that school was experienced as a requirement or pathway to the domain of athletics, in which they were experiencing true joy and fulfillment.

For some athletes, without practice and games or meets to look forward to, school seemed to lose its purpose. A junior male athlete shared, “But one bad thing, it was more on academics, is that lack of a motivator...not physically interacting with people. It just kind of took a toll on (my) academics, because I felt pretty much bored out of my mind, and there’s nothing to look forward to at the end of the day.” A junior continued this line of thinking with more intensity, writing, “The bleak nature of attending classes from 8 o’clock to 3 o’clock followed by three to five hours of homework takes a toll on the teenage psyche. Personally, rowing gives me something to look forward to after the bell rings at 2:45. It’s a break between the mindless workloads we’re told to endure from age five until our late-twenties, and all of it is just for the slight chance of success in adulthood. The meaning of athletics stretches far beyond just existing as an extracurricular to write down on a college application. Athletics are an escape from a world where kids are judged by numbers on paper. Athletics care for the real physical student instead of the name on a transcript. After reading what I had just stated on athletics, you may ask me: What’s the meaning of athletics to you once the academic aspect is removed? Athletics becomes a place to bond with teammates and nurture inner-competitive spirit. It teaches kids to physically push themselves after they’ve told themselves they have nothing left. Personally, I believe athletics to be critical in the development of teenagers.”

Our inquiry into the lived experiences of high school athletes uncovered remarkable adaptability as expressed by home workouts, family support and advocacy, and coach outreach. Individual explanations of how students established new home rituals and routines, were reflective about their own agency and decision making, parent and coach resource sharing, are together the ecosystem in which these high school athletes were able to grow as a result of the myriad challenges of the pandemic. Initiative was required not just to maintain one’s own practice and workouts, but to stay connected to teammates and coaches via group messaging, email, and Zoom calls. Parental presence, without over-involvement, seemed to provide the necessary added structure of support, for what in the loneliness and isolation experienced even in this pandemic.

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