

College athletes in supportive programs coping better with pandemic, study shows

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Like much of society, college athletics were thrown into disarray by the COVID-19 pandemic. While student athletes were suddenly prevented from competing, training or seeing as much of their teammates and

coaches, those who perceived they were part of a positive sporting environment also coped better during the early days of the crisis, a new study from the University of Kansas has found.

KU researchers have long studied a caring, task-involved sporting climate, in which [young athletes](#) receive support and recognition for their efforts, while mistakes are treated as learning opportunities. But the [pandemic](#) provided a unique opportunity to see whether the approach helped [collegiate athletes](#) cope with the unique stresses and challenges that came with the disruption of their seasons. A survey of more than 700 NCAA Division I, II and III and NAIA [student athletes](#) showed those who had positive support of coaches, teammates and programs were coping with the challenges of the pandemic better than those who were involved in more ego-driven climates, where the primary focus is on performance outcomes.

Athletes took the [online survey](#) in early 2020 during the first wave of the pandemic.

"We were thinking about athletes across sports and competitive levels and wondering if they were experiencing the caring climate we study. Were they part of such a climate, and if they were, would that help equip them to come through the pandemic with a more positive perspective?" said Mary Fry, professor of health, sport & exercise science. "For a lot of athletes, this pandemic might be the biggest challenge they've faced in life. We found that those athletes who perceived they were part of a strong, caring team environment reported experiencing greater psychological well-being and support and care from coaches and teammates."

The study, co-written by Chelsi Scott and Troy Wineinger, doctoral candidates at KU, and Susumu Iwasaki of Fort Lewis College, was published in the *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*. In addition to

sharing survey results, the authors outlined positive responses athletes have experienced and strategies coaches and administrators could use to help athletes and staff cope.

While many respondents reported they had been able to stay in virtual contact with coaches and teammates, others responded that they were on their own. While they faced challenges including family health, financial pressures and disruptions to their academic lives, athletes involved in ego-driven sporting climates said they suffered blows to their personal identities. Losing access to competitions and facilities was exacerbated by losing contact with their coaches and teammates.

"The pandemic is so new to the research literature, but one thing we can compare it to is injury, if someone lost a season that way," Wineinger said. "It was fun to see how coaches were able to create positive outcomes for their athletes even during a pandemic. Unfortunately, a lot of athletes didn't get that support in their sport or in life."

Respondents who had support reported higher levels of mental health, overall well-being, hope, happiness and ability to cope with the stress of the pandemic. Athletes who perceived they were part of a caring environment routinely reported their coaches asked about their health and challenges they faced off the field. Those coaches also encouraged players to stay in contact with teammates. The students also reported that the blow of losing the highly structured life of a collegiate [athlete](#) was softened by coaches who offered hope and reassured them their contributions were still valued.

"A lot of the athletes who had this kind of support were able to become their own beacons of hope," Scott said. "Almost all said, 'The most important thing is we're staying healthy.' We've seen a lot of positive things come from the caring, task-involved climate on the field. This highlights the benefits off the field, especially in challenging times, the

impact it can have on personal identity and well-being."

Based on the experiences of survey respondents and previous research, the authors shared several strategies coaches and administrators could use to support athletes throughout the pandemic, including checking in regularly; considering student views while making team decisions; helping them plan for their future and making their health a priority. That included promoting healthy behaviors; providing information on accessing food, medical and financial resources; identifying mental health concerns and promoting psychological well-being; and sustaining motivation and encouraging optimism.

While it is unclear when the pandemic will end or how collegiate athletics will return to normal, the authors said the study shows fostering a positive, caring climate can provide benefits to performance as well as help deal with the stress of a global health crisis.

"This adds to the benefits of coaches being intentional in supporting their athletes," Fry said. "Research has shown that athletes have more fun, manage stress better and compete harder when they perceive a strong and supportive climate within their teams. The evidence for the benefits within sport have been strong, but the benefits to athletes outside the sport are growing, and we think this information can really help the next generation of coaches and parents."

More information: Chelsi E. Scott et al, Creating an Optimal Motivational Team Climate to Help Collegiate Athletes Thrive during the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/21520704.2021.1876194](https://doi.org/10.1080/21520704.2021.1876194)

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