



ISSN Print: 2664-7559
ISSN Online: 2664-7567
IJSHPE 2024; 6(1): 23-28
www.physicaleducationjournal.in
Received: 20-11-2023
Accepted: 29-12-2023

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Exploring the sports performance training of the college student-athletes amidst COVID-19 Pandemic: A qualitative inquiry

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26647559.2024.v6.i1a.96>

Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences in sports performance training of college student-athletes during the pandemic in Higher Education Institutions in Davao del Norte. The study employed a qualitative research design, specifically phenomenology, and involved ten college student-athletes who had been active in individual, dual, and team sports for the previous three years. Semi-structured questions were employed during the interview. According to the study's findings, four distinct significant themes emerged; first is finite access which includes: limited sports equipment; struggles with limited sports facilities; and limited physical interaction and communication. Meanwhile, a degenerate spirit involves losing self-discipline, inactive lifestyle, and screen time temptations. On the other hand, a dearth of wellness includes loss of motivation, health issues, and fitness issues. Lastly, adaptive robust sports innovations include home sports workouts, modified sports training procedures, and improvised training equipment. A further study should be undertaken to examine student-athlete experiences from a different angle.

Keywords: Finite access, degenerate spirit, dearth of wellness, sports innovations, student-athletes, COVID-19

Introduction

Sports performance training prepares your body for success in a specific competitive environment. Overall, fitness is essential for athletes. However, each sport is distinct. Even within the same sport, different positions require different skills to succeed. It is well understood that adequate athlete training through long-term plans is necessary for developing sports elites. In addition, if athletes undergo proper sports performance training, this will contribute to their fitness and wellness. In this context, fitness refers to physical health and is defined as the ability to complete a physical task or the absence of a physical ailment. On the other hand, wellness refers to the harmonious coexistence of various health-related elements in one's life. Everybody must engage in fitness and wellness activities regularly to avoid health condition and encourage individuals to maintain their healthy lifestyles in order to maintain total fitness in life actively. Moreover, engaging fitness and wellness activities can achieve physically, mental, emotional, and social (Calixtro, 2021) ^[2].

Furthermore, student-athletes or varsity students are among the most affected during this pandemic. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, widespread insecurity has been in the sporting world. As a group, student-athletes face a variety of social and academic challenges. It is essential to recognize some of the specific challenges this demographic is currently facing and understand our student-athletes mental and physical status. This ensures that their needs are met while protecting the population's health and well-being. Thus, sports performance training was considered a prevalent problem throughout the country. Because of the added stress that comes with being an athlete, mental illness is thought to be more prevalent in student-athletes than in the average college student. According to research, student-athletes have a higher rate of depression and suicidal ideation when compared to non-athletes.

This study contributes to sports, particularly athletes' performance training. Sports have a significant impact on economic and social development. Governments recognize its significance and have even emphasized its contribution to advancing women and young people, individuals, communities, and health, education, and social inclusion goals.

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Stopping or changing school, sports, and/or recreational opportunities may significantly impact student-athlete's health behaviors, such as physical activity, social connections, and mental health. We are still determining what sports will look like after the pandemic, especially given early evidence that the virus that caused the pandemic will likely become a regular fixture in life from now on (Evans, 2020)^[4]. As a result, research into the pandemic's impact on physical activity, social connections, and mental health has spread rapidly.

However, the conduct of sports performance training among the student-athletes encountered many challenges not only in the local, national, and international settings, as mentioned above. There are other issues and concerns raised by student-athletes that need to be addressed. How student-athletes maintain their sports training performance during the pandemic is an important question. As a researcher, she explored the sports performance training of college student-athletes in the midst of the pandemic and allows us to see the realities unfolding in front of our eyes as we take a closer look at these aspects and formulate mechanisms to address them appropriately, as well as develop a proposed sports training program based on the study's findings. This proposed enhanced sports training program will assist college student-athletes in remaining physically active while mitigating the effects of detraining. The athlete's physical fitness must stay relatively high. As a result, athletes must attempt to perform the technical movements of their sport, even if this is difficult in many cases.

Materials and Methods

The primary instrument in this study was the researcher, guided by the semistructured interview guide focusing on student-athletes experiences with sports performance training during the pandemic. This interview guide contains structured questions prepared to serve as a guide for interviewers, researchers, and investigators in collecting information or data about a specific topic or issue. This interview schedule is a researcher-made question based on philosophical studies principles. The interview was divided into four sections. The first is the main question. Second the developmental question. The third question is probing. The fourth is the concluding question. Moreover, this study is a qualitative research approach utilizing the descriptive phenomenological design. Qualitative research is a systematic empirical investigation into the meaning or subject of investigation. One benefit of qualitative research is its sensitivity to contextual factors, which increases the opportunity to develop new ideas and theories. Moreover, qualitative research focuses on this issue through qualitative inquiry methods, gathering data in a natural setting sensitive to people and the environment under study. Therefore, to describe the lived experiences of the student-athletes during the pandemic, the researcher used the descriptive account of the phenomenon provided by the student-athletes in the interview.

Results

Essential Themes about the Lived Experiences of Student Athletes

Theme 1. Finite Access

In this study, finite access refers to sports set-up training during the pandemic, which demonstrated difficulties with sports equipment, struggles with limited facilities, and issues with physical interaction and communication among athletes. To mitigate the virus's spread, sports teams and athletes have

had to adopt new training methods that prioritize safety while still allowing them to maintain their physical fitness and skills. It is highlighted the importance of athlete health and safety while looking for strategies to maintain their training and preparation for future competitions.

Sub-theme 1.1 Limited Sports Equipment: Limited sports equipment displays struggles with actual sports equipment, insufficient equipment used by athletes, and insufficient sports equipment found in their homes. The closure of educational institutions worldwide as a result of COVID-19 has also had an impact on the sports education sector. They were struggling to train due to a lack of sports equipment. According to them, some participants were having difficulty on the sports equipment needed for the conduct of trainings.

Sub-theme 1.2 Struggles with Limited Sports Facilities: It illustrates space limitations during training, restricts the number of people who can cater to the facilities due to risky situations, and they find it difficult to conduct training inside their home due to space constraints. However, the design of sports training facilities, as well as the nature of sports training, offer difficulties in maintaining social distancing and adopting other safety precautions. The limited access to sports facilities during the pandemic has presented some challenges for athletes and teams attempting to train.

Sub-theme 1.3 Limited Physical Interaction and Communication: It reveals that no coaches were present during training, limitations in physical interaction among athletes, limited communication with coaches, and limited physical interaction with teammates. Although the extent to which coaches can contribute to their athletes' development is limited in many cases due to confinement, coaches who participate in coach training programs during the Covid-19 pandemic will still need to learn how to help athletes achieve various outcomes. They claim to have had difficulty adjusting to the abrupt transition from actual training to home workouts, as well as having no coach to guide and monitor athletes' training.

Theme 2. Degenerate Spirits

In this study, degenerate spirits refer to athletes' deteriorating sports skill performance which was manifested by a loss of self-discipline, the demonstration of an inactive lifestyle, and exposure to screen time. Due to the pandemic, athletes have been forced to adapt to new training methods, which may not be as effective as their previous methods. This can have an effect on an athlete's ability to train effectively, reducing their ability to perform well in sports.

Sub-theme 2.1 Losing Self-Discipline: This describes having no control over overeating and sleeping, which impacts sports skill performance. The pandemic has disrupted athletes' daily routines, including training and competition schedules. This disruption can make keeping a consistent schedule difficult, resulting in a loss of self-discipline. Athletes experienced a loss of self-discipline in training, exercise, and diet as a result of the pandemic. Sports skill performance is suffering because athletes are no longer motivated to exercise since competitions have stopped.

Sub-theme 2.2 Inactive Lifestyle: Demonstrates inconsistent fitness maintenance, feeling lazy during training and workouts, and demonstrating an inactive lifestyle among athletes. Furthermore, athletes who adopt a more sedentary

lifestyle during the pandemic may lose physical fitness, perform poorly in sports, and be more prone to injury. Due to quarantine restrictions implemented in many countries in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, daily active behavior has decreased. Home confinement appears to lead to detraining, becoming a new challenge for sports scientists in determining how to counteract the effects of detraining on physiological adaptations related to regular exercise and athlete performance.

Sub-theme 2.3 Screen Time Temptations: Exposure to screen time generates temptations from watching movie series, gadgets, and watching dramas on televisions and cellphones. However, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people, including athletes, have increased their use of social media. While social media can help athletes stay in touch with their coaches and teammates during the pandemic, it can also present a number of temptations that may negatively impact their performance.

Theme 3. Death of Wellness

The study's findings of a dearth of wellness allude to the lack of sporting activities during the pandemic, which displayed experiences of motivation loss caused by health and fitness issues. Due to restrictions and limited contact, suspending collegiate sports tournaments during the pandemic impacts their athletic ability because they no longer actively participate in sports training. In addition, lack of competition is an additional issue for teams and athletes because competitions are the best way for athletes to maintain their physical fitness and sport form.

Sub-theme 3.1 Loss of Motivation: The core of losing motivation experienced by athletes includes a lack of motivation due to the unusual regimen, a loss of desire to train due to the cancellation of intercollegiate activities, and a sense of futility in maintaining sports skills because there is no reason to prepare. On the other hand, a lack of opportunities to compete or train with others can lead to athletes losing motivation. Lack of motivation can also be exacerbated by the absence of sports participation's social and emotional benefits, such as camaraderie and a sense of purpose.

Sub-theme 3.2 Health Issues: Facing health issues during a pandemic exposes athletes' experiences with anxiety over their future careers, losing and gaining weight due to uncontrolled eating, and being concerned about not maintaining fitness due to the cancellation of sporting activities. Similarly, we all know that sports play an essential role in promoting student athletes' mental health and well-being. The loss of athletic activities and motivation to train can result in feelings of sadness, anxiety, and depression, all of which can harm students' mental health. Canceling sports activities can result in increased sedentary behavior, which can have negative health consequences such as weight gain, poor cardiovascular health, and decreased mobility.

Sub-theme 3.3 Fitness Issues: Suffering from fitness issues during the COVID19 pandemic discovers low cardiovascular endurance, inability to maintain the usual skills, having to play differently due to inconsistency in training, and being quickly off balance. Athletes' physical fitness levels have declined as a result of their inability to participate in regular training and competitions. Athletes have experienced several fitness issues as a result of the cancellation of sporting

activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, including decreased physical fitness, muscle mass loss, decreased endurance, weight gain, and poor flexibility and mobility. When sports activities resume, their overall health and athletic performance may suffer. COVID-19 was associated with significant decreases in mobility, walking, and physical activity, as well as increases in sedentary behavior.

Theme 4. Adaptive Robust Sports Innovations

In the present research, adaptive robust sports innovations refer to managing sports innovations initiated by student-athletes during the pandemic by changing their home workouts, modifying sports procedures due to limited access to facilities, and improving sports training equipment found at home. Athletes have had to adjust to a new reality in which they have limited access to training facilities, competitions, and even teammates due to the pandemic. Many athletes, however, have demonstrated resilience and ingenuity in finding ways to continue training and stay active during this time.

Sub-theme 4.1 Home Sports Workout: It unveils being innovative just to maintain their sports performance by watching training and workouts that can be done at home via videos. Performing basic movements with as little equipment as possible. Many athletes have resorted to personal home workouts due to the closure of training facilities and the cancellation of sporting events during the pandemic. Athletes have had to become creative in designing their workout routines using minimal equipment and space due to limited access to gym equipment and training facilities.

Sub-theme 4.2 Modified Sports Training Procedures: Modifying sports performance training procedures reveals details concerning adjusting sports drills, implementing social distancing in a specific space, and adapting changes such as safety protocols while training. Furthermore, modified sports training procedures emphasized safety and risk reduction during the pandemic while allowing athletes to maintain physical fitness and prepare for competition. Sports teams and athletes may need to continue adapting and modifying their training procedures as the pandemic evolves to ensure safety and reduce the risk of transmission. Sports training procedures were significantly altered during the pandemic, which was necessary to ensure athletes' safety.

Sub-theme 4.3 Improvised Sports Training Equipment: Improvising sports training equipment reminded athletes to be creative by making alternative equipment found around the house. The pandemic has disrupted the athletes' daily routines, including their workout plans. However, there are still ways to keep training and improving equipment to keep them active and healthy. Run up and down your basement stairs, do triceps dips with a chair, or use cans of soup or a gallon of water as a weight. Jumping over a shoebox a few times can also provide a quick cardio burst. They do not need a gym to exercise, but they can take advantage of their surroundings and available equipment at home.

Discussion

Lived Experiences of Student Athletes

The first theme is finite access with three sub-themes. The first sub-theme reveals limited sports equipment. Many athletes lacked access to the equipment required to participate in or maximize their training. During this confinement at home, athletes attempt to perform technical movements of

their sport, though this is often limited due to, for example, reliance on the opponent, such as team sports, the need for equipment, or the location of practice, such as swimming (Andreato, 2020) ^[1]. As the result of this study reveals, the participant's sports trainings were affected due to limited sports equipment. This implies that limited sports equipment can obstruct the conduct of sports training, and athletes may have had limited access to the equipment and resources they needed to train because many sports facilities were closed or operating at reduced capacity. Athletes' training and fitness levels have suffered due to limited access to sports equipment. Athletes cannot maintain their training regimens without the proper equipment, which can lead to a decline in their physical condition. This can impact their ability to stay physically fit, develop their skills, and prepare for competition. Second sub-theme reveals struggles with limited sports facilities. Closures of specific athlete training facilities were prevalent, limiting athletes' access to these and their multidisciplinary teams. Access to training resources was a significant barrier for student-athletes to maintain their training (National Collegiate Athletic Association Research, 2020), and it was especially difficult for athletes who required sport-specific equipment such as a pool, a court, or a weight rack. It conveys that struggles with limited sports facilities hinder in maintaining their sports skills. This can have long-term consequences for their performance and prospects. People may need more access to sports facilities to maintain their fitness levels and physical health. This can have negative health consequences, such as weight gain, poor cardiovascular health, and poor mental health. Third sub-theme reveals limited physical interaction and communication. The lack of systematic training, lack of proper interaction between players and coaches, and unsuitable training conditions caused by the pandemic harm athletes' sports performance (Chen *et al.*, 2020) ^[3]. However, returning to regular training like pre-COVID days is still being determined, especially since new waves are expected. The situation could result in extended restrictions on direct training, putting physical coaching at risk. This entails that limited physical interaction and communication between coaches and athletes during the pandemic has been challenging for them, which can reduce their motivation to train and compete. Athletes may struggle to stay motivated and focused on their goals if they do not have the support of their coaches and teammates. Coaches are essential in developing athletes' talents, motivating them, and promoting collaboration. To mitigate the adverse effects of limited interaction, coaches, and athletes must find ways to maintain physical interaction and communication while adhering to safety protocols.

The second theme is degenerate spirits with three sub-themes. The first sub-theme pertains to losing self-discipline. Studies have emphasized the high risk which college athletes are exposed to, including the inability of college athletes in dealing with the challenges that they encounter. In fact, youth athletes who are unable to deal with perceived failure prefer to drop out of sports participation. As a result of poor performance, athletes reduced their self-identification with their athletic role. Athletes have expressed significant grief and frustration as a result of the forced period of isolation, disruption to regular training routines, and cancellation of competitions. This connotes that athletes' losing self-discipline during the pandemic can lead to a decline in their sports skill performance. Athletes must be self-disciplined to maintain focus and motivation during training and competition. Athletes who lack self-discipline may struggle

to focus on their goals and may lack the motivation to push themselves to improve their athletic abilities. This can affect their athletic performance because they may not be able to perform to their full potential. The second sub-theme reveals inactive lifestyle. Maintaining an active lifestyle is also critical for athletes to maintain their sports skill performance. Home exercise using various safe, simple, and easy-to-apply training methods is ideal for maintaining fitness levels while avoiding COVID-19. Prolonged periods of inactivity can impair cardiovascular fitness, impairing an athlete's ability to perform at their peak. Athletes who have not been training for some time due to a pandemic lockdown may be concerned that this will harm their sporting skills and performance. This matter proved that the most important impact of an inactive lifestyle for athletes is reduced physical fitness. Athletes may struggle to maintain their strength, endurance, and flexibility if they cannot access their regular training facilities and equipment. This may make it more difficult for them to return to their sport at their previous level of performance once the pandemic ends. When competitions reopen, this might have an adverse effect on an athlete's performance and ability to satisfy the physical demands of their sport. Athletes should stay as active as possible during this time, whether through home workouts, virtual training sessions, or other forms of physical activity that can be done while adhering to social distancing guidelines. Third sub-theme pertains to screen time temptations. Athletes can be easily distracted by social media during training sessions. Constant notifications, messages, and feed scrolling can disrupt their focus and concentration, resulting in less effective workouts and potentially affecting their performance. Excessive social media use reduces physical activity in young athletes, which has been linked to increased depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms. Instead of being distracted by gadgets, staying connected with teammates via virtual platforms such as video conferencing and messaging apps is far better. This can assist them in maintaining a sense of community and support even when physically separated. This indicated that screen time during the pandemic could have several consequences for student-athletes, including decreased physical activity, decreased social interaction, mental health issues, and poor sleep quality. Athletes who neglect their training in favor of social media use are more likely to perform poorly on the field or court. This can result in poor performance, reduced playing time, and injuries. Athletes who spend too much time on social media may miss out on valuable training opportunities, affecting their sports performance.

The third theme is dearth of wellness with three sub-themes. The first sub-theme reveals loss of motivation. Several studies have investigated training motivation among athletes during the pandemic. Morbée *et al.* (2021) surveyed 207 cyclists in Belgium. While all cyclists struggled to motivate themselves to train, those with autonomous motivation adapted to the changes and continued training, whereas those with controlled motivation or amotivation struggled. One of the most significant impediments to being motivated to train was disruptions to a training schedule. Discovered that training interruptions during lockdown reduced motivation in more than half of the athletes surveyed. Due to a lack of resources, athletes usually exercise to promote general health and well-being rather than sport-specific skills. It is inferred that loss of motivation, athletes may struggle to maintain a regular training program or put in the required effort to enhance their abilities and physical condition if they lack the motivation and excitement to push themselves. A lack of goals and milestones to aim for might make athletes feel stuck

and lose their identity. Motivation loss's consequences underscore the need to address and conquer this difficulty. Schools can help student-athletes stay engaged and motivated even in the absence of traditional sporting activities by addressing motivation loss head on. Loss of motivation and cancellation of sporting events can have a negative impact on their chances of pursuing such careers. The second sub-theme pertains to health issues. Many athletes perceived the canceled sports season as a tragic loss, causing feelings of grief, frustration, and stress (National Collegiate Athletic Association Research, 2020). Detraining is the partial or complete loss of training-induced adaptations, in response to an insufficient training stimulus. Detraining characteristics may be different depending on the duration of training cessation or insufficient training. This suggests that the health issues arising from the cancellation of sporting activities during the COVID-19 pandemic have a number of consequences for athletes' long-term health, recovery, mental health, opportunities, and daily routines. Athletes must find ways to maintain their health during these difficult times and collaborate closely with their coaches and healthcare providers to manage any health issues that may arise. Furthermore, schools and organizations should provide support and resources to help athletes cope with the pandemic's challenges. The third sub-theme reveals fitness issues. Muscle mass loss can occur when strength training is reduced or eliminated. Muscle atrophy is caused by a protein degradation/synthesis imbalance that favors the former. Inactivity, in general, affects different muscles and muscle chains depending on whether they are tonic or phasic, resulting in muscle shortening and/or hypertonia or laxity and/or hypotonia depending on the muscle type. However, physical activity lowers both systolic and diastolic blood pressure and helps remodel left ventricular hypertrophy, lowering cardiovascular risks (Hegde & Solomon, 2015) [5]. It is stressed that fitness issues due to the cancellation of sporting activities during the pandemic significantly impacted athletes' fitness. Due to a lack of regular competition and training opportunities, physical fitness levels have declined, as have muscle mass, cardiovascular endurance, and overall athleticism. The long-term effects of the pandemic on athlete fitness are likely to be felt for some time to come. We all know that being physically active can help you manage your weight, improve your brain health, lower your risk of disease, strengthen your bones and muscles, and make it easier to do things you normally do. The last theme is adaptive robust sports innovation with three sub-themes. The first sub-theme reveals home sports workout. Athletes can tailor their workouts to improve specific skills such as strength, endurance, or flexibility. Working out at home lowers the risk of exposure and creates a more secure workout environment. By eliminating the need to travel to a gym or training facility, athletes have been able to save time and easily incorporate workouts into their daily routines. Although it can be difficult for many athletes to maintain peak physical condition when they cannot train in their usual facilities or with their usual trainers and coaches, they find ways to continue their training by implementing home workouts. It can be noted that home sports workouts may not provide the same level of social interaction and support as training with teammates and coaches. This can affect an athlete's motivation and mental health. Regular home exercise helps athletes maintain their cardiovascular health, muscular strength, and general athleticism. Many athletes have turned to technology to help them with their home workouts. This has highlighted the potential for

technology to play an even more significant role in future training and fitness. The second sub-theme is modified sports training procedures. During the pandemic, changes to sports training procedures may impact athletes' performance. Smaller group sizes and modified drills, for example, may result in less teamwork and fewer opportunities for athletes to practice their skills in game-like situations. The study underscored that the implications of modified sports training procedures during the pandemic are significant and may have long-term consequences for sports training and competition. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of adaptability, health and safety, innovation, and teamwork in sports training. Changing sports training procedures during the pandemic may put athletes at risk of injury. Athletes may be working with new equipment or training in different environments due to changes in training routines, which can increase the likelihood of accidents or injuries. Furthermore, the pandemic's stress and uncertainty may increase the risk of injuries. The third sub-theme reveals improvised sports training equipment. To compensate for the limitations of their improvised equipment, athletes may need to modify their training routines. Although some sports require specific equipment and facilities to train effectively, improvising may not be possible. During this time, athletes may need to find alternative ways to train or focus on different aspects of their sport. This can be indicated that while improvising sports equipment may be a viable option for athletes to continue training during the pandemic, the implications mentioned above must be considered. When upgrading their training equipment, athletes should prioritize their safety, access to resources, and performance goals. This can have an impact on their training plan and their performance goals.

Conclusion

Student-athletes or varsity students are among the most affected during this pandemic. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, widespread insecurity has been in the sporting world. As a group, student-athletes face a variety of social and academic challenges. It is essential to recognize some of the specific challenges this demographic is currently facing and understand our student-athletes mental and physical status. This ensures that their needs are met while protecting the population's health and well-being. On the other hand, this study aimed to explore student-athletes experiences on sports training performance in the province of Davao del Norte. The following were the significant results of this study. First is finite access, which refers to sports set-up training which includes limited sports equipment; sub-theme struggles with limited sports facilities; and limited physical interaction and communication. Second, degenerate spirits which refers to deteriorating sports skill performance, which include losing self-discipline; inactive lifestyle; and screen time temptations. Third, dearth of wellness which refers to a lack of sporting activities inflicts issues, which include lack of motivation; health issues; and fitness issues. Fourth, Adaptive robust sports innovations which refers to managing adaptive sports innovation which include home sports workouts; modified sports training procedures; and improvised training equipment.

Subsequently, this study proved that, indeed, every narrative account of the participant is a text to be read, which attempted to ascertain the multiple facets of their experiences in the sports training performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results yielded in the phenomenological inquiry that issues and concerns regarding sports training can be addressed through the proposed outputs. Indeed, the COVID-19

pandemic has significantly impacted student-athletes and their athletic training programs. While some students could continue training at home or with modified programs, others faced significant challenges due to gym closures, canceled games, and limited access to training facilities. Epistemologically, the result also confirmed the assumption that athletes' point of view in looking at their experience in sports performance training during the COVID19 pandemic would unfold valuable inputs in determining various challenges to understand the situation.

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