

It's Not Just Physical: Exploring Identity Threat in Sports



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It's Not Just Physical: Exploring Identity Threat in Sports

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1.0 Introduction - What is Identity and How is it Threatened

Sarah is a 19-year-old college student who is involved with her school's rugby team as one of the team captains. Rugby is an irreplaceable, imperative aspect of her experience at school. She has several good friends on the team, a good relationship with her coach, and enough skill to potentially get her on a national team. If she were to tear her ACL after a bad tackle, have a serious falling out with a teammate, if she can no longer play because she cannot balance rugby with academics – then what follows can be despairing. In most cases of students in college who are also on a sports team, they develop an identity in their role as an athlete. Another aspect of this and being on a sports team relates to their social identity. This is when we attribute a part of our identity based on the groups we affiliate ourselves with (Scheepers 2007 p. 228), which is only strengthened by being on the same sports team. When a person describes themselves, there are important factors in their lives that make them who they are. One thing that pairs with this is and evaluates it further is Social Identity Theory. Social identity can be described as “categorical membership” (Davis, et al., 2019), and how someone fits into different groups and how this makes up who they are. This could be through your family, school, work, political affiliation (Davis et al., 2019), or through your sports team. There are also aspects of one’s social identity that may prevail over others, and this can come out in different ways. Someone's social identity can be expressed very vibrantly or it can be more dormant, but when a person's identity is threatened, the effects of that can be very damaging.

1.1 Social Identity Threat

Social identity threat can be described as the declining of psychological and physical well-being due to the positive image of a group being compromised in the case of inter-group threat (Scheepers, 2008), or when someone is forced out of a group, either by choice of the group, injury, or any other reason, and how that affects their ability to connect with others. In Sarah's case, this would be as if Sarah's ACL was torn and she was forced to quit rugby even though that was the last thing she wanted. This can also result from things other than physical injury, as the next sections will analyze. Resulting from this can be an identity crisis, where she no longer knows where she belongs or how to continue with her life with rugby no longer being in it. She has done the sport since she was four years old, and she did not learn how to connect properly with people who did not play rugby, so she will have trouble finding a new social identity with a new group. She will most likely still be friends with her past teammates, but she will no longer share the comradery that comes with physically playing together and sharing that experience.

1.2 Identity Crisis

Identity crisis in literature written by Patrica Lally (2007) is described as a suspension, specifically meaning the transition from their athlete self to the other self that they will become. It mostly is confusion about what they will now become, now that they have lost possibly the biggest part of themselves (Lally 2017, p. 92). She quotes a swimmer, and he states that he would no longer be known as "The Swimmer", and how he has found it difficult to cope with that since retiring from swimming (Lally 2017, p. 92). She also goes into how those who retire from their sport expect to be barred from their peer group, and they also report situations where

this has happened. They give examples regarding specific athletes who have retired and were then slowly excluded from the team dynamic (Lally 2007, p. 92), and of course, this is natural since you are not playing with them and practicing every day as you used to, but nonetheless, it is one of the things athletes dread the most about in their athletic career - when it has to eventually end. As far as coping strategies in order to deal with this, they note that spending time appreciating and anticipating the extent of which the emotional effect will have on you when it comes around, and they approached other teammates who had already retired and asked them for guidance on how they dealt with it (Lally 2007, p. 92).

When it comes to sports, a lot of athletes' identities and the sport that they do can be very intertwined, and what this research will explore is how one deals with the heartbreak that comes with no longer being able to participate in their sport that they have based their life experience on and gave most of their energy to. When someone is unable to do a sport anymore, it can be for a number of different reasons, including many different types of threats, some being physical, some being more emotional. This paper will outline 4 threats athletes face and how they overcome reshaping their identity.

There are a few important terms that are included later in this research related to ego and how it affects identity. The two terms specifically are defined as ego dissonance and ego resilience. Ego dissonance can be described as when an athlete feels like they no longer can fill out the role that they feel responsible for, in this case playing the sport and accomplishing the goals they set for themselves (Renton et al., 2021). This can affect identity in that our identity is defined by the roles we give ourselves, and if one of those roles fail, we feel as though we lose a piece of that identity, and this can result in crisis. Ego resilience, in an article written by Lee et al. (2017), is defined when one has a positive outlook and people are adaptable to adverse

situations without letting their dignity be affected to an extreme amount. This combats ego dissonance in that when you have an imbalance of emotions towards your identity as a result of losing something that played an important role in your life, for example when you can no longer play a sport, ego resilience is what opens people up to finding new things to love. It helps athletes keep away from feeling helpless and unable to search for new endeavors.

1.4 How Groups Identify and Evaluate Threat

Part of the reason why social identity is affected so deeply by sports is because of the aspect of being a part of a group that all identify together. When a group's identity experiences threat or praise, it usually is affected in a similar way among all members of the group (Ma et al., 2023). This is when a member or members of a group feel that they are the focus of a stereotype or prejudice not because of their individual attributes, but because of a group they are affiliated with. This is also sometimes not by their own volition. There are threats that apply to groups in general, but especially when a group has a common goal and they all are working together regularly to achieve that goal, as that is what generally occurs on a sports team. There is also even evidence that suggests threats can sometimes be motivational to a group as well because they strive to keep a certain image or reputation (Ma et al., 2023).

1.3 Identifying Threats

As far as how threats can be identified, there are several different ways to process this as well. Possibilities include placing the group in a negative spotlight via a rumor or the spreading of information about something unfavorable that a group member has done, the deviant group members themselves can cause a threat to a group when they are compared negatively to an

outside group, and so on (Ma et al., 2023). It is difficult to address the threat a group is experiencing and to remedy it before any damage is done if the threat is not first identified. There are different ways in which a group can deteriorate, and thus different ways to solve these issues. In order to treat the threat, different information is needed as it changes with any given circumstance. We need to know what type of threat it is, where it came from, and the contextual evidence that led to the threat and the consequences thereafter (Ma et al., 2023). The result and consequence of a threat can also vary. Sometimes, when there is a member of the group who acts in an unsavory way, this can affect how the group is perceived by others and increase the threats that come to them, and can cause anxiety and shame for the group as a whole.

One of the threats that will be discussed is related to the reputation an athlete has by being an athlete. Reputation threat is how you are viewed as a group, referring to the team that you play with, by members that are not involved in the sport that you play. This comes into play when you are forced out of a sport or athletics in general because when people see you a certain way, perhaps as the “rugby girl” in Sarah's case, and they associate you with that part of your life and that suddenly goes away, people sometimes do not know how to address you. Even if they do not play the sport themselves, sometimes that is the only way they know how to talk to you, because they know how important it is, or was, to you. Also depending on how you were forced out of the group, it harms your reputation and, if you ever wanted to get into sports again, it can damage your possibility of doing so.

The second threat that will be discussed is that of comparison threat. How comparison threat differs from reputational threat, is that while reputational threat refers to how people outside your specific sports team, and outside of the sports arena in general, see you and what you are known for, comparison threat refers to how people within your team see you, and how

you may compare yourself to your team members or role models in your sport. It can be difficult also for the team to know how to talk to you either without making you feel uncomfortable or left out because you cannot participate or engage with them in the same way.

The next route is physical injury or physical threat. This brings us back to Sarah's ACL injuries. This refers to when someone is forced out of a sport because of a debilitating injury that causes them to no longer be able to play or participate in the sport they were previously involved in. This can have a devastating effect on someone's mental health, and it is something that is unfortunately experienced very often in the realm of athletics. It also incorporates the hardship that comes with wanting to play through an injury, the fear and anxiety surrounding potential injury, and overworking yourself in order to perform well. This also portrays how injuries are not always sudden, but rather a long-lasting injury that comes with this, depriving your body of what it needs.

Transitioning from physical threat is also a very important aspect of someone's sporting career, and that is mental and emotional threat. This includes things like burnout, mental illness, and other things that might arise. Burnout can occur when you overwork your mind and your body so hard that everything starts to fail, and you no longer work to the best of your ability. Most of the time this happens both in your sport and your academics. It is possible for disorders like anxiety and depression to be pre-existing but they can also come about through shortcomings and disappointment in incapacabilities in athletics.

Throughout the sections as well, we will discuss solutions to all of these different types of threats, and how they are best treated. Many types of therapy strategies could be used. This may include how to overcome mental blocks, physical injury, and many other adverse experiences one can have from being a part of athletics. There are even some resources that describe threats

as being motivational. Researching these solutions and strategies for how to treat athletes who may struggle with any of these threats is extremely important for future endeavors in the field of sports psychology and how best to treat athletes under these conditions in the best manner. It is especially important to research this field because athletes specifically tend to be a group of people who struggle with identity threats the most because of all the different stressors they have related to their athletic identity and then also including the threat to their identity after they eventually have to leave the arena (Lee, 2017). Learning how to remedy this would be essential to either continue on in an athletic career successfully, or to be able to cope with having to end an athletic career for any reason. There is also hope that this research will help future sports psychologists in helping their athletes the most effectively.

2.0 Reputational Threat

Author Dumont (2017) provides the definition of reputation to be a “shared, localized and temporary social representation associated with a name and generated through a process of social evaluation relatively formalized” (Dumont 2017, p. 516). Reputation is a huge part of anyone's life, let alone a college student, and a college athlete at that. It determines, essentially, how you are known at school and by your peers, and in a professional setting, how the public eye views you. So, as one can imagine, when this is threatened, it can cause a chain reaction of effects on a person and their identity. Reputational threat can be described as the threat to the relationship, whether it be known by both parties or not, between an athlete and someone or people outside of the sport that they play, and your relationship with your social identity. More specifically, it is how people outside of a certain sport view or perceive athletes who do play that sport and how they would expect them to act or behave. This can be, in the case of university sports, when

college athletes are being perceived by other students at the school, or by professional athletes and their fans. Reputation plays a huge role in how universities operate in general as well. For example, if there is some sort of scandal or the reputation of a university is damaged in any way, it can seriously hinder how many enrollments or even applications they receive, donor withdrawals, and student defections (Downes, 2017). This can also be how students perceive their reputation being damaged to be, but replace enrollment numbers with the ability to meet new people, student defections in place of losing friends, and so on. In Sarah's case, since she can no longer play on her school's rugby team, she also feels as though her reputation has been hurt and that she has become isolated. She doesn't necessarily feel this way because she thinks people think less of her morally, but she feels like people do not have anything to associate her with anymore, and she fears she will eventually become irrelevant.

Sometimes, when a person is forced out of a sport for any reason, it can be difficult to grapple with how you think you are perceived by others when you no longer are associated with a sport that you believed to identify you in a big way. This can be very stressful and difficult to cope with. Reputation is a gigantic part of university and professional sports, because, especially when it comes to schools that are dominated by athletes, it becomes what people see you as, and it becomes what people outside of athletics associate you with. This also creates pressure in which athletes feel like they need to succeed and receive high honors in their sport to keep up their reputation, whether that be on campus or in the public eye in terms of professional sports. Going back to Dumont's article on reputation, he refers to the time and energy it takes to create one's reputation. He explains it in terms of someone creating a "perception of legitimacy" according to the expectations of society (Dumont, 2017, p. 516). He also notes how creating one's reputation is something that we do and work on every day, and that half of our lives are

performance, and the other half is the anticipation and preparedness for the performance (Dumont, 2017). The reason people create resumes for jobs is so that they can create a reputation for themselves that is attractive to different places of work or universities, and if you are accepted into that position that you applied for using that resume, the stress is now about keeping that reputation up without feeling like you are letting them down. The process for creating one's reputation contains many steps, such as things you would not normally think of in terms of athletics, but things like creating a social media presence, choosing where you live or go to school, and constantly deciding on things that will make you more or less palatable to the world, among other things that you decide on in daily life. All of these factors dictate how others see and perceive you. So, when you pour the majority of that reputation work into a sport, and how you grow and twist around this sport like a tree, making it the center and the roots of your identity and the main thing that people associate you with, one can imagine how a person can be affected if all that work comes up for nothing because of something minute. This can include anything that can damage a reputation, such as going to jail, getting caught in a lie, drug or alcohol abuse, something you post, or something that was posted about you online, and the list continues.

There is also the argument that, along the same vein as reputation in sports, that there is always the condition of people or students only doing a sport to gain social recognition or status, or even money in a professional setting. In Dumont's article, he worked on a case study involving professional rock climbers, and he notes how athletes help the promotion of products and brands dramatically (Dumont, 2017), because if people see other people doing what they hope to be able to eventually accomplish, such as climbing a mountain while wearing Eddie Bauer, then more people are going to buy Eddie Bauer products in the hope that the clothes will

somehow help their athletic ability. In terms of student-athletes and social status, this would be equivalent to a student doing a sport because they know of a person that they idolize who does that sport and they wish to be like them. This relates back to reputational threat in the sense that if someone works very hard to be in a sport in order to be like someone else, or with the goal in mind to be more liked or well-known at their university, this can be threatened if they aren't allowed to play the sport anymore. This can lead to a sort of hopelessness, and it could cause them to believe that their goals of higher social status will now never be achieved because their specific plan did not come to fruition. When this comes crashing down, especially with something unexpected, this can damage the student's reputation they worked so hard to build, even if it was not solely for athletic success. For some students, social ascension can be as good as cash. There are even some studies that portray the use of sports as a motive for an enlarged social status even in children. Research done by the Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport by Melissa Chase has found that, especially in boys, when questioned about what they care most about and what most determines their popularity, they say what sport they play, and this only increases with age (Chase et al., 2013). They also found that what was most important for girls when determining popularity among their classmates was appearance. Importantly, social norms are already prevalent in grade school children where boys are supposed to be interested in sports and girls in appearance - both of which are related to reputation.

Another facet of reputational threat is the threat of strict parents on a child that they wish to see succeed both academically and athletically. This can put a lot of stress on adolescents that are trying to do their absolute best not just for themselves, but also for the approval of their parents, and this kind of threat can present itself in different ways, whether this be emotional abuse, physical abuse, and so on, in more serious cases. More mild examples can include never

seeming like you can please your parents, and not having a lot of interest from their side in what you do and accomplish, among other things. Fear of pleasing your parents can portray that the reasoning behind doing a sport can also be for reasons other than your motivation to do well for yourself and your team. Therefore, this makes the fear of not being able to play the sport sometimes even greater, even if it is for physical injury. Research has shown that parents with general negative feelings about themselves in certain topics may project these topics onto their children and expect them to be good at what they are not (Kaplan, et al., 2001). This then puts a negative light on their children, because they feel like they have a reputation to live up to from their parents, but it is truly false and it is when parents want their children to make up for their shortcomings.

As far as solutions for this threat, It is difficult to say that one has “solved” students wanting to do a sport for social gain, because this will likely continue with or without treatment for students to come. However, a remedy for someone who has already experienced this would possibly be to instill in kids as children that you don't need to be anything specific to make others happy. This can be instilled in athletes by giving them psychological interventions to think about whenever they feel inadequate by any standard. These interventions are involved in positive psychology, and can be any sort of positive affirmation given to them first by a therapist and then they are instructed to repeat themselves on a daily basis. Some interventions include focusing on your strengths, writing down and reading through good experiences that happen to them throughout the day, that they are grateful for what is good in their life, among other sayings and actions that instill confidence in the person (Bolier et al., 2013). The use of positive psychology has resulted in reports of greater general satisfaction, not just in sports either. Students do not have to be the quarterback on the football team to have friends. You do not have to be captain of

the rugby team in order to stay in touch with your teammates. Sarah might not be playing with them anymore, but she still should be encouraged to go to games to cheer them on and to hang out with them when they do not have practice. Also, because she is now out of rugby, she should be reminded that others exist who are not in the rugby world, and maybe now that she has been forced to take a step back from it, she can allow herself to meet new people and let future friends into her web of a life that no longer centers around rugby. Ending a sports career does not mean that life itself is also over, because it has lots more to offer, and student-athletes need to be reminded of this regularly.

As for the reputation among your family, it would be useful to focus on the root of the source first, and make sure that parents know to put the well-being of their child first, and that they only wish to motivate them to do well, not to punish them if they do not. This also includes communication from the child to the parents about what they may need from them, and if the fear of doing so is too great, then they can look into seeking professional help concerning their family and how they operate.

3.0 Comparison Threat

We make comparisons every day. We compare ourselves to everyone we see, whether it be upward or downward comparisons. Upward comparisons are when you compare yourself to someone you believe to be superior to you, therefore making you feel less of yourself or letting it motivate you to be better. Downward comparison is when you compare yourself to someone you perceive to be inferior to you in order to make you feel better about yourself, or to motivate you to never stoop to their level. While reputation threat discusses how people outside of your group see and perceive you, comparison threat involves what it is like to compare to others within your group, otherwise known as the people you affiliate with on a regular basis. In terms of athletics,

this can include your teammates, other teams you are in competition with, or people you idolize, such as professional athletes. This relates to how one feels about their role models in their sport and aspiring to be like them. Comparison can be dangerous because most of the time, the person you are comparing to, especially if they are a role model and professional, is much higher than your skill level. If one is trying to achieve what they achieve it can be extremely difficult and unrealistic. If and when you do not achieve the unrealistic goals you set for yourself, the disappointment and low self-esteem that normally follow are devastating. This is especially true for people that compare themselves to their role models, because most of the time these people are professionals in the sport. Most of the time, skill levels in professional sports are much higher than, say, that of a Division Three university team.

Sarah had a role model that played for the English rugby team, and emulated her every move. She would scroll on her social media pages for hours on end, looking for how to improve so she could be more like her. Sarah was already an outstanding player, but she always put herself down because she did not make it onto the English team when she tried for it, and did not always have the exact technique and finesse that a professional rugby player does. Now that she has torn her ACL and can no longer play on the field, this disappointment has only grown larger, because now she knows for herself that she now has no way of ever achieving the dream of being on the English national team.

There is also a lot of research that suggests that social media is a horrible outlet to consider when you are looking to improve any aspect of yourself. Sarah spent so much time scouring the internet and social media of this one player, and most of the time there is a heightened sense of reality on social media pages, especially for well-known professional athletes. They talk frequently about how much their life has improved since joining the realm of

professionalism, and the drills and tips and tricks they use to maintain their status. While some of the content may be genuine, a lot of it tends to be the opposite, and people who post the most positive content are often the ones who are struggling the most with emotional instability (Weber, 2021). This portrays how you can't base the ability of an athlete and everything about them on what they post, and you shouldn't make comparisons between yourself and the posts themselves.

It makes it very easy to look down on our own lives when the average person doesn't even have the resources to do everything a professional athlete can, such as gym memberships, home gym equipment, athletic gear, and even workout clothes. It is unfair to compare yourself to something that is not attainable to most people. Also, even if it is attainable for you, buying all the same equipment that they buy will not make you the same as them and will not give you their ability. This is particularly important to remember because it is also a major component, in women's sport especially, to want to compare athleticism and body type. There is research that supports that women endure gender stereotypes when it comes to having an "athletic body" and what that looks like. In reality, societal norms make women think that athletic is "sexy", but do not accept all sorts of athletic bodies, and they emphasize sexuality more than the actual athletic ability. This is portrayed in an article written by a database known as Gender Issues (Kim, 2014). When people compare their bodies to those that they idolize, therein lies the issue that cannot be solved by new equipment. There are women who want to look more "athletic", but there is not a one-size-fits-all body type when it comes to ability. Different qualities are helpful in different contexts or different sports, but I think a lesson that is important to be learned is that any body can be athletic, and playing to your strengths is what is important. It becomes comparison threat when you either compare yourself to others within your sport when you can still participate in it,

or, like in Sarah's case, when you no longer can play the sport that you love and what allowed you to stay in shape regularly and still compare yourself to other athletes that simply have the advantage over you in that they have the use of both lower limbs. Additionally, no body type is the "right" body type, and it is unfair to compare your body in general to that of a professional athlete. Also, if you consider yourself to be different from your idols, whether that be physically, mentally, or what have you, this does not mean that you are not an athlete. If you show up and put in effort to the sport that you do, that is an athlete.

One particular piece of research done by the European Sport Management Quarterly focuses on the element of comparison threat that describes it as a rivalry. Rivalry, or a rival group as defined in this article, is when a group poses an immediate threat to another group and affects their ability to make positive comparisons between the two groups. It is also defined in this same article that it is when the influence of another player or team increases the stakes involved in the competition that is independent of the sport itself but rather emotional motivation (Tyler et al., 2015). This also plays into the notion that comparing yourself to others within your realm of athletics can be motivating or deprecating, and it is a fine line to tread upon. They focus also on the steps it takes to create rivalry within a team, and also between fans of different sports teams as well, and how they develop and get stronger over time. The steps that go into creating a rivalry include the background history of the rivalry, so if there has "always been" a feud between the two teams, a sort of scandal that happened years ago that fueled the dislike for one another. When there is categorization happening once the feud has started between an ingroup and an outgroup, hierarchies within groups form to establish who can put the best foot forward to defeat the outgroup, and many other factors (Tyler et al., 2015).

Social identity theory also plays a role in the competition, as the self and people we believe to relate to ourselves are considered to be the in-group, and those who are not, the outgroup. In Sarah's case, she goes to Lancaster University in England, and Lancaster is known to have a centuries-long feud with another English town called York. There has always been competition between the two cities before rugby was ever a part of it, and they were battling for the crown of England. Now, there is a huge game at the end of the year where Lancaster and York face off for the Roses Trophy. There is a huge sense of pride that comes with winning this game. Sarah always puts so much hard work and dedication into playing this match, and the history behind this competition only fuels how keen they are to win. Now, because of Sarah's injury prohibiting her from playing, she feels as though she has not only let herself down, but also her team in that she can no longer help them to victory. One could say that Lancaster and York strongly dislike each other, which causes Lancaster to view York, as this article by Tyler (et al., 2015) would define, as the outgroup. When we define ingroups and outgroups, they tend to have some natural differences. Still, as such a rivalry is so defined within itself, we tend to “notice” differences in how the ingroup behaves versus the outgroup. Such as the outgroup is less intelligent, worse at rugby, has meaner players, and more things along those lines. The article also defines this as social categorization theory, where we categorize pleasurable things to our own ingroup and not-so-pleasurable things to the outgroup (Tyler et al., 2015).

Another aspect of the comparison threat is that of racial bias. Sarah is mixed race, in which she is half Nigerian and half Swedish. Her idol on the English national team happens to be White. She has had several people in her life, including coaches and teammates, tell her that being on the national team would be quite an unrealistic goal to set for herself and that she would most likely never make it. They never said it was explicitly about her race; however, Sarah could

infer that was what they were alluding to. Just because an idol that you have is a different race than you does not mean in the slightest that you cannot achieve what they have. Solutions to this include the fact that it is imperative to make it known to athletes of color that their race is not a reason to put shame upon them, and this should not impact the way they are treated in any capacity, in the medical or athletic arena, and if they are, to tell someone that will listen.

There is research that supports that racial bias can be present when assessing how to deal with an injury. Druckman et al. (2017) state that it is more likely for White athletes to receive pain medications immediately after injury than Black athletes. Also, even when they do receive pain medication, they get less. This research also suggests that this racial bias occurs in the medical system because they believe Black people have a higher tendency to abuse the medication and be addicts, hence the reluctance to give adequate remedies for pain, or because they feel “less pain” than White people (Druckman et al., 2017). Now imagine Sarah being put into this position, and now not only does she have to deal with this injury that she has just gotten which is excruciating both physically and mentally, but now on top of this, she has to worry about not being treated adequately by her doctors. Also, because of all of this added to her plate, it may make her feel as though she is less than her White teammates, that she must not be good enough to get the correct treatment, or that people do not care about her. This is also where comparison becomes a threat, because in this comparison that she is making because of her race, she may feel as though now that she is injured, she will never be as good as her White counterparts on her team. She is even friends with people on her team, but never feels like she can truly relate.

As far as solutions for comparison threats go, it is important to remind athletes what true success is. An article by Whiting (2008) focuses on this regarding social media and what people

define as success, such as “playing for the highlight”, meaning that they want to play well just so that they are featured on the team's social media (p. 1). Success is not a linear term, and it means different things to every individual person because every person has different goals that they set for themselves. Success also does not mean being the top scorer in Sarah’s case, getting the most goals, or getting awards at the end of the season. Sometimes what is portrayed on social media is that the account only posts when a team has a big win or some major achievement, and this messes with your “internal measuring stick”, and it causes athletes to sometimes just play to make it onto the highlight reel of their school’s athletics page (Whiting, 2008). It makes it difficult to see your own goals and accomplish these goals as being successful when you see others creating and accomplishing what others may perceive to be bigger goals. However, the point of making a goal for yourself is to make it attainable for you. This article also touches on the point that we need balance in competition. A little bit is healthy and can be motivating, but too much of it and that is where the comparison threat starts coming into the equation. It is also important to note that social media is not a reliable source to compare yourself to, and this should be made known to athletes. Just because you see someone you idolize on social media as being more athletic, more active, a better body type, and other things you can compare your own body to, does not mean that, first of all, they are like that all of the time. Everyone needs days off, everyone needs to sleep, eat right, and have time for themselves, and this is not always portrayed on social media. Additionally, no body type is the “right” body type, and it is unfair to compare your body in general to that of a professional athlete. Also, if you consider yourself to be different from your idols, whether that be physically, mentally, or what have you, this does not mean that you are not an athlete. If you show up and put in effort to the sport that you do, that is an athlete.

They also note that the adequate training of a coaching staff is imperative to success on a team (Whiting, 2008). Having a coach who does not pick favorites and makes everyone feel like they are just as important as their teammates can put a positive outlook on someone's athletic career. A coach can make or break an athlete's career, and they can also be the reason they either continue or quit. Research has shown, through the International Journal of Sports and Coaching, that coaches play a huge role in the intention of youth athletes to continue in the sport they chose originally. The most important factor in determining this intention was the use of competence-supportive coaching behaviors, and this is defined in this article from the journal as feeling affirmed and validated by your coach, and feeling like they see you as competent and capable of learning, and that knowing it is okay, and not a burden, to ask questions (Wekesser et al., 2021).

When trying to treat someone who has been injured and removed from playing the sport, it is important to make them aware of how comparing themselves to people who were already difficult to live up to before any injury is already unhealthy. Continuing to do this even after they have been injured and can no longer do anything about it is unnecessary and can cause more deterioration of well-being. Trying to compare yourself to something unattainable is unfair. Also, just because you are injured does not mean that it will completely end the trajectory you were on, and just because the journeys are different does not mean that the ending cannot still be the same, and with determination, it can motivate you to be a better player. Comparing yourself to others will not heal you faster, and buying a bunch of unnecessary gym equipment or fancy-brand gym clothes will not either. Being yourself and making a plan that works for you is the most important factor for a lot of sports. Having a plan tailored to your needs is the best way to improve, not trying to reach someone else's standards. If you are in a position like Sarah, you may feel like

you are letting your team down, and it is important to be reminded that this is not the case. Just because you were a captain and can no longer play does not mean that every single one of the team's losses were your fault, because injuries do not normally happen on purpose.

4.0 Physical Threat

The threats that have been discussed thus far are threats that you cannot see, and they can be harder to articulate. Physical threat, however, is a tangible thing that can be a little easier to identify but can be every bit as damaging to not only your body, but your mental health and identity. Physical threats can be a slew of different things, such as broken bones, head injuries like concussions, fatigue, and so on. However, physical threats do not just include injuries and feeling unwell. There is a lot of stigma surrounding athletes and their bodies, and how you need a certain body type to play a sport, and if an athlete does not have it, then people may not take them seriously. Athletes put a lot of energy into their chosen sport. They dedicate hours of time to practice, they contribute pretty much everything they do to being an athlete. What they eat, how much they sleep, how much they socialize – and sometimes this can pay a physical toll. Sometimes, overworking our bodies on not enough food or sleep can have extremely detrimental consequences. Athletes contort their schedules to make their sport work. Physical threats can affect our identity heavily (Renton et al., 2021). If you injure yourself badly enough, it can take an athlete out of athletics for a long period, like Sarah. Also, though, the types of physical threats such as body image can have long-lasting effects on your identity, because your identity becomes the body type that you have. Injuries that happen over time also take their toll on identity, because every time you have a sleepless night, a missed meal, a day where you only have a cup

of water – this chips away at athletes until they break, and injuries will continue to happen as long as sports exist (Renton et al., 2021). Sarah, for example, before she was injured, took part in 2-hour practices every day, and on top of that lifting 3 times a week. Then, because she didn't have enough time during the day, she would work on her academics until at least 2 am every night. One could say that it was because of this that the worst happened, a torn ACL. She was not taking care of herself the way that she had been advised to by her coaches and did not warm up enough that day because she was tired from not sleeping the night before. However, this does not make her injury her fault. The reason she stayed up all night was to finish a paper that was due in the class she had the next day that she was only given that day. This is what is difficult to remember about physical threats and injuries: it is not our fault for the injuries that our other commitments cause us.

When we think of stress fractures or fractures in general, we think of being injured for some time, maybe being on crutches for a few weeks, and then healing and resuming where you started. Unless it is something one has experienced, it is very difficult to realize what goes into a stress fracture and the healing process. Stress fractures compose 10% of all sports injuries among athletes, with certain sports being over 30%, with the majority of these being in the lower limbs (Robertson et al., 2017). The results of injuries like this can not only be physically but also mentally devastating. Research found by the World Journal of Orthopedics has found that injuries can be a leading factor in causing depression because the injury takes them away from playing their sport (Robertson et al., 2017). This is due to a term known as ego dissonance, which is when a person, more specifically here how it relates to athletes, that they feel as though can no longer fill out the role that they feel responsible for. There is also a lot that goes into the healing process of a stress fracture, which can prolong these depressive symptoms depending on

the severity of the injury and the amount of time they have to take off. The longer someone is away from doing the sport they love, the more dissociated they may feel. Healing times for these kinds of injuries can be up to 3-6 months (Robertson et al., 2017), with the same going for concussions. Concussions can also severely affect brain function long term if they are serious enough. They note in an article that while one concussion is not likely to have long-term effects, the long-term effects of several concussions over time can include increased risk for diseases such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, Lewy body disease, epilepsy, and some others (Provencher, 2019). There is also the mental toll of having to decide, in some cases, whether or not to opt to do surgery. A higher risk for a higher reward, given that the rate of which athletes returned to sports using only conservative measures was 71%, and for those that went through surgery, 96% returned to sports (Robertson et al., 2017). There are also normally casts, braces, crutches, or slings involved in the healing process, and sometimes even surgery which elongates the process even further. This not only does not allow you to play your sport, but it also limits your general ability to complete menial tasks. This includes showering, eating and cooking, driving, and more. If you are the type of person who identifies as someone who never asks for help, is very independent and normally healthy and able-bodied, this dimension of injury is exceedingly difficult and also plays a role in how we view ourselves as a burden now that we need assistance from others. What is portrayed here is how much goes into the healing of an injury that is not common to think about, and how many different ways it can affect your identity.

A huge part of identity in sports also has to do with the person who coaches you. Athletes who identify themselves with their sport also often identify the sport they play with their coach, and this can mean that they will do things like playing through an injury in order to please them or feel like they are getting validation from them. A lot of coaches lack adequate training in basic

first aid and signs of injury. While, in one survey of 117 coaches, 70% of them reported having coaching qualifications, and only 61% reported having first-aid training in any capacity (Whatman, 2018). While this is still the majority, it leaves 39% of coaches who do not have any qualification concerning injury prevention or recovery, and this can affect how they treat athletes with injuries, and this can therefore affect how the athletes themselves treat the injury. This is especially true for coaches who may be tough on their athletes. In the same survey, in regard to the players that they surveyed, they reported that an overwhelming majority, specifically 87%, said that they hid or downplayed an injury during a game, and 26% admitted that they did this often (Whatman, 2018). While these results are staggering enough, this does not even account for hiding an injury during the practices that both preceded and followed the games as well. Sometimes, when athletes are injured, they downplay their injuries not only because of the fact that they want validation from their coach, but there is also the factor of not wanting to stop playing themselves. When we over-identify in a sport, athletes will tend to be either in denial of an injury because they want to remain playing or are afraid of what they will do or who they will be without the ability to play. Athletes in the survey who stated they had hidden an injury said they did so either because the pain was bearable or because they did not want to let their teammates down (Whatman, 2018). This portrays that hiding injuries is common and can be exaggerated when outside components are motivating them to do so because they do not know where the threshold is in order to stop playing at the right time so that there can be ample time allowed to fully heal so that there is no long term damage.

The other aspect of physical threat that I would like to discuss further is the condition of body type and the insecurities that come with it, and how it relates to athletics and motivations to continue playing. As we know, there is a lot of stigma surrounding body type and athletics,

especially for women, and there is a lot of fatphobia in sports because of those who believe those who are overweight cannot compete to the same caliber as someone who weighs fifty pounds lighter, which is not the case. Research suggests that fatphobia is something that is established early on, and can be heightened based on how you are raised if your parents share that belief. Especially in Western societies, it has been found that fatness has been recognized as having “master status”, where it is the first thing a person notices about someone, before even gender and race (Varea, 2016, p. 465). According to the European Physical Education Review and a study they completed, the participants, along with the fact that the first thing they notice about someone being their weight, made them think about how they evaluate their perception of how healthy the person is. There was one answer in particular that I feel portrayed this well – there was a woman who commented on how she was in a spin class, and she perceived the instructor to be overweight, her exact words being “quite big” (Varea, 2016, p. 470), insinuating that she did not look fit enough and therefore did not belong there. Imagine how this would affect the instructor's self-identity as a spin class instructor and how this might make her feel like she does not belong in her profession that she excels in while also helping others. She also serves as a role model for those who think they do not belong in those classes, and if she were to leave because of a compromise to her identity because of a comment someone else made, that would affect all the other women that would have joined her class to feel seen. This negative stereotype about physical appearance may cause people to automatically assume that they are unathletic and therefore do not belong or are unfit to run classes such as spinning, and this is what may drive people to lose weight, possibly in unhealthy ways, to be respected and taken seriously in their profession.

When it comes to solutions for treating physical threats, Whatman (2018) suggests that it be a requirement to have coaches be first aid certified at least, so that the signs can be spotted and long-term injury prevented, and getting the validation from the coach that you don't need to keep playing if you are in pain in order to prevent the identity crisis that would eventually follow a serious injury. It however can also be difficult, though, for a coach to discern what is real pain and what is athletes trying to take advantage of their kindness to get out of a workout, so they should know about this as well before getting into the field. It is also largely important to know, especially in athletics, how to maintain body positivity and to know how to eliminate fatphobia and body shaming because of how damaging they can be. Some ways of maintaining body positivity amongst trainers in NYC, as noted in an article written by Hillary Sheinbaum, are included in quotes she incorporates from various trainers, coaches, and others within the realm of exercise. One woman, a boot camp trainer, said that what helps her is never weighing herself, and allowing rest days when her body needs it, and not forcing a workout when she will not get the most out of it (Sheinbaum, 2016). Another woman said that she likes to surround herself with friends who support and love her no matter what, and people who always radiate positivity when she needs it most, and this helps her keep a good mindset (Sheinbaum, 2016). Another person said that when they wake up, the first thing they do is think of three things that they are grateful for, one is always her body and her health and how proud she is of how far she has come, and another says that she likes to remind herself that healthy looks different on everyone, and that she does not need to compare herself to stereotypes (Sheinbaum, 2016). These are all extremely helpful tips for keeping yourself kind to your body and reminding yourself that you are doing your best every day. As far as repelling and eliminating fatphobia and body shaming, it was discussed in a research article conducted by T.M Diversi et al. (2016) among medical

professionals. They state that things like perspective exercises to induce empathy, creating a zero-tolerance policy for comments that could in any way be related to weight bias, and incorporating meditation periods into the day are all things that help reduce fatphobia in the workplace. They note that meditation specifically helps facilitate positivity and to regulate negative emotions (Diversi, et al., 2016). They also discuss how they sometimes have practitioners self-administer tests related to implicit and explicit bias to promote awareness of biases they may not have even known that they have, and to focus less on weight-related reasons to be healthy, and more on health benefits in general regarding healthy eating and exercise (Diversi, 2016). Interestingly, they found that when health promotion students incorporate what they would prescribe to a patient, such as having a set amount of calories per day for one week, into their daily life helps them have empathy towards their clients and reduce weight bias. 35% of students were also unable to complete the task, which one would imagine would put things into perspective for them (Diversi, 2016). None of these solutions are answers that will work for everyone, because everyone needs different things to aid their recovery if that is what they wish, but having these options, even just as a baseline, can still be very helpful to those who struggle with this.

5.0 Mental and Emotional Threat

The final and, for some, most challenging aspect of identity threats that will be discussed is the issue of mental health and how we are affected emotionally by being an athlete. Mental and emotional threats can present themselves in numerous ways, such as different mental illnesses like depression and anxiety. It can also present itself in causing burnout, which can have

devastating effects both physically and mentally. There is also the component of eating disorders, which can also drastically affect your body negatively. Sports are not guaranteed to cause mental illness by any means, but there are attributes of athletics that can lead to these sorts of issues that will be outlined here. This can include relationships within your team and your coaches, your own motivations to continue in the sport, and others. Mental health also greatly affects your identity, in that it alters your perception of who you are and who you are meant to be, and changes your outlook on what you can be and what you can accomplish. There is also such a thing as “illness identity”, which explores how when someone is diagnosed with a debilitating mental illness, they begin to internalize that illness and identify themselves with it, and become very knowledgeable about their illness, and they may not seek recovery because they know nothing else anymore (Wisdom et al., 2008). They also describe in the same article that mental illnesses can significantly change your view on self-concepts and their definition of self after what they may have heard about negative stereotypes on the mental illness they struggle with before they were diagnosed. This makes the recovery process much harder for those who have internalized those negative schemas because internalization makes a disorder a lot harder to reverse the effects of (Wisdom et al., 2008). Negative schemas can include the perception of people that struggle with depression as lazy, unmotivated, and unable to amount to anything, and when these are internalized it can greatly increase learned helplessness. This also relates back to impact bias, in that people tend to catastrophize events and blow the possible results of a situation out of proportion to the actual risk they present. Mental health is also greatly impacted by your support system such as your family and friends, and whether or not they help you keep a positive outlook on the illness or if they only offer criticism (Wisdom et al., 2008). There are a lot of ways mental health can affect your identity and the recovery of your identity you may have

had before your diagnosis, and it is important to know strategies for how to remedy this. There is also evidence that suggests sports to be a great way to improve your mental health and promote a sense of belonging within a team, more so in group sports rather than individual ones, and giving people a sense of purpose and accomplishment. It can even help with self-control (Eather et al., 2023). Both views of sports can be true, and the important thing to focus on is the person it is affecting. It is once again emerging that everyone is different and requires different ways to remedy mental illnesses if they do have them, but everyone deals with that differently, and being healthy can mean different things for different people. However, that being said, everyone should have awareness of the fact that this is not the case for everyone and that there should always be known strategies of how to handle when someone is showing signs of mental illness such as depression so that it can be treated.

There is a general consensus in research surrounding this topic is that one of the main stressors behind mental illness and its causes is exactly that – stress. Stress is evidently present among student-athletes because of their commitment to their sport alongside trying to get their degree academically as well. Stressors can also be caused by relationships, either with your coaches, teammates, or even parents. For example, when Sarah was 15, there was a girl on her team that she fought with about a game that did not go their way, and each of them thought it was the other one's fault that they did not score the goal that would have won the game. When they went to practice the next week, they were uncomfortable around each other and the practice did not go as well. This exemplifies how stress can affect your performance, because you spend so much time worrying about what the other person is thinking that you cannot put your full energy into training. Keunchel Lee and others define stress in their journal as the result of an interaction between someone and their environment, and when the person's coping strategies are

not sufficient for the obstacles the environment causes them to face (Lee et al., 2017).

Student-athletes are among a target group of research when it comes to this topic, and we can draw a lot from how athletes are tested by doing both athletics and academics at once and while they try to excel in both, how the difficulty of this is hard to deal with, and how students may sometimes put their work and their sport above themselves and their mental health. There was an article written by Carolin Bastemeyer and others that outlined the effect of study-related stress processes in sports students, and how this affects their risk of depression. They define something called the transactional stress model, which dictates that when people feel as though they cannot meet the demands of their daily lives and commitments, this is when stress starts to arise. The term transaction is used because it defines transaction in this case as being between a person and their environment, and this paired with personal appraisals is what causes stress (Bastemeyer, 2021). They also note that they found sports science students reported having significantly higher stress levels than students who are not involved in sports at all (Bastemeyer, 2021). This can be for several reasons, but a couple that were listed in this article were that there was both physical and psychological stress involved, and doing a sport on top of other commitments can cause time restraints and feeling like there is never enough time for it all. Interestingly, they also found that PE teachers had more stress than PE students, and that women also were more likely to be stressed in the student-athlete environment than men (Bastemeyer, 2021). Although other studies have found conflicting results, I do not think that these results should be ignored. The difference between men and women in stress levels in sports is an interesting comparison, because it makes one wonder if it is because of the stereotypes women are fighting against in the realm of sports and athleticism, and always feeling like they are in the shadows of men. They also in this article discuss the definition of “well-being”, and the fact that there is a lack of a definition. Well-being

is something that can only be felt by individual people in assessment of their pursuit of happiness, and can only be defined by those who have felt a great contrast in different stages of their lives and can compare states of “well-being”.

The American Psychiatric Association offers the definition of depression, or major depressive disorder, as a medical disorder that affects how you feel, think, and act in a negative manner (Bastemeyer, 2021). This is a pretty vague description of what depression entails, but it can be noted that it is recognized as a medical illness and not just something that people experience when they are sad, but rather a result of a chemical imbalance in the brain. It is important to conceptualize depression in this manner because not everyone understands how serious depression can be, and many used to think that it was not real at all. Another symptom of depression includes a loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy (Bastemeyer et al., 2021), and this can, of course, impact identity in a big way. If someone identifies strongly with their sport, but then over time grows a distaste for it, they may feel like they have to keep playing out of obligation, or feel like a piece of them is missing. The piece of this being the love they used to have for the sport, and wondering if they will remain the same person if they give in to the temptation to quit because of depressive symptoms. Another study conducted by the American Journal of Sports Medicine found that over 9 years, there is a correlation between the amount of concussions NFL football players experience and diagnoses of depression. When they did the first survey, they found that, first of all, 10.2% (about 106 players) had disclosed that they had been diagnosed with depression, and 65% reported that they had at least one concussion during their career. When they then conducted the 9-year risk of depression scale, the depression diagnoses increased with the number of concussions they had had, with only 3% in the no concussions group having a depression diagnosis and it jumps to 26.8% in the group that had 10

or more concussions (Kerr et al., 2012). This shows that injuries, especially to the brain, not only affect your identity because of not being able to do a sport for a certain period of time, but also because it can literally alter your brain chemistry from being so badly damaged. There are a lot of studies and articles that report exercise as being a great part of a treatment plan for those who struggle with depression, however, there is little on treatment for those in which depression develops through their sport and training. Nevertheless, there is one article that articulates more specifically how depression is identified, how it presents itself in athletes, and then best treated by professionals. According to the British Journal of Sports Medicine, they illustrate how student-athletes have more stressors than normal students, because of sport-specific factors that people who are not athletes would not experience. This includes performance expectations, traveling for a sport that requires you to miss other commitments, and the actual competitions themselves, among other reasons as well. All of these factors, as they portray, increase the risk factor regarding mental health symptoms and disorders like depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and substance abuse issues. Other stressors that they mention also incorporate excessive training leading to injury with inadequate recovery, inadequate performance, and knowing when to retire also increase their susceptibility to symptoms of mental health issues (Stillman et al., 2019). In terms of treatment, they state that athletes would be good candidates for cognitive behavioral therapy and psychotherapy, which is defined in the article as individual, group, or couples therapy with the context of their depression and how to best treat it. In these sessions, they create goals for the patient, so that they can feel like they are serving a purpose and accomplishing these goals. They articulate that part of the goal setting needs to involve being aware that therapy can be a long-term process, and sometimes even lifelong (Stillman et al., 2019). Some people may hear this and think there is no point if they just have to do this for the rest of their lives, but

it is important to instill that the point is to achieve your goals over time and receive assistance in living a fuller life throughout the time you spend in therapy and that life will be better while you receive that help. They admit that psychotherapy is understudied in the realm of research, but still firmly believe that it will be useful regarding the future of mental health in athletes and sports (Stillman et al., 2019). They also note that in many cases, a lot of doctors recommend medication to be paired with the psychotherapy regimen, or just medication and no therapy. There are costs and benefits to the use of medication as an intervention, as it works well for some and it changes their lives for the better. However, they need to evaluate thoroughly for every individual patient whether that is the best option for them, and should almost always be paired with some sort of other therapy. Medications can have adverse effects as well as positive ones, including weight gain, sedation, and tremors (Stillman et al., 2019). Sarah deals with depression, and this has been heightened through the injury of her ACL. Her doctor and family recommended that she receive therapy, and it has been helping her in her recovery, and being able to find joy again without playing rugby. In the article, they also recommend against doctors prescribing “alternative” treatments such as herbal therapy and acupuncture because they have unknown risks that they cannot account for, and the good results only being anecdotal (Stillman et al., 2019).

If pushed to the limit, the buildup of stress and depressive symptoms and any other factors present can lead to the worst – burnout. Burnout can be defined as a treacherous combination of physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion, and it can have devastating effects on athletes. It can result in a reduced sense of success, social degradation, and feeling like you are not worthy to continue in the sport (Lee et al., 2017). Returning to the discussion on stress, stress is the most likely cause of burnout, and a study done by Keunchul Lee and others found

that among high school and middle school physical education classes, there was a high number of students who experienced burnout (Lee et al., 2017). They say this is due to having a hefty training and lifting schedule along with trying to balance this with academics. They also note that those with burnout typically denote athletics in general, even though it is something they used to enjoy enough to pursue it in study (Lee et al., 2017). To add to the definition of stress that has already been said, it can also be viewed as a mechanism that leads eventually to something else. Depending on the situation, it can result in an unbalance in the factors the environment provides and the ability to respond (Lee et al., 2017). Athletes are highly susceptible to stress because of the specific factors they face, such as the competition itself, injury and the fear of it, pressure from various coaches or when you get a new coach, balancing sports and academics, conflict within the team and then having to play together, pressure from your parents to succeed, and more (Lee et al., 2017). With all of these stressors piling up, it leads to a much higher susceptibility for anxiety specifically, but also other mental illnesses as well as burnout (Lee et al., 2017). In severe cases, Lee notes that burnout can also have an effect on self-concept and general attitude during the sport. This turns back to when athletes no longer have joy for the sport they do, and it now only causes them pain. This may cause them to think that they are not worthy anymore of anything, and that their identity will change now that they do not like doing the sport anymore. Specifically, he defines the term “athletic identity” as the extent to which an individual thinks of themselves as an athlete. The younger the athlete as well, if they experience burnout because of a sport, they may develop a negative sports identity, and this makes it very difficult to return to sports after leaving (Lee et al., 2017). Something that pairs with this and a way to combat burnout is to have ego resilience, which is when an athlete has a positive outlook, when they can adapt to various situations and contexts, and when they can assess dangerous

situations. This is hard to create if you do not already have it. They also are known to have more positive emotions and a higher adaptability to changing surroundings, even stressful ones, and are reportedly more emotionally flexible (Lee et al., 2017). There is a lot of advice around starting kids in sports young so that they have the time to develop abilities over the years that they do the sport into high school and maybe college, but there is also evidence to support that the younger you start a child in a sport, the more susceptible they are to burnout, and the more likely they are to develop a negative sports-related identity (Lee et al., 2017). While this is not always guaranteed to happen, and children often fall in love with the sport that they began their sports career with, and play essentially until they cannot anymore, there is always this risk if not taught how to balance it properly with your other commitments.

The article notes that more research needs to be done about curbing burnout, but they also say it has a lot to do with a coach telling you and making sure you know that their life is not on the line if you miss a game to write a paper, or anything else that both of you consider to be important. This can be used to minimize stress that leads to burnout because of the fact that you can put all your energy into one thing that day instead of trying to cram it all into one. Athletes, especially children, need to be aware that they will be the same person if they choose to leave the sport. Even though it will not be the same life experience, you will remain the person you are and can still achieve other goals you have set for yourself and your life (Lee et al., 2017), and this leads back to impact bias as well. It would also be my suggestion to have every team member and coach be mandated to see a sports psychologist before the beginning of each season. I would recommend this because I believe it would be useful to make it mandatory so no one feels singled out in having to see a psychologist. Also, so that everyone on the team, coaches included, can be adequately educated on the signs leading to mental illness and burnout, and knowing how

to both deal with it and try to prevent it. It is important to have goals in several aspects of your life, and it is about making changes, adapting, and finding new things to want to succeed in every day, no matter how small.

6.0 Limitations and Future Directions

There were many aspects that arose throughout this paper that I would have loved to elaborate more on and topics that piqued my interest that were not within the scope of this paper. One being how social norms are already prevalent in grade school children. This is described by Chase et al., (2013), where boys are supposedly more interested in sports and athletics, and girls are more interested in appearance and image. Both of these are related to reputation and how other children see them, but I was not able to go much deeper into the issues that surround gender norms and what creates them. I would love to both explore current research and see future research surrounding stereotypes of what boys and girls should be interested in, what is instilled in us at such a young age, and what we can do to combat these gender norms.

There is also conflicting research regarding mental health in sports, but I think this opens up the possibility of more research surrounding this topic because it is indeed an important one. When I was discussing how women's sports are not watched or broadcasted nearly as much as the men's version of the sports they play, I would have loved to go deeper into how women's sports professionals are watched significantly less than men's and how this is observed and can possibly be remedied. One example of this I have seen recently is the viewing of the Women's Rugby Six Nations, because I watched all of the men's games on Peacock with my subscription, but for the women's games, they not only were not streaming them on Peacock, but I had to download and pay for a VPN to watch it on BBC iPlayer. I wished I could have done more

research on why this is and how this may affect the identity of women professional athletes and feeling like they belong on the big screen just as much as the men, and if people would admit reasons as to why they prefer to watch men's sports over women's.

Another potentially interesting path to take into future research would be to learn more about concussions and how they change identity. Reading about concussions and how they can lead to debilitating disorders such as anxiety, depression, and even Alzheimers, intrigued me, and it would be interesting to learn more about how they can change even your personality. Additionally, how they can affect your relationships would be interesting to research as well.

The article by Stillman et al. (2019), admitted that therapy strategies, specifically psychotherapy, are under-researched, and I found this as well, as it was difficult to find articles and substantial research surrounding how to treat athletes specifically regarding mental health. Therefore, I would love to find out more about this and do research of my own to explore this topic so that it can benefit me in the future in my pursuit of a sports psychology degree.

A final topic that would be interesting to research further and exceed the role of this paper and the constraints on time I had to write it, would be to discuss how specific weights are needed for certain sports or positions athletes want to play, and how this factors into both bodily and psychological health. This includes sports like wrestling, in which you have to be a certain weight to be in a specific weight class, or in football needing to be a certain weight to play a certain position, and so on.

Conclusion Statement

The goal of this research was to provide examples of different kinds of threats to identity that athletes face, how to treat these threats with concrete examples found in research, and what

can be improved upon in terms of these treatments and what can be researched further. Four different types of threats were discussed, including firstly reputational threats, in terms of how you are perceived by those who are not involved in your sports experience directly. Comparison threats were discussed next, and how comparing yourself to either your idols, or even people within your own team, can be damaging to your identity, and keeping in mind to keep goals realistic and that you do not need fancy equipment or the “perfect body” in order to be considered and respected as an athlete. Next was physical threats, where it was portrayed how physical threat does not just include physical injury, but also the fear and anticipation of injury, and it also touches on body image and what we perceive to be healthy behavior. The final threat, being the threat to mental and emotional health, talked about coping strategies to keep positive during our hardest times, and how to prevent things like burnout from costing athletes their careers. A lot of these topics focus on the things that can happen to athletes that are understudied and often go unnoticed by teammates, coaches, and even the athletes themselves. Providing awareness of what these threats are and how to acknowledge them, and therefore accept that they exist, are imperative to the future research of sports psychology and the overall care of athletes in not just teaching them skills that are directly related to their sport, but also how to balance it with other aspects of their lives. The goal in mind should be to provide athletes with the coping mechanisms, self-appreciation methods and reminders, and general support they need in order to elongate their sports career for as long as they want to continue it. Also, to remind them that if they need to take a step back from athletics, it is not going to be the end of everything they know and that there is always room to find something new to discover and love.

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