

The Influence of Mindset, Social Media, and Environment on Athletic Performance

Wesley Zaron

Ben Townsend

Independent Research G/T

Wilde Lake High School

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to analyze the influences that mindset, social media, and environment have on each other and the athletic performance of high school student-athletes. Currently, there is a lack of knowledge in student-athletes about what affects the athlete's capability to perform to the best of their ability. Student-athletes can have trouble discerning which of the many influences that they interact with have impact on their athletics, whether those influences are internal, like mindset, or external, like social media and environment. A literature review and a survey of student-athletes was conducted to gather information on this subject. Stress and confidence are both major parts of mindset, with both having influence on athletic performance. Increased confidence or self-esteem consistently improves athletic performance. However, increased stress only has a negative effect on athletic performance for around two-thirds of the student-athletes surveyed. It has variable effects on student-athletes, with those who have been involved in sports for longer being less likely to be negatively affected by stress. Additionally, social media has a surprisingly positive effect on confidence, where student-athletes who used social media but not for anything athletics-related had the best self-rated confidence before a competition. Finally, the social environment of a student-athlete boosts athletic performance for almost every athlete when they receive more support from their peers, their teammates, and their families.

Introduction

In the duration of a person's lifetime, the high school years are possibly the most formative. Not everyone goes to high school, but for the majority that do, experiences during this time develop how students gain responsibility, independence, and a comradery. One of the strongest communities of a high school is the athletic community. In the athletic community, student-athletes learn how to recover from failure, work hard, and above all they learn to collaborate with others.

A key aspect of high school athletics is competition. Student-athletes use their skills and power in efforts to consistently improve. How good or bad an athlete does in competition can be described as their athletic performance, which is not necessarily the same as their athletic ability. Athletic ability is what a student-athlete is capable of doing, as determined by their training, environment, and lifestyle. However, athletic performance is how well an athlete is able to apply their athletic ability under the pressure of competition. Athletic ability is only a piece of the puzzle when it comes to athletic performance. Student-athletes can perform far worse than their athletic ability if they do not have the right attitude, support, and motivation. They can even seem to perform better than their ability when they are able to push themselves beyond their previous limits.

But what is the key to being able to perform proficiently and efficiently in competition? Mindset, or the mental attitude of an athlete, includes the emotions, including stress and loneliness, and the beliefs, including confidence and self-esteem, of the athlete. It has the power to determine the scale to which a student-athlete performs under pressure. A student-athlete's mindset, which is affected by external factors such as social media and environment, can have a perceptible influence on their athletic performance.

Review of Literature

Background

As a supplement to the review of literature, two interviews were conducted, one of which was with Sean P. Mullen, who is a professor and head of the Exercise Technology & Cognition Laboratory at the University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign. His research is focused on sports psychology. According to Mullen, understanding the factors that affect athletes' performance has changed a lot in the past decade. He said that injury rates have increased since the pandemic, and that it could be because of illness rather than overtraining. He also claimed that student-athletes are not currently completely sure what could be causing them to have difficulty improving competitively, whether it is because of overtraining, motivational issues, or external factors (S. Mullen, personal communication, December 13, 2025). This major gap in general knowledge or certainty around the various influences on athletic performance can easily lead to a lack of guidance for student-athletes looking to improve their athletic performance. In the end, student-athletes may be unsure as to how different elements of their lives influence how they perform, and even how they think and feel. Some of the most prominent influencers on student-athletes are social media and environment. Social media is an online application or website that connects people with others. For student-athletes, it can connect them to other student-athletes and expose them to content about leading athletes. Environment is the social and physical spaces that the student-athletes interact with. It includes their schools, communities, peers, and socioeconomic statuses.

Mindset and Its Influence on Athletic Performance

Stress is especially relevant to all student-athletes' athletic performance, as stress influences performance for athletes of all levels. In a 2018 study by Joanna Basiaga-Pasternak,

Basiaga-Pasternak used scientific questionnaires to measure 122 high school student-athletes' types of interactions with their surroundings, and how they handle stress. She published her findings and interpretations in the *Journal of Human Kinetics*. According to her study, "Sports activity is full of difficult and stressful situations. Even athletes with long-term experience often face problems with emotional regulation, coping with stress and with very strong pre-competition emotions such as anxiety" (Basiaga-Pasternak, 2018, p. 261). Because of its prevalence to all athletes, whether new or experienced, stress is important and relevant to the athletic performance of student-athletes, as it influences athletic performance through performance anxiety. Also, since her research was focused on student-athletes in high school, student-athletes must have to deal with stress in their athletics. High school athletes can have a wide range of prior experience when it comes to how long they have been playing sports, and explaining that athletes will have to deal with stress regardless of how long they have been involved in sports makes the effects of stress relevant to all student-athletes.

Stress influences athletic performance through physiological and psychological factors. In a 2023 research study, Bernd R. Huber measured how female collegiate athletes' free throw accuracy and salivary cortisol levels were affected by exposure to negative and positive simulated social media posts. He published his research in a Master's Thesis at the Humboldt California State Polytechnic University as a Psychology major. He used his research to highlight the importance of social evaluative threat, which he defined as how the body reacts to fear of negative evaluation, both physically and mentally. It can cause the release of stress hormones, such as cortisol and adrenaline, and an increase in heart rate, sweat, and muscle tension. Cortisol is a stress response hormone that causes energy stores to activate, and increases blood sugar levels (Huber, 2023, pp. 2-5). The body's reactions demonstrate how the threat of negative

evaluation causes stress and how that stress impacts the body, potentially impacting performance. Since stress, as Basiaga-Pasternak found, is relevant and common in student-athletes, Huber's findings demonstrate how stress affects the bodies of most student-athletes. The impacts that Huber describes affect athletic performance, as they cause reactions with muscles, heart rate, and energy stores, which are all physiological aspects of the body. However, stress does not affect everyone the same way.

Stress can cause varying effects on performance, depending on how much stress is experienced. Huber references another study of golfers, where it was found that almost all performed worse under high pressure, except for some who excelled. He explains that stress can have varying effects on performance. If it is too low athletes will lack motivation for performing well, and if it is too high athletes will feel overwhelmed, anxious, and fatigued, as well as have impaired decision making (Huber, 2023, pp. 7-8). Though Huber's study claims that stress has varying effects on performance, golf is a special sport, where players have to be very relaxed and smooth in order to do well, so this likely will not apply to all sports. Other sports can have similar or different interactions with stress. This effect means an increase in stress influences athletes in different ways, but often the increase causes performance to become worse, at least in some sports. Stress has an impact on athletic performance, but it has different effects to different degrees in different athletes who participate in specific sports.

Mindset, or mental attitude, is a determinant of athletic performance, as lower self-esteem causes more stress. Huber emphasizes the importance of attitude in athletic performance, as he claims that "Mental preparedness is as important as physical fitness when it comes to successful athletic performance" (Huber, 2023, p. 3). Self-esteem is an element of mental preparedness, as it is a major part of a person's mindset. As Huber states, mindset is the key factor in applying

athletic ability to athletic performance, therefore self-esteem can have a huge impact, as a more confident student-athlete has a better mindset.

Additionally, other studies look at other aspects of stress and self-esteem. In a 2016 research study, Anna Kariou, Panagiotis Antoniou, Evangelos Bebetos, and Kasampalis Athanasios surveyed 87 student-athletes to find how Facebook usage and other factors affected their self-esteem. They found that an athlete's perception of their own athletic ability influences their self-esteem (Kariou et al., 2016, p. 96). Basiaga-Pasternak adds to this with the claim that "Negative perception of oneself and others increases the level of cognitive anxiety and decreases the tendency to seek social contacts" (Basiaga-Pasternak, 2018, para. 44). Basiaga-Pasternak's conclusions demonstrate self-esteem's impact on stress and environment in that a decrease in self-esteem leads to an increase in stress and less support from peers.

Also, less social interaction is connected with lower self-esteem and higher stress levels. Since Huber (2023) and Basiaga-Pasternak (2018) found that more stress is related to worse performance in most cases, and Basiaga-Pasternak (2018) found that lower self-esteem is generally indicative of worse performance, and since Kariou et al. (2016) found that self-esteem is a reflection of how athletes perceive themselves, self-esteem has a significant influence on stress. Finally, Basiaga-Pasternak's findings support increased stress having a negative effect on performance, therefore self-esteem's influence on stress indirectly affects performance. Kariou et al.'s main purpose was determining how social media impacts self-esteem, but social media also influences mindset and performance in other ways as well.

Social Media and Its Relationship With Mindset and Athletic Performance

Online misinformation and social media itself affect high school student-athletes, which can lead to injury, as well as malpractice and mismanagement of injuries. In a 2020 study

evaluating the impact and misleading information of 200 online media items about musculoskeletal injuries or other afflictions, Layla A. Haidar et al. found that online information about professional athletes' injuries in online media is correct only slightly more often than incorrect, with Google, Bing, and Yahoo's top search results concerning athletes and injury having statements which have an average accuracy of 55%, as evaluated by an orthopedic surgeon and two medical researchers (Haidar et al., 2020, p. 34). Because they found almost half of the online content sampled was misleading or untrue, any student-athlete using social media will likely be exposed to injury misinformation online, which can lead to following through with poor injury guidance and causing or worsening injuries. Additionally, they found the low level of accuracy leads to misinformation about how injuries happen, how they can be identified, how they can be treated, and how the injury will run its course, with misinformation about how to deal with injuries being most common (Haidar et al., 2020). Dealing with injury incorrectly is malpractice, and the exposure to the misinformation that Haidar et al. (2020) found to be so relevant can easily influence teenage student-athletes. They are vulnerable to influence by online misinformation, according to Yvonne Skipper (2025) in her study involving focus groups of teenagers, as many teenagers are not aware of the prevalence of misinformation. Because of Skipper (2025) and Haidar et al.'s findings, student-athletes in high school are susceptible to following misleading or hurtful advice found online, which can lead to injury because of the large amount of injury-treatment misinformation.

Social media misinformation also affects performance through lifestyle habits. According to Sean Mullen, a professor at the University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign, social media "can have a large impact on [the] lifestyle. Training matters, but your lifestyle outside of the few hours of a day or a week that you devote to your sport is determining whether your training's actually

going to work” (personal communication, December 13, 2025). He explained social media’s indirect influence on athletic performance through its effect on a student-athlete’s behaviors and habits, as he claimed that social media affects one’s lifestyle, determining how well a student-athlete’s training improves their performance. This connects athletic ability to athletic performance with lifestyle as the key to utilizing the full extent of one’s athletic ability while performing in a competition. Since Mullen (2025) claims that social media affects the lifestyle of student-athletes, social media indirectly impacts performance through its influence lifestyle.

Another study supports the relevance of misinformation on knowledge and lifestyle. David D. Thomas and eight others, including Sean Mullen, conducted a review of 33 other studies about existing misinformation online. They published their findings in the *JMIR Infodemiology* journal in October of 2025, and they found that social media with misinformation on athletics reaches millions of people across many platforms. The reach of misinformation that they found creates a lack of knowledge of healthy behaviors in many student-athletes. This directly affects the lifestyle and therefore the performance of student-athletes in competition, making social media’s misinformation regarding even something as simple as nutrition able to affect athletic performance. But social media’s reach extends beyond just the lifestyle of student-athletes.

Social media itself also influences mindset and performance is able to boost self-esteem in some cases. According to Huber (2023), online communities on social media can lead to an athlete making negative comparisons about themselves (Huber, 2023, p. 4), which connects negative mindset and a low self-esteem to social media use. This is corroborated in a 2015 literature review by Deborah Richards et al. on the effects of social media on younger people, as they found that the number of online friends a young person has is correlated with having a more

negative body image (Richards et al., 2015, p. 1153). However, Kariou et al. (2016) found that some studies have found that too much social media leads to loneliness and less interaction with others, while some have found that it leads to social and psychological improvements in a person's character (2016, p. 94), indicating controversy over the exact outcomes of excess social media usage, in that excess usage could lead to different outcomes with different people. However, social media does not always create a beneficial effect on student-athletes' mindsets.

Social media can also create and promote negative mindsets by hurting a student-athlete's mindset and emotional health. Sean Mullen, in his interview, claims that after having a poor performance in a competition, student-athletes "might just kind of perpetuate that mental state [through social media usage] instead of just letting go of that loss and those negative feelings. . . It can have a huge impact, even impacting your sleep and your recovery rates" (S. Mullen, personal communication, December 13, 2025). One of social media's effects on mindset is that it can make negative swings worse, which Mullen describes the negative effects of: worse sleep and recovery.

Also, the worse sleep itself can even have a worsening effect on mindset and mental health. In the National Sleep Foundation's 2024 Sleep in America Poll, 1138 teenagers were polled about their sleep and mental health, and 73% of the American teenagers polled agree that less sleep has a negative effect on their emotional health (Langer Research Associates, 2024, p. 7). Social media's psychological impact on student-athletes both directly and indirectly demonstrates its ability to heavily influence student-athletes' mindset. Emotional health, as created by the poor sleep habits related with social media use, controls emotions and therefore mindset because mindset is how one feels and thinks. The impact that social media has through sleep and emotional health negatively affects mindset because poor emotional health means that

one does not have the tools to regulate their feelings and stress, which allows for the promotion of negative mindsets. Overall, social media is able to negatively affect mindset by prolonging negative swings and by hurting emotional health.

In contrast, social media also improves the confidence and mindset of some student-athletes. Kariou et al.'s survey found that some people using social media who have low self-confidence have positive feelings when viewing the comments of their own posts (Kariou et al., 2016, p. 95), therefore social media can also have positive effects on teens by boosting their self-esteem. As mentioned earlier, Richards et al. had similar findings, that "There are some positives of social media, such as access to support groups. For example, teen pregnancy groups on social media allow people to access peers they can talk to and share experiences with. This can actually allow better access to health information tailored to specific groups" (Richards et al., 2015, p. 1153). Their findings demonstrate how social media can also give good advice if users seek it correctly and in the right places, therefore social media can be used as a tool having positive effects on self-esteem, as it is able to connect people with support.

Finally, social media is not completely independent. Social media usage itself is controlled by external factors, such as free time or parental intervention, which are both elements of a student-athlete's physical and social environment. Richards et al. found that "there is a lack of guidance for parents and teachers of the appropriate use of social media with children," which describes how parents, who play a significant role in most students' lives, act as an external influence on social media use (Richards et al., 2015, p. 1155). Social media already has a broad influence on mindset and performance, but the environment of student-athletes also affects other aspects of a student-athlete's lifestyle besides how much time is spent online.

Environment and Its Relationship With Mindset and Athletic Performance

The social aspect of sports is especially important—according to Charles Shoemaker, who coached distance running for 22 years at Wilde Lake High School—for high school athletes, because they are not getting paid or on scholarship (personal communication, January 11, 2026). This lack of external motivation places more value on student-athletes' social life, as they are not competing to make money or maintain their scholarships. They may quit if they do not feel supported by their peers, as any fiscal reasons for staying in sports most likely have far less influence than they may have in college sports.

The environment of student-athletes influences their mental attitudes through interactions with others, where a more supportive and positive peers leads to better performances. Environment includes social support, or the lack of it, and the attitudes of those around them. Basiaga-Pasternak directly connects the experiences of teens, which are products of their respective environments, to their attitude and self-esteem. She claims that teens' vision of themselves and the world is shaped by their interactions and observations in their life so far and in sports. Depression can be caused by having negative views on themselves and the world as a result of misinterpreting experiences and of negative representations of themselves within their head (Basiaga-Pasternak, 2018, p. 261). She also highlights the impact that peers have on performance, as she found that when the student-athletes surveyed received less support from peers when feeling helpless, it led to higher amounts of stress, and very high levels of stress hurt athletic performance (Basiaga-Pasternak, 2018, p. 269). Shoemaker corroborates her findings, as with his years of experience, he has found that “having people who are positive around you has a great deal to do with it and believing in the program or the training that you're doing has a tremendous amount to do [with motivation],” clarifying that a positive social environment can have a big impact on student-athletes' motivation (personal communication, January 11, 2026).

Since less social support leads to more stress, and peers have such a huge impact on a student-athlete's motivation and mindset, their respective social environments have a significant influence on performance, as who they surround themselves with shapes their stress levels and motivation.

The feedback from the student-athletes' peers can also have an effect of mindset. Huber found that negative feedback from others causes performance to be worse than if the feedback was positive or if no feedback was received (Huber, 2023, p. 3). Being exposed to a negative social environment causes worse athletic performances, due to its influence on overall performance. Huber's findings line up with Basiaga-Pasternak's and Shoemaker's conclusions: more exposure to positive feedback and support from peers benefit athletic performance by reducing the likelihood of high stress levels.

Socioeconomic status of student-athletes is another key indicator of differences in physical and mental health, because of decreased injury care availability and less time for personal wellness. On average, American teenagers show more symptoms of depression in homes where the household income is lower. 15% of teens whose household incomes are less than \$50k show depressive symptoms (Langer Research Associates, 2024, p. 3). Since it was found that lower socioeconomic status in the form of household income is correlated with depressive symptoms, student-athletes in homes with lower socioeconomic statuses are more likely to have more negative mindsets and worse mental health.

Additionally, socioeconomic status can affect the physical environment of a student-athlete, in terms of resources available to them. In a 2022 study by Hannah J. Robison et al., a cross-sectional study was used to identify how Athletic Trainer interactions vary between schools with different socioeconomic statuses. They found that student-athletes from schools that

had a more disadvantaged socioeconomic status visited the athletic trainer less days per injury, were serviced by the athletic trainer fewer times per injury, and received less service from the athletic trainer per day while visiting them, when compared to schools with average socioeconomic statuses (Robison et al., 2021, p. 421). Having a lower socioeconomic status often causes student-athletes to receive less help for their injuries, potentially leading to longer-lasting injuries or recurring injuries, and therefore worse performances as a result of worse physical health. Because socioeconomic status is an external influence in the lives of student-athletes, it is a part of their environment. Its impact on access to the athletic trainer, a resource for injury prevention, demonstrates socioeconomic status' indirect effect on athletic performance through injury likeliness. In the end, the social support a student-athlete is exposed to and the external environmental factor of socioeconomic status both affect athletic performance. Social support affects the self-esteem and mindset of the student-athlete, while socioeconomic status affects their access to injury prevention care.

To conclude the review of literature, mindset has previously been found to influence athletic performance, with more positive mindsets being associated with better performance, and more negative mindsets being associated with worse performance. However, there are some exceptions to this, as Huber (2023) found that stress has varying effects on athletes. Next, social media is another big influence on the lives and performances of student-athletes. It can create connection and improve self-esteem, but it can also hurt self-esteem through self comparison with others on the platform. Additionally, social media presents the danger of misinformation, which can cause student-athletes to follow bad athletic advice. Finally, environment influences mindset and therefore athletic performance because of a student-athlete's social environment of peers imprinting their attitudes onto them. Also, the physical factor of socioeconomic status

leads to unequal injury treatment and prevention care, which can cause injury. Social media and environment's influence on mindset and athletic performance, as well as mindset's own impact on athletic performance, demonstrate the relevance and impact of the various influences a student-athlete faces.

Research Methods and Data Collection

My hypothesis was that for student-athletes, a positive mindset, less social media usage, and more support from external factors would have a noticeable positive influence on their athletic performance. In order to answer my research question, which was "what is the connection between mindset, social media, environment, and athletic performance of student-athletes?", I conducted a survey of 51 student-athletes attending Wilde Lake High School. Wilde Lake has an athletic program with diverse participation in athletics, which makes it an excellent candidate for my research. The Wilde Lake Athletic Director has also been working hard to cultivate a positive and encouraging environment for the student-athletes at this school. At least partially as a result of this, female student-athlete participation has increased greatly in the past two years, especially on the cross country and track teams.

The student-athletes who were asked to participate in the survey were almost all in the "A" lunch on March 3, 2026, a "B" day. The population would make up slightly less than one-third of the school's student body, considering that it was a scheduled two-hour delay. Around eight minutes into the lunch period, to ensure that most of the students would be present, I went from table to table and offered candy to any student-athletes who scanned the QR code I was carrying, filled out the survey, and showed me the Google Forms submittal confirmation screen. All responses remained anonymous. Some demographic limitations were that there were very few Seniors who participated, since many of them do not attend lunches, and the

respondents were 47.1% sophomores, which is likely because potential participants were more likely to respond if they knew of me already, though I generally refrained from going out of my way to ask people I already knew. Secondly, 64.7% identified as males, which may have been because of males being more motivated than females at the prospect of a candy reward, which I observed while distributing my survey. Finally, another limitation of this survey is that it could only measure how student-athletes claim to perceive their own emotions, interactions, and performances, therefore responses may include bias.

Results and Data Analysis

Figure 1 shows students' responses when given the question of how increased stress and increased confidence impact their performance. I found these results to be statistically significant using the Chi-Square formula, with a p-value less than 0.05. 32 (62%) of the students reported that they feel they perform better when experiencing increased confidence. Also, as seen on the chart, perceptions of stress' influence on performance was much more varied than that of confidence's influence. Variance in perceptions of stress corroborates Huber's claim that stress has different effects on different people (Huber, 2023, pp. 7-8). From my survey, I found that 36 (70.6%) of the students felt more stress has had a negative effect, while only 7 (13.7%) felt more stress has had a positive effect on their performances. The rest said that higher stress levels caused them to perform at about the same level. My findings in relation to the impact of stress and confidence on mindset support my hypothesis, as only eight student-athletes (~15.7%) said that stress does not affect their athletic performances, and only four (~7.8%) said that confidence does not affect their athletic performances. Because the vast majority of student-athletes observed that stress and confidence had some kind of positive or negative effect on their athletic

performance, mindset has a noticeable impact on athletic performance, as stress and confidence are components of mindset.

Figure 1

Student-athletes' Perceptions of How Different Mindsets Impacted Their Athletic Performances



Note: This chart shows student-athletes' perceptions of how increased stress and increased confidence impacted their performance. The perceived effects of more confidence are shown in green, and almost all student-athletes claimed that more confidence improved their performance. The perceived effects of more stress are shown in yellow, with a much more variable perceived effect on performance.

However, this does not quite line up with my hypothesis since there were still some student-athletes who felt that they performed better when more stressed, and stress is associated with a negative mindset.

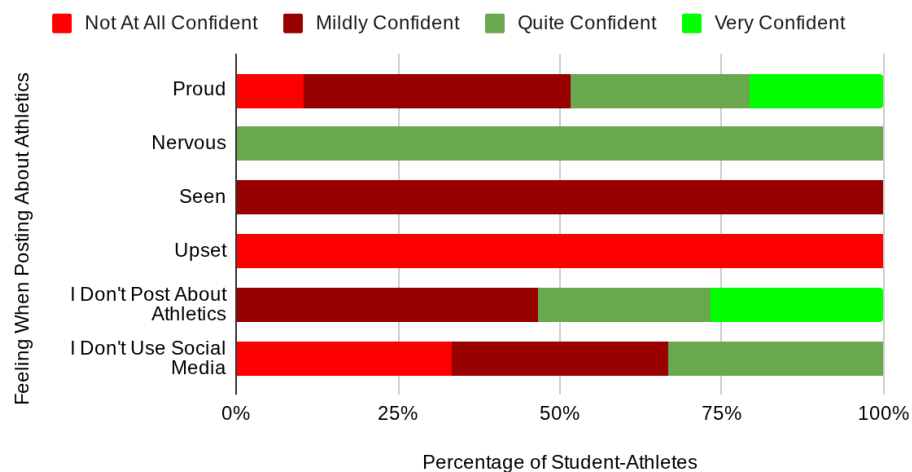
Another connection I explored through the survey was social media's relation to mindset in the form of confidence. Figure 2 shows a comparison between how students perceive their

feelings when they post about athletics on social media and how confident they feel in themselves or their team before a competition. Student-athletes who felt proud as they posted about their athletics on social media were more likely to feel confident before a competition than student-athletes who felt nervous, seen, or upset as they posted. There were two students who responded that they feel seen when they post about their athletics on social media. Their relatively low confidence before a competition is significant because this likely means they seek

Figure 2

Confidence of Athletes Compared to How They Feel When They Post on Social Media

Note: This chart shows a comparison between how student-athletes perceived their



feelings when they post about athletics on social media and how confident they feel in themselves or their team before a competition. Student-athletes who felt proud posting about their athletics on social media were more likely than student-athletes who did not use social media. Additionally, student-athletes who used social media, but not for athletics, had the highest confidence.

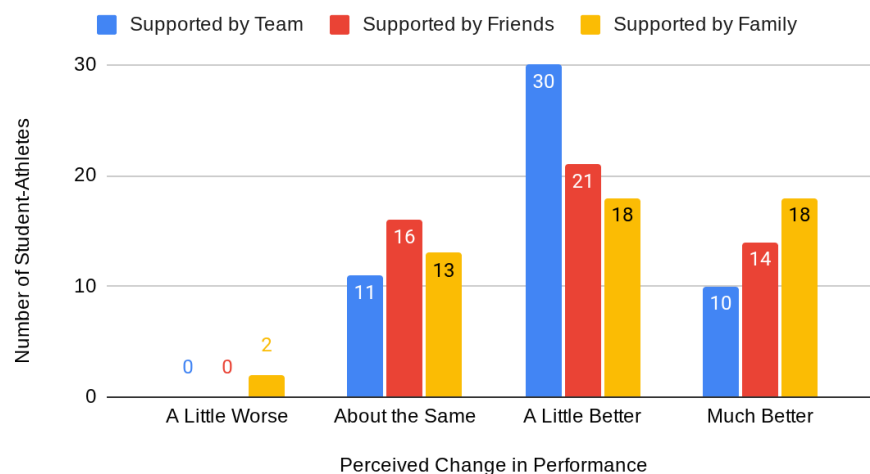
affirmation through social media, which leads to their lower confidence in themselves or their team because they may feel they receive negative or not enough positive feedback. Also,

student-athletes who use social media but do not post about athletics had confidence ranked well above that of student-athletes who do not use social media at all. This is not what I predicted in my hypothesis, and it is especially surprising that not a single student-athlete who does not use social media ranked themselves as having very high confidence in themselves or their team before a competition. This corroborates Richards et al. and Kariou et al.'s claim that social media can also have positive effects, by creating a sense of connectedness and giving access to support from others that may have been unavailable.

Figure 3 showcases how more support from different groups shapes their athletic performance. Support from one's team has the most consistently positive effect on perceived athletic performance, as the fewest number of student-athletes ranked it as causing an

Figure 3

How Student-Athletes Perceive Their Athletic Performance When They Have More Support From External Factors



Note: This chart shows how more support from different groups shapes student-athletes' athletic performance. The different external influences are shown as different color

columns. For all three external influences in the survey, more support led to perceived better performance most of the time.

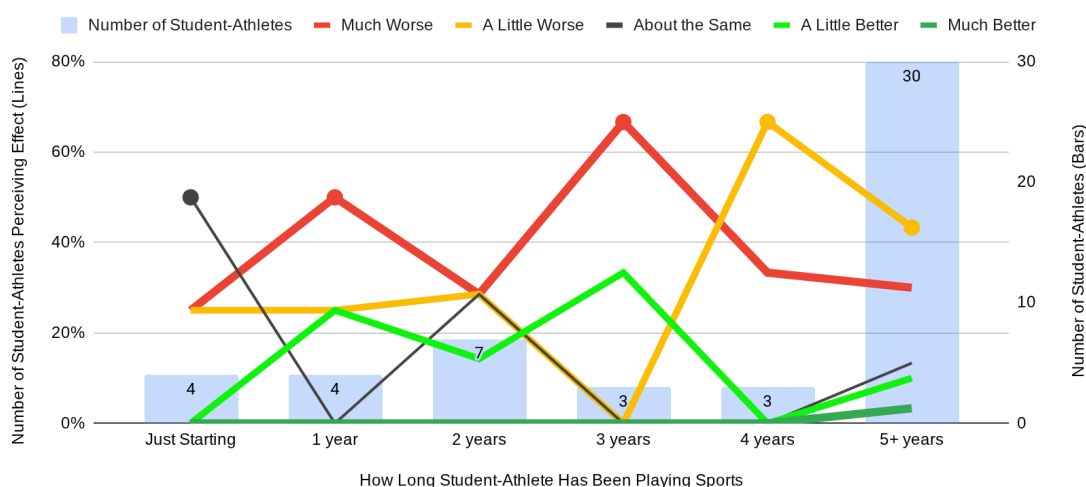
effect that was not positive. Also, since family support is the only one that always increased or stayed the same as amounts of it increase, more support from a student-athletes' family will generally cause increases in performance level. However, two (3.9%) related more familial support to performing a little worse in competition, which can be explained as the result of a more negative relationship between a student-athlete and their family. Still, for all three categories of increased support from teams, friends, and families, the majority of student-athletes claimed that they performed better, which supports my hypothesis. Improved athletic performance as a result of increased social support creates a moderately strong connection between social environment and performance, as the majority felt they performed better, but there were still some that felt they performed the same, if not worse.

Finally, figure 4 displays the relationship between the number of years involved in sports and how an increase in stress impacts performance. There are two data sets on this graph. One is the bar graph, which shows the distribution of student-athletes surveyed across the amount of time playing sports. The majority of student-athletes had been involved in sports for 5 or more years. The second dataset on figure 4 is the percentage of student-athletes who have been playing sports for that specific amount of time and how they feel they perform when experiencing increased stress. For student-athletes just getting involved in sports, the most chosen response was that increased stress causes them to perform at about the same level. Every other group had a negative correlation with stress as their most chosen (or tied for most chosen) response. The reason behind the new student-athletes being outliers could be caused by their lack of experience; not having played long enough to understand their body's response to increased

stress. The most interesting part of this data is that only student-athletes who have been involved in sports for at least four years mostly claimed that stress only made them perform a little worse. Additionally, the only student-athlete who responded that he performs much better when experiencing increased stress had been involved in sports for five or more years. Because of the

Figure 4

Time Spent Playing Sports and How Well a Student-Athlete Performs When Feeling More Stress



Note: This chart displays the relationship between the number of years involved in sports and how an increase in stress impacts performance. The bar graph shows the distribution of student-athletes surveyed across the amount of time playing sports. The line graph shows the percentage of student-athletes who have been playing sports for that amount of time who feel that they perform much worse, a little worse, about the same, a little better, or much better when experiencing increased stress.

visible decrease in the perceived negative consequences of stress as years involved in sports increased, more athletic experience is strongly associated with being less susceptible to the negative effects of stress, which explains the unexpected improvements in athletic performance as a result of stress, as seen in Figure 1.

Conclusion

The effects that mindset, social media, and environment have on each other are significant in their influence on athletic performance in student-athletes. Mindset, and especially stress, determine how well a student-athletes' athletic ability applies to their athletic performance. Mindset creates encouragement and motivation, and stress can have a range of effects. Most people will experience worse performances as a result of more stress, though some will perform better. As for mindset itself, it can be described as one's "mental attitude." This includes self-confidence, emotions, and a growth- or fixed- mindset. More positive mindsets are generally associated with better performances.

The physical and social environment of a student-athlete influences their mindset, and their team has a giant impact on their perceived performance. Since more support from parents, team, and friends were all associated with better performances by a majority of student-athletes surveyed, more social support is strongly correlated with better athletic performance. Social media can cause worse self-confidence through negative feedback, and it can also lead to injury and injury mismanagement through misinformation. However, some experience a positive impact from social media use, as they feel that it allows them to connect with and form relationships with people they usually would not have any connection with.

In the future, I would like to continue this research by learning more about experiences from other high school student-athletes. I could use my contacts within the distance running community to interview athletes across a variety of skill levels. Distance running is unique in that it is entirely reliant on physical power and willpower in competition, which would allow me to get a close look at how mindset influences performance.

Being aware of the numerous influences that exist in the lives of student-athletes is valuable as it allows for evaluation of which actions have an improving effect and which have a worsening effect on athletic performance. Cultivating a positive and healthy mindset, as well as developing healthy habits, is very helpful not only in high school athletics, but also in life after high school. It will help with maintaining health as time passes, and it will allow for more positive interactions and connections with others. Being aware of what affects feelings as well as how feelings are physiological influences on the body will allow for a healthier and happier life.

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Appendix A

Sean P. Mullen Interview

WZ=Wesley Zaron SM=Sean P. Mullen

WZ: All right. So, how much awareness do you think people in general have of the potential impact of social media on them?

SM: Well, I think they're aware of what they hear through mainstream media, mainly about the dangers to adolescents, about the dopamine hits, that you're rewarded through likes and things like that, but the average person really doesn't know a whole lot about the extent of misinformation. The breadth and the depth to which a lot of information is shared; who's sharing it. Yeah, so I'd say they have a maybe a loose, artificial understanding, but not enough to really arm themselves against it.

WZ: Do you think that would be different or the same for teens? Because - if you're on social media more and you see it more - would you be able to notice it or would it still pass through you.

SM: It's a great philosophical question, and I think that it is a topic of debate in science and in the people that are concerned about the impact on child development, on the impact of the brain and the transfer effect, or the side effect, which is if you're on social media, you're generally not physically active; you're usually sitting down. So, just the more screen time in general has really been my main concern. Although I am concerned now. I'm concerned about the misinformation and disinformation, and there's been reporting on estimation from different security firms that say now that 51% or more of the traffic online is generated by AI. So, AI is great. It's a great tool. It's been around. Most people don't even realize this, but generative AI is relatively new, roughly 2022 is when people started using Chat GPT, and then there's a proliferation of a bunch of different companies that are using and selling consumer grade generative AI, and now students are using it, but it is impacting social media. Some people use it to summarize science articles and then they spread it around and it's not always capturing the nuance and it's not always accurate.

WZ: Yeah.

SM: So the average person doesn't know how to differentiate the actual science from what generative AI is telling them. But being immersed in something, it's hard to see things from the outside, right? You have to be able to step away and have good skills and metacognition. You have to know how people think and how people are influenced by

technology, and that's really my field. So you don't get that unless you study it, generally speaking. But, there are people that are aware of it and that are using it to their advantage, and then there's bad actors out there that spread information that they're using to sell products or sell services.

WZ: Yeah. So, how do you feel about the algorithm that's in social media? How do you think that would affect someone's consuming of false information, getting health advice based on what you're interested in and not what's good for you?

SM: Well, you're just getting things that are reinforcing your own beliefs, right? So it's just creating stronger bubbles if the person is not someone that is well versed in lots of different areas, right? So if you can recognize it, you can step out of it. But if you are in a bubble within your social network, and you generally don't go out of your way to learn things that are of the opposite opinion or opposite viewpoint. Or, if you just have not a lot of interest, not a lot of hobbies, you're not going to see a lot of diverse content. And so, it can cause more extreme positioning on issues because you just think you're right and you see things, you're liking things and it's just reinforcing by giving you more of that same content.

WZ: Yeah, so it's kind of like a single perspective.

SM: Yeah, an isolated perspective that is just kind of like a digital shot of steroids, where you're just seeing the same thing over and over in different ways, just reinforcing. So if you're taking a certain supplement or you're into cosmetics and you're liking certain products, you're just going to see more and more of that content and the advertising is going to capitalize on that and, you know, distribute the ads to people that seem to be viewing and engaging with that content. And that engagement, if you're not a casual observer and just scrolling, that's going to accelerate the extent to which they inject your feed with ads and services, or link you to people that they believe are like-minded. So if you are going to add them to your social network you might see more faces that are also liking that same content.

WZ: So, where would you say is a good place where people can learn to identify misinformation and disinformation, or just learn to avoid it entirely. Like a website, place, or person to go to.

SM: You know, I would say that those things don't really exist at this point. I mean, there are. Let me step back. There are some things that exist; they're just not very well known. In fact, I can point them to you, but they're not there right off the top of my head. I can't

remember the website, but there are one or two researchers that have put together some acronyms and, actually, there's a free course. I'm blanking on the acronym.

WZ: That's fine.

SM: Because I only just learned this recently when I was trying to develop content for my course. But yeah, there's two or three sites that have some free courses, some content that you can go through and learn the strategies that can get you to pause and reflect on whether or not it's an emotional angle or something that they're trying to hook you with, right? And if it seems extreme on its surface then it really should give you pause. And that's really the main thing. It's to not share something until you've kind of researched it yourself. But that's not to say that people are the best researchers either. And there's a lot of bias. So, it's a really difficult problem right now. There used to be a lot of fact checking sites for political purposes and even those can be biased and a lot of people don't trust them. So, yeah, it's a thing you need to be trained in. It's a new area of scientific research. I mean, social media, and really smartphones, have only been around since roughly like 2008. So it's 2025 and the science on social media disinformation and misinformation is in its infancy.

WZ: Sometimes it seems a little bit weird for me because everyone says, "it's so new," but it's been around my entire life. So I guess, like you said, that teens just kind of grow up with it.

SM: Yeah, exactly. And you may very well be more attuned to a lot of the issues if your parents were early adopters to technology, if they were really involved in trying to make sure that they safeguarded you from harmful information and stuff that was inappropriate for your age, they may have been very involved in teaching you things, even just out of instinct, right?

WZ: Yeah.

SM: You know, for anything new, you don't want to expose your child to something that could harm them and, yeah, it makes a lot of sense that you could be inundated with this kind of stuff since you were first given a phone, or even before that, if you had a tablet or played Roblox or whatever, and if you've seen some of the ways that advertisers can even infiltrate games online.

WZ: Yeah. So, what do you think? What are the negative effects that misinformation and disinformation could have on athletes, who I'm focusing on because I'm really

researching the effect on student athletes. So what could it do to your season or your performances?

SM: Well, I think it can have a large impact on your lifestyle. Training matters, but your lifestyle outside of the few hours of a day or a week that you devote to your sport, your lifestyle is determining whether you're training's actually going to work. And, that includes how you handle your stress, whether you've developed any healthy coping mechanisms, how you eat, how you sleep, your physical activity habits, and that even includes the environments that you're exposed to. So, in today's world, being an athlete or a healthy person in general, it just requires more than discipline in that sport's specific practice; you have to be multifaceted; you have to read. You have got to think critically, you have got to understand what supports performance and what is potentially going to take it away. So I think, in life in general, the more time that you're spending outside of school, you're generally spending it . . . I think the average adult after 16 and over has like 5 hours of discretionary time each week. And most people spend that time on the screen. And they're not text messaging. They're generally scrolling social media.

WZ: Yeah.

SM: So it's a lot of time being monopolized by information that is either exaggerated or incomplete, but it can also be disingenuous, and it can guide your lifestyle habits, your choices, the purchases that you make. Most people and most athletes have tried supplements at some time in their life. And some of them swear by them. But paper after paper has shown that when you third party test these things, they have contaminants in them and something like 90 - 95% of them have shown contaminants and many of them don't have the potency that they list on the bottle. So that alone can be dangerous; you can have gut issues with things that you're ingesting if you're allergic to or that or if they're filled with fillers and things that you shouldn't be consuming. Some of these things can be toxic. If they have too much caffeine and you're expecting only a little, you can have performance jitters. So that's just one area, one slice of life where misinformation can cause real bodily harm. Then, just in terms of stress and mental health, your feed is just going to, again, reinforce your mind state. Let's say you have a loss, where you're playing an individual sport or a team sport. Afterwards, you get on social media; you might just kind of perpetuate that mental state instead of just letting go of that loss and those negative feelings. It might linger because you get on, you start doom scrolling. So, it can have a huge impact, even impacting your sleep and your recovery rates. I think a lot of what we found is that injury and rehab content was one of the worst areas for misinformation, and that really surprised us. So things like ACLs. Do you know what that is?

WZ: Yeah.

SM: Yeah, okay. Like ankle springs, Achilles pain. These are like some of the most misinformation heavy areas online. And it's not about athletes necessarily pushing too hard. There's been links between illness, COVID, and damage to the entire vasculature of the body. There's a lot of people getting Achilles stairs right now in basketball and tennis. There's a watershed area in the back of the heel. It's a bottleneck where the blood flows. I mean, if that gets cut off, it could cause serious damage so it makes a lot of sense if you are getting repeatedly infected by something that can damage your blood vessels that you could risk serious injury. And nobody's talking about it. Most of the injuries have been kind of explained away as too much training, athletes are playing in too many competitions, they're doing too much in the off season, or they're not resting enough. And some of that could be true. Things have definitely changed in the past decade or so. But over the last six years, something else has also changed. And we only see these alarming rates of injury changing since the pandemic. Some misinformation can mislabel problems and some can mislead people. I think the real danger's that you are giving people bad advice. It convinces athletes that performance problems are motivation problems, and they're often biology or just recovery problems. I teach sports psychology. My training is in psychology, educational psychology and exercise and sports psych. For years, I was trying to convince athletes that a lot of what you do is a motivation problem, right? "You need to will yourself to be able to do more. You need to set better goals, more effective goals, more realistic goals. And, and break things down and come up with strategies for, you know, overcoming your mental obstacles." And then the more I learn about illness... Illness can really mess you up and people, athletes, especially, want to jump right back into training. But that's not necessarily the best thing to do. You can really do some damage if you're not fully recovered from injury. People don't think of illness as injury, but it is an injury. Yeah, I could go on and on about the negative effects of COVID, but I don't want to bore you or scare you, but a lot of people are downplaying it and it's still around. I still mask, and athletes, certainly at the professional level, collegiate level, high school level don't really pay attention to the science. But yeah, I mean, there are a half a million articles on the negative consequences of COVID, of repeat infection, of cumulative damage to the heart and to the brain. So, yeah, it's one of those things where it's a topic that is being hidden from social media. There's a lot of information out there about vaccines that is highly inaccurate. Even just like washing your hands, right? That's great. Everybody should wash their hands. But if someone's coughing in your classroom, washing your hands is not going to prevent you from inhaling their respiratory aerosols that they're exhaling.

WZ: Yeah.

SM: So, yeah, even our, Unfortunately, our government has shared a lot of information that's not entirely accurate either.

WZ: Yeah. Okay, well, thanks so much for the help. I really appreciate it.

Appendix B
Charles Shoemaker Interview

WZ=Wesley Zaron CS=Charles Shoemaker

WZ: What have you noticed that helps athletes perform at their best?

CS: Well, there's lots of factors that help athletes perform at their best, um. Certainly nutrition is part of it, rest is a part of it. Also, I think it depends on the athlete because different athletes respond differently to different kinds of training and they need different kinds of training. Not everybody has the same skill set. And so I think being aware, whether it's the coach or the athlete themselves, of what they need and how best to get the things that they need with regards to training is key. Some athletes need more rest, some respond better depending on what the athlete is doing. If we're talking about distance runners, they respond better to speed endurance training where maybe the mileage is not as high, some athletes respond better to a higher mileage program. So it's an individualized system, to a large extent.

WZ: Okay, cool. What would you say would be a good way for athletes in general to gain awareness about what's good for their body?

CS: I think a lot of that has to do with some trial and error; just being in tune. I don't know if you've come across the term "biofeedback," but being able to sense what part of your body needs to relax, and so... I lost focus a little bit here. So what would be best? So, you asked me, "how can an athlete know best what's good for them," right? So I think, again, there's some trial and error, and it takes quite a while for an athlete to mature, and just understand how they feel on any given day. I think keeping a log is a good thing as far as what they're eating over time, and what they're training is, or has been. I think it's a good idea because you, the athlete themselves, can see what's working best for them. And of course, if they have a coach communicating with them, I think it is really good. You know, they can track how much sleep they're getting. I think that a lot of those things really can pay dividends. Unfortunately, I would say there's a lot of times things go kind of a one size fits all type of approach to some extent, and it's difficult to individualize the way you need so the athlete has to kind of find out for themselves what's working best and go from there.

WZ: Yeah, I agree. I understand, you have a lot of experience in coaching. So how have you noticed that athlete behavior and practices and habits have changed since social media has been popularized?

CS: Well, you know, I really stopped coaching around 2013. I'm just now just volunteering a little bit, and that's really almost like a drop in basis because just like now, here I am in South Carolina with my daughter and grandchild, and family's become more of a priority, and everybody lives away from me. You know, my kids don't live with me anymore. So that takes me away. But I think, for social media in general, you can see there might be some quick fixes in there and there is dope, which is a quick fix. I think the things that we just talked about are the essential ingredients to improve performance, like rest, nutrition, the proper kind of training, being in tune with your body, the proper kind of recovery, and being in good running shoes. Then there's the technical aspects of it as well, that tie into training in general. Those things are all important. I also think that with social media, great performances are readily accessible; you can see them on different age levels and for different individuals. So my point being that it's very important, I think, for athletes to compete against themselves. It's important, and you want to compete against others when you're on a certain level. There's no doubt about that. But first and foremost, no matter how much desire you have, if the other components aren't in place, you're not going to improve quickly. So I think just being mindful of where you are and where you want to go, and being able to bridge that, combined with the proper training, nutrition, rest, and mindset et cetera, that's the key to it all. And whoever can do that best uh, is going to improve most rapidly. And that's not taking away from that there's a lot to be said for your desire and motivation. There's a lot to be said for that, so that's a part of it, but no matter what, you have to do these other things and have them in place as well.

WZ: Oh, that's really cool. Thanks. So what would you say are the effects of environment on athletes, like peer pressures, friend groups, and who you hang out with?

CS: Well I think if you can develop a community where you're talking about it, like a team sport; like cross country, for example, or track and field as well. If the community is such that you are not only thinking about your own performance, but also doing well for the team, and that being a piece of the motivation that we're talking about, that is ideal. And so, in other words, that can be a very big motivating factor. I think having people who are positive around you has a great deal to do with it and believing in the program or the training that you're doing has a tremendous amount to do. Just the social aspect itself, as far as liking to be around the people that you are spending so much time with, I think that's very important. The social aspect can't be ignored. I'll put it like that. I think especially for younger runners, it's really important. Nobody's getting paid out there. Nobody's on a scholarship out there for high school athletes. I think enjoying the people and having camaraderie with the people that you're around is really important.

WZ: I really like going into the community aspect of sports. How do you think that the community plays a role?

CS: Now, when I was talking about community, I'm talking about the smaller, like a “micro” community, going as far as the people that you're training with. Are you talking about a larger community as a whole, like the Wilde Lake community?

WZ: Yeah, kind of more like, how does the bigger community affect the micro communities?

CS: Well, I think if we're talking about performance in general, we have to acknowledge that there are certain sports that are put on a higher pedestal by a community. It's just kind of the way it is. I mean, football is kind of what it is. There were times where I would have to negotiate with the band director, because we were sharing athletes. In other words, the person that was running cross country, for example, was also in the band. There was a time where that was looked at as part of the curriculum as far as marching for a halftime show. And so it would be difficult for that athlete then to go to an invitational, for example. Now, luckily, I was always able to work it out. You know, I had a good rapport with the director, but it was the cause of some friction. And, success gets success. I would say it like that. I mean, I think the better the team is doing, people get more excited about it, but there are certain sports that are just higher profile sports, and right off the top I think of, and this is not data driven, but basketball and football are two that are kind of up there. So that's just my opinion.

WZ: Thanks. So, I definitely see that a lot, where half of our cross-country team is away from practice so they can do marching band stuff. But yeah, kind of shifting gears a little, I want to talk about injury a little. Have

CS: Yeah, sure.

WZ: Have you noticed any habits that tend to lead to injury? And what do athletes do that will make their injury into more of a long-term affliction?

CS: Well, that's where you have to be in tune with your body and also know the difference between just a little bit of discomfort and pain. At any time, I really think that you have to err on the side of caution. I mean, if shins are bothering you, you know, you see people with tape and they're taping things up. I mean, you have to look at “what kind of shoes are you in?” “Are you running it in the grass or, what kind of pavement are you running on?” I did hear one time where someone was asked about American training in general and they talk about how really what you find is there can be overtraining and going through injury. It's a delicate line and that's where you have to. Be able to communicate with your coach, if you're being coached, or just really be conscious of how you're feeling and not trying to push through injuries because your body is designed to give you

feedback about what's going on with it. Now there, I did allude to the whole thing with biofeedback. There are ways that you can relax and think about different things and kind of put yourself in a different think about different muscle groups that you might use something, whether that entails shortening your stride a little bit or things like that, that might help you relax a certain body part that might be bothering you. But you just have to be aware of how you're feeling, and be able to be honest with yourself about what you can do. Maybe shift gears for that day because there are a lot of things that will help you with running as well: If you have access to the pool, then getting in the pool; Doing a little bit of upper body work. You know, those types of things. So yeah, I mean it's easy to get busted up if you're not careful, and if you just try to run through injury, and then something that might be able to be handled in a matter of days becomes a long term problem.

CS: It's tough when you have somebody who is talented and does have desire, then you want them to do well for the team, and they're also thinking about, "okay, I want to do this for the team." Those are all pieces of the puzzle that have to be put in place properly, whether it's by the coach or you. That's where communication also becomes so important. On the high school level, it's critical.

Appendix C Survey Questions

Student-Athletes and Mindset

The goal of this survey is to understand how mindset is affected by social media and environmental factors, and how mindset affects athletic performance. Thanks for your time!

By Wes Zaron, Independent Research

* Indicates required question

1. What grade are you currently in? *

Mark only one.

- ☐ 9th grade
- ☐ 10th grade
- ☐ 11th grade
- ☐ 12th grade

2. What gender do you identify as? *

Mark only one.

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other: _____

3. What sport are you currently involved in (or your main sport)? * _____

4. Are you involved in other sports? *

Mark only one.

- ☐ Yes, multiple other sports
- ☐ Yes, one other sport
- ☐ No

5. How long have you been involved in sports? *

Mark only one.

- ☐ Just starting!
- ☐ 1 year
- ☐ 2 years
- ☐ 3 years
- ☐ 4 years
- ☐ 5+ years

6. At what level do you play? *

Mark only one.

- ☐ Varsity
☐ Junior Varsity
☐ Club
☐ Other: _____

Mindset / Mentality / Attitude

7. How much importance do each of these have to you? *

Mark only one per row.

	High Importance	Moderate Importance	Low Importance	No Importance
Winning	☐	☐	☐	☐
Improving	☐	☐	☐	☐
Making Friends	☐	☐	☐	☐
Getting Noticed	☐	☐	☐	☐

Social Media

8. How much time do you spend on social media each day, on average? *

Mark only one.

- ☐ I don't use social media (skip questions 9 and 10 if chosen)
☐ Very little time
☐ 1 hour
☐ 2 hours
☐ 3 hours
☐ 4 hours
☐ 5 hours
☐ 6 hours

9. When do you post about your athletic experiences? *

Check all that apply.

- ☐ When I do really well
☐ When my team wins
☐ When we beat a rival

- ☐ When I don't do well
- ☐ When my team doesn't do well
- ☐ Never
- ☐ Other: _____

10. How do you usually feel when you post about your athletics? *

Mark only one.

- ☐ Proud
- ☐ Upset
- ☐ Ashamed
- ☐ Cheated
- ☐ Nervous
- ☐ Seen
- ☐ I don't post about athletics
- ☐ Other: _____

11. Why do you avoid social media use? _____

(Skipped unless "I don't use social media" was selected in question #8)

Self Talk

12. How confident in your team and yourself do you feel before a competition? *

- ☐ Mark only one.
- ☐ Not at all confident
- ☐ Mildly confident
- ☐ Quite confident
- ☐ Very confident

13. How is your confidence impacted by your competitor? _____

14. When you're thinking to yourself before and after a competition, which phrases do you use often? *

Check all that apply.

- ☐ I/we will...
- ☐ I/we won't...
- ☐ I/we can...
- ☐ I/we can't...
- ☐ I/we might...

- ☐ I should quit this sport
- ☐ I/we need to try harder
- ☐ I/we will keep giving it my/our best!
- ☐ This team sucks
- ☐ Next practice, I/we can focus on...
- ☐ Other: _____

Environmental Factors

15. How much influence do each of these have on your attitude and performance during a competition? *

Mark only one per row.

	No Influence	A Little Influence	A Lot of Influence	It Changes the Whole Game for Me
Weather	☐	☐	☐	☐
Coach's Pep Talk	☐	☐	☐	☐
School Day	☐	☐	☐	☐
Family Life	☐	☐	☐	☐
Parents	☐	☐	☐	☐
Friends	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social Media	☐	☐	☐	☐
Current Events	☐	☐	☐	☐

16. How much do your peers care about your performances in your sport? *

- ☐ Mark only one.
- ☐ They care a lot
- ☐ They don't really care that much
- ☐ They are totally uninterested
- ☐ Other: _____

17. When I feel more _____, I perform...

Mark only one per row.

	Much Worse	A Little Worse	About the Same	A Little Better	Much Better
Stressed	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Happy	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Sad / Upset	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Confident	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Judged / Pressured	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Supported by my Teammates	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Supported by my Friends	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Supported by my Family	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐