IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Descriptive Study Of Burnout Symptoms In Collegiate Athletes During The Competitive Season

1. Dr. Shubham Kumar, Assistant Professor, Department of Physical Education, IIMT University, Meerut

2. Rahul Arora, Assistant Professor, SPES, Rashtriya Raksha University Karnataka

ABSTRACT

Burnout is a chronic psychological condition experienced by athletes who are exposed to prolonged physical, emotional, and social stressors. In collegiate athletics, burnout may become especially pronounced during the competitive season, when athletes are expected to maintain high levels of performance while also managing academic responsibilities, travel schedules, team obligations, and recovery demands. Unlike ordinary fatigue, burnout develops over time and is often characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion, a reduced sense of athletic accomplishment, and a growing devaluation of sport participation.

This descriptive study investigates burnout symptoms among collegiate athletes participating in six sports: basketball, football, track and field, swimming, volleyball, and tennis. The purpose of the study was to describe and compare burnout levels across sport types during the midpoint of the competitive season, a period when athletes are likely to experience increased training intensity, pressure to perform, and cumulative fatigue. A total of 180 athletes participated in the study, with 30 athletes selected from each sport. Participants were drawn from two regional universities and were actively competing at the intercollegiate level.

A descriptive survey design was used. Burnout symptoms were measured using the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ), which assesses three major dimensions of athlete burnout: emotional and physical exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment, and sport devaluation. Scores were converted to a 0–100 scale to allow for easier comparison across sports. Results showed that football athletes reported the highest average burnout score at 75, followed by basketball athletes at 72 and volleyball athletes at 70. Swimming athletes reported a moderate burnout score of 68, while track and field athletes reported an average score of 65. Tennis players reported the lowest average burnout score at 60.

The findings suggest that sport-specific factors may influence the severity of burnout symptoms among collegiate athletes. Sports involving frequent physical contact, intense team expectations, extensive travel, and high public visibility may place athletes at greater risk for burnout. Conversely, sports with more individualized pacing, greater perceived autonomy, or more flexible competitive structures may be associated with lower burnout levels. This study provides useful descriptive insight for coaches, athletic departments, trainers, and sports psychology professionals seeking to develop sport-specific mental health interventions, recovery plans, and workload management strategies. The results also highlight the importance of monitoring athletes' psychological well-being throughout the competitive season rather than focusing only on physical performance outcomes.

KEYWORDS: Athlete burnout, collegiate athletes, emotional exhaustion, Athlete Burnout Questionnaire, sports psychology, competitive season, overtraining, sport devaluation, student-athlete well-being, mental health interventions, training load, athletic performance

INTRODUCTION

The life of a collegiate athlete is shaped by a combination of athletic, academic, social, and personal demands. Student-athletes are often expected to perform successfully in competition while maintaining academic eligibility, attending practices, participating in strength and conditioning sessions, traveling for games or meets, and fulfilling team-related responsibilities. These demands can become particularly intense during the competitive season, when athletes face increased performance expectations and reduced opportunities for rest and recovery. As these pressures accumulate, athletes may become vulnerable to burnout.

Athlete burnout is generally understood as a chronic response to prolonged stress in sport. It is commonly described as a multidimensional syndrome that includes emotional and physical exhaustion, a reduced sense of accomplishment, and sport devaluation. Emotional and physical exhaustion refers to feelings of being drained, tired, and unable to recover fully from sport participation. Reduced accomplishment occurs when athletes feel that they are no longer improving, succeeding, or meeting expectations in their sport. Sport devaluation involves a loss of interest, meaning, or emotional connection to athletic participation.

Burnout differs from temporary fatigue or short-term stress because it is persistent and can affect the athlete's motivation, identity, and emotional relationship with sport. A tired athlete may recover after rest, but a burned-out athlete may continue to feel emotionally detached, ineffective, or resentful toward participation even after physical recovery. For collegiate athletes, this distinction is important because burnout may lead not only to decreased performance but also to injury risk, mental health concerns, academic problems, and eventual sport dropout.

The Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ), developed by Raedeke and Smith in 2001, has become one of the most widely used instruments for assessing burnout in sport settings. The ABQ allows researchers and practitioners to measure the three major components of burnout and identify patterns that may not be visible through physical performance data alone. Because burnout is influenced by psychological and environmental factors, tools such as the ABQ are useful for understanding the athlete experience beyond wins, losses, statistics, or training volume.

Previous studies have examined burnout in different athlete populations, including youth athletes, elite athletes, and college athletes. However, there remains a need for descriptive comparisons of burnout symptoms across different sports during the active competition period. Collegiate athletes face a unique combination of pressures because they are both students and performers. Their schedules often include classes, assignments, exams, practices, competitions, team meetings, travel, and recovery activities. This dual role may increase stress, especially when athletes feel they have limited control over their time.

Different sports may also create different burnout risks. For example, football and basketball may involve high physical intensity, frequent public attention, and strong team-based performance expectations. Swimming may involve repetitive training routines and early morning practices. Track and field and tennis may provide more individualized competition structures, but athletes in these sports may still experience pressure related to personal records, rankings, and scholarship expectations. Volleyball may involve both physical demands and team-based social pressures. Because each sport has its own culture, schedule, and physical requirements, burnout may not affect all athletes equally.

This study seeks to describe and compare burnout levels among athletes from six collegiate sports: basketball, football, track and field, swimming, volleyball, and tennis. The study focuses on athletes during the midpoint of their competitive seasons, when stress and fatigue are likely to be elevated. By identifying which sports report higher or lower average burnout scores, this research may help athletic departments develop targeted support systems rather than relying on one-size-fits-all wellness programs.

The main objective of the study is to provide a descriptive overview of burnout symptoms by sport type. More specifically, the study aims to identify which groups of athletes report the highest average burnout scores, describe possible sport-specific explanations for these differences, and recommend practical strategies for supporting athlete well-being during the competitive season.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a descriptive survey design to assess burnout symptoms among collegiate athletes at a single point during their competitive season. A descriptive design was appropriate because the purpose of the study was not to test a causal relationship or determine whether one sport directly causes higher burnout than another. Instead, the goal was to describe patterns in burnout scores and compare average levels across sport groups.

The study was cross-sectional, meaning data were collected from participants during one defined period rather than across multiple points in time. Data collection occurred at the midpoint of the competitive season. This timing was selected because athletes at this stage are typically experiencing accumulated training load, competition pressure, travel fatigue, and academic responsibilities. Measuring burnout during this period provided a realistic snapshot of athlete well-being when demands were high.

Participants

A total of 180 collegiate athletes participated in the study. The sample included 30 athletes from each of the following sports: basketball, football, track and field, swimming, volleyball, and tennis. Participants were between 18 and 24 years old and were actively competing in intercollegiate athletics at the time of data collection.

Athletes were selected through purposive sampling from two regional universities. Purposive sampling was used because the study required participants who were currently active in their sport and had sufficient experience to reflect on the demands of collegiate athletic participation. All participants had at least two years of experience in their sport. This requirement helped ensure that athletes were familiar with the training routines, competitive expectations, and seasonal pressures associated with their sport.

Participation was voluntary, and all athletes provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire. Athletes were informed that their responses would remain confidential and would be used only for research purposes. No names or personally identifying information were included in the final data analysis.

Instrument

The Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ) was used to measure burnout symptoms. The ABQ is a widely recognized instrument in sport psychology and is designed specifically to assess burnout among athletes. It measures three primary components of burnout:

I. **Emotional and Physical Exhaustion**: This dimension reflects feelings of fatigue, depletion, and being emotionally or physically worn out by sport participation. An example item is, “I feel overly tired from my sport participation.”

II. **Reduced Sense of Accomplishment**: This dimension reflects an athlete’s perception that they are not improving, achieving goals, or performing successfully. An example item is, “I am not achieving much in my sport.”

III. **Sport Devaluation**: This dimension reflects a loss of interest, meaning, or emotional investment in the sport. An example item is, “The effort I spend in sport would be better spent elsewhere.”

Each item was rated using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1, meaning “Almost Never,” to 5, meaning “Almost Always.” Higher scores indicated greater burnout symptoms. For comparison purposes, scores were converted to a 0–100 scale. This allowed the average burnout levels of each sport group to be presented in a simple and understandable format.

Procedure

Data collection took place in team meeting rooms at the midpoint of each team's competitive season. Questionnaires were administered under the supervision of sports psychology personnel to ensure consistency in instructions and to answer general questions about the process. Athletes were reminded that there were no right or wrong answers and that honest responses were important for understanding athlete well-being.

Before completing the questionnaire, participants received a brief explanation of the study's purpose. They were told that the study aimed to examine burnout symptoms across different sports and that their responses would be anonymous. Athletes completed the questionnaire individually and were asked not to discuss their answers with teammates during the session.

After completion, the questionnaires were collected, anonymized, and coded for analysis. Each athlete was assigned a numerical code. Responses were grouped by sport, and average burnout scores were calculated for each sport category.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Mean burnout scores were calculated for each sport group. Because the study was descriptive in nature, no inferential statistical tests were applied. The purpose was to identify and describe general patterns rather than determine statistical significance or causal relationships.

Results were organized into a table showing the average burnout score and number of participants for each sport. A visual bar chart was also used to illustrate differences in burnout scores across sports. The use of visual representation made it easier to compare patterns and identify which sports reported relatively higher or lower burnout levels.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results showed variation in average burnout scores across the six sports included in the study. Football athletes reported the highest average burnout score, followed by basketball and volleyball athletes. Tennis players reported the lowest average burnout score, while track and field and swimming athletes fell in the middle range.

Sport	Average Burnout Score	Number of Participants
Basketball	72	30
Football	75	30
Track and Field	65	30
Swimming	68	30
Volleyball	70	30
Tennis	60	30

FINDINGS

Football athletes reported the highest average burnout score at 75. This suggests that football players in the sample experienced the greatest level of burnout symptoms during the competitive season. Possible explanations include the high physical contact involved in the sport, demanding practice schedules, injury concerns, team size, and performance pressure. Football athletes may also experience significant physical recovery demands due to repeated collisions and intense strength and conditioning requirements.

Basketball athletes reported the second-highest average burnout score at 72. Basketball seasons often include frequent games, travel, conditioning, skill work, and team meetings. The fast-paced nature of the sport, combined with public performance pressure and limited recovery time between competitions, may contribute to elevated emotional and physical exhaustion.

Volleyball athletes reported an average burnout score of 70. Although volleyball is not typically considered a collision sport, it still requires repeated explosive movements, jumping, diving, and high levels of team coordination. Athletes may also experience psychological pressure related to communication, role expectations, and maintaining performance consistency across long seasons.

Swimming athletes reported a moderate burnout score of 68. Swimming is often associated with repetitive training, early morning practices, high training volume, and year-round preparation. Although swimming is an individual sport, the repetitive nature of training may contribute to mental fatigue and sport devaluation over time.

Track and field athletes reported an average burnout score of 65. This score suggests a moderate level of burnout symptoms. Track and field includes a wide range of events, and athlete experiences may vary depending on whether they compete in sprints, distance events, jumps, throws, or combined events. Some athletes may benefit from individualized pacing and goal-setting, while others may experience pressure related to personal records and qualification standards.

Tennis players reported the lowest average burnout score at 60. This may suggest that tennis athletes in the sample experienced relatively lower levels of emotional exhaustion, reduced accomplishment, and sport devaluation. Tennis may provide greater autonomy in training and competition routines compared with some team sports. However, the score of 60 still indicates that burnout symptoms were present and should not be ignored.

Overall, the results suggest that team sports with high physical intensity and frequent performance demands were associated with higher average burnout scores. Football, basketball, and volleyball had the highest scores, while tennis and track and field had lower scores. Swimming occupied a middle position, which may reflect the unique demands of repetitive, high-volume training.

The range of burnout scores, from 60 to 75, indicates that burnout symptoms were present across all sports but varied in severity. This variation supports the idea that athletic departments should consider sport-specific stressors when designing wellness programs. A general mental health program may be useful, but it may not fully address the unique demands of each sport.

DISCUSSION

This descriptive study revealed clear differences in burnout symptoms among collegiate athletes across six sports. The highest burnout scores were observed among football, basketball, and volleyball athletes. These sports involve intense physical demands, structured team commitments, and frequent pressure to perform in front of coaches, teammates, spectators, and sometimes media audiences. These factors may contribute to emotional exhaustion and a reduced sense of accomplishment, particularly during the midpoint of the competitive season.

Football athletes reported the highest average burnout score. This finding may be related to the physically demanding and contact-heavy nature of the sport. Football players often experience intense practices, strength training, film sessions, tactical meetings, and injury management. In addition, football teams usually have large rosters, which may create competition for playing time and pressure to maintain one's position. Athletes who feel replaceable or constantly evaluated may experience increased stress and decreased enjoyment.

Basketball athletes also reported high burnout scores. Basketball seasons can be demanding because of the number of games, travel schedules, practices, and physical conditioning requirements. Athletes may have limited time to recover between contests, especially during tournament periods or conference play. The pace of basketball requires repeated sprinting, jumping, decision-making, and defensive effort, all of which may contribute to both physical and mental fatigue.

Volleyball athletes reported the third-highest average burnout score. Volleyball requires explosive movements, rapid communication, and strong team cohesion. Because success depends heavily on coordinated team execution, athletes may experience pressure related to communication errors, role expectations, and maintaining consistency. For some athletes, team dynamics may either protect against burnout or intensify it, depending on the motivational climate created by coaches and teammates.

Swimming presented a somewhat different pattern. Although swimming is often viewed as an individual sport, swimmers reported a moderate burnout score of 68. This may be explained by the repetitive and high-volume nature of swimming training. Swimmers often complete early morning and afternoon practices, sometimes with limited variety in routine. Over time, repetitive training environments may contribute to boredom, reduced motivation, and sport devaluation. The individual nature of swimming may also make athletes feel personally responsible for performance outcomes, which can increase pressure.

Track and field athletes reported a lower average burnout score than football, basketball, volleyball, and swimming athletes. However, their average score still suggested the presence of burnout symptoms. Track and field may allow for more individualized training and event-specific goal setting, which can provide athletes with a sense of control. However, the sport also places athletes under pressure to achieve measurable outcomes such as times, distances, and heights. Athletes who repeatedly fall short of performance goals may experience reduced accomplishment.

Tennis players reported the lowest burnout score among the six sports. One possible explanation is that tennis athletes may experience greater autonomy in training routines and competitive preparation. Tennis is also often structured around individual development, which may allow athletes to feel more control over their performance process. However, tennis can still involve travel, ranking pressure, scholarship expectations, and emotional stress during competition. Therefore, lower burnout scores should not be interpreted as an absence of concern.

The findings are consistent with the broader understanding that burnout is not caused by workload alone. While training volume and physical intensity are important, burnout is also shaped by perceived control, recovery opportunities, motivational climate, coach-athlete communication, team culture, role clarity, and academic stress. Two athletes may complete the same number of training hours but experience different levels of burnout depending on how supported, autonomous, and valued they feel.

For collegiate athletic departments, these findings highlight the need to monitor athletes' psychological well-being throughout the season. Physical metrics such as training load, injury reports, and performance statistics are useful but incomplete. Coaches and support staff should also pay attention to signs of emotional exhaustion, loss of motivation, irritability, declining confidence, reduced enjoyment, and withdrawal from teammates.

Sport-specific interventions may be especially valuable. Football programs may benefit from recovery monitoring, injury-related mental health support, and workload discussions. Basketball programs may need strategies for managing travel fatigue and frequent competition schedules. Volleyball teams may benefit from communication training and team culture assessments. Swimming programs may need variety in training routines and structured mental recovery. Track and field programs may benefit from individualized goal-setting and support around performance expectations. Tennis programs may benefit from mental skills training focused on pressure management and self-regulation.

Intervention strategies should include both preventive and responsive approaches. Preventive strategies may include education about burnout, scheduled rest periods, recovery planning, coach training, and early-season mental health screening. Responsive strategies may include counseling referrals, workload modifications, peer support, and individualized performance planning when an athlete begins showing signs of burnout.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study emphasize the importance of sport-specific mental health strategies in college athletics. Burnout is a serious concern because it can reduce performance, increase injury risk, weaken motivation, damage athlete well-being, and contribute to sport dropout. Although all six sport groups reported some level of burnout symptoms, football, basketball, and volleyball athletes reported the highest average scores.

The findings suggest that athletic departments should not assume that all athletes experience stress in the same way. Different sports create different physical, emotional, and social demands. Contact sports, high-intensity team sports, repetitive individual sports, and technical individual sports may each require different support strategies. A successful athlete wellness program should therefore combine general mental health resources with sport-specific interventions.

Collegiate programs, especially those involving football, basketball, and volleyball, should consider implementing preventive and responsive measures to manage burnout during peak competition. These measures may include scheduled rest periods, athlete-led workload discussions, psychological skills training, team culture assessment, coach-athlete communication workshops, and regular mental health check-ins.

Athletes should also be encouraged to communicate openly about fatigue, stress, and motivation without fear of being judged as weak or uncommitted. Coaches play a central role in shaping this environment. When coaches create a supportive climate, athletes may be more likely to seek help early and maintain a healthier relationship with their sport.

This study serves as a foundational step for more detailed future research. Future studies could use longitudinal designs to track burnout throughout an entire season or across multiple seasons. Researchers could also examine how gender, playing time, scholarship status, coaching style, academic pressure, injury history, sleep quality, and social support influence burnout symptoms. Inferential statistics could be used in future research to determine whether differences between sports are statistically significant.

In conclusion, burnout among collegiate athletes is a multidimensional issue that deserves continued attention. By recognizing sport-specific patterns and responding with targeted support, athletic departments can promote both performance and long-term athlete well-being.

REFERENCES

1. Raedeke, T. D., & Smith, A. L. (2001). Development and preliminary validation of an athlete burnout measure. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 23*(4), 281–306. https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.23.4.281
2. Goodger, K., Gorely, T., Lavallee, D., & Harwood, C. (2007). Burnout in sport: A systematic review. *The Sport Psychologist, 21*(2), 127–151. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.21.2.127
3. Gustafsson, H., Hassmén, P., Kenttä, G., & Johansson, M. (2008). A qualitative analysis of burnout in elite Swedish athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 9*(6), 800–816. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2007.11.004
4. Cresswell, S. L., & Eklund, R. C. (2005). Motivation and burnout among top amateur rugby players. *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise, 37*(3), 469–477. https://doi.org/10.1249/01.MSS.0000155398.71387.C2
5. Cresswell, S. L., & Eklund, R. C. (2006). The nature of player burnout in rugby: Key characteristics and attributions. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 18*(3), 219–239. https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200600830299
6. Gould, D., Tuffey, S., Udry, E., & Loehr, J. (1996). Burnout in competitive junior tennis players: I. A quantitative psychological assessment. *The Sport Psychologist, 10*(4), 322–340. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.10.4.322
7. Gould, D., Tuffey, S., Udry, E., & Loehr, J. (1997). Burnout in competitive junior tennis players: II. Qualitative analysis. *The Sport Psychologist, 11*(4), 341–366. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.11.4.341

8. Lemyre, P.-N., Treasure, D. C., & Roberts, G. C. (2006). Influence of variability in motivation and affect on elite athlete burnout susceptibility. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 28*(1), 32–48. https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.28.1.32
9. Madigan, D. J., Stoeber, J., & Passfield, L. (2016). Perfectionism and burnout in junior athletes: A three-month longitudinal study. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 38*(3), 305–315. https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.2015-0266
10. Smith, R. E. (1986). Toward a cognitive-affective model of athletic burnout. *Journal of Sport Psychology, 8*(1), 36–50. https://doi.org/10.1123/jsp.8.1.36
11. Gustafsson, H., Kenttä, G., Hassmén, P., & Lundqvist, C. (2007). Prevalence of burnout in competitive adolescent athletes. *The Sport Psychologist, 21*(1), 21–37. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.21.1.21
12. Isoard-Gautheur, S., Guillet-Descas, E., & Lemyre, P.-N. (2012). A prospective study of the influence of perceived coaching style on burnout propensity in high-level young athletes: Using a self-determination theory perspective. *The Sport Psychologist, 26*(2), 282–298. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.26.2.282
13. Lonsdale, C., Hodge, K., & Rose, E. A. (2009). Athlete burnout in elite sport: A self-determination perspective. *Journal of Sports Sciences, 27*(8), 785–795. https://doi.org/10.1080/02640410902929366