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Research Article

Beyond the Game: Mental Well-Being of University Student-Athletes

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Abstract
University student-athletes navigate the competing demands of academic achievement and athletic performance, which may expose them to psychological distress and challenges to their mental well-being. Guided by the Mental Well-Being Theory, this qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences and psychosocial resilience of student-athletes in managing academic and athletic responsibilities during a regular academic semester. Ten university student-athletes were purposively selected, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview data were analyzed using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. Four themes emerged: (1) resilience and endurance, (2) balance and self-regulation, (3) self-confidence and identity, and (4) social support as a coping mechanism. The findings indicate that participants managed the demands of their dual roles through intrinsic motivation, perseverance, personal discipline, emotional regulation, and support from family members and teammates. Athletic participation also provided opportunities for developing self-confidence, personal identity, and a sense of belonging. Collectively, these findings highlight the complementary roles of individual psychosocial resources and interpersonal support in shaping student-athletes' experiences of mental well-being. The study contributes contextual insights into the psychological and social dimensions of student-athletes' dual-career experiences and underscores the importance of institutional support mechanisms. Higher education institutions should consider strengthening academic flexibility, accessible mental health services, and structured psychosocial support programs to promote student-athletes' well-being and sustainable academic and athletic development.

Keywords
mental well-being; student-athletes; resilience; self-regulation; social support

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Ethics Statement
This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards.

INTRODUCTION

Physical activity has been widely recognized as an essential component of a healthy lifestyle and an important factor in preventing various health conditions. Beyond its physiological benefits, regular physical activity has contributed to psychological well-being, cognitive functioning, and overall human development (Piercy et al., 2018; Mahindru et al., 2023). Regular exercise has also been associated with improved stress recovery and academic performance among university students, suggesting that participation in physical activities complemented rather than hindered academic engagement (Teuber et al., 2024). Furthermore, physical activity has been associated with the prevention of depression, emphasizing its importance in promoting psychological health (Mammen & Faulkner, 2013). These findings established the relevance of physical activity in supporting students' physical, psychological, and academic development.

Physical activity has played an important role in promoting mental health and psychological well-being among university students (Mahindru et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2025). However, maintaining mental well-being may have become more challenging for university student-athletes because they were required to fulfill academic requirements while meeting the demands of athletic training and competition. These competing responsibilities may have exposed them to psychological pressure and difficulties in maintaining a healthy balance between their academic and athletic roles. Previous research on

student-athlete mental health highlighted the importance of understanding their psychological experiences within the context of dual-career demands (Kegelaers et al., 2024). Similarly, research examining student-athletes' perspectives on dual-career policies, institutional provisions, and related challenges emphasized the importance of appropriate support mechanisms in managing their combined academic and athletic responsibilities (De Maio et al., 2025).

Despite the recognized benefits of physical activity and the growing attention given to student-athletes' mental health, understanding how university student-athletes maintained their psychological well-being while managing competing academic and athletic responsibilities remained important. Existing literature provided insights into physical activity, mental health, athletic identity, resilience, and social support (Choudhury et al., 2024; Edison et al., 2021; Gray et al., 2024; Khalid et al., 2022; Luo et al., 2025). However, the lived experiences of student-athletes in specific university contexts required further exploration, particularly regarding how personal coping strategies, self-regulation, athletic identity, and interpersonal support contributed to their experiences of mental well-being. Examining these dimensions through participants' own accounts provided contextual understanding of how student-athletes responded to the psychological and practical challenges associated with balancing their dual roles.

To address this contextual research need, this qualitative phenomenological study explored the mental well-being of university student-athletes during the first semester of Academic Year 2024–2025. Specifically, it sought to understand their lived experiences in balancing academic and athletic responsibilities, identify the challenges they encountered, and examine the coping mechanisms and psychosocial resources that contributed to their overall well-being. The study involved ten purposively selected student-athletes from Central Philippines State University, Hinigaran Campus. By examining their experiences, the research aimed to contribute contextual insights into student-athletes' resilience, self-regulation, athletic identity, and social support. The findings were expected to inform higher education institutions, athletic administrators, coaches, and faculty members in developing supportive practices and institutional arrangements that promote student-athletes' psychological well-being and sustainable academic and athletic development.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of student-athletes as they balanced academic responsibilities and athletic commitments. Phenomenology was deemed appropriate because it focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and ascribe meaning to their shared experiences within a particular context. The study sought to document participants' personal perspectives regarding their mental well-being while managing the dual demands of academics and sports.

Participants

Ten student-athletes were purposively selected to participate in the study. To qualify, participants had to be varsity athletes officially enrolled during the first semester of Academic Year 2024-2025. Their ages ranged from 17 to 24 years. The participants included four females and six males. During data collection, all participants were actively engaged in both academic coursework and competitive athletic training.

Procedure

Following institutional approval, participants were recruited by purposive sampling. They were fully informed and signed consent forms before taking part in the study. Semi-structured, individual sessions were conducted in a private room on the university campus, depending on the participant's availability and preference. During the sessions, the discussion was recorded after obtaining the participant's permission, and the recordings were later transcribed word for word. Member checking was employed when participants were allowed to consult their transcripts for accuracy.

Collection

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions focusing on: personal background, experiences juggling academic and athletic activities, perceived stressors and coping mechanisms, and reflections on mental health. Further questioning was done to get more detailed explanations of the experiences.

Analysis

The data were analyzed phenomenologically through Colaizzi's (1978) method. The most important steps of the analysis were: getting familiar with the transcripts/picking out significant statements; determining meanings; putting themes in groups according to the central ideas; writing an in-depth description of the lived experience. Moreover, participant feedback was obtained in order to verify and thus confirm the findings as being credible and trustworthy.

Reflexivity

The researcher's identity as an academic faculty and sports program coordinator at Central Philippines State University – Hinigaran Campus lent contextual insight and an insider view of collegiate sport policies and the ever-present allure of the dual-economy intersection of academics and sports training, although the proximity made it incumbent upon the researcher to be sensitized against personal and institutional bias. To preserve qualitative rigor, reflexive bracketing epoché was employed throughout all research stages through journal prompting of biases as tied to audit linked journaling, outside peer consultation to guard against researcher pre-eminence in determining data significance, and adherence to Colaizzi's seven step procedures to inductively extract theme from raw verbatim data.

Ethical considerations

Prior to participant recruitment and data collection, ethical approval and formal permission were secured from the Institutional Ethics Review Committee. The study was carried out as the country-specific and university standards and regulations as well as professional ethical standards for human research. All potential participants were provided with a participant information sheet for the investigation in writing and with an oral explanation that explained the aim of the study was explained including that participation was voluntary and had no impact on the athlete's athletic career or team

function or on their academic registration at any point. Ethics and data collection before data collection, all participants provided written informed consent. To ensure confidentiality, reduce the possible trauma linked to recalling recent personal events, and minimize social desirability bias, all individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in a private soundproof conference room on the university campus in a time and place that was mutually agreed on; outside of class times, outside of athletic training hours. All personal identifiers were replaced by numerical codes (ST1 through ST10); audio-recordings and digitization of the interview recordings were securely stored on encrypted password protected institutional cloud drives only accessible to the primary researcher, with recordings scheduled for permanent removal following the fulfilment of institutional archival requirements.

Limitations and rigor

The trustworthiness and methodological rigor was guided by Lincoln and Guba's four-dimension to qualitative inquiry. In ensuring credibility, member checks, extended engagement in the field, and direct transcription of interviews ensured that the thematic summaries conformed with the lived experiences of the participants. Thick descriptions of the school environment, the demographics of the sample, the nature of their dual-career commitments, and the interview context ensured transferability of the analysis, while the use of a comprehensive audit trail from field notes, to the raw audio, to the transcripts, coding pages, provided dependability. This was further grounded in the participants' own words, by referencing all the identified themes to their verbatim responses in Hiligaynon, and English translations thereof.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the objectives, after the review, themes were identified from the in-depth interview.

Theme 1. Resilience And Endurance

The characteristics mainly associated with the student-athletes are Resilience and Endurance, which primarily give an insight into their ability to fight off phys`ical and emotional fatigue. Even when they surpass their boundaries, they still demonstrate remarkable perseverance to the world their unwavering willpower. *("Kapoy guid, pero fighting dyapun*"). Apart from this, the sub-theme of stress and anxiety management is another aspect of student-athletes that acknowledges that they are very much challenged by the dual demands of academics and sports, but still they manage to find ways to cope with such difficulties ("*Ka stressful sang tanan....," "Tam-an ka pressure sa training kag pag maintain sang akon grado")*. The theme communicates their grit and the different ways that they take to be able to survive the continual challenges. Below are some statements from participants that are consistent with the themes:

> *"Kapoy guid,pero kay kung naga hampang ko ya diri ko nalipay, diri ko gakuha sang kusog, confidence kag sense of belonginess."* " (It is truly exhausting, but when I am playing, that is where I find happiness; it is where I draw my strength, confidence, and sense of belonging.) – Participant *ST4*
>
> *"Ka stressful sang tanan pero fighting dyapun, gatinguha nga ibalance ang tanan, disciplina, motivate kag saligan ang kaugalingun."* (Everything is so stressful, but I am still fighting. I am striving to balance everything, stay disciplined, stay motivated, and trust in myself.) – Participant *ST 1*

Theme 2. Balance And Self-Regulation

Publishing Balance and Self-Regulation as a report concern, the authors spoke about the student-athletes' struggle to find balance between the two areas of their life, i.e., school and sports. As the sub-theme of striving for balance uncovers, they are making conscious efforts to both keep themselves healthy and maintain good performance at the same time *("Gatinguha nga ibalance ang tanan").* Self-discipline and motivation are the inner sources that drive the capability of managing stress and maintaining the endeavors ("*Keep discipline,...," "saligan ang kaugalingun"*). The theme here points out that being able to manage time, regulate emotions, and motivate oneself are the main factors that lead to holistic well-being. Some of their statements are presented below:

> *"Tam-an ka pressure sa training kag pag maintain sang akon grado sa klase kay isa ako ka Dean's Lister."* (The pressure from training and maintaining my grades in class is overwhelming because I am a Dean's Lister.) – Participant *ST9*
>
> *"Siguradohun guid nga mangin smart player, tinguhaan guid nga ibalance ang tanan nga butang para sa ikamayu sang lawas kag sang performance"* (Make sure to be a smart player; strive earnestly to balance everything for the well-being of your body and the excellence of your performance.) – Participant *ST7*

Theme 3. Self-Confidence And Identity

The theme Self-Confidence and Identity represents the student-athletes' recognition of their own worth that was not even slightly shaken after they were negatively judged in terms of their academic abilities. The sub-themes are composed of, first, the belief in one's identity as an athlete *("kami nga mga athletes maalam")* and from there, getting satisfaction and a feeling of being a part through playing sports ("*diri ko gakuha sang kusog, confidence kag sense of belonginess").* This theme demonstrates how participation in sports can be a means of developing one's value and being more socially integrated which, in turn, give/support the young people the needed protection from unfavorable pronouncements.

> *"Halin elementary hambalan ko nila nga ungo ko kay nugbo grades ko, pero si mama wala gapati kay halin sang una ga excel ko ya sa volleyball."* (Ever since elementary school, people told me I was slow or a failure because of low grades, but my mother never believed them because, since the beginning, I have excelled in volleyball.) – Participant *ST5*
>
> *"Gapati ko ya nga kami nga mga athletes maalam, indi kami parehu sa iban but maalan kami ya maam kapin pa sa tunga sang court."* (I believe that we athletes are intelligent. We might not be like others, but we know how to think critically and solve problems, especially in the middle of the court.)– Participant *ST2*

"Mas gin palangga ko ang akon kaugalingun, kag gapati guid ko nga damu paku may mahimu sa kabuhe ko." ((I have learned to love myself more, and I truly believe that I have so much more to achieve in my life.) – Participant *ST8*

THEME 4. Social Support as a Coping Mechanism

The theme Social Support as a Coping Mechanism is an emphasis on the elements that include the love and care from parents, brothers and sisters, and friends which are the main sources of encouragement and the driving force for the student-athletes *("Diri ko kakita mga utod ko nga gabulig kag naga motivate sa akon"* – Participant *ST 7).* The support provides a resource for mental well-being through the acts of encouragement and the feeling of being part of a group during stressful times.

"I am just so blessed kay kabalo guid ako nga damu ako ya sang support system. Biskan anu ang mag kalatabo ang akon pamilya ara guid nga naga suporta sa akon sa tanan nga butang." (I am just so blessed because I know that I have a dedicated support system. No matter what happens, my family is always there to support me in everything). – Participant *ST2*

"Diri ko kakita mga utod ko nga gabulig kag naga motivate sa akon nga mapadayon." ((Here with my teammates, I found brothers and sisters who support me and motivate me to keep going.) – Participant *ST3*

"Kung stress katama, mahampang ko, kung kapoy ko gapahuway ko, gapamalandung kag gina ampo tanan sa Ginoo, kag mapadayun naman." (When I am overwhelmed by stress, I play. When I am tired, I rest, reflect, pray about everything to the Lord, and then continue moving forward.) – Participant *ST3*

This research examined the real-life experiences of student-athletes who have to juggle both their studies and sports commitments. The data revealed four closely connected themes that explain the story: Resilience and Endurance, Balance and Self-Regulation, Self-Confidence and Identity, and Social Support as a Coping Mechanism. Overall, these themes convey how student-athletes psychologically stay well, overcome difficult situations, and get both their personal and performance selves developed.

The first theme, Resilience and Endurance, reflects the participants' capacity to sustain their academic and athletic commitments despite physical fatigue and emotional pressure. Their experiences demonstrate that resilience involves more than enduring difficulties; it also includes developing adaptive responses to competing responsibilities. This interpretation is consistent with O'Neil et al. (2021), who examined student-athletes' dual commitment to school and sport. Khalid et al. (2022) further provide relevant evidence concerning the development and assessment of resilience among athletes. The participants' accounts suggest that perseverance, intrinsic motivation, and personal discipline helped them manage the challenges associated with their dual roles.

The second theme, Balance and Self - Regulation, highlights the indispensable role of self-management in dual, career student-athletes. Participants shared how they consciously planned their time, controlled their emotions, and gave priority to their tasks. The athletes' self-management techniques relate to the sport psychology concept of self-regulation, which consists of goal setting, monitoring, and behavioral control as the basis of both performance and psychological well-being (De Maio et al., 2025; Kang & Alaeddini, 2025). The high-performing participants, such as the Dean's Listers, illustrated the most advanced levels of self-discipline and self-efficacy, thus showing that good self-regulation is both a cause and a consequence of continuing dual success. Experimental research shows that individuals who follow a self-regulatory program experience less stress, become more resilient, and behave more adaptively while they are studying and practicing sports at a high level (Ator & Ortizo, 2024).

The third theme, Self-Confidence and Identity, highlights the psychological significance of athletic participation in shaping participants' perceptions of competence, personal worth, and social belonging. Their narratives indicate that identifying as athletes provided a positive source of self-recognition, particularly when they encountered negative judgments regarding their academic abilities. This finding is consistent with research examining athletic identity and its relationship with youth sport participation (Choudhury et al., 2024; Edison et al., 2021). These findings suggest that athletic identity may contribute to confidence and personal development, although its influence should be understood within the broader academic and social experiences of student-athletes.

The fourth theme, Social Support as a Coping Mechanism, demonstrates the importance of family members, peers, and teammates in helping participants manage academic and athletic pressures. Their accounts indicate that encouragement, emotional understanding, and a sense of belonging provided important resources during stressful situations. This finding is supported by research examining the relationship between social support and depressive and anxiety symptoms among college student-athletes (Sullivan et al., 2022). Similarly, Gray et al. (2024) examined the effects of social support on athlete burnout and well-being, while Luo et al. (2025) synthesized evidence concerning social support and mental health among athletes. Collectively, these studies reinforce the importance of interpersonal relationships in supporting athletes' psychological well-being.

The findings from the current study help deepen the theoretical understanding of student, athlete well, being by showing how personal resilience, self-regulatory strategies, identity development, and social support interact. They collectively constitute a coherent psychosocial model that equips student-athletes to successfully handle their academic and athletic workload. These revelations emphasize the value of initiatives that develop the above aspects to improve an athlete's overall well-being in college sports environments.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings of this study demonstrate that university student-athletes experience mental well-being as an ongoing process of managing academic and athletic responsibilities while drawing on personal and social resources. The four emerging themes—resilience and endurance, balance and self-regulation, self-confidence and identity, and social support as

a coping mechanism—illustrate how participants navigated the demands of their dual roles. Perseverance, personal discipline, emotional regulation, and encouragement from family members and teammates helped them respond to challenges and sustain their involvement in both academic and athletic activities. These findings suggest that student-athletes' mental well-being is shaped not only by individual coping capacities but also by the support available within their social and institutional environments. Although the experiences of the ten participants provide valuable contextual insights, the findings are specific to the study setting and should not be generalized to all university student-athletes.

Higher education institutions should strengthen support systems that address the combined academic, athletic, and psychosocial demands experienced by student-athletes. These may include flexible academic arrangements during training and competition periods, accessible counseling and mental health services, regular well-being assessments, and structured programs that develop stress management, time management, and emotional regulation skills. Coaches, faculty members, and athletic administrators should also coordinate their efforts to create supportive environments in which student-athletes can communicate challenges without fear of academic or athletic disadvantage. Family members and teammates may further contribute by providing consistent encouragement and practical support. Future research should examine student-athletes from different institutions, sporting disciplines, and demographic backgrounds to explore how their experiences may vary across contexts. Further studies may also use longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to investigate changes in mental well-being over time and assess the effectiveness of institutional support interventions.

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