THE MENTAL JERSEY: MENTAL TOUGHNESS AND
ATHLETIC IDENTITY IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENT ATHLETES

BY

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Abstract

This study investigated the possible relationship between mental toughness and athletic identity in student athletes, who identify as African-American. This research used a correlational analysis to look at the subcomponents of both mental toughness and athletic identity. Participants, after giving consent, filled out a demographic questionnaire, the athletic identity measurement scale, as well as the mental toughness questionnaire. Results suggested that participants scored high on both mental toughness and athletic identity, but male athletes scored higher on athletic identity.
Introduction

Mental toughness and Athletic Identity

When thinking about student-athletes one must consider role theory, which focuses on the impact of social systems/structures (e.g., educational institutions, athletic programs, etc.) and processes (e.g., socialization experiences, relationships,) on an individual’s identity salience and developmental outcomes (e.g., academic, personal, and psychosocial) (Adler and Adler 1985, 1987, 1991), and how these individuals identify with both their role as a student and athlete. This theory contends that the roles individuals identify with can impact their overall life in many ways, ultimately which can produce role conflicts which can arise when athletes encounter the inherent structural constraints and entrenched challenges associated with fulfilling roles as a student and an athlete at a Division I institution (Snyder, 1985). Meaning that this form of role theory can influence the overall well-being of the athlete in many ways inside and sport setting as well as outside. However, according to Steinfeldt, Reed & Steinfeldt, 2010 being African-American and an athlete are two salient self-concepts, which African-American student athletes negotiate. Athletic identity is defined as the degree to which an individual identifies with the role of an athlete (Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder, 1993). It is made aware that athletic identity can serve as a mediator for well-being, is related to more frequent exercise and athletic participation, and is also associated with greater scholastic and vocational competence (Anderson, 2004; Lamont-Mills & Christensen, 2006; Ryska, 2002). Where the intersection lies between the athletic identity of the individual and race is evident through findings which state African-American student athletes who may experience difficulties with faculty interactions, negative stereotyping of academic competencies, preparedness, athletic abilities, and personal dispositions accentuated by their athlete status (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007; Sailes & Harrison, 2008). These
individuals have also entered college academically unprepared and have grown up in low socioeconomic status compared to their peers (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). While although a strong athletic identity can increase sport commitment and persistency it can also negatively compromise and be detrimental to academic achievement, behavior choices, and transitioning out of sport (Horton & Mack, 2000; Beamon & Bell, 2006; Harrison, Harrison & Moore, 2002; Webb et al., 1998). There are both pros and cons to having a strong athletic identity and assessing these allow for thorough analysis of the overall well-being of the athlete.

When discussing what makes an athlete successful on and off the field, mental toughness comes into play because it is considered one of the most important psychological attributes in determining success in sport. Mental toughness is defined as having the natural or developed psychological edge that enable you to: Generally, cope better than your opponents with the many demands that sport places on a performer, specifically be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure (Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002). It is also something coaches look at for recruitment purposes as well as determining which athletes are committed to their sport and will be able to endure stressful athletic situations without faltering (Weinberg, Butt, & Culp, 2011). Mental toughness, which refers to an inner focus and commitment to rise above challenges when facing adversity (Thelwell et al., 2005), and the mental toughness questionnaire has been assessed and developed recently to assure validity and reliability not only for elite performers, but for collegiate athletes as well. Jones et al. (2002) identifies mental toughness as the ability to cope and perform well under excessive pressure, exerts control over varying demands placed upon them in training in their personal life, and enables themselves to experience positive psychological states. It is related to stress management and psychological well-being. Mental toughness also encompasses
positive psychological attributes of college athletes such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, flow, competitiveness, and goal orientation regardless of competition level or sport type (Madrigal et al., 2013). Mentally tough athletes can maintain concentration in pressurized situations, persist, and retain high levels of self-belief after setbacks (Crust & Clough, 2011). This information lead to the formation of the model of the Mental Toughness Questionnaire that assesses challenge, commitment, confidence, and control. The mental toughness questionnaire showed convergent and divergent validity and the results encompasses the positive psychological attributes of college athletes such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, flow, competitiveness and goal orientation, showing all the ways mental toughness can affect the psychological well-being of the athlete. Much research has been done on athletic identity and mental toughness, but not in the realms of their relationship as it pertains to African-American student-athletes who make up a good amount of the athlete population at the collegiate level, but also go onto to make up a good amount of the population in the professional world as well. The purpose of the study is to explore, if any, the relationship between mental toughness and athletic identity in African-American collegiate student-athletes, as well as the benefits of having a well-rounded and holistic individual who will prevail in situations of sport, academics, and life overall. In addition, the purpose is to explore what are the effects of a strong athletic identity and a high mental toughness score. It is very imperative that all athletes maintain some form of balance between their athlete and student role, however research needs to be conducted to understand how or if this balance can be affected for an African-American student athlete. This research will be looking at these effects solely at PWIs or predominantly white institutions. The purpose of studying these two concepts is to see how mental toughness and athletic identity can overall help and not hinder the athlete, especially an African-American athlete at a PWI. Low mental
toughness can affect athlete performance as well as the way their coaches view them. Strong athletic identity can cause athletes to be less invested in school, pursue limited career options, and have difficulties when retiring from sports whether that be voluntarily and forced. The aim of this research is to gain insight about athletic identity and mental toughness as it pertains to African-American student-athletes, which will allow background information on an understudied topic and population. We hypothesize that male student athletes will have a higher athletic identity compared to their female counterparts, but will have little to no difference regarding mental toughness; there will be a statically significant relationship between athletic identity and mental toughness.

Methods

Experimental Design

Eligible participants from six schools in the Division 1 Big 12 Conference were contacted. Student athletes had to be identifying African-American male and females who were eligible for play by NCAA definitions, were receiving a scholarship, and played the following sports: basketball, volleyball, track and field (indoor and outdoor), football, soccer, golf, and tennis. Individuals who were considered as walk ons or were not receiving scholarship were omitted from the study. Once eligible the participants completed three surveys a demographic questionnaire, the mental toughness questionnaire, and the athletic identity scale.

Subjects

A total of sixteen participants (n=16) completed the study. Seven was the total amount of female identifying participants and nine was the amount for male identifying participants. Out of the participants only four (n=4) of the participants identified as African-American. The rest of the
participants were excluded from the study. The Institutional Review Board approved all procedures from this study and all participants gave consent prior to participation.

**Demographic Questionnaire/Information**

Participants (n=16) had a mean age range of n=20.5 years. The following sports, which were represented in the study, include equestrian, soccer, swimming and diving, track and field, and football. The following schools represented from the participant pool included Texas Christian University. All the participants were considered eligible according to NCAA and all were receiving scholarships. Eight of the participants were on full scholarship and the other eight were on partial scholarship. College freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors were represented in the study. Mean average of experience was n=11.87 years. Out of the four participants who were considered eligible for the study there were three females and one male. Football, soccer, track and field, and equestrian were represented by these participants and the mean age was n=21 years. The average years of experience was n=14 years. Three of those individuals were on full scholarships and one of the individuals was on partial scholarship.

**Results**

After completion of the questionnaires they were scored. The mean average score for the AIMS was n=46. The female participants did score lower on this measure opposed to the male participants. For the MTQ, 62.5% of individuals felt they remained calm in high pressure situations and 74% of the participants felt in control. 87.5% of the participants reported traits like optimism and the ability to remain positive. Lastly results showed that 80.5% of the participants find it hard to get going and do things when they feel tired.
**Discussion**

Overall the data showed that majority of the athletes scored high on both mental toughness and athletic identity. As predicted the male athletes scored higher on athletic identity compared to the female participants. Limitations of this study include the small population size and timing of the year (off season for some sports and in season for other sports). Results of this study can be used to help look at the high rates of mental toughness and athletic identity with the collegiate population and how that relates to academics, college experience, and the overall well-being of the athlete. Although participants were excluded from the study it is possible to use non
identifying African-American student athletes to compare and correlate athletic identity and metal toughness scores.