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## Short Communication

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## Division I Softball Athletes' Perceptions on Stress, Coping, Performance, and Mental Health

Rhianna J. Weall<sup>1</sup>, Alex C. Garn<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Kinesiology, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA

<sup>2</sup> School of Kinesiology, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

### Abstract

**Background:** Collegiate student-athletes face unique stressors due to the dual demands of academics and athletics. This study explores the perceived stress and coping strategies of Division I softball players using the Transactional Model of Stress as a framework. **Aims and Objectives:** This research aims to uncover the dynamic relationship between stress, coping, and performance, providing valuable insights into how mental health and athletic performance are interconnected. **Materials and Methods:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five Division I softball players from the same program, and thematic analysis identified three key themes: Pressure is Privilege, Identity Development and Team Dynamics, and Softball-Centrism. **Results:** Findings revealed that softball-related stressors were typically appraised as challenges, leading to the use of active coping strategies, such as structured routines and mental skills training. Athletes viewed high-pressure situations as opportunities for growth, reinforcing confidence and motivation. However, academic stressors were more frequently appraised as threats, often resulting in passive coping behaviors, such as avoidance and disengagement. Players struggled to balance academic responsibilities with the demands of their sport, citing limited time management skills and inadequate academic support. **Conclusion:** These findings suggest that structured mental skills training can help athletes manage performance stress, while additional academic resources and identity development programs may improve overall well-being.

**Keywords:** Stress, Coping, Primary appraisals, Female athletes.

### INTRODUCTION

Collegiate athletes face amplified physical, social, emotional, and mental demands due to their dual roles as students and athletes. Balancing these roles is challenging, as success in one may come at the expense of the other [1]. Stress, defined as a state of mental and/or emotional exertion from challenging situation [2], is heightened for college athletes due to their academic, social, and personal demands [3]. Unlike their non-athlete peers, student-athletes must also manage intense performance expectations.

Mental health is closely tied to the athletic environment, yet stigma persists, discouraging athletes from seeking help due to fears of appearing weak or losing playing time [4]. Awareness of mental health in sports is growing due to its impact on athletes' well-being [5]. As athletic performance constantly fluctuates, athletes need to develop effective coping strategies to manage stress [6]. Coping strategies are categorized as task-oriented (e.g., skill improvement), emotion-oriented (e.g., self-talk), and avoidance-oriented (e.g., denial) [7]. In the context of student-athletes, effective coping strategies can help sustain performance and resilience.

### Transactional Model of Stress

This study applies Lazarus [8] transactional model of stress, which emphasizes cognitive appraisal in stress perception and coping responses (See Figure 1). Cognitive appraisal and coping strategies act as mediators between stressful situations and actions. When faced with a stressor, individuals typically frame it as a challenge or threat (i.e., primary appraisals) and respond with active or passive coping strategies (i.e., secondary appraisals).

Coping refers to the thoughts and behaviors used to manage stressful demands [9]. According to Lazarus [10], coping strategies (i.e., secondary appraisals) often diverge based on the level of perceived threat associated with the stressor and one's assessment of having the resources to successfully address it. Active coping, such as mindfulness and self-talk, is employed when athletes perceive adequate resources

\*Corresponding author:  
**Rhianna J. Weall**  
50 Huey P. Long Field House,  
Baton Rouge, LA, 70802, USA  
Email: rweall1@lsu.edu

to manage stress. Passive coping, such as avoidance, is used when athletes feel unprepared [10].

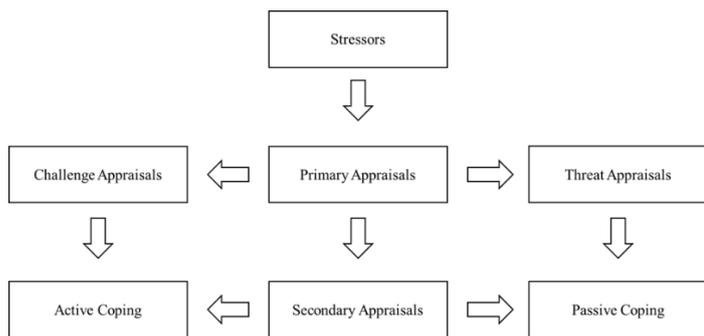


Figure 1: Transactional Model of Stress

Cosh and Tully [1] revealed that athletes undergoing multiple stressors often feel ill-equipped to cope. Mental skills training, including mindfulness and positive self-talk, helps athletes develop resilience [11]. On the other hand, negative coping strategies, such as self-defeating thoughts, can undermine performance [2]. Understanding how athletes perceive and cope with stress can inform mental skills training and improve both performance and mental health [12].

The goal of effective coping strategies is not only to reduce stress but also to enhance emotional well-being and performance [13]. Athletes who employ successful coping mechanisms are better equipped to manage stress and mental health challenges, leading to sustained performance and emotional resilience both during competition and in their personal lives. The present study investigates how Division I softball players perceive stress and the coping strategies they employ in response, utilizing Lazarus' transactional model of stress as the framework. This research aims to uncover the dynamic relationship between stress, coping, and performance, providing valuable insights into how mental health and athletic performance are interconnected. The following research questions guided this study: 1) What do Division I softball players perceive as prominent stressors? 2) What coping strategies do Division I softball players use to address prominent stressors? 3) How do players describe relationships among stress, coping, performance, and mental health?

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

This qualitative study employed a semi-structured interview design [14] and included a purposive sample of five current Division I softball athletes from the same program, aged 18 to 24 years. Collegiate softball represents a highly selective population, with only 7.8% of high school softball players advancing to any collegiate level and approximately 1.6% competing at the Division I level [15]. Given the specificity of this population, the sample size remains intentionally small, focusing on a subset of female collegiate athletes. Recruitment prioritized diversity in backgrounds, playing positions, performance levels (e.g., starters and non-starters), and team experience to capture a range of perspectives on stress and coping (see Table 1 for Participant Information).

Table 1: Participant Information

Participant #	Age	Year	Years Playing	Starter
1	22	Junior	16	Yes
2	20	Junior	18	Yes
3	23	Grad Student	20	Yes
4	22	Grad Student	18	No
5	20	Junior	15	Yes

### Role of the Researcher

The researcher maintained an insider role due to personal experience and close ties to the sport of softball. This position provided advantages in participant recruitment and fostering a comfortable environment for open discussions. Bonner and Tolhurst [16] identify three key benefits of an insider role: deeper cultural understanding, minimal interference with social interactions, and increased participant trust, facilitating candid responses.

However, the researcher's direct experience with collegiate athletics introduced potential bias. To mitigate this, steps were taken to minimize personal influence during interviews, including maintaining neutral body language, using open-ended questions, and ensuring responses were participant-driven.

### Data Collection

Approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board. The researcher first secured permission from the coaching staff and then contacted players via email. Participants provided informed consent before engaging in individual, in-person semi-structured interviews [17]. A structured interview guide (See Appendix A) provided consistency while allowing for flexibility in responses. Sessions lasted between 33 and 52 minutes (M = 41:58, SD = 9.02) and were recorded with consent and conducted in a consistent setting. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. All interview data were transcribed, and identifying details were removed to protect participants' anonymity.

### Data Analysis and Credibility

A thematic analysis approach was employed to extract meaning from participant responses. Researchers followed an interpretive framework, emphasizing athletes' subjective experiences [17]. Thematic analysis occurred as: 1) initial coding- line-by-line coding was conducted for each interview transcript, 2) category identification- recurring patterns and significant statements were grouped into overarching categories [18], and 3) theme development- the identified categories were further analyzed to generate key themes aligning with the research questions [19]. To enhance credibility, an independent peer debriefer reviewed the coding and thematic analysis. This process supported triangulation and reduced potential bias.

The researcher, despite having firsthand experience in collegiate softball, minimized personal bias by focusing on participant-driven responses. Voluntary participation ensured that selection bias was limited despite the researcher's existing connections to the participants [20]. The Transactional Model of Stress [8,21] guided the interpretation of results, offering insight into how Division I softball players navigate stress, coping mechanisms, performance, and mental health.

## RESULTS

Three primary themes were generated from the data: Pressure is Privilege, Identity Development and Team Dynamics, and Softball-Centrism. These themes highlight how Division I softball players appraise stressors and the implications for their performance and mental health.

### Pressure is Privilege

Few athletes have the opportunity to compete at the Division I level, and those at Power 5 universities experience heightened expectations due to the level of competition, fan engagement, and scrutiny from coaches. At this elite level, athletes must uphold "the standard of the high level" expected of them (Participant 4). This creates a dynamic

where achieving this status reinforces confidence yet also generates a high-pressure environment.

Despite the intensity, participants viewed this pressure as a privilege rather than a burden. They recognized that not every athlete gets to compete in a Power 5 conference, and they framed high-stakes moments as opportunities rather than stressors (i.e., challenge appraisal): “Pressure is privilege” (Participant 3). Many players expressed gratitude for these experiences, with one noting, “I feel like that’s why you play—to be in those big moments and high-pressure situations” (Participant 1). The responsibility of being relied upon in crucial situations served as motivation. As another participant explained, “Being the person you put in any situation drives me to put forth effort and strive for success” (Participant 3).

Participants’ perceptions of pressure influenced their confidence, performance, and even their outlook beyond softball. According to Participant 2, “If I’m confident on the field, it usually goes to life...if I’m like zero confidence like last year, I become a different me [off the field].” This suggests that the confidence built through sport directly impacts overall life satisfaction.

**Coping Strategies: The Red, Yellow, and Green Light System.** All five participants reported using a mental health coaching strategy called the Red, Yellow, and Green Light System to self-assess stress. This strategy provided a structured way to assess stress levels and implement coping mechanisms: a) green light- the athlete is mentally prepared, focused, and unaffected by stress, b) yellow light- signs of distress appear (e.g., frustration or loss of concentration) requiring adjustment to refocus, c) red light- the athlete feels completely out of control and must take deep breaths or engage in other calming techniques to regain composure. Participants use specific release routines for both offensive and defensive situations to reset before the next play:

We have these routines that we go through, like in the box, we all walk up to the plate with the barrel of the bat in our hand. We all must wipe out the box in some way, and we all have our own special routine. I draw a cross in the middle and then take a deep breath” (Participant 1).

This coping method was unanimously adopted by all participants and was crucial in maintaining confidence and composure in high-pressure moments.

### **Identity Development and Team Dynamics**

Softball was central to participants’ identities, with most playing since early childhood.

Upon entering college, players encountered unfamiliar roles that required adaptation. Unlike in high school, where they were often the top players on their teams, many found themselves taking on supporting roles. This shift was a source of stress: “I had never really failed so it was a huge adjustment coming in and being literally at the bottom of the totem pole” (Participant 3). Coaches determined player roles before the season, and for some, accepting these roles was challenging. Struggling with role acceptance contributed to increased stress and affected performance.

**Team Cohesion.** Participants emphasized that team camaraderie was essential for success and a key factor in managing stress: “The camaraderie of the team stood out above everything else as my favorite part of being a student-athlete” (Participant 1). However, not all team dynamics were positive. Some players recounted past seasons with tension and discord, which created additional stress. In contrast, the current environment was described as having a “homey vibe” (Participant 3). Pre-season dynamics were particularly crucial in shaping the team’s overall success: “If we don’t start good [in the pre-

season], then we are not going to end up good [in the regular season]” (Participant 1).

**Identity Beyond Softball.** The intense focus on softball made it difficult for participants to establish identities outside the sport. For some, this realization came as a shock: “I wanted to figure out who I was outside of softball because I lost who I was, and I never realized I didn’t know myself” (Participant 5). This struggle highlights the need for further research on identity development in student-athletes and the potential long-term effects of sport-centric identities.

### **Softball-Centrism**

Participants described significant challenges in balancing their academic and athletic responsibilities. Athletics took precedence over academics, and while academic resources were available, they were not as emphasized as athletic support: “I felt like I was going all in on softball, so my grades slacked” (Participant 5). Time management was a major struggle, and the demanding schedule left little room for academic focus: “Then by the time I like get to go home, it’s dark, and I am ready to just go to bed and then you just do the repeat cycle. I get tired” (Participant 2).

**Perceived Lack of Academic Support.** Despite available academic support, participants found it impersonal: “Our [academic] advisors are our advisors, but they’re not really looking at it [progress towards degree] because there are so many of us. They can’t 1-on-1 with us and figure out what’s best for you” (Participant 5).

By contrast, they placed higher value on their athletic support systems, such as coaches, sports psychologists, and mental health coaches. Because their environment was centered around athletic performance, some participants struggled to seek academic help, feeling embarrassed or hesitant to ask for assistance: “You feel embarrassed to ask for help [academically], but it actually takes strength to ask for help” (Participant 3). Participants also reported relying on more active coping strategies for softball by using more passive strategies for academics. This disparity highlights an area where additional academic support and coping skill development could benefit student-athletes.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study examined stress perceptions and coping strategies among Division I softball players using the transactional model of stress. Findings revealed that players often framed softball-related stressors as challenges and used active coping strategies, whereas academic stressors were more frequently appraised as threats, leading to passive coping behaviors.

### **Primary Appraisals**

Primary cognitive appraisals determine whether an individual perceives a stressor as a challenge or a threat<sup>[10]</sup>. If an individual believes they have the resources to handle a situation, they are more likely to appraise it as a challenge, which fosters a proactive response. Conversely, if they perceive the demands to exceed their resources, the situation is appraised as a threat, which can lead to avoidance or maladaptive coping<sup>[22]</sup>.

**Challenge Appraisals in Softball Performance.** The results demonstrated that softball-related stressors were often framed as challenges, particularly in high-pressure game situations. Within the Pressure is Privilege theme, participants expressed confidence in their training and previous successes, allowing them to reframe pressure as an opportunity rather than a burden. As one participant noted, “Pressure is privilege,” highlighting a mindset shift toward embracing competition. Similarly, within the Softball-Centrism theme, participants reported thriving in intense game moments when they had high confidence levels. These findings align with prior research indicating

that challenge appraisals are essential for maximizing athletic performance [23].

*Threat Appraisals in Academic Stress and Role Acceptance.* In contrast, academic stressors were frequently framed as threats. Participants expressed difficulty managing academic responsibilities due to the demands of their athletic schedule, a key component of the Softball-Centrism theme. The perception of limited time and inadequate academic support led to avoidance behaviors and passive coping strategies. This aligns with prior research linking threat appraisals to maladaptive coping mechanisms and motivation focused on failure avoidance [24].

Similarly, in the Identity Development and Team Dynamics theme, participants who had less prominent roles on the team often appraised their situation as a threat rather than a challenge. For many, transitioning from being a high school standout to a collegiate bench player was a significant source of stress. The pre-season period was particularly anxiety-inducing, as this was when coaches determined playing roles, reinforcing the pressure to prove oneself.

*Identity and Future Uncertainty.* This study also revealed mixed primary appraisals regarding identity development outside of softball. Some participants embraced the challenge of exploring new identities beyond their sport, seeing the transition as an opportunity for growth. However, others experienced fear and uncertainty, viewing life after softball as a threat due to the lack of a clear future path. This identity conflict is a well-documented stressor among collegiate athletes [25].

### Secondary Appraisals

Secondary appraisals refer to how individuals respond to stress and are categorized into active and passive coping strategies [8]. Active coping occurs when a stressor is appraised as a challenge, prompting proactive behaviors. Passive Coping occurs when a stressor is appraised as a threat, often leading to avoidance or disengagement.

*Active Coping in Softball.* Within the Pressure is Privilege theme, participants identified routines as a key problem-focused active coping strategy. These routines were unique to each player and were used in both offensive and defensive situations to maintain focus and composure. Many athletes employed a “Red, Yellow, and Green Light” system to self-assess their stress levels and implement appropriate coping mechanisms. These structured routines were critical for performance enhancement, allowing athletes to regain control in high-pressure moments. The results align with previous findings that athletes who engage in pre-performance routines and self-regulation strategies are better equipped to handle competitive stress [26].

*Passive Coping in Academics.* While active coping strategies were prevalent in softball, academic coping strategies were passive. Within the Softball-Centrism theme, participants reported limited engagement with academic advisors and a reluctance to seek academic support. Study tables were often viewed as a punishment rather than a tool for success, further discouraging proactive academic coping behaviors. their academic

In the Identity Development and Team Dynamics theme, participants used both active and passive coping strategies to navigate their evolving identities. Active coping strategies included expanding social circles, exploring new interests, and planning for post-softball careers. Conversely, passive coping strategies included fear of the future, procrastination, and feeling overwhelmed by uncertainty. These findings align with previous research indicating that identity foreclosure in athletes can lead to stress and difficulty adjusting post-sport [25].

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study had several limitations that should be addressed in future research. Interviews were conducted during the pre-season, which may have influenced participants’ stress perceptions. Future studies should examine stress and coping across an entire season. This study focused solely on athletes’ perspectives; future research should incorporate coaches and academic staff for a more comprehensive analysis. While this study provides valuable insights into Power 5 softball athletes, future research should examine stress across different divisions and sports.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex interplay between stress, coping strategies, and identity development among Division I softball players. Participants predominantly appraised softball-related stressors as challenges, utilizing active coping strategies, while academic stressors were seen as threats, leading to passive coping. Structured mental performance training helped athletes manage competitive stress, but academic challenges required greater support. Expanding mental health resources beyond athletics may foster a more balanced student-athlete experience. Future research should expand on these findings by tracking stress and coping strategies over time and incorporating multiple perspectives within the collegiate athletic environment.

### Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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### ORCID ID

Rhianna Weall: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8701-8578>

Alex C. Garn: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7824-4027>

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