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Race and Gender's Effect on the Prevalence and Perception of Mental Health Struggles in Athletes

Authors: Maya Hoff, Jordan Walsh, Sarah Well

Introduction and Methods

Athletes are expected to be “mentally strong” despite external and internal pressures. Our goal is to learn more about what plays a role in the mental well-being of athletes along with the stigmas they face. We explored differences between team and individual sports, gender, and race.

We conducted a meta-analysis of academic and popular sources related to athletes' mental health complemented by interviews with Binghamton University student-athletes involved in team sports. We also measured the presence of anxiety symptoms in Binghamton student-athletes using Smith's Sport Anxiety Scale.

Black student-athletes are dehumanized to a great extent, being valued only as players, and not as full human beings.^{2,21}

College level student athletes have a lack of autonomy, from everyday decisions such as what they eat and wear to bigger choices such as the classes they take and the major they declare. The socioeconomic disadvantages faced by athletes of color make this lack of autonomy even greater.²¹

There is a stereotype that student-athletes behave poorly in the academic setting and do not care about their academic responsibilities. This stereotype is especially aimed at Black male student-athletes.²¹

Male athletes in one study had significantly higher levels of anxiety regarding finances and social media than females.²⁰

The levels of mental illnesses mirror those of the general population. In college students, both male and female athletes had lower levels of mental health struggles, attributed to due to their increased exercise levels.^{4, 18}

Many studies found that male and female athletes had similar levels of mental illness, but women were more likely to report these issues.^{6, 20}

Professional Athletes and Media Reactions

“He has shown courage and bravery to prioritize his mental health.”

- Jack Leach on Ben Stokes

“We are raising a generation of weak people like Simone Biles.”

- Charlie Kirk

“She’s hurting tennis. It’s a real problem.”

- Gilles Moretton on Naomi Osaka

“He seems to be in a very bad space right now - hope he has friends and family to provide support.”

@joannlanderson - on Matthew Wolf

“Get back out there, Simone- you’re a great champion not a quitter.”

Piers Morgan -



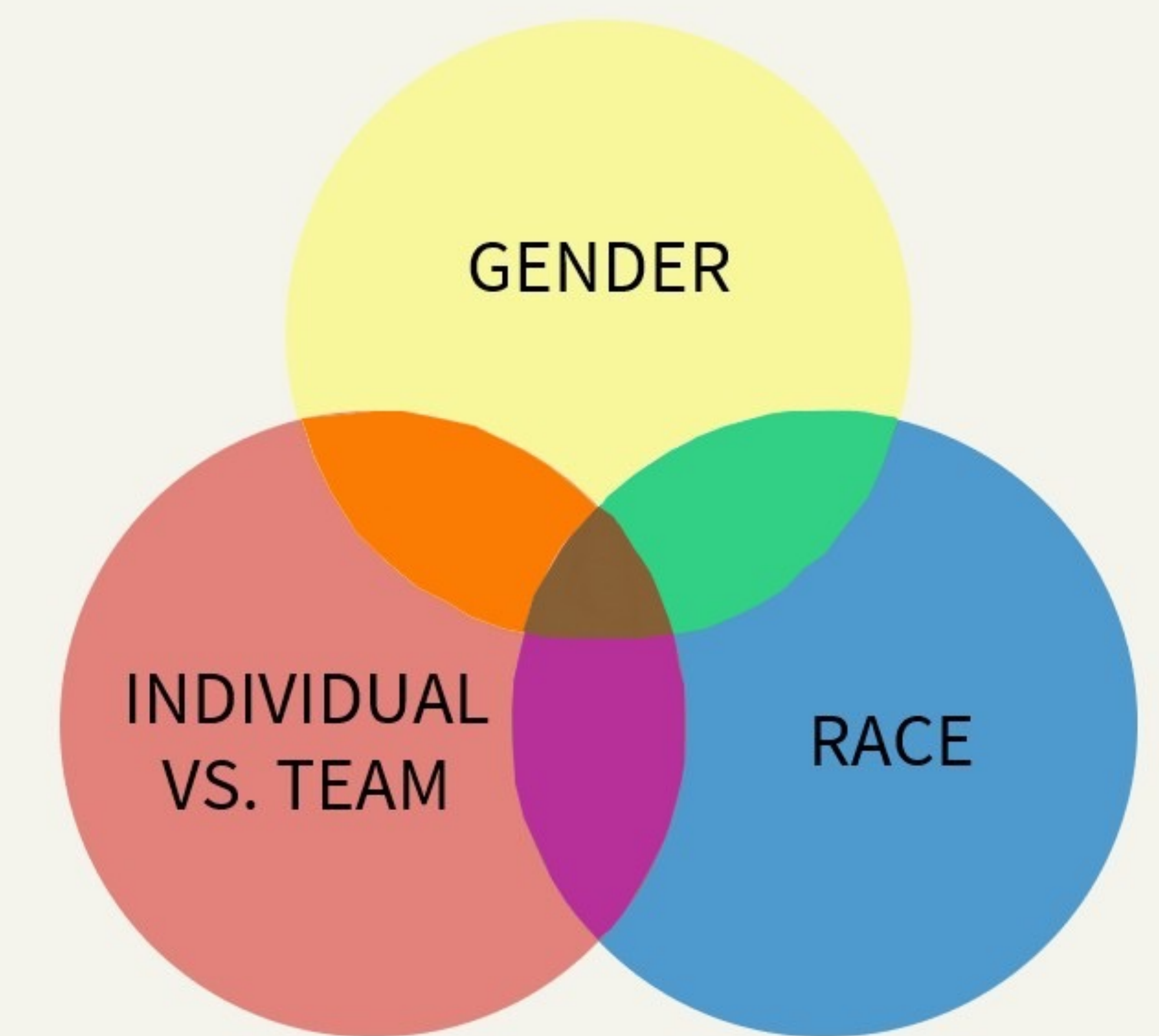
Quotes From Interviews

“Yes, my teammates and I all kind of share this anxiety (to different degrees) which is helpful to know we’re in the same boat.”

- Interviewee #1 (Women’s Basketball Team)

“I put so much pressure on myself, and there is also outside pressure from people who know me and know what I’m capable of. It stays in my mind when I don’t do well or have a good practice.”

Interviewee #2 - (Women’s Basketball Team)



Team:
 “[The] mental load is distributed among team members.”⁵
 “... Cooperative sport collegiate athletes were more likely to endorse rallying [against racism] to help their teammate.”²²

Results
 Several of the studies we looked at reached the same conclusion: “A higher proportion of individual sport athletes reported anxiety or depression than team sport athletes (13% vs. 7%, $p < 0.01$).”¹⁷

Individual:
 “When athletes compete as individuals, the pressure to achieve the desired outcome will be borne by the individual alone, intensifying anxiety symptoms.”¹²

Conclusions

We conclude that the three factors we investigated all intersect. We suggest tactics that mitigate discrimination, structural inequalities, and stigma. Possibilities include:

- More mental health campaigns that encourage open dialogue between professional athletes and the public
- Policies constructed by sports governing bodies that can accommodate their athletes if they require assistance or treatment due to mental health issues
- Holding athletic organizations accountable for the lack of support of their athletes in cases in which their athletes are subject to discrimination or ridiculed for dealing with their mental health



References