Quality of Life for Male and Female Athletes

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When I was a small kid we used to play ball—all kinds, day after day, with no adults around, no trophies, no fans, and no external pressures—and we loved it. —Shaw, 1973, p. 130

At the beginning of this paper, I want to make it clear that I am not a sport sociologist or a sport philosopher. However, at times during this venture I wish I had been one or both of those. My graduate training is in motor learning and control; I was privileged to have studied under the excellent tutelage of Richard Schmidt at the University of Michigan. In the past 10 years, a sequence of serendipitous events has drawn me to the field of sport psychology. At present, I teach, conduct research, and supervise graduate students in applied motor learning and sport psychology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. For the past 5 years I have also supervised the provision of mental training services for athletes and coaches in the Departments of Men’s and Women’s Athletics. This experience has allowed me a closer look into the lives of many high-performance athletes. Sometimes I find myself wondering how these people are doing... really doing... under the searing spotlight of intercollegiate athletics. This concern, as much as anything, prompted me to accept the challenge of this paper.

Sport has always been enmeshed in social history. Zinsser (1994) has even suggested that sport in America is a major frontier of social change and contends that “some of the nation’s most vexing issues—drug abuse, spectator violence, women’s rights, minorities in management, television contracts—are being played out in our stadiums, grandstands, and locker rooms” (p. 205). In the middle of this mix are the participants. What is all of this doing for them? To them? Or, more specifically for the purpose of this paper, how is the quality of their lives being affected by experiences in competitive sport?

To date, little attention has been given to determining the influence of competitive athletics on the life quality of participants, although considerable recent commentary has been devoted to the plight of certain groups of athletes—primarily women (Blinde, 1989; Blinde & Taub, 1992; Dewar, 1991; Greendorfer, 1989; Lenskyj, 1986, 1994; Messner, 1988; Nelson, 1991), ethnic minorities (Brooks & Althouse, 1993; Dewar, 1993; Eisen & Wiggins, 1994; Jarvie, 1991; Melnick & Sabo, 1994; Parry & Parry, 1991; Smith, 1992), and gays (Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990). Such scholarship is not surprising for, as Hoberman (1984) has observed,

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"American sport carries a very substantial ideological load of ideas about masculinity, femininity, celebrity, patriotism, heroism, narcissism, race, violence, and more" (p. 20).

In this paper I revisit some of the aforementioned literature in an attempt to address the issue of quality of life for male and female athletes. However, rather than listening to the voices of the authors, I have tried to locate the voices of the participants themselves. To do this, I chose an inductive approach, relying initially on the results of the National Study of Intercollegiate Athletes conducted for the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) by the American Institutes for Research (1988a, 1988b) and then moving to a number of sources that contain quotes arising from extensive interviews with athletes. I also personally interviewed one former U.S. Olympian who won three medals, including a gold, at the 1984 games in Los Angeles.

In the sections that follow, I briefly define the terms athletes and quality of life. Then I discuss the results of the 1987-1988 National Study of Intercollegiate Athletes that address issues of life quality. After that, I offer a narrative containing selected quotes from athletes. The purpose of that section is to provide anecdotal richness to several themes arising from the national study. I conclude the paper with a brief synopsis of my view of the present quality of life for male and female athletes.

Athletes

In this paper, athletes are defined as those individuals who compete or have competed at the NCAA Division I collegiate level or in amateur contests at either the national or international level. For the most part, I have chosen to focus attention on the life quality of athletes residing in North America due to the fact that the majority of sources used for this paper deal with competitive amateur athletes in Canada and the United States. It is assumed that for this type of athlete, sport is a salient aspect of their self-identity and that sport involvement demands a strong personal commitment. Athletes performing at this level also realize that the outcome of their performance is of extreme importance to a variety of people (i.e., family, friends, teammates, coaches, spectators, the media). Although some of the previous conditions may apply to professional athletes or to other categories of amateur athletes (e.g., youth sport competitors, athletes in other cultural contexts), the focus of this paper is on those participants who comprise the amateur athletic community that is most visible to the eye of the North American sporting public.

Quality of Life

The expression "quality of life" refers to a state or condition of living that usually carries a positive connotation. For example, The Random House Dictionary (Flexner, 1987) offers the following definitions of quality: "high grade, superiority, excellence; good or high social position; an essential or distinctive characteristic, property, or attribute" (p. 1579).

Conceptualizations of life quality include the degree of satisfaction of an individual’s perceived psychophysiologic needs (Dalkey, Lewis, & Snyder, 1972) and the degree to which the environment is perceived as facilitating or retarding one’s functioning (Pflaum, 1973). Of significance to both of these definitions is
the role of perception, suggesting that assessments of life quality must include the interpretation of the individual. Or, as Bain (1995) has pointed out, “what you see and hear depends on who you are and where you are standing” (p. 239). Quality of life in the present paper, then, is estimated by an inductive process using athletes’ reports and statements about their own lives in competitive sport.

Dalkey et al. (1972) mention a number of contributing factors to life quality including novelty, health, self-respect, freedom, comfort, security, status, and involvement. Pflaum’s (1973) inventory of life quality contains four components that together are presumed to constitute perceived life quality at any particular time. The components include biophysical (e.g., physical comfort and well-being), self-concept (e.g., self-acceptance), primary social (e.g., being needed and wanted by close relatives and friends), and secondary social (e.g., acceptance by others, recognition, prestige, and favorable reputation) dimensions of life experience. To date, there has been only one study in which Pflaum’s inventory was used to determine the life quality of athletes (Morris, Lussier, Vaccaro, & Clarke, 1982). In that study, the total life quality of 10 nationally ranked female long-distance runners was found to be superior to that of a control sample of nonathletes. Other than this research, there have been, to my knowledge, no systematic attempts to directly assess the life quality of athletes.

The 1987–1988 National Study of Intercollegiate Athletes

The most extensive investigation of the effect of participation in intercollegiate athletics on the lives of student-athletes was conducted for the Presidents’ Commission of the NCAA by the American Institutes for Research. In the National Study of Intercollegiate Athletes (American Institutes for Research, 1988a, 1988b) more than 4,000 athletes and other students from 42 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I colleges and universities were surveyed. Division I institutions were defined as those that (a) sponsored at least six all-male or mixed-team varsity sports and at least six all-female varsity sports, (b) competed against other Division I teams a specified number of times, (c) met requirements for stadium size and attendance, and (d) offered a specified number of grants-in-aid based on athletic skills (American Institutes for Research, 1988b).

The two principal objectives of the study were to determine the experiences and perceptions of athletes and to identify the extent to which those experiences and perceptions represented the effects of participation in intercollegiate athletics. A comparison group consisted of students involved in nonathletic extracurricular activities (e.g., marching band, drama, student newspaper) that entailed time commitments similar to those placed on athletes. All participants completed a questionnaire consisting of 116 items pertaining to personal experiences (e.g., interpersonal experiences, educational experiences, injuries) and 68 self-description items (e.g., self-esteem, trait anxiety, locus of control).

The reported results did not distinguish participants’ responses by gender or by race. However, comparisons were made between the responses of athletes in the “big-time” sports (i.e., football and basketball) and those in the “other” sports. In addition, the responses of athletes in more successfully competitive basketball and football programs (i.e., those having a final USA Today poll or Sagarin rating above the median of the average poll ratings of the 42 programs in the sample) were compared to those of athletes in less successfully competitive basketball and
football programs (i.e., those having a final rating below the median of the average).

The results I have chosen to present in this paper are confined to those experiences and self-descriptions of participants that are related to the presumed components of life quality (Dalkey et al., 1972; Pflaum, 1973). For example, an item such as “total hours in a typical week spent on your sport/extracurricular activity” was considered to be a factor influencing life quality, since it might be expected to retard opportunities to engage in other activities or in other forms of social interaction. However, an item like “number of schools that tried to convince you to apply for admission” was not considered to be a factor affecting present quality of life.

**Time Demands and Use of Personal Time**

During their sport season, athletes reported spending more time per week in their sport, missing more classes, and being involved in fewer additional extracurricular events than did students participating in nonsporting activities. Approximately 75% of the athletes reported that they were discouraged by their coaches from participating in additional activities. During the off-season, time demands were reduced for both athletes and nonathletes, but athletes—particularly basketball and football players—continued to spend more time in their sports than they did in attending class. Time demands in their sport were found to be no different for first-year athletes who were being redshirted and first-year athletes who were declared eligible for competition.

**Academic Performance**

Basketball and football players—particularly those from more successfully competitive programs—performed less well than other athletes and extracurricular-activity students on almost every measure of academic performance. In spite of the fact that they felt it was “much easier” for them to get help from tutors, a significantly higher percentage of basketball and football players felt it was “much harder” for them to be regarded as serious students by professors, to keep up with coursework, and to get grades they were capable of. Also, compared to students involved in other extracurricular activities, a significantly higher percentage of athletes in “other” sports reported it was “much harder” for them to be regarded as serious students by professors, keep up with coursework, and get the grades they were capable of.

**Health**

A significantly higher percentage of athletes than of extracurricular-activity students felt that participation in their sport/activity made it “easier” or “much easier” to keep in good physical shape and to obtain adequate medical treatment. However, a higher percentage of athletes reported suffering injuries due to participation in their sport than did control students in their extracurricular activity. In addition, football and basketball players reported feeling “intense” or “extremely intense” pressure to ignore their injuries more than did other athletes. Football and basketball players—particularly those in more successfully competitive programs—also reported being “bothered” or “greatly bothered” by extreme tiredness or exhaustion more than did other athletes or extracurricular-activity students. Compared to other athletes, basketball and football players also indicated having more difficulty avoiding drugs.
Personal Development

The vast majority of all respondents reported never experiencing physical abuse or mental abuse. However, compared to other athletes and to students in extracurricular activities, a higher percentage of basketball and football players—particularly those in more successfully competitive programs—reported at least one experience of physical and mental abuse. When compared to students in extracurricular activities, a higher percentage of athletes reported it was more difficult for them as athletes to take on leadership responsibility, develop new abilities/skills, learn about themselves, learn from their mistakes, take responsibility for others, exercise self-control (basketball and football players only), have close friends, be liked by others for just being themselves, talk about personal problems with others, get to know other students, and speak their mind. In addition, a higher percentage of basketball and football players reported they felt different from other students, felt isolated from other students, and lacked control over their lives.

The only differences that emerged on the selected self-description measures were those dealing with locus of control. Specifically, athletes attributed their actions to be due more to “chance” and “powerful others” than did students in other extracurricular activities. Taken together, these findings suggest that the personal development of athletes in general and basketball and football players in particular is considerably diminished by their participation in high-level collegiate sports.

On a more positive note, athletes—particularly basketball and football players—reported that as athletes they found it easier to travel to new places, get special treatment from local townspeople and merchants, and get summer jobs. Thus, it appears that sport participation may provide material benefits that are less available to students involved in nonsporting extracurricular activities.

Social Activities and Interpersonal Development

The results of this study suggest that the social and interpersonal lives of athletes are primarily confined to people and activities dealing with their sport. Athletes reported spending more time with other athletes during their free time, spending most of their free time talking about their sport or sport in general, and spending less time talking about current events or politics than did extracurricular-activity students. Basketball and football players—particularly those living with other athletes—reported more frequent feelings of isolation from other students. This may be due to the fact that these players lived in housing owned or run by the school, lived in housing in which most of the residents were also student-athletes, and had a roommate who was also a student-athlete. Of those athletes who said they were required to live with another athlete, 76% reported being in favor of such an arrangement. The investigators speculated that athletes may feel this way because they appreciate the security that comes from “living with others who share so much in common” (American Institutes of Research, 1988a, p. 63).

Satisfaction

In spite of the fact that athletes reported spending more time in their sport than did control students in their extracurricular activities, a lower percentage of athletes (12% of football and basketball players and 16% of other athletes) reported being “totally satisfied” with their athletic performance than did extracurricular-activity students (47%) with their performance. It was suggested that
whether the reason is a greater tendency toward self-criticism, a greater appreciation of how well others are performing, or something else, fewer student-athletes than extracurricular students are likely to leave practice or competition each day feeling satisfied with their performance. (American Institutes of Research, 1988a, pp. 27-28)

Summary

The picture that emerges from the 1987-1988 National Study of Intercollegiate Athletes is one that offers little evidence of a high level of life quality by any definition or measuring standard. NCAA Division I athletes spend most of their time doing, witnessing, or talking about activities related to their sport. Academics are a struggle—particularly for basketball and football players. Athletes are physically fit, and their medical needs are attended to; however, many deal with an assortment of injuries and are chronically exhausted or fatigued. Basketball and football players have more difficulty avoiding drugs. As a group, Division I athletes feel isolated from and misunderstood by other students. Compared to students in other extracurricular activities, athletes attribute the cause of their actions more to external factors and feel that they have little opportunity for personal development in areas not related to their sport. In spite of all the time and energy devoted to their sport, a lower percentage of athletes report being satisfied with their performance.

It should be noted that the results of the National Study of Intercollegiate Athletes has led to revisions in several policies for NCAA member institutions, including reductions in the number of hours per week allowed for “supervised” practices and the elimination of “athlete-only” housing (Bollig, 1995). However, it remains to be determined whether the experiences or perceptions of NCAA Division I athletes have changed significantly since that legislation was enacted.

Life Quality—What Are the Athletes Saying?

In this section I attempt to provide a more in-depth portrayal of the feelings and emotions of athletes living in a world that appears to be narrowly focused on sport and to some extent disconnected from other people and events. To achieve this goal I surveyed a number of scholarly articles containing quotes from athletes about their experiences in competitive sports. In general, I found more pieces devoted to the sport experiences of men than to those of women. Therefore, the following section contains more quotes from male athletes than from female athletes. The important thing is that all quotes represent the voices of athletes. These I weave into a narrative that I feel addresses key factors defining the lives of high performance male and female amateur athletes.

The Meaning of Sport Participation

Most athletes say that sport participation is attractive because it represents an opportunity for them to demonstrate their ability and to obtain social reinforcement. The following are some examples: “The only time I got any attention was when I was out on the field playing” (Messner, 1992, p. 55); “Athletics was the one thing that I excelled in, and that was the one thing I had to use. That was my tools. That was my attention-getter” (Messner, 1992, p. 54); “I’m proud to be a
national woman athlete. I love to tell people I play rugby and I am confident because I am strong and fit due to my sport" (Young & White, 1995, p. 54).

Participants in high performance sport appreciate other athletes, but the bond is usually closest among teammates:

The guys I played with, I had the utmost respect for. Because once you’ve been through training camp together, and those hard times together, you learn to know and feel things about them that no one else can ever feel if they haven’t been in those situations with them. The most important persons are your teammates, and to be loved and respected by them means more than anything. (Messner, 1992, p. 87)

There are also those who express appreciation for an opponent:

we battled. He enjoyed it and I enjoyed it. But never was it a cheap shot, never did he have me down and just drive my head into the ground, you know, unnecessary stuff. We played a good, clean game of football, because we respected each other. Now, if he could knock me on my butt, he’d do it. And I’d do it to him and help him up. Talk to him after the game. Sit and talk with him like I’m sitting here talking to you. But while we’re out there, now, we go at it. And I loved it. Yeah, I loved it. (Messner, 1992, pp. 68-69)

After the race, she wanted to come over and see who I was. It was funny. She really encouraged me to beat her. It was great. She was saying, “Don’t give up, you came in second and it was really close.” Which made me feel great. (Nelson, 1991, p. 206)

Participation in sports holds additional meaning for men. Messner (1992) argues that it not only serves as an essential masculinity rite but also bonds men, at least symbolically, as a separate and superior group to women:

I played football and hockey because it was masculine. My fear that I would be discovered being afraid was greater than my fear of being hurt, and I was getting hurt all the time because I was much smaller than most everyone else. It hurt a lot to hit and get hit. But I was aggressive. It was part of being male and defining your masculinity and toughness. (Pronger, 1990, p. 23)

For athletes who place an extremely high level of importance on sport participation, serious injury is demoralizing (“pretty close to the biggest down of my life,” Young, White, & McTeer, 1994, p. 187) and demasculinizing (“I was feeling less of a man,” Young et al., 1994, p. 187).

Gay men especially feel the need to project a masculine public image:

Homophobia was rampant, especially in athletics. You see, I think a lot of athletes go into athletics for the same reason I did. They need to prove their maleness. And I did, I readily admit it. I felt I’ve got to hide this thing—because I know what they were thinking: If I were gay, they would see me as less than a man, or not a man. So I’m going to be a man, because that’s what I am. (Messner, 1992, p. 99)

The role of sport participation in the development of female identity is not as clear:
I don’t think my sense of femininity is enhanced, but my feeling of self-worth is most certainly enhanced. I feel sports allows me to be who I am, a fairly competitive and aggressive person. Sports allow me to display these qualities without the feeling of having to hide or subdue them. (Young & White, 1995, p. 54)

The former U.S. Olympic athlete I spoke with commented that “in a way women are lucky because when they choose to participate in sport they do so because they like it, not because they feel like they have to prove anything” (Former female Olympic athlete, personal communication, July 27, 1995).

The Sport Experience of Males

Once they reach the highest levels of amateur athletic competition, males find themselves enmeshed in a complex group dynamic:

Most athletes just get to college—they’re looking to have a chance to play pros, and they’re gonna do what they’re told—So they’re gonna do whatever they’re told by the coaches and administration, and these are the ones who are really shaping that person’s mind, moreso than probably even their parents or anyone else. (Parker, 1993, p. 100)

The one person who seems to have the most profound impact on the life quality of athletes is the coach. Unfortunately, many coaches, faced with the excruciating pressure to “win at all costs,” contribute in negative ways to the athlete’s life:

Now you get talked down to as an athlete from your coach sometimes. See, you just made him mad when he tells you what to do and you just don’t do it . . . And just, BANG! ZOOM! He’s in your face. (Parker, 1993, p. 108)

Other athletes express similar sentiments: “I’d do it again but I’d do things differently. I wouldn’t let them walk all over me like they did. . . . And people wonder why I hate the way I was treated” (Parker, 1993, p. 93); “He doesn’t have to talk to me that way to get me to do something. I’m a grown man. Talk to me like a grown man” (Parker, 1993, pp. 92-93); “When the coach yells at me that’s it. I feel no motivation; I don’t want to have anything to do with it” (Anshel, 1990, p. 241). In spite of the negative treatment, most athletes do not challenge anything the coach says or does: “The coaches would push us in ways that didn’t seem fair, and I would do it!” (Messner, 1992, p. 103).

Although the coach may have the greatest impact on the level of life quality of athletes, teammates can exert an influence as well. Gay men in the competitive sport arena experience ostracization and stigmatization that is both subtle and explicit: “I haven’t heard gay men in locker rooms talk about things, or people talk about gay topics whether the person talking is gay or straight. It’s something that if it’s brought up, it’s as a joke” (Pronger, 1990, p. 194); “You’re more likely to find the machos among the straights and you’re going to have some difficulty with them; they tend to be afraid [homophobic]” (Pronger, 1990, p. 242).

Most male athletes feel pressure from their coaches and teammates to play with pain. The perceptions of males about the role of pain in sport performance seem to be generally consistent with hegemonic forms of masculinity: “athletics is the key to the dominance of males” and “take it [pain] like a man” (Young et al.,
1994, p. 181). Pain is venerated as the "manly sacrifice" of competitive athletics, and playing with pain or even injury is an implicit expectation of many coaches and teams:

We have this term in football. People refer to it as a difference between pain and injury. If you can walk or you can run to any degree, you know, they look at your injury in terms of percentages. If you’re at seventy percent and it’s better than your second stringer’s hundred percent, then you’re playing. So, you tend to take a couple of painkillers and tape her up nice and tight and ice before you play, and away you go. (Young et al., 1994, p.184)

When asked how he felt about losing a piece of cartilage as a result of surgery designed to allow him to compete in the conference championships, one wrestler responded,

I guess they said I don’t really need it. Some people don’t have any ... Other people might feel differently. It is kind of strange in some ways. Normally, if you got hurt, you’d want to sue and make sure you got compensation. Athletes don’t think anything of going through this for their sport or school. (Curry & Strauss, 1994, p. 206)

Male athletes who succumb to pain or refuse to participate in competition because of an injury face stigmatization by the people who are the most important to them. Sometimes an injured athlete notices teammates distancing themselves from him: “I can’t relate to their physical activities anymore, and I felt the silences between us” (Young et al., 1994, p. 188). In some cases the treatment by teammates and coaches borders on abuse:

I was hurt. I couldn’t play, and I got a lot of flack from everybody. The coach said, “Are you faking it?” And I was in the whirlpool and a teammate came in and said “You fucking pussy!” I still remember that to this day. That hurt more than the injury. Later people told me it was my fault because we lost, and I just couldn’t handle that—not just coaches and other players, but people in the whole town. It hurt; it just really hurt. (Messner, 1992, p. 72)

Pressure to compete in the face of physical adversity—and to win—also comes from spectators and the media. Former U.S. Olympic athlete John Thomas offers the following lament about spectators:

They only like winners. They don’t give credit to a man for trying. I was called a quitter, a man with no heart. American spectators are frustrated athletes. In the champion, they see what they would like to be. In the loser, they see what they actually are, and they treat him with scorn. (Donohoe & Johnson, 1986, p. 129)

Unfortunately, as has been observed on many occasions in high-stakes sport, “both the public and the media are prepared to acclaim the successful athlete, but they are often equally likely to mock or insult a poor performance” (Donohoe & Johnson, 1986, p.128).

The threat of stigmatization causes many athletes to conceal their emotions and pain: “it hurts but you can’t show that it hurts” (Young et al., 1994, p. 185). Sometimes, attempts are made to participate in spite of injury. One athlete who sustained a broken leg during a hockey game recalls,
I tried not to show pain and lay there on the ice. I was trying to get up and I remember just falling back down again. And then I remember the coach coming up and trying to help me up and he said, “Come on you can get up,” “You’re tough,” or whatever, and just trying to stand on it, but there was no way. I remember my dad even giving me shit. Even going through the dressing room no one would help me take my equipment off. (Young et al., 1994, p. 185)

For some athletes the pressures of sport lead to the use and abuse of drugs. Although the underreporting of personal drug use has been a problem in research with sport populations, the results of a recent study by Anshel (1991) revealed that 81 out of 126 university athletes said they knew their teammates were using illegal or banned drugs. These athletes further indicated that drugs were taken most of the time for the purpose of enhancing performance. The extremes to which some athletes go to improve performance is perhaps best illustrated by the results of a survey in the early 1980s in which 55 out of 100 elite American amateur athletes said they would take a drug if it would make them an Olympic champion, even if they knew it could kill them within a year (Donohoe & Johnson, 1986, p. 125).

In perhaps the most graphic published account of drug abuse in high-level amateur sport, former University of South Carolina football player, Tommy Chaikin, revealed how the prolific use of anabolic steroids affected his behavior and almost took his life (Chaikin & Telander, 1988). In that paper, Chaikin cited the pressure to win (“college athletes feel tremendous pressure to succeed,” p. 88) and veiled encouragement from his coaches to “do what you have to do, take what you have to take” (p. 88) as contributing factors in his decision to use drugs.

There is little evidence that athletes are ever “forced” to take drugs; many internal factors (e.g., the desire to succeed) or external factors (e.g., the need to avoid the wrath of coaches, teammates, spectators, and the media) likely influence athletes’ choices. Some choose to take painkillers in order to play hurt whereas others decide to ingest performance-enhancing drugs in order to be competitive with opponents they think might be using them.

For men, the NCAA Division I and high-level amateur athletic experience is laced with numerous pressures to conform. Most male athletes travel the road of conformity in compliant silence: “It’s a matter of just don’t tell anybody else about yourself and just do your job basically” (Young et al., 1994, p. 184).

Comments on the Sport Experience of Females

A distinguishing feature of the sport experience of females is the lack of public acceptance. From an early age, females are reminded that they do not have the tools to be “real athletes”:

You can’t do that, you’re not that strong, you just can’t—that’s what you’re told. If you hear that enough, you can’t. That’s one of the things that’s keeping (men and women) apart. A lot of the ladies feel, deep down inside, Well, I can’t. Because they’ve been conditioned for so long to think that. (Nelson, 1991, p. 46)

Even outstanding female competitors admit to being initially embarrassed about engaging in rigorous physical activity. Renowned U.S. Olympic distance runner Joan Benoit Samuelson said, “When I first started running I was so
embarrassed I’d walk when cars passed me. I’d pretend I was looking at the flow-
er’s” (Nelson, 1991, p. 25).

As Pronger (1990) points out, women are excluded from most men’s sports. “Generally speaking, men don’t want women on their hockey teams, in their rugby scums, on their wrestling mats, in their locker rooms” (p. 177). Moreover, males use various techniques to let women know they are “outsiders” in the world of competitive sport. The most obvious tactic is ridicule: “They didn’t take me seriously ... boys would make goo-goo eyes and throw kisses just to be funny” (Nelson, 1991, p. 18). The derision of men does not go unnoticed by female athletes (“It really bugged me sometimes that men, especially male athletes, would not give me the recognition I felt I was due,” Former female Olympic athlete, personal communication, July 27, 1995), and many women are frustrated by all the attention given their male counterparts (“Male athletes often obtain respect, whether deserving or not,” Young & White, 1995, pp. 50-51).

Another source of frustration for females is the societal tendency to label women athletes as lesbian: “There were those who labeled me gay for years. I was labeled everything you can think of. What bothered me was not that I was labeled, but that I was asked at all” (Nelson, 1991, p. 63). Some women respond to the allegation by distancing themselves from the label: “Lesbians don’t bother me as long as they don’t hit on me ... the label does not pertain to me” (Blinde & Taub, 1992, p. 524); “those of us who aren’t . . . we joke about them” (Blinde & Taub, 1992, p. 525). For lesbian athletes the response is usually to remain “closeted” (“A lot of players would be gay, but they can’t be. They’re asexual,” Nelson, 1991, p. 142), although a few acknowledge their sexual orientation and contend that it should be a “nonissue” for female athletes: “It’s okay with me if people know that there are gay women in sports. We’re slandered. I don’t think that’s right. We’re all in this together. We’re all people. Let us be people” (Nelson, 1991, p. 154).

Men, especially male athletes, are the most frequent purveyors of the lesbian label (Blinde & Taub, 1992, p. 527). This form of stigmatization not only reduces the power position of women in sport, but also affects the way heterosexual females feel about themselves: “unattractive . . . less desirable to men . . . always worry about how I look” (Blinde & Taub, 1992, p. 531).

Sexual harassment is another “fact of life” for female athletes. Women runners who train on public streets or country roads are accustomed to the usual honking, leering, and verbal harassment: “Hey baby, lookin’ good” (Nelson, 1991, p. 121). Some even fear the threat of rape or murder:

I’m very tight when I run. When somebody honks to get my attention, I tense inside. When I pass a solitary man or somebody who in my judgment doesn’t seem safe, I look over my shoulder after I pass. Were I to feel perfectly safe, I wouldn’t do that. I wouldn’t avoid bushes. I have been known to cross the street to avoid somebody I think may be threatening. A car slows down, maybe they’re just dropping somebody off, but I dodge that stuff. I fear being grabbed into a car. (Nelson, 1991, pp. 121-122)

Women pay a high price to prove that they belong in what Pronger (1990) has termed “the masculine arena.” Many choose to compete with pain and injury because it represents a tangible challenge to men’s claims to dominance, particularly in those sports that are the most physically demanding. In doing so, however, females become victims of the same mentality as their male counterparts: “The
attitude among swimmers on our team was that you perform with pain” (Former female Olympic athlete, personal communication, July 27, 1995). Another woman observed,

> I never skated or played basketball without constant pain. However, this just made me push harder to beat it. I was often sore and stiff. The pain, while playing, was often enough to make me cry once I got home... never at the rink! I dealt with it through the use of painkillers and denial. (Young & White, 1995, p. 52)

Disdain by teammates toward an injured athlete is also becoming a more frequent occurrence among women: “The other players at the club pretty much ignored the injury and downplayed its seriousness. It wasn’t ‘cool’ to admit your body wasn’t finely tuned and healthy, so I downplayed it” (Young & White, 1995, p. 52).

One threat to life quality that is more prevalent among female athletes than among male athletes is an obsession with weight: “I always feel like, ‘Gosh, I’m not thin enough.’ I always go, ‘Do I look fat?’... I realize it’s a little bit destructive” (Nelson, 1991, p. 52); “There is this constant emphasis on weight and many swimmers I know are anorexic or bulimic” (Former female Olympic athlete, personal communication, July 27, 1995). Thompson (1987) contends that eating disorders are a problem for some female athletes because of their belief that weight is an important determiner of performance outcome:

> The others kicked back and relaxed after the season. If I went without my running “fix” I experienced withdrawal symptoms. I used to get hyper and irritable, as well as becoming overwhelmed with the fear that I would gain weight and lose my training edge. I would become so preoccupied with not having run and the fears of what would happen [weight gain] that activities such as studying became very difficult. My ability to concentrate suffered greatly. (Ryan, 1994, pp. 2-3)

For athletic women whose identity or valued social reinforcement is contingent on their performance, body consciousness is particularly exacerbated: “I lost the meet. I hadn’t lost as much weight as coach said I should. I felt so undisciplined. That’s when I started the laxatives” (Ryan, 1994, p. 2). Many dread the ridicule of their coach:

> Thanksgiving weekend was the worst time of my life—food everywhere and I lost control. The next week coach called me “Tubs.” I swore I wouldn’t eat until I lost 10 lbs but it never worked. I could never please coach. (Ryan, 1994, p. 3)

A teammate of mine said that she was nervous about her weight the whole time she was diving and she was crazy about the tension that the coach had created within her... The coach doesn’t want to deal with you if you are overweight. (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1992, p.109)

As in the case of men, female athletes reluctantly accept the demands of their sport:

> I sacrifice trying to have a social life. You’ve got school, classes, homework, studying, basketball, and road trips and you can’t see your friends very often.
I'd say my social life was the number one sacrifice. And, my GPA is not as good as it could be. (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1992, p. 107)

Women also comply with the demands of their coach, even if it means compromising their own life values:

I remember feeling this great injustice. I didn't respect her. I felt like she was on a power trip and, so, I allowed her to have that power in order to achieve what I wanted, which was to play. I don't think she made wise decisions in certain situations, and, so, here you've got a situation where she is the absolute authority; however, in the back of our minds, or in the back of me, I'm not agreeing with what she's saying. But, you know . . . I wanted to play, so . . . (Wright, 1988, p. 118)

In spite of the frustrations, women continue to post remarkable feats of athletic achievement. In the recent World Championships held in Goteborg, Sweden, Ana Quirot, the remarkable 32-year-old Cuban, won the 800 m run in 1 min, 56.11 s, the fastest time in the world this year. What makes Quirot's accomplishment particularly incredible is that 2 1/2 years ago she was near death following a tragic accident that left her with third-degree burns on nearly 40% of her body ("Johnson Reaps Medal," 1995). However, for some women even the experience of extraordinary athletic achievement is diminished by other life concerns. When asked during a television interview what she was thinking about when she stood on the victory platform after winning the gold medal in the 200-m dash at the 1992 Olympic games, Gwen Torrence replied that she had been thinking about her young son, about all the early mornings she had left him to begin her workouts, about the demands she had placed on her mother and other family members to provide child care, about her expectations that her husband, who is also her coach, would take care of things at home while she concentrated on her running. (Fairchild, 1994, p. 377)

Taken together, the previous paragraphs suggest that female athletes in the 1990s are not completely at peace with their experiences in organized sport. Nelson (1991) has observed that what makes women interesting to talk with is that they've analyzed themselves and their participation. Most men seem to be able to play sports without thinking, without becoming introspective or political or sociological about it. Most women can't. Even now, when they are being offered some of the perks of the male system, women retain an outsider's perspective and an outsider's tendency to evaluate, judge, and devise alternatives. (p. 8)

Females continue to experience a number of value conflicts as a result of their competitive sport experience. Lenskyj (1994) suggests that "possible sources of this value alienation include conflict between sport participation and previous socialization experiences of women, and conflict between the male-defined sport system and the essential nature of being female" (p. 14). Whether women are able to resolve these various sources of discord in their sport experience is a matter that remains to be determined.
Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to characterize the life quality of high-performance amateur athletes using sources that contain survey responses and quotes from the participants themselves. I acknowledge the possibility that I have overlooked literature containing additional anecdotal information about athletes' life experiences. Nevertheless, the references I was able to locate do, I feel, provide an accurate and representative portrayal of the primary factors that influence the lives of the general population of high-level male and female collegiate and amateur athletes. Noticeably silent are the voices of some sport participants, chiefly those of color. This is due, as much as anything, to the present dearth of research on non-Caucasian athletes.

I am also aware of the fact that the life of each athlete is unique and that the experiences of athletes differ depending on a number of things. Thus, the factors affecting life quality that I have discussed in this paper would not be expected to affect all athletes in the same ways. For example, the existing data seem to suggest that quality of life is compromised more for participants in the "high profile" sports of basketball and football than for those in other sports. Consistent with this notion is the research of Parker (1993) who observed former college football players to be a "jaded, tired group" (p. 154), adding that "these players were not pushed, kicking and screaming, from a sport that they loved. In fact, most expressed relief that it was over" (Parker, 1993, p. 155).

I doubt that sport sociologists are surprised by the findings presented in this paper. Most, I believe, would further contend that a number of the discussed threats to life quality (e.g., pressure imposed by coaches, teammates, and spectators) are systemic ones. For example, it is doubtful that all coaches are naturally abusive people. However, some coaches treat athletes in abusive ways because they are under extreme pressure to "just win." Although there are undoubtedly those in the coaching community who deserve criticism for their role in diminishing the life quality of athletes, it might be argued that coaches are themselves pawns of a system of organized sport that is "characterized, for the most part, by elitism, commercialism, and the interests of mainstream media" (Lenskyj, 1994, p. 23). In fact, the same might be said for spectators. As Hoberman (1992) has suggested, the emotional distance that separates the sporting public from the physiological [and I would add psychological] ordeals of its heroes and heroines confirms that the high-performance athlete is widely viewed, consciously or unconsciously, as an experimental subject whose sufferings are a natural part of the drama of sport. (p. 13)

Upon completing this paper, I became genuinely concerned that I had perhaps misrepresented the perceptions and experiences of the general population of high-level collegiate and amateur athletes. Therefore, I solicited the opinions of two of my esteemed colleagues at the University of Tennessee, Bill Morgan and Pat Beitel. I also asked several NCAA Division I athletes to read and react to the paper. All assured me that my synopsis was "pretty much on target" and that I should "go with it."

Assuming that what I have found is representative of the experiences of high-performance amateur athletes, there appears to be little evidence to refute Dewar's (1991) observation that competitive sports are "important sites where the
social relations of power and privilege are negotiated” (p. 18). For male athletes, quality of life remains bound up in issues of masculinity, power, and competitive superiority. Life quality for female athletes continues to be influenced by their struggle for respect and opportunity.

For the most part, I consider myself to be a positive person. However, I must admit that I am concerned about the direction that competitive sport, particularly at the NCAA Division I level, appears to be headed. It bothers me when I hear athlete after athlete say that sport used to be so much fun, but it’s not fun anymore. In his book, Winning Through Cooperation, Terry Orlick, a prominent sport psychologist who works with many high-performance athletes in Canada, writes that a football player once told him that

the most fun he ever had was “playing touch at the end of the street. That’s what I really enjoyed.” That was now all gone and “It’s simply a business, there’s great emphasis on winning, on being mean, on hitting and hurting others, there’s negative consideration for others. (Orlick, 1978, p. 129)

Contemporary Division I female athletes express similar sentiments: “I had a lot more fun in high school. . . . The way we were coached in college and the way we trained was different than I had ever trained before. . . . I viewed my participation more as work than play” (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1992).

Clearly, the quality of life is not very high for many athletes at the NCAA Division I or national-caliber amateur levels. Particularly troubling is the fact that high-performance sport has such hypnotic power that it discourages penetrating inquiry into its effect on the lives of participants. Perhaps those in positions of power fear the voices of people like Dewar (1993) who has suggested that acceptable reform may require “the complete destruction of intercollegiate sport, as we now know it. It may not be possible or even desirable to try to ‘reform’ existing structures and practices” (p. 244). In any case, it is likely that for substantive improvements in the life quality of athletes to be achieved, a new or revised system may be needed. As C.S. Lewis once observed,

We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer to the place where you want to be. And if you’ve taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you’re on the wrong road, progress means doing an about turn and walking back to the right road. (Lewis, 1964, p. 36)

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