

# Athletic Identity and Life Roles of Division I and Division III Collegiate Athletes

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research has suggested that athletes who place too strong of a centrality on the athletic life role may be at risk for psychological problems, particularly during a sport transition period. If the athlete only identifies with the athletic role and it is terminated, he/she may be at risk for psychological problems (Brewer, VanRaalte, & Linder, 1993). The purpose of the current study was to analyze how division affiliation may influence the many roles of collegiate athletes. Track and field athletes from a Division I and Division III college completed measures of athletic identity, self-concept, and importance of life roles. Division I athletes ranked the athletic life role significantly higher than Division III athletes. However, both groups placed more emphasis on other roles in their lives, suggesting a decreased risk of psychological distress during sport transition periods.

College years are a dynamic period of development for students. Key developmental tasks include establishing independence, solidifying a firm identity, learning to manage relationships, and planning for future and lifestyle goals (Cornelius, 1995). It has been suggested that athletics can provide college students with valuable life skills and psychological benefits that can help them cope with these developmental tasks. Athletics also teach individuals self-discipline, teamwork, confidence, work ethic, and leadership, social, and interpersonal skills (Richards, 1999). Even though there is a positive side to college athletics, there can be drawbacks that athletes face. Namely, time commitment is a major issue. Athletic teams have been found to be the most time consuming extracurricular activity (Richards, 1999). Athletes must give up time socializing with friends and other outside activities in order to train and compete. How an athlete balances the many roles during the developmentally challenging time of college is likely to be contingent on the overall culture of the campus. This study will be focusing on the differences between campus cultures by examining Division I and Division III schools.

## Division I & III

In college athletics one of the key distinguishing features is division affiliation. There are known differences between divisions. Division I schools tend to be larger (average undergraduate population: 10,054) than Division III schools (average undergraduate population: 2,152). Division I schools can award scholarships based on athletics, however, not every athlete receives a scholarship. Division III schools cannot award any athletic scholarships as athletes may only receive scholarships based on merit or financial need. Recruiting regulations are also stricter for a Division I school. Therefore the experiences and opportunities for Division I and Division III athletes vary considerably.

### Athletic Identity

Athletic identity may be defined as the degree with which an individual identifies with the athlete role (Brewer, 1993). The athletic role is an important social dimension of self-concept influencing experiences, relationships with others and pursuit of sport activity (Cornelius, 1995). Past research has indicated that strong athletic identity is linked to a greater importance of athletics in an individual's life (Brewer, 1993). Those with strong athletic identity spend more time with teammates and coaches that further strengthen their athletic identity (Horton, 2000). Family, friends, coaches, teachers and media may all support an individual's identification as an athlete. Consequently, athletics take on a great psychological significance in an athlete's identification (Brewer, 1993). Strong athletic identity has been found to correlate with a stronger sense of self-identity, more social interactions, boosting confidence, and report more positive athletic experiences.

Athletic identity that is strong but not exclusive may have lasting psychological benefits for the athlete (Brewer, 1993). However, athletes who place too strong of a centrality on athletics may experience psychological and physical drawbacks. Over-commitment to athletics and excessive training may create a situation in which an athlete may jeopardize their physical and psychological health. Many of the risks for individuals with an exclusive athletic identity occur during a sport transition period such as being cut from a team, experiencing an injury, or retirement from their athletic careers (Brewer, 1993). Athletes that were involved in other activities prior to the transition were more effective at making the shift out of the athletic role. On the other hand, if an athlete exclusively identifies with the athletic role, he/she has an increased risk for experiencing a severe emotional disruption during a career transition. The increased risk for emotional disturbance is even more difficult for those individuals that lack other sources of self-worth and self-identification. Individuals who organize their knowledge only in terms of athletics and cannot separate athletics from other roles in their self are at an increased risk for depression, low physical and emotional health, and experiencing feelings of isolation (Brewer, 1993). An exclusivity of the athletic role may also severely restrict the development of other roles within the self (Wiechman, 1997).

### Self-Concept

Self-concept is defined as how an individual's evaluates his or her competence and worth (Richards, 1999). The amount of worth and competence an individual places on self-concept may influence their self-esteem, affect, and motivation (Brewer, 1993). The amount of perceived importance that an individual places on each role of their self-concept also influences their feelings of self-worth. Past research and studies has suggested that self-concept is multidimensional. Individuals tend to not evaluate their self-concept on a global level, but rather in series of specifically defined roles. For example, an individual may perceive worth and competence in athletics, but not in an academic role. According to the construct of a multidimensional self-concept, this individual would not display a low global self-concept, but instead would show a low self-concept only in the academic domain (Brewer, 1993; Richards, 1999). If an individual displays incompetence, or poor performance in a role of low perceived importance, it is expected to have little affect on a person's self-concept. However, if an individual displays incompetence, or poor performance in a role of high-perceived importance it may have a greater, negative effect on the individual's feelings of self-worth (Brewer, 1993). The construct of multidimensional self-concept also examines if certain roles within an individual are more highly developed than others. Individuals with an exclusive

athletic identity have been found to limit the development of their multidimensional self-concept (Wiechman, 1997).

The relationship between athletic identity and self-concept is one that has only recently begun to receive more attention in the literature. There are still many unanswered questions regarding the significance of athletic identity and life roles in the college athletic population. This study attempts to examine if athletes place a strong importance on the athletic role and whether this is related to the importance of other roles within the individual. These questions were explored by comparing Division I and Division III collegiate athletes. It is predicted that Division I athletes will score significantly higher on the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale than Division III athletes. It is also predicated that individuals with a strong athletic identity will rank the athletic role higher on the Life Roles Inventory Scale, as compared to those with a weak athletic identity. In respect to the multidimensional self-concept, it is hypothesized that Division I athletes will rank athletic competence significantly higher other competence domains in the Self-Perception Profile for College Students. We also expect that for Division III athletes, there will be no significant difference between the athletic competence and other competence domains.

## METHOD

### Participants

One hundred and thirteen (sixty-one women, fifty-two men) track & field athletes from a Midwestern Division I university and one hundred and twenty-one (sixty-six women, fifty-five men) track & field athletes from a Midwestern Division III university participated. Their ages ranged from 18-22. The sample was primarily Caucasian.

### Materials

The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale consists of 10 items, which are designed to measure the degree to which a participant identifies him/herself as an athlete. Each item is rated on a seven-point Likert scale. The end points of Strongly Disagree and Strongly Agree are one and seven respectively. A high score on this scale correlates with a stronger identification with the athlete role. A low score on this scale correlates with a weaker identification with the athlete role.

The Life Roles Inventory assesses the "psychological centrality" of seven different life roles: academic, athlete/exercise, extracurricular, spiritual, family, friendship, and romantic partner role. The extracurricular role was modified and broken into two categories, spiritual and extracurricular activities. The spiritual role will be defined as "the role of spiritual development in your life." The extracurricular activities will be defined as "aspects of yourself not covered by other life roles listed, (i.e. hobbies, clubs, volunteer)". The inventory is a forced choice measure. This type of measure pairs two different stimuli, in this case two life roles, against each other and forces the participant to make a choice as to which is more important regarding how he/she views him/herself. If a role is considered more important over another role, it is scored as a "1" and the remaining role received a score of "0." The scores are totaled up and a "1" is added to each score. Therefore, the scores for each role range from 1-7. A score of 7 for a role indicates that this particular role is rated as the most important to the participant. Conversely, a score of 1 indicates that this particular role is the least important to the participant.

The Self-Perception Profile for College Students is a multidimensional scale that measures a participant's perception of eleven different domains within the self-concept as well as

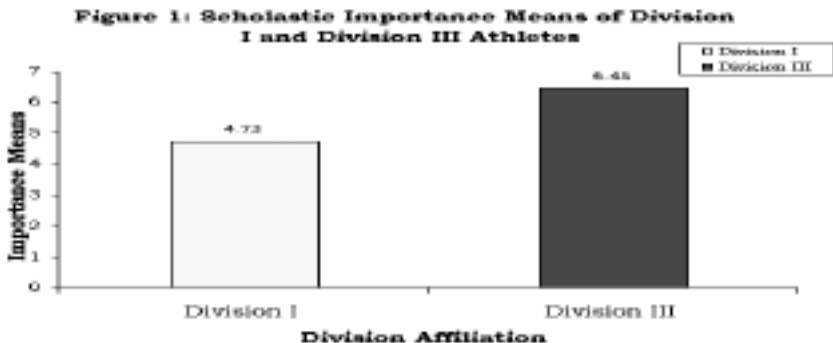
measuring global self-worth. The twelve scale domains are: creativity, intelligence, scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, appearance, romantic relationship, social acceptance, close friendships, parent relationships, humor, morality and global self-worth. It was chosen for this study based on its focus of multidimensional self-concept and its specificity to college students. Participants will be asked to rate the fifty-four items on a Likert-scale from 1-4. A score of "1" suggests that a specific behavior is "Really True for Me," and a score of "4" suggests that a contrasting or opposite behavior is "Really True for Me."

### Procedure

Coaches granted permission to distribute the surveys at a general team meeting. Participants were given an informed consent form to read and sign. Next, the surveys and pencils were distributed and the participants were given brief instructions on how to complete the surveys. Following completion of the surveys, all participants were debriefed. Participation in this study was voluntary and Powerbars or Gatorade were distributed as a thank you for their time.

## RESULTS

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine significant relationships between the variables. In regards to the first hypothesis, data analysis revealed that Division III athletes reported higher levels of athletic identity than Division I athletes, ( $M_{\text{Division III}} = 61.93$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ;  $M_{\text{Division I}} = 57.87$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ),  $F(1,165) = 4.78$ ,  $p < .05$ . This evidence does not support the original hypothesis. As expected in the second hypothesis, athletes with a high athletic identity ranked the athletic life role significantly higher than those with a low athletic identity, ( $M_{\text{High Athletic Identity}} = 3.23$ ,  $SD = .17$ ;  $M_{\text{Low Athletic Identity}} = 2.56$ ,  $SD = .16$ ),  $F(1,103) = 8.02$ ,  $p < .01$ . Division I athletes reported athletic competence as the highest domain compared to the other competence domains as expected by the third hypothesis. Data analysis revealed that Division III athletes reported differences between athletic competence and other competence domains, which does not support the original hypothesis. Division III athletes reported athletic competence as the highest domain when compared to other competence domains.



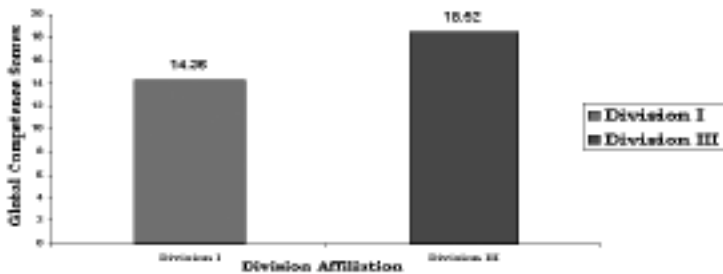
Secondary Analysis

ANOVA results revealed Division III athletes reported significantly higher levels of scholastic importance as compared to Division I athletes, ( $M_{\text{Division I}} = 4.73, SD = .20; M_{\text{Division III}} = 6.45, SD = .18, F(1, 92) = 41.35, p < .01$ ). See Figure 1.

Division III athletes also reported higher levels of global competence as compared to Division I athletes, ( $M_{\text{Division I}} = 14.36, SD = .51; M_{\text{Division III}} = 18.52, SD = .46, F(1, 92) = 37.11, p < .01$ ). See Figure 2.

In comparison to other life roles, Division I athletes ranked the athletic role higher than Division III athletes. See Table 1.

**Figure 2: Global Competence Means of Division I and Division III Athletes**



**Table 1: Life Roles Rankings of Division I and Division III Athletes**

Rank	Division I	Division III
1	Family Relationships	Spiritual
2	Friendships	Romantic Relationships
3	Academic	Family Relationships
4	Spiritual	Friendships
5	Athletic	Academic
6	Romantic Relationships	Extracurricular
7	Extracurricular	Athletic

**DISCUSSION**

The finding that Division III athletes had significantly higher levels of athletic identity when compared to Division I athletes was not expected. Division I athletic programs are usually at a higher athletic level and practice more hours a week than Division III schools. Also, Division I schools are typically bigger schools in comparison to Division III schools. As such, many athletes at a Division I school may choose friends primarily to socialize with from the team they are on, which may further strengthen athletic identity (Horton & Mack, 2000). A smaller Division III school may provide athletes with less intimidating opportunities to meet friends outside the athletic team. However, the Division III track and field team we surveyed is an excellent program with a history of winning national titles in their division. Many of these athletes could have participated at the Division I level. This could be a possible explanation as to why Division III reported higher levels of athletic identity. In addition,

the two teams were surveyed at different points in their seasons. The Division III School was surveyed in the spring before the Division III National Championships, when many athletes are intensely focused on their sport. The Division I School was surveyed in the fall at the beginning of their season before any real competition had begun.

Athletes with a high athletic identity ranked the athletic role significantly higher than those with a low athletic identity. This is congruent with findings from the Horton & Mack (2000) study. They report similar results when measuring athletic identity and importance of life roles with marathon runners. This was expected being that individuals who identify with a particular role more strongly than other roles will prioritize it higher in their lives.

Division I athletes reported athletics as the number one competence domain. This was expected because Division I athletes are usually of higher athletic abilities. Division III athletes also reported athletics as the most important competency domain. This did not support the original hypothesis. The success of the team rather than Division affiliation may be more influential in predicting athletic competency. The Division III team that was surveyed is an excellent program with a history of winning national titles within their division. Many of these athletes could have participated at a Division I school.

The current study attempted to determine if there were differences in self-concept within the athlete group between division affiliations. Division III athletes reported significantly higher levels of global competence. This suggests that cultural differences may be present between Division I and Division III schools. Previous research done by Curry & Rehm, (1997) suggested that there were little differences in self-concept between athletes and non-athletes. Their study suggested that athletes and their non-athlete peers were facing the same age and stage-appropriate developmental tasks of personal growth throughout their college years. The differences between these studies suggest that division affiliation may influence an individual's college experience to a greater extent than participation in athletics. An alternative explanation is that Division III athletes may be pressured to balance other domains of their life with athletics.

In particular, Division III athletes reported higher levels of scholastic importance than Division I athletes. Scholarship money may influence an athlete's decision of where to attend college. Division I athletes are often awarded scholarships to participate in collegiate athletics. Athletes recruited to a Division I school are also often of higher athletic abilities and are generally offered more opportunities to continue competing in athletics after college. Conversely, Division III athletes have a limited number of future athletic opportunities and consequently must rely more heavily on academics for a future career. NCAA regulations prohibit Division III athletes from receiving an athletic scholarship. Therefore, there is no monetary pressure for a Division III athlete to participate in sports. Division III athletes that are choosing to continue sports, whereas Division I athletes may feel the need to participate in sports to financially support their college education. The combination of these factors indicates that Division III athletes could be motivated to participate in athletics for different reasons than Division I athletes. Division III athletes must display a strong desire to continue participating in sports for rewards other than scholarship money.

Previous research has suggested that athletes who place too strong of a centrality on the athletic life role may be at risk for psychological problems, particularly during a sports transition period (Brewer, et al., 1993). However, this does not seem to be the case with the group of athletes surveyed. Division I athletes ranked the athletic life role higher than Division III athletes on the Life Roles Inventory. In comparison to other life roles, the athlet-

ic life role was not as prominent as other life roles for both Division I and Division III. In fact out of seven life roles listed, Division I athletes ranked the athletic life role as fifth and Division III athletes ranked it as seventh. This suggests that both groups of athletes surveyed may be focusing their priorities on other life roles, such as friendships, romantic relationships, academics, and family and not solely on the athletic life role. Instead they may be experiencing the psychological benefits associated with athletics, such as self-discipline, confidence and social skills that are extending into other areas of their lives (Richard and Aries, 1999).

The findings of the study may be dependent on the sport sampled. In comparison to sports such as football and basketball, track and field athletes are less likely to continue competing on professionally as a career. Most of these athletes expect to be done after college and can prepare themselves for retirement. Even if some athletes continue running, it is usually not as a career. Future research should examine if athletes in higher revenue sports (i.e. football or basketball), place more of a centrality on athletics due to the increased pressures to continue competing professionally after college. Future research should also examine gender differences and how gender could influence the many roles of student athletes. Future research could examine which constructs determine a positive self-concept or global competence.

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