

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“I Feel Completely Present”: College Athletes’ Perceptions of Yoga for Physical and Mental Performance

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Abstract

College athletes face significant physical and mental challenges as they balance rigorous training schedules, academic responsibilities, and personal commitments. The demands of collegiate athletics often contribute to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and an increased risk of injury. Yoga has been increasingly recognized as a holistic practice that supports both physical and mental well-being, particularly in high-performance athletes. However, limited research has explored how college-athletes perceive the benefits of yoga. Informed by Mindfulness-to-Meaning Theory (MMT) and using semi-structured interview method, this study explored NCAA Division I college athletes’ perceptions of yoga. Using purposeful and convenience sampling, 14 college athletes participated in the study. The data revealed two overarching themes: mental well-being and performance enhancement. Mental well-being included mindfulness, stress reduction, and personal time, while performance enhancement was associated with mobility, flexibility, and injury prevention. The participants reported that yoga helped them stay present, manage stress, and recover mentally and physically, contributing to their overall athletic performance and well-being. The findings from this study contribute to the growing body of literature on mindfulness-based interventions in sport. The results suggest that collegiate athletic programs should consider incorporating yoga as part of structured training and wellness programs to support college athletes’ mental and physical health.

Keywords: College Athletics, Yoga, Mindfulness, Stress Reduction, Athletic Performance.

1. Introduction

College athletes face unique physical and mental challenges as they balance rigorous training schedules, academic responsibilities, and personal commitments (Stokowski et al., 2019; Stokowski et al., 2020). The demands of collegiate athletics often contribute to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and an increased risk of injury (Kegelars et al., 2024; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2019; Wilkerson et al., 2022). One emerging practice that has been recognized for its holistic benefits in both mental and physical health is yoga (Büssing et al., 2012; Cramer et al., 2013; Nayak, 2016; Ross et al., 2013).

Yoga, traditionally rooted in spiritual and meditative practices, has gained popularity in athletic settings for its ability to enhance flexibility, mobility, strength, and injury prevention while also supporting mental health and emotional regulation (Polsgrove et al., 2016; Sharma, 2015). Studies have demonstrated that practicing yoga regularly decreases stress levels, improves mood, and promotes mindfulness. (Pascoe & Bauer, 2015; Pascoe et al., 2021). Research has also shown that mindfulness-based interventions, including yoga, can significantly reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress (Bonura, 2011; Kallapiran et al., 2015; Pascoe et al., 2017; Riley et

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al., 2015). The breathing exercises and meditation techniques incorporated into yoga practice contribute to emotional balance and self-regulation, making it an effective coping strategy for athletes experiencing mental fatigue or burnout (Grilli Cadieux et al., 2021; Hagen & Nayar, 2014). Additionally, yoga has been found to improve cognitive function, enhance focus, and contribute to greater overall well-being (Gothel et al., 2019; Streeter et al., 2007). Given the increasing emphasis on mental health in collegiate athletics, yoga presents itself as a valuable tool for fostering psychological resilience in college athletes.

From a physical perspective, yoga supports athletic performance by increasing flexibility, strengthening key muscle groups, and preventing injuries, particularly in high-impact sports (Gunjawate & Ravi, 2021; Polsgrove et al., 2016; Woodyard, 2011). Studies have shown that yoga can help improve joint stability and muscle endurance, which are critical components in reducing the likelihood of musculoskeletal injuries (Polsgrove et al., 2016). Athletes who engage in regular yoga practice have reported improvements in mobility, balance, and core strength, all of which contribute to enhanced movement efficiency and reduced injury risk (Sharma, 2015). Furthermore, research suggests that yoga-based rehabilitation programs can assist in injury recovery by reducing inflammation, improving circulation, and promoting muscle relaxation (Halappa, 2023).

Despite the documented benefits of yoga, limited research has explored how college athletes perceive its role in their training, recovery, and mental health. Informed by Mindfulness-to-Meaning Theory (MMT; Garland et al., 2015), the purpose of this study was to explore NCAA Division I college athletes' perceptions of practicing yoga. Specifically, this study strives to address the following research questions:

Table 1. *Participants Demographics (By Classification)*

Pseudonym	Classification	Sex	Sport	Conference
Sophia	Grad	F	Lacrosse	Big 12
Grace	Senior	F	Lacrosse	ACC
Ava	Senior	F	Lacrosse	Atlantic 10
Mia	Grad	F	Lacrosse	ACC
Lucas	Junior	M	Soccer	ACC
Oliver	Junior	M	Basketball	ACC
Ethan	Sophomore	M	Soccer	ACC
Callum	Sophomore	M	Basketball	ACC
Armando	Grad	M	Basketball	ACC
Alexis	Grad	F	Lacrosse	Big East
Olivia	Senior	F	Lacrosse	Big East
Sarah	Senior	F	Lacrosse	AAC
Phillip	Senior	M	Football	CUSA
Mark	Freshman	M	Basketball	ASUN

RQ1: How do Division I college athletes perceive the role of yoga in their overall well-being?

RQ2: How do NCAA college athletes describe the impact of yoga on their athletic performance?

This study will contribute to the growing body of literature on athlete wellness by offering first-hand perspectives from collegiate athletes. By identifying the specific ways yoga influences athletic performance and recovery, this research may inform coaches, athletic trainers, and sports psychologists on how to integrate yoga into training regimens to enhance both physical and mental performance.

2. Methods

To address the research questions, semi-structured interview method was utilized. This type of interview method provided both structure and flexibility, allowing the researchers to ask predetermined open-ended questions while also probing deeper into participants' unique experiences and perspectives (Dittmore & Stokowski, 2020). This method was particularly valuable because it enabled college athletes to express their thoughts in their own words, offering rich, nuanced insights into the role of yoga in their athletic and personal lives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Utilizing purposeful and convenience sampling, 14 Division I college athletes agreed to participate in the study (see Table 1). All participants were current Division I college athletes and practiced yoga at least twice a week. The semi-structured interviews were conducted using Zoom and lasted an average of 29 minutes. To protect the confidentiality of the college athletes, each participant selected a pseudonym, and all identifying information was removed upon transcription.

2.1 Data Analysis

Video interviews were transcribed using Zoom's transcription feature and later reviewed for accuracy. The data was examined using Saldaña's (2009) two-cycle coding method (i.e., attribute, structural, descriptive, pattern). Attribute coding, which identifies participant characteristics such as demographics, was applied first (Saldaña, 2009). Structural coding, which involves identifying key concepts and phrases related to the research questions, was also utilized (Saldaña, 2009). Descriptive coding was then applied, summarizing significant words or passages relevant to the research topic (Saldaña, 2009). In the second coding cycle, pattern coding was used to recognize patterns across the data (Saldaña, 2009). This step helped uncover emerging themes across all interviews, ultimately contributing to answering the research questions. Trustworthiness was established through a pilot study, member checks, and triangulation of coding (Dittmore & Stokowski, 2019).

3. Results

The purpose of this study was to explore NCAA Division I college athletes' perceptions of practicing yoga. Overall, the participants felt that yoga was a practice that they greatly benefited from. Throughout the data, two major themes emerged: mental well-being and performance enhancement.

3.1 Mental Well-Being

Yoga provided the participants with a structured way to reset, refocus, and maintain emotional balance. Thus, mental well-being was the first major theme to appear in the data. This theme resulted in three subthemes: mindfulness, stress reduction, and personal time.

3.1.1 Mindfulness

Mindfulness was the first subtheme identified in the study. In this context, mindfulness referred to a state of focused awareness and nonjudgmental attention to the present moment, cultivated through breath control, movement, and meditation (Baer, 2003). It involves being fully engaged in bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions without attachment or reactivity (Baer, 2003). Participants described how yoga helped them clear their minds.

Sarah shared how yoga improved her ability to focus, stating, "I feel like when I'm doing yoga, I'm just in the moment. It's one of the only times I feel completely present, which has helped me stay locked in during games." Callum found that yoga improved his ability to stay engaged during games. Callum

explained, "Basketball moves so fast, and I used to let mistakes throw me off. Now, I try to just focus on my breath which has made me a smarter player under pressure."

Olivia expressed that practicing yoga increased her body awareness. "I have noticed benefits such as being able to control my breath when I need to. I catch myself using those techniques, especially when I'm feeling fatigued or trying to stay calm in high-pressure moments," Olivia said.

Lucas described how yoga made him more intentional in training, "I used to go through the motions at practice, but yoga helped me become more aware of my movements." Similarly, Ethan shared that yoga helped him control his emotions in high-stress moments. According to Ethan, "I handle pressure way better now. I used to get frustrated a lot, but now I focus on my breath, refocus, and move on." For Ava, yoga helped her manage performance anxiety. Ava expressed, "Before I want in my own head and would overthink everything, yoga reminds me to focus on my breathing, and it helps me stay composed."

3.1.2 Stress Reduction

Stress arises when an individual perceives that the demands placed on them exceed their ability to cope, leading to cognitive, emotional, and physical strain (Chrousos, 2009). Many participants suggested that yoga was a tool they relied on to reduce stress and maintain emotional balance. Phillip, emphasized the connection between stress and performance, stating, "Before big games, I would get so tense that I wasn't playing like myself. Yoga helps me to manage my nerves, and I stay a lot calmer." Similarly, Mark, noted that yoga helped with post-game stress, "After a tough game, my body and mind are both exhausted. Yoga gives me a way to reset mentally so I don't carry that stress into the next game." Ethan shared how yoga helped him handle stress from school and sports, "When you're constantly balancing practice, classes, and travel, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. Yoga helps me slow things down and stay in control, even during my busiest weeks."

Grace explained how yoga became a part of her stress management routine, "I didn't realize how much stress I was holding until I started yoga. It helps me release everything I've been carrying so I don't bring it into my next practice or game." Mia described how yoga helped her manage stress before competitions, stating, "The breathing techniques I learned in yoga are what get me through pre-game nerves. Instead of

letting anxiety take over, I just focus on my breath, and it keeps me steady.” Alexis explained that yoga gave her a space to mentally recharge, “Game days are mentally exhausting, even before we step on the field. Yoga helps me clear my mind, so I’m not drained before the game even starts.”

Olivia expressed how she ultimately feels more stressed when she does not integrate yoga into her schedule, “If I skip yoga, I start to feel like everything is building up. After I practice [yoga], I feel like I’ve taken a break from the pressure of competing and I come back feeling refreshed.” For Armando, “Yoga is like my reset button.”

3.1.3 Personal Time

In addition to mindfulness and stress reduction, many participants emphasized how yoga provided them with valuable personal time. With demanding schedules, college athletes often struggle to find moments for self-care. Yoga allowed them to carve out time for themselves, which contributed to their overall well-being.

Sophia described yoga as her only time to truly disconnect, stating, “Yoga is the one time I get to just focus on myself without thinking about my next responsibility.” Similarly, Lucas explained, “I never used to make time for myself, but yoga forced me to stop and breathe for once. I didn’t realize how much I needed that mental break.” Armando spoke to the importance of a peaceful environment, “It’s a great space to just kind of clear your mind. If you’ve got a lot going on, it’s an easy way to find your center again before stepping back into competition.” Ava described yoga as an essential self-care practice, “Athletes are always told to push harder. Yoga is the one thing I do that actually feels like I’m giving back to my body instead of just pushing it to the limit.”

The participants’ experiences demonstrated the significant role that yoga played in improving their mental well-being. Through a consistent yoga practice, the participants stayed present and connected. In addition, yoga helped the participants manage the demands of being a college athlete. Lastly, yoga allowed the participants to create space for self-care.

3.2 Performance Enhancement

Performance enhancement emerged as the second major theme. The participants shared insights into the physical benefits of yoga. To this, three subthemes were revealed: mobility, flexibility, and injury prevention. Sophia described how yoga directly

impacted her athletic performance, stating, “Yoga increases my flexibility and kind of eliminates any soreness that I would experience during practice and stuff.” Similarly, Lucas expanded on how yoga benefits his performance, explaining,

I think it benefits the performance. From the physical side, just being able to be a little bit looser, be a little bit more mobile, and build strength. Kind of doing exercises you wouldn’t normally do when you’re lifting in the gym, for example.

These perspectives reflect the participants’ recognition of yoga as a unique tool for improving physical performance.

3.2.1 Mobility

Mobility emerged as the first subtheme under performance enhancement. Many participants described how yoga improved their range of motion, helping them move more freely and comfortably during games and training. Phillip shared how yoga influenced his movement, stating, “It helps me just to be able to move the way I want to.” Similarly, Lucas highlighted how yoga alleviated muscle tightness, explaining, “Tightness will get in my thighs and areas that I usually have problems with. Yoga helps alleviate that, and I always feel better physically the next day.” Ava also emphasized the importance of yoga in enhancing mobility and recovery, stating,

Like when we do yoga, it’s with the instructor who is focused on movements and positions that are supposed to release tension in areas of our body that we use in lacrosse. So obviously, that aids in recovery, and you’re able to perform.

Ethan said, “Before [trying yoga] I would feel stiff when I had to make quick turns or sudden stops, but yoga has really loosened me up, and I notice the difference when I’m playing.” Mark discussed how yoga has helped him feel more in control of his movements, “When you play football, you’re putting your body through so much impact. Yoga has helped me feel like my joints and muscles move better, so I’m not as stiff when I need to make quick movements.” Mia also described how yoga contributed to her mobility, stating, “I used to feel really restricted in my movements. Since incorporating yoga, I feel like I can move more freely, and my body doesn’t feel as tight.”

3.2.2 Flexibility

Flexibility was the second subtheme under performance enhancement. Olivia explained how

she started yoga with the goal of becoming more flexible, stating, "I first started yoga in hopes to gain some flexibility." She further emphasized its importance, saying, "Flexibility is very important in the sport of lacrosse." Alexis also highlighted the connection between yoga and flexibility, linking it to a better understanding of her body as an athlete. She explained, "Through yoga, I feel like I can kind of learn more about myself and myself as an athlete and like what I need to be able to recover fully."

Sophia shared her experience of how consistently practicing yoga improved her flexibility, stating, "My hamstrings and quads have stretched out and been more mobile through yoga." She also described the benefits of this increased flexibility on her legs, explaining, "A lot of the lactic acid has been worked out and just relaxed altogether." Callum, reflected on how yoga helped his agility and flexibility on the court, "Basketball is all about quick changes in direction and being able to adjust your movement. Since doing yoga, I feel like my body responds better when I need to shift quickly or make a sudden stop." Lucas mentioned that his flexibility has helped him avoid unnecessary strain on his muscles. Lucas explained, "I used to feel really stiff, and I would sometimes tweak something because my muscles weren't loose enough. Yoga helps me stay limber, and I've had fewer issues with tightness."

3.2.3 Injury Prevention

The final subtheme under performance enhancement was injury prevention. Many participants highlighted their motivation to stay physically healthy throughout their athletic careers. Some shared personal experiences with injuries and explained how yoga helped them recover and prevent further issues.

Lucas provided a detailed account of his injury and how yoga contributed to his rehabilitation. "I had the sports training surgery a year ago, and with that, I had to have both my abductors totally released and reattached because they were both torn," he explained. Lucas continued, "That caused me a while to come back from and to feel normal again in the groin and lower ab area. Even when I first got [to college], I was still experiencing discomfort, and practicing yoga actually did help."

Sophia also described how yoga aided her recovery from an injury. "I recently had a little hamstring strain, so I know a lot of the recovery with that is stretching," she shared. "Yoga can definitely help in your recovery when you have super tight muscles and that sort of stuff."

Phillip felt that yoga helped him to maintain his physical health throughout the season, stating, "When you're constantly training and competing, your body takes a beating. Yoga helps me feel like I'm keeping my body in better shape and avoiding little injuries."

Ava reflected on how yoga has helped her prevent injuries by improving body awareness. "I feel like I know my body better because of yoga," she said. "I can tell when I need to stretch something more or when I should take extra care of a certain muscle group."

Olivia explained how yoga has helped her with injury prevention in her sport:

Lacrosse is such a high-impact game, and you don't always realize how much wear and tear your body goes through. Yoga has been a way for me to reset and take care of my body before little aches turn into bigger injuries.

The participants' experiences highlight the strong connection between yoga and performance enhancement. Through improved mobility, increased flexibility, and injury prevention, student-athletes felt that yoga provided them with the tools necessary to perform at a high level while maintaining their physical health.

4. Discussion

This study explored NCAA Division I college athletes' perceptions of yoga, revealing two major themes: mental well-being and performance enhancement. Participants reported that yoga helped them manage stress, improve focus, and create personal time for self-care. Many found mindfulness practices beneficial in staying present during games and handling performance anxiety. Yoga was also viewed as an effective tool for reducing stress.

In regard to performance, the participants credited yoga for providing them with enhanced mobility, flexibility, and believed the practiced aided in injury prevention. They described how yoga helped them move more efficiently, reduce muscle tightness, and recover from injuries. Many participants believed yoga contributed to overall physical health and helped prevent common sports-related injuries.

The results of the present study reinforce the existing literature further demonstrating the benefits of yoga for both mental well-being and athletic performance. Consistent with previous research, the participants in this study reported that yoga played a meaningful role in managing stress, enhancing mindfulness, and

improving physical capabilities. The results reinforce the notion that yoga serves as a holistic intervention for college athletes, addressing both psychological and physiological demands associated with collegiate athletics (Büssing et al., 2012; Cramer et al., 2013; Nayak, 2016; Ross et al., 2013).

Prior research suggests that college athletes face considerable stress due to their dual role as students and competitors, (Stokowski et al., 2019; Kegelars et al., 2024). The present study supports these findings, as participants emphasized the role of yoga in reducing stress, increasing self-awareness, and fostering emotional balance. Similar to Pascoe and Bauer (2015) and Pascoe et al. (2021) work, which found that yoga and mindfulness-based interventions alleviate symptoms of anxiety and depression, the participants in this study described how yoga provided a structured approach to stress management. In particular, the study's findings align with Bonura (2011) and Kallapiran et al. (2015) work which found that mindfulness-based practices enhance emotional regulation and cognitive function. The participants frequently referenced how yoga helped them to remain composed under pressure, regulate their breathing, and improve their focus during competition. These findings support the claim that yoga can act as a powerful tool for developing psychological resilience, allowing athletes to manage the mental demands of their sport effectively (Grilli Cadieux et al., 2021; Hagen & Nayar, 2014).

The results of this study reinforce the literature on yoga's benefits for flexibility, mobility, and injury prevention. Consistent with research by Polsgrove et al. (2016) and Woodyard (2011), the participants in the present study reported improvements in movement efficiency, muscle recovery, and overall flexibility. The participants expressed that yoga helped them to move more freely and prevent muscle stiffness, mirroring the conclusions of Gunjawate and Ravi (2021). Furthermore, this study supports prior research on yoga's role in injury prevention and rehabilitation. Sharma (2015) and Halappa (2023) suggested that yoga promotes muscular balance, improves circulation, and aids in injury recovery. Participants echoed these findings, emphasizing how yoga helped to prevent recurring injuries and support post-injury rehabilitation. These results reinforce the growing recognition of yoga as an effective complementary practice for athletic training and recovery.

While prior studies have established the physical and psychological benefits of yoga in general populations, limited research has focused specifically on how Division I college athletes perceive and integrate yoga into their training and well-being practices. This study adds to the existing literature by providing firsthand insights into how high-level collegiate athletes experience the benefits of yoga, both in terms of mental health and performance enhancement.

Unlike previous research that primarily examines yoga's impact on general athletic performance (Polsgrove et al., 2016; Sharma, 2015), this study provides qualitative evidence on how college athletes internalize the benefits of yoga. By emphasizing the direct experiences of NCAA Division I college athletes, this study builds on existing mindfulness-based intervention research (Bonura, 2011; Pascoe et al., 2017) and underscores yoga's relevance as a practical tool for high-performance athletes.

4.1 Theory

The findings of this study align with the principles of MMT, which suggests that mindfulness facilitates adaptive emotional regulation and meaning-making processes that contribute to psychological well-being (Garland et al., 2015). Participants in this study described how engaging in yoga promoted mindfulness by fostering present-moment awareness, which, according to MMT, enables individuals to reframe stressors and cultivate positive emotional responses. Athletes who practiced yoga reported increased focus, stress reduction, and a greater ability to manage performance-related anxiety, which supports MMT's assertion that mindfulness initiates a shift from habitual negative thought patterns to more flexible and adaptive cognitive appraisals (Garland et al., 2009).

Additionally, the study's findings reinforce MMT's proposition that mindfulness enhances an individual's ability to derive meaning from experiences. Through repeated engagement in yoga and mindfulness practices, participants developed greater self-awareness and emotional resilience, allowing them to reframe their experiences in a way that fostered a deeper connection to their sport and personal growth. This process is reflective of the meaning-making component of MMT, which posits that mindfulness allows individuals to reinterpret challenges as opportunities for growth and positive transformation (Garland et al., 2011).

4.2 Implications

The present study provides valuable insights into how NCAA Division I college athletes perceive the role of yoga in their mental well-being and athletic performance. Based on the results, several key implications emerged for collegiate athletic programs, sports medicine professionals, coaches, and mental health practitioners. These implications emphasized the potential benefits of integrating yoga into structured training and wellness programs to enhance college athlete health and performance.

A significant implication of this study is the need for athletic programs to consider incorporating yoga as a regular component of training regimens. Participants reported that yoga helped them manage stress, increase mindfulness, and improve focus, suggesting that structured yoga sessions could be a valuable addition to mental skills training. Given that stress, anxiety, and performance pressure are common challenges for college athletes, integrating yoga-based mindfulness training into team routines could help athletes develop emotional regulation skills, improve concentration, and manage competitive pressure more effectively.

From a performance standpoint, this study reinforces the importance of yoga in improving mobility, flexibility, and injury prevention. The Participants described how yoga contributed to their ability to move more efficiently, reduce muscle tightness, and recover faster. These findings suggest that strength and conditioning coaches should explore integrating yoga into training programs to help athletes optimize movement patterns and reduce injury risk. Given that yoga has been linked to increased joint stability and muscular balance, incorporating sport-specific yoga routines could be particularly beneficial for athletes in high-impact sports that place significant strain on the body.

Although yoga has been widely recognized for its benefits, it has not traditionally been prioritized in collegiate athletic settings. The results of this study suggest that shifting cultural perceptions of yoga within sports programs could enhance its adoption among college athletes. Many participants initially viewed yoga as separate from their traditional strength and conditioning programs but later recognized its direct benefits for both physical performance and mental resilience. Educating athlete and coaches about the benefits of yoga could increase its acceptance and encourage the implementation of the practice across sports teams.

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of research on mindfulness and athlete performance, but additional studies are needed to further explore the long-term impact of yoga in collegiate athletics. Future research could examine the effects of different yoga styles on specific athletic populations, the ideal frequency of practice for optimal results, and the role of yoga in injury prevention and rehabilitation across various sports. Additionally, developing sport-specific yoga programs tailored to the needs of different athletic disciplines may enhance engagement and maximize performance benefits.

While this study provides important insights, there are several limitations that should be considered. First, the sample consisted of Division I college athletes, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied on self-reported perceptions, which may introduce response bias, as participants may have provided socially desirable answers rather than fully objective reflections on their experiences. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study means that the findings are based on subjective interpretations rather than quantifiable performance measures.

This study provides evidence that yoga is a valuable tool for both mental and physical well-being in college athletes. The findings suggest that yoga can enhance mindfulness, reduce stress, improve focus, and contribute to overall performance by increasing mobility and flexibility while reducing the risk of injuries. Athlete development specialist should consider integrating yoga into training regimens and mental health support strategies to provide college athletes with a holistic approach to their development (Stokowski et al., 2020). By recognizing the benefits of yoga, collegiate sports programs can take proactive steps to support the mental resilience and physical longevity of their athletes.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study explored NCAA Division I college athletes' perceptions of yoga, revealing its role in both mental well-being and performance enhancement. The findings support existing literature on the benefits of yoga for stress reduction, mindfulness, flexibility, mobility, and injury prevention. Participants expressed that yoga provided them with a valuable tool to manage the pressures of collegiate athletics, improve focus, and maintain physical health. Given these insights, integrating yoga into structured athletic training programs could offer holistic benefits, supporting

both mental resilience and physical longevity. By recognizing yoga as a beneficial practice, athletic programs can take proactive steps to enhance student-athlete development, ensuring that athletes have the necessary resources to succeed both on and off the field.

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