



Neurodiverse Student Athletes' Experiences of Meaningfulness in Sport

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Abstract

Background: The term neurodiversity refers to differences in individual brain functioning affecting information processing and influencing behaviour and communication (Wood et al., 2025). Neurodiverse traits tend to be associated with poorer mental health and compromised wellbeing (Buckley et al., 2024). In recent years, limited research has focused on the mental health of elite neurodiverse athletes (Hoare et al., 2023) and has highlighted the importance of understanding neurodiverse experiences in sport to foster more supportive, inclusive sporting environments. However, little research has sought to understand the lived experiences of neurodiverse athletes in non-elite sporting contexts. To help fill this gap, this research is aimed at understanding the lived experiences of neurodiverse student athletes navigating university while playing sport. Research has shown that, despite the challenges associated with balancing the demands of sport training and academics, student athletes can find meaningfulness in their sport experiences when they are well supported (Ault et al., 2024). However, neurodiverse student athletes are at increased risk of experiencing overload when balancing competing demands on their time (Wood et al., 2025), and little is known about the quality of their experiences and the support they receive from their support networks.

Methodology: This visual ethnographic research utilizes photo elicitation and vignettes (Hill & Flemmons, 2024) to understand and share neurodiverse student athletes' lived experiences of sport through the lens of meaningfulness. Theoretically, this research draws on concepts and features of meaningful experiences in sport (Beni et al., 2017) to understand the meaningfulness of neurodiverse student athletes' experiences of sport when navigating the added pressures presented by neurodiversity in university settings.

Results/Conclusions: Understanding experiences of meaningfulness in sport for neurodiverse athletes can provide important insights into how coaches and other support personnel can foster a neuroinclusive sport space and facilitate meaningful experiences for neurodiverse students in sport.

Keywords: Meaningfulness; Neurodiversity; Student Athlete



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