

Athletes with disabilities within NCAA and different divisions and how they manage their  
disability and are supported by their Colleges and Universities

By:

Tara Sasso

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\_\_\_\_\_, Sponsor Chyrs Ingraham

\_\_\_\_\_, Sherry Llauger

## **Abstract:**

The majority of research shows that athletes with disabilities have it harder and have more rules and exceptions than the athlete who isn't disabled does. Athletes who are disabled have it a lot harder than the "normal" student athlete because in addition to schoolwork and their responsibility to their sport, they also need to worry about having different rules as far as their health condition or disability is concerned. Oftentimes, they are compared to the student athlete who doesn't have a disability and how they are performing in their sport. I will show the difference between NCAA Div I, Div II, Div III and JUCO' rules and regulations within college athletic departments. This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1) How are athletes with disabilities treated as far as their disability and are accommodations made for a student athlete with a disability?

2) How is the student athlete that is disabled compared to the non-disabled student athlete? 3) How do athletes that suffer with mental health issues get treated at each division level and how serious do the athletic departments take athletes when they say they are struggling mentally?

Through content analysis, I am going to find TikTok social media articles about athletes with disabilities to answer the above questions and to showcase how much athletes with disabilities truly take on that they shouldn't have to in order to participate in the sport that they love.

## **Introduction:**

Discrimination against athletes with disabilities is a real issue in college sports both physically and mentally and it has been a problem for a long time, but over time it has risen to extreme levels. Many disabled athletes who would not have even considered trying out for a sports team are now participating in all sports in record numbers.

As a result of this, athletes with disabilities have to prove themselves not only on the field of play, but also to athletic trainers, athletic directors and the team coach. As a disabled student-athlete, I often feel like I/they can't ask for help because I/they would be perceived as "weak" or too needy, especially athletes suffering in silence with invisible disabilities. Famous athletes suffer mentally and have come out and spoken about how being a competitive athlete can be really hard at times and that people only see them for their skill and do not see them as a person.

An example of that was Simon Biles and how she had to take a step back from the Olympics due to her mental health. (White Sand treatment , 2022). Michael Phelps, professional swimmer, has been well documented in addressing his ADHD, anxiety and depression throughout his life, starting from a very young age.

He discusses how hard it is for athletes to address their issues and needs because they do not want to be perceived as weak and inferior to their non-disabled peers.

He states that image is important to athletes and oftentimes, this causes fear and forces athletes to keep their struggles private both professionally and in college (Adelphi Psych Medicine Clinic).

Athletes struggle to be taken seriously because they deal with a disability both physically and/or mentally. Bethany Hamilton, one of the best surfers of all time, who was attacked by a shark in

2003 and was told she would never surf again, because her left arm was bitten off, proved that athletes with disabilities can do the same thing other athletes can do. The film *Soul Surfer* takes you on her journey and shows that she has gone down in history as one of the best surfers of all time even though she is different. Athletes with disabilities struggle with people seeing them as equal to their teammates who do not have a disability, be it mental and or physical. Work ethic, grind, determination, practice and love for your sport is what should matter. I am the only pitcher on my college team, here at SUNY Purchase, this season. I am a competitive student athlete with severe epilepsy. I sometimes have three or four seizures a day, but my teammates and coaches know that I'm going to show up to practice every day and give 110 percent no matter how tired or sore I feel, because my team needs me. My disability/Illness shouldn't matter, because I don't allow it to affect my performance.

Mental health is defined as a person's condition with regard to their psychological and emotional well-being. A physical disability is defined as a condition that substantially limits one or more basic physical activities in life. ( it hinders the person's ability to do everything someone who doesn't have that disability can do). What are some ways athletes are treated differently? Does the fact that it's physical or mental change how other people act or feel? *Sports within an athlete's life can contribute positively and disabled athletes should be included as well.*

## Literature Review

As one of its core values and principles, the NCAA is committed to an inclusive culture that fosters equitable participation for student-athletes. Important legislation states that, “the NCAA encourages participation by student-athletes with disabilities (physical or mental) in intercollegiate athletics and physical activities to the full extent of their interest and abilities. An NCAA member institution will have the right to seek, on behalf of any student-athlete with a disability participating on the member’s team, a reasonable modification or accommodation of a playing rule, provided that the modification or accommodation would not:

- \*compromise the safety of, or increase the risk of injury to, any other student-athlete;

- \* change an essential element that would fundamentally alter the nature of the game; or

- \*provide the student-athlete an unfair advantage over the other competitors.”

Previous research within the NCAA shows there are a lot of rules and the association as a whole is very strict in applying those rules. In the article on their website (ERIC,2012), the NCAA agreed to loosen the rules for athletes with disabilities with an agreement from the federal Department of Justice. They are attempting to make things more fair by counting special education classes as being equal to “normal” classes for the average student. They are also trying to help disabled athletes in the regards that the NCAA is helping to make the rules the same across the board for all athletes regardless of disabilities. Within one of the articles, (C. Barnes 2010) it discusses the fact that disabilities are a complex social construct and that athletes face

many things that block or stop them from participating in their sport. Disabled athletes already must juggle school, the sport they are playing, and their personal lives and it is unfair for the athletes with disabilities to be treated or questioned any further than any of their teammates based on something they have no control over. Within the article it dicusses, “People with a disability face barriers to all areas of citizenship through inadequate policies, negative attitudes, lack of service provision, inadequate funding, inappropriate access to technologies, lack of inclusive formats for information, and lack of participation in the decisions that directly affect their social participation (World Health Organization, 2013). The article is stating that because of a lack of funding and lack of knowledge, athletes with disabilities get the negative end of it because their situations are “harder” than an athlete that isn’t disabled. The article is stating that the NCAA needs to accommodate students with disabilities to have the same opportunities as student athletes that don’t have disabilities. It also states that it must be based on skill and nothing else, especially if that athlete has a note clearing them for participation from a doctor. The only way things need to be altered is if the athlete somewhat has an advantage based on their disability. This is something that personally relates to me as a student athlete with a disability and what I’ve been going through because I take, or I did till coming here, medical marijuana. I had to stop using it even with a doctor’s note because SUNY Purchase was not on board with the use of medical marijuana. The inability to use a proven drug to help control my seizures has negatively impacted my life both on and off the softball field. I also suffer from pseudo seizures and medical marajuana was instrumental in helping to control my anxiety and seizures. My seizures are more frequent during softball season as a result of this rule. The University assumed that the NCAA was going to deny me and then looked into the matter further. They determined that it wasn’t just going to affect me but every other athlete at SUNY Purchase.

However, if it is someone's medication and they have a doctor's note for its specific use, I don't believe it should be a generic rule. I have felt very unsupported by this arbitrary ruling. It also mentioned the OCR, which is the Office of Civil Rights, and how its job is to protect the rights of students with disabilities. It doesn't matter if you're an athlete or not, the OCR protects all students who are labeled as disabled and have equal rights as students who aren't disabled. This will tie into my project because it is important as a student with disabilities to know whether you have that protection as an athlete or not, because it shows that they can't force rules that do not address that athlete's needs on them and not give them the same rules as every other athlete on their sports team.

### **Methods**

For the purpose of this study, I conducted my research by using content analysis to review how athletes with disabilities within the NCAA and different divisions and how they manage their disability and are supported by their colleges and universities. The articles that I used were research based, along with journals that helped to find relevant information to help prove my abstract.

The research methods approach focuses on the experience of athletes, coaches and people hired in the athletic department. It emphasizes that depending on the college and athletic department, the rules for athletes with disabilities can change, which impacts the student athlete who could already be struggling greatly both on and off the field. Athletes with disabilities will also face a lot more than the normal student athlete in regards to managing their medication, sleep and eating habits. The data is obtained through different media sources and data on social media.

This bolsters my senior project a lot because there is a lot of helpful information on social media videos and articles. There have been so many student athletes committing suicide, especially females (there's literally been 7 over the last few years). It made me think, are college athletic departments really doing everything they can to help these student athletes who give so much of themselves and their time to the school? Social media has kept everyone informed about it and it made me realize that you really can find out anything on social media and because of that I feel as if using media as the main method for my project would be perfect.

### **Preliminary findings:**

The research question about how athletes with disabilities within the NCAA manage their disability and are supported by their colleges and universities. My assumption before actually researching this topic was that there are going to be a lot of different opinions on rules based on the college and the division one is in. Based on the literature about how the NCAA rules governing student athletes are the same across all levels and divisions within its jurisdiction. It is my determination that the NCAA must re-examine which athletes are being excluded by its practices. The NCAA seeks to create an atmosphere of fairness; however, the inclusion of varying ability levels is excluded throughout various statements and hiring practices. The NCAA has made well-being a top priority but this cannot be achieved without representation and focus on disability identity. That means more funding and resources should be implemented to support the understanding of disability identity development and formation. (Stokowski 2022)

While researching athletes with disabilities I found a video on tik-tok about a guy named Dave who was born with an eye condition where he only has 3 percent of his eyesight left and



competed in high level games. He has a documentary series about his journey and how he was treated differently based on his disability. (tik-tok,blindhipsterdave).

I also watched a Ted talk spoken by David Kyle, where he talks about how people with disabilities can be athletes as well and that when you go through something it can make you not want to continue your sport anymore. He was diagnosed with MS and his entire world changed. He talks about just having a new daughter and realizing that “he can’t sit on the couch forever”, he ended up going back to college and doing cross country and track to train to do a tria-tholon and he felt like with his age and on top of the fact that he was diagnosed with spell out he felt like the world was against him playing a college sport again but he did it and for the most part everyone was nice to him. (people with disabilities are athletes too, Ted talks).

## **CONCLUSION**

Researching this topic and finding articles that discuss athletes with disabilities within divisions of NCAA it was obvious that athletes with disabilities are treated differently than the “normal” student athlete. Throughout everything I researched it was known by the student athletes with disabilities that they had to encounter more questions and heartache than their peers and teammates which I think shouldn’t be allowed. Both for athletes with disabilities and illnesses such as epilepsy and mental health issues as well, It is obvious that athletic departments just want the “easier” athletes, which is the ones that they don’t have to pay as much attention to. I feel as if the student athletes will also have a different opinion on what is best for them and how they manage their disability then the athletic administrators and coaches do. I can personally say

that when I came to purchase, the athletic staff was nice to me, but they also didn't realize my capabilities, as an athlete. All they heard was "I have epilepsy" and everyone was afraid of both me being a pitcher and being a division 3 competitive athlete. This topic was interesting and for students or athletic departments who want to learn more about athletes with disabilities and how they are treated they should research it more on their own and find additional articles to help them understand why athletes with disabilities are treated so differently than their peers. I believe finding more sources and more information will help "fight the fight" for athletes with disabilities.

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