Pregnancy: An Exploratory Study of Student-Athlete Knowledge and Decision Making

Barbara Osborne, University of North Carolina
Lindsey Jaco, University of North Carolina

Abstract 2009-166

In 2007, the sports media broke a number of stories about student-athletes and pregnancy. It was reported that seven female Clemson student athletes had terminated their pregnancies primarily because they were afraid of losing their scholarships. Track athletes at the University of Memphis reported that they were forced to sign contracts that stated they would lose their athletics grant-in-aid if they became pregnant (AP, 2007). Other horror stories surfaced: an 18-year-old freshman volleyball player at Mercyhurst University was charged with murdering her newborn daughter after delivering her in a dormitory bathroom, and a basketball player at the University of Louisville concealed her pregnancy and continued to play until her eighth month when early contractions sent her to the hospital.

As a result of the media scrutiny and negative publicity, the NCAA enacted emergency legislation to establish a uniform practice for college athletics departments (Bylaw 15.3.4.3). The legislation should not have been necessary, as Title IX regulations enacted in 1975, provide a strong legal guarantee to all pregnant students at educational institutions that receive federal funding that they will not be discriminated against because of pregnancy. Apparently few institutions were aware of the Title IX regulation, so the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) sent a Dear Colleague letter in the summer of 2007 to all educational institutions to remind them that Title IX prohibits coaches from revoking a pregnant student-athlete's scholarship during the current year, or from treating a pregnant student-athlete differently than any other student-athlete with a temporary medical condition. As athletics grant-in-aid is renewed on a yearly basis under NCAA legislation, the protection provided by Title IX loses power when the academic year ends. Also, a pregnant student-athlete would lose her scholarship if she quits the team or chooses to withdraw from school, as Title IX only provides protection for current students. Although the protection provided by Title IX is limited, the federal Constitution provides additional protection under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Applying equal protection principles, institutions are required to treat a pregnant student-athlete in the same way that other athletes (male or female) who are experiencing a temporary medical condition would be treated. However, if student-athletes are unaware of their rights under the law, they are unlikely to demand those protections. This exploratory study sought to discover what female student-athletes know about their reproductive rights and gain insight into their decision making process when confronted with either real or hypothetical pregnancy. The study was guided by the following research questions: 1. What do female student-athletes know about their reproductive health? 2. What do female student-athletes know about their reproductive rights and the protections afforded by NCAA rules and federal law? 3. What choices do female student-athletes make when confronted with pregnancy? 4. Do current NCAA rules and programs adequately address the needs of female-student athletes relative to pregnancy?

The investigators contacted athletics administrators from four NCAA Division I member institutions for permission to survey female athletes. Administrators from three institutions provided unconditional permission, while the administration from the fourth institution forwarded the request for permission to the coaches of each women's team. Consequently, only half of the coaches opted to allow their student-athletes to participate. The Senior Woman Administrator or Life Skills coordinator at the various institutions contacted all female student-athletes and arranged for meeting space. Paper and pencil surveys were administered in person to female student-athletes at the participating institutions. A 20 question survey assessed general demographic information, knowledge of NCAA rules and legal rights pertaining to pregnancy, information related to sexual activity and contraception, and decision making scenarios. Participants were assured anonymity and confidentiality, and upon completion of the survey were provided with an information sheet that contained information on their pregnancy rights according to Title IX and NCAA legislation and school-specific resources to use if they or anyone they know is faced with an unplanned pregnancy.

Of the total 897 female student-athletes (ages 18 – 22) at the four NCAA DI-A institutions, 517 chose to participate in this study, with a response rate of 57.6%. Using SPSS, frequencies were calculated. Fifty-eight percent of the participants reported that they are sexually active. Of the 295 subjects who reported that they are sexually active, oral contraception is used most often (45.3%), with 69% of those indicating that they used oral contraceptives primarily to prevent pregnancy, while 31% responded that they used oral contraceptives for reasons other than to prevent pregnancy. When asked what they would do if they suspected that they were pregnant, 87% responded that they would use a home pregnancy test to verify their pregnancy, 45% would go to a doctor not affiliated with the school or athletics department, 45% would contact their parent(s). The options with the fewest responses were: go to student health (14%), contact the team athletic doctor (14%), contact the coach (13%), and contact the team athletic trainer (12.6%). If faced with a confirmed pregnancy, 68% of subjects would turn to their parents for
help or advice. The people least likely to be asked for help or advice were the head coach (14%), athletic trainer (13%), team doctor (11%), and assistant coach (8%). When asked what they would do if they became pregnant, 53% of the subjects responded that they would continue their pregnancy and 47% responded that they would terminate their pregnancy; 14% chose not to respond. Although 60% of the participants responded that they were aware of their legal rights related to pregnancy, the majority answered questions related to their rights incorrectly. Eighty-four percent of the participants were not aware of any NCAA rules related to pregnancy. Of the 16% who were aware of the NCAA rules, 97% correctly identified the rules. Chi-square goodness of fit and crosstab procedures were used to determine if relationships exist between the participants' pregnancy decisions and outcomes to their knowledge of reproductive health and rights. No statistically significant relationships were identified.

On November 14, 2008, the NCAA released 'Pregnant and Parenting Student-Athletes: Resources and Model Policies'. Written by Nancy Hogshead-Makar, a legal expert on Title IX, and Elizabeth Sorensen, Ph.D., a leading researcher and advocate for student-athlete pregnancy policies, it is a comprehensive source of information and tool kit for administrators, athletic trainers and student-athletes. Based on the data collected in this study, the researchers conclude that the tool kit will best serve student-athletes by educating administrators and coaches about student-athlete rights and appropriate responses to pregnant student-athletes. However, female-student athletes need more comprehensive education about reproductive health, contraception, and resources, as they are unlikely to confide in athletics department personnel if pregnant.