

**Beyond the Physical: Are Policies in Place to Provide High School Football Players in the State of Washington Adequate Psychological Care as it Pertains to Personal Development?**

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Introduction

In May of 2012, former NFL linebacker and future Hall of Fame inductee Junior Seau committed suicide, dying from a self-inflicted gunshot to the chest (O'Connell & Manschreck, 2012). This was a man who was beloved by many, and by all standards should have enjoyed a happy and financially secure retirement. A situation like this goes to show just how much pressure athletes today are under. Junior Seau is not the only person whose life was ended in tragedy, as many other athletes over the years have ended their lives due to psychological issues. This is not limited to just the professional level, it is just as prominent if not more so in high school and college athletes. For years athletes in general have either had their psychological issues cast away by those they seek help from, or they keep it hidden from others so as not to show potential weakness, lose contracts/scholarships, etc. According to O'Connell & Manschreck (2012) athletes often feel pressure to play through psychological and physical pain so they do not let down their parents or coaches, who often push players to "tough it out" and encourage them to play through the pain. The research question for this study is the following: Are policies in place to provide high school football players in the state of Washington adequate psychological care as it pertains to personal development?

To be able to answer this question we first must define psychological wellness itself, and also, what adequate psychological care should consist of. Psychological wellness, or mental wellbeing, refers to the degree to which one feels positive and enthusiastic about oneself and life, whereas illness refers to the presence of disease (Manderscheid, 2009). Adding onto the presence of disease, one may also include the presence of clinical depression, self-perceived depression, stress, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and anxiety, among other conditions. A multitude of different factors can contribute to the existence of these conditions for high school football players, including family issues, lack of support from parents and/or coaches, lack of playing time, bullying, injuries, drugs and/or alcohol abuse, etc. Players often will not tell anyone about these problems due to perceived weakness and/or potential ridicule from teammates, parents, coaches, etc. For this reason, sport managers in this field need to make psychological testing and proper psychological care a priority and a mandatory policy among high school football teams. For the sake of this study, adequate psychological care should consist of a mandatory baseline psychological test at the beginning of each season, as well as the presence of a team psychologist (usually in form of a referral from the athletic department) who will perform psychological checkups for players dealing not only with injuries, but any of the aforementioned factors as well. Strict confidentiality must be offered, and in many cases it may be the coaches' jobs to recognize a player struggling with psychological health issues, as even with the presence of these resources players will still often resist the idea of seeking help. The hypothesis of this study is the following: Policies are not in place to provide high school football players in the state of Washington are not adequate psychological care as it pertains to personal development.

Method

This study will incorporate a mixed methods approach. Data will be collected through quantitative methods, and after data has been collected, qualitative methods will be employed to conduct a policy analysis of the school policies, if such policies exist. For this paper, the methods will be split into two subsections.

Quantitative

For this study, only 4-A level Washington state high schools will be included, as this is the highest classification in the state. There are 67 4-A high schools in the state of Washington. The survey will be based off of the definition of psychological care provided earlier in paragraph two. To find this information, we will conduct phone or personal inquiries (depending on school location) to high school athletic departments, and we will begin by asking if the high

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school has a policy in place as it pertains to psychological care of its football team. After this, we will dive into the policy, if one exists, and begin by asking if the school provides a baseline psychological test at the beginning of each season. Next, we will determine whether the school has a team psychologist available at the players' disposal, whether this is by referral or if the school has a designated psychologist. If the school does not have a team psychologist policy of any sort, we will then ask if they have another form of counselor at the players' disposal. Finally, we will inquire about the school's confidentiality policy as it pertains to high school football players' interactions with a team psychologist or counselor, if such a policy exists. This will determine if these high schools have a policy in place as it pertains to offering football players psychological care, and if they do not, they may include alternatives their school offers, if any exist. Answers for the survey will be statistically divided based on each portion of the psychological care expectations, and additional variables may be added later depending on answers provided during the survey.

### **Qualitative**

After obtaining data from participating 4-A Washington high schools, qualitative means will be employed for policy analysis. For the policy analysis portion, only high schools which do have a policy already in place may be analyzed using Chalip's Policy Analysis Model (1995). At this point, I will dive deep into the policy itself and determine exactly what services are being offered by the school. Existing policies will be compared to the definition of psychological care provided by this study, to see if the provided services, or similar services, exist. In this portion, it is possible that a school may offer a further service that was not covered in this study's definition of psychological care, and such services will be included and possibly added to this study's definition of adequate psychological care in the conclusion of the study.

### **Results/Discussion**

Since this study has not been conducted, results obviously do not exist at this point. However, this study is very relevant to the health and well-being of individuals who are at a highly influential stage in their development into adults. With recent events pertaining to suicide, mental disorders, substance abuse, concussions, etc in the sport of football, it is becoming evident that research needs to be conducted in this field to attempt to insure the safety of those participating in the sport. My expectations for this study are that high school football players are not receiving adequate psychological care in the state of Washington, and if this expectation holds true, it will point to a serious need for further research in this field from both a management standpoint, and a psychological standpoint.