Given that one in five U.S. adults face mental health issues, it is not surprising that mental health issues in sport are increasing (Affleck, 2019; National Institute of Mental Health, 2019). When combined with social stigmas, pressure and scrutiny, elite athletes are especially at risk for mental health issues. Similar to physical health, the “under-reporting of mental health concerns in athletes is a significant concern” (Rao & Hong, 2016, p. 136). A burgeoning line of research consistently has demonstrated that it is vital for sport managers to understand the community and support that is created within a sport setting as this has direct implications on an athlete’s experiences and well-being (Berg & Warner, 2019; Warner, 2019; Warner & Dixon, 2011). Consequently, addressing mental health issues within sport requires an examination of the environment, from the athlete perspective, in an effort to better understand how a help-seeking culture can be built. Thus, the guiding research question for this study is “what are the barriers and facilitators that contribute to an athlete seeking help?”

Using a qualitative design and best practices approach (Bardach, 2012), evidence on the factors that impact whether athletes seek help was gathered via nine focus groups (n=30). The best practices approach has been widely applied in organizational research and practice because the purpose is to identify techniques, factors, and processes that can strengthen an organization’s effectiveness (Bardach, 2012). With this approach at the forefront, a semi-structured focus group format was used. Guiding questions included: “If you were experiencing a concerning situation would you seek help? Why or why not?” The results indicated that Athlete Culture (sub-themes Businesslike and Toughness), Administrative Connections, and Resources have the greatest impact on athlete help-seeking. Athlete Culture encompassed the environment and expectations that today’s athlete encounters. The sub-themes Businesslike captured the sport being like a “job” and athletes being treated as tools and machines, while Toughness was defined as not being able to show weakness. Administrative Connections, which were the genuine relationships with people in positions of power, was also an important factor in determining whether or not an athlete would seek help. Lastly, Resources included the programs, initiatives, and services available to athletes.

From a practical standpoint by treating athletes as humans foremost, rather than a commodity or employee, and being more aware of the negative discourse that praises the “no pain, no gain” mentality, progress on athlete help-seeking can be made. Sport managers also should consider the importance of connecting athletes with people in power. This work provides direct evidence that in order for athletes to seek help, they need to develop relationships beyond the playing field. Last, the resources and campaigns surrounding sport are important components to changing stigmas and creating a help-seeking culture and should not be overlooked. In summary, this study provides important evidence, from the athlete perspective, on how sport managers can better build a help-seeking culture for athletes. Additional practical implications and future directions of the research will be provided.