

## **Tots and Timeouts: Issues Facing Pregnant Student-Athletes**

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**Abstract:** The topic of student-athlete pregnancy was once minimally discussed. Now as the issue is up for debate and best practice models for institutions are being developed, the everyday life experiences of pregnant-student athletes are sometimes underemphasized. This paper provides an overview of the issues facing pregnant student-athletes including: scholarship and financial issues, academics, identity, physical changes, parenting, and social support. Information may be useful to coaches, athletic trainers, and teammates all of whom play a role in successful transitions for pregnant student-athletes.

**Key Words:** student-athlete, pregnancy, scholarship

Student athlete pregnancy had been a rather hush-hush issue, until ESPN and other media, featured stories of student athletes who had to choose between having a baby and keeping a scholarship. ESPN's Julie Foudy, who reported "Outside the Lines: Pregnant Pause" which first aired in 2007, and described student athlete pregnancy as "an underground topic" at the time of the show's broadcast (Hiestand, 2007, p. 3). After the recent media frenzy regarding the topic, many athletic administrators and others associated with collegiate athletics began to voice their opinion. Of course, not everyone had the same opinion. While debate still exists and the NCAA works to establish best practices regarding pregnancy and student-athletes, this paper has a different focus. Although policy is discussed briefly, the focus is less about the policy surrounding athletic eligibility and scholarship funds, and more about the influence of pregnancy on the student athletes. The paper provides an overview of hurdles facing pregnant student-athletes along with information to help coaches, athletic trainers, and teammates be supportive during this time.

### Policy Opinions

*Pregnancy is a Medical Condition.* To some, it seems crystal clear. They describe pregnancy as a medical condition, plain and simple. Marilyn McNeil, Monmouth University Athletics Director and former Committee on Women's Athletics (CWA) Chair states, "I get upset when we talk about pregnancy being this strange thing or something that needs to be treated differently. We don't have a national policy for ankle injuries—I'm struggling with why we need a policy for pregnancy" (Hiestand, 2007, p. 20). This is a sentiment echoed by Nora Lynn Finch, North Carolina State University Senior Associate Athletics Director, "I'd be shocked if a coach wanted to talk to me about a stricter policy than just treating it as a medical condition" (Hiestand, 2007, p. 20). Those who view pregnancy as a medical condition as opposed to viewing pregnancy as a choice, may be more likely to see the need for a policy protecting student athletes and their scholarships. Athletic administrators at the University of Iowa were among the first to develop a pregnancy policy. While administrators say it hasn't been an issue at Iowa, they wanted to be proactive and feel that they have provided "a safe policy procedure for student athletes" (Dochterman, 2007, p. 3). Wright State University led by Professor Elizabeth Sorenson has been instrumental in raising awareness about the topic and the previous lack of policy (Rainey, 2006). Numerous other institutions agree and this sentiment is found in the newest policy model and handbook information provided by the NCAA. "We want to protect every student athlete's physical and psychological health, and their ability to complete their education" (Model Athletics Dept Administrative Policy NCAA, 2008, p.59).

*Pregnancy is a Choice.* What seems so clear to some, is a dark shade of gray to others. Pregnancy becomes a moral and ethical dilemma. Some athletics administrators are taking the stance that getting pregnant is a choice and in this case, a choice with major consequences. Athletics director at the University of Indianapolis, Sue Willey feels that allowing pregnant student athletes to remain on scholarship is a disservice to the program and the coaches stating, "If you become pregnant and aren't able to play, then you shouldn't have your scholarship maintained...If we just open it up and say pregnant student athletes can keep their scholarships, that counts against equivalencies. You are handcuffing your coach, because you are using part of your equivalencies for a kid who can't play"

(Heistand, 2007, p. 20). Often the view regarding pregnancy seems to depend on the funding source and/or religious affiliation of the institution (Johnson, 2007).

### A Daunting Task

Regardless of the stance one takes, there is no denying that facing pregnancy as a student athlete can be a daunting task. “The pregnancy issue doesn’t end with the scholarship outcome. Even if a student athlete keeps her athletics aid, she still faces life challenges after the baby is born, such as who will watch the child while the student athlete is at practice or competing in a game” (Johnson, 2007, p. 20). Several factors including administrative view of policy, social support, and availability of resources will help to determine the experience of expecting student athletes. Pregnancy at any stage of life is a life changing event. Concerns about how this will influence one’s life along with other concerns regarding the baby, significant others, career, and finances are not unusual. These concerns are often heightened when the pregnancy is unplanned, which is often the case with pregnancy and student athletes. Combine the heightened level of concern with athletic and academic factors, and pregnant student athletes face a tough match up.

*Scholarship and Financial Issues.* The NCAA’s new policy regarding scholarship status of pregnant student athletes may be of comfort but financial concerns still loom for many. Raising a child is expensive and having athlete status does not make it any less so. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that middle income, two-parent families will spend approximately \$12,000 a year providing for their children (Lino, 2008). With academic, athletic, and child rearing obligations, there is very little time, if any, to earn extra income. For Division I student athletes outside employment isn’t just difficult, it is greatly restricted with no more than 20 hours a week allowed (NCAA, 2009). For this reason, it is important to get student athletes in touch with financial resource providers. Information regarding government assistance can help ease the stress.

*Academics.* Completing a college degree is challenging. When you combine college coursework with athletics and child rearing, it requires commitment, time management, and resourcefulness. This is where academic support staff resources are vital to the academic success of a student athlete. If formal services exist, the student athlete should be encouraged to take advantage of the opportunity. Finding a supportive academic advisor to help navigate the system while providing knowledge and encouragement is sometimes the difference between dropping out and a degree (Harrison, Comeaux, & Plecha, 2006).

*Identity.* Athletic identity or how much one associates with the athlete role (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993) can be all encompassing for some athletes. Student athletes spend the majority of their time with other athletes. They train together, travel together, compete together, and often live together. When one spends most of their day in a specific role, that role becomes salient, sometimes engulfing (Brewer et al., 1993). When that role is taken away, or temporarily suspended, the effects can be great. Research exists on the influence of injury on athletic identity (Wiechman & Williams, 1997) but literature on pregnancy and athletic identity is lacking. Injured athletes often report feeling isolated from the team and report frustration, depression, and other negative feelings. The same may be true for

pregnant student athletes who are no longer able to compete, at least for the duration of the pregnancy. Self-worth, esteem, and confidence are often tied to athletic performance, especially for those with a high athletic identity. Pregnant student athletes not only have to deal with the separation from sport and the athlete role, they are also developing a new identity. Becoming a parent can be a daunting role change for a person eagerly awaiting the mother-to-be role, when the role change is unplanned, it may be more difficult to transition (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001).

Once a student athlete has transitioned into the parent role, it may also be difficult to regain status as an athlete. Research indicates that professional career women often report not being taken seriously as a professional after the birth of a child (Messias & DeJoseph, 2007)). This is often associated with the assumption that a woman cannot be a committed professional and mother (Arun, Arun, & Borooh, 2004). Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) athlete Sheryl Swoopes feared that her pregnancy would lead to the loss of sponsors, namely Nike, where she was the first female athlete to earn a shoe contract (Pearson, 1999). While Nike not only supported but embraced her pregnancy, the doubt of onlookers was still evident. *People* magazine (1997) named her one of the "25 Most Intriguing People" for being able to balance the roles of mother and athlete. This honor indicates the view that it is impressive and award-worthy to be able to hold both roles. Pregnant and parenting student athletes face this stigma and doubt when they return to athletics (Pearson, 1999).

*Physical Changes.* This doubt that pregnant student athletes face may also be due to the physical changes that take place during pregnancy. On average, pregnant women gain 25-35 pounds during pregnancy. Their hips widen and some report that they never truly get their body back (Kardel, 2005). While it is possible to remain in shape during pregnancy, there is a difference between pregnancy shape and competition shape (Kardel, 2005). Losing baby weight can be a challenging process. Losing weight, taking care of an infant, and getting back into playing shape can seem impossible. Strength and conditioning coaches as well as athletic trainers are valuable resources as a student athlete transitions back into competition.

*Parenting.* A common saying is *kids don't come with an instruction manual*. Learning how to parent can be overwhelming (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2004). Even parents who have planned for months and months for a pregnancy and baby are often surprised by the amount of physical and mental energy required to care for a new baby. Student-athletes who were not anticipating a pregnancy may not be prepared for the parenting role. Caring for the child often becomes the number one priority, which can be an all-encompassing activity. Trying to survive four hour sleep-cycles, changing diapers, soothing, feeding, and all the other first year tasks make parenting an adventure and most definitely a challenge. Parenting books abound with varieties of "best practice" information and "how-to" guides on surviving parenting. These books sell because most parents want what's best for their children. The worry about "doing it right" and giving their children a good start can be overwhelming. When one combines the tasks of taking care of an infant and the desire to be a good parent, with attending classes, and returning to athletics, it is likely to be exhausting at best at seemingly impossible at worst.

*Social Support.* The one factor permeating all of those above is the need for social support. At Wright State University "if a player finds out she is pregnant—and decides to both proceed with the

pregnancy and participate in college sports—the university will establish a support group for her” (Rainey, 2006, p. 41). This support group is a crucial element to a student-athlete being able to raise a child, complete a degree, and return to competition. Coaches, teammates, athletic trainers, administrators, as well as family and friends all have a role in supporting a pregnant or parenting student athlete. Administrators have a responsibility to let student athletes know of the policy in place. Connie Neal, basketball player from University of Louisville, explains “Having a policy in place, then you know it’s happened to other people. You have somewhere else to turn besides, ‘Oh no, I have to quit’” (Rainey, 2006, p. 42). Knowing support is available can make a seemingly impossible situation, doable.

*Coaches.* The role of a supportive coach cannot be overstated. Coaches serve as mentors for many athletes (Lough, 2001). Players look up to their coaches and spend most of their athletic careers trying to impress their coaches (Miller, Salmela, & Kerr, 2002). The fear of a coach’s disappointment can seem overwhelming. Le’Coe Willingham was a basketball player at Auburn University when she found out she was pregnant (Elfman, 2007). She was able to have a healthy pregnancy and raise a child while playing for the Tigers. Willingham credits this to knowing that her coaching staff supported her decision (Elfman, 2007). It’s important for coaches to be supportive of the athlete not just when they hear the news but throughout the pregnancy and when the student-athlete returns to competition. When one is away from the team, feelings of isolation and doubts about her role often surface.

In the case of injured athletes, research indicates that athletes often feel abandoned and ignored by their coaches (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001). Since pregnancy has some commonalities with injury (i.e., not being able to fully participate in team activities), lack of contact with a coach may lead to stress and a separation that may discourage a student athlete from returning to the school and athletic program (Rainey, 2006). Tara Brady experienced this after announcing her pregnancy to her coach at Sacred Heart University. Her coach deemed her a “distraction to the team” and “refused to speak to her” when she returned (Rainey, 2006. P. 42). This isolation from the team, which often serves as a primary source of social support, can be devastating, especially to an athlete going through a major life transition. Sacred Heart University later developed a policy so this would not happen to other student athletes (Rainey, 2006).

*Athletic Trainers.* Athletic trainers are often go-to support people for an athletic team (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001). This is especially true during times where an athlete is injured and thus somewhat separated from the team. While pregnancy is not the same as an injury that needs to be rehabilitated, certain restrictions (prescribed by a physician) are in place, and the athletic trainer is often the person to enforce these restrictions (Ray, 2005). Athletic trainers have the unique opportunity to spend time with pregnant student athletes at practice, training, and competition. These are especially difficult times for student athletes forced to the sidelines (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001), and athletic trainers can be there to listen and support the student athlete. They will likely play a role in the athlete’s return to competition. Motivation and support from the athletic trainer can be very important to a pregnant student athlete who may be feeling overwhelmed and isolated at the same time.

*Teammates.* Teammates also serve a vital role. This role includes keeping their teammate involved in social activities during pregnancy and remembering the teammate as a person and not just a

new or expecting mom. This can help with the identity issues that surround pregnancy (Messias & DeJoseph, 2007). Some teams have come to the assistance of their teammates by throwing baby showers (Rainey, 2006). This not only helps to keep the student athlete involved, it can help with the financial issues surrounding the birth of a child. After the child is born, teammates can show their support by helping to care for the baby while the student athlete attends class (Johnson, 2007). The entire team can learn from the experience of helping to care for the child. In former pregnant student-athlete, Connie Neal's situation, her daughter Carsynn "has become a beloved mascot" for the team (Rainey, 2006). The ways in which teammates can aid in a smooth transition are diverse, numerous, and cannot be over-emphasized.

### Conclusion

Navigating the issues facing pregnant student athletes is a daunting task. Coaches and administrators hopefully want to do what is best for their student athlete since the student athlete is facing the natural fears that come with pregnancy as well as the added pressure of telling her coaches and teammates. The NCAA has developed policy guidelines that should help each university show support and a plan for each student athlete. While this might ease the initial fears, the game is just beginning for the pregnant student athlete who decides to continue with her pregnancy and her athletic career. Loss of identity, financial concerns, academic progress maintenance, as well as parenting and child care issues can influence even the best game plan. The best defense includes resources and social support from a variety of sources namely: coaches, teammates, administrators, and athletic trainers. With a comprehensive and cohesive team and plan, it's clear the student athlete will emerge victorious.

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