The College Athlete's Guide to Academic Success: Tips From Peers and Profs


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When I agreed to review this book, I was somewhat surprised that the editorial board of The Sport Psychologist would believe its readers might be interested in the academic performance of athletes. How could this guide, meant for a target audience of high school seniors and college underclassmen, have any relevance to the field of sport psychology? Because I teach and mentor undergraduate student-athletes at the University of Idaho, I wanted to see if any mental-skills-training tools were suggested by the authors as useful strategies (for instance, how to focus one’s attention or relax).

Initially, I noticed that the guide is well organized and written in an easily understandable and conversational style. Rather than being an all-encompassing life-skills textbook, it deals solely with what an athlete needs to do in order to succeed in academia. The layout of the book is very easy to navigate, alternating passages of text with specific points for the reader to consider (labeled “TIME-OUT!”) and tips from current and former student-athletes and professors at various institutions across the country. The profiles section in the back of the book contains a photograph of and biographical information about each of the 35 student-athlete contributors to the guide. I was delightfully surprised to find a colleague, University of Idaho sport psychology master’s degree student Angela Whyte, listed among them. A section titled “Questions to Think About” is included at the end of each chapter.

With the various tips and “TIME-OUT!”’s flagged by identifiable icons, the student-athlete comments contained in highlighted boxes, and the chapter-ending questions printed in a notebook paper format, the book looks and reads more like a high school text than a college one. For its target audience, however, this is a perfect transition text that contains a great deal of good advice. Another plus is that Nathanson and Kimmel (and all of the book’s contributors) do not preach to the reader; rather, they explain their points of view and make suggestions based on personal experiences.

Although sport psychology per se is never mentioned in the guide, several principles and techniques of the field are incorporated throughout the text, albeit in scant detail. In the second chapter, Nathanson and Kimmel devote two pages to motivation and focus, followed by three pages on managing stress. On the positive side, including aspects of mental training in the text is important because they are vital to the academic success of student-athletes. When the authors suggest, however, that the reader “stay focused” (p. 14) or use what they term “diaphragm breathing” to reduce stress (p. 16), without an explanation as to how to do either, the suggestions seem to be of little value. The concept of self-talk is addressed in
11 words: “Talk to yourself without focusing only on the negatives or ‘awfulizing’” (p. 16). Although awfulizing might be a familiar term for sport psychologists who know it was coined by the late Albert Ellis, that term is not defined for the targeted audience of the guide.

Later in the book, more cursory references are made to mental skills. The authors advise student-athletes to “Focus, Focus, Focus!” so they can “achieve maximum performance in the classroom.” (p. 76). Nathanson and Kimmel then encourage the reader to listen actively to focus, but without offering any specific techniques for doing so. In chapter 9, “Learning to Study and Studying to Learn,” the reader is encouraged to “Maintain a Positive Academic Mind-Set” (p. 93), to “Bounce Back When You’re Down” and “demonstrate resilience” (p. 94). How, you may ask? “Stay Positive! Talk to yourself: I can do this! I will do this!” (p. 94). Unfortunately this ends up being a simplistic solution for the audience. Without providing specific implementation strategies, such suggestions can only be, at best, minimally helpful.

Advice to the reader from current and former student-athletes is liberally sprinkled throughout the guide. One quote in particular highlights the importance of mental toughness to being successful in the classroom and on the playing field. Maurice Yearwood, a former Academic All-American basketball player at Long Island University-Brooklyn, writes

School work is mental. You must incorporate self-suggestion in all aspects of your life. When I am on the court, I always say mentally, ‘Mo, you are the best player on the court; show everyone what you are made of’. (p. 95)

Comments by other former student-athletes about perseverance, resilience, time management, and self-confidence might also be inspirational to young adults embarking on their undergraduate experience.

The guide is not the first book written to advise young athletes who plan to pursue higher education. What makes it unique is that it focuses solely on the academic perspective of college life. Only 20 pages are devoted to this aspect in The Student Athlete’s Handbook: The Complete Guide to Success, by Perry Bromwell and Howard Gensler (1997). A newly published book, Life Skills for the Student-Athlete, by Scott Street (2008), offers more comprehensive advice about academic success to its readers. Street devotes one section (over 60 pages) to making a commitment to academic excellence. In this section are chapters about time management, study skills and habits, campus and academic resources, and academic planning. As in The College Athlete’s Guide to Academic Success, student-athletes’ stories are highlighted to inspire readers. Unlike the guide, though, Street does not include specific advice by student-athletes. Street’s book was written to complement the NCAA CHAMPS/Life Skills Program. As a result, it focuses on a broader range of topics (academic excellence, athletic excellence, personal development, career development, and community service) with much less depth.

From a sport psychology perspective, The College Athlete’s Guide to Academic Success makes no contributions to the field itself. It might be argued that the guide could actually contribute to the public’s misperceptions regarding mental-skills training as being superfluous to performance success. Nathanson and Kimmel’s ideas about what to do contain few, if any, examples of how to do what they suggest.