

Isolation and Injuries Pilot Study:

College Soccer Players Rehabilitating Significant Injuries Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

During late 2019 and early 2020, a new infectious disease from the coronavirus family, named SARS-CoV2, swept across the world. The virus caused the disease known as COVID-19, a highly contagious respiratory disease that impacted hundreds of thousands of people across the globe. In order to limit fatalities, schools, businesses, and most other gatherings were shut down and quarantine measures were put into place. This appeared to help slow the pandemic, but it did impact almost every aspect of life. College students, and specifically student athletes, were not immune to these impacts, as they were sent home and switched to online learning, while athletic seasons were canceled and these athletes were isolated from their teams and coaching staff. In regards to the drastic changes to these student athletes' lives, there is much room to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic shaped daily experiences that may from a surface level seem unrelated.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic was a defining event in recent history, grinding life to a halt and leaving entire countries in panic. The tremendous tangible impacts of the pandemic are not difficult to identify, including statistics such as cases and deaths, but there is a hidden story in the every-day experiences of those that lived through it. The COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in the early spring of 2020, and quickly spread across the country. Businesses had to be moved onto virtual platforms, masks had to be worn, social distancing practiced, quarantining implemented, and education administered via online servers as the pandemic shut down life. During the Spring 2020 semester, 1300 institutions across the United States put a pause on in-person classes, with some shifting to virtual servers.¹ For the following Fall 2020 semester, 44

percent of colleges and universities moved online, 21 percent had both in-person and online options, and 27 percent opened in-person following specific pandemic protocol.² College students were in unprecedented territory, as the education and experiences tied to life in college were put on hold. With a lot of aspects of life becoming virtual or being suspended indefinitely, the physical therapy field is of particular interest, as patients needed to receive therapy to maintain and progress through their recovery. Traditionally, physical therapy is considered a hands-on, interactive practice that requires in-person sessions between a physical therapist and patient.³ This process would be very difficult within the confines of the COVID-19 pandemic, as face-to-face interactions were shifted onto virtual platforms and protocols were created to help protect people. Of these physical therapy patients, college athletes were not only put under the stress of being sent home from their respective universities, but they also felt the pressure of recovering from their injuries in time for seasons on the horizon, and any setback due to COVID-19 could have been detrimental to this timely process.

Before investigating college athletes specifically, it is important to understand how COVID-19 affected the physical therapy and rehabilitation field as a whole. Interestingly, 62 percent of physical therapy locations stayed open in some capacity during the pandemic across the United States, despite the extensive protocols and danger. To adapt within the pandemic and suit their patient's needs however, there was a steep increase, from 2 percent to 50 percent, in the number of physical therapists that used telehealth for consultations and treatments during the pandemic compared to prior to the shutdown.⁴ Telehealth uses online appointments and chats to check in on patients to allow a wider range of patients to receive treatments and consultations.⁵ This provided an alternative method physical therapists could utilize within the pandemic and adhere to protocol guidelines and safety concerns. That being said, the physical therapy industry

did not shut down completely, but in-person training and face to face access to physical therapists and athletic trainers appeared to be reduced. This was most likely due to a sufficient understanding of COVID-19, which physical therapists used to best implement their practices within the confines of the pandemic.⁶

The move to an online format was not the only change implemented by physical therapists over the course of the pandemic. For example, many athletes at all levels were forced to train without coach or therapist supervision, leading to the potential of reduced adherence to recovery programs and a greater risk of being re-injured.⁷ Despite a large proportion of physical therapy practices remaining open and alternative telehealth check-ins, changes to training regimens and management of the rehabilitation could jeopardize the success of recovery. Therefore, despite a majority of physical therapy practices avoiding closures, it is important to investigate how these changes impacted the recovery experiences of the patients.

Unfortunately, the individual injury and recovery experience is not as simple as whether physical therapy was available and the format by which it was administered. Successful recovery from any serious physical affliction has been linked to higher levels of emotional well-being.⁸ Physical therapy success is no different, as the psychological burden of physical therapy has been found to impact overall success and an individual's experience.⁹ Thus, the patients' emotional and mental aspects are also crucial to the rehabilitation process and also need to be considered when determining the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on recovery outcomes and overall experiences.

Outside of the confines of the COVID-19 pandemic, serious injuries to college athletes are major events that have physical, emotional, and mental repercussions. From a physical standpoint, there is obviously the recovery process and typical physical therapy for the specific

injury. As hinted at previously, though the physical aspects may seem straightforward, the mental and emotional side of the recovery is incredibly important for successful return. Perceived hope has been found to improve rehabilitation behavior, well-being, and encourage college athletes to remain dedicated to their rehab programs.¹⁰ This is important to consider, as the feeling of hope can positively impact the overall physical therapy experience, leading to a more successful recovery.

In addition to perceived hope, social support has been implicated as crucial for athletes recovering from major injuries. Similar to hope, social support was also found to improve well-being and belief in the rehab, increased motivation, and also reduced negative responses including fearfulness, anger, guilt, and sadness.¹¹ Brewer and colleagues¹² also suggest that a lack of social support contributes to emotional distress following injury while also highlighting the importance of having a sense of control over their rehab process to help mitigate the emotional response in their study. The need for social support and a sense of control establishes that the people and situation around an athlete and their rehabilitation process can greatly impact the experiences throughout the recovery.

With hope, social support, and sense of control in mind, the role of COVID-19 on all college athletes is crucial. Student athletes of all sports, regardless of injury status, were found to have experienced higher anxiety scores from decreased training and stress when returning to sports post-pandemic.¹³ Anxiety and stress psychological symptoms linked to being an athlete during the COVID-19 pandemic was self-reported as increased in 12.1 percent of 437 student athletes surveyed, with a small portion reaching dysfunctional levels.¹⁴ Despite a significant change in anxiety and stress not being observed across the survey, any potential added stress in a specific student athlete from the pandemic combined with the mental toll from an injury can

potentially reduce perceived hope, which would go on to negatively impact recovery experience and outcome.

College students were also found to have experienced high levels of psychological stress, which was triggered by uncertainty and worry over COVID-19 and their futures.¹⁵ The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on their mental health is a highly studied topic. Madrigal and Blevins¹⁶ identified that college students' psychological well-being was found to be impacted by stress from online academics, their personal situation, like living arrangements, within the confines of the pandemic, and the simple fear of the virus itself. This would implicate an increase in uncertainty, stress, and worry, leading to a lack of control over their situation.

In regards to athletes rehabilitating an injury, this potential lack of control could translate into a feeling of lacking control over their rehab process, adding to the emotional distress being felt. This feeds back into the stress and anxiety that can reduce hope, amplifying the potential negative impacts on recovery. College athletes were also found to have experienced a lack of listening support, emotional support, reality-confirmation support, and task-appreciation support during the pandemic, negatively impacting well-being and recovery experienced while being stuck at home or limited to only interacting with their teams.¹⁷ This was also supported by Graupensperger and colleagues,¹⁸ who suggested that those with a solid social base around them experienced less stress and symptoms of depression, while those who could not socialize with teammates saw negative effects. Both of these studies indicate the need for social support for student athletes overall, not only when recovering from injuries, and suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic reduced social support and all of its desired effects. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to challenge hope, control over rehab processes, and social support, all factors crucial for a positive and successful recovery experience.

Based on these findings of the field, physical therapy practices appear to have been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting these changes would have also had a significant impact on college athletes and their successful recoveries. The industry was forced to adapt, moving to online formats and altering their techniques to provide the best treatment for the situation. COVID-19 also appears to have placed added emotional and mental strain on college students and athletes generally. Collegiate athletes going through rehabilitation prior to the pandemic have shown that reducing hope, sense of control, and social support are detrimental to successful recovery from injuries. The importance of this study is to create a bridge between the two distinct set of investigations, connecting the crucial aspects of physical therapy and the confinements of the pandemic. Published studies focused on college students and athletes during the pandemic have been impersonal surveys, but this approach loses crucial details. Scholarship which focuses on events prior to the pandemic provides a more complete look into rehab experiences, and can serve as a control in analysis of the ways the pandemic affected the industry and experience. A similar study by Moore and colleagues,¹⁹ investigated and identified a perceived impact of rehabilitation within the pandemic on mental health in regard to the experiences of individual athletes. That being said, this study will not only look to explore these similar psychological aspects and experiences throughout the rehabilitation process, but also explore the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the overall success of recovery. Subsequently, this project investigates the question: How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the individual experiences and outcomes of college soccer players that were rehabbing significant injuries. The project is focused on a sample of student athletes from a New Jersey university. Despite the wide range of challenges experienced by these injured athletes, this paper will argue that there was no overall impact on recovery outcome despite the literature's implications of negative

experiences, as well as also identifying a few unexpected positive aspects of the rehab experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Materials and Methods

To investigate the possible effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on college soccer players and their rehabilitation experiences, the selection of participants required the researcher to find players who were severely injured, defined as an injury that sidelined an athlete from participation in their sport for six or more months by the researcher. The other requirement was that these athletes needed their injury to occur during a small window prior to March 2020, when the pandemic began to affect New Jersey, so that their rehabilitation process would overlap with the peak of the pandemic. Therefore, purposive non-probability sampling methods were applied to identify participants that fit this injury timeline. The three participants, who are referred to as Participants 1, 2, and 3, are college juniors and soccer players at in university and also all grew up in New Jersey. Participants 1, 2, and 3 all suffered severe knee injuries, and they are suitable for the study because they all sustained their injuries prior to the pandemic hitting New Jersey. The important distinction between the three are that Participant 1 was injured in October 2019, six months before the pandemic, while Participants 2 and 3 were both injured in February 2020, a month before the pandemic affected their experience. This timing difference was used to compare and determine how COVID may have impacted their overall rehab experiences.

The participants were interviewed about their sports background, injury, diagnosis, rehab and physical therapy experience, as well as the effect COVID had during all of these events and processes. As each injury and recovery was quite different, a semi-structured interview with guided questions that propelled discussion was utilized to open the floor for each participant to express their individual thoughts and experiences. After collecting background information

outlining the research being conducted and gaining informed consent, the interviews ran for approximately twenty minutes each. The questions posed to all participants were: What was your injury, when did it happen, and did COVID cause any initial setbacks? How was your relationship with your physical therapist and did COVID affect this relationship? What precautions did you have to take because of COVID, did they impact your rehab experience or recovery, and was it difficult to get doctor's appointments? Did the pandemic make dealing with your injury easier or harder? Overall, was your recovery time delayed, on track, or accelerated and do you believe COVID impacted that? What was the most difficult part of your rehabilitation process and did COVID play a role in it at all?

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, with the consent of the participants. The transcripts were analyzed through a coding process, taking into account the difference between Participant 1 and the other two that were injured much closer to the COVID pandemic. From the coding process, three themes were developed to address the research question. The research was determined as exempt from further review when presented to the Institutional Review Board, Drew University.

Results

The interviews were coded to identify over-arching themes across all the participants and their experiences. The major themes were: a direct impact due to the temporal proximity of the injury to the COVID-19 pandemic, the emotional and mental toll of the recovery experience, and the typical rehabilitation experience for a college athlete returning from a serious injury. Each theme was considered within the framework of the three participants' injury timing to compare how COVID impacted individuals who sustained their injuries closer to versus further away from March 2020.

When considering the temporal proximity to COVID-19 theme, analyzing Participant 1 alone is important as he was injured in October of 2019, six months prior to the COVID-19 pandemic hitting New Jersey. Participant 1 reported that he did not miss out on any rehab sessions or access to exercise equipment due to COVID, with appointments proceeding normally and with no delay in his recovery process. When asked about how COVID may have impacted the tail end of his rehab, Participant 1 responded “I wouldn’t say too much” and that “I thought my knee was good enough for me to do exercises and stuff like that on my own.” The other perk of being so far along in his recovery process was that Participant 1 had the ability to do more during the height of the pandemic. He summarized it by explaining that “I couldn’t play soccer like I wanted, because that’s one of the things I would have done during COVID. But I was still able to ride bikes, go outside, go to parks, and stuff like that.” Both the ability to stay active and to be recovered enough to do rehab at home allowed Participant 1 to have a rather smooth transition into the final stages of rehabilitation during the pandemic, minimizing the direct effect of COVID on his rehab experience. Participant 1 even left the interview saying that without the cancelation of the fall soccer season, “I don’t think I would have been ready to play. But with the delay, having it [the season] in the spring, I was able to play 100 percent.” Participant 1 did not just remain rather unaffected by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to his recovery period, but he also almost seemed to benefit as he was allowed to fully recover and take his time returning to play.

To compare to Participant 1, Participant 2 and 3’s rehab experiences have been synthesized by the researcher to help determine COVID’s direct impact on the injuries that occurred in February 2020, a month before the pandemic. Both Participants 2 and 3 had surgeries pushed back into May after being initially scheduled for March, delaying the beginning of their

recovery process two months from the get go. Participant 2 explained that with “COVID happening in the middle of March, I found out a week before I was supposed to get surgery that it got pushed back. And at that point it was indefinite.” There was a lack of control over the recovery process at this point, with no light at the end of the tunnel and a recovery subjected to however the pandemic would play out. Although both participants agreed that despite fewer available appointments there was no difficulty scheduling or attending them, the delay in surgery did in fact prolong the recovery process.

Another effect of being hurt so close to COVID was the alleviation of some of the struggles an injury normally has on the individual. Participant 3 summarizes that once COVID hit, “I didn’t have to walk all day at school” and all he had to do was “just chill home.” When juxtaposed next to Participant 1’s experiences with every-day life, who recalled that he “couldn’t sit on a bus,” “was on crutches awhile,” and “couldn’t walk normally for a couple of months,” there seems to be a possible benefit to the timing of the injury and the pandemic. Though the prolonged recovery process and delayed surgery due to COVID made the rehab process seem completely out of the athletes’ control, being stuck at home during recovery did provide a means of resting without the struggle of school and other daily activities.

The emotional and mental side of the rehab process was the next theme that emerged through analysis and coding of the interviews, and a clear distinction between the experiences of Participant 1 and the two other participants was clear. Participant 1 defined the entire experience as not being emotionally negative, attributing most of the emotional and mental burden as being tied directly to the physical pain of the injury and rehab. When posed with the question regarding the most difficult part of recovery both overall and emotionally or mentally, Participant 1 responded, “it all revolved around the pain” and the “most difficult part was getting my knee to

bend and getting mobility back.” Any questions and discussion probing the difficulty of the recovery process always brought him back to the physical pain and injury itself, and any emotional distress was tied directly to it, not the pandemic. The important observation noted in Participant 1’s interview was the social side of the injury. He explained, “I had a lot of support, which was pretty nice. A lot of guys on my team on my senior night wrote my number on their warm ups, so a lot of people still supported me even though I wasn’t playing, but as if I was still a big part of the team.” Participant 1 goes on to explain how that made dealing with the injury a little easier, and helped improve his overall outlook on his situation.

Looking at Participant 2 and 3 and their recovery experiences, the emotional and mental toll the rehab took was not as solely like Participant 1’s physical stressors. As discussed before, the delay in surgery caused both to experience worry, displeasure, and stress at the prolonged recovery process and lack of control over their recovery. Participant 2 directly attributed COVID to compounding the isolation experienced due to the injury. He recalls, “the isolation was tough because without the delay in surgery, I would’ve been able to see my friends and be able to do things. I was kind of just alone.” Similar to the sense of isolation, Participant 3 also added that COVID-19 caused him to be lazier. He said that it “made me a lot lazier, and all I wanted to do was sit in bed all day.” The pandemic stifled a lot of motivation while being stuck at home most of the day, making the recovery process more grueling. The emotional effect of COVID-19 was not all bad though, as Participant 3 summarized: “I probably would’ve been more upset and all without COVID, but I think it definitely made it better because a lot of people were missing out.” Sharing the suffering of missed activities appeared to make it easier to cope for Participants 2 and 3. That being said, COVID-19 made coping with the injury a little easier, but it prolonged recovery times, isolated the athletes from friends, and reduced motivation.

When considering the theme that there is a consistent rehabilitation and recovery experience, all three participants were analyzed together. All three participants stressed the severity of their injury and provided detailed stories and fears of reinjury, emphasizing the emotional significance of these events on their lives and athletic careers. Participant 2 spoke for all three when he admitted that “I was really worried about my knee. I was nervous to be back on the field. I was scared that it was going to happen again.” The prominence of their injuries, severity of the pain, and large-scale impact on their lives is consistent across all three, regardless of the timing of the injury. All three were also able to attend physical therapy sessions in person the entire time, implementing mask and social distancing protocols when needed, and experienced the daily pain and struggle of the rehab itself. The only divergence in their specific physical therapy experience was for Participants 2 and 3 who defined their relationships with their PTs as a little more impersonal. Participant 2 explained that “I don’t know if I know what they look like without masks on,” while Participant 3 addressed the fact he could not “shake hands” or “normally greet a person outside of COVID.” Though they did admit this made the experience a little less personal, both participants suggested that it did not significantly hinder their relationship with their physical therapist or their overall rehab experience.

Another key aspect of all three participants’ experiences was the negative impact losing soccer had on their mental health, but they also attributed the prospects of returning and playing college soccer as motivation to keep progressing. Participant 1 explained that “maybe if I wasn’t planning on playing soccer again I wouldn’t have been as motivated for rehab.” Participant 2 adds to that saying, “I knew that it [surgery and rehab] is what needed to be done” and that “I was just so ready to be getting surgery and getting back on the field.” Despite the negative impacts of the severe injury itself, there was also a hope to return and play college soccer that

pervaded the typical recovery experience of the college soccer player recovering from a significant injury.

Discussion

To truly determine the role of the COVID-19 pandemic on the rehabilitation experiences and recovery outcomes for these college soccer players coming back from major injuries, the three themes found through the interviews must be placed within the context of a normal rehab experience, as well as the prevalence of hope, sense of control, and a support system throughout the process as identified by the literature. Using the themes of timing relative to COVID, the emotional and mental side of rehab, and the typical overall recovery experience, it is important to see how the three participants and their described experiences relate to the literature and to one another. By considering both the themes in the interviews and findings within the literature, a proposed impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these athletes' overall experiences and outcomes can be determined.

As established earlier, the overall physical therapy industry transitioned into the COVID-19 pandemic by shifting some practices online as well as away from physical strength training, but the impact on the experience of the patients and their outcomes has not been clear in the published scholarship.²⁰ Looking at the three participants' experiences, they were all still able to attend in-person rehab sessions at private practices near their homes, and despite a delay in surgery for Participants 2 and 3, had no other struggles with scheduling appointments or progressing through rehab due to COVID. This would mean that though some of the physical therapy industry was moved to online formats or forced to close, these college soccer players whose return to their sport relied on successful physical therapy were not barred from receiving effective in-person rehab.

The next consideration is the role of hope during the rehab process, promoting positive outlooks on rehab outcome, adherence to the program, and wellbeing.²¹ This was supported by all three participants, as their struggles and overall situations greatly impacted their hope. In the case of Participant 1, any struggle through the recovery was physical based, reducing the positive outlook on the future outcomes. Pushing surgery back and prolonging the recovery process added distress and made the future look bleak for Participants 2 and 3, depleting hope and making their recoveries all the more difficult, including draining motivation in the case of Participant 3. Despite these negative factors reducing perceived hope, the prospects of playing college soccer provided hope, motivation, and mental fortitude to push through their situations and achieve a successful outcome. That being said, the project has identified that the increase in hope appears to have greatly outweighed the negative aspects, meaning that the COVID-19 pandemic did not completely reduce hope and the positive outlooks, dedication to rehab, and wellbeing associated with it for these participants.

Moving on from hope, the sense of control over the rehab process was a factor that did negatively affect Participants 2 and 3, supporting the findings of Moore and colleagues.²² The postponement of their surgeries and their rehab schedules were completely out of their control and were indeterminable for a while. As with all student athletes during the pandemic, the lack of clarity in the future provided worry and stress, amplifying the baseline feelings experienced by all athletes at the time.²³ This would mean that this lack of control and distress ate at hope and positive outlooks on the rehab process, making the rehab experience more difficult. This was not experienced by Participant 1, whose rehab was far enough along to be within his control on his own, so he did not experience the strain on his recovery outlook. The difference between Participant 1's experience and the sense of control that was lost by Participant 2 and 3 suggests

that the COVID-19 pandemic is responsible for added strain on psychological well-being in college soccer players rehabilitating significant injuries.

The final finding of the literature was the influence of social support on the rehabilitation experience and process.²⁴ As shown by Participant 1, having teammates and the ability to be around other people was beneficial to feel motivated, wanted, and hopeful. Participants 2 and 3 explained how the pandemic created the opposite level of social support, with the isolation of the pandemic being compounded by the isolation of the injury, along with being stuck at home reducing motivation. The loss of social support due to COVID-19 had a negative impact on the recovery experience of Participants 2 and 3, meaning that COVID-19 did negatively affect their rehab by reducing their support system.

In addition to these points highlighted by the literature, there are also other important influences of COVID-19 on the recovery experience and outcomes identified in this project. Most of these are positive, including the delayed season allowing full recovery, eased burden of dealing with every-day life, and shared pain with everyone else missing out on sports and other activities. The results presented in this paper suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic had some positive impacts on rehabilitating student athletes in addition to the negative ones previously addressed.

Interestingly, the positive impacts of recovering during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the increased time to heal as a result of postponed NCAA competition, is one that stands out from the literature of the field. Most of the surveys asked about stress, social support, hope, and other emotional and mental health aspects of the recovery as a whole, however in the in-depth interviews allowed this study to ask athlete's to expand on how they perceived their recovery experience in both the short term and long term experiences. The field is widely

summarized by the findings of Heyman and colleagues: that physical recovery was not impacted while mental health was negatively affected.²⁵ However, because of delays in competitions, these student athletes were not only afforded the time to completely recover, but the pressure and stress of an expedited rehabilitation process in time for the season was also a burden taken off their shoulders. Although this finding is consistent among these three student athletes, further study of the potential positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on increased recovery time both physically and mentally should be conducted among a larger sample size to substantiate this result.

To summarize, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to impact the recovery experiences of rehabilitating college soccer players in predominantly an emotional and mental way. Despite changes to the physical therapy field, the participants did not experience any significant change to their rehab experience or outcome due to the format of their PT. Nonetheless, COVID-19 did sap at the hope and will power of these athletes, making them feel a lack of control in their rehab process and taking away their social support system. Contrary to the literature however, the underestimated impact of the delayed season, ease on everyday life, and shared experience with others missing out on sports certainly began to provide a counterbalance to the negative psychological stressors of the student athletes' recovery.

When considering the findings of this paper, it should be noted that the small sample size may limit the perceived effect of altered physical therapy on college athletes. This study focuses on the experience of three individual college soccer players, a sample size that may not represent all student athletes that participated in physical therapy to recover from significant injuries during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, while the authors acknowledge that the sample size is low for this study, it serves as a pilot in a sense for future, more comprehensive research. This

research has demonstrated that student athlete recovery was affected and while most existing literature on COVID-19's effect on physical therapy has focused on practitioners, patients including student athletes are an important area for future research. Such future work could have implications leading to better support for student athletes during interruptions of physical therapy.

To elaborate, in-depth, open-ended interviews with a small number of participants, as opposed to, for example, large-scale surveys, can be valuable and contribute to thick description of phenomena within a specific context. Returning to the research question of this study, *How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the individual experiences and outcomes of college soccer players that were rehabbing significant injuries*, which guided the sampling and methodology, the authors aimed to explore individual experiences and outcomes rather than develop a generalizable result. To achieve this, the sampling strategy was developed to reduce variability of extrinsic factors between participants, thereby increasing similarity between them. Along these lines, individuals were selected from the same team of the same sport at the same university to control for those factors. All students who met this specific criteria were interviewed. The amount of student athletes at a given university which experienced physical therapy care during the pandemic lockdowns represents a small number of college athletes and of physical therapy patients. Future research should be continued on this topic to expand the current literature which primarily focuses on practitioners, and to explore the effects of the pandemic lockdowns on a diverse group of college athletes who were undergoing physical therapy.

Conclusion

When considering the research question: "How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the individual experiences and outcomes of college soccer players that were rehabbing significant

injuries,” using the literature to support the participants’ experiences and outcomes, it has been determined that the recovery experience was impacted, but the overall outcome was not. A reduction in perceived hope, sense of control, and social support imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic all negatively affected the rehab experience. Some positive impacts were determined as well, but they did appear to only help the student athletes push through the overall dismal experience of rehabbing during this stressful time. The pandemic did not impact the physical therapy administered to the participants, and thus, despite delays in surgeries leading to prolonged recovery times, there was no significant physical impact on returning to play.

That being said, certain aspects of the interviews fit into how the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacts rehabilitation as discussed by the literature, but the overall recovery narratives of the participants challenge the severity of these detriments. Based on the findings of the literature, the perceived experiences of college athletes performing physical therapy during the pandemic would be painstakingly difficult, with little hope and social support to push through the altered form of rehab work. The participants experienced several of these issues, but they also added much insight to the contrary. The participants revealed that physical therapy was in-person, the prospect of eventually returning to college soccer increased perceived hope, the delayed season took pressure off recovery, daily life with an injury was less of a burden, and losing soccer was shared with everyone while life was shut down during the pandemic. Based on these findings, the interviews provide valuable insight into the individual experiences of college athletes rehabbing significant injuries during the COVID-19 pandemic. The recovery experience was not simply a free fall but rather a rollercoaster of positive and negative moments that provided a unique rehabilitation experience. The overall outcome of the physical therapy may not have been impacted greatly, but the overall experience these student athletes faced during

this time cannot be defined by a simple measure of physical or emotional difficulties, but rather a narrative of struggle and triumph as they fought to regain their health.

ENDNOTES

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