

Skill-Building Intervention for Student-Athletes in a Sports Bubble Training Set-Up

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Abstract: The field of sports is one area that is highly impacted and disrupted since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has prevented athletes' sport participation and impeded their time to train in a more suitable environment. They are forced to confine themselves at home and limit their sports activities into virtual trainings. Recently, the sporting community is slowly making its way back to safely resume practices and tournaments while the COVID-19 pandemic is still on-going. One approach that is being embraced by sports teams in the professional and collegiate levels is the concept of being in a sports bubble or a quarantine training camp. Under this kind of set-up, athletes and all related personnel are isolated from the general public for a period of time to perform sport-specific activities. Despite the clear benefits of having this type of training set-up, a sports bubble may also impact the mental and emotional wellness of the participants and elicit psychological strain on athletes. This paper conceptualizes an intervention that will promote the enhancement and use of self-management skills among student-athletes who are participating in a bubble type of training. It anchors itself to the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) framework which promotes the development of the following self-management competencies: regulating and expressing emotions thoughtfully, practicing perseverance and resilience to overcome obstacles, maintaining healthy boundaries, identifying and using stress management strategies, setting personal and collective goals, using planning and organization skills, and using feedback constructively. The strategies and techniques used in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) which focus on four modules namely mindfulness, distress tolerance, interpersonal effectiveness and emotion regulation will be utilized to achieve these desired outcomes. The delivery of these strategies will be done through virtual group skills training, individual sessions, and phone coaching.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; student-athletes; sports bubble; self-management skills; Social-Emotional Learning (SEL); Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT).

I. INTRODUCTION

For the past two years, the field of sports is one area that is highly impacted and disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since its onset, it has prevented athletes' sport participation and impeded their time to train in a more suitable environment. To prevent community transmission of the virus and to safeguard the health of athletes and coaches, the government enforced safety and confinement measures such as travel restrictions for competitions, closure of sporting facilities, cancellation of all sporting events as well as the in-person physical training of all athletes. Under such conditions, they are forced to confine themselves at home and limit their sport participation into virtual trainings which is often with minimal supervision from the coaches, with no or limited interaction with teammates, with limited equipment to use and an unstable internet connection. Pillay et al. (2020) revealed that most athletes at home trained alone at moderate intensity and have struggled to keep themselves motivated to exercise. Moreover, there's a significant decrease in athletes' self-reported participation time in sport-specific activities specifically on strength training, endurance, and mobility plus there were notable reductions in training frequency and time spent in completing various training related activities as compared during in-person organized team practices (Jagim et al, 2020). Researchers likewise confirmed that

the number of athletes who exhibited symptoms of depression while doing home training has doubled, and majority experienced changes in their sleep patterns, preferred sedentary than active lifestyle, felt unmotivated to exercise, and experienced significant changes in their dietary habits characterized with excessive intake of carbohydrates (Schinke et al., 2020; Pillay et al., 2020). They tend to feel restless, experiencing somatic anxiety and negative mood (Jukie et al., 2020) and their self-confidence and perceived sport competence were also affected (Schinke et al., 2020). Iancheva et al. (2020) also posited that athletes' confinement at home during the pandemic has led to several psychological reactions such as depression, increased anxiety, problems with motivation, aggressive reactions, and risky behavior mainly because of the uncertainty of the situation which can be likened when one suffers an athletic injury.

Though home training has its benefits, it is still unclear at this point whether it has been effective in terms of the development of skills and the over-all functioning of athletes. The pre-pandemic sports life of athletes as well as coaches which includes their training habits, athletic goals, motivation, connection with the team was temporarily restructured but lately, the sporting community is slowly picking up the pieces and making its way back to safely resume practices and playing individual and team sports while the COVID-19 pandemic is still on-going. One approach that was conceived in which sports teams in the professional and collegiate levels are embracing right now is the concept of being in a sports bubble or a quarantine training camp. Under this kind of set-up, sports activities are done in a defined and exclusive manner to guard against the spread of the virus while also allowing contact with the participants (Merriam-Webster, 2021). As observed on the safety protocols being implemented by local and foreign leagues, athletes and all related personnel (e.g. coaches, trainers, physiotherapists, and other support staff) are isolated from the general public for a period of time to perform sport-specific training and tournaments. Student-athletes must follow a set of safety regulations whether they are training, playing, or enjoying some downtime in an isolated accommodation and venue. During the athletes' time off from games, practices, and team meetings they are allowed to use designated places for relaxation and recreation within the "bubble" while following prescribed safety regulations and practicing social distancing. Moreover, competing sports teams as well as league personnel must stay isolated from the general public during a series of games without spectators in attendance. Higher education institutions must ensure that the bubble remains intact, thus student-athletes, coaches and other staff inside shall not have physical interaction and not share space, facilities, or areas with those outside the bubble.

Though there is very limited research work on the concept of sports bubble, some studies implied that a confined training camp poses some benefits in regaining a sense of normalcy in the field of sports. Washif, Mohd Kassim, Lew, Chong & James (2021) cited in their study that in other countries where sports bubbles or quarantine-style camps were permitted, coaches and athletes were able to use regular training facilities and receive immediate performance support from relevant staff within the camp. It also allowed athletes to experience a conducive training environment and focus on the quality of training, without having to worry about facilities and equipment, nutritious food, and external distractions. They further revealed that athletes' experiences in the quarantine camp as compared to doing training during home confinement resulted to improvements in access to training and recovery facilities, nutritional choices, mental and emotional health, training motivation, perceived stress, and sleep behavior thus reducing the adverse effects of previous home confinement to the participants. In addition, Tayech et al., (2020) forwarded that athletes' routine, nutrition, sleep, and training program can be strictly monitored by the coaching and other support staff when they are in a confined training camp. It would also allow the coaches and trainers to design, monitor, and maintain the load and intensity of training sessions to the maximum competitive level of the athletes.

However, a sports bubble set-up is still different from the routines and guidelines being followed in the pre-pandemic sports training. It necessitates the implementation of strict protocols within the bubble in order to maintain a minimized risk of virus transmission. As such, no participants are allowed to leave the venue throughout the duration of the training camp, and they have restricted movements inside the venue. Aside from being away from their families, they will have limited interaction among their teammates even in their downtime. In the case of student-athletes, they have to perform another role which is to be a student inside the bubble and cope with the demands of online learning while also regaining their pre-pandemic form, fitness and performance as athletes. Living in an isolated environment may increase the negative consequences of home confinement such as changes in sleep patterns and dietary habits (Pillay et al., 2020). Therefore, despite the clear benefits of having this type of training set-up, a sports bubble may also impact the mental and emotional wellness and elicit psychological strain on athletes and coaches as well (Jukie et al., 2020). If student-athletes will perceive this kind of situation as stressful and threatening, this can lead to negative physical and psychological responses.

Given this, it is indeed crucial that student-athletes are equipped with the necessary skills while they cope inside the bubble and strive to minimize the negative impact of confinement on their wellness, performance, as well as personal and athletic goals. They must have the appropriate skills or strategies on how to properly regulate undesirable thoughts, feelings, and behavioral reactions to stress that may negatively influence performance. In view of this, the objective of this paper is to conceptualize an intervention that will promote the enhancement and use of self-management skills among student-athletes who are participating in a bubble type of training. The intervention anchors itself on the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework which describes self-management as the ability to navigate and shift in a healthy way one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in order to make decisions and reach goals that benefit oneself and others (CASEL, 2020). It is the objective of the intervention to help the student-athletes who are in a confined set-up to enhance and use their self-management skills specifically by learning to regulate and express their emotions thoughtfully, practice perseverance and resilience to overcome obstacles, maintain healthy boundaries, identify and use stress management strategies, set personal and collective goals, use planning and organization skills, and use feedback constructively. These desired outcomes can be promoted through the use of strategies and techniques of an evidence-based approach called Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) which focuses on four modules namely mindfulness, distress tolerance, interpersonal effectiveness, and emotion regulation. The delivery of these strategies will be done through the use of online group skills training sessions, individual sessions, and phone coaching. Over-all, the skill-building intervention targets on equipping student-athletes with the necessary self-management skills to cope successfully inside the bubble and be able to use them for personal wellness and goal achievement.

Self-management Skills of Athletes

In the field of sports, self-management is referred to as an athlete's capacity to effectively monitor, control and manage thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that could facilitate goal accomplishment (Kim and Cruz, 2021). In general, athletes employ self-management strategies during trainings and competitions to achieve a positive psychological and mental state and improve sports performance. Commonly practiced strategies include goal setting, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, arousal and anxiety level regulation, mental training, developing focus and concentration, maintaining self-confidence and motivation (Andreato, Coimbra & Andrade, 2020; Schinke et al., 2020; Furlonger et al., 2017; Weinberg and Gould, 2015). These strategies allow them to modify their behaviors towards gaining desired outcomes (Furlonger et al., 2017). In the study made by Kim and Cruz (2021), it was highlighted in the results that self-management is effective in enhancing the self-confidence, commitment and satisfaction of martial arts practitioners and emphasized on the importance of incorporating self-management programs in athletes' sports training. They further infer that those athletes with well-developed self-management skills have the capacity to initiate, modify, and complete sport-related tasks with confidence, thereby making them less dependent on coaches and other support staff for constant instruction and support to achieve higher levels of sports performance. During this pandemic, some researchers also looked into how athletes coped while in home confinement using strategies that are descriptive of their self-management skills. A study conducted by Iancheva et al. (2020) looked into how student-athletes from Bulgaria and Russia managed to cope with self-isolation and lack of competitive sports and school activities while the pandemic is on-going. Active planning, cognitive restructuring and emotional calming were dominant strategies that surfaced. Athletes focused on looking into the good that can come out of the bad situation, learning something new, and modifying their goals. Samuel et al. (2020) forwarded the idea that athletes can deal successfully with the pandemic while in confinement if they will have the skill to vent out their negative emotions in positive ways, make action plans and take direct actions to enhance their physical and psychological well-being. In a study made by Espina (2021), majority of the student-athletes in a private university coped with the pandemic and home confinement by employing different strategies that clearly indicates the use of self-management skills. Results showed their perseverance and resilience to overcome the situation by taking actions to modify the abnormalities of the situation and generating alternative solutions to minimize the stressful effect of pandemic in their lives. They used their planning skills to maintain their focus on their academic and athletic goals by balancing their time to attend to important responsibilities such as attending online classes, team trainings, fulfilling academic requirements, and attending to responsibilities at home. They adopted a healthy lifestyle to improve their fitness and well-being and took the initiative to learn new skills that will allow them to earn and to maximize the available support in their communities. There is conscious effort as well to be well-informed about the current situation while strictly complying with government-imposed protocols on health and safety. There were also efforts to relate well with family members while in confinement. The data gathered likewise provided another clear indication that these student-athletes employed self-management skills in the duration of their home confinement by adopting several coping strategies to regulate the different emotions

triggered by the pandemic and to maintain their physical and mental wellness. They were able to identify and employ workable stress management strategies. While in many cases these student-athletes did not have control over the existing environmental circumstances, they still opted to assume control over their emotional responses and their willingness to adapt their goals and routines accordingly. Majority of them made a conscious decision to modify their goals for the quarantine period (e.g. maintain fitness and strength) and apply any required modifications to their daily and weekly routines and lifestyle so as to prepare as well for in-person return to sport activities. The findings of the study also suggest that by having self-management skills the student-athletes were able to exercise control over their stressors brought about by the pandemic and regulate their functioning in the different roles that they must perform in their academics, sports, and families. They have explored means to be productive to achieve positive outcomes and have used their capabilities outside of being an athlete to battle or minimize the effects of the pandemic. Findings also indicate that these student-athletes have the capacity to develop and implement a self-care plan in order to protect themselves from stress.

II. CONCLUSIONS

A. Intervention Framework

The intervention that is being conceptualized will anchor itself to the learning process that is being promoted by the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework. It targets to develop five broad interrelated areas of skills or competence namely: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making. Specifically, the SEL framework promotes the acquisition and application of skills and attitude to develop healthy identities, recognize and manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, develop care and concern for others, make responsible decisions, create, and maintain supportive relationships, handle interpersonal situations constructively, and manage challenging situations effectively (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 2020). CASEL (2020) believes that if young people are equipped with such skills, attitudes, and beliefs, they are more likely to have better adjustment in challenging situations, better academic performance, fewer conduct problems, more positive social behaviors, and less emotional distress.

Self-management is one of the five components that make up CASEL's model of SEL. It describes self-management as the ability to navigate and shift in a healthy way one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in order to make decisions and reach goals that benefit oneself and others (CASEL, 2020). This includes the capacities to regulate and express one's emotions thoughtfully, practice perseverance and resilience to overcome obstacles, maintain healthy boundaries, identify and use stress management strategies, set personal and collective goals, use planning and organization skills, and use feedback constructively. Developing self-management skills in young people and adults is integral to harnessing one's emotions and behavior in productive ways and in dealing with stress, adversity, and building resilience (Durlak et al., 2011). The practice of self-monitoring, adapting, and expressing one's emotional responses and behavior in ways that are respectful, and productive can lead to forming stronger relationships, a more balanced mental well-being, and engagement in less risky behavior (Jones, Greenberg & Crowley, 2015; CASEL., 2020). Students who are equipped with self-management skills (e.g. organization and planning skills, problem-solving skills) also tend to perform better academically and able to effectively collaborate with others towards achieving common goals (Durlak et al., 2011).

The desired specific outcomes being targeted by this proposed intervention will be addressed through the use of strategies and techniques of another evidence-based approach called Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). The four modules of psychological and emotional function that DBT focuses on include mindfulness, distress tolerance, interpersonal effectiveness and emotion regulation (McKay, Wood, & Brantley, 2007). DBT is a modified type of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Its focus is on balancing acceptance and change and its main goals are to teach people how to be present in the given moment, develop healthy ways to cope with stress, tolerate distressing and negative emotions, regulate their emotions, and communicate and interact effectively with others resulting to better relationships (Linehan, 1980). This approach to therapy has been proven helpful to anyone who is trying to develop coping skills and achieve balance in life. Traditionally, skill development through DBT is approached in three settings: group skills training, individual session, and phone coaching. It focuses on the individual's daily functioning and incorporates skill coaching and reinforcement of skill practice between sessions.

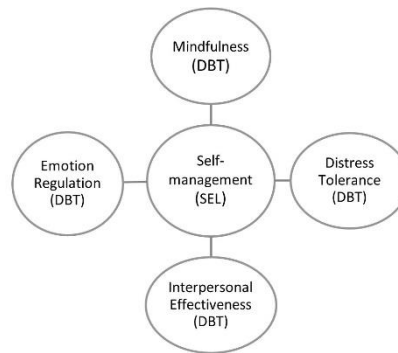


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework of the Skill-building Intervention

B. Methodology

1. Participants

The target recipients of the skill-building intervention that is being conceptualized are student-athletes in the collegiate level who will be chosen by their respective teams to participate in a bubble training camp in preparation for their upcoming tournaments. They are members of different varsity sports teams and enrolled in different degree programs in college. They are clustered according to their sports events when they enter the training venue. Since the onset of the pandemic, virtual team trainings and online classes are their major activities in relation to their roles as student-athletes.

2. Implementation Strategies And Approaches



Fig. 2. Intervention Process

2.1 Pre-bubble Assessment

Prior to the student-athlete participants' entry to the bubble training venue, they will be asked to complete a Personal Information Form to gather enough background on relevant factors that might have an influence on the way they will manage themselves inside the bubble. They will also be asked to accomplish an Informed Consent Form to ensure that they agree to participate in the intervention that will be delivered and that confidentiality of the sessions whether individual or group shall be strictly observed. Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) by Cohen (1994) shall also be given as a tool to know about their recent feelings and thoughts on the current happenings in their lives. Each participant will then be scheduled for an online Intake Interview using all the forms and tool that were completed. The session should be able to create the rapport and alliance needed between the counselor (i.e. facilitator) and the student-athlete and elicit the commitment of the latter in the intervention process. The participant will be oriented to DBT and the goals for the future sessions will be set.

2.2 Group skills Training

To promote the development of self-management skills, participants will be taught skills in a group setting. This can be done through weekly group sessions (2.5 hours per week) devoted to teaching new skills and reviewing the application of these new skills in their daily life. The skills are broken down into four categories of modules. The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook (McKay et al., 2007) shall be used as the primary reference material for the modules/exercises that will be delivered.

2.2.1. Mindfulness

The module will target on teaching the participants how to focus more fully on the present moment by consciously bringing attention to feelings, thoughts, body sensations, behaviors and events without judgement. This will allow the participants to pay attention to what is happening inside them (their thoughts, feelings, sensations, and impulses) as well as using their senses to tune in to what's happening around them (what they see, hear, smell, and touch) in nonjudgmental ways. The module further aims on helping the student-athletes develop the skill to differentiate and understand their thoughts from their physical sensations and emotions which in turn can make them slow down, stay calm, focus on healthy coping skills and avoid engaging in automatic negative thought patterns and impulsive behavior. By the end of the module, the student-athletes are expected to have basic knowledge on the role and effectiveness of mindfulness-based strategies and be able to apply them on their own.

2.2.2 Distress Tolerance

In this module, the student-athletes will be introduced to techniques which will help prepare them to deal with intense emotions and unpleasant life events (e.g. argument, rejection, failure, painful events) with greater calm, acceptance to improve the outcome and a more positive long-term outlook. The exercises will focus not on changing the unpleasant moment but on accepting the current situation and finding ways to get through it without engaging in problematic behavior. Techniques that will be introduced include distraction, improving the moment, self-soothing, and thinking of the pros and cons of not tolerating distress. Learning some distraction skills will allow the participants to temporarily stop from thinking about the situation and the unpleasant emotion that goes with it and have the time to find an appropriate coping response. Likewise, exercises on soothing skills will enable the participants to practice self-compassion and experience some amount of recharging and relief from unpleasant emotions.

2.2.3 Interpersonal Effectiveness

The Interpersonal Effectiveness module will focus on the three sets of interpersonal skills; skills for getting one's objectives met while enhancing both the relationship with the other person and one's own self-esteem; skills for building relationships; and skills for validating and balancing each person's needs and priorities. Specifically, it will cover exercises that will help the participants learn strategies on how to become more assertive in a relationship while still keeping it positive and healthy. They will also be taught how to listen and communicate more effectively, deal with conflict and challenging people, and maintain self-respect and respect for others. It is the goal of the module that the student-athletes will be able to apply specific interpersonal problem solving, assertiveness, and social skills to be able to maintain positive relationships inside the bubble.

2.2.4 Emotion Regulation

The Emotion Regulation module will target on helping the student-athletes gain control of their emotions and avoid undesired emotionally driven behaviors. The skills that they will learn will hopefully help them identify, understand and change undesired emotions and change them into positive ones. Emotion regulation allows one to navigate powerful feelings in a more effective way. When one is able to recognize and cope with intense negative emotions, it reduces the individual's emotional vulnerability and helps one to have more positive emotional experiences. After completing the module, the participants are expected to demonstrate basic knowledge on the basic principles of emotion regulation and other related concepts. They are also expected to be able to identify key stressors and/or circumstances that overwhelm their emotion thresholds and the consequent maladaptive behaviors that they exhibit. Different emotion regulation strategies will also be introduced in this module.

2.2.5 Additional Relevant Modules

Participants will also be given additional modules which will focus on exercises to improve their individual skills on goal setting, time management, planning and organization to help them learn how to balance their physical and emotional capacities while coping inside the bubble. The goal is to minimize the stress that they can possibly experience while performing two roles (i.e student and athlete) and at the same time diligently complying with strict protocols inside the bubble training venue. Furthermore, they will be assisted in terms of setting individual and collective goals that are realistic and consistent with what are expected of them in terms of improving their performance and in achieving their personal and team targets for their upcoming tournaments.

2.3 Individual Session

A one hour weekly individual session between the student-athlete and the sports counselor or the sports psychologist will be carried out in which the main goal is to teach behavioral and cognitive skills that will help the participant adapt positively to their personal life challenges inside the bubble. Likewise, the individual sessions will use DBT-based interventions which center on the concepts of acceptance and change. Student-athletes will learn strategies to make positive changes in their behaviors specifically those that are causing strain in their lives and in their relationship with others while simultaneously accepting oneself and their present circumstance. They will be taught to analyze problems or destructive behavior patterns and replace them with more healthy and effective ones. In addition, they will be directed to focus on changing thoughts and beliefs that are not effective or helpful. The session likewise hopes to foster positive alliance between the counselor and the participant which is necessary to elicit cooperation and engage in the difficult task of changing maladaptive patterns.

2.4 Phone Coaching

Phone coaching can be done as needed to reinforce learned skills between sessions. The participant(s) may call the counselor between individual and group sessions whenever the participant needs guidance in coping with a difficult situation that they are currently in.

2.5 Post-bubble Assessment

A debriefing as well as an evaluation session shall be conducted to process the participants over-all experience inside the bubble and to gather useful feedback from the participants in terms of how well the intervention achieves its goals of helping them improve their self-management skills.

3. Implications of the Intervention

1. Skills learned will still be relevant in the student-athletes' daily academic and sports life at post-bubble.
2. Self-management skills learned increases the capacity of student-athletes to develop their own self-care plan that would help them manage life stressors.
3. The proposed intervention forwards the importance of taking care of a student-athlete's mental and emotional well-being in order to perform better in school and in their sport.
4. Mental health practitioners play an important role in promoting the holistic formation of student-athletes and in the successful implementation of a sports bubble training set-up.

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