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The Phenomenon of Burnout Among Handball Athletes: A Qualitative Study of Student FIKK UNM

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ABSTRACT

*Athlete burnout is a psychological phenomenon that significantly impacts performance, mental health, and the sustainability of a sports career. This study aims to explore in depth the phenomenon of burnout experienced by university handball athletes, covering contributing factors, emerging symptoms, and coping strategies employed. A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was utilized. The participants consisted of eight university handball athletes selected via purposive sampling, based on criteria of having actively trained for at least two years and having experienced burnout symptoms. Data collection involved semi-structured in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Data analysis followed the Moustakas model, comprising the stages of *epoché*, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation. The findings identified three main themes: (1) the accumulation of a dual burden balancing academic and athletic demands as a trigger for burnout; (2) the manifestation of burnout through dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment; and (3) coping strategies involving social support, emotional regulation, and cognitive reframing. This study underscores that burnout among student-athletes is multidimensional and necessitates a holistic intervention approach involving coaches, educational institutions, and sports psychology services.*

1. Introduction

Competitive sports at the collegiate level place student-athletes in highly demanding psychological and physical positions. They are not only expected to demonstrate peak performance on the field but are also required to meet high academic standards just like regular students. This duality of roles creates multi-layered pressure that, if not properly managed, can trigger a psychological condition known as burnout. Burnout in the context of sports first received serious scientific attention in the early 1980s, and since then, it has become one of the most relevant topics in modern sports psychology (Darmadi Kosen et al., 2025).

Athlete burnout is defined as a psychological syndrome characterized by three main dimensions: chronic physical and emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or a cynical attitude toward the sport being pursued, and a reduced sense of accomplishment. This definition was first adapted from Maslach and Jackson's framework into the athletic context by Raedeke in 1997, and to this day, it remains the most widely used conceptual foundation in sports burnout research worldwide (Saufi et al., 2024). This condition not only affects an athlete's competitive performance but also has serious implications for long-term mental health, social relationships, intrinsic motivation, and the decision to continue or leave a sports career.

Handball is a team sport that requires a complex combination of physical strength, speed, tactical intelligence, and high team coordination. In Indonesia, handball began to gain broader attention since it was contested in the National Sports Week (PON) and various student competitions such as the National Student Sports Week (POMNAS). Nevertheless, scientific research on the psychological aspects of handball athletes in Indonesia is still very limited, particularly regarding mental health and burnout. Most existing studies focus on physical and technical aspects, while the psychological dimensions of handball athletes tend to be neglected in both academic discourse and coaching practices.

The phenomenon of burnout in student-athletes has different characteristics compared to professional athletes or youth athletes below the collegiate age. Student-athletes are in the early adulthood developmental phase, which is psychologically characterized by identity searching, the formation of personal values, and the setting of long-term life goals. In this phase, the conflict between identity as an athlete and as a student often becomes a significant source of stress. The burden of coursework, academic assignments, exams, and the pressure to maintain a grade point average (GPA) run concurrently with tight training schedules, competitions, and performance targets set by coaches or institutions. This condition is exacerbated by limited time for adequate rest and recovery.

Numerous international studies have shown that the prevalence of burnout among student-athletes is quite alarming. Studies conducted in various countries report that between 10 to 35 percent of student-athletes experience moderate to severe burnout symptoms at a given point during their sports careers (Lestari & Purnomo, 2022). Contributing factors include excessive training loads, a lack of autonomy in sports decision-making, an ego-oriented rather than task-oriented motivational climate, unsupportive athlete-coach relationships, and pressure from the social environment, including parents and peers.

In Indonesia, awareness of burnout issues in sports remains relatively low among coaches, parents, and the educational institutions overseeing student-athletes. The stigma surrounding psychological issues often makes athletes reluctant to disclose the difficulties they face, resulting in burnout conditions frequently going unidentified and inadequately addressed (Santoso & Fitriana, 2023). In many cases, coaches are more oriented toward short-term competitive results without considering the athlete's overall psychological well-being. This creates an environment conducive to the silent yet destructive development of burnout.

Theoretically, this research is grounded in the Investment Model developed by Raedeke, which states that burnout occurs when athletes feel entrapped in their sport not because of intrinsic desire, but due to external pressures and the already substantial investments made. Furthermore, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a strong framework for understanding how the fulfillment or frustration of three basic psychological needs-competence, autonomy, and relatedness-can be significant predictors of burnout in athletes (Zulkarnain, 2025). The integration of these two theoretical frameworks offers a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological dynamics underlying burnout in collegiate handball athletes.

Previous studies on athlete burnout in Indonesia have predominantly used quantitative approaches with standardized instruments such as the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ). Although this approach provides useful statistical overviews, it has limitations in capturing the depth of athletes' individual subjective experiences. A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design is considered more capable of revealing the meanings, perceptions, and lived experiences of athletes holistically, thereby producing a richer and more contextual understanding of the burnout phenomenon (Karnia et al., 2025). Therefore, this study selected a phenomenological approach as its primary methodology.

Based on the description above, this study aims to: (1) identify the factors that cause or trigger burnout in collegiate handball athletes; (2) describe the manifestations and experiences of burnout as felt directly by the athletes; and (3) explore the coping strategies used by athletes in dealing with burnout. The findings of this study are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of sports psychology in Indonesia, while simultaneously offering practical recommendations for coaches, student sports program managers, and policymakers in creating a more psychologically healthy sports environment.

2. Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with a transcendental phenomenological design developed by Moustakas. This approach was chosen for its ability to deeply explore and understand the essence of individuals' subjective experiences, which in this case is the burnout experience of collegiate handball athletes. The phenomenological design allows researchers to go beyond surface descriptions and delve into the essential structure of a lived experience (Kartono, 2017).

The research participants consisted of eight collegiate handball athletes selected using a purposive sampling technique. The established inclusion criteria included: actively training and competing in handball for a minimum of two years, being an active student at a university in Indonesia, and having experienced or currently experiencing burnout symptoms identifiable through an initial screening using the short version of the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire. The participants came from three universities with active handball teams, ranging in age from 19 to 23 years old. The participant composition consisted of five male and three female athletes, with competition experience ranging from regional to national levels.

Data collection was conducted through three complementary methods. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in two sessions for each participant, with an average duration of 60 to 90 minutes per session. The interview guide was developed based on Raedeke's three dimensions of burnout and included questions regarding experiences of exhaustion, attitude changes toward the sport, perceived self-competence, and contextual factors perceived to contribute to the condition experienced. Second, non-participant observation was conducted during training sessions to capture behavioral expressions and social dynamics that might not be revealed through interviews. Third, documentation in the form of field notes, the researcher's reflective journal, and audio recordings of the interviews was used to enrich the data.

Data analysis followed Moustakas' phenomenological procedure, which consists of four stages. In the *epoche* stage, the researcher conducted deep reflection and temporarily suspended personal assumptions regarding burnout to prevent them from influencing the analysis process. In the *horizonalizing* stage, every participant statement relevant to the burnout experience was treated with equal weight. Subsequently, cluster themes were constructed from interrelated statements, which were then integrated into textural and structural descriptions of the burnout experience. Data trustworthiness was ensured through four criteria: credibility via member checking and data source triangulation, transferability via thick description, dependability via an audit trail, and confirmability via documented researcher reflexivity.

This study met prevailing research ethics standards, including obtaining informed consent from all participants, guaranteeing identity confidentiality, and ensuring participants' freedom to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. The entire research process was conducted over an eight-month period, encompassing the preparation, data collection, analysis, and report writing stages.

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3. Results and Discussion

The first and most dominant finding in this study is that the burnout experienced by collegiate handball athletes does not emerge suddenly, but rather is the result of an accumulation of multi-layered pressures stemming from two equally intensive and demanding life domains: the academic domain and the sports domain. All eight participants consistently described that they often felt as if they were living two full lives simultaneously, without adequate space for either physical or psychological recovery (Shidiq et al., 2019).

In the sports domain, participants described a training schedule that took place four to six times per week, with a duration of two to three hours per session, in addition to matches that could take place on weekends. This high training intensity was not always balanced with structured recovery programs, causing physical fatigue to accumulate over time. Beyond mere physical exhaustion, participants also expressed the psychological burden of high performance expectations, whether from coaches, institutions, or themselves. One participant described their experience that every time they came to the field, there was an inexplicable heavy feeling, as if they could no longer find a reason to continue training that hard. This statement accurately reflects the dimension of emotional exhaustion that is a hallmark of burnout (Aziz & Lely Nur Azizah, 2024).

In the academic domain, participants faced equally heavy pressure. As students, they had to fulfill attendance obligations, complete assignments and projects, prepare for exams, and in some cases, also undertake internship programs or thesis research. Schedule conflicts between academic and sports activities often forced participants to make difficult choices that left them feeling guilty on both sides. When they chose to prioritize training, academic performance declined and anxiety about the future increased. Conversely, when they prioritized academics, guilt toward the team and coach became a burden of its own (Indilusiantari & Meliana, 2015).

These findings align with the concept of role conflict that has been widely discussed in sports psychology literature. The role conflict between the athlete identity and the student identity creates a condition that some experts refer to as athletic identity foreclosure, a state in which athletes define themselves so heavily through sports that they have difficulty balancing other aspects of life. Research (Ramadan, 2018) found similar results among student-athletes in team sports in Indonesia, where role conflict significantly predicted higher levels of burnout. The inability of institutions to provide adequate academic flexibility for high-achieving athletes serves as a structural factor that exacerbates this condition.

Another factor identified as a crucial trigger is the motivational climate within the team and the relationship with the coach. Participants who reported more severe levels of burnout also tended to describe a training environment that was highly oriented toward inter-athlete comparison, where praise and punishment were more often tied to relative results against teammates rather than personal progress. This kind of ego-oriented motivational climate has been consistently proven across various studies to be a negative predictor of an athlete's psychological well-being. Conversely, participants who had a more supportive and open relationship with their coaches reported better abilities to manage pressure, even though the objective burden they bore did not differ significantly.

The dimensions of the burnout experience expressed by the participants in this study demonstrate both a rich diversity and consistent patterns. The exhaustion experienced was not solely physical; rather, it was an exhaustion that permeated every layer of the athlete's existence physical, emotional, cognitive, and motivational. Participants described this feeling using various expressions such as "my body always feels heavy," "I have no energy for anything," "my mind cannot focus during training," and even "I want to cry but I don't know why." This variety of expressions reflects the multidimensional nature of exhaustion in the context of burnout, which cannot be reduced to mere post-training physical fatigue (Darmadi Kosen et al., 2025).

The dimension of depersonalization or cynicism, which constitutes the second component of the burnout syndrome, was also clearly identified in the participants' narratives. In the sports context, depersonalization manifested as a negative attitude change toward handball itself a sport that was previously loved and a source of happiness began to feel like a burden, an obligation, or even a prison. Several participants revealed that they started to feel indifferent about match results, losing the enthusiasm they used to always feel before competing, and even feeling that it made no difference whether their team won or lost. This dramatic shift in attitude, from a deep love for the sport to apathy and cynicism, is one of the most alarming manifestations of burnout because it directly impacts the quality of participation and the potential for dropout from the sport.

The third dimension, namely a reduced sense of accomplishment, emerged in the form of intense self-doubt and negative perceptions of competence. Participants described how they began to question their own abilities, compare themselves unfavorably with teammates, and feel that the hard work they had poured in did not yield commensurate results. Interestingly, in some cases, this reduced sense of accomplishment did not always correlate with a decline in objective performance meaning, the athlete still performed adequately in the eyes of coaches and teammates, yet internally felt like a failure and incompetent. This phenomenon indicates that burnout operates primarily at the level of perception and subjective experience, rather than solely at the level of externally observable performance.

Manifestations of burnout were also identified in the physical dimension, which is often overlooked in burnout discourse that focuses too heavily on psychological aspects. Participants reported sleep disturbances in various forms difficulty sleeping despite being exhausted, waking up frequently during the night, or conversely, oversleeping as a form of escapism. Several participants also reported changes in eating patterns, an increased frequency of minor injuries or illnesses which they interpreted as a weakened immune system, and various somatic complaints such as headaches, prolonged muscle pain, and digestive disorders. These findings are consistent with a psychosomatic perspective that views mental and physical health as a bidirectionally interacting system (Zulkarnain, 2025). In the context of student-athletes, these physical symptoms are often misinterpreted solely as the consequences of high physical training loads, resulting in the psychological dimensions not receiving appropriate attention.

The third finding of this study relates to how collegiate handball athletes attempt to cope with and manage the burnout condition they experience. The identified coping strategies demonstrated significant variation among participants, which can generally be categorized into problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and meaning-focused coping.

Social support consistently emerged as the most frequently mentioned and highly valued coping resource by the participants. However, the sources of social support considered most meaningful varied; some participants found their primary support in teammates experiencing similar situations, while others relied more heavily on friends outside the sports sphere, family, or, in some cases, romantic relationships. Support from teammates possesses a unique quality in the form of validation of experience an acknowledgment that what is being experienced is real and understandable because

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they share the same context. Meanwhile, support from outside the sports environment provides a different perspective and a space to express oneself beyond the athlete identity (Fadli, 2021).

In contrast, formal institutional support whether from campus counseling programs or the coaching staff was almost never mentioned by participants as an effective coping resource. This does not mean that such services are unavailable, but rather that there are significant barriers to their access and utilization. These barriers include the stigma surrounding seeking psychological help (particularly among male athletes), fears that admitting to psychological issues will negatively impact their position

on the team, and a lack of trust that coaches or institutional staff will respond with empathy rather than judging them as weak. This finding indicates a significant gap between the availability of support services and their actual accessibility for student-athletes.

Emotion regulation strategies were also identified as utilized coping mechanisms, albeit with varying levels of awareness and effectiveness. Some participants consciously developed routines to manage negative emotions, such as journaling, short meditation, or listening to music before training. However, others employed avoidant strategies, such as excessive distraction through social media or withdrawal from social interactions. Avoidant strategies, while providing short-term relief, tend to exacerbate burnout conditions in the long run because the underlying sources of stress are not constructively addressed (Karnia, Riza, and Tyas, 2025).

Cognitive reframing-the ability to change the way one interprets stressful situations—emerged as the coping strategy most closely associated with long-term psychological resilience. Participants who demonstrated better reframing abilities tended to view their burnout experience as a part of the athletic journey that must be navigated and overcome, rather than as evidence of personal failure. They were also better equipped to maintain a long-term perspective regarding their goals in sports and life more broadly. This reframing ability appears not merely to be an innate trait, but rather one that can be developed through appropriate experiences and interventions, including cognitive-behavioral-based sports psychology counseling.

Overall, the findings of this study provide a comprehensive and nuanced picture of the burnout phenomenon among collegiate handball athletes in Indonesia. This study affirms that burnout is not merely an individual problem relying solely on the athlete's mental capacity, but rather the product of complex interactions between individual, interpersonal, and structural factors. Consequently, solutions to the issue of burnout must also be multidimensional, involving changes at various levels—ranging from the development of athletes' individual coping capacities to cultural and policy reforms within the collegiate sports environment.

4. Conclusion

This study successfully explored in depth the burnout phenomenon experienced by collegiate handball athletes through a phenomenological perspective. Three main findings can be concluded from this research: first, burnout in collegiate handball athletes is triggered primarily by the accumulation of the dual burden of simultaneous academic and athletic demands, exacerbated by an unsupportive motivational climate and coach-athlete relationships that are unresponsive to the athletes' psychological needs. Second, the manifestations of burnout are multidimensional, encompassing chronic physical and emotional exhaustion, depersonalization toward the sport pursued, a reduced sense of accomplishment, as well as various interrelated physical and psychosomatic symptoms. Third, the coping strategies used by athletes vary in their effectiveness, with social support and cognitive reframing emerging as the most constructive strategies, while access to formal institutional support remains highly limited due to structural barriers and social stigma.

This study also affirms that burnout among student-athletes is a hidden and often undiagnosed phenomenon, as athletes frequently lack the language and safe spaces to express their psychological experiences. This highlights the need for a more fundamental cultural shift within the collegiate sports ecosystem in Indonesia, where the psychological well-being of athletes is placed on equal footing with competitive achievements.

Based on the research findings, several recommendations are proposed for relevant stakeholders. For coaches and coaching staff, it is recommended to develop competencies in recognizing the early signs of burnout, create a task-oriented training climate, and encourage open communication regarding athlete well-being. Coaches need to understand that an athlete who admits to psychological difficulties is not a weak athlete, but rather one in need of appropriate support.

For higher education institutions with sports programs, it is highly recommended to develop more flexible academic policies for high-achieving athletes, provide specialized and easily accessible sports psychology counseling services, and facilitate better integration between academic and coaching programs. The presence of a sports psychologist or counselor integrated into the coaching team is a highly recommended long-term investment.

For future researchers, this study opens up several research agendas that need to be pursued. These include longitudinal studies on the trajectory of burnout in student-athletes, intervention research based on burnout prevention programs, and cross-sport comparative studies to identify specific risk factors associated with the characteristics of each sport. The development of a burnout measurement tool contextualized to the reality of Indonesian student-athletes is also an urgent methodological need.

6. Author Contribution

1 wrote the manuscript with support from 2. also conceived the original idea and supervised the overall project.

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