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PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<https://doi.org/10.1080/19357397.2020.1736487>

PUBLISHER

Taylor & Francis

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education on 12 Mar 2020, available online:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/19357397.2020.1736487>.

LICENCE

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Garrett, Stephanie, Emma Vickers, David Fletcher, and Guy Taylor. 2020. "Sport Migration from the UK to the US: The Student-athlete Experience". Loughborough University. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/14224004.v1>.

Sport Migration from the UK to the US: The Student-Athlete Experience

Stephanie Garrett

Loughborough University

Emma Vickers

Loughborough University and Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme

David Fletcher

Loughborough University

Guy Taylor

Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme

Author Note

Stephanie Garrett, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, United Kingdom; Emma Vickers, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, United Kingdom and Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme, Newcastle Upon Tyne, United Kingdom; David Fletcher, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, United Kingdom; Guy Taylor, Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme, Newcastle Upon Tyne, United Kingdom.

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Stephanie Garrett, School of Sport, Exercise, and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Epinal Way, Loughborough LE11 3TU. Email: stephaniejune02@gmail.com

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article [and/or] its supplementary materials.

Word Count: 9891

Abstract

There has been an upward trend of student-athletes migrating to the US (United States) from the United Kingdom (UK). This study focused specifically on elite UK student-athletes' motivations for migrating to the US and their perceptions of the transition on their athletic development. A qualitative research method was used to facilitate the development of this relatively new area. Three primary reasons for migration were identified: 1) the appealing nature of the recruitment process; 2) US university environment: conducive to athletic development; 3) idealistic expectations of US university experience. Five predominant influencing factors of their athletic development in the US were also identified: 1) nature of the coach-athlete relationship; 2) training demands; 3) exposure to high-level competition; 4) representing the university; 5) perception of sport as their job. Due to this study's emphasis on sport, the researchers identified two new concepts: multifaceted perceptions of athletic development and positive reframing.

Keywords: sport migration, student-athlete, athletic development, athlete transitions, cultural transitions, collegiate sport

Sport Migration from the UK to the US: The Student-Athlete Experience

Globalization has altered society in numerous ways. Global labour migration has become a common and even essential practice around the world. It has significantly transformed the sporting world, encouraging sports persons to extend their opportunities beyond national borders. This is exemplified by the substantial increases in sport labour migration. Lee (2010) attempted to rationalize the phenomenon of labour migration by applying Ravenstein's (1889) push-pull [supply-demand] process to the sporting world. Lee (2010) proposed that the main reasons for increases in sport labour migration are cost minimization, quality improvement, and resource access. This concept of supply-demand is especially relevant to university sports teams across the United States (US). National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sports teams have been accumulating more international athletes each year (Lee, 2010). The number of international student-athletes (ISAs) participating in the NCAA increased by 184%, going from 8,945 in 2001-02 to 16,440 in 2007-08 (Trendafilova, Hardin, & Kim, 2010). Despite this snowballing movement of ISAs to the US, there has been minimal research that has explored the experiences of athletes who have made this transition in depth, and the impact such experiences have on their athletic development.

Bale (1991) was the first researcher to take a humanistic approach to understanding this geographic behaviour. Bale (1991) explored the motivations for migration, driving factors for recruitment of international athletes, effects of migration on both home and donor countries, and academic, athletic, and social experiences of ISAs at university in the US. In subsequent research, attention has been put on two main aspects of ISA migration to the US: their motivations for migrating (Bale, 1991; Love & Kim, 2011; Popp, Pierce, & Hums, 2011; Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard, & Selänne, 2015) and their experience at university (Bale, 1991; Popp, Hums, & Greenwell, 2009; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000; Newell,

2015; Bentzinger, 2016). Studies of migration incentives have identified some of the main motivational factors as free education through athletic scholarships (Love & Kim, 2011; Popp et al., 2011), organized training schedules (Bale, 1991; Ryba et al., 2015), high-level competition (Bale, 1991; Ryba et al., 2015), superior facilities (Bale, 1991; Ryba et al., 2015), quality coaching (Bale, 1991; Popp et al., 2011; Ryba et al., 2015), and attractiveness of US colleges (Bale, 1991). Even though ISAs' experiences are unique to each individual, previous research has identified a pattern of culture shock as a significant aspect of the migration process. Scholars have suggested additional investigation be made into the motivations for ISA migration to the US (Popp et al., 2009; Popp et al., 2011), and the experiences of this population (Love & Kim, 2011; Ryba et al., 2015; Bentzinger, 2016).

Studies have previously investigated ISAs migrating to the US from Kenya (Bale & Sang, 2013; Chepaytor-Thomson, 2003), Finland (Olin & Penttila, 1994; Ryba et al., 2015), Latin America (Arbena, 1994), and Eastern Europe (Duke, 1994). These studies discovered in-depth and origin-specific information that was especially valuable for the home country under examination. For example, Ryba and colleagues (2015) identified two pathways of transnational athlete mobilization from the Nordic region to the US at the university level; the sport mercenary pathway (i.e., prioritization of gaining a free education in the US over development of their athletic career) and the nomadic cosmopolitan pathway (i.e., the prioritization of athletic career development over education; Ryba et al., 2015). Research has also recognised an upward trend of student-athletes migrating to the US from the United Kingdom (UK; Dreher and Poutvaara (2011). Andris (2018) identified the top ten teams with the most established international recruitment trends and found that three of the top five teams had a prominent athlete recruitment pathway from the UK. These studies highlight that the UK has been a hotspot for athlete migration to the US intercollegiate system during the last decade. Despite this knowledge, no research has focused on the perceptions of UK

athletes who have migrated to the US and whether the experience was beneficial for their development. Knowledge of UK athlete migration experiences could be used to inform support structures within the UK, including how coaches and university staff can effectively prepare athletes for the transition (e.g., provide an awareness of what the experience could be like) and help to inform their decision-making process (e.g., highlight the potential positives and negatives of migrating). This information could be delivered by sports clubs, universities, and national governing bodies, and could help athletes to determine whether migration to the US is the right decision for their athletic development.

Accordingly, the aim of the current study was to explore UK student-athlete's perceptions and reflections of their ISA journey. Because the driving motivation for attending US universities has consistently been centred on athletic development, similar to the nomadic cosmopolitan pathway identified by Ryba and colleagues (2015), the current study chose to concentrate on this population's athletic experience in the US. The current research set out to explore two research questions: (i) What are UK student-athletes' reasons for attending university in the US?; (ii) How do student-athletes' perceive their experience affected them and their athletic development?

Method

Design

The researchers were aware that personal experiences in the intercollegiate sporting and academic systems of both countries (UK and US) could impact their interpretations of the data throughout the analytical process due to prior knowledge of the collegiate culture. The researchers approached the data with a constructionist orientation. This orientation follows the belief that instead of there being one objective reality, individuals construct their own realities based on their perceptions (Weed, 2009). The researchers' epistemological stance on the basis of knowledge is categorized as interpretive, meaning they assume

knowledge is not direct; it is implicitly gained through a process of interpretation (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Researchers have stated that there are benefits of performing additional qualitative research to facilitate the development of this relatively new area (e.g., Popp et al., 2011; Ryba et al., 2015; Bentzinger, 2016). Therefore, the current study chose to use qualitative methods. Because this is a relatively new area of study, this research used the analytical structure set out by thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used to interpret features of the research area in complex and rich detail (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection due to the exploratory nature of this study. The use of interviews provided participants with the opportunity to share their experiences themselves (Creswell, 2007).

Participants

The researchers recruited a convenient sample of participants through announcements posted on social media outlining the topic under investigation and types of participants required. Emails were sent to associates of the Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS) including universities within the TASS network that provide support services to student-athletes who proceeded to email potential participants on behalf of the researchers. In addition, word-of-mouth methods to colleague contacts were used (e.g., the researchers asked colleagues to notify current or former athletes who have undertaken education at a university in the US to get in contact if they wished to participate). All potential participants either provided the researchers with their email address or reached out to the researchers through social media or email for more information regarding the study. The researchers then proceeded to contact potential participants to provide more information about the study if required. Bentzinger (2016) recommended focusing on ISAs attending different campuses across the US. In order to get a well-rounded and meaningful understanding of the UK

athletic population migrating to the US, the current study explored ISAs' experiences attending a variety of NCAA Division I, II, and III universities. The current research focused on NCAA Division I, II, and III athletes during (pursuing a bachelor's degree from a US university at time of interview) and after their migration (graduated with a bachelor's degree from a US university) to gain more in-depth knowledge of the full experience. Four student-athletes were enrolled in a US university at the time of the interview, including first year ($n=2$) and second year ($n=2$) student-athletes. Seven student-athletes were graduates from a US university ranging from six months to eight years post-graduation. This study's inclusion criteria required participants to be elite athletes. Based on Swann and colleagues' (2015) recommendations for appropriate classification of elite athletes, this study defined elite as athletes whose highest level of competition was at the national, international, or professional level in either country. For information regarding the current study's participants, refer to Table 1.

Procedure

The investigator followed the ethical guidelines outlined by the American Psychological Association throughout the research process. This study was also approved by the Loughborough University Ethics Board to ensure participant's physical and psychological safety. All participants were provided with an information sheet and were required to sign a consent form before taking part in the study. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews generating, on average, one interview hour per athlete (mean = 58 minutes). Semi-structured interviews are based on pre-set questions and allow for further probing, enabling further insights into the participants' perceptions, experiences, and opinions (Peters & Halcomb, 2015). All interviews were conducted over Skype due to geographical limitations. The use of Skype interviews allowed for an expanded variation in participants. This procedure was both time and cost efficient, while still allowing researchers to build good

rapport and identify non-verbal cues (Lo Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016). Semi-structured interview schedules were based on previous interview schedules and discussions amongst the research team. All interviews were video and audio recorded for the purpose of transcription and analysis.

A data-driven inductive thematic analysis was used in order to “[code] the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or [the researcher’s] analytic preconceptions” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). Once data collection was completed, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines for thematic analysis were followed. The researchers transcribed all of the interviews verbatim and then checked them for accuracy. Next, the researchers reread through each interview to further familiarize themselves with the data. Transcripts were coded and collated allowing for patterned representations of the ISA experiences and reflections to be identified across the data. The researchers developed a combination of semantic and latent codes allowing for the identification of both descriptive and underlying concepts. From the collated codes, the researchers then created meanings based on the context of the research questions. Initial themes were further interpreted and developed in relation to the entire data set as the analysis proceeded. The final themes along with additional sub-themes were recognised and conceptualized to answer the investigator's research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

Reasons for Migrating

This section addresses the reasons why UK student-athletes make the decision to migrate to the US to study and compete in the NCAA intercollegiate system. The primary contributing factors are presented and separated into three themes: 1) the appealing nature of the recruitment process; 2) US university environment: conducive to athletic development; 3) idealistic expectations of US university experience.

The appealing nature of the recruitment process. Due to the high level of competition among NCAA sports teams and increasing pressure on US coaches to materialize, US coaches have been dedicating increasing time on international recruitment (Jara, 2015; Riley, 1997). In comparison to the US, participants described the recruitment process in the UK as occurring less frequently. This contrast in levels of recruitment may allow US coaches to attract UK student-athletes to their universities. This theme is further clarified in two sub-themes: *coach effort* and *substantial scholarships*.

Coach effort. Participants described the efforts of the coaches recruiting them as influential in their decision to migrate to the US. The recruitment process consisted of coaches displaying interest in the athletes during frequent phone/video calls, emails, and official visits. The attention that the coaches offered led participants to consider the US intercollegiate system as an option for their sporting development.

I think because I had never looked into going to America, I never really scouted out where I could go so it was only through that one coach scouted me that I even thought about it really. So I think yeah he was definitely a big pull.

[...] I mean I took his word for a lot. (Peyton)

This level of trust could stem from Peyton's lack of knowledge surrounding the US system (Popp et al., 2011), the coaches' position of power (Potrac, Jones, & Armour, 2002), or a combination of both. This factor left participants susceptible to influence. The information provided by Kacey's coach before she migrated to the US helps to illustrate the influence a coach can have on athletes' decision making. "[He] influenced [my decision] a lot. I think it was more them like they gave me information and they told me, they asked me what I wanted in a university and they tried to like relate it to theirs." The use of this recruitment tactic convinced Kacey that moving to the US was the right decision. Multiple participants stated that they had a similar experience during the recruitment process.

The quantity and quality of interactions with the coach was an additional driving factor within participants' decisions making. The efforts of the head coaches made the participants feel appreciated. Michael stated that his US coach's recruitment style "was a bit more personal" and made him feel that the coach was "more committed" to him. The effort exerted by US coaches to recruit their athletes may have contributed to UK athletes' idealized perceptions of the US intercollegiate system, and may have been a significant pull factor for athletes.

Substantial financial scholarships. Another influential aspect of the UK to US university recruitment process is the presentation of substantial scholarships. Participants' described being offered full scholarships to cover any costs they would incur during their time in the US. In the UK, there are far less scholarship opportunities. Full support packages are extremely rare, offered only to the very elite. In the US, however, there are more scholarship opportunities available and full support packages are more common at the collegiate level. The funding that the US intercollegiate system is able to devote to their student-athletes could have contributed to the participants' perceptions of the opportunities for them in the US. Kacey stated, "I know money doesn't make the world go around, but it kind of does, and I kind of realized that like the more money they had, the more opportunities I was going to get." When comparing her opportunities in the US to those in the UK, she believed "[she] would've been paying so much money and like not even having anything really," if she had stayed in the UK. Michael also described his perception of the funding for UK elite student-athletes as underwhelming.

The scholarships are a bit pathetic so I think the university I was looking at...you get three thousand [pounds] in spending money but that's about it like you don't get anything else. You still have to pay for your own housing, your tuition, stuff like that.

Free tuition fees were appealing to participants, and a level of support that UK student-athletes often cannot access, each participant felt that it was an offer that they could not refuse. For UK athletes, the financial benefits on offer were an enticing aspect of the recruitment process that trumped the UK competition. The substantial financial support that the participants were offered fed into their idealized perception of the US.

US university environment: conducive to athletic development. Before migrating, every participant perceived the US university sport culture as conducive to their sport progression. The majority of the participants migrated for the primary purpose of pursuing their sporting career. Most participants perceived that they would improve and develop as an athlete more effectively in the US than they would in the UK. There were two main aspects of the US university sport environment that led UK student-athletes to make this conclusion: *higher level of competition* and *abundant resources*.

Higher level of competition. Green's (2005) model of sport advancement claims that exposure to higher levels of competition is necessary for athletic growth. Participants described the level of competition in their sport as being higher in the US than in the UK, and perceived that access to higher-level competition would facilitate athletic development. Marcus demonstrated this belief when he described his initial perception of his sport at the NCAA level.

There was a crazy NCAA championship triple jump between Christian Taylor and Will Clay who ended up finishing 1 and 3 at the 2012 Olympics...I was just amazed at how these guys were jumping so far and I was like 'they've got to be doing something that we're not doing here.' So that was a big draw, I wanted to know why they were so good.

Marcus described how he made the decision to migrate based on the perception that it would give him an edge in his sport over UK competition. Many participants felt that the level of

competition in the UK university system was significantly lower. When comparing competition levels, Matt described the US in a positive light.

The general competition isn't there, whereas in America, week in week out you play against people who want to go pro [...] the top probably like 100 guys that are ranked in college all want to go pro and more or less all have ATT rankings already while they're in college so the level is definitely a few steps ahead of the British.

Matt believed student-athletes in the US intercollegiate system had serious intentions of becoming professional athletes. George planned to “use college golf as a platform for bigger things” and stated that his dream was to play professional golf. He believed that “the culture in the US [was] the right way for people to improve in sport, to get a degree, play a college sport and then become a professional.” The US collegiate system has strong links to professional pathways in sport, whereas UK university sports are rarely linked to professional teams and opportunities. This was a contributing factor to participants' perceptions that migration would lead to athletic growth and the possibility of a professional sports career. It is, however, still rare for collegiate athletes to make it to the professional level in the US following college (Harrison & Lawrence, 2003).

Abundant resources. Another contributing factor to migration was the participants' views of the resources provided by US universities as superior to those available in UK universities. Marcus described “the gap in terms of resources, fan base, money, facilities, coaching” as being like “two different worlds.” He went on to state, “the [US] college teams are on a different bracket entirely.” Michael especially appreciated the accessibility of resources.

I just heard about [...] how easy it is to get what I need [...] so I think just in general I just liked the idea of having everything there and I can use it when I

need it rather than here where I have to like travel a lot to get different things
[...] and just they do everything there.

Opportunities were gained from both abundant resources and additional competitions. These are essential features of an environment that is capable of nurturing athlete development (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). All participants initially perceived the US intercollegiate system, more so than the UK system, as capable of providing enhanced athletic career development.

Idealistic expectations of US university experience. Many participants had high expectations of what their experience would be like at a US university. The idealization of the US university culture motivated participants to migrate. This theme is characterized by two sub-themes: *cultural experience* and *sport in media*.

Cultural experience. The majority of participants had an expectation of the social experience at a US university to be significantly greater than at a UK university. Nadia explained this when describing her expectations of the US university culture.

It was such a different culture [...] On my recruiting trip we went to, I think it was a basketball game and just seeing the amount of people that turned out and just the school spirit and I just couldn't wait to be involved in something like that.

Nadia's view suggested that the idea of support, especially for university sports teams in the US, appeared to be one of the main reasons for their fantasized perceptions. The enthusiasm when speaking about the university culture in the US was common among participants. Peyton demonstrated this when she said, "the size and the passion that you get even like through just looking it up online with like college sport is just really overwhelming so for me it was just all excitement." The eagerness to experience this university culture may have stemmed from common perceptions of the high level of pride that US students have for their

university and sports teams. Participants may have been motivated by a culture where the community is invested in their sport and their performance. The US's appreciation for athletes drove many athletes to attend a US university over a UK university.

Sport in media. Media's portrayal of sport influenced a number of participants' perceptions. The way their sport was depicted in the media led participants to believe that the US was the home of their sport. For some sports, the largest competitions, tournaments, movies, and shows take place in the US, often giving UK student-athletes an impression that they must compete in the US in order to succeed in their sport. This was a critical motivator for migration to the US because of participants' desires to pursue a sporting career. George described the US as being, "the most exciting place to play golf in the world" and "the best place to [pursue a career in golf]" after watching the biggest golf tournaments take place in the US on television. Some participants described being strongly influenced by sport in the media.

Even if you're an English kid, you still know like America is where basketball is at. You know the NBA, college basketball, you're constantly watching it, constantly aware of it [...] It is like the highest level of basketball in the world so it's where you want to be really. (Tyler)

For Tyler, the media played a role in reinforcing the idea that to achieve in sport, he would need to migrate to the US. Due to the media, some participants also fantasized the outcomes of competing in their sport in the US.

As cliché as it is, Bend it Like Beckham the movie is I think for me as a child [...] had a huge impact for me. It was like, 'I want to go to America. I want to go to America and play football because you're allowed to think. That's where females go and they can make it big time.

These quotes highlight the influence that media had on participants' perceptions of their sport, fueling a desire to chase their ambitions in the US.

“The American grass is greener.” These results had an overarching theme of US idealism referred to in this study as, “the American grass is greener.” This concept stems from the common perception that the US is the land of opportunity, where hard work leads to success (Bale, 1991). This represents the glamorized view the participants had of the US before migrating. This impression was developed through US coaches, the sport dominated university culture, and the portrayal of sport in the media. When weighing up their options, each participant perceived the US to be a significantly better fit for their aspirations in their specific sport. Most participants viewed the US as the obvious choice if they were going to have any chance at competing at the highest level of their sport.

Perceptions of Impact on Athletic Development

This section of the results addresses how UK student-athletes perceived their experiences in the US impacted their athletic development. The section identifies the predominant influencing factors of their athletic development in the US as five themes: 1) nature of the coach-athlete relationship; 2) training demands; 3) exposure to high-level competition; 4) representing the university; 5) perception of sport as their job. Each of these factors had a complex impact on participants causing both positive and negative effects on the athletic development of many participants. The multifaceted nature of these factors has been demonstrated through a number of sub-themes.

Nature of the coach-athlete relationship. The coach-athlete relationship is a crucial element of an athlete's environment that can strongly impact their development and wellbeing. It is a delicate relationship requiring effort and understanding from both parties (Davis & Jowett, 2014; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; Jowett, 2005; Lyle, 2002).

The way that participants felt their coach affected their athletic development has been explained further in two sub-themes: *coach-athlete compatibility* and *coach turnover*.

Coach-athlete compatibility. The quality of the coach-athlete relationship has the potential to impact athletes' growth and development (Rhind & Jowett, 2010). This is supported by its effect on the coach-athlete relationship and athletic development of all eleven participants. Nadia's experience is one example of the positive effect of a good quality coach-athlete relationship.

She was awesome and probably you know one of the best parts of my experience really and [...] the biggest thing was just she wanted you to succeed as a person, as opposed to just a golfer. Like obviously our performance was massively important to her and kept her in her job, but equally I think whatever happened it was all about developing us as people.

A holistic-focused coach may significantly improve the overall experience for UK athletes that migrate to the US. In contrast, Matt described being incompatible with his tennis coach.

Our personalities did not click at all on or off the court. [...] I personally didn't think he was a great coach but that's personal preference, and I just didn't like his attitude. It was quite like military, you know like I'm the boss, shut up, do what you're told.

Matt did not respond well to his coach's style, which resulted in a strained relationship. This relationship negatively influenced his experience at university in the US, as he perceived that he was not getting the coaching quality he required to further develop as a player. Because of this, Matt had to transfer to another university and athletic program.

Commitment is another important element of the coach-athlete relationship (Rhind & Jowett, 2010). When the participants felt their coach was not committed to them and their development, it had a negative effect on the athlete. Tyler experienced this with his first US

coach. The head coach was more concerned with the team materializing in order to boost his own reputation.

He was just like a horrible guy...just horrible to play for and no one wanted to play for him because of that, no one you know he wasn't, you can't play for a coach like that because it's not inspiring.

This not only demonstrated the negative relationship Tyler had with his coach, but also showed the impact this had on his motivation, describing his coach's style as uninspiring. The coach-athlete relationship was perceived to have affected many participants' athletic progression throughout their time in the US, whether that was positively or negatively.

Coach turnover. There can be a detrimental effect on the coach-athlete relationship if both parties are not committed to each other long-term (Rhind & Jowett, 2010). A number of participants felt abandoned by the coach that recruited them because they left after the participants' first few weeks, or in some cases, before they even arrived in the US. The coach that recruited Michael left three weeks after he arrived on campus. "I was quite annoyed about that obviously. Traveled halfway across the world to train for the coach and he just ends up leaving just to go to a different university." He was left there without a coach for a few weeks while the university searched for a temporary replacement. Similarly, Matt's first coach left the summer before he arrived. Once arriving, Matt "hated the [replacement] coach with a passion," forcing him to transfer to a different US university later that year. Many participants were put in similar situations during their experience and struggled adjusting. In Nathan's case, the loss of his coach also resulted in fewer opportunities for growth.

The coach that recruited me [...] was able to raise a lot, did a lot of fundraising and get a lot of money. One of the big attractions to them was that they were able to travel. They went to like California, Texas tournaments like

that so I mean so we really didn't do quite as much traveling after he left [...] the competition wasn't quite as good.

The turnover of coaches affected participants' at least once during their experience in the US. Each participant had a different experience, but all were surprised and disappointed by the unexpected turnover of coaches. As discussed previously, the coach was one of the main reasons many participants chose to go to the US, making the circumstance even more difficult to accept.

Training demands. The training demands in the US university setting were perceived as shocking. The transition from the junior to senior level is often accompanied by large increase in training expectations, but these circumstances also require a cultural adjustment (Hollings, Mallett, & Hume, 2014). The impact of increased training demands has been demonstrated in two sub-themes: *enhanced strength and conditioning* and *trained to exhaustion*.

Enhanced strength and conditioning. With an increase in training demands, the majority of participants perceived an improvement in their strength and conditioning. Peyton described being at her peak fitness during her time in the US. "Physically I was the strongest I think I'll ever be. I was the most conditioned I'll ever be. [...] I felt really confident in myself like physically." Nadia described a similar improvement.

[The] gym side of things [...] made a massive difference [...] I think strength wise, particularly I'd say in year two and three, that's the strongest, at that point, I had ever been, and even now, that I've ever been based on the regime you know that we did [strength] and conditioning wise so strength wise one hundred percent I was way better then I'd ever been and golf wise that translated into hitting the ball further you know having more stamina for playing a thirty-six hole competitions.

These improvements in fitness were perceived to have had positive effects on participants' performance. Most participants explained this as an acquired asset to their game. The observed increase in strength and conditioning could have also been a result of the emphasis the US puts on physicality in sports.

Trained to exhaustion. An increase in training intensity has the potential to have negative consequences if not done gradually. Over training can result in exhaustion and injury (Kuipers & Keizer, 1988). "You're fatigued [from] the lack of sleep, the lack of downtime, the [...] two, three-hour training sessions twice a day" (Nicole). Likewise, George stated that he was "much more tired over there than [he] ever thought [he] could be." Peyton described it as "brutal" explaining that "you are like trained to exhaustion [...] or almost to exhaustion." The intense training schedules led to injury for some participants. George's trainer told him that his injury was due to "overuse, overwork and not enough rest." These intense schedules were not sustainable for some participants, causing serious injuries to gradually develop over the years. Nadia developed a chronic back injury during her time in the US.

I think suddenly with such an increase in the amount of golf I was playing and the amount of stress that was put on me through [strength and conditioning] that I had never done before, I think yeah that was a massive shock and I think probably...it was towards the end of my career really, third year and fourth year that my back became more and more of an issue purely through overuse really.

Nadia currently plays golf recreationally, but still suffers from her back injury nearly eight years post-graduation; highlighting the potential challenges athletes could face long-term from their time in the US. Similarly, Marcus and Tyler, who currently compete professionally, explained that their injuries from the US were avoidable and now could be

limiting their performance at the top level. The high rate of injury and intense training conditions could be due to the short-term “win at all costs” mindset many coaches and athletic departments hold in the US.

Exposure to high-level competition. The funding, resources, support and recruitment for NCAA teams allow them to maintain a competitive environment. Exposure to a high level of competition is anticipated to help increase performance (Green, 2005). The impact of this exposure had a complex effect on athletic development. This is clarified within two subthemes: *handling pressure* and *re-evaluated sporting career goals*.

Handling pressure. Through exposure to a high level of competition, several participants felt they had learnt “how to deal with pressure” (Kacey). Many participants mentioned gaining valuable skills while in the US. Marcus stated, “learning to compete, that's something I learned in America. [...] Being able to handle a tough level of competition, I think I learned that over there.” This exposure to a high-pressure environment along with the support and mental skills training from sport psychologists may have resembled the principles of mental fortitude training. Mental fortitude training has the potential to enhance athletes’ ability to withstand pressure (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016).

There’s a mental toughness to sport in America that they don’t teach here.

That’s the biggest difference, I think, is that they don’t teach that in England, at all. And the whole like idea of being able to dominate the competition and [...] like the mental side of the game. It’s, it’s a whole different level in the states. (Tyler)

Tyler competed at the NCAA Division I level in the US and at the professional level in the UK. He perceived the US to be better equipped to instill mental toughness in its athletes. This perception may stem from the quality and quantity of resources offered to intercollegiate

athletes in the US. Many participants perceived the mental skills taught to them by sport psychologists in the US as enhancing an underdeveloped aspect of their performance.

Re-evaluated sporting career goals. The exposure to high-level competition was also a humbling experience for the many participants who migrated with the expectation of being a top competitor and having immediate success. One example of this humbling effect was evident in Tyler's experience.

My initial expectations of everything being perfect and I'd play a bunch of minutes and I'd do really well and I'd be this and I'd be that and I'd go to the NBA and it was kind of like well, that's not how it works. The best player on the team at the time didn't even make it to the league, you know, it was, I realized how good you actually really have to be.

After getting the opportunity to compare himself to the best competitors in the world, he re-evaluated his dream of going to the NBA. The environment had a similar effect on George.

I think it's made me realize quite how high the standards required for someone to make it as a professional golfer and so when we played Division II nationals for example I realized quite how good some of the very best players are. [...] Which is kind of both a positive and negative because it's kind of made me realize that maybe I won't, well I don't know if I'll ever reach that level but it's also, so that was kind of negative, but it was positive in the sense that I needed to see that.

This reality check may have led many participants to shift their focus onto academic or career goals, which could have influenced their commitment to their sport.

Representing the university. Participants felt that the act of representing their university in their sport impacted their athletic development. They described this pressure as

being both motivating and damaging to their progression as athletes. These contrasting effects are depicted in two sub-themes: *team culture* and *team comes first*.

Team culture. Participants identified the team aspect of sport as a massive feature embedded in the US intercollegiate sport culture. They described a strong sense of pride for their university and team throughout their time in the US. Many participants found this concept enjoyable and even motivating. Nadia exemplified this, describing the team dynamic at her university as beneficial to her athletic performance.

I loved being part of a team. I loved the fact that everything you did was in a team environment and it wasn't just for you, it was for somebody else and that almost motivated me even more because if I didn't put a hundred percent in, it wasn't just me I was letting down, it was my teammates as well [...] I think the biggest thing for me was being surrounded by people who shared the same goal as you.

Nadia felt motivated by the camaraderie of the team environment. Participants described their relationships with their teammates as being close, many even describing them as family. This could be a result of extensive time spent together in team training, study sessions, workouts, and shared living environments. This could have been especially influential for those competing in individual sports that had limited previous experience in a team environment in the UK.

Going into every event I'm always motivated to do my best because I want to finish as high as I can on the leaderboard, but as part of the team I wanted to contribute to the team so it motivated me to practice even, practice harder, play as well as I can while I'm in the event. (George)

George felt the team culture added a dynamic to his motivation he had not previously experienced in the UK.

Team comes first. The team culture also caused many participants to sacrifice their own athletic development. Matt disagreed with the way his university gave priority to the team over the individual.

[My university] was literally the team they almost paid like no attention to the individuals. It was just about the team getting better. [...] I think for personal, well to personally get better, I think that it's more important they focus on individuals and of course if each individual is getting better than that results in a better team.

Matt felt deprived of individual coaching and perceived this as a disadvantage for his athletic development. Danielle also felt this aspect was damaging to her progression.

I thought they'd be more invested in you as an individual to improve but it's much more...instead it's like they you don't really get much individual attention. It's more like you it's up to yourself when you got get here to improve [...] that was a bit like of a shock that I can say I was so spoiled when I before I came.

Danielle struggled adjusting to the lack of individualized attention and felt it suppressed her development as a squash player. This adjustment suggests a potential cultural difference in coaching styles between the US and the UK.

Perception of sport as their job. The majority of participants perceived to have been both negatively and positively impacted by the increase in expectations and pressure. Participants often referred to their sport as resembling their job. This was due to the demanding athletic schedules and the US's romanticised perception of NCAA student-athletes. This supports previous research stating that university sports have a major role in US culture (Beyer & Hannah, 2000). This concept had mixed effects on the participants as depicted within subthemes: *US perception of intercollegiate student-athletes* and *burnout*.

US perception of intercollegiate student-athletes. Many participants described perceptions of intercollegiate student-athletes and professional athletes as being very similar in the US. George described them as “almost on par with each other.” Additionally, Nathan expressed that US intercollegiate student-athletes are “treated like superstars.” Student-athletes are potentially perceived in this way due to the way university teams are run in the US. Marcus believed it resembled a professional sports team.

In America like the college system is very similar to professional sports...it's run like an organization you know they call them an athletic director but he's more like a CEO and you know so it is run like a professional sports team.

In addition to the teams being run like professional organizations, “the newspapers and the publicity [and] the media attention” that went along with this caused many participants to feel valued (Peyton). Many other participants had a similar reaction to the US university sports culture. Though, these benefits were accompanied by expectations to meet the demands of a professional athlete’s schedule. Tyler explained, “it’s such an intense schedule [...] you’re basically a professional, you’re living a professional sports schedule life.” The pressure and demands of this professional lifestyle did not exclusively impact participants’ athletic progression positively.

Burnout. Some participants found the high-intensity environment unsustainable and described experiencing symptoms of burnout. Athlete burnout is a physical, emotional, and psychological withdrawal from sport due to chronic stress (Smith, 1986). Peyton described her experience of burnout as unexpected.

At the end of those four years, it was kind of sad because I didn't, I was kind of done with playing for a little bit and I didn't expect that [...] I was completely like just exhausted I think and I actually just wanted to remember why I love the game. Although I absolutely loved like still loved it, it had

become kind of like a career, playing full-time you know every day for years it had become so much routine.

Instead of being a pleasurable outlet, Peyton's sport began to "feel like a chore." These participants may have felt a lack of autonomy, which led to a decrease in motivation. In one element of self-determination theory, it is suggested that autonomy is essential for optimal development, integrity, and motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Similarly, after years of being a student-athlete in the US, Nathan no longer perceived his sport as pleasurable.

When I was out there, I'm not going to like, I did kind of fall out of enjoyment with the sport by like my senior year. [...] It kind of took me a while to kind of get my enjoyment and pleasure back for the game.

The continuous and long-standing high-pressure environment exhausted Nathan and participants like him. Kacey described experiencing symptoms of burnout within her first year at university in the states.

I didn't realize the amount of pressure that it was going to put on me and that like, in the end it crushed me. [...] I just I remember I just could not walk on court one day. We were going to practice and I was almost in tears every day, like going to practice I was always in tears. [...] I can't like go on court right now. I just don't want to go I hate it so much. I just couldn't, literally. [...] I just had like literally a breakdown and I just couldn't do it anymore.

Kacey had such a negative experience that she transferred to a different US university after her first year. The high-pressure environment she was surrounded by was a massive influencing factor in that decision. A number of participants also perceived their symptoms of burnout to be one of the main reasons they decided to retire early from their sporting careers.

Positive reframing. Positive reframing was identified as an overarching theme of these results. Positive reframing is a process of recalling negative circumstances or events in

a positive light (Lambert, Graham, Fincham, & Stillman, (2009). Positive reframing is one method that elicits a grateful state, which has been linked to better wellbeing and fewer depressive symptoms (Lambert, Fincham, & Stillman, 2012). Every participant positively reframed some reflections of his or her sporting progression, recollecting negative experiences as valuable lessons or personal growth. An example of this was presented in Matt's reflections about the difficult experience he had at his first university in the US.

It made me appreciate what I had and again like made me grow up, taught me a lot of things so as **** as it was, as hard as it was, as stressed as I was, it definitely in the long run had more benefit, I mean it's only because it's worked out for the best in the end obviously but I had more benefits than like negative impacts in the long run.

Matt reflected optimistically upon this experience claiming it was beneficial for his personal growth. Though he does acknowledge that he may have been speaking positively about it because he was about to start his professional tennis career. Another example is Peyton's reflections upon her experience. By choosing to go to the US, she felt that she had taken away the opportunity to pursue her dream of playing for England.

That's not a regret now. In fact, I'm very grateful for it now, but [...] although it was only four years and I essentially retired at that level [...] that's all I needed now in hindsight. I kind of ticked that box to, that dream was everything. [...] All I can see is positives.

This reflection contradicted her earlier statements expressing that she struggled to accept her choices and had ruminated about the outcome of her sporting career. Nicole had similar doubts about her decision to go to the states. She felt that she “gave up an opportunity to play semi-professional football in Paris,” which could have potentially led her to an opportunity to play for England.

It was what it was. It was a decision I made. You can't go back and change it so I don't I don't live with regrets. I don't see you know there's no point in having regrets. I made the decision. I rolled with it. This is what I came out of it with.

Nicole did not go through a rumination phase. Her positive reflections could be characteristic of an optimistic personality. The consistent trend of positive reflections across participants suggests that although participants were disappointed with some aspects of their development in the US, they came to accept the progression of their sporting career and viewed it as a valuable experience.

Discussion

The current study aimed to further explore and stimulate additional research into the sport migration of student-athletes to the US. This study performed an in-depth analysis of the experiences of UK athletes who have migrated to the US to study and perceived effects on their athletic development. The current research is the first qualitative study to exclusively explore the experiences of UK athletes who have migrated to a US university, and therefore the information gained is unique and valuable.

First, many of the motivations identified by athletes to attend a US university supported previous findings: athletic development (Bale, 1991; Ryba et al., 2015), coach influence (Bale, 1991; Popp et al., 2011), resources (Bale, 1991), scholarships (Popp et al., 2011; Wilson, 2008), sport in media (Bale, 1991), and ideological perception of the US (Bale 1991). This study also discovered some aspects of the ISA experiences that were similar to previous research: training demands (Newell, 2015), priority of the team (Bale, 1991), team socialization (Popp et al., 2005), pressure of university representation (Popp et al., 2009), high-level competition (Bale, 1991), and sport adjustment (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000; Popp et

al., 2009; Bale, 1991). Due to this study's emphasis on sport, the researchers identified two new concepts: multifaceted perceptions of athletic development and positive reframing.

The findings from the current research are significant as they can help to inform practice. First, knowledge of the UK athlete experience in a US university can be used to better inform and prepare athletes that may be considering attending university in the US, increasing awareness levels around what the experience may be like and allowing the athlete to more effectively prepare. Because perceptions about the experience often do not match actual experiences (e.g., idealized perceptions about the how the experience would lead to professional sport and minimal focus on personal development), this highlights the importance of introducing pre-transition support programs where athletes can be educated on what the experience might be like and the importance of various aspects. Although many athletes did find migration to be a valuable learning experience, athletes should be made aware of the potential negative consequences of migrating to the US to participate in collegiate sport. These negative consequences can include short and/or long-term injuries, disadvantageous coaching, a stunted athletic career, and risk of burnout. Athletes may also benefit from being made aware of the possibility of experiencing a team-focused training environment, changes in athletic career aspirations, loss of contact with connections in home country, potentially damaging training conditions, and coach turnover at the NCAA level. UK student-athletes may also benefit from being made aware of the nature of the recruitment process and the value of conducting their own research into the university as many of the athletes described being easily persuaded by US coaches. In practice, this information could be dispersed via workshop format or online/physical materials to UK student-athletes who are in the process of deciding where to undertake their undergraduate or postgraduate education.

In sum, the knowledge gained from this study can help better inform student-athletes before making pivotal decisions relating to their future in both education and sport. This information may also be beneficial for US university staff to be aware of when interacting with and supporting potential and current UK student-athletes. This may include helping athletes to adapt to the new training demands and competition environment that they have not previously experienced and putting more effective structures in place to monitor ISA burnout to avoid career-ending injuries.

A potential limitation of the current study was the lack of participants who dropped out of their university in the US and moved back to the UK. The researchers were in contact with potential participants matching this description, but they all dropped out of the study. This may have been due to their discomfort discussing negative experiences. Future research may benefit from including individuals that choose to drop out of a US university to understand the factors that led them to making this decision. Such research may be valuable to US universities to help improve athlete experience and retention. Future research within this field may also benefit from focusing on the potential differences between gender, sport, and division specific motivations and experiences of this population. Understanding experiences in multiple contexts may help pre-transition support and advice to be tailored accordingly.

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Table 1

Participant Information

Participant (pseud.) (N=11)	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Years attending university in the US	NCAA Division	Sport	Highest level of achievement
Nadia	30	Female	White British	2006 - 2010	DI	Golf	National champion
Peyton	26	Female	White British	2010 - 2014	DI	Soccer	Professional (UK)
Marcus	25	Male	Black British	2012 - 2015	DI	Triple Jump	Professional (UK)
Tyler	26	Male	White British	2011 - 2016	DI, DII	Basketball	Professional (UK)
Nicole	24	Female	White British	2012 - 2016	DIII	Soccer	International
Nathan	24	Male	White British	2013 - 2017	DII	Golf	National champion
Matt	21	Male	White British	2014 - 2018	DI	Tennis	International
Danielle	20	Female	White British	2016 - present	DI	Squash	International champion
Kacey	20	Female	White British	2016 - present	DI	Tennis	International champion
Michael	19	Male	White British	2017 - present	DI	Hammer	International champion
George	20	Male	White British	2017 - present	DII	Golf	National