

Review

Stress and Time Management Strategies for High School Student-Athletes: A Review of Policies and Solutions

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Abstract: Student-athletes at the high school level have challenges from the dual career path, requiring academic excellence alongside rigorous athletic training. This dual career path leads to significant physical and mental stress, exacerbated by rigid school schedules that offer few alternatives for exams or tasks. This review study aims to analyze the current status of high school student-athletes across different geopolitical contexts (the United States of America (USA), the European Union and the United Kingdom, and Japan), evaluating existing school policies and support systems. Stress management interventions and gaps in current institutional support are identified. While the USA emphasizes academic accountability through no pass, no play policies, it lacks flexibility. European models show flexibility in the dual career with implementation barriers, while Japanese systems lack mental health literacy. In those countries, individualistic coping strategies are insufficient. To mitigate the problems identified for student athletes, an integrated framework involving hybrid scheduling, mandatory mental health literacy, and institutionalized support are required to effectively mitigate student-athlete stress.

Keywords: Student-athletes, Stress management, Dual career, High school policy, Academic flexibility, Mental health

1. Introduction

Modern high school student-athletes have high pressure from competitive sports and the classroom. Such dual career paths require the effective management of training schedules, travel for competitions, as well as academic responsibilities. Many high schools expect student-athletes to perform at elite levels in sports without reducing their academic load or modifying test of assessment schedules in classes. This lack of flexibility often results in chronic stress, sleep deprivation, and burnout of the student athletes (Solano et al., 2025; Simons et al., 1999).

While collegiate athletes who can consult with dedicated academic advisors and have priority registration for sports, high school athletes have dual responsibilities with limited school support, which makes the status of student-athletes in high schools precarious. High school student-athletes seem to be subject to a zero-sum game where time spent on athletics equals the time lost for academics, leading to conflict with teachers who view sports as a distraction rather than a developmental pathway (Simons et al., 1999). Julian found that 77% of high school students do not sleep enough, since student-athletes need to trade their sleep for study time after late-night practices (Julian, 2023). However, school authorities' policies vary significantly and depend on punitive measures rather than supportive ones. In the United States, student athletes must be eligible, meaning that they must maintain a certain grade point average (GPA) for their participation in athletic teams. While this ensures academic prioritization, it does not provide flexibility, significantly increasing stress without alleviating the workload (Global Town, 2023). In contrast, in European and Asian countries, club sports and school sports are separated. This reduces academic pressure added to the athletic load that they are carrying, but leads to conflicting demands (Gjaka et al., 2024).

Problems, including physical fatigue, anxiety from academic performance, and social isolation due to time constraints, are found for student athletes who have dual stress from academic and athletic demands. Recent studies on student-athletes showed that time famine is a critical stressor, where the volume of tasks exceeds the available time in a day (Ator and Oritzo, 2024). However, solutions only focus on individual time management skills, with which the student athletes are taught to use planners or matrices to prioritize tasks. This method places more burden of adaptation on the student (Lamban et al., 2025). Therefore, it is necessary to employ institutional changes in high schools. Since previous studies on the burden of student athletes focus on the National Collegiate Athletic Association or elite academies, those on high school student athletes are scarce. Furthermore, there is a lack of comparative analysis on how different cultural approaches to education and sport influence athlete stress.

Therefore, this review study aims to propose a support framework of high schools that need to structurally alter their academic delivery to accommodate the developmental needs of student-athletes without compromising educational standards by comparing different countries and discussing the limitations of present policies. In this study, dual career-pursuing athletes, high school sports policies, and adolescent mental health interventions in the United States of America (USA), the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom, and Japan were explored. Based on the results, policy frameworks, stressors, and intervention efficacy were discussed.

3. Time Famine and Academic Stress

Recent qualitative analysis results represent the situation of the high school student-athlete. Using the Eisenhower Matrix, Lamban et al. (2025) examined how student-athletes prioritized tasks and investigated (1) struggles with overcommitment, (2) falling behind in classes, (3) conflicting time schedules, and (4) a pervasive sense of feeling overwhelmed. The results showed that student-athletes often experienced a state of crisis management, prioritizing urgent and important tasks, for example, between a game tomorrow and a test today, while neglecting tasks that are important but not urgent, such as a long-term review or sleep. Such a prioritization undermined their academic performance. Students prioritizing urgent and important tasks reported academic struggles due to athletic fatigue (Ator and Oritzo, 2024). Quantitative research results involving 135 student-athletes indicated that the most significant stressor was the inability to create a viable daily schedule (Ator and Oritzo, 2024).

The student-athletes' situations significantly vary by region, influencing the type of stress. Table 1 summarizes the notable differences in policy and support structures in different countries.

Table 1. Student-athlete support policies In the USA, the EU/UK, and Japan.

Feature	USA	Europe (EU/UK)	Japan
System	School-based (Interscholastic)	Club-based and dual career academies	School and club Hybrid (Bukatsu)
Academic policy	No Pass, no play (eligibility based on GPA)	Flexible pathways in sport schools; limited in standard schools	Strict adherence to standard curriculum; no exemptions
Support structure	School counselors available; emphasis on eligibility compliance	Developing dual career support networks (mentorship)	High peer support; low institutional/mental health support
Primary stressor	Maintaining eligibility vs. time constraints	Coordination between external clubs and schools	Cultural stigma on help-seeking; hierarchy pressure
Flexibility	Low (rigid exam schedules)	Moderate (varies by country/school type).	Very low (uniformity valued)

In the US, sports are integrated into the school system in a centralized environment, but the no pass, no play policy creates a high-stress academic environment for student athletes. High school student athletes are identified by their athletic identity first, leading to identity foreclosure where self-worth is closely tied to performance (Harris and Maher, 2023). While schools provide counselors, they rarely offer structural flexibility. A student returning from a game at 10:00 PM still needs to attend an 8:00 AM class (Keystone Sports, 2025).

Europe operates a club-based system for school sports. While the European Commission's Dual Career guidelines protect the athlete's right to education, their implementation is inconsistent by country. Even with school support, coordination between the private club and the public school is lacking (Gjaka et al. et al., 2024). A major barrier identified in a lack of such coordination is financial and logistical support; student-athletes in Europe commit over 17 hours per week to sport without academic concessions because the school does not formally recognize their club activity (Gjaka et al. et al., 2024).

Japan presents a unique case of high integration but low mental health support. The Bukatsu (school club) system is intense, requiring daily practice including weekends. There is a lack of mental health literacy among college student athletes, reflecting the

situation of the high school system. 45% of the student athletes had no one to talk to about their mental health (Noguchi et al., 2022). While self-reported mental health complaints are low, such a low rate of consultancy is attributed to extreme cultural stigma and underreporting (Noguchi et al., 2022).

Across the countries, dual career athletes are at risk. Female student-athletes are more likely to feel mentally exhausted (35%) compared with males (16%) (Julian, 2023). Additionally, there is a negative correlation between high-intensity training periods and academic performance, showing that students struggle to prioritize academic tasks, leading to a low completion rate for important but non-urgent academic responsibilities during peak season (Ator and Oritzo, 2024).

4. Discussion

The prevailing solution for the time famine and academic stress of student athletes is to teach them time management skills (Lamban et al., 2025). However, this is not an appropriate solution because it assumes that the problem is inefficiency on the part of the student, rather than the impossibility created by the schedule. For example, when a student has 7 hours of school, 4 hours of training, 2 hours of travel, and 3 hours of homework, better time management cannot be applied to find more hours for study. This causes time famine, a systemic resource deficit that individual coping mechanisms cannot solve (Ator and Oritzo, 2024).

The USA's eligibility model maintains academic standards, but cannot relieve the student's stress. By threatening to remove sport, which is often the student's primary stress reliever and motivation, schools increase anxiety (Cosh and Tully, 2015). Similarly, the Japanese model's lack of mental health support presented that students toughed out psychological distress until they reached a breaking point, evidenced by the high rates of anxiety of those who broke the silence (Noguchi et al., 2022).

To address the time famine and academic stress, a flexible institutional framework must be provided to release the burden of the student athletes from the school.

- *Solution 1: asynchronous red zone protocols*

Schools must adopt a data-driven load monitoring system. When a student enters a competitive red zone (e.g., playoffs), schools need to automatically trigger a policy for asynchronous learning. Such a flexible focus strategy is found in several studies, where students can switch attention between high-intensity training and study without the penalty of missed synchronous lectures (Lamban et al., 2025).

- *Solution 2: integrated dual career support teams*

Borrowing from the European dual career guidelines, schools must designate a student-athlete liaison who bridges the gap between the athletic department and the faculty (European Commission, 2012). Instead of the student negotiating extensions with multiple teachers, the Liaison manages the academic calendar based on the athletic schedule.

- *Solution 3: mandatory mental health literacy*

Considering the Japanese students' lack of mental health literacy, schools must implement mandatory mental health literacy training for coaches. Since coaches influence student athletes primarily, they must be trained to recognize signs of "identity foreclosure" and burnout (Noguchi et al., 2022).

5. Conclusions

Student-athletes have a unique situation, requiring distinct educational support structures. Current school policies for the student athletes are characterized by rigidity and a lack of mental health consultancy or related literacy education, which exacerbates the stress of the student athletes. By learning from cases of different countries and adopting a flexible, technology-integrated, and wellness-centered approach, schools must transform the dual career path, which is a source of stress, into a holistic platform. It is recommended that schools review their policies for student athletes and officially include athletic participation as a valid ground for asynchronous assessment.

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