

Mindfulness & Athletic Performance for Middle Schoolers

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Abstract

Asheville Middle School (AMS) strives to excel in academics, athletics, and involvement in the community, and recently the school has started to incorporate mindfulness into students' everyday activities. The objective of this public service project was to extend this practice into athletics and shift mindfulness from a required activity to something the students could enjoy and benefit from in an extra-curricular context. The methods undertaken as part of the project included weekly visits to AMS to lead mindfulness practices with the girls' soccer team. Prior to the beginning of each practice, a new mindfulness technique circling the idea of visualization and breathing was explained. Following the completion of the technique, an explanation was given on how the athletes could individually implement the practices into their athletic performance. Based on this work, we are developing a manual for coaches. The manual includes a list of mindfulness activities, directions on how to implement each activity, a page of extended resources, and guidance for coaches to move forward with their players. The manual will also emphasize athletics as a whole in hopes to extend this positive movement throughout all athletics and reduce any further negative connotations around mindfulness. Following the completion of the gathered feedback and results on certain exercises and research, all AMS coaches will have the ability to access the created manual to use with their teams so they can cultivate a more stable mind in their athletes and better cooperation overall.

Background/Origins of the Project

Mindfulness allows one to bring awareness to their present thoughts, bodily states, openness, sensations, and the environment that surrounds them (Hofmann et al., 2010). Research suggests that mindfulness practice can affect a wide range of health outcomes. These include but are not limited to: academics, athletics, depression, drug abuse, relapse, and PTSD (Creswell & Lindsay, 2014). Becoming aware of is imperative when specifically working with athletes who are middle school students. With middle school being an important age of growth, there could be a plethora of physical and mental health concerns. To enhance athletic performance, youth may come to mindful techniques on their own time and in their own ways.

Playing a sport at any level includes various challenges. Constant stress is put on the brain with questions revolving around injury, playing time, pressure, team chemistry, and performance level (Sibinga et al., 2016). This stress can lead to detrimental mental, emotional, and physical conditions for any athlete at any age. From a neurological perspective, a study that was published in 2011 concluded that mindfulness practice contributes to an increase in regional brain gray matter density. The results that were concluded from this controlled longitudinal study stated that, “Mindfulness practice is associated with changes in gray matter concentration in brain regions involved in learning and memory processes, emotion regulation, self-referential processing, and perspective taking” (Holzel BK et al., 2011).

According to a study conducted in the *American Journal of Public Health*, “Studies find that youth benefit from learning mindfulness in terms of improved cognitive outcomes, social-emotional skills, and well-being. In turn, such benefits may lead to long-term improvements in life. For example, social skills in kindergarten predict improved education, employment, crime, substance abuse, and mental health outcomes in adulthood” (Jones et al., 2015).

Mindfulness is an evidence-based practice that is showing significant rise in practice in our society. More recently, the integration of mindfulness and athletics has become more and more popular including youth, collegiate, and professional. Mindful Schools states, “scholarly research finds that mindfulness practice decreases stress and anxiety, increases attention, improves interpersonal relationships, strengthens compassion, and confers a host of other benefits” (Mindful Schools, 2018). One may argue that middle school is one of the toughest times mentally and emotionally. It is said that 70% of middle school students feel stressed out. It is a high time of bullying, cliques, puberty, peer pressure, anxiety, etc (Mindful Schools, 2015).

Asheville Middle School strives to support students in excelling in academics, athletics and involvement within the community. Fellow student Kyra Kandel and I partnered with Asheville Middle School Girls’ Soccer Team to introduce mindfulness practice and develop a positive environment within the athletic community. As both of us have partnered with AMS on an academic level for 2-3 years, we were aware of their recent efforts to incorporate mindfulness in the student’s everyday activities. Our objective was to extend mindfulness practice from the

existing curriculum (in-school) program into athletics and shift mindfulness from a forced activity to something the students enjoy and find beneficial.

Methods and Work Undertaken

As someone who has worked with Asheville Middle School students for three years now, this opportunity was something that instantly caught my attention. I have been an AVID tutor for 6th, 7th, and 8th graders at AMS for the past several semesters while attending UNCA. I am aware of the steps that AMS has taken thus far in trying to incorporate mindfulness in their school day, and thought it could be even more beneficial to share how it could influence their athletic performance. As Dr. Batada works with the mindfulness committee, I learned that there was an opportunity to work with the soccer coach, and it was a natural extension from the work I am currently doing with AMS students. Through my time of tutoring more recently I had spoken with students to understand their perceptions on the idea of mindfulness and believed that I could help create a more positive connotation around the subject.

As we continue to gain a better understanding of the benefits of mindfulness in academics and athletics, it is important that we share this with youth. The introduction of mindfulness could be a challenging time for some of the players as it is something that is not necessarily easy at any age and can be a new technique/practice to a lot of them. As a collegiate athlete at UNCA, practicing mindfulness was something we started to incorporate into our soccer season two years ago. We met with a sports psychologist weekly who introduced various breathing and visualization techniques with us. For many of us, this was something relatively new but left a lasting impact. It dramatically changed not only our individual performance, but our team chemistry as well. Mindfulness practice is something I wish someone had brought to my attention at a young age because of how much it altered my performance in a positive way.

From a personal perspective, I was introduced to mindfulness my sophomore year of collegiate soccer, and I found that visualization practice instantly changed my game. Prior to practice and games, I would take a few minutes to visualize myself in successful scenarios involving winning a tackle, scoring a goal, or making a big run for my teammates. Mindfulness creates a sense of attention, emotional regulation, adaptability, compassion, a calming mindset, and a resilient attitude that all youth athletes could benefit from, especially at the middle school level.

In order to organize the mindfulness practices we develop with the athletes, we will be developing a final product of a guide/manual for coaches on mindfulness for optimal performance activities at the middle school age. It's purpose is to serve as a reference for the coaches and players to take steps forward in creating a more mindful environment in their athletic community.

Below is a timeline of the work that was conducted on a weekly basis. More detail regarding the process is discussed below.

** Every Wednesday: 3:45-5:15 - introduce new exercises/review previous week**

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February 14th: first team meeting - introduce mindfulness (what it is, how we will incorporate it, and its benefits)

February 21st - Early March: get to know team, introduce mindfulness activities.

February 28th: conduct informal check-in with players to get information on perceived notions on mindfulness/opinions on mindfulness practices we are doing.

March 7th - 21st: draft sample activities and introduction for manual.

March 28th - April 11th: complete resource section for manual and add pictures/comments.

April 18th - 25th: pilot test the manual and test with coaches. Conduct informal check-in with players post mindfulness practice.

During the first meeting it was evident to us that it was going to be a challenge to change the players' negative connotations around mindfulness. There were abrupt comments immediately following the introduction of mindfulness including: "Why do we have to do this!" "We don't like mindfulness." "Mindfulness is pointless." This was something that was not going to come easy, and we were going to need the girls to trust us before we could move any further.

Following the negative comments that were said from the start, it was important to show key statistics with them to re-focus their attention on the effects of mindfulness (Mendelson et al., 2010). These statistics included:

- 83% of educators see improved focus within their students
- 89% of educators see improved emotion regulation within their students
- 76% of educators see more compassion
- 79% see improved engagement

We decided to conduct an informal check-in with each athlete prior to the start of the first practice to evaluate their thoughts and reactions to mindfulness. This same check-in was given following the efforts made to alter their thoughts and change their negative connotations. The following week, the girls were much more open to suggestions and were able to verbalize what they would like to see and what would help them succeed. Their honest feedback was very helpful throughout the whole project, as we wanted to ensure this was going to be beneficial for them and their athletic performance.

We visited AMS every Wednesday during the semester and prepped before each session, resulting in a total of 30 hours. Prior to the beginning of their practices we explained a new mindfulness technique circling the idea of visualization and breathing. Following the completion of the technique, we related it to how they could individually implement that into their athletic performance. All athletes were exposed to different mindfulness techniques. In particular, breathing and visualization practices were introduced as a way to enhance their athletic performance.

Following the completion of our gathered feedback and results on certain exercises and published research, soccer and other middle school athletic coaches will now have access to our manual for future reference. This manual includes a list of mindfulness activities, directions on how to implement each activity, a page of extended resources, and guidance for coaches to move forward with their players. This manual also emphasizes athletics as a whole and not specific for

soccer in hopes to extend this positive movement throughout all athletics and alleviate all negative connotations. We were able to conduct a pilot test of the manual to receive feedback from the coaches and players. The pilot test was extremely successful, as they were able to provide different feedback including more mindfulness techniques on visualization rather than breathing. We also remained open-minded in regards to adding more resources to allow players the ability to practice mindfulness on their own time without their coaches instruction.

Challenges Faced and Responses to those Challenges

One of the biggest challenges we faced appeared to us right from the start. Prior to beginning the project, even though Coach Suer had agreed with the school counselor to bring mindfulness to the soccer team, she remained a little skeptical about the idea. She perceived that this might cause a distraction and cause the girls to be less aggressive on the field, because of the negative connotations they had around the practice. Kyra and I agreed to help not only teach mindfulness, about also be there for practices and games when we could to check-in on mindfulness but also be a mentor for them as well. Coach Suer enjoyed the idea of having help around not only with mindfulness, but also coaching. Following the discussion with Coach Suer, we were able to move forward with the project. Another obstacle that we faced was that our objective of shifting the student athletes' negative connotation towards mindfulness was going to be extremely difficult. Initially, we could tell that they were excited to have two division I collegiate soccer players working with them, but their thoughts of mindfulness were also uneasy. They didn't enjoy the term "mindfulness," so we tried to steer away from using that terminology within our activities.

Following the first meeting, we felt as if the girls were still resistant to the idea. We focused on visualization and how they can use that prior to preparing for their games. After observing, there were some girls who seemed very confident on the idea, but some girls were also taking the advantage of "free time." This certainly hindered our confidence as we moved forward, but we were determined that we would see results if we continued to try new things. However, Coach Suer did tell us that the girls were able to practice the visualization technique in the next practice. During the next meeting, we wanted to steer away from preaching mindfulness, and show them a video that might catch their attention. This video focused on an NFL player's *positive* experiences with mindfulness, and how as a professional athlete he cannot go on without it. This was essentially the turning point in our project. Hearing not only our opinions on mindfulness, but also someone from an even higher level, was what opened their minds. We received substantial positive feedback, and the girls were excited to move forward.

Facing this challenge early on made it that much more enjoyable along the way. Other than the proposed negative connotations prior to starting the project, there weren't many drastic or misleading challenges along the way. Coach Suer was very helpful and communicated with us very well and the girls remained open minded about the idea and allowed us to proceed even though their experiences with mindfulness were not necessarily positive.

With mindfulness being something that changed my athletic performance dramatically, it was something I wished I had access to at an earlier age. With that in mind, I was determined to share these incredible experiences with these young girls and was up for the challenges they gave me.

Project Outcomes and Sustainability

The final manual that Kyra and I created as a partnership will remain within the Asheville Middle School community. This manual allows for not only Coach Suer and the Girls' Soccer Team to have access, but also other athletes and teams throughout the school. This manual has the ability to serve as a key component as AMS strives to move forward using mindfulness in their academics and extracurricular activities.

Kyra and I were often reminded by the coaches and athletic director on how much our efforts and time were appreciated by not only the girls and staff, but the families and school community as well. Throughout multiple community partnerships over my four years, this seemed to be the most rewarding. Not only was I working with a community that I had such strong relationships with already, I was working with a community that I used to be apart of years ago; trying to pursue my dream of collegiate soccer through my youth soccer career. It was evident that the girls saw me not only as someone trying to help them improve their game from a mental perspective, but also from a soccer perspective. I was essentially a mentor for many of the girls and may even move forward with private lessons for some of them.

Leaving AMS with a hands-on tool was a great idea as we made our exit with the Women's Soccer Team. It allowed the girls and the coaches to have access to different ideas, learning styles, practices, and resources without having to do any outside research on their own. The learner's manual was a perfect starting point for Asheville Middle School Athletics. There might be an opportunity for another undergraduate to move forward with this project and continue to take steps forward in mindfulness activities within their athletics.

Ties to Academia

As a senior health and wellness promotion major, mindfulness practice is a key topic in several of my classes. First and foremost, the 'health communications' class was very beneficial to the way I carried out this project. Throughout health communications, we learned how to communicate effectively to a specific population under different conditions. Health communications prepared me for this project, as we were working with a very specific population but also were conscious on how we could expand our ideas throughout the rest of athletics and administration. Something I had learned throughout my time at UNCA in the health and wellness promotion department, is that it is essential when working with a specific population to evaluate their needs. For example, each student on AMS's team has a different need as far as excelling in the classroom and on the athletic field. Not only does each individual have a specific need, but the team and community has a specific need as well. Evaluating the needs prior to beginning the project is an essential task that must be taken to carry out successful communication and health promotion.

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The course on holistic health also taught me more about mindfulness as a whole. Holistic health covered numerous ways to assist with our well-being from a holistic perspective; one being mindfulness practice. This is something I found interesting, because most my classmates were regularly practicing mindfulness in their everyday lives, but I was just using it for my athletic abilities. This opened my mind on how effective and transferable mindfulness practice is and how others can benefit it from it as well.

As a health and wellness promotion major, something that is emphasized in all of our classes is how all aspects of wellness are interconnected; physically, mentally, and emotionally. It has been clear to me amongst my academics and athletics on how important it is to take care of ourselves from a physical, mental, and emotional matter.

This project benefited me in all different categories but also helped me move forward in my career aspirations. Prior to beginning this project, I had hoped to gain a better understanding on how to share different activities that target the younger population, as it is the population I would like to move forward with as I pursue my career in the medical field. In August, I will begin to take a step towards my career of pediatric nursing. This project allowed me to prepare for the obstacles that pediatrics could and will give me as I move forward. Often times, children will remain closed minded to different activities that they are unfamiliar with. This immensely ties to my dream of working in pediatric oncology. Children on the floor are going to face adversity on a day to day basis and will more often than not remain close minded about moving forward in their treatments.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the objective of extending the practice into athletics and shift mindfulness from a required activity to something the students enjoy and benefit from was a success. I am thankful to be given the opportunity to work with these girls throughout the last several months. I am not positive that the girls' opinions regarding mindfulness practice would have ever changed if it weren't for this project. They had only experienced forced mindfulness circling their academics, with little to no freedom of choice or suggestion around the topic. Often times as a society, we are introduced to new things and if we are not fond of them, we immediately push it away. It was important to Kyra and I when completing this project to be mindful of their experiences with mindfulness and attempt to change those negative connotations that existed.

With mindfulness being so new, I am convinced that Asheville Middle School will continue to strive towards positive experiences circling mindfulness. Though the girls might not carry out these exercises daily, they are now introduced to the idea in a more positive way and are able to use it outside of their academics. Overall, this project was rewarding to be able to know that we made a direct change in their connotations around mindfulness.

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