



Activist Tiered Systems of Support (ATSS) Framework: An Ecosystem of Care and Well-Being for Student Athlete Activists

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The re-emergence of the convergence of sports and activism highlights athletes' roles as advocates for social justice, reflecting their engagement with complex dynamics that intertwine their public personas, personal beliefs, and the socio-political context. This intersection presents unique challenges, especially for athletes of marginalized communities, who must navigate the compounded pressures of visibility and personal conviction, thereby impacting their mental well-being. This paper introduces the Activism Tiered Systems of Support (ATSS) framework, recognizing the need for specialized support. The ATSS draws inspiration from the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) used in educational settings (Sailor et al., 2020; Roth and Erbacher, 2021) and is also enriched by the insights of Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), Black Athlete Activist Leadership Model (BAAL) (George-Williams, 2019), The Activism Growth Model (George-Williams, 2021), the Racial Identity Development Model (Tatum, 1992) and the Sexual Identity Development Model (Cass, 1984). The ATSS framework aims to provide comprehensive mental health support tailored to athlete activists, fostering resilience and enabling their success in sports and activism. This paper seeks to establish a foundation for sustained athlete activism engagement, ensuring they can face the challenges and effectively leverage their platforms.

Keywords: athlete activism, social justice, critical race theory, MTSS, social identity

In recent years, the intersection of sports and activism has grown increasingly prominent, with athletes across various sports leveraging their platforms to advocate for social justice and community issues. This intersection, however, is not without its challenges. Athlete activists, particularly those of color, often navigate complex landscapes that intertwine their public personas, personal convictions, and the sociopolitical realities of the times. These individuals grapple with the intricate interplay of public visibility, personal beliefs, and the socio-political landscape, a confluence that can significantly strain their mental well-being. The imperative for a robust support system deeply rooted in mental health care becomes clear under these

circumstances. Developing a framework that recognizes and meticulously addresses the distinct adversities faced by athlete activists is crucial.

This paper introduces the Activism Tiered Systems of Support (ATSS) framework, drawing inspiration from the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) used in educational settings (Sailor et al., 2020; Roth and Erbacher, 2021). The ATSS is also enriched by the insights of Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), the Black Athlete Activist Leadership Model (BAAL) (George-Williams, 2019), The Activism Growth Model (George-Williams, 2021), and Social Identity Development Models such as the Racial Identity Development Model (Tatum, 1992) and the Sexual Identity Development Model (Cass, 1984). The Activism Tiered Systems of Support (ATSS) framework is constructed to ensure that athlete activists receive targeted, comprehensive mental health support tailored to their unique needs, fostering resilience and enabling them to thrive both in their sport and in their activism endeavors. In crafting the ATSS, this paper draws upon existing literature on athlete activism, the challenges they face in the public eye, and the principles of effective support systems. Moreover, this paper outlines the structure and components of the ATSS, detailing each tier of support and how they collectively form a comprehensive support system for athlete activists. By doing so, it aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation on how best to support athletes who step into social activism, ensuring they have the resources, guidance, and advocacy necessary to make their voices heard and their actions impactful.

Challenges Faced by Athlete Activists

Athlete activists, particularly those athlete activists of color, encounter a multifaceted array of challenges as they navigate the realm of public advocacy while maintaining their athletic performance. These challenges can include:

Navigating Intersectionality

Athletes of marginalized racial and gender backgrounds often confront additional layers of discrimination and bias. They may face unique challenges related to their identity, which can compound the pressures of activism (Harrison & Lawrence, 2014). Athlete activists, especially those from multiple intersecting identities, often face discrimination and bias, both within their sport and in broader society. Their activism can exacerbate these challenges, making them targets for racial and gender-based harassment (Harrison & Lawrence, 2014; Davis & Harris, 2020). Black student-athletes at predominantly white institutions face unique challenges, including navigating a campus climate that often perpetuates racial stereotypes and exclusion. This relentless attention can be a source of significant stress, often exacerbated by racial stereotypes and biases that pervade the sports industry and society at large. Consequently, stereotypical expectations and racial discrimination against athletes of marginalized identities can lead to a heightened sense of pressure, contributing to anxiety, stress, and other mental health issues. These environments can affect their academic and athletic pursuits, necessitating a supportive framework that addresses their identity and role as athletes (Simiyu, 2012; Anderson, E. (2019).

Public Scrutiny and Backlash

Athlete activists are subject to intense scrutiny and criticism from fans, media, and even their peers or sponsors. Athlete activists often face intense backlash for their activism, particularly on social media and from fans who may disagree with their stance. This can lead to significant psychological stress and pressure to conform, resulting in negative publicity, social media harassment, and potential loss of endorsements or career opportunities (Coakley, 2015; Cunningham, 2019). In the digital age, athlete activists are vulnerable to harassment and abuse on social media platforms, which can amplify negative feedback and increase personal stress (Sanderson & Frederick, 2020).

Balancing Athletics and Activism

Athletes who engage in activism must balance their identities as athletes and activists. Managing time and energy between training, competitions, and activism can be demanding. This dual role can create conflict, as the time and energy devoted to activism may be seen as detracting from their sports performance. Athletes must find ways to excel in their sport while committing to their advocacy work, which can lead to physical and mental exhaustion (Simiyu, 2012; Smith & Andrews, 2015).

Lack of Institutional Support

Athletes may not always receive the backing they need from their sports institutions, which can hinder their activist efforts and leave them feeling isolated or marginalized within their teams or organizations (George-Williams, 2019; 2021). Athletes challenging systemic issues may face opposition from sports organizations, leagues, or teams that prefer to maintain the status quo or fear alienating certain segments of their fan base or sponsors (Jackson, 2018; Kellison & Vincent, 2020). Taking a stand on controversial issues can also lead to isolation or alienation from teammates, coaches, or fans who do not share the same views or prioritize sports over social and political engagement (Anderson, 2019; George-Williams, 2019; 2021).

Risk to Professional Career

Engaging in activism can pose risks to an athlete's professional career, including potential conflicts with sponsors, teams, or leagues that may have different political or social stances (Cunningham, 2019). Additionally, there can be financial repercussions through lost endorsements or contractual issues (Stewart & Beauford, 2019). Engaging in activism can sometimes lead to legal consequences, especially if athletes participate in protests or actions that are met with legal retaliation (Carter & Hawkins, 2020).

These challenges underscore the multifaceted experiences athlete activists face and highlight the importance of providing them with comprehensive support systems that address these issues, particularly about their mental health and well-being.

Impact of Activism on Mental Health

Athlete activists often engage in emotionally and mentally taxing advocacy, challenging systemic injustices while navigating their careers. This dual role can exacerbate stress, anxiety, and depression, highlighting the need for comprehensive mental health support that addresses both their athletic and activist endeavors (Souter, et al, 2018). Furthermore, people of color from multiple walks of life experience racial battle fatigue navigating White or majority White spaces (Smith, 2004). Research also supports the notion that activists experience activist burnout and compassion fatigue (Asa, 2009), the idea that one can get exhausted from caring so much. Perhaps the most insidious aspect of compassion fatigue is that it attacks the core of what brings individuals into activist work: their empathy and compassion for others (Asa, 2009). Furthermore, the plethora of intersecting identities embodied by athlete activists, unless acknowledged and supported, can lead to a perplexity of negative emotional and psychological outcomes. These emotional and psychological problems can range from experiencing isolation, depression, anxiety, and burnout, not just from the physical demands of their sport but also from the emotional labor of their activism. These vulnerabilities underscore the importance of tailored mental health interventions that consider the unique pressures faced by athletes of color (Schinke, et al, 2017; Souter, et. al, 2018; George-Williams, 2019). Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders in the sports ecosystem to provide targeted support, promote inclusivity, and advocate for systemic change. The mental health of athlete activists is not just a personal issue but a reflection of the broader societal dynamics that shape the world of sports.

The next section will inform the conceptual and theoretical frameworks informing the ATSS and introduce the inner workings of the Activism Tiered System of Support (ATSS).

Conceptual Frameworks Informing the ATSS Model

Several conceptual frameworks inform the crafting of the ATSS, which include Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic (1993); Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; McCoy, 2015), Black Athlete Activist Leadership Model (BAAL) (George-Williams, 2019), The Activism Growth Model (George-Williams, 2021), and Social Identity Development Models, such as the Racial Identity Development Model (Tatum, 1992) and the Sexual Identity Development Model (Cass, 1984).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; McCoy, 2015).

Critical Race Theory explores the intersections of race, power, and systemic oppression (Bell, 1979; Donnor, 2005; Harper, 2009b; Milner, 2008). It encourages the examination of institutionalized racism, racial stereotypes, and the impact of racial hierarchies on sports participation, representation, and opportunities (Crenshaw, 1991; (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Under the guidance of CRT, Intersectionality Theory, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), recognizes the interconnectedness of social identities and the unique experiences of individuals

at the intersections of multiple axes of oppression, including race, gender, sexuality, class, and more (Crenshaw, 1989; Byrd et al, 2019).

The Activism Growth Model (George-Williams, 2021)

The AGM is a framework that provides a structured approach for individuals, including student activists and athlete activists, to develop their activism skills, engage in social change, and achieve personal and collective growth. It includes components such as self-reflection, skill development, and sustained activism.

Black Athlete Activist Leadership Model (BAAL) (George-Williams, 2019)

The Black athlete activist leadership (BAAL) model is an invitation for athletic departments, student services, and higher education practitioners overall to gain a deeper and more informative understanding and support of Black college athlete activists using a holistic lens and approach. When utilizing the suggested pillars in the model, (a) viewing athletes as leaders, (b) embracing intersecting identities, (c) accounting for campus climate, and (d) incorporating holistic support, this will allow athlete activists to operate and navigate their campuses feeling empowered and invigorated.

The Racial Identity Development Model (Tatum,1992)

The Racial Identity Development Model provides a vital framework for understanding the psychological evolution individuals of color may experience about their racial identities. The Racial Identity Development Model's Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, and Internalization provide critical insights into the athletes' experiences, shaping tailored support mechanisms (Tatum, 1992, 1997).

The Sexual Identity Development Model/Cass Identity Model (Cass, 1984)

The CIM can inform athlete activists about the stages individuals go through in understanding and embracing their identities. The Cass Identity Model, a vital framework for understanding LGBTQ identity development, offers invaluable insights into the experiences and needs of these athletes. These models help athletes navigate their journeys and support their advocacy efforts in fostering inclusivity, challenging stereotypes, and promoting acceptance. Gleaning from The Cass Identity Model for insight will provide the ATSS framework a nuanced and affirming support for LGBTQ athlete activists.

This section elucidates why incorporating this model is indispensable in offering holistic and culturally competent support for athlete activists, particularly those of color. Each conceptual framework provides a unique lens to analyze and address the complexities of athlete activism. Athlete activists and their stakeholders can use these frameworks to better understand the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they work and to inform their strategies for promoting social change.

Theoretical Foundation

The ATSS model adapts the principles of the Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework, a well-regarded approach in educational settings for providing services and interventions tailored to student needs (McIntosh, & Goodman, 2016; Romer, et al, 2018). It is a tiered system that recognizes athlete activists' unique psychological, professional, and personal pressures, particularly those stemming from their intersectional identities.

Overview of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

The essence of MTSS is the building and creating wraparound services for the population of focus. Wraparound services, or wraparound, support or wraparound care, are a holistic approach to providing coordinated and comprehensive support to individuals and families with complex needs (Wackerle-Hollman et al., 2021; Sugai et al., 2016). The concept of wraparound services originated in the field of child welfare and has since been applied to various contexts, including education, mental health, and social services (Bruns & Walker, 2011; Vest et al, 2018; Olson et al, 2021). Wraparound services involve bringing together a team of professionals, family members, and other supportive individuals to collaboratively develop and implement an individualized care plan (Bruns & Walker, 2011; Vest et al, 2018; Olson et al, 2021). The goal is to address multiple needs across different domains, such as education, mental health, housing, employment, and social connections, in a coordinated and integrated manner.

Key features of wraparound services include a) Individualized Care, b) Multidisciplinary Team, c) Family Involvement, d) Strengths-Based Approach, e) Coordination and Integration, and f) Culturally Responsive Care (Wackerle-Hollman et al., 2021; Sugai et al., 2016).

While wraparound services are commonly associated with supporting individuals and families with complex needs, they can also be adapted to provide comprehensive support for athlete activists. Here are some examples of wraparound services that can be applied to support athlete activists:

Personalized Advocacy and Mentorship

Athlete activists can benefit from personalized advocacy and mentorship services. This may involve assigning a mentor or advocate who understands their unique challenges and goals. The mentor can provide guidance, connect them with relevant resources, and support their personal and professional development.

Social and Emotional Support

Wraparound services for athlete activists should include social and emotional support to address the pressures and emotional toll that activism can bring. This may involve access to counseling services, peer support groups, and stress management and self-care resources.

Legal Assistance and Advocacy

Because of their activism, athlete activists may face legal challenges or encounters with sport governing bodies. Wraparound services can provide access to legal assistance and advocacy to help navigate these situations, ensuring their rights are protected and providing guidance on legal strategies.

Media and Public Relations Support

Effective communication is crucial for athlete activists to amplify their message and navigate media attention. Wraparound services can offer media training, public relations support, and access to communications professionals who can help athletes craft their messaging, handle media interactions, and strategically leverage their platform for social change.

Partnerships with Advocacy Organizations

Athlete activists can benefit from collaborating with advocacy organizations that align with their cause. Wraparound services can help facilitate these partnerships, connecting athletes with established organizations with advocacy, community organizing, and policy change expertise.

Career Development and Education Support

Wraparound services should also address athlete activists' long-term goals and aspirations beyond their activism efforts. This can involve providing access to career development resources, educational opportunities, and networking connections that support their personal and professional growth.

Financial Support and Resources

Wraparound services can assist athlete activists in accessing financial support, such as grants, scholarships, or sponsorships, to sustain their activism efforts. This support can help alleviate financial burdens and allow athletes to focus on their advocacy work.

These examples demonstrate how wraparound services can be adapted to meet the unique needs of athlete activists. When designing and implementing wraparound support, it's important to consider the specific goals, challenges, and aspirations of each athlete activist. The services should be personalized, culturally responsive, and aligned with the athlete's vision for social change. More importantly, collaboration among multiple stakeholders, including athlete activists, is crucial for effective wraparound support.

Multi-Tiered Approach

Like MTSS, ATSS employs a tiered structure to ensure athletes at all levels of activism receive appropriate support, from universal to individualized assistance. This tiered approach allows for a flexible and responsive support system that can adapt to the evolving landscape of athlete activism. Additionally, the ATSS framework emphasizes the importance of community building, feedback mechanisms, and ongoing evaluation, ensuring the support system remains relevant and effective (Harrison & Lawrence, 2014).

Tier 1: Universal Supports for Student and Athlete Activists:

- This tier is accessible to all athletes, focusing on general education on activism, providing resources, and creating a foundation for advocacy efforts.
- A key component of Tier 1 is creating a positive and inclusive school or team culture that supports activism.
- Provide strategies for fostering a safe and respectful environment that values diverse perspectives.
- Explore integrating social-emotional learning, restorative practices, and character education into curricula.

Tier 2: Targeted Support or Interventions for Student and Athlete Activists

- This tier offers specialized support for athletes who are more actively engaged in advocacy. It addresses specific challenges and enhances their activism skills.
- Identify the signs of stress, burnout, and emotional fatigue among student and athlete activists.
- Offer evidence-based interventions and strategies for promoting self-care and resilience.
- Discuss the role of mentorship and peer support in nurturing and sustaining activist efforts.

Tier 3: Intensive Individualized Supports for Student and Athlete Activists

- Specific mental health challenges faced by athlete activists are explored.
- Athletes facing significant challenges due to their activism receive personalized support, including mental health services, legal advice, and crisis management.
- Guidance is provided on providing professional counseling, therapy, or other mental health services.
- Reiterate the importance of creating a supportive network of professionals, including school counselors, coaches, and mental health experts.

Customizing the wrap-around mental health support to athlete activists' individual needs and circumstances is as important as recognizing their diverse backgrounds, experiences, and personal challenges. Collaboration between mental health professionals, coaches, trainers, and other support staff is crucial in providing a holistic approach that promotes athlete activists' mental well-being and resilience. The comprehensive nature of ATSS ensures a flexible, responsive support system that adapts to the evolving landscape of athlete activism. Crucial to

the ATSS is the emphasis on community building, continuous feedback, and ongoing evaluation, ensuring the framework remains attuned to the activists' needs.

Conclusion

Athlete activism, while noble and necessary, often puts them at odds with segments of the public, media, and even their sporting communities. The emotional toll of confronting social injustices, dealing with public and private responses, and striving to make meaningful change can impact athletes' mental health, leading to stress, anxiety, or depression (Williams & Mohammed, 2009). The intersection of sports and activism presents opportunities and challenges for athlete activists. The ATSS framework offers a promising approach to supporting these individuals, providing a structured, tiered system of support tailored to their needs. By fostering an environment that nurtures and empowers athlete activists, ATSS promotes social justice and community engagement through sports. This model aims to enrich the ongoing discourse on supporting athletes as agents of social change, ensuring they have the necessary resources, guidance, and advocacy to amplify their voices and actions. Furthermore, the more practical interventions higher educational practitioners can implement for a growing population of Black athlete activists, the progress toward engaging in meaningful and safe experiences for this population can occur (George-Williams, 2019). The significance of ATSS lies in its potential to empower athlete activists, enabling them to navigate their unique challenges effectively and make impactful contributions to social activism.

Figure 1. *Key Features of Wraparound Services*



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