



Between class and court: A phenomenological exploration of student-athlete's lived experiences

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Abstract

This study titled “Between Class and Court: A Phenomenological Exploration of Student-Athlete’s Lived Experiences” explored the lived experiences of Senior High School student-athletes of Universidad de Sta. Isabel of Pili, Inc. during School Year 2025–2026. It aimed to determine their motivations in joining the university’s sports program, the challenges they encounter, the strategies they use, and the support or intervention program that may be proposed based on the findings. The study used a descriptive-phenomenological research design, with fifteen Senior High School student-athletes selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered through face-to-face individual in-depth interviews and were analyzed using deductive and reflexive thematic analysis. Findings revealed that student-athletes were motivated by passion for sports, stress relief, social belonging, confidence, and financial incentives such as tuition discounts and cash awards. However, they also experienced challenges, including time management difficulties, lack or insufficient support, financial struggles, physical fatigue, and mental or emotional pressure. To cope with these challenges, they used strategies such as time management, task prioritization, discipline, moral support from family and friends, and financial management. Based on the findings, the study proposed an enhanced student-athlete support program that includes academic considerations, flexible deadlines, attendance considerations, more active sports clubs, improved sports facilities, and seminars on time management, financial management, stress management, and mental health awareness. The study concludes that student-athletes need holistic school support to help them balance academics, athletics, and personal well-being.

Keywords: Student-Athletes; Lived Experiences; Phenomenology; Academic-Athletic Balance; Support Program

1. Introduction

The Philippine government passed the Student-Athletes Protection Act (RA 10676), implemented through DepEd Order No. 52, s. 2021. This policy protects student-athletes by providing benefits such as tuition discounts, allowances, medical support, and academic assistance. It also aligns with the United Nations’ SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education), which emphasize the need for both education and overall well-being. These efforts show that learning should go hand in hand with health.

At Universidad de Sta. Isabel of Pili, Inc., many students are athletes. The school offers tuition discounts, helping families manage expenses and encouraging participation in sports. As a result, more student-athletes strive to succeed in both academics and athletics. The researcher, who is both a teacher and sports coordinator, has closely observed their daily struggles.

Students shared several reasons for maintaining their student-athlete status. One major reason is the reduced tuition, as the university values students who are skilled in sports. Aside from this, many are motivated by co-curricular reasons, such as developing their talents, improving their skills, and gaining valuable experiences outside the classroom.

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Participation in sports also helps them build confidence, leadership, teamwork, and discipline, which are important for their personal growth. Others enjoy representing the university in competitions, bringing pride and recognition to the school while doing what they love.

However, students also shared several challenges. Many struggle to balance academics and sports, especially when schedules overlap. One student stated, "sometimes I can't really focus on one thing, so I fail on both," showing how difficult it is to manage both responsibilities at the same time. They often feel pressured when they have to choose between attending classes, completing schoolwork, or joining training and competitions. In addition, student-athletes experience mental and physical strain, particularly during intramurals or when competing with external teams.

This involvement inspired the researcher to study their experiences more systematically. The study aims to explore the lived experiences of student-athletes at Universidad de Sta. Isabel of Pili, Inc. during School Year 2025–2026. It examined their motivations, challenges, and coping strategies. It also seeks to provide practical recommendations and interventions to support their needs.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

This study explored the lived experiences of student-athletes in Universidad de Sta. Isabel, Pili, Inc., Pili Camarines Sur school year 2025-2026. Specifically, it answered the following questions:

- What are motivating factors of student-athletes in participating sports club?
- What are the lived experiences of student-athletes in participating sports club?
- What challenges do student-athletes encounter in participating sports program?
- What strategies do student-athletes employ in addressing the challenges encountered?
- What support intervention program can be proposed based on the findings of the study?

1.2. Scope and Delimitation

This study focuses on the lived experiences of student-athletes in Universidad de Sta. Isabel of Pili, Inc. during School Year 2025 - 2026. It explored how they balance academics, athletics, and well-being by examining their motivations for joining sports, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they use to cope. The findings served as the basis for proposing an intervention program that may help improve the support system for student-athletes in the institution.

The respondents of the study will be limited to five (14) Senior High School student-athletes from Grades 11 and 12 of USI of Pili, Inc. These participants were chosen because they have already spent a considerable amount of time in both academic and athletic settings, which is expected to yield deeper and more valuable insights into their lived experiences. Student-athletes from all sports programs are eligible to participate, except those in esports, since the focus of this study is on physical sports. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were given the freedom to withdraw at any time if they choose.

The scope of the study is limited to motivations, challenges, and coping strategies of student-athletes, which was used to design possible support or intervention programs. It did not cover other aspects of student life such as religious formation, spiritual activities, or community service, even though the institution is sectarian, as these areas are beyond the focus of the study.

The delimitations include the exclusion of Junior High School student-athletes and regular students who are not official members of the school's athletic programs. College-level athletes and student-athletes from other institutions are also excluded, as the study intends to concentrate solely on the experiences of Senior High School student-athletes at USI.

By setting these boundaries, the study ensures that the data collected is specific, manageable, and directly related to the objectives. While the results may not fully represent all student-athletes in other contexts or levels, they provided meaningful insights into the unique realities faced by Senior High School student-athletes at Universidad de Sta. Isabel of Pili, Inc.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study used a Descriptive-Phenomenological Research Design. The descriptive part of the study looked at the real experience of Senior High School student-athletes at Universidad de Sta. Isabel of Pili, Inc. during School Year 2025–2026. It described their reasons for joining sports, the challenges they faced, and the strategies they used to manage their school and athletic life. As Manjunatha (2019) discussed, descriptive research shows the situation as it is, without changing or controlling anything.

The phenomenological part of the study focused on understanding the lived experiences of student-athletes based on their own stories. Phenomenology aims to explore how individuals experience and give meaning to a certain situation or phenomenon. In this study, the participants' narratives helped describe how they balance academics, athletics, and personal well-being. The findings may also serve as a basis for proposing a Student-Athlete Support Program or Intervention, such as seminars, school policy suggestions, or activities that can help improve student-athlete well-being.

2.2. Respondents of the Study

The respondents of this study were fifteen (15) Senior High School student-athletes from Universidad de Sta. Isabel of Pili, Inc. during School Year 2025–2026. Since the study is qualitative and phenomenological, a small number of participants was chosen to allow for a deeper exploration of their personal experiences. The selected respondents are between 16 to 19 years old and must be certified student-athletes of the institution with sufficient experience or tenure in both academics and sports to ensure that they can provide meaningful and relevant insights based on their lived experiences. To ensure variety, the respondents included athletes from major sports such as Badminton, Basketball, and Volleyball.

The selection of participants used purposive sampling, as only those who could provide rich and relevant information about balancing academics, athletics, and well-being were included. These respondents are expected to provide meaningful insights into the motivations, challenges, lived experiences, and coping strategies of student-athletes.

For ethical considerations, the researcher strictly followed the guidelines of the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (RA 10173) in the Philippines. Informed consent was obtained from the respondents before the interviews. For those who are minors, parental or guardian consent was also required. Respondents were assured that their participation is voluntary, and they may decline or withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. All information shared was treated with strict confidentiality, and their names will not appear in the study to protect their privacy and anonymity.

2.3. Data Gathering Procedures

The data for this study was collected through individual interviews with the selected student-athletes. Each interview was conducted in an isolated and private setting to make the respondent feels comfortable and safe to share their personal experiences. This is important since some students may feel uneasy discussing their challenges in a group setting.

The interview used an unstructured but guided format, where open-ended questions were asked to allow respondents to freely share their stories. Follow-up questions were asked when necessary to clarify or expand their answers. This approach ensures that the discussion remains natural while still focusing on the main topics of the study such as motivations, challenges, and coping strategies.

With the respondents' informed consent, the interviews were audio recorded to ensure that no detail is missed. Recordings were used only for transcription and analysis and was stored securely in compliance with the Data Privacy Act.

2.4. Face-to-face Individual In-depth Interview

The study used face-to-face individual in-depth interviews as the main method of gathering data. Each student-athlete was interviewed personally and separately in an isolated classroom to protect their privacy and help them feel safe in sharing their experiences. During the interview, the researcher asked oral questions in English, with Filipino translations or explanations provided when needed to make sure that the respondents clearly understood each question. The respondents were allowed to answer in English, Filipino, or a combination of both, depending on where they felt more comfortable. Follow-up or probing questions were also asked to clarify answers and gather deeper details

about their motivations, challenges, coping strategies, and support needs. This method was appropriate for the study because it allowed the researcher to collect rich and detailed descriptions of the student-athletes' lived experiences in balancing academics, athletics, and personal well-being.

2.5. Qualitative Data Treatment

The data in this study was analyze using a phenomenological approach together with deductive and reflexive thematic analysis. Phenomenology is used because it focuses on the real experiences of people and how they give meaning to those experiences (Groenewald, 2004, as cited by Lee, 2020)¹. This helped the researcher understand the true stories of student-athletes and how they balance their studies, sports, and personal well-being.

The study used a deductive process, which means that the themes come directly from what the student-athletes say, while following a fixed set of categories, the researcher let the themes show from the actual answers (Braun & Clarke, 2006, as cited by Dawadi, 2020)². This way, the results truly reflect the voices of the participants.

The analysis has also followed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Campbell et al., 2021)³. In this process, the researcher carefully decides what counts as a theme based on both how often it appears and how important it is to the research questions. Both clear or surface meanings (semantic themes) and deeper, hidden meanings (latent themes) was be studied.

To make sure the process is organized, the researcher has followed six steps: (1) reading and becoming familiar with the data, (2) making codes, (3) grouping codes into themes, (4) checking and refining the themes, (5) naming and explaining the themes, and (6) writing the results.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Motivating Factors Influencing Student-Athletes' Participation in Sports Clubs

Table 1 presents the themes and subthemes on the motivation of student-athletes in joining sports. The findings show that their motivation may be grouped into five major themes: Passion, Stress Relief, Social Belonging, Confidence, and Financial Incentives. These themes show that student-athletes are motivated not only by their interest in sports, but also by emotional, social, personal, and practical reasons.

Table 1 Thematic Analysis of the Motivating Factors of Student-Athletes in Participating in Sports Club

Theme	Subtheme	Student-Athlete Statement	Coding
Passion	Genuine Enjoyment	SA2: "One thing that motivates me to join is my love and drive to join athletic programs."	Love and drive for athletics
		SA3: "I love my passion in sports, specially in playing basketball..."	Passion for playing basketball
		SA6: "Because I am passionate in the game that I play..."	Passion for the game
		SA6: "I just simply enjoy the thrill that I feel when playing the game."	Enjoyment and thrill of playing
		SA7: "I still decided to join in athletic programs because of the passion and pride that I've put in that sport."	Passion and pride in sports
		SA14: "At same time it makes me entertained..."	Entertainment and enjoyment
		SA15: "Aside from my interest in sports..."	Interest in sports
	Improve Skills	SA4: "It's my passion and it's the only sports where I can say that I can excel in some way."	Desire to excel in sports
		SA6: "I want to showcase my skill..."	Showing athletic ability

		SA10: "Being part of a team inspires me to keep improving..."	Motivation to improve
		SA13: "I want to train my physical capabilities in different aspects."	Improving physical ability
Stress Relief	Escape from Reality	SA9: "Makes me happy and breathe from the reality."	Sports as escape from reality
		SA11: "Basketball helps me to escape from so many problems and stress especially on academic..."	Escape from academic stress
		SA14: "An escape from the real life..."	Sports as escape from reality
	Relaxation and Clarity of Mind	SA8: "Sports help me to relax from school."	Relaxation from school pressure
	Emotional Release	SA3: "It help(s) me to reduce stress..."	Sports as stress reducer
		SA10: "They help me stay healthy, manage stress, and balance my school life..."	Managing stress through sports
		SA11: "It's my happiness and stress reliever."	Sports as happiness and stress relief
		SA12: "This is my coping mechanism to avoid stress and depression."	Sports as coping mechanism
Social Belonging	Bond with coaches and co-athletes	SA8: "My teammates and coaches are supportive..."	Support from team and coaches
	Meeting New People	SA5: "It motivates me to be more socially active."	Social interaction through sports
		SA14: "Met people that creates an interesting experience."	Meeting people through sports
Confidence	Improve Discipline	SA3: "Teach me new strategies that I can apply in real life situation."	Learning life strategies through sports
		SA10: "The discipline I learn in sports also helps me with my studies."	Discipline transferred to academics
Financial Incentives	Tuition Discounts	SA1: "Sports help my family financially by giving tuition discounts."	Motivation through tuition discount
		SA15: "Tuition discounts also help."	Motivation through tuition discounts
	Monetary Rewards	SA15: "Cash awards... also help."	Motivation through cash awards

The findings show that student-athletes join sports because of both internal and external motivations. Their internal reasons include passion, enjoyment, stress relief, confidence, discipline, and personal growth. These show that sports are meaningful to them because they provide happiness, emotional relief, and self-development. Their external reasons include social belonging and financial incentives, such as support from teammates and coaches, cash awards, and tuition discounts.

This means that student-athletes do not join sports only to compete, win, or receive rewards. Their participation is strongly connected to passion, happiness, personal growth, emotional relief, social connection, confidence, and financial support. However, passion is the dominant motivation because most responses emphasized love for the sport, enjoyment, pride, and the desire to improve. Sports become part of their identity because it allows them to express themselves, build skills, manage stress, and connect with other people.

These findings are supported by related studies. The theme of Passion is supported by Yukhymenko-Lescroart (2021)⁴, who found that student-athletes' athletic effort is influenced by their interest in sports, while passion for sport is connected to motivation in both athletic and academic areas. This supports the finding that student-athletes continue joining sports because of love, enjoyment, and personal interest.

3.2. Lived Experiences of Student-Athletes in Sports Club Participation

Table 2 presents the lived experiences of student-athletes in participating in sports clubs. It presents the common experiences that shaped their journey as student-athletes while participating in school sports activities.

Table 2 Thematic Analysis of the Lived Experiences of Student-Athletes in Participating in Sports Club

Theme	Subtheme	Student-Athlete Statement	Coding
Personal Development	Discipline	SA1: "Joining the basketball club helped me become more disciplined..."	Development of self-discipline
	Confidence Building	SA4: "Being part of the sports club improved my confidence..."	Increased self-confidence
	Emotional Growth	SA10: "I learned how to handle both success and failure..."	Emotional maturity through competition
	Social Development	SA13: "I struggled at first because I was shy, but being in the sports club helped me become more social."	Improved social interaction skills
	Life Lessons and Meaningful Experience	SA15: "Being a student-athlete is not easy, but the friendships, lessons, and achievements made the experience meaningful."	Finding meaning through student-athlete experience
Social Connection	Sense of Belonging	SA2: "I made many close friends in the volleyball team..."	Building close friendships
		SA8: "The sports club gave me a sense of belonging..."	Feeling accepted within the team
	Coach Support	SA9: "The encouragement from my coach kept me going."	Motivation through coach encouragement
Health and Well-being	Physical Exhaustion	SA3: "There were times I felt physically exhausted after training..."	Physical fatigue from training
	Improved Physical Health	SA7: "I became healthier and more active."	Improved fitness and activity level
	Stress Relief	SA12: "Joining the badminton club helped me reduce stress..."	Sports as emotional outlet
	Mental Fatigue	SA14: "There were times I felt mentally drained..."	Mental exhaustion from training demands
Performance Pressure	Pressure to Perform	SA5: "Sometimes I feel pressured to perform well..."	Performance-related pressure
	Enjoyment of Challenge	SA5: "...but I also enjoy the challenge."	Positive response to competitive pressure
Time Management Challenges	Balancing Academics and Sports	SA1: "...balancing practice and schoolwork can be stressful."	Difficulty balancing academic and athletic responsibilities
		SA6: "I had to balance practices, assignments, and family responsibilities."	Managing competing responsibilities

		SA11: "Traveling for games was exciting, but it sometimes made me miss important school activities."	Academic sacrifices due to sports participation
Motivation and Achievement	Fulfillment from Success	SA3: "Winning games made it feel worth it."	Satisfaction from achievement

The findings show that the lived experiences of student-athletes are shaped by both positive and difficult situations. Their participation in sports clubs gave them opportunities to grow as individuals, build relationships, improve their health, and achieve meaningful goals. However, they also experienced struggles such as pressure, fatigue, and difficulty balancing multiple responsibilities. These experiences show that being a student-athlete involves both rewards and sacrifices.

These findings are supported by related studies. The theme of Personal Development is supported by Holden (2025), who explained that sports participation contributes to holistic athlete development by strengthening personal skills, confidence, and emotional growth. This supports the finding that student-athletes gain discipline, confidence, and maturity through sports participation.

4. Proposed Support Intervention Program for Student-Athletes Based on Study Findings

Based on the findings of the study, a comprehensive support intervention program entitled "Mind Over Match: Mental Resilience Training" is proposed to address the challenges commonly experienced by student-athletes in balancing their academic responsibilities, athletic commitments, and personal well-being. The lived experiences of student-athletes revealed that while participation in sports provides opportunities for personal growth, confidence-building, discipline, and social engagement, it also presents significant challenges such as time management difficulties, mental and physical exhaustion, financial concerns, and limited institutional support. In response to these findings, the proposed intervention program is designed to provide holistic support that addresses the academic, psychological, emotional, and practical needs of student-athletes.

The program will consist of a two-day seminar-workshop and experiential training specifically designed for student-athletes. One of its major components is the Mental Resilience and Emotional Wellness Session, which will focus on helping student-athletes understand stress, pressure, emotional fatigue, and burnout associated with managing their dual roles. This session will include discussions on emotional awareness, stress triggers, coping strategies, breathing exercises, relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, confidence-building activities, and guided reflection sessions where participants can openly share their lived experiences and personal struggles.

The suggested intervention program named "Mind Over Match: Mental Resilience Training" was developed with consideration for the findings about the experiences and challenges faced by the student-athletes obtained through the study. Also, the major difficulties include lack of time, mental issues such as stress and pressure, and problems connected with financial and support aspects. According to the results of the investigation, student-athletes experience particular difficulties when it comes to the balance between their academic requirements and participation in sporting activities. Thus, it may be concluded that there is a need for the incorporation of activities that will help to solve the existing issues.

First and foremost, the program suggests organizing the Mental Resilience and Well-Being Training Session. This part of the intervention will be dedicated to the consideration of psychological and emotional issues faced by the students who engage in sport activities. Table 5 shows that some respondents mentioned that it was hard for them to manage stress, meet high expectations, and overcome difficulties associated with performing well at school and participating in competitions. Therefore, it will be necessary to develop the knowledge and skills associated with managing stress, developing coping mechanisms, breathing techniques, positive thinking, and reflecting upon certain issues.

Another component that will be integrated into the program is related to the Time Management and Academic Balance Workshop. This aspect should be regarded as particularly critical because it is connected with the necessity for student-athletes to combine school activities, training schedule, participation in competitions, and other issues that are important for them. The discussed session will offer participants a chance to learn how to prioritize activities, set goals, plan their days and weeks properly, avoid procrastinating, manage deadlines, and find an optimal balance between school, athletics, family life, and personal health.

It should be noted that some student-athletes experience financial difficulties. Therefore, it may be assumed that it is necessary to integrate into the program a Financial Awareness and Budget Management Session. Student-athletes sometimes face certain financial troubles related to paying for transportations costs, having meals, purchasing sport equipment, and other expenses associated with taking part in sport activities. As a result, this component of the program will be aimed at promoting financial literacy and encouraging participants to work out their budget plans in order to be able to save money better and spend them more carefully.

Another important aspect of the discussed intervention is related to its psychosocial component – namely, Team-Building Activities and Friendly Games. These events are supposed to promote team spirit, improve communication, increase the level of discipline, foster good sportsmanship, and encourage building of relationships among participants. It is known that adequate social support plays a pivotal role in coping with different problems, according to the findings made. That is why, this part of the intervention will be helpful in achieving these objectives and creating friendly atmosphere around.

Since some student-athletes reported that they needed better understanding and assistance from coaches, teachers, and other people working within a school, the organizers of the intervention decided to include a School Support Dialogue Session into the proposed intervention. This event will involve coaches, teachers, guidance personnel, and student-athletes in order to discuss the issues that exist and the possibilities of making schools more supportive towards them.

Finally, the Action Planning Session will be used as the culminating moment of the proposed intervention. During the process of this activity, participants will be encouraged to formulate the ideas of their Personal Student-Athlete Balance Plan. This plan will help them to find solutions that will contribute to enhancing academic achievements, being committed to their athletics, managing finances adequately, and becoming more resilient and psychologically healthy.

In general, it is necessary to note that the intervention under consideration does not focus only on one problem but takes into account all those aspects that were highlighted during the study. Namely, Table 5 shows that student-athletes need more help when trying to find balance between their school achievements and sport results and overcome financial, mental, and support issues. Therefore, the implementation of the proposed "Mind Over Match: Mental Resilience Training" will help to create a supportive environment for those involved in sport.

These findings are supported by related studies. The theme of Considerations is supported by Thompson et al. (2022)⁵, who found that sports school student-athletes often miss school because of training and competitions. Their study also noted that student-athletes may benefit from adjusted school schedules, extra tutoring, lighter academic loads, and compensatory lessons. This supports the students' suggestion for flexible deadlines, task exemptions, and attendance considerations.

The theme of Reinforced School Focus is also supported by Thompson et al. (2022), who explained that sports schools provide athletic support services such as better training facilities, high-quality coaches, sport science support, nutritionists, nurses, physiotherapists, and other support personnel. This supports the students' call for more active sports clubs and improved sports facilities. Strong school-based sports structures can help student-athletes train properly and safely.

The theme of Interventions is supported by Thompson et al. (2022), who recommended monitoring and support tools that assess the holistic development of student-athletes. This includes well-being, training load, injury, education, psychosocial factors, health, and performance. This connects with the need for mental health awareness programs, medical support, and wellness services. Nguri (2024)⁶ also stated that sports participation may improve time management, self-discipline, and academic success, but too much sports commitment may cause time constraints, fatigue, and stress. This supports the need for time management and stress management seminars.

This confirm that student-athletes need a holistic support system. This includes academic considerations, flexible deadlines, task and attendance exemptions, active sports clubs, improved facilities, time management seminars, financial management support, and mental health awareness programs. Among these, consideration are the dominant support needs because most student-athletes directly asked for special consideration, exemptions, flexible deadlines, and opportunities to complete missed schoolwork. These findings show that schools should create support systems that help student-athletes succeed both as learners and as athletes.

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

- Student-athletes join the university's sports program because of different personal, social, and practical reasons. Their participation is influenced by their passion for sports, desire for self-development, need for stress relief, sense of belonging, confidence-building, and financial benefits such as tuition discounts and awards.
- The study concludes that the lived experiences of student-athletes reflect the complex nature of balancing academic and athletic commitments, highlighting both the rewarding and demanding aspects of their dual roles. Their experiences demonstrate the need to continuously adapt to the challenges of managing multiple responsibilities as student-athletes.
- Student-athletes experience several challenges as they participate in the sports program. These challenges are mainly related to balancing academic requirements, training schedules, competitions, personal responsibilities, financial needs, and health concerns. These show that being a student-athlete involves multiple demands that may affect their academic, athletic, and personal life.
- Student-athletes use various coping strategies to manage the challenges they encounter. These include time management, task prioritization, discipline, routine-building, financial management, and seeking Moral Support. These strategies help them continue fulfilling their roles as both students and athletes.
- An enhanced student-athlete support program is needed to address the identified needs of student-athletes. The program should include academic considerations, stronger sports support, improved facilities, organized training schedules, and seminars on time management, financial management, stress management, and mental health awareness. Such a program may help student-athletes better manage their academic, athletic, and personal responsibilities.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

I declare that I have no conflicts of interest related to this research. I have no personal or financial relationships that could influence my work.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study

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