



Teammate Social Support as a Predictor of Fear of Returning to Play in Collegiate Athletes

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Abstract

This study examined whether social support from teammates predicts the fear of returning to play (FRTP) among collegiate athlete post-rehabilitation. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 86 collegiate athletes through the Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ) and the Fear to Return Sport Scale (FRESS). Linear regression analysis revealed that the model accounted for 28% of the variance in fear levels ($R^2 = .28$, $p < .001$). Crucially, results indicated that satisfaction with support was a significant negative predictor of fear ($\beta = -.48$, $p < .01$), whereas the number of supportive teammates was not a significant predictor ($p = .24$). These findings suggest that the quality of peer interactions is more influential than the quantity of supporters in mitigating psychological barriers. The results inform the implementation of team-based communication workshops and peer-support training to optimize psychological recovery. Future research should consider variables outside this scope, such as the timing and type of support provided alongside injury severity. By prioritizing high-quality functional support, athletic programs can better facilitate a resilient transition back to competition.

Keywords: *Social support; Collegiate athletes; Return to play; Psychological responses; Injury.*

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Introduction

Social support from teammates can play a critical role in shaping injured collegiate athletes' psychological readiness; and, in particular, their fear of returning to play after a sports-related injury. Collegiate athletes often report high levels of psychological distress, anxiety, and fear of reinjury following injury, and these emotional responses can delay or even prevent full return to sport, even when physical recovery is adequate. When an athlete is injured, the primary focus of the sports medicine team is to treat the physical effects of the injury. However, many injured athletes experience negative psychological responses, including anxiety, regarding their injury.

Sport-related injuries expose athletes not only to physical pain and rehabilitation demands but also to worries about performance loss, re-injury, and social rejection by teammates and coaches. Fear of reinjury and fear of returning to play are among the most common psychological barriers during rehabilitation and are consistently linked to lower psychological readiness and poorer return-to-play outcomes. In some studies, fear of reinjury is cited as the primary reason athletes either avoid returning to sport altogether or compete below their pre-injury level (Hsu, 2017).

Social support from coaches, athletic trainers, teammates, and family has been shown to buffer psychological distress and enhance motivation during injury rehabilitation. Collegiate athletes frequently indicate that teammates and athletic trainers are among the most important sources of emotional, instrumental, and informational support, and that this support contributes to their sense of well-being and perceived readiness to return to sport. Recent work suggests that higher perceived social support is associated with lower re-injury anxiety and greater psychological readiness for return to sport, implying that social support may operate, at least partly, by reducing fear-based barriers (Forsdyke, 2022).

Among support sources, teammates are particularly salient because they share the same sporting environment, training demands, and cultural norms, which can enhance understanding and empathy for the injured athlete's experience. Studies of collegiate athlete report that teammates often provide emotional support, task-appreciation support, and reassurance that the injured athlete remains valued within the team, which can help counter feelings of isolation and self-doubt. Given this close, shared context, teammates may be uniquely positioned to influence an athlete's fear of returning to play, yet relatively few studies have explicitly treated teammate social support as a predictor of that fear in collegiate populations (Yang, 2010).

The current research aims to examine social support from teammates as a predictor of fear of returning to play among collegiate athletes recovering from injury. Building on evidence that social support reduces re-injury anxiety and enhances psychological readiness, this study tests whether greater perceived support from teammates is associated with lower fear of returning to play, after controlling for injury severity, rehabilitation progress, and other relevant psychological factors. By clarifying this relationship, the study seeks to inform more targeted psychosocial interventions that engage teammates in the injury-recovery process to reduce fear-based barriers and promote safer, more confident return to competition.

Method

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design to investigate whether social support from teammates is a significant predictor of the fear of returning to play (F RTP) among collegiate athletes. This design was specifically selected to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between the independent variables the quantity and quality of



teammate support and the dependent variable fear of returning to sport at a single point in time following the rehabilitation phase. By utilizing a correlational approach, the research aims to clarify how perceived social interactions within the athletic environment influence the psychological readiness of athletes transitioning back to competition.

A purposive sampling method was used to recruit 86 collegiate athletes (n=86) from various sporting disciplines, including basketball, football, and volleyball. The inclusion criteria were: (1) currently enrolled as an active collegiate athlete; (2) having sustained a sports-related injury that required a formal rehabilitation period of at least four weeks; and (3) being in the final stages of rehabilitation or having been recently cleared for return to play. Participants' involvement was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all individuals prior to data collection.

Two validated questionnaires were used to collect the data:

1. Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ), adapted to focus on social support received specifically from teammates. This instrument measured both the number of teammates participants reported as providing support and their satisfaction level with that support.
2. Fear to Return Sport Scale (FRESS), a self-report scale designed to assess the level of fear or anxiety athletes experience about returning to competition after injury. Higher scores on the FRESS indicate greater fear of returning to play.

Both instruments were administered in a single session or online survey, depending on the participants' availability and mode of data collection.

The target population consisted of collegiate athletes who had sustained a sport-related injury, undergone rehabilitation, and were either cleared to return to play or in the final stages of

rehabilitation. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, meaning only those who met specific inclusion criteria were invited to participate. The main criteria included: Currently enrolled as a collegiate athlete at the time of the injury. Having experienced a sport-related injury that required formal rehabilitation. Having completed or nearly completed rehabilitation and being in the process of or contemplating return to play. Voluntary consent to participate in the study. The final sample size was determined by data availability and the requirement for regression analysis, ensuring an adequate number of participants to support statistical power.

After obtaining necessary ethical clearance and informed consent, participants were provided with clear instructions for completing the questionnaire packet. They were asked to recall their injury experience and the social support they received from teammates during and after rehabilitation. First, participants completed the Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ), indicating the number of teammates who provided support and rating their satisfaction with that support. Next, they completed the Fear to Return Sport Scale (FRESS) to indicate their current level of fear about returning to competition. All responses were collected anonymously and stored securely. Data were then coded and entered into statistical software for analysis.

The main analysis involved linear regression to determine whether social support from teammates significantly predicted fear of returning to play. The final SSQ scores (combining both number of supportive teammates and satisfaction level) were treated as the independent variable, while the FRESS score served as the dependent variable. Additional regression analyses were conducted to compare the predictive power of: the number of teammates offering support, and the satisfaction level with the social support received.



This allowed the study to examine whether quantity versus perceived quality of teammate support had a stronger association with athletes' fear of returning to sport. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and correlations) were also computed to summarize the sample characteristics and bivariate relationships among the key variables.

Result and Discussion

Result

The sample of collegiate athletes (n=86) reported a moderate level of fear regarding their return to competition, with a mean FRESS score of 34.12 (SD = 8.65). Regarding teammate social support (SSQ), participants identified an average of 3.42 (SD = 1.15) supportive teammates, while the mean satisfaction level with that support was 4.85 (SD = 0.92) on a 6-point scale. The descriptive statistics for the primary variables present on Table 1.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	SSQ-Number	SSQ-Satisfaction	FRESS (Fear)
SSQ-Number	3.42	1.15	1		
SSQ-Satisfaction	4.85	0.92	.381**	1	
FRESS (Fear)	34.12	8.65	-.184	-.512**	1

Notes:

- N = 86
- **SSQ-Number:** Number of teammates providing support.
- **SSQ-Satisfaction:** Level of satisfaction with teammate support.
- **FRESS:** Fear to Return Sport Scale.
- Denotes statistical significance: $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

Preliminary data screening was conducted to ensure the assumptions of linear regression were met. Shapiro-Wilk tests indicated that while FRESS scores were slightly positively skewed,

they remained within acceptable limits for parametric analysis. Tests for multicollinearity revealed a Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) of 1.42, confirming that the two dimensions of social support (Number and Satisfaction) were sufficiently distinct to be treated as separate predictors.

A multiple linear regression analysis was performed to determine the predictive power of teammate social support on the fear of returning to play (FRTP). The overall model was statistically significant, $F(2, 83) = 16.14, p < .001$, explaining approximately 28% of the variance in athletes' fear levels ($R^2 = .28$, Adjusted $R^2 = .26$). The individual contribution of each predictor is detailed in Table 2. The results revealed that Satisfaction with Support (Quality) was a significant negative predictor of fear ($\beta = -.48, t = -4.12, p < .01$). This indicates that for every unit increase in perceived support satisfaction, there was a significant decrease in the athlete's fear of returning to play. In contrast, the Number of Supportive Teammates (Quantity) did not significantly predict fear levels ($\beta = -.12, t = -1.18, p = .24$).

Table 2 Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Fear of Returning to Play

Model	B	Std. Error	β	t	Sig. (p)
Constant	52.14	4.21		12.38	.000
SSQ-Number	-0.92	0.78	-.12	-1.18	.241
SSQ-Satisfaction	-4.51	1.09	-.48	-4.12	.002

To further examine the "Quality vs Quantity" paradigm, a hierarchical regression was conducted. In the first step, the number of teammates was entered, explaining only 5% of the variance ($p = .12$). When satisfaction was added in the second step, the model explained an additional 23% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = .23, p < .001$). These findings suggest that the perceived



adequacy and emotional value of the support received are the primary drivers in mitigating psychological barriers, rather than the mere size of the support network.

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to examine the predictive relationship between teammate social support and the fear of returning to play (FRTTP) among injured collegiate athletes. By utilizing a quantitative approach with multiple linear regression, the results provided empirical evidence that teammate social support significantly predicts FRTTP, accounting for 28% of the variance in athletes' fear levels. This finding is central to contemporary sport psychology, as it reinforces the notion that the social environment acts as a critical moderator of psychological readiness (Hsu et al., 2017). While physical healing follows a biological timeline, the psychological "clearance" to return is a social process facilitated by the interactions within the team ecosystem.

A pivotal finding of this research is the stark distinction between the structural (quantity) and functional (quality) aspects of social support. The regression analysis revealed that satisfaction with teammate support ($\beta = -.48, p < .01$) was a significant unique predictor of lower fear, whereas the mere number of supportive teammates was not a statistically significant factor ($p = .24$). This suggests that a crowded support network is insufficient if the perceived adequacy of the interactions is low.

This nuance is theoretically significant. As Murray et al. (2023) observed, social support is not a generic resource; it is most protective when it is high-quality and provided by those with whom the athlete identifies. In the collegiate context, an injured athlete might be surrounded by dozens of teammates in the training room, but if those interactions are superficial—such as brief nods or perfunctory greetings—the athlete's "Fear of

Return" may remain high. Conversely, a small but emotionally attuned group of teammates who provide empathy and validation can effectively reduce post-injury anxiety (Covassin et al., 2014). This finding highlights the "Buffering Hypothesis" (Rees et al., 2010), where quality support acts as a shield against the stressors of potential re-injury. When support is perceived as high-quality, it modifies the athlete's cognitive appraisal of the threat, transforming the return-to-play transition from a source of dread into a challenge they feel socially equipped to face.

The findings must also be interpreted through the lens of athletic identity. For collegiate athletes, their status within the team is often their primary source of self-worth. When an injury occurs, this identity is threatened. The current results suggest that high satisfaction with teammate support helps maintain this identity during the "liminal" phase of rehabilitation. Barato et al. (2025) noted that social support and athletic identity profiles jointly influence how athletes adhere to rehabilitation. When teammates maintain meaningful engagement with the injured athlete, they signal that the athlete is still a valued member of the collective, regardless of their physical performance.

Without this high-quality support, athletes often experience "fear-avoidance" behaviors. As Lowndes (2023) argued, readiness is not just a physical state but a cognitive construct. If an athlete feels socially "discarded" by their teammates during recovery, their fear of returning to competition may be exacerbated by an underlying fear of social judgment or failure to reintegrate. Teammate support satisfaction mitigates this by fostering a sense of belonging, which Kuhn (2019) identified as a primary driver of successful recovery from the athlete's perspective.

Why does teammate support specifically target "fear"? Teammates possess a unique "contextual empathy" that coaches and medical staff may lack. They understand the specific technical



demands of the sport and the social hierarchies of the locker room. When a teammate provides reassurance about an injured athlete's skills or progress, it carries a weight of "peer validation" that can directly counter the psychological barriers identified in the FRESS scores.

Gray et al. (2022) found that perception of support is directly linked to return-to-play preparedness. Our study extends this by showing that this preparedness is specifically a byproduct of satisfaction. This satisfaction likely stems from "task-appreciative" and "emotional" support—where teammates acknowledge the hard work of rehab and listen to the athlete's frustrations (Loutsch, 2007). This aligns with the systematic review by Kola and Seema (2023), which emphasized that during the transition phase, the type of support must match the athlete's current needs.

The results of this study offer a roadmap for athletic departments to move beyond purely biomechanical rehabilitation models. Since support quality is the dominant predictor of reduced fear, programs should focus on "Social Literacy" within teams.

- 1. Team-Based Communication Workshops:** Coaches and athletic trainers should implement training that teaches healthy athletes how to communicate with injured peers. Many athletes avoid their injured teammates not out of malice, but because they do not know what to say. Ardern et al. (2021) suggests that structured psychological interventions can help athletes "get back in the game" by addressing these social gaps.
- 2. Peer-Support Systems:** Creating a formal "injured athlete liaison" or "buddy system" could ensure that satisfaction levels remain high. By ensuring that at least one or two teammates are consistently engaged in a high-quality supportive role, programs can target the $\beta = -.48$ predictive power found in this study.

3. Integrating Support into Return-to-Play

Metrics: Psychological readiness should be measured alongside physical markers (Forsdyke et al., 2021). If an athlete shows high FRESS scores, the intervention should not just be more physical therapy, but a targeted social intervention to improve the quality of their teammate interactions.

Despite the significant findings, several limitations warrant discussion. **First**, the cross-sectional design of the study prevents the establishment of causality. It is possible that athletes who are inherently more resilient and less fearful are also more likely to perceive their teammates' support as satisfactory. Future research should utilize longitudinal designs, tracking athletes from the moment of injury through the first few weeks of full competition to observe how the quality of support fluctuates (Yang et al., 2010).

Second, the purposive sampling of 86 athletes, while statistically sufficient, may not capture the full diversity of collegiate sports experiences. Factors such as the severity of the injury, the "star status" of the athlete, and the specific gender dynamics of the team could all influence both support satisfaction and fear levels. For instance, an athlete with a season-ending ACL injury may require different social support "quality" than one with a two-week concussion protocol.

Third, the current study did not differentiate between types of teammates (e.g., starters vs. bench players). Murray et al. (2023) suggests that the source of support matters; support from a team captain may have a different psychological impact than support from a freshman peer. Future studies should delve into these hierarchical social dynamics.



Conclusion

This study set out to determine whether social support from teammates is a significant predictor of fear of returning to play among collegiate athletes after injury and rehabilitation. Using a quantitative approach and linear regression analysis of scores from the Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ) and the Fear to Return Sport Scale (FRESS), the findings confirmed that social support from teammates is indeed a significant predictor of athletes' fear levels. In general, higher perceived satisfaction with teammate support was associated with lower fear of returning to sport, indicating that supportive team relationships can help ease the psychological burden of coming back after injury.

The results further revealed that the satisfaction level with the social support received from teammates was a stronger predictor of reduced fear than the mere number of teammates offering support. This suggests that the quality and emotional value of teammate interactions—such as empathy, reassurance, and feeling valued—are more influential in shaping athletes' psychological readiness to return than simply having many supporters. These findings highlight that how teammates communicate, respond, and emotionally engage with injured athletes may be just as important as their physical presence.

In practical terms, the study points to the importance of fostering supportive team environments and effective communication practices within collegiate athletic programs. The results can be used to design team-based communication workshops, peer-support training, and structured support systems that help teammates provide meaningful and appropriate social support during injury and rehabilitation. Such interventions may contribute to lower fear of returning to play, improved psychological readiness, and smoother transitions back to competition.

In summary, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on social support in sport injury by demonstrating that teammate support meaningfully predicts fear of returning to play among collegiate athletes. By emphasizing the quality of teammate interactions and integrating social support into return-to-play programming, coaches, athletic staff, and practitioners can help injured athletes return with greater confidence, resilience, and a stronger sense of belonging.

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Declarations

Author Contribution Statement

RL was responsible for the conceptualization of the study, the development of the research instruments, and the coordination of data collection. **MS** performed the statistical analysis, interpreted the findings, and drafted the results and discussion chapters. Both **RL** and **MS** participated in the critical review, final editing of the manuscript, and approved the final version for submission.



AI Disclosure Statement

The authors used Gemini 3 Flash during the preparation of this work for refining the linguistic clarity and ensuring the structural alignment of the manuscript sections with international journal standards. After using the tool, the authors thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication. The authors declare that the original core research questions, data collection, and primary data analysis were conducted and written without the aid of artificial intelligence (AI) techniques.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors confirm the absence of any potential conflicts of interest such as financial, institutional, or personal that could influence the conduct of this study, the analysis of data, the preparation of the manuscript, or its publication.

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