Jocks vs. Nerds…Is There a Difference

An Analysis of Athletes and Non-Athletes with Regards to Grades and Attitude Toward School

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Abstract

According to the common definition of a “jock,” being an athlete makes you less likely to be good at academics. In my study, I wanted to test whether there was a correlation with being an athlete and one’s grades, how one acts in class, and how one looks at academics and athletics in their community. My hypotheses were: 1) Athletes will report a higher self-reported grades compared to non-athletes, 2) Non-athletes will cut class more often than athletes, 3) Athletes will study more each night compared to non-athletes, and 4) Athletes will put more in to get good grades from the knowledge they gain from class compared to non-athletes. Some of my hypotheses were proven correct from my results. Athletes reported a higher GPA and they also tended to cut class more. Also, compared to female non-athletes, female athletes put more time into both getting good grades and studying. These results are significant because according to the standard “Jock” term, athletes would not care about school and only about their sports. This study doesn’t prove the definition of “jock” wrong so much as it shows the definition to be oversimplified. In fact, being an athlete was associated with good academic outcomes for girls, but not so much for boys.

Introduction

Jock- Someone who is good at sports. Usually implies that they're not good at academics (Definition of Jock, 1999). This suggests that as an athlete you’re not good at academics. But is one who partakes in athletic competition really that bad in the classroom? A typical weekday for a student-athlete involves, at a minimum, four hours of intense training in addition to a full time academic schedule (Santucci, 2012). Student athletes have a lot of work both school and athletic related. They have to find a balance between both of those things in order to be successful in both aspects as a student and as an athlete (Yu, 2012).

Do the long hours of commitment to a sport day in and day out affect one’s ability to study and do well on tests? In one study, done in a rural high school in Canada, they found that all athletes scored higher that non-athletes on their final grade in all subjects, though not significantly so. This study consisted of 134 high school students from grades 10-12, including 52 athletes and 82 non-athletes. The study compared both the midterm grades and final grades of each subjects for athletes and non-athletes. A limitation of this study was that if a person was involved in more than one sport, they were eliminated from the experiment. The results show that athletes had higher midterm and final grades than non-athletes in all subjects except mathematics in the midterm grade. Even though the athletes had higher grades; the only subject that was statistically significantly higher was science in both the midterm and the final (Zaugg, 1998).

In another study, the same results were shown again but this time in Kansas, student athletes had a better final GPA then non-athletes. This study used academic data from the Kansas State Department of Education and athletic data from the KSHSAA master roster of students who participated in high school sports during the 2008-2009 school year. There were over 62,000 participants in this study due to the availability of their grades from Kansas State Department of Education. The participants included students from grade 9-12. They used self-reported GPA scores to compare athletes and non-athletes. There results showed that 80.1% of athletes said they had a GPA of 3.0 or above and only 70.5% for non-athletes. For those who said they have a GPA of 3.5 or higher, 51.8% of athletes agreed with that statement while only 39.8% of non-athletes agreed (Lumpkin & Favor, 2012).

In both these studies, even with the long hours that come with being an athlete, these students prevailed in academics as well.

The “Jock” name comes with a classroom effect as well. The idea of the jock suggests minimal participation in the classroom and that these students may not be taking meaningful courses that will help them in the job market. In a study conducted at the University of California, Berkley, athletes were found to lack motivation in the classroom because they focus most of their time on their athletics. This study consisted of 361 Division I athletes. The experimenters used a Likert scale instrument based on the self-worth theory. The results showed that athletes weren’t motivated to succeed in college academically but they tried to avoid failure in order to continue play on their respective teams (Covington, Simons, and Rheenen, 1999).

Most of the studies that looked at classroom participation in the classroom were done at the collegiate level, and my study was conducted at the high school level. Lately, in the news, there have been reports coming out about college athletes taking classes that don’t exist just so they can stay on the team. These students took classes that they never had to attend and their final consisted of essays that were a paragraph long. All these fake classes can be done at the collegiate level where people are looking the other way, but it cannot be done at the high school level where I tested it.

My study looked at high school students and student-athletes from the south shore of Long Island in New York and their GPAs, class participation, and athletic and academic values.

*Hypotheses*

1. Athletes have a higher self-reported GPA compared to non-athletes.
2. Non-athletes cut class more often than athletes.
3. Athletes study more each night compared to non-athletes.
4. Athletes put more work in to get good grades from the knowledge they gain from class, compared to non-athletes.

Methodology

*Participants*

Participants in this study were students at a south shore public high school on Long Island, NY. The participants were 186 male and female high school students of varying races of from 14 to 18 years old. Some participants were student athletes (n=104) and others were not (n=82). Out of the entire sample, 21% were male non-athletes, 31% were male athletes, 23% were female non-athletes, and 25% were female athletes.”

*Instrument*

The survey was a total of 34 questions. The first part, which everyone took, was 24 questions long. The survey was administered using a 5 point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 (“Strongly disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly agree”). Some questions were scored reversed, so each question was looked at differently. In this part, I asked the participants to provide me with their self-reported grades (“*What kind of grades do you usually get?)*, with responses ranging from 1 (mostly Fs) to 5 (mostly As). I also wanted to find out how these students felt about their community in regards to academics and athletics (“*Athletics are important in my community”, “Academics are important in my community.”)*. I also wanted to find out how the students felt about school (“ *It would really bother me to get a bad grade”).*  The last 10 questions were used only for athletes to answer. Here, I wanted to find out what sports they play, if they wanted to continue with their sport career in the collegiate level (“*Do you expect to play a sport in college?”)*, and how much time they dedicate to playing the sport each week (“*During your sport season, how many hours a week do you devote to athletics (including playing, practicing, etc.)?”)*. Responses ranged from 1 (1 hour) to 5 (10 hours or more).

*Procedures*

Since all students are required to take English every year of high school, I contacted the English teachers through email and in person. I asked them to hand out the surveys. It took approximately from 5-10 minutes. Students were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would be kept anonymous, that is, their identities would never be publicly associated with their responses. After I got the surveys back, I organized and analyzed the data in an Excel spreadsheet. Lastly, I performed statistical analysis on the data collected.

*Data Analysis*

After the surveys were completed, I analyzed and separated the data into three test (Athletes vs. Non-Athlete, Male Athletes vs. Male Non-Athlete, and Female Athletes vs. Female No-Athletes). Then, I analyzed the results and determined if there was statistical significance. For analysis of the data test, I tested the average for a pair item of athletes and non- athletes and did a 2 sample t-test. Lastly, I compiled my data into graphics and tables.

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Conclusion

The topline finding was that athletes self-report higher grades than non-athletes. According to figure #1, athletes reported statistically significantly higher grades than non-athletes (p<.01). But the most interesting findings were the gender differences in the associations between sports participation and academic outcomes. For females, sport was modestly associated with better academic performance (cutting fewer classes, more studying, etc.) and attitudes about school. My results correlate with precious studies because in a study, because female athletes tend to have higher grades than non-athletes (Maloney, Robert E. McCormick, 1993). For males, sport was actually correlated with worse performance and attitudes. My results also correlate with a previous study, because male athletes lack motivation in the classroom (Covington, Simons, Rheenen, 1999).

Throughout the study I was faced with a few limitations that I had to fix. First, when I was limited to one high school. Due to my district being on the smaller side, we only have one high school and I couldn’t go to different districts to conduct my survey because I was limited on time. I had to get my surveys completed by the participants before last year and the survey was finished being constructed about a month before school ended. Another limitation was the recruitment of English teachers. I had to contact each teacher individually and due to the limited time at the end of the year, a few teachers wouldn’t distribute the survey to their students. Because my surveys were distributed by the teachers in each of their classes, my response rate was close to if not 100%.

Future research that can be done from this study is to use all high schools in New York. If I had unlimited access to schools all over New York, the results would be endless. I could compare the results to where one is from and how that can possibly affect the results. More future research that can be done is taking it to the collegiate level. But I’d monitor what classes the athletes took so the data wouldn’t be skewed.

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