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## Division I Softball Athletes' Perceptions on Stress, Coping, Performance, and Mental Health

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# **DIVISION I SOFTBALL ATHLETES' PERCEPTIONS ON STRESS, COPING, PERFORMANCE, AND MENTAL HEALTH**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science

in

The Department of Kinesiology

by

Rhianna Weall

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## Abstract

Collegiate athletes face numerous stressors in both athletic and academic areas of performance. Their perceptions of situations dictate coping responses and their ability to enact behavior or implement strategies to manage stress levels. This study investigated perceived stress and coping strategies using semi-structured in-person interviews with five current NCAA Division I softball players. Three main themes emerged from the interviews: (a) *Pressure is Privilege*, (b) *Team Dynamic and Identity Development*, (c) *Softball-Centrism*. In the first theme, pressure is viewed as a positive aspect and as an opportunity to perform in areas of high and low levels of confidence. Within the second theme, there is a struggle with identity outside of softball that presents challenge and threat appraisals across the participants. Lastly, the third theme demonstrated passive coping strategies geared towards academics and prominent problem-focused coping strategies taught and actively employed in the area of athletics. Primary appraisals portrayed challenge appraisals as the more prominent form of appraisal when faced with present stressors in a NCAA Division I softball setting. While secondary appraisals varied based on the situation, passive coping strategies were associated with academic stress and problem-focused coping associated with athletic stressors. Practical implications from this study provide guidance for coaches and players to navigate relationships with stress and how to cope with specific situations.

## **Introduction**

Young adults (Generation Z; 18-23) report higher stress levels compared to other segments of the population such as millennials (24-41), Gen X (42-55), boomers (56-74), and older adults (+75) (American Psychological Association, 2020). Physical, social, emotional, and mental demands within daily life are often magnified for young adults participating in collegiate athletics because they must maintain diverse roles specific to the demands of being a student-athlete. Upholding the role of a student-athlete is often challenging because the success of one role may come at the cost of others (Cosh & Tully, 2015). While the role of student should be prioritized, many athletes find themselves in a position where lighter academic workloads are prescribed in order to maximize athletic performance (Burden et al., 2004). Similarly, many student-athletes feel pressure to prioritize their sport over school. These conflicting roles can leave student-athletes with increased levels of stress (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007).

Stress can impact the physical functioning of the body, resulting in potential athletic performance fluctuations (Atito & Abdelaty, 2016). According to Schneiderman et al. (2008), stress is defined as the demands of a situation exceed the resources of the individual. College athletes often deal with academic stressors, social demands, life stressors, and internal conflicts (Hwang & Choi, 2016). Hwang and Choi (2016) revealed that college athletes often identify academic demands as a major source of stress. While navigating the role of both student and athlete, there are also the demands of everyday life that impact stress levels including social demands and the maintenance of relationships (Evans et al., 2012). The added roles of both student and athlete on top of everyday stressors, leave collegiate athletes under greater amounts

of stress than their peers. Therefore, coping with stressors effectively becomes crucial in terms of maintaining or enhancing sport performance and mental health (Dugdale et al, 2002).

Mental health is commonly regarded as an individual issue; however, one's surrounding environment can have a significant impact on mental health (Saxe et al., 2022). According to Saxe et al. (2022), there is a connection between team environments and student-athlete mental health. Examination across multiple levels within mental health needs to occur as there is not one single factor driving decline in mental health (Saxe et al., 2022). There is a stigma surrounding mental health in sport-specific environments including a belief that seeking care will cost playing time or identify the individual as mentally weak in a setting that prioritizes mental toughness (Bisset et al., 2020). The discussion of mental health is increasingly becoming more popular due to the amount of healthy and unhealthy manifestations that occur within an athlete's career (Henriksen et al., 2020).

Performance throughout an athlete's career witnesses constant fluctuations. Elite athletes do not always demonstrate optimal performance, so they are required to cope effectively with declination of performance (Calmeiro et al., 2014). According to Lundkvist et al. (2021), there is a reciprocal link between emotions and performance over time. In efforts to maximize performance, coping strategies have been categorized into three groups: task-oriented, emotion-oriented, and avoidance-oriented (Lundkvist et al., 2021). Performance can be predicted through the knowledge of the coping strategies used in response to stressful situations (Reddy & Ramgopal, 2022).

## **Transactional Model of Stress**

This study is based on the transactional model of stress developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The transactional model of stress is a process-oriented model that is founded on how an individual perceives stressful situations and their following actions. Cognitive appraisal and coping strategies act as mediators between stressful situations and actions.

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), appraisals represent a crucial element of understanding coping responses to stress. Appraisals reflect one's conscious evaluation of a stressor, focusing on its potential level of threat (i.e., primary appraisals "Am I okay?") as well as ways to manage it (secondary appraisals, "What can I do?") (Folkman, 1970). When faced with a stressor, individuals typically frame it as a challenge or threat (i.e., primary appraisals) and determine if active or passive coping strategies should be used (i.e., secondary appraisals). According to Laubmeier et al. (2004), the initial appraisal made by the individual determines the impact of the presented stressor. Fogaca (2019) reports that many student-athletes are resistant to seeking help when faced with excessive amounts of stress and have negative attitudes toward mental health services. This stigma often limits the effectiveness of athletes' ability to deal with stressors. For example, Cosh and Tully (2015) revealed that athletes undergoing multiple stressors reported feeling unequipped to deal with and overcome their stressors.

Coping is defined as thoughts and behaviors used to manage the internal and external demands of situations that are appraised as stressful (Folkman et al., 2004). Forms of coping vary between individuals and are employed to manage stress in specific aspects of life. According to Lazarus (1999), coping strategies (i.e., secondary appraisals) often diverge based on the level of perceived threat associated with the stressor and one's assessment of having the resources to



successfully address it. When a stressor is perceived as irrelevant or having limited threat, it is dismissed. When an individual perceives they possess the resources to manage a threatening stressor, they generally use active coping measures aimed at resolving the stressor. On the other hand, if one's assessment of a threatening stressor is not having the required resources to manage it, typically passive coping strategies are used such as avoidance, rumination, complaining to others, or wishful thinking.

In relation to collegiate athletes, mindfulness, visual imagery, positive self-talk, and proper recovery are often identified as positive coping strategies (Mistretta et al, 2017). However, coping strategies can be either effective or ineffective at reducing stress and achieving desired outcomes. Prior research suggests that coping skills can result in improved athletic performance (Paiva, 2007). Teaching athletes effective active coping skills is often referred to as mental skills training in sport psychology literature. Investigating prominent stressors and coping skills amongst college athletes can help guide more effective mental skills training, potentially leading to increased sport performance and mental health (Fogaca, 2019).

The desired outcome of employed coping is to reduce the overall level of stress endured by the individual to improve mental well-being and increase performance (Anshel et al., 2012). The method of coping is commonly reflected through their perception of appraisal of a specific situation. However, individuals often appraise and reappraise the same situation, which influences the type of coping methods employed. The transactional model of stress and coping embodies a dynamic approach theorizing the environment is in a constant state of change (Giacobbi Jr. et al., 2004). Collective groups of coping strategies are referred to as the individual's coping style. According to Anshel et al. (2012), there is a correlation between the

coping style and the athlete's use of coping strategy following the occurrence of stressful events.

According to Bandura (1977), an individual's belief in their own ability is likely to affect whether they even attempt to cope with the given situations. Based on the initial perception of their own ability in relation to the presented stressor, the primary appraisal determines the coping strategy and effort of employment. Those with a greater perception of self-efficacy increase the level of active effort (Bandura, 1977). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) view control and self-efficacy appraisals as similar concepts (Haney & Long, 1995). Thus, there is a clear need for researchers to continue investigating how student-athletes cope with stress.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate perceived stress and coping strategies in a sample of Division I softball players. Division I is the highest level of collegiate softball in the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association). The Power Five conferences are the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big Ten Conference, Big 12 Conference, Pac-12 Conference, and Southeastern Conference (SEC). The researcher gathered first-hand detailed information through the form of interviews, to identify common coping strategies athletes use to address major stressors. Athletes' beliefs about the effects of stress and coping on performance and mental health will also be explored. The following research questions guided this study: 1) What do Division I softball players perceive as prominent stressors? 2) What coping strategies do Division I softball players use to address prominent stressors? 3) How do players describe relationships among stress, coping, performance, and mental health?

## Methods

This study used a basic qualitative research design (Patton, 2015), relying on semi-structured interviews. The participants represent a purposive sample of 5 current Division I Softball athletes between the ages of 18-24 years old. The players are from the same Division I program with a distinguished softball history in a Power 5 (P5) conference. Recruitment focused on a sample of players with various backgrounds, positions, performance levels (e.g., starters; non-starters), and team experience to gain diverse perspectives on stress and coping. Participants were active members of the team. Participant 1 had 16 years of experience and played infield. Participant 2 had 18 years of experience, switched positions on defense, and is a starter. Participant 3 was a graduate student with 20 years of experience, played defense, and had the most recorded starts for their position. Participant 4 had 18 years of experience, was not usually a starter and played outfield. Participant 5 was a current starter in the infield and had 15 years of experience.

Table 1. Participant Information

Participant #	Age	Year	Years Playing	Starter
1	22	Junior	16	Yes
2	20	Junior	18	Yes
3	23	Grad Student	20	Yes
4	22	Grad Student	18	No
5	20	Junior	15	Yes

### Role of the Researcher

The researcher maintained an insider role attributed to the understanding between the participants and close ties with the sport of softball. Through the role of an insider the researcher had the advantage to recruit participants and establish a comfortable environment for them to be

open and candid in their responses. The insider role enables the investigator to establish rapport with the participants because of their extensive knowledge in the area. According to Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) there are three core advantages to maintaining an insider role with participants: having a greater understanding of the culture, not interfering with social interaction, and establishing a level of intimacy that encourages candid answers.

It should be noted that bias may be present from the researcher's deep ties with the sport of softball and personal experience of being a collegiate softball athlete. Caution was made during the interview process to keep emotions and personal biases from interfering with the participants' responses. The researcher was aware of her reactions and body language as participants responded to the interview questions.

### **Data Collection**

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the LSU Institutional Review Board (See Appendix A). The primary researcher first explained the study and gained permission from the coaching staff. Following the permission, players were contacted via email to set up an initial individual meeting to explain the purpose of the study in-depth and followed up with a set date to conduct the interview if they choose to participate. The researcher informed participants of the purpose of the study and gained informed consent prior to engaging in the interview process. Semi-structured interviews were used to allow for targeted questions and expansion on the topics of perceived stress, coping, performance, and mental health. An interview guide was used to provide a foundation for the interview process (See Appendix B). A voice recording device was used to document each interview following the consent from each participant. These interviews

were conducted in-person to provide the interviewee with a face-to-face experience. The interviews ranged from approximately 33 to 52 minutes ( $M = 41:58$ ,  $SD = 9.02$ ).

Participant information remained confidential within the context of the transcribed interviews. The researcher conducted private in-person interviews to maintain trust and allow for the freedom to discuss without interruption during potential sensitive subjects.

### **Data Analysis and Credibility**

Through thematic analysis the researcher dissected the collected data and established meaning through the rich descriptions given by the participants (See Appendix C). To begin the analytical process, the researcher conducted line coding for each of the interviews. Following the initial coding of each transcription the researcher identified main categories across the interviews (Rich, 2012). These categories were then analyzed to establish overall themes that emerged in the interviews. The themes portray the response to the researcher's initial research questions. In order to strengthen the analysis process, a peer debriefer was included to aid in the triangulation of codes and themes. The peer debriefer had extensive knowledge and experience in the area of research and was not directly involved with data collection. This form of analysis takes on a narrative approach where the researcher applies themes to the collected qualitative data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Although the researcher was well versed in softball, her own experiences were scarcely shared when conducting the interviews, so as to not sway or alter the mindset of a participant. The participants were volunteers within the inclusion criteria limiting the possibility of selection bias regardless of the relationship between the researcher and the participant (Panucci & Wilkins, 2010). At the conclusion of analysis, the researcher met with the participants face-to-face with

the completed analysis of the interviews to ensure that the initial messages were accurate and interpreted correctly.

## **Results**

Three main themes emerged from the data related to the participants' perceptions of stress and coping: Pressure is Privilege, Identity Development and Team Dynamics, and Softball-Centrism. The themes focus on these division I softball players' primary and secondary appraisals of common stressors and implications related to performance and mental health.

### **Pressure Is Privilege**

Few softball players get the opportunity to play collegiate softball at the division I level. Division I players at Power 5 universities are often placed at a greater level than other divisions due to their level of competitors, fans, and the watchful eye of their coaches. At this level of competition these athletes must uphold "the standard of the high level" they are expected to meet (Participant 4). This created a complex dynamic that reinforced confidence for players who achieved this level of softball yet produced a pressure-filled environment. Each participant was mindful of the fact that not every player has these experiences in softball. The opportunity to be placed into pressure situations of playing in a P5 conference was framed as an opportunity (i.e., challenge appraisal), regardless of the outcome because "pressure is privilege" (Participant 3). Players felt "lucky to endure this stress" and to have the chance to perform at such a prominent level (Participant 3). Pressure was not viewed in a negative light, but rather as something these players looked forward to facing. Participant 1 states, "I feel like that's why you play. To be in those big moments and high-pressure situations." The feeling of being counted on and to take on the role of being "that person you put in any situation" drives players to put forth effort and strive for success (Participant 3).

There was a connection between the participants' outlook on the pressures of playing division I softball, the level of confidence attached to their overall sport performance, and application outside of softball. According to Participant 2, “If I'm confident on the field, it usually goes to life...if I'm like zero confidence like last year I become a different me [off the field]”. The emphasis placed on sport performance seemed to influence one’s overall life satisfaction. When facing a pressure situation there was a fluctuation in the level of confidence across all participants that affected their overall performance. Specifically Participant 2, stated she “build[t] confidence within myself and build[t] confidence with other players with me” and it aided in her ability to perform on the field and in other facets of life.

There was a central coping mechanism employed by all five participants that was introduced through their mental health coach called red, yellow, and green light. This coping strategy involved using routines and consistency to regroup mentally in the face of stress or loss of control on the field. Each color represents a different level of perceived stress that called for a unique ‘release’ for each player:

Green light you're good, you're ready to go and nothing is bothering you. The yellow light is starting to feel out of control, and you don't really know where you are. Or something happened that made you kind of snap. And then the red light is out of control. You need to take a long deep breath, maybe a couple (Participant 1).

There were release routines for both offensive and defensive situations aimed to regain a sense of control and poise before the next play or pitch:

We have these routines that we go through, like in the box we have walking- like all of us walk up to the plate with...the barrel of the bat in our hand, and we all have to wipe out the box in some way and we all have our own special routine. I draw a cross in the middle and then take a deep breath.



This form of coping was mentioned unanimously across all five participants and was heavily relied on during game play. Each participant viewed this form of coping to maintain an elevated level of confidence and perform successfully when faced with high-pressure or stressful performance situations.

### **Identity Development and Team Dynamics**

The development of identity was a dynamic process that changed over time. Participants started playing softball from early ages (3-6 years old). Commonly across the participants there was a continuance of play from the time they started to present day: “I started when I was four. So, like t-ball kind of and I have been playing ever since, but I haven't stopped” (Participant 2). Their lives revolve around softball, which engrained the sport into their identity. Throughout high school these participants excelled in their sport compared to others. They were highly awarded and recognized throughout their teams, conferences, and Participant 3 stated: “I got player of the year all four years in my conference...I won three state titles.”

Transitioning into college established new roles for each of the participants that were not roles they were always familiar with maintaining. The fulfillment of these new roles was crucial for the functionality of the team. However, transitioning from being the best player on their high school team to accepting a less prominent role in college was a shock for some of these participants. “I had never really failed so it was a huge adjustment coming in and being literally at the bottom of the totem pole” (Participant 3). Players’ roles were decided by the coaches during the pre-season, causing many to struggle with acceptance.

The ability for these participants to accept their new roles affected the functioning of the team and its cohesion. Functioning as one collective unit was essential to team success.

Establishing a strong and supportive team dynamic was identified as crucial for this team to function effectively and win together. For example, Participant 1 stated, “the camaraderie” of the team stood out above other aspects as the favorite part of their role as a student athlete. These players discussed how the dynamics of the team have not always been positive, which created tension. However, these players agreed that currently there was a “homey vibe” to the team and the overall environment was more positive than previous seasons (Participant 3). According to Participant 1, “if we don’t start off good [in the pre-season], then we are not going to end up good [in the regular season].” In other words, the acceptance of role fulfillment before the season began was perceived to affect the team’s success in the competitive season.

For many of these participants, adjusting to new roles on the team caused personal reflection about identity. For example, Participant 5 stated “I wanted to figure out who I was outside of softball because I lost who I was, and I never realized I didn’t know myself.” The sport had become the individual’s identity and interfered with an occurrence of a more personal level of identity development that others may experience. These student athletes had been deeply molded into their roles that there was a lack of self-identification outside of the realm of sport; “I’m trying to find my other identity” (Participant 4). The lack of identity outside of the participants’ sports merits further attention in future research.

### **Softball-Centrism**

Participants discussed the difficulties of maintaining balance between responsibilities related to being a student and athlete. Athletics was situated at the forefront of the participants’ lives and given more attention than their schoolwork. The participants had academic resources available to them, but without the same level of pressure to perform as compared to the pressure

of athletic performance. In other words, these participants were expected to excel in their performance on the field while simply taking care of business in the classroom. “I felt like I was going all in on softball, so my grades slacked” (Participant 5). Resources and support were viewed as heavily skewed toward improving athletic performance according to these participants. These players were aware of the academic expectations, but understood they took a backseat to softball. This imbalance produced academic stressors:

I’m looking at my grades every single day and my grades are slowly going down and down and down because I’m so tired I can’t do my homework. I’m so annoyed and frustrated about softball and my boyfriend that I’m not doing the homework (Participant 5).

Time management was viewed as a constant struggle throughout the school year by many of the players. Finding effective ways to handle all their responsibilities at once was often characterized as overwhelming. Participant 3 noted that “you don’t feel like you can get everything done in a day.” The daily pre-season schedule consisted of practice, weight training and conditioning, classes, position skill practice, eating, and sleeping; “Then by the time I like get to go home, it’s dark, and I am ready to just go to bed and then you just do the repeat cycle. I get tired” (Participant 2). The workload for these athletes was substantial, but they were expected to meet lofty standards in softball and school. Participant 5 stated, “School is hard for me...I would get good grades [if I wasn’t on the team]; I don’t get bad grades. I just feel like it’s hard for me to balance.”

The players seemed to place greater value with softball performance resources such as their coaches, sport psychologists, and mental health coaches. Participant 4 provided feedback on one resource in that “we have a mental coach...one thing he does that I do like is that we stick to

routines like all the time.” Although this is a single method taught by their mental health coach it is used in multiple areas of their athletic performance in both offense and defense. However, the environment is centered on softball and overall athletic performance. This creates difficulty for some participants to address issues outside of softball; “You feel embarrassed to ask for help [academically], but it actually takes strength to ask for help” (Participant 3). The participants provided myriad examples of support systems in relation to athletics but were not able to provide similar examples when regarding academics.

The participants reported using more active coping skills toward athletic performance compared to academics. Participant 5 described it in the following manner, “We say we have all these accommodations [for academics] but it's not as accommodating as everyone realizes.” There were designated academic advisors for softball players, but they were often viewed as impersonal and playing a passive-role in the eyes of the participants: “Our [academic] advisors are our advisors, but they're not really looking at it [progress towards degree] because there are so many of us, they can't 1-on-1 with us and figure out what's best for you” (Participant 5). These players did not attach the same amount of value with the help provided to them by their academic advisors compared to the coaches and staff that directly guided their performance on the field. This seemed to lead to more negative appraisals and passive coping strategies in the classroom compared to on the field.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate perceived stress and coping strategies of Division I softball players. The following research questions guided this study: 1) What do Division I softball players perceive as prominent stressors? 2) What coping strategies do Division I softball players use to address prominent stressors? 3) How do players describe relationships among stress, coping, performance, and mental health? The transactional model of stress established by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) asserts that stress perception of an individual is based on the difference between their appraisal of a situation as stressful and their available coping resources. The results of this study are discussed from a transactional model of stress lens in the following paragraphs. Specifically, the emergent themes are explained using primary and secondary appraisals as a framework of understanding.

### **Primary Appraisals**

Primary cognitive appraisals are either challenge or threat focused (Lazarus, 1999). When presented with a situation where an individual perceives to have the resources to overcome a stressor, it is typically framed as a challenge opportunity; however, if an individual perceives the demands of the situation to outweigh one's resources, then it is typically framed as a threat (Williams & Cumming, 2012). Results from this study showed that in many cases primary appraisals were different for softball and academic situations. For example, in the Pressure is Privilege theme, participants focused on challenge appraisals. When faced with pressure situations related to softball, participants often thought about their extensive preparation and prior successful performances to take control of the situation rather than shy away from it. Similarly, in the Softball Centric theme, participants discussed thriving in high pressure game

situations when they had elevated levels of confidence in their abilities. Based on the findings reported by Van Rens et al. (2021), athletes generally focus on challenge appraisals to maximize performance in sport. Results demonstrated that participants often used challenge appraisals when faced with softball related stressors on the field.

Fluctuations in confidence levels were evident in this study related to factors outside of softball and their impact on overall performance. Specifically in academia, the Softball-Centrism theme highlighted the additional stress of school that was not given as much attention as athletic performance. Threat appraisals frequently present maladaptive coping strategies and focus motivation on avoiding failure. Fear of failure has been associated with psychological stress according to Gustafsson et al. (2017). Within the Pressure is Privilege theme, there was a desire to meet expectations of the team, school, coaches, and self when faced with stressors.

Acceptance of roles was crucial for the development of the team. However, participants who played a less prominent role on the team generally appraised the situation as a threat rather than a challenge. Within the Team Dynamic and Identity theme, individual identity was centered on softball, and it was difficult for players to accept sitting on the bench and having a minimized role on the team. Participants discussed the elevated level of stress that occurred during the pre-season because this was the time when coaches made decisions about player roles such as the starting rotation.

In the Softball-Centrism theme, the participants often reported threat appraisals due to the emphasis placed on athletics over academics. School was identified as a major stressor outside of softball due to the time spent focused on softball athletics reduced time spent focused on academics. The results of the study demonstrated that the athletic and academic workloads

created stress for the participants due to time constraints and the feeling of being overworked. Time management skills were a form of coping that was not employed efficiently to create balance between schoolwork and softball obligations. The absence of time management strategies created an association of threat appraisals to academics for participants. The travel schedule linked to softball resulted in missing classes and limited the amount of time participants felt they had to get work completed emerged as an additional stressor.

Finally, both forms of primary appraisals were presented in the Team Dynamic and Identity theme. Some of the players felt a strong need for identity development outside of their softball. They were aware that softball dominated their individual identity and that playing softball would be over in the near future. These athletes started seeking out other opportunities to grow their identity beyond softball. This struggle with identity was sometimes viewed as a challenge, grounded in optimism of moving on and doing new things. However, in some cases the players viewed moving on from softball as a threat appraisal due to the fear of not knowing what the next steps would be.

### **Secondary Appraisals**

Secondary appraisals focus on how individuals react to stressors and are categorized into active and passive coping strategies (Lazarus, 1999). Active coping strategies occur after challenge primary appraisals while passive coping strategies happen after threat appraisals. Pressure is Privilege theme identified routines on both offense and defense as a form of problem-focused active coping to employ when in a stressful situation. Routines are a prominent strategy used by all the participants when placed in a stressful situation and are unique to each participant for offense and defense. There are specific situations where the participants employ these

routines, and it was based off a red light, yellow light, and green light system. The participants tended to start in a green light stage and disregard signs of a yellow light stage, where they would perform their release, and result in skipping yellow and go straight to red. However, when presented with pressure situations there was a tendency to thrive in these situations because they were viewed as favorable when performance was high, as highlighted in Pressure is Privilege.

Previous literature suggests that athletes with higher levels of performance anxiety were more likely to employ passive coping strategies (Dias et al, 2012). It should be noted that there were minimal forms of active coping strategies employed in relation to academic stress across the participants. The Softball-Centrism theme identified various active coping strategies regarding athletic performance, but academic coping strategies were generally more passive in nature. For example, in academic performance coping took a passive role through their general lack of interaction with academic advisors. Academic advisors were provided as a resource to aid with academic stress, however, there was less emphasis/active support employed in this role as compared to the emphasis placed on improving athletic performance. Alongside academic advisors, study tables were a requirement for players if they were not doing well in the classroom. The players did not really view academic advisors as a tool that could enhance their academic performance. Rather, they were almost viewed as a punishment.

In the Team Dynamics and Identity theme, the participants reported softball participation since childhood and this aspect of their life often defined them. Participants explicitly identified the desire to find an identity outside of softball because after college many of them did not envision softball as part of their futures. Active forms of coping were presented through participants expanding their social circles, exploring self-discovery, and pondering



hobbies outside of softball. Passive coping strategies also occurred including fearing the future and at times feeling overwhelmed and procrastinating. Identity conflict between sport and roles outside of sport is a common stressor that athletes face (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007).

## **Conclusions**

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There were limitations associated with this study. The interviews were conducted during pre-season for the participants, which could mediate the responses given the most stressful time of the year is for them is during the season. Future studies should track players across pre-season, regular season, post-season, and off-season. This would identify prominent stressors and coping strategies across the length of an entire year in comparison to conducting a solitary group of interviews at one point in time. Finally, this study only focused on the perspective of players. Future studies should include coaches, performance coaches, and academic advisors in order to obtain a more holistic perspective on softball players' stress, coping, performance, and mental health.

### **Practical Implications**

This study provides insight for coaches, players, and academic advisors regarding their involvement with division I softball players. It provides coaches with first-hand responses that can shape approaches to practices or coping strategies to manage their players' levels of stress on and off the field. The results of this study provide an inside look into the minds of the players that might allow coaches to proactively address stressors both on and off the field. The findings may also help players implement active coping strategies when they experience similar stressors. Academic advisors can use the results from this study as a way to find strategies that promote a more active role in the academic pursuits of their assigned athletes.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, these division I softball players faced stressors in both academics and athletics. Challenge appraisals and active coping strategies were more prevalent regarding softball situations while threat appraisals and passive coping strategies were more prominent in academic settings. Coaches and supporting faculty need to be aware of their players as more than just athletic performance vessels, providing encouragement across multiple aspects of their players' lives. There is a clear need for division I softball players to experience balance in order to flourish both on and off the field.

## Appendix A. Institutional Review Board Approval



**TO:** Alex Christopher Garn  
LSUAM | Col of HSE | Kinesiology |  
CC00163

**FROM:** Alex Cohen  
Chairman, Institutional Review Board

**DATE:** 25-Oct-2022

**RE:** IRBAM-22-1132

**TITLE:** Division I Softball Athletes Perceptions  
on Stress, Coping, and Performance.

**SUBMISSION TYPE:** Initial Application

**Review Type:** Expedited Review

**Risk Factor:** Minimal

**Review Date:** 25-Oct-2022

**Status:** Approved

**Approval Date:** 25-Oct-2022

**Approval Expiration Date:** 24-Oct-2023

**Expedited Categories:** 07

**Requesting Waiver of Informed Consent:** No

**Re-review frequency:** Annually

**Number of subjects approved:** 10

**LSU Proposal Number:**

**By:** Alex Cohen, Chairman

**Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:**

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects\*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the

- individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
  7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
  8. **SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.**

*\* All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/research>*

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## Appendix B. Interview Guide

Topic: Perceived Stress Performance in Division I Softball Athletes

Introduction: My name is Rhianna Weall I am a second-year graduate student here at LSU studying Kinesiology. Our purpose of being here today is to conduct an interview about stressors related to being a Division I softball player. We will talk about what you think are major stressors, how you deal with them, and how they relate to your life on and off the field. As a reminder, this interview is being recorded, but your identity will remain confidential. This recording will be transcribed and analyzed for structure and outcomes based on our concluding results, following that conclusion, the interview will be deleted. Please note that I am a mandatory reporter for Title IX and will be required to share sensitive information if presented.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Opening Question: So, how long have you been playing softball?

What got you into the sport?

Tell me about your high school softball experiences.

How does softball fit into your lifelong plans?

What made you decide to come to LSU?

What position do you play at LSU?

What has your playing time been like at LSU so far?

1. What do you like most about playing softball for LSU?
  - What are some other things that you like about playing for LSU?
2. What are the most stressful aspects about playing softball for LSU?
  - Can you give me an example of a stressful situation you have been through at LSU?
  - Are there certain times of the year that create more stress than others? Why?
3. What are the most stressful aspects of being a Division I student athlete at LSU?
  - To what extent does playing softball at LSU cause stress outside of the team?
  - Examples?
4. When you experience a lot of stress, how do you feel emotionally?
  - Physically?
  - Mentally?
5. What do you think are the main causes of these stressors?
  - How do you perceive stress? Negative? Positive? Explain.
6. How effectively do you think you cope with your stressors?
  - Explain
7. What coping strategies do you normally use when dealing with these stressors?
  - Can you give me an example?
  - To what extent does the type of stress influence the coping strategy you use?
  - How have you changed the way you deal with stress? If so, how? If not, why not?
8. What forms of support do you receive to deal with your stress?
  - Describe the most prominent form of support you receive regarding stress.

- What type of support do you want to receive?
  - How would you like to see change within the support systems you currently have in place?
9. How do the stressors in your life influence your ability to perform on the field?
    - Can you think of any positive examples?
    - Negative examples?
  10. How do the coping strategies that you use relate to your performance?
  11. When you are playing softball, how do you maintain your poise when you are in pressure situations?
    - Can you give me an example?
    - Are there any specific situations that trigger you to lose that sense of poise? Explain.
    - How do you view pressure situations?
  12. Based on the stressors you've talked about and your ability to cope with them, describe your overall mental health.
    - What aspects of your health are most affected by the stressors of being a Division I athlete?
    - What steps have you taken, if any, to improve your mental health off the field?
  13. What are your concluding thoughts on our conversation about stress today? Do you have any other thoughts about topics we haven't discussed today?

## Appendix C. Interview Transcripts

### Participant #1 12/8/2022

*The topic that we are going to be talking about today is going to be perceived stress performance in division I softball athletes. My name is Rhianna Weall I am a second-year graduate student here studying Kinesiology. Our purpose of being here today is to conduct an interview about stressors related to being a Division I softball player. We will talk about what you think are major stressors, how you deal with them, and how they relate to your life on and off the field. As a reminder, this interview is being recorded, but your identity will remain confidential. This recording will be transcribed and analyzed for structure and outcomes based on our concluding results, following that conclusion, the interview will be deleted. Please note that I am a mandatory reporter for Title IX and will be required to share sensitive information if presented. Do you have any questions before we begin?*

No.

*Alright Cool.*

*So, just to get started...can you tell me how long you have been playing softball?*

I started when I was 5 in tball, then went to slow-pitch, not slow-pitch, coach pitch then kept going. So, 16, 17 years.

*I know you started with tball, but what got you into the sport?*

Watching my brother, he's two years older than me and I would always go to his games because my parents couldn't leave me at home. And I would actually sit and watch the games while most kids would run off and play at the playground. But my mom saw that I was actually like paying attention and interested so they put me in it. And I ended up loving it.

*When it comes to carrying through with the sport, tell me about how high school softball was for you.*

Uh, honestly, I don't remember much about that age. I guess like being born through like 16 a lot of it is like a blur. I don't really know why. But high school wasn't bad, we didn't have the best team. It was normal, like that was what I would look forward to most every day I played volleyball too, so I didn't get to be there for the off-season for softball because I was always in-season. In the fall was volleyball and spring softball. But I mean it wasn't that big of a toll on me I did start having problems like injury in high school that are still with me today. But yeah.

*Okay, how do you see softball fitting into your lifelong plan?*



Well, before I started having knee problems, I pictured myself going to the Olympics and other stuff, but as of right now I might play a couple more pro-seasons. A couple pro-seasons after I graduate and see what else happens. This past summer I got to play with the USA team. And we did the world games and some other tournaments. But, yeah, that was really fun. We'll see if I last until 2028 for the next Olympics, but yeah.

*What brought you here specifically?*

I started getting recruited at like 13 or 14 and it was like 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade and I didn't know what I wanted then. But I started going on all of these visits. I was about to commit to southern DI program, which is like the top dog right now. And then I came on a visit here to rule it out. The coach that I was playing for at the time was like blocking me from here. She wanted all her kids to go to a specific southern institution, the best program ever. And one of my teammates on that team's dad was Coach A's husband and he was like just go and give it a shot. Just see what they have to say, you can still say no, like it's not gonna hurt my feelings. And I was like "Okay, whatever". So, my parents made me go and I was very upset about it. I didn't wanna go at all. And I ended up falling in love with the people and the place.

*So, what position do you play?*

Shortstop.

*What has your playing time been like so far?*

I have started every game-

*Since, being a freshman?*

Yes.

*What do you like most about playing softball here?*

I would say the comradery as a team. Last year we didn't have the best teammates, but this year is like what I've been wanting and what I saw whenever I came on my visit. Like the team getting together even when we don't have to, just like coming together and actually being a part of something. I think we have that this year and I love it.

*Good, what are some other things outside of just the comradery that you like about playing for this team specifically compared to other programs?*

I would say the coaches one, and second is the facilities. Because we have the Facility A, which is the, I don't even remember, like 8-million-dollar facility. The fact that we get to have that, our own weight room, our own everything. Like a lot of DI schools still have to share they have a

little barn with no A/C. Ours is full A/C, we can do whatever we want. We have an upstairs cardio deck and it's top-notch.

*What would you say are probably the most stressful aspects of playing softball here?*

I'd say trying to please everyone. So, as a freshman I came in and was like "okay, you're the starting shortstop" and in my head I'd be like that's me. But then Being a freshman was much easier than being a sophomore and now junior. Cause I didn't need to try and find myself I could just come in as who I thought I was. Last year was tough. in like all aspects of trying to please my family, my teammates, the fans, it was- I don't know if it really took a toll on me. I think it could've happened in a way. But just trying to please everyone. Figure out who I want to be. I think this year I'm starting to figure out more of who that is.

*Do you think there are certain times of the year that are more stressful than others? And if you could explain why.*

I think it's preseason. Cause that's whenever you start playing together as a team. Most people would say post-season because like, intensity. But I think at the beginning is what sets the tone for all of it. So, if we don't start off good then we are not gonna end up good. And its preseason and figuring out who we are and every filling into their rolls. Like not everyone is going to play all of the time. knowing that you might be a bench player for the year might be hard for some people. and if they do recognize that and accept this role and be like "okay" - not a cheerleader, but just like doing cheers and keeping the energy that way.

*What do you think are the most stressful aspects of being a division I student athlete here?*

Sorry, repeat the question.

*What do you think are the most stressful aspects of being a division I student athlete here?*

I think the time management part. Like having time. This semester I took 18 hours and normally I have like 15. But I would say managing time that we actually have to put into softball. Yeah, we have our 20 hour weeks or whatever and stick to that. Its the having to do the extra reps that we didn't quite get in practice. and they're never mandatory, but you know you're gonna need them to go somewhere. Like we don't really do, and I talk to a lot of people about the extra work, and we are the only school that actually follows the time restrictions. It makes me so mad. Having to manage the extra reps and schoolwork on top of that. And if your GPA is not great and you have study hall hours and you can do up to 8 hours. I think freshman have 8 hours.

*Just coming in?*

Yeah, they have to sign in, sit down 8 hours a week. That on top of our 20-hour weeks and sleeping and eating. its a lot to take in.

*To what extent of playing softball here causes stress outside of the team? Does it relate back to the time management?*

I don't- can you rephrase the question?

*So, when you have being a student first. being able to take care of your schoolwork/ classwork, when playing softball comes in how does that cause stress to you. And not just within the team and teammates. Does being on the team for you cause other things to trickle down?*

It doesn't really cause anything that happens here. I would say its more between them and their families. Like I'm from a southern state, so I only live 4 hours away. So, my parents expect me to come home every once in a while, on the weekend. Like I can't do that. First of all, that's too off days, and you don't take two off days. Second, I still have to study. I still have this school thing going on. So, then they're mad at me for not coming home and think I'm putting them on the back burner. and I'm like I don't know what else you want me to do.

*When you experience stress how do you feel emotionally?*

I think I mostly feel it whenever I'm not on the field. I'm one of those people that when I step on the field, I feel like most of my problems go away. I mean you have to be in the moment to do good at what you are doing. Trying to hit a ball coming at you 70 mph, you can't do that thinking about other things. Its gonna be a horrible practice, you don't want that. But off the field I'd say like quiet time right before I go to bed is when I go through like all of it and I'm like "I'm starting to struggle, I'm starting to slip". Like I don't know what's happening. so then I make myself busy all of the time and then I'm like really tired.

*I was going to say, physically when do you feel that stress. How does your body feel?*

I think that the tired probably takes it. And knee problems plus pain. And it's been happening for a while and with last year the stress of trying to figure out who I want to be, who I need to please is what mainly took a toll, and I didn't realize it then. And now that I am talking about it. Because right now is really good for me. All of it. Emotional crap and what-not.

*Good, and now that you're talking about it, you're starting to "Oh hey!". What do you think are the main causes of stress for you?*

I would say the expectation. So, like, expectation in anyway. Academically, I'm expected to make all A's "not really" and like high grades. and on the field be an all-American. I came in freshman year and became an all-American and last year was horrible. So, the expectation is still there that I need to get back too. I also feel like, I don't know if this even goes with the question, but like all of my life I need to do something for someone else or please people and that is what motivates me. the ability to do that. like if someone wants me or if someone wants someone to

do- I don't know- see five cartwheels, "okay". like I'll please you. That's just what my motivation wraps around.

*Okay, so how do you perceive that stress? Do you see it as a positive thing? Negative thing?*

For the most part I feel like its pretty positive. Like if I'm fielding balls on an off day. Like Monday, my roommate and I went to the fields to field balls and coach was in her office because I saw her car outside. And then I'm trying to make it more real and do things better because I know someone's watching. I just feel like if someone is always watching me then I do things right.

*Specifically, if you look at just that expectation of softball would that feeling still be positive or negative?*

I feel positive if it's going well. And negative if its not. Cause like last year I was like "Oh my gosh" I'm trying to please all of these fans and all this stuff, and I just want to do it good and not look stupid. So, in that way it could be good. But mostly positive.

*And then, how effectively do you feel you cope with the stress?*

I think I do fine with the stress. I think tis the other parts that seem to get me. We do this survival week where one of the weeks rotations where one of our psychologist come in and just like, this was my first time meeting her, and we were in our groups, so I was with the other juniors. and she asked a question about who our biggest, not motivator, encourages us and discourages us the most. And I was like "uhhhh, I think it's my parents." They do it at the same time. like they encourage me by discouraging me to do better. and then it goes back to the pleasing thing. if I'm, no, if I'm just- I don't know how it goes, but. Okay.

*You're okay. How do you feel like, give me an example of how you cope with that.*

I don't...

*That's okay, that's an answer too! There is no right or wrong answer to any of these questions.*

I just pick it up and I move it to the side. and keep playing. Like if I recognize it, I don't think I actually do anything with it.

*I know you talked about keeping yourself busy to the point where you weren't thinking about what was going on, so its there, but not.*

Yeah, yeah.

*And then I was going to say what extent of the type of stress, whether you feel it emotionally, physically, or mentally, how does that influence the coping strategy? So, I know you said you put it off to the side, but do you feel that you would initiate it in a different way?*

Like if its stress through not performing then I over-do it at practice. and I will stay and do way too many reps or hurt my knee or do something else. I will just over exert myself trying to get to that point which doesn't help in any way. But last year I went to the "I can't do work" so then I never did it. So, then I just- last year was different.

*That's okay. Thats what we're here to talk about Do you think you have changed the way you deal with stress? So, from any point in time and if so, why? why not?*

I don't know if this year was just easier all around or if I did cope with it in a way. I'm not sure if that's okay. It all just seemed so much easier.

*Now? Then it did last year?*

Yeah.

*What kind of support do you receive to deal with stress?*

Like friend type thing?

*Yeah, it can be friends...*

I think friends then, like my roommate is my biggest person I talk to too.

*Okay, what type of support do you want to receive?*

I feel like if this was last year, I would want it from my coaches. Like that they see me and see that I'm struggling and want to help me. but it was more like "Hey, what's wrong/ what are you doing? Whatever, fix it. " Rather than sit me down and have a conversation you know like they see me.

*How would you like to see change in the support systems that you currently have in place? I know you referenced last year, but is it kind of the same currently or-*

I would say it would be the same.

*How would you like to see that change and have them dive more into you than just as a player?*

Yeah, for sure. That. And friends. My roommate. Not that I wanted her to go and like to talk to the coaches. Like going to the root of the problem and having them come down. Me and my roommate talking that's not going to change much. I'm just venting at that point.

*Yeah, how do the stressors in your life affect your ability to perform?*

It depends. I don't know. Sometimes it would be, like last year if its prolonged, it would impact it. Because I would be thinking all these negative thoughts "Oh shit I've done bad all year, I don't know what else to do". This year, I don't know yet.

*The biggest thing is that this is taking place within your pre-season so its because you have already had a competitive season prior to now. You kind of know what to expect and can go from there. Do you have any like, I know you said it depends, but do you have any real positive examples that impacted how you played on the field, I know you said you struggled remembering...*

I didn't even think about this. but I am kind of a religious person, and before the games I would go to the fence and pray and then go back with the team. And some other girls would come too. But I feel like in one way a coping mechanism, like you go do it and let all your worries out, whatever, and then you're there, like you're playing a game and you don't have to think about anything else.

*Exactly, a lot of people get lost at that point with what's going on, so yeah, it definitely mattered. Do you have any solid negative experiences, I know you said it depends, but is there anyone you can think of that influenced your ability to perform?*

I feel like after getting into a slump, I feel. like that could be one. And the negative self-talk that happens with it. like "I don't know why I'm up to bat right now" "I don't know why I'm still in the three hole when I haven't done shit for five weekends now". So, things like that continue to eat up at me.

*And do you feel like you are kind of holding it in in a sense, by putting it off to the side and then it just comes back if it doesn't change.*

That's what's happening...

*So how do the coping strategies that you use, even though you said you don't cope with them, how do you feel that it relates to your performance?*

It builds up. If I allow a couple bad things to keep eating up at me, then yeah. But if its a good stretch then I don't think because of that it affects me because I don't need to cope with it. But I also think that I base a lot of feelings in everything on performance if you can tell, both good and bad.

*When you're in softball how do you maintain your poise in pressure situations? And do you have any specific examples?*

We have these routines that we go through, like in the box we have walking- like all of us walk up to the plate with the bat- the barrel of the bat in our hand, and we all have to wipe out the box in some way and we all have our own special routine. I draw a cross in the middle and then take a deep breath which, you know, relaxes you which everything says.

*Okay, so once you take a deep breath, then?*

So, that happens and if a bad play happens or if we feel triggered like we call it yellow lights, red lights, and green lights. So, if we're starting to get into a yellow light then we have to do a release, I un-Velcro my batting glove, put them back, buckle them down and then I have to look up and take a deep breath and get back in. And it's the same for defense. We have our approach. Before I go into the approach as the pitcher's take their deep breath then I take mine with her. And then go in, so deep breath.

*Okay, and can you go into a little bit more about the yellow light, red light, can you go into that in a bit more detail? Just because is there a specific thing that causes you to lose your sense of poise?*

So, we use our mental performance coach, and this is where it came from. Greenlight you're good, you're ready to go and nothing is bothering you. Yellow light is starting to feel out of control, and you don't really know where you are. Or something happened that made you kind of snap. and then red light is out of control. You need to take a long deep breath, maybe a couple. We talk about them all the time whenever we do them. Like what's an example of getting in a yellow light. But I realize, like in the box I try to and not let myself believe I'm in a yellow light and barely do a release, like "Oh, I'm not there." and then it happens again, and I am there, so then I skip yellow and go to red.

*That's okay, do you feel that's because you don't have active coping mechanisms*

I mean, probably, yeah.

*How do you view pressure situations, specifically with offense and defense?*

I love them.

*You love them?*

Yes! I feel like that's why you play. To be in those big moments and high pressure situations. I mean you're not always going to succeed but if you practice them more then yeah. Because almost every time on my last round I'll be like "Okay, runner on second and third, down by one, bottom of the 7<sup>th</sup> inning world series, game three whatever". And I get up there and have one at bat. And if I hit it bad then I guess I'm ending on that one today. So, I know how that feels. And

then the other one I'll throw my bat and celebrate. So, just putting myself in those situations so when it actually happens, I can feel calm in those situations.

*Okay, and specifically with defense?*

I do the same thing...uhhhh...I don't end on a bad one with defense. Defense kind of got me coming into college. I used to feel really strong about it. And I love defense. But then injuries happened, and I can't go practice as much and I don't really know how to feel about it. With less practice, less good performance. Yeah, I kind of do the same thing. Gotta get one more out or whatever. I did it on Monday and it was a bad hop and it hit me in the stomach, and I was like "s\*\*\*" and then I had to do it again. Like I'll keep going until I succeed on that one, but offense is different. I don't know why.

*I was about to say, what about coming to college made defense feel different for you?*

The changes. Like I thought I knew what I was doing and then started changing what I thought was my strength. I was like "okay, I don't know what my strength is anymore".

*Offense then?*

Yeah, I knew that was going to change. Like I was never the strongest hitter. So, I knew things were going to change after that period and I didn't have a problem with that. I've changed my swing like five times since I've been here. But I think I found one that actually sticks.

*When it comes back to those pressure situations, I know you said you love them, but has there ever been one you feel like ate up at you? And had that red light situation.*

Yes, this game was last year. Post-season, I don't know. I think I was 4 for 30...it was bad...and I came up to bat we were down by one. No runs had been scored since the first inning and it was 3-2, we were in the bottom of the 7<sup>th</sup> I was up to bat with two outs. Like not very confident, like "okay, I can't be the last out". Because I'm not going to do that. I ended up getting a hit down the line, it wasn't a very good hit, I got lucky, but...what was the question?

*That's okay! Being able to hear you talk about any kind of pressure situation whether or not it was good or bad is good because it lets me see how you're dealing with them even if you aren't having active coping strategies. Still, it does make a difference.*

Okay,

*Based on the stressors you have talked about mostly, just expectations being the biggest one and your ability to cope with them, which we talked about, we need to figure that out, describe your overall mental health. All three aspects, physically, mentally, emotionally, how do you feel?*

Right now, I feel great.



*Can you elaborate on that a little bit? What about that- what's going on in life makes you feel that way?*

I feel like everything is stable and under control. I had a good fall with my knee, like it hurt a little bit, but it wasn't anything that I couldn't manage. Knowing that that's going to be okay, because in the past it was injections up down had a scope surgery and it went okay. I don't know what's going to happen and then this past summer with a pro-team, I think that might be a big deal too. I didn't do great, but I wasn't like bottom of the pack type thing. I did get to start in the championship game, at first base though.

*That's okay.*

But being able to hang out with them and understand why they play and their thought process of the game I feel like I learned a lot more so when I came back, I was like "okay, I'm older than I think I am". Like I have more experience. Whatever happens I can handle it. I think that's where it came from.

*So, you had this transition from where you were last year and then you had this "Oh snap!" it clicked over the summer and now you're in this good spot right now. What aspects of your health are most affected by being a division I athlete? Where do you feel you're getting hit the most when that stress of the expectation does come along?*

I'd say emotionally. I don't like to show my emotions. So, I just keep those bottled up.

*Do you care to show them a little bit right now?*

What do you mean?

*Talk about them a little bit.*

I mean I don't really have anything at the moment.

*When it comes to being in season and specifically, we can go back to last year when you said you weren't at your highest like you are now. Compare emotionally how you felt then to how you felt this fall season. How would you describe the two?*

I'd say last year it was a lot of like not self-pity things with myself it was very selfish emotions. Like I didn't get a hit in the time that we needed it, but we still won the game. It was emotional in that way. I felt like everything was just out to get me, like all these bad things, it all just came back to me. No matter what happened- I don't know exactly how to explain it.

*That's okay. To the best of your ability. And with being where you are now- how would you describe yourself emotionally?*

I am very happy with where I am. Not a lot happening, joyful. I don't know, I feel like everything just seems to fall in line right now. Like at practices- I think it's also the people around me. This year we had some transfers that kind of lit up the emotions in the locker room. Everyone would come to practice and be like "Oh my god we have practice again..." and now we're like "Yeah Practice!" and we get to hang out. The people around me make me see what it's like to actually have fun playing softball

*What steps have you taken, if any, to improve your mental health off the field?*

None. It just got better.

*I know you mentioned the transfers and before you talked about being able to get together as a team do you feel like all the togetherness that's happening is playing a role into this happy or joyful feeling?*

I would say so. I mean my performance this fall wasn't great, but it felt good because I felt good doing whatever I was doing.

*What are your concluding thoughts on our conversation about stress today?*

That I need to find a coping mechanism.

*So, identify a coping mechanism for sure. And do you have any other thoughts on topics that we might not have talked about? So, anything related to stress, coping, or your performance.*

Yeah actually, I don't know if this Whenever I was little everyone always talks about Gymnastics when they start out its rough. There's no mercy on the kids and they're six years old or whatever. I feel like its the same with me. My dad was always really hard on me. My parents only coached me until I was 8. So, until like 2013. But it was never, it was always performance based and I think that's where a lot of it comes from. Because if I did good, I got praise from my parents and who doesn't want praise from their parents. I didn't really have anyone to talk to while growing up. I had my teammates, but that was pretty much it. I was always changing teams, so nothing really ever stuck. Until I went to high school, I had one friend that is still my friend today. And she is like the longest friend I've had.

*It does relate, in case you're wondering.*

I figured it did because it started earlier and was performance based.

*But if we don't have anything else, I am okay and if you don't have anything then we are set.*

**Participant #2**  
**12//2022**

*My name is Rhianna Weall I am a second-year graduate student here studying Kinesiology. Our purpose of being here today is to conduct an interview about stressors related to being a Division I softball player. We will talk about what you think are major stressors, how you deal with them, and how they relate to your life on and off the field. As a reminder, this interview is being recorded, but your identity will remain confidential. This recording will be transcribed and analyzed for structure and outcomes based on our concluding results, following that conclusion, the interview will be deleted. Please note that I am a mandatory reporter for Title IX and will be required to share sensitive information if presented. Do you have any questions before we begin?*

No.

*Just to get started how long have you been playing softball?*

I started when I was four. So, like tball kind of and I have been playing ever since, but I haven't stopped.

*What got you into the sport starting out?*

I have two sisters and the first one started, and she was like the “guinea pig” that’s what we called her. so, she didn't get to go to college for it. My parents didn't do the things necessary to allow her to get seen by coaches. so, she was the guinea pig. They put my second sister in softball so then they put me in it too. It was three sisters in softball and just had fun with it.

*Tell me about high school softball experiences for you. Good memories, bad memories, the whole thing. Give me a recap.*

My high school was really not good with softball. ours is like easy and I made varsity the four years and I was good for that. and it was nothing though. the practices were kind of pointless. So, I would practice on my own outside of it because I still had travel going on during it. So, yeah it was bad. but it was still fun with the girls that I played with because they were my friends over there that I played with. and then I went to another school than my sisters. So, I got to play against her and that was like a fun little moment. m game.

*Do you have any specific memories from high school or a game situation?*

I would say like last practices were always fun. We would have balloon fights and everything and just eat desserts and everything. It was fun. Those were the good moments.

*How does softball fit into your lifelong plans? Where do you see it going?*

Ooh, after...well I'm a senior now but I have still have an extra year because of covid, but after that I'll be done. I don't think I'm going to go to the professional one, I'm not going to do that. I don't know maybe like coach, not college, but the little young ones. Thats what my older sister does sometimes. Maybe that. I don't know.

*Is there a reason why?*

No, not really. I feel like I've done it so much I just want to find my own person like outside of softball. I'm still looking for it.

*What made you decide to come here?*

I was a freshman in high school, and I committed that freshman year. and I was just looking at it as a cool place to be and I wanted to go away from home because I'm from the west coast. So, once you got here it was completely different from there. Culture, the people. Like it was cool and that was like what drew me into it. And my coaches were very genuine and real to me and the players too. Whenever we would go to different officials you can tell who wants to be there and who doesn't based on how they interact. And all of the players interacted were really super nice and everything. The football game also sold me. like I love football. that's what bought in my dad and then yeah...I would say the people. I'm more of like a people person. If I don't feel comfortable with them then I won't be comfortable. So, people.

*What position do you play here and if you've played more than one?*

So, coming in I was just first base because I'm a lefty and its kind of hard to go anywhere else. I played that and then freshman year hit and then covid and then my sophomore year, which is technically my freshman year or like my second freshman year. I started hitting really well and my coaches were like "Do you know how to play outfield a little bit?" I mean like I played a little bit maybe a few times, but I'll give it a go. They put me in right for a few games and I'm not like cocky I promise, but I am like really confident in my defense at first. So, they're also confident with that too. They would do this like switch-a-roo thing. It's complicated to talk or explain it. Even the commentators don't even know how to explain it. But she makes an adjustment where she can switch me to first and put someone in and then use them up. So, first and outfield.

*What has your playing time been like so far?*

So, going back to before covid hit. We didn't really get to play a lot because we didn't even play any SEC because of covid. I would only play defense. Cause that was my " I'm good at it"

*Yes, confidence.*

Yeah! I'm confident in it. So, then I would only play defense and I wouldn't hit. and then the next year is when I got things going with my bat. So, like the first month I didn't really see action in the batter's box and then once I took my opportunity and like did well with it, they put me in, and I would play and would be a starter for there. and then last year was a tough year for me, so I didn't really play. I would just play defense and then this year also really nothing going on.

*What do you like most about playing softball here?*

I would say, its like a double whammy. Like the crowds. The crowds are like a fun thing but if you're not doing good it can be a little rough. but I just like the cheers and the team in general. I know like last year we had an issue with drama, but this year its like different and its fun and everyone just can tell we all love each other and are here for it. so, I would say the people again.

*And do you have anything else you would say that brought you here outside of the people?*

Resources that we have I would say. The mike is like our indoor facility and no one else has that. and we have our machines that we could go and look at the pitcher's rpm, so like the spins kind of thing and how fast they spin and translate it to the machine and go prepare for them before. So, once we were in the game, we were comfortable with them. Resources for sure, coaches, love them.

*What about the coaches?*

They have different personalities. Coach A she's very like sarcastic I think and you don't know if its sarcastic or not, but she's very honest with it. And honesty is what I love so I'm here for that one. Coach B, the fielding coach helped me personally with the things that I struggle with like anxiety, and I don't know just becoming a better person. And then Coach C is like I don't know a second father he's amazing. the best person. I love him.

*What would you say are the most stressful aspects about playing softball here?*

Probably the schedules and like time management. So, we'll have our classes before practice, and they usually end at like 12. and then we have practice and then it'll be like four hours maybe and then you do your extra however, and I'm like the person who wants to practice more and do more. Then by the time I like to go home its dark and I'm ready to just go to bed and then you just do the repeat cycle. I get tired.

*Are there certain times of the year that create more stress for you and why?*

I would say I think like the fall just because I am very self-conscious with my weight personally. like I met up with a nutritionist like I said that in your email. about it and just being able to keep gaining and gaining and it's very hard for me to do that and when it translates to softball like me

being in the uniform or if I don't fit the pants, it like drops my confidence I guess and that's what I struggled with last year and just the anxiety of it and it just fills up from it. Probably that, fall.

*Do you have anything else to add? So, compare the fall to in season or post season.*

I would just say the fall because that's where you build everything so you're ready for the season and just like leading up to it and staying consistent throughout.

*What's the hardest part about staying consistent?*

I don't know like I think when we like do weights in season were obviously not like putting a lot of weight or focusing on training a lot so that's when I either like to lose the weight or my muscle mass or whatever goes down. so, yeah and my body fluctuates a lot.

*What are the most stressful aspects of being a DI student athlete here and do you have any examples?*

Probably putting students before athletes. Last year again, a rough year I didn't do that, and my grades were like error. I mean I passed, but I was struggling. and then, so I had that in my mind and then going to softball I would have to shove it away for those like four hours and then do softball tired and do that. and then after taking it back and putting it in my head and saying I need to fix everything and do it. So, time management again.

*To what extent playing softball here causes stress outside of the team? I know you said time management but jump into that without relating it to the team.*

Well before college in didn't really have anxiety and I was very outgoing. and I don't know what kicked it in college but that's when I would have like panic attacks and anxiety and then I would have to, and I still go to the sports psychologist, and I would use that or like my friends and I would just have to do something. I don't know what caused it. maybe just having everything all at once, like coming at me. but yeah, anxiety.

*When you experience a lot of stress how do you feel emotionally?*

Drained. I think I have matured I'm able to like I don't know control it I guess and express it instead of keeping it in the whole time instead of going to someone and now I'm able to like not to be afraid to be judged or what not and tell the right people.

*What about physically? How does that stress impact you physically?*

I think after season you can tell we are all like literally done and our bodies are exhausted and maybe just being exhausted all of the time. I feel like that is stress related.

*And mentally where do you see yourself handling that stress?*

Talking to people I feel like if I think about it too much in my head then I start thinking about the worst kind of things. So, if I talk to someone and they give me reassurance I guess then that helps me. So, yeah talking because it was rough not. Or like holding it in for so long.

*What do you think are the main causes of these stressors? I know you said time management, distance, but what do you think causes it for you?*

Dang, I think I just having too much on my plate and not realizing it. I feel like that's something and then putting pressure on myself to be perfect. So, I like softball and school now. But, yeah. I think me thinking like I don't know my thoughts like spirals me down a lot and then that just stresses me out more.

*How do you perceive stress? Positive Negative? Explain.*

Hmm...

*When you feel stress or experience it yourself do you see it as a positive or negative thing?*

So, going through it obviously negative. But then I like to think. about it like something that's like in my life. I'm reading a book called 'Can't hurt me' and like calvinizing the mind so that I could be more than what I think I can. so, it's just something that's God has given me, and I just got to go through it, and I'll come out a better person. That's what I keep telling myself.

*How effectively do you think you cope with your stressors? And if you could explain why.*

I think I do pretty well I mean I talk about it with people obviously. And I went to the doctor. I mean I take the meds now. I don't know if I feel like talking about it helps me cope with it. I don't know what else I would do to cope with it.

*Who else outside of the doctor who are you talking to?*

Yeah, so I talk to my roommates, so participant A, I lean on her a lot. I don't like talking about it with my family, I don't know. We're not like a super close family. Like I love them, and they were good, but we just don't talk about things like that, and I think that's what. Caused me to keep it in and then once I matured with myself, I learned to reach out to people and ask.

*That's awesome. And then outside of talking to people what other coping strategies do you use to cope with stress and if you have any examples of those.*

I have mental health things that I do. that counselor A, has helped me with. Doing like meditation, staying away from social media because those are like triggers for me. Like I have like a timer on social media, so I only do it for like 15 minutes a day. So, I stay off my phone too. television I watch like, I can't watch like sad things or scary or real-life things or else I start

spiraling and it goes whackko. But making sure I'm aware of what triggers my anxiety and what not. Having mental health days is good for me.

*To what extent does the type of stress influence the coping strategy you use? So, depending on what is stressing you out how do you deal with it?*

Sometimes its hard for me to accept the fact that I'm stressing about a certain thing. let's see, my anxiety had been like- you know when you feel like something bad is going to happen, I feel like that every day. I tell myself "Okay, if you're feeling like that give me the reasons why you're thinking that. and if you can't you got to shut it off". So, I do that. Let's see with the weight and stress about softball I so meet with the nutritionist and kind of - try to push it away but I think about it when I'm at the softball field, so I don't know if I really cope with that one.

*That's okay, that's an answer still. How have you changed the way you deal with stress? If so, how? If not, why not?*

I would say like talking to people and not just holding it in because it fills the bucket up and if it teeters and it just keeps going and I don't know just talking. Talking. Like this too I feel like I needed to do it.

*That's okay, I'm glad you did it. What forms of support do you receive to deal with your stress?*

Like Counselor A, roommates, with my coaches like if they see us struggling with something they'll come to us and talk to see if everything is okay and then like recommend like going to Counselor A or doing something. So, people.

*Describe the most prominent form of support that you receive. So, what is the most standout form for you?*

My roommates, participant A, yeah, I really like to go to her for everything and like let it all out because I know that I can trust her and like what she says and actually take it in and try it.

*What type of support do you want to receive? and that can be from any of the people or anything you have mentioned.*

So, like again honesty and not saying what I want to hear. if I'm acting a certain way, don't tell me it's like normal or like I don't know but like give me an honest opinion about it and how you perceive it, I guess.

*How would you like to see change within the support systems that you currently have in place? Specifically, can you give me an example from your coaches, other roommates, participant A, any of them.*



I don't know if I feel like they do a good job for how I work. I feel like they do a good job with me. You can say "I don't need to see a change. I feel good right now." Yeah, like I do feel good with what they say. They like honestly to tell me to my face what it is and not make me happy. It makes me happy, but they don't just say what I want to hear.

*How do the stressors in your life influence your ability to perform on the field? And can you think of any positive examples? Or negative.*

Well, last year that's when my like weight loss went down, and I wasn't confident in myself when I saw myself in the uniform. I felt like as I looked back that was one of the reasons why I wasn't playing. and I knew I wasn't supposed to be playing and in knew I wasn't doing well because of it. So, I would say that. Like the playing time would be it.

*Do you have any positive, really good examples of how you played on the field?*

I would say like this fall when I like really focused on weight gain and like on my body and how I do it has helped me, and I have done better this fall than any other one from previous years and focusing on that and doing like the hard things that I have to do to continue to build myself.

*How do the coping strategies relate to your performance? So, you talked about being able to talk to other people and when you're acknowledging the stress how those forms of coping impacting how you play, good or bad?*

I feel like it because I'm more honest with Counselor A. and I talk about it with my team but not as detailed like with my friend. So, it has helped me bond with them and build the chemistry and help me grow as a player and focusing on my strengths rather than my - what I struggle with kind of thing. I feel like it has helped me build confidence within myself and build confidence with other players with me, if that makes sense.

*How did that impact your offense?*

Yeah, it has helped me. Like I've gained strength and power with it. So, then I feel confident in the bat and knowing I'm going to make contact with it and then we're going to see where it goes. So, I've built confidence better offensively. Defensively, I'm always fine. like I love defense and it just...

*Kind of a flat line for you?*

Yeah, but like a good flat line.

*When you're playing softball how do you maintain your poise when you're in a pressure situation?*

So, we have a mental coach kind of thing that comes and zooms with us kind of thing. So, we talk about our releases and if we swing and miss at one of the pitches, we have a release. Like I'll hit my leg guard three times and then take a breath and then like I say "I got it" and then I get right back in and flush whatever happens. I want to say I do, I feel like I do and if I don't that means I didn't do my release.

*Do you have a specific example or situation where you had to do that, and you could tell me about it.*

Last year it was a big game, and it was Player A, I don't know if you know who that is, and were playing against her and that was like our home opener and it was a quick 0-2, and I was like "Dangit!" They told us not to go 0-2 on her or else it's going to be screwed up. So, I had to do my release and then I got the hit and then I went 3-3 off her after that and it like built my confidence after that. Okay, I can do it! Especially being a big name and going up and doing that. And yeah, it like gives her the confidence same, like dang it's her.

*Are there any specific situations that trigger you to lose your sense of poise, and could you explain why?*

Oh, changeups. They make me look silly. it's really bad. I swing and miss and then I literally turn. And everyone on my team knows I can't do changeups. like I always practice them, and I just can't. it doesn't go well and I'm always like "Oh Dang." Then we do scrimmages, and our coach calls the pitches, and she just hammers me with changeups. There was one time she threw me three changeups in a row. So that an know- and giving them like the benefit of the doubt, but yeah giving them the credit that they can do that to me. Again, that's offensive. I feel like offensively nothing really bothers me, and I know I can do it. I wish that would translate to offense, but it doesn't.

*Do you think there's something you want to try when you know that change-up situation is coming? Do you feel like there is something you could employ or do to control that situation or even try and stop that from happening within yourself?*

Okay, I know when they're going to do it. but I don't trust myself personally so then I don't sit it and I'm like always right when knowing what pitch will come next, but I don't trust myself in that part of the game where I can just sit that pitch and take other pitches knowing I'm gonna miss that one pitch. So, I think working on that is important for me and actually trusting myself with that. Like I'm confident in my swings and the physical part, but the mental part I gotta work on it.

*How do you view pressure situation. When you get placed into a pressure situation is it something you're looking forward to or something you want to shy away from?*

Like I'm not gonna lie, offense again I wouldn't picture myself being the most confident person in that situation. Like I'd rather have someone else be up there because I'm more confident in the other people around me to do that. Then me personally, eh, but if I'm in that situation I just go for it. I'm just very "F\*\*\* it person" Sorry you'll have to bleep that one out.

*That's okay, nonchalant. If it's like the winning run is no third base and you have to make this play and the ball is hit right at you.*

Defense, I'm like "give me the ball, just hit it to me. I'll get it." Let me pick something. like I love those situations. So, very like polar opposites between defense and offense.

*That's okay, everyone has a favorite. Based on the stressors that you have talked about and your ability to cope with them, describe your overall mental health. So, full circle when it comes to stress, how do you see it. If we could put your mental health on the table here, how would you describe it?*

Oh, funky. It's bad, but I'm like learning how to process it and live with it, I guess. So, meeting Counselor A. I literally had a med-eval yesterday and do like medication. I don't know like being okay knowing that I'm obviously dealing with stress and anxiety and that I'm gonna get through it.

*What aspects of your mental health are impacted the most by being a division I softball athlete?*

So, like physical things?

*It could be physical, mental, emotional but because you are a division I softball athlete. What parts are most affected?*

Probably my physical.

*In what sense?*

I don't know if this like goes with it, but I always get like the headaches caused by anxiety so I'm constantly like having headaches every single day. That and I don't know. like that- could you kind of rephrase it a different way and I could try to respond.

*So, the stressors we talked about- time management, being in certain situation, offense more than defense, how do you feel- so because you're being put in these situations as an athlete as compared to someone who just comes on campus and doesn't have those extra things to worry about. How would you explain your physical, mental, emotional health are impacted by these situation that you are placed in because you are a division I athlete versus someone who doesn't have those experiences?*

Okay, I feel like it goes back to the confidence part too. And just like confidence in general. If I'm confident on the field, it usually goes to life and like I'm doing good in life then. and if I'm like zero confidence like last year I become different me. like negative, sadly, but yeah, I would say confidence and like emotionally I'm just exhausted and like done if I'm not doing good on the softball field. So, it translates.

*So, if you're having a good day on the softball field, you're more likely to have a good day off the field?*

Yeah, basically?

*What if you are just out and about for your day and it be good or bad, so that's how you'll play on the field that day?*

Yeah, so usually if I have a good day before. And that's like usually every day except for like a few where I'm just 'meh'. But if I have a good day before then I come to practice and I'm like good happy or ready to go. or sometimes I'll have to fake it, but fake it till I get it.

*What steps have you taken, if any, to improve your mental health off the field? It doesn't have to relate to softball, but if you want to talk about Counselor A...*

Counselor A has really helped me and I'm able to talk to her and be real with her and she helps me do like different methods to try. So, again like the breathing and know what to do if I have my panic attacks or what not. Having her, I leaned on my faith a bit and then I stopped just because it gave me like- I can't describe it, but I stayed away from it for a little bit and used more like what Counselor A says. So rather than faith I'm leaning on science. I don't know. but for a long time, I leaned on faith and that helped me a lot and I still do it some but not as much as I do my mental health days.

*What are your concluding thoughts about our conversation about stress today? Anything that we talked about. Or if you have any thoughts about topics that we have not discussed today as well. It can relate to how you're dealing with stress or just what you're stressed out about.*

No, I feel like once I mature as a person I will mature as a player. so, I feel like that correlates with each other. As I build myself up mentally, I'm able to perform differently.

*Any questions?*

No, I don't think so!

**Participant #3**  
**12//2022**

*Our topic today is going to be perceived stress performance in division I softball athletes. My name is Rhianna Weall I am a second-year graduate student here studying Kinesiology. Our purpose of being here today is to conduct an interview about stressors related to being a Division I softball player. We will talk about what you think are major stressors, how you deal with them, and how they relate to your life on and off the field. As a reminder, this interview is being recorded, but your identity will remain confidential. This recording will be transcribed and analyzed for structure and outcomes based on our concluding results, following that conclusion, the interview will be deleted. Please note that I am a mandatory reporter for Title IX and will be required to share sensitive information if presented. Do you have any questions before we begin?*

No.

*Alright, how long have you been playing softball?*

Since I was like three, so its 2023...so 20 years.

*Wow!*

Yeah, it's beyond crazy, and it's my last year ever. It's very bittersweet.

*What got you into the sport?*

I have three brothers and I was like the all-time quarter back. They all would catch the football and my grandma was like "Hey! You've got a good arm. You should try softball." So, I started playing softball.

*And it just carried on?*

Yeah, well I played all sports. I played basketball, soccer, like I did everything, but I just really loved softball.

*Tell me about high school experiences for you with softball.*

I was pretty dominant. Like I don't want to sound conceited, but I was like the best player in Colorado. I got all the accolades.

*Which ones?*

Yeah, so pretty big.

*Where do you see softball fitting into your lifelong plans? I know you said its your last year, but is there more?*

Yeah, its my last year. I could probably play pro if I wanted too but I want to do social work. I have this whole plan. I have my internship for the next two years and softball doesn't really fit. But I could definitely continue doing lessons because I'm a pitcher I could do lessons and I could even go teach softball back home and be a coach.

*What made you decide to come here?*

I had a couple of offers that I visited, but here just stood out, I guess. It had kind of like a family feeling and instead of going somewhere and being like "You'd be lucky to come here" it was more "We'd be lucky if you came here". So, it just felt like it was more than just softball. And I'm like far away from home so its my second family.

*And what position do you play here?*

I'm a pitcher. A PO actually.

*What has your playing time been like so far?*

My freshman year I didn't really play much just because I had a pitching coach, and it was kind of like a development year. And then from there on I have been the main pitcher. I pitched the most games last year, had the most wins, like starts and stuff. So, it definitely has picked up since I've been playing.

*What do you like most about playing softball here?*

I think honestly about the environment. It's just like every game feels like a world series game and you're just on this big stage with the fans and I feel like I'm super blessed to play here and the facilities are insane. And then it is just a homey vibe again, like I love the fans, my teammates and the coaches, it's just fun to be out there.

*What are some other things you like about playing here outside of the facilities itself?*

Here gave me the opportunity to be the first one in my family to graduate. So, its like super cool that I get to be an alumni. and be the first one in my family and it just kind of opened up a world perspective for me. Because I have always been in North West, and I've never been in the south. So, it was kind of a culture change and I got to meet some really cool people and be friends with them for the rest of my life. Just a different environment.

*What are the most stressful aspects about playing softball here?*

I mean, it's a game of failure. Like if you go from a hitting perspective you hit 3/10 and you're a really good hitter, but that means you're failing 7 times. Same with pitching. Like I have the ball in my hand every time and every time that pitch could be a failure. So, I mean you kind of have to learn to deal with failure and how to overcome it. So, its kind of hard and you have a lot of people watching you. And a lot of times they're not happy and if they are happy its really rare. They always have something to say or critique and they aren't the ones that are out there and working or putting in the work to be out there. It's a lot of different stressors

*Do you think it would be different if you were at a different school? Like if you weren't at a division I.*

I don't think so. I think that anywhere you go there are different types of stressors. I mean, like luckily am at a higher division so like more eyes are on us. But I definitely still, like I have friends that play at lower levels, division 2's and they still have just as much stress. So, I think it just comes with the sport.

*Do you have any specific examples of stressful situations that you have been through here?*

I can tell you we were in super regionals, and I was pitching, and we had to win this game to get to the next round, sorry. We were up by one and I just had to get three outs. I had two outs, and I got their two best hitters out. Then this girl I had got out all game, she hit a homerun off of me and I think that was like the most triggering moments for me. Because it was like "I had gotten you out all game, and now I am putting me and my team in a bad situation where we have to score or else our season is gonna end". I mean I feel like that is like an everyday occurrence with this game. Like you never know what is gonna happen.

*Do you think there are certain times of the year that create more stress for you? And, why?*

I think there are different kinds of stress. Like you have the beginning of the year stress where everyone is trying to get their groove and figure out who we are as a team. And then you get to Conference stress which is a different stress because you are analyzing a team that is analyzing you just as hard. And its literally like our super regional every weekend. Which is also the coolest thing ever, but also very stressful. And then you have post-season stress which is exciting, but also terrifying in a way.

*What are the most stressful aspects of being a division I student athlete here?*

Managing your time. I feel like it is a big one. Especially now I'm in grad school. I have 490 hours (about 3 weeks) that I have to accomplish from January to August as well as travelling, competing, practicing and doing all of my school work this semester. So, I have to be able to do all of that and still find time to get enough sleep and take care of myself. Its very stressful and it has kind of been like that. It gets tiring. But we have a lot of resources at the end of the day which is super nice when you're playing.

*To what extent does playing softball here cause stress outside of the team?*

I mean- you always have the stress that you should be doing something. And I don't know if it's just me because I'm a pitcher. But if I don't pitch that day or workout its like an automatic stressor. Like I didn't do what I was supposed to today. So, then its like you're thinking about it all day then you go make yourself do it tomorrow no matter what is on your plate. I definitely think its stressful situation because its always on your mind. and now it'll be weird when its not on my mind anymore. But I mean its fun, so you can't really complain.

*And when you experience a lot of stress how do you feel emotionally?*

I mean, I go up and down. Luckily being in social work I learn a lot of tools, but we do have counseling which we can go and talk to which is super nice. When things aren't going so hot for you mentally or physically. Its hard.

*How do you feel physically?*

Oh, worn down for sure. Fall is like where you break yourself to be strong and have endurance and get in shape. In season it is different because you're practicing all the time and you're playing all the time. And you only get one day off. And usually that one day off consists of catching up on schoolwork, getting your grocery shopping done for the week so its like really tiring.

*How does that put you mentally?*

Mentally, I guess again its really hard and you have to manage it really well. I think some people are better than others at it. Like I've been able to manage it mentally pretty well. Just because when its my day off its my day off. And I take that day off. And I am also able to talk to counselors here and its really able to help clear your head. But it is very stressful.

*What do you think are the main causes of the stressors?*

Failure. I guess it is a really big one. And I guess like consistency. Like you should or have to always be doing something is like a big one. Time management because you don't feel like you can get everything done in a day. Kinda feels like you have so much to do. So, I feel like those three big ones.

*How do you perceive stress? Negative? Positive? And if you could explain why.*

I mean I think we're lucky to have to endure this stress because at the end of the day its helping me pay for my school. Like its helping me pay for my school as well as I get the opportunity to live out my dream. So, I think it's like a happy stress because I am able to do something I've dreamt of doing since I was little and also it could be negative because sometimes it does get



very overwhelming to a point where it is almost paralyzing. So, I guess there are pros and cons, and it depends on the day.

*And how effectively do you think you cope with your stress?*

Some days better than others.

*Would you explain?*

I mean it kind of depends if I have a good day my stress isn't as high, versus like if you have a bad day its always on your mind and then you're thinking about the next game and what if you do just as bad or at practice or worried about the fans. like I have people send me not very nice things, but you can't really escape. When the game is over and you go on social media and you see ugly comments made at you like in all reality, I'm still like a 23 year old girl. You know what I mean? Like I'm not perfect. so that kind of gets hard but I think you kind of just have to deal with it in a way.

*And on the good days is there anything you do specifically that makes them good days?*

I try, because I know I'm a very external person, to go out and do things. Like if there's a basketball game, I like to go with some of my other teammates to go and cheer on some of the other student athletes. Football games, beach volleyball is usually in season when we're in season, so try to like to get out and get softball not necessarily on your mind 24/7 because we do it all the time, so it is nice to get out with your teammates and do something else.

*What coping strategies do you normally use when dealing with these stressors?*

Coping strategies-...

*So, you mentioned going out...meditation, self-care days, different things like that.*

We have a mental strength coach that we talk to, and I really sometimes listen to his meditation things. I also like to do self-care and sometimes I'll do things like a hair mask or a face mask, go get my nails done, maybe go shopping kind of like get out of the softball world so anything that kind of relates to that. I'm pretty religious so being able to go to church or bible study or something is also a really nice escape.

*To what extent does the type of stress influence the type of coping strategy that you use? So, if you're feeling it physically, mentally, emotionally.*

I mean I think if I'm feeling it physically a lot of times, I don't want to do anything I'm more of homebody and I'll want to stay at home and watch a movie or take a bath. If its mental that's when I feel like I have to go out and socialize to kind of get my mind off of it so I'm not just at home thinking about it all of the time. and it depends on what I'm stressed about.

*How have you changed the way you deal with stress? If so, how? If not, why not?*

My freshman year I was horrible at dealing with stress, I had never really failed so it was a huge adjustment coming in and being literally at the bottom of the totem pole. And honestly, I kept it all in I was crying, and it was just not a very pretty freshman year. I would say now that in my fifth year I definitely know how to talk to people and now I'll actually like go to counseling which I used to never believe in. so I'll be able to talk to somebody but actually be open about how I'm feeling to my coaches my teammates or be honest with myself like "You're not doing okay right now". I guess its like the growth aspect of it.

*What forms of support do you have to deal with your stress?*

I think my team does a really job of being a support system my coaches are always there to listen and if they can't help you, they point you in the direction of someone who can. Teammates are always a good outlet because they understand exactly what you're going through and those are the only people who know exactly what you're going through. Those are some main ones and then you always have your family that is like a good rebound too.

*I know you said you're from the North West, with your family specifically is it sometimes hard to rely on them because they are far away or-*

I don't get to see them very often because of financially and obviously the distance. I think they have only come down three times in the five years that I have been here. so, I don't get to see them very often. But they are always a phone call away. like my mom is my person like I call her like 5 times a day and kind of just tell her everything to just talk to someone who is just not in it so they can just like listen. But yeah, it's hard because they don't always like knowing where I am or what I'm doing.

*Describe the most prominent form of support you receive regarding stress.*

Counseling. I think its just available to everybody and its very anonymous. like you can go if you want to on zoom/in person// what suits you.

*Do you have specific team counselors?*

Yeah, Counselor A is it and she has assistants that usually help us. But there is like a team one which is like super nice, and you can go anytime or as much as you want. So, its super convenient.

*What type of support do you want to receive?*

I definitely think here has done more now than they have. From freshman year, like now we have people who come talk to us about Title IX and all these different things, but I guess it would be

cool to have a teacher or a stress coordinator to help you deal with some of these different things. Because my freshman year I didn't know anything, and it took going from like the rough of it to find out what I need versus having someone there who can like help dictate what's best for you. So, I guess just kind of having someone specifically for the team that's there for them. And to travel with them maybe.

*How would you like to see change within the current support systems that you have in place?*

I mean definitely traveling the counselor's to the away series. We did it in post season, but we don't all the time. So, like if you have a bad game, you still have another game the next day. So, it would be nice to still have somebody to talk to that's like on staff there that would be super nice. I guess that would be a big one.

*How did the stressors you're experiencing influence your ability to perform on the field?*

I mean I guess there can be good or bad. The stressors can help you get after it and get the work done. Kind of turn that into good stress versus like paralyzing stress. You can get into it like- we have the mental strength coach who talks about red light, green light, yellow light. Red light is when you're not in a good zone and you're not you, you're not thinking straight you're not doing what's good for you. yellow light is when you're getting like that. and green light is when you're cruising, you're good. So definitely think some days you're in red, some days you're in yellow, and some days you're in green.

*Do you have any specific examples of stressors that are positive?*

Stressors that are...

*Yes, so stressors that are influencing your ability to perform.*

I mean you can always say that the post season is a good stressor. you're excited your adrenaline's going. its like a good stress because you worked so hard to get there so then it's a good stress to be in that position. So, its nice to be able to be stressed and in that position because there are a lot of teams that aren't playing at that time.

*Do you have a specific memory on the field, pitching, where you're in a good positive situation where you're in that green light?*

We had I think it was 2021, we played this team for regionals and we played them like five times that year which was convenient that we had them for regionals which means we had to play them like over and over again. and I pitched against them in the first game, and I did really well, but we lost. Because we lost by one and I think I like two hit them. So, it was not like-- I pitched really well. They rolled me to pitch for game two. and the kind of stress of pitching against the

same team two times in a row. and I was like "I will be successful" and it was like a very dominant day for me. and we ended up winning and going to super regionals.

*Good, and do you have any negative examples?*

Yeah, I went this past year to a game, and I was not feeling great physically I was pitching a lot and had hurt my foot and had a sprained ankle and was having some pain in my shoulder not like sharp pain, but overuse pain so then I was thinking about that as well as the stress of like post season. so, it kind of turned into that negative stress so I wasn't able to perform as clearly as I usually would. I was very like-- I guess negative towards myself and towards the pitching. so, I wasn't able to execute as well as I usually do and it kind of took a bad toll on me as well as the team.

*How do the coping strategies that you use relate to your performance?*

I mean when I use the coping strategy, I'm in a green light, like we talked about. It's a lot of times I'm in the green light. but if I'm in yellow or red I have to get myself back into green light where I feel confident and ready to attack instead of being like "I don't want the ball".

*I know you guys have specific releases what do you do for yours?*

When I'm on the mound if I'm in yellow I usually turn around and talk to my middles. So, I like either Player A or player B. So, I like to talk to them. My thing is I have to be external, when I'm not that means I'm bad and in my red light. When I'm in red light I have to stop and go to the back of the mound and pick up dirt and throw it and that's my release. and I'll turn around and try to be back in green light.

*When you're playing softball how do you maintain your poise in pressure situations?*

That is the key that everyone is trying to learn still. I mean I guess its kind of hard but you kind of have to sink back to training. That's one that Coach A always say "you have to sink back to what you know". That's what they always tell me and like the world series game is like a mid-series week game that we play. So, kind of just being able to take one breath at a time and execute that one pitch instead of worrying about the next inning or the next batter.

*Do you have an example of when you were able to maintain your poise?*

The main one that I remember is when we played away, and I started against them, and we got run-ruled the game before. and I was pitching the second game and the umpire was completely squeezing me. I would throw it like right there and he would call it a ball. I literally was like "what was that coach, I don't know where to throw it." so she came out and was talking to me and was telling me to keep doing what I was doing, and I was able to keep my poise and be how I was, and it ended up working out and I was very dominant for both those games.

*Are there any situations that trigger you to lose that sense of poise and if you could explain.*

I think its hard when you're not getting pitches called for you. So, if I'm executing pitches and they are not getting called and then like I end up getting hit or walking people. like I hate walking people. I walked so many people last year. That's like a trigger for me and I hate it. I have to be really able to know that and stop and re-breathe and like everything else.

*How do you view pressure situations?*

Pressure is a privilege is what we always say. like being able to be in pressure situation is a privilege. I remember in my freshman year like I told you wasn't a very good year like I talked to coach A at the end of the year and told them that "I want to be that person that you put in any situation" I worked my butt off to be able to be that person. but you don't really know what you're asking for until you get into that situation, but I'm very thankful that I get to be that person because I like to thrive under pressure. I like it and I think its fun and you don't have time to think. I don't do well when I have time to think versus when I just go out there and so what I know what I can do, it's fine.

*Is it different between offense and defense for you?*

I don't hit, so it's kind of like my release like I get to come in and cheer on my teammates and just talk to the coaches and when it comes to defense, that's my time to turn on for my teammates. like when they're working hard for me, I can work hard for them.

*Based on the stressors that you've talked about and your ability to cope with them, describe your overall mental health.*

I would say that it differs and it kind of dictates the year and what time of year. I think two years ago I was not in a good mental health state and that was on me because I didn't let any body know and I also didn't know about the resources, so I just kept it to myself and when you keep it to yourself it builds up and you just break. this is why last year anytime I got into a negative state I was able to talk to some teammates and then they were able to say "you need to talk to somebody" and I was able to talk to some counselors who were able to help me and put me on some medication if I needed it and stuff like that, I guess it depends on how open I am too it. I don't really like asking for help. I'm more of the person who is like 'you come to me when you need help'. so, it's just on and off.

*Is there anything that cause you to shut down from where you were to where you are now?*

I guess like failing. I really don't- like it. Which is funny because I play a game of failure but when I fail, I feel like-- I don't care about if I fail-- I care about that I fail my coaches or let my team down. and I think that is the one that kills and how am I supposed to go talk to the people that I just let down. So, I just think that is a trigger.

*What aspects of your health are most affected by being a division I athlete?*

Body dysmorphia. I deal and train-- like we train really hard, and I know I'm in shape but it's always like that. it's like "Oh, I'm not skinny enough" or "I'm too big". or I'm too skinny. You never have that perfect body. and I know that's a big one and a big struggle throughout the team.

*Is that something that only started once you got to college?*

I think it got highlighted when I got to college because we do things like a scan that tells you your body fat and your muscle percentage and I was a little chunky when I was a freshman, and I can admit it. I was chunky and it was kind of like it was embarrassing having to talk about that because I was embarrassed. It was to the point where if I gained two pounds even if its two pounds of muscle its gaining two pounds. So, I'm trying to like still to learn from it. but I think that is one thing that has definitely altered, like body image and stuff.

*Is there anything else that impacts your overall mental health as well?*

I mean we always have the stress of failing even if I fail in school, if I fail a test or if I don't do good or if I get like a B, I'm like "ugh", you know what I mean?

*Yeah.*

I'm not perfect type of thing. those like little type of things that relate to everything. Those little things that you take from sports and put into everything else.

*Comparing where you were freshman year to where you are now, where do you think that big shift was made? Like where do you feel your ability to deal with things changed?*

Honestly, I think it took me awhile. like until last year. So, four years.

*What caused that change?*

I think it was that breaking point that I reached mentally where I was really not mentally okay. for instance, I pitched against this team, and I had death threats and I got dmed some death threats and I just didn't understand because it's a game. Its literally just a game. and like how someone could be so passionate and feel so strongly that they could wish me harm. so that pushed it on, and you have some interviews that aren't very nice and can ask some questions that are triggering to you. especially because failure is a big trigger for me, so that and if you don't do well, you're letting your teammates down or if you lose you still have to be a team. There's a lot of things that just---yeah...

*What steps have you taken to improve your mental health off the field?*

I mean I think I'm lucky to be a social worker because I kind of learn like little things as I go. Like the flight and free and that kind of stuff. So, like I learn what my little habits can be and learning how to talk to people and I guess I'm still trying to learn and it's just kind of a learning process.

*What's the biggest thing you've taken away from your experience in social work?*

That you continue and that you're gonna be fine. things will continue and that what you're going through is real and its not just in your head you feel like it's just me. but what you're feeling is valid and being able to talk to somebody about it to actually get help is okay. Like a lot of times, you feel embarrassed to ask for help, but it actually takes strength to ask for help.

*Going back a little ways, I'm going to ask about your coaches. I know you said you talk to them, but do you consider them a resource that you go to about different things even if its not softball related?*

Yeah, I definitely think we're lucky I feel like the everybody thinks of the coaches as like their family. its like my family away from family. I definitely think that some people are closer with some coaches than other coaches. like I'm closest with coach A because she's my pitching coach. I don't necessarily hang out with coach B or coach C all the time because I'm not really practicing with them all the time. So, I think that I have those kind of resources and they always open their homes to me. like I'm best friends with coach a's daughter. so, I know I can like go to them for anything

*What are your concluding thoughts on our conversation about stress today? And do you have any other thoughts about topics we haven't discussed?*

I think talking about it makes me realize how much stress I actually go through in a season which is kind of nerve wracking considering we start the season in a month. so, it's kind of eye-opening but I guess its again pressure is privilege, but yeah.

**Participant #4**  
**12//2022**

*My name is Rhianna Weall I am a second-year graduate student here studying Kinesiology. Our purpose of being here today is to conduct an interview about stressors related to being a Division I softball player. We will talk about what you think are major stressors, how you deal with them, and how they relate to your life on and off the field. As a reminder, this interview is being recorded, but your identity will remain confidential. This recording will be transcribed and analyzed for structure and outcomes based on our concluding results, following that conclusion, the interview will be deleted. Please note that I am a mandatory reporter for Title IX and will be required to share sensitive information if presented. Do you have any questions before we begin?*

No.

*How long have you been playing softball?*

I have been playing softball since I was four years old.

*And what kind of teams were you growing up with?*

So, when I was four it was tball and they called it like sugar and spice or whatever. Then I moved to 8 and under which was like coach pitch and that was an all-star league through my rec league. Then I got on a travel team and that travel team wasn't like a big name and you need a big name travel team to get recruited. so, then I moved over to this team and that was my freshman year before I graduated and that's when I got recruited.

*What got you into the sport?*

Well, my mom took me in every single sport possible, and it was the one sport that I very much enjoyed. I played other sports too obviously. My mom was a collegiate swimmer so I swam for majority of my life too but that was just like for fun, and it wasn't really competitive. and other sports I didn't really play because softball is in like once 10 & under and 8 & under it was year round. I couldn't really do anything and like wanted to play other sports in high school but softball in my home state is in the fall when other sports would be. And travel ball is in the spring, so it just never worked out and I only played softball.

*Tell me about your high school experiences.*

Ehhhhhhh, my high school softball experience was horrible. Well, okay it was so like furious and crazy for the level we were at. My coach was fairly a new head coach, so she was kind of crazy and like I remember one time we had played a team that was the worst in our region, and she sat down all of us juniors because we didn't have seniors at that time. I don't know why. So, we were



the oldest and all of us sat down in the baseball dugout and told us every single individual thing wrong with us. And like I was sitting there like...some of the people there were like- I was obviously one of the best on the team its just high school. Like they literally told me that I smile too much. They had nothing to tell me. Thats literally what they said to me, and I laughed in their face, and I was literally like “what?” So, for that whole two weeks I was being really straight faced and not speaking and they were like oh my god I'm sorry, just go back to the way you were. They told some girls you're too sensitive, you can't take criticism. It was like a jab at personal stuff. and then it got better my senior year that she started understanding that she couldn't act like that. She would make us run like crazy and I'm the type of girl that doesn't like yelling. I picked here because the coaches don't yell. I'm sorry but I'm too old for you to be yelling at me based on softball. And that was like crazy. but I mean I played all four years like I didn't not play. It was just interesting. But it was fun to play with like your best friends. Obviously, not now but in high school you grew up with them, it was fun. You would have all the baseball players would come they would be so crazy to the other team and heckle them or whatever, but it was up & down.

*How does softball fit into your lifelong plans?*

Nothing. I mean it obviously helped me but after I graduate my second time, I will never pick up a bat again. I think I've outgrown it. I've outgrown it, but I'm still doing it. It really is not, I would like talk about it because it's been my identity but right now, I'm trying to find my other identity because I'm about to graduate and softball is not all of it. Like when you talk to someone it just comes up and I'm trying to figure myself out right now. What other qualities do I have that's not softball since I've been that since four years old.

*Would you ever consider transitioning over to coaching or anything?*

Oooh, no. I would never want to be a coach. Especially after going through college and going through it and how many players. 15 girls for college are like 25 girls and the type of personalities. and especially of this day and age. If you say one wrong thing it could be taken so many wrong ways and negative when it wasn't meant that way. I could never have like- I'm a very unfiltered say what I feel kind of person. I could say like “the sky is blue” and you're getting fired! I would never ever want to coach, especially like now. Maybe like little kids team obviously, but never as a job. And like my coaches never, she tries her best with her kids, but they are always at the field and like they're young and they have nothing else to do and like I would want to have a more stable real life. Like its fun but its unstable.

*And what made you decide to come here?*

So, when I was getting recruited here it was like, I remember this, I like moved to the good travel team that I was on, and they were like what are your top 20 schools. And at that point I was listing all the cool schools and here wasn't on there. Obviously, I'm from my home state so it was like in-state schools, my dream school was out of state, thank God I didn't go there, and you hear

so many bad things about there. I'm a slapper and that was like slapper university back then. That's what they were known for, and I actually got there my freshman year on my travel team I was actually late getting started because people were committed 8th or 9th grade. and I was like coming to the good team and I was good, but half the teams already had the slappers they need or outfielders that they need. so, I was like "What am I gonna do?" or whatever. So, I basically played that summer, and I was getting like people looking at me but then another year, sophomore year you play in like the west that's where all the college coaches are watching you. and I had a few other interest from sec schools. Here and- I think here was one of my first visits and I was like I love it and just like the family and how they care about you as people, and it was just like other schools were like a transaction and if I was gonna go far away from home, I wanted to go somewhere that would give me the best chance to win a national championship. and like based on my options this was the best one I could have stayed at home, but I wanted to venture out Like I'm very independent and I love being on my own so that was fun, but looking back I don't know if I would want to stay so far because I can't ever see my mom but it's an adventure and it taught me a lot.

*What position do you play here?*

I play left field.

*And then offense you said you slap?*

I'm more of like a power slapper though. I hit doubles and triples, singles obviously. but I'm more of like a doubles hitter. I hit homeruns in practice but never in games though. You know though I'm not a very like- I have speed, but I need to hit the ball through the infield. That's how I like to try to get on.

*What has your playing time been like so far?*

So, in my freshman year I started to like every game. not to toot my own horn I had like the best batting average you can look it up. Sophomore year comes around, the year covid happened. I was playing but someone else was rotating in a little bit. then covid hit and obviously we went home. Junior year was kind of off and on in the beginning, I'm trying to make sure I have my years right. Off and on but not that much. My senior year aka last year, but I didn't really play. And we were horrible last year in my opinion like we didn't make it past the regionals. We had a lot of ups and down and it was the same line up every time. Like it is what it is, at that point you got to give other people grace too or whatever, but I would be the person they would call to pinch hit and I would get on majority of the time. It was funny because literally me and this one girl were leading the SEC in batting average, now granted we only had like six at bats, but still it was a high batting average, and it was funny how I was like coming off the bench cold and I'm able to do it but so that was that last year. I don't think I started, but maybe I started like one or two but not very many and that was my role and like I'm very I will support my teammates to the day I die and I'm not a very sour teammate. Like I will be the first one at the top of the stairs

cheering. like I don't have any animosity towards it. That's just how it was. This year it'll be interesting because our best is in the outfield and like everyone has a chance to play. So, I don't really know what the final line up will be at the end of the year, but I think it will change a lot in the beginning.

*What do you like most about playing softball here?*

What I like most is, I just think about the people. I have my ups and downs. Like do I like going to softball practice? do I not? because its so repetitive and its so many days. but like especially this year we just made things like very fun and competitive. We will literally be like shagging balls and be like playing games out of it to bring like anything fun to it because you have to do it so you might as well make it fun. So, like the people playing and travelling with your friends like that's fun so like the people.

*And do you have anything besides that as well?*

I mean the traditions are cool and the fans are funny because they love you when you're doing good, and they hate you when you're doing bad. And its kind of annoying because our season ticket holders would like to buy season tickets and then never come. and they're taking up the best seats and all these poor people wanna sit in the good seats and you can't even get them. and they're like old so they don't cheer very loud. So, we need to change that, and they started bringing in all the people from the berm into the new seats because its not open and now it gets louder and like we do a lot of fun things on the road when we can, and they try to make it fun.

*What are the most stressful aspects of playing softball here?*

I mean I think there's a bunch. obviously holding up the standard of the high level we are supposed to be at. Especially this last year like we didn't- we haven't met the expectations in a few years, and I have not been to the college world series. Like that's not normal for the university. But then, especially last year was like a wakeup call. So, I think this year will be like a really added pressure to do well especially like us seniors. We will have to try not to put the pressure on the people because it's like we won't play well. We can't be thinking about how we have to win because we're not going too. I think playing free. that's a big stressor. And like the idea like that if you make one wrong move you might not be playing again. I think that's the overall thing that the team feels. Like half the team steps on campus and knows we're not gonna play. The team the people that are like in and out of line ups are constantly trying to prove themselves and are like "did I do enough that day?" to like to earn a spot and clearly my freshman year did not earn me anything or any grace period in the following years and you feel like you constantly need to do enough and its like never enough to earn that.

*What is an example of a specific stressful situation that you went through?*

I mean I can think of like down to the wire you gotta get a hit type of plays and then I didn't get a hit. I remember one time we were playing and I think the game was, okay I have a better example because its more recent. We were in the SEC championship, and I had pinch hit and they left me in, and I was playing defense too. I had like three bats or four I don't remember. My first two or three at bats I had done really well, got on moved runners whatever. Then my fourth at bat its tied and we had runners on, and she was like "you just gotta end it here" and you gotta hit the ball in and then I was like Okay. My coach was this is your type of pitching so like her amping me up and it made me just like want to swing. and I ended up swinging too hard and I ended up striking out and then the next batter ended up hitting us and we ended up winning so it was perfect but that was a very stressful situation for me that I failed in.

*That's okay too! Are there certain times of the year that create more stress than others and why?*

There are two different times, in the fall its just a lot of hard workouts and hard practice and you're like really trying. I mean you play a few games but they're just exhibition games its mostly practice of like really hard and you just gotta perform and do well. there the types of stress like that. Then in the spring when we start playing, you're dealing with games and every single week you're changing opponents and your matchups. One week we might be seeing a drop ball pitcher and the next it might be seeing a rise ball. So, there's so many approaches that you have to change and that can be stressful on top of you're constantly traveling and you're constantly- well its easy for me because I have online school, but these kids, I mean I had to do it way back when. But they're missing two or three classes because we leave on Thursdays and you're missing all these classes and sometimes these teachers are so mean, and they just hate athletes and are so mean. Like I'm sorry I'm not a football player but I'm trying my best here so like they will add that. like you're missing tests and you're missing that. And you have study hall, but I'm exhausted and we have study hall at 7oclock. By that time, I've already had practice and a full day of class, and my attention is just –blehhhh- I just want to go to sleep so you're not really focused and it's just overwhelming. and then you have finals week. Luckily, I don't think since I've been here finals week hasn't been during the SEC championship, but it has happened in the past. Well, I think it was this year. but I was online, so it didn't matter. And people were trying to schedule their tests when they were out of town. and the SEC championship we leave either Tuesday or Monday, and you could be back the next day or that Sunday. you just don't know. And trying to get your teachers to understand that and also preparing for the test when you don't know if its gonna be tomorrow or next week. so, things like that

*What are the most stressful aspects of being a student athlete here?*

I guess I kind of answered that with school, but um...I'm gonna say this as a person who actually goes to school. Its just like 24/7. We have it better now that we have our own weightroom and own facility. But in the past, we had to share a weightroom and sometimes we had to all go at different times in our little gaps during class and leave and go straight to practice. and practice lasts three hours and then you go to eat and then you have tutoring and then tutoring at 9 o'clock sometimes. Like why have tutoring at 9oclock? And then when I get home I don't study for the

test because I'm tired. it's not gonna help anyways. and then you do it all over again. I think that's the hardest part, that its never ending. Yeah, you get one off day, well you're supposed to go hit and throw on your off day. Like my off day is my off day, I need to get my school work done I need to go grocery shopping, you know what I mean? There's just not enough time in the day for a student athlete in my opinion. The demand doesn't equal the amount of time you have and energy you have. Because you're exhausted 24/7 and then you add on top of traveling and we would get back at like midnight sometimes and 2am on Sundays and then you're expected to go to class the next day, like what? And yeah, you have an off day, but you have all your other stuff and it's just never ending ever.

*When you experience a lot of stress how do you feel emotionally?*

I'm not your normal person. I'm a very chill person, I don't really get stressed. Even if I'm in a stressful situation or I'm stressed I'm very like chill because like since I'm older I can't show that I'm stressed because then everyone else is going to get stressed so I try to do my best to stay very neutral or stay the same that I am. Say the question again?

*When you experience a lot of stress how do you feel emotionally?*

Okay, so when I am feeling stressed, I just feel very out of control. I was telling my friend this yesterday. When my room is clean you can tell I'm not very stressed out, I'm not having a hard time, I'm on top of things, I feel very motivated to d s tuff. But when my room is disaster that is a very obvious depiction of what my life is, and I have no motivation whatsoever. And I'm stressed out you would think I would be more motivated to get things done, but I'm like the opposite like I'm just like "I don't want to do anything and I'm just like over it. and I'm like it'll happen tomorrow or the next day.

*How do you feel physically when you're experiencing a lot of stress?*

Beat down. Worn down. I mean we're expected to do everything in the world coming down and you just can't do anything right and you just feel like a punching bag. You just begging for something to go right, and it just doesn't. Like you're stressed about school and then softball isn't going right or vice versa. So, it could be kind of like just exhausting.

*Where would you place yourself mentally?*

I'm a very high mental- yeah, I go through some crazy shit. I'm not gonna lie some people have not dealt with the stuff that I have dealt with, and I don't think anybody has. Like I've dealt with it all. And I try to stay positive, but I don't know why its easy for me and I know that sounds very selfish or whatever, but I just deal with it. and other people have like little things where their mental health is just so bad and like you would think the stuff that I go through would do that. and I'm just like whatever. and yeah I get like, so one time there was a police report and this girl tried to fight me or whatever and I was very stressed out in this situation because the police scare

me, but you would think I would be like way more, but I was still at practice like ha-ha he-he, like I like to make jokes out because it's happening and I can't do anything about it and I just laugh at it because it's funny.

*What do you think are the main causes of all the stressors you face?*

Me personally, boys. School doesn't really stress me out. I'm gonna be honest I don't think I've studied for one test in my entire life. And I'm here doing well, I've gotten D's so I can't say I've done perfectly. But grad school is so easy, but I would say boys. Softball obviously because it is just a thing. Another thing that I don't think I've talked about is the stress of like doing well for your parents. in a sense of, I'm at peace if I don't play. but I get more stressed out because I feel bad for my parents watching me. Obviously, they don't come to very many games this year, but all of our out of state sec matches are very close to Atlanta. and they're coming to like all of them. I'm already stressed out about that because if I'm not playing, I'm gonna feel bad if they're spending money this or that. And obviously I just try to do my best and control what I can control but like going hard and doing extra and doing as much as I can. So at least my mom knows I'm trying. But that's like an added stress that I think about more t hats why I cannot wait for softball to be done. I know I'll have other stressors but like this has just been all the time

*How do you perceive stress? Negative? Positive? If you could explain.*

I guess I would say positive. I mean like I said I just try to make life make it very positive because it's happening. I mean I can be negative too. I'm not like sunshine and rainbows all the time because that's just my personality like I'm sassy or whatever. But when something stressful is going on I'm just gonna laugh about it. and sometimes that perceived as not caring or whatever. But if I mess up in the outfield, I'm just gonna laugh it off because me getting mad does nothing. well sometimes the coaches want to see you get mad, like what? And that doesn't help me, and they've learned that obviously and understand that my response might be different than somebody else's and that's the job of a coach just cause I'm laughing about it doesn't mean that I don't care. For me my reactions have to be positive, or I will shut down. Like if I start thinking negative about it than that doesn't help me and I'll just be in a dark hole and I don't wanna be like that so I just make light of every single thing cause if not it would end badly it's just life I'm still here, like I always tell people your mama still gonna love you at the end of the day so don't worry about it I tell my mom all the time can you control the situation ? Well, no, then don't worry about it! Obviously its easy to say that and like we all have our ups and downs for the most part I try to live by that.

*How effectively do you feel that you cope with stress?*

I'm good. I mean like I said my coaches always said they would have more of me in the way that I handle things in the positive aspect of how I act on the field and stuff. I mean we play a game of failure like we all glorify getting 3/10 hits and its like great. so, you're failing seven out of the ten times and you're supposed to be okay with that and you're supposed to be okay with that and

that doesn't seem right, but you have to learn how to cope with that and even on defense you make an error you still have the whole game to go. And the worst part about softball is you might not get a ball until the seventh inning, like you might have got your very first. Like I was a freshman and we played in the super regionals second batter up I drop the ball and I'm a freshman and I'm like holy shit my life is over like whatever that's what stresses me out that's a stressor is defense because I don't feel very confident, but I feel better now. And of course, that whole game I had like 8 balls hit to me that game and I had that in the back of my mind like don't drop this ball so things like that. but yeah

*What coping strategies do you normally use when dealing with stress?*

I don't know.

*Like talking to people, going to do different things, things like that.*

Oh yeah. I like to talk. I don't shut up. I don't even need to talk about softball like if I'm in the outfield I just talk shit. like in the outfield I talk a lot and like goof around and it's a stressful time for me I don't know why I feel like I was great at defense before I came to college and then it just like became so much more complicated for no reason like it's the same struggle but it got way more complicated and I just didn't feel like confident in it so I would just goof around in the outfield and like I still get my work done and I'll still be diving or whatever. but well just talk and just talk about our days or whatever and not really constantly overthinking of you have to do this you have to do this, and it just comes more naturally like it did when I was younger and when I wasn't thinking if I miss this ball what's gonna happen to me or whatever. So, in the outfield I would just have fun. and then it's not as stressful so I'm not overthinking it if I'm gonna get this ball

*So, to what extent does the type of stress influence the type of coping strategy that you use? When you feel it physically emotionally mentally do you react differently when dealing with it. Do you do different things to help? I know you said when you're physically tired you feel beat down. What do you do to make yourself feel better?*

Well, I try to surround myself with people if I'm alone I get very like I start thinking about a lot of stuff. So, I try to keep myself busy and doing a lot of stuff helps because if you think about it if you go to bed at night you think about all the things you did that day because you're by yourself and alone and like you have all your thoughts. So, I trying to keep busy I don't think about all the bad things, and we just have fun and its more enjoyable. I try to just distract myself. I think that would be the best.

*Have you changed the way you deal with stress? If so, why? If not, why not?*

I mean obviously as you get older you understand how to better deal with it. I would be like way back when I would just keep it in and like handle it myself because I thought, I don't want to

burden anyone else, so I don't want to put my stress on anybody else, especially with my family at home. I know its not softball. But I'm not like a very emotional person like I don't cry. And my mother and sister are very emotional, so I feel like I have to have it together 24/7. And they think I have no issues or whatever but its just because I'm very good at hiding it and putting on a brave face or whatever things like that. I like to hide it when I'll talk about it with my best friends because I have more trust in them. but before I had trust in anybody here, I would just keep it to myself. and like you would never know anything is wrong with me or you would never know the shit I deal with because I'm very good at hiding it.

*What forms of support do you receive to deal with stress?*

I mean obviously I have my friends. but I feel like our coaches are very good at it. Like they will always ask me how my day is and they like get to know you personally like my coaches know me in and out and I allow them to do that because I'm an open book but I allow them to have dialogue with them so it's like- I feel like it's hard for coaches to get to know you if you're not very willing to and I'm very willing to know and stuff. Like they'll ask me about specific situations about my boy or whatever. like simple things so they show that they are caring or whatever and obviously you have your friends to support you.

*How would you describe your most prominent form of support that you receive?*

Like who?

*Which form of support is there for you the most?*

Definitely friends. I also found friends that are not like softball obsessed so obviously you are gonna have people on your team that like to eat, breathe, live softball, but I'm like a person who is very like trying to figure out a different identity. Like I'm me first and like I have found friends that are not like anti-softball like we all care about the sport. but when we left softball, we were not talking about softball. We're talking about other things or whatever, so I think that helps. I feel bad for people who don't have another thing outside of softball I think that's why it helps to have like a boyfriend because you can talk about everything and anything else at like so like even my mom has learned I don't need to talk about softball because I've been doing it for four hours let's just talk about something else. I don't want to think about what happened but like laughing about it, but we talk about other things and like finding people to talk about other things with and not just talking about things that bring you stress. aka softball. It helps.

*What type of support do you want to receive? Whether it be from people, coaches, something from the university itself.*

You know how there's that like anonymous text thing, I don't believe that. And I've never done anything wrong to make me think its anonymous because I would never text something even if I had something to say because I don't really trust it. its just business and in know they all try their



best, but I feel like from an administrative thing they try. but I don't feel like this is so fake and I really don't think they care that much. You can tell who cares because they're at our practices but like they don't give a damn except for like football. You know what I mean. You see them all the time over there but never at the smaller sports. especially like the female sports. You know who I will say, especially like this year, is our dang president of the university. He shows support for every single sport, and he is the epitome of what we need in these leaders. you can say like oh they're busy or they're this. But he's busy and directs these thousands and thousands of people and all that and you just have to deal with student athletes, and he finds a way to deal with every single thing. So, I think he is the perfect example of what we want and what we're not getting. and I don't think the excuse of being busy is an excuse. because he does it and he still has a lot more in my personal opinion.

*I know you just mentioned that, but how would you like to see change within the current support systems that you have in place?*

I'm just thinking, our coaches do a great job, and our teammates do a great job. Obviously its what you can control is how our coaches can control their actions and our actions, but I just think it's very obvious what they care about, what they care about and who they care about. its especially like Title IX and equality and why are we holding these big staged events like this just so you can take pictures? You know what I mean. do it for yourself. Why are we making this a publicity stunt because if you really cared you would do it all the time when people aren't watching. And its only when they're watching that they're like "oh we're doing this!" and no you're not. I guarantee you don't know the names of any of the softball players. maybe one. Any of the swimming team or tennis, or golf. And like those are some small teams. Obviously not swimming, but like golf it is a small team. You should know them. and I don't think that. Our athletic director and his little minions come once a year and say we care about y'all...then what's my name? Like you don't know my name. I'm not bringing you millions of dollars like I'm sorry.

*How do the stressors in your life influence your ability to perform on the field? And could you give me any positive examples?*

Positive?

*Or negative, you can do either.*

I might fit positively in this. I just think like so I would say defense is a stressor for me. I don't even know why. I don't even have anxiety, but I feel like my chest is about to burst in the outfield. thinking about every single possible thing that could happen. And I'm just thinking don't f up don't f up. And then I'm on offense and I have no care in the world and its where I'm very good at and where I can succeed at.

*How do the coping strategies that you use relate to your performance?*

I feel like they help, is that what you mean?

*So, talk to me about when you're in a game situation or even at practice how talking to people helps ease that stress to allow you to perform.*

So, like we have four at bats three at bats a game. let's just say the first at bat was God awful and you just swung at crap or rolled over to the pitcher. I come in and laugh about it and we joke about it like "that was so bad. that was chicken shit." and we just laugh about it and joke. Because if I'm over here and not tell anybody about it and just keep it to myself that's when like the negative thoughts happen and so like I would say that type of thing. being able to laugh about it. like my slapping coach. Did you see that? Like it was so bad. And shed be like what were you even doing? Like we can joke about it like that and its funny and we try to make light of the situation because its already happened you can't change it. You're gonna have to have another at bat. You better try to brush it off.

*When you're playing softball, how do you maintain your poise during a pressure situation? And could you give me an example?*

Routines. I mean like we have a mental coach and I'm like not very fond of him all the time. but one thing he does that I do like is that we stick to routines like all the time. We have this red, yellow, green light release thing and its like a routine we do all the time. like we have one for offense and one for defense and like every single pitch you step out and do the same exact thing. Yellow is when you start to feel bad and then you have a red release you only do when you're spinning out of control or having negative thoughts. or feel like you don't have control over the at bat or whatever and then you do a release and having good intention when doing it is important because if you like going through the motions then it doesn't really help. but if you really like doing it. like for me my red release is like undoing my batting gloves and doing them really tight and that like releases all the bad stuff and then you go back into your green routine and having consistency with that really helps and stay even. Because when you're not doing that for like pitcher is not doing her routine that everyone knows then you know that she's not mentally good and like she's not feeling good and she's not feeling well. So, reminding your players and teammates to do that helps too.

*Are there any situations that cause you to lose that sense of poise? Can you talk to me about a time where you experienced a red light situation?*

I think when it happens multiple times. That one at bat we can laugh about but when it starts happening like three times you start shutting down and being like "what the heck is going on?" This is not happening, and I also think when offense and defense isn't going well. So, like we're privileged to have both and I'm not doing good, and coach is always like if you're not gonna do something on offense make up for it on defense and make a play. get your like and do everything you're supposed to be doing and it might make you feel a little bit better that you're not doing anything on offense that day or whatever. Everyone will feel better and make yourself feel better.

So, I feel like when you miss a ball in the outfield make an error and then strikeout twice that's when you're starting to spiral that's when you're like oh my god everything is going wrong today. just take me out. or like that's when you start having a lot of negative talk and that's when you got to try your best to try and get out of it. and pray that another ball doesn't go to you or that you won't have another at bat because that day is just kinda toast.

*When it comes to pressure situations how do you view them?*

I mean I think they're fun...

*Compare offense to defense for me.*

Okay, I think I see both sides of it. offense I'm supposed to be good at offense like I'm a good hitter. Like sometimes there's a lot more pressure on myself because I'm supposed to be getting a hit right here and it's unacceptable if I'm not getting a hit because this is what I'm good at. Defense I'm like it's a different type of pressure because I just need to make the routine play. Even if I don't make the spectacular play, I just need to make the routine. Sometimes that when you start spiraling because you start overthinking a simple fly ball that you've caught a million times and you've caught every single one and you start over thinking what if I don't catch this one. what if the wind blows it what if the sun, whatever, and you start overthinking it. So, I think those different types of pressure with offense and with like also because I'm good at offense on a good day when things are going right pressure situations are so fun. I'm like I get to be the person that wins this game. I get to be the person that they count on. Especially when I was pinch hitting. I was expected to get a hit when you're a pinch hitter. The coaches are like, well no one else is so just see if you can do it type of thing. So, I never really felt that type of pressure unless it was a big game or if I didn't get on and we lost the game type of thing. but for the most part there wasn't pressure with pinch hitting because you weren't supposed to, and it can be kinda fun and negative. It really just depends on how you feel that day. Obviously, that's with anything. but if hitting is going well then give it to me. But when it's not going well you're like giving it to the next guy. I'm good, I don't want it to be me.

*Based on the stressors you've talked about and your ability to cope with them how would you describe your overall mental health?*

I feel like I'm in very good mental health regardless of what. And I don't know any science behind mental health but like if it's if people are missing something in their body. I don't think they like to choose to have bad mental health. I think there is something actually wrong with them because it happens like the littlest of things affect them and it doesn't affect me. So, like it's not based on - I don't feel like- like I just got blessed to be like this, you know what I mean no body chooses to have bad mental health. we have people on our team that like have anxiety and I never dealt with that I just got lucky in my brain that I can deal with it better than other people I would say mine is like positive and it's like hard for me, but since like mental health is like more talked about now it's better but I don't understand it. because I never dealt with it really and when

people talk about it with me like I'm here for you, but I don't know how to help you. I can give you people to help you, but for me I don't know the right answer and I don't know what to say. because I don't know because I never really had to deal with it.

*What aspects of your mental health are most impacted by being a division I athlete?*

I mean you're constantly tired, like that type of thing?

*Yeah, so it can be physical or mental-*

It's mainly physical for me. like you never feel 100% percent. Like I worked out every single day over this break and I felt sore every single day. and I don't understand why. Like my body is just so worn down. And for us in the outfield we're like diving, I mean infield too, so we're like diving more in the air and just plopping and like physically its very taxing on your body and you just never feel 100% and that affects your mental because you're tired. Like my foot hurts, my ankle hurts, my knees hurt. Every single thing hurts and well then, you're like your mental starts going crazy because I don't feel 100% and I don't feel good mentally either.

*What steps have you taken, if any, to improve your mental health off the field?*

None, I mean there was one instance when this crazy thing happened, and I went to our like sports psychologist, and I hated her. Yeah, she's not even there anymore so it doesn't even matter, but I just think that they didn't have enough people. like they have a lot more people now. So, they had just put her in there. She was terrible. She told me like, and I would say something and shed say "that was bad" and trying to like to parent me. when you're supposed to be listening to me. So, I never went back. But we have lots of good experiences with people that are here now. Like we have Counselor A, well and she's not our sport psychologist anymore but she likes to come to our games sometimes and will come on our away trips with us. She's really easy to talk to so I do have a lot of good resources to talk about too. I just don't because of that bad experience.

*What are your concluding thoughts about stress today? And do you have any other thoughts about topics that we have not discussed?*

I mean I feel like we pretty much covered a lot. Obviously its just overall different for everybody. Every situation is gonna be handled differently, every single person is going to deal with things, and I think that overall, it's a lot easier said than done. like I'm not perfect at it. trust me like trying to give grace to people are one of the biggest thing our coach tries to harp on because everyone is gonna have bad days and everyone is trying to be understanding and getting to know your teammates and getting to know why they are the way they are. Like people always say you're a bitch because I just say what I feel. And there's a girl on our team that is like that. and they're like "why are you acting like that?" and I'm like I promise she's not and she didn't mean any negative with it, but I understand it because I'm like that sometimes. like I'm just sassy

and it just comes out like that. I don't mean it negatively. So, like trying to get people to understand that people are acting differently, that's just them. They don't mean any harm by it. They're just trying to say they're just speaking and you're taking it negatively and vice versa. Sometimes I say something, and they take it and I understand it came out like that, but I promise you I didn't mean it like that. So just trying to understand people and all of your teammates because there's so many girls. and so many girls on one team and a lot of different personalities and just girls. It can be really challenging and just trying to have fun with it.

*And you don't have any other questions for me?*

Nope.

**Participant #5**  
**12//2022**

*My name is Rhianna Weall I am a second-year graduate student here studying Kinesiology. Our purpose of being here today is to conduct an interview about stressors related to being a Division I softball player. We will talk about what you think are major stressors, how you deal with them, and how they relate to your life on and off the field. As a reminder, this interview is being recorded, but your identity will remain confidential. This recording will be transcribed and analyzed for structure and outcomes based on our concluding results, following that conclusion, the interview will be deleted. Please note that I am a mandatory reporter for Title IX and will be required to share sensitive information if presented. Do you have any questions before we begin?*

No.

*So, how long have you been playing softball?*

Since I was six.

*So, you started later?*

Then most people yes.

*And did you play from then on?*

Yeah, I haven't taken one break, not one break.

*What got you into the sport?*

Ok, so my parents are originally from out of state, so my dad drives 18 wheelers and he had to drive back and forth, and it was too far so he'd fall asleep driving back home at night, so we had to move to Ingleton. And in my town you'd do like cheer or softball. So, my mom is black, and my dad is white. So, my mom took me to sign up for the cheer stuff and that lady was like do you have enough money to do cheer? And my mom felt offended so were no doing that then. So, then they have like sign ups in Ingleton and its like all around Ingleton and my mom just signed me up.

*Did you fall in love with it?*

I just- no. I was just having fun. And I like to hang out with people, and I was just fast, and I just had to run fast. That's all I had to do.

*Tell me about your high school softball experiences.*

Okay, so freshman year of high school was a little bit harder for me because I committed. Well, we used to commit really young. So, my freshman year no one really knew me, but I was committed to a big DI school. So, like my freshman year people didn't like me because they thought I was stuck up, but they really didn't know me. So, I was kind of like bullied a little bit on the softball team because everyone thought I was an asshole when I wasn't. But after that it was really good. And I kicked myself a lot, but it was different just because of experiences that everyone else would have I didn't have. Like I didn't drink I never really hung out with people. I was always playing softball. No homecoming. no powder puffs. all those things that are big in high school I never got to do so it was kind of hard.

*How do you see softball fitting into your lifelong plans?*

I really don't see it fitting in. so I basically came to school. My parents have money but its a free education for me. And I know that ends for me. So, while I'm in it I'm gonna give it my best but when it ends, I know that I have to have a job and the income just like everybody else.

*Do you think you would ever get into coaching?*

Maybe, it would depend. I guess because I've done it so long people take advantage of children, and I don't want to take advantage of children. Not taken advantage of necessarily but the way they impact you and. I don't want to be a negative impact the way that some people were negatively impacted on my life.

*What made you decide to come here?*

It was here or another school. I actually didn't get a full ride from here when I got a full ride from every other school except from here. I have a little brother, and this was the closest school that offered me. And my little brother wanted me to go to the other school and I didn't want to, I wanted to come here. He was like I can't wait to watch you and I'm coming to all your games. Thats 16 hours away from home. And my mom was like. I just want you to know that if you decide to come here, we are not gonna be able to come down here every weekend. And then I ended up liking it here too. I was not going to go for 16 hours away from home, so I came here.

*What position do you play here?*

My freshman year I started as a second baseman, but now I play third base.

*Offensively where are you at in the lineup?*

I bat leadoff.

*What has your playing time been like so far?*

My freshman year I wasn't the best defensively and I don't think they helped mentally with that. They have mind games, they play mind games. So, they like broke me down a lot. And hitting wise I'm like really good. but I played like one in every three games my freshman year. And then for a while I played like every single game and then I messed up like one time and she sat me back on the bench and then I only got to hit again every one in three games. And then last year I played every single game, and I didn't sit on the bench one time.

*And this past fall season?*

We like switch in the fall back and forth.

*What do you like most about playing softball here?*

I think I like my head coach a lot. more than I would want to admit. Once I spent more quality time with her and learned more about her, I was able to enjoy her. Sometimes my teammates but really my coach. I really enjoy her.

*What are some other things you like about playing here?*

They treat us really well, like really well. And IO for softball kind of sucks a little bit, but they treat us like they care for us outside of softball. Where a lot of people. I think they care too much outside of softball in my opinion. They care about us as people where most people can't say that. Like if something were to happen, like one of our teammates dad passed away and it was like immediately everything shut down to go and figure out what she had going on. I feel like that is a really good aspect as a pro and a con. But I really like that the most.

*What would you say are then most stressful aspects about playing softball here?*

People's comments, social media sometimes. Your coaches opinions. Sometimes the own stress that you put on yourself because you want to perform at a certain level and then if you don't like it people don't think you're trying. Not saying that you're not trying to give it your all, but people don't realize that you're human. I think that for me, for me personally it was more about stress. Like I wanted to prove so many people wrong. because where I came from even my coaches to prove wrong. or the people that are supposed to believe in you the most sometimes don't even believe in you. So, that's the most stressful thing for me.

*Can you give me an example of a stressful situation that you have been through here?*

Stressful like how?

*Anything, like if you found it stressful specific to like softball or something else you had to deal with as well.*



Well, school is hard for me. I'm not dumb. I could make- like if I applied myself, I would make really good grades. I don't get bad grades. I just feel like its hard for me to balance. Like I feel like I'm all in or not all in. So, like last season I was all in on softball, so my grades slacked like so much. It was really bad, like it sucked. So, for me that's hard. Thats like the most stressful thing or like- Okay, everyone says once you start playing your life is so much better. As a benchee life sucked, nobody wants to be a benchee. Last year I played every single game, and I still wasn't happy. So, for me last year was very stressful and like my family wasn't there. I mean my family is back home so my parents would miss. And my mom works on Fridays so my parents would miss every Friday game and be there Saturday and Sunday. But if we had mid-week games, I would probably have the best season that we had on our team, and I would still go home and cry because we still don't have anyone to go to. And everyone is like "you're so good, you're so good, you're so good" but like after in the moment it feels so good, but afterwards it's like what the fuck am I even doing this for? It wasn't as thrilling as everyone made it seem. So, like last year I had a really hard time. Like figuring out who- like I wanted to figure out who I was outside of softball because I lost who I was, and I never realized that I didn't know myself. Until the season the came and I was playing every single game and I still wasn't happy. I feel like that was really stressful for me.

*And are there certain times of the year that create more stress than others and why?*

Definitely, so, more stress is like during season more so because you have to perform, while everyone expects you to perform at a certain level. While I have to have a certain attitude or certain persona so I'm always happy. And they're like leave what happens off the softball field off the softball field. When all of those things start to contribute then its hard to say I'm gonna let this go for four hours because its still on your mind. But during season its way more stressful and compact. You don't have really quality time for yourself anymore. you don't have time to sit and reminisce on your thoughts because you just go and go and go. so, its like stressful during the season than off-season. No drinking alcohol nothing to like, well that's not saying coping with alcohol, but it's really hard to find a coping mechanism when all you do is softball for six months.

*What are the most stressful aspects about being a division one student athlete here?*

There's a lot of pros to being a student athlete but people don't realize that we have all this access to things, but no one really tells us how to get access to things. You have all things at your hand, but like how many of us actually use them, how many of us actually know about them is crazy or like sometimes people –everyone has to do their job. So, like our advisors are our advisors, but they're not really looking at it because there are so many of us, they can't 1-on-1 with us and figure out what's best for you. I wanted to graduate in three years, and I told her that before I got to college, and we never realized the social work program my classes are like sequenced so I can only take certain classes at a certain time. so now I have to graduate as a senior. because I didn't look at it and I thought that she would look at it, but neither one of us looked at it so now it's like we say we have all these accommodations but it's not as accommodating as everyone realizes

because everyone is trying to just do their job and get home. So, no one is really being thoughtful.

*To what extent does playing softball cause stress outside of the team?*

Like one-on-one relationships?

*Relationships, school, work, anything.*

Our coach always feels like you have to put softball first. Or like having this persona to be someone that you're not. You can't post on social media going out and having fun. No one finds that intimidating, so she wants you to lie. Not lie necessarily but be someone that you're not basically so that's stressful. School is stressful for me, not for other people.

*What about school?*

For me keeping up. I'm a horrible procrastinator. like a really bad procrastinator. I think like last year even this fall I should've made all A's and I didn't because you get frustrated, and you need an outlet and softball is the outlet. But its not a good outlet, I think. Like you go do it for hours upon hours and then you're missing things and its stressor that like when we get a week off – we call normal people NARPS. Just normal people. So, like we have like a normal life for like a week. And never realize how much time normal people have when our lives are so stressful like we are always doing softball. No one realizes how long they were there and after you're finished you want to go to sleep. but you have to do more softball and then school so it's like that's stressful

*So, does it really end for you?*

Yeah, its always going.

*When you experience a lot of stress how would you say you feel emotionally?*

Oh, I'm a cry baby. I cry. I have no problem admitting that to anybody, I will cry in a heartbeat. So, I don't cry in front of other people, but I can hold it together for a while so I can get to my car and then I will break down. But my mom always tells me that crying is an emotion and that its okay to cry if you feel like that's the way to express yourself. So, that's the best way for me. So, I'll take a shower, a steaming hot shower and just wail. And then I just let it go after that.

*When you're experiencing a lot of stress how do you feel physically?*

Tired. Tired a lot. Because we start stretching you like you can't sleep, you're not really hungry and at our school they want you to be thicker and I'm not thicker, I don't like to eat. So, when I really start stressing, I really don't like to eat. You know like my stomach is growling right now and I could still like push myself not to eat food. So, that-wait what was the question again?

*Just when you're under a lot of stress how do you feel physically?*

Horrible, horrible, horrible. You can't lift crazy heavy weights no more. You just feel tired all the time. You eat food and it makes you sleepy, everything just makes you sleepy. You always wanna sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep.

*Where would you say you feel mentally when you're under that amount of stress?*

It depends on the year. So, like last year I was on Accutane too. So mentally I was not in a good spot. It was really hard last year. And like this year I have like, so we play softball, softball is a stressor. People don't consider if you have a boyfriend or family issues or school issues. Okay, so you have to perform at this level. And now I have boyfriend that I have boyfriend issues with. So, then that adds to my stress. Then my parents aren't here and that adds another stressor. And I'm looking at my grades every single day and my grades are slowly going down and down and down because I'm so tired I can't do my homework. I'm so annoyed and frustrated about softball and my boyfriend that I'm not doing the homework! I just need to go to sleep all the time. So, then my grades start to dwindle and then you look at yourself and I just dug this deep hole and like how do I get out this hole. And when you tell somebody that oh, I just dug myself this deep down and they're like well how'd you get there? Obviously, I know I went wrong in some areas, but can you help me? And then they're like "you gotta just try to figure it out. you gotta get up and put on your big girl drawers." But I'm not, like I don't know what to do. Its really hard. And then my freshman year was even harder because I didn't play. So, then I had boyfriend problems still. Parents couldn't come and they really didn't come since I wasn't playing. Then I wasn't playing and I'm like "Oh Fuck this!" And my grades were fine, but that was the only thing going good for me but everything else was like it was rough.

*What do you think is your main cause of the stress?*

Mine was more outside factors than softball. I had a bad relationship and that added a lot of stress into my life. Because I was worried about things I couldn't control. Once I let that go my life is like very relaxing, very relaxing! But I think that was my biggest stressor. It wasn't softball for me because softball is not who I am no more. So, like other people if we lose the game at the end of the day, if my folks are there, I'm gone be cool. But if my people aren't there then I'm gonna have. a rough time. But if I speak for my teammates a lot of them get caught up in who they are as a softball player and that's who they are. It also made it easier for me because I haven't had like a horrible game yet. Like I've always gotten on base. So, I've never experienced the low that everyone else hits yet. And I don't really want to. But I just know they like it- it creates a really hard time for them because they aren't performing at the level that they think they should. But I haven't experienced that yet because I haven't been that bad yet and I don't want to get there.

*How do you perceive stress? Negative? Positive? If you could explain.*

I guess its how you view it, how you view it. Stress can grow and make you become a better person or whatever, but stressing can dig way deeper into a hole. So, I guess its the person and how you perceive it. And how much perseverance you have and how much willing you have to like to go through and also you have to know some day is gonna be good. No matter how many bad days you have there's gonna be a day where something good happens even if it's like 0.25 seconds. just take it and like \*Breathe\*. So, stress for me I think I find it that it can help me positively, but in the moment when it's happening its negative. But I know like these things are happening for a reason and if they weren't happening then maybe my outcomes would be different.

*Of course, and how effectively would you say you cope with stress? If you could give an example.*

I'm gonna do this based on last year. I complained a lot. I because a negative-nancy in my opinion. I really had a hard time finding positives in anything. Like you could've gave me this perfect golden apple and I would've told you it had a god damn smudge on it because I was so stressed out. So, it was hard, really hard. But I guess when you start to eliminate certain things that are going wrong. like if you cut the problem then the stress goes away. So, then it makes it easier.

*And are you doing anything specific to cut those problems down?*

I let go of the boyfriend. that was a big one. I really like to paint. I'm a perfectionist. I'm a really bad perfectionist. So, painting is like blob painting. You like to pour it in this cup and put it over there and let it all fall on the thingy and you like spin it. And I realized life doesn't have to be perfect like as athletes everyone wants to perceive us a certain way. and I'm finding out more and more that some people just don't have to like you and that's okay. Like you don't have to be there for everyone. As long as I had a smile on my face, I would be fine.

*What coping strategies do you normally use when you're dealing with stress? And could you give me an example?*

Cry. I rant to my mom a lot. Me and my mom are really close. My coach would get on my nerves. First person I would call after that game if she wasn't there was my mom. If she did show up to the game that is the first person that I talk to too. And I think that without her a lot of things would've been hard. Because you have to have someone to express your feelings too because if you don't then you like hold it in. Without expressing my feelings to her she might say like validating my feelings like "what you feel is okay, what you feel is alright". And you write these things down and you have to explain these things to your coach, or she'll never know. So, I think my mom was a big one for me last year. Because without her it probably would've been totally opposite.

*To what extent does the type of stress influence the type of coping strategy that you use? So, whether you feel it physically, mentally, or emotionally.*

Like- wait explain it again?

*So, if you're physically stressed does that change how you decide to deal with it versus if you're emotionally stressed or mentally stressed?*

Oh! Yes, yes, yes. So, if I'm physically stressed for me would be more like my muscles are tight and stuff. But if that happens you gotta push through that and keep it moving. But if I'm mentally not there I have to like to shut down. My mom tells me like turn off your tv, turn off the light, I have a hairless cat fun fact, but put your hairless cat out the room, and sit in the room in complete silence for a good like 10-15 minutes. Try not to think about anything, try not to worry about anything. Just sit there so you can let it go for a minute. So, I think that helps like mentally. What's the other one?

*Emotionally.*

Oh, emotionally I would cry. I would probably cry.

*Have you changed the way you deal with stress? If so, why? If not, why not? So, compare your freshman year to this past year.*

My freshman year no matter what it was I would shut down. No matter what it was physical, mental, emotional I would shut down. And I mean shut it down like I would be so overwhelmed that I wouldn't go to the softball field, I wouldn't do the homework and I wouldn't even wanna talk to my mom. It was just like this bubble basically. And then last year when I would get stressed. I would go to the softball field, it was kind of like psychotic. I would hit balls, and balls, and balls, and balls. So many balls! I would listen to like therapeutic music, so I think that was the difference. But I don't think my coping skills are at its best because softball is still apart, like I love softball, but it's still a part of it and I know at some point it has to end. I can't go hit some god damn softballs at 30 when I'm stressed out. So, I need to find something that helps me relieve it better.

*What forms of support do you receive to deal with your stress?*

My mom, So, I was on Accutane and softball was going well but I was still like- I was having a really hard time mentally. My mom had told me "If I'm not enough for you, you can go see someone". So, hearing that, race comes into this too kinda. As for who I am, I'm always supposed to be strong. My coaches present me more or like one time my coach like made me dive for this like one ball in front of all 28 of my teammates like thirty times and no one else had to. and it was embarrassing kind of. So, you have to put on this persona that you're stronger. And going to see someone else I like couldn't do it. So, I just had to tell my mom everything. Every

single thing that I was feeling. even if I didn't want to tell her. I had to tell her because I knew I couldn't go see someone else. Like I really wanted to like if someone would have just pushed me in there and said go do it, then I would've done it. I was so like "you have to be strong, you have to be tough you gotta be that person. So, I didn't go do it. I was too scared.

*That's okay. So, tell me more about your mom. Would you describe her as the most prominent form of support that you receive?*

Okay, financial support is my dad. Mental support is mom. Parents are still together though. But my dad is more like he doesn't- both of my parents came from like nothing. I'm like the first person to go to college all that my dad is more like push through it, just stop complaining about it and just fucking do it. And my mom is like I wanna hear about it. I want you to tell me about it I want you to explain these things and if you wanna cry about it we can talk about it. All those emotional things going on in your life my mom is always there. So, no matter what goes on she's the first one I call.

*What type of support do you want to receive?*

I just want someone to listen to me. And sometimes its not always about someone chiming back into me. I just need someone to listen to. So sometimes I tell my mom I just need you to listen. And even if I'm wrong please just still listen. And then let me calm down and then you can tell me how I'm wrong. I just like to be heard. Because it'll like fest up really bad and I will start screaming at someone and they'll be like "why are you screaming at me?" and I'll be having like a million emotions that I should've just explained when they were happening.

*How would you like to see change within the support systems that you currently have in place? So, within the support you're receiving from your coaches, your mom, your dad, anything else, how would you like to see change?*

The only thing I think is like my coaching staff. They are very one dimensional in my opinion. They feel like- I believe in God- but they feel like everything has to be like, I don't know like. They just want it done their way, like their way or the highway. And I guess me and my coach, my head coach and I are starting to come to terms that everything isn't like that. You not about to tell me that I need to do something all the time when I'm an adult just like you're an adult. And I didn't- I don't like that they like play mind games with you. Like my coach is like very conniving like I've heard multiple- she hasn't done anything to me, but I wish she would try me. I heard just so many things that she's created issues within the team and she's not realizing she's creating these issues and she's just being her. without realizing it's a problem. Like coaches shouldn't be messy. Coaches shouldn't worry about outside life. They should care about you. But if I decide to post like- not a naked picture but like a bikini picture its none of your business. If I wanna see my flat stomach that I worked for that's my choice. So, I don't like that and then they kinda like gang up on you. Say like, okay in the season I had a lot of problems with them. Like a lot. Before my exit meeting I had a one-on-one with coach on the plane because she didn't want

me to go somewhere else. And if I wouldn't hadn't had that one-on-one when season would've ended, and it was time to talk in front of all ten of them. I don't think I would've said half of what I said when it was one-on-one. And it would have that chime, chime, chime. and it just feels like so many everyone has an opinion, but no one is understanding where I'm coming from. And then I don't like that they say "Oh, we're gonna try to change these things" and they don't change. like that really irritates me because like my first thought is like if your daughter was in this situation how would you feel? You don't like that right? So, how could you do it to me? Like you have a baby girl and if these things were happening to your daughter, you would not like that. So, why would you do that to me? Yeah, you know what I'm saying

*So, just taking that back to being here? Being heard to your coaches?*

Yeah, yeah, I could say that.

*How do the stressors in your life influence your ability to perform on the field?*

I think they make me thrive.

*So, could you give me a really positive example of when you were feeling a lot of stress and you did really well?*

Last season, definitely. Well, it wasn't as much stress. It was more outside factors so softball was the reliever. But it was very like I'm a competitor for me I didn't- practice is different from a game for me. So, like at practice I'll let those affect me. but when it came game time it was like I wanted to be the best. and I didn't care what was going on and it was my time to just snap out of it. And the game is three hours long. I'm not saying the whole three hours I'm like not complaining not talking bullshit not doing that but like for me when I step in that batter's box. I just wanted to knock the shit out of the ball for that split second and then right after that I would go back to- I would be stressed still, but it was like a relief for a minute. Because you did good. And softball was a reliever, but it was also a stressor.

*Do you have any negative examples where you were stressed within those situations on the field?*

Oh, yes. Freshman year, so my coach, mental games. playing with me mentally. We played this team, and first ball got hit and I missed it. And I don't mean like flat out missed it, like it hit my glove and bounced out my glove and went backwards. And I'm like looking at her. You know when you're like looking at someone for validation, that is a big problem for us. We looked for a person for validation every single- so much and I looked to her, and she gave me a head nod like it was okay, but I knew it was still disappointing. So, I was so stressed in that moment that the next ball came, and I missed it again. I mean I was so stressed that when I got back in that dugout that I told them don't put me back in the game. I was literally like crying. like please don't put me back in please don't put me back in, like I can't do this. It was really stressful and

then also my freshman year. I told the slapping coach because me and her are really close. I told her how I felt, and she took what I said and used it against me like later on and it was very just ughhh. Like it really irritated me because I was talking in confidence thinking that we were really close and she like used it against me. and that was a really rough time, and it was the most backstabbing thing So now I don't tell anybody anything like I can't trust someone because they're always gonna use it against you.

*How do the coping strategies that you use relate to your performance? So, specifically with your mom.*

I don't think if I didn't talk to her, I would carry- well, talking to her, crying about it, if I didn't let it go it would fester and I think my games would start to get worse because I would start to get irritated. Like I like my teammates, but I didn't like my coaches. But that's changed. I told them how I felt so now I'm okay with them. But I didn't like a lot of things that were going on with them. I mean like the slightest little thing that they did would make me like - I was so irritated it was bad. It was really bad. So, if I didn't like to let it go it would be really bad. It would end up where I would be disrespecting them.

*Was there ever, because I know you guys play double headers, specifically when your mom was there and it was a good game or bad game and you were able to talk to your mom in-between, did that impact the second game?*

I don't talk to my mom during the game because we make this like eye contact. I like to make this face and she likes to understand. Or like sometimes its just to like to hear her voice. Her voice is so distinct to me that when she says something it just snaps back, and I get it back together. My batting coach, the likes slapping coach. She's really good at that for me too. Shes like "go to the bathroom, take a minute. take a deep breath and let it go and try again". Or she'll tell me "You're still tripping" and I'm like "Oh shit! If someone can see me tripping, I need to snap it back." Someone just needs to like to say like I see that things are not going right for you, and you just need to snap back into reality. And I snapped back really fast.

*When you're playing softball how do you maintain your poise when you're in pressure situations?*

I'm not good at this! Hitting I'm good, I do show emotions but its not as bad as people think. I make faces but its not irritating me as bad as people think because it looks like its irritating me. But defensively when I mess up, I mean all hell is breaking loose for me mentally. Like I mean I'm about to have a fucking breakdown on the field in front of all these people. So, wait, what was the question?

*Haha, how do you maintain your poise, so how do you keep it?*



So, my teammates the ones that stand right next to me. And she's really good at defense. And she just said "Participant E its fine, deep breath" and I'm like okay its fine and I'm like "Participant A I should've like- no, just let it go. Deep breath, try again. Like io just need someone that can snap me back into reality because if not you fester in your own thoughts, but if someone says like "it's fine, you're okay, move on" I move on.

*Can you give me an example of when you lost your sense of poise? So, something that triggered you.*

That freshman year, same thing. Ball, miss it. No one said anything to me. Like me and then– we were playing close– where we play now well, she plays shortstop I play third base – but before we had a base where I played second, and she played short. And I'm a freshman so I didn't really talk to anyone, like I didn't want you in my personal business. So, like I messed up there's like no one to like to snap me back and I just festered, and I was like "Oh, shit another ball is coming in my direction. Here it comes, here it comes! You can't field the ball." It's just like negative and it just like it's just so much negative so fast that it just added, and no one could snap me back and I just lost it so much. I would cry and it was a shit show.

*That's okay, and then how do you view pressure situations?*

Oh, I like them.

*What about them?*

It like it shows who a person truly is in my opinion. So, will you rise to the occasion, or will you drop down? Like I like to rise, when a game is on the line and that person is up to bat like I want to be that person. Like I like those situations.

*Defensively?*

Defensively...

*Yeah, so winning run on third base bottom of the seventh, two outs.*

OOOOHHH! Please don't hit the ball too hard, please don't hit the ball too hard to me. Because I'm gonna tell you, my coach has told me, told me my freshman year in exit meetings. "You cost us the game defensively". It is so heartbreaking and heart wrenching to hear that you cost the game. And more than one person and one play cannot cost the game in seven innings. one play. One play can cost the game. Bullshit. So, me defensively I can't mess up. like my heart starts BOP and I'm like please if you hit this ball like right here not too crazy now not too- I would like not to panic and then like- if it wasn't one thing my coaches did it was something else. First it was defensive, couldn't field the ball correctly, now I can't throw the ball correctly. Now, I done field the ball and I got like 15 errors on the year, and more than half my errors are throwing

errors. How you can't- you've been playing and made maybe 15 errors in your whole life, and you get to college and can't throw the ball. And you Jank your arm and get stuck back there, like c'mon now. Like this is the issue like c'mon.

*Based on the stressors you've talked about and your ability to cope with them, describe your overall mental health.*

Like right now?

*Yes, right now.*

Oh, its amazing. its amazing.

*What's different about it now than what it was?*

I think I know my worth. I know my worth now. I don't have the toxic boyfriend anymore and I know my worth. I don't give a damn about what my coach said. I know like what are you- not that I don't wanna say that she needs me, but she does need me. So, like because I know she needs me I'm not gonna step down my game because of that but like I'm still gonna be the same person. But you not gonna talk to me in any kind of way now. Like you not about to make me psyche myself out because you got your own problems. So, I think its really good right now.

*What aspects of your mental health are most affected by being a division I softball athlete? It could be mental, physical, just overall where do you feel the most impacted because you are a division I athlete?*

School. School.

*And does that take you on the mental, physical, emotional side? Or thank all three?*

More like mental. Not emotional. Mental because I know what I'm capable of and I'm not executing it. So, what pisses me off if I was like just an average person, I think my grades could be pretty god damn outstanding if I had all day to do my god damn work. but because I'm like adding these other things in I'm like- well, let me rephrase. I don't think my grades would be crazy outstanding, but I think they would be like higher because I have all day to do the work. Because some things I couldn't change. Like the boyfriend problem, I couldn't change that. And that would mentally mess me up still. So, I think it would help it. But because of softball it like it makes me irritated because I just feel like it's just different for me than football players, basketball players and like all of these people can play and go make millions, and we can with like endorsements, not saying we can't, but I just know when it's time for me to get in my master's program I can't blame it on softball. They not gonna wanna hear that softball is the reason my grades are- they gonna say that's an excuse so I know or like all the internships that my classmates get to have and experiences that they get to have and we're like in the same

department and like I don't have those experiences that like really irritates me because I want to still excel like I just don't want to excel with softball. But softball takes up so much of my time that I can't go work in no prelab school to get that one on one happening in like the mental hospital. I can't do that because I have classes in the morning and then I have a 2-5. I have a job basically. So, that irritates me, and it's been rubbing me really rough because now it's time to get down to the nitty gritty of school and like I really wanna make it to that master's program and I want to do a one year program and if my grads aren't to this level then it's like you done failed yourself. Not failed yourself, but like the next step of life just fucked up because you didn't take it where you needed to take it.

*What steps have you taken, if any, to improve your mental health off the field?*

Well, I decided to make friends outside of my sport a little more. That was a big one. Now I have this like real cool friend. She plays basketball but likes it differently. If like someone who isn't with me every day and isn't at practice like someone who can just hear me and doesn't know- like I don't know much about basketball, and she don't know much about softball. So, when we talk it's easier because the person really doesn't know much about the sport and it's more about how we feel than the sport necessarily.

*And then what are your concluding thoughts on stress today? And do you have any additional thoughts on topics we didn't discuss today?*

I think most athletes don't really think about stress. I think we all know we're stressed but we don't realize that it's stressful. So, if you were to say physical stress, I wouldn't really know what physical stress is. Like I know when my body is in agony, but we wouldn't call it stress than just say we just worked really hard, or your body is not prepared for that. Or like mentally, I know what you're talking about, but I don't know how to exactly pin point the stress. So, that's kind of hard.

*Like having it explained to you, did this conversation bring to light anything you may not have realized.*

Yeah, it did!

*Do you think that's gonna cause you to change things you have been or haven't been doing?*

I think it's gonna help change it. I think social work is helping me with this too. It makes you think more about you not necessarily what you're doing. Like learning who you are kind of, and I think like a lot of us don't know where stressed or what even are our coping mechanisms. You don't even know, like we have coping mechanisms, but we don't even know them about ourselves. - hmmm, something else we could talk about. I think the coaching staff. the coaching staff because those people are the people that are supposed to believe in you the most because they chose you, but they break you so much that you could hate the sport you could not like

yourself. Everything can go to shit because of one person, and it doesn't always have to be at a DI level. You have like over from 6- I'm 20 now. I've had over like 10 coaches, my coaches for the most part were good, but I could tell you like two or three of them that like had mentally added to stuff that wasn't supposed to be added because you're a kid and people don't, people do realize it, but people don't really talk about it that much. Thats about it.

*Do you have any other questions for me about anything else?*

No, well, actually no.

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## **Vita**

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