Welcome to Episode 1 of CommRadio’s coverage of successful community building strategies and efforts among Penn State Athletics Teams. This episode dispels the myth that hazing builds bonds among teammates that create a strong community on college athletic teams. I’ve spoken to mental health professionals, academics and student-athletes themselves. They all discuss healthy ways to build community within athletic teams. This episode consists of interviews with Shea Brown, a wellness and clinical services coordinator at Penn State and Dr. John Heil, a clinical and sports psychologist. I’m your host Julia Henry

There has not been an official hazing case in athletics reported at Penn State since 2020 with its Altoona baseball team. Hazing in sports has been an issue for many years and all athletes are vulnerable to it according to Heil’s research published in 2016. Hazing can be traumatizing. It is instituted to create a group identity and as a tradition that builds character which creates the hazing cycle. Teams need positive and constructive environments to succeed. To find a sense of belonging, sometimes hazing is instituted. Teams should focus on building characteristics of loyalty, respect and unity through positive team building methods.

Shea Brown discussed the type of support offered to student athletes here at Penn State.

***“****So my name is Shea Brown. I'm a Penn State alumna who literally graduated in the summer, and then I started working for the university in the fall. I'm from Massachusetts, so out of state, but I knew that I wanted to come here and experience like the sport culture, and I'm not an athlete myself, but I thought that that was what made the college experience, like very worthwhile. And so I came here. I started in 2019, so I was, I was somebody who experienced COVID during college, and that changed things quite a bit, but after that, I started working for the football team as the receptionist, in a very informal position. I didn't have any real goals of being there, or necessarily knew that I wanted to work with athletes ahead of time. But as I finished my collegiate career, I recognized how important it was for me to work with student athletes, especially student athletes of color, in getting them therapeutic care. So a lot of the black community and other minoritized communities have very specific feelings, I guess, about mental health and therapy and what that looks like. And so one of my main missions in my life that I want to do is help not only destigmatize but integrate therapeutic care into those communities. And so in front of me at the football facility was the perfect example of, people who really needed that support, and so rather than wait for somebody else to do it, I knew that this was my time to do that, and so I was able to get a job at my department now. So we recently changed our name, so I literally apologize if I say the wrong thing, but we're calling ourselves athlete therapy and wellness services, which is essentially a compliment to CAPS we were built about three years ago when Pat Kraft came in to provide our student athletes specifically with access to therapy, and they have access to it the entirety of their collegiate career, as long as they're a student athlete. So we serve all of our Olympic sports teams, which means we do not serve rugby, cheer or dance. And then my role as the clinical services coordinator is to do a lot of outreach to communicate with other athletic departments regarding like if they have a student that they want to be referred to me, or even if there's different issues related to both of our work where we can work with each other”*

Dr. Heil discussed his background too.

*“So I'm a clinical psychologist and sports psychologist both. My clinical practice focuses on injury management and then my sports psychology practices. Like many people, I see athletes to work on performance and sometimes mental health, but mostly performance. I was a division one athlete myself. I'm a parent of a college athlete. I've been on the faculty at a number of different colleges and universities. I've worked with college teams and so forth. The strongest area for me is where the clinical psychology and the sports psychology overlap, which is the psychology of sport injury. So I published pretty extensively in that particular field. The hazing is somewhat of a side topic, you know, it's its own topic, but a little bit of a side topic from injury, because hazing creates physical injuries sometimes too and, and so I was in a situation. I was president of the Society for sport, exercise and performance psychology as president with the expectation of creating some kind of service oriented activity or making some kind of contribution to the field. And at that time, there was a lot happening with hazing in the news. And so I thought, well, I should no one else is doing it. I should step in and try to make something happen here. And then you may or may not have discovered that I have a sport hazing web page. I was going to mention, probably**Dave Yukelson**was the the athletic department sports psychologist for many years. He he left about three, four years ago. So you may not know about him, but at any rate, because we were close friends, I was pretty well familiar with what was happening at Penn State. so I have some knowledge of of the way things work there. And you know, it's always changing, of course, but Penn State, Penn State did have the first Athletic Department hired sports psychologist of any school in the country.”*

Dr. Pat Kraft has served as Penn State’s Vice President for Intercollegiate Athletics since July 2022. In his almost three years at Penn State, Dr. Kraft has committed to improving the student-athlete experience and advocating for coaches and staff.

According to gopsusports.com, the university has over 850 student athletes. Kraft created the mental health and wellness department to support student-athletes as well as upgrading nutritional stations in all athletic facilities.

*“Yes, so before this, we had two sports psychologists on on staff. They were housed within the Morgan academic center, but they weren't able to provide a lot of one on one care to student athletes, just because of the way that it was set up. And so when Pat came, as well as there was best practices put into place by the NCAA that required that we have a more direct therapy department and access to this sort of service. So yes, it was partially because of Pat but also there were structural changes that happened at the conference level too”*

That’s super interesting to hear that Penn State’s athletic department hired the first sports psychologist in the country. Looking at your website, you’ve worked with aspiring athletes and Olympians. Are there trends across the mental health of all athletes? Or are there differences depending on the stage they’re performing on?

*“Yeah, I think specifically working with athletes falls into two main categories. One is dealing with mental health issues. The other is dealing with performance issues, you know, learning skills that will help a person perform better. Those two areas certainly overlap some but more you're dealing with those things, those two types of interventions, really, regardless of the level, whether it's a youth athlete or an elite Olympic or professional athlete, the same potential issues come up. The the other thing that can come up based on your role as a sports psychologist, whether you're working with the individual or the team, is team building interpersonal dynamics and that sort of thing. So when you have a role, not just with an individual athlete, but with the team, you start having the opportunity to step into other areas. And that would be one way that a sports psychologist might work with the team on hazing in the very way that you suggest, which is team building and and what I would say is hazing is team building gone wrong. Team building gone wrong. When you bring people together, they're going to go through this process of, there's an acronym for it, which is form, Storm, Norm, conform, perform.So people first come together, and then they have to create an identity as a team, as individuals within that team, and as they create that, there's some negotiation, you might say, not in the formal sense of the word, but*

*collectively, people identify who they are as a team, what it means to be part of that team. And then people try to reinforce that norm and stick to it, hopefully a constructive one and and then once you've got the that clear the expectations, then it's just about focusing on performance, because you've got a lot of the other issues about how to interact with others and what your values are as a group, you have that in place, and it's time To perform”*

What helps the student-athletes transition from high school to college or even with the prevalence of the transfer portal, what helps new players to Penn State thrive at the Big Ten level while being a student too?

*“Sure, yeah. So I don't have a I don't have a ton of research to back this up, but I can tell you anecdotally that there are a lot of similarities to a regular student who comes in and you know, they're the top of their class, and now they're in classes with people who are just as smart, if not smarter, than them. So you know, people experience feelings of inferiority or anxiety related to performance. They don't feel like they're performing well enough, or the expectations that they feel like are set. They're a little bit concerned about whether or not they can be met. And so a lot of anxiety, the most, the trendy, I guess, the most trends that I would see within the student athletes that I do see, or I'm not a clinician, but the ones that are on our schedule would be anxiety as a diagnosis, so performance anxiety, but also anxiety about like, perfectionist, perfectionism rooted anxiety, and that looks like, you know, Just wanting to to please coaches and staff, and it's hard for some people. It's hard some people, some people are used to that, and so it's not too challenging for them to make that adjustment while others struggle.”*

Going off of athletes who utilizes your services, you mentioned the referral too, is there a higher usage of these services with athletes who are recovering from injury?

*“Yeah, so surprisingly, there actually isn't a correlation with student athletes being injured and coming to seek services. One of the biggest pieces of my role is staying up to date on our injury support list and then reaching out directly to our student athletes to ensure that they are doing okay and offering our services. I will say that I've tried to run a student athlete injury support group for three semesters, and unfortunately, it hasn't really had much of a turnout. I think there's a lot of reasons for that, but one of them is injured or not, a student athlete has so much on their plate that sometimes groups, whether it's support groups, therapy, regular therapy, are viewed as just like an additional task, and unfortunately, that can be too overwhelming For our student athletes, and I do think there's sometimes shame and stigma around being injured, and that creates a lack of desire to engage and participate in those kind of things, you know? Yeah, so the other part of student athlete life at Penn State is that for the most part, our student athletes don't have a lot of crossover interaction, if that makes sense. So your tennis players aren't usually spending time with your soccer players. You know, I can't think of a good example, but like typically, folks stay to their own group. And so what happens with that is, if I'm not seeing that other people have an injury, if I feel isolated, I definitely don't feel comfortable going and meeting up with these other people talking about this injury, right? Because even though it's perceived, and there are other people who might have had the same exact injury as you, as you know, on a different team, it can feel like they're being exposed if they do come in and seek those services”*

That’s interesting. If you had to say, what percentage of injured student-athletes that you reach out to informing them of your services respond to you?

*“ I would say that I'm not good with numbers, but the highest percentage of the time, like 99% of the time, even our student athletes who are injured are not the ones that are coming into therapy every time. For the most part, I can tell you that every time that I've reached out to somebody who's injured this semester, they have not sought services with us. So I think that it's like, especially when you are experiencing injury that is time intensive. So if I have to do, I don't know, three days of rehab of a week for an ACL tear, or if they're getting surgery another like they don't want to have another thing to do in going to therapy.”*

Let’s dive deeper into performance anxiety. What are some strategies or methods that help athletes cope with it at a different stage than academic or workplace anxiety?

*“Yeah, so Presently, the clinicians that I have on staff are not sports psychologists or have any sports background, I will say that they are seeking their certified mental performance coaching certificates, and I think they'll be complete with them this summer. But in saying that the approaches that our clinicians take to therapy are rooted in traditional therapeutic orientation, so it's not anything where I'm addressing performance anxiety based on sports psych. S o yeah, we definitely are focused on hitting the root of the issues. So that looks like, Hey, I'm coming in with anxiety, but if your anxiety is present on the field, on the court, on the track, then it's usually present in other areas of your life. And so our clinicians seek to address that. And I do think eventually, as we grow and continue to learn and get more education, like I said, they're getting their certificates, they will be able to do more sport, rooted work. But one thing that does have a lot of crossover is cognitive behavioral therapy, which is restructuring thoughts and so and visualization is a big piece of that. So that is something that is common in everyday therapeutic practice that I think when addressing a more performance based anxiety is super helpful as well. Okay, but again, with therapy, everything is so niche to each person that you just sort of use different orientations based on whatever the student needs.”*

Working with athletes across all teams, are there any trends or traits you’ve noticed across the high performing teams such as the national champions, women’s volleyball, or wrestling, or even football who had a strong playoff run compared to maybe the basketball programs which struggled this season?

*“I can say that we don't have any, we didn't have any basketball athletes in our care. Now, I don't think that being in therapy with our services is what made them successful by any means, but I think the culture is a big thing. Team culture, having that shared goal and a coaching style. I mean, again, I don't know much of the research, but I do know that culture is built through the type of coaching. And I think, like, Katie's really great obviously, Cael Sanderson has something going on that he like is doing really well. They do have their own I guess I don't, I think she's a therapist that is sort of contracted directly by Cael, because she was his specific therapist. So we don't tend to have a ton of insight into what the wrestling team gets to do, but I will say, yeah, just like general positive team culture, open communication with staff members and whoever's in their circle. But outside of that, I can't say for sure. Like, hey, this is what is making them really great. I would love to know. I would love to get some data on that, but I don't personally know, and I don't think necessarily that. Like, I would love to sit here and say, Oh, 10 of the athletes were in therapy, and that's why they were able to be national champions. But that's not necessarily true”*

That’s interesting to learn about Cael Sanderson and wrestling, especially given they’ve won four NCAA national championships in a row.

*“we, we're they are more than allowed to come see us. They can see us as much as they would like, but they do have somebody that I think is more integrated into their system, so they don't tend to to see us as much”*

And then working with teams as a sports psychologist, are there certain traits that you see within, captains and those leaders that help build that strong team from the start? And traits that prevent the more negative hazing acclimation when freshmen or transfers join the teams?

“*Yeah, that's, that's a fantastic question, and it's a hard one to, I mean, I can answer it, but the process, what you point to is the idea of, well, what makes when you have a captain, what type of a person is it that makes hazing less likely to happen or more likely to happen? And I think it's a person who has really strong interpersonal skills and really cares about teammates, but then also has the respect of the teammates. So you can be a very caring person, but you need the respect of your teammates if they're going to follow your lead on things. Because, for whatever reason, hazing happens a lot, and it seems like people come up with team building ideas. They're just not very good ideas. And who was there to say, hey, we shouldn't do this. And I think nothing can happen without the captain endorsing it. A lot can happen without the coach knowing about it. But whatever the team is going to be doing, the captain will know about and the captain is an important influencer in that regard. Now I'm not answering the question exactly, but what you're referencing is choosing a captain becomes really important. And so how do you how do you do that? Is the captain elected? Is the captain appointed by the coach, and if the captain is appointed by the coach, to what extent does the coach really trust that captain to manage the team with some degree of independence, or to what extent does the coach expect the captain will be delivering orders from him to the team?”*

That’s a good question–how are those captains selected? Ging off of that how can

advocacy happen if hazing occurs on a team level or instiitutionally? And what are some skills that either like the athletic department or the school overall, to advocate for and protect them?

*“There's a mandated reporting system that's that follows from some NCAA guidelines for and you can check with administrators, they would know that people that serve an administrative role in the athletic department, there are specific reporting guidelines and mandates, and these include not just athletes, but all the students, and they're actually governed by laws that have been passed by Congress in terms of each school submitting reports on a yearly basis about interpersonal violence. So it would include athletes and others. It would include not just hazing, but significantly, it would include sexual assault and harassment charges and that sort of thing. So there is an infrastructure that provides should provide a system and guidelines and even expectations about reporting information. So there's that within the Olympic movement, there's something called safe sport. So for me as a sports psychologist, to work with Olympic teams or anything that happens within the national governing body of the sport, I need to get safe sport certified. I need to complete some simple coursework. And so do all the coaches that are you know also function within this national governing body, and so those are the two main mechanisms I'm aware of that guide, reporting and accountability.”*

While there has been no official hazing reports, Brown commented on times where her supervisor has had to facilitate conversations.

*“So we've been really lucky that we haven't had to experience either the fallout or any super prominent hazing situations. But I will say that anything that I've sort of heard about has been swiftly addressed positively by, you know, once, once things are brought to the awareness of coaches and upper level administration or staff, things are nipped in the bud very quickly and so and there's usually, like, a debrief or conversation, and at times we will be brought into that communication to help, like, have those conversations. So I haven't personally experienced it, but I do know that there has been a few instances in which Katie, my my director, is brought in to help facilitate conversation. I do think, in general, there's a lot of really positive relationships among teams and with the new generation of coaches being on the younger side, I think they like, know that that's not a thing, right? Like, we're not gonna that's like, not a thing of the past that sounds dismissive, but it's just not as prevalent, which is really awesome.”*

Thinking about the current state of college athletics, and just the way NIL has changed the sport and the transfer portal. With teams with new players ,transfers, how does that impact team culture? Because I feel like that's something that causes some struggle, just in team building and team chemistry. I don't know if there's any real correlation to hazing, but it just seems that with players constantly able to transfer for you know, better opportunity or more NIL money. For example, Indiana men's basketball, for example, lost every single one of their starters due to either graduation or the transfer portal. Our women's basketball team here last year brought in 8 out of the 13 players last season were new, and then this year, like pretty much everyone, except, like three players left for the transfer portal or is out of eligibility. So it just kind of seems like this turnover makes it hard to, you know, have that successful performance.

“I think it makes team, team building, certainly more challenging. I think that goes without saying. How this will play out remains to be seen, because we're also having, like, a pay discrepancy. We're going to have athletes perhaps making a million dollars, and other athletes on the same team paying their own tuition, potentially. You know, it's all remains to be worked out. How does that affect the team dynamic? You know, because there was whole idea that we're all part of the same team and we're even but as the you know, before, with scholarship or non scholarship athletes, now, it's spread out, you know, pretty significantly. At the top end, in terms of some people making a lot of money, there's a whole question of loyalty to the school, loyalty to the team, and so we don't know. I think everybody's just trying to guess and figure that out. So you might know as well as anybody that was going to happen. You, you seem to have been thinking about it. And we just don't know yet, but, but we know it's not making anything easier. I t's making some people wealthier, and we could say some people fairly getting them fairly compensated. But will they all be fairly compensated? It's just a giant question mark I think.”

*Yeah, it’ll certainly be interesting especially with that House settlement that’s been in the process of revenue distribution and all of that. St. Francis, a school in Pennsylvania dropping to Division 3 and schools following suit across the country or even cutting athletic programs. It’s definitely sad to follow, but certainly interesting to follow how the world of NIL is impacting institutions and athletic programs across the country.*

“Well, yeah, if you think about it, NIL affects really two sports, a little bit of women's basketball, but it's mainly men's football, men's basketball, and then only at a limited number of schools. You know, most basketball and football programs aren't influenced by this at all. They're low, lower level, division one or division two or three,

and then all the other sports. I don't know, essentially, what's happening with them. You know, remains to be seen. But there's not a lot of money in sports like, let's say fencing. For instance, Penn State has a fencing team for a lot with fencing, there's just not a lot of money there to support fencing. So you might have someone who is an Olympic level athlete at Penn State, who's not making any money at all, and may probably has a scholarship. But will they get compensated too? I don't know. You know, it's just,

it's a big mess, but it's really gonna, you know, it's a disrupter for everyone. It's advantaging some very few two sports at a limited number of schools. But to me, it's disadvantaging college sports in general”

*Definitely again it’s so interesting to watch it all play out especially I’m a big basketball person and Penn State basketball both teams definitely struggled a little bit this past season. And, again Indiana their men’s basketball team. They had to replace all five starters but theirroster for next year is making combined over 10 million in NIL according to the Daily Hoosier, they’re one of 10 division one teams that CBS Sports’ Matt Norlander is reporting has a player and NIL budget of 10 million and at Indiana that’s based on athletic department revenue sharing and from the Hoosier Connect collective and I don’t know what exactly Penn State basketball men’s and women’s are making, I tried to find that data but couldn’t find anything published, but I believe it iscertainly less than 10 million as there there’s only 10 schools who are doing that across the country for basketball and it’s just interesting to see how different schools can compete at different levels with NIL in ​​terms of teams and the amount of money that they dedicate to each team.*

“but yeah, to your point, it's really going to affect the whole way in which team building and team dynamics unfold. I'm sure it already has. I don't think you have to be that close to know that that's happening. What I would say, is this, it the whole question you asked points to an important role for sports psychologists to assist teams and coaches. Back to my point, if when a team forms, they're going to more or less go through some team norming or team building process, is it going to be terribly destructive. Is it going to be incredibly helpful? It's going to be somewhere in between. And if it's going to be really good, it would be helpful to have someone who has some expertise in team building and interpersonal dynamics playing an active role in helping make that happen. So it speaks to a role for sports psychologists to be involved with teams, or maybe to just be involved with captains,to train them to be more up to the role of being a team leader. I without giving details, I did intervene with a college program where there was a hazing incident with one of the sports teams, actually a woman's team. And one of my suggestions that the college like, but never followed through on it is creating like, like a Captain's Council, where captains of all the teams would meet at some interval and they would have guest lecturers and speakers who could provide them at. Advice and consultation on how to work effectively with teams. So my if someone put me in charge of that kind of role in Penn State, I would have create some entity where the captains would have opportunities to meet in groups for educational things and individually, to help consult with someone, to help them address issues that might come up with the team and how to work effectively as well with the coach. So I'd like to see that happen. Perhaps it has not that I know of.”

*And then I thought of actually, one last thing when I talked with our wellness and services coordinator Shea Brown, here in athletics, she mentioned that every time an athlete is injured, that her team sends an email to them and says, we're here for you as a resource, we can help meet with you, and, go through therapy with you during this time. And she was saying that 90% of the time, those athletes don't ever, like, email them back or attend these, like therapy sessions while they're injured. I just kind of like, what, when athletes are dealing with injuries, you know, she was saying that, what her department kind of thinks, they have to do so much physical therapy and all that that, she thinks that that mental health aspect isn’t a priority as they’re prioritizing the physical rehabilitation. But I just was wondering, like, kind of, if you had any thoughts on the fact that, like, that's something that happens here and these athletes who are injured are reached out to, but majority don't really seem to take up on that offer.*

“Well, I, you know, so if I were there and I were trying to make that work better, I would have, again, captains meeting with people, letting the captains know what the resources are, and the captain saying to someone, hey, I can see you're really having a rough time here. Why don't you reach out to this person? I've met them. I've talked with them. They seem like pretty good person. So that would be a way to make that happen more

at this time as we speak, the meeting I was just getting off of to join you, was working with a group of researchers who were creating an injury app for athletes, a psychology of injury app so athletes could do that on their own, with some guidance, with with a self self assessment tools and self help exercises. So that's an interesting question to me. Is something with some others and actively working on”

That’s definitely an interesting innovation that we may see in the future helping to assist student-athletes to take steps to work on their mental health on their own time through an app.

To summarize, team culture can be tricky to build, especially with the prevalence of the transfer portal. But, hazing is never the answer. Effective team building strategies often start with the captains, which is why it is important to know how they are selected.

Both Brown and Heil discussed how all athletes working together might help. Brown discussed how there’s not much crossover between injured athletes of diffferent sports and how she has tried to kickstart a student athletes injury support group for three semesters, but hasn’t had success yet. Heil discussed a captain’s council, a group for captains of every team to listen and learn from guest speakers who advise them on how to work effectively with teams.

Stay tuned for Episode 2 where we’ll hear from the men’s soccer captains Ben Liscum and Matthew Henderson as they discuss the importance of effective communication and building relationships to roster a strong team dynamic.

**Episode 2**