In the United States where obesity and lack of physical activity seem to have reached epidemic levels, is it possible for there to be concern for the extreme opposite behaviors of under-eating and over-exercise? While to some, these issues might seem like isolated occurrences, to coaches and athletic administrators in high school and college settings, it is a reality. Compulsive exercise disorder, also known as anorexia athletica (Sundgot-Borgen, 1993), can affect both men and women, starting at an age as young as 12 years, and continuing into young adulthood (Orenstein, 2011). Over-exercise is also linked to eating disorders in that it is often identified as a method by which individuals with anorexia and/or bulimia burn calories and control their weight. When recommendations of exercise are significantly exceeded without appropriate recovery time, individuals may endanger themselves physically. This becomes a risk factor that could mean liability and potential litigation.

Because the primary population affected by eating disorders is adolescents and young adults, high school and college students can fall prey to these unhealthy behaviors, particularly athletes. Bickford (1999) claimed the problem is pervasive by stating “in virtually every college athletics department across the United States, there is an athlete with an eating disorder engaged in intercollegiate competition” (p. 87). Although the majority of athletes with eating disorders and subsequent compulsive exercise behaviors are female, male athletes are also at risk, especially those competing in sports that tend to place an emphasis on the athlete’s diet, appearance, size and weight requirements, such as wrestling, bodybuilding, running, and football (Judd, 2011).

In Kleinknecht v. Gettysburg College (1993), the court established that colleges owe a duty to their athletes based upon the special relationship that exists between the athlete and the institution, and that the duty extends beyond just adequately dealing with emergency situations to anticipating and preventing their occurrence. Consequently, can high school and college athletic coaches and their respective institutions be held negligently liable for compulsive exercise and eating disorders in their athletes and the harm that can result? This presentation will provide an overview of the legal implications for coaches and athletic departments of educational institutions in dealing with athletes who exhibit compulsive exercise and eating disordered behaviors. An analysis of Besler v. Board of Education (2008) will be provided which illustrates the specific claims of negligence and intentional infliction of emotional distress.