Coaches’ Perspectives on Athlete-Centred Coaching

by

Karlene Joy Headley-Cooper, B.P.H.E., B.Ed.

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University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

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Karlene Joy Headley-Cooper

Graduate Department of Exercise Sciences

University of Toronto

The purpose of this study was to explore elite coaches' perspectives on the athlete-centred approach to coaching. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten (five male and five female) current coaches of female athletes on Canadian national team sports. The data were analyzed qualitatively using inductive and deductive analyses. Data revealed that coaches attached divergent meanings to the term "athlete-centred" sport. They referred to a holistic philosophy of the athlete, coaching practices that involve athletes within the coach-athlete partnership, specific values as essential components of athlete-centred coaching, and a philosophy of success that extends beyond athletic performance. The coaches also identified barriers to implementing athlete-centred coaching behaviours. The findings of this study have implications for our understanding of athlete-centred coaching and holistic athlete development, as well as policy revisions, coach education, and future coaching research.
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And to everyone else who has been there for me on this journey: thank you.

Karlene Headley-Cooper

January, 2010

“If you wanna make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and then make a change.”
~ Michael Jackson (Man in the Mirror, 1988)
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PERSONAL REFLECTION

This research for my MSc has been inspired by my previous experiences in school and in sport. Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to have a number of different roles related to sport, including: grassroots athlete and coach, experienced camp counselor, secondary school physical education and science-biology teacher, national team athlete, junior national team coach, intercollegiate varsity athlete in two sports, undergraduate student in Physical Education and Health, and graduate student. All of these experiences have provided me with a wide range of learning opportunities that have influenced the direction of my work in significant ways. Both the positive and negative aspects of these roles have fuelled my passion to contribute to the research and practice of sport psychology and coaching. My research interests were initiated by my real-life experiences and have been informed by the previous literature. I believe it is important to acknowledge and situate my position within the research paradigm and the choice of my thesis topic.

Two recent sporting experiences have significantly impacted my journey towards my MSc research topic. First, I was a varsity athlete in softball and squash at the University of Toronto from 2002 to 2009. The University of Toronto prides itself in its commitment to varsity athletics and in providing a student-athlete-centred program. Although the term ‘athlete-centred’ is a widely used term, from my experiences, the meaning is unclear as are the behaviours that represent it. These issues have led me to further question the behaviours that make coaches athlete-centred, and whether coaches who consider themselves to be athlete-centred actively practice athlete-centred coaching practices on a daily basis?

Second, I have been involved with the Great Britain National Softball Program as both a women’s team athlete and youth team coach since 2005. In July of 2007, the Great Britain Women’s team finished in 5th place at the EurAfrica Olympic Qualifier (in Trieste, Italy), which meant that we failed to qualify for the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. At the conclusion of this tournament, I began to question and analyze the attributes and skills that other, more successful, national softball teams and programs had, which we lacked, and that contributed to their success and our failures. Upon
reflection, I began to realize that other teams were better able to focus on the pursuit of personal, as well as performance excellence and had built stronger, more meaningful relationships between the athletes and coaches.

I wish to continue to learn from these experiences as they now serve as the catalysts for the current direction of my MSc research. I hope that my research will contribute to the emerging study and application of athlete-centred coaching, the pursuit of personal and performance excellence, as well as the examination of the coach-athlete relationship.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the complex culture of elite sport, success is traditionally measured by the ability of athletes and coaches to produce technically and tactically superior medal-winning results. At this level of sport in Western cultures, athletes and coaches are focused primarily on achieving performance excellence. However, other attributes such as the athletes’ psychological, physical and social well-being are also important. Miller and Kerr (2002) suggested that both performance and personal excellence can be achieved through an athlete-centred model of sport. Within the athlete-centred system, the athletes’ health, education and moral development are considered to be essential requirements in the pursuit of excellence (Kidd, 2006). Athlete-centred coaching is of significance, as it expands upon the traditional focus on attributes which contribute to athletes’ performance excellence to also recognize the importance of the athletes’ psychological, physical and social well-being. According to Vealey (2002), the use of a holistic approach offers “an alternative to the narrow, unidimensional performance enhancement model” which has been employed by many sport psychologists and coaches in the past (p.299).

Elite coaches and athletes need to strive for both performance and personal excellence continuously. Within athlete-centred sport, coaches act as leaders, partners and facilitators in the coach-athlete relationship and therefore, the coach-athlete relationship is considered to be one of the most important interpersonal relationships in sport (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Jowett, 2005b). Athlete-centred coaches must work to empower their athletes in the pursuit of both performance and personal excellence (Kidman, 2005). Numerous authors (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault; Kidd, 2006; Kidman; Miller & Kerr, 2002) have suggested that athlete-centred sport is the framework that best supports the pursuit of performance excellence and personal excellence and acknowledges the need for the athlete to be an active participant within the coach-athlete relationship.

The athlete-centred model of sport is based on the premise that optimal sport performance is influenced by and dependent on the holistic development and growth of the athlete (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Cross and Jones (2007) suggested a link between Olympism and the sport psychology of
personal excellence which actively supported the importance and relevance of this research. “The philosophy of Olympism – the original idea behind the Games – is that sport has the ability to make a significant positive impact on the psychosocial development of young people across the globe” whereby “personal excellence is the Olympic psychology and bridges the gap between the Olympic Ideals and the actual application of developmentally appropriate sports participation” (Cross & Jones, p.11). Even at the Olympic level, the development of desirable personal and social characteristics through sport is possible (Cross & Jones). Given that many elite athletes aspire to represent their country at the Olympic Games, it is important to identify the behaviours, characteristics and skills that can contribute to reaching that goal.

“A basic tenet of the athlete-centred sport model is the enhancement of the holistic health and well-being of the athlete, through the pursuit of excellence in sport” (Miller & Kerr, 2002, p.147). This can be achieved through the following eight characteristics of athlete-centred coaching:

1. mutual respect amongst athletes, coaches, and other members of the sporting community;
2. understanding that sport is an important part, but not the entirety of the athletes’ life experience;
3. recognition of the athletes as whole and developing people, who need support in all aspects of their health (i.e., physical, psychological, social);
4. athletes are empowered by being active, informed participants in their program design and policy development (i.e., goal setting, training);
5. clearly defining, agreeing upon and following the athletes’ and coaches’ rights and responsibilities;
6. development of athletes’ leadership, teamwork and decision making skills;
7. furthering of athletes’ self-knowledge, self-esteem, and moral integrity; and
8. the building and maintenance of a partnership style coach-athlete relationship (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Kidman, 2005; Miller & Kerr).

Despite the limited research that focuses specifically on athlete-centred coaching, an athlete-centred sport system has been suggested as the framework for high performance sport in Canada since 1994 (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994). Canada is one of the leading countries in the development and promotion of an athlete-centred approach to elite sport. The most recent editions of the Canadian
Sport Policy (Sport Canada, 2002), the Coaching Code of Ethics: Principles and Ethical Standards (Coaches of Canada, 2006) and the Canadian model of Long Term Athlete Development (Canadian Sport Centres, n.d.) all refer to programs, guidelines, and frameworks as athlete-centred. “The holistic development of athletes appears to be a genuine concern of several expert Canadian coaches” (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998, p.278). Athlete-centred sport is an emerging and developing approach and philosophy of sport, which is currently being implemented as the future direction of elite sport in Canada. However, many questions remain unanswered with respect to athlete-centred sport, including the meaning this term has for elite coaches.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore coaches’ perspectives on athlete-centred coaching behaviours. Of particular interest were the specific perceptions of coaches regarding the meaning and practice of the aforementioned athlete-centred coaching characteristics and the translation of athlete-centred theory into practice. In addition, the perceived barriers to implementation within the coach-athlete relationship were also investigated.

**Organization of Thesis**

Chapter 2 consists of a review of literature on the history of athlete-centred sport in Canada, which includes a brief history of sport in Canada leading up to the emergence of an athlete-centred approach to sport, as well as an overview of various sport policy documents. The coach-athlete relationship and more specifically the power relationship that exists between coaches and athletes are also discussed. Lastly, research on coaching behaviours and the coach-athlete relationship within athlete-centred sport are described. Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative methods used in this study. Data collection and data analysis methods are also explained. The study’s results and discussion are presented in Chapter 4. First, participant profiles introduce each coach who was interviewed, followed by the researcher’s interpretation of the findings integrated with previously published
literature. The meanings attached to the term “athlete-centred” sport, the coaches’ understanding of athlete-centred coaching principles and practices, and barriers to implementing athlete-centred coaching behaviours are discussed. Chapter 5 consists of a summary of the study’s findings, implications, limitations and suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The Pursuit of Excellence

The pursuit of performance and personal excellence is a recent and emerging philosophy in sport psychology (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Several studies have proposed the need for a greater balance between performance and personal excellence, and as a result have encouraged the fields of sport psychology and coaching to work towards creating sport environments that place equal value on the pursuit of performance and personal excellence (Amirault & Orlick, 1999; Miller & Kerr; Orlick, 1998). Traditionally, performance excellence in elite sport refers to observable and measureable athletic outcomes that are often determined by personal bests, competitions won, championships titles, Olympic medals, and world records (Miller & Kerr). Performance excellence depends on the coaches’ and athletes’ ability to produce physically strong, tactically sound, and technically flawless performances on the playing field during training and competitions. There is a wide body of research that examines performance enhancing strategies often used by successful elite athletes to achieve performance excellence; however, there is a paucity of research focusing on the pursuit of personal excellence or the combined effect of both excellences (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2006).

Personal excellence is defined as “the achievement of developmentally appropriate tasks across the length of one’s life and the acquisition of personal qualities that contribute to optimal health and well-being” (Miller & Kerr, 2002, p.141). Fostering life skills such as leadership, teamwork, decision-making and career planning are all believed to be of lifelong value as they address the person’s psychological, emotional, personal, social, moral and intellectual development (Miller & Kerr). These are also attributes of personal excellence which can significantly influence an elite athlete’s path to success. Recognizing and focusing on the athlete’s holistic development is integral to the pursuit of personal excellence. Coaches must not only be “committed to teaching their players how to excel on the field, but in life as well…. Character is not caught, but must be systematically taught in sport” (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2006, p.4). One of the coaches who participated in the Gould, Collins, Lauer, and Chung study stated that “‘you not only need to develop
him as an athlete, but you better develop him as a person also’” when referring to the role as a coach to teach life skills beyond the field and the classroom, thereby pursuing personal excellence (p.7).

Similarly, Orlick (1998) recognized the importance of maintaining a sense of balance in all aspects of sport and life when pursuing ongoing excellence in elite sport (Amirault & Orlick, 1999). According to Miller and Kerr, the athlete-centred model of sport forms the basis of an elite sport system where both performance excellence and personal excellence can be achieved through sport. The next section will address the historical development of sport in Canada that has led to the athlete-centred philosophy and approach to sport.

The History of Athlete-Centred Sport in Canada

History of Sport in Canada

Canadian government involvement in elite sport began in the early 1960s. In the late 1950s, efforts to support sport were primarily oriented towards fitness, mass participation in sport and physical education in schools (Macintosh, Bedecki, & Franks, 1987; Morrow & Wamsley, 2005). There was no official policy outlining the government’s perceived role in contributing to or sponsoring sport until the passing of federal government Bill C-131 ‘An Act to Encourage Fitness and Amateur Sport’ in September 1961 (Morrow & Wamsley). “The purpose of the Act was to provide access to sport and fitness for all Canadians” (Morrow, Keyes, Simpson, Cosentino, & Lappage, 1989, p.329). Bill C-131 also symbolized the government’s new commitment to be more involved in the administration of amateur sport (Macintosh, Bedecki, & Franks).

During the 1968 election campaign, Prime Minister Trudeau recognized “the potential of sport to act as a unifying force in Canadian society…[and] committed his government, if elected, to studying sport and strengthening it” (Morrow, Keyes, Simpson, Cosentino, & Lappage, 1989, p.331). In 1969, the ‘Report of the Task Force on Sports for Canadians’ made thirty-eight recommendations for the new broad path for the future of sport in Canada, including, Coaching in Canada, Financing Amateur Sport, The National Team Concept, and The Olympic and Sport Canada (Morrow &
This report led to John Monroe’s 1970 Proposed Sports Policy for Canadians, which asserts “for the first time that the federal government had a legitimate role in the pursuit of ‘excellence’ in elite sport” (Macintosh, Bedecki, & Franks, 1987, p.42). This document also outlined the organization of the Fitness and Amateur Sport Branch into two divisions: Recreation Canada and Sport Canada (Morrow et al.). Sport Canada supported and promoted excellence and pan-Canadian unity through what became known as the Canadian sport system (Kidd, 2006).

In response to the recommendations made in the 1970 report, the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) was established. The mandate of the CAC was to provide more knowledgeable, effective and better prepared coaches to Canadian athletes (Morrow, Keyes, Simpson, Cosentino, & Lappage, 1989; Coaching Association of Canada, n.d.). The CAC, in partnership with the Canadian Olympic Association, the Olympic Trust, and federal/provincial governments, organized and implemented Game Plan ’76, “a planning exercise…to produce excellent results in Montreal, and to develop amateur sport programs of a calibre sufficient to increase Canada’s chances of winning medals at international competitions” (Morrow et al., p. 335).

A decade later, in August 1988, The Federal Sport Task Force Report entitled ‘Toward 2000’ was released (Macintosh, Bedecki, & Franks, 1987). Recommendations were made regarding national sport organizations goals, directions, priorities and principles. The six themes that emerged included (1) the need for a holistic integrated approach to the development of the Canadian sport system; (2) sport development based on models and systems for the development of athletes; (3) national sport organizations as the key agencies in the Canadian sport system; (4) the need for strong federal-government leadership in sport; (5) shared leadership in the Canadian sport system; and (6) leadership development and education (Macintosh, Bedecki, & Franks). These concepts describe the government’s continued shift towards the development of high-performance Canadian athletes. However, this document came at a difficult time in Canadian sport history, following the disappointment of the Seoul Olympics and the Dubin Commission inquiry. More recent Canadian sport history will be discussed in the next section. Specific emphasis will be focused on athletes’
rights and other movements which paved the way for an athlete-centred approach to sport coaching.

**Athletes’ Rights and Athletes CAN**

As previously discussed, Canada’s sport system has undergone many important changes since the 1960s. The human rights movement in sport has also developed over this time. According to Donnelly (1989), “human rights are literally the rights that one has because one is human” (p.7). Moreover, “universal rights – entitlements – are the mechanism for implementing such values as nondiscrimination and an adequate standard of living” (Donnelly, p.23). Kidd and Donnelly (2000) discuss different classes of people to whom rights have begun to be specifically associated with, such as children, women, aboriginal, and athletes. “The first declarations of access to sport and physical activity as a human right began to develop as the right to participate in the 1970s” (Kidd & Donnelly, p.136). As part of the equity movement, emphasis was placed on the fundamental right for everyone to participate in sport and physical education, the right to access programs and facilities (Kidd & Donnelly). This right to sport exists at all levels. The International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) Olympic Charter states that “the practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practicing sport, without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play” (International Olympic Committee, 1997, p.11).

More specifically, athletes’ rights have also gone through numerous changes. Prior to the 1976 Montreal Olympics, athletes had begun to accept the denial of their rights, as they had “been encouraged to believe that the concept of rights is incompatible with the pursuit of excellence” (Kidd & Ebert, 1982, p.12). Therefore, Kidd and Ebert’s study was based on two premises:

First, the rights of athletes, as citizens and landed immigrants, cannot be diminished because they are members of team sports. Canadian sport programs must be consistent with the standards of fairness established by Canadian law. ‘Excellence’ at the cost of basic civil rights is simply not excellence. Second, a just system of sports administration is infinitely preferable to recourse to the courts (p.14).
Recommendations from Kidd and Ebert’s study recognized that “athletes must be afforded the same protections enjoyed by all citizens, particularly with regard to freedom from discrimination, selection for representative teams, the allocation of other benefits, and discipline and punishment” (Kidd & Donnelly, 2000, p.140). Past incidences such as Tommy Smith and John Carlos’ black power salutes on the podium of the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, and Vince Matthews’ expulsion from the 1972 Olympics in Munich for appearing too nonchalant on the podium during the American national anthem, both have:

Encouraged elaboration of the very notion of human rights for athletes into the rights to education, to informed consent about the physiological effects of training and scientific treatment, to have capable and responsible leadership, to be free from sexual harassment, and to be treated fairly by the mass media (Kidd & Donnelly, p.140).

Historically, issues about athletes’ rights have stemmed from struggles against racism, apartheid and gender inequity (Kidd & Donnelly). As a result, Kidd and Ebert suggest, “it is now imperative that new structures and practices recognize athletes’ rights” (p.100).

Following the events of the 1988 Seoul Olympic that were headlined by Ben Johnson’s positive drug test, the Dubin Inquiry was commissioned. The Dubin Commission report included seventy recommendations regarding a number of issues, such as the role of government in sport, doping controls in Canada, and improving coaches, athletes and sport organizations. Athletes’ rights were discussed with respect to athletes having the rights to an appeal process with an independent arbitrator and no penalty of self-incrimination after a drug related suspension (Moriarty, Fairall, & Galasso, 1992). As a result, the Dubin Inquiry has become known as an important document that represents a shift in the goals of Canadian sport (Moriarty, Fairall, & Galasso). Following its release, Sport Canada switched from its original mandate in 1967 directed toward mass participation, academic development through a national advisory committee, and support for sport governing bodies in a decentralized volunteer system to its 1988 goal to win medals through national sport organizations” (Moriarty, Fairall, & Galasso, p.23).

This shift in government efforts moved away from the administrative and bureaucratic nature of sport and towards an increased focus on the development of high performance athletes, in what is now
referred to as an athlete-centred approach to sport (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Kidd, 1996; Thibault & Babiak, 2005).

The athlete-centred approach to sport and the notion of the pursuit of excellence evolved following the Dubin Inquiry’s recommendation for a “change in emphasis by the sporting community, the media and the public at large from winning medals to personal excellence” (Moriarty, Fairall, & Galasso, 1992, p.28). The National Association of Professional Coaches Association and the Canadian Athletes Association also supported the implementation of an athlete-centred approach to training and competition. “The idea is to enhance the athletes’ health, education, and social capacities, as well as their sporting skills, and to provide them with an environment free from sexual harassment and discrimination” (Kidd, 1996, p.269). Likewise, Kirby, Greaves and Hankivsky (2000) suggested that,

Integral to the response to public pressure to develop a healthy and safe sporting environment has been the education of coaches and athletes about their roles, rights and responsibilities. To date, however, one of the most radical and arguably significant shifts for organized sport in Canada occurred in 1992, when it was proclaimed that sport should be athlete-centred (p.136).

As a result, this shift towards an athlete-centred approach began the process of recognizing the athlete’s right to be an active participant in the sporting system. Important changes that illustrate this shift and provide resources which directly benefit the athlete include: athlete representation on decision-making committees of national sport federations; the creation of national sport training centres called Canadian Sport Centres which assist in the training of high performance athletes; increased direct funding to support athletes’ living and training expenses; and more funding for high performance coach professional training and development (Thibault & Babiak, 2005). All of these changes exemplify the movement of Canada’s sporting system in the 1980s and 1990s from one preoccupied with administration and bureaucracy to a more specific focus on the athlete (Thibault & Babiak).

The formation of Athletes CAN as the association of Canada’s National Team Athletes has also been an important step towards the goal of human rights for high-performance athletes in Canada.
After originally being formed in 1992, the Canadian Athletes Association (CAA) changed its name to Athletes CAN in 1996 (Athletes CAN). Athletes CAN has contributed to the increase in athlete-centred sport in Canada by acting as the collective voice for Canadian amateur national team athletes. One of the most significant changes made in 1998 following the creation of Athletes CAN was the introduction of the 20% solution, in which “according to Sport Canada’s Minimum Expectations for athlete-centredness, a system-wide goal for 2001 proposes that key NSO [national sport organization] committees related to high performance sport decision-making should have 20% athlete representation” (Athletes CAN, p.1-2). Athlete representatives can be rookie, veteran, recently retired or retired national team athletes who are “willing to learn, to speak out and to best represent the view of the athletes…[and also] play a critical role as the conduit between the active athletes and the decision-makers in your sport” (Athletes CAN, 2004, p.2-3). The inclusion of athlete representatives was the first step in promoting athletes as active participants within the sporting system outside of the training and competition environments.

During Abby Hoffman’s tenure as Director of Sport Canada (1981 to 1991), a template for an athlete development model was created to help national sport federations produce high-performance (Thibault & Babiak, 2005). Almost a decade later, Denis Coderre in his role as Secretary of State for Amateur Sport (1999-2001), organized the National Summit of Sport. During the summit, athletes were well represented and were therefore able to voice their concerns regarding issues that pertained to them, such as the lack of attention given to their various athletic needs (Athletes CAN, 2004; Thibault & Babiak). As a result of this participation from all stakeholders, including athletes, the summit culminated in the development of the Canadian Sport Policy. Even though Thibault and Babiak concluded that “to call Canada’s sport system fully or exclusively athlete-centred would be misleading” there is evidence to support the “strategic direction toward athlete-centred change” (Thibault & Babiak, p.125). Thibault and Babiak identified the following changes that favoured the movement toward an athlete-centred approach: (1) athlete representation on decision-making committees of national sport federations; (2) increased funding to athletes; (3) the creation of training
centres for athletes; (4) a forum where disputes between athletes, coaches, and/or national sport federations are addressed and resolved; (5) the restructuration of the Canadian Governments priorities; (6) the increasing media coverage of Canadian athletes and their performances in international sporting events; (7) Sport Canada’s strategies, (i.e., Canadian Sport Policy); (8) the creation of Athletes CAN; (9) receptivity of some national organizations (e.g., Canadian Olympic Committee and Coaching Association of Canada) to adopt changes; and (10) extensive consultation processes undertaken through the Dubin Inquiry, the Sport Forums, the Task Forces, and the National Summit on Sport. All of these agents, values, structures and strategies impacted change and continue to influence the advancement of athlete-centred sport.

**Athlete-Centred Sport**

Athlete-centred is both an approach to sport, as well as a philosophy of sport. First, an athlete-centred approach to sport recognizes the athlete “as the focal point, and, as such, the organizational structure, sport infrastructure and decision-making process have been adapted to support and respond to the needs, values, and objectives of athletes” (Kihl, Kikulis, & Thibault, 2007, p.2). This process focuses on the athlete as not only an active participant on the field, but also within discussions involving decisions and policies that most affect them (Kihl, Kikulis, & Thibault).

Second, the athlete-centred model of sport is defined as a “philosophy where performance excellence is facilitated by personal experience, rather than achieved at its expense” (Miller & Kerr, 2002, p.146). Additionally, the athlete-centred model “contests the assumption that striving for personal development precludes athletic excellence or that athletic excellence is viable only through personal sacrifices” (Miller & Kerr, p.146). The basic tenet of this approach is that sport is to be used as a vehicle which contributes to the athlete’s overall performance and personal development (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994).
The athlete-centred approach to sport applies to all levels of sport in Canada. Clarke, Smith, and Thibault’s (1994) discussion paper on athlete-centred sport is a planning framework for sport in Canada, and emphasizes that,

Leaders at all levels of the Canadian sport system have an important role to play in advancing the concept of athlete-centred sport. They have a responsibility to ensure that sport contributes to the all-round development of athletes as whole, healthy people through sport and that all who participate in sport have an opportunity to experience the many positive benefits and values of sport (p.25).

The athlete-centred approach and philosophy of sport can be applied to all athletes, regardless of their skill, ability or previous experiences in sport. Many of the characteristics outlined by Clarke, Smith, and Thibault refer to community and club development, as well as elite programs. Every athlete, community or national team level, has the right to participate in sport that is athlete-centred.

Within athlete-centred sport, the psychological, and social health of elite athletes is of equal or greater importance to their physical well-being. Even at the elite level, the pursuit of high-performance excellence is attained only when coupled with personal excellence and the holistic development of the athlete (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Thus, it is important for all coaches, athletes, parents, supporters, sport programs and policies to recognize and give consideration to the athletes’ performance goals, as well as to their personal needs (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994). In order for elite athletes to reach their highest performance potential, a commitment to develop personal excellence is needed (Miller & Kerr). The experience of sport ought to be one in which performance excellence occurs alongside personal excellence, and Miller and Kerr suggest that this can be achieved through an athlete-centred model of sport. Within recent years, documents such as the Canadian Sport Policy, Coaching Code of Ethics, and the Long-Term Athlete Development model have been released and have attempted to include the concept of athlete-centred coach-led sport and the characteristics of athlete-centred sport in policies, goals, ethical standards and development stages. However, the amount of direct impact these documents have had on improving elite athlete development and success (e.g., growth, winning), coach-athlete relationships (e.g., professional working partnership, supportive environment), or the promotion of actualizing athlete-centred
behaviours (e.g., giving athletes a voice, goal setting, valuing feedback, team building) is unclear. Furthermore, the challenge remains for coaches to determine how to lead and put into practice the athlete-centred policies, goals, standards and stages that are presented in the Canadian Sport Policy, Coaching Code of Ethics or the Long-Term Athlete Development model. In the following three sections, each of these policy documents will be presented through the lens of an athlete-centred approach to sport.

The Canadian Sport Policy

The Canadian Sport Policy (CSP), published May 24, 2002 by Sport Canada (2002), describes an athlete-centred sport system which “exists for athletes who are the primary focus in the development of policies, programs, and procedures. Athletes are involved throughout the system in decisions that directly relate to them. They share responsibility for participating fairly within an ethical framework” (p.13). The CSP also “challenges all stakeholders in sport to create and support an integrated athlete-centred sport model that ensures the seamless progress of athletes to the full extent of their abilities and interests” (Sport Canada, p.2). By 2012, the vision of the CSP, with respect to elite sport, is to have a dynamic and leading-edge sporting environment that enables all elite Canadian athletes to perform consistently and achieve success at the highest competitive levels (Sport Canada). Throughout the CSP document, it is implied that the future of sport in Canada is an athlete-centred, coach-led sport system.

The development of the Canadian Sport Policy reflects an athlete-centred, coach-led approach amongst administrators, coaches, and athletes which aims to reach the goals of enhanced participation, excellence, capacity and interaction in sport (Sport Canada, 2002). The vision and the goals of the CSP have significant ties to the introduction and implementation of an athlete-centred, coach-led sport system at the elite level (Sport Canada). The CSP goals that are clearly outlined and described in the policy document do refer to qualities which are athlete-centred in nature, such as the development of the whole person, the pursuit of excellences and a healthy coach-athlete relationship.
The four Canadian Sport Policy (CSP; Sport Canada, 2002) goals as they relate to the athlete-centred characteristics can be described as follows: (1) participation in sport has been shown to contribute to an individual’s physical, social, emotional and character development; (2) world-class results and performance excellence can be achieved by consistently focusing on the personal excellence, as well as the physical development of athletes within a supportive and holistic athlete-centred approach; (3) elite athletes’ performance and development capacities are continually being enhanced and strengthened through the ethically based, athlete-centred system; and (4) the interpersonal interaction between the athlete and coach is enhanced by their shared leadership and collaborative natured relationship. More details about the CSP goals and the specific level of responsibility for the federal/provincial-territorial governments are summarized in Table 1.

Throughout the CSP document, similarities between the visions, goals and athlete-centred sport are evident when examining the policy through an athlete-centred lens; however, the link between such athlete-centred goals and the actualization of such goals into specific coaching behaviours within the elite sporting environment remains unclear.

The Coaching Code of Ethics

In addition to the 2002 Canadian Sport Policy, the Coaches of Canada’s (2006) Coaching Code of Ethics also refers to athlete-centred characteristics. This document outlines principles and ethical standards which all elite Canadian coaches should adhere to during their coaching practices. The behaviours discussed may exemplify many of the characteristics of the athlete-centred approach and philosophy of sport; however, no explicit reference is made to athlete-centred sport within the Code of Ethics document.

Four principles and the corresponding ethical standards are presented (Coaches of Canada, 2006). First, respect for participants whereby coaches have the responsibility to act in a respectful manner which promotes the rights and dignity of all participants. This is accomplished by establishing standards and following procedures for confidentiality which ensure the right to privacy,
allowing informed participation and shared decision making which promotes the athletes’ right to self-determination, and support the right to fair and reasonable treatment. Second, responsible coaching is defined as the ability to act in the best interest of the athletes to enhance their holistic development. As a result, responsible coaches work to maximize their athletes’ benefits while minimizing their risks, keep up-to-date with areas of their expertise, and are well prepared. Third, integrity in relationships advocates that the coach’s relationships with others are to be honest, sincere and honorable. The values of integrity are upheld when coaches possess a high degree of self-awareness and are able to reflect critically on how their behaviours and perspectives influence the interactions with their athletes in particular. The final principle, honoring sport, recognizes, acts on, and promotes the values of coaching and sport for all involved, including athletes, teams, coaches, support systems, administrators, and the wider sporting community. In addition, coaches must also encourage and model honorable attributes and behaviours within their daily coaching practices as a means of showing a high regard for and promoting the value of sport in Canadian society and around the world (Coaches of Canada). All of these principles speak to appropriate behaviours of coaches and athletes, and promote numerous athlete-centred qualities.

The Long-Term Athlete Development Model

In 2005, the Canadian Sport Centres released the newly re-designed seven-stage Canadian Sport for Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model. The LTAD focuses on promoting its framework as an “athlete-centred, coach driven, and administration, sport science, and sponsor supported system” (Canadian Sport Centres, n.d., p.7). Athletes who progress through the LTAD stages participate in training and competition programs that are specifically tailored to meet their biological, training and development needs (Canadian Sport Centres). And while the LTAD recognizes the physical and psycho-social development of athletes as important components of the maturation and growth process, the significance of these domains are only addressed and summarized in the appendix of the LTAD model resource paper (Canadian Sport Centres). These important
aspects of an athlete’s holistic development should be incorporated more fully throughout the seven stages if this model is to address the characteristics of the athlete-centred approach and philosophy of sport. Upon closer examination of the seven stages, it appears that the earlier stages (i.e., Active Start and FUNdamentals) are more athlete-centred in nature than the later, more specialized, stages of athlete development (i.e., Training to Compete and Training to Win).

The CSP, the Coaching Code of Ethics and the LTAD model are all important documents which support the premises of an athlete-centred approach to elite sport in Canada. However, they are only the first step in the attempt to apply coaching research and literature to the real-life practice of coaching elite sport. These documents, which are published by national sporting governing bodies, include the phrase ‘athlete-centred’ without any further reference or explanation as to what is truly meant. As such, ‘athlete-centred’ is used as a label to describe sport in Canada without supporting or substantiating what athlete-centred coaching is. No information is provided directly to coaches regarding a description of athlete-centred sport or specific behaviours that actively exemplify or put into practice the goals, standards and stages of an athlete-centred sporting system. Therefore, the challenge for national sport organizations and federal-provincial/territorial programs is to adopt and translate the athlete-centred, coach-led CSP policy and LTAD model into action (Sport Canada, 2002).

The next section will introduce the importance of the coach-athlete relationship.

The Coach-Athlete Relationship

The coach-athlete relationship is considered to be the foundation of the coaching process and the most meaningful interpersonal relationship in sport because its nature is likely to determine the athlete’s development, satisfaction, self-esteem, confidence and performance accomplishments (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett, 2005b; Lyle, 1999b). The coach-athlete relationship has the ability to play a significant role in many of the decision-making processes which ultimately determine the athletes’ ability to develop and perform both on and off of the playing field. Therefore, it is not
surprising that the coach-athlete relationship is considered to be particularly crucial. Jowett explained “now that the coach-athlete relationship is recognized as the foundation of coaching and a major force in promoting the development of athletes’ physical and psychosocial skills, [the] coaches’ ability to create perfect working partnerships with their athlete becomes paramount” (2005b, p.412).

The “athlete and coach are mutually dependent” (Phillippe & Seiler, 2006, p.160). Whether the sporting experience is positive or negative depends largely on the coaches’ philosophy and coaching behaviours. Coaches and athletes in negative relationships have identified experiences such as, hurt feelings, minimized time spent together, limited verbal exchanges, tension, avoidance, unfulfilled expectations, poor communication, lack of commitment and dissatisfaction, as well as various abuses of power and discomfort (Poczwardowski, Barrot, & Henschen, 2002). Jowett (2003) added that feelings such as being unattached, distant, having competing interests, conflicting goals, lack of understanding, and incompatible roles, tasks and support can all negatively affect coach-athlete relationships. Conversely, effective coaches are individuals who are able to provide a positive and supportive environment in which their coaching practices significantly enhance their athletes’ performance, personal and professional development. As a result, the relationship that a coach has with an athlete is of paramount importance to the pursuit of excellence in sport.

The coach-athlete relationship is based on interconnected and interdependent thoughts, feelings and behaviours of both the coach and the athlete (Jowett, 2005b). These attributes “have been operationalized and systematically studied through the constructs of closeness, commitment and complementary” and co-orientation, and are often referred to as the “3 C’s (closeness, commitment, complementary) + 1 C (co-orientation)” (Jowett, p.413). Closeness is the emotional tone that coaches and athletes refer to as interpersonal liking, trust and respect within their relationship and sporting experience. Commitment is a measure of the coaches’ and athletes’ intention and desire to maintain their relationship. Complementary refers to the qualities of the behavioural interaction between coaches and athletes, which include cooperation, affiliation, responsibility, easiness, willingness, and friendliness. Co-orientation focuses on uncovering both the coaches’ and athletes’ perceptions of each
other, as a means of communicating and working towards shared goals, beliefs, values, and expectations. Recent studies by Jowett and colleagues have,

Demonstrated that high scores along the 3 C’s [closeness, commitment and complementary and co-orientation] dimensions are associated with higher level of satisfaction with performance and personal treatment, higher levels of team cohesion, higher levels of harmonious passion toward activity – as opposed to obsessive passion, and lower levels of role ambiguity in team sports” (Jowett, p.414)

Even at the elite level of training and competition, the coach-athlete relationship is one of the most important and influential factors that contributes to the coach and athlete’s closeness, commitment, complementary, co-orientation, as well as the athlete’s pursuit of performance and personal excellence (Jowett). While the 3 C’s provide a framework to measure elements of the coach-athlete relationship, they do not outline specific coaching behaviours or address the power differential that inherently exists between a coach and an athlete.

**Power within the Coach-Athlete Relationship**

Given the interpersonal nature of the relationship between elite coaches and athletes, it is not surprising that the issue of power is of particular interest to sports psychologists and sociologists, coaches and athletes.

In sport, where coaches have considerable power, this term is synonymous with action. The challenge for coaches is taking the right actions – actions that contribute to the all-around development of athletes, both while they participate in sport and throughout the rest of their lives (Tomlinson & Strachan, 1996, p.5).

Therefore, coaches must find ways to positively use their power to promote the pursuit of both excellences within the coach-athlete relationship.

Grounded in the fields of ethics and sexual exploitation in sport, Brackenridge (2001) describes two broad interpretations of power and also provides an overview of the types of power and how they are specifically applied to sport (summarized in Table 2). First, the traditional structural concept of power implies “a hierarchy, in that there are the powerful and the powerless” whereby power is a possession that is “acquired through one’s position or status within a social hierarchy”
(Brackenridge, p.83). For example, “women … are inevitably oppressed by patriarchy and have little possibility of resisting or challenging the power of those (men) above them in the hierarchy” (Brackenridge, p.83). Second, power is also experienced as an effect and a “relational process, continuously in flux and expressed in negotiations between people” in which “the power of the coach is sustained because he (and usually is ‘he’) has the skills and abilities to develop, enhance and maintain success and a strong reputation for the sport” for example (Brackenridge, p.83).

It is also important to address the various sources of power in sport (Brackenridge, 2001; Tomlinson & Strachan, 1996). Table 2 outlines eleven types of power: enabling, expert, referent, legitimate, coercive, reward, positional, information, relationship and charismatic/personal power. Within the athlete-centred philosophy, coaches are in the primary position to focus on enabling power by using their ability to facilitate team and athlete progress and development by giving their athletes a voice in team meetings and decision-making processes. Coaches also need to be aware of how they use their expert (e.g., coaching specialization in demonstrating and developing a technically advanced skill), resource (e.g., applying more sophisticated tactical awareness and knowledge of the sport), referent (e.g., using their network to contact the additional support staff), information (e.g., using previously gathered scouting knowledge) and legitimate power (e.g., using the title of head coach advantageously to gain additional opportunities) as means of providing positive sporting experiences to their athletes (Tomlinson & Strachan). In addition, coaches must understand the possible negative implications of exerting coercive, reward, relationship and charismatic/personal power over their athletes, such as bullying, cessation of sport, harassment and abuse (Brackenridge).

Tomlinson and Strachan (1996) identified two approaches to understanding the imbalance of power which exists between coaches and athletes: “power-over” and “power-to” (p.6). The more dominant and controlling coaching styles (i.e., authoritarian, benevolent dictatorship) are often referred to as power-over relationships in which the coach exerts power over his or her athletes (Tomlinson & Strachan). Another example of this would be “a coach-centred coach – that is, a person who coaches for himself or herself, uses power to dominate and considers the athlete (whether
consciously or unconsciously) as only a means to an end” (Kidman, 2005, p.16). Furthermore, a coach-centred coach controls every aspect of their athletes’ behaviour, disempowers the athlete by taking away ownership of the team, encourages athletes to be robotic in their actions and thinking, and does not allow athletes to be active or contribute to their learning or development (Kidman).

On the other hand, a coach who uses a power-to style actively shares power and responsibility, thereby fostering freedom, facilitating the empowerment of the athletes, and supporting the athletes’ social, psychological, and physical growth and development (Tomlinson & Strachan, 1996). Of significance to creating and maintaining healthy coach-athlete relationships is the recognition that the power-to and power-over approaches are not mutually exclusive. Many coach-athlete partnerships use a subtle mix of both approaches (Tomlinson & Strachan). Although coaches are typically in a more powerful position relative to the athlete, the ability of coaches to share power with the athlete is of paramount importance. The athlete-centred coach-athlete relationship, which will be discussed in the next section, is characterized by a power-to approach to coaching.

The Coach-Athlete Relationship in Athlete-Centred Sport

Despite a paucity of research on the athlete-centred coach-athlete relationships, other models and coaching styles attempt to describe effective, successful, helpful and healthy coach-athlete relationships that may also be considered athlete-centred in nature. Coach-athlete relationships that combine the pursuit of personal and performance excellence, share power, form a partnership, and are humanistic and empowering, exemplify characteristics that are also part of athlete-centred coaching.

The nature and quality of the interpersonal relationship that exists between coaches and athletes has the potential to impact many different aspects of the athlete’s sporting and personal life (Poczwardowski, Barrot, & Peregoy, 2002). ‘It is perhaps surprising then that, historically, coaching has been preoccupied with merely enhancing athletes’ physical, technical and strategic skills’ and focusing on performance excellence, while simultaneously disregarding the value of developing the athletes’ psychological, social, emotional, and personal excellence (Jowett, 2005b, p.412). Bloom,
Durand-Bush, Schinke, and Salmela (1998) and Jowett and Cockerill (2003) suggested that coach-athlete relationships should be “reciprocal, trusting, genuine, and helping in nature and go beyond merely teaching and instructing skills, techniques and tactics” (p.314). Furthermore, Olympic medalists identified successful coaches as people “who can provide technical instruction in a manner that inspires and nurtures the athlete” thereby combining the pursuit of personal and performance excellence within the coach-athlete relationship (Jowett & Cockerill, p.324).

Coaching in which the coach–athlete relationship is contained is capable to promote not only the [athlete’s] skills in terms of performance improvements (e.g. break personal bests and win medals), but also the [athlete’s] skills in terms of personal and social development (e.g. feel satisfied, worthy, and self-reliant; Phillippe & Seiler, 2006, p.160).

Athlete-centred coaching recognizes that athletes are more than just physical beings and as such, coaches’ roles and responsibilities extend far beyond the traditional training of the athletes’ performance skills (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998; Miller & Kerr, 2002).

By implementing this power-to approach in which power is shared, athletes become partners within the coach-athlete relationship (Tomlinson & Strachan, 1996). The coaches’ ability to create positive, working partnerships with their athletes is of prime importance in the promotion of the athletes’ physical and psychosocial skills (Jowett, 2005b). As a result, Phillippe and Seiler (2006) suggested that the coaches and athletes should develop a professional partnership relationship which focuses on the athlete’s training and performance results, as well as other aspects related to the personal life of the athlete.

**Humanistic Coaching**

The humanistic model of athletic coaching, which is based on the work of Rogers (1969) is also “athlete-centred, and focused on enhancing the self-awareness, and growth and development” across the athletes’ cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of learning (Lombardo, 1999, p.4). Many aspects of this model are also applicable and transferable to athlete-centred coaching whereby the needs, goals, values and the total development of the athlete are of utmost importance. As a result,
“the humanistic side of coaching may be associated with the display of a deep interest in the welfare and development of the athlete on the part of the coach” (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003, p.320). In addition, Lombardo suggests that humanistic coaches are authentic, real and empathic people who actively remember what it was like to be an athlete, and therefore draw on their positive playing experiences as a means of influencing their behaviours as a coach. In this regard, it is not surprising that athletes who participate in a humanistic sporting system are more likely to be excited and remain enthusiastic about their sporting experiences (Lombardo). Effective athlete-centred coach-athlete relationships use these humanistic characteristics to help create a sporting environment that supports and encourages personal, as well as performance excellence (Jowett & Cockerill).

Lyle (1999b) provided a similar description whereby,

The humanistic approach to coaching views the sporting context and the athlete’s training and performance as a vehicle through which the athlete can be influenced to develop and grow. The technical aspect of improving performance and taking part in competition is perceived to be just one aspect of a process involving interpersonal relationships, social meaning, relationships to other parts of the athlete’s life and an emotional and psychological engagement in the commitment to the process” (p.38).

In addition, Lyle suggested that coaching practices that are more directive and focus only on performance, and therefore are not humanistic, may stifle the athlete’s development and undervalue the coach-athlete relationship. Positive developmental and interpersonal experiences in sport have the capacity to foster athlete success in both personal and performance outcomes.

Even though the humanistic model is considered to foster athlete empowerment and to be athlete-centred, there are some limitations. Lyle (1999b) suggested that promoting humanistic coach education and training can be problematic, as it seems easier to proscribe inappropriate coaching practices than specify appropriate humanistic coaching behaviours. For example, Lyle outlined twelve truly humanistic coaching practices, some of which describe what coaches should not do or are phrased in the negative, such as,

Do not use the threat of disapproval or punishment to coerce athletes to behave in a way that the coach perceives to be appropriate, … value each individual’s contribution equally (this does not mean that they each make the same contribution to performance), … actively
discouraging all forms of cheating, … do not allow the athlete to become too dependent on the coach, … [and] never fail to exercise a caring, athlete-welfare centred approach (p.39-40).

A humanistic approach is geared towards promoting the athlete’s growth and development through sport; however, the aforementioned coaching practices do not provide coaches with a positive and enabling set of principles to follow, but rather a list of non-humanistic behaviours to avoid. Educating coaches what not to do, does not ensure that they are supporting humanistic or athlete-centred philosophies.

Furthermore, Lombardo (1999) concluded that, “the humanistic model requires a major shift in the thinking and actions of sport leaders. However, such changes would make sport much more congruent with the needs of the athletes and also respond to demands of society in the 21st century” (p.5). While Lombardo acknowledged the shift in coaching practices towards a more modern humanistic and athlete-centred approach to sport, it is unclear what demands he was referring to in this statement. To suggest that this change in coaching practices will better address the societal demands of the 21st century is a generalization which places undue pressure on coaches, athletes and sport culture. However, the humanistic model of coaching and its athlete-centred values has the potential to become more widely accepted and practiced in the future if greater positive attention is given to encouraging both competitive performance and interpersonal success in elite sport.

Kidman (2007) uses the terms athlete-centred and humanistic coaching interchangeably. The humanistic model and athlete-centred coaching share the same focus of the pursuit of personal and performance excellence though sport. The humanistic model includes many athlete-centred characteristics, such as recognizing athletes as whole and developing people; whereas, athlete-centred coaching highlights the importance of building humanistic interpersonal relationships. Both value holism within the process of athlete development.

Empowering Coaching

The athlete-centred approach is also considered an empowering style of coaching, in which
athletes gain and take ownership of the knowledge, development and decision-making processes that will help them to maximize personal development and physical performance (Kidman, 2005). This shared and dynamic power relationship between coach and athlete creates a leadership style that caters to the athlete’s needs (Kidman). Athletes have a greater understanding and stronger retention of technical and tactical skills, as well as cognitive, psychological, spiritual and social skills as a result of this empowering style of coaching (Kidman). All of these attributes are important to ensuring athletic performance success, which at the elite level is still a top priority. However, as Miller and Kerr (2002) have suggested, the ability to demonstrate athletic prowess and dominance within any given sport is ultimately related to the athlete’s level of personal growth and development. This view supports the assumption that development empowers performance. Enabling and encouraging athletes empowers them to become leaders within their immediate sporting environment as well as in the wider sporting community, and helps to motivate them to achieve their highest potential.

Although no research has been conducted which specifically examines the link between athlete-centred coaching, the pursuit of performance and personal excellence, and the coach-athlete relationship, Kidman (2005) and Miller and Kerr (2002) have both identified qualities which begin to illustrate the interdependence and connectedness within these areas. According to Kidman, empowered athletes possess and regularly demonstrate numerous qualities and behaviours that aid in their pursuit of performance and personal excellence. As a result of experiencing coaching practices which exemplify an athlete-centred approach, athletes set their own goals and are intrinsically motivated to reach them, develop self-efficacy and confidence in their abilities, understand that they contribute to and must take responsibility for their learning and development, feel that they are important and understood, enjoy their sport, and are willing to completely engage in what they believe in (Kidman). In this regard, athletes are valued and active participants in decision-making processes, as well as their development and journey to achieving success in sport.

Kidman (2005) also suggested that coaches who teach and allow their athletes to become leaders promote both personal and performance excellence and also experience the benefits of
maintaining high standards and motivation, preparing a team that is mentally tough, gaining athlete input to enhance the team environment, and having athletes adhere to the team values and expectations. More specifically for elite coaches and athletes who are part of a team sport, the number one belief and outcome of team cohesion is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Leith, 2003). Coaches play a vital role in supporting and exemplifying this belief. In team sports in particular, team culture can significantly impact the individual athletes, and more importantly, the team’s overall development, performance, and pursuit of excellence. In addition, Kidman identified empowered athletes as ‘coachable’, enthusiastic, resourceful, innovative, cooperative, accountable for their actions, and highly committed to achieving high levels of performance and personal excellence for not only themselves but also for the whole team.

Empowerment is an important component of athlete-centred sport. Athletes who experience athlete-centred coaching are empowered by being active and informed participants in their performance and personal development. Empowering coaching also helps to further athletes’ self-knowledge, self-esteem and moral integrity, which are personal qualities that are often receive less attention than the development of technical skills and tactical decision-making. Athlete-centred coaching highlights the importance of providing athletes with coaching that empowers them to simultaneously pursue personal and performance excellence through sport.

Previous research has identified similarities between athlete-centred sport and humanistic coaching (Rogers, 1969; Lombardo, 1999; Lyle, 1999b) and found that athlete-centred coaching is an empowering style of coaching (Kidman, 2005). In addition, a theoretical link between an athlete-centred approach to sport, its characteristics and the pursuit of performance and personal excellence has been proposed (Clarke, Smith, and Thibault, 1994; Kidman; Miller & Kerr, 2002). However, a paucity of empirical research on athlete-centred coaching behaviours exists.
Summary of Literature Review

The athlete-centred approach to sport is of significance to elite coaches and athletes as it expands upon the traditional focus of athletes’ performance by recognizing the importance of pursuing the athletes’ personal excellence and acknowledging the athlete as an active participant within the coach-athlete relationship (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Kidd, 2006; Kidman, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2002). Even though there is a current trend within the Canadian sport policy documents to use the term “athlete-centred” to describe both an approach to sport, as well as a philosophy of coaching, there is an absence of empirical research on athlete-centred sport. Questions that remain unanswered include the following: How do coaches and athletes define athlete-centred sport? How do coaches and athletes describe athlete-centred sport? The current study begins to fill the gap in the existing literature with an examination of elite coaches’ perspectives on athlete-centred coaching and inquiry into the question, what does the concept of athlete-centred mean to coaches?
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY & METHODS

Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative research design. Qualitative research in sport and exercise psychology is increasing in use and credibility (Dale, 1996). In recent years, a plethora of sports related studies have employed qualitative methodologies to better understand the experiences of coaches (Bloom, Schinke, & Salmela, 1997; Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998); Culver & Trudel, 2000; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2006) and athletes (Amirault & Orlick, 1999; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Phillippe & Seiler, 2006).

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding that explores a social or human issue and aims to make sense or interpret it by focusing on the meaning that the participants bring to the phenomena (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In this study, as in other qualitative research, I was interested in the holistic perspective, as well as the underlying values and the context as a part of the phenomena (Morse, Swanson, & Kuzel, 2001). I also focused on building a complete and complex picture based on the analysis of words and the detailed views of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln). As the focus of this study was the participants’ description and meaning of their behaviours, practices and social interactions, a qualitative methodology of inquiry was chosen.

More specifically, semi-structured interviews were used. According to Schwandt (2007), the interview process is “a means of gaining direct access to an interviewee’s experience” (p.162). In-depth, semi-structured interviews aim to elicit meanings and stories about experiences from the interviewees (Schwandt). As such, semi-structured interviews were used in the current study to better understand elite coaches’ perspectives on athlete-centred coaching.

Methods

Participants

Current coaches of female athletes on Canadian national team sports were asked to participate in this study. All Canadian national coaches were certified at Level 4 or 5 as per the National
Coaching Certification Program coaching qualification guidelines (Coaching Association of Canada, 2005). The term ‘elite’ was used throughout this study to represent national level coaches and their athletes. A further rationale for the selection of participants for this study is discussed in the next section.

Rationale for Participant Inclusion Criteria

The recent focus on elite Canadian sports leading up to the 2010 and 2012 Olympic Games, the absence of studies focusing specifically on female sports, and an interest in athletes within a team environment informed the choice of participants for this study. National level coaches were chosen as the participants for this study due to the timing of this project, following the 2008 Beijing Olympics and during the current push for high-performance excellence at the upcoming 2010 Vancouver Olympics.

Female athletes are often under or misrepresented in elite sport coverage and research (Hardin, Dodd, & Lauffer, 2006). Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung (2006) suggested that “more research needs to be conducted paying specific attention to coaches of girls and women” (p.10). At the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, Italy, sixteen of the twenty-four Canadian medalists were females, including the women’s ice hockey team, and in Beijing, China at the 2008 Summer Olympics, seven of the eighteen medalists were females (Canada at the 2006 Winter Olympics, 2009). Despite the successful performances of female athletes on the world-stage, very little research has focused on female athletes and their coaches.

Further, due to the lack of sport psychology research involving team sports (e.g., softball, soccer, volleyball, basketball, field hockey, ice hockey), coaches of national teams sports were included as participants. The results of sports science research projects at universities and research centres (i.e., the Australian Institute for Sport) show that the majority (61.2%) of projects conducted were targeted towards specific sports, with only 16.9% of those focused on team sports (Williams & Kendall, 2007). In addition, previous studies have shown that the dynamics between the coach and
the athlete of team sports and individual sports vary (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998; Jowett, 2005a; Lorimer & Jowett, 2008). In team sports, the focus is on the synergy between the coach and multiple athletes, while balancing the development and progression of each athlete, as well as the whole team together (Lorimer & Jowett). Leith (2003) explained that coaching team sports challenges coaches to consider the interactive and interpersonal dynamics which exist in teams in order to get the most out of each individual athlete for the collective good of the team, thereby supporting the notion that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (p.10).

Both male and female coaches were included in order to increase the number of available coaches. While female coaches of female teams would have been a more specific participant group, the number of elite female coaches is still a growing population. Carpenter and Acosta (2008) show that only 20.6% of all men’s and women’s intercollegiate teams were coached by a female head coach. Similarly, a 2005 Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) analysis of male and female coaches reported that 20% of all CIS coaches were female (Canadian Interuniversity Sport, 2005). Given the shortage of female coaches of National teams, this study involved both male and female coaches.

Current coaches of Canadian national level teams were contacted in an attempt to investigate the perspectives of experienced elite level coaches. To be eligible for participation, Canadian coaches needed to be affiliated with Sport Canada and certified by the Coaches Association of Canada. Coaches who were previous national team coaches and no longer held coaching positions were not included in this sample. Thus, the study’s findings may have implications for coaching within the Canadian context.

**Ethics**

Prior to beginning this study, the appropriate Ethics Review Protocol application forms were submitted and approved by the Health Sciences Research Ethics Board (REB) at the University of Toronto. This research study was granted REB approval on January 16, 2009 under the protocol reference number of 23672.
No financial compensation was offered for participation in this study; however, the participants hopefully experienced the benefit of contributing to this research area. There were no direct benefits and no perceived risks to the participants as a result of their involvement in this study.

Following the completion of the thesis, a copy of the complete thesis will be made available to all participants. As an alternative, coaches will also be offered a condensed version of the thesis. Both documents will satisfy the ethics guidelines to disseminate the study’s information and results, as well as inform the coaches who are interested in the topic.

Pilot Interview

Following ethics approval, one pilot interview was conducted prior to interviewing the study’s participants. The participant for this pilot interview was a former coach of Canadian women’s beach volleyball players. This coach is fully a certified Level 4 volleyball coach. In addition, this coach played volleyball at the Olympic, professional and collegiate levels. The purpose of this pilot study was to evaluate the effectiveness, directedness and accuracy of the study’s interview guide, as well as for the interviewer to practice interviewing, questioning and probing techniques. Due to the pilot interviewee’s past experiences being similar to experiences of the study’s participants, discussion regarding the interview process and guide occurred at the end of the pilot interview; however no changes to the interview guide were made following this pilot interview (see Appendix C for Interview Guide). This interview was conducted as if it were a formal interview for this proposed study, although the interview was not transcribed verbatim or analyzed. The primary reason for the pilot interview was as a learning tool for the interviewer prior to commencing the study’s interviews.

Sample Size

Ten coaches of Canadian national women’s team sports participated in this study. Previous qualitative studies using interviews conducted in sport psychology, coaching behaviours and leadership also used samples ranging from five to ten participants (d’Arripe-Longueville, Saury,

Furthermore, to ensure that coaches from a variety of sports were included, no more than two coaches per team sport were selected to participate.

**Procedures**

**Recruitment.** A purposive method of sampling was used in this study. As a commonly used strategy in qualitative research, purposive sampling “selects individuals for study participation based on their particular knowledge of a phenomenon for the purpose of sharing that knowledge”, expertise and understanding (Streubert Speziale & Carpenter, 2007, p.94). Thus, coaches of national female team sports were invited and selected to participate in this study based on their experiences with the phenomena under investigation: coaching of elite, female athletes.

To ensure that elite coaches from a wide variety of female team sports were invited to participate in this study, numerous national governing organizations for the specific sports (e.g., Softball Canada, Basketball Canada) were contacted to gather contact information for the coaches of female national teams. Names and contact information was also found via national team websites (e.g., www.hockeycanada.ca). Once the names and contact information had been gathered, participants were contacted and recruited via email. Coaches were asked about their interest in participating in the study and provided with the letter of information via email when they were initially contacted. The letter of information provided the candidate participants with background information regarding the study before they consented to participate in the study, such as the purpose of the study, a description of what is involved in the study, an explanation of voluntary participation, issues regarding confidentiality and anonymity, brief comments about compensation, benefits and risks of participation, and contact details for the researcher and supervisor. The letter of informed consent, which includes the letter of information and the consent form can be found in Appendix A.
Once the contacted coaches confirmed their interest and agreed to participate, phone interviews were arranged at their convenience. At this time, coaches were also sent (via email) a handout entitled ‘Athlete-Centred Tenets and Characteristics,’ which can be found in Appendix B. This document provided the participants with the background information on which the procedures of the study were based.

After each participant was recruited to participate in the study, the researcher and participant arranged a convenient time to conduct a phone interview. At that time, participants were asked if they had read the letter of informed consent and to verbally confirm that they consent to participating in the study. This indicated that participants had voluntarily agreed to participate, understood the necessary information regarding the study, and were therefore ready to begin their interview.

**Interviews.** Interviews are a widely used method of data collection for qualitative inquiry in sport and exercise psychology research (Côté, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993). This study used semi-structured interview questions as a means of obtaining rich, detailed and diverse information from elite coaches regarding their views on athlete-centred coaching characteristics and behaviours (Vazou, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2005). Nine of the interviews were conducted with coaches via telephone and one via Skype. With the permission of the participants, the interviews were digitally recorded. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 75 minutes in length. The interview guide was based on the previous research compiled in the literature review, with specific attention given to the basic tenets of the athlete-centred approach to sport and its athlete-centred coaching characteristics. Each interview began with the two general questions, “Please tell me about your coaching experience” and “Please tell me what the term ‘athlete-centred’ means to you?” Then, more specific questions were asked, such as “What do the given athlete-centred tenets and characteristics mean to you?”, “How might these athlete-centred characteristics be demonstrated in day-to-day coaching practices?” “What does an athlete-centred coach-athlete relationship look and feel like?” and “What are the barriers to implementing this model of coaching?” The complete interview guide is listed in Appendix C.
**Data analysis.** Upon the completion of each interview, the digital voice recording of the interview was transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Interviewee confidentiality and anonymity was maintained following each interview with the use of pseudonyms and the elimination of any identifiable information during the analysis and interpretation of results.

In this study, the socially and contextually constructed characteristics of athlete-centred sport were identified both inductively and deductively. An inductive approach allowed themes and categories to emerge from the coaches’ interviews. Inductive data analysis establishes themes and the final written report “includes the voices of the participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature” (Creswell, 2007, p.37). However, in this study, the investigation is not based on a problem, but rather, the topic of athlete-centred sport. During the inductive process, as the researcher, I built from the ‘bottom-up,’ by organizing the data into meaning units, categories (e.g., profile, terminology, practices and principles, barriers), and themes which will be presented in the results and discussion chapter (Creswell, 2007).

Following inductive analysis of the data, the themes that emerged were then studied deductively. The process of deductive analysis revealed similarities between this study’s emerging themes and previously identified characteristics of the athlete-centred approach to sport. Results of deductive process are discussed throughout the interview findings and discussion section.

**Member checking.** Following the transcription of the interview data, each of interviewees were contacted via email and invited to participate in a member checking session. Member checking is the process of determining “the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to be participants and determining whether these participants feel they are accurate” (Creswell, 2009, p.191). All participants were sent a copy of their interview transcript and encouraged to review the document. The participants were asked if the interview transcript was an accurate representation of what was said and they were invited to make any additional comments on the topic or the research process. Six coaches responded; however coaches
said that their transcripts were accurate and no further information pertaining to the content of the study or findings of the interviews was discussed.

Confidentiality. Participant anonymity and confidentiality was maintained through the research project. All digital recordings and transcripts remain secured and locked in the researcher’s office at the University of Toronto. Only the researcher and the thesis supervisor have access to the data. All names and any other identifiable information were removed from the labeling and storage of the tapes and transcripts. All data, audio tapes and written transcripts will be retained for a maximum of five years, at which time they will be appropriately disposed of.

Dissemination of the study’s information and results. Following the completion of this thesis, a brief summary report of the study’s results will be made available to participants who are interested. Anonymity will be assured and only group research data will be presented. These findings will form the basis of the summary report and will also inform sport leadership and coaching conference presentations related to specific knowledge translation and transfer of information to the coaching community.

In addition, this study’s information and results may also be disseminated to the appropriate organizations (e.g., the Coaching Association of Canada, the National Coaching Certification Program) in order to use this study’s findings as a means of making recommendations for policy development or coach education revisions.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This chapter is organized into two sections: profiles of the study’s participants are included in the first section; and the second section consists of the researchers’ interpretations of the findings, integrated with previously published literature.

Study Participants

Ten current coaches of female athletes on Canadian national team sports participated in the study. Coaches represented nine different sports, including ice hockey, soccer, basketball, rowing, synchronized swimming, rugby, handball, water polo, and baseball. Seven coaches were in a head coach position and the remaining three were assistant coaches. One coach had been coaching within the national team program for over twenty years, three coaches have spent between five and ten years on the national team coaching staff, and six coaches have been in their current coaching position between two and five years. Five male and five female coaches of female national teams were interviewed. All ten coaches were former athletes in the sport they now coach, and of these, four coaches were former members of Canadian national teams.

The profiles that follow provide demographic information about each participant including their coaching experience and accomplishments. Pseudonyms were given to each participant and will be used for the remainder of this document.

Participant Profiles

Tyler. Tyler is a former national team player in the sport he now coaches. He began coaching at the club level in 1993, and over time started to get more involved at the elite level with the Canadian women’s youth program and then took over the position of head coach of the senior national women’s program and team in 2003. Tyler has international experience and has been successful with both the junior and senior teams at the Olympic Games, World Championships and World Cup. He considers his greatest accomplishments to be winning medals at the junior World
Championships, as well as at the senior World Championships with the team that would later represent Canada at the Olympic Games.

**Crystal.** Crystal played her sport throughout high school and university and then started to coach as soon as her university playing career had finished. Her career in sports has been a process of going from player to assistant coach, to head coach across a variety of settings, which included a Canadian university, American universities, overseas, high school, provincial, and youth teams. Crystal has been in her current position as head coach of the senior national women’s team for the past eight years. Crystal described her greatest achievement as her abilities to give more ownership of the program to everyone who is involved and connect the national and national development teams as a means of getting the national program back on track and leaving a legacy. She also considered the team’s greatest achievement to be reaching a performance status that had not been attained in many years.

**Derek.** Derek was a former elite athlete in his sport. During his studies as a graduate student he decided to offer some coaching assistance on a volunteer basis to the national team and in return he was offered the position of head coach of the team. He has been a national level coach on and off since 1978. In addition to his responsibilities to the national team, he also helps to coordinate the coaches and assist with the intercollegiate program at a local university. Derek has been to seven Olympic Games and it is the continued success that the team has had over the years that he considers as his greatest accomplishment with the team.

**Jessica.** Jessica is a former university athlete in her sport. She played university level sport at a school in the U.S. and then returned to Canada to continue her education. Around the same time as Jessica was completing her second degree program, the school she was attending started a women’s program and team in her sport. She decided to apply for the position of head coach, and now at the end of her eleventh year in that position, she says “the rest is just history, really.” She has been involved with the under-22 national program for the past three years as a member of the coaching staff and as head coach of the team since the beginning of the 2008 season. For her, the greatest
achievement with the team was winning a series of games against a team that many thought was superior.

**Jason.** Jason began his sporting career playing both organized club and high school sports. He has now been involved in coaching two sports year-round for close to twenty-seven years. He started coaching at the community level and has worked with athletes of all ages and abilities throughout this coaching career. Jason has been involved with the women’s national team since 2004 following a successful application process. Jason considers his steady growth in terms of his own coaching over the years to be a great accomplishment. In addition, in 2008, the team improved its rankings from the two previous World Cup tournaments, which Jason described as “definitely going in the right direction.”

**Steve.** Steve was first introduced to his sport at the age of twelve in elementary school, and by the time he was sixteen his coaching career had already begun. He played and coached at a club, which was and still is one of the top clubs in Canada. Following a successful club tournament, he was approached to coach another national team, a position he began in 2002. At the end of that contract, the Canadian national team asked him to join the program. In 2007, Steve started coaching the Canadian women’s team. At that time, Steve realized that he would be financially unable to live as a full-time national team coach in Canada, so he decided to continue to develop his coaching career internationally. Steve has been coaching for twenty-two years, and he is now trying to continue his passion of coaching professionally in Europe while coaching the Canadian women’s national team simultaneously.

**Eric.** Eric finished his sporting career as an athlete in 1992, and upon his retirement he fulfilled a promise he had made to his club to return some of the support it had given to him. At that time he assumed the responsibility of coaching the younger athletes for a couple of years, then he became the development coach and later the head coach, as well as being one of two coaches who ran the national team program. Following all these experiences coaching overseas, Eric came to Canada and started coaching the women’s national team in the spring of 2006.
Michelle. Michelle spent nine years as an athlete on the national team in her sport and competed at one Olympic Games. She comes from a very sports-oriented family, but growing up didn’t think that coaching was her calling; however, two years after her retirement from the sport she wanted to go back. At that time, her former club coach asked if she would just come to help out part-time since she had so much experience in the sport, so she told herself “you know what, what the heck I can try it, and that’s how it started.” After coaching at her club, which was and still is one of the best clubs in Canada, she applied for a position with the national team, and despite having had only three years of full time coaching experience, she was hired to the national team coaching staff. Within the past year she has moved up from coaching the national second team to the national Olympic team. For Michelle, her best accomplishment as a coach has been exemplified by her ability as a club coach to move athletes up from the club level to the national team. In her current role as an assistant coach of the national team she continues to fulfill her passion of helping the athletes achieve their goals.

Danielle. Danielle began playing her sport in 1991 and moved up from her club team to the national team. While at graduate school, Danielle was a player-coach for the university team. When she completed her degree, she continued in her coaching position, and is still the head coach of the women’s intercollegiate team today. In 2006, she also took over as the head coach of the women’s national team. Danielle described her major accomplishments as head coach as a process. She has been able to take a team of athletes who were relatively new and inexperienced in the sport, and through her own ability to learn and coach the game, has helped the team reach its current ranking amongst the top teams in the world following the recent World Cup tournament.

Stacey. Stacey began her coaching career before her playing career had ended. She started coaching at camps and clinics at the same university where she was studying and playing, and then she moved onto coaching the youth provincial select teams. After making the decision to make a career out of coaching her sport, Stacey began coaching at the collegiate level in the U.S. Six years later, she moved back to Canada, where her background in fitness, nutrition and physical education
helped her get a position as a physical exercise specialist and instructor. Stacey’s job also allowed her to become more involved with the national team program and in 2007 she became an assistant coach of the national team. She identifies her greatest accomplishment as being part of the team’s extraordinary performance at the World Championship in what she called “the best showing the team had ever had on the international stage.”

**Interview Findings and Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore coaches’ perspectives on athlete-centred coaching. Of particular interest were the specific views of coaches regarding the meanings attached to the term “athlete-centred” sport and coaches’ understanding of athlete-centred principles and practices. In addition, the perceived barriers to implementation within the coach-athlete relationship were also investigated.

The ten current coaches of female athletes on Canadian national team sports, introduced in the previous section, were given the opportunity during semi-structured interviews to share their perspectives regarding athlete-centred sport. The interviews ranged from thirty to seventy-five minutes in duration. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Using a qualitative methodology of inquiry, data were analyzed inductively from meaning units to categories and themes, as well as deductively compared to previous research. Additionally, the researchers’ thoughts about the experience were incorporated.

*Throughout the process of this research project, I, as the researcher bracketed my personal beliefs, previous knowledge, preconceived notions and ideas about athlete-centred sport. During the data collection and analysis phases of this study I tried to adhere to the interview guide without interjecting my personal opinions. However, previous experiences in elite sport as both a coach and athlete enabled me to offer an additional lived experience perspective to this study. As a result, personal reflections are included throughout the presentation of the findings and discussion.*
In all, 1443 meaning units were highlighted from the ten interview transcripts. Following data analysis, three major themes were identified: the meanings attached to the term “athlete-centred” sport, coaches’ understanding of athlete-centred principles and practices, and barriers to implementing athlete-centred coaching behaviours. Each of these themes and the associated subcategories will be explored in greater detail in the remainder of this chapter.

The Meanings Attached to the Term “Athlete-Centred” Sport

After the opening questions, participants were asked “please tell me what the term athlete-centred means to you.” This broad, open-ended question, allowed coaches to discuss and unpack their own interpretation, meaning, and understandings regarding athlete-centred sport as it relates to their own coaching philosophy and experiences. Thus, it is not surprising that coaches described divergent definitions and views of the concept of athlete-centred sport and coaching. One participant, Tyler, recognized the potential complex nature of the findings of this research: “this is tricky, this is going to be real interesting what other coaches are going to say…. I think you’ll find some interesting answers from different coaches.” Although the term athlete-centred exists within the sporting culture as a label, a buzz phrase or a name, the findings suggest it means something slightly different to various coaches. Jason stated that “It’s a biased perspective from my point of view for sure … [it’s] a lot of it is just jargon and vernacular if you will.” Therefore, as the researcher, I began to question whether coaches were simply differing in the terminology they preferred to use or whether they ascribed different meanings to the term “athlete-centred.”

The coaches’ responses to the above question were grouped into two categories according to whether specific reference was made to the athlete(s) or coach. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

Reference to the athlete(s). All of the coaches interviewed made countless references to their athletes. Coaches spoke very passionately and in great detail and length about their athletes, often recalling multiple anecdotes and stories of their experiences together. And despite “athlete-
"being the phrase used in many of the National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) documents (e.g. The Canadian Sport Policy, Coaching Code of Ethics and Long Term Athlete Development model), four different references of the athletes emerged: athlete-centred, team-centred, athlete-focused and athlete-driven.

**Athlete-centred.** Despite the divergent meanings attached to this coaching philosophy, which will be discussed in the following sections, some coaches maintain views akin to the literal translation of the term athlete-centred, by emphasizing that the athlete is centre. Coaches were very clear in their beliefs. Danielle said, “ultimately it is about the athlete” while Eric agreed that “you have to put the athlete in [the] centre.” Michelle further described what being in the centre meant to her: “I think it’s about being more centred on what the athlete development is and what their own journey is, and not being centred on just the medal and the success.” Danielle said,

> I think athlete-centred is ensuring that … everything you are doing is to better the athlete…. That the coach is acting more as a guide to enhancing that development … to provide learning opportunities and tools for that athlete to grow to develop. Ultimately it is about the athlete, and the athlete does have a say in how things are run, what they want, what they expect, and how things are going…. I think when athletes start getting involved in sport everything revolves around them, and that’s not a bad thing about sport, I think that’s how they become better, they’re the centre.

These coaches emphasized athletes being in the centre, whereby coaches and the rest of the sporting community revolve around and surround the athletes to influence the athletes’ development and progress positively.

One coach spoke at great length regarding his understanding and application of athlete-centred coaching as sport and situationally-specific relative to the age, maturity and experience levels of the athletes on the team. Derek explained,

> I want to stress it’s so individual. The mean age of the athletes that I coach is 28, the range is 23 to 32. All of them have university degrees, most of them have been out doing some level of work, some of them are working and they’re in professional schools, they’re doing post graduate work, they’re incredibly motivated, so that’s a unique group, and that would be quite a different coaching relationship in terms of being athlete-centred than you have if you were coaching 15-year-old gymnasts, you know, or coaching you know 9-year-old boys playing hockey. The thing that’s really neat about sport is you can’t really compare coaching from situation to situation, and there are certain common points, like in our sport, they’re a very
mature group, so we’re almost forced to be athlete-centred and if we’re not it’s disrespectful. The athletes expect everything to revolve around them in a good way.

This view illustrates why there is no one model of coaching, as every coach, team and athlete needs to tailor specific programs and working relationships to best fit their needs and goals (Lombardo, 1999). Even at the elite level, the way in which coaches treat their athletes, and vice versa, varies significantly.

*It was my previous experiences as a national team athlete that sparked my interest in studying coaching and elite sport. And while I am sure that every elite athlete can say that they have had coaches who they did not like for a number of different reasons, my experiences seem to follow Derek’s views, whereby as an athlete I felt disrespected by my coaches’ lack of recognition of the importance of being athlete-centred and disregard for the maturity and expertise that I brought to the national team program. As a result of this feeling of disconnect between myself and my coaches, I also did not feel that we as athletes were at the centre, or that things revolved around us in a positive way, which I think in the end contributed significantly to our struggles on the playing field.*

However, not all coaches felt comfortable with the term athlete-centred. As Tyler explained,

*It is a fear of the coaches that we do become too athlete-centred. A lot of coaches in the country feel like coaches are already forgotten. So, the big fear of many coaches is that sport goes completely athlete-centred and … the coach isn’t even recognized at all. That’s a huge problem in Canada.*

Previous literature has referred to athlete-centred coach-athlete relationships as partnerships (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Kidman, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2002). As partners, both the coach and the athlete are valuable contributors to their relationship. Centering or revolving efforts towards the athlete does not necessarily mean that the role of the coach is overlooked or taken for granted.

Nevertheless, the position of the coach in an athlete-centred approach to sport seems to vary for different coaches, teams, athletes and sports.

*Team-centred.* The sporting experience varies between team and individual sports and as a result, I specifically chose to interview coaches of team sports. The rationale for doing so was two-fold: first, there is a lack of sport psychology research involving team sports; and second, the coach-
athlete relationship in a team environment is particularly complex. The latter is supported by the following findings. Two coaches shared their views about being centred on multiple athletes within the team environment. Stacey said,

The only concern that I would have is that people sometimes concern themselves with athletes portrayed as being individual instead as a team. If you’re playing a team sport some people might think well if it’s athlete-centred you’re focusing on the individual instead of focusing on the team, and I think that’s where people can be misled because I think to improve each athlete one at a time, by improving every athlete you’re improving your team overall…. Everybody is individual, so you can’t treat them all like a big herd of cattle and have them all do the same thing, it has to be individualized and it has to be centred to each individual athlete.

Tyler stressed,

I don’t see how you can use athlete-centred in a team environment. It has to be team, because there are 13 individuals in my sport, that would make the team, so with athlete-centred I guess I would chose team-centred. I don’t think you can have an athlete-centred, you can have an athlete-centred team, coach-driven…. At my level, everything in my team-centred is athlete-centred sport.

The challenge of being athlete-centred and team-centred increases as the number of athletes on the team increases. Therefore, it is essential for all coaches and athletes involved in team sports to create and maintain a positive team dynamic and environment that addresses the needs of the team, as well as the needs of each individual athlete (Crace & Hardy, 1997).

**Athlete-focused.** Coaches also referred to a specific focus on the athlete. Many coaches made the distinction between the use and interpretation of the terms athlete-centred and athlete-focused.

According to Tyler,

Athlete-centred means that the focus is the athlete. That’s how I’m taking athlete-centred. For me, athlete-centred, I don’t like the title, but obviously it exists. To me it just says that the main focus is that athlete. Everything that the coach is doing is geared towards the performance of that athlete.

He went on to explain,

I would say athlete-focused, instead of athlete-centred. They kind of do mean the same thing. I think that when you say athlete-centred the importance of the coaches’ role is lost. In athlete-focused it means that, yes, everything that is done is focused on the athlete, but being done by the coach and the support team around the athlete.
Even though other coaches shared similar views, some coaches simply referred to a general focus on the athlete, as opposed to using the phrase athlete-focused. In this regard, the comments emphasized the athlete and acknowledged the role of coach as a facilitator. Jessica said,

> What [athlete-centred] means to me would be that the coach is focused on the development of the complete athlete. Some people might say that a coach tries to please the athlete but I don’t think that’s a realistic scenario. I think that at the end of the day it’s all about the coaches serving the athletes, but in a way that is helping them to develop as athletic people.

Michelle also referred to this focus on development by stating that, “I think another way to be always focused around the athlete [is] to make sure that they’re really ready for that day of practice and that everything is taken care of for them.” And while it is likely that coaches have their own definition of what it means and takes to get athletes ready to perform, there is a common emphasis placed on focusing on the athletes’ needs. Jason explained,

> As coaches we need to make sure that our athletes are prepared, are put in the correct environment [and] positions in which they are going to succeed or most likely will succeed. That’s really the essence of what athlete-focused means to me. Everything we do revolves around creating successful environments for athletes.

One of the key characteristics of the athlete-centred philosophy is that the athlete is a whole and developing person who needs support for all aspects of his or her health (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Kidman, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2002). More specifically, the athletes’ psychological, emotional, and social health is of equal or greater importance to their physical well-being. The focus on the athlete needs to go beyond the technical skills and tactics necessary to play the sport (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). This is illustrated in Stacey’s description of her athletes:

> The athlete is the focus of everything when it’s athlete-centred. The training, the nutrition, the programs are all specific to each individual and I think you treat them as individuals and you focus specifically on improving the athlete because improving one player, one athlete at a time can then improve the entire program. So, I believe on focusing on the individual athlete.

There are many similarities in the coaches’ understanding and use of the terms athlete-centred and athlete-focused. In my personal opinion, which naturally has been influenced by a combination of my previous experiences in sport, academic and coaching literature, as well as these coaches’
perspectives, I use the terms athlete-centred and athlete-focused interchangeably and recognize that there is significant overlap in their meanings. An athlete-centred approach to sport is based on focusing on the holistic development and performance success of each individual athlete, as well as the team (Kidman). Furthermore, athlete-centred coaching behaviours emphasize the provision of all of the needs of both the athlete and team as a means of developing leaders, athletes and well-rounded people.

**Athlete-driven.** During the interviews, the discussion around the term athlete-driven became quite animated as many coaches had very strong opinions regarding its use as a term to describe the coaching environment. Coaches expressed opposing views that were often supplemented with an analogy or story. Michelle was among the coaches who supported the term, as she stated,

I think athlete-driven and athlete-centred is the same thing. It’s just being behind the bench or in front of the bench. It’s kind of the same thing because being an athlete-centred coach you give [the athletes] the power to drive the bus by themselves, they’re driving the well oiled machine which is a team.

Eric used a number of examples to advocate, “it’s more athlete-driven practice.” His athletes understand his coaching philosophy, in which athletes have the freedom to determine and follow-through with their own responsibilities both inside and outside of sport. If his athletes choose to take a break from training, for family reasons for example, then they are free to make that decision; however, they need to understand the responsibilities of that decision. Eric explained,

If [athletes] don’t feel they have to be at the centre for two months, then I know that their heart is somewhere [else], but I also know that when they [come] back they think they should be here and …. I really strongly believe I get way more in return … because they want to be here with their hearts.

It is clear that Eric, as well as his athletes also value life outside of sport. Eric also added that athletes “should not do it to please me, they should do it to be the best they can be for themselves.” In this way, athletes are driving their own development, both as athletes and as people outside of sport.

Likewise, Derek described a recent experience to explain his view on athlete-driven sport. He said,
You can have that with very mature athletes, I think the maturation of the athletes is a critical. For example, at the most recent Olympics I coached [athletes] who’ve been in the sport for many years, so certainly I would say that was pretty much athlete-driven at that point, but with a younger … national team and [a university team] … it’s much more coach-driven. So, I think that there is one model … and there are situations that you have to read, and sometimes you’re in the driver’s seat and sometimes you’re sitting back and letting it be driven.

This concept of athletes driving their own programs can be seen in my previous experiences on a national team. The structure of the Great Britain national softball team means that we spend almost ten months of the year apart from our teammates and coaches. Most of the athletes on the team live and go to school or work in separate places around the world. We typically only get together as a team during training camps prior to major tournaments which means the majority of our national team training is conducted on our own. We are responsible for following team strength and conditioning programs, practicing and playing as many games of softball as we can, and keeping in touch with teammates and coaches while we are apart. In this regard, much of the team’s structure and program is athlete-driven, primarily because of geography. As athletes, we must be the drivers of our own development, progress and growth so that when the team does get together we are all individually ready to play as a team again.

While both Michelle and Derek compared their interpretation of athlete-driven sport to athletes literally driving their program, this view was not shared by all the coaches. Some coaches found the use of the term athlete-driven to be problematic and disagreed with the notion that athlete-driven practices are positive ways to describe and organize sport. Tyler said that the “the problem is a lot of people get confused between athlete-centred and athlete-driven. But an athlete-driven model is not going to work.” He goes on to explain the relationship between athlete-centred and athlete-driven by stating,

I do think a lot of coaches really have a concern about athlete-centred turning into athlete-driven …. I think we’re at the pinnacle, we can’t keep on going more and more athlete-centred because eventually that’ll just turn into athlete-driven. And that distinction has got to be made, where does athlete-centred stop and athlete-driven begins …. It’s my responsibility to let [the athletes] know who makes the decisions [and] as long as I explain the decision making process, and they understand that I make the ultimate decision then I don’t think it’ll ever be athlete-driven.
Tyler attributed the concern about going more athlete-centred to eventual loss of the role and significance of the coach. Similarly, Jason said,

It’s not athlete-driven. Athletes have the talent, they have age on their side …. but athlete-led is kind of a stretch in my estimation. The last thing you want an athlete to be doing is all the admin stuff, the planning, the organizing, the pulling in of resources, the managing of equipment, all of that stuff … this is what you need a coach for. So to suggest that it’s … athlete-led I think is a huge stretch.

Specific references made about the coach will be revisited in greater detail in a later section.

Thus far, coaches have referred to the athletes in their described meanings of the terms “athlete-centred”, “athlete-focused” and “athlete-driven.” However, another significant part of every national team is the coach. References made regarding the coach will be presented next.

Reference to the coach. Two terms that refer to the coach specifically were used by some of the coaches during the interviews: coach-driven and coach-led. Other coaches spoke more generally about the role of the coach and characteristics of the coach-athlete relationship, which will be presented later.

Coach-driven. Similar to coaches’ previous references to athlete-driven practices, two coaches described their interpretation of the use and importance of the term coach-driven. In this view, the role of the coach becomes more prominent, as the coach is seen to be the one who is driving the athletes’ program. Tyler explained,

You have to lay down your foundation, your framework, how everything is going to run, with exceptions … and you make the athletes understand that, yes, this is athlete-focused, and obviously we’re doing everything for you, but this is coach-driven, so if I choose to make a decision for this player, I can make that decision. I don’t have to worry about being, unequal, as long [as] they know the rules, there can be a variation in specific circumstances [and] they know who the authority is to make the decision…. The biggest fear of the coach is [if the] coach is not making decisions [that] the athlete comes back and can change those decisions, now you’re no longer coach driven. Once I start letting emotions, discussions and opinions of athletes dictate my decision-making, then I believe that’s where we’ll run into the problems. So, the process of decision-making [needs to be] understood by the athletes, that I as the head coach make the ultimate decision.

Jessica suggested a slight variation that “you need to have coach-driven expectations with input from your leadership, but I think you walk a very fine line.” The balance between coach and athletes is a
key determinant in who designs and directs the program as Tyler suggested “if it’s athlete-centred, but coach-driven it’ll work.”

**Coach-led.** As mentioned previously, the role of the coach is not ignored in an athlete-centred approach to sport. Jason described in great detail his interpretation of the term coach-led:

We refer to it as athlete-focused and coach-led, so you’re going to get a bit of a twist in the dynamic from me because we believe that the coach is always the one driving the process and while the athlete is the one that performs and the one that everybody comes to see and so on, there’s always a coach behind an athlete driving a program …. My job now frankly is to raise awareness of what the coaches’ role in sport because it’s always been taken for granted. We’re not taking anything away from the athlete here, that’s not the intention at all, however we do need to raise the awareness of the role of the coach, not only at the community level but even at the high-performance level. [For example], pick a sport, downhill skiing coming up Vancouver 2010, what you see is an athlete receiving a gold medal on a podium but what you don’t see is all the work that the coach put into that athlete to get that athlete there …. [The] coach does more than just stand at the side and blow a whistle and point fingers and so forth, there’s so much admin work that’s directly related to what a coach does, like I said managing facilities, managing equipment, [and] organizing an integrated support team.

*My experiences as a coach have taught me that there are many different ways in which a coach leads his or her team. I believe that within an athlete-centred approach, coaches lead their teams in two ways; first, by developing their athletes as people; and second by making sure everything that will give their athletes and team the best chance to perform to their fullest potential is done. Given the extensive amount of work that is required on and off the field, especially at the national team levels, teams and athletes need to have a coach lead and support them as they develop and pursue excellence together.*

At the conclusion of the interview, Jason added that, “the key message that I wanted to make was changing the word centred to focused, and adding coach-led behind it.” As a coach who obviously had background knowledge and a vested interest in coaching and the athlete-centred approach in particular, Jason spoke very passionately about his perspectives regarding the different terminology used to describe sport. However, Michelle was best able to succinctly summarize much of what has been discussed throughout this section when she said,

*For me I see it the same way, driven or led by the coach. The coach is kind of a facilitator for the athlete to find their way and get the drive to go reach for those goals.*
Summary of meanings attached to the term “athlete-centred”. An analysis of the coaches’ perspectives of the concept of “athlete-centred” revealed differences from the conceptualization of athlete-centredness provided in the literature (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Kidman, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2002). Coaches described a variety of meanings attached to the term “athlete-centred” and also spoke about other related terms, such as “athlete-focused”, “athlete-driven”, “coach-led”, and “coach-driven.” No reference to these additional terms were found in the previous athlete-centred literature. Although coaches have different perspectives of the concept “athlete-centred” and different levels of support for the use of the term “athlete-centred,” all coaches viewed the athlete as important. However, most of the coaches’ descriptions were based on the development of the athlete as an athlete rather than as a person. There were very few references related to athlete development as people outside of sport or the coaches’ role in helping athletes develop as people apart from athletes. These are two elements which have previously been identified as important within an athlete-centred approach to sport (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault; Kidman; Miller & Kerr). While coaches failed to emphasize their athletes as people in the meanings they attach to the term “athlete-centred,” coaches’ recognition of this concept was evident throughout their discussion of athlete-centred principles and practices, which will be presented in the next section.

Coaches also misunderstood or misinterpreted the concept of “athlete-driven” as it is outlined in the athlete-centred theoretical approach to sport. The theory proposed not that the athlete, as an individual, drives the program (e.g., training, decisions), but rather the athlete’s rights and needs drive the nature of the program. Coaches who supported athlete-driven sport spoke about athletes determining the content and direction of their training; whereas those who opposed athlete-driven sport referred to the coaches’ loss of control. In both cases, coaches failed to recognize that athlete-driven sport within an athlete-centred approach suggests that the athlete’s rights, responsibilities and holistic developmental needs must drive the nature of the national team program (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994).
In addition to the references that coaches made about their athletes, they also emphasized the role of the coach as important. Some of the coaches interviewed believed that placing the athlete at the centre, somehow diminished the importance of the coach. This finding may be the related to coaches’ misunderstanding of the concepts of “athlete-driven”, as well as “athlete-centred”. Coaches who interpret athlete-centred sport to mean that athletes make all the decisions may also question their role as coach and perceive it to be less important. My interpretation of the literature is that the athlete-centred approach does not diminish the importance of the role of the coach. Athlete-centred coaching should not take the coach out of the picture, but rather emphasize a more balanced working partnership between coach and athlete. As Kidman (2005) notes,

Within the athlete-centred approach it is not suggested that the coach should give full responsibility to athletes. Rather, coaches should exercise their leadership by guiding athletes towards decision making and allowing them to take their own responsibility for sport participation (p.18).

The role of the coach therefore remains an important part of the process of an athlete’s development within an athlete-centred approach to sport.

Despite the divergent meanings ascribed to the term athlete-centred, coaches described similar values and behaviours that are athlete-centred in nature. The next section of this chapter will address coaches’ perspectives of various athlete-centred principles and practices.

**An Understanding of Athlete-Centred Coaching Principles and Practices**

While coaches differed in the meanings they attached to the term “athlete-centred”, consensus existed amongst the coaches with respect to an understanding of athlete-centred coaching principles and practices. In this study, coaches generally agreed with and described experiences that showed that they valued and applied a variety of athlete-centred principles and practices in their day-to-day coaching. In addition, many of the principles and practices that emerged from the interviews were consistent with previous research regarding an athlete-centred approach to sport (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Kidman, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2002).
In all, four sub-themes and a myriad of athlete-centred principles and practices emerged from the interviews. The first sub-theme, the coaches’ philosophy of the athlete, includes discussions about unique aspects of coaching females, recognizing the athlete as part of a greater whole, enhancing team cohesion, as well as extended responsibility, fostering the holistic development of the athlete, enlisting a support team, and making sport fun, enjoyable, and happy. The second sub-theme focuses on developing a coach-athlete partnership, in which the coach is a facilitator of independence, effective communication and leadership development. Sub-theme three examines value-based coaching which highlights qualities such as respect, trust, responsibility, and accountability. The fourth sub-theme revolves around defining success. Each of these themes and principles and practices will be addressed in turn in greater detail.

**Coaches’ philosophy of the athlete.** Several athlete-centred principles and practices will be discussed within this theme: unique aspects of coaching females, recognizing the athlete as part of a greater whole, enhancing team cohesion, as well as extended responsibility, fostering the holistic development of the athlete, enlisting a support team, and making sport fun, enjoyable, and happy.

**Unique aspects of coaching females.** The coaches interviewed in this study had several interesting challenges to address, namely to be centred and focused on the needs of their athletes, as females and as members of a team sport. Michelle explained, “another way for me to look at the athletes’ development is to make sure they have all the things they need.” For example, their needs may be related to being a female athlete or being an individual athlete in a team environment.

For many young girls and women, sport is a venue where positive growth, development and success can be achieved and celebrated (Brady, 1998). Crystal agreed by saying that “I definitely think [sport] is a vehicle which contributes to the athletes’ overall performance and personal development, especially for women I think sport is a great place to empower.” In order to empower females (and males) through sport it is important the athletes feel important, valued, that they are the centre focus and that all their needs are being taken care of (Kidman, 2005). This can also significantly affect coaching behaviours, expectations and team dynamics (Kidman). It is important to
emphasize that this does not imply that men cannot be empowered through sport, but rather that there are some differences in methods of communication and organization that may be better suited for female athletes.

Based on Derek’s previous experience of working with both male and female national athletes he explained,

Certainly there’s probably some group dynamic differences, psychological differences, certainly there’s physical differences, and physiological abilities you have to be aware of…. I’ve found that women react very well to more explanation of the process, they really appreciate that, and men tend to be more a little bit more just lets get on with it. Women tend to deal in a team setting more in this zone of the sort of social side, friendship side, so you might leave a little more time for warm-up chatter at the beginning of a workout for example. That’s a very common tactic with women, if you’ve got an afternoon session you may let them stretch and chat for a while and wind down from the day and compare notes…. I think there’s it’s a stronger social group in that sense.

Likewise, Crystal who had only coached females at the national team level said,

I think women need to know more. Men are more apt to just go tell me what to do, I’ll get it done, and I think women want to know the how’s, the why’s, the where’s…a bit more of the detail, of where we’re going, and how we’re getting there, [and] how we’re doing this together…. I just find with my women’s team there has to be the social aspect.

For both Derek and Crystal, their experiences with female athletes have shown that the social aspect of sport is an important component of focusing on meeting the needs of the athletes and the team.

During the interview with Jason, he was asked about his perspective on coaching the whole athlete and to elaborate on an earlier point he had made about there being more parts to the athlete than just physicality and physical performance. He went on to explain,

The whole dynamic of emotional and mental training, I find there’s a bigger requirement for it when coaching women, especially maybe because I’m a man, and maybe because I have an awareness of it, but you tend to get more output from women if you put the time into that kind of training, mental and emotional training. Physical training essentially is the same when you look at males and females, they either do it or they don’t, they reap the benefits if they do it and they suffer if they don’t.

Michelle also spoke about the training regime and how the female national team program, which includes youth and development levels, is structured. She also referred to the specific nature of her sport:

I believe that in my sport especially because we deal with … [young] women, we tend to be a little more in-tune to be more centred around them. I think it’s part of coaching girls because
they’re more sensitive in many ways than boys…. It’s about being part of a sport that’s very demanding technically and physically, artistically and [requiring] so many hours, I think it’s kind of innate with the sport, you have to make them happy, you have to be there for them …You have to be more of a mother, a person that cares for them, for the whole person not just for the athlete that will [perform] with you.

When coaches described their experience of working with female athletes, many of them referred to athlete-centred characteristics, such as ensuring the athlete is the focus or central figure by taking care of their needs, creating a supportive and positive environment in which to train and compete, and recognizing the importance of the athletes’ holistic development as people and players. Stacey quoted U.S. soccer star Mia Hamm during her interview when she explained,

‘Coach us as men, but treat us like women’, so in other words you’re coaching the athlete no matter what gender you are, you’re always coaching the athlete but you also have to understand that women are different than men, and so I try to accept that and really focus on that because you can’t treat every female the same. Unfortunately, the male gender you can stand there and yell and swear and do whatever and they’ll all bounce, they’re resilient, they’ll respond immediately and when you do that with a women’s team maybe half of them get it and the other half shut down completely.

This philosophy of coaching requires coaches to know their athletes both on and off the playing field, to help maximize their development through sport.

These findings show that coaches perceive subtle and important differences between coaching males and females. Generally when coaching women, coaches reported a greater need to focus on fostering positive group dynamics, prepare appropriate mental/emotional training regimes, recognize the demands of the sport, and build a supportive social environment. However, it is plausible that the findings of this study are generalizable to coaches of male teams, whereby male team athletes are at centre focus of the program and the needs of male athletes are being met.

**Recognizing the athlete as part of a greater whole.** Coaches also spoke about coaching each individual athlete within a team setting. The simplest explanation of how coaches perceive coaching individuals in a team sport came from Michelle, “I think a lot of coaching a team is [about] coaching the individual. It’s the same, just in bigger numbers.”

Other coaches’ philosophies were exemplified by the phrase, “the whole is greater than the sum of the parts” (Leith, 2003, p.10). This view describes team dynamics that are synergistic in
nature. Stacey explained that as a coach of a team sport “you want to make sure that every one of your athletes is improving and if every one of them is improving then your whole entire program is going to improve.” If each athlete, coach, manager and support staff worked towards the common team goals to the best of their ability, the team as a collective whole would increase the likelihood of achieving success and promoting individual and team development. Jessica said,

When you’re looking at work ethic, being a team player and those kinds of things, you can have all the talent in the world, if they can’t work together then, in a team sport, then it’s not going to be successful.

Similarly, Stacey also described,

You can have the most skilled athlete out there on field, somebody who knows what to do in a game situation, but if they don’t have the qualities of leadership [or] the true character of knowing what it’s like to part of a team … then they’re going to fall apart under pressure.

These results suggest that coaches have a responsibility to help their athletes develop a work ethic and the necessary leadership qualities that will enable athletes to further their own individual development, as well as help the team to progress.

**Enhancing team cohesion.** For national team programs to function at their highest potential, everyone on the team (i.e, athletes, coaches, medical and administrative staff) must work together as one cohesive unit. Crystal explained that she wants her national team environment to be a positive setting for everyone to work and train in:

It feels like a great place to be … I really think everybody enjoys going to the gym, going to workout, and going to training because it’s inclusive and it makes people feel like they matter, and feel like they have some good. I think that’s crucial in a team sport, that everybody feels like they’re part [of the team]. And it’s not just a fake feeling, everybody is important, from your physio to your manager to your trainer, every player, whether they play forty minutes a game or they don’t play.

Similarly, in Eric’s team he explained,

The unwritten rules … [that] you have to contribute to the group everyday. You have to contribute with energy everyday so we grow as a group… [and] contribute to that culture we have in the club.

These references to the team environment and group dynamics are similar to previous definitions and explanations of team culture (Kidman, 2005) and team building in sport (Yukelson,
Kidman identifies team culture as “a major philosophical underpinning in athlete-centred coaching” (p.20). Yukelson (1997) explains that “in sport, team building involves bringing coaches, athletes, managers, and support staff together to share resources and exchange ideas in order for the group to accomplish agreed-upon goals and objectives” (p.93). Kidman adds,

> It is important to note that each team is unique. Its individual members have unique attributes as well as some commonality with other athletes. Teams also participate in an ever-changing context…. An athlete-centred approach to coaching will take uniqueness into account by focusing on nurturing athletes and enhancing the positive aspects of each environment in which they participate (p.21-22).

A high quality team culture helps to meet the psychological and social needs of the athletes, which according to the athlete-centred approach contributes to the athletes’ holistic development (Liu, 2001)

Yukelson (1997) also outlines a variety of components of building a successful team, which include: having a shared vision and unity of purpose, collaborative teamwork, synergistic goals and complementary roles, individual and mutual accountability, an identity as a team, open and honest communication processes, peer helping and social support, trust at all levels, and a positive team culture and cohesive group atmosphere conducive for team success. Coaches included in Kidman (2005) referred to many similar characteristics in their explanations of their athlete-centred coaching methods, such as: giving athletes roles and responsibilities and a sense of ownership of the team, drawing individual athletes together to establish a team environment, establishing trust to enhance communication, and including team-building activities. Previous literature, as well as the results of this research project support many of the aforementioned components and show that having a quality team culture is important. By using an athlete-centred approach, coaches ensure that team culture is valued and that an environment is created in which athletes and coaches work together to pursue development and success.

Elite coaches and athletes also recognize the value of life outside of the team and life after sport. Extended responsibility is the second athlete-centred principle, and will be discussed next.

*Extended responsibility.* According to Clarke, Smith, and Thibault (1994) extended
responsibility focuses on the recognition of the long-term impact of sport on the athlete’s life.

Coaches referred to their athletes’ lives outside of sport and to the learning of life-long lessons that will hopefully influence their athletes’ lives positively after they leave sport.

Coaches made reference to the importance of helping their athletes develop outside of sport. Danielle explained that by enhancing the athlete’s “mental skills, her ability to concentrate, focus, ability to tune out distractions, [and] her motivation” she is teaching her skills that are transferable to other aspects of the athlete’s lives. Alternatively, Steve identified that “there are so many things that could affect a player’s life that can be not sports related.” In this regard, athletes’ development outside of sport can also influence their experiences within sport. These findings support previous researchers who have emphasized that while sport is an important part, it is not the entirety of an athlete’s life experience (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Kidman, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2002).

Several coaches also spoke at length about the lessons that can be learned through sport, how as coaches they can help their athletes learn these lessons and the impact these lessons can have on athletes’ lives after sport. Stacey explained,

I believe that everything that I have learned in life I’ve pretty much learned through sport. I was fortunate to have that experience and I try to teach that to my athletes. In life when you move on from athletics and you get a job there’s going to be people that you don’t like and you don’t get along with, it’s the same on a team but you have to learn to accept those people and how to work with them because if you don’t then in the real world you’re going to lose your job, and in a team aspect you’re not going to be cohesive to be able to give the performance that you need...[and] then you’re probably not going to play because you don’t understand what it means to be a team player. So teaching those kinds of things through sport are extremely important, those types of life lessons [about] adversity, how to overcome injury, how do you overcome being down a goal. And I think those are the many lessons that you can learn through sport... and [are] truly that’s what it’s all about. I try...to educate [athletes] about that because what they learn through sport they will carry with them for life absolutely.

Jessica referred to Canadian mental training consultant Peter Jensen’s book, Igniting the third factor, when she spoke about the lessons learned in sport,

I just read a line this morning, ‘when you’re done all you have left is the person’, and I think that’s an important point. You can play ten or fifteen years with the national team but eventually it’s going to come to an end ... and if they don’t learn [lessons] through [sport] they may not learn it otherwise.
As a result, it is important for coaches to help their athletes “understand that to be successful in sport required using both their mind and body and that some of what they had learned in sport had value beyond sport to other aspects of their lives” (Danish, 2002, p.51). According to Danish, sport can be used as a context for teaching life skills, such as: (1) learning how to learn; (2) communicating with other; (3) managing anger; (4) using positive self-talk; (5) giving and receiving feedback; (6) working with a team and within a system; (7) increasing focus and concentration; (8) performing under pressure; (9) solving problems; (10) overcoming roadblocks and challenges; (11) meeting deadlines; and (12) setting goals and attaining them. Similarly, results from Fraser-Thomas and Cote (2009) suggested “that sport provided a unique (i.e., different from school and other contexts) that rewarded commitment, discipline, and perseverance,” as well as a strong work ethic, good time management skills and resiliency (p.8). These life skills are qualities that can help athletes succeed on and off the playing field, both during and after their experiences in sport. This previous research highlights coaches’ need to understand and recognize specific life skills that are of life-long value to their athletes.

Crystal explained her responsibility as the coach to help her athletes develop and learn as people while on the national team:

I think [the lessons learned in sport] are qualities that they are going to take for the rest of their life, and though this is a really intense time for them to play national team, it’s not their whole life, and I would feel bad as would our whole staff if after these games they didn’t have any more skills to take on, more than shooting a ball. I would feel devastated actually. I would feel like I let everybody down. So definitely I want us to facilitate their learning. I want us to facilitate their growing, both as a person and obviously as an athlete. When you get a national team together, athletes are coming from all types of backgrounds, from all over the country, different family backgrounds, different university experiences, different cultural experiences, and it’s amazing the lessons that are still being taught at that age, at that level, even with the athletes at a national team level…. And I think it is our job as coaches to facilitate their growth in all areas.

The lesson learned through sport can significantly impact the athletes’ lives once they finish their sporting career. Michelle said,

The most important thing that we forget is that we are educators for those people, those girls, those athletes. They become somebody else after the sport and you only get them for such a short period in their life and you touch them in such a profound way that if you do it wrong, I
guess there’s for sure consequences after…. It can tie in very nicely to the athlete development because in the end you are a person, you’ve become an athlete, and then you go back to normal life.

Coaches in this study spoke very generally about the lessons that athletes learn through sport and their role as coaches in delivering these lessons. However, they did not identify specific skills or lessons that are potentially learned through sport, nor did they articulate ways in which they, as coaches, were explicit and purposeful in ensuring these skills were learned.

Moreover, athletes often differ in their ability to continue their life outside of sport. Crystal explained,

We had several players retire after we didn’t qualify for the Olympics. I’ve seen some that go off into the sunset and they’re great, they’re ready to make the transition phase, and I’ve had some that have really struggled….I don’t believe this is your whole life, so I really believe that you want to go and do your best, and it’s a big part of your life, but there’s still bigger and better out there still. I think [for] a lot of athletes to get to [the national team] level it is their whole life.

Steve concluded,

I think it’s key that people [do] whatever they do in a team [so] that at the end of the day they push themselves so much that they will be able to use that in their normal life, and be able to address any potential problems or issues that they could have in their life, and become not only a good athlete but a good person, and use that to their benefit throughout their lives.

Overall, coaches made very few references to the specific extended responsibility which recognizes the long-term impact that sport can have on their athletes’ lives, as defined by Clarke, Smith, and Thibault (1994). While some coaches referred generally to the role that sport plays in influencing development after sport, one could interpret their disclosures as indicating that the development of life skills happens naturally as a result of sport participation, rather than as a result of careful planning of learning outcomes.

Sport has always been one of the most important parts of my life. The life-long lessons and skills that I continue to learn and develop are invaluable and significantly contribute to who I am today. Being involved in sport has greatly influenced my life, in so many positive ways: meeting the most amazing people, experiencing the honour of representing the country I was born in, the opportunity to travel around the world playing softball, and impacting my academic future working
careers. Sport has also made me who I am today. I am a stronger, more confident, independent, well-rounded person because of my experiences in sport. Everything I have learned through sport will continue to fuel my passion for sport and physical education, aid in my desire to make sport better for others, and help me in wherever life takes me next. The personal skills that I have gained from sport will also give me the strength and courage to face my fears, stand up for what I want and believe in, and pursue my dreams outside of sport.

The next athlete-centred principle that emerged dealt with fostering the holistic development of the athlete.

**Fostering the holistic development of the athlete.** The enhancement of the athletes’ holistic health and the recognition of the athletes as whole and developing people who need support in all aspects of their health are two important elements of athlete-centred sport (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Kidman, 2005, Miller & Kerr, 2002). Coaches’ perspectives bring these previously identified findings to life.

Maintaining perspective and balance between sport and life are two important ways to promote holistic development and pursue excellence (Orlick, 1998). Crystal described how her team tries to achieve this:

> When we’re traveling to other countries, we [take] one day to go and see the city, to grow and to learn about the culture. I have always encouraged that if we can, somewhere along the way without interfering with our training and game preparation… You can’t think about [sport] 24/7, you have to get away from it, and so we try to … spend the day doing different things and just celebrating the things we’re doing….I also believe trying to keep [sport] in the whole perspective of real life [and] what’s important in the broader spectrum of life.

This perspective will help coaches and athletes prioritize what is truly important to them. A sense of balance is also essential. Orlick defined balance as “finding beauty, passion and meaning in the different loves of your life, and living those loves – everyday. Balance is respecting your needs for achievement and relaxation, work and play, giving and receiving, intimacy and personal space” (p.xiii). Derek described the need for athletes to have balance in their lives in and out of sport:

> I think when you have balance in your life, you have a higher probability of success, because you’re sort of at sense of peace with yourself….I think to be very successful in sport you
have to emphasize a few areas to keep balance in your life. Like, don’t just be a full-time athlete, find other things to do. That will help you [to better achieve] your number one goal [of] athletic success.

Likewise, Eric spoke about balancing sport and family. He said “it’s more balance in life so [athletes] don’t feel they’re missing out on other things, because if they’re missing out on the family I don’t think they will become a great athlete.” Jessica agreed that “family is definitely something that is valued.” Crystal also described the importance of family, and a situation in which one of her athletes made arrangements to bring her daughter to training with her. Crystal explained that for her athletes, Their life is important, their contact to their significant others are important, [and] we take time for that. They get on Skype when we’re overseas. After meetings I try to give them time where they can be themselves and connect to their worlds.

The perspectives of this study’s coaches are similar to the views of the athletes in Amirault and Orlick’s (1999) study, whereby “athletes felt that to be balanced they should fully respect the different aspects of their lives outside of sport” and “that when their life was more ‘well-rounded’ they had better results in their respective sports” (p.41). These results demonstrate that some coaches recognize the importance of showing an interest in their athletes’ holistic development.

Several coaches emphasized the importance of understanding that their athletes are developing people. Crystal said that athlete-centred “means developing the whole person.” Michelle agreed that “athlete-centred coaching would be more to help the athletes develop in all of their potential not just as an athlete but as a whole person.” While, Eric said “I want to see people developing as human beings … It’s important because I want to see them … growing as human beings not only as athletes.” Michelle also stressed the importance to “never to forget that they’re people.”

*It is important for coaches to recognize that their athletes are more than just athletes.*

_Throughout my experiences, I found participating in sport to be more productive, meaningful and enjoyable when I felt that I was valued as an athlete and as a person. When my coaches talked with me regularly, became genuinely interested in getting to know me, and asked about my life, school,
family, and future hopes and dreams outside of sport, my holistic development was enhanced because more than my athletic skills were being recognized.

Previous research also identified the importance of focusing on the athlete’s holistic development within the combined pursuit of personal and performance excellence in sport (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Tyler explained,

You can’t have performance development without personal development. It’s a must. And they come hand-in-hand. Performance is a process, people don’t just perform like that, the whole process, the journey, you are developing. That’s where your personal development is being enhanced and you’re prepared to perform, and that’s where the performance comes out of it. You can only take talent so far, there needs to be that personal growth within that person to know themselves and their own characteristics as an individual.

Other coaches spoke more generally about the need to focus on developing the athlete as a whole. Although they did not use the words performance or personal development, both aspects were clearly important to several of the coaches interviewed.

Derek referred to what he called the Norwegian approach to sport,

In the Norwegian approach to sport, they typically think of developing the athlete as a whole, in other words they’re very concerned about their personal life, their personal health, what career routes they’re on, what they’re going to do after they retire from sport, so they have this really general approach to the athlete, and it’s not just athletic performance they value, but the development of character and personality…. They’re concerned with the total body and the total person, and the development of all that stuff and once you get all that kind of stuff in order, their way of thinking is you have a higher probability of athletic success. So to me that’s a dream model…. and that’s a system we’d like to emulate.

The Norwegian approach that Derek described sounds very similar to the athlete-centred approach to sport that has been proposed within the Canadian sport system over the past twenty years. Derek also related aspects of both of these coaching styles to athletes when they reach an elite level in his sport and join the national team program and arrive at the national training centre:

The first thing we say is move into the community and make [the city] your home, find good housing, … go out and do full or part time academic studies, work or volunteer work in the community, and then come out and join us for training. That would be an example of what I would say is a holistic approach for an athlete-centred approach, one that’s concerned about the overall athlete’s development.

This perspective also relates to the previous athlete-centred principle whereby life outside of sport is valued as a means of promoting the athlete’s holistic development.
The enhancement of holistic health and well-being of the athlete can be achieved in different ways. Derek described one interpretation that focuses on the body, mind and soul.

The example I really like to use, and I’ve seen some athletes do this very successfully is the example of the [YMCA and YWCA] triangle, where you have the three corners of the triangle are body, soul and mind. I believe that when athletes have their body in good working order, they’re healthy, they’re pushing themselves hard, they’re trying to be the best they can be; their mind in good order, they have some other sort of pursuits, their psychology is in good order, they’re in a good mental state, but they may also have other diversions, their mental diversions like school or work or hobbies or volunteer work or whatever; and when they have a spiritual life that would definitely be the soul piece…. I think when people get those three areas aligned they have a really positive situation.

The history of the YMCA triangle is well documented. In the early 1890s, the YMCA and YMCA were recognized as organizations dedicated to the improvement of the spiritual, mental, social and physical condition of men and women, respectively (Shaha, 2004).

Other coaches explained the importance of emphasizing psychological, technical, tactical and nutritional health as means of helping their players develop into well-rounded athletes. Steve said,

I did some of those psychological things even in my first few camps, not only technical and tactical stuff. It takes time, but I think at the end of the day it’s also valuable similarly to talk about nutrition or other stuff like that, to try to help them be not only good [sport-specific] players but better overall athletes.

Likewise, Jason explained training the whole athlete, “there’s physiologically training, there’s mental, there’s emotional, there’s things like strategies and so on and so forth in my sport you need to be able to bring into a training program.” In these views, the athlete is understood to be more than just a physical being. Similarly, Danielle said, “the way I look at coaching is there are four pillars of performance. There’s technical, tactical, the physical and then the mental. And so if athletes are developing in those areas then I think they’re growing.” Stacey’s interpretation of holistic development expanded upon Danielle’s four pillars and placed the onus on the athlete to develop both on and off the field:

[Athletes are] doing whatever they have to do to get better as a player and as a person. Mentally, physically and tactically and technically there are ways to improve that on their own. Part of the leadership and part of the off-the-field stuff includes the on-the-field…. So if you have a truly dedicated athlete off-the-field they are going to hit the gym everyday, go out and watch games, they’re going to a racquetball court or field and work on their skills,
they’re going to see a sport psychologist and mentally prepare for everything and that’s how you get better as an athlete and those are the kinds of people that really excel.

All of the coaches’ views discussed thus far support and exemplify the understanding that athletes are more than physical beings, and that other aspects of health, such as mental, emotional, nutritional are important to consider when focusing on the athletes’ overall development.

The perspectives of these coaches are also similar to previous research findings. Clarke, Smith, and Thibault (1994) and Miller and Kerr (2002) emphasize the athlete’s overall development, health and physical, psychological and social well-being. Coaches in this study identified the importance of developing the athlete’s holistic health in the following ways: recognizing the athlete as a person, acknowledging the athlete's life outside of sport, focusing on combining the body, mind and spirit, as well as emphasizing the importance of psychological, technical, tactical and nutritional health. Although coaches did not specifically identify social health, earlier discussions regarding the team environment and culture exemplify the importance of athletes developing socially. Vealey (2002) explained a similar need to focus on using a holistic approach which “views athletes as organisms constantly interacting with environment stimuli and undergoing personal development” (p.299). This work was based on the previous research of Danish and Hale (1981) who emphasized the importance of accounting for the athlete and the environment, as well as athletes’ individual development, growth and change when examining sport performances.

Coaches in this study also recognized that they were responsible for providing the appropriate means to attend to their athletes’ physical, psychological and social needs. As a result, many coaches enlisted support from specialists to help foster the holistic development of their athletes.

*Enlisting a support team.* Almost all of the coaches interviewed referred to recruiting additional assistance in order to best meet the needs of their athletes. In the Canadian sport system, sport science experts in medicine, psychology, physiotherapy, exercise physiology, nutritionists, biomechanical analysis, and strength and conditioning who work together supporting the coaches and
athletes form an Integrated Sport Team (IST; Werthner & Coleman, 2008). The purpose of the IST is to provide expertise to support the holistic development of the individual athletes, as well as the performance of the team (Werthner & Coleman). Many athlete-centred elite coaches enlist the support of experts to help develop their program, team and athletes.

One of the previously identified characteristics of athlete-centred coaching is the need to recognize athletes as whole and developing people, who need support in all aspects of their health (i.e., physical, psychological, social; Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Kidman, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2002). Derek said,

I think that the whole system beyond even the coach, the managerial system, the consultants, sports scientists for example, sports psychologist, biomechanists, health practitioners and so on, all the people are there primarily to sort of to service the athlete, so everybody but the athlete is essentially staff, and all decisions are made with the welfare of the athlete in mind.

As the coach, Jason explained that one of his tasks is “organizing an integrated support team, like massage therapists or physiotherapists, strength and conditioning people.” Similarly, Tyler emphasized that the coach works to arrange the support team: “The support teams that are put in place by myself, such as an IST team, is made up of my physio, my masseuse, my psychologist. These are all ways where coaching now is athlete-centred.” Crystal also explained that her whole staff including the physiotherapists value the athlete-centred approach to sport, whereby they do more than just tape an athlete’s ankle or wrist, “they want [athletes] to understand why they’re hurt, what they need to do and take responsibility for your injuries and your rehab.” In this way, members of the IST are not only providing their expertise but are also encouraging the athletes to take an active role in their recovery.

Stacey described what she could do as a coach to help ensure that her athletes were developing: “I think also incorporating as many specialists as you possibly can. Bringing in sport psychologists, licensed nutritionist, anything that will assist your athletes in the ability to improve and develop themselves.” Likewise, Michelle said “at the centre it’s easy for me, there’s funding, there’s nutritionists, there’s psychologists, we have a specialist for everything they do, whether it’s [training]
or weight lifting, they’re really surrounded, they have everything they need.” Jessica added “I think it’s also using your assistant coaches and making sure they know every [athlete] to know that they’re getting the attention and the coaching that they need.” It is evident that coaches are doing everything they can to be there for their athletes by providing additional expertise beyond the traditional teaching of technical and tactical skills. Derek said,

I’m really big in terms of helping athletes be better, using a lot of consultants. We travel with a sport psychologist,… an assistant coach who maybe offers some different skill sets than I do,… a physiotherapist, massage therapist, doctor,… [and] a manager. And sometimes I’ll lean on them.

Being able to have an integrated coaching staff provides the athletes with a larger base of support. It takes a group of coaches and experts to develop an elite national program and team.

Within the Canadian Sport Policy (Sport Canada, 2002) document, one of the ways in which the government will achieve its goal of enhanced excellence is to “increase accessibility for high performance athletes to essential services such as financial support, coaching, sport science, and sport medicine” (p.17). While the provision of IST staff to national sports teams is positive, the measure for achieving this goal is solely performance-based relative to the number of national team athletes and their world-class results, and does not consider internal measures of success such as improvement or development. The issue of measuring success will be discussed in a later section.

Despite a lack of academic literature examining the IST and elite sport, the findings of this study show that the majority of coaches recognize the need and value of having IST experts on their team’s coaching staff. These coaches also referred to the inclusion of an IST within their national team program. Coaches acknowledged that enlisting an IST was one way in which they addressed the athlete-centred principle of fostering the holistic development of their athletes. An interesting avenue for future research would be to examine the extent to which members of integrated support teams are athlete-centred.

Thus far, the coaches’ philosophy of the athlete has focused on the athlete, the responsibilities beyond sport, and the holistic development of the athlete. However, an important element of sport has
not yet been discussed: making sport fun, enjoyable and happy will be presented next.

Making sport fun, enjoyable and happy. Three coaches in this study expressed their opinions about the importance of having fun, enjoying sport and being happy. Crystal explained, “I think that’s another thing that we sometimes forget at the national level, that if you come every day and it’s not, for lack of a better term, fun, why do you want to be there?” In Culver and Trudel’s (2000) study, “the coaches emphasized that they wanted the athletes to work hard [and] the athletes expected to work hard but they emphasized that it must be fun” (p.36). Likewise, Gould and Carson (2004) stated, It is a misconception to think that an emphasis on fun is not needed throughout one’s athletic career. Quite the contrary, given the tremendous effort needed to engage in deliberate practice, fun needs to be emphasized as often as possible (p.24).

Coaches also emphasized the importance of enjoyment for both coaches and athletes. Michelle explained that her “responsibility is to be [at the training facility], always enjoying what I do. I think that’s really important to show the girls that we can enjoy ourselves daily.” Within training sessions, Michelle described trying to take time to “have a joke or a laugh” with her athletes as a way of relaxing and enjoying the time they spend together. She thought this was important for the development of her athletes and encouraged them to have the “feeling that they’ve actually accomplished and enjoyed themselves and that they’ve grown and moved forward.” Athletes on Crystal’s team valued hard work and they “train like we’re world class athletes and enjoy doing it.” Moreover, Eric added, “of course [athletes] want to train … they like to train to try to feel their bodies and what the body is doing things to challenge themselves.” Crystal and Eric highlighted an important assumption of elite sport, that elite athletes inherently experience enjoyment and fun when they train hard and compete at an elite level. These findings support the coaches’ views from Culver and Trudel’s (2000) study, which emphasized the importance of combining hard work and fun in sport.

In addition, coaches often make sport fun, enjoyable and happy outside of the playing field. Some coaches described team bonding and social events outside of sport as occasions in which coaches, athletes, and support staff spent time enjoying each others’ company. Examples included organizing lunch and dinner social mixers (Crystal); having the whole team live in a house together
and do their own cooking and shopping during road trips (Danielle); and allowing time to go sightseeing and encouraging everyone to learn about the different cultures while the team is traveling around the world (Crystal).

As a coach and an athlete, enjoying sport has had two meanings for me: (1) to enjoy the opportunity to work hard (e.g., achieve personal bests) in order to be able to represent Great Britain softball, and (2) to enjoy the whole experience of being on a national team (e.g., traveling, playing against the best in the world, promoting the sport worldwide). For me, enjoying sport happens on and off the field, and is therefore also closely related to having fun and being happy.

The importance of being happy was also highlighted by several of the coaches. Michelle said,

Another thing would be for me to always give [her athletes] an example to follow. I think if I lead by example they’ll become better athletes. If I’m punctual, if I’m happy, and if I’m in a good mood, if I’m enjoying myself, if I respect them, if I give them the break that they need, I celebrate their successes, I think that will make them respect me in return…. I have to always put myself in tune to be that person that they want to look up to.

Eric described how his coaching style aims to make his athletes happy:

I want to make it a good day for everybody I touch that day…. I think that’s the key, you can choose what you want, what you want to accomplish that day and then you will do your very best to do that. That’s why I say I want to see happy faces. I can choose what I want to say, so I choose to say something positive as much as I can.

For Eric, being happy and enjoying sport is part of a larger picture: “I think you should do your sport with your heart. Everything you do in life you should do it with your heart 100 percent.” Michelle also explained what makes her happy as a coach:

I think for me coaching is about touching people. I guess it’s not about winning. For me the pleasure I get of knowing that [her athlete] had this moment of brilliance during her day and that she was so happy that she got something, for me that’s what makes me happy.

Michelle described her perspective of the relationship between enjoying sport and the athlete-centred approach: “I think some things become really routine and you just enjoy yourself and just enjoy coaching. If you don’t enjoy coaching I don’t think you’ll find it easy to be athlete-centred.”

While these findings show that coaches recognize the importance of making sport fun,
enjoyable, and happy, the pursuit of these attributes appears to be based on two assumptions: first, that fun emerges from hard work naturally; and second, that if coaches present themselves as positive the athletes will enjoy the experience. Given the limited research that refers to fun, enjoyment and happiness in elite sport, it is encouraging that some coaches do recognize that these elements are valued in elite sport and part of an athlete-centred approach. Although the importance of making sport fun has been well-supported in previous literature on youth sport, the current findings suggest it is also important at the elite level. Interestingly, while all the coaches in Kidman (2005) talked about fun, previous literature on athlete-centred coaching has not specifically identified making sport fun, enjoyable and happy as characteristics of athlete-centred sport.

As an elite athlete, I continue to value the importance of fun, enjoyment and happiness. I have always believed that when sport stops being fun, enjoyable and happy it is time for me to move on in life. On the other hand, as a coach, I think that my experiences as an athlete (and researcher) have helped me to understand and acknowledge the importance of making sport fun, enjoyable and happy for my athletes. I want to coach as I would have liked to have been coached.

Developing a coach-athlete partnership. The second theme that emerged from the coaches’ interviews focused on developing a coach-athlete partnership. This partnership development theme consisted of three sub-themes, in which coaches were facilitators of the development of independence in their athlete, facilitators of effective two-way communication, and facilitators of leadership development opportunities.

Extensive research has been published regarding the coach-athlete relationship (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998; Jowett, 2003; Jowett, 2005b; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Lyle, 1999b; Phillippe & Seiler, 2006; Poczwardowski, Barrot, & Henschen, 2002), the power dynamic of the coach-athlete relationship (Brackenridge, 2001; Kirby, Greaves, & Hankivsky; 2000; Tomlinson & Strachan, 1996), and athlete-centred coaching (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Kidman, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2002). All of this prior research highlights the importance of the athlete having an active role in the coach-relationship and in determining the nature of their sport...
experience. The results of the current study emphasize the coach-athlete relationship as a partnership, the coaches’ description of their role as a coach, and the specific practices needed to establish a partnership.

Three coaches recognized the importance of developing a coach-athlete partnership and described the relationship between themselves and their athletes as partners. Danielle said “we’re all in this together…it’s that mutual working of athletes [and] coaches together to get the work done and they know they are a contributing partner.” Likewise, Eric said, “we have to be in a partnership with the athlete. The coach is not the only key anymore.” While Danielle explained, “I was here to guide them on their journey. I had this vision of what I wanted them to do, but they were also partners in that relationship and partners in the whole thing.”

Within the coach-athlete partnership, coaches described a variety of roles that they play, consistent with Poczwardowski, Barott, & Jowett’s (2006) statement:

Reducing a coach’s role to merely one that is focused on increasing athletic performance invites a risk of misjudging the kinds of influence that coaches have on their athletes. Other multiple roles that a coach plays in training and competition (e.g., a confidant, friend, foster parent) also need to be addressed (p.135).

Coaches described themselves as facilitators. Crystal said, “at the national level, I still think I’m a facilitator of their experience.” Similarly, Michelle said “I need to be there as a facilitator to empower them to go forward and build that team.” Coaches are facilitators who assist in their athletes’ growth and development through sport. According to Kidman (2005), coaches act as facilitators or catalysts for their athletes’ optimal performance. Coaches in this study also described their roles as facilitators of the development of independence in their athletes, as facilitators of effective two-way communication, and as facilitators of leadership development opportunities. These three roles will be discussed in detail.

**Coaches as facilitators of independence.** Several coaches also spoke about athletes becoming independent of their coach. Michelle described her experiences as a former national team athlete and the transition to becoming a coach of the national team:
The way I see things is it’s kind of like being a parent. At the beginning you have some rough spots and you tend to want to control everything but I think in the end... you understand that coaching is more about giving power and taking some away from you, and always thinking of [the athletes] first.

Jessica said, “I think the most important thing as a coach is ultimately your athletes need to be able to function without you, because you’re not always going to be there for them.” Michelle described what it means to be there for her team:

[I am] giving the abilities and knowledge to athletes for them to achieve their goals without me always having to feed them…. It’s about adjusting and giving the knowledge to the athlete whenever they need it the most, so they can really achieve those things by themselves, so that one day when they’re actually there doing their own thing, it doesn’t matter if you’re standing beside them or not they’ll still know what to do.

According to Kidman (2007), “a key to coaching is the ability to read the situation and decide when to stand back and let athletes play and when to jump in and try and give them some thinking opportunities” (p.66). In this way, coaches are supporting and encouraging their athletes to become more independent.

Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2009) also found that the traveling associated with high performance sport fostered independence. Traveling required athletes to be disciplined and to act responsibly which are two important qualities that can translate onto the playing field. Crystal explained the “kind of athlete that you’re trying to develop, takes responsibility for their training, they’re aware of where they have to go and what they have to do … so they don’t need you.” And when Crystal was asked to expand on what she meant by athletes not needing their coach, she continued,

I think that they’re not dependent on you. I read a study a long time ago … [that] interviewed world-class athletes, Olympians, World Champions, and they had listed coaches as the eighth most important thing on their list. And at the time, I was like, what does that mean? We’re just useless? Like we’re hopeless? But I think what it meant was not that [athletes] don’t see the value of coaches coming through the system, of course they do. [When] you hear someone getting inducted into the hall of fame they’re always very grateful to their family, and their coach, people that helped them, but I think when they get to the top level if its done properly they realize that the coach helped them, but the coach isn’t the reason. So, I say they don’t need you, I think it’s more they don’t have to depend on you.

Similarly, Derek explained some research his national team participated in:

[Two experienced sport psychologists] analyzed all our athletes at the World Championships and the people they depend the most on [competition] day were their fellow athletes, which
really blew me away as a young coach at the time, because I always thought the coach was the centre of the universe on [competition] day, and that we were providing leadership and the motivation and the comfort and all that, but they think they depended more on their fellow athletes. And since I read that research in 1986, I’ve been very respectful of the fact that athletes tend to talk a lot among themselves and they will tend to solve and create among themselves.

The coaches’ role is still valued within the coach-athlete partnership; however, Derek described how mature elite athletes in his sport are not dependent on their coach within an athlete-centred approach:

> [When athletes] come in [they] don’t in a sense know as much as you, [but] by the time they’re finished you want them to be pretty independent of you. So by the time athletes I coach get to the Olympics they’re kind of running the show. I think that’s another feature of an athlete-centred program that’s obviously different in basketball where you have time-outs and periods in hockey or half time in football where you can have discussions, but in our sport they go out and [compete] on their own and there’s no communication between the coach and the athlete during the [competition]. So a lot of our preparation is to let them grow up to your level and pass you by, so you almost make yourself redundant.

Coaches in this study support Kidman’s (2007) view that athletes who are dependent on their coach will find it challenging to make decisions on the playing field, when the coach is not there to provide instruction. Thus, athlete-centred coaches must recognize that they play an important role in helping their athletes become more independent and confident by encouraging them to take responsibility for decisions and actions.

Crystal empowers her athletes to think independently, as well as work together as a team unit during trainings. She also becomes a follower when her athletes take the initiative to implement their own ideas and opinions into the team plays and strategies. Crystal described,

> Within practice it’s including them, it’s giving them leadership roles, it’s stepping away sometimes as a coach, its letting them figure it out. You don’t always have the answer, and lots of time I’ll give them what we call a free timeout or free huddles. So they’ll say we need a timeout, and then they huddle and work [together]. And I don’t even know what’s said, but they usually come out and they’ll do something quite different or they’ll be a lot more focused.

She went on to explain that her whole coaching staff acts as facilitators within the team’s training environment. Coaches and players work together during practices: “on the actual floor, [the coaches are] not dominating the practice, we are organizing the practice, we go back after our last practice, debrief it and plan the next one, but we are not dominating the practice.” Crystal recognized the value
of allowing her athletes to express their opinions which also promotes the sharing of power within the coach-athlete partnership. This understanding also enabled coaches to act as facilitators of effective communication, which will be addressed next.

**Coaches as facilitators of effective two-way communication.** The emphasis on communication within the coach-athlete relationship is well supported in the literature (Culver & Trudel, 2000; Jowett, 2005b; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). According to Jowett, “communication promotes the development of shared knowledge and understanding about various issues (e.g. goals, beliefs, opinions, values) and forms the basis for initiating, maintaining, and terminating the coach-athlete relationship” (p.415). Furthermore, Culver and Trudel suggest “coaches need good communication skills in order to give technical and tactical instructions, manage their teams, interact with parents and administrators, and provide psychological support to their athletes” (p.28).

Communication is a fundamental part of the coach-athlete partnership and the practice of effective communication can significantly enhance the athlete’s development and enjoyment of sport.

Although the previously identified athlete-centred characteristics do not specifically mention communication, every coach interviewed in this study spoke about involving his or her athletes in communication. Danielle said,

> This [coach-athlete] relationship is two way, it’s not just one person. [It’s] making sure that [the athletes] understand that I want to know what they think, what they feel, how they feel, where they see us going, are we on track, [and] do we need to change something?

This view echoes the findings from Bloom, Schinke, and Salmela (1997) in which coaches described using a more autocratic style with novice athletes compared with a two-way communication style with elite international athletes. This bidirectional communication between the coach and athlete(s) was used as means of transferring knowledge, giving instructions, providing feedback, addressing conflicts, getting to know each other outside of sport, improving team cohesion and fostering dialogue between the athletes. Similarly, results of Jowett and Cockerill’s (2003) study showed,

> The important role that interpersonal communication had to play in the [athletes’] relationship with their coaches, regardless of it’s content…. Participants reported that they
were frequently engaged with their coaches in discussions about issues, such as performance goals, training and life in general (p.322).

Such communication also occurs between athletes. Michelle explained, “I definitely feel that as a coach I need to be a facilitator for [athlete] communication between themselves, helping them grow as individuals within the team.” Thus, one of the most important roles of a coach is to facilitate coach-athlete communication, as well as communication between athletes.

Coaches also commented on the importance of communication being open, honest, fair, and based on the needs of the athlete. For Jason and his athletes, “there needs to be dialogue and open communication about what each other is thinking.” Similarly, Crystal described what an athlete-centred coach-athlete relationship feels like for her:

I think it feels open and honest to me. It certainly feels like we’re in this together… win, lose, draw, we’re kind of having this experience together…. I know that when I feel like we have things flowing with the team… there’s tons of interaction on the court [and] tons of discussion.

Michelle explained,

I think the most difficult part would be to keep a ratio perspective of interaction and be fair with everybody, not pick on or always applaud one person…. You have to keep track of what you say, how you say it, [and] the way you interact with athletes.

In addition, Eric described a unique method of communication he used with one of his athletes:

Some people need a very structured [program], other people don’t want to be bothered at all…there’s a different approach for everybody… and we treat each person a little bit different…. [There was one athlete] who said ‘you have to yell at me.’ And [Eric] said ‘yeah, but I feel really bad if I am yelling at you, but what we can agree on is, if I yell at you, I lift my right finger and then I mean that’s a yell’…. So we did it that way.

Eric’s story also exemplifies one way that coaches may need to modify their methods of communication to best suit the needs of their athletes. These findings support previous research which also suggests that effective communication should be positive, interactive, open, ongoing, honest, and based on mutual sharing and understanding (Culver & Trudel, 2000; Yukelson, 1997). According to Yukelson, it is “important for coaches and athletes to learn how to express their thoughts and feelings effectively about various issues that affect them” (p.84).
Furthermore, coaches identified the importance of giving athletes a voice, listening to the athletes, allowing athletes to express their opinions, and reaching a mutual agreement. This athlete to coach directed dialogue ensures that the communication is a two-way channel. Crystal explained, 

I want [the team] to be a safe environment because that is when people will talk [and] will feel like their voice is being heard … [And] I think listening to your athletes is really empowering for them. You will go further when you know what they want, what their goals are, how you can help them [and] you’ll only know if you ask them.

Similarly, Derek described the team environment: “I think the successful coaches create an environment where athletes feel like they have the right avenues to go and express their opinion and say ‘this is what we need’.” Crystal added, depending on the situation “I’m not going to put the hammer down on a national team athlete and say you have to do this, I’m going to discuss it with them and we’re going to come to a mutual agreement”; however, on the other hand, she also added, “I think that there are times when I just have to say, ‘no, we’re doing it this way’, and I think that every coach has to do that, but I think we’re really trying to get them to be involved.” These findings support Bloom, Schinke, and Salmela (1997):

It is implicitly understood by athletes selected for national teams that their coaches have the final say. However, the results of this study revealed that even at the highest level, coaches attempted, to a certain degree, to empower athletes by involving them in the decision making process. The coaches understood that at this level, more than ever before, commitment to the team and the team’s vision, could only come via two-way communication (p.8).

Other modes of communication involving the athletes that coaches spoke about included one-on-one and team meetings, an open-door policy, use of questioning, and keeping in contact via email. Several coaches discussed having meetings with their athletes individually or as a whole team. Crystal said, 

I noticed at the national level we have a ton more individual meetings than I thought would be necessary at that level. That was a bit of a surprise with for me … [but] we’ve added that, so [athletes] can talk and be heard. We do it on the court [and] we try to do it casually.

Coaches and athletes can benefit from having daily conversations, as well as regular official team meetings. Meetings between coaches and athletes can help to significantly improve the quality of the coach-athlete relationship. Derek explained,
Very early in my relationship with this Olympic [team], we sat down and we talked about our coaching relationship and how we can be more effective. What we discovered what [we] really liked was that I talked to them before workouts, after workouts, and in between their intervals of work, or when they were [re-organizing their equipment], … and not while they were [training].

Jason described how his coaching staff implements meetings with athletes to inform them of the team expectations and decision-making processes:

We have one-on-one meetings with all of our players at the beginning and at the end of the process so that we’re always in dialogue and always in communication with our team and with our players about how things went and why things went the way they did.

However, having one-on-one meetings does not eliminate the possibility of issues arising throughout the year. Both Tyler and Danielle referred to coaches as mediators during times of conflict to ensure that best interests of the athletes and the team are being met. Derek explained the importance of communication when dealing with a disagreement: “if it’s something we need to discuss, let’s discuss it … through direct eyeball-to-eyeball group or individual discussions.” Derek also added that within an athlete-centred approach to sport, “an athlete who feels they’re functioning well is allowed a lot of feedback. In other words their feedback is valued, there’s a lot of discussion, [and] lots of opportunities to ask questions.” Several coaches also referred to an open-door policy whereby athletes could have unofficial one-on-one meetings in which they could discuss anything they wished with their coach. Michelle said,

Our door is always open. All the coaches at the [national training] centre have the same policy that any athlete can come to talk to any coach regarding any subject, whether it’s school or it’s [the sport] and we’re always there to help them…. I think that’s really important because there are other things that are a really big part of their lives … outside of [sport].

Likewise, Steve explained that he tries to talk with his athletes a lot so they know “they can come knock at my door and I will be there to help them.” Jessica added, “I think it’s important to show an interest in what they’re doing outside of [sport, by] talking to them at the [training venue] or at team functions.” While Jason said, “the younger or newer [athletes] to the program know that they can come directly to me and discuss anything to do with the team.” Coaches on Jason’s staff value the “principles of openness and communication especially about our goals, our intentions and where the
program’s going.” These coaches described the importance of discussing both team business, as well as issues outside of sport.

Stacey added a slightly different perspective:

I think every coach would love to be able to have that open door policy and sit down and work with your athletes to improve, unfortunately depending on what role you’re playing, if you’re a head coach sometimes [athletes] don’t feel comfortable enough doing that. So as an assistant coach you tend to be able to get more personal relationships with your athletes so they’ll come and joke around with you a little bit more, they’ll sometimes feel a little bit more comfortable about opening up to you about certain situations, whether it’s lack of playing time [or] whether it’s a personal situation that they have at home…. It’s easier to develop relationships with [the athletes] I think as assistant coach than as a head coach.

Although there may be several underlying reasons why athletes prefer to communicate with a certain member of the coaching staff (i.e., years of knowing them, previous experiences together), athletes need to feel comfortable discussing team and/or personal issues with their coaches (Voight, 2002).

According to Voight,

Coaches whose players feel comfortable talking with them about their feelings and perceptions (how things are going) will not only gain a better understanding of their athletes and team, but a greater awareness of how their own attitudes and coaching behaviours are affecting their players (p.46).

Questioning is another form of communication. Three coaches explained how they ask questions of their athletes. Danielle explained she uses questioning as a means of interacting with her athletes:

I do ask them questions. I ask them how they feel [and] I take that into consideration. I ask for feedback. [I ask] what do you think I can do better for you? Where do you think you are in terms of your performance? … [And the athletes need to] have the confidence [and] trust in me that I am going to take their input and actually do something with it in a positive way.

Similarly, Crystal described,

When we are breaking down a tactical situation … [the coaches] will certainly put the structure in and then I’ll say [to the athletes] ‘how do you like this? Does this work? Where do you think you would go when the ball goes there?’ So now we’ll work through it, not me saying ‘go here’, because come the game time that’s not realistic, I’m not playing. So, trying to ask them, what they see, where they would go, how they would see that situation … And [athletes] also see things that [coaches] don’t…. You have to allow them to have a voice …. In fact, I kind of get a little scared when they’re not speaking. I’m like what have we done as coaches that’s not allowing them to have a voice.

Similarly, Derek said,
I really value athletes’ feedback and principles. I think it’s really important, but I value it more on the casual face-to-face day-in-day-out, how you’re feeling today? Do you think the workout should be altered? Do you think we should go to this competition? What do you think we need to do to improve? …. I value [feedback] more on an informal level and I think that’s the heart of a really strong athlete-centred approach.

In this way, both Danielle and Derek used questions to gather information and feedback from their athletes. Alternatively Steve asked his athletes questions that were specifically designed for him to get to know his athletes better:

I’ve been working with a sport psychology [graduate student] to develop a questionnaire or exercises that I can do with my team… to identify my leaders in the group, to identify what the players prefer in a relationship or what they’re expecting from the coach.

Kidman (2005) identified questioning as one aspect that enables athletes to own responsibility for their learning, develop thinking and decision-making skills, and learn to problem solve. According to Kidman, “questioning is more than asking questions; effective coach questioning requires purposeful questions phrased in a way that encourages the athlete to respond…[it] also engages athletes at a conscious level, enhancing their concentration and thus their intensity” (p.19).

The use of questioning requires coaches to listen to their athletes’ responses, then prompt or probe for more detailed answers, then process or implement the information that their athletes are giving.

Athletes can experience higher-level thinking through sport:

Athletes who take ownership of the content of their learning will remember, understand and apply it more effectively than those who are told what to do, when to do it and how to do it. Solving problems through coach questioning enables athletes to discover, explore, create and generally experiment with a variety of movement forms, skills, tactics or strategies of a specific sport (Kidman, p.20).

Therefore, the use of questions can be seen as a beneficial form of coach-athlete communication in which the athlete is valued as an active member of the partnership.

Thus far, coaches have referred to only verbal communication between coaches and athletes. However, Derek added an additional dimension of coaching whereby a coach is sensitive to verbal and non-verbal cues. He explained,

I find the really successful coaches have a certain sensitivity to managing people, in other words, they know when it’s appropriate to kind of turn the screws a bit [or] to back off [and] when it’s appropriate to give negative reinforcement and positive reinforcement. They read
the audience really well, read the mood…. I do that all the time, I look at people’s eyes, I look at how they walk into the [building], I look at how they’ve done in the previous workout, I listen to the questions and the tone of their voice and shift your answer. That to me is the simple definition of being athlete-centred.

Another method of keeping in contact and communicating with coaches and athletes who spend a lot of time away from the national team is via email. Some national team programs are residential or centralized and have a national training centre where coaches and athletes re-locate to live nearby; however, many other teams only get to train together during camps and/or prior to a competition. The latter is the structure of Crystal’s team. She explained,

I think it’s difficult [because] you don’t have [daily contact] with national team athletes. But I think that we tried with our staff and our coaches to celebrate everything about each other, so it’s not just come together and train and go try to win some games… We try to celebrate when people have had great accomplishments and we do it by email right now. So everybody’s birthdays [or] if something happens in someone’s life we try to share those things with the group.

In this technological era of email, Blackberry’s, Facebook and Twitter, communicating with coaches and teammates while the team is apart seems relatively easy. One can assume that staying in contact with teammates and coaches via the Internet throughout the year can help to sustain and possibly improve the team dynamic.

The findings of this study and the literature support the notion that the nature of the communication between the coach and the athlete is the cornerstone of an athlete-centred coach-athlete partnership. Coaches also discussed their role as facilitators of leadership opportunities.

**Coaches as facilitators of leadership development opportunities.** Although the majority of previous leadership research in sport has focused on the coach in a formal leadership role (Chelladurai, 1994), anecdotal and empirical evidence supports the importance of coaches facilitating leadership development opportunities for athletes. According to Loughead, Hardy, & Eys (2006), athletes are an important source of leadership within sports teams. Giving athletes the opportunity to act as leaders enables them to become active participants in their development and pursuit of excellence. Eric described the importance of every athlete being a leader: “we are all leaders, some are leaders for the whole group … but we also have to be that little leader that contributes to
ourselves.” Being a leader involves taking responsibility for yourself, as well as the larger team unit. Athletes play an important role in contributing to their own growth, as well as the development and success of the whole team. Michelle explained,

Our athletes are all responsible for part of the team … for example, we have a team leader, we have a festivities person, a person for the music, so each [athlete] has a role which empowers them in a way to lead their own team. They become the leaders so I don’t need to be all that for them…. By giving them all those little chores they lead their own team. Stacey explained what characteristics she looks for in her athletes:

Definitely leadership, that they have intrinsic motivation because it’s a lot easier for athletes to improve if they have the intrinsic motivation as opposed to relying on a coach to motivate them…. That’s the type of things that I look for, true character and true leadership ability, wanting to improve and wanting to get better both on and off the field. It’s not just all about on the field, it’s about what your role is and how can you improve the team off the field as well.

She then went on to describe what she can do as coach to foster and ensure that her athletes are growing as leaders:

I think you have to set the example yourself. Show them that you are a leader, have character, make good decisions and are continuing to improve yourself because unless you’re improving yourself it’s hard to ask your athletes to do the same thing … I’m working hard to improve myself everyday both on and off the field, so in other words, continuing my coaching development, going to coaching clinics, watching the game [and] learning from the game….. [And as coach] you ask [the athletes] to get into the gym everyday to improve their level of fitness, to be competitive, to be ambassadors of the country, to really step up and be leaders … to set small goals and improve themselves.

It is within the coaches’ responsibilities as a leader to acknowledge the importance of allowing the athletes to act as leaders and provide them with ample opportunities to develop their leadership skills. Athlete-centred coaches recognize the value of providing leadership opportunities and fostering leadership qualities amongst their athletes.

Athletes can hold leadership positions as formal and informal leaders (Loughead, Hardy & Eys, 2006). Formal leaders are prescribed to a position of captaincy by the organization (e.g. coach) or group (e.g., team selection), whereas informal leaders (e.g. senior player) emerge over time as a result of the team’s interactions (Loughead, Hardy, & Eys). Both formal and informal leaders work together with the team to achieve a common goal. Several coaches described a variety of situations in
which their athletes are leaders, including: captain or team leader, an experienced senior player, an athlete representative, peer-teaching fellow teammates, and living and traveling as a whole team.

Athletes selected as captains and team leaders, as well as senior players who have multiple years of national level experience hold positions of formal and informal leadership within the team. These roles can also be used as effective channels for communication either between athletes or between an athlete and a coach. Jason said, “I’ve got captains on my team, [in a sport that] doesn’t typically have captains, but I do because I’ve got senior players and I’m creating a leadership process for them.” Danielle explained the value of communicating with her team captains as a means of putting into practice the information that they are relaying from the athletes:

When we’re on tour we have a staff and captains’ brief at the end of the day and we go over responsibilities, how their day went and what can change. Then the athletes communicate between coaches and athletes via captains [saying] ‘in practice we really like this’ [or] ‘athletes need a little more time with our trainer they’re getting tired.’ [Coaches then] implement what [athletes] need, what they want and make that a part of the plan for the next day.

Michelle described the role of her team leader who “is actually kind of the lifeline between the team and the coach. This girl is appointed by all the girls in the team to come [to the coaches and] talk about problems or problematic things in the team.” Senior players often have the experience to take the lead and deal with situations that occur within the team. Derek said,

Sometimes I’ll appoint a senior to deal with it. We have in [the national team program] for many years a very senior [athlete]… and often I’ll say [to her] I’m aware this is going on, would you help deal with this…. And sometimes she’ll even deal with it without me even knowing because she’s so on top of things.

All athletes, regardless of seniority or position on the team need to feel comfortable communicating with their coaches, as well as taking on leadership roles within the team. Crystal recognized that the women on her team were experienced and based on what the specialist coaches had outlined, any athlete was capable of leading the team:

One of our coaches is a strength and conditioning specialist, but once they’ve shown our movement series that we do in game practice, I have someone lead it and so they can add to it, they can you know change it a bit…. I see other countries’ strength and conditioning coaches out there taking them through everything, and I don’t think it’s necessary… So, I just designate a different leader each day.
According to Stacey, having leaders can also help to improve the team dynamic.

You always want to have a couple of strong leaders who will step up and hopefully create the sense of team cohesion and team bonding because ultimately sometimes that can win and lose games. If you’ve got a team who’s tightly bonded they’ll stick together when their backs are against the wall [and they’ll] be able to pick each other up, push each other and work a little harder to get out of that situation.

Being an athlete representative is another formal leadership role for athletes. According to Athletes CAN (2004) an athlete representative is someone who speaks on behalf of athletes during processes where the opinions of the athletes are heard and acted upon, such as national and international committees (i.e., Sport Canada, the International Olympic Committee). One coach spoke at great length about the role of athletes as representatives on national sporting organization boards within an athlete-centred approach to sport. For some coaches, the position of athlete representative may be seen as a leadership opportunity; however, Derek described how the need for athlete reps might also be an indication of poor communication between coaches and athletes:

Along with the athlete-centred approach, there’s been a big movement to have athlete committees or athlete representation on boards, which unto it’s own is a very healthy concept, but what’s interestingly enough that I’ve noticed is … when we’ve had a lot of athlete involvement on our committees and boards, it’s actually I think been a sign of quite a weak system. Because if the coach is really doing their job and keeping athletes informed on a daily basis [with] team meetings, … text messages … memos, … notices, … emails, if you’re doing a really good job the athletes will have no questions, complaints or concerns…. The ideal system should be set up so that [athletes] are out doing what they do best and that’s playing [and] preparing for the game and not worrying about the politics related to selection or funding or all the other things that have to go on in the committee meetings…. So in the ideal athlete-centred system in my mind all that support is there and the information is flowing, but the athletes can get on with the job of being great athletes.

Coaches need to ensure that the structure of the team, the ways in which they communicate with their athletes and the opportunities provided for athletes to develop as a leader are all geared towards furthering the athlete on and off of the field.

Two coaches also described the opportunity for athletes to work together, teach and coach each other. By doing so, athletes who are acting as coaches take on leadership roles that help improve their teammates, as well as the team. Stacey explained,
Maybe there’s two or three people on the team that need to improve [a specific skill]… so you can pair those players up and have them work together … Again you’re building a sense of teamwork and accomplishment when you’re able to help each other…. It’s all about improving the team and the best way to do that is to look at improving the individual athlete.

Michelle expanded upon the use of this form of peer-teaching. In a sporting context, it becomes peer-coaching, whereby athletes are responsible for interacting and coaching each other during trainings:

I want the players to be able to self-teach each other [and] to ask questions…. One of the ways I see athlete-centred coaching is to give them the chance to coach each other. I really believe in self-coaching. I use a lot of video I use a lot of work two-by-two. The athletes often have to become coaches for the team. …. [and] do all these brilliant things without me having to tell them how… I think when they self-coach two-by-two they retain information better. [There are] more visual [cues] for them because they can see somebody else doing something and then I would be able to say ‘this is exactly how you did it the other way, do you see the difference with that?’

This peer-teaching method is also referred to as the reciprocal style of teaching (Mosston & Ashworth, 2002). This teaching style consists of three characteristics which are transferable to a reciprocal style of coaching: (1) athletes are organized into pairs or three’s; (2) doer performs the skill while observer watches; and (3) observer gives feedback to the doer (Mosston & Ashworth, 1994). Therefore, this style has the potential to improve and increase social interaction between athletes (i.e., having a one-to-one ratio of athlete to peer-coach), encourage the athletes to take more active roles in the learning process, reduce the constant presence of the coach (i.e., independence away from the coach evolves), and promote a sense of trust that athletes can make appropriate decisions when necessary (Mosston & Ashworth, 1994; Mosston, 1966, as cited in Garuccio, 2004). It is important to note that within an athlete-centred approach and when working with mature, experienced, elite athletes, the reciprocal teaching style needs to focus on allowing the athletes to become active and equal partners and contributors within the evaluation and feedback portions of their training and competition.

Being away on tour with a national team provides many additional opportunities for leadership development. Danielle describes multiple situations which require athletes to communicate, work together and demonstrate a number of leadership qualities in order for the team to be able to function optimally, such as:
If we are going to competition… the athletes have an understanding of their comfort needs that will enable them to have better performances, [such as] who do they want to room with, organizing who are the people that like to stay up later [or] go to bed earlier [and], making sure those people room together. When we travel we try to rent a condo or house so we do our own cooking, we do our own shopping if we’re together for a week, getting athletes to work together building the team chemistry and unity that way it’s not just on the field they can get together [it is also] how we are going to function in an environment where we’re all together.

Derek explained what his coaching staff does to challenge his athletes’ teamwork, leadership and problem solving skills:

We actually set up problems. We try to make things hard for them, to see how the team comes together and works together to solve the problem…. So, if we’re on a road trip all of a sudden the bus broke down [or], the kitchen forgot that we were coming and they don’t have the meals ready for us [or] the gym is closed or the pool is closed. So, we’ll actually create problems before major events and then you see [the athletes] grow as a team and how they handle it.

Leadership, teamwork, and communication skills all improve over time and can significantly impact the athletes’ performance and personal development, the team’s success, as well as the coach-athlete relationship.

Throughout my years involved with team sports I have experienced varying degrees of success in developing teamwork, communication and leadership skills. However, I have noticed that most athletes who participate in team sports have a propensity to learn how to effectively work, communicate and co-exist with others through their experiences in sport. Additionally, I firmly believe that everyone on any team has the potential to be a leader. The latter is also supported within the literature. Northouse (2001) describes leadership as an interactive process that is available to everyone rather than a trait that is restricted to those individuals who have been designated as leaders. In an athlete-centred approach to sport, coaches are responsible for facilitating opportunities for their athletes to develop as leaders, while it is the athletes’ responsibility to take those opportunities and become active contributors in the development of the team, as well as in their development as athletes and individuals.

Value-Based Coaching. The third theme that became apparent during the coaches’ interviews was value-based coaching. Coaches focused on respect and also made references to other
qualities such as trust, responsibility and accountability throughout the discussions of their coaching philosophy, principles and practices.

Effective coach-athlete relationships include basic features such as understanding, honesty, liking, acceptance, responsiveness, friendliness, cooperation, commitment, caring, respect (Jowett, 2005b; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000). Jowett and colleagues have determined “coaches’ and athletes’ description of their relationship in terms of interpersonal liking, trust and respect indicated the level and nature of Closeness” (Jowett & Cockerill, p.315). The constructs of Closeness, Co-orientation, and Complementarity have been used by Jowett and colleagues to study the coach-athlete relationship. However, the interpersonal qualities described by the coaches more closely relate to closeness than co-orientation and complementarity. Athletes recognized the importance of closeness relative to other athlete-centred behaviours, such as being able to communicate more freely with a coach whom they like, respect, believe and trust (Jowett & Cockerill). The findings of this study support this research.

All ten coaches interviewed in this study spoke about respect. They provided a few examples of respect, which included coaches respecting athletes, athletes respecting coaches, athletes respecting each other, as well as respect for the game. Jason identified, “there’s an element of respect involved especially in a team sport.” Moreover, when Jessica was asked about what everyday values translate into sport, she said “respect, hard work, gratitude,… balance, a perspective,… communication, [and] competing or intensity.” Respect plays an important role in determining the quality of the team atmosphere, as well as the coach-athlete relationship.

Tyler explained, “respect for the athlete and the way [coaches] treat the athletes is a huge thing.” Similarly, Danielle said, “the relationship I try to set up with the athletes is one of respect but also that they had ownership of it” so that she is “developing a very good relationship based on respect based on commitment.” Coaches also noted that respect is an important quality that both athletes and coaches need to possess. Jason explained, “there has to be mutual respect. If you don’t have that, the relationship’s not going to work.” Tyler added, “you have to respect the athlete as an
individual …. If you [they are] not going to respect you back, and then there’s no trust…. [And] you have to respect what’s going on outside their life as well.” Michelle also identified trust and honesty as important qualities: I think if we don’t build trust and honesty between the coach and the athlete, then I think small difficult situations get bigger.” Danielle also hoped, “that the athletes benefit from interacting and being part of a team culture, that they grow, that they can develop, that they can feel respected [and] they feel like they’ve been treated like a person.” Jason explained the most important quality in his coaching philosophy:

Number one is respect…. You respect them as people, you respect them as athletes, and you expect the same in return. It’s something however that you don’t just walk and automatically get. It’s something that you earn on both sides, and I explain that especially to my newer athletes… I expect them to respect me, but I don’t expect them to respect me just because I’m the guy with coach on my hat [and] conversely their actions will garner a lot of respect from me.

Building and sustaining respect within the coach-athlete relationship is one of the keys to having a positive and successful athlete-centred coaching partnership. In addition, coaches referred to the importance of athletes respecting each other, which is vital in team sports. Jason explained, “if [the athletes] don’t respect each other then they’re not going believe in each other and therefore neither one is going to give full effort to the task at hand.” Similarly Danielle said, “I don’t expect [athletes] to be best buddies with each other but I do expect them to respect each other, just like I expect the athletes to respect me, and I respect them and trust them.”

Jessica expanded upon these ideas of respect within interpersonal relationships. She explained respect as a characteristic that she looks for in elite athletes in her sport:

Respect for the game, respect for their [team], respect for people in their everyday lives and that I think is visible in the way they play, whether they play by the rules, they play in our sport a pretty physical game and they can push the limits but they are still respectful of their opponents and teammates.

The Coaches of Canada (2006) Coaching Code of Ethics is heavily based around ensuring respect and responsibility amongst athletes and coaches:

The principle of respect for participants (i.e., athletes, coaches) challenges coaches to act in a manner respectful of the dignity of all participants in sport. Fundamental to this principle is the basic assumption that each person has value and is worthy of respect (p.2).
Respect is outlined in this principle and the ethical standard of extended responsibility is included throughout the other three principles (e.g., responsible coaching, integrity in relationships, honouring sport). Specifics regarding how each principle applies to the activities of the coach are also included in this document. The Coaching Code of Ethics provides a concise and thorough overview of the important principles and ethical standards that must be upheld in sport, as well as in life.

In addition to respect and trust, coaches referred to responsibility and accountability as important qualities. Stacey described the importance of athletes to understand and show a “sense of responsibility [and] a sense of accountability for my actions. I’m going to get better because nobody else is going to do it. I have to do it myself.” Within the team dynamic, athletes need to recognize that they are responsible for themselves, as well as their teammates. Crystal explained, “I think being in a team sport … you have to have respect …. I don’t necessarily think that would be the same in individual sport, [athletes] don’t have the same responsibility to each other.” Crystal also emphasized the importance of coaches “being purposeful and meaningful … and encouraging their [athletes] accountability and giving them responsibility.” Jessica suggested “accountability” as a quality that represents good coaching. Coaches and athletes involved in team sports must understand the value of giving athletes responsibilities regarding their training, as well as helping them to develop into responsible athletes and people. Likewise, both coaches and athletes should be accountable to themselves and each other.

In sports, there are many clichés used to describe coaches and athletes. Crystal explained that her coaching philosophy recognizes that “players don’t care how much you know until they know who much you care.” While Tyler said he would “respect my athletes the way I would like to be respected by them.”

This more specific view is supported by the literature as indicated by Gould, Collins, Lauer, and Chung (2006):

Coaches also had the ability to earn the trust and respect of their players. Typically this was done by having a record of success, holding clear expectations, and holding athletes
accountable relative to those expectations. Coaches also consistently demonstrated that they cared about their players as people and not just as athletes. General coaching strategies for developing player life skills included such categories as treating players respectfully and team building (p. 8-9).

Two coaches also spoke about value. Stacey explained how she encourages her athletes to reflect on the value of their contributions to the team environment:

One of the ways that we do that is asking them a simple question, am I adding value? It’s such a simple question to ask for absolutely anything...under any circumstance, and if they are adding value then it’s pretty easy to answer it.

Alternatively, Crystal shared the values which her team believes in:

We have a set of core values that we’ve [created] with coaches and athletes .... These twelve values are what we are all about, we need to live them everyday, they’re what makes us who we are, we are the Canadian women’s national team...[The 12 core values are] work hard....world class fitness....a physical toughness....we are in this together...a non-judgmental and inclusive environment...communication ... act with class at all times....no maintenance... don’t get frantic over ridiculous issues... take responsibility for our actions... choose to be positive...and we are thankful and grateful for all that we have and for all those people who have helped us.

Respect, trust, responsibility, accountability, adding value and believing in core values were perceived as important elements of creating and maintaining supportive sporting environments and interpersonal relationships that are athlete-centred in nature. These qualities and values are also essential parts of the coach-athlete partnership, communication involving athletes, the provision of leadership opportunities, and enlisting support.

The final theme which emerged focused on coaches’ perspectives on success. The ways in which success is defined varies within those who are involved in sport. These views will be presented next.

**Defining “success”.** Achieving and measuring success had not been previously identified as a characteristic of an athlete-centred approach to sport. However, coaches’ perceptions of success relates to their overall approach to the pursuit of performance and personal excellence. The coaches interviewed in this study described different ways that they determine success. Coaches identified external measures of success, such as funding, medals and results; internal measures, such as development and achieving goals; and the combined effect of both measures. Crystal explained that
the second tenet of the athlete-centred approach which highlights the enhancement of the holistic health and well-being of the athlete through the pursuit of excellence in sport, is,

At times it’s very difficult at the national team level, because the government, the administration, everybody is very focused on medals and this focus on winning. When you think of the Road to Excellence and the Own the Podium, how they sponsor is solely based on your results.

Similarly, Jason said,

National team programs for the most part are funded based on the quality of the program. The quality is defined also as results. If you’ve got a program that is not generating results then you’re not going to get money, that’s the bottom line.

Like most elite coaches, both Crystal and Jason are well aware of how producing medals is the primary prerequisite for receiving support and funding assistance for national teams and national team athletes.

The Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) and the Canadian Government lead initiatives that reward medal-winning success with their Road to Excellence (RTE), Athlete Excellence Fund, and Own the Podium 2010 (OTP 2010) programs. The COC in partnership with the Canadian Paralympic Committee (CPC) and Sport Canada developed a Road to Excellence “action plan to start the process of creating a more coordinated, effective Canadian sport system resulting in world-class programs, policies and financing that will help Canada achieve podium success” in Olympic and Paralympic summer sports (Canadian Olympic Committee, 2006, p.1). The Athlete Excellence Fund is also “an athlete support and reward program that will provide Canadian athletes with performance awards of up to $20,000 per Olympic medal…. For a medal-winning team sport, each member of the team will receive the performance award” (Canadian Olympic Committee, 2007, p.1). And in preparation for the upcoming Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games, “OTP 2010 is a $110 million sport technical program designed to help Canadian winter athletes achieve unprecedented medal success by finishing first overall (in total medals; Canadian Olympic Committee, 2009, p.1). All three initiatives support and reward medal-winning results only.
This performance and results-based approach to providing financial support recognizes medals and winning as more worthy of reward than personal development. Michelle shared her perspective that “it’s the way you look at it, is it the medals that you want or is it to make a difference, make a change, be part of the growth of the life of that person.” She went on to further explain the relationship between earning medals, measuring improvement and receiving funding:

In my sport right now I do feel that there’s pressure to gain a medal because when once you have a medal at the Olympics you have more funding…. [Alternatively], I think the funding comes from the ability to show that you’re striding forward and I think a lot of the organizations that give you funding now really look at that as well, where you were last year, where you’re going this year, where your project is, where you want to be in the next two or four years. So I think it is tied in, but at the same time I believe it really stems down to what you do everyday.

Other coaches described their perspectives on how everyday details such as the team environment, goal setting, and achieving small successes should influence the ways in which performance and development are measured.

Kidman (2005) suggests that “the team’s pursuit of a mutual goal informs the quality of its functioning and success. Without quality team culture, success, learning and often winning are difficult” (p.21). Therefore, coaches need to find ways to bring athletes together for learning and success (Kidman). Jason described the importance of creating a team environment that values athletes as people who are willing to work towards a common goal.

In my opinion most coaches even at the high-performance [level] believe that their measurement of success is the colour of the medals or the fact that they even got a medal period, rather than creating good people in a good environment at which people can excel…. The closer you can get [the athletes on the team] to act for the one cause, the better you’re going to be in terms of results, and results aren’t necessarily measured by wins and loses.

Jessica also emphasized developing people within her sport’s national team program.

The team that I work with is more of a developmental team, and sure we have pressure on us to win, but these players are part of a bigger picture too, and we’re trying to develop them to get to the senior team. If they want to get to the senior team they have to do things off the [playing field] as well, so the pressure to win from [the National Sport Organization] is there but there’s more pressure to develop people.

Four coaches referred to goal setting and working towards attaining that goal as a measure of success.

In Fraser-Thomas and Côté’s study (2009), setting and achieving goals were perceived to be positive
development experiences for athletes and coaches. Coaches in their study were actively involved in teaching goal setting strategies, working individually with athletes on setting long-term, season, and short-term goals, as well as monitoring athletes’ progress (Fraser-Thomas & Côté). In this way, coaches helped to guide the goal setting processes, which may vary for different athletes, teams or sports. Crystal explained,

It’s setting that big dream goal out there, and then not really talking about it again, because we know it’s out there, and then trying to focus on the day-to-day process of what we do, and who we are, and what it means to be a Canadian national women’s team player.

Similarly, Derek said,

To be successful you have to have balance in your life, you have to have other diversions and one of those things is to have lifetime goals beyond sport. Very few people go through more than three or four Olympic cycles, most people go through one, it’s usually a very narrow window so I think if you have these other goals you enhance your chance of winning.

He then went on to clarify that “winning is probably not the best guideline, but let’s say doing as well as you can or being the best you can be is the guideline.” Eric echoed this in his definition and explanation of success:

The best you can be. People set up goals that they want to go to Olympics [and] win a gold medal. But if you don’t win that gold medal and you can then say to yourself ‘this was the best race until date, I’m really disappointed but I felt I had a really good [competition]’, then I also feel they have accomplished a lot as an athlete.

Likewise, Stacey said,

I think success can be measured on several different levels and I think it depends oddly enough on what the goals are of the team that you’re working for…. If you can improve to a level where you know it lifts the program up, then that’s success…. If you can step off the field at the end of a game and know in your heart that as coach you did everything for your team, every player on that field did absolutely everything [and] played their best, then in the end to me that is success, that’s a win…. Your team and yourself still performed to an exceptional level and I think you can still have success within that.

Several of coaches also referred to celebrating the achievement of small successes and doing the little things right. Michelle explained,

Success for me is when I’m able to lead them and be their partner to achieve the goals that they want, whether it’s day-by-day or competition or for just their personal growth…. Small success is as important for me as big success, because I think in the long run … you want to make sure that all those little success steps you take every day are well done because in the end that’s what gives you the medal or the Olympic stature.
In addition, Danielle said,

I’ve always believed we all continue to develop and get better in what we do, so it’s always a learning process…. If you do the little things right all the time and you focus on those things then the outcome should take care of itself, because at the end of the day I can’t guarantee that we’ll win a medal or win the game, I’m not in control of the other team so I can only do what I have control over.

*Staying focused on ‘your game’, both on and off of the playing field enables coaches, athletes and the team to work towards achieving performance and personal success. One of my former coaches used the expression “control the controllable” to emphasize the importance of taking care of our own business, doing everything we could as a team to play to the best of our ability and let the result take care of itself.*

Coaches also voiced other perspectives regarding winning, defining performance, measuring success from an outsider’s perspective, and success on and off the playing field. Once again, Crystal tries to stay focused on the process and recognize that there is more to achieving success in sport than one single game:

As a coach, of course you’re going out to win every game, you go to play your best and try to win, but when its over you debrief it, you analyze it and you move on to the next thing, and you work to try to be better.

On a similar note, Danielle identified her team’s best performance at the last World Cup was in a game in which they were the underdog and ended up losing. However, upon reflection she realized that during that game they “did everything we were supposed to do and reached all of our performance goals and that’s something to be proud of…. So when you say measuring performance, I think that depends on what you define as performance.” Danielle continued to discuss the use of expected outcomes and medals as an easy marker of performance for people who do not understand or know the whole process that a team has gone through to reach that level. She described,

If I’m watching another team that’s not in my sport… the only thing I can measure their success by is what I know, and it’s whether they win or lose a game. But at the end of the day is that really success? There’s a lot of other things that have gone on in that team that measures success but I don’t know what they are, so it’s difficult. If I have to measure it from an outsider’s point of view the outcome is the only thing I have.
As a coach who values many of the athlete-centred principles, Crystal explained that her team’s core values act as a guide of what “we had to do to be successful both on and off the [field]. We’re reinforcing our core values everyday. That’s being athlete-centred because it’s about more than about just winning games, it’s the process along the way.” And that process, Michelle said, “it’s not always easy. As a coach I have two hats, you have the best person you can be to help develop that athlete but at the same time you have all that pressure on you to succeed in getting medals.” The majority of the coaches recognized the dilemma that exists for those who aspire to achieve success in elite sport, namely how to develop athletes as people while producing results?

Generally, coaches’ perspectives supported previous research, including Cox (1999),

At the elite end of competitive sport there is a public perception that effective coaching is simply another term for successful coaching, and success is mostly equated with winning – medals, knockout competitions and leagues. However, being successful does not always have to mean finishing in first place (p.68).

Previous research on the athlete-centred model of sport also suggests that performance excellence (i.e., producing results) can be achieved along with personal excellence (i.e., developing athletes) not at its expense. (Miller & Kerr, 2002). While many coaches in this study spoke about developing athletes and producing results, some coaches’ references to success seemed to be based on the assumption that winning medals and enhancing personal development are mutually exclusive. The coaches did not emphasize the notion that in order for athletes to achieve their best performance and produce results they need to be well-developed. One reason that coaches may not have highlighted this previously identified athlete-centred characteristic is due to the pressure they feel from external sources (e.g., national sporting organizations, media, sponsors) which are more focused on the business of sport, finances and medals than development.

Sir Clive Woodward, former coach of the England national rugby team that won the 2003 World Cup described several ‘Elements of Winning’, which emphasized a combination of development and results-based characteristics: (1) consistently putting more points on the scoreboard to increase margin of victory; (2) executing the game plan; (3) ensuring that the elite squad continued
to come together as a team; (4) coaches and players are genuinely excited and enjoy the experience of being on the team; and (5) improving efforts in preparation off the field (Woodward, 2004). These elements were ones in which Coach Woodard knew his team needed to improve considerably in order for his players to reach their true potential and achieve their definition of success (Woodward). Not surprisingly, these are also closely related to the principles and practices that coaches referred to in this study.

Previous literature and the findings of this study suggest that achieving personal success (i.e., reaching goals, being the best you can be) is important; thus making personal excellence a worthy measure of success which should complement the pursuit of performance success (i.e., medals).

**Summary of athlete-centred coaching principles and practices.** The coaches’ perspectives revealed several principles and practices, many of which support previous athlete-centred research (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Kidman, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2002). Similar findings included: enhancing team cohesion, extended responsibility, fostering the holistic development of the athlete, developing a coach-athlete partnership, facilitating athletes’ independence, facilitating effective two-way communication, facilitating opportunities for leadership development, and value-based coaching. Coaches also identified five principles and practices that are contributions to this literature, including: aspects of coaching females, recognizing the athlete as part of a greater whole, enlisting a support team, making sport fun, enjoyable and happy, and defining “success.” It is important to note that these may five findings may not truly be new contributions as they may have been implicit in previous athlete-centred research. However, coaches in this study made explicit reference to these principles and practices. The comparison between this study’s findings and previous literature is summarized in Table 3.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study in which coaches were encouraged to share their perspectives on athlete-centred coaching, it is not surprising that different principles and practices emerged. Coaches gave their opinions and described what they had experienced as a coach of a national female team. Thus, different coaches discussed different perspectives and experiences. Given
the specificity of this study’s sample, it is not surprising that unique aspects of coaching female athletes and team-sport athletes emerged. Furthermore, enlisting a support team recognizes the need for coaches to employ assistants and experts to help attend to the athletes various needs. In recent years, a greater emphasis has been placed on fun, enjoyment and happiness in youth sport (Bengoechea, Strean, & Williams, 2004; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Gould & Carson, 2004), and as a result, elite coaches may be translating this principle to the national level. Lastly, the dilemma coaches face in defining “success” has largely been influenced by the recent push towards ensuring that Canadian athletes bring medals home from international competitions.

These new findings suggest that these aspects should be added to the existing athlete-centred characteristics. The other principles and practices that coaches discussed in this study provided empirical support for previous athlete-centred research (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Kidman, 2005; Kihl, Kikulis, & Thibault, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2002). The addition of the three findings which were unique to this study will enhance the existing characteristics of athlete-centredness and bring athlete-centred coaching up-to-date with respect to its application to the Canadian elite sport system.

**Barriers to Implementing Athlete-Centred Coaching Behaviours**

Coaches identified seven potential barriers to implementing athlete-centred coaching behaviours, including: concerns about winning and receiving funding; the lack of athlete-centred coaching in youth sport; athletes’ resistance to athlete-centred coaching; the background of the coach; coaches’ level of confidence and experience; cultural differences in coaching; and the structure of the national team program. Each of these will be presented in turn.

**Concerns about winning and receiving funding.** As previously discussed, coaches were aware of the impact of their team’s results and medal-winning performances on earning financial support and being recognized as successful. Coaches were concerned with the dual role that they face, to develop athletes and produce results. Once again, this view is based on two assumptions; first, that developing athletes and producing results are mutually exclusive; and second that focusing on the
development of athletes may negatively affect the production of results. Previous literature has addressed both of these assumptions and suggests that an athlete-centred approach to sport promotes that athletes can only achieve performance excellence (i.e., results) when it is coupled with the pursuit of personal excellence (i.e., development; Miller & Kerr, 2002). Although the coaches in this study spoke about the importance of considering the person beyond the athlete, they did not convey a sense that personal and performance excellence could or should be pursued simultaneously or ways in which these could be pursued. When the coaches spoke about results, winning, success and athlete development, they did not specifically refer to the notion that personal development is a prerequisite for performance excellence and vice-versa.

One coach also proposed an explanation for why coaches are controlling and pushy, neither of which are qualities of an athlete-centred coaching style. Crystal said,

"Winning at all costs, at lower levels, winning…. At the national team level, I’m at the [Long Term Athlete Development] Train to Win stage, [but] at the Learn to Train or the fundamental stage then you coach differently, you need to be building their self-esteem, you need to be encouraging them, but … I think there’s a lot of ego involved, a lot of people worried about their record and how that looks…. I always say to youth coaches ‘you’ve had your experience, this is not about you, this is about their experience and you’re simply a facilitator in your child or other children’s experience.’ And I don’t feel that’s very different for me at the national level, I still think I’m a facilitator of their experience … So, I think it’s ego, and I think it’s trying to win, and I think it’s not having a grasp on what’s important for athletes.

As Crystal described, the concern for winning starts at a young age and thus naturally continues as athletes and coaches progress to an elite level. At the youth level, the reason for this concern may begin as a public perception of being a good coach within the community; however, at the national team level, winning persists as a perceived measure of success. Boxill (2003) suggested that success, as defined by athlete learning, enjoyment, performance or growth is often overridden by the ‘win-at-all-costs’ attitude which ignores athletes’ needs and negatively impacts the pursuit of excellence. This win at all costs mentality is prevalent across a large number of athletes, from youth to professional athletes (Rudd & Stoll, 1998). The issue is the prevailing attitude amongst coaches and researchers that winning and personal development are mutually exclusive; coaches either
produce winning athletes and receive funding or develop people and compromise performance.

Future research needs to address this concern and barrier by asking the question: how can both be achieved simultaneously?

This is also related to the second barrier, the application of athlete-centred coaching principles and practices in youth sport.

**Lack of athlete-centred coaching in youth sport.** Two of the coaches interviewed had also done extensive work with youth coaches in their sport and spoke about experiencing athlete-centred coaching in youth sport. Jason explained,

*I can facilitate 40 coaches [in a coaching] session, and [ask] them what’s the definition of success, and they’ll say all the right things. But then I watch them in action and I don’t believe that they really believe what they said. If they win they feel good, [but] can they feel anywhere near as good if they lose as well, I know I can.*

Jason learned from experience how to deal with those losses, how to talk to his players about their performance and how to involve his athletes in being able to move on and learn from the losses; however, youth or less experienced coaches may not be able to take such an athlete-centred approach.

Crystal described her views on youth sport and coaches:

*I think [coaches] have a responsibility through especially those first [fundamental] stages … [and] such a great opportunity there to teach values, the value of sport, how that can be important in your whole life … and how you treat others…. I think at those younger levels if we’re making it fun and we’re empowering them and we’re starting them to be able to make decisions at a young age then I think they’ll stay in sport longer, and I think we’ll have a healthier group of kids coming through. [There is] such an opportunity in sport to make a difference in kids…. Unfortunately, I think that at the younger levels, I don’t see [athlete-centred coaching] as much as I’d like to.*

It has been purported that positive experiences in youth sport can impact young athletes for the rest of their lives. According to Hamilton, Hamilton, and Pittman (2004), sport can act as a vehicle to promote optimal development in youth, which “enables individuals to lead a healthy, satisfying, and productive life, as youth and later as adults” (p.3). Youth coaches who implement athlete-centred coaching principles and practices would therefore be providing a supportive sporting environment that encourages young people to participate and stay involved in sport.
Crystal also identified another potentially important characteristic of youth sport coaches in Canada:

Many other countries actually pay their youth coaches. We don’t pay them in this country. [In other countries] they realize the value of that, and I think that’s where our system might be little bit backwards. We pay our university coaches, and that’s great, they should be paid, but our youth coaches are all volunteers, and they could be a great person that brings great values, … starts asking [players] questions and involving them and teaching to seek knowledge. That can all be done through sport. It’s an unbelievable opportunity.

Both Jason and Crystal explained that youth coaches are not believing or applying athlete-centred coaching principles or practices as often as their young athletes may need. The findings of this study suggest that increasing the focus of athlete-centred coaching principles and practices within youth coach education programs, as well as financially reimbursing youth coaches who give their time to coach may address the lack of athlete-centred coaching in youth sport. Further implications are discussed in the next chapter.

**Athletes’ resistance to athlete-centred coaching.** Teams are made up athletes from a variety of backgrounds, not all of whom would have experienced or liked athlete-centred coaching. Several coaches spoke about these athletes. Derek said, “I know there are many athletes who just want to be told what to do, [they] don’t want to think about it too much [and say] just tell me what to do.” Throughout their sporting career, some athletes may have experienced only dictatorial coaches, and come to believe that this style of coaching works best for them. Derek went on to say that “really successful programs bounce back and forth between the two,” between simply telling athletes what to do and including more athlete-centred characteristics, such as communicating with the athletes and allowing the athletes to think and voice their opinions. Similarly, Crystal explained,

I really feel that there are players who don’t want [athlete-centred coaching]… It’s true. I think there are a few that we’ve seen through the national team program and at juniors too, who want it done for them, who’ve had it done for them, who want just tell me what you want me to do [and] I’ll do the training. And I actually haven’t seen those players improve as much. I haven’t seen those players embrace their growth.

Related to the last barrier, Crystal attributed athletes’ lack of willingness to participate in athlete-centred coaching to not having experienced it prior to making the national team. Therefore, those
athletes may have just been “a bit shocked… [and] resisted it because they haven’t really ever had it, and so it’s like anything new they, they struggle with it.” She concluded it “depends on their background” and even though athletes who do not want athlete-centred coaching behaviours presents a barrier to the widespread implementation of athlete-centred coaching, Crystal says as coaches, “it’s our job to bring them along” and introduce them to daily athlete-centred coaching behaviours.

Similarly, several coaches in Kidman’s (2005) research identified the need to sell the concept of athlete-centred sport to athletes and get athletes to buy-in to the approach as two challenges of implementing an athlete-centred system. They suggested that many athletes have not “experienced the opportunity to contribute their valuable ideas in a positive way” (p.106).

Jason also discussed his perception of athletes’ understanding of athlete-centred principles and practices.

I’m not 100 percent convinced that all elite athletes understand the concept because they’re very intense people, they’re very competitive, they’re very focused and when they suggest that somebody else is going to move in and sort of take their initiative, they may not understand or comprehend the principle.

According to Miller and Kerr (2002), coaches “play an important role in actualizing an athlete-centred sport system” (p.146). Therefore, coaches need to help their athletes understand athlete-centred principles, such as sharing initiatives related to development and improving performance. Therefore, it is important that coaches themselves understand athlete-centred principles and practices. These finding also suggests that the need to implement athlete-centred coaching from the beginner level, so that both athletes and coaches become more familiar with its characteristics.

**Background of the coach.** Most coaches’ styles of coaching have been influenced by their background in sport. Crystal described her high school and intercollegiate experiences:

Having been an athlete myself [playing] high school [sport] through the 70’s [and] university [sport] through the early 80’s, it was a bit of a different approach back then. It was very much almost dictatorial the coaching, and you weren’t really allowed to say too much and you did what you were told. And I remember thinking as I decided that I was going to be a Phys.ed teacher and a coach … I’m not going to do it that way.
As Crystal pointed out, not all previous experiences in sport are positive; however, most successful coaches and athletes have been able to learn more about themselves from difficult circumstances or losses than from successful situations or wins. Being able to take something positive away from a negative situation is a skill that elite coaches and athletes need to possess. Results of Schinke, Bloom, and Salmela’s (1995) study similarly revealed that coaches’ past experiences as athletes helped to shape their coaching philosophy and “negative experiences with early coaches often resulted in the identification of behaviours and attitudes that they were certain they would never use themselves as coaches” (p. 54). In this regard, Crystal and the participants in Schinke, Bloom, and Salmela’s study were able to overcome the potential barrier of their negative past experiences in sport.

The barrier of previous coaching experiences can also be gender specific. Jessica explained,

I think male coaches who have come from the male game maybe don’t understand how important it is for female players to have those [athlete-centred] qualities [such as balance and leadership] …. Female coaches who have had to grow with the game maybe realize the understanding of developing the game further.

Jessica implied that being a male coach of a female team may act as a barrier for male coaches to truly understand what it is like to play the women’s version of their sport. Furthermore, Fasting and Pfister (2000) found that elite female players were more satisfied with female coaches because they preferred the female style of communication and believed that female coaches were better psychologists. Even though gender differences in coaching style were not examined in this study specifically, Jessica’s comments suggest the potential need for future research to conduct a similar gender analysis of the athlete-centred coaching styles of male and female coaches. Nevertheless, the coaches’ background, both experiential and personal, may affect the implementation of athlete-centred principles and practices significantly.

**Coaches’ level of confidence and experience.** Previous literature identified the coaches’ lack of confidence and experience as challenges to implementing an athlete-centred approach to sport (Kidman, 2005). Results from this study support this research. Derek said,

I think one of the biggest problems is the coaches feel that if athletes are given the right for too much feedback or there’s too many rights or it’s too athlete-centred, that they’re losing control of the ship…. That’s the big barrier, coach’s confidence. They see it as an
insurrection, as a challenge to their authority or to their knowledge in terms of being open and letting the athletes be more involved and having more input. In my mind an athlete-centred program is one where there’s lot of opportunity for feedback and lots of involvement and lots of participation. So, the barrier thus is, sometimes [coaches] just can’t handle that, and see it as a challenge and … and that comes down to … [the] coaches’ confidence level.

Michelle spoke about her growth throughout her young coaching career:

I think it’s something that for me has been more of a growing period, I think [as] you gain experience as a coach you tend to go from more of an authoritative way of coaching to more of an athlete-centred way of coaching, so I think it’s the journey that a lot of coaches have.

She continued,

Time, experience, confidence in my coaching skills has given me the leverage to try and give more power to my athletes. Because in the beginning you’re not experienced, you want to win those medals, and you do tend to want to spoon feed them a lot, you do tend to want to do everything for them, and show them everything how it’s done, not because you want take the power, but because you’re so worried that you’re not going to do enough. But in the end I think you realize the less you want to hold them tight, the less you want to control everything, the better it’s going to get, the more the athlete is going to grow and be more in tuned with their skills if you develop that athlete-centred way of seeing things.

According to Marback, Short, Short, and Sullivan (2005), a coach’s confidence is an important consideration, used as an overarching concept that encompasses both coaching efficacy and coaching competency. Furthermore, Feltz, Chase, Moritz, and Sullivan (1999) found that coaches with high coaching efficacy were more confident and also more likely to have satisfied athletes, successful teams, as well as use praise and encouragement as a coaching style. Alternatively, coaches with low efficacy were less confident and used more instructional styles of coaching (Feltz, Chase, Moritz, & Sullivan). As a result, Marback et al., suggested that confidence in one’s abilities is an important quality for coaches. Michelle agreed,

I truly believe that the more confidence I have in myself as a coach, the more I can take distance from the athlete and let them be by themselves and actually see their results in the end because I took the time to let them do it themselves without pushing too hard.

This view epitomizes an athlete-centred approach to sport. Thus, coaches who lack the confidence to share power and facilitate leadership will be unable to implement athlete-centred coaching behaviours into their daily coaching habits. Interestingly, findings from Campbell and Sullivan (2005) suggest that participating in the National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) or similar coach education
courses has a real, substantive and positive effect on improving coaches’ confidence. Attending coach education courses that emphasize athlete-centred principles and practices may help coaches gain more confidence in athlete-centred coaching. Related to other findings of this study, coaches could also enlist a support team to help implement athlete-centred coaching behaviours.

**Cultural differences in coaching.** The coach’s cultural background was also identified as a potential barrier. Michelle described her own background, “I’m European and I’ve been very strictly brought up. I tended to be very strict at the beginning without giving the athletes a lot of room to make their own decisions.” She also suggested that being strict may not be something that coaches do on purpose and it may be derived from how they were coached as an athlete. In addition, Stacey explained,

> It’s unfortunate sometimes you see those coaches who are still old-school still screaming and yelling at their players and they are more concerned about the result on the scoreboard than getting anything out of them.... You’re not always going to see your opposing coach in the same type of philosophy that you have and so I think you know it kind of depends what state you’re on, what country you come from, what their cultural values are.... Somebody can be from South Korea and have a completely different background than a coach from Canada, somebody from Germany is going to have a different cultural background than we are, so you know the culture plays into it a lot and you have to be accepting of that. [It] doesn’t mean they’re a bad coach, [it] doesn’t mean they’re a good coach, it just means they’re different and that’s part of learning.

Coakley (2001) and Leonard (1998) both use the example of baseball in Japan to illustrate how cultural differences affect a particular sport, as well as coaching character traits. “To the American observer, Japanese baseball seems authoritarian and ritualized; really, however, Japanese baseball simply reflects traditional Japanese values. Individualism and egotism are highly stigmatized in Japan” (Eitzen, 1989 as cited in Leonard, p.67). It is inevitable that different coaches will have different coaching styles; however, coaches who use strict, controlling, results-based methods of coaching are less likely to implement athlete-centred principles and practices. Consequently, coaches’ athletic careers, low confidence, inexperience, as well as cultural background can all act as barriers to implementing athlete-centred behaviours. An interesting direction for future research would be to explore the relationships between cultural differences and use of athlete-centred practices.
Throughout my experiences playing sport internationally, I have been extremely fortunate to watch, as well as compete against athletes from other countries. I agree with Stacey’s view that coaches and athletes from different parts of the world may have different coaching styles; however, this does not necessarily mean they are ineffective coaches. Coaches all over the world need to recognize and implement coaching behaviours that best suit their athletes. Regardless of coaches’ previous experiences in sport, confidence levels and cultural backgrounds, all athletes have the right and deserve to have their psychological, social, as well as physical needs met. It is plausible that athlete-centred coaching may look and feel different in different parts of the world, but as long as the basic principles and practices are valued and upheld, coaches and athletes will be able to combine the pursuit of personal and performance excellence through sport.

**Structure of the national team program.** One coach spoke at great length about how the structure of the national team program influenced his coaching philosophies and behaviours. Steve said,

My reality in Canada has been a huge concern for me. I do not really have a lot of choices [of players] to make because we are governed by the availability of the athletes…. We don’t have the number of athletes to create that internal competition…. They are the ones who are paying for it.

Despite being an Olympic sport, Steve’s national team receives no government funding, which makes it hard to attract, recruit and retain players: “I’ve been unsuccessful trying to work things out with the players because of the way the program is set up we don’t have any full time residency program [and it] was tough to attract people at the camp.” He went on to explain that the difference between his sport’s national sporting organization and other national level governing bodies “must be tremendous” in availability of management, coaches, support staff, athletes, and resources. According to Lyle (1999a), a sport-specific performance system consists of a national governing body which provides the necessary structures, personnel, processes and services to support its athletes and coaches. However, Lyle also identified “traditionally again, the availability of finance and, as a result, competition access, training volume, sport science assistance and the availability of the most expert
coaches, have been a problem” (p.241). As a coach within a system that makes it difficult to have the necessary time and resources to give the athletes what they need and attend to their holistic and performance development, Steve admitted, “I’m more dependent than the athletes. I try to do my best to show them that I do believe that if we can come together that will achieve something.” The structure of this national program significantly diminishes the team’s resources, thus, reducing the opportunities for elite athletes in this sport to develop and achieve success.

This also illustrates the need for resources as a requirement for athlete-centred sport. While attending to the physical, psychological and social needs of a group of athletes can be extremely rewarding, it can also be an exhausting, time-consuming, and expensive task. Governments and national governing bodies need to recognize that rewarding medal-winning performances financially and providing athletes with funding to cover training and competition costs throughout the season primarily helps athletes pursue performance excellence. However, the pursuit of the athletes’ personal excellence may require more than just financial aid, such as addressing the structure of the national team program, as well as the other barriers that coaches in this study identified.

**Summary of barriers.** Seven barriers to implementing athlete-centred coaching behaviours were identified by the coaches interviewed based on their perspectives and experiences in elite sport: concerns about winning and receiving funding; the lack of athlete-centred coaching in youth sport; athletes’ resistance to athlete-centred coaching; the background of the coach; coaches’ level of confidence and experience; cultural differences in coaching; and the structure of the national team program. Similarly, Kidman (2005) discusses the challenges of implementing an athlete-centred approach, including: changing the expectations athletes had of the coach-athlete relationship which may have been based on the previous coaches’ style, ‘selling’ the concept of athlete-centred sport to athletes, allowing time for athletes to become accustomed to being coached in a different way, and understanding that including athletes in decision making processes takes time.
Summary of Interview Findings and Discussion

An analysis of the coaches’ perceptions revealed a variety of meanings attached to the term “athlete-centred.” Coaches used several different terms to describe their interpretation of the term, such as “athlete-focused”, “athlete-driven”, “coach-led”, and “coach-driven.” Although coaches had different perspectives of the concept of “athlete-centred” and different levels of support for the use of the term, coaches viewed the athlete and the role of the coach as important.

Coaches’ perspectives revealed several principles and practices, many of which support previous athlete-centred research (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Kidman, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2002), such as: enhancing team cohesion, extended responsibility, fostering the holistic development of the athlete, developing a coach-athlete partnership, facilitating athletes’ independence, facilitating effective two-way communication, facilitating of opportunities for leadership development, and value-based coaching. Results which are unique to this study include: aspects of coaching females, recognizing the athlete as part of a greater whole, enlisting a support team, making sport fun, enjoyable and happy, and defining “success.”

Coaches also identified seven potential barriers to implementing the athlete-centred principles and practices. These included: concerns about winning and receiving funding; the lack of athlete-centred coaching in youth sport; athletes’ resistance to athlete-centred coaching; the background of the coach; coaches’ level of confidence and experience; cultural differences in coaching; and the structure of the national team program.

Coaches’ discussed a wide range of perspectives and lived experiences related to athlete-centred coaching which provided empirical support for previous research in this area of sport psychology. The divergent meanings ascribed to the term “athlete-centred”, the myriad of athlete-centred principles and practices and the seven barriers to implementation all have implications for policy documents, coach education and future research in this area of study.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore coaches’ perspectives on athlete-centred sport and related practices in order to learn from the experiences of elite coaches in Canadian sport. Although the concept of athlete-centred sport has been addressed in a theoretical sense, there is a paucity of empirical research on the topic.

The coaches in the current study discussed a wide range of perspectives and experiences related to athlete-centred coaching which provided empirical support for previous research in this area. The divergent meanings ascribed to the term “athlete-centred”, the athlete-centred principles and practices and the seven barriers to implementation all have implications for policy development, coach education and future research in this field of study.

The participants in this study reinforced many aspects of athlete-centred coaching. However, the findings of this study also identified coaches’ misconceptions about the terms “athlete-centred” and “athlete-driven.” Many coaches thought that athlete-centred meant that the athlete drives the decision-making process and direction of the program, rather than the athlete’s rights and developmental needs driving the program as suggested by the athlete-centred approach to sport.

In addition, coaches were weak in two areas related to athlete-centred coaching principles. First, coaches struggled to articulate the inextricable links between athletic performance and personal development. The notion that both performance and personal excellence can be pursued simultaneously was not emphasized, and neither was the understanding that fostering holistic development is a necessary ingredient to achieving athletic success. The athlete-centred approach to sport focuses on the process of developing successful athletes, therefore, coaches who implement athlete-centred principles and practices are more likely to develop well-rounded athletes and people who will also experience success in their sport.

Second, coaches in this study were weak on their explanations related to extended responsibility. Coaches did not highlight specific lessons learned or life skills acquired through sport and how they can influence athletes’ development in sport and impact athletes’ lives outside of sport.
Although the coaches did refer to holistic development in relation to athletes’ physical, psychological, and social health, they did not convey goals and strategies for enhancing the personal development of athletes outside of sport.

Coaches spoke very passionately about their experiences in elite sport. Coaches’ abilities to communicate effectively throughout the interview seemed to relate to their understanding of the importance of facilitating communication with their athletes. In addition, coaches in this study noted the importance of enjoying sport. Making sport fun, enjoyable and happy may have previously been thought as an implicit characteristic of an athlete-centred approach to sport given the emphasis placed on humanistic development. It may be presumed that if sporting experiences are not enjoyable, then holistic development will not be achieved. As a result, enjoyment may be a prerequisite for athlete-centred sport, as well as an outcome of positive athlete-centred sporting experiences. Nevertheless, it was clear that all of the coaches were committed to providing quality coaching to their athletes, and most importantly seem to thoroughly enjoy coaching a Canadian national team.

**Limitations**

Several limitations need to be acknowledged and addressed with respect to this study. This study was limited by the selection criteria of the participants: elite coaches, of female athletes, in a team sport, at a national team level. The study’s results may not apply to other populations, such community-level coach and sports, male athletes, and individual sports.

Moreover, self-selection bias during the recruitment process may also have affected coaches’ interest in participating in the study. For example, coaches who are familiar with the concept and characteristics of athlete-centred and therefore, more comfortable talking about its principles and practices may have been more likely to agree to participate. Conversely, coaches who felt uncomfortable about discussing the topic may have chosen not to respond to the recruitment email. Therefore, this bias may have limited the number of coaches who could have made positive contributions to the field of sport coaching research.
Another limitation of this study was related to the coaches’ accountability of their responses. This study relied on self-reports of their perspectives and experiences during the interview. As a result, a social desirability bias may have affected the coaches’ responses. Although interview questions did not specifically ask coaches if they were athlete-centred or if they themselves apply the principles and practices that were discussed, coaches may have felt obligated to give answers that would be viewed favourably and interpreted positively by the researcher and others. Therefore, while accuracy in the transcript was confirmed by some participants in the member checking session, accuracy with respect to coaches’ implementation of the suggested principles and practices was not established.

As a result, using only one method of qualitative data collection was also a limitation of this study. Richer data would have obtained if multiple methods of data collection used. Data from observations would have addressed the aforementioned self-reporting limitation, as well as added to the depth of the findings.

In addition, had the results been interpreted using a different disciplinary lens, several other limitations of this study may have come to light. As some examples, coaches did not mention: (1) a lack of attention given to issues related to social justice and human rights; (2) discussions on power dynamics, specifically power negotiation, struggle and engagement; (3) other areas of development, such as community development and character development; (4) lack of knowledge of emotional intelligence and self-awareness; and (5) the inclusion of spiritual health within holistic development.

Despite these limitations, this study was exploratory in nature and therefore, the perspectives the coaches shared form a valuable contribution to athlete-centred sport research. Suggestions to address the limitations of this study will be addressed in future research section. Implications for policy documents and coach education will be discussed next.

Implications

The findings of this study have implications for policy documents, such as the Canadian
Sport Policy (CSP), the Coaching Code of Ethics and the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model. In their current form, these documents label the Canadian sport system as athlete-centred and describe sport in Canada using visions, goals and qualities which are athlete-centred in nature. However, the athlete-centred model of sport is not specifically outlined in any of the three documents. Given that this study provides Canadian empirical evidence to support the previous theoretical approach, the next step would be to include a more comprehensive description of athlete-centred coaching within these important sport documents. This model of athlete-centred sport would be comprised of study’s athlete-centred principles and practices, as well as the previous characteristics identified by Clarke, Smith, and Thibault (1994), Kidman (2005), and Miller and Kerr (2002). With respect to the three documents: a description of athlete-centred sport coaching could be included into the CSP’s introduction; athlete-centred practices and examples of athlete-centred principles could be added to the Coaching Code’s ethical standards; and athlete-centred characteristics, principles, and practices should be incorporated throughout all of the stages of the LTAD model. These modifications to the current policy documents would begin to address the issues of how sport can be athlete-centred, how coaches can implement athlete-centred principles and characteristics, and how athlete-centred based policies and goals can be translated into action. In this regard, the athlete-centred approach to sport would become actualized and exemplified within sporting environments rather than simply a label of Canadian sport in policy documents.

In addition, there are also implications for coach education. Within the Canadian National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP), the majority of coaches within the new structure complete Competition Introduction and/or Competition Development or their equivalents to become a certified coach. Throughout these courses, increased emphasis could be placed on the topic of athlete-centred coaching. This study’s principles and practices, as well as previous characteristics of athlete-centred coaching could be examined for example within Competition Introduction Part B modules such as making ethical decisions, planning a practice, designing a basic sport program or in Competition
Development’s psychology of performance or coaching and leading effectively modules (Coaches Association of Ontario, n.d.).

Finally, suggestions for future academic research will be presented.

**Future Research**

Given the paucity of research or empirical research on athlete-centred coaching, this study’s findings form the basis for several suggestions for future research in this area. Research which studies a wider and more diverse population would expand upon this study’s sample. Other participants could include: community level or provincial level coaches and athletes, coaches of individual sports (e.g., swimming, track and field, tennis, cycling, speed skating, etc.), and coaches of male athletes.

In addition, a gender analysis may highlight any gender differences related to perceptions and actualization of athlete-centred coaching. Since athlete-centred principles and practices are closely related to the coach-athlete relationship, examining athlete-centredness within male coach and male athlete, female coach and female athlete, and male coach and female athlete may produce some interesting findings.

Another approach to future research would be to compare coaches’ perspectives on athlete-centred coaching with their athletes’ recollection of their coaches’ behaviours. This may provide information regarding coaches’ accountability of putting athlete-centred principles and practices into action. The pursuit of performance excellence and personal excellence can most effectively be achieved if the principles, practices and characteristics of the athlete-centred approach to sport are being implemented. Athletes may be able to comment on this better than coaches, as well as provide insight into how to make athlete-centred sport more widely known and practiced in their sport. Interviewing the athletes would also provide a complete picture of the athlete-centred coach-athlete relationship.
REFERENCES


### Table 1 Goals of the Canadian Sport Policy (Sport Canada, 2002, p.16-19)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>It is a goal of the Canadian Sport Policy that by 2012...</th>
<th>In pursuit of the goal, the federal/provincial-territorial governments will...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **I: Enhanced participation** | A significantly higher proportion of Canadians from all segments of society are involved in quality sport activities at all levels and in all forms of participation | 1. Promote the personal and social benefit associated with participation in sport at all levels and in all forms.  
2. Support sport organizations, at all levels, to increase participation, by recruiting new participants and reducing dropout rates in their sports, in collaboration with current and potential partners such as municipalities, educational institutions, and national and regional sport centres.  
3. Increase the exposure of children and youth to sport in the school setting.  
4. Encourage communities to increase individual and family-based participation.  
5. Increase access and equity in sport for under-represented groups. |
| **II: Enhanced Excellence** | The pool of talented athletes has expanded and Canadian athletes and teams are systematically achieving world-class results at the highest levels of international competition through fair and ethical means. | 1. Establish performance targets for major Games that guide expectations and assist in evaluating performances and the effectiveness of Canada’s sport system.  
2. Increase the number of qualified, fully-employed female and male coaches working with high performance athletes to provide the requisite coaching expertise, in English or French as desired, to successfully compete at the highest levels of international competition and to strengthen the coaching profession.  
3. Increase accessibility for high performance athletes to essential services such as financial support, coaching, sport science, and sport medicine, and development opportunities such as competition and training required to successfully compete at the highest levels of international competition, and ensure access to these services in English and French.  
4. Confirm the role of the Canada Games as a prime means of increasing the quality and numbers of the next generation of national team athletes participating in international competition.  
5. Identify and recruit talented athletes into the sport system and provide for their systematic and holistic development towards internationally competitive levels. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>It is a goal of the Canadian Sport Policy that by 2012…</th>
<th>In pursuit of the goal, the federal/provincial-territorial governments will…</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| III: Enhanced Capacity      | The essential components of an ethically based, athlete/participant-centred development system are in place and are continually modernized and strengthened as required. | 1. Ensure that the essential components of the system required to achieve the sport participation and excellence goals of this policy – such as coach/instructor education, facilities, sport medicine, sport science, research and the use of technology – meet the needs of athletes/participants in an ever-changing sport environment.  
2. Promote safety, fairness in play and decision-making, and ethical behaviour in sport environments for all levels and types of sport, to protect the health of athletes/participants and the ethical basis of sport, and to increase the fun, attraction, and value of participation.  
3. Develop a long-term strategic approach to the hosting of major national and international sport events to maximize their contribution to sport and community objectives.  
4. Support the development of volunteer and salaried leadership and organizations at all levels to strengthen their contribution to a healthy and ethically based, athlete/participant-centred sport system.  
5. Develop a sustainable and diversified public and private resource base for the ongoing development of sport at all levels. |
| IV: Enhanced Interaction    | The components of the sport system are more connected and coordinated as a result of the committed collaboration and communication amongst the stakeholders. | 1. Strengthen and develop collaboration within Governments, between governments, and between sectors to ensure the harmonized growth of the sport system and promote the overall benefits of sport.  
2. Foster stronger relations between national and provincial/territorial sport organizations and multi-sport organizations to maximize their contribution to their members and the goals of this policy.  
3. Foster stronger relations between sport organizations and educational institutions, at the appropriate levels, to maximize mutual interests relating to participation, athlete/participant development, coach education and employment, access to facilities, and the provision of other services.  
4. Strengthen relations between governments and their sport communities, to develop new partnerships, harmonize planning, and increase the overall effectiveness and accountability of the sport system.  
5. Strengthen international strategies to promote Canadian values and sport programs, to keep abreast of leading-edge developments abroad, and to maximize the benefits of sport |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Basis within Sport</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enabling power</td>
<td>Ability to facilitate</td>
<td>Giving athletes a say in meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert power</td>
<td>Ability in the sport</td>
<td>Coach demonstrating a performance technique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource power</td>
<td>Intellectual, technical or physical resources</td>
<td>Having a wide repertoire of tactics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referent power</td>
<td>Knowledge of sport and internal workings</td>
<td>Coach knowing where and how to network with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information power</td>
<td>Knowing useful information</td>
<td>Knowing scouting information about opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimate power</td>
<td>Official appointment</td>
<td>Position of team head coach appointed by governing body of the sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coercive power</td>
<td>Physical or emotional force applied to make athletes compliant</td>
<td>Bullying by shouting at an athlete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward power</td>
<td>Ability to give or withhold rewards</td>
<td>Selecting or cutting a player on the team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship power</td>
<td>Relative standing in a social system</td>
<td>Being a male coach in a women’s sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charismatic/Personal power</td>
<td>Attractive and persuasive personality</td>
<td>Charming athletes to make them train harder</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 Summary of Athlete-Centred Sport

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Athlete-Centred Coaching Principles and Practices Study Findings</th>
<th>Characteristics of Athlete-Centred Coaching (Clarke, Smith, &amp; Thibault, 1994; Kidman, 2005; Miller &amp; Kerr, 2002)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unique aspects of coaching females</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing the athlete as part of a greater whole</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing team cohesion</td>
<td>Developing athletes’ teamwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended responsibility</td>
<td>Understanding that sport is an important part, but not the entirety of the athletes’ life experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fostering the holistic development of the athlete</td>
<td>Recognition of the athlete as a whole and developing person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enlisting a support team</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making sport fun, enjoyable and happy</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing a coach-athlete partnership</td>
<td>Building and maintaining a partnership style coach-athlete relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaches as facilitators of independence</td>
<td>Furthering of athletes’ self-knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaches as facilitators of effective two-way communication</td>
<td>Athletes are empowered and active participants in their programs; and clearly defining, agreeing upon and following the athletes’ and coaches’ rights and responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaches as facilitators of leadership development opportunities</td>
<td>Developing athletes’ leadership, teamwork and decision making skills; and furthering of athletes’ self-knowledge, self-esteem and moral integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value-based coaching which highlights respect, trust, responsibility and accountability</td>
<td>Mutual respect amongst athletes, coaches and the sporting community; and defining and agreeing on athletes’ and coaches’ rights/responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining “success”</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Indicates the findings of this study were not previously identified as characteristics of athlete-centred coaching
Appendix A: Letter of Informed Consent

Coaches’ Perspectives on Athlete-Centred Coaching Behaviours

Information Letter

[Insert date], 2009

Dear [name of coach],

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research project. This letter will provide you with some background information regarding the study.

Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of this study is to identify coaches’ perspectives on athlete-centred coaching. The athlete-centred model of sport forms the basis of Canada’s elite sport system where performance excellence, personal excellence and positive coach-athlete relationships can be achieved through sport (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994, Miller & Kerr, 2002, Sport Canada, 2002). Therefore, coaches’ experiences and views on this topic are of paramount importance to ensure the continuing understanding of this area of study in the fields of coaching and sport psychology.

What is involved?

If you decide to participate in the study you will be asked to meet with the M.Sc. student researcher, Karlene Headley-Cooper, to discuss your experiences as a national team coach. The interview will be held at a time and place that is mutually convenient and will take about one hour. At the completion of the study the researcher will contact you again to arrange a second meeting to present the results of the research.

Voluntary Participation

Please be assured that your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw at any time, without penalty, and you have the right to not answer any questions you choose.

Confidentiality

With your permission the interview will be audio tape-recorded as to not miss any information. Please be assured that the information you provide will be kept confidential at all times. Following the interview the researcher may use quotations from the interview in the write up of the study, but be assured that your identity will remain anonymous through the use of a pseudonym and the elimination of any identifiable information. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the data. All names and any other identifiable information will be removed from the labeling and storage.
of the tapes and transcripts. All data, audio tapes and written transcripts will be retained until data analysis is complete to a maximum of 5 years, at which time they will all be appropriately disposed of.

**Compensation**

There will be no financial compensation for your participation; however, by participating in this study you will hopefully experience the benefit of contributing to this research area.

**Benefits**

While there may not be any direct benefits to you, it is hoped that the interview data will enhance our understanding of the athlete-centred model of sport and the experiences of elite coaches. All participants will also be provided with a copy of the final thesis dissertation document.

**Risks**

There are no perceived risks to your participation.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

If you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, please contact Zaid Gabriel, Research Ethics Officer, Health Sciences

zaid.gabriel@utoronto.ca or 416-946-5806.

In addition, if you have any questions or concerns regarding the research project, please do not hesitate to contact one of the researchers below.

Sincerely,

Karlene Headley-Cooper, B.P.H.E, B.Ed. MSc Candidate (Primary Researcher)
FPHE, University of Toronto
(416) 978-6096
k.headley.cooper@utoronto.ca

Gretchen Kerr, B.P.H.E., M.A., Ph.D. Thesis Supervisor
FPHE, University of Toronto
(416) 978-6190
gretchen.kerr@utoronto.ca
Written Informed Consent Form

I agree to participate in the aforementioned study. I have read and understand the procedures outlined in the attached letter of information. By consenting to my participation in the study I acknowledge:

- I understand what my participation involves
- I understand my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without penalty
- I understand all interview data will be kept confidential
- I understand quotations may be used in the research write-up but my identity will remain anonymous through the use of a pseudonym and the elimination of any identifiable information
- I understand that there is no financial compensation for this study
- I understand the perceived benefits and risks of the study
- Any questions I had have been addressed
- I have a copy of this form that I can keep for my records

If you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, please contact Zaid Gabriel, Research Ethics Officer, Health Sciences zaid.gabriel@utoronto.ca or 416-946-5806.

I hereby consent to participate in the study at this time:

_________________________  _________________________
Signature of participant       Date

_________________________  _________________________
Name of participant (please print)   Signature of witness
Appendix B: Athlete-Centred Tenets and Characteristics

The purpose of this study is to identify coaches’ perspectives on athlete-centred coaching. Therefore, the semi-structured interviews of this study will be based on the following tenets and characteristics of the athlete-centred model of sport and athlete-centred coaching.

Two basic tenets of the athlete-centred sport model are as follows:

1. Sport is to be used as a vehicle which contributes to the athletes’ overall performance and personal development (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994).
2. “The enhancement of the holistic health and well-being of the athlete, through the pursuit of excellence in sport” (Miller & Kerr, 2002, p.147).

The eight characteristics of athlete-centred coaching which stem from a summary of the previous literature in this area of research coaching (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault; Kidman, 2005, Miller & Kerr, 2002) include:

1. Mutual respect amongst athletes, coaches, and other members of the sporting community.

2. Understanding that sport is an important part, but not the entirety of the athletes’ life experience.

3. Recognition of the athlete as a whole and developing person, who needs support for all aspects of their health (i.e., physical, emotional, psychological, social).

4. Athletes are empowered by being active, informed participants in their program design and policy development (i.e., goal setting, training).

5. Clearly defining, agreeing upon and following the athletes’ and coaches’ rights and responsibilities.

6. Development of athletes’ leadership, teamwork and decision making skills.

7. Furthering of athletes’ self-knowledge, self-esteem, and moral integrity.

8. The building and maintenance of a partnership style coach-athlete relationship.
Appendix C: Interview Guide

General Questions:

“Please tell me about your coaching experience (i.e., sport and team currently coaching, years in current position, major goals/accomplishments with current team).

“Please tell me what the term ‘athlete-centred’ means to you?”

Specific Questions

− “What do the given athlete-centred tenets (e.g., overall performance and personal development) and characteristics (e.g., respect, balance, overall health, empowerment, active participants, rights/responsibilities, leadership/teamwork/decision-making, self and morals, coach-athlete relationships) mean to you?”
− “How might these characteristics be demonstrated in day-to-day coaching behaviours/practices?”
  ▪ “How might you ensure the all-around health and development (i.e., both performance and personal excellence) of the athletes on the team?”
− “What does an athlete-centred coach-athlete relationship look like?”
  ▪ “How might coaching a female team sport impact this coach-athlete relationship?”
  ▪ “Where might the coaches’ role in the athlete-athlete relationship fit into this topic?”
− “Consider the following example…”
  o “As the coach of the team, you overhear three of your athletes talking after practice, as they discuss that one of them has a conflict between a personal commitment (i.e., a family engagement) and an upcoming team commitment (i.e., the next competition).”
    ▪ “What do you think and how might this situation be dealt with?”
    ▪ “How might an athlete-centred focused coach deal with this situation?”
− “What are the barriers to implementing this model of coaching?”
  ▪ “To what degree do you see athlete-centred behaviours in your experiences in elite sport? Please explain.”
  ▪ “What might enable this model of coaching in elite sport?”
  ▪ “Are there elements of this model that might have sport specific or team-specific (as opposed to individual) characteristics?”
− “In your opinion, do you think that elite athletes benefit or are hindered by more athlete-centred coaching behaviours? Please explain.”
  ▪ “Are athlete-centred coaching behaviours what elite athletes want or need?”

NB 1: This interview guide was used for the pilot interview, as well as the interviews conducted for the research project.

NB 2: Italicized portions were used throughout the interview as additional information or questions.