INITIATING AND SUSTAINING EMOTIONAL ABUSE IN THE COACH-Athlete Relationship: Athletes’, Parents’, and Coaches’ Reflections

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of

Doctorate of Philosophy

Department of Exercise Sciences

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Abstract
Initiating and Sustaining Emotional Abuse in the Coach-Athlete Relationship: Athletes’, Parents’, and Coaches’ Reflections

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The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the process by which emotional abuse occurs and is often sustained in sport, and to examine athletes’, parents’, and coaches’ reflections on emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. The methodological approach used for the study was a constructivist and symbolic interactionist approach to grounded theory. Methods were established that were consistent with the iterative nature of grounded theory. In total, 18 retired elite athletes, 16 parents of retired elite athletes, and nine elite coaches participated in the study. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, and data were coded using open, axial, and selective coding techniques. Athlete data were interpreted to suggest a sequence of stages by which emotionally abusive coach-athlete relations developed and were sustained over time. Furthermore, the perceived impact of emotionally abusive coaching practices on motivation, self-confidence, commitment, and achievement outcomes in sport were discussed. Parent data were interpreted to suggest that parents are socialized into the culture of elite sport and can become silent bystanders to their children’s experiences of emotional abuse. Coaches’ reflections about the reasons for choosing to use emotionally abusive behaviours in the coach-athlete relationship were interpreted to suggest two distinct origins for the use of this behaviour. Additionally, perceived reasons for
abandoning emotionally abusive coaching techniques were reported by the coaches.

Finally, based on the collective reflections of the athletes, parents, and coaches, an ecological transactional model of vulnerability to emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship is proposed. Several implications of the study findings are discussed and questions are posed for future research.
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who supported me in the completion of this thesis. To begin, I would like to thank my mentor and supervisor, Prof. Gretchen Kerr, for her encouragement, devotion and support throughout this entire process. With her attention to details and constructive criticisms, she continually challenged me to push myself and my work with this thesis. I am grateful to the other members of my committee, Prof. Bruce Kidd, Dr. John Wallace, and Dr. Katreena Scott. You have been an immense influence on my growth as an academic. Thank you for your guidance. I also wish to thank my friends and family for supporting me in my academic endeavours. Finally, I would like to thank the athletes, parents and coaches that participated in this study, without them this thesis would not be possible. Thank you.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*I think people tend to idealize what being a successful athlete is and what’s involved in that… There is a crazy aspect of elite sport that I almost think of as the dark side that nobody knows unless they’ve been there. For me personally I feel like I am okay, but I consider myself to be one of the lucky ones - Former national swimmer. (Stirling, 2007)*

While the many long-term benefits of sport have been well-established and promoted in attempts to increase youth sport participation, the issue of child maltreatment has recently surfaced and has created a ‘moral panic’ within sport societies (Brackenridge, 2001a). Child maltreatment, referred to as, “volitional acts that result in or have the potential to result in physical injuries and/or psychological harm” (Crooks & Wolfe, 2007, p.3), has become a growing area of concern, as child abuse and neglect has recently been recognized as “one of the most pressing social problems facing children today” (Feerick, Knutson, Trickett, & Flanzer, 2006, p.xxvii). According to the World Health Organization, it is estimated that 40 million children aged 0 – 14, from all nations of the world, are victims of child maltreatment each year (World Health Organization, 1999).

Research in sport indicates that athletes are not immune from experiences of sexual and emotional maltreatment (Fasting, Brackenridge, & Sundgot-Borgen, 2003). Recently, there has been a growing understanding of the experience of sexual abuse of young athletes in sport (Brackenridge, 2004), but very little research has attempted to explore other forms of abuse, such as emotional abuse, within this environment.

In addition to the lack of empirical research, the establishment of athlete protection measures to reduce the potential for maltreatment in this environment is critical. A better
understanding of the experience of emotional abuse, including processes by which it is initiated and sustained, is needed to inform prevention and intervention strategies. As well, given that research to-date on emotional abuse in sport has focused exclusively on athletes’ perspectives, research on the reflections of parents and coaches on athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse is warranted. The purpose of my dissertation, therefore, was to explore the process by which emotional abuse occurs and is often sustained in sport, and to examine athletes’, parents’, and coaches’ reflections on emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship.

**Self-Reflection**

Research in general is a process in which ideas are represented and meanings are attributed to specific phenomena. I choose to support a postmodernist perspective in which the researcher is no longer an active bystander but rather an integral part of the research process. “Postmodernism claims that writing is always partial, local, and situational, and that our self is always present, no matter how much we try to suppress it” (Richardson, 2000, p.930). Purely objective research is ultimately unattainable due to the position of the researcher within this process. Accordingly, who I am as a researcher was inescapably entwined with the conceptualization and implementation of the research project, and accordingly the collection and interpretation of data from this study was also be influenced by my own subjective experiences, and the perspectives I placed on the research.

Schram (2006, p.40) explained that a person’s analytic intent, referring to the “explicit desire to make sense of something,” and intellectual orientation, or “the way you are positioned to view the world,” are situated within the conceptualization and
proposal of a study. According to Schram (2006), there is a need for self-reflexivity within qualitative research, and articulations of the premises that influence one’s stance on the research project. Through this autobiographical piece, I hope to bring to light my roots of interest in this area of inquiry, and the experiences I bring to the research.

**Personal Experience**

I grew up as a competitive swimmer, and my friendships with teammates, relationships with my coaches, and other sport experiences were powerful influences on my personal development. I learned many life skills as a result of my sport experiences and I believe that sport provided me with some very positive experiences that I would not have been opportune to otherwise. My best friends were my teammates and I had a great experience with all of my coaches. Looking back on my sporting career, while I competed at a fairly competitive level, I don’t remember my exact times or my specific placement at every meet. What I take from my experience is the memories of the friends I had, the fun times at meets and training camps, and the sheer enjoyment of training towards a goal and feeling like I was a part of a team. While this is what I interpret as my personal experience, I did train and compete in the competitive sport world for several years and I know many athletes that had quite a different experience than myself. Whether it is attributed to an immense focus on winning, pressure from parents or coaches, or experiences of less desirable coaching practices, some of these athletes do not look back as fondly on their sport experience.

I personally believe that sport, if delivered in an age and stage appropriate manner, is a means through which youth development may be enhanced. Sport, however, is not inherently good. As such, it is important to understand what factors contribute to a
positive sport experience, and how and why we should prevent those circumstances that can lead to less favourable developmental outcomes.

**Academic Experience**

Since I started conducting research, I have come to view my sport experiences from a different perspective. Just as my academic experiences have influenced my personal reflections on sport, my research has been strongly influenced by my athletic background.

My very first research project was an examination of the mood state profiles of different competitive levels of athletes. The question came to me in an undergraduate sport psychology class when I perceived a point of dissonance between what was cited in the textbook and what I perceived other athletes’ experiences to have been in sport. In attempt to understand the difference between the mood state profiles of athletes, I then explored the relationship between perfectionism and mood states in sport. Findings from this research study were interpreted to suggest that the role of the coach plays a major role in determining the mental well-being of the athlete in sport (Stirling & Kerr, 2006). Admittedly, while there is a strong empirical basis supporting this question, this research question was mostly derived from personal intuition. Upon reflection, I am grateful to have had a supervisor that encouraged my intellectual curiosity and allowed me to pursue my own research question at such an early stage of academic development. While this study was quite different in many ways than the research I do today, it was a pivotal academic experience, which introduced me to the world of research and encouraged my initial pursuit in graduate research.

Since this time, as a graduate student I have enjoyed working within different traditions and fields of research. The general focus of my work though has been on
critiquing currently accepted coaching practices that occur within sport culture, understanding athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse, and promoting healthy sport environments through the establishment of athlete protection measures. During my Master’s degree I conducted two research projects pertaining to issues of emotional abuse and athlete protection in competitive sport. The first inquiry entitled, “A retrospective analysis of the coach-athlete relationship among elite female gymnasts and swimmers,” used a qualitative methodology to analyze appropriate and inappropriate coaching behaviours in elite sport. This study explored cultural contributors to athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship, and supported previous literature highlighting the differential power of the coach over the female athlete in this environment (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Secondly, my M.Sc. thesis entitled “Elite female athlete’s experiences of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship,” defined and categorized emotional abuse in sport, and retrospectively explored athletes’ affective responses to their coaches’ emotionally abusive behaviours across the course of their careers (Stirling & Kerr, 2007; 2008). Although these studies have contributed to the literature on emotional abuse in sport, many future research questions surrounding athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse still need to be addressed.

**Organization of Thesis**

Chapter 2 consists of a review of the literature on the evolution of child protection and definitions of child abuse and neglect. This is followed by a specific examination of the research conducted to-date on emotional maltreatment. Athlete protection developments with respect to advocacy, policy, and education are reviewed, followed by a summary of the research conducted to-date on relational abuse in sport. In Chapter 3, I
explain the methodological approach that was used throughout the study. The methods of
data collection and analyses are detailed, including specific information on subject
criteria and study procedures. Chapter 4 comprises the findings and discussions as
interpreted from the respective athlete, parent, and coach interviews. Implications and
future directions of each of the studies are reviewed. Chapter 5 discusses the cumulative
findings. Finally, Chapter 6 briefly summarizes the dissertation in totality.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Overview of Child Abuse and Neglect

Considerations of abusive and neglectful behaviours often revolve around cultural values and ethical beliefs of appropriate standards of care (Crooks & Wolfe, 2007). The interrelation between societal concern for the best interests of the child, responsibility to protect children, and respect for the privacy and sanctity of families, dictate the extent of concern for child protection, and therefore, situates the history of early research on child abuse and neglect (Feerick & Snow, 2006). Accordingly, the development of child protection measures in sport must be examined within the greater societal and cultural context in which they have been developed. This section will review the evolution of child protection, and general definitions and categorizations of types of child abuse and neglect will be presented.

Evolution of Child Protection

The first work that identified and explored the experience of child maltreatment was conducted in the early 1800’s by the French physician Ambroise Tardieu. However, at the time, family privacy was highly valued and few rights were appointed to the protection and liberation of children (Feerick & Snow, 2006). Moral concern for the physical and psychological well-being of children did not fully surface until the establishment of Children’s Rights that came with industrialization. “It was not until the 19th century and the changes that came with industrialization that there was clear identification of child maltreatment as a social problem and the development of social and legal mechanisms to address it” (Feerick & Snow, 2006, p.7).
Interest in child maltreatment began during the World Wars as a moral concern for orphaned children and children in impoverished families, and then grew to include concern over abusive and neglectful behaviours directed at children (Giovannoni, 1989). In 1962, Kempe and colleagues published an article entitled ‘The Battered Child Syndrome,’ which emphasized “the malevolent actions perpetrated on children by their parents or other adults” (Lappe, 1994, p.49). This paper was the first study to introduce the term “battered child syndrome” into medical vocabulary (Feerick & Snow, 2006), and refuted the claims of previous child abuse cases that attributed the abuse of children to psychological abnormalities in the parents, rather suggesting that child battery occurs more frequently than what had been previously thought. The term battered child however, referred specifically to the chronic, intentional, physical abuse of children (Walker, 1994), and was therefore later replaced in 1975 by the term ‘child abuse and neglect,’ to include other non-physical forms of child maltreatment (Wachtel, 1994), such as emotional maltreatment and neglect. By 1967, 50 states in the United States of America had passed child abuse reporting laws. Likewise, by 1970, the reporting of child maltreatment was mandated by law in the Canadian provinces of Ontario (1965), British Columbia (1967), Nova Scotia (1968), Newfoundland (1969), and Alberta (1970) (Wachtel, 1999). Today the reporting of child abuse and neglect is mandated in all parts of Canada except for the Yukon Territories (Wachtel, 1999).

In 1974, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) was passed, and Child Protection Services were established across North America (Feerick & Snow, 2006). Giovannoni and Becerra (1979) then published a study defining what constitutes child maltreatment. During this period of time, public awareness of child maltreatment
and research on child protection increased considerably (Wolfe, 1985). Throughout the 1980’s, nationally funded scientific efforts such as America’s National Incidence Study (NIS-1) was designed to examine the scope of the problem of child maltreatment. The first Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect was quite a few years behind though, and was only recently reported in 2001. In the 1990’s, up to and including present day 21st century, our understanding of the complexities of child maltreatment has continued to grow as the field of child abuse and neglect in general has undergone “a period of reappraisal,” and definitions and classification structures of child maltreatment have been called into scrutiny (Feerick & Snow, 2006, p.8).

**Defining Child Maltreatment**

One of the greatest criticisms of the work that has been conducted to-date on child abuse and neglect is the lack of a standardized definition and classification structure of the various forms of child maltreatment. Much of the discontinuity in definitions of child maltreatment though, can be accounted for by examining the purpose for which the definition or classification was designed (i.e. federal, legal, case work, research, etc.). Porter, Antonishak and Reppucci (2006, p.331) explained, “Because levels of definitional specificity and reliability, as well as the bases for validity, differ depending on the purpose for which a definition was designed, the divergent purposes of child protective legislation, child protection services (CPS), and empirical research in child abuse and neglect can impede the development of a universal definition of child maltreatment.” That being said, forms of child maltreatment can be roughly categorized into relational and non-relational maltreatment.
Relational child maltreatment.

In general, the four major recognized forms of relational child maltreatment include; neglect, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and physical abuse (Crooks & Wolfe, 2007). Neglect, as a form of child abuse, refers to a lack of reasonable care (Glaser, 2002) and an all-round deprivation of attention (Iwaneic, 2003). Glaser (2002) defined emotional abuse as a relationship between a child and caregiver that is characterized by patterns of non-physical harmful interactions. Sexual abuse is defined as, “any sexual interaction with person(s) of any age that is perpetrated (1) against the victim's will, (2) without consent, or (3) in an aggressive, exploitative, manipulative, or threatening manner” (Ryan & Lane, 1997, p.3). And physical abuse refers to the infliction of physical harm on a child by a parent or caregiver (Perry, Mann, Palkar-Corell, Ludy-Dobson, & Schick, 2002).

These four forms of child abuse and neglect mentioned above are referred to as “relational disorders” as they “occur within the context of a critical relationship role,” in which the relationship has significant influence over the child’s sense of safety, trust, and fulfillment of needs (Crooks & Wolfe, 2007, p.17). This relationship role is no longer limited to that of the parent-child relationship. Rather, extra-familial caregiver-child relationships, such as the coach-athlete relationship, have been included within child protection legislation. Health Canada reported,

It was hardly a stretch to consider child abuse by caregivers other than parents or relatives and then go on to a larger category of persons in positions of trust. Thus, attention had to be paid to baby sitters, foster parents, daycare staff, preschool and school teachers, coaches, medical personnel, and so on (Wachtel, 1999, p.13).
Non-relational child maltreatment.

Other forms of maltreatment that do not occur within critical relationships, are referred to as non-relational maltreatments, and include for example: child corruption/ exploitation, sexual exploitation/ prostitution, child labour, and assault by persons not known closely to the child. Furthermore, as definitions of abusive and neglectful behaviours of children have broadened over time, a separate categorical structure of non-relational abuse, entitled institutional child abuse and neglect, has been introduced (Wachtel, 1999). Institutional child maltreatment involves the abusive or neglectful experience of a child by a child-serving institution (Wachtel, 1999). Examples of institutional child maltreatment include the failure of an institution to meet appropriate standards of care, or when the core practices of an organization are abusive.

Overall, our understanding of the experience of child abuse and neglect has grown substantially over the last century. Likewise, specific examinations of the respective maltreatments, such as emotional maltreatment, have also developed over time.

Emotional Maltreatment

Emotional abuse in general is understood to be an under-recognized but extremely common form of child abuse (Glaser, 2002). Of the four main relational abuses, emotional abuse has received the least amount of clinical and research attention, which may be attributed to the cultural acceptance of psychological aggression, the frequent lack of malicious intent by the perpetrator, and the perceived lack of urgency with respect to intervening on children’s experiences of emotional maltreatment (Brassard & Donovan, 2006). As well, identification of emotional abuse in general has been limited, arguably due to limitations with definition, hence impeding research on the identification,
prevention and intervention of emotional abuse among children (Iwaneic, 2003). As the focus of this study is on athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse, the development of research on emotional maltreatment will be examined. This section will present past and current definitions of emotional maltreatment, followed by a review of the effects of emotional abuse and factors of risk and resilience.

**Defining Emotional Maltreatment**

The term emotional abuse or emotional maltreatment has been used synonymously with mental injury, psychological maltreatment, psychological battery, psychological abuse, and soul murder (Loue, 2005). However, while these forms of maltreatment are similar, they are not necessarily the same (O’Hagan, 1995). Definitions of emotional maltreatment have developed over time, and distinctions between different classifications of psychological and emotional maltreatment have evolved.

**Emotional maltreatment: an historical perspective.**

Interest in the general concept of emotional maltreatment has existed for over a century (Shengold, 1989). Dating back to the late 1800s and early 1900s, there was a great deal of concern for psychological damage resulting from “uncontrollable, terrifying life events,” and at the time many early psychologists considered this to be the major contributor to much of psychopathology (Van der Kolk, 1988, p.1). Although this psychological trauma was never labeled as a consequence of any sort of abusive relationship, it reflects the initial conceptualization of the effects of such behaviours. In accordance with the development of child protection, awareness of problematic actions that result in the mental harm of children grew throughout the 1900s, but was not as well-
established as a specific form of child abuse and neglect, relative to the other abuses (Binggeli, Hart, & Brassard, 2001).

The first official reference to the emotional abuse of children was in 1974, when the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) included the term “mental injury” when defining child abuse as:

…the physical or mental injury, sexual abuse or exploitation, negligent treatment, or maltreatment of a child under the age of eighteen, or the age specified by the child protection law of the state in question, by a person who is responsible for the child’s welfare under circumstances which indicate that the child’s health or welfare is harmed or threatened thereby, as determined in accordance with regulations prescribed by the Secretary. (Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, 1976; originally passed in 1974 as P.L. 93-247)

Following the passing of the CAPTA, interest in the psychological maltreatment of children began to rise. In 1978, Lourie and Stefano presented a workshop on defining psychological maltreatment at the second National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect. In this workshop Lourie and Stefano provided a list of examples of emotional abuse including; scapegoating, denigration, ridicule, shaming, ambivalence, inappropriate expectations for behaviour/ performance, threatened withdrawal of love, threats to safety/ health, physical abuse, sexual abuse, substance abuse, and psychosis (Brassard & Donovan, 2006).

Also around this time, research began to look more closely at emotional maltreatment specifically as a form of child abuse. Giovanni and Becerra (1979) surveyed professionals and lay people to determine concordance of perceived categories
of parental actions, including actions of emotional maltreatment that could potentially be considered abusive. From this study it was found that the community detected five categories of maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, failure to provide, supervision, drugs/sex), whereas surveying of the professional group yielded nine categories of maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, fostering delinquency, supervision, emotional maltreatment, alcohol/drugs, failure to provide, education, parental mores), of which one was emotional maltreatment. In 1980, Rohner and Rohner identified two patterns of parental rejection: 1) behavioral aggression and hostility toward the child, and 2) indifference and the neglect of children’s emotional and physical needs.

In the early 1980s, the U.S. federal government then became involved in defining psychological maltreatment. In 1981, a definition of psychological maltreatment as comprised of emotional maltreatment and emotional neglect was provided for use in the first National Incidence Study (NIS-1) of child abuse and neglect in the United States. Likewise, the American Human Association (AHA) developed standardized definitions of emotional abuse and emotional neglect to aid in the annual collection of national data. At this time, the AHA defined emotional abuse as, “active, intentional, berating, disparaging or other abusive behavior toward the child, which impacts upon the emotional well being of the child” and emotional neglect as, “passive or passive/aggressive inattention to the child’s emotional needs, nurturing, or emotional well being” (1980, p.36-37).

**Definitions and classifications of psychological maltreatment.**

In the early 1980s, the need for the development of adequate operational definitions and classifications was recognized as “the major impediment to progress in addressing
psychological maltreatment” (Binggeli et al., 2001, p. 4). Although psychological maltreatment had been described as comprising two separate forms of maltreatment; emotional abuse and emotional neglect, major attempts remained focused on examining psychological maltreatment as opposed to its separate components, as psychological maltreatment was thought to broadly include both the cognitive and affective dimensions of the maltreatment. In 1983, at the International Conference on the Psychological Abuse in Children and Youth, a generic definition of psychological maltreatment was produced:

Psychological maltreatment of children and youth consists of acts of omission and commission, which are judged on the basis of a combination of community standards and professional expertise to be psychologically damaging. Such acts are committed by individuals, singly, or collectively, who with by their characteristics (e.g. age, status, knowledge, and organizational form) are in a position of differential power that renders a child vulnerable. Such acts damage immediately or ultimately the behavioral, cognitive, affective, or physical functioning of the child. Examples of psychological maltreatment include acts of rejecting, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting, and missocializing. (Binggeli et al., p. 4)


Developed in 1995, the Guidelines for the Psychosocial Evaluation of Suspected Psychological Maltreatment in Children and Adolescents of the American Professional
Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) created a standard by which to identify and categorize psychological maltreatment in children. The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC, 1995, p.702) contended that psychological maltreatment refers to, “a repeated pattern of caregiver behavior or extreme incident(s) that convey to children that they are worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or of value only in meeting another’s needs.” The APSAC also described six main forms of psychological treatment including: spurning, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting/corrupting, denying emotional responsiveness, and mental, health, medical, and educational neglect (APSAC, 1995). Considering that psychological maltreatment consists of emotional abuse and emotional neglect, these categories may be further divided. Thus, the first five categories of psychological maltreatment including spurning, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting/ corrupting, and denying emotional responsiveness may refer specifically to emotional abuse, while the sixth category of mental, health, medical, and educational neglect is reflective of emotional neglect. Similarly, Glaser (1993, 2002) proposed that there are five categories that fall within the definition of psychological maltreatment: (1) emotional unavailability, unresponsiveness, and neglect; (2) negative attributions and misattributions to the child; (3) developmentally inappropriate or inconsistent interactions with the child; (4) failure to recognize or acknowledge the child’s individuality and psychological boundary; (5) failing to promote the child’s social adaptation. According to Glaser (2002), her classification system has greater applicability as it is clinically informed and derived from theoretically and conceptually-based research initiatives. However, after reviewing the different descriptions provided of the various subcategories of psychological maltreatment, Brassard and Donovan
(2006) claimed that the actual content of the separate classification systems are quite similar.

**Current definitions of emotional maltreatment.**

Consistent with the definitions and classification systems of psychological maltreatment previously developed, various definitions, specifically of emotional maltreatment, have been recently proposed. O’Hagan (1995, p.456) defined emotional abuse as, “the sustained, repetitive, inappropriate emotional response to the child’s experience of emotion and its accompanying expressive behavior.” Similarly, Glaser and Prior (1997, p.315) distinguished emotional maltreatment as unique from sexual and physical abuse because, “it refers to a relationship rather than a series of events.” Glaser (2002) further defined emotional abuse as a relationship between a child and caregiver that is characterized by patterns of non-physical harmful interactions. Paavilainen and Tarkka (2003) stated that a child, who is forced to assume adult roles and is burdened with adult responsibility too early in life, also suffers from a form of emotional abuse. Moreover, Iwaniec, Larkin, and Higgins (2006, p.74) stated, “ Instances whereby adults hold excessive power over children and fail to take children’s rights into consideration in a meaningful way are widespread in our society and this has to be regarded as constituting emotional abuse.”

Christensen (1999) differentiated between active and passive emotional abuse. Christensen (1999) defined active emotional abuse as consistently being exposed to verbal insults, threats, and rejections, and passive emotional abuse as subjection to under-stimulation or a lack of security care. Furthermore, Iwaniec (2003) contended that emotional damage can be caused by verbal hostility, denigration, unrealistic expectations,
induced fear and anxiety by threats of abandonment, rejection, all-round deprivation of attention, and by having excessive power over the child.

**Issues with definitions.**

Despite the advances that have been made in standardizing definitions of emotional maltreatment, a recent review of emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect rates reported by the National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, revealed significant variation in the rates of emotional abuse reported across state boundaries relative to other reported forms of abuse (Hamarman, Pope, & Czaja, 2002). After an analysis of differences in sociodemographic variables failed to yield a correlation with the variability of reported emotional abuse, a systematic review of state laws of child emotional abuse was conducted. In this review, difference in prevalence rates of emotional abuse was attributed to a continued absence of consensus on definition (Hamarman et al.).

Adding to the debates around definitions, O’Hagan (1995) argued that contrary to the current identification of emotional maltreatment as a form of psychological maltreatment, emotional maltreatment and psychological maltreatment are similar, but not the same. O’Hagan (1995, p.456) asserted that emotional maltreatment refers to the repeated infliction of “emotional pain upon the child (e.g. fear, humiliation, distress, despair, etc.)” and impairs the child’s emotional development and ability to regulate and moderate emotional experiences. On the other hand, psychological maltreatment is described as “repetitive behavior that damages or impedes the development of important mental (particularly cognitive) faculties, like intelligence, perception, attention, recognition, and memory.”
As mentioned previously, discontinuity between definitions of child abuse and neglect in general exist due to the differing purposes for which the definition or classification was designed (Porter et al., 2006). Looking specifically at the definitions of emotional maltreatment presented above, definitions may differ depending on whether the occurrence of maltreatment is defined by the behaviour itself (i.e. Paavilainen & Tarkka, 2003), or the outcome of a particular behaviour (i.e. Iwaniec, 2003). For the most comprehensive understanding of emotional abuse though, definitions should include both the specific behaviour perpetrated as well as the effects or potential effects of that behaviour.

Finally, it has been acknowledged that many caretakers will convey negative messages to a child at some point in time (Binggeli et al., 2001), so what differentiates poor caretaking from emotional maltreatment? Crittenden and Hart (1989) recommended that child-rearing and interpersonal behaviours should be placed along a continuum ranging from positive and developmentally holistic caretaking practices at the most positive end, to psychological maltreatment (or emotional abuse) representing the most damaging interpersonal behaviours seen at the negative extreme of the continuum. Caretaking behaviours in the mild or moderate negative range would include ‘inappropriate,’ ‘inadequate,’ or ‘misdirected’ caretaking practices (Binggeli et al.). Hamarman and Bernet (2000) also discussed the severity stratification of emotional abuse and defined severity of an emotionally abusive behaviour as dependent on 1) the intent of the perpetrator to inflict harm, and 2) the degree of emotional harm experienced by the child as a result of emotionally abusive behaviour. Other factors that may be considered
when determining severity may include the intensity, frequency and duration of the emotional abuse (Emery & Laumann-Billings, 2002).

**Effects of Emotional Maltreatment**

Along with the attention paid to defining emotional maltreatment, researchers have also examined the negative effects of children’s experiences of emotional abuse. Emotional abuse is thought to be more closely tied to negative outcomes than other forms of abuse (Crittenden, Claussen, & Sugarman, 1994). It has been called “the core issue in child abuse and neglect” (Jellen, McCarroll, & Thayer, 2001, p.624), and may act as the mediating condition of the developmental consequences rendered from the experience of other abuses such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, and physical neglect (Binggeli et al., 2001).

Emotional abuse is thought to be extremely devastating to a child’s well-being due to the debilitating developmental effects and life-long implications (Jellen et al., 2001; Shumba, 2002). The experience of emotional maltreatment in childhood has been found to have serious implications for the child’s mental health and psychosocial functioning (Jellen et al., 2001), and has been suggested to correlate more strongly with depression and anxiety compared to other childhood traumas including physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect (Kent & Waller, 1998).

Other implications of emotional abuse are cited in Binggeli et al. (2001) review of probable effects of psychological maltreatment. This review summarizes the literature conducted up to that time on the effects of the psychological forms of maltreatment and describes the five following categories of negative effects: 1) Interpersonal thoughts, feelings, behaviours (low self-esteem, negative emotion/ life view, anxiety symptoms,
depression, suicide/suicidal); 2) Emotional problems/symptoms (emotional instability, borderline personality, emotional unresponsiveness, impulse control problems, anger, physical self-abuse, eating disorders, substance abuse); 3) Social and anti-social functioning (attachment problems, low social competency, low sympathy/empathy, sexual maladjustment, non-compliance, dependency, aggression/violence, delinquency/criminality); 4) Learning problems (low academic achievement, impairments to learning, impaired moral reasoning); and 5) Physical health (failure to thrive, somatic complaints, poor adult health, high mortality). Similarly, a more recent review categorizes the effects of emotional maltreatment into the following outcomes: Cognitive and Educational Outcomes – low school performance, discipline problems, repeat years; Social and Behavioural Outcomes – behavioural extremes (overly adaptive, overly compliant and engage in activities that are overly demanding), delinquent behaviours – function as attempt to deal with self-esteem issues; Physical and Health Outcomes – smaller, weigh less, developmentally slow; and Interpersonal and Mental Health Difficulties – low mood, hopelessness, low self-esteem, insecure attachment styles, inability to develop positive relationships with others (Iwaniec, 2006).

Further support was provided by the research by Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, and Herbison (1996) who reported increased rates of psychopathology, sexual difficulties, low self-esteem, and interpersonal problems associated with all forms of abuse, including emotional abuse. However, logistic regressions indicated that some of the associations were accounted for by common variables of childhood disadvantage. Conversely, Stevenson (1999) reported the long-term sequelae of child abuse are related
Factors of Risk and Resilience to Emotional Abuse

Considering the negative effects of emotional abuse, factors of risk and resilience affecting a child’s experience of these behaviours have recently become a pursued area of inquiry.

Risk factors.

Black, Smith, and Heyman (2001) conducted a review of the literature on risk factors contributing to the psychological abuse of children. In this review four separate categories of risk were identified including: sociodemographic variables (increased age, lower-income families, “other” race, low number of children), child characteristics (child aggression, child delinquency, child interpersonal problems), parent characteristics (low parental adjustment, parent’s family of origin experiences, parent-child physical aggression), and marital relationship variables (giving and receiving less affection, and greater levels of verbal and physical aggression) (Hemenway, Solnick, & Carter, 1994; Lesnik-Oberstein, Koers, & Cohen, 1995; Sedlak, 1997; Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998; Vissing, Straus, Gelles, & Harrop, 1991).

Likewise, Iwaniec et al. (2006) reviewed factors of risk and resilience in cases of emotional abuse, and stated, “Risk and resilience for emotional abuse involves a complex interplay between processes at work at the level of the individual, the family unit and the wider community” (p.74). In this review, Iwaniec and colleagues reviewed a list of family factors and child factors that were previously identified as risks for emotional abuse. Family factors reviewed include increased family stress, lower income, ‘other’
race, older children, parents’ own history of maltreatment, poor quality family relationships, divorce, physical and mental illness, substance misuse, early parenthood, social exhaustion, and parental personality factors such as aggression, hostility, low self-esteem, social anxiety, less engagement in social activities, dysthymic symptoms, and lower verbal reasoning (Belsky, 1980; Chaffin, Kelleher, & Hollenberg, 1996; Doyle, 2001; Hemenway et al, 1994; Iwaniec, 2006; Iwaniec & Sneddon, 2001; Lesnik-Oberstein et al., 1995; Mitchell, 2005; Sedlak, 1997; Thoburn, Wilding, & Watson, 2000). Child factors that place the child at increased risk of emotional abuse, include birth defects, premature babies, temperamentally difficult children, registered physical or intellectual disability, and disrupted parent-infant bonding processes (Doyle, 1997; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000; Tomison, 1996).

Factors of resilience.

In contrast to the identified variables of risk to emotional abuse, several factors of resilience have been identified that may prevent or reduce the severity of a child’s experience of emotional abuse. Emery & Laumann-Billings (2002) identified the following factors as influencing the consequences of emotional abuse: nature of the abuse, frequency, intensity and duration, nature of the relationship in which the abuse occurs, response of others to the abuse, factors associated with the abuse, and individual characteristics of the victim. As well, Iwaniec et al. (2006) reviewed previous literature on risk and resilience to emotional abuse and divided identified factors of resilience into the following categories; predisposing factors, intrinsic factors, and environmental factors. Examples of predisposing factors of resilience included the nature of the abuse (Emery & Laumann-Billings, 2002), and positive early childhood experiences and
attachment security (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Factors of resilience intrinsic to the victim include positive self-perceptions (Doyle, 2001), external attribution style (Wolfe, 1987), overly resistant versus compulsive compliant behavioural coping strategies (Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989), dispositional characteristics such as an easy temperament, problem-solving skills, planning abilities, outgoing personality, bright, resourceful, ability to mobilize support and plan one’s future purposefully (Clarke & Clarke, 2000; Friedman & Chase-Lansdale, 2002; Rutter, 1989), and positive peer relationships, activities and accomplishments which may increase self-esteem and self-confidence of the child outside that of the abusive relationship (Daniel, Wassell, & Gilligan, 1999). Factors categorized as environmental resilience to emotional abuse include a positive school environment (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995), belonging to different organized clubs or activities (Doyle, 1997), and the presence of a supportive relationship that provides unconditional positive regard for the child and may help a child make sense of how and why abuse occurred (Doyle, 1997; Madge, 1997).

Overall, examination of the literature on emotional maltreatment has highlighted the long-term negative effects of this form of abuse, and factors of risk and resilience to the experience of emotional abuse. As a whole though, research in this area has indicated that concerns still remain surrounding the lack of consensus in definition, and in order for child protection initiatives pertaining to child emotional maltreatment to advance, these concerns must be addressed adequately.

When applying this knowledge to research on emotional abuse in sport, many inferences can be drawn. Just as there is a history to the evolution of child abuse awareness in society and a periodization of child protection initiatives, it is also important
to explore the historical and contextual contributions which may have led to the increased advocacy for the protection of children in sport. The necessity of investigating young athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse is strengthened by the empirical evidence on the negative effects of emotional maltreatment. As well, research on factors of risk and resilience, and current definitions of emotional abuse posed in the general child abuse and neglect literature provide a knowledge base upon which discussions of the phenomenon of emotional abuse in sport can begin.

**Maltreatment in Sport**

Concern for the protection of children in sport has a history that is as old as modern sport itself; however, it is only recently that concern has been established about athletes’ experience of relational maltreatment in this domain. Developments pertaining to issues of maltreatment in sport are categorized into the four interrelated components of advocacy, policy, education, and research. Each will be reviewed in turn.

**Advocacy for Abuse Prevention in Sport**

As sport is considered to be a highly child-populated domain, one would surmise that empirically-based athlete protection measures would exist to reduce the potential for abusive and neglectful experiences of young participants. It is only recently that concern has been established about athletes’ experiences of relational forms of abuse including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect (Kerr & Stirling, 2008) however, advocacy for athlete protection has long existed. Similar to the temporal evolution of child protection initiatives in society, concern for the maltreatment of young athletes’, and advocacy for athlete and child protection in sport, has also derived from several historical and contextual contributions. This section will review some of the
preceding movements in sport that have contributed to the advocacy for recent athlete and child protection initiatives, including: the development of organized youth sport; the development of children’s and athletes’ rights in sport; examinations of the coaching profession; and promotions of positive athlete development models.

**Development of organized youth sport.**

Children’s participation in contemporary sport dates back to its initial conception in the mid to late nineteenth century (Kidd, 1999). However, it was not until the formalized development of youth sport programs in the 1930s, that the phenomena of children in sport became a substantial area of interest (Coakley, 1993). Since this time, several investigations have been conducted on young athletes’ participation in sport. Areas of inquiry related to the protection of children in sport include criticism of the highly competitive climate of youth sport, research on violence and injury prevention in children’s sport, and concerns for the development of elite child athletes.

**Competitive climate.**

One of the greatest criticisms of children’s participation in sport has been the prevailing climate of competition that characterizes the majority of organized youth sports. In the early 1970s Terry Orlick conducted several examinations on children’s sport participation and reported that the over-emphasis on winning outcomes in youth sport decreases the enjoyment of child participants (Orlick, 1972; 1973; Orlick & Botterill, 1975). Ogilvie (1979, p.50) stated, “The motivational force of being evaluated for grading, drafting, and other forms of external judgments begins to take precedence over more wholesome motives.” Similarly, Pooley (1986) suggested that within the competitive sport model the average or moderate athletes are discriminated against, skill
development is inhibited, and too much early pressure on competition leads to burn-out and withdrawal from sport.

The increasing emphasis on winning performances has also been criticized for the many consequences it can have on the athletes’ psychological well-being. Cook and Cole (2001, p.227) explained that competitiveness and a focus on winning creates a dynamic tension between the child and sport:

Competitiveness negates/ challenges the notion of innocence, unselfconsciousness, and the imminent, sentimental value of children that remain central to contemporary constructions of childhood… Who and what children are (or should be) in these constructions stand essentially at odds with dominant discourses and images of fierce competition, winning at all costs, and winning for winning’s sake.

Martens (1978) suggested that competitive sport can negatively affect the mental health of child athletes as evident in their significant levels of reported stress. Passer (1983) reported that some children in sport experience considerable performance and evaluation-related worries. Likewise, Scanlan (1986) cited that sources of stress experienced by young athletes include high competition anxiety, worries about failure, and fears of evaluation.

Concern for the abuse of child athletes within this competitive sport model has also emerged. Orlick (1986, p.171) suggested that the winning-centred philosophies that predominate in children’s sport can create situations for child abuse. “You can walk into an arena, gym, pool, or onto a field any day of the week and still see abuses in children’s
sport. Adults still scream at kids, and in many programs, winning is still a priority in children’s games.”

Highlighting the particular ways in which competitive sport makes young athletes vulnerable to abuse, Cook and Cole (2001) explained that when the goal of winning overshadows other reasons for participating in sport, the participant is lost and the child quickly becomes an instrument of status to be trained and disciplined in order to fulfill a role within the realm of sport. Once this shift in identity occurs, the athlete is no longer viewed as an individual with personal needs and rights, but rather as a tool simply to be used in the pursuit of sporting success, therefore placing the athlete in a position of vulnerability to abuse. Similarly, Donnelly (1993, p. 114) stated:

…the body has become an instrument, an object to be worked on, trained, tuned, and otherwise manipulated in order to achieve performance. Those close to the athlete (coaches, trainers, commentators) and even athletes themselves refer to the athlete’s body as if it or the performance it produces exists distinct from the person (in some cases even substituting for the person). Detachment of the body and its performance from the person legitimizes the use of drugs and other techniques, even violation and abuse, in the name of improved performance.

As well, Tofler and DiGeronimo (2000, p.24) explained that potentially abusive situations can result when adults lose their ability to differentiate their own needs and goals for success from that of the child. “At this level the child is at risk of becoming an objectified and exploited instrument of the adult’s goals. These goals are pursued with little regard for short- and long-term physical and emotional morbidity or even mortality.”
Furthermore, it has been suggested that as pressures to win in sport increase, not only are athletes depersonalized in their sporting environment, but the competitive nature of sport encourages them to do whatever it takes to achieve success. “The greater emphasis on winning will increasingly mean to win at any price” (Crone, 1999, p.321). Bringer, Brackenridge and Johnston (2001, p.229) explained that the highly competitive culture of sport places athletes at risk to abuse. Once competitive athletes are willing to do anything in order to achieve their goals, their vulnerability for abuse is increased by normalizing and justifying various processes they believe will help them attain this goal. “Athletes learn to subject themselves to anything that might assist them in pursuit of medals… Ultimately, these behaviours contribute to an environment that normalizes abuse and disempowers athletes.”

Violence and injury prevention.

Analogous to the research on the competitive climate of children’s sport, and the drive to endure whatever it takes to win, is the literature suggesting an increasing acceptance of violence and aggression in this environment (Smith, 1975). Children’s risk for injury and the problems of violence in contact sports such as hockey have been widely reported (Smith, 1974; 1979; Vaz, 1982). Facial injuries among youth hockey players in the 1960s led to the mandated use of helmets with a face mask (Reynan & Clancy, 1994). Shortly after this, concern was expressed for the increase in hockey-related spinal injuries (Tator & Edmonds, 1984). Consequently child protection initiatives have been implemented in order to reduce the risk of children to injury in this domain. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2000) reviewed the detrimental effects of body-checking in youth ice hockey on the safety of its participants, and recommended
that body-checking be prohibited among hockey players 15 years of age and younger. It was also suggested that a fair play strategy may help decrease the injuries of children that result from penalties and unnecessary contact.

The fair-play concept of scoring ice hockey games, seasons, or tournaments was developed in response to the perceived increase in violence in youth hockey…the system decreases penalties, intimidation, and violence during hockey and creates a climate that promotes fun and player development. (AAP, 2000, p.658)

Orlick (1972; 1973) also reported the need for rule changes, equipment modifications, and changes to the nature of sport in order to reduce the degree of violence and enhance the enjoyment of children’s participation.

In addition to concerns for the acute injury of children in contact sport, there has also been an emerging concern for chronic overuse injuries in youth. Harvey (1986) discussed the increased frequency of overuse syndromes such as plantar fasciitis, achilles tendonitis, anterior leg pain, stress fractures, osgoode-schlatter disease, and patellofemoral syndromes among young athletes. Similarly, Personne (1995; cited in Maes, 2004) reported that 40% of gymnasts ages 6–10 suffer regularly from tendonitis. Eighty-three percent of the top European junior gymnasts have abnormalities of the radius. And in America, two surgeons operated on 26 shoulders of 14 promising swimmers.

Subsequent concern has been expressed about the legality of this risk to injury in youth sport.

In no other occupation or profession, even for adults, would the high rate of burnout, the high rate of overuse injuries, the serious potential for traumatic
injury, [and] the serious possibility of long-term disability (i.e. arthritis or growth-plate damage)...be allowed to pass without question. (Donnelly, 1997, p.394)

As well, it has been suggested that these overuse injuries should constitute physical abuse in youth sport. According to Personne (1995), in the surgeons’ opinions, the overuse syndrome which resulted in the shoulder surgeries of the promising swimmers was a result of society-tolerated athletic abuse (Maes, 2004). Furthermore, David (2005, p.63) referred to chronic overuse injuries in youth sport as the physical exploitation of children and stated, “Competitive sport can expose athletes to at least four types of physical abuse and violence: excessive intensive training; peer violence; physical violence by adults, including corporal punishment; and violence due to participation in competitions.” This in turn, directly relates to criticisms about the intensive training and development of elite child athletes.

**Elite child athletes.**

As participation in youth sport has increased steadily over the years (De Knop, Engstrom, & Skirstad, 1996), so have trends towards early athlete development and the intensive participation of children in competitive sport (Coakley, 2001). Research has indicated that in many sports young elite child athletes are encouraged to spend a substantial proportion of their time training and competing (Donnelly, 1993). As such, concerns have been expressed for the protection of children within the process of early talent identification and elitist development. Specific questions of examination have included; what is the minimum age at which children should engage in intensive training and competition? And, what is the impact of this early competition and specialization on the child’s long-term personal and athletic development?
Research has examined the age at which a child is physiologically, psychologically and socially ready for intensive training and competition. Sharkey (1986) reviewed recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics with respect to the strength and endurance training of children. It was suggested that children should avoid weightlifting until puberty, but that resistance and endurance training exercises are permissible among prepubescent children. Looking at a child’s psychological ability to engage in competitive sport, Passer (1986, p.57) stated, “…it is not until the early elementary school years that most children will have a fairly well-developed orientation to perceive these contests as competition in the same social comparison sense that adults view them…” Finally, from a sociological perspective, Coakley (1986) suggested that until children reach the age of eight, competitive sport activities may not be understood in a way that is motivational or enjoyable to the child athlete. Coakley (1986) however, clarified that sporting competition before this age is not necessarily harmful, but can affect intrinsic satisfaction with the sporting activity.

In addition to analyses of the minimum age at which children are capable of intensive sport participation, several studies have highlighted the risk of dropout from sport that is associated with the intensive training and competition of child athletes (Gould, 1996). Dropout, referring to the premature termination of an athletic career before the athlete reaches his or her performance potential (Cervello, Escarti, & Guzman, 2007), has been attributed to a variety of reasons including conflicts of interest, a perceived lack of ability, pressures of competition, not liking the coach, and not having fun (Gould, 1987; Gould, Feltz, Horn, & Weiss, 1982; Klint & Weiss, 1986). Similarly, Sharkey, (1986, p.53-54) explained,
The major risk [of early intensive training] is the eventual loss of interest that occurs when preadolescent athletes train too hard and compete too often in sport… While it is true that young athletes in swimming, gymnastics, and wrestling seem to prosper with early training, these athletes often leave competition before they achieve physiological maturity.

Furthermore, burnout, referring to a physical, psychological or emotional withdrawal from sport due to chronic stress (Smith, 1986), has been linked to emotional and physical exhaustion, devaluation of the sport, and a reduced sense of accomplishment (Raedeke, Lunney, & Venables, 2002). Likewise, Rushall and Lavoie (1983, p.4) stated,

What is important for a nation’s sporting development is that all potentially good athletes are retained in the system long enough to realize their potential.

Currently, this doesn’t seem to be done since hard work eliminates those who do not have anything but the toughest work tolerance capabilities. The ‘hard work ethic’ is still eliminating many potentially good athletes from participating at the highest levels of sport.

Directly related to the protection of children in sport, concerns for the personal well-being of elite child athletes have also been expressed. Based on in-depth interviews with 45 recently retired high performance athletes and a number of documentary and informal sources of data, Donnelly (1993) discussed the many problems associated with youth involvement in high-performance sport, including troubled family relationships, problems in social relationships, educational problems, physical and psychological problems, excessive out-of-control partying behaviour, the use of performance-enhancing drugs, dietary problems, issues with politics in sport, and problems associated with retirement.
Donnelly (1993) also discussed the vulnerability of elite child athletes to inappropriate behaviours within the coach-athlete relationship, such as unwanted rubdowns, sexual advances, and domination of the body and coercion into unnecessary dieting. At this time however, Donnelly (1993, p.105) admitted, “Although, apparently unhealthy and overly dependent relationships may be relatively common [in children’s high-performance sport], it is difficult to sensitively and accurately determine at what point coach-athlete relationships become abusive.” Likewise, David (2005, p.53) stated, “There is a very thin line that divides intensive training that allows children to fulfill themselves from that in which they are abused and exploited.” As well, Coakley (2001, p.117) expressed concern that there are no enforceable standards regulating the treatment of children in sport, thus placing child athletes in a position of vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.

In 1995, a sports columnist published a book entitled, “Little Girls in Pretty Boxes,” which storied the abusive experiences of elite child gymnasts and figure skaters (Ryan, 1995). Although the evidence gathered for this book was anecdotal, it was based on nearly one hundred interviews and brought to light some of the problems associated with early elite athlete development and the need for protecting child athletes in this environment.

The bottom line is clear: There have been enough suicide attempts, enough eating disorders, enough broken bodies, enough regretful parents and enough bitter young women to warrant a serious re-evaluation of what is done to produce Olympic champions. Those who work in these sports know the tragedies all too well. If the federations and coaches truly care about the athletes and not simply
about the fame and prestige that comes from trotting tough little champions up to
the medal stand, they know it is past time to lay the problems on the table,
examine them and work out a way to keep their sports from damaging so many
young lives. But since those charged with protecting young athletes so often fail
in their responsibility, it is time the government drops the fantasy that certain
sports are merely games and takes a hard look at legislation aimed at protecting
elite child athletes. (Ryan, 1995, p.14)

The participation of children in intensive sport training and competition is further
critiqued in the literature positioning young elite athletes as child athletic workers
(Cantelon, 1981). Donnelly (1997, p.402) also equated the involvement of children in
high-performance sport to the issue of child labour and stated:

There is a growing body of evidence which indicates that specialized intensive
training and high-level competition at an early age are neither advantageous or
necessary…Serious advocacy of the protection of young athletes under the child
labour laws is legitimate…it is also the type of shock treatment that may be
needed to encourage a change in the policies and structures of high-performance
sport so that less emphasis is placed on ‘work’ and early performance.

Furthermore, related to the issue of elite child athletes as child labourers, Donnelly
and Petherick (2004) discussed the issue of trafficking children in elite sport, both issues
which are supported by the development of children’s and athletes’ rights in sport.

**Development of children’s and athletes’ rights in sport.**

Children’s and athletes’ rights in sport derive much of their moral and legal force
from the claims that sport is educational, and are reinforced by preceding human rights
legislation (Kidd & Donnelly, 2000). Accordingly, like the establishment of children’s rights in society, issues surrounding the protection of children’s rights in sport date back to industrialization in the early 1900s.

In 1948, the United Nations (UN) proclaimed the Universal Declaration, which included a segment on human rights in sport (Kidd & Donnelly, 2000). In 1980, an American organization called Sports for People elaborated on the rights of the athlete in sport and proclaimed, “the right to competent concerned coaching, free from the pressure of ‘winning at all costs’” (p. 137). The Court of Arbitration for Sport, established in 1983 by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the National Olympic Committees and the International Sport Federations, then began to encourage elaboration of human rights for athletes, which lead to the disclosure of the right to be free from sexual harassment (Kidd & Donnelly, 2000). In 1989, the United Nations (UN) declared the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. Articles 19 and 34 of the Convention, declare the rights of children to be protected from all forms of abuse, neglect, violence, and sexual exploitation. This Convention however, does not make direct reference to the protection of children in sport, but the articles outlined serve as international standards on child protection that are applicable to all child-populated domains (David, 2005).

In Canada, specific organizations and policies implemented to protect the rights of athletes in sport include for example; the Canadian Olympic Association Athletes’ Advisory Council (Macintosh & Whitson, 1990), AthletesCAN (www.athletescan.com), the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada (Canadian Heritage, 2002a), and inclusion of ethical conduct and athletes’ rights in the Canadian Sport Policy (Canadian
Heritage, 2002b). Likewise, in the U.S., the protection of athletes’ rights has been initiated through policy developments such as the Ted Stevens Olympic and Amateur Sports Act (www.usoc.org), and the Student Athletes’ Bill of Rights (www.ncaa.org).

**Examinations of coaching as a profession.**

Also related to the advocacy for athlete protection, are previous examinations on the role of the coach, including criticisms of the degree of power the coach possess over the athlete and the use of authoritarian coaching practices in sport.

**Power of the coach.**

The coach-athlete relationship has been suggested to be one of the most significant relationships experienced by an athlete in sport (Gervis & Dunn, 2004). Interviews of female Olympic swimmers 6-12 years following retirement indicated that these women still considered their former coaches the most significant influence in their lives (Gustovson & Ogilvie, 1977). Similarly, Ogilvie (1979, p.51) reported, the power in the role of ‘coach’ will be directly proportional to the individual child’s need for acceptance by that adult. In actual consultation experiences in youth sports it has been found that some children will give their coach near divine status.

While it is certainly understandable that a coach possesses a certain degree of influence over an athlete’s athletic endeavours, previous research has stated that the power of the coach often extends beyond the athlete’s training into other areas of the athlete’s life including diet, sleep patterns, and even interpersonal relationships (Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997). This finding is supported by Tomlinson and Strachan (1996) who explained that the coach-athlete relationship is an unbalanced one with the
coaches having power over the athlete by virtue of his or her age, expertise, experience, and access to resources and rewards. Keri Strug, a member of the 1996 US Olympic gymnastics team, was quoted as making the following statement about her coach:

Bela had complete control of everything in your life – your workouts, your eating, your sleeping…I look back now and say, ‘That was crazy. That’s not America.’ but it was Bela’s way or no way, and he was a coach who got you where you wanted to go. (Strug, 1999, p.73)

Likewise, Palframan (1994) claimed that due to the knowledge of the coach, he or she inevitably holds a position of power over an athlete who requires this knowledge to succeed. Also, Brackenridge (1997) asserted that the power of the coach can be likened to that of a priest whose absolute knowledge is not questioned or challenged, and explained that this power is sustained because of the coach’s role in the development and maintenance of success.

As the realm of influence a coach has over an athlete becomes more significant, the potential for abuse in this relationship increases. Tofler, Stryer, Micheli, and Herman (1996, p.281) contended, “In general, they [elite athletes] are in awe of coaches and other authorities, who hold the key to potential success; consequently, they are at risk for abuse.” Likewise, Tomlinson and Yorganci (1997) stated that coaches stand unquestioned in the methods they use to produce champions, and thus, the sport culture and power of the coach renders the athlete vulnerable to frequently tolerated forms of abuse and harassment. While coaches may believe that they are working in the best interests of the athlete, Donnelly (1997) explained how coaches quickly realize that their future career and income is dependent on their athletes’ performances. In this sense, it is
suggested that while the power and control the coach has over the athlete may not be intended to be exerted in a negative manner, pressures on the coach to succeed may result in decisions that go against the well-being of the athlete, which reveals the potentially abusive consequences of this dynamic. Similarly, Ogilvie (1979, p.52) explained that the dependent child in sport is at risk for exploitation. “The children are expected to perform for others’ expectations, others’ goals, not their own. That is exploitation.” Burke (2001, p.232) also stated, “The dependent [coach-athlete] relationship can result in exploitation of the athletes.” Furthermore, Crosset (1986, p.2) referred to the coach-athlete relationship as similar to that of a “master/slave” relationship. In his view, an abusive relationship can result from the lack of independence of the athlete, the high level of control and dominance the coach has over the athlete in this relationship, and the “normalcy” of authoritarian coaching practices.

**Authoritarian coaching practices.**

Tomlinson and Yorganci (1997) examined the domination and control of the coach within coach-athlete relations in competitive sport and revealed that in the sample studied, the major form of authority exerted by the coach was authoritarian, more specifically autocratic. In this approach the coach imposes order through fear, which may be attained physically or psychologically. Those of the authoritarian school of thought would claim that a coach must enforce high expectations in order for an athlete to reach full potential. With this mind-set, yelling or disparaging comments can be viewed as a part of the coaching process that is required to toughen up high-performance athletes so that they may succeed (Palframan, 1994). Keri Strug described her former coach’s authoritarian coaching style as follows: “He knows how to get the most out of each child.
I think a lot of his motivation is fear. When I messed up, I was more worried about what he would think than about messing up” (Raboin, 1999, p.2A). Dominique Moceanu, another member of the 1996 Olympic team, revealed that her father-coach physically and mentally abused her as she trained. “He’d hit me because I was gaining weight or wasn’t doing well in the gym” (Raboin, 1998, p2C). Similarly, a recent report on child abuse in swimming revealed that violent or improper behaviours of a coach are often accepted as a part of the training routine (Boocock, 2002).

As opposed to the traditional autocratic coaching style, others suggest that techniques that encourage and support the athlete are more appropriate (Palframan, 1994). Likewise, Gervis and Dunn (2004) agreed that some coaches’ behaviours can be a threat to the psychological well-being of the athlete and new forms of appropriate coaching practice should be established.

**Promotions of positive athlete development models.**

Initial promotions of the need for more positive athlete development models derived from criticism of the winning-centred culture of sport and contentions that sport participation should contribute to the holistic well-being of a child. Thus, advocacy arose for the implementation of development models in sport relative to the child’s stages of physical, psychological, emotional and social development. Describing the nature of an athlete development model, Terry Valeriote (1986, p.201-202) with the Coaching Association of Canada explained:

The creation of a developmental model implies that because of patterns of growth and development, participants in sport have different needs at various stages of development. In the development model, the appropriate skills, modifications of
the game, degree of competition, and other developmental activities for participants are set forth for each stage of development. The model provides a blueprint of action for all groups involved in the development and delivery of sport skills and knowledge, including administrators, athletes, coaches, parents, and officials.

Referring specifically to the development of children in sport, Valeriote (1986) continued:

Furthermore, a development model uses a holistic approach which addresses the physical, mental, emotional, and social needs of participants. Consequently, in children’s sport, which is a developmental phase and not a time for emphasizing winning, children would be exposed to fun, relaxation and concentration procedures. These skills are required not only for future success in sport, but also for success in coping with life.

Since research began on the nature of children’s participation in sport, the necessity for positive approaches to athlete development has been widely expressed. Ogilvie (1979) reviewed some of the psychological implications of competitive youth sport participation, and cited the need for a child-centred sport model in which the athletic activity has intrinsic value, and reflection on the part of the child is encouraged. In his view,

The sport experience should be designed in a form that would permit every child to develop strong positive feelings about their bodies...contribute positively to the child’s ability to identify more sensitively with others through shared experiences both physical and emotional...[and] should condition attitudes that health
maintenance through some form of physical expression does increase one’s joy of living (Oglivie, 1979, p.58).

Pooley (1978) also criticized the highly competitive model for athlete development that predominated North American sport, and proposed an alternative inclusive model for athlete development. This inclusive model focuses on maximizing opportunities for participation, skill development, and leadership at different stages of a child’s growth and development. This strategy was first designed to reduce competitiveness in Canadian organized youth soccer (Pooley, 1978), and has resulted in the development of mini-soccer, which is characterized by among other modifications, a reduced length of game, and size of playing area. Similarly, Orlick (1986) argued the need for de-emphasizing winning and re-emphasizing fun in children’s sport, and proposed that this could be done by increasing cooperation and reducing evaluation. Orlick (1986, p.174) further acknowledged however, that the nature of children’s sport is “not likely to change dramatically until some very basic societal values and media projections are changed.”

As well, Martens (1986, p.32) discussed the need to “emphasize the value of pursuing personal excellence” as a means for improving the nature of youth sport participation.

Since this time, several researchers have discussed both the positive development of children through sport and positive approaches to athlete development. Based upon the work of Guy (1997), Cowie Bonne (2000) indicated the following four determinants of a child’s healthy development through sport; 1) Protection (age-stage appropriate programming, safe environments); 2) Relationships (awareness and education); 3) Opportunity and hope (multilateral development opportunities, respect for children’s
motivational needs); and, 4) Community (equity and access). Furthermore, Coté, Strachan, and Fraser-Thomas (2008) used the process-person-context-time (PPCT) component of Bronfrenbrenner’s (1999) ecological systems theory to discuss several principles of positive youth development through sport. Coté et al. (2008) suggested the following recommendations: there should be a progression from play to practice in youth sport, and children should have the opportunity to sample several sporting activities; the delivery of youth sport programs should focus on the developmental assets of the child; various aspects of the sporting context should be addressed (i.e. physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support of efficacy and mattering, opportunities for skill building, and integration of family, school, and community efforts), and attention should be paid to how playing and training activities of the child change over time.

Looking more specifically at positive models for the development of children and athletes in sport, two frameworks for athlete development have been recently promoted; the athlete/child-centred sport model, and the long-term athlete development model.

**Athlete/child-centred sport model.**

The model of athlete-centred sport espouses a value-based approach to athlete development by emphasizing developmentally-appropriate child-focused sport. It is both a philosophy and an approach to delivering sport programmes. The basic tenet is that sport should contribute to the overall development of the person: physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994). The health and well-being of the athlete takes precedence over performance outcomes and is the primary focus in the development of policies, programmes and procedures (Canadian
Heritage, 2002b; Clarke et al., 1994). In this way, sport is a vehicle through which personal development occurs, life skills are taught, and ethical conduct and citizenship are pursued (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Advocates of this approach to sport maintain that it is only through full development of the person that optimal athletic performance can be achieved. Performance excellence is thus made possible only through personal excellence (Miller & Kerr, 2002).

In an athlete-centred sport system, adults, such as coaches, parents, administrators and support staff have responsibilities to protect and enhance the well-being of athletes beyond the athlete’s career. These adults are guided by questions such as; how are the decisions we’re making today going to affect this young person as an athlete, and as a person, long after the competitive career is over? And, will these decisions contribute to the development of a well-rounded individual upon retirement? Coaches in particular, play an important role in actualizing an athlete-centred sport system (Miller & Kerr, 2002).

The philosophy of athlete-centred sport is unique from previous promotions of positive youth development in and through sport, in that it recognizes athletes as active participants in the sport experience (Miller & Kerr, 2002). “The key to the athlete-centred approach is a leadership style that caters to athletes’ needs and understandings where athletes are enabled to learn and have control of their participation in sport” (Kidman, 2005, p.16). Proponents of this approach advocate a coach-athlete relationship that functions as a partnership, where planning, decision-making, and evaluation are shared responsibilities (Clark et al., 1994). Similarly, Kidman (2005, p.16) explained that within the framework of an athlete-centred approach, “empowered athletes have the
authority and are enabled to engage actively and fully in shaping and defining their own direction.”

David (2005) outlined the ten following principles as fundamental to a child-centred sport system: 1) Equity, non-discrimination, fairness; 2) Best interests of the child: children first; 3) Evolving capacities of the child; 4) Subject of rights: exercise of rights; 5) Consultation, the child’s opinion, informed participation; 6) Appropriate direction and guidance; 7) Mutual respect, support and responsibility; 8) Highest attainable standard of health; 9) Transparency, accountability, monitoring; and 10) Excellence. Furthermore, Kidman (2005) described key components of the athlete-centred sport model including; the employment of teaching games for understanding, developing thinking and decision making in athletes through questioning, pursuing a sport culture in which athletes gain responsibility for establishing and maintaining goals for themselves or a team, and the use of role rotation on teams to enhance empathy, understanding, trust, and decision making skills.

Relating this framework to issues of child protection, it is only when the athlete is free from physical and psychological harm that she or he is able to pursue personal and athletic development (Kerr & Stirling, 2008). In an athlete-centred approach, the athlete’s needs and rights determine the nature, content and delivery of the sport programme and inform the decisions made by involved adults. This is also true for the long-term athlete development model.

**Long-term athlete development model.**

The long-term athlete development (LTAD) model incorporates many aspects of the athlete/child-centred sport model. The model was created by the Canadian Sport Centre
(2007) to reflect the four goals of the Canadian Sport Policy; enhanced participation, enhanced excellence, enhanced capacity, and enhanced interaction. Within this model, research, principles and objectives are outlined in order to inform approaches to athletic development, which have been categorized into the following seven stages: 1) Active Start, 2) FUNdamentals, 3) Learning to Train, 4) Training to Train, 5) Training to Compete, 6) Training to Win, and 7) Active for Life. These stages of athletic development are based on the maturation level of the athlete, and incorporate the athlete’s physical, mental, emotional and cognitive developmental stages.

The LTAD model addresses the impact of the entire sport continuum on athlete development, and is based on the promotion of a cycle of physical activity, including school sports and physical education, organized sport and podium performance, and recreation and life long participation. The positive experience of the athlete in sport is a strong focus of this model as it is suggested that “a positive experience in sport is the key to retaining athletes after they leave the competition stream” (Canadian Sport Centre, 2007, p.44).

LTAD is also described as being athlete-centred, and like the athlete-centred sport model it is referred to as a “philosophy and a vehicle for change” (Canadian Sport Centre, 2007, p.50). Unlike the athlete-centred sport model though, LTAD does not necessarily include athletes in the process of planning, decision making, and evaluation, and thus the autonomous development of the athlete and positioning of the athlete within relationships of differential power are not considered. As well, while both models consider the holistic development of athletes both in and through sport, it is suggested that the philosophical premises to these approaches differ significantly. LTAD is focused on enhancing the
positive experiences (personal and athletic) of athletes in their pursuit of podium performances. Conversely, the athlete-centred philosophy purports that the achievement of performance excellence in sport is made possible only through an athlete’s holistic development as a person. Despite theoretical differences, both models consider the need for positive experiences of young athletes in sport. Therefore, promotions of both the long-term athlete development model and the athlete-centred sport model have directly contributed to the advocacy for child and athlete protection in this domain.

Overall, this review represents a few of the many inter-related temporal developments in sport that may have contributed to the advocacy for athlete protection. Regardless of the collective sources of influence, this increased advocacy for athlete protection is apparent in the recent preliminary developments in athlete protection policy, education, and research.

**Athlete Protection Policy**

The development of children’s and athletes’ rights in sport, as discussed above, represents the initial stages of athlete protection policy. More specifically, with the introduction of the United Nations International Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, along with the publicity of several youth sport scandals in the 1990s, the priority for child and athlete protection policies in sport has increased recently (Kidd & Donnelly, 2000).

In recent years, the UK and Australia have led the way in implementing a political and programmatic response to relational abuses in sport (Turner & McCrory, 2004). In 1997, the Great Britain Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) started a child protection programme that was introduced into their coaching qualification programme, the
National Vocational Qualification (NVQ). From this point on, coaches were required to have an Enhanced Disclosure Certificate from the UK criminal records bureau in order to work with children in any capacity. All coaches were required to become part of the child protection programme and were mandated to be able to recognize and report incidences of abuse (Turner & McCrory, 2004). In 1999, Sport England, in partnership with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) launched the Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU). This agency acts in addition to other UK government authorities to regulate child protection issues in sport (Turner & McCrory, 2004).

Following in the footsteps of Sport England’s CPSU, Australia has also started to implement child protection policies in youth sport. Recent child protection legislation in Australia places responsibility on clubs with child memberships to ensure the safety of its members (Australian Sports Commission, 1998a, b, c, d). In other nations, preliminary developments have been made with respect to the mandated reporting of relational abuse in sport. The Coaching Association of Canada (2005) has implemented an Harassment and Abuse Policy, which outlines procedures for reporting complaints of harassment and abuse in sport. In this policy it states that any person who thinks he or she has been subjected to harassment under this policy is encouraged to submit a complaint in writing to the authorities of that sport organization. All formal complaints will be investigated, and the CAC will seek out legal counsel, respect Canadian law, and take appropriate recommended actions, as required. This policy however, focuses primarily on the more overt forms of child maltreatment including sexual and physical maltreatments. Furthermore, the Coaches of Canada (1993) has established a Coaching Code of Ethics
Principles and Ethical Standards that outlines ethically appropriate behaviours of coaches in sport, including the principles of respect for participants, responsible coaching, integrity in relationships, and honouring sport. But there currently lacks any measure of accountability to this code.

Despite the preliminary developments discussed above, all national and international sport governing bodies still have a long way to go with respect to the development of child protection policies in sport. For example, the child protection policies established so far in Canadian sport are lacking in accountability and universality. As well, although England currently stands as the benchmark in child protection in sport, these leading policies have been called into scrutiny as they were established in response to grass root pressure for child protection and are not necessarily founded upon knowledge from empirical research initiatives (Brackenridge, 2002). Considering the state of child protection policy in sport, it is not surprising that educational initiatives are also limited.

**Education on Athlete Protection**

While several educational programmes address child protection issues to some extent, a comprehensive structured programme to promote the protection of children in sport, that involves all stakeholders, is lacking. Given the significant role that coaches have in determining the nature of the sport experience for children, current education, accountability and professional development of coaches on issues of child protection are fundamental to the positive development of young athletes. Current Canadian educational programmes addressing issues related to child protection include the National Coaching certification Programme (NCCP), Respect in Sport, RespectED, and True Sport.
The NCCP is a coach training and certification programme for 65 different sports. Programmes are designed for first-time coaches to the high performance coaches. The recently revised NCCP model is made up of three streams including (i) community sport, which is geared to coaches working with entry level or grassroots athletes; (ii) competitive sport which is designed for coaches who are working with young athletes whose skills are beyond a beginner level and who are starting to compete; and (iii) instruction, which is designed to help coaches teach others how to do particular skills across the lifespan (www.coach.ca). The NCCP courses, while reaching a vast number of coaches across Canada, still face several challenges with respect to child protection issues. To begin, the programme does not educate coaches on child protection policies, the specific responsibilities of the coach to ensure the protection of children from maltreatment in sport, or even what constitutes child maltreatment. While the Competition stream of certification includes a unit on ethical decision-making, the Community stream, which involves primarily novice or inexperienced coaches, does not have a requirement for an ethics unit. Instead, each sport may determine the content of this course; this allows each sport to tailor the course to its specific needs, but fails to ensure that education on child protection issues are addressed uniformly. Furthermore, coaches in some organizations are not required to be certified by the NCCP, and therefore many coaches do not participate in the programme. And finally, the courses do not explicitly address relational abuse and neglect prevention, child protection, or athlete protection.

Respect in Sport is a programme that has been developed relatively recently and is designed to deliver an engaging internet-based training to community and sport
organizations that promotes respect and abuse prevention. It aims to provide a simple process by which stakeholders in sport such as recreation leaders, coaches, parents, officials and volunteers may receive certification in risk management and abuse prevention (www.respectinsport.org). Partnered with the Respect in Sport programme, Respect ED is an abuse prevention programme designed for children and youth and delivered by the Canadian Red Cross (www.redcross.ca). The Red Cross also delivers “It’s More Than Just a Game” for coaches, trainers, parents and sport administrators in order to provide a better understanding of abuse, neglect, and harassment and how to protect children and youth in the unique context of sport (www.redcross.ca). Like the National Coaching Certification Programme, the Respect in Sport programme is also limited in several areas. Respect in Sport is not yet offered universally to all coaches across Canada. For those provinces in which this educational programme does exist, with the exception of Sport Manitoba, there is no governing organization mandating the completion of this education. Many of the educational programmes are completed on a volunteer basis, and one would surmise that those who most readily volunteer to participate in child protection education may already value the importance of this education and are in less need of this programme. In order for education programmes to be most effective and create the greatest awareness of child maltreatment issues in sport, education should be mandated by all sport organizations as a compulsory component of coach education, and be made readily accessible to athletes, parents, and other individuals in sport. Furthermore, while it is recognized that Respect in Sport proposes to fill an educational gap, the programme itself is not empirically derived, nor tested for content validity and efficacy.
Also related to the education of child protection in Canadian sport, True Sport is a national movement consisting of communities and groups across Canada that work to promote a positive, meaningful and enriching experience for those who participate in sport. The True Sport movement is a branch of the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport and is based upon four core values: fairness, excellence, inclusion and fun (www.truesportpur.ca). This movement however, lacks concrete programmatic development, and is also not tested or empirically researched.

Other education sources established outside of Canada on child protection in sport include for example, the educational initiatives of Sport UK’s Child Protection in Sport Unit. In the UK, all coaches, staff and volunteers in regular contact with children must complete a minimum 3 hour recognized and accredited course or workshop on child protection training (www.thecpsu.org.uk). Likewise, in the United States of America, the Youth Sports Safety Foundation is an educational organization dedicated to protecting the well-being of youth in sport (www.nyssf.org). While this organization focuses primarily on reducing the severity of injury in sport, issues of child abuse (i.e. emotional injuries in sport and the National Child Protection Act) have been discussed in their educational newsletter. It is interesting to note however, that this education is not formalized, and although background checks have become common place in American youth sports, little is being done to ensure that coaches are educated about issues of child protection. Like the current education programmes in Canada there is no measure of accountability and neither of these initiatives alone provide sufficient education on the issue of child maltreatment in sport. Furthermore, like political developments in child
protection, many of the educational programmes on relational abuse in sport have not been developed from empirical research.

**Research on Relational Athlete Maltreatment**

Despite current developments in policy and education, research indicates that relational child maltreatment remains a significant problem in sport (Kirby & Greaves, 1996; Stirling & Kerr, 2007). To date, the experience of sexual abuse in sport has been the focus of much research, with emotional abuse receiving less attention (Stirling, 2009). Given the focus of this study and the paucity of literature on emotional abuse, an extensive review of the research on sexual abuse in sport will be presented as this may potentially inform the proposed study. It is perplexing that no empirical studies have specifically examined physical abuse or neglect in sport.

**Sexual abuse in sport.**

It has been suggested that research on sexual abuse in sport initiated in 1985 in the UK from the influence of sport feminists’ research on sex discrimination, segregation and harassment in sport (Krauchek & Ranson, 1999; Lenskyj, 1992a, b; 1994), and isolated examinations of coaching misdemeanours (Brackenridge, 1997; 1999). Subsequent investigations were conducted throughout the 1990s on the prevalence of harassment in sport.

**(Sexual) harassment.**

In 1995, Parks and Recreation Ontario interviewed and surveyed 138 participants ages 11-25 and reported that 47% of the respondents had experienced harassment in sport in the form of jokes, gestures or looks that were humiliating, insulting or offensive (MacGregor, 1998). Holman (1995) surveyed 1,100 CIAU varsity athletes and reported
57% of respondents had experienced sexually harassing behaviours. At the 1995 Canada Winter Games in Alberta, the Canada Games Council questioned athletes on their experiences of harassment in sport. 50% of the athletes had reported experiencing at least one form of harassment (11% racial, 16% sexual, 18% verbal, 11% physical). This study was then repeated at the 1997 Canada Games in Manitoba revealing similar results. 47% of athlete respondents reported experiencing some form of harassment in sport (MacGregor, 1998). One of the most well cited investigations of sexual harassment in sport is Kirby and Greaves’s (1996) national-level study on sexual harassment and abuse amongst Canadian Olympians. In this study it was found that of the 266 surveys completed, 19% of the athletes complained of experiencing upsetting sexual comments or advances; and 21.8% experienced sexual intercourse with authority figures in sport. Additionally, 25% of the respondents reported being insulted, ridiculed, made to feel like a bad person, slapped, hit or beaten by these authority figures. In order to assess American female student-athlete experiences of sexual harassment in sport, Volkwein, Schnell, Sherwood, and Livezey (1997) administered a survey to 210 female college athletes from three separate campuses representing Divisions I, II, and III of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Results of this study found over 18% of respondents had experienced derogatory remarks or sexist jokes from their coach, and 2% reported verbal or physical sexual advances of their coach. Furthermore, using the survey administered by Volkwein et al. (1997), harassment experiences related to sport were reported by 14% of 301 surveyed Israeli female student-athletes (Fejgin & Hanegby, 2001).
Sexual abuse.

In 1997, Brackenridge published an article on women’s experiences of sexual abuse in sport. In this paper Brackenridge proposed the Sexual Discrimination/Abuse Continuum in which the stages of sex discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual abuse were construed along a continuum of sexual violence and institutionalization. This article described sex discrimination as various institutionalized oppressions that contribute to a “chilly climate” in sport. Sexual harassment included a combination of institutional and personal issues. It referred to “unwanted attention” experienced by the athlete, and included such behaviours as sexually oriented comments, bullying or vandalism on the basis of sex, and inappropriate physical contact (fondling, pinching, and kisses). Sexual abuse was then defined as “groomed or coerced” sexual activity including groping, rape, and indecent exposure, and was described as mainly personal behaviours (Brackenridge, 1997, p.116).

Evidence of the existence of sexual abuse in sport has been reported in several studies. Investigation of 253 student-athletes and 275 coaches on perceptions of interpersonal coach-athlete relations reported 2% of the athletes sampled had experienced sexual abuse in sport, and 3% of the coaches admitted to having been intimately involved with an athlete under the age of 18 years (Toftegaard Neilson, 2001). Survey analysis of the prevalence of sexual abuse in organized competitive sport in Australia reported that of the 2,118 respondents, 13% of female athletes and 6% of male athletes reported experiences of sexual abuse in the sport environment (Leahy, Pretty, & Tenenbaum, 2002). Moreover, Fasting et al. (2003) compared the prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse of 572 Norwegian elite female athletes with a sample of 574 age-matched
controls. Results revealed no overall differences between the groups, but the prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse in athletes increased with age. Forty-two percent of athletes over the age of 23 reported experiences of sexual harassment and abuse in sport compared to 17% of athletes 15-18 years of age. Female athletes had experienced abuse from both men (45%) and women (15%), and the prevalence rate of athletes’ experiences of sexual harassment and abuse from male authority figures in sport was greater than what the controls had experienced in a workplace or educational setting.

**Risk factors.**

Along with the recent emergence of research defining the problem of sexual abuse in sport, quite a few studies have been published identifying specific risk factors for athletes’ experiences of sexual abuse. Several models of developmental risk factors for sexual abuse in sport have been presented.

Brackenridge (1997) explained that various stakeholders are involved in the occurrence of sexual abuse in sport, including the abusers, children, parents, coaches, social services/police, sport club/organization, and the national coaches’ organizations. Based on the individual accounts of 90 sexually abused female athletes, Brackenridge (1997) categorized trends of risk into the following: 1) Coach variables - sex (male), age (older), size/physique (larger), accredited qualifications (good), reputation (high), previous record of sexual abuse (unknown/ignored), trust of parents (high), commitment to codes of ethics (low), etc., 2) Athlete variables – sex (female), age (younger), size/physique (smaller), status (high), self-esteem (low), medical problems (med/high), relationship with parents (weak), awareness of sexual abuse (low), devotion to coach
Brackenridge (1997) further related the perpetration of sexual abuse against women in sport to Finkelhor’s (1984) four preconditions of sexual abuse and Wolf’s (1984) cycle of offending. Finkelhor (1984) explained the various preconditions that an abuser must overcome in order for sexual abuse to occur: motivation to sexually abuse, internal inhibitors, external inhibitors, and overcoming resistance of the girl/woman. It was therefore suggested that in order to prevent sexual abuse in sport particular attention should be paid to identifying and strengthening inhibitors of the external sport environment and the athlete (Brackenridge, 1997). Wolf (1984) described a cycle of offending in which an offender goes through the following stages in order for sexual abuse to occur: poor self-esteem, expects rejection, withdraws, unassertive, compensatory fantasies, sexual escapism, grooming, and outlet. The act of abuse is then followed by transitory guilt and once the offender is able to push the guilt away the cycle begins again. In contrast to this paedophiliac profile identified, sexually abusive coaches were found to have high-self esteem, good personal skills, assertiveness, and high levels of sexual confidence (Brackenridge, 1997). Brackenridge (1997) therefore proposed that within this cycle, the abusers’ profiles in sport were more characteristic of a predator rather than a paedophile. The only two common stages in the cycle of offending within sport and general society were grooming and outlet, which suggest that particular attention should be paid to identifying risk factors associated with these predisposing stages.
Drawing on the work of Leberg (1997), Fasting and Brackenridge (2005) described three different types of grooming that occur in sport: physical grooming, psychological grooming, and grooming of the social environment. Inappropriate touching that appears to be legitimate for the sporting event is referred to as physical grooming. An example of this may be inappropriate contact while spotting an athlete in gymnastics or during the manipulation of an athlete’s body into a required stance in figure skating or dance. Psychological grooming involves emotionally establishing situations of vulnerability to abuse. This may be done through establishing trust and rapport with an athlete and the athlete’s family. Finally, grooming of the social environment refers to the establishment of power of the perpetrator within a particular environment. An example of this in sport would be the building of a successful reputation of a coach which in turn leads to his/her unquestioned power in the sport domain (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005).

Specific examinations of the grooming process of sexual exploitation in sport have suggested four stages: 1) Targeting a potential victim, 2) Building trust and friendship, 3) Developing isolation, control and loyalty, and 4) Initiation of sexual abuse and securing secrecy (Brackenridge, 2001b). Likewise, Toftegaard Neilson (2001) proposed a grooming process model for sexual abuse in sport, including three interrelated phases: confidence, seduction, and abuse. According to Toftegaard Neilson (2001), these phases correspond with the following temporal categories of coach behaviour: directly instruction-related behaviour, indirectly instruction-related behaviour, non-instruction-related behaviour, and verbal/ physical advances and/or exercising power behaviour.

Furthermore, based on the interview data of sexually abused male and female athletes from the Netherlands, Cense and Brackenridge (2001) examined risk for
grooming within the overall abusive relationship. Influenced by the previous work of
Brackenridge (1997), Cense (1997), and Finkelhor (1984), Cense and Brackenridge
(2001) proposed a model on the temporal sequence through which sexually abusive
coach-athlete relations occur: Initial stages - motivation of perpetrator, overcoming inner
inhibitions, and overcoming general external barriers; Victim selection - select victim,
overcoming specific external barriers and test stage: Grooming; Abuse - overcoming
resistance of athlete and development/continuation of abuse; End of abuse; and
Victimization - harassment after abuse. A list of temporal and developmental
corresponding components and indicators of risk were identified relative to the coach,
athlete and sport situation. Variables of risk identified in this project that had not been
discussed previously included, a coach’s incapability of dealing with his own
homosexuality (typically male victims), negligence or lack of attention in family/parental
absence, isolation from fellow-athletes, failure to recognize the abuse, institutional denial,
and an athlete’s fear of the losing the coach. The development of a close relationship
between an athlete and a partner and/or friends was identified as factor of intervention
and resilience to abuse in the coach-athlete relationship.

In addition to the models of risk presented above, other individual factors of risk
identified in the literature include athletic maturation of the athlete, parents’ trust of the
explained that the risk for sexual abuse in sport is dependent on the athletic maturation of
the athlete. It was suggested that athletes are most vulnerable to sexual abuse during their
peak athletic maturation, the period of time in which they have the most at stake in terms
of their careers. This is referred to as the stage of imminent achievement. It is then
proposed that the risk for sexual abuse is highest among athletes in sports where the stage of imminent achievement coincides with age of sexual maturity, such as gymnastics and figure skating.

In 1998, Brackenridge examined the role of parents in preventing sexual abuse in sport and reported that parents often trust coaches uncritically, which places young athletes in a position of vulnerability. It was reported that less than 45% of the parents surveyed knew of the coach’s qualifications, and 80% were unaware of whether or not the coach was bound by a code of ethics.

Examination of the prevalence of sexual harassment across 56 different Norwegian sport disciplines was conducted by Fasting, Brackenridge, and Sundgot-Borgen (2004). A total of 572 female athletes, aged 15-39, who qualified for the Norwegian national team at either the junior or senior level completed a questionnaire that included an 11-item list of sexual harassment descriptions. In this study, Fasting et al. (2004) reported that female athletes who participate in traditionally masculine sports such as basketball, football, and ice hockey experience more sexual harassment than females in other historically more feminine sports.

As well, the culture of sport itself has been discussed as a factor of risk to abuse. Bringer et al. (2001, p.229) reviewed aspects of sporting subculture that make experiences of sexual exploitation in sport “‘part of the game’ and something ‘you just put up with.’” According to Bringer et al., the risk for sexual abuse in sport is increased by the unquestioned power of coach, single-minded pursuit of excellence, normalization/ambiguity of sexually harassing or abusive behaviours, the morally good image of sport and desire to maintain such an image, and the often apolitical standpoint
of many voluntary sport organizations. Martin (2003) surveyed 134 division II tennis players asking them to identify 20 perceived sexually abusive behaviours in sport and reported that the behaviours ranked by the athletes as appropriate were contrary to the researchers’ expectations, also demonstrating the ambiguity of appropriate and inappropriate behaviours in sport as a risk for abuse. Further supporting the culture of sport itself as variable of risk, Krauchek and Ranson (1999) proposed that sexual harassment and abuse of girls and women in sport exists as a means of upholding masculine hegemony in the face of increasing participation and challenge by women. Calder (2000) elucidated the need for “a more holistic, ecological interpretation of sexual abuse which locates risk within the social and cultural systems that surround the individual from the ontogenic to the macro” (cited in Brackenridge, 2003, p.6). Brackenridge (2003) then categorized sport or situational variables of risk into; normative variables that relate to the culture of the activity or sport organization; constitutive variables that are strictly embedded within the culture of sport; and other variables including age relations, specific locations, sport specificity/ sub-cultural norms.

The risk for abuse in sport is further enhanced by the general reluctance to report inappropriate coaching behaviours. Bringer, Brackenridge and Johnston (2002) conducted a series of focus groups with 19 male coaches about their perceptions of appropriateness with regard to coach-athlete sexual relations. This study reported that in general, the coaches perceived a higher standard of appropriateness in the coach-athlete relationship for themselves than the standards by which they would judge other coaches. Furthermore, it was indicated by participants of this study that they would be reluctant to intervene if they considered a peer coach to be acting inappropriately.
Emotional abuse in sport.

In contrast to the literature on sexual abuse in sport, examinations of athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse have been quite limited. Preliminary exploration of the experience of other relational abuses in sport occurred in the mid 1990s alongside the investigations of harassment in sport. In order to inform the athletic department about student-athlete satisfaction and potential problems in the programme, Gravely and Cochran (1995) developed a Student Athlete Survey, which was administered to 110 and 103 U.S. intercollegiate student-athletes in 1994 and 1995 respectively. Among other aspects, the survey assessed the frequency of physical, verbal and mental abuse by coaching staff. Results of the study showed that 3% of respondents reported having been subjected to physically abusive coaching techniques, and 22% of respondents reported experiencing coaching techniques that were verbally or mentally abusive (Gravely & Cochran, 1995).

Research specifically on athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in sport has not emerged until recently. Gervis and Dunn (2004) conducted a study on the prevalence of emotional abuse of elite athletes by their coaches. Exploratory, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 former elite child athletes. Data from the investigation were interpreted to suggest that “the behavior of some coaches is a threat to the psychological well-being of elite child athletes” (p.215). Shouting, belittling, threats, and humiliation were found to be the most common forms of emotional abuse, with more abusive behaviours reported once the athletes reached the elite level (Gervis & Dunn, 2004). While this research is arguably the first research conducted specifically on emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship, it is limited in several ways. Given the
n novelty of this field of research, a qualitative approach to investigation is warranted. However, this study was not grounded in any particular methodological tradition leading to scrutiny of the methods of data collection and analysis employed, and highlighting the lack of academic rigor that this emerging area of inquiry merits. Instrumental aspects of the study design, such as the application of Garbarino, Guttman, and Seeley’s (1986) list of key behaviours indicative of “emotional abuse” in parent-child relations to the examination of emotional abuse in sport is problematic given that this list was initially developed to identify different categories of psychological maltreatment - a concept that is related, but not equivalent to emotional abuse, and was defined somewhat differently at the time that the research was conducted. This is an especially prudent point given that Garbarino et al.’s (1986) framework is quite dated and has itself been criticized in more recent literature (APSAC, 1995; Binggeli, Hart, & Brassard, 2001; Glaser 1993; 2002). Furthermore, the application of this framework to the coach-athlete relationship and the use of this framework as the foundation for the interview guide was not empirically supported using related research in sport. The study claims to investigate the prevalence of emotional abuse of elite child athlete by their coaches and interprets the research data providing numerical frequencies based on the retrospective accounts of 12 athletes. Finally, while much of the discussion of the study findings has been supported by later research on emotional abuse in sport, within this study the scope of the discussion extends beyond the findings presented.

Accordingly, subsequent examination of athlete’s experiences of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship was conducted using grounded theory methodology, in attempt to develop a basis for our understanding of emotional abuse within the context of
sport (Stirling, 2007). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 retired, elite, female swimmers and data were analyzed inductively using a grounded theory approach. In this research it was reported that emotionally abusive behaviours of the coach reportedly occurred in three ways: through physical behaviours (i.e. throwing objects at an athlete without hitting the athlete), verbal behaviours (degrading comments, name-calling, and verbal acts of belittlement and/or humiliation), and the denial of attention and support (i.e. intentionally ignoring the athlete or refusing to provide adequate feedback). According to the athletes, the denial of attention and support had the most negative effect, followed by the experience of verbal emotionally abusive behaviours. Interestingly, the physical behaviours had the least negative effect (Stirling & Kerr, 2008).

In addition to preliminary research on the various forms of emotional abuse in sport, a model of the process by which athletes experience emotional abuse across the course of their careers was proposed, and suggested that an athlete’s experience of emotional abuse is related to her cultural acquiescence and perception of performance (Stirling & Kerr, 2007). Athletes’ retrospective accounts of their experiences of emotional abuse over time were categorized roughly into the phases of normalization and rebellion, referring to changes or shifts in the athletes’ acquiescence or lack or acquiescence to the culture of elite sport. It was reported that during the bulk of the athletes’ careers, their experiences of emotional abuse are normalized. Conversely, at the end of the career, corresponding to athletes’ plateau or decline in perceived performance, athletes start to question the culture of elite sport and rebel against their coaches’ emotionally abusive behaviours (Stirling & Kerr, 2007).
Most recently, research has been conducted on abused athletes’ perceptions of the coach-athlete relationship. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine previously abused athletes; four retired elite female gymnasts and five retired elite female swimmers. Consistent with previous research, the participants reflected upon the significant power held by the coach over the athlete. The findings contributed to existing literature by revealing specific ways in which the coach’s power influenced the athletes’ experiences of abuse and their ability to report incidences of maltreatment (Stirling & Kerr, 2009).

Although this body of research extends on the previous work of Gervis and Dunn (2004), it is also limited in several ways. The work of Stirling and Kerr (2007; 2008; 2009) is limited by the small number of female-only participants. The studies lack diversity in the type of sports represented. In all of these studies, the athletes had participated previously in individual sports characterized by a young age of imminent achievement. The specific research questions asked in the investigations on emotional abuse in sport thus far have been quite preliminary in nature, focusing almost exclusively on gleaning descriptive knowledge about the occurrence of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. As well, these studies have only examined athletes’ perspectives on their experiences of emotional abuse in sport, and have failed to explore the perspectives of other stakeholders in sport.

Collectively the research to-date on emotional abuse in sport has reported that emotional abuse can occur in the coach-athlete relationship (Gervis & Dunn, Stirling & Kerr, 2008), that is it often normalized in the sport environment (Stirling & Kerr, 2007), and that given the power of the coach in the coach-athlete relationship, athletes may be
reluctant to report abusive experiences (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). In order to inform the
development of future prevention and intervention initiatives in sport, a better
understanding of the experience of emotional abuse, including the processes by which it
is initiated and sustained, is required. As well, given that research to-date on emotional
abuse in sport has focused exclusively on athletes’ perspectives, research on the
reflections of parents and coaches on athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse is
warranted.

Summary of Literature

Interest in child maltreatment began during the World Wars as a moral concern for
orphaned children and children in impoverished families, and then grew to include
concern over abusive and neglectful behaviours directed at children (Giovannoni, 1989).
Since this time, various definitions and classifications of child abuse and neglect have
been proposed. In general, forms of child maltreatment can be roughly categorized into
relational and non-relational maltreatments (Crooks & Wolfe, 2007). The four major
recognized forms of relational child maltreatment include; neglect, emotional abuse,
sexual abuse, and physical abuse. These maltreatments are referred to as “relational
disorders” as they “occur within the context of a critical relationship role,” in which the
relationship has significant influence over the child’s sense of safety, trust, and
fulfillment of needs (Crooks & Wolfe, 2007, p.17). Other forms of maltreatment that do
not occur within critical relationships, are referred to as non-relational maltreatments, and
include for example: child corruption/ exploitation, sexual exploitation/ prostitution, child
labour, abuse/ assault by persons not known closely to the child, and institutional child
abuse and neglect (Wachtel, 1999).
Just as there is a history to the evolution of child protection in society, the advancement of athlete protection initiatives and research on athletes’ experiences of maltreatment in sport must be examined within the greater societal and cultural context in which they have been developed. Preceding movements in sport such as the development of organized youth sport, the development of children’s and athletes’ rights in sport, examinations of the coaching profession, and endorsements of positive athlete development models, have contributed to the advocacy for athlete and child protection initiatives in sport. However, despite this increased advocacy, it is apparent that much improvement is required to protect athletes from maltreatment in this environment.

Research clearly indicates that relational child maltreatment remains a significant problem in sport (Kirby & Greaves, 1996; Stirling & Kerr, 2007; 2008). To date, the experience of sexual abuse in sport has been the focus of much research, with emotional abuse receiving far less attention. Given that research on emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship is relatively new, many important theoretical and practical questions remain. Research is required on the process by which emotional abuse is initiated and sustained. Additionally, as previous investigations of emotional abuse in sport have focused exclusively on athletes’ perspectives on the topic, research on the reflections of parents and coaches on athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse is warranted.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of my dissertation was to explore the process by which emotional abuse occurs and is often sustained in sport, and to examine athletes’, parents’, and coaches’ reflections on emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship.
Operational Definitions

For the purposes of this investigation, the following definition of emotional abuse was employed: “Emotional abuse refers to a pattern of non-contact deliberate behaviours by a person within a critical relationship role that have the potential to be harmful to an individual’s [emotional] well-being” (Stirling & Kerr, 2008, p.178). Emotional abuse is a relational disorder and refers to a pattern of harmful behaviours that exist in a critical relationship role. In sport, potential critical relationships may include the relationship between a parent and an athlete, or the relationship between a coach and an athlete. In order for a coach-athlete relationship to constitute a critical relationship, it must be similar to that of a parent-child relationship. In order for a critical coach-athlete relationship to exist the coach must be in a prescribed position of authority over the athlete and be responsible for the welfare of the athlete in some capacity. As well, the athlete must depend on the coach for his or her sense of safety, trust, and fulfillment of needs. Importantly, it is the pattern of behaviours occurring within a critical relationship that constitutes abuse. The same behaviours experienced by an athlete in isolation, on a single occasion or in the absence of other harmful behaviours, or outside of a critical relationship would not constitute emotional abuse. As well, the term emotional abuse is distinguished from neglect as in cases of neglect the harmful behaviour is not executed intentionally by the coach. Conversely, in cases of emotional abuse, while the emotionally abusive behaviours may not be used with the intent to cause harm, the behaviour that causes harm is executed intentionally. Emotionally abusive behaviors within the coach-athlete relationship may include demeaning comments, ridicule,
belittlement, name-calling, humiliation, physical threats and intentionally ignoring an athlete, as some examples.

In this study, elite athletes’ and the parents and coaches of elite athletes’, were interviewed about their experiences and reflections on emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. For the purposes of this study, “elite” was defined as an athlete who competes or trains at the national and/or international level(s). Elite athletes were chosen because it is at the elite level of sport where the greatest pressures to succeed exist, and where athletes may be the most vulnerable to experiences of emotional abuse (Gervis & Dunn, 2004).

Finally, while the terms child maltreatment and child protection have been used throughout the literature review in order to reflect the statements and positions of other authors’ research accurately, it is my opinion that vulnerability to abuse in sport, especially emotional abuse, it not limited to child athletes. Therefore, for the remainder of this dissertation, the terms athlete maltreatment and athlete protection will be employed.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Methodology

A qualitative research design was used to pursue the research question. Qualitative research seeks to study phenomena in their natural settings and explore and interpret the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Paraphrasing Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg (1992, p.4), Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p.7) stated:

Qualitative research is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counterdisciplinary field. It crosscuts the humanities and the social and physical sciences. Qualitative research is many things at the same time. It is multiparadigmatic in focus. Its practitioners are sensitive to the value of the multimethod approach. They are committed to the naturalistic perspective, and to the interpretive understanding of human experience. At the same time, the field is inherently political and shaped by multiple ethical and political positions.

The nature of qualitative inquiry is two-fold. “On the one hand, it is drawn to broad, interpretive, postexperimental, postmodern, feminist, and critical sensibility. On the other hand, it is drawn to more narrowly defined positivist, postpositivist, humanistic, and naturalistic conceptions of human experience and its analysis” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.4). This form of inquiry allows for an in-depth analysis of a particular phenomenon. In view of my research objective, and the value of using qualitative methods for the study of human experiences, I believe that this form of inquiry was most suitable for this investigation.

In conducting qualitative inquiry, Burrell and Morgan (1979) explained that before you can understand the nature of social phenomena, there are four major assumptions
about the conception of social reality that must be addressed; ontological assumptions, epistemological assumptions, assumptions regarding the nature of human behaviour, and methodological assumptions (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Ontological assumptions address the realist/nominalist debate in asking questions such as; what is the nature of reality? And, is the world knowledgeable as is, or is knowledge created by the meanings we place on the world around us? Epistemological assumptions are broadly categorized into positivist and anti-positivist epistemological perspectives, and address the nature of knowledge about reality as either an objective truth or a collection of subjective experiences. Models of human nature exist along a continuum ranging from determinism – people respond to their environment, to voluntarism - people are initiators of their own actions. And finally, assumptions about methodology address how to make meaning out of reality. Nomothetic methodological approaches seek to abstract reality, often using mathematical or statistical analysis, whereas ideographic methodological approaches are concerned with the representation of reality, commonly depicted through analysis of language and meaning (Cohen & Manion, 1994).

Reflective of my personal assumptions and beliefs, this section will describe the ontological and epistemological perspectives upon which the research is founded, and the methodological approach I used to address the research purpose. As well, I propose the criteria by which the quality of the inquiry should be evaluated.

**Ontological and Epistemological Perspectives**

Ontology and epistemology respectively seek to describe the nature of reality and how we come to know the world around us. The ontological and epistemological perspectives I uphold in my research are discussed in turn.
Ontological perspective.

In upholding a relativist or nomonalist ontological approach, I believe that there are multiple dimensions to our understanding of phenomena in the world around us. Meaning making therefore, is produced along a continuum of understanding that is dependent on the different ways in which experience is construed and represented. Although knowledge of the world is not made up of a bunch of discrete categories or dichotomies, it is my view that categorization and dichotomization can help in our understanding of complex phenomena. Thus, in categorizing my ontological perspective, I choose to uphold a postmodernist ontological paradigm in my research.

Postmodern thinking emerged from the humanities in the 1960s and permeated the social sciences in the 1980s and 1990s (Creswell, 1998). The basic concept of postmodern thinking is that “knowledge claims need to be set within the world today and within the multiple perspectives of class, race, gender and other group affiliations” (Creswell, 1998, p.79). Working within the postmodern perspective I present the standpoint that there is no such thing as an objective ‘Truth,’ but rather that multiple realities may exist as a function of multiple perspectives. By contending that the knowledge produced from the inquiry will provide one form or representation of the specific reality of emotional abuse in sport, I acknowledge that not all athletes experience abuse in sport, and that not all athletes’ experiences of abuse are the same. Furthermore, while the intent of my research is to propose a theory describing how emotional abuse is initiated and sustained in sport, by situating the research within a postmodern perspective I do not assume universality of any model across all contexts and cultures of sport.
Epistemological perspective.

Consistent with a relativist ontological perspective, I have chosen to employ constructivist and symbolic interactionist epistemological perspectives to describe my beliefs surrounding the nature of knowledge.

Similar to postmodernism, constructivism assumes that there are multiple realities where meanings and representations are socially constructed within each individual (Bruner, 1990). Constructivism asserts that knowledge is built from an individual’s construct or processing of certain stimuli in the environment (Bruner, 1990). In a constructivist view, knowledge is not 'about' the world, but rather 'constitutive' of the world (Sherman, 1995). Therefore, there is no such thing as an objective truth, only approximated realities that are created and confined by surrounding social constructions and interactions within the environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In attending to this epistemological perspective, I realize that the knowledge produced in the study will be a function of the interaction between the participants and myself, thus I have acknowledged my presence as a researcher within the research process by alluding to my own personal contributions to the investigation. Quite analogous to constructivism, is the epistemological perspective of symbolic interactionism.

Symbolic interactionism assumes, “meanings are created as a person interacts with others and redefines meanings in the light of new situations and interpretations by self and others” (Swanson, 1988, p.492). According to Berg (2007, p.13), within a symbolic interactionist epistemological view:

Objects, people, situations, and events do not in themselves possess meaning.

Meaning is conferred on these elements by and through human interaction… To
understand behavior, one must first understand the definitions and meanings and the processes by which they have been created. Human behavior does not occur on the basis of predetermined lockstep responses to preset events or situations. Rather, human behavior is an ongoing and negotiated interpretation of objects, events, and situations.

With this ideological perspective, I uphold the view that the athlete continually negotiates the boundaries of the relationship with the coach, and in this sense is not a passive victim to abuse. Rather, the athlete actively participates in the production of the environment in which the nature of sport contributing to the potential for abuse is created, and is involved in the negotiation of this behavior as acceptable or problematic. “In focusing on the interaction itself as a unit of study, the symbolic interactionist creates a more active image of the human being and rejects the image of the passive, determined organism” (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.33). By using the interactionist approach, my inquiry attempted to understand the process by which emotional abuse occurs and is sustained in sport, and also examined the contributing roles of the athletes, coaches, and parents within this process. Coinciding with my ontological and epistemological perspectives is the methodological approach in which I conducted my research.

**Methodological Approach**

Within qualitative inquiry there are various theoretical approaches that can be used to address the methodological design of the research. Each theoretical approach can then be examined within a particular frame of analysis. The specific tradition of inquiry and analytic lens that was used for this study is addressed below.
Tradition of inquiry.

This study was placed with the qualitative tradition of grounded theory. The tradition of grounded theory was first articulated by the sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, in 1967. In their view, theories should be grounded in data from the field (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Since its induction in sociology in the 1960s, this tradition of inquiry has also gained popularity in nursing, education, and other social fields (Creswell, 1998). In recent years however, Glaser and Strauss have differed in their approaches to grounded theory, with Anselm Strauss and Julia Corbin (1998) promoting a more systematic approach to grounded theory than what is proposed in Barney Glaser’s (1998) descriptions of the grounded theory tradition. This study used the methodological tradition described by Strauss and Corbin, and thus the remainder of this section will discuss their perspective on grounded theory.

According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), the aim of grounded theory is to produce a theory that is derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). “Grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.12). Martin and Turner (1986) explained grounded theory as “an inductive, theory discovery methodology that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data.” This research approach assumes that knowledge is grounded in individual experiences and interpretations. The major difference between grounded theory and other research methods is its specific approach to theory development. Therefore, unlike other forms of
inquiry, grounded theory does not test a hypothesis but rather allows theory to emerge from the experiences of the participants. Furthermore, as will be reflected in the methods of my investigation, grounded theory suggests that there should be a continuous interplay between data collection and analysis allowing for the plausible identification of relationships among concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

**Analytic lens.**

In addition to defining the tradition of inquiry in which a study is situated, Schram (2006) emphasized the importance of linking the research problem and perspectives (ontological, epistemological, and methodological) with the broader purpose for which the study is being conducted. Assertion of a researcher’s analytic lens is meant to elucidate the influence of the greater purpose of the investigation on the research process (Schram, 2006). The analytic lens I hold on this inquiry is a critical ecological lens.

Critical inquirers assert that “researchers should engage in inquiry with the expectation that their work will be instrumental in bringing about change… It moves researchers beyond a concern for describing what is and pushes them and others toward the question of what could be” (Schram, 2006, p.45). This advocative lens is quite applicable to my research as the broader goal of this study is to advance our understanding of emotional abuse in sport in order to support the development of future athlete protection initiatives. It is my hope that the long-term implications of this research will help to ensure that the overall psychological health of children and adolescents is enhanced through participation in elite sport, and that incidences of emotional abuse that have gone unnoticed in the past will be acknowledged and prevented in future generations of competitive athletes. In using a critical lens on my
research, the discussion of the research findings focus on the applied implications of the research, specifically on changes that must occur within sport in order to protect athletes from experiencing emotional abuse in sport.

The ecological analytic lens, “builds upon the basic notion that individuals are embedded in and affected by a social context that influences their behaviours” (Schram, 2006, p.50). Therefore, as mentioned previously when discussing the role of symbolic interactionism in the research process, my analysis of the research data focused on the contributing roles of the athletes, parents, and coaches within the process of initiating and sustaining emotional abuse in sport.

Connecting the critical and ecological lenses, in the discussion section I attempted to articulate the applied implications of the research relative to the need to implement change at all levels of the sport organization. Similarly, describing how a researcher could advocate for change when focusing on contextual contributors to individual or institutional behaviour, Schram (2006, p.51) stated, “Change, if and when it comes, is something that is best considered as being introduced in all levels and structures simultaneously.”

Now that I have discussed the nature of the inquiry and interpretive paradigms in which this study was situated, I will briefly propose the quality criteria that should be used for evaluating this research.

**Quality Criteria for Evaluation**

Research in general exists within a discipline of inquiry. This discipline of inquiry is part of a community of practice with both explicit and implicit standards of what constitutes research. Ultimately, community standards distinguish research from other
forms of inquiry by defining specific principles of research within an area of practice. Cohen and Manion (1994) discerned research from other forms of inquiry such as experience and reasoning by contending that research must be systematic and controlled, empirical, and is self-correcting.

In describing the practice of qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p.17) explained “A triple crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis confronts qualitative researchers in the human disciplines,” and challenges the quality of anti-positivist research. Rooted in postmodern and poststructural discourses, the crisis of representation refers to the authenticity of the data, and concerns that lived experience can not be directly captured. The crisis of legitimation includes concerns with examining the accuracy or lawfulness of an inquiry, and problematizes traditional positivist criteria of validity, reliability and generalizability. The crisis of praxis then attends to concerns with the potential implications of the investigation. In attending to these crises, it could be suggested that the criteria of representation, legitimation and praxis be used to evaluate the quality of anti-positivist research. Conversely, Loudon and Wallace (2001, p.75) explained,

Legitimation and representation should not be read as standards against which a text can be tested, but as values to be respected. Whatever the tradition within which a text is written, the issues of legitimation and representation will be present for many readers. Our obligation as authors, we think, extend to being explicit about claims for trustworthiness of research texts we produce and the fairness of the strategies we use to represent the experience of others who figure in the text.
While there have been several sets of criteria proposed for evaluating the quality of naturalistic research (Eisner, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mulholland & Wallace, 2003; Richardson, 2000), due to the tradition of inquiry employed, the criteria for grounded theory studies (Charmaz, 2006) are reviewed below.

In ascertaining the quality of grounded theory research, Charmaz (2006) proposes the following four criteria for evaluation: credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness. Credibility of the research includes breadth and depth of the data, and the integrity and trustworthiness of the research process. Mulholland and Wallace (2003, p.8) suggest,

Criteria belonging to this set should include considerable time spent in the field, use of multiple data sources, participants sharing in the interpretive process, presence of researcher’s voice, documentation of researcher’s subjectivity, interpretations subject to outsider audit, and discussion of limitations of the study.

Originality refers to the social and theoretical significance of the work as determined by the extent to which it challenges, extends, or refines current ideas, concepts or practices (Charmaz, 2006). Resonance concerns the transferability or believability of the research findings as reflected in the degree to which the research makes sense to the participants or people who share their circumstances. According to Denzin (1994, p.505), this criterion of resonance is generally achieved by using thick description that, “gives the context of an experience, states the intentions and meanings that organize the experience, and reveals the experience as a process.” Finally, the fourth criterion, usefulness, considers the transferability and potential impact of the research, and areas of future direction derived from the inquiry.
Methods

Methods have been established in congruence with the methodology of grounded theory described above. As stated previously, the overall purpose of this research was to explore the process by which emotional abuse occurs and is often sustained in sport, and to examine athletes’, parents’, and coaches’ reflections on emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. In order to address these questions, three separate studies were conducted. Each study will be described below. First ethical considerations in the research of maltreatment in sport are addressed.

Ethical Considerations in the Research of Maltreatment in Sport

When addressing the ethical treatment of the participants, there were various concerns to attend to, including, the assurance of privacy and confidentiality, the risks and benefits of participation, and issues surrounding the informed consent process. Each will be addressed in turn.

Privacy and confidentiality.

Assuring confidentiality of participants was a major ethical consideration that had to be addressed at all stages of the research process. In each of the studies, it was imperative that I was able to assure the participants that anything discussed in the interview would be kept in confidence. However, due to the nature of the inquiry on athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship, there was a possibility that duties to protect the privacy of the participant could have conflicted with legal duties to report circumstances of child abuse. The Child and Family Services Act of Ontario, Section 72(1), mandates that everyone whom believes or has reasonable grounds to suspect that a child is in need of protection must report this circumstance directly to
Children’s Aid Society. The act clearly defines reportable circumstances of a child in need of protection to include risk or present experience of physical abuse or harm, sexual molestation, or emotional harm. Failure to report is a criminal offence.

I met face-to-face with the chair of the university’s ethics review board in order to get advice on how to address this ethical consideration. From this conversation I learned that because my research had potential duty to report obligations, there were a couple ways in which I needed to approach the confidentiality issue. These approaches included understanding my duties and obligations to report and maintaining a proactive approach to protect confidentiality, and full disclosure to participants of duty to report obligations and confidentiality limitations. The impact of each of these approaches on the research design is discussed in turn.

**Maintaining a proactive approach to confidentiality.**

Before commencing the study I read the Child and Family Services Act of Ontario in order to educate myself on my duty to report obligations. I also sought advice from experts on maintaining ethics in research and other academics with experience researching issues of child abuse. As reviewed previously, the Child and Family Services Act of Ontario, Section 72(1), mandates that everyone who believes or has reasonable grounds to suspect that a child is in need of protection must report this circumstance directly to Children’s Aid Society. Note that in this legislation it is the present need for protection of a child that must be reported to Children’s Aid Society.

Gaining this understanding of what information is and is not required to be reported was a major step in the development of my study design. To reduce the potential for information on children presently at risk of abuse to emerge from the research, specific
inclusion and exclusion criteria were added for participation. Athlete participants had to be 16 years of age or older and no longer competing in their sport. As well, any athlete who had his/her parent as a coach was excluded from participation. This criterion was established to reduce the potential for information on any ongoing abusive relationship between the parent and a younger sibling to emerge. Parents of elite child athletes had to have a child who was presently retired from sport (therefore no longer at risk for abuse in the coach-athlete relationship), must not be his/her child’s previous coach (no potential for ongoing abusive relationship), and must not have another child still competing in sport. This reduced the risk that the parent would speak to any present behaviours still happening in the sport environment. No additional inclusion or exclusion criteria were added for the coach participants. I debated adding the requirement that the coach had to be presently retired, but I felt this would limit the recruitment sample drastically and would limit my data on the coach’s reflections to older coaches only (i.e. not necessarily the same generation of coaches discussed by the athletes and parents in the other two studies). Instead, protecting confidentiality in the coach interviews was approached through other means as described below.

In all three studies, the athletes, parents, and coaches were requested to speak solely about past experiences in sport. Coaches specifically were instructed to reflect on past coaching behaviours and not discuss any present athletes or present coaching behaviours. It was important that I did not ask for any information that I would potentially have to report. Therefore, while many coaches explained that they had changed their coaching behaviour, I intentionally did not ask the coaches to elaborate on their present coaching methods. For all participants I requested that they anonymize the information provided
when possible. Athletes and parents were asked not to provide the names of the coach, and coaches were not asked about the present age of his/her athletes or potential ongoing relationship with any past athletes. Again, this was done to reduce the risk of information about a child presently at risk of abuse to emerge in the course of the research.

**Disclosure of confidentiality limitations.**

Once I understood my duty to report obligations, I knew that I would have to disclose these obligations and the consequential confidentiality limitations to the research participants. In the information letter and in-person before the interview started, all athlete, parent, and coach participants were assured that the information they provided would be kept confidential unless required by law. With the permission of the participants, each interview was digitally-recorded. No names were linked with any of the recordings and when coded, any mentioned names or identifiable information were removed from transcribed quotations. The data were then stored in a locked office at the University of Toronto. Only my supervisor and I have access to the data.

**Risks and benefits.**

The following section reviews methods used to address the social and psychological risks of participation. As well, benefits of participation are discussed.

**Social risks.**

The limitations in assuring confidentiality increased the potential social risks to participation, particularly for coach participants. Initially I had proposed that the following purpose statements for the each of the three studies:

- Study one (athlete study): The purpose of this study is to explore the process by which emotional abuse occurs and is often sustained in sport, and to
examine athletes’ reflections on emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship.

- **Study two (parent study):** The purpose of this study is to explore the process by which emotional abuse occurs and is often sustained in sport, and to examine parents’ reflections on emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship.

- **Study three (coach study):** The purpose of this study is to explore the process by which emotional abuse occurs and is often sustained in sport, and to examine coaches’ reflections on emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship.

When I submitted my initial proposal for ethics review, the university’s ethics review board noted that with this purpose statement for study three (coach study), some of the recognized risks for coaches’ participation in this study would include loss of job, damage to reputation, and legal prosecution. It was recommended that this information be added to the letter of consent and reiterated to each coach before participation in the study. Alternatively, the purpose of the study could be re-addressed. I was initially concerned about my ability to recruit coach participants with the initial purpose statement, and my concern increased drastically with the recommendation that I should add the additional information on risk of participation. Consequently, in order to reduce the perceived risks of participation and increase the ease of recruitment of coach participants, I decided to change the purpose statement of study three to “explore coaches’ perceptions of the athlete development strategies employed in competitive sport, in order to inform athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in this environment.”
included a range of questions on both potential positive and negative coaching experiences. As well, in attempt to get at information on emotional abuse, instead of asking about abuse directly, I asked about any past harmful behaviours and past strategies for motivation, reward, and/or discipline. In my view, this research question was still honest because the coaches were questioned on their perceptions of the athlete development strategies employed in competitive sport, and the coaches were informed that this information was being used to inform a broader research purpose on athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. I felt that this research question was less threatening to potential coach participants. As well, the ethics review board agreed that with the change in purpose statement, questionnaire, and the additional precautions established for assuring confidentiality, the risk to participation was reduced and the previously suggest statements did not need to be added. To maintain consistency across the three studies, the three purpose statement was changed to the following:

- Study one (athlete study): is to examine athletes’ emotionally abusive experiences and perceptions of the athlete-development strategies employed in competitive sport, in order to inform athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in this environment.

- Study two (parent study): The purpose of this study is to examine parents’ perceptions of the athlete-development strategies employed in competitive sport, in order to inform athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in this environment.

- Study three (coach study): The purpose of this study is to examine coaches’ perceptions of the athlete-development strategies employed in competitive
sport, in order to inform athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in this environment.

**Psychological risks.**

Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, a strict protocol was put in place to reduce the psychological risks of participation. Each participant was assured that if he/she felt uncomfortable at any time during the interview he/she could take a break, reschedule or end his/her participation. The interview was approached in a sensitive manner and the questions were communicated in a style that was best suited for the participant’s emotional state. None of the participants asked to end their interviews, however throughout the course of the investigation some of the athletes and parents showed signs of emotional upset such as tears and lowered voices. As well, some coaches showed signs of uneasiness such as shifting in the chair and inability to maintain eye contact. When any of these signs of stress occurred, the line of questioning switched to more positive questions about the athlete’s, parent’s or coach’s sport experience and then returned to the topic of emotional abuse when the participant calmed down or redirected the conversation that way. At the end of the interview, each participant was provided with a list of local counseling services. As well, each athlete was informed that opportunities were available for professional counseling should they be desired.

**Benefits.**

There was no financial compensation for participation, but each athlete, parent, and coach participant seemed to appreciate the opportunity to talk about his/her experiences in sport. Interestingly, retired athletes, in the course of their athletic career, tend not to have had the chance to talk about, analyze or de-brief their sport experiences and they
typically are grateful that someone takes an interest in their experience. Presumably this would be the same for parents of retired athletes and coaches.

**Informed consent process.**

Another issue pertaining to the ethical treatment of the participants concerns the informed consent process. Each participant was told that participation is completely voluntary and the stipulations for inclusion and exclusion were outlined during the initial recruiting emails. After the initial emails, once a meeting was arranged, the potential participant was emailed a copy of the information letter and consent form so that he/she had adequate time to read about the study and the involvements of participation. These letters highlighted the purpose, confidentiality, risks and benefits of the study. Once the participant arrived at the interview, I provided him/her with a verbal explanation of the study, reviewed the information letter and consent form, and gave the participant a chance to ask any questions he/she may have had about the study. At that point I also gave an example of an interview question and showed the participant the demographic questionnaire. If he/she was still willing to participate, written consent was obtained before commencing the interview session.

Wallace and Louden (2000) sought to address the ethical question, to what extent does the informed consent apply? “People may initially provide formal consent without realizing the full implications of this process. Roles are not static and require continuous negotiation and renegotiation of the relationship” (p.153). In order to deal with this dilemma, at the completion of each interview session, I invited specific feedback from the participant on my interpretation of his/her interview and on the developing theory. The theory was presented via a running theoretical discussion, in which I talked about
conceptual categories and their properties (Glaser, 1978). Firstly, I asked the informants to check my interpretation of what was discussed in our interview. Following this feedback, I requested any criticisms, feelings, or expansions about my theory presentation. This form of member checking has been recommended for grounded theory research as a way to ensure credibility and consistency in the data interpretation (Goulding, 2002). As well, by approaching the participants for feedback on my interpretation of our interview I provided them with a chance to be a part of the analysis process and allowed them the opportunity to reject or accept my interpretation of their experiences, thus allowing them a secondary opportunity to consent to the interpretation of their statements.

**Study One: Athletes’ Perspectives**

**Purpose.**

The purpose of this study was to examine athletes’ emotionally abusive experiences and perceptions of the athlete-development strategies employed in competitive sport, in order to inform athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in this environment.

**Participants.**

Eighteen former athletes, eight males and 10 females, between the ages of 16 and 28 years participated in the study. All athletes had competed previously at the national or international level and had been retired from their sport between 1 and 6 years. A variety of sports and sport types amongst the participants were represented. The participants began competing between 4 and 11 years of age and their careers lasted between 4 and 18 years. The following sports were represented: artistic gymnastics (n=3), dance (n=1), figure skating (n=2), hockey (n=2), kayak (n=1), lacrosse (n=1), rhythmic gymnastics
(n=5), swimming (n=3), and tennis (n=2). Note that two of the athletes participated in two different sports at the elite level.

Participants for this study included retired elite athletes. For the purposes of this study, “elite” was defined as an athlete who competes or trains at an international, national and/or junior national level. This level of athlete was chosen because it is at the elite level of sport where the greatest pressures to succeed exist (Gervis & Dunn, 2004), and where the coach-athlete relationship may be the most intense (Tofler et al., 1996). An athlete is considered “retired” when he/she no longer competes in his/her sport. For the purposes of this study, athletes who have been out of competition between 1 and 6 years were solicited. This suggested time period was chosen to balance the benefits obtained from having some distance from the sport experience with the challenges of memory recall. As well, in order for an athlete to be considered retired he/she must have demonstrated some form of psychological retirement in which he/she was able to acknowledge that his/her competitive athletic career had concluded. For research purposes, psychological retirement has been reported to be an important criterion for defining an athlete as retired as it strongly impacts an athlete’s ability to reflect on his/her athletic experiences (Stirling, 2007). Attempts were made to recruit both male and female athletes from a variety of sports. Previous research has indicated that both male and female athletes experience emotional abuse (Gervis & Dunn, 2004). While it may be suggested that male and female athletes differ in their abusive experiences, no study has yet confirmed this supposition. Furthermore, with respect to the purpose of this investigation, to examine the process by which emotional abuse occurs and is often sustained in sport, there is no reason to assume this process should differ between male
and female athletes. Participants were recruited from a variety of sports to aid in the transferability of findings across different sporting contexts.

**Inclusion criteria.**

Individuals meeting the following criteria were eligible for participation in the study:

1. Is a retired athlete (retired 1-6 years, admits to being retired).
2. Competed at the junior national, national or international level at some point in athletic career.
3. Trained on a team affiliated with Sport Canada.
4. Is at least 16 years of age.
5. Has adequate English communication skills.
6. Consents to participate and signs the Informed Consent Form.

**Exclusion criteria.**

Any participant comprising one or more of the following exclusion criteria would have been excluded from participation in the study:

1. Under the age of 16 years.
2. Does not sign Informed Consent Form.
3. Was coached by a parent.

No more than two participants from the same club participated in the study. Note that the participants of the study were not required to have been emotionally abused in order to participate. It was anticipated that the experiences of those who report emotional abuse in sport as well as the experiences of those who do not report abuse would inform the research. In past research experiences on this topic, I have found that many athletes do not recognize their experiences in the coach-athlete relationship as emotionally abusive.
As well, I was concerned that by only including those participants who openly acknowledge their experiences in sport as emotional abuse, I would have limited the diversity of the sample.

**Sample size.**

Consistent with the principles of theoretical sampling and grounded theory, sampling decisions were based on the emerging theory. When building theory, it is important to gather data until a point of theoretical saturation is reached, where each category is fully saturated. “Unlike statistical sampling, theoretical sampling cannot be planned before embarking on the study. The specific sampling decisions evolve during the research process” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.215). It was estimated that a range of 8-12 interviews would be sufficient to reach saturation, but the actual sample size was 18 participants.

**Procedures.**

**Recruitment strategies.**

Following approval of the study from the university’s Ethics Review Board, participants were recruited by word of mouth. A snowball sampling technique was used, which is a special nonprobability method used when the desired sample characteristic is rare.

The names and contact information of potential participants were acquired through referrals provided by participants who had been involved in previous investigations of abuse in sport. This list of referrals of participants from previous investigations provided the index case for the snowball recruitment method. In order to assure confidentiality of the participants in the study, when athletes provided referrals of other retired athletes they
did not know if the person he/she referred would be contacted for participation.
Likewise, when contacted, the potential participants were not informed of where their contact information was retrieved from. None of the participants were involved in any way with an investigation or court case related to abuse in sport, but if through the course of participation an athlete had revealed an ongoing investigation, his/her data would not have been included in the write-up of the study.

Initially, I contacted potential participants by email to describe the study. Description of the study included the purpose, methods, risks and benefits, confidentiality, and criteria for inclusion and exclusion, including a lack of intention to return to sport. For this study, potential participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to examine emotionally abusive experiences and perceptions of athlete-development strategies employed in competitive sport, in order to inform athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in this environment. Potential participants were also informed that experiences of emotional abuse in sport were not necessary, as both the experience and non-experience of abuse would inform the research. If the individual contacted was interested in participating and met the participant criteria, I emailed the retired athlete the information letter and consent form (Appendix A) to read before the interview. Interview sessions were arranged at a mutually convenient location. Excluded locations however, included the participant’s home, the researcher’s home, or any previous training or competition location of the participant. Of the 18 athlete interviews, 15 were conducted in an office at the University of Toronto and three were conducted over the phone.
In order to recruit a diverse sample, I made a conscious effort to recruit from several different sport clubs. There was no previous relationship between myself and the participants. Each participant was asked to read and sign an informed letter of consent before participating in the study (Appendix A).

A main component of grounded theory is the constant comparative method in which data collection and analysis occur simultaneously to establish, compare, and refine relationships among concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Due to the iterative nature of grounded theory, the procedures for data collection and analysis are not separate stages in the research process, but rather occur in unison. Therefore, although I have separated the description of data collection and analysis in this proposal, it is important to acknowledge the interactive nature of the inquiry as a whole.

**Data collection.**

At the beginning of each interview session, the information letter and consent form were reviewed and the participant was given the opportunity to ask any questions about the study that he/she may have had. The retired athlete was then asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire including age, gender, sport, level of sport involvement, and years spent in sport. This questionnaire took about 5 minutes to complete (Appendix B).

In-depth semi-structured interviews were then conducted with the retired athletes. The interviews, which were conducted individually, ranged from 1-3 hours. The participants were asked to reflect retrospectively on their athletic experiences. Each interview began with the general questions, “Please tell me about your experiences as an elite athlete” and “Describe your relationship with your coach throughout your sport
career.” Other probes are listed in Appendix C and included, for example, “Have you ever been yelled at/ called names/ humiliated/ ignored by a coach? If so, what is your first memory of this? Did this behaviour change over the course of your career?” And, “Did you ever report these experiences?” Athletes were given the freedom to discuss any aspect of their sport experience and/or their relationship with their coach that they wished, and were encouraged to reflect and elaborate on any experiences of emotional abuse (e.g. who, when, where, why, how). With the participants’ consent, all interviews were digitally-recoded.

During each session I made notes on my own personal reflections and the general points that were being made by the participant. Identified themes of data were noted along with any early analytic thoughts. Strauss and Corbin (1998) indicated that memo taking is critical to building theory as it helps grounded theorists move from working with the data to conceptualizing a theory. At the completion of each interview session, I invited specific feedback from the participant on my interpretation of his/her interview and on the developing theory. The theory was presented via a running theoretical discussion, in which I talked about conceptual categories and their properties (Glaser, 1978). Firstly, I asked the informants to check my interpretation of what was discussed in our interview. Following this feedback I requested any criticisms, feelings, or expansions about my developing theory. This form of member checking has been recommended for grounded theory research as a way to ensure credibility and consistency in the data interpretation. As well, consistent with what is recommended in the grounded theory literature, this member checking was done during the early stages of data collection before the process of abstraction (Goulding, 2002).
**Data analysis.**

Following each interview, recordings were reviewed in full and specific meaning units and themes of data were identified. In grounded theory there are three separate coding processes used to analyze the data; open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding is the analytic process through which categories are identified in the transcribed data and entails defining the properties and dimensions of these categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding involves relating categories to subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This involves linking the properties and dimensions together into subcategories of the larger category identified in the open coding. Selective coding is the stage where the categories are integrated and a theory is built and refined (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The constant comparative method of grounded theory asserts that the categories, subcategories, and theory that emerge must continually be compared to new and previously collected data until saturation occurs (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Consistent with the constant comparative approach of grounded theory, emergent themes along with their properties and dimensions were compared with themes identified in each of the previous athlete interviews. As the analysis progressed, relationships were determined between the emergent themes and sub-themes of data and integrated until theoretical saturation occurred (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory is generally described as an inductive method of theory development (Martin & Turner, 1986), however, while the emergent theory was initially derived solely based on the inductive analysis of the athletes’ reports; the interpretation of these data resembled a previous model of the temporal development of risk for sexual abuse in sport (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001). Thus, for the final stages of data analysis in this study, a
combination of inductive and deductive analysis in the final confirmation and refinement of the categorization of themes was employed.

**Study Two: Parents’ Perspectives**

**Purpose.**

The purpose of this study was to examine parents’ perceptions of the athlete-development strategies employed in competitive sport, in order to inform athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in this environment.

**Participants.**

Participants for Study two included 16 parents, 12 mothers and four fathers, of elite athletes who had retired in the last 1-6 years. All of the parents involved were two-parent families at the time their child was in sport, and in each family both parents worked on either a part-time or full-time basis. The socioeconomic status of the parents appeared to range from low to high across the participants. Across the sample of elite child athletes, 15 daughters and four sons were discussed. The children of the parents interviewed had all reached a national or international level of competition. Five of the children were members of an Olympic Team and nine others participated in a World Championship competition. Across the parents interviewed, the following sports were represented; artistic gymnastics (n=7), figure skating (n=1), hockey (n=2), rhythmic gymnastics (n=3), swimming (n=5), trampoline (n=1).

**Inclusion criteria.**

Individuals meeting the following criteria were eligible for participation in the study:

1. Is a parent of retired athlete (child retired 1-6 years, admits to being retired).
2. Has a child who competed at the junior national, national or international level at some point in his/her athletic career.

3. Has a child who trained on a team affiliated with Sport Canada.

4. Has adequate English communication skills.

5. Consents to participate and signs the Informed Consent Form.

**Exclusion criteria.**

Any participant comprising one or more of the following exclusion criteria would have been excluded from participation in the study:

1. Does not sign Informed Consent Form.

2. Is a parent coach of his/her own child.

3. Currently has a child still in sport.

**Sample size.**

It was estimated that a range of 8-12 interviews would be sufficient to reach saturation. The actual sample size was 16 participants.

**Procedures.**

**Recruitment strategies.**

Following approval of the study from the university’s Ethics Review Board, participants were recruited by word of mouth. A combination of snowball and purposive sampling was used in order to ensure that individuals displaying certain attributes, namely - had elite child athletes, whom experienced emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship, were included in the study. More specifically, the names and contact information of potential participants were acquired through references provided by athlete participants who had been involved in previous investigations of abuse in sport.
As well, some parent participants made referrals to other interested parents, which added to the potential participant pool. In order to increase the likelihood that the parent would speak about emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship, parent referrals from athletes whom had reported experiences of emotional abuse in sport, and referrals of parents whose children participated in a sport organization with a reputation of problematic coaching conduct, were intentionally selected for recruitment. In order to assure anonymity of the participants, when participants provided the names of other parents of retired elite athletes they did not know if they would be contacted for participation. Likewise, when contacted, the potential participants were not informed of where their contact information was retrieved from. None of the participants were involved in any way with an investigation or court case related to abuse in sport, but if through the course of participation a parent had revealed an ongoing investigation, his/her data would not have been included in the write-up of the study.

Initially, I contacted potential participants by email to describe the study. Description of the study included the purpose, methods, risks and benefits, confidentiality, and criteria for inclusion and exclusion. For this study, potential participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to examine parents’ perceptions of the athlete-development strategies employed in competitive sport, in order to inform athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in this environment. If the individual contacted was interested in participating and met the participant criteria, I emailed the parent of the retired elite athlete the information letter and consent form (Appendix D) to read over before the interview. Interview sessions were arranged at a mutually
convenient location. Of the 16 parent interviews, 10 were conducted at the participant’s home and six were conducted over the phone.

In order to recruit a diverse sample, I made a conscious effort to recruit from several different sports. There was no previous relationship between myself and the participants. Each participant was asked to read and sign an informed letter of consent before participating in the study (Appendix D). Note that there was only one known parent-athlete dyad across the investigations. All but one of the parents recruited had no relation to the athlete participants in Study one.

Data collection.

Procedures for data collection and analysis were similar to those in Study one. At the beginning of each interview session, the information letter and consent form were reviewed and the participant was given the opportunity to ask any questions about the study that he/she may have had. The parent was then asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire including number of children, children in elite sport, sport, level of sport involvement, and previous personal sport participation. This questionnaire took about 5 minutes to complete (Appendix E).

In-depth semi-structured interviews were then conducted with the parents. The interviews, which were conducted individually, ranged from 2-3 hours. The participants were asked to reflect retrospectively on their children’s experiences in sport and their involvement as a parent. Each interview began with the general questions: “How did your child get into sport?”, and “Please describe how your child’s career progressed and your role as a parent in this progression.” Other probes are listed in Appendix F and included, for example: “What did you know of the competitive coach prior to your child becoming
a competitive athlete?” “Did you have any concerns about the coaching practices? If so, please describe.” “When and where did the disconcerting behaviours occur?” “Was there anyone else who observed these behaviours?” “Did you address your concerns in any way? If so, with whom, when, and what was the outcome?” And, “Looking back is there anything you wish you would have done differently?” Parents were given the freedom to discuss any aspect of their children’s sport experience and/or their relationship with their coach that they wished, and were encouraged to reflect and elaborate on all aspects of their children’s athletic development and any potential issues that arose in the sport domain. With the participants’ consent, all interviews were digitally-recoded.

During each session I made notes on my own personal reflections and the general points that were being made by the participant. Identified themes of data were noted along with any early analytic thoughts. At the completion of each interview session, I invited specific feedback from the participant on my interpretation of his/her interview. Firstly, I asked the informants to check my interpretation of what was discussed in our interview. Following this feedback I requested any criticisms, feelings, or expansions about my analytic thoughts and the general themes of data that had emerged thus far.

Data analysis.

Following each interview, recordings were reviewed in full and specific meaning units and themes of data were identified. Data were coded using open, axial and selective coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Consistent with the constant comparative approach of grounded theory, emergent themes along with their properties and dimensions were compared with themes identified in each of the previous parent
interviews. As the analysis progressed, relationships were determined between the emergent themes and sub-themes of data and integrated until theoretical saturation occurred (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

**Study Three: Coaches’ Perspectives**

**Purpose.**

The purpose of this study was to examine coaches’ perceptions of athlete-development strategies employed in competitive sport, in order to inform athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in this environment.

**Participants.**

Participants for Study three included nine elite coaches, seven male and two female. Coaches ranged in age from 38-68 years of age (M=52 yrs), with 18-47 years of coaching experience (M=28 yrs). All of the coaches were presently coaching athletes at the junior national, national, or international level. Across the sample, five of the coaches have had multiple Olympic athletes, and of the remaining four, two of these coaches have coached athletes at a semi professional level. All of the coaches had been previous athletes themselves, but not all competed at a high-performance level. Education backgrounds of the coaches ranged from high school education to having a Masters degree. Seven of the coaches interviewed have children of their own, all of whom participate in sport at least at a recreational level. Across the coaches interviewed the following sports were represented; archery (n=1), artistic gymnastics (n=1), figure skating (n=2), hockey (n=2), soccer (n=1), triathlon (n=1), volleyball (n=1).

**Inclusion criteria.**

Individuals meeting the following criteria were eligible for participation in the study:
1. Coaches an athlete or athletes who compete at the junior national, national or international level.

2. Coaches on a team affiliated with Sport Canada.

3. Has adequate English communication skills.

4. Consents to participate and signs the Informed Consent Form.

**Exclusion criteria.**

Any participant comprising one or more of the following exclusion criteria would have been excluded from participation in the study:

1. Does not sign Informed Consent Form.

2. Coaches his/her child.

No more than two coach participants from the same sport club.

**Sample size.**

It was estimated that a range of 8-12 interviews would be sufficient to reach saturation. The actual sample size was nine participants.

**Procedures.**

**Recruitment strategies.**

Following approval of the study from the university’s Ethics Review Board, participants were recruited by email. The names and contact information of potential participants were acquired through an internet search of the country’s top coaches. To the best of my knowledge, none of the participants were currently involved with an investigation or court case related to abuse in sport, but if through the course of participation a coach had revealed ongoing investigation, his/her data would not have been included in the write-up of the study.
Initially, I contacted potential participants by email to describe the study. Description of the study included the purpose, methods, risks and benefits, confidentiality, and criteria for inclusion and exclusion. For this study, potential participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to examine elite coaches’ perceptions of athlete-development strategies employed in competitive sport, in order to inform athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in this environment. If the individual contacted was interested in participating and met the participant criteria, I emailed the coach the information letter and consent form (Appendix G) to read before the interview. Interview sessions were arranged at a mutually convenient location. All nine interviews were conducted in person at the coach’s place of work.

In order to recruit a diverse sample, I made a conscious effort to recruit from several different sports. There was no previous relationship between myself and the participants. Each participant was asked to read and sign an informed letter of consent before participating in the study (Appendix G). Note that there was no known relationship between the coach participants and any of the athletes or parents in Study one and two respectively.

**Data collection.**

Procedures for data collection and analysis were similar to those employed in studies one and two. At the beginning of each interview session, the information letter and consent form were reviewed and the participant was given the opportunity to ask any questions about the study that he/she may have had. The coach was then asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire on the descriptive information of the participants including age, coaching qualification, education background, years coaching,
previous athletic background, and family information. This questionnaire took about 5 minutes to complete (Appendix H).

In-depth semi-structured interviews were then conducted with the coaches. The interviews, which were conducted individually, ranged from 1-2 hours. The participants were asked to reflect retrospectively on their coaching careers. Each interview began with the general questions, “How did you get into coaching?” and “What do you enjoy about your job?” Other probes are listed in Appendix I and included, for example: “How do you as a coach, produce successful athletes?” “When, why and how do you reward your athletes?” “When, why and how do you discipline your athletes?” “To the best of your knowledge, has an athlete ever been upset as a result of your coaching? If so, please describe.” And, “With regards to athlete development, are there any situations that have occurred in the past that you wish you dealt with differently? If so, please describe.” Coaches were given the freedom to discuss any aspect of athlete development or their experience as a coach. With the participants’ consent, all interviews were digitally-recoded.

During each session I made notes on my own personal reflections and the general points that were being made by the coach. Identified themes of data were noted along with any early analytic thoughts. At the completion of each interview session, I invited specific feedback from the participant on my interpretation of his/her interview and on the developing themes. Firstly, I asked the informants to check my interpretation of what was discussed in our interview. Following this feedback I requested any criticisms, feelings, or expansions about my analytic thoughts and the general themes of data that had emerged thus far.
Data analysis.

Following each interview, recordings were reviewed in full and specific meaning units and themes of data were identified. Data were coded using open, axial and selective coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Consistent with the constant comparative approach of grounded theory, emergent themes along with their properties and dimensions were compared with themes identified in each of the previous parent interviews. As the analysis progressed, relationships were determined between the emergent themes and sub-themes of data and integrated until theoretical saturation occurred (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Summary of Methodology and Methods

Overall, as my orientation as a researcher was crucial to the conceptualization and implementation of this research project, I explained my ontological and epistemological perspectives on the inquiry as postmodern, constructivist, and symbolic interactionist. Methodologically, my research was situated within the tradition of grounded theory. A critical ecological lens was placed on the analysis of the inquiry, and the criteria of credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness serve as the standards by which the nature and quality of the inquiry should be evaluated. Methods were established that are consistent with the iterative nature of grounded theory. As well, ethical considerations in the research of maltreatment in sport were addressed.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the process by which emotional abuse occurs and is often sustained in sport, and to examine athletes’, parents’, and coaches’ reflections on emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. Related to this research objective, several themes emerged from the studies conducted. Data from the athlete interviews are categorized into the following themes: stages by which emotionally abusive coach-athlete relations develop and are sustained over time, and the impact of emotional abuse on athlete development. The parents and coaches discussed a wide range of issues related to athlete-development, however, only those themes of data specifically relevant to the purpose of this dissertation are presented. Related to athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in sport, the following themes of data emerged from the parent and coach interviews respectively: the socialization of parents to concerning coaching practices in sport, and coaches’ reflections on past incidents of athlete maltreatment. Each theme is presented in turn.

Initiating and Sustaining Emotional Abuse in the Coach-Athlete Relationship

Findings

As reviewed previously, emotional abuse is a relational disorder referring to a pattern of non-contact deliberate behaviours by a person within a critical relationship role that have the potential to be harmful. Degrading comments, personal criticisms, threats, acts of humiliation, belittlement, or the silent treatment were reportedly experienced on at least one occasion by all of the athletes interviewed. A pattern of these behaviours within a critical coach-athlete relationship, which is required for these experiences to constitute emotional abuse, was reported by 15 of the athletes interviewed. While the frequency
and intensity of each athlete’s experience of emotional abuse differed, reflections on the development, or lack of development, and continuation of the emotionally abusive coach-athlete relations were consistent across participants. The reported stages by which emotionally abusive coach-athlete relations developed and were sustained over time are described below.

**Introduction period.**

With the exception of one participant who entered directly into competitive hockey at age 11, all of the other athletes described an introduction period to their sport that started as early as 4 years of age. During this period, the athletes participated in their sport at a recreational level. They recalled the passion they developed for their sport during this period, and reflected on several internal and external influences such as self-motivation and parental direction that led them to a more competitive stream of participation. One athlete recalled:

> I started gymnastics when I was 5 and I never really looked back. I remember I started Saturday morning classes just to try it and there weren’t any auditions or anything because I was 5. It was just one of those recreational classes and I loved it. I just absolutely loved it!” (female gymnast, 22)

Furthermore, other athletes stated,

> I’ve always been competitive in nature, but I think when I realized that I was pretty good – like I was scoring a lot of goals and much more than other people. That’s when I knew that if I really wanted to get a scholarship or play professional then I really had to put the time into my training and practice. (male hockey player, 25)
And, “For me it was mostly parental pressure saying go into sports – go do something”
(male hockey player, 23).

Of the athletes interviewed, nine athletes had participated in a variety of sports at a
competitive or recreation level before specializing in one (single specialization occurred
around the age of 12). At this stage the athletes had yet to form an ongoing relationship
with one coach. Two athletes never specialized in a single sport, and instead competed in
two complementary sports at the elite level. Seven athletes specialized in their sports
between 5 -7 years of age.

**Investment.**

The period of investment is initialed by talent identification of the athletes and marks
the early stages of the athletes’ venture in competitive sport and in the coach-athlete
relationship.

**Recruitment.**

Following preliminary skill development at the recreational level of sport, the
athletes were recruited by an expert coach, and were identified as talented and as having
the potential to be a top athlete. This is reflected in the following statements: “My coach
pulled me out [of the recreational program] because she was starting a pre-competitive
group which is basically a group for really young girls who have potential (female
rhythmic gymnast, 24). “I was highly recruited. When he [coach] was recruiting me he
was very positive about my gymnastics. He said really positive things to me and it made
me feel good” (female artistic gymnast, 23). “I felt honoured that someone that was so
tough to impress, selected me” (female figure skater, 28). “She [coach] told my parents
that she saw a lot of potential in me – a lot! And that in order to improve I would have to start coming more hours...” (female rhythmic gymnast, 22). And,

They [coaches] were like this is what we can do for you. They obviously talk you up as well. I think in the recruiting process the coaches have to bulls---t you a little bit to try to get you to commit because they want you. (male hockey player, 25)

Investment of time and energy.

Subsequently, the athletes made a commitment to the coach and invested significant time and energy into their athletic development. The frequency and intensity of training sessions increased and for many, there were long periods of travel for training and/or competition - in some cases months at a time. “It [training] was different meaning longer and more intensive. It was long long days. I would dance from 8 in the morning until 8 at night (female dancer, 28). “I trained more hours. I learned a lot more skills (female artistic gymnast, 26).” Likewise, when asked about what investments or early sacrifices he made for his athletic career, another athlete said, “Time, sacrifices, going to camps and travel” (male hockey player, 25).

Directly referring to the development of emotionally abusive coach-athlete relations, one athlete elaborated on how this early investment made him vulnerable to inappropriate coaching practices. “At this level they [coaches] would isolate us for three months before the tournament... And ‘cause you’re just there with the coaches they can do whatever they want” (male hockey player, 23).
Isolation from social group.

Other consequences of the investment the athletes made in their athletic development included separation from peer and social group. One athlete stated,

I moved to a club that was really far away [about age nine]. I left all my friends. I switched schools. I was never home. I had to be there at 4 o’clock in the morning. Go to school, training after school, then come home at night – do homework and go straight to bed. It was definitely more competitive. They meant business. (female artistic gymnast, 26)

One athlete explained that at age 14 he moved to a prep school to pursue his hockey career. As a consequence of this commitment he had to leave his friends and family behind (male hockey player, 25). Likewise, other athletes recalled,

Once you get to that point – rhythmics becomes all you know. I gave up having a social life with friends. My only true girlfriends or friends at all were teammates. And I had a coach who has played a humungous role in my life through so many crucial years, who I spent more time with than my mother. (female rhythmic gymnast, 24)

And,

I remember in middle school and high school I really sort of lost my social life. I went to a different high school for a gifted athlete program, and my life just kind of all fell away other than tennis. I didn’t have a lot of close friends at that time. (male tennis player, 25)
**Relinquishing of parental control.**

As the athletes became increasingly invested in their athletic careers, their parents relinquished control, training and travel was less supervised, and athletes’ interactions with the coach were less monitored. This is reflected in the following statements: “It was a rule at our gym club that once you got to the national level the parents weren’t allowed to stay at the same hotel” (female rhythmic gymnast, 24). And, “In my old club you traveled with your parents and here you traveled with the coach” (female artistic gymnast, 26).

In some cases, the athletes described having to move away from home which further isolated them from family and friends. One participant explained, “I actually used to live with my coach” (male kayaker, 21). Another athlete stated,

At age 10, I moved out so I could live at the training centre. It was the best program in the country so I knew that it would take me where I wanted to go. I would only see them [parents] on weekends when I wasn’t competing. (female artistic gymnast, 23)

Similarly, another athlete explained,

My parents essentially dropped me off there [at prep school] and were like “see you later.” For me I was okay with everything because it was something I had to do in order to get to where I wanted to be. (male hockey player, 25)

Relating the transition to competition sport and the relinquishing of parental control to his vulnerability to inappropriate coaching practices, another athlete explained,

It was very different. It took a while to get used to. It was like going from one extreme to the next. This was all about winning and they [coaches] didn’t really
care about school or personal things – it was more of just a competitive thing like we are here to win – and they didn’t hold anything back. If there was something they want to say then it was said. There was no one there to protect you sort of thing. (male figure skater, 23)

**Grooming.**

Along with the investment years, initial grooming occurs. Grooming refers to actions or conditions in the coach-athlete relationship that lead athletes to conform to their role in the abusive coach-athlete relationship and adapt to and/or accept the occurrence of abusive coaching behaviours. Across the interviews, the athletes discussed several factors experienced early in their athletic careers that affected their later acceptance of emotional abuse.

**Initiation of grooming.**

*The coach-athlete relationship.*

Most notably, all of the athletes discussed the closeness of their relationship with their coach. “She [coach] was such a mother to all of us. We loved her - I loved her” (female gymnast, 22).

My relationship with my coach was very close. We definitely had a special bond from the beginning because she basically pulled me out of that recreational group when I was seven years old and moved up with me. Like she was always my coach. There were no questions about it. And throughout my teenage years she became a mother-figure to me. I was spending more time with her than I was with my family. (female rhythmic gymnast, 24)
“I really liked him and he really took to me. We had a really positive relationship then” (female artistic gymnast, 23).

Athletes explained the respect they held coach. “He was like a mentor. I just respected him so much and I think he really liked me as a student – well not a student but as a person” (female tennis player, 16). Likewise, another participant said:

He was definitely a mentor and a well respected authority figure. He sort of commanded respect. That was one of his biggest pet-peeves – disrespect. One time he was complaining to me about how a coach in England got in trouble for being too strict. He said that if he would be allowed to take a group of 13 year olds and seclude them in some sort of Nazi training camp, that he would do it. He wasn’t like into torture or anything. He just wanted complete control. He just wanted to control his swimmers as much as possible in order to get the maximum potential out of them. (male swimmer, 27)

As well, in many cases, feelings of fear or intimidation of the coach were felt by the athlete right from the beginning of the coach-athlete relationship. This is reflected in the following statements: “I remember being really scared” (female artistic gymnast, 25). “I was scared of him immediately. He was just very strict in his ways and I would get in trouble for absolutely everything” (female gymnast, 23). “He [coach] really intimidated me” (female tennis player, 16). “I was completely terrified from day one… They [coaches] just were very authoritative. It’s hard to explain but I was just dealing with a different type of adult. They tell you what to do and you do it” (female rhythmic gymnast, 24). And, “I just remember him being a loud scary guy from the get go” (male swimmer, 27).
The social environment.

In addition to factors within the coach-athlete relationship, athletes also mentioned several grooming factors experienced in the sport environment itself, including witnessing other athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse and increasing awareness of the coach’s successful reputation. All of the athletes had witnessed other athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse almost immediately upon recruitment into the elite sport environment. One athlete recalled, “You would always see the older girls getting yelled at and called names and stuff like that. You kind of got used to it because it was constantly there” (female rhythmic gymnast, 17). Similarly, other participants stated, “At first I wasn’t yelled at that much, but I would see other girls on the team be yelled at every day, and by the end, personally I was probably yelled at at least 2 or 3 times a week” (female artistic gymnast, 23). “I knew it [demeaning comments] was going to happen ‘cause it had been happening to all these girls around me” (female rhythmic gymnast, 22). “She would scream at everyone else and everyone would just stop at her attention because they were so scared of her they’d just do whatever she said” (female rhythmic gymnast, 24). “I saw other teammates being yelled at vulgarly by the coach. I don’t want to say all coaches are like that, maybe they’re not, but this one was really messed up in the head. He went ballistic on players” (male hockey player, 23). And, I met her [coach] on my first day there. She was coaching the older girls and she was just the scariest thing alive. She made me so nervous, but when you’re little you think that’s what it takes to be up top” (female rhythmic gymnast, 19).

Many athletes also talked about their coach’s reputation of success. “She was a big deal in the dance community” (female dancer, 28). And, “In a skating world it is a luxury
to be coached by some of these head coaches. She had coached a lot of really elite skaters so it was a luxury that I got to have one or two lessons a week with her – it was sort of a big deal at the time” (female figure skater, 28). Elaborating on the influence of the coach’s reputation of success, one athlete stated,

He was such a successful coach in tennis and I knew I could get really good if I listened to him. Basically I just trusted everything he said and I just liked the coach ‘cause he was fair, but he made you work really hard. (female tennis player, 16)

Similarly, another athlete recalled,

He trained a lot of former Olympians and gold medalists. He just had a whole bunch of stories about training at national camps and going to national meets. Like you guys are complaining about having to do this, well we did this… I knew a guy that did this…And at the time we totally believed everything he said. (male swimmer, 27)

**Experience of emotional abuse/initial upset.**

All 15 athletes experienced their first incident of an emotionally abusive behaviour, as well as a pattern of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship before the age of 16. Of the three athletes who were classified as not experiencing emotional abuse, they did not stay in the relationship with their coach long enough for a caregiving relationship to develop or a pattern of emotionally abusive behaviours to be experienced. Two athletes retired from their sports shortly following their initial incident of an emotionally abusive behaviour due to a lack of interest, and the third athlete was able to switch to a different coach.
All of the athletes were upset by their initial experiences of emotional abuse. This is reflected in the following recollections: “She would call me fat and stuff and that was tough. I would just get yelled at a lot” (female artistic gymnast, 23). “He [coach] would say, ‘You’re a piece of shit – get out of here.’ Inadvertently he was pushing buttons, maybe yelling too much. I know I absolutely saw many people cry” (male swimmer, 27).

I was really caught off guard the first time he [coach] directed an outburst at me, and I was really quite surprised. We were at training camp and I think we had swum the day before and I think I wasn’t used to training after flying. I was experiencing some jetlag and just had this weird overall body fatigue. He started to really get at me every time I touched the wall. I just said my arms feel useless and then he countered back yelling “No. You’re useless!”… I wasn’t used to that. Especially when it wasn’t about “Oh you’re swimming like crap.” That was different. This was more you as a person, you are useless. (male swimmer, 24)

Another athlete also stated,

They [the coaches] just come from this world where anything and everything goes. She [coach] screamed at us, and it wasn’t yelling, it was screaming. That was terrifying. Even just hearing her voice now would terrify me. And it was mean. You know you can yell and say things like “you’re doing it all wrong” and stuff like that, but it was so much more than that. It was really hurtful. It seemed like she really tried to hurt you. And everything you did was wrong. Everything! You would do one move wrong and she would come stomping over and stand over you and then physically maneuver your body and scream in your face. Sometimes she would smash cds or whip cd cases at you. If you were practicing
and god forbid you messed up and something was within her range she would kick it so hard – it was like she was a soccer player! It was almost like she had a force field around her… I think when she yelled at me for the first time it was ‘cause I couldn’t get a certain skill. I started crying and she was like, “Don’t cry! No one cries here. Be strong!” It really got to me that I had to be a strong person. I think the first time I was really upset. (female rhythmic gymnast, 22)

Acquiescence.

Once the athlete got over his/her initial upset, all of the athletes came to accept their experiences of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship, thus sustaining the emotionally abusive relationship. For all 15 athletes interviewed who had experienced emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship, the abuse lasted throughout the duration of their careers, ranging from 5–15 years since the athletes’ initial experiences.

At the time, several of the athletes normalized the emotional abuse as a standard coaching method for elite athlete development. One participant stated,

I’ve seen my coach screaming at a kid and that kid bawling his eyes out, but I guess no incident in particular stands out in my mind because that’s just part of it. I guess I have that mentality that you should do everything in your power to achieve your goals and if you’re not then you deserve to be yelled at. (male swimmer, 27)

Similarly, other athletes explained, “In order to get your gymnasts to the top you need to do stuff like that [abusive coaching practices], unfortunately in this sport that’s the way it is” (female rhythmic gymnast, 17). And, “For high performance athletes there’s sort of a
level of intensity that performance coaches have to have – you see that in almost every sport” (female artistic gymnast, 23).

Alternatively, other athletes did not necessarily agree with their coach’s behaviours, but rationalized their experiences of emotional abuse because they felt that the situation could have been worse or they had no alternative option. One athlete stated,

I got screamed at, but it was always for something that I deserved, like not swimming fast enough… He definitely yelled at people, but it was always justified in my mind. I think it was okay. It was a punishment, but it wasn’t like we were bleeding or anything. (male swimmer, 27)

Likewise another athlete said, “They [coaches] would yell, but it wasn’t always directed at one person. Sometimes it was and I recall being a little bit petrified, but I wasn’t bracing for a racket to the face” (male tennis player, 25). Additionally, other participants explained, “I got to a point where I didn’t think it was right, but I was just going to deal with it” (female rhythmic gymnast, 22). And, “I think I knew that that wasn’t a nice thing to do [yell at the athletes], but it’s acceptable. She’s the head coach and that’s what she does. It’s accepted. It’s not that it’s normal, but it’s fine” (female figure skater, 28).

Regardless of whether the emotional abuse was normalized, rationalized, or just accepted by the athlete, grooming factors that lead to the athletes’ compliance of emotionally abusive coaching behaviours over the course of their athletic careers included: characteristics of the athlete, the coach-athlete relationship, environmental influences, and cultural influences. Each is reviewed below.
**Sustaining of grooming.**

**Characteristics of the athlete.**

Characteristics of the athlete that seemed to perpetuate the abusive coach-athlete relationship included a high achievement motivation, commitment to following through on athletic goals, and salient athletic identity.

The personal desire to win by all means necessary was commonly expressed among the participants and was reflected in the competitiveness and discipline presented by the athletes interviewed. It was suggested by the athletes that this intense desire to achieve successful performances, and the athletes’ fortitude towards their athletic ambitions, lead them to accept abusive behaviour in sport. One athlete recalled,

> I think at a young age you know it’s wrong, but at the same time you don’t because you’re working towards competing and it feels so good when you do well, you just feel caught… I was doing so well and loved the sport so much that it almost became normal to me. The yelling and screaming, it was normal. Like the whipping of a cd across the room, that wouldn’t even phase me if I saw someone do that right now. (female rhythmic gymnast, 22)

This same athlete continued,

> Those years were just brutal… I can take criticism and I can work with coaches and push myself really hard, but when the coach is yelling comments at you that don’t make any sense and are hurtful and mean – I started to think I don’t need to take this. I don’t need to be here. So it was really really difficult working with her. It was hard though because we were so far into our plan for ourselves. You set a goal – My main goal was the Olympics and once I was on my way to
achieving that, midway through you can’t just decide I’m not going to do this anymore. There was so much that went into it. There’s everything your family sacrificed and I had worked my ass off. It just wasn’t worth it to me to walk away because of the split personality of one woman. So I just battled it through.

(female rhythmic gymnast, 22)

Another participant explained,

At that level it was like you do it at all costs – no matter what. And that’s kind of why you just have to deal with it [abuse] – it’s your choice but your kind of wasting everything if you don’t do it anymore. (female artistic gymnast, 26)

Likewise, other athletes stated, “Quitting just didn’t really feel like an option for me, like for myself… I just didn’t feel like I could [quit] at the time” (female artistic gymnast, 23).

And,

I knew going in that he wasn’t the nicest guy around. I was intimidated by that, but I knew what I wanted. Basically he had this reputation that he got good results, and I knew that I had to step it up to move on. You get to a point when it’s not really about having fun. (male figure skater, 23)

Linked with this point, it is suggested that this acquiescence was further increased in cases where the athlete had a previous history of coaching abuse, and among athletes of greater athletic maturation (were closer to achieving their goals in sport).

In addition to high achievement motivation, athletes also discussed a strong degree of dedication to following through with the commitment they made to participate in sport, even if this participation meant enduring less favourable coaching practices. This is reflected in the following quotations: “I just wanted to do it so that I wasn’t a quitter – I
just wanted to persevere” (male hockey player, 23). And, “I think it’s just my personality – well me and my parents. We are just so loyal and when we commit to something we follow it through ‘til the end. Like once I make a decision I’ll do it (female artistic gymnast, 26).

Moreover, the athletes referred to a salient athletic identity in which the athletes had not only come to define themselves by who they are in sport, but sport became the only thing they knew. Separation of athletes from friends, family, and all other aspects of life beyond sport made it difficult for the athlete to consider leaving the sport, thus leading the athlete to blindly accept all positive and negative aspects of sport, including their experiences of emotional abuse. When asked why they endured their coach’s emotional abuse for so long, these athletes made the following remarks:

I think I felt bad [about wanting to quit]. I felt guilty. And mostly I just didn’t know what else I would do. I didn’t really feel confident about anything else in my life so what else was I going to do? Just go to school and be an average student? It just didn’t feel like I had anything else going on. I didn’t have a lot of friends…I just remember feeling like I have nothing except this. (male tennis player, 25)

And, “I didn’t even give quitting a thought, because that’s just all I knew. And the thought of not having that in my life was scary because I didn’t know what else I was going to do” (female rhythmic gymnast, 24).

The coach-athlete relationship.

Sustained grooming in the coach-athlete relationship describes the acceptance of an athlete to experiences of emotional abuse due to coercion factors that continue to exist
and grow within the relationship between the coach and the athlete. Grooming factors reported within the coach-athlete relationship include praise and admiration from coach, the authority of the coach over the athlete, respect for the coach, and the athlete’s sense of trust and security within this relationship.

Many athletes recalled that his/her coach was not always demeaning. Rather, although the coach’s comments and criticisms were quite hurtful at times, at times the athletes also received a great deal of admiration and praise from his/her coach. This is reflected in the following statements:

I don’t know how to express. It’s like he’s by-polar. Like he’s your best friend one day and loves you. He’d say “Oh you’re so great. You’re doing so great.” And then the same night he’d scream at you and anything you did was wrong and you’d get punished. (female artistic gymnast, 26)

“It becomes kind of like a cult, because this person is both the source of demeaning [comments] as well as praise” (male hockey player, 23). “It was all about feeling special. Those coaches had the ability to make or break your day by making you feel special or making you feel like you’re nothing” (female rhythmic gymnast, 24). And,

The way they [coaches] treat you when you do so well, it’s like I’m perfect, I could do no wrong. They’re so proud of you and everyone is so happy, but then the second that it’s not going so well you feel so insignificant, and small, and like nothing. It was always those two extremes. (female rhythmic gymnast, 22)
All of the athletes referred to the influence of the coach’s authority on their acceptance of experiences of emotional abuse. Some athletes had such high respect for his/her coach’s position and successful reputation that they blindly accepted the coach’s emotionally abusive practices. On athlete explained,

You have adults dealing with kids. Coaches manipulate their players, and as a kid I didn’t know any better so coaches use that to their advantage. They’re an authority figure over you and that’s why you get these cases of abuse – because you think it’s okay. (male hockey player, 25)

A similar point was expressed by the same participant, but referring to a separate coach,

I always knew that he [coach] was a dick. And that a lot of it was just he was doing things for himself because he wanted to move to the next level and be that guy. So people always held him up on a pedestal and that’s just how it was. And I think he used that to his advantage, that we all saw him on this pedestal. (male lacrosse player, 25)

Another athlete stated,

He [coach] was very aggressive, and you wouldn’t know this when you first met him but he is very manipulative. He knew how to convince you of things, and it was his way or the highway. I’m kind of afraid of authority and he knew that. He
knew how to push my buttons and he knew I would never stand up to him.

(female artistic gymnast, 26)

Likewise another participant said,

He was absolutely feared. He was very stern. Very loud. You didn’t question him because he had control over the things that can cause you pain. He can tell you to do a bunch of 400s butterfly or jump out at every wall and do push-ups. And I guess you don’t have to do anything, but you’re there listening to him so you’re going to do what he says. (male swimmer, 27)

Several athletes also discussed the respect they held for his/her coach. This is expressed in the following comments: “He was the coach and he gave me this opportunity so it was like don’t screw it up for yourself and don’t screw it up for him” (male kayaker, 21). “I had to prove myself to her [coach]. At the time you try to do everything in your power to impress her” (female figure skater, 28). “You didn’t want to disappoint her [coach]. You knew it [upsetting comments] was for your own good, and you had that little bit of fear” (female rhythmic gymnast, 24). And, “As you grow old you started to want to talk back to her but you wouldn’t… What ever happened in gym stayed in gym” (female rhythmic gymnast, 17).

Athlete reports also indicated the intense level of trust they placed in his or her coach. As a result of this trust, several of the athletes recalled how they excused
emotionally abusive coaching behaviours because they believed their coach would never intend to hurt them. One athlete stated,

   My coach would be screaming at me but I knew she cared about me. She wanted me to be the best gymnast I could be and I knew that. I always knew that she wasn’t screaming at me just to make me feel like I was nothing. There was always an ulterior motive and that was to make me the best gymnast I could be, and I trusted her (female rhythmic gymnast, 24).

Likewise, another athlete recalled,

   You can look at it like he [coach] cares so much about us doing well or he cares so much about this workout that he’s created and we’re not living up to our potential. So in the aftermath you can kind of saw that I guess it’s better than a coach who would just write a workout on the board and then sit down and have a donut or something while you’re swimming. (male swimmer, 24)

*Environmental influences.*

Sustained grooming in the social environment describes the acceptance of an athlete to experiences of emotional abuse due to qualities of the environment in which the abuse takes place. Grooming factors reported within the sport community include continual exposure to other athletes’ experience of emotional abuse, responses of others to the athlete’s own experiences of emotionally abusive coaching practices, a growing positive reputation of coach, and continued relinquish of parental control.

In discussing their constant exposure to other teammates’ and competitors’ experiences of emotional abuse, several athletes described having no other reference of
what constituted appropriate coaching in sport, and as such, were unable to recognize
his/her coach’s behaviours as abusive.

From day one that’s all you know… You go these competitions at the national
level and every gym club is the same so you don’t question it. And there may be
some truth to that. Maybe being in this type of sport you do need coaches like
that [emotionally abusive]. I don’t know… (female rhythmic gymnast, 17)

Another participant stated,

I think it [yelling] was just another obstacle, it just made it [training] a little more
frustrating, but I didn’t know any other way. And all the other athletes that I had
competed with or trained with were getting the same sort of thing. So I didn’t
really think there was anything wrong with it. (female artistic gymnast, 23)

Likewise another athlete said,

There would be times when he [coach] would say, “Oh come on stop acting like
that. You’re an embarrassment to your family.” Or, “You look like a fat sausage
rolling on the floor.” And as bad it sounds, at the time I didn’t think anything of it
because everyone got those comments. But certainly now I look back and I’m
like oh my god having a young girl being called a fat sausage and an
embarrassment to her family, that’s terrible. (female rhythmic gymnast, 24)

Further supporting this point, other athletes stated, “It gets to you. But considering it’s
everyone it’s not something you have to take personal” (female artistic gymnast, 26). “I
think that I thought I was new and we were all treated the same” (female figure skater,
28). And, “It made it more normal because I knew they [teammates] were also going
through it” (female rhythmic gymnast, 22).
As well, participants explained that the responses of others to the athletes’ emotionally abusive experiences illustrated to the athletes the widespread acceptance of the entire sporting community to the occurrence of emotionally abusive coaching practices, and further coerced the athletes to also accept these behaviours when experienced by himself/herself. Athletes talked to authorities, family members and teammates about their coach’s conduct. When these individuals did not intervene and instead responded with advice on how to cope with these upsetting experiences, it gave the athletes the message that the abusive coaching behaviours were something they just had to deal with. One athlete explained,

I talked to my parents about it and my siblings. And I spoke to the other assistant coach about it, but everyone just said to push through it. So they were all really supportive, but it was basically just I had to deal with it. (female artistic gymnast, 26)

Similarly another participant recalled,

We [a group of athletes] talked to the people in charge of athletics, like the athletic director, but our team was doing really good and they made more money if we won. So they didn’t really care because we were winning. They said they’d talk to them [the coaches], but nothing ever changed. (female artistic gymnast, 23)

Several athletes tried to talk to their parents about their coach’s behaviour. This is reflected in the following statements:

I definitely told my parents because it was something that I wasn’t used to. It was really strange. I don’t exactly remember how they reacted to that but I don’t think they were phased. (male swimmer, 24)
A lot of the time she [mom] was not so sensitive about it. And obviously if she
saw me upset she would try to calm me down, but she would just say that it was
all part of the sport. (female rhythmic gymnast, 17)

And,

I am one of four kids and after what she went through with me in rhythmic, she
[mom] said she would never have another one of her kids in a national level sport
again. Because she said at the time you get so swept up in it and it’s so
consuming of your life, even for the parents, she said you don’t realize when
something’s wrong or when something’s not right because you just so swept up in
all of it. (female rhythmic gymnast, 24)

Similar messages were also received from conversations with teammates.

They [teammates] would always understand what I was going through and I could
always turn to them for advice on how they dealt with it. We just sort of
supported it. If one person had a bad day with the coach we would all know what
each other was going through and we would support each other through it.

(female rhythmic gymnast, 22)

And,

All the skaters would talk about how they got yelled at that day – it was the main
topic in the change rooms. They found that it was a bit extreme. When we talked
about it, it was our way of getting though it. (male figure skater, 23)

Other grooming influences in the sport environment including the growing positive
reputation of the coach, continued relinquishing of parental control, and the power of the
coach in the sport environment, all of which influenced the athletes’ and parents’
acceptance of emotionally abusive experiences, and sustained the pattern of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship over time. Parents’ trust in the coach and continued relinquishing of control are reflected in the following athlete statements: “I tried telling my mom about it [coach’s behaviour], but she didn’t believe me” (female rhythmic gymnast, 19).

My dad was a big part of it [athletic career] in the beginning. He’s the one that got me into it and he was the one driving me, but he didn’t really get involved in the coaching. He kind of backed off at a certain point. Actually it was from pretty young that he just let my coach take the reins. (male tennis player, 25)

And,

My parents were the type of parents that really trusted the coaches. They dropped me off at 7am and picked me up, but they didn’t really ask a lot of questions. They talked to me, but they didn’t really bother the coaches. They had a meeting twice a year with the coach and I think they would make suggestions, but the coach would say no and that would be it. But having said that, they did care about me a lot. They just weren’t really involved in the coaching and the training aspect of it all. (female artistic gymnast, 23)

In some cases, the athletes felt that their parents recognized the problem of their coach’s abusive behaviour, but were unable or unwilling to intervene due to the coach’s position of power and fear of repercussion for the athlete. One athlete explained,

I’m an only child so I feel that my parents were more involved than a lot of other parents were. But then again there was only a certain degree to which the parents could be involved. The program did not like when the parents tried to intervene.
It was like you put your child in this program you have to trust us and let us take
care of it. So it was a little difficult for them [parents] because they could see it
[emotional abuse] happening. My coach didn’t try to hide it from anyone. There
would be viewing areas to watch and my parents would watch almost every single
day and they would see her yelling and yelling and yelling. And at first I guess
they thought that that’s what happens and that’s right, but then after a while I
guess they started to see how it affected me, but there wasn’t much they could do.
(female rhythmic gymnast, 22)

Likewise other athletes stated,

My mom was a good listener but they [parents] tried not to get between us [coach
and athlete]. They thought that if someone should talk to the coaches then they
thought that it should be up to me to do it. (female artistic gymnast, 25)

“She got worse when one of the parents threatened to sue her for yelling at her child”
(female rhythmic gymnast, 19).

They didn’t agree with it but there were just like that’s the way it was. I also told
them not to get too involved. The coach really didn’t react well to parents coming
in there and telling him what to do. If parents did go in then the athlete would be
penalized. He would single the person out. (male figure skater, 23)

And,

They [parents] never wanted to get involved with the coaches. If parents get
involved with the coaches it just makes it messier. They [coaches] want to keep
what happens in the gym, in the gym. (female artistic gymnast, 26)
Cultural influences.

Cultural influences describe the acceptance of abusive behaviours by social norms within a particular group of people. Grooming factors reported within the culture of sport include media messages that condone abusive coaching behaviours and culturally accepted aggression. Two athletes in this study reminisced about messages in the media which helped rationalize their experiences of emotional abuse. These athletes made the following comments:

I didn’t think it [emotional abuse] was a completely normal thing, but in sports movies they tend to portray coaches as these people who will have outbursts and go on these rants or throw things, so it’s almost like it was an accepted way to react to things. If you saw someone acting like that on the street you’d think you should call somebody or do something, but somehow it’s okay for our coach to do that. So although we were all surprised we just thought it was him being a coach. (male swimmer, 24)

And,

Everyone just seemed to accept that she was going to yell at you. You see it on tv. You hear stories about coaches [from other athletes], and you just sort of assume that coaches are going to yell at you. So I just thought – Great. What fun for us [sarcastic tone]. (female rhythmic gymnast, 19)

As well, another two athletes talked about how culturally accepted violence and aggression in their sport, further contributed to their acceptance of aggressive behaviours in the coach-athlete relationship. One athlete stated,
The more aggressive the sport is, the more aggressive the language and the vocabulary is going to be. I think that guys know that their coaches can get away with it in a more aggressive sport. Like they can yell more profanity at you and be more aggressive and in your face because that’s the way the game is also played. (male hockey player, 25)

Similarly, another athlete explained, “In hockey there is this saying, ‘Cowards shouldn’t play hockey.’ And to be honest, cowards shouldn’t play hockey for their own emotional survival” (male hockey player, 23).

**Pattern of abuse.**

Of the 15 athletes who experienced emotional abuse across the course of their careers, 12 had experienced the same emotionally abusive behaviours from more than one coach. Once the athletes achieved increasingly elite standards of performance they were recruited and/or progressed to a higher level coach. As this occurred, the pattern of abuse was repeated, including the stages of talent identification, investment, development of specific external vulnerabilities, grooming, abuse and the sustaining of abuse. With each new coach there was a honeymoon period in which the relationship was great, slowly tension would build until the first incident of emotional abusive behaviour and a pattern of emotional abuse began to occur, and eventually these behaviours would escalate over time. “At the beginning it was sort of the break-in period where he didn’t yell at me as much, but as time went on it got more intense” (male figure skater, 23).

Further, athletes’ indicated that his/her resistance was reduced with each cycle - presumably due to enhanced investment and vulnerability, the athlete’s history of maltreatment, and the athlete’s increasing athletic maturation. “I got it [emotional abuse]
from every other coach, so I wasn’t surprised when he turned out to be no different” (male hockey player, 25). Similarly, another athlete recalled,

We had a really good relationship at the beginning… With her [coach] those first couple of years were great. It was probably one of my favourite times in sport because it was very positive. But then she started to turn again… She [new coach] started to yell a lot and she never yelled before. When it happened with her I don’t think I cried. I was more angry… So it was really really difficult working with her. It was hard though because we were so far into our plan for ourselves. You set a goal – My main goal was the Olympics and once I was on my way to achieving that, mid way through you can’t just decide I’m not going to do this anymore. There was so much that went into it. There’s everything your family sacrificed and I had worked my ass off. It just wasn’t worth it to me to walk away because of the split personality of one woman. So I just battled it through. (female rhythmic gymnast, 22)

End of relationship.

For the one athlete, the abuse stopped when he switched coaches. For the other 17 athletes, the emotional abuse did not end until they terminated their athletic careers. All of the athletes retired after achieving his or her goals in sport. Each athlete achieved at least the national standard in his or her respective sport. Three of the athletes retired after becoming the national champions in their sport, and seven of the athletes retired after competing at the Olympic Games, Pan-Am Games or World Championships. Specific reasons given for retirement include goal achievement, injury, mental and physical exhaustion, and a lack of interest or reduced focus on sport.
Following retirement from sport, of the 15 athletes who experienced emotionally abusive coach-athlete relations across the course of their careers, eight remained in contact to some extent with their previous coaches. All of these athletes explained that their relationships with their coaches following retirement are much more positive. As well, there appeared to be no hard feelings about their prior experiences of emotional abuse. This is reflected in the following comments: “I see her [coach] sometimes. It’s funny though ‘cause she treats me like a princess as if none of this stuff ever happened throughout my gymnastics career” (female rhythmic gymnast, 19). “I don’t hold anything against them [coaches]. I don’t hold a grudge. To them that was just their job” (female artistic gymnast, 26). “You know I don’t believe there are any hard feelings anymore. She does what she has to do. I accomplished what I wanted to accomplish and that’s about it” (female figure skater, 28). Furthermore other athletes explained,

I still do remain in contact. It’s really really good. It’s so much better now. It’s so much different because we’re older and more mature and everything’s kind of in perspective. Like for high performance athletes there’s sort of a level of intensity that performance coaches have to have – you see that in almost every sport. And I see them [coaches] as real people now and not just authorities and intimidating people. They’re actually not that intimidating. (female artistic gymnast, 23)

And,

Now we have more of an adult relationship. Now they [coaches] care what I think, where before when I was a gymnast they didn’t really care. The way they look at me and the way they talk to me now is very different than the way they
looked at me and talked to me when I was in gymnastics. Like even when I was 16, 17, they would talk to me like they were the boss. But now they talk to me like a friend. (female artistic gymnast, 25)

One athlete had no ongoing relationship with his coach following retirement, and reported being upset and feeling abandoned by this lack of relationship. “Never a card. Never an email. Literally, I went back home and he never talked to me again… all of a sudden just discarded” (male hockey player, 23).

Finally, six athletes reported no ongoing relationship, and no interest in having an ongoing relationship with their previous coach.

I know that I worked with her for 10 years of my life, and we traveled all over the world and were so intimate, but if I never see her again I’ll be totally fine. I don’t talk to her at all. (female gymnast, 22)

And,

I haven’t talked to any of my hockey coaches. With hockey I am just trying to put it behind me. It’s easier for me to put it behind me and not deal with it because of things that have happened… At times I have felt resentment towards them [coaches] – like afterwards the fact that they used me like a piece of meat. Like I was used for them to get to where they want… I’m just like you know what that’s over and done with. (male hockey player, 25)

**Discussion of Findings**

Looking at the themes that emerged from the data on the development of the emotionally abusive coach-athlete relationship, several findings are supported by previous research. Athletes in this study discussed their early years in recreational sport,
the love they developed for their sport, and eventual recruitment to a more competitive level. Likewise, Côté and Hay (2002) explained that children’s participation in sport progresses along the following stages: sampling, specializing, and investment. More specifically, in the sampling years children engage in play in a variety of different sports which leads to the building of physical competence and motivation. The specializing years are a transition phase in which the child narrows his or her focus onto one or two sports and emphasis is placed on sport-specific skill acquisition. Then, in the stage of investment, the nature of the athlete’s participation becomes more intense as reflected in the greater emphasis on competition and increased deliberate practice (Strachan, MacDonald, Fraser-Thomas, & Côté, 2008). Data from this study also indicated the athletes made this same progression from sampling to investment and that during the transition to investment, the athletes’ degree of participation intensified.

As a part of their progression into competitive sport, the athletes discussed several factors which may have enhanced their vulnerability to emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship including, the investment of time and energy, isolation from social group, and relinquishing of parent control. Likewise, previous research has indicated that in many sports young elite child athletes are encouraged to spend a substantial proportion of their time training and competing, thus placing them at risk for abuse in the sport environment (Donnelly, 1993). Isolation of the athlete/lack of supportive relationships, and unsupervised training/travel have been previously identified as external vulnerabilities to sexual abuse in sport (Brackenridge, 1997; Cense & Brackenridge, 2001). And, Brackenridge (1998) identified the surrender of parental control to the coach as a further risk factor to athlete sexual abuse.
During this investment period, the athletes also began to develop a close relationship with their coach. Participants described the friendship they shared with their coach or compared their coach to a parent-figure. Athletes also explained that during this stage they developed a respect for the coach’s authority and many expressed feelings of fear or intimidation. These findings are supported by previous research that has reported the power of the coach over the athlete, reflected in the closeness of the coach-athlete relationship, the legitimate authority of the coach, and the coach’s expertise and previous success, can make athletes fearful of their coach, normalize abusive coaching behaviours, and deter athletes from reporting abusive incidents (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Likewise, the building of trust in the coach-athlete relationship and a successful reputation of the coach have been cited as factors in the development of sexually abusive coach-athlete relations (Brackenridge & Fastig, 2005).

Athletes’ were reportedly upset by their initial experiences of emotional abuse, but then due to a variety of reasons, rationalized or accepted their coaches’ emotionally abusive practices as a required part of their athletic pursuits. This supports previous research that has theorized the affective response of athletes to emotionally abusive coaching practices over the course of their careers (Stirling & Kerr, 2007). Arguably, one of the greatest risks to experiences of emotional abuse may be the inability of the victim to recognize the abuse as problematic. Previous research indicates that emotionally abusive coaching practices are often normalized among athletes as a required part of the coaching process (Boocock, 2002; Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Palframan, 1994; Stirling & Kerr, 2008). Furthermore, research has reported that emotionally abusive behaviours are often normalized as standard methods of child-rearing. “In most cases of
emotional abuse, the abuser does not know that he or she is abusing someone and the 
abused does not know that he or she is being abused” (Krugman & Krugman, 1984, 
p.285). Previous research on responses to child abuse and neglect in parent-child 
relations in Hong Kong has indicated how cultural norms often dictate the acceptability 
or condemning of abusive behaviours. In this study it was explained that scolding, 
beating, and shaming behaviours were viewed as legitimate disciplinarian techniques and 
often occurred in public settings, thus demonstrating the widespread normalization of 
these child-rearing attitudes and practices (O’Brian & Lau, 1995). Likewise, emotional 
abuse has been reported to be perceived as an appropriate and even required part of child-
development in various educational settings (Krugman & Krugman, 1984; Shumba, 
2002).

The concept of grooming children to sexual exploitation and abuse has been widely 
discussed within the social work literature (Cross-Tower, 2009; Doyle, 1994; Leberg, 
1997; Levesque, 1999; Morrison, Erooga, & Beckett, 1994; van Dam, 2001) and has been 
applied to the coercion of athletes to sexual abuse in the coach-athlete relationship 
(Brackenridge, 2001b; Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005). Although the term grooming may 
be most readily identified as a concept specific to the coercion of individuals to sexual 
molestation, in this research a more liberal application of the definition of grooming was 
employed. Just as an apprentice may be “groomed” to take over a particular job at work 
or a dog may be “groomed” to fit a certain breed standard in appearance, in this research 
the concept of grooming is understood to refer to actions or conditions that lead 
individuals to conform to a particular role or standard. With respect to the grooming of 
athletes to emotional abuse in sport, grooming is defined as actions or conditions in the
coach-athlete relationship that lead athletes to conform to their role in the abusive coach-athlete relationship and adapt to and/or accept the occurrence of emotionally abusive coaching behaviours.

In comparing the grooming of athletes to emotional abuse versus sexual abuse in the coach-athlete relationship, it is suggested that although there may be a few similarities, overall these are very different grooming processes. Specific examinations of the grooming process of sexual exploitation in sport have suggested four stages: 1) Targeting a potential victim, 2) Building trust and friendship, 3) Developing isolation, control and loyalty, and 4) Initiation of sexual abuse and securing secrecy (Brackenridge, 2001b). Some of the coercive factors discussed by the emotionally-abused athletes fit into the grooming process previously described in the sexual abuse literature. Collectively, the seclusion of the athletes in the sport environment during periods of training or competition, the lack of access to peers outside sport, and relinquishing of parental control, all served to isolate the athlete both physically and socially in the sport environment. Likewise, the building of trust and friendship, as described by Brackenridge (2001b), was also seen in the athletes’ discussions about the positive comments athletes received during recruitment and the close relationship they built with their coach.

Contrary to the grooming of athletes to sexual abuse, however, the athletes did not report the phenomenon of targeting. Athletes were not assessed by their coach for degree of vulnerability nor did they feel as though they were specifically selected to be emotionally abused. Conversely, athletes recalled how every team member experienced the same emotionally abusive coaching practices, and identified the witnessing of other
athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse, and their peers’ acceptance of emotionally
abusive experiences, as contributors to their initial acceptance of these behaviours.

Furthermore, the initiation of the abusive behaviour itself and the act of securing
secrecy seemed to differ in many regards. As opposed to the gradual incursion to
sexually abusive behaviours described by Brackenridge (2001b), the emotionally-abused
athletes felt that although the frequency of their coach’s emotionally abusive may have
increased over time, there was no escalade in the use of various emotionally-abusive
behaviours. The athletes were exposed to other athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse
immediately upon entry to the sport/team, and experienced their own incidents of
emotional abuse from the coach shortly after. These initial incidents were described to be
the same emotionally-abusive behaviours they experienced at the end of their careers.

Many athletes did not report their emotionally-abusive experiences. Contrary to the
concept of securing secrecy, which is characterized by feelings of guilt and the
discrediting or threatening of the victim, it is suggested that there were alternative reasons
for this lack of disclosure including beliefs in the necessity of this coaching approach for
athletic success, perceived lack of concern from authorities, or social pressures to
comply. Further research is required on the this issue of secrecy in emotionally abusive
coach-athlete relations, as well as the possible cooperation, feelings of guilt, and the
discrediting of the athlete in this potential process of securing secrecy.

This study extends previous grooming literature by using by a more liberal
application of the term grooming and including coercion factors beyond those exerted
intentionally by the coach. To-date, research identifying grooming factors to sexual
abuse in the coach-athlete relationship has solely reported intentional actions undertaken
by the coach in order to lower the athlete’s inhibitions in preparation for sexual abuse. Of the grooming factors reported in this study, some influences on the athletes’ acceptance of emotional abuse related to specific actions of the coach (e.g. establishing trust and feelings of benevolence in the coach-athlete relationship). However, contrary to the grooming factors identified for the grooming of athlete to sexual abuse in the coach-athlete relationship, these actions were not exerted by the coach in a deliberate attempt to prepare the athlete for emotional abuse. Additionally, a number of grooming factors were reported that were conditions outside of the coach’s realm of influence (e.g. media messages glorifying athletes’ experiences of emotionally abusive coaching). Initial and continual factors experienced by the athletes that affected their acceptance of emotionally abusive coaching practices were categorized into characteristics of the athlete, the coach-athlete relationship, environmental influences, and cultural influences.

Characteristics of the athlete including a high achievement motivation, dedication, and salient athletic identity were perceived by the athletes as contributing to their normalization of emotional abuse. Admittedly, when discussing intrapersonal grooming factors it is important to not blame the victim, however it is also important not to negate the contribution of the individual to his/her own vulnerability. In support of achievement motivation as a grooming factor, previous research reports the drive to endure whatever it takes to win has led to the justification of deviant behaviour in sport (Crone, 1999). Similarly, Bringer et al. (2001, p.229) state, “Athletes learn to subject themselves to anything that might assist them in pursuit of medals… Ultimately, these behaviours contribute to an environment that normalizes abuse and disempowers athletes.”

Furthermore, compulsive compliance has been previously identified as an individual risk
factor to emotional abuse in parent-child relations (Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989).

Grooming within the victim-perpetrator relationship has been the most widely researched. Leberg (1997) explained that a perpetrator may groom a child physically and/or psychologically by building trust and slowly coercing a child to accept the legitimacy of inappropriate behaviours. As well, as previously discussed, previous research has reported that the power of the coach over the athlete can lead many athletes to not question abusive behaviors because of the legitimate authority of the coach and the admiration and respect athletes have for their coaches (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Furthermore, literature on emotional bullying in the workplace suggests, “Bullying may stem not so much from abusive or illegitimate use of power, as from power which is considered legitimate, and tightly related to the labour process and the managerial prerogative to manage” (Hoel & Salin, 2003, p. 205).

Based on the athlete data, it is proposed that the inter-relational grooming factors of dependence, authority, respect, trust and security collectively function to create a cycle of control between the athlete and the coach. In this cycle, the perpetrator (coach) is upheld in a significant position of control over the athlete. If athletes trust their coach, believe their coach has their best interest at heart, and respects their coach’s authority and expertise, then it is easy to see how an athlete may be coerced to normalize and/or justify abusive coaching techniques. In support of this cycle of control, Johns and Johns (2000) assert that in sport, a “discourse of expertise” is housed within a “culture of conformity”, which leads to an unquestioning, compliant and dependent athlete.

Environmental grooming influences have also been described previously by Leberg (1997) in relation to the grooming of children to sexual abuse. Leberg (1997) explained
that this type of grooming involves such acts as a perpetrator building a successful reputation in the community. Athletes in this study also talked about the growing positive reputation of coach and how this made them more accepting of his/her coaching practices. This study extends this literature by shedding light on the influence of other agents in this community grooming. For example, continual exposure to other athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse made the athletes feel as though they were not a targeted victim and that the experience of emotional abuse was a standard part of sport. As well, some of the athletes talked to authorities, family members and teammates about their coach’s conduct. When these individuals did not intervene and instead responded with advice on how to cope with these upsetting experiences, it further illustrated to the athletes the widespread acceptance of the entire sporting community to the occurrence of emotionally abusive coaching practices, and further encouraged the athletes to also accept these behaviours when experienced by himself/herself.

Finally, in support of the cultural grooming factors reported, previous literature has suggested that structural and cultural conditions can legitimate physically violent and verbally aggressive family interactions. “It stands to reason that the more society encourages and condones some forms of violence as legitimate, the more illegitimate violence will occur” (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2007, p.49). Similarly, referring to the cultural influence on acceptance to emotional violence, Rayner, Hoel, and Cooper (2002, p.136) explain, “Individuals act in context; that is, they work with others and within a power structure with rewards and punishments of different kinds around them – some of which they value, and some of which they do not.”

Looking at the pattern of emotional abuse experienced by the athletes from different
coaches across the athletes’ careers, it is proposed that as the pattern of emotional abuse was repeated with each relationship, the resistance of the athlete was reduced. Influences on the athlete’s acceptance of emotional abuse in different coach-athlete relations overtime include enhanced investment, the athlete’s history of maltreatment, and the athlete’s increasing athletic maturation. These factors have also been cited as contributing to an athlete’s acceptance of sexually abusive coach-athlete relations (Brackenridge & Kirby, 1997; Cense & Brackenridge, 2001).

A proposed model of the development of emotionally abusive coach-athlete relations.

Interpretation of the data from the athlete interviews suggest that the process by which emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship is initiated and sustained is related to the talent development of the athlete. Adapted from Cense and Brackenridge’s (2001) temporal model of sexual abuse with children and young persons in sport, a model of the development of emotionally abusive coach-athlete relations is proposed (Figure 1).
Figure 1. Development of emotionally abusive coach-athlete relations (adapted from Cense & Brackenridge, 2001)

Although the title headings (stages in abuse, components, and indicators) and the visual layout of the model have been adapted from Cense and Brackenridge (2001), all of the information included in the figure has been derived exclusively from the findings of this investigation.
As previous literature on the development of abusive coach-athlete relationship refers to sexual abuse only, comparison of the processes by which sexually and emotionally abusive relations in sport develop is warranted. In both processes, the development of abusive coach-athlete relations follows a temporal pattern of stages of abuse development. Interestingly, comparison of the sub-stages, specifically the development of specific external vulnerabilities, grooming, and the continuation of abuse between the proposed models of sexually and emotionally abusive coach-athlete relations, suggest many commonalities. Findings from this study, however, illustrate several significant differences in the ways that sexually and emotionally abusive coach-athlete relations develop. According to Cense and Brackenridge (2001) the development of sexually abusive coach-athlete relations is initiated by the motivation of the perpetrator to abuse and subsequent victim selection. In cases of sexual abuse, the perpetrator generally has a personal emotional or sexual desire to dominate the potential victim, and for this to occur he (or she) must overcome various internal and external inhibitors (Brackenridge, 1997; Finkelhor, 1984).

Conversely, the emotionally abused athletes in this study suggested that their coaches may not fit a pedophilic or predator profile. Although emotionally abusive behaviours are exerted in a deliberate manner, and a coach may derive pleasure from these behaviors (e.g. feelings of power and control), the current athletes suggested that their coaches did not have a personal desire to emotionally abuse. Rather, the athletes reported that their coaches were acting in the best interests of the athlete’s athletic development, suggesting that the perpetration of emotional abuse is closely tied to ambitions and philosophies of athlete development.
In the development of sexually abusive relations, the perpetrator is motivated to abuse and vulnerable athletes are selected individually to be victimized. With emotional abuse, the coaches do not necessarily possess a motivation to abuse, and individual victim selection does not occur. Instead, the coach may use the same emotionally abusive coaching techniques with all of his/her athletes and may direct the abuse at multiple athletes simultaneously. Furthermore, there are no specific external barriers or personal athlete resistances that a coach needs to overcome because emotional abuse is accepted as a required part of elite athlete development (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Stirling & Kerr, 2007).

Finally, in comparing the two models, sexual abuse can terminate anytime during an athletes’ sport participation, while emotionally-abusive coach-athlete relations tend to endure until the end on athlete’s athletic career. The potential occurrence or continuation of both sexually and emotionally abusive relations following retirement, however, needs to be explored further

**Implications.**

Several similarities were highlighted between the development of emotionally and sexually abusive coach-athlete relations, particularly the external vulnerabilities and physical opportunities in the sport environment for abuse to occur. Pertaining to these specific components in the development of abusive coach-athlete relations in sport, Cense and Brackenridge (2001) have posed several recommendations for prevention including, developing coaching codes of conduct pertaining to both issues of physical contact and issues of dependency and control, defining and monitoring interpersonal boundaries in the coach-athlete relationship, enhancing the vigilance of non-coaching adults (parents,
sports staff, and other adults), and creation of specific strategies for empowering athletes in the sport environment. It is suggested that all of these recommendations are both applicable and essential to the prevention of emotional abuse.

While there are some similarities between the temporal developments of emotional and sexual abuses, fundamental differences exist. More specifically, the main stages in the abuse process differ as do the theoretical bases for the initiation and progression of sexually and emotionally abusive coach-athlete relations. The development of effective athlete protection measures must therefore be informed by these differences. Athlete reports highlighted that the initiation and maintenance of emotionally abusive behaviours in the coach-athlete relationship progress along a series of stages that are closely tied to ambitions and philosophies of athlete development. Accordingly, prevention and intervention strategies need to address this theoretical underpinning to the occurrence of emotional abuse in sport.

In general, recommendations for protecting athletes from abuse in sport have focused primarily on specific strategies for enhancing external barriers to abuse in this environment (Brackenridge, 1997). “The best preventive measure against sexual abuse in sport is to stop potential perpetrators from becoming actual perpetrators… By keeping perpetrators away from situations in which they are given the opportunity to build up an exploitative relationship with children (as a coach or otherwise), recurrence may be avoided” (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001, p.71). Consistent with this recommendation, recent athlete protection initiatives in sport have focused on policy developments concerning the implementation of screening measures for coaches, enhanced monitoring
and avenues for reporting, and the facilitation of educational workshops on abuse awareness and protection procedures (Brackenridge, Bringer, & Bishopp, 2005).

Relative to the prevention of emotional abuse in sport, it is proposed that these surveillance measures may help to identify the most extreme cases of emotional abuse and subsequently address the conduct of these coaches in the sport environment. However, given the vast normalization of emotional abuse in sport (Stirling & Kerr, 2007), it is proposed that athlete emotional abuse may be best prevented through an enhanced focus on the education of coaches on ethical coaching conduct and alternative, non-abusive, philosophies and strategies for elite athlete development. This recommendation complements recent research which indicates, “…coaches respond far more positively to a rationale for child protection that stresses continuous improvement and best practice in coaching rather than one that appears to emphasize surveillance” (Brackenridge et al., 2005, p.260).

Finally, in considering the prevention of emotional abuse in sport, particular attention needs to be paid to the development of advocacy campaigns targeted at enhancing the awareness of sport leaders, professionals, participants, and spectators/bystanders of the problematic nature of this approach for athlete development. This advocacy should supplement current athlete protection developments in policy and education. More specifically, avenues for advocacy against emotional abuse in sport may include: ascertaining media attention through national or regional newspapers, news broadcasts, commercial campaigns, and posters/information in sport journals, newsletters, webpages, and within athletic venues. Opportunities for social advocacy may be promoted by encouraging previously abused athletes to discuss their experiences of abuse
and the corresponding negative effects of their abusive experiences on their personal and professional well-being. As well, coaches should be encouraged and provided with opportunities (e.g. workshops, conferences, online discussions, newsletters, etc.) to discuss their tips and successes in using non-abusive strategies for athlete development. Furthermore, bureaucratic advocacy may occur by lobbying sport organizations together in a commitment towards adherence to ethical standards in sport. Collectively, it is hoped that these advocacy efforts may help to problematize the occurrence of emotional abuse in sport, so that emotionally abusive coaching techniques may be challenged instead of glorified, and the normalization and cultural acceptance of emotional abuse in this environment may be eradicated.

**Future directions.**

As this study looked solely at athletes’ experiences, future research should explore coaches’ perspectives on the development of emotionally abusive coach-athlete relations. Considering the application of this study’s finding to the development of prevention initiatives, many future research questions need to be explored. For example: How is a coaching philosophy developed culturally and within individual coaches? What influences a coach’s approach to athlete development? How does a coach’s developmental philosophy change over time? And, what factors are required to inspire a change in coaching philosophy? In order to contradict the assumption that emotionally abusive coaching techniques produce successful performances in sport, further research is required on the effects of emotional abuse on an athlete’s personal and athletic well-being. As well, research highlighting the narratives of successful non-abusive coach-
athlete relations may further enhance prevention initiatives by advocating for alternative methods for elite athlete development.

**Influences of Emotionally Abusive Coaching Practices on Athlete Development**

**Findings**

In addition to describing the process by which their emotionally abusive relations were initiated and sustained in the coach-athlete relationship, the athlete participants also spoke about the influence of emotionally abusive coaching practices on their athletic development in sport. More specifically, the following personal characteristics of athlete development emerged from the raw data themes as factors perceived to have been influenced by athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse: motivation, sense of self, and commitment. General perceptions of the influence of emotionally abusive coaching practices on achievement outcomes in sport were also discussed. Each theme will be discussed in turn.

**Motivation.**

Themes of data included in the category of motivation included athletes’ perceptions of the influence of emotionally abusive coaching practices on their incentive to train or compete to the best of their ability. Subcategories included perceptions of increased motivation and perceptions of decreased motivation.

**Increased motivation.**

Many of the athletes reported that experiences of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship enhanced their drive or motivation in sport. The majority of the athletes interviewed indicated that as a result of his or her coach’s demeaning criticisms
and frequent outbursts, he/she was motivated to increase his/her training efforts. One athlete recalled,

   It [coach’s yelling] made it so that every moment of training was really intense, so I would obviously give 110 percent at all times. So you could see it as a good thing because it made me use my time to the best that I could. (female figure skater/dancer, 28)

In several instances, athletes’ reports suggested that this increased effort or motivation resulted from a fear of reprisal. This is reflected in the following statements, “There was this whole fear thing behind it [my increased effort]. The coach was obviously pissed off and I didn’t want to deal with it, so I would just paddle harder” (male, kayaker, 21). “I think you want to train hard because you wouldn’t want to get in trouble. That was your motivation” (female artistic gymnast, 26). And, “For me, I never wanted her to yell so because I was always scared that she was going to yell, I pushed myself insanely hard and never stopped working” (female rhythmic gymnast, 22).

Other athletes explained that after experiencing demeaning comments and belittling acts from their coach, they were motivated to train harder in order to earn or regain the coach’s respect. For example, one participant explained, “She [coach] would tell me that I was hopeless… It was upsetting, but at the same time it pushed me to work harder because all I wanted to do was get her respect” (female rhythmic gymnast, 17). Similarly other athletes recalled,

   I think when people tell me I can’t do something I feel the need to prove to them that I can – that they’re wrong… Eventually I just wanted to prove to her [coach]
that she was the idiot. I think a lot of where I am today is because I was just trying to prove to her that I wasn’t worthless. (female rhythmic gymnast, 19)

And,

The coach used to throw his shoe into the pool if someone was going too slow. He would say ‘hey my shoe is going faster than you what the hell is wrong with you?’… It was half lightening the mood and having fun, but it was also I don’t want him to think I’m a piece of crap so I’m going to try harder. (male swimmer, 27)

In another case, one athlete recalled how in some instances his coach’s emotionally abusive actions were encouraging as he took it as a sign of caring and investment.

In some ways if the coach got angry at you, you get angry at them and start to train harder in order to prove a point. But also in some ways it would be encouraging… If a coach throws a chair at you sometimes I would just react, but if you think about it there’s a meaning behind it - there’s a purpose. He was frustrated because I wasn’t performing to my full potential and they take it to heart you know? So when someone cares that much about something you start to think well maybe I should care about it a little more. It [coach’s abusive behavior] put some value in it [training]. (male kayaker, 21)

**Decreased motivation.**

Several of the athletes in this study also reported a lack of motivation as a result of his or her coach’s emotionally abusive training techniques. These athletes reported decreased motivation as a result of feeling angry and demoralized. Referring to experiences of being intentionally ignored, one athlete recalled:
I don’t think I’ll ever fully understand why she did it. I would think it would be because I wasn’t performing to her standards and she just thought if you’re not going to do what I say then I’m not going to give you the feedback that you want, kind of like a tit for tat sort of thing. So that obviously just made me mad and made me NOT want to do what she wanted. (female rhythmic gymnast, 22)

Likewise, talking about the negative impact of his coach’s yelling and name-calling on his motivation in sport, one swimmer stated,

There’s a difference between yelling at your team to motivate them or to light a fire under them to get them going, but that kind of thing [name-calling] isn’t helpful. I think that it just sort of made me angry and it didn’t make me want to swim better or faster. I just got mad and it wasn’t helping the situation because I was already feeling so down already. (male swimmer, 24)

One athlete commented, “You just feel like you’re not getting the attention. You feel like you’re washed up. You just felt lonely as well. It’s just not as motivating” (male kayaker, 21). Similarly, when talking about being intentionally ignored by his coach, an athlete stated:

I wouldn’t be getting yelled at but I wouldn’t be getting any feedback whatsoever… The focus was just to get you to push yourself more, but I think the motivation would go down actually. It’s not that I needed constant praise or constant feedback, but you miss it, and sometimes if you’re having a rough week there’s nothing you can really do about it. I would just get frustrated and get into my own headspace and try to ignore it. (male swimmer, 27)
Sense of self.

Themes of data included in the category of sense of self included athletes’ perceptions of the influence of emotionally abusive coaching practices on their beliefs in one’s self and one’s abilities in sport. Subcategories included decreased self-confidence, increased anxiety, and a sense of accomplishment. Each will be described in turn.

Decreased self-confidence.

Experiences of emotional abuse were reported by several of the athletes as negatively impacting their confidence level in sport. This is reflected in the following statements:

There was always this idea that as a dancer you are judged all the time in front of hundreds of people. It’s sort of the nature of the sport, so to be honest I think they [the coaches] were of the mind that they were training us mentally and physically for competition, but all it [demeaning comments] did was make you feel like you’re not good enough. (female figure skater/dancer, 28)

“You start to believe that you’re not good enough for him [coach]. You’re not worth the time” (male kayaker, 21). And, “She [coach] had the immaculate ability to make you feel like you were nothing” (female rhythmic gymnast, 24).

Increased anxiety.

Some of the athletes interviewed talked about the stress and anxiety they experienced as a result of their coaches’ emotionally-abusive behaviors. One athlete stated, “I was afraid to go to practice every day ‘cause I knew I was going to get punished… I hated the intimidation and I didn’t know how to deal with it” (female artistic gymnast, 23). Also, another athlete said,
You didn’t know when you were going to get yelled at. There was a lot of anxiety and constant stress ‘cause you might do something fine and then you get yelled at… I guess the idea, or his [coach’s] method to his madness, was that when you go and compete you’re under a lot of pressure so he wanted to implement that into the training so that we would be successful all the time and get used to that in a competition and be able to deal with all the emotions that your body’s going through. I never took well to it though. I was pretty anxious all the time. (male figure skater, 23)

**Sense of accomplishment.**

A few athletes believed that the end reward of a successful performance was that much greater given the coaching behaviors that they had endured in the process of achieving this success. One participant stated,

I definitely think that because of everything I had to go through to get there, the more rewarding my success was. In many ways I was proud that I endured everything I did and it made it even that much more of a high… There is just so much craziness but if you can make your way though it, it is just that much more amazing. (female rhythmic gymnast, 22)

Likewise, another participant explained,

It was always so up and down that when you do achieve something it’s such a bigger deal. I guess you feel more rewarded. I guess going through that stuff [emotional abuse] in a way made it more rewarding. And if I hadn’t gone through it then maybe it wouldn’t have been as dramatic. (female artistic gymnast, 23)
Commitment.

Themes of data included in the category of commitment included athletes’ perceptions of the influence of emotionally abusive coaching on their desire to remain engaged in sport. Subcategories included a decline in interest and a desire to leave the sport.

Decline in interest.

The interview data suggested that although most athletes were motivated to increase their training and/or performance levels as a result of their coach’s emotionally abusive behaviours, some of the athletes reported a decline in interest for the sport due to this coaching approach. This is reflected in the following quotations: “You shut down from being yelled at and you just get turned off the sport” (male hockey player, 25). And, “I went through a phase where it really started to affect me… I just didn’t want to be there anymore” (female rhythmic gymnast, 17).

Desires to drop-out.

Not only did the athletes report a decline in interest in training and performing, but several athletes expressed a desire to drop-out and quit their sport altogether. “He insulted my weight, called me worthless. He even went as far as to tell me that I shouldn’t have been born. That’s when I realized that he went too far… I quit [gymnastics] about 4 times in one month” (female rhythmic gymnast, 19). Similar views were expressed by other athletes. “The coaches definitely yelled a lot. It got to the point that I was so upset and angry that all I wanted to do was walk out” (female rhythmic gymnast, 24). And, “I’ve seen a lot of good players quit because they just don’t want to put up with the bullshit from the coaches” (male hockey/lacrosse player, 25).
Achievement outcomes.

In the category of achievement outcomes themes included athletes’ perceptions of the influence of emotionally abusive coaching on their performances in sport. Subcategories included performance decrements and enhanced performance.

Performance decrements.

Several athletes talked about performance decrements as a result of their decreased motivation, compromised self-confidence, and lack of commitment. This is reflected in the following comments: “I always felt that I could have done even better without this [abuse]” (female rhythmic gymnast, 22). “I became really self-conscious…and I shut down emotionally. I think you could see it in my performance” (female rhythmic gymnast, 24). “It got you pretty stressed out and anxious about doing the skill. And you don’t do the skill as well when you’re in that situation” (male figure skater, 23). And, “It can be very distracting when you’ve got this stuff going on and you can’t really get back to the mind frame that you need to be in” (male swimmer, 24).

Enhanced performance.

A few participants expressed the opinion that emotionally abusive behaviours in the coach-athlete relationship may have enhanced their performance development. This is reflected in the following statements, “I needed the yelling in order to push me to that next level” (female artistic gymnast, 25). And,

I wouldn’t wish it [abuse] upon anyone and knowing what I know now I wouldn’t go through it again. I definitely think it made me a stronger person though, and it made me a better athlete to a certain extent. (female artistic gymnast, 23)
Furthermore, in support of the belief of the need for this developmental approach in sport, the following statements were made: “The tree is judged by its fruit and I made it to pro so how can you say it didn’t work? Of course it worked” (male hockey player, 23). “In order to get your gymnasts to the top you need to do stuff like that, unfortunately in this sport that’s the way it is” (female rhythmic gymnast, 17). “For high performance athletes there’s sort of a level of intensity that performance coaches have to have – you see that in almost every sport” (female artistic gymnast, 23).

Discussion of Findings

This study provided former athletes the opportunity to discuss their experiences of emotionally abusive coaching practices in sport and the perceived influence of these behaviors on their athletic development. The participants perceived that their coaches’ emotionally abusive practices influenced their talent development in sport. This is supported by previous research that has highlighted the role of the coach as a facilitator and supporter in the athlete development process (Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria, & Russell, 1995; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, Whalen, & Wong, 1993; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001), and the influence of specific coaching practices on factors of talent development (Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002). This study adds to previous research as the athletes addressed the influence of negative coaching practices on specific personal characteristics in the development of athletic expertise. More specifically, the experience of emotionally abusive coaching practices was perceived to influence the athletes’ motivation, sense of self, commitment, and achievement outcomes.
Analysis of the data suggested that there is tremendous variation between athletes’ statements. Some athletes made comments indicative of positive influences of emotionally abusive coaching behaviours, including increased motivation in training, enhanced reward from successful performance, and performance achievement. Others presented opposing feelings, citing the negative influences of these coaching behaviours, such as a lack of motivation in training, loss of interest, desires to drop-out, reduced confidence, and increased anxiety. Looking at the specific themes that emerged from the data, several of the findings are supported by previous research.

The impact of emotional abuse on athlete motivation was commonly discussed. Previous research has argued that the quality of the coach-athlete relationship is a crucial determinant of athlete satisfaction and motivation (Jowett, 2003; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Athletes in this study reported both positive and negative influences of their coach’s emotionally abusive behaviours on their motivation to train hard and perform well in their respective sports. One possible explanation for these discrepancies may be the specific form of motivation in which the athletes referred to. Athletes in the study spoke globally about their perceived motivational states, however, previous research has distinguished forms of motivation to be intrinsic or extrinsic in nature, and have further categorized extrinsic motivation into self-determined or non-self-determined states depending on the individual’s degree of internalization versus compliance (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Looking at the impact of coaching behaviour on athlete motivation, previous research has highlighted the importance of autonomy-supportive coaching behaviours for intrinsic and self-determined extrinsic motivation. Conversely, controlling behaviours, such as criticisms,
and other “power-assertive techniques that pressure others to comply”(p.886), may motivate athletes, however, this form of motivation has been reported to most often be a non-self-determined extrinsic motivation, and compared to self-determined motivation is less beneficial for athletes’ optimal functioning (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Given the controlling nature of the emotionally abusive behaviours, it is suggested that these coaching techniques may enhance an athlete’s degree of compliance and non-self-determined motivation in sport, but may decrease the intrinsic motivation of the athlete, a psychological factor previously identified among successful Olympic athletes (Gould et al., 2002). This suggestion is consistent with the finding that although the majority of the athletes interviewed reported increased motivation in training and performance, many athletes explained that this enhanced effort resulted from fear of reprisal, disapproval, and/or rejection. These same athletes also discussed reduced pleasure and desire to drop-out from sport.

Many athletes described a direct relationship between their experiences of emotionally abusive coaching behaviors and compromised self-confidence and heightened anxiety. These findings are supported by previous literature that has indicated several possible short- and long- term effects of psychological maltreatment including among other consequences, low self-esteem, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, depression, hyperactivity and distractibility, and pessimism and negativity (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2007). This study extends this literature by highlighting the potential negative implications of emotional abuse, outside of the parent-child relationship, on a victim’s psychological well-being.
Many athletes discussed the negative impact of the abusive coach-athlete relations on their achievement outcomes. Likewise, Jowett (2003) reported the costs of negative relational issues within the coach-athlete on performance outcomes. Interestingly, a few of the participants also expressed beliefs about the positive impact of emotionally abusive coaching on their athletic performances. Of the two athletes who attributed their success in sport in part to their coach’s emotionally abusive training techniques, both had achieved their desired goals in sport and retired following a top performance. It is possible that these athletes rationalized their coaches’ behaviours and exhibited ‘effort after meaning’, noting that because they experienced performance success, the coaching practices must have worked. In other words, if the outcome is positive, one could deduce that the process for achieving this outcome was also positive. These findings may be interpreted to suggest that athletes come to buy into a win-at-all-costs mentality and normalize potentially abusive coaching practices as part of their development as elite athletes.

One questions the ethics of condoning or justifying emotionally abusive practices in the name of performance success particularly in light of the current findings with respect to the athletes’ sense of self. Although some of the participants believed abusive practices were necessary for performance, interestingly, none of them claimed these practices enhanced their self-confidence or commitment in sport. Further, although these athletes experienced performance success through these practices, this does not mean that these athletes would have thrived under these coaching techniques indefinitely. The general child abuse literature indicates that the long-term sequelae of emotional abuse are significant and harmful and are correlated with impaired learning and performance in
such areas as academic performance (Binggeli et al., 2001; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2007). Even though an athlete may experience performance success through these emotionally abusive means, the findings are not to be interpreted to suggest that these practices represent the best approach for optimal development. It is feasible that these successful athletes would have achieved even greater results through non-abusive means. Also, one wonders what short and long-term costs – psychologically, socially and physically – the athlete may experience by enduring abusive practices, even if they reach the pinnacle of athletic success.

Given the self-reflective nature of the study design it is not possible to discern whether the athletes interviewed differed in the influences of their emotionally abusive experiences, or if individual differences affected the athletes’ perceptions of these influences. Presumably, the varied nature of the results may be best attributed to a number of individual differences between the athletes, which may have influenced both their experiences of emotional abuse as well as their perceptions of these experiences. Possible individual differences may include: the nature of the coach-athlete relationship, the stage of career in which the abusive behaviour occurred, age of the athlete at the time of the abuse, performance level, degree of self-motivation, duration, frequency and intensity of the emotionally abusive behaviours, forms of emotionally abusive behaviours experienced, the presence of external supportive relationships, the specific sub-culture of each sport, and the retired athlete’s present opinion on the acceptability and/or necessity of this developmental approach in sport.

Similarly, previous research has identified several resilience factors that may prevent or reduce the severity of a child’s experience of emotional abuse including; the nature of
the abuse (Emery & Laumann-Billings, 2002; Stirling & Kerr, 2008), positive early childhood experiences and attachment security (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), positive self-perceptions (Doyle, 2001), external attribution style (Wolfe, 1987), overly resistant versus compulsive compliant behavioral coping strategies (Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989), specific dispositional characteristics (Clarke & Clarke, 2000; Friedman & Chase-Lansdale, 2002; Rutter, 1989), positive peer relationships, and activities outside that of the abusive relationship (Daniel et al., 1999). Future investigations of these individual differences may help to account for the different perceptions purported.

Furthermore, a wealth of research has reported the widespread normalization of emotional abuse as a common and accepted form of child-rearing in various sporting, educational and parenting settings (Krugman & Krugman, 1984; O’Brian & Lau, 1995; Shumba, 2002; Stirling & Kerr, 2007), thus potentially precluding the athletes’ abilities to criticize their experiences of these behaviours. Previous research suggests that abusive behaviours have less negative impact on the recipient when they exist in a culture of acceptance. For example, in cultures in which physical punishment is common and widely accepted as a parenting practice, children suffer far fewer consequences than those children in cultures where this is not considered acceptable practice (Parke, 2002). Following this argument, it may be that athletes are less affected by emotionally abusive practices because they are so commonplace in sport. Conversely, one wonders how athletes make sense of the acceptability of emotionally abusive practices in sport when these same practices would not be tolerated in their schools or other settings. This would be an informative line of inquiry for future research.

**Implications.**
It is clear from this study that athletes have varied perceptions regarding the influence of emotionally abusive coaching practices on their development in sport. Considering the potential long-term detrimental effects of abusive experiences, alternative strategies are recommended for optimal athletic development. Given the exploratory nature of this study, further empirical work is needed.

**Future directions.**

As this study was purely exploratory in nature, future research is required on the relationship between specific emotionally abusive coaching behaviours and identified factors of talent development. Given the reliance on self-reported retrospective accounts, further examination of the influence of emotional abuse on athlete development would benefit from prospective, observational research. Moreover, it is recommended that greater attention be paid to examining the holistic nature of athlete’s development in sport, including the impact of emotional abuse on the social, educational, psychological, physical, and spiritual development of the athlete through sport (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Coaches’ perspectives on this issue are also warranted. As well, future research on successful high-performance coaches’ and athletes’ experiences of non-abusive coaching techniques and the influences of such coaching approaches on athlete development would be a fruitful line of inquiry.

**The Socialization of Parents to Concerning Coaching Practices**

**Findings**

All 16 parents who participated in this study discussed some form of emotional abuse experienced by their child in the coach-athlete relationship. The nature of the emotionally abusive experiences and perceived impact of the coaching behaviour on the
participant’s children ranged across the parents interviewed. Of note, is the finding that the parents seemed eager to talk in spite of the emotionally disturbing nature of some of their stories. Several parents shed tears at various points during the interview, but no participant wanted to take a break or end his or her participation at any time. Instead, parents were extremely grateful for the opportunity to discuss their stories and were keen to refer the researcher to other parents interested in the research.

As a way to describe their encounters with problematic coaching practices, the participants ended up describing the process by which they entered sport and became accustomed to the sport culture. Parents then continued to explain their reflections on their children’s’ experiences of problematic coaching behaviours over time. The interview data are interpreted to suggest that these parents experienced five rather distinct phases of socialization to concerning coaching practices. These phases occurred over the course of their children’s athletic careers, and are described below.

**Phase 1: “star-struck”**.

The parents described the point at which their child was identified as “talented.” In each case, the young athlete was participating in a recreational or summer camp program when the head coach of the club approached the parent(s) and expressed interest in working with the child in the competitive program. Here, the parents were told that their son or daughter was extremely talented and that the coach could take him/her to higher levels in the sport. In each case, the head coach of the particular club had coached previous members of the National Team, an Olympic or World Championship Team. The parents described themselves at this stage as being “star-struck.” They were being told by someone with expertise and success that their child could have a very exciting
career in the sport. This is reflected in the following statements: “As parents, we think everything she does is great but to hear it from an Olympic coach – that’s a very different story” (artistic gymnastics mom).

You know every parent thinks that their child is perfect so I think that we were very proud that she was invited to not only be a part of the competitive part of the club but that she was identified as having the potential to be better than average at this. (rhythmic gymnastics mom)

“You feel very overwhelmed and very flattered that clubs are looking for you” (swim mom). And,

It was an honour to be chosen to be coached by him. He [coach] was very knowledgeable. He coached the first women’s Olympic team. He just had a lot of experience coaching women’s hockey and he ran a lot of women’s hockey schools. (hockey mom)

Likewise, other parents explained, “You do get excited and start to have day-dreams” (swim mom). “We were told that it’s a privilege to be in the programme” (swim dad). And,

He was the coach of the previous dream team and he identified her as one of the swimmers that they would like to work with over a long period of time with the intentions of aiming for the Olympics – That’s exciting. (swim dad)

The parents’ self-described response to this news was to eagerly comply with the coach’s requests for training times and parental assistance. They were highly committed to helping their children succeed in a sport he/she loved and wanted to do everything possible to see their children succeed: “Every parent wants to see their children succeed
at something they love – and it’s our job as parents to clear the path and make the journey easier for them” (artistic gymnastics mom). Similarly, other parents explained, “My daughter was setting the pace and knocking on the door to move to the next level. We were just trying to be as supportive as we could be to help her with that” (swim dad).

And,

This was a high point for my husband and I. Our daughter loved gymnastics – she would do gymnastics continuously at home, at school, in the yard, wherever she could. So when we were told by an Olympic coach that she also had talent in addition to her passion, it was like a dream come true. We wanted to do whatever we could for our kids… so we did whatever the coach asked of us. (artistic gymnastics mom)

**Phase 2: relinquishing of control.**

Early in their children’s sporting careers parents were asked to place a great deal of trust in the coach’s expertise and were expected to relinquish a degree of control over to their child’s coach. One parent said,

We left them [the kids] in the coaches’ hands. We were not there monitoring every stroke that they ever took…They would go off with the coaches for training or competition. Both my husband and I decided that as long as they [the kids] were enjoying it and were showing a commitment to it, we were going to support them in whatever they wanted to do in terms of the sport. (swim mom)

This parent continued,

There is a triangle. It is the swimmer and the coach and the parent. And sometimes it is hard because there are times when there are things that will be
discussed between your child and the coach that will not be discussed with you, but I think as a parent you need to respect that side of the triangle. You have to respect that athlete-coach relationship. I trusted the coach and I believed in the coach and the programme I put my child in. (swim mom)

Another parent explained, “It was very much you bring the kids you leave them at the doorway. Kiss them goodbye and come back when they’re done” (gymnastics mom).

Participants also reflected on formal expectations established by the coach within the sport organization about the extent to which parents may be involved within the sport environment.

The tone is set by the coach. At the beginning of every year the coach would have a meeting with the parents. He would give his coaching philosophy and part of that coaching philosophy is stating that ‘I respect you as a parent and what I need from you is respect for what I’m doing for the athlete and trust. And even though you may not understand it you have to have faith that your swimmer and myself will do what is best for him or her’…And you need to buy in to that concept. You’re not forced to, but I saw some parents that had some issues and you can have a lot of conflict that way. (swim mom)

Similarly, another parent stated,

The policy there is that the parents are not supposed to distract the athletes therefore no parents are allowed [in the gym] when they are training or when they are competing. So we were completely out of the loop. We could not even see what was taking place. That’s how it works. (rhythmic gymnastic mom)
When discussing this stage of being introduced to the world of competitive sport, parents also commented that in hindsight they questioned whether they had relinquished too much control of their child’s sport involvement to the coach. “Now that she’s out of the sport and we look back, we gave up too much control as parents – we let the coach run the show and we shouldn’t have” (artistic gymnastics mom). Similarly, another parent said, “You almost get the feeling that the coaches are taking over the kids and you are just there to drive them and feed them” (swim mom).

**Phase 3: growing concern.**

Within a short period of time, the training and competition demands intensified. The child and the family were now required to make sacrifices in terms of other interests and time commitments. The athlete had to forgo other activities such as school teams or soccer leagues, and families were required to make vacation arrangements around training and competition schedules. At this point, the parent began to develop a better understanding of the requirements for training at the elite level. The parent also had some concerns about the loss of family time and well-rounded development of their children, but was willing to comply in order to facilitate the development of the child’s athletic career. As one parent said,

We began to question whether it was best for our daughter to spend all of her time in gymnastics and not pursue anything else. What was she missing out on by not experiencing other activities? And what would happen if her gymnastics career ended before she was ready? When we raised these concerns with our daughter though, she became very upset. She said that all she wanted to do was gymnastics
and she didn’t mind missing out on other things – she said it was worth it, so we
didn’t push it. (artistic gymnastics mom)

Similarly other parents said,

When she got to a certain level there was a bigger commitment. They had so
many practices a week and they had to travel… Her whole adolescence was
hockey and sometimes I was concerned about what she was missing, like prom.
(hockey mom)

And,

The whole lifestyle was absolutely out of balance and punishing at times. She
[daughter] missed a lot of family activity or other parts of life that were going on.
It’s not the extent like in hockey where she moved out of her home at age 12 or
13, but she was away. She traveled a lot. She would go away for months at a
time for training and then weekends would be competitions. Even when she was
here, she was sleeping in her bed, but she was gone all day. (swim dad)

All of the parents were engaged in their child’s sport experience, observing between
one and ten hours of training per week and attending all of their local competitions. As
the training became more intense, the parents described their children experiencing some
unhappiness from time to time. The athletes began to complain to the parent about their
feelings of upset because the coach got mad at him/her, or that training on that particular
day was “not fun.” In many cases, the emotional upset occurred as a result of trying to
work through fear of performing certain skills or as a result of the “general coaching
process”. One parent described an incident as follows:
She had a very rough time learning this aerial skill on the [balance] beam. She was very afraid of it. Perhaps the coach was patient at the beginning but at some point she [the coach] became frustrated as well and started yelling at my daughter to do the trick. She said she was being silly for being afraid. My daughter would stand on the beam for half an hour crying, not even trying the skill, but the coach would not let her come off that beam. It was horrible. (artistic gymnastic mom)

Furthermore, another parent recalled,

It was about 3 days before nationals and the kids were seated to win. I was observing the last practice and the coach was making them do it over and over again, and eventually the little girl had to get off the ice and just puked her guts out. I felt so bad for her…And just the language. What the f--- are you doing? Get the f--- off the ice. F--- you. It’s scary and it’s sad. And this is with kids. Especially the young kids, it scared the hell out of them. (figure skating mom)

In most cases, when the parent had a concern about a coaching practice or their child’s distress, he/she addressed it with the coach. In the vast majority of these cases, the coach responded by emphasizing that the process of becoming an elite athlete requires mental toughness – the ability to tolerate some pain, to make sacrifices, to work through fear and demanding physical training. As the coach, it is his or her job to “push the athlete” to become the best he/she could be and that this often requires yelling and criticism. In the situation described above, the mother continued to explain,

The coach came out of practice and he said “I can see that you were shocked.” I said “yeah I mean they’re at exhaustion. They should be resting especially before a competition.” And he said, “Well I want to get them to the point that no matter
what happens to them out there they will rise to the occasion.” He said, “I push your son because I know I can push him.” I just said, “well there’s a fine line and I think you’ve gone over it.” So I didn’t like that [coach’s behaviour] and he knew it, but he had control over those kids. You as a parent you have no control when you’re at that level because that coach can help you win. (figure skating mom)

The parents were told that “Elite athletes are not softies” and that “gymnastics is not for wimps.” The coaches emphasized that if the child’s goal was to become an elite athlete, then it is up to the coach and parent to help her. Alternatively, if the parent didn’t think his/her child had “what it takes” then perhaps the child should not be in that level of the program. Many parents also reported that at one point or another, their child’s coach had told them that their child would not be successful in the sport without him/her [the coach].

At this stage, there were often repercussions for the athlete as a result of the parent expressing concerns to the coach. In subsequent training sessions, some of the coaches teased the athletes about needing their parents to do their “dirty work” for them or that they perhaps didn’t have the strength of character to become a good athlete. These comments were always made in the presence of the other athletes.

Historically the coaching staff at the club are not considered very approachable. I would occasionally speak to the coach about the girls, but depending on the coach that sometimes backfired. The coach was on her case about something and I spoke to the coach and I said, “You know I don’t know what you’re going to get out of the girls when you yell at them like that. Basically I was asking her to
change her behaviour. And well, she just backlashed. My daughter came home from practice the next day and said “Mom please don’t talk to the coach again. She tore a strip off me!” (rhythmic gymnastics mom)

In hindsight, these parents reported feeling defeated at this stage of their child’s career; they acknowledged that they weren’t going to get anywhere with the coach by addressing their concerns with him/her directly. As one parent said, “We were boxed-in. Unless we wanted to take our daughter away from something she loved and didn’t want to leave, or see her punished, we had to find another way to manage things” (artistic gymnastics mom).

The participants indicated that they grew more aware of the culture of elite sport, and expectations of them as parents from the other parents in the gym. Through these relationships, they learned that other families were making similar sacrifices, and that others appeared to accept the coaching practices. As one parent said,

We were new to this world of elite gymnastics. When we saw that other parents who had been around longer than us weren’t concerned about how the girls were being trained, we assumed this was just the way it was. (artistic gymnastic mom)

Similarly, another parent stated, “The parents talk with each other. How to act and how a parent should behave. We talk about it [coach’s behaviour] and the message is automatic - The parents should not interfere with the coaching. That’s the view” (swim mom).

**Phase 4: acceptance/acquiescence.**

In this phase, the athlete was at the peak of his/her career; he/she was competing at the national and/or international level and vying for spots on the National, Olympic and/or World Championship Teams. The parents expressed pride in their children’s
accomplishments but the process of reaching this stage was not without distress. Three different scenarios were described at this stage of the athlete’s career.

In the first case, the parents reported that their child continued to experience unhappiness with the coach’s yelling, berating and intimidating behaviours. “The ongoing yelling and personal criticisms were really hard to take.” Although these disconcerting behaviours reportedly worsened over time, the athlete did not want the parent to address their concerns with the coach, presumably because of the repercussions and retributions suffered in previous experiences. The parents knew enough about the elite sport culture to fear repercussions for their child’s athletic career should they “rock the boat.” They had decided to comply with their child’s pleas to avoid discussing their concerns with the coach, knowing that raising these issues with the coach would bring their child further distress.

We thought it was best to keep our mouths shut at this point. The Olympics were approaching and our daughter had a very good chance of making the team. We were very worried that if we were seen as complainers or if we got the coach mad at us, it might hurt her chances. There are always several other athletes ready to take her place on the team – everything has to be just right for her to make it so we kept quiet. Besides, after the Olympics, she planned to retire so there wasn’t much time left to put up with stuff. (artistic gymnastic mom)

Some parents expressed explicit decisions they made to respect their children’s choices to continue training with the coach despite the coach’s upsetting behaviours. This is reflected in the following quotations: “I have always respected the idea that the athlete
makes her own decisions and she chose to stay with the coach” (rhythmic gymnastics mom).

We didn’t like the aggressiveness of the coach but we thought our son was mature enough to take the good, the bad, and the ugly. He chose the coach and he still thought he was the best coach. He just didn’t like the way he approached his coaching. (figure skating mom)

And,

For me it was very confusing because on one hand my child is now in her mid to late teens. She’s saying don’t go in. I’ll deal with it. It sucks, I don’t like it, but it won’t happen again. I want to train. So I sort of accepted it [coach’s behaviour]. (artistic gymnastics mom)

Additionally, the parents had been convinced or had convinced themselves that these problematic coaching practices were everywhere in sport at the level and therefore were an inherent part of the elite sport culture. As one parent said,

I thought that this was how all coaches at the elite level were – in all sports – and that this is what it took to make a champion … maybe I was just trying to make myself feel better but I remember believing this. (artistic gymnastics mom)

Another parent reported,

My wife and I believed the coach when he told us that our daughter needed him if she wanted to make it to the Olympics. We didn’t know any better – neither one of us had been in sport at this level. (artistic gymnastics dad)

For these parents whose children continued to experience emotional upset from their coach, but felt they had no choice but to accept the coach’s behaviour, many discussed
ways they tried to help their children cope with the distress. Several parents had frequent discussions with the athlete about his/her feelings. This expressed in the following comments:

We tried to discuss it with the girls and say so how to you feel about that. I think that helped them, but who knows if that was the right thing, if that was effective or not or if it just made me feel better. (rhythmic gymnastics mom)

And,

I would give her a lot of motivation talks about how you need to make the best of what you have and it’s important to have fun and don’t focus on what the coach is saying - Focus on your goals. (hockey mom)

Another parent explained that she sent her son for professional counseling in order to help him cope with his coach’s conduct:

There was a point when he first started, he was afraid of his coach and I had to send him to a sport psychologist to help him learn how to deal with his coach. So I paid more money to get the sport psychologist to get him through this. He learned how to stand up to his coach when he was screamed at or whatever and the sessions helped him deal with all his [coach’s] craziness. My son said that it was helping him, but why would we have to do that as parents? Why did we think that we can’t change the coach - he [my son] just needs to learn to cope with it. (figure skating mom)

A second scenario was described in this phase. Some of the parents described thinking that everything was fine with their child’s training as they didn’t see him/her being unhappy and he/she didn’t communicate any concerns. Subsequently however,
they learned that their child stopped telling them about their unhappiness or certain upsetting events. It was only upon retirement from the sport that the athletes admitted to not disclosing this information. According to the athletes, they did this to avoid causing distress to their parents and/or they knew at some point, their parent would speak to the coach which meant further turmoil for themselves.

I did struggle. I made sure that we discussed everything, but he [my son] got smart enough to know that if mom knows this is happening she won’t let me be coached by this guy so I’m not going to tell her… Stories came out after. He told me more once he finished. (figure skating mom)

A third scenario existed, where three of the parents interviewed discussed their children’s experiences of problematic coaching behaviours, but were not concerned as they fully respected the coach’s position. Parents explained,

For me I am a very competitive person and I totally respected and understood the athletes going through training…. I always trusted what was going on. I never questioned what the coaches were doing with the children. I respected the coach and did not step in to a place that I felt was not my business. (swim mom)

And,

You have to respect that the coach is the expert on the training and everything that happens in the pool. The coach never interfered in our home life and we did not interfere with his role. (swim dad)

Likewise, another parent said,

They [the coaches] were the professionals and I have a respect for what they would say. So I wouldn’t question it because it’s really not my background. The
coach obviously knew that doing this and this would strengthen the athlete. I think some of the other parents had concerns about the yelling and screaming that was going on, but I think all of us know that this isn’t a perfect world and you’re not going to shelter your children for their lifetime. It’s just the way the coaching is. (hockey mom)

For a variety of reasons therefore, during this phase of the athlete’s career, both the parent and the athlete accepted the existing circumstances as a requirement for athletic success and maintained silence about their concerns.

**Phase 5: guilt.**

In this final phase, the athlete retired after what the parent referred to as a successful career – one in which the athlete’s goal of making an elite level team had been met. The parent and athlete were now removed from the elite sport culture and had the opportunity to review the athletic career without the situational influences of the sport environment. At this point, the parents’ appraisals of the coaches’ behaviors were far more negative than when their children were competing. Although the parents described the coaching behaviours as problematic, upsetting or disturbing during the career, it was at the retirement stage that they spoke adamantly about the abusive nature of these behaviours.

This part of the interview was extremely distressing for several of the parents, often accompanied by crying and long periods of time when the parent tried to collect him/herself emotionally. Parents expressed guilt, remorse, and self-doubt about allowing emotional abuse to occur and to continue.

I don’t know what I was thinking… I was upset about the way he [the coach] dealt with her on several occasions but I didn’t call it abusive then. Now when I
look back, how could I have called it anything else? If any other adult had spoken to her that way, I would have called it abuse. I don’t know what happened to me? (artistic gymnastic mom)

Several parents went even further and claimed they had contributed to their child’s experiences of emotional abuse through their own complicity. They struggled with the meaning of acting in the best interest of your child. They wanted to do whatever was beneficial for their child and yet were unclear about whether this intention translated into remaining silent about their concerns or speaking up and dealing with the consequences.

I always wanted to do what was best for my child – doesn’t every parent? So when my daughter pleaded with me not to talk to her coach about his manipulative behaviour … that by talking to him might interfere with her chances to make the team, what was I supposed to do? Making the team was always her dream and I wanted to help her get there. Now, looking back, I wish I had said something. My role as a parent was to protect my kid and I didn’t do my job. It would have been different if it had been a one-time incident but this went on for years. She shouldn’t have had to go through that. How do I forgive myself for that? (artistic gymnastic mom)

Other parents revealed the following:

It was tough to see it [abuse] happening, but I thought I was supporting her. Once your kid starts winning championships it’s easy to forget that she may be being damaged along the way. (swim mom)

And,
My daughter is out of sport now and she struggles a lot with her self-esteem. Imagine a young person making the Olympic team and still not feeling good about herself? I blame myself for this… I sat back and let her coach criticize her on a personal level for years … no wonder she feels lousy about herself. I’m not sure how I’ll come to terms with the fact that I allowed this to happen at all, let alone for it to go for years [parent crying]. (artistic gymnastic mom)

**Discussion of Findings**

Parents were asked to reflect on their child’s potential experiences of emotionally abusive coaching practices. The results of this study indicate that parents are socialized into the culture of elite sport and can become silent bystanders to their children’s experiences of emotional abuse. Previous research has also indicated that parents not only socialize their children into sport but that parents are in turn socialized into the sport culture through their children’s participation (Woolger & Power, 1993).

Parents were star-struck by the potential athletic prospects of their children and committed themselves to helping their children achieve their potential in sport. Similarly, previous research has indicated how parents provide the financial, time and logistical support to enable their child’s sport participation, and are heavily involved in the child’s sport experiences in the early years (Côté, 1999). As the child athletes advanced in competitive sport, and training and competition requirements increased, some parents were concerned with the singular focus on the specific sport, and the sacrifices that the child was being asked to make within their family and social lives. Côté (1999) also describes sacrifices made by the family and the athlete during the investment years.
At this time, parents discussed a growing intensity of the coach-athlete relationship with the young athlete often spending more time with the coach than with the parent(s). This supposition has also been previously stated (Donnelly, 1993). Likewise, in support of the parents’ expressed concerns about their relinquishing of control over their children to the coach, previous research has also reported that during the investment period the parent, while still playing an important supportive role, tends to move into the background and have secondary influence (Côté, 1999), and may experience a loss of control at this stage as they are relegated to the outskirts of the coach-athlete relationship (Harwood & Knight, 2009; Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004).

Not knowing much about the world of elite sport, parents deferred to the authority and direction of the coach, someone they respected for his or her expertise and past success as a coach, and entrusted with their child’s career. Parents also recalled how they took cues about how to behave as parents of elite athletes from the other parents. When conflicted over concerns with the coach’s practices, parents explained that they were socialized into silence and complicity by the other parents and by the coach. The participants in this study observed other parents remaining silent in the face of what they considered to be problematic coaching practices. Further, when retribution was directed at their children as a result of raising concerns with the coach, complicity was encouraged. And finally, the athlete himself/herself encouraged the parent to be silent about concerns regarding coaching conduct. These data are supported by previous research that has also indicated that athletes do not want to report incidences of coaching abuse for fear of reprisal from the coach (Stirling & Kerr, 2009).
Related to the point above, it is suggested that the emphasis on performance in this culture contributed to the collective silence around emotional abuse. The athlete had a performance-related goal or “dream” and the parent wanted to assist him/her in achieving this. Additionally, both athletes and parents became aware of the career-related costs potentially associated with expressing concerns. In addition to being afraid that if they rocked the boat, their son/daughter may be ignored or ridiculed by the coach in training, something they had previously experienced, parents were also concerned that the child may not be selected for important upcoming events. In essence, the overriding emphasis on performance, coupled with the authority of the coach, stifled the parents’ gut-level concerns about the ways in which their children were being treated.

Although the parents were uncomfortable with the coach’s behaviour they remained silent, and upon reflection feel guilty for doing so. Likewise, previous researchers have reported that parents often feel uncomfortable with some of the athlete development strategies used at the elite level but feel unable or ill-equipped to address their concerns with the coach, in part because they have moved to a subordinate role (Harwood & Knight, 2009). Lally and Kerr (2008) also reported that parents of retired elite female gymnasts disclosed self-doubts and recrimination about relinquishing parental control during their child’s sport experience. More specifically, they described experiencing guilt and remorse about failing to ensure a broader identity for their children, not intervening when their child’s physical or psychological health was compromised or when boundaries between the parents and coach were violated.

The significant emotional distress expressed by the parents is a particularly noteworthy finding. Some of the parents cried in the interview and most were struggling
with guilt and remorse about their failure as parents to protect their children from harm. Given that these participants were fairly well-educated and well-intentioned parents, the effects of the socializing influences of the elite sport world in suppressing parents’ desires, or even instincts, to protect their children, are remarkable.

The involvement of parents in their children’s athletic endeavours has previously been recommended as a protective factor against abuse (Brackenridge, 1998). The findings of the present study challenge this assumption in relation to the prevention of athlete emotional abuse. If parents are socialized into the culture of elite sport in much the same way that athletes are, then the environment is ripe for coaches to exert their power and authority in positive or negative ways. These findings suggest that parents are bystanders in their child’s experiences of abuse. As many training and competition settings are open to public viewing, numerous parents observed abusive coaching practices and through their lack of intervention, were complicit in allowing these practices to be sustained. Similarly, workplace bullying literature highlights the influence of a lack of intervention from bystanders on the victim’s vulnerability to a repeat of the perpetrator’s harmful behaviour. “Each time a bully gets away with their behaviour this must reinforce the notion that such behaviour is acceptable. As such, non-intervention by witnesses can act as an encouragement to the persistence of bullying” (Rayner et al., 2002, p.157).

Contrary to the athlete development models that suggest that parents can increasingly withdraw from the athlete’s experience or take a secondary role to the coach-athlete relationship during the mastery or investment stages (Côté, 1999; Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004), this study suggests that parents should not relinquish control to the
coach. Instead, these findings indicate that to protect athletes from problematic or abusive coaching practices, parents should remain highly involved in the athlete’s experience. However, given the early socialization that occurred with parents in this study and its implications on the parents’ acceptance of problematic coaching behaviours, it is recommended that parents maintain a more balanced and stable level of involvement across their child’s athletic career. It is proposed that both the over or under engagement of the parent within the sport culture may place the parent at risk to being socialized to accept the occurrence of emotionally abusive coaching practices.

Fredricks and Eccles (2004) describe one of the roles parents play in sport is to be an interpreter of sport experience for child. Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough (2009) also reported that parents help to buffer negative sport-related emotions and re-frame distressing competitive experiences for the child. The findings of the current study raise questions about the ability of parents to play an interpreter or buffering role given that they seem to be socialized into accepting problematic behaviours as normal or accepted. Perhaps this also helps to explain the guilt and remorse parents reported after their children retired from sport; they may have intended to play a helper role in their children’s experience but then found themselves unable or unwilling to intervene. Dorsch et al. (2009) also reported that when the child has higher expectations/goals than parents did for them, parents adopted a “whatever it takes” attitude. It is possible that this “whatever it takes” attitude contributed to their lack of intervention when they had concerns; they may have interpreted “helping” as not intervening, in accordance with their children’s wishes.
Implications.

Application of these findings suggests that athlete protection initiatives need to consider the role of the parent as a bystander to the athlete abuse. Parents are in a position in which they may witness or hear about their child’s emotionally abusive experiences and need to be able to recognize the behaviours as problematic and have an appropriate avenue for expressing their concerns.

Given the socialization of parents into the culture of sport and their reported acceptance, acquiescence, and even complicity to emotional abuse in this environment, athlete protection initiatives need to focus on developing advocacy campaigns targeted at enhancing the awareness of athletes and parents alike on the problematic nature of this coaching behaviour. As one example, information on what parents should expect as appropriate or inappropriate coaching behaviour could be posted on the websites of the sport organizations. As well, the establishment of formal avenues for reporting concerns of coaching misconduct should be available to the parents without fear of repercussion from the coach or the sport organization. Formalized reporting and investigation procedures with assurances of confidentiality may be one way in which parents and athletes may feel more comfortable challenging situations of coaching misconduct.

Future directions.

Clearly there is much more to be learned about parents’ role in their children’s experiences of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship, and how they may play a role in prevention and intervention. Specifically, examination of the process by which parents are socialized into their roles within the coach-athlete-parent triad and their subordinate position within the sport environment, needs to be examined. Exploration of
specific factors of risk and resilience to parents’ acquiescence to the culture of elite sport
is a required line of inquiry. Given the socialization of the parent, the potential modeling of
the coach’s abusive behaviours by the parent is an issue that may need to be assessed.
Notably, all but one of the parents interviewed had children in individual type sports.
Comparison of potential differences in parents’ experiences with these emotionally
abusive coaching behaviours in individual versus team sports is warranted. Similarly, the
potential impact of gender of the parent and/or the child on the parent’s complicity to the
athlete emotional abuse remains to be explored.

**Coaches’ Reflections on Past Incidents of Athlete Maltreatment**

**Findings**

Coaches reflected retrospectively on their coaching careers and discussed numerous
athlete-development philosophies, strategies, and experiences employed in competitive
sport. A wealth of data was collected on strategies to empower athletes and enhance their
development both in and through sport. Pertaining to the broader purpose of this
dissertation, to examine the process by which emotional abuse occurs and is often
sustained in the coach-athlete relationship, the following themes emerged from the raw
data and were interpreted as relevant to understanding the experience of athlete emotional
abuse; coaches’ care for the athletes, the nature of the coach-athlete relationship, previous
incidents of harmful coaching behaviour, past normalization/justification of harmful
coaching practices, and perceived reasons for change in coaching behaviour. Each theme
will be discussed in turn.
Care for the athletes.

All of the coaches interviewed spoke highly of their athletes and expressed feelings of consideration, compassion, and endearment for the athletes they have coached. Across the interviews, feelings of care for the athlete as a performer and care for the athlete as a person beyond sport were expressed.

Care for the athlete as a performer.

Several of the coaches expressed desires to see their athletes achieve their full athletic potential in sport. This is reflected in the following statements: “I want my athletes to be the best they can be and know that they have a chance to win every single night. Not just to compete, but that they have a chance to win” (hockey coach).

My goal is to see how close to their athletic potential they can come. I challenge them to take whatever their potential is to the highest levels. That may be a tremendous high school athlete, a tremendous university athlete, or an international athlete. (triathlon coach)

“I want them [athletes] to enjoy the sport and to achieve as much as they are able to do and want to do” (archery coach). And, “My ultimate goal for my kids [athletes] is to reach their full potential as far as the sport is concerned” (soccer coach).

Two coaches talked specifically about the personal enjoyment they get from watching their athletes succeed in sport. One coach stated, “It’s a thrill to see talent develop” (artistic gymnastics coach). Similarly, another coach explained,

I have a very competitive personality and I realized that I was never going to fulfill that part for myself as an athlete… Living a bit vicariously through others [as a coach] I’ve had a chance to see what it’s like to be standing on the podium
with a gold medal…clearly something I was never going to be able to do as an individual. (triathlon coach)

**Care for the athlete as a person.**

All of the coaches interviewed talked about feelings of endearment towards their athletes and concern for developing the athletes as individuals beyond their participation in sport. Referring to his care for his athletes as individuals, one coach said, “I respect my athletes as athletes and as people” (artistic gymnastics coach). Another coach stated, “I just really love what I do. This is my life. I love the people I hang around. I love the kids I work with” (volleyball coach). Similarly, another participant explained,

I want my athletes to walk out at the end of the day and say ‘That was an amazing experience. Whether I won any gold medals, whether I went to Nationals or not, the experience of knowing that somebody cared about me was important.’ …

That’s the biggest part of the whole job. (figure skating coach)

Many coaches talked about their care for developing their athletes as good citizens outside of sport. This is reflected in the following statements:

I want our athletes to be young men that I would be proud of seeing at my door asking my daughter out. I want them to be good citizens, and I want them to enjoy some of the once in a life time experiences that they would never get if not for playing the sport. (hockey coach)

“I see sport as a unique vehicle through which I can help develop some really neat young people who are going to be citizens of the world down the road” (triathlon coach). “I live on that good feeling of seeing kids grow up and become good citizens. That’s rewarding.
It’s a good feeling” (soccer coach). And, “That’s a part of my job, to make healthy, normal good members of society” (archery coach).

Beyond developing good character individuals, coaches discussed the care and concern they felt for aspects of the athletes lives outside of sport. “We focus on three things: school, your sport, and then your social life/family. We try to get them to balance all three” (hockey coach). More specifically, several coaches expressed the belief that they were not coaching their athletes to be successful in sport. Instead, they felt they were developing their athletes to be successful in whatever they wanted to pursue in life. With this view, athletic ambitions were viewed as just one aspect of the individual’s life ambitions that the coach feels he/she attends to. This is reflected in the following quotations:

Who they [athletes] become when they’re done skating or who they are becoming while they are skating and what that leads them to is very important to me… I feel like I make a difference to their [athletes’] lives. That’s what drives me and I’m really focused on that - helping them become a champion in life. They all know that it’s not possible to win every competition, or I help them realize that, and I’m helping them learn skills that will help them later in life and help them become a better person. Not everybody gets a chance to help someone with their life so I really value that. (figure skating coach)

And,

… It’s all about what can I do for you to help you find the winner that’s inside you. ‘Cause everybody is a winner. Everybody has a gift… You’re building a
person. You’re building a character person that can do unusual things. (figure skating coach)

Likewise, other coaches stated,

For me it’s that sport becomes a vehicle to teach lessons of hard work. It’s a place to learn about team work and it’s a place where they [athletes] can then learn to transfer those skills to other parts of their life, whether it’s becoming a parent or a boss or whatever. (triathlon coach)

And,

The athletes need to know that they are more than just an athlete. They are not just a person complete with a bunch of skills, but a person who is cared about, whose development is the important thing here. The concepts that are learned in volley ball and in many team sports transfer to future education, to the work place, to social skills in general. (volleyball coach)

**Nature of the coach-athlete relationship.**

**Closeness of the coach-athlete relationship.**

Referring to the nature of the relationship between the coach and the athlete, the coaches described their relationships with their athletes as close. This closeness was reflected in the trust they developed with their athletes and openness in communication shared between the coach and the athletes. One coach stated, “You build a relationship of trust with athletes by sharing yourself, sharing information about yourself and your life, asking the kids questions, learning about their lives” (artistic gymnastics coach). Similarly, another coach explained,
I think they [athletes] describe me as a players’ coach. I’m open so you can come and talk to me. And if I see something is wrong I’ll pull you aside and say, “Are you okay? What’s going on?” I will go out of my way and pick kids up at the airport so they don’t have to drive in a taxi. So we have a good relationship.

(soccer coach)

As indicative of the closeness of the coach-athlete relationship, several coaches equated their role in the coach-athlete relationship to that of a parent figure. Other coaches referred to their mentorship role and some discussed their position of authority over the athlete.

**Coach’s role as a parent figure.**

Several coaches described themselves as a parent figure to their athletes. This is reflected in the following statements: “Each gymnast becomes your child” (artistic gymnastics coach). “I have 35 children, they’re called athletes” (triathlon coach). And, “At [age] 11 or 12 I’m like the father figure, and when they [athletes] grow up and they’re [age] 18 or 19, it’s almost like having a daughter that grew up” (figure skating coach). Likewise other coaches stated, “A lot of the kids move here away from home….so you do have to take on more of a parenting role [when their parents are not around]” (figure skating coach). And,

It depends on the athlete. It really does. Some ask for a lot more of you than others. Some really need that father figure, and they need that positive role model. Others come to you and ask for nothing except a training opportunity and a safe place to play. (volleyball coach)
Coach’s role as a mentor.

Related to the caregiving role of the coach, several coaches commented on their mentoring role within the coach-athlete relationship. One coach said, “I look at myself as a mentor and a teacher of a sport… I’m approachable, whether it be issues about volleyball, or life in general. I think I’ve always had an open door policy” (volleyball coach). Another coach stated, “Former gymnasts are friends – I still am a mentor to many of them – they call and ask for career advice – I hear about their kids, I get letters and emails from them all the time” (artistic gymnastics coach). Likewise, when asked how he would describe his relationship with his athletes, another coach explained, “…Probably that of a mentor. There’s a bond that we are creating as a family… It’s like I’m more than a teacher, more of an uncle within the family” (hockey coach). When asked what he enjoys most about coaching, one coach responded, “I think it would be the interaction with kids and providing them with solutions and mentorship. Most importantly being in their lives as someone who has been through it and can show them the path” (soccer coach). Similarly, another coach stated, 

I enjoy having the opportunity to affect a young person’s life and mentor them in a way that you yourself have been mentored, it’s pretty special… It’s a pretty powerful responsibility and I take it very seriously. I think that’s the part of coaching that I enjoy the most. Knowing that I’m in a position where I can make an impact on someone’s life. (hockey coach)

Coach’s position of authority.

Some coaches also discussed their position of authority over their athletes. One coach explained,
I think it [nature of the coach-athlete relationship] changes over time. If you look at the whole growth of an athlete from the beginning until he retires, at the beginning, I’m here [points high] and they’re there [points low]. I think because I’m the one with the knowledge and they’re not. But that changes over time as they [athletes] become more and more and more knowledgeable. (archery coach)

Similarly, another coach said,

I think there’s a sense of respect there [from athletes]. I played at the pro level and I still have a lot to offer in that way… I may not talk about it, but they seem to be aware of the fact that my playing career is by most standards pretty accomplished. (hockey coach)

In addition to the authority of the coach over the athlete, one coach suggested how this position of authority in the coach-athlete relationship can extend to the parents of the athletes as well.

I sit with her parents and tell them how I feel and they tell me how they feel, but other than that they let me do what I do… I will always give your kid back, but if you want to do the coaching then you don’t want me. We figure that out from the very first day when the parent comes in here. (figure skating coach)

**Previous incidents of harmful coaching behaviour.**

*Disclosure of past harmful behaviours.*

Of the nine coaches interviewed, five coaches disclosed the previous use of harmful behaviours in their interactions with their athletes. Coaches were asked to provide an example of this previous behaviour. While the following examples may appear to be one-off occurrences, coaches indicated these incidents as examples of a pattern of past
behaviour. Five of the nine coaches disclosed incidents when they had yelled demeaning comments at their athlete(s). One coach explained, “If we came to an agreement that this week when you do your solo you’re not stopping on anything, if they stopped then there would be lots of yelling” (figure skating coach). Similarly, another coach disclosed,

Of course I’ve yelled at players. Of course. At this level, if a player makes a bonehead move out there, a bad mistake, they know it. Right. It’s more, of the denial that gets you. That’s when I would have got mad and gave them a blast… I would get pretty mad [at the player] and I would get upset. (hockey coach)

In addition to the verbal acts described above, one coach explained that he used to propel sporting equipment across the locker room in attempt to intimidate his athletes. This is reflected in the following statement:

I would go in [to the locker room], kick over the Gatorade jug and let them have it [yell at the athletes] … I probably told them the truth. Probably reaffirmed our position of you know, “It’s my team, and if you don’t like the way things are done, then there’s the door.” And some guys choose to use it, and some guys don’t. That’s the way it was. (hockey coach)

Furthermore, another coach recalled the following harmful incident. In this case the coach also disclosed that harsh words were directed to the athlete and she was expelled from the training session:

I guess I could lose it, anybody could, but they really had to piss on my cornflakes for me to go oh flippin there’s something really wrong here. I’m talking outrageous, no respect… There was once where I had a young female athlete… She told me to f--- off on the ice so I grabbed her right by the hair and dragged
her across the ice. “Don’t ever talk to anybody on the ice like that - anybody, not me or your parents, or your trainer.” I dragged her right across the ice, right in the middle of the rink. All the way to the doorway and said see you later… That I wouldn’t do again. (figure skating coach)

**Perceived reasons for past harmful behaviours.**

*Intentions behind harmful behaviour.*

Two of the coaches specifically articulated the perceived reasons for behaving in the harmful manner described above. One coach indicated that he acted out of frustration as a way to push his athletes to perform better, “I shouldn’t get that upset, but I did. It was a spur of the moment. There would be times that I got a little bit too… I take it too seriously, because I hate to lose” (hockey coach). Conversely another coach explained that she was thinking about the character development of her athlete when she exerted her harmful behaviour as a means of discipline.

It [the situation] was this is what you [the athlete] said you were going to do and now you’re not doing it, so you’re not holding up your end of the deal. I’m holding up my end of the deal. I’m here for you. I’m going to help you with this. We said that the run through is what is required and you’re not doing that… You have to be accountable. You have to do what you say you’re going to do and if you don’t then there’s going to be consequences of some kind. You can hide them under the rug for only a little bit of time, but in the end you’re just hurting yourself. So I’m just trying to help you with that. (figure skating coach)
Normalization of harmful coaching practices.

Assertion of harmful behaviours as previously accepted coaching practice.

Whether the harmful behaviours were exerted in attempt to address athletic or character development of the athlete, all five of the coaches who disclosed past harmful coaching behaviours also discussed a previous normalization and/or justification of these coaching practices. This is reflected in the following statement: “[I thought] There’s nothing wrong [with the way I responded]. That was the moment and you leave it at that point. And at that point that kind of thing was allowed” (figure skating coach).

Several reasons were suggested by the coaches as factors that led them to normalize or justify their use of harmful coaching practices including: a history of maltreatment, exposure to other coaches’ harmful practices, lack of knowledge on alternative strategies to discipline athletes and/or develop athletic talent, perceptions that their harmful coaching techniques were less severe in comparison to other witnessed incidents of athlete abuse, and athletes’ acceptance of the harmful coaching practices.

History of maltreatment.

Several coaches discussed a previous history of abuse and directly related this history of maltreatment to the normalization of their own harmful coaching practices. One coach referred to the influence of abuse he received from his father on his coaching techniques in sport.

My father used to beat the crap out of me until I was about 17. And I love the man to death, but I’m talking about tie up my ankles with a belt and beat the bottom of my foot. I grew up in the middle east and the man just didn’t know any better. He didn’t do it because he wanted to hurt me. He would give his life for
me. I know that. There’s no questions asked. I mean stuff that he did to me throughout life says that I am who I am partially because of what he did to me. Right? But he just didn’t know any better. So the fact that I went in there and was running the kids like drill sergeants was just because I didn’t know any better. (soccer coach)

Other coaches discussed the influence of previous abusive behaviours experienced as an athlete from past coaches on their acceptance of their own coaching behaviours. This is reflected in the following statement:

I played for years with all types of coaches, through the yellers and the hollerers, and you know and the guys who would threaten you and everything else. One coach in particular, he [coach] has had a tremendous impact on my life. He was very much a disciplinarian, and, and knew the game, but, but he was very authoritative and, and it was his way or no way. He just demanded that you practice, and practice, and practice. And not just practice but you practice his way. And you know some may argue that he was the worst coach they ever had, but for me he was great… As a former athlete you’re probably going to use some of the techniques that your coach used with you, and you think you know as a student athlete know what worked and what didn’t work… I’m a product of the sport, both as a player, and as a coach. (hockey coach)

Similarly, other coaches said,

I take everything [coaching philosophy] from my own experiences and [my coach] was a tough nut. He had his thumb in my back everyday, like a sergeant.
It was like gees I’m alive. Thanks for the super bolt. It didn’t hurt me, but it did make me pay attention, and I liked that piece. (figure skating coach)

And,

I had a coach that was probably the greatest coach. I was lucky, because every coach I had was good. But I had a coach in midget, and you know, he’s passed away now, but he was probably one of the toughest coaches you could play for. I think kids today would have a hard time playing for him. It was this is the way it is. You do it this way, and if you didn’t, if you couldn’t fit that, then you drifted away, you probably quit. (hockey coach)

Exposure to other coaches’ harmful practices.

All of the coaches interviewed who disclosed their own use of harmful behaviours in sport had witnessed another coach exert harmful behaviours at his/her athletes at some point in their coaching career. Reflecting on one of his senior colleagues, one coach recalled,

There was one time when I saw him [coach] just rip on this athlete, almost had him [athlete] in tears, and just ripped him apart, just completely demoralized him. It was national championship weekend and we’re just killing everybody because we’re so good, and he just felt like, it was important for him to do that. There were probably 30 other things that I could talk to you about that I’d rather not.

(hockey coach)

Similarly, other coaches reflected, “I’ve seen too much of that way of coaching. I’ve seen the kicking things, the throwing stuff, hitting garbage cans, throwing shit against the wall” (figure skating coach). And,
You see coaches all over North America that coach negatively. They [coaches] think if you yell at them [athletes] long enough and loud enough they do what you want… One competition in particular absolutely shocked the daylights out of me at the time. You know, there was one competitor and she wasn’t performing well, no question. It was not up to her standard. And at lunch time, the Russian coach just yelled at her - he just tore a strip out of her in Russian, and the body language and everything else went along with that. He just ripped her, and while nobody could understand what he was saying, everyone knew. And she came back in the afternoon and performed much better. So is it wrong? Who knows if it’s wrong. Did it work? Apparently. (archery coach)

Furthermore, one coach explained that she perceived harmful behaviours as less severe in comparison to other witnessed incidents of athlete physical abuse.

In other countries they [coaches] hit them. For sure they hit them, and I’ve seen it. You see the life that the world champion has and that’s what you want for yourself, you just think that that’s the way it is – I’m going to get beat. And even the parents know what’s going on, but they let it go ‘cause they think that’s what it takes. I believe in having high expectations, but I don’t believe in actually physically hurting someone. And I don’t believe in humiliation. Like I wouldn’t go sit them [athletes] in a corner. And even some coaches here make them do push-ups and stuff. (figure skating coach)

_Lack of knowledge of alternative coaching strategies._

Another factor discussed by the coaches as contributing to the acceptance of their own harmful coaching practices was a lack of knowledge of alternative strategies for
athlete development. One coach stated, “It was just lack of information, that’s what it was” (soccer coach). Similarly, another coach explained,

Very few coaches knowingly make errors. They are doing everything possible using their skill set at that time to help their athletes… The unfortunate part for me personally was that there was no mentor for me coming through, which was good and bad. The good was that it gave me opportunities sooner than I normally would have. The bad was that I had to make all these errors going along because I didn’t have any body that had any more experience than I did and I just had to make the best guesstimate on decisions of volume, training, all kinds of stuff.

(triathlon coach)

In support of these assertions, referring to other coaches’ behaviours, the following statements were made: “The younger coaches want results now – they don’t have enough patience or understanding to develop talent” (artistic gymnastics coach). And,

I know a lot of guys who played at the national hockey league who went into coaching that are terribly coaches. They can’t deal with kids, can’t identify with problems of today, they can’t do a lot of things… It’s not enough just to play in the NHL. You have to know you’re stuff, you have to know how to coach and you have to know how to relate to kids. (hockey coach)

Athletes’ acceptance of harmful coaching practices.

In addition to the factors describe above, a few coaches also discussed the normalization of harmful coaching techniques among athletes. One coach stated,

It’s an understood process here [in this sport]. If you quit [stop in the middle of a routine] you’re going to get yelled at. You’re going to hear about it. It’s not
personal. It’s not why are they picking on me. It’s like I know why I’m getting yelled at. Because you’ve come to the understanding that it’s your job and this is what is required to keep going. (figure skating coach)

Likewise, another coach explained, “I’ve had athletes tell me they wish I was tougher. They’d say, ‘Tell me what to do and I’ll do it. Yell at me if I’m doing it wrong’” (archery coach).

**Perceived reasons for change in coaching behaviour.**

None of the coaches who disclosed past incidents of harmful behaviour currently endorse or reportedly use these practices in sport. This change in coaching practice is reflected in the following comments:

If you’re going through life and you’re paying attention at all your going to get better, you’re going to change. Change is constant, and if you’re finished changing then you’re through. It’s over. You got to be able to stay out of the box. (figure skating coach)

And,

Going in and kicking over the Gatorade jug…there’s no integrity in that. I think as a younger coach, I probably did a lot more of that, and now I’ve kind of developed into the coach I think I want to be. (hockey coach)

Similarly, another coach stated, “I hope that year to year I have added to my coaching philosophy and coaching strengths because I hope I’m not the same coach I was when I was 17 when I started… I definitely used to yell more” (figure skating coach).

When asked to reflect on what may have led to their change in coaching behaviour, several variables were identified by the coaches including, the process of self-reflection,
incidents of harm brought to the attention of the coach, general maturity and experience, and education.

**Self-reflection.**

Many coaches discussed the importance of self-reflection in enhancing their development as a coach over time. One participant explained,

“You do stuff all the time and you sit back and you think how could I have made that process better. That’s part of improving as a person and as a coach. I do that all the time. I look back on my training session. I look back on how I dealt with things. I talk to people that were my mentors, that I respect and other people that I know in the business world that are good people and good career coaches, and I speak to them even about sports. I tell them this is what happened and this is what I did, what do you think? And they say you did good, or maybe you could have done this differently, and so I re-evaluate the whole situation and learn as a whole. (soccer coach)

Another coach stated, “Well, hindsight is 20-20 right” (hockey coach). Similarly, other coaches made the following comments: “You’re only a good coach if you’re evaluating everything that you do all the time” (volleyball coach). And, “Coaches need to always reflect, ask themselves questions, question their approach, whether they did the right thing? How could things have been done differently? Never stop questioning” (artistic gymnastics coach).

Specific subjects that coaches reflected on that were identified as contributing to their change in coaching behaviour to less harmful practices included, reflection on the
effectiveness of the emotionally abusive coaching techniques, concern for the well-being of the athletes, awareness of personal reputation, and personal enjoyment as a coach.

*Reflection on effectiveness of the behaviour.*

Many coaches talked about the detrimental impact that their past coaching behaviours can have on their athletes’ training or performance. Some coaches personalized their statements to their own behaviours, while others spoke globally about opinions of the impact of harmful coaching behaviours on the athlete’s performance and used other coaches as an example of their realizations. Referring to the negative impact of this coaching style on athletes during practice or competition, the following statements were made: “In competition I find that when there’s a yelling coach on the sidelines screaming at them [athletes], they can’t focus on the game because they’re too stressed about me” (volleyball coach). And,

They [athletes] would shut down [after yelling at them]. They wouldn’t hear me anymore. Not hear as well. You have to pick your style. Anybody can yell and shout. That’s easy. Get lost get out of here. Now what do we have left? Relationship is ruined, mentally, physically, emotionally. Now we have to recover. How long is it going to take? One week? One month? (figure skating coach)

Furthermore, one coach reflected back on the impact of his own experience of harmful coaching behaviour and the impact that had on him as an athlete. This coach explained, “It [yelling] just went in one ear and out the other. I just didn’t want to hear it any more. I just came in, worked, did my business and went back home” (hockey coach).
Additionally, some coaches reflected on realizations that alternative coaching strategies may be more effective at getting their athletes to perform to the best of their abilities. This is highlighted in the following comments: “I’m not really a yeller to players on the bench because I really think it’s probably the poorest form of communication” (hockey coach). And, “There’s that saying scream at me and I’ll hate you, yell at me and I’ll be upset. But encourage me and I’ll never forget you. So it’s really about encouraging them” (soccer coach). Likewise, other coaches stated,

I think you find you understand people better and you learn how to get to them a little bit more. You know how to tug at their strings. Some people – well it’s understood that you’re yelled at, but you can say some things to some people that hits them harder. (figure skating coach)

And,

I think I’ve become calmer. I understand what works, and I can motivate more with just me being involved and me being a person. And sometimes they don’t even hear the message that you’re giving and just watch the way that you present it. You sell a game by being involved with it yourself, being interested in who they are and who, what it is what we’re working for… I’ve realized that by creating a very safe and positive training environment they feel challenged and pushed, but at the same time they’re set up to succeed. (volleyball coach)

Concern for the well-being of the athletes.

Some coaches expressed concern for the long-term well-being of their athletes and questioned the impact of their coaching practices on the emotional health of the athlete. One coach explained, “…You know, I thought every play was crucial, and it’s not. If
you lose a game, well there’s another game. If you go bananas and you lose the kid, there’s more at stake” (hockey coach). Another coach stated:

- What type of person are you left with at the end of the day if all you’ve done is threaten them and they only respond to any sort of inspiration out of fear? And for the rest of your life are you ever going to perform under any other circumstances? For your boss or you know? I think you can get a better performance sometimes from threats or yelling. I think you can, but in the end you’re by yourself and I don’t think it helps that [the person]. (figure skating coach)

Similarly, another coach explained,

- Anybody can go out on the ice and say this or that and tear an athlete apart, but there are only a few [coaches] that can pull one [athlete] together. How are we going to go about this thing? Are we always tearing someone down or are we building? Which way is it going? And that’s what coaches are supposed to do. You build character people. They [coaches] are not supposed to be not destroyers. (figure skating coach)

**Awareness of personal coaching reputation.**

One coach discussed his dislike for his growing reputation as a coach, which caused him to re-think the way he was coaching his athletes, and ultimately lead to a change in his coaching style. This coach made the following comments:

- For me it’s about being able to live with myself. My reputation started to become a little bit more important to me than it was in my early 20’s and I started to think
about, what are people saying about me? What are they thinking of me when I’m
yelling at a referee, when I’m yelling at the team. (hockey coach)

This same coach continued,

I’m recognizable in the community, so for me to act like an idiot at the arena and
for people to recognize me doing that became too much of a struggle for me. I
hate to be vain about it, but I really I think that’s what it is [concern for coaching
reputation]. That’s what meshed, that’s what transpired me into the person I am
today. (hockey coach)

_Not enjoyable._

Additionally, one coach explained that he no longer yelled at his athletes because he
was not happy coaching that way.

I knew that to keep my sanity I had to make some adjustments. It’s not fun to do
that [yell and scream at the athletes]… Whatever works for you works for you. I
would be a good yeller. I really would be. But I wouldn’t be very happy doing it.
(hockey coach)

Likewise, another coach discussed the reasons why she chooses not to yell at her athletes:

I wouldn’t like to be that other person. I’m not that other person. I have to
myself, and who I am, and I wouldn’t be a successful coach if I was not… I can
sit down and talk but I’m not going to do that [yell at the athlete] because I don’t
think that’s the way you should treat people. (archery coach)
Incident of harm brought to attention.

For two of the five coaches, this process of self-reflection was initiated or enhanced when an incident of harm to an athlete was brought to the coach’s attention, causing him/her to reflect on the coaching behaviours that caused this harm. One coach recalled,

I remember the first year I started coaching, and you talk about how my coaching has changed. I was coaching little kids. It was a development program so they were about 7 or 8 in that program and I was running it like they were professionals [slaps back of hand]. You know cause that’s all the experience that I had had. I hadn’t had any formal coach education, my coaching just came from my experiences and what I’ve seen and observed. I brought that. And I remember this one kid - I called the kid to ask why he hasn’t signed up for the next season and the father said to me, ‘You know what? He doesn’t want to play soccer anymore.’ It was one of the most devastating comments I heard from a kid or from a parent of a kid. I can honestly tell you I was in tears. To say my kid doesn’t want to play soccer anymore because of you. And I think that’s one of the first times I felt like someone had just slapped me across the face because it was a shock to me – that whatever I did unintentionally caused the kid to not want to play anymore, and I couldn’t live with it. And I wanted to make sure that it never happened again so I committed to myself to change… Since then every time I open my mouth to say stuff to athletes I remember how important it is to say the right thing and to make sure that I never have that experience again.

(soccer coach)
The second coach discussed the following incident:

I had a girl come to me once and said ‘I wish I would have done that double axel, but you told me I would never do it.’ And I was thinking [in shocked voice] I would never do that. But what she understood was different than what I would say. I would say if you don’t fix your arm position you’re never going to do a double axel, and all she heard me say was you’re never going to do a double axel. So you have to be really specific and repeat yourself, and make sure they understand you… It was devastating, because I would never tell someone they could never do something. That would be the last thing that I would say. And I was like holy smokes! And I thought to myself, how important it is to have proper communication [with the athlete]. Just making sure that what you say is understood. You have to think about where their head is at and explain it [feedback] in a way that they can handle. (figure skating coach)

**Maturity/experience.**

Another factor identified by a few of the coaches as influencing their change in coaching behaviour was general maturity and coaching experience. This is reflected in the following statements: “Things that have remained consistent is my desire to coach and my ability to prepare my players, but I think my motivational style has changed. I guess it’s about maturing as a coach and experiencing things” (hockey coach). “Well hopefully you learn from your experiences. I don’t think anybody that says I was perfect everyday as a coach is telling the truth” (figure skating coach). And, “I’m better now at knowing when I’ve screwed up, and knowing during the screw-up” (archery coach). Similarly, other coaches stated,
You’re a rookie. You’re starting out just dipping your feet in the water to see if it’s going to work anyway. You can see something and have an idea, but you have no idea how it’s going to turn out… And you’re probably a little rough around the edges because you’re a rookie. (figure skating coach)

And,

It [coaching style] changed as I got exposed to more elite level sport and as I got more experience coaching women. And coaching women changed the way I coach men. Coaching women I changed my motivational skills in terms of not motivating kids by having to shout and scream on the sidelines. I found I don’t need to shout. Instead it’s much better to listen. So that has changed. (soccer coach)

**Education.**

Finally, coach education was identified by two coaches as influencing their change in coaching behaviour. One coach said,

I have gone and taken more coaching education, coaching seminars, and high level coaching certification, and that has changed my coaching style… I started to read about characteristics of kids and I learned how to motivate little kids and what do they need to learn and what’s important – self-confidence and all that stuff. I educated myself on coaching and I realized f---ing hell man if I could go back and change that… I would go back and change that [the way I used to coach] any day if I could. (soccer coach)
Likewise, the second coach explained,

My belief is that the day you stop learning, you’re dead. The world is too
dynamic to not continue to learn. I would like to be able to have time to maybe
read a little bit more, or do a little bit more, but that’s the nature of the beast.
You’re pretty busy with a team. That’s why you have good assistant coaches, so
they can share their strategies with you, drills of the week, conferences that you
go to, and just sharing knowledge and best practices. (hockey coach)

**Discussion of Findings**

Coaches were asked to reflect retrospectively on their coaching careers. In addition
to a variety of other topics discussed, some coaches disclosed the use of past harmful
coaching behaviours that are interpreted to be emotionally abusive. A few studies have
been conducted to-date examining coaches’ perspectives on sexually abusive coach-
athlete relations (Bringer, Brackenridge, & Johnston, 2002; 2006; Toftegaard-Neilson,
2001). This is the first study that has examined coaches’ perspectives on the use of
emotionally abusive coaching behaviours in sport.

Coaches’ reflections are interpreted to suggest that these coaches are well-intended
coaches who care significantly for their athletes. Not surprisingly, the coaches are
concerned with helping their athletes achieve their full athletic potential in sport, but the
coaches also expressed feelings of endearment and care for the athletes as individuals
beyond their athletic careers. This care was further reflected in discussions about the
closeness of the coach-athlete relationship, feelings of trust, dedication, openness in
communication, and the coaches’ parenting and mentoring roles within this relationship.
Previous research has described the coach-athlete relationship as “the foundation of coaching,” where the coach and the athlete develop a relationship characterized by an appreciation and respect for each other as individuals (Jowett, 2005, p.412). According to Jowett and colleagues, effective coach-athlete relationships are holistic in nature and place emphasis on the positive growth and development of the athlete as a person (Jowett, 2005; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000). Furthermore, Jowett and Cockerill (2002) proposed The 3Cs Conceptual Model, which describes the following three broad constructs of an effective coach-athlete relationship; closeness, commitment, and complementarity. Closeness refers to the connection and emotional attachment between the coach and the athlete, and is represented by mutual feelings of like, trust, respect, and appreciation. Commitment reflects a mutual intention between the coach and athlete to maintain their partnership overtime. And complementarity defines an interaction between the coach and the athlete that is perceived as cooperative, responsive, and friendly (Jowett, 2005). Recently a fourth construct has been proposed, that being co-orientation, which addresses coaches’ and athletes’ inter-perceptions of one another (Jowett, Paull, Pensgaard, Hoegmo, & Riise, 2005). In contrast, “ineffective relationships are undermined by lack of interest and emotion, remoteness, even antagonism, deceit, exploitation and physical or sexual abuse” (Jowett, 2005, p.412).

Application of the data to this relational model suggests that the nature of coach-athlete relationships, as described by coaches, were close and committed. Several behaviours indicative of complementarity such as friendly interactions, jokes, willingness to communicate on any subject matter, and caring jesters such as a pick-up from the airport, also suggest a degree of cooperation between the coach and athlete. The coaches’
inter-perceptions of athletes’ feelings towards themselves were discussed by two coaches only, whom described feelings of respect received from their athletes. Given the supposed “effective” relationships described above, one is left to question how these coaches also behaved in harmful ways characterized as emotionally abusive. Related to the relationship between a close coach-athlete relationship and athlete abuse in sport, previous research has reported athletes’ feelings of closeness within abusive coach-athlete relations (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Similarly, feelings of trust and friendliness have been identified as interpersonal grooming factors that can make athlete vulnerable to experiences of sexual abuse in the coach-athlete relationship (Brackenridge, 2001b).

In this study, five coaches disclosed past incidents of harmful coaching behaviours that are interpreted to be emotionally abusive including, yelling demeaning comments or profanity at an athlete, and throwing a Gatorade jug across a locker room, as a few examples. Of the five coaches whom disclosed past incidents of harmful coaching behaviours, only two coaches articulated the specific reasons for exerting this behaviour.

In the first case, when poor performances occurred, the coach became upset, stressed, and frustrated with the athletes as a result of their poor performance. Due to the coach’s poor management of his emotions, he lashed out at his athletes with anger and behaviours characteristic of athlete emotional abuse. In this situation, the origin of athlete emotional abuse parallels Wolfe’s (1999) process theory on the origins of child physical abuse. In this model, Wolfe (1999) proposed that child physical abuse results from the following three-stage process: Stage 1 - Reduction in parent’s stress tolerance; Stage 2 – Parent’s poor management of acute crisis; And, Stage 3 – Chronic patterns of anger and abuse. Similarly, Straus (2001) examined the use of corporal punishment in
families and explained that many parents do not intend to cause physical harm, but lose their tempers while disciplining their children.

Conversely, in the second case the coach perceived her behaviours to have been exerted as a way to address the athlete’s character and aid in the development of the athlete as a good person. In this situation, the coach normalized the use of emotionally abusive coaching practices as the best way to develop athletes both as performers and as individuals beyond sport. Additionally, it is suggested that not only were the emotionally abusive behaviours accepted by the coach as a normal part of athlete development, but the coach was unaware of any potential negative outcomes that could result from her emotionally abusive behaviours. The origins of the other three coaches’ emotionally abusive behaviour are hypothesized to be similar to this situation. This supposition is supported by the other coaches’ accounts of their normalization of harmful coaching practices, the well intentions expressed in their coaching, and the reports that they changed their behaviours once educated on the negative impact of their behaviours and/or alternative strategies for athlete development. Furthermore, this origin of emotional abuse is supported by the athletes’ accounts of emotional abuse, in which they believed their coaches felt they were acting in the athletes’ best interest and were trying to help enhance their athletic development the best way they knew how.

Reasons for this normalization of harmful developmental approaches suggested by the coaches include, histories of maltreatment from parents and past coaches, exposure to other coaches’ harmful coaching techniques, lack of knowledge of alternative developmental strategies, and the athletes’ acceptance of these coaching techniques in sport. Supporting these data, a number of studies have linked childhood victimization to
violence in adulthood (Crouch, Milner, & Thomsen, 2001; Ehrensaft, Khashu, Ross, & Wamsley, 2003; Maker, Kemmelmeier, & Peterson, 1998). Previous research has reported the influence of modeling in the perpetration of violence, where a person learns social and cognitive behaviours by simply observing and imitating others (Akers & Jensen, 2002). In support of coaches’ exposure to other coaches’ emotionally abusive behaviours, focus group research with 12 male and seven female coaches on ethical concerns experienced in the sport environment reported that the ethical theme most often identified by the coaches was that of abusive treatment of athletes. More specifically, coaches were described as witnessing the use of training methods and techniques that can harm the athletes and may be classified as physical or mental abuse (Haney, Long, & Howell-Jones, 1998). Similarly, 3742 coaches were recently surveyed on ethical dilemmas faced in sport. In this study it was reported that 78% of the coaches surveyed had been exposed to emotional abuse in the sport environment (Stirling, Kerr, & Cruz, 2009). Athletes’ descriptions of their normalization of emotionally abusive coaching practices have also been previously documented (Stirling & Kerr, 2007).

Based on the two different cases described above, two distinct types of emotional abuse are proposed along with the respective origins of this behaviour in the coach-athlete relationship (Table 1). Expressive emotional abuse refers to a coach’s emotionally abusive behaviours that are an end in itself (i.e. yelling at an athlete out of anger or frustration). Instrumental emotional abuse refers to emotionally abusive behaviours that are used to achieve a desired end (i.e. coach’s motivation to curb an athlete’s behaviour). This distinction between expressive and instrumental emotional abuse is adopted from Gelles and Straus’s (1979) description of types of parent-child
violence. The origin, destabilizing, and compensatory factors for expressive emotional abuse have been adapted from Wolfe (1999) and are supported by the data collected in this study. This is the first known adaptation of Wolfe (1999) to emotional abuse, and the only known application outside the parent-child relationship. The origin, destabilizing, and compensatory factors for instrumental emotional abuse have been gleaned solely from the coaches’ reports in this investigation.
Table 1

*Origins of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Emotional Abuse</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Destabilizing Factors</th>
<th>Compensatory Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expressive Emotional Abuse</strong></td>
<td><strong>Origin: Poor anger management</strong></td>
<td>• Stressful life events</td>
<td>• Social support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Stage 1:</strong> Decreased stress tolerance</td>
<td>• Poor coaching preparation</td>
<td>• Good coping resources</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Stage 2:</strong> Poor management of crisis</td>
<td>• Multiple sources of anger/aggression</td>
<td>• Improved behaviour of athlete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Stage 3:</strong> Pattern of anger and abuse</td>
<td>• Perceive athlete’s behaviour as harmful or threatening (e.g. not performing during championship season)</td>
<td>• Coach’s dissatisfaction with using strict control techniques</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>(adapted from Wolfe, 1999)</em></td>
<td>• Escalation in athlete’s behaviour (e.g. athlete’s performance continues to deteriorate)</td>
<td>• Availability of community/coaching resources <em>(adapted from Wolfe, 1999)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Success in using strict control techniques</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instrumental Emotional Abuse</strong></td>
<td><strong>Origin: Normalization of emotionally abusive developmental approach</strong></td>
<td>• History of emotional abuse from a parent or coach</td>
<td>• Self-reflection on the lack of effectiveness of the emotionally abusive behaviours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Stage 1:</strong> Normalization of an emotionally abusive developmental approach</td>
<td>• Exposure to other coaches’ emotionally abusive behaviours</td>
<td>• Concerns for athlete well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Stage 2:</strong> Commitment to an athlete’s development as a performer and/or person</td>
<td>• Lack of knowledge of alternative developmental approaches</td>
<td>• Dislike of behaving in emotionally abusive ways</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Stage 3:</strong> Pattern of abusive coaching</td>
<td>• Athletes’ normalization of emotionally abusive coaching practices</td>
<td>• Modeling of more positive coaching</td>
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<td>• Coach education on alternative strategies for athlete development</td>
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This chart explains that although some emotionally abusive coach-athlete relationships may exist as a result of stress in the coach-athlete relationship and a coach’s poor management of this stress, emotional abuse can also result from an almost opposite set of circumstances. As opposed to the first scenario where there is a source of stress in the coach-athlete relationship and the coach directs emotionally abusive behaviours at the athlete out of anger or frustration, in the second scenario the coach and the athlete have a close, caring, and complementary relationship. The coach is committed to the athlete’s development in sport and in many cases as a person beyond sport. In this scenario the emotionally abusive behaviour is not exerted as an emotional reaction to a source of stress, rather it is exerted intentionally as a developmental strategy. In this situation the coach cares for the athlete and believes that he/she is acting the best interests of the athlete. Athletes’ reported normalization of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship (Stirling & Kerr, 2007) further support the normalization of this developmental approach by coaches and explains why this behaviour may occur in a close, committed, and complementary relationship.

Relating this discussion of the different origins of athlete emotional abuse back to Jowett’s (2005) description of effective coach-athlete relations, it is suggested that the occurrence of emotionally abusive coaching behaviours is not necessarily indicative of an ineffective coach-athlete relationship, as what has been previously identified for behaviours of physical and sexual abuse (Brackenridge, 2001b; Jowett, 2005). Instead, in both expressive and instrumental emotional abuse the coach may not intend to harm the athletes. Particularly in cases of instrumental emotional abuse, as reflected in the second coach’s articulation of why she used emotionally abusive coaching techniques, it is
possible that an effective coach-athlete relationship exists where a coach cares for an athlete’s growth as a person, yet still uses emotionally abusive coaching techniques as a result of a normalization of these coaching behaviours and a lack of knowledge on the negative implications for the long term well-being of the athlete. This means that many coaches who exert emotionally abusive behaviours in the coach-athlete relationship can be educated and helped to correct their poor coaching behaviours. It is likely that these coaches are well-intended and care significantly for their athletes, but do not realize the negative outcomes of their coaching practices.

Without doubt, the greatest contribution of this study was the coaches’ discussions of the reasons why they no longer use emotionally abusive coaching techniques. According to the coaches interviewed this change in coaching behaviour was attributed to coaches’ personal self-reflections, growing awareness of harm to the athlete, general maturity and experience, and education. Based on in-depth interviews with three coaches who had engaged in sexual relations with athletes, Bringer et al. (2006) also proposed that reflective practice is one method by which coaches may embed child and athlete protection in their definition of effective coaching. Furthermore, among other factors, education on child development and quality child care has been suggested as important components of a model child maltreatment prevention programme (Schatz, 2006).

Social learning theory suggests that an individual’s behaviour is determined by a three-way relationship between cognitive, environmental, and behavioural factors (Bandura, 1971). Themes of data on the coaches’ perceived reasons for change in coaching behaviour fit appropriately into the framework of social learning theory, as illustrated in Figure 2.
Cognitive (Personal) Factors
- **Knowledge** (awareness of harm, education on alternative coaching strategies)
- **Expectations** (perceive emotionally abusive behaviours as ineffective)
- **Attitudes** (concern for athlete well-being, feel emotional abuse is wrong, dislike using emotionally abusive coaching practices)

Environmental Factors
- **Social norms** (emotionally abusive coaching practices are now less accepted in sport compared to in the past)
- **Access in community** (recognized in the community, awareness of reputation)
- **Influence on others' ability to change own environment** (becomes head coach and runs own team/program)

Behavioural Factors
- **Skills** (coach education seminars, practical coaching tools, modeling of positive coaching behaviour)
- **Practice** (coaching experience)
- **Self-efficacy** (self-reflection, maturity, success as a coach)

**Figure 2.** Application of coaches’ perceived reasons for change in coaching behaviour to social learning theory.

Cognitive factors reported by coaches in this study as influences on their change in coaching behaviour included, incidents of harm brought to attention, education on alternative coaching strategies, concern for the well-being of the athletes, perceived ineffectiveness of past harmful coaching practices, feelings that the use of harmful coaching behaviours is wrong, and dislike of using harmful coaching behaviours.

Environmental factors reported by coaches in this study as influences on their change in coaching behaviour included, a change in social norms associated with the cultural unacceptability of past coaching behaviours, the reputation of the coach in the community, and the coach’s position to determine his/her own coaching strategy.

Behavioural factors reported by coaches in this study as influences on their change in coaching behaviour included, acquiring education on how to use more positive coaching
practices, experience, maturity, success using non-abusive practices, and the self-reflection process.

According to social learning theory, cognitive, environmental, and behavioural factors of influence are interrelated and collectively influence behaviour change (Bandura, 1971). One example of this interrelation of cognitive, environmental and behavioural factors in the present model is described. The enhanced social norms in sport associated with the unacceptability of emotionally-abusive coaching behaviours and a coach’s growing reputation in the sport community (environmental factors) could lead a coach to self-reflect on his/her own coach practices (behavioural factor) and develop an attitude of dislike for the use of emotionally abusive practices (cognitive factor). Collectively these factors would influence the coach to change his/her behaviour to a less abusive coaching approach. As a second example, awareness of harm of past coaching behaviours and coach’s concern for athlete well-being (cognitive factors) may encourage a coach to acquire education on how to use more positive strategies for athlete development (behavioural factor). The implementation of the coach’s change in coaching behaviour ultimately occurs once he/she is promoted to head coach and has the ability to establish his/her own coaching philosophy for the team (environmental factor).

Of the five coaches in this study that disclosed the past use of harmful coaching behaviours, all the coaches discussed factors of influence on their change in coaching behaviours from at least two of the three categories in Bandura’s (1971) social learning theory. If surveyed specifically for each of the factors described above, I believe that at least one factor from each category of cognitive, environmental, and behavioural factors
would have been reported by the coaches whom changed their coaching practices to a less harmful coaching approach.

Application of the determinants of change in coach behaviour to social learning theory is particularly useful for understanding that coaches learn to use non-abusive coaching practices through the collective interrelated influences of cognitive, environmental and behavioural factors. Accordingly, intervention and prevention of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship must address these cognitive, environmental, and behavioural influences in order to be most effective. Specific application of this model to athlete protection strategies is discussed in the following section.

**Implications.**

Based on the findings, several recommendations are posed for the prevention and intervention of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. Considering the two different origins for the use of emotionally abusive coaching behaviours, prevention and intervention initiatives need to be focused accordingly.

In order to reduce the vulnerability of athletes to expressive emotional abuse from their coach, prevention efforts should aim to reduce the stress level of the coach and increase coping resources. Specific recommendations include providing the coach with social support systems such as encouraging coaches’ relations with family and friends outside the sport environment, and facilitating formal and informal opportunities to discuss coaching challenges with administration and peers. Education on specific coping resources may aid coaches’ ability to manage their anger and anxiety in stressful situations. Messages and resources within the coaching community that increase
coaches’ dissatisfaction with the use of strict control techniques in sport may also aid in the prevention of expressive emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship.

When developing initiatives for the prevention and intervention of instrumental emotional abuse, the focus should be on reducing the coach’s acceptance of these behaviours as a required strategy for athletic or personal development. Coaches need to be educated on holistic athlete-centred developmental approaches. As modeling was reported as an important contributor to the coach’s normalization of emotionally abusive coaching practices, it is recommended that more formal mentoring relations be established between coaches, and that the criteria for a coach mentor be based on both the performance success of the coach as well as the coach’s reputation of practicing positive behaviours in the coach-athlete relationship. It is paramount that coaches are not only educated on the detrimental impact of abusive coaching practices on the long-term well-being of the athletes and alternative strategies for athlete development, but sport organizations also need to find a way to increase coaches’ confidence and abilities to implement these new coaching skills. This may be done through practical coaching workshops or as an interactive component in coaching certification programmes. The process of self-reflection is strongly encouraged to help the coaches gain positive attitudes about implementing new positive–based coaching strategies. As well, the establishment of athlete protection policies and codes of conduct may influence social norms and the perceived unacceptability of emotionally abusive practices by coaches.

Furthermore, it is important to reiterate that in cases of both expressive and instrumental emotional abuse the coach may not intend to harm the athlete(s). Instead he/she may exert emotionally abusive behaviours in the coach-athlete relationship due to
a lack of emotional control and/or lack of awareness of the negative implications of his/her behaviours. Accordingly, it is imperative to be sensitive to the emotional arousal that these prevention and intervention programmes may cause for the coaches. More specifically, as many of the coaches who use emotionally abusive coaching practices may be otherwise “good” coaches, future prevention and intervention programmes should focus on promoting critical self-reflection and continual improvement to enhance the personal and performance development of athletes. It is important therefore, not to judge other coaches based on their behaviours, but to understand that by working together we can educate one another on more optimal strategies for athlete development.

**Future directions.**

Several questions remain to be addressed in future research. As some examples: Does the severity of the harmful coaching behaviour used in the past influence a coach’s ability to critically reflect on this past behaviour? How may a court case or abuse allocation influence a coach’s desire or lack of desire to change his/her behaviour in the coach-athlete relationship? What variables may impede a coach from recognizing his/her coaching behaviour as harmful? What may restrain or inhibit a coaches’ change in coaching behaviour? What aspects about holistic athlete-centred coaching are coaches most attracted to? What aspects of holistic coaching techniques may coaches be concerned with? Does age, gender, culture, or educational differences exist in the reasons for the use of emotionally-abusive coaching practices, ability to recognize the problematic nature of emotionally abusive coaching behaviours, desires to change, or ability/confidence to adopt a new coaching philosophy? As two distinct types of emotional abuse were proposed along with the respective origins of these behaviours in
the coach-athlete relationship, further testing of this proposed model is required. As well, it is suggested that future research is needed on the efficacy of the various intervention strategies proposed.
CHAPTER FIVE: CUMULATIVE DISCUSSION

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the process by which emotional abuse occurs and is often sustained in sport, and to examine athletes’, parents’, and coaches’ reflections on the development of emotionally-abusive coach-athlete relations. In addressing this purpose, the research was situated within the methodological tradition of grounded theory, the aim of which is to produce a theory that is derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2007), contemporary theories regarding child maltreatment may be process-based or transactional in nature. Process-based theories “emphasize specific precursors that lead to abuse, and in some cases, the specific processes that serve to maintain abuse (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2007, p.59). In contrast, transactional theories, “emphasize the interactions among risk factors and protective factors associated with child abuse” (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2007, p.59).

Earlier in this discussion section, several process-based models were proposed. Based on athletes’ reflections about the initiation and maintenance of emotionally abusive relations with their coach, a temporal model of the development of emotionally abusive coach-athlete relations was outlined. Data from coaches’ reflections about the reasons for choosing to use emotionally abusive behaviours in the coach-athlete relationship were interpreted to suggest two distinct types of emotional abuse; the respective origins of the use of this behaviour were either expressive or instrumental. As well, parents’ reflections on their children’s experiences of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship were discussed temporally as developing stages of complicity across their children’s athletic careers. While aspects of these models referred to the
individuals’ interactions with others and the influence of these interactions on the
development of emotionally-abusive coach-athlete relations, none of these models
accounted for the integrated reflections of the athletes, parents and coaches, or
comprehensively present the ecological transactional influences on the etiology of
emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship.

In upholding a critical and ecological lens on the research, it is suggested that
individuals are embedded in and affected by a social context that influences their
experiences and behaviours. Accordingly, in addition to interpreting the data relative to
the developmental process by which emotional abuse develops and is sustained in the
coach-athlete relationship, a focused discussion of the contextual influences on the
experiences and interactions of all persons involved is required.

Previously published ecological transitional models of child maltreatment etiology
include Belsky’s (1993) developmental-ecological model of child maltreatment and
Cicchetti and Lynch’s (1993) ecological/transitional model of community violence and
child maltreatment. In both of these models, the authors theorized the etiology of child
maltreatment by organizing variables of risk into the following categories of
vulnerability:

(1) ontological development, which includes factors within the individual that are
associated with being a perpetrator of child maltreatment; (2) the microsystem,
which includes factors within the family that contribute to the occurrence of child
maltreatment; (3) the exosystem, which includes aspects of the communities in
which families and individuals live that contribute to child maltreatment; and (4)
the macrosystem, which includes the beliefs and values of the culture that
contribute to the perpetration of child maltreatment (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993, p.98).

These transactional theories describe various factors that might contribute to the occurrence of child maltreatment as well as the role of the interactions of these variables. However, relating these theories to the present investigation, Belsky’s (1993) and Cicchetti and Lynch’s (1993) models do not refer specifically to the etiology of emotional abuse. Further, these models looked at etiology of child maltreatment solely in parent-child relations. As well, the models were theoretically derived and not based on empirical data.

More recently, Black et al. (2001) conducted a review of the literature on risk factors that contribute to the psychological abuse of children and categorized variables of risk into child characteristics, parent characteristics, factors in the marital relationship, and sociodemographic variables. Although this review focused specifically on risk to psychological abuse of children, it did not present any cultural risk factors or account for the interrelation between the developments of different categories of risk factors. Similarly, Iwaniec et al. (2006) reviewed factors of risk and resilience in cases of emotional abuse and categorized these variables into risk factors at the level of the child, family, and environment. While this review acknowledged the “complex interplay between processes at work at the level of the individual, the family unit and the wider community” (p.74), it still did not present the broader ecological influences on a child’s risk to emotional abuse. An empirically derived ecological transactional model of emotional abuse in a critical relationship role outside that of the parent-child relationship has yet to be presented.
An Ecological Transactional Model of Vulnerability to Emotional Abuse in the Coach-Athlete Relationship

This section of the discussion will draw upon the collective reflections of the athletes, parents, and coaches and propose an ecological transactional model of vulnerability to emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship (Figure 3). The categories of ontological development, the microsystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem have been adopted from the previous work of Belsky (1993) and Cicchetti and Lynch (1993).

Figure 3. Ecological transactional model of vulnerability to emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship.
Ontological Development

Ontological development includes factors about the perpetrator that explain why the individual may abuse. Looking at the use of emotionally abusive behaviours in the coach-athlete relationship, this section considers individual characteristics of the coach that may explain why he/she uses emotionally abusive behaviours in sport. In this study, coaches reflected on their previous use of emotionally abusive behaviours in the coach-athlete relationship. In some of the examples provided, the coaches purported that these behaviours resulted from an emotional outburst from frustration with the athletes and the heightened stress of a playoff or championship competition. Likewise, athletes reported that their coaches would lose their temper and direct their frustration at the athletes through intimidating acts of non-contact physical aggression and demeaning outbursts. Athletes further reported that the frequency of their coaches’ emotionally abusive behaviours was heightened during peak competition periods. Many of the parents’ reflections of witnessing their children’s experiences of emotional abuse were also described immediately prior to or during a major competition. Based on these data, it is suggested that coaches who feel pressured to obtain winning performances in sport, but may not have the resources to do so, can have unrealistic performance expectations for themselves and/or their athletes. When this occurs, not fulfilling these expectations can lead to anger and frustration of the coach, expressed as outbursts of emotional abuse.

Additionally, major life events in a coach’s career, such as being appointed as coach of the National or Olympic team, may create an increased period of stress and make the coach susceptible to react to frustrations with his/her athletes. A specific example of this was provided by one of the athletes interviewed, who explained that one of her coaches
did not yell at her or call her names until after the coach received a promotion, and speculated that this change in behaviour was due to the heightened pressure the coach felt to fulfill expectations of her new role. These data are interpreted to suggest that coaches may be particularly prone to react on their frustration and engage in emotional abuse when their frustration is heightened by a stressful life event (e.g. job promotion) and/or specific situational variable (e.g. peak competition periods).

In other examples of past incidences of athlete emotional abuse, several coaches felt that they were acting in the best interests of their athletes when they acted in emotionally abusive ways. In these examples, the coaches had normalized the use of these behaviours as an appropriate and/or required method for athlete development. Perceived reasons for this normalization include a history of maltreatment, exposure to other coaches’ emotionally abusive coaching practices, lack of knowledge of alternative strategies for athlete development and the perceived acceptance of others to the coach’s emotionally abusive coaching style. Athletes and parents also expressed the opinion that the coaches were well-intended in their actions, and felt that the coach truly believed his/her emotionally abusive coaching techniques were the best way to develop his/her athletes.

**The Microsystem**

In the general child abuse literature, the microsystem addresses factors within the family that contribute to the occurrence of child maltreatment. This section will examine these factors with reference to the coach-athlete relationship. Athletes reported that the immense authority of the coach and their respect for and sense of trust and security with the coach made them more vulnerable to experiences of emotional abuse. Similarly, parents discussed the amount of trust they had for the coach’s expertise and reported that
they valued the coach’s role and granted him/her authority over themselves and their children in the sport environment. Coaches also discussed their position of authority over the athlete in the coach-athlete relationship and recalled that many of their athletes expressed a great deal of respect for them as a coach.

Some athletes and parents recalled how they rationalized and legitimated experiences of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship as a result of the coach’s position of authority and the trust and respect the athletes and parents held for the coach. Additionally, other athletes and parents said they were fearful of the potential repercussions of reporting and/or intervening in the coach’s inappropriate behaviour and in turn remained silent about the abuse. Several athletes and parents also identified the substantial amount of time the athlete spent with the coach as a vulnerability factor, suggesting that the athletes saw their coach more than their own family. Presumably, the significant amount of time spent together further enhanced the potential for opportunities for abuse to occur.

When reflecting on specific incidences of emotional abuse, athletes generally believed that their coach’s emotionally abusive behaviours were a response to poor athletic performance. Parents explained that they witnessed this coaching behaviour when a child was not able to perform a certain skill in practice or did not achieve a specific goal. As well, the coaches explained that in all past cases of emotional abuse, they have acted that way because the athlete did not perform according to his/her abilities. By the end of the athletes’ careers, some athletes reported that they rebelled against their coach’s emotionally abusive behaviours by talking back to the coach. This in turn was met with an increase in the frequency and intensity of the emotional abuse
from the coach. Likewise, one parent reported that her daughter would yell back at her coach when put-down, but that this only made the situation worse.

**The Exosystem**

The exosystem includes aspects of the communities in which families and individuals live that contribute to child maltreatment. This section considers aspects of the sport community that make an athlete vulnerable to emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. One of the greatest vulnerabilities to emotional abuse may by the widespread acceptance of emotionally abusive coaching behaviours by various stakeholders within the sport community. Athletes, parents, and coaches all discussed the normalization of emotional abuse in sport. Athletes said that they had witnessed other teammates’ experiences of emotional abuse, which made them justify their own emotionally abusive experiences as something every athlete deals with. Some athletes talked to authorities, family members and teammates about their coach’s conduct, but according to the athletes, these individuals did not intervene and instead responded with advice on how to cope with these upsetting experiences. The parents discussed concerns of coaching misconduct with other parents and were informed that this is a part of the normal development process. Even the coaches talked about being exposed to other coaches’ more harmful coaching techniques, which legitimated the use of their “less harmful” practices.

Findings from the athletes’ interviews suggested that the authority of coach and the influence of the coach’s successful reputation on the athletes’ vulnerability to emotional abuse extended beyond the coach-athlete relationship to various aspect of the sport community. Some athletes explained that they had reported the coach’s emotionally
abusive behaviour to the sport administration, but that there were no repercussions for the coach, presumably due to his or her successful coaching record. Across the interviews, many of the parents and athletes interviewed were unaware of a formal avenue for reporting incidences of athlete maltreatment. Some parents explained that, aside from talking to the coach directly about his/her behaviour, or encouraging their son or daughter to talk to the coach, there were no other avenues to express their concerns.

An additional aspect of the sport community that can make an athlete vulnerable to emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship is the relinquishing of parental control in the sport environment. Not knowing much about the world of elite sport, parents explained that they deferred to the authority and direction of the coach. Even when they were uncomfortable with the coach’s behaviour they remained silent, and upon reflection, feel guilty for doing so. Similarly, coaches explained that they would have a parent meeting at the beginning of each season and review the roles of the coach, parent, and athlete, and request that the parents respect the fact that they may not be included in all aspects of their child’s training and development in sport.

Furthermore, athletes reported that emotional abuse was frequently experienced during early morning training sessions when parents and other spectators were not present, or in secluded practice sessions where spectators were not permitted. Some parents recalled being upset when they were not permitted to attend their children’s training sessions. Likewise, many athletes and parents discussed how the athletes frequently traveled alone or in small groups of athletes with their coach for competition purposes. One athlete in particular explained that the seclusion of athletes with their
coach for long periods of training or competition made him susceptible to abuse because he was isolated from his family and had no where else to go.

**The Macrosystem**

The macrosystem includes the beliefs and values of the culture that contribute to the perpetration of child maltreatment. This section considers aspects of the culture of sport that may contribute to athlete emotional abuse. Factors of vulnerability reported within the culture of sport include media messages condoning abusive coaching behaviours and culturally accepted violence and aggression. Athletes in this study reminisced about messages in the media which helped rationalize their experiences of emotional abuse. As well, athletes suggested that the more aggressive and violent the sport is, the more aggressive the behaviours and language are going to be between the coach and the athletes.

Many athletes also explained that sport values, specifically the value of winning in sport often leads to the prioritizing of athletic performance over the well-being of the athlete in the elite sport environment. As such, athletes recalled how they prioritized their sport career over their personal well-being, thus contributing to their acceptance of abusive coaching methods. In addition, the emphasis on performance in the sport culture also contributed to the collective silence of parents around emotional abuse. Based on the parent interviews it was suggested that the athlete had a performance-based goal and the parent wanted to assist him/her in achieving this. Once the parents became aware of the career-related costs potentially associated with expressing concerns of coaching misconduct, the parents stifled gut-level concerns about the ways in which their children were being treated. Furthermore, when talking about past emotionally abusive coaching
practices, coaches explained that they used this coaching approach because they felt it was an appropriate strategy to produce successful athletic performance.

**Implications**

As an athlete’s vulnerability to emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship is comprised of a range of ontological to macro spheres of influences, athlete protection strategies should also consider an ecological approach to prevention and intervention in order to be effective.

Specific intervention and prevention strategies aimed at reducing an athlete’s vulnerability to emotional abuse at the level of the perpetrator include: coach education on positive approaches to athlete development and realistic goal setting strategies, mentorship opportunities with coaches with a history of a holistic, non-abusive coaching approach, counseling opportunities for coaches with personal histories of maltreatment, social support networks for coaches (e.g. coach discussion boards or retreats), and ensuring work-life balance of coaches.

Within the relationship between the coach and the athlete, it is important to reduce the authority of the coach in this relationship. One of the most effective ways to reduce the authority of the coach is to increase the power of the athlete. This may be done through athlete education on general theories of coaching and the technical aspects of their respective sports, or by rotating coaches across teams in order to reduce an athlete’s feelings of dependence on one particular coach. Rebellious behaviour of the athlete may be reduced if the athlete felt he/she was more respected in his/her relationship with his/her coach. As such, to enhance interpersonal feelings of respect in the coach-athlete relationship, coaches should be encouraged to maintain more open communication with
their athletes and when possible, include their athletes in the decision making process. Furthermore, coach education that addresses ways to establish realistic performance expectations and challenges current notions of what defines “successful” performance in sport is needed.

At the level of the exosystem, to reduce the vulnerability of an athlete to emotional abuse, greater parental supervision of training and travel is recommended. Given that parents can also be socialized to accept concerning coaching practices in the coach-athlete relationship, it is recommended that supervision become more formalized and informed. Parents may be appointed as a supervisor for a particular training session or competition and as a part of that position he/she would be responsible for reading the sport organization’s codes of conduct on appropriate and inappropriate coaching behaviour. As well, it is recommended that each sport organization establish means for parents to report potential issues that may arise, in addition to talking to the coach directly. Parents should be encouraged to remain involved in their child’s athletic careers and maintain a protective role in their child’s athletic development. Finally, within the culture of sport, anti-violence advocacy campaigns are needed. The promotion of holistic athlete development in sport may reduce the sole emphasis on performance-based measures of success. As well, media campaigns problematizing the aggressiveness of the present sport culture are needed.

Although all of the above recommendations may individually aid in reducing an athlete’s vulnerability to emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship, it is important to reiterate that just as these vulnerabilities do not occur in isolation of one another, prevention and intervention initiatives must also consider the transactional influences
between each level of vulnerability. As an example, prevention efforts focused purely on increasing the surveillance of coach-athlete interactions would not be successful if they did not consider the widespread normalization of emotionally coaching practices by different stakeholders in the sport community (i.e. parents, coaches, athletes, administrators), or the broader cultural influences on coaches’ behaviours. Likewise, an anti-violence advocacy campaign would be ineffective without the development of policies and formal codes of conduct to support the assertions of these campaigns, or required coach education on how to make ethical decisions in sport, positive approaches for athlete development, and appropriate and inappropriate methods of discipline in the coach-athlete relationship. Accordingly, for athlete protection initiatives to be effective, vulnerabilities to athlete emotional abuse at the level of the coach, the coach-athlete relationship, the sport community, and the culture of sport must be considered collectively.

Limitations

This study is limited by the reflective nature of the participant interviews. Over time, participants’ recollections of their experiences in sport may have been skewed in positive or negative directions. Due to the nature of the inquiry and the recruitment strategies employed, participant bias, common with retrospective methods such as interviews, could be a further limitation of this investigation. It is important to acknowledge the possibility that it may be those athletes and parents who are still experiencing the long-term implications of the emotional abuse who were most eager to be interviewed. Conversely, those athletes who may still be experiencing severe implications of emotional abuse may not be willing to talk about their experience and thus may not have volunteered to
participate. Similarly, due to the nature of the inquiry, the sample of coaches was presumably limited to converted coaches or those coaches who have never used emotionally abusive behaviours in sport.

This study would have benefited from a greater number of female coaches. As well, as the athlete, parent, and coach participants were primarily Caucasian, the study would have benefited from a greater ethnic diversity in participants. Although attempts were made to recruit participants from a wide variety of sports, athletes, parents, and coaches from team sports were underrepresented.

In an attempt to achieve triangulation of the data, reflections on emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship were solicited from athletes, parents, and coaches. While the data collected from these respective groups complemented one another, it was unfortunate that no athlete-parent-coach triads participated in the study. There was one known athlete-parent dyad, but there were no known relationships between the coaches and any of the athletes or parents in the study.

Finally, consistent with the postmodern ontological perspective upheld in this research, it is important to acknowledge that the findings and discussion presented in this dissertation represent just one form of interpretation of the data collected. Depending on different perspectives of the researcher and the social contexts in which the research is conducted, there may be many other ways to collect and interpret these data.
Final Thoughts

In addition to the future directions already discussed, a few cumulative areas for future research are suggested. As this study focused on initiating and sustaining of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship and associated factors of vulnerability, future research should examine more purposively potential resilience factors that may protect athletes from emotional abuse in the sport environment. Examination of the applicability of the proposed models to other child-populated environments is warranted. Additionally, with all prevention or intervention initiatives, it is paramount that efficacy of the initiative be assessed. In order for athlete protection initiatives to be most effective, standardized measures of evaluation need to be developed and future research must examine the impact of each of the recommendations for athlete protection on coaches’ behaviours in sport, both imminently and over time.

Finally, it is important to reemphasize the contextual influences on the definition of emotional abuse employed in this investigation. Not only do definitions of emotional abuse differ depending on the purpose for which they have been developed (Porter et al., 2006), but even with the same intentions, definitions of abuse may vary depending on a number of contextual factors. It is possible that the same behaviours may be experienced differently in different cultures and across different periods of time (Fontes, 2005; Futterman, 2003). A number of personal characteristics of the athlete may influence his/her experience of the same coaching behaviour (Iwaniec et al., 2006). Accordingly, individuals may differ in the degree of harm potentially experienced from a specific behaviour, thus influencing the interpretation of that behaviour as being “emotionally-abusive”. What constitutes unacceptable harm may depend on several variables.
including societal intolerance for interpersonal violence (Rosenfeld, 2000), and the
degree to which the behaviours and associated harm are condoned within specific
environments (Gelles & Straus, 1979), such as sport. As well, in upholding a postmodern
perspective on the research, it should be noted that my own perspectives and line of
questioning would influence participants’ recollections and personal identification of past
harmful experiences – the basis upon which participants’ past experiences were defined
as emotional abuse. For these reasons, researchers need to remain critical of the
definitions employed in any maltreatment research. Likewise, when referring to the
findings in this dissertation, it is paramount that others be cognizant of definition of
emotional abuse used, and the time and context in which this research took place.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

Research clearly indicates that relational child maltreatment remains a significant problem in sport (Stirling, 2009). To date, the experience of sexual abuse in sport has been the focus of much research, with emotional abuse receiving far less attention. Given the lack of empirical research on emotional abuse in sport and the potential long-term detrimental effects of emotional abuse (Iwaniac & Sneddon, 2001; Jellen et al., 2001; Kent & Waller, 1998), the establishment of athlete protection measures to reduce the potential for emotional maltreatment in this environment is critical. A better understanding of the experience of emotional abuse, including processes by which it is initiated and sustained, is needed to inform prevention and intervention strategies. The purpose of my dissertation therefore, was to explore the process by which emotional abuse occurs and is often sustained in sport, and to examine athletes’, parents’, and coaches’ reflections on emotionally abusive experiences in the coach-athlete relationship.

The methodological approach used for the study was a constructivist and symbolic interactionist approach to grounded theory. Several ethical considerations had to be attended to in the study design, namely understanding duty to report obligations, maintaining a proactive approach to assuring confidentiality, and minimizing social and psychological risks to participation. Methods were established that were consistent with the iterative nature of grounded theory. In total, 18 retired elite athletes, 16 parents of retired elite athletes, and nine elite coaches participated in the study. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, and data were coded using open, axial, and selective coding techniques.
Athlete data were interpreted to suggest a sequence of stages by which emotionally abusive coach-athlete relations developed and were sustained over time. Furthermore, the perceived impact of emotionally abusive coaching practices on motivation, self-confidence, commitment, and achievement outcomes in sport were discussed. This study contributes to the present child abuse literature as to-date, no other temporal model of the development of emotionally abusive relations has been proposed. As well, this study adds to the present sport literature by highlighting the influence of negative coach-athlete relations on various athlete characteristics associated with the development of athletic expertise. Parent data were interpreted to suggest that parents are socialized into the culture of elite sport and can become silent bystanders to their children’s experiences of emotional abuse. Research on the role of parents in sport is limited. This study adds to this literature by highlighting the socialization of parents in sport, and providing evidence of the need for parents to remain involved, in a protective role, in their child’s athletic development. Coaches’ reflections on why they chose to use emotionally abusive behaviours in the coach-athlete relationship were interpreted to suggest two distinct origins for the use of this behaviour. Additionally, the reasons why the coaches no longer use emotionally abusive coaching techniques were reported. Coaches’ reflections on abuse in sport are limited. This is the first study conducted on coaches’ reflections on emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. As well, this study adds to the general literature on emotional abuse, which also lacks in research on the perpetrators’ perspective of emotionally abusive behaviours in parent-child or teacher-child relations. Finally, based on the collective reflections of the athletes, parents, and coaches, an ecological transactional model of vulnerability to emotional abuse in the coach-athlete
relationship was proposed. While ecological-transactional models of child maltreatment have been proposed previously, this is the first ecological-transactional model specifically on vulnerability to emotional abuse. Additionally, as this model is empirically derived based in the integration of athletes’, parents’, and coaches’ reflections of emotional abuse, this model complements the previous ecological-transactional models of child maltreatment which have been theoretical derived.

This study was limited by the reflective nature of the participant interviews. There was an under-representation of athletes, parents, and coaches from team sports, and the study would have benefited from a greater number of female coach participants. As well, although triangulation of data was pursued by collecting reflections of athletes, parents, and coaches on their reflections of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship, this study lacked specific athlete-parent-coach triads. Many questions exist for future research including examination of the applicability of the proposed models to other child-populated environments. Standardized measures for evaluation of athlete protection interventions need to be developed, and future research must examine the impact of each of the recommendations for athlete protection on coaches’ behaviours in sport, both imminently and over time.

To conclude, the findings of the present study suggest that athletes, parents, and coaches are all embedded in and affected by a social context that is comprised of a range of ontological to macro spheres of influence. Accordingly, the perpetration or prevention of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship is also contingent on these influences. This study has underscored the need for an ecological approach to athlete protection. To most effectively reduce the vulnerability of athletes to emotional abuse,
prevention and intervention initiatives need to address the range of vulnerability factors at
the level of the coach, the coach-athlete relationship, the sport community, and the
culture of sport.
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www.thecpsu.org.uk

www.truesportpur.ca

www.usoc.org
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Athlete Informed Letter of Consent

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
FACULTY OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND HEALTH

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Title of Research Project: “How is Emotional Abuse Initiated and Sustained in the Coach-Athlete Relationship?”

Purpose
The purpose of this study is to examine emotionally abusive experiences and perceptions of athlete-development strategies employed in competitive sport, in order to inform athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in this environment.

Previous research has indicated that athletes are not immune from experiences of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. Considering that this relationship can be one of the most important and influential relationships experienced by a young athlete within a competitive sport environment, athletes’ experiences of abuse have become an important area of study in the field of exercise sciences. Recent research has suggested that emotionally abusive coaching techniques are often normalized and justified as a means to produce successful sport performance (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Stirling & Kerr, 2007), thus both positive and negative athlete-development strategies, employed in competitive sport, have become a critical area of inquiry.

What is involved?
If you decide to participate in the study you will be asked to meet with the student researcher, Ashley Stirling, to discuss your previous experiences with your coach(es). You will also complete a brief questionnaire. Interviews would occur at a location that is convenient to you, and may be conducted in person or over the phone, depending on your preference. At the completion of the study the researcher will contact you again to arrange a second optional 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 not to answer any questions you choose.

Confidentiality
With your permission the interview will be digitally-recorded as to not miss any information. 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 the supervisor, Prof. Gretchen Kerr, and the student researcher will have access to the data. It is kindly requested that throughout the course of your participation you do not mention the names of third parties (e.g. former coaches) or affiliations. Confidentiality will be preserved, unless required by law.

Benefits
It is hoped that the interview data will enhance our understanding of elite athletes’ experiences in sport, and contribute to the scholarly community by informing future initiative for the prevention and intervention of abuse in sport.

Risks
If some of the memories you recall during the interview are negative, there is a small but possible risk that some emotional upset may occur. For this purpose you will be provided with a list of local counseling services that can provide you with psychological assistance. If you feel uncomfortable during the interview you can ask to take a break, reschedule or end your participation at any time. If there are any questions you do not wish to answer, please do not feel pressured to do so.

Thank you in advance for your participation. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact one of the researchers below.

Sincerely,

_______________________                                ______________________________
Ashley Elisa Stirling, M.Sc.                                 Gretchen Kerr, Ph.D.
PhD Candidate (Primary Researcher)                  Thesis Supervisor
FPHE, University of Toronto                                FPHE, University of Toronto
(416) 702-1377                                                      (416) 978-6190
ashley.stirling@utoronto.ca                               gretchen.kerr@utoronto.ca
Consent Form

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

- I am at least 16 years of age
- I understand what my participation involves
- I understand my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without penalty
- I understand confidentiality will be preserved, unless required by law.
- 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 the perceived benefits and risks of the study including possible emotional upset from negative experiences
- I have received a list of local counseling services
- Any questions I had have been addressed
- I have a copy of this form that I can keep for my records

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

_________________________________________  _______________________
Signature of participant   Date
Appendix B: Athlete Demographic Questionnaire

Age: _____

Sex:     Male    Female

Previous Sport Club(s): ____________________________________________________

___________________________________________________ ____________________

If more than one, what was your reason for switching?________________________

___________________________________________________ ____________________

___________________________________________________ ____________________

What was the highest sport level you achieved (please check one)?

Regional    Provincial    Junior National    National    International

How many years did you spend in your sport? _______

At what age did you retire? _______

What was the reason for retirement? ________________________________

___________________________________________________ ____________________

___________________________________________________ ____________________

How many coaches did you have throughout your athletic career? _____

If more than one, what was your reason for switching?________________________

___________________________________________________ ____________________

___________________________________________________ ____________________

Are you currently employed in a sports related occupation?   Yes   No

Is so what do you do? ____________________________________________________

Thank-you.
Appendix C: Athlete Interview Guide

**General Question:**

Please tell me about your experience as an elite athlete.

**Probes:**

Describe your relationship with your coach throughout your sport career.

Have you ever been yelled at by a coach?

When was the first time you remember experiencing this behaviour?

Why do you think the behaviour occurred?

- How frequently did you experience this behaviour?
- Did you continue to experience this behaviour throughout your career?

Have you ever been called names by a coach?

- When was the first time you remember experiencing this behaviour?
- Why do you think the behaviour occurred?
- How frequently did you experience this behaviour?
- Did you continue to experience this behaviour throughout your career?

Have you ever been humiliated by a coach?

- When was the first time you remember experiencing this behaviour?
- Why do you think the behaviour occurred?
- How frequently did you experience this behaviour?
- Did you continue to experience this behaviour throughout your career?

Have you ever been ignored by a coach?

- When was the first time you remember experiencing this behaviour?
- Why do you think the behaviour occurred?
• How frequently did you experience this behaviour?
• Did you continue to experience this behaviour throughout your career?

Have you ever had objects thrown at you by a coach?
• When was the first time you remember experiencing this behaviour?
• Why do you think the behaviour occurred?
• How frequently did you experience this behaviour?
• Did you continue to experience this behaviour throughout your career?

Have you ever cried as a result of your coach's behaviour? If so, what was the behaviour?
• When was the first time you remember experiencing this behaviour?
• Why do you think the behaviour occurred?
• How frequently did you experience this behaviour?
• Did you continue to experience this behaviour throughout your career?
Appendix D: Parent Informed Letter of Consent

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
FACULTY OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND HEALTH

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Purpose
The purpose of this study is to examine perceptions of athlete-development strategies employed in competitive sport, in order to inform athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in this environment.

Previous research has indicated that athletes are not immune from experiences of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. Considering that this relationship can be one of the most important and influential relationships experienced by a young athlete within a competitive sport environment, athletes’ experiences of abuse have become an important area of study in the field of exercise sciences. Recent research has suggested that emotionally abusive coaching techniques are often normalized and justified as a means to produce successful sport performance (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Stirling & Kerr, 2007), thus both positive and negative athlete-development strategies, employed in competitive sport, have become a critical area of inquiry.

What is involved?
If you decide to participate in the study you will be asked to meet with the student researcher, Ashley Stirling, to discuss your experiences as a parent of an elite athlete. You will also complete a brief questionnaire. 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 optional 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 not to answer any questions you choose.

Confidentiality
With your permission the interview will be digitally-recorded as to not miss any information. 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 the supervisor, Prof. Gretchen Kerr, and the student researcher will have access to the data. It is kindly requested that throughout the course of your participation you do not mention the names of third parties or affiliations. Confidentiality will be preserved, unless required by law.
Benefits
It is hoped that the interview data will enhance our understanding of elite athletes’ experiences in sport, and contribute to the scholarly community by informing future initiative for the prevention and intervention of abuse in sport.

Risks
If some of the memories you recall during the interview are negative, there is a small but possible risk that some emotional upset may occur. For this purpose you will be provided with a list of local counseling services that can provide you with psychological assistance. If you feel uncomfortable during the interview you can ask to take a break, reschedule or end your participation at any time. If there are any questions you do not wish to answer, please do not feel pressured to do so.

Thank you in advance for your participation. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact one of the researchers below.

Sincerely,

Ashley Elisa Stirling, M.Sc.                             Gretchen Kerr, Ph.D.
PhD Candidate (Primary Researcher)                   Thesis Supervisor
FPHE, University of Toronto                           FPHE, University of Toronto
(416) 702-1377                                      (416) 978-6190
ashley.stirling@utoronto.ca                           gretchen.kerr@utoronto.ca
Consent Form

I agree to participate in the aforementioned study. I have read and understand the procedures 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 confidentiality will be preserved, unless required by law.
- 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 the perceived benefits and risks of the study including possible emotional upset from negative experiences
- I have received a list of local counseling services
- Any questions I had have been addressed
- I have a copy of this form that I can keep for my records

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

_________________________________________  _______________________
Signature of participant   Date

__________________________
Name of participant (please print)
Appendix E: Parent Demographic Questionnaire

Sex: Male Female

Sport(s) of child athlete(s): ________________________________

What was the highest sport level your child has achieved? (If more than one child in elite sport please provide a check for each child).

Regional Provincial Junior National National International

How many years have your child(ren) spent in sport? ______

As a parent, how involved are you in your child’s athletic development?

Highly Involved Somewhat involved Not involved

Were you the primary coach of your child when he/she completed at the elite level of his/her sport?

Yes No

Are you currently employed in a sports related occupation? Yes No

Is so what do you do? ________________________________

Thank-you.
Appendix F: Parent Interview Guide

General Question:
How did you and your child get involved in sport?

Probes:

1. Why did you enroll your child in gymnastics?
2. How did your child move from a recreational level to a competitive level?
3. What benefits did you anticipate your child would experience as a result of his or her participation in competitive gymnastics?
4. a) What did you know of the competitive coach prior to your child becoming a competitive gymnast?
   b) Were you aware of the coach’s qualifications?
5. a) Describe your initial interactions with the coach?
   b) Did you have any discussions with the coach in advance about expectations, roles of the parent/athlete/coach, methods for decision-making, preferred modes of communication, etc.?
6. a) How did you come to know the other parents of the competitive gymnasts?
   b) Describe your relationships with the other parents of the competitive gymnasts.
7. Describe your relationship with your child’s coach(es)?
8. Describe your child’s experience in elite sport. (There may be different experiences across the course of the athlete’s career).
9. What did you perceive your role to be, as the parent, in your child’s athletic career?
10. Did you ever have concerns about:
a) Your child’s involvement in/experiences with elite sport? If so, please describe.

b) Your child’s coach(es)’ and their coaching practices? If so, please describe.

c) If you had concerns, did you address these with the coach(es)? If so, with whom, when, and what was the outcome??

11. Looking back, rate your level of involvement in your child’s athletic career from 1 = not involved, to 10 = extremely involved.

12. Looking back, what were the positives about your and your child’s experiences in elite sport? Did your child experience the benefits you thought she or he would?

13. Looking back, what were the negatives about your and your child’s experiences in elite sport?

14. Looking back, what do you wish you had done differently?

15. Any other comments?
Appendix G: Coach Informed Letter of Consent

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Information Letter

Purpose
The purpose of this study is to examine perceptions of athlete-development strategies employed in competitive sport, in order to inform athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in this environment.

Previous research has indicated that athletes are not immune from experiences of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. Considering that this relationship can be one of the most important and influential relationships experienced by a young athlete within a competitive sport environment, athletes’ experiences of abuse have become an important area of study in the field of exercise sciences. Recent research has suggested that emotionally abusive coaching techniques are often normalized and justified as a means to produce successful sport performance (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Stirling & Kerr, 2007), thus both positive and negative athlete-development strategies, employed in competitive sport, have become a critical area of inquiry.

What is involved?
If you decide to participate in the study you will be asked to meet with the student researcher, Ashley Stirling, to discuss your experiences as an elite coach. You will also complete a brief questionnaire. 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 optional 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 not to answer any questions you choose.

Confidentiality
With your permission the interview will be digitally-recorded as to not miss any information. 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 the supervisor, Prof. Gretchen Kerr, and the student researcher will
have access to the data. It is kindly requested that throughout the course of your participation you do not mention the names of third parties or affiliations. Confidentiality will be preserved, unless required by law.

Benefits
It is hoped that the interview data will enhance our understanding of elite athletes’ experiences in sport, and contribute to the scholarly community by informing future initiative for the prevention and intervention of abuse in sport.

Risks
If some of the memories you recall during the interview are negative, there is a small but possible risk that some emotional upset may occur. For this purpose you will be provided with a list of local counseling services that can provide you with psychological assistance. If you feel uncomfortable during the interview you can ask to take a break, reschedule or end your participation at any time. If there are any questions you do not wish to answer, please do not feel pressured to do so.

Thank you in advance for your participation. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact one of the researchers below.

Sincerely,

_______________________                                ______________________________
Ashley Elisa Stirling, M.Sc.                                 Gretchen Kerr, Ph.D.
PhD Candidate (Primary Researcher)                  Thesis Supervisor
FPHE, University of Toronto                                FPHE, University of Toronto
(416) 702-1377                                                      (416) 978-6190
ashley.stirling@utoronto.ca  gretchen.kerr@utoronto.ca
Consent Form

I agree to participate in the aforementioned study. I have read and understand the procedures 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 confidentiality will be preserved, unless required by law.
- 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 the perceived benefits and risks of the study including possible emotional upset from negative experiences
- I have received a list of local counseling services
- Any questions I had have been addressed
- I have a copy of this form that I can keep for my records

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

_________________________  _______________________
Signature of participant   Date

__________________________
Name of participant (please print)
Appendix H: Coach Demographic Questionnaire

Sex:    Male    Female

Sport(s): __________________________________________________________

What is your current coaching qualification? ____________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

What is the highest sport level one of your athlete(s) has achieved?
Regional    Provincial    Junior National    National    International

How many years have you been coaching (total)? ______

How many years have you been coaching athletes at an elite level? ______

Are you the primary coach of your child at the elite level in his/her sport?
Yes          No          N/A

Are you a former athlete?
Yes          No

If so, what sport(s) did you compete in?

What is the highest sport level you achieved as an athlete?
Regional    Provincial    Junior National    National    International

Thank-you.
Appendix I: Coach Interview Guide

General Question:

How did you get into coaching?

Probes:

In your opinion, what does it take to be a successful athlete in your sport?

In your opinion, what does it take to produce a successful athlete in your sport?

Do you feel you are capable of producing successful athletes? Why?

In what ways are you involved in your athletes’ athletic development?

Are there areas of your athlete’s athletic development in which you feel you are excluded? Please describe.

Please describe the type of relationship you share with your athletes?

If applicable, please describe the relationship you share with your athletes’ parents?

What motivates you as a coach?

How do you motivate your athletes?

Do you adhere to any particular coaching philosophy?

Where did you acquire or adopt your coaching philosophy / beliefs about how to develop successful athletes?

What factors influence your coaching style?

Has your coaching style changed over time? If so, please describe.

Are there any specific factors that constrain how you can behave as a coach?

To the best of your knowledge, has an athlete ever cried as a result of your coaching? If so, please describe.
With regards to athlete development, are there any situations that have occurred in the past that you wish were dealt with differently? If so, please describe.

What are some of the positive aspects of your position as a coach? When did you first acknowledge these?

What are some of the negative aspects of your position as a coach? When did you first acknowledge these?

What is your best coaching memory?

If you were given the chance to do it all over again, would you (get into coaching)?

Is there any other information you would like to add?

Do you have any questions for me?
Appendix J: List of Counseling Services

Local Counseling Services

Christian Counseling Services - 704-36 Eglinton W, Toronto, ON M4R 1A1, Canada. (416) 489-3350.

Dr. Dan Dalton Psychological and Counseling Services - 3080 Yonge Street, Suite 5016, Toronto, ON, Canada. (888) 245-5516. 505 Eglinton Avenue West, Suite 505, Toronto, ON, Canada. (888) 245-5516.


Oasis Centre des Femmes - Individual counseling and support groups for French-speaking women who are survivors of sexual assault or incest. Call for information. 9 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Mon. - Fri. 416-591-6565, Bilingual Crisis Line: 416-657-2229, Crisis Line: 416-657-2229.

Sexual Assault Care Centre, The Scarborough Hospital: Grace Division - Provides individual counseling for male and female victims of sexual assault over the age of 12. Able to provide services to the disabled and provide translators when required. Services are free. 416-495-2555, TTY: 416-498-6739.

Sherbourne Health Centre - offers general counseling services for people with emotional or mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, family and relationship issues, childhood or adult abuse, as well as issues around sexual and emotional health for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities. 333 Sherbourne St. 416-324-4180, www.sherbourne.on.ca.
The Anne Johnston Health Station - offers counseling and advocacy around a variety of issues including abuse. 2398 Yonge St. 416-486-8666.

The 519 Church Street Community Centre - The 519 offers support groups, counseling, and resources to primarily the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered/transsexual communities. 519 Church St. 416 392 6878.

The Gate House - Individual and peer counseling for youth and adults who have been assaulted or abused in their childhood. Referral services and sensitive interview room for police interviews with victims. 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Mon. - Fri. 416-255-5900.

Toronto Child Abuse Centre - Crisis counseling and child victim witness support program. Must be referred by Children's Aid Society, police, probation officer or crown attorney. Self referrals may be accepted. 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Mon. - Fri. 416-515-1100

Toronto Rape Crisis Centre / Multicultural Women Against Rape - offers free and confidential services to all survivors of sexual violence, as well as their friends and family. Those services include a 24-hour crisis line, face-to-face counseling, court support, and advocacy. Office: 416-597-1171, Crisis: 416-597-8808, TTY : 416-597-1214, Email : trcc@web.net.

Universal Counseling Services - 33 Orchard View Bl, Toronto, ON M4R 2E9, Canada. (416) 483-8836.

Women Recovering from Abuse Program - Offers group therapy and individual counseling to women who have experienced abuse, who suffer from mental health problems, and who have sought traditional forms of psychiatric treatment in the past. 416-323-6010.
Services for Mental Disorders

Mood Disorders Association of Ontario provides telephone support and self-help support groups which share experiences and coping techniques. 416-486-8046.

Mood Disorders Clinics (GP referral required)
Clarke Institute of Psychiatry - 416-979-6933
Toronto Hospital (TGH) - 416-340-3747
Sunnybrook Health Science Centre:
Youth Clinic (14-19) - 416-480-6069
Adult Clinic - 416-480-4089

St. Michael’s Hospital Crisis Team Access through Emergency Department will provide assessment of individuals in suicidal crisis. 416-864-5349.

Support for Eating Disorders

Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders (ANRED) http://www.anred.ca
National Eating Disorders Information Centre (NEDIC) non-profit organization that provides information and resources on eating disorders and weight preoccupation. 200 Elizabeth Street 416-340-4156 http://www.nedic.ca

Sheena’s Place Support programs and group services for those with eating disorders and related issues, their families and caregivers. 416-927-8900

Help Lines
Aboriginal Crisis Intervention Team - Volunteer, non-medical crisis service. Will provide phone counseling or meet in community. Mobile crisis service when necessary. For males and females all ages. 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Mon. - Fri. 416-531-7127, 24 hr crisis line: 416-531-0330.


Distress Centre - (24 hour) Trained volunteers provide telephone support and counseling. Referrals to professional or emergency services. Phones often busy, so keep trying. 416-439-0744, 416-408-4357.


Gerstein Centre - (24 hour) Non-medical crisis intervention for adults 16 years and older who are or have been involved with the mental health system. Telephone counseling, problem-solving and referrals. Mobile response in the home or other community setting, if necessary. 416-929-5200, TTY: 416-929-5200

Integrated Crisis Service - (24 hour) Crisis line and mobile response team will provide assistance to adults 16 years and older who have a mental illness. Support to families and referrals to mental health and other community services. 416-289-2434

Kids Help Phone - (24 hour) Canada-wide telephone counseling, information and referral service for children and youth. 1-800-668-6868

Toronto Area Gays Lesbian Phone Line and Crisis Counseling - Telephone peer counseling. 7 p.m. to 10 p.m., Mon. - Fri. 416-964-6600
Toronto Rape Crisis Centre - (24 hour) Phones answered by answering service. Counselors return call promptly. Services directed toward female survivors. Offices open Mon.-Thurs. until 5:00 pm 416-597-8808.

Women's Sexual Assault Help Line of York Region - (24 hour) Crisis line for sexually assaulted/abused females, over the age of 16. After hours answering service, calls returned promptly. 905-895-7313, 1-800-263-6734.