Elite Athletes’ Experiences of Athlete-Centred Coaching

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A thesis manuscript for the degree of Master of Science

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2013
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Master of Science, 2013

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ABSTRACT

Athlete-centred coaching is proposed to enhance performance (Lyle, 2002), develop life skills (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010), and prevent athlete maltreatment (Kerr & Stirling, 2008). Despite the consistent recommendation, very little is known empirically about athlete-centred coaching, the extent to which it is implemented, or athletes’ experiences with this style of coaching. The purpose of this study therefore was to examine recently retired elite athletes’ perspectives on their most athlete-centred coach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight male and female recently retired Olympians. The findings of this study provided mixed evidence for coaching behaviours characterized as athlete-centred coaching as defined within the literature. Specifically, at least half of the coaches did not use stimulating questions, one of the most central athlete-centred tenets. Explanations for the mixed findings are discussed and a continuum of athlete-centred coaching is proposed. Lastly, suggestions for future research and practical implications are presented.

KEYWORDS: Athlete-centred, Coaching, Coach Education, Elite Athletes
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Too often, the primary concerns of performance athletes, coaches, and sporting organizations revolve around winning games, making money, and being champions (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). These desires to win may put the holistic development of athletes in jeopardy. Further, a popular belief exists that performance excellence comes at the expense of an athlete’s personal well-being (Miller & Kerr, 2002). However, Miller and Kerr (2002) propose that the style of coaching known as athlete-centred coaching may in fact reconcile potential conflicts between performance excellence and personal well-being.

Athlete-centered coaching refers to a process by which “athletes gain and take ownership of knowledge, development and decision making that will help them to maximise their performance and their enjoyment” (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010, p. 13). A basic principle of athlete-centered coaching is to enhance “the holistic health and well-being of the athlete, through the pursuit of excellence in sport” (Miller & Kerr, 2002, p. 147). The child-centred sport system contends that athlete-centred coaching “aims at both developing competitive talent among young athletes and fulfilling their human rights and dignity” (David, 2005, p.237). The following five tenets describe athlete-centered coaching: (1) fostering the holistic development of the athlete and the development of life skills through sport (e.g., developing independence, leadership, teamwork skills, and decision making skills; highlighting respect, trust, responsibility, accountability and that sport is only part of the life experience); (2) creating a partnership relationship between the coach and athlete (e.g., athletes are empowered and included in some of the planning, decision making and evaluation processes); (3) teaching by guiding not prescribing (e.g., teaching games for understanding and using stimulating questions); (4) establishing a quality team culture in which the athletes gain responsibility for establishing and maintaining a
direction for the team (e.g., athletes are having fun, recognizing athletes as part of a greater whole, and defining ‘success’); and (5) utilizing resources (e.g., good assistant coaches, outside help, and feedback systems; Clarke, Smith, & Thibault., 1994; Headley-Cooper, 2010; Kidman, 2005; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Miller & Kerr, 2002).

Concerning elite and youth sport Kidman (2001, 2005), Kidman and Lombardo (2010), and Rizola, Souza, Scaglia, and Oliveria (2002) reported the following benefits associated with athlete-centred coaching: (1) increased player engagement; (2) increased communication on and off the playing field; (3) increased competence; and (4) increased motivation. Similar to Miller and Kerr, other scholars have advocated that athlete-centred coaching fosters performance excellence. Lyle (2002) suggests that an athlete-centered coaching philosophy is good for performance coaches because it increases effectiveness, athlete satisfaction, and team performance. Not employing an athlete-centered coaching philosophy has the potential to break down coach-player relationships that may influence effort, interest and motivation, relating to overall performance (Lyle, 2002). Martens (2004) also supports some athlete-centred qualities in his three keys for a coach to be successful. His criteria for a successful coach include the need to be knowledgeable, motivated and empathic. An empathic coach understands his or her athletes, which helps to gain their respect and create a partnership relationship—an important aspect of athlete-centered coaching. Therefore, the related literature proposes that athlete-centred coaching has numerous benefits for performance.

Additionally, recent research has highlighted the occurrences of athlete maltreatment (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Kirby, Greaves, & Hankivsky, 2000; Stirling & Kerr, 2007, 2008). Athlete-centred coaching has been proposed as a way to counteract the occurrences of athlete maltreatment in sport and assist athletes in attaining positive developmental outcomes. Kerr and
Stirling (2008) recommend “that an athlete-centred philosophy is perhaps the best way to address the protection of children in sport” (p. 315). In particular, the increased focus on the holistic development of the athlete may diminish the ‘win-at-all-cost’ approach which has been associated with occurrences of athlete maltreatment.

Kidman and Lombardo (2010) suggest further benefits of athlete-centred coaching. They contend that a coach with an athlete-centred approach would take advantage of coachable moments and/or organize the sporting experience to maximize the occurrence of such events to develop life skills. This becomes important as there is little evidence that youth sport coaches make an effort consciously to develop their athletes' personal well-being and life skills (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). Instead, these outcomes are believed to develop simply as a result of the athlete’s participation in sport (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). If coaches are reducing their role to just that of increasing athletic performance, they are underestimating the kind of influence they have (Poczwardowski, Barott, & Jowett, 2006).

Despite the propositions that athlete-centred coaching enhances performance, develops life skills, and prevents athlete maltreatment, very little is known empirically about athlete-centred coaching. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to empirically examine recently retired elite athletes’ perspectives on their most athlete-centred coach.

**Self-Reflection**

This thesis was inspired in significant ways by my previous experiences in sport and my personal career ambitions. I first started to play hockey when I was two and a half years old and I have just finished my fifth year of OUA hockey at the age of twenty-five. Thus, sport, specifically hockey, has been a large part of my life. I was fortunate enough to be able to play at some high levels including the OHL, professionally in the IHL, and lastly in the CIS. However,
my experiences of competitive sport have not always been so positive. Specifically, there have been many times when I felt playing hockey was no longer fun and even a few extreme cases when I hated hockey and just wanted to quit. I’ve had coaches who treated me like a pawn in a chess game at the age of seventeen and others who consistently yelled at me or my teammates for making mistakes. Throughout my career I have always noticed how crucial a role the coach played in the experiences I have had – both positive and negative. Consequently, I developed a yearning to understand what it was about my coaches that determined the kind of experiences I had. This yearning still lies within me and is responsible for a lot of the passion that fueled this thesis. I hope that by developing a greater understanding of effective coaching, I will be able to help coaches use their influence wisely and facilitate more positive experiences for athletes.

In addition, this thesis was inspired by my own passion to coach hockey. I first became an assistant coach for a minor hockey team in the GTHL three years ago and have quickly become aware of the sense of contribution and fulfillment I receive from coaching. Subsequently, I am the head coach of a minor hockey AAA team for the upcoming season. Therefore, learning about how to be an effective coach has become personally meaningful in terms of my career ambitions.

In the pursuit to understand effective coaching, I have taken a personal interest in the athlete-centred approach. I found that my experiences at the performance levels within hockey supported the proposed benefits cited in the literature. Particularly, I have found that a lack of athlete-centred coaching behaviours decreases a team’s performance. For example, I can recall that on one of the performance teams I played on, we had a coach who ran a “my way or the highway” approach, taking little to no input from the team. He was also a very poor teacher who consistently barked “don’t do that,” “be better,” and “that can’t happen,” not teaching the team anything we didn’t already know. As a result, the coach had very little respect from the players
and his lack of athlete-centred behaviours left my teammates and me unmotivated to play while also compromising the commitment we felt toward the team. I suggest that his lack of athlete-centred behaviours was a significant factor in our team’s poor performance.

On the other hand, I have been on a team that highly respected the head coach. This coach had many athlete-centred behaviours; he kept the team involved in some of the planning, asked stimulating questions, and treated us with respect. Consequently, we were motivated to play hockey, work hard in practice and games, and play for this coach. If the team wasn’t putting forth our best effort, the coach would let us know and we would respond because we respected and wanted to play for this coach. Therefore, I would suggest that part of our team’s performance success was because our coach implemented athlete-centred behaviours.

It is evident that I have a bias for athlete-centred coaching. Therefore, it was crucial for me to control my prejudices while collecting and analysing the data to avoid the data being influenced in favour of athlete-centred coaching. I attempt to explain how I dealt with these challenges in the contextual analysis section of the Methods chapter.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Perspectives on Sporting Excellence

As an ideal, sporting excellence is a combination of performance excellence and personal excellence. Performance excellence in elite sport is traditionally referred to as the measurable athletic outcomes that come “in the form of Olympic medals, championships, and world records” (Miller & Kerr, 2002, p. 140). Conversely, personal excellence has been defined as “the achievement of developmentally appropriate tasks across the length of one’s life and the acquisition of personal qualities that contribute to optimal health and well-being” (Miller & Kerr, 2002, p. 141). Similarly, personal excellence is associated with attaining holistic development, life skill development, and personal well-being.

Several scholars have encouraged the fields of sport psychology and coaching to work towards forming sport environments that place equal value on the pursuit of performance and personal excellence (Amirault & Orlick, 1999; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Orlick, 1998). However, the primary concerns of performance athletes, coaches, and sporting organizations typically revolve around winning games, making money, and being champions (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). These desires for performance excellence can eclipse the need to pursue personal excellence. In fact, it is the popular belief that performance excellence comes at the expense of an athlete’s personal well-being (Miller & Kerr, 2002). For example, emotionally abused elite female swimmers explained that at the beginning of their careers they had already thought emotional abuse was needed in order for them to progress as elite swimmers; they didn’t question it and they had accepted it as normal (Stirling & Kerr, 2007).

A recent and emerging philosophy is that performance excellence and personal excellence can be achieved at the same time (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Particularly, Miller and Kerr
(2002) suggest “performance excellence is facilitated by personal excellence” (p. 146). The Canadian Sport Policy (CSP) document includes goals to foster both personal and performance excellence, such as the development of the whole person, the pursuit of excellences, and a healthy coach-athlete relationship (Sport Canada, 2002). These policies are noble in theory but they become problematic when there are only measures for performance excellence outcomes and not personal excellence outcomes. For example, performance excellence is measured by win-loss records, medals, and championships. However, there are no measures of life development, life skills, personal well-being, enjoyment, or other outcomes outside of performance. Lastly, the obsession with performance excellence, which can lead to a ‘win-at-all-cost’ mentality, has been associated with occurrences of athlete maltreatment (Miller & Kerr, 2002). The next section will further discuss these occurrences of athlete maltreatment and other concerns about competitive sport.

**Concerns about Competitive Sport**

It is often believed that sport is associated with positive developmental outcomes; however, academics argue that positive developmental outcomes are not automatically achieved through sport participation alone (Gould & Carson, 2008; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). Particularly, researchers have identified occurrences of athlete maltreatment, overuse injuries, eating disorders, burnout, social isolation, lost childhood, premature identity foreclosure, aggression and violence, doping, decreased self-perceptions, and dropout as some outcomes of competitive sport participation (David, 2005; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Gould, 2010; Smith, 1983).
Recent research on athlete maltreatment in sport indicates that athletes are not immune to experiences of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Kirby et al., 2000; Stirling & Kerr, 2007, 2008). In addition, research on abuse suggests that emotional abuse may be the most frequently occurring form of abuse in sport (Kirby et al., 2000). Emotional abuse is defined as:

a pattern of deliberate non-contact behaviours by a person within a critical relationship role that has the potential to be harmful. Acts of emotional abuse include physical behaviours, verbal behaviours, and acts of denying attention and support. These acts have the potential to be spurning, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting/corrupting, or doing emotional responsiveness, and may be harmful to individuals’ affective, behavioural, cognitive or physical well-being. (Stirling & Kerr, 2008, p.178)

Aside from occurrences of maltreatment in sport, other concerns for athletes have risen. Research has shown that aggression and violence is strongly embedded in the culture of many sports, particularly hockey (Smith, 1984). Additionally, David (2005) discussed the serious health risks that adolescent athletes take and many youth athletes are taking when doping. He argues that “research carried out in North America, Australia, and Western Europe concerning the number of people using illicit drugs tends to show that between 1 and 10 per cent (3 to 5 per cent as an average) of young people under 18 – and not just athletes – take illegal drugs” (p. 105).

Furthermore, several of the concerns about competitive sport and youth sport in particular are identified within the controversy of athletes specializing in sport at a young age. Baker, Cobley, and Fraser-Thomas (2009) conclude that there is not enough research on early specialization for any substantial claims to be made for or against early specialization. However, the research that has examined early specialization has alluded to several negative outcomes. Strachan, Côté, and Deakin (2009) assessed young athletes (M age = 13.7) as ‘specializers’ and
The ‘specializers’ reported high levels of emotional exhaustion, which is a subcomponent of athlete burnout. Similarly, other studies by Gould and colleagues (Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996, 1997) found concerning numbers of early specialization leading to burnout and increased stress. Lastly, other concerns regarding early specialization include: costs, time demands, social isolation, lost childhood, and premature identity foreclosure (Gould, 2010).

In summary, it is evident that positive developmental outcomes are not automatically achieved through sport participation alone and, notably, competitive sport has been associated with many negative outcomes. The next section will discuss the coaches’ role in influencing the developmental outcomes in athletes, positive and negative.

The Power of the Coach

Regarding youth sport, the coach is likely the most significant individual in determining the values and life skills that children learn through participating in sport (Steelman, 1995). In fact, coaches and teachers combined, accounted for the most important role models for leadership in 26% of Americans aged 18 to 30, second only to family members at 40% (Kouzes & Posner, 2010). Coaches possess several sources of power, including: age, physical size, expertise, often gender, ascribed position of authority, access to and control over resources, rewards, and punishment (Tomlinson & Strachan, 1996).

Smith and Smoll (1991) found that youngsters accurately perceived their coaches’ behaviours, which means if the coaches were being disrespectful the players recognized the disrespectful behaviours. Furthermore, the youngsters readily internalized their perceptions; for example, if the players perceived the coaches as being disrespectful they internalized that being disrespectful is an acceptable behaviour. Likewise, young athletes’ sport enjoyment and
evaluations of their coach were more strongly related to coaching behaviours than to their team’s won-lost record (Cumming, Smoll, Smith, & Grossard, 2007). Specifically, coaches were viewed more positively by their athletes when the coaches engaged in more mastery behaviors focused on effort and personal development. In contrast, result-focused behaviors were associated with negative views of the coaches. Since coaches have more control over their behaviors and the climate they create than they have on the performance outcomes, Cummings and colleagues (2007) suggest that “every coach, regardless of won-lost record, should potentially be able to provide an environment and experience that is enjoyable for young athletes” (p. 331).

On the other hand, the significant influence coaches have over their athletes’ experiences in sport can be problematic if their power is used inappropriately. Problems such as injuries, burnout, and athlete maltreatment, have all been attributed to the abuse of power by the coach (Brackenridge, 2001; David, 2005).

Similarly, the influence coaches have can be problematic if they only use their power to develop athletic skills. Coaches often believe that the holistic development, life skills, and the personal well-being of athletes will be achieved simply as a result of participation in sport (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). As a result, coaches tend to put all their energy into developing athletic skills (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). Poczwardowski and colleagues (2006) contend that if coaches are reducing their role to just that of increasing athletic performance, they are misjudging and underestimating the kind of influence they have. In summary, coaches have significant sources of power over their athletes and the nature of their athletes’ experiences, which can be positive or negative. The relationship between a coach and an athlete also affects both the coach’s and the athlete’s experiences. This relationship will be discussed in the next section.
The Coach-Athlete Relationship

Athletes’ satisfaction, self-esteem, and performance accomplishments are likely to be influenced by the nature of the coach-athlete relationship (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Coaches and athletes in poor coach-athlete relationships have identified the following negative outcomes: hurt feelings, minimized time spent together, limited verbal exchanges, tension, avoidance, unfulfilled expectations, poor communication, lack of commitment, dissatisfaction, and various abuses of power and discomfort (Poczwardowski, Barott, & Henschen, 2002).

On the other hand, Jowett and Cockerill (2003) found that the coach-athlete relationship can have a positive effect on athlete development and performance, even at the elite level of sport. The types of coach-athlete relationships found by Jowett and Cockerill were underlined by mutual respect, trust, care, concern, support, open communication, shared knowledge and understanding, as well as clear, corresponding roles and tasks. These findings counteract the popular belief that the coach-athlete relationship at the elite level is impersonal, authoritarian, and dependent upon competition success.

Moreover, the coach-athlete relationship is considered to be “the foundation of coaching and a major force in promoting the development of athletes’ physical and psychosocial skills” (Jowett, 2005, p. 412). Consequently, Jowett (2005) derived the popular 3 C’s plus 1 C Model for assessing the coach-athlete relationship. The model includes closeness, commitment and complementarity, plus co-orientation. Closeness reflects the depth to which the coach and athlete are emotionally attached. Expressions of like, trust, respect and appreciation between the coach and athlete indicate a positive affective relationship. Commitment is the coaches’ and athletes’ desires or intentions to preserve their relationship (e.g., the cognitive representation of connection between the coach and the athlete). Complementarity defines the behavioural...
interaction between coaches and athletes, which includes cooperation, affiliation, responsibility, easiness, willingness, and friendliness. Lastly, co-orientation refers to the coaches’ and athletes’ perceptions about each other. While the 3 C’s plus 1 C Model offers a framework to quantify elements of the coach-athlete relationship, its application is limited to the coaching behaviours related to the 4 C’s and it does not allow researchers to examine the dynamics of the coach-athlete relationship from a broader point of view. An alternative approach to understanding how coaches approach their relationships with their athletes is to understand their coaching philosophy. The next section will review the literature on the importance of coaching philosophies and the factors that influence coaches’ philosophies.

**Coaching Philosophies**

A coaching philosophy can be defined as a set of principles based on values and beliefs that guide coaching behaviours, where values differ in terms of arrangement and valence (Burton & Raedeke, 2008; Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2009; Rokeach, 1972, 1973, 1979; Wilcox & Trudel, 1998). Regarding youth sport, Steelman (1995) argues that coaching philosophies may directly impact the experience of youngsters because of the coach’s position of authority and influence, as alluded to in the power of the coach section.

Apart from affecting the sporting experience of young athletes, coaching philosophies are also widely recognized as a prerequisite for a coach to effectively lead his or her athlete(s). The numerous coach education publications and courses that have a subsection dedicated to developing a coaching philosophy exemplify its importance (Cassidy et al., 2009). Cassidy and colleagues (2009) claim that being able to accurately articulate one’s coaching philosophy is necessary for good practice, as it provides direction and focus to one’s coaching. Martens (2004)
states that a well-developed philosophy will help coaches resolve the difficult decisions they make and enable them to coach more effectively. He elaborates that those coaches without a well-developed philosophy may lack direction and may easily succumb to external pressures. In summary, the ability to accurately articulate a coaching philosophy is proposed to strengthen a coach’s ability to effectively lead his or her team.

The subjective nature of a coaching philosophy makes it susceptible to the constant pressures of many external factors that could influence the translation of the philosophy into behaviour (Stewart, 1993). Stewart identifies these external factors as the ethos of the organization, definitive coaching subculture, athlete expectations, and the pressures associated with winning. Lyle (1999) states that personal beliefs are derived from sources such as experience, observation and education programs, among others. Lyle also emphasizes the differences between participation, development and performance coaches. McCallister, Blinde, and Weiss (2000) speculate that the coaches in their study were influenced by remnants of their own competitive experiences, parents wanting to win, and the professional sports model that emphasizes winning as the ultimate goal.

The literature demonstrates some consistency in identifying the influencing factors on coaching philosophies. By synthesizing the identified influences from the literature, five distinct factors have been distinguished: the situation, past experiences, the organization, the sport culture, and the athletes and parents. Although these factors are recognized as influencing coaching philosophies, it is important to understand the influence may also flow the other way. For example, a coach’s values and philosophy could determine which organization he or she chooses to coach for. Thus, it is reasonable to infer that there is a bi-directional influence.
between the coaching philosophy and influencing factors. The next section will describe a specific coaching philosophy known as athlete-centred coaching, which is the focus of this study.

**Athlete-Centred Coaching**

**Athlete-Centred Coaching**

Athlete-centered coaching refers to a process in which “athletes gain and take ownership of knowledge, development and decision making that will help them to maximise their performance and their enjoyment” (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010, p. 13). A basic principle of athlete-centered coaching is to enhance “the holistic health and well-being of the athlete, through the pursuit of excellence in sport” (Miller & Kerr, 2002, p. 147). The child-centred sport system proposes that athlete-centred coaching “aims at both developing competitive talent among young athletes and fulfilling their human rights and dignity” (David, 2005, p.237). The following five tenets describe the athlete-centered approach to coaching: holistic development, partnership relationship, optimal teaching, quality team culture, and support team (Clarke et al., 1994; Headley-Cooper, 2010; Kidman, 2005; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Miller & Kerr, 2002). Each will be described in turn.

**Holistic Development.** Athlete-centred coaches foster the holistic development of their athletes through sport. For example, they develop characteristics in athletes that are beneficial both in and out of sport, such as respect, trust, responsibility, accountability, and independence. Athlete-centred coaches also provide opportunities for their athletes to practice working together, being leaders, and making decisions. Importantly, the athletes’ rights and developmental needs drive the design and delivery of sport programmes (Clarke, et al., 1994). Lastly, an important
component of the holistic development tenet is highlighting the fact that sport is only part of the life experience.

**Partnership Relationship.** Athlete-centred coaches create partnership relationships between themselves and their athletes. The athletes are empowered and included in some of the planning, decision making and evaluation processes in a developmentally- and situationally-appropriate manner. In creating this partnership relationship, athlete-centred coaches are more democratic than autocratic when coaching. However, being autocratic can be just as important in certain situations. Martens (2004) coined a third alternative, submissive coaching, where the coach acts more like a babysitter who passively sits back. Certain approaches are more useful in certain situations. When decisions need to be made quickly, it is time to be autocratic, such as a hockey team pulling their goalie in the last minute of a game. If a coach is making decisions when there is time to discuss the options, a more democratic style is appropriate, such as an overall game plan. Even taking a submissive style, where a coach lets his or her athletes just play and enjoy the sport, is appropriate at certain times. Athlete-centred coaches are more orientated to being democratic coaches, but this does not restrict them to the one approach.

**Optimal Teaching.** Athlete-centred coaches use optimal teaching techniques, such as teaching by guiding not prescribing. For example, Wink and Putney (2002) concluded that children are able to solve problems beyond their predicted developmental level if they are provided with guidance in the form of leading questions or prompts from somebody who is more knowledgeable and capable. These actions are termed the guiding style of coaching and are based on Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development. This idea of learning is contrary to the traditional nature of the teaching and learning environment of many sports, where coaches are often prescriptive regarding when and how athletes should perform specific skills or
movements (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). Potrac and Cassidy’s (2006) review of the literature led them to claim that Vygotsky’s work might usefully be applied to enhance coaching practice and athlete learning within the context of sport. Particularly, Kidman and Lombardo (2010) identified the use of stimulating questions and teaching games for understanding to optimize development. In summary, teaching by guiding is identified as the optimal teaching method within the athlete-centred approach.

**Quality Team Culture.** Athlete-centred coaches establish a team culture in which the athletes have responsibility for establishing and maintaining a direction for the team. Creating a quality team culture is recognized as an important component for a team to achieve performance excellence. Examples of a quality team culture for all levels of sport include the athletes having fun, being recognized as part of a greater whole, and a broad, non-performance outcome definition of success being identified for the team.

The research on goal-orientations within a team environment is relevant to defining success within a team. Athlete-centred coaching involves creating more of a task-orientated culture, which focuses on success in terms of self-improvement and mastery rather than an ego-orientated culture, which views success in terms of results (Nicholls, 1984). Creating a task-orientated culture is recognized as important because research by Smith and Smoll (2002) and Smith (2009) indicates that task-orientated cultures maintain lower attrition rates.

On the other hand, recent research by Preston and Fraser-Thomas (2011) has shown coach ego-orientation to be a predictor for success as defined by the team’s winning percentage. Their research was conducted on athletes who were at the developmental and performance level. Their results indicated that performance coaches cared about winning, and that this quality predicted success as measured by performance outcomes. In conclusion, for performance level
coaches to adopt an athlete-centred approach, they do not need to abandon their desires to win, but they do need to create a quality team culture that includes being task-orientated, fun, and consistent with the other tenets of this approach.

**Utilize Resources.** Athlete-centred coaches utilize resources. They surround themselves with good assistant coaches, use outside help, and have feedback systems. For example, a head coach might have his/her assistant coach report once a week on how the coaching staff is doing in terms of developing partnership relationships with their athletes. Therefore, the assistant coach is providing a feedback system that will help keep the coaching staff on track with their athlete-centred philosophy.

Similar to the athlete-centered approach are the humanistic and holistic approaches. Some researchers have used these terms interchangeably (e.g., Kidman & Lombardo, 2010) because all of them refer to the total development of the whole individual. However, Kidman and Lombardo recognize that each approach can be interpreted to mean different things. Therefore, the next section will review the definitions and tenets of humanistic and holistic coaching.

**Humanistic Coaching**

Humanistic coaching involves a philosophy that “stresses the centrality of the individual athlete’s personal growth and development through an active engagement in the coaching experience” (Lyle, 1999, p.37). Based upon Rogers’ (1969) seminal work on humanistic psychology, humanistic coaching “addresses the whole person who is the athlete and encourages athletes to reflect upon the subjective experience of sport” (Lombardo, 1999, p. 4). The literature on humanistic coaching can be summarized into three basic tenets: (1) valuing all participants and treating them as human beings (e.g., coach is caring, empathic and open; goals of the athlete
are greater than the coaches); (2) creating coach-player relationships that are facilitating, empowering, supportive, encouraging, empathic, and reinforcing (e.g., athletes are expected to analyse, think and make decisions; coaches cannot fully relinquish their responsibilities); (3) developing the athlete as a person (e.g., supporting athletes moving from adolescence to maturity and independence; Hellison, 1973; Lombardo, 1987, 1999; Lyle, 1999; Sage, 1978).

**Holistic Coaching**

Kidman (2005) claims that the “holistic development of the athlete is central to the success of an athlete-centered coaching approach” (p. 25). Holistic coaching considers athletes as mental, physical, emotional, political, social, spiritual and cultural beings, while keeping context in mind (Cassidy et al., 2009). To keep context in mind infers that every coaching situation is different; thus, coaches need to treat each situation individually, weigh all the options, and choose the most appropriate plan of action. Further, “the hallmark of a holistic coach is one who has the ability to integrate various knowledge strands, including those that refer to the personal, emotional, cultural and social identity of the athlete” (Cassidy et al., 2009, pp. 174-175). The main problems with holistic coaching include the different cultures and social skills of the athletes. Lastly, importance is placed on the impact of three factors: “(1) athlete self-actualization (which refers to the identity and personal worth of the athlete within the cultural/social context); (2) athlete learning processes (which equates to how individual athletes learn and prefer to learn); and (3) social competencies (which focus on their abilities to develop socially responsible behaviours towards the self and others)” (Cassidy et al., 2009, p. 182).

Upon reviewing the definitions and basic tenets of athlete-centered, humanistic and holistic coaching, significant overlap between the terms is evident. However, subtle differences
are apparent among the terms and they each favour certain tenets over others. The next section will provide a rationale for the preferred choice of the term ‘athlete-centred coaching.’

**Athlete-Centred Coaching as the Preferred Term**

Athlete-centered, humanistic and holistic coaching are similar approaches to coaching. As some examples, all three approaches emphasize holistic development of the athlete and respect for the best interests of the athlete, both as an athlete and as a person, and are very mindful of the importance of the coach-athlete relationship. However, there are some subtle differences, for example: athlete-centered coaching favours empowering athletes by engaging them in the decision making process; humanistic coaching favours developing athletes as a whole through empowering the athlete while always being empathic with the athlete; and holistic coaching favours the whole development of the athlete while keeping the context in mind.

Furthermore, the definitions and tenets of the terms exemplified by both athlete-centered and humanistic coaching have larger scopes than does holistic coaching. The holistic development of athletes is referred to as a component of athlete-centered and humanistic coaching; however, these approaches also specify the importance of athletes being a part of the decision making process, while holistic coaching does not touch on this process. Likewise, athlete-centered coaching has a greater scope than humanistic coaching. The tenets of athlete-centered coaching include the process of teaching by guiding rather than prescribing (e.g., teaching games of understanding and using stimulating questions) and establishing a quality team culture in which the athletes are given responsibility for establishing and maintaining a direction for the team—humanistic coaching does not touch on these tenets.
For the purpose of this study, the term athlete-centered coaching is preferred as it has a larger and more comprehensive scope than either humanistic or holistic coaching. The next section will address the theoretical framework of athlete-centred coaching.

**Self-Determination Theory**

Self-determination theory (SDT) provides a theoretical framework for the athlete-centred approach. SDT “focuses on types, rather than just amount, of motivation, paying particular attention to autonomous motivation, controlled motivation, and amotivation as predictors of performance, relational, and well-being outcomes” (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 182). The central component of SDT is the difference between autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. Autonomous motivation is both the intrinsic motivation and the types of extrinsic motivation in which people identify with an activity and integrate it into their sense of self. People who are motivated autonomously self-endorse their actions. On the other hand, controlled motivation involves external regulation, in which one behaves in reaction to rewards or punishment, and introjected regulation, in which one behaves according to partially internalized social regulations. People who are motivated by these controlled external factors experience pressure to think, feel, or behave in particular ways. Both forms of motivation energize and direct behaviour; however, research has confirmed that they yield very different outcomes. Autonomous motivation tends to lead to greater psychological health, increased persistence, and more effective performance on experiential types of activities (Deci & Ryan, 2008). At the foundation of the athlete-centred approach, is a focus on enhancing autonomous motivation in athletes.

The basic psychological human needs are an important component of the SDT. The basic needs include competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Competence is the
urge to control the outcome and experience mastery. Autonomy is the desire to be causal agents of one’s own life. Relatedness is the want to interact, be connected to, and experience caring for others. The satisfaction of the basic psychological needs predicts psychological well-being in all cultures. In particular, satisfying the basic needs orientates the type of motivation an athlete develops. If all three of an athlete’s basic needs are satisfied, then the athlete will develop a strong autonomous motivation. When the need for autonomy is thwarted but the needs for competence and relatedness are still satisfied, then controlled motivation is developed (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Hence, it is particularly important to highlight the basic need of autonomy in order to develop autonomous rather than controlled motivation.

SDT is at the root of many of the athlete-centred coaching tenets. Creating a partnership relationship between the athlete and coach promotes autonomy within the athlete and the necessary relatedness, human connection. Likewise, the stimulating questions associated with optimal teaching foster athletes to make decisions for themselves and further produces more autonomy within the athletes. The process-oriented approach of a quality team culture fulfills the basic psychological need for competence and mastery. Therefore, the tenets of athlete-centred coaching thoroughly cover the three basic psychological needs associated with autonomous motivation.

In summary, SDT provides a theoretical framework that supports the athlete-centred approach. This framework that has been tested numerous times, and has consistently demonstrated that autonomous motivation is related to greater psychological health, increased persistence, and more effective performance on experiential types of activities. The athlete-centred approach aims to recreate these outcomes by developing autonomous motivation in the athletes. The next section will address the literature on athlete-centred coaching.
Research on Athlete-Centred Coaching

Proposed Benefits

There are numerous cited benefits associated with the athlete-centred approach. For example, Kidman (2001, 2005), Kidman and Lombardo (2010), and Rizola and colleagues (2002) reported the following benefits: (1) increased player engagement; (2) increased communication on and off the playing field; (3) increased competence; and (4) increased motivation. Specifically, these studies examined elite and youth sport, players who had experienced athlete-centered coaching and coaches who used an athlete-centred approach. Lynn Kidman, the leading researcher on athlete-centred coaching, used a multi-methods approach in one of her studies. She observed a senior boys’ high school volleyball team, interviewed the head coach and two players, as well as conducted several group interviews with the players. Her findings are very detailed; however, they are only one team’s experience of athlete-centred coaching. The remaining work of Kidman is based on interviews with elite, head coaches from a variety of sports. Although her work on athlete-centred coaching has provided valuable knowledge, future research should extend the work of Kidman.

Similar to Kidman, other scholars have advocated that athlete-centred coaching fosters performance excellence. Lyle (2002) suggests that an athlete-centered coaching philosophy is good for performance coaches because it increases effectiveness, athlete satisfaction, and the performance of coaches and players. Not employing an athlete-centered coaching philosophy has the potential to break down coach-player relationships that may influence effort, interest, and motivation, all of which relate to overall performance (Lyle, 2002). Martens (2004) is also in favour of such a coaching approach. He identifies three elements of success for coaches: they
need to be knowledgeable, motivated and empathic. An empathic coach understands his or her athletes, which helps gain their respect and create a partnership relationship – an important aspect of athlete-centered coaching.

Miller and Kerr (2002) take the discussion one step further. They suggest that not only does athlete-centred coaching foster performance excellence, but that personal excellence facilitates performance excellence. Therefore, athlete-centred coaching is proposed to reconcile the popular belief that performance excellence can only be achieved at the expense of an athlete’s personal well-being (Miller & Kerr, 2002). In theory, some professional and performance level coaches may not only be compromising their athletes’ personal well-being but also their athletes’ and/or teams’ performance by not using an athlete-centred approach.

Moreover, athlete-centred coaching has been proposed in response to the occurrence of athlete maltreatment and, specifically, the frequent emotional abuse from coaches. Athlete-centred coaching is believed to counteract the occurrences of athlete maltreatment in sport and assist athletes in attaining positive developmental outcomes. Kerr and Stirling (2008) recommend “that an athlete-centred philosophy is perhaps the best way to address the protection of children in sport” (p. 315). In particular, the increased focus on the holistic development of the athlete may diminish the “win-at-all-cost” approach which has been associated with occurrences of athlete maltreatment.

Lastly, Kidman and Lombardo (2010) suggest further benefits of athlete-centred coaching. They contend that a coach with an athlete-centred approach would take advantage of coachable moments and/or organize the sporting experience to maximize the occurrence of such events to develop life skills. Athlete-centred coaches acknowledge the kind of influence they have and expand their role to increase both athletic performance and life skills. Nonetheless,
although athlete-centred coaching has many alleged benefits, as well as it being the proposed approach to counteract the occurrences of athlete maltreatment and increase the development of life skills in athletes, there are still many barriers to the implementation of athlete-centred coaching; the next section will examine these barriers.

**Barriers to Implementing an Athlete-Centred Approach**

**The Professional Sports Model.** There is resistance to the use of athlete-centred coaching at the professional and performance level (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). It is known that the holistic development of the athlete will not be as much of a concern for professionals, as their primary concerns revolve around winning games, making money, and being champions (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). In addition, there is the popular belief that performance excellence comes at the expense of an athlete’s personal well-being (Miller & Kerr, 2002).

Apart from the resistance of athlete-centred coaching at the performance and professional levels, the professional sports model to ‘win-at-all-costs’ influences youth sport. McCallister and colleagues (2000) concluded from their research on youth sport coaches that coaches’ philosophies can be heavily affected by the professional sports model. In particular, they reported that coaches generally had good intentions in terms of providing a quality experience for their athletes; however, they often struggled to articulate the methods they used to achieve these outcomes. Consequently, McCallister and colleagues (2000) suggest that the influence from the professional sports model is difficult to escape and could explain the inconsistencies between coaches’ stated intentions and their behaviours. For example, a coach of a developmental team might articulate that he/she wants to develop his/her athletes’ life skills and that there is more to life than sport; however, when it comes time to actually coach, he/she may
not make reference to life skills and instead may strictly focus on improving his/her team’s abilities and chances to win. It may be difficult for coaches to break this pattern because the most prominent sport model is the professional one in which the primary concerns are performance based. Thus, it may be concluded that the professional sports model may serve as a barrier to implementing the athlete-centred approach, which subsequently trickles down to youth sport.

**Coaches’ Past Experiences.** Coaches’ past experiences can limit a coach’s ability to apply an athlete-centred approach. McCallister and colleagues (2000) claimed that a coach’s experiences in sport as an athlete will likely influence his or her coaching philosophy. This could work against an athlete-centred approach for those coaches who were previously coached with more autocratic styles. Hence, they may not have had the opportunity to learn athlete-centred coaching behaviours from their own playing experience. Likewise, if coaches are not introduced to the athlete-centred approach through other avenues that influence a coach’s philosophy (e.g., education programs, books, the internet and interaction with other coaches; Lyle, 1999), they may be missing the opportunity to learn and practice athlete-centred coaching. Overall, coaches who do not learn about athlete-centred coaching through their experiences may be restricted in their capacity to implement the approach.

**Team and Situation Specific Factors.** There are several team and situation specific barriers to implementing an athlete-centred approach. Wilcox and Trudel (1998) identified that the time of the season affects coaching tactics; for example, preseason is focused on development and playoffs are focused on winning. This means that playoff time is less amenable to the implementation of the athlete-centred approach compared to the beginning of the season.

The extent to which a coach is involved in an organization is also likely to be a powerful factor in determining his or her coaching behaviours (Stewart, 1993). The organization’s
expectations, implicit or explicit, can be formidable, especially if the coach is an employee of the organization. An organization that puts pressure on a coach to win can constrain that coach’s ability to employ an athlete-centred approach.

The expectations of the athletes and parents can influence a coach’s philosophy and/or whether the philosophy translates into behaviour (McCallister et al., 2000; Stewart, 1993). In short, the athletes and their parents’ values and beliefs will likely influence their coach’s values and beliefs. For example, when parents highly value winning, the coach will be more likely to value winning and behave accordingly to please the parents. In addition, athletes are often the most vocal critics of the athlete-centred approach (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). They are not accustomed to being asked to be a part of the decision-making process and, consequently, often resist the change. In summary, in addition to the professional sports model and past experiences of a coach, the time of the season, the organization, and the players and parents, can affect the implementation of an athlete-centred approach. The next section will assess the research that has examined coaches’ perceptions of athlete-centred coaching.

**Coaches’ Perceptions of Athlete-Centred Coaching**

The majority of research that has been done on athlete-centred coaching has examined it from coaches’ perspectives. Specifically, one recent study by Headley-Cooper (2010) investigated elite coaches’ perceptions of athlete-centred coaching. She found that the participants were exhibiting many aspects of athlete-centered coaching. Her research also found that “many coaches thought that athlete-centered meant that the athlete drives the decision-making process and direction of the program, rather than the athlete’s rights and developmental needs driving the program as suggested by the athlete-centered approach to sport” (p. 106). They
erroneously believed that athletes were the decision-makers in an athlete-centred model, rather than athletes and coaches making decisions collaboratively in a developmentally- and situationally-appropriate manner. Furthermore, the coaches did not emphasize that both performance and personal excellence can be pursued simultaneously. The notion that holistic development is necessary for performance success was also not emphasized. Finally, although the coaches identified the importance of holistic development of their athletes, they did not convey specific goals or strategies to holistically develop these athletes. The next section will examine coaching practices that have used an athlete-centred approach.

**Athlete-Centred Coaching in Practice**

Research has found the implementation of athlete-centred philosophies by numerous distinguished performance coaches. Top coaches from professional cricket and rugby leagues, as well as the Rugby Union in Australia, focused on teaching and improving their athletes as opposed to ‘win-at-all-costs’ attitudes (Bennie & O'Connor, 2010). The philosophies of these top coaches highlighted the total development of the person and the importance of strategic teaching methods, both important tenets of the athlete-centred approach. Further, ten expert coaches at the performance level emphasized the importance of thinking long term, having an authentic coaching environment, creating a learning environment, and stressing the quality and quantity of training sessions (Horton, Nash, & Sproule, 2011). These expert coaches also highlighted important tenets of the athlete-centred approach, particularly the importance of teaching and creating a quality team culture. Lastly, the late and famous John Wooden is recognized for his unique style of coaching that led UCLA to a record of ten NCAA basketball championships in twelve years. His approach to coaching had many similarities to the athlete-centred approach.
Some of the resemblances taken from Nater and Gillimore’s (2010) book on Wooden’s teaching principles and practices include: (1) Wooden’s focus on the holistic development of his players; (2) his aim to create a quality team environment such as defining success as “the peace of mind which is a direct result of the self-satisfaction in knowing that you have made the effort to become the best of which you are capable” (p. 25); and (3) his goal for his players to be “creative, confident problem-solvers” (p. 89). These examples of professional and performance coaches implementing athlete-centred tactics gives hope that more coaches may do the same in the future.

**Literature Review Summary**

Athlete-centred coaching is proposed to reconcile the ideals of sporting excellence, such that personal excellence may facilitate performance excellence (Miller & Kerr, 2002). In addition, athlete-centred coaching is suggested to decrease the occurrences of athlete maltreatment (Kerr & Stirling, 2008) and increase the development of life skills in athletes (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). SDT, the theoretical framework of the athlete-centred approach, has consistently demonstrated that autonomous motivation is related to greater psychological health, increased persistence, and more effective performance on experiential types of activities. However, there is a lack of empirical research to support the proposed benefits of athlete-centred coaching. In addition, the majority of research on athlete-centred coaching has focused on the coaches’ perspective. Only one study, by Kidman and Lombardo (2010), has examined athlete-centred coaching from the athletes’ perspective. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to empirically examine recently retired elite athletes’ perspectives on their most athlete-centred coach.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Participants

Recently retired Olympians who had experienced athlete-centred coaching, were asked to participate in this study. The athletes were required to be at least four months into retirement and no longer than four years into retirement. The athletes interviewed competed in different sports to provide a variety of coaches and types of sports. To determine if the participants had athlete-centred coaching, a preamble was given at the start of the interview (see interview guide: appendix C) describing some of the behaviours associated with the basic tenets of holistic development, partnership relationship, optimal teaching, quality team culture, and utilize resources. The rationale for the selection of participants in this study is discussed in the next section.

Rationale for Participant Inclusion

The lack of empirical research on athlete-centred coaching and the under representation of athletes’ perspectives on athlete-centred coaching informed the inclusion criteria of the participants for this study. The majority of the studies on athlete-centred coaching have taken an approach based solely on the coaches’ perspective. Only one study by Kidman and Lombardo (2010) examined male senior basketball players’ perspectives of athlete-centred coaching. Therefore, investigating athlete-centred coaching from the athletes’ perspective was chosen for this study to provide a wider range of perspectives on the approach. Recently retired athletes were asked to participate because as retired athletes they have had the opportunity to reflect on their entire sporting experience.
Athletes from both team and individual sports were included. It is recognized that the coach-athlete relationship likely differs from team to individual sports. However, both are of interest and including both provided more opportunities to recruit participants. Similarly, both female and male athletes are included. Although there may be differences within the coach-athlete dynamic based upon gender, both were of interest and this approach enhanced the pool of potential participants.

Lastly, this study used semi-structured interviews, which are discussed in the next section. A sample size of eight participants was chosen as an appropriate sample size for semi-structured interviews to reach saturation.

Procedures

Recruitment

Purposive sampling was used to recruit recently retired elite athletes who have had athlete-centred coaching. The experience of athlete-centred coaching at the elite level can only be shared by a select number of individuals; therefore, a purposive method of sampling is required to capture this specific sample (Streuber, Speziale, & Carpenter, 2007). This method also allowed for a maximum variation in the sample (Higginbottom, 2004).

Variety in sports and athletes with different coaches were attained through multiple recruitment avenues. As an elite athlete myself, I used my connections to elite athletes. My supervisor also used her connections to elite athletes and specifically her ability to contact international Canadian athletes. Once potential participants’ names and contact information were gathered, they were contacted through email, sent the letter of information (Appendix A) and informed consent (Appendix B) explaining the study, and asked if they were willing to
participate. The letter of information and informed consent provided the purpose of the study, what is involved in participating, an explanation of voluntary participation and confidentiality, comments about benefits and risks of participating, and the researcher and supervisor’s contact details. Once athletes confirmed that they would like to participate, a phone, Skype, or in-person interview was arranged with the researcher at a convenient time and location for in-person interviews. Before beginning the interview, the participants were asked to sign two copies of the consent form, one for themselves and one for the researchers. The participants also kept a copy of the information letter. By signing the consent form, the participants were confirming that they had read and understood the letter of information and consent form, and that they consented to participating in the study.

**Interviews**

The lack of research on athlete-centred coaching necessitated this research to be exploratory in nature. Since interviews are a common method of data collection for qualitative inquiry in sport and exercise psychology research, semi-structured interviews were used (Côté, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993). Through the interviews, rich detail on elite athletes’ perceptions of their athlete-centred coaches’ various behaviours was obtained. Three of the interviews were conducted in person, two via Skype, and three over the phone. All of the interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of the participants and ranged from 90 minutes to 120 minutes in length. The interview guide (Appendix C) was based on the literature on athlete-centred coaching as well as the findings from the pilot study. The interview guide was broken down into four sections: development of life outside of sport, development of life skills, development of confidence, and development of athletic skills and increasing motivation. Each
section included numerous questions regarding specific behaviours. Open-ended probing questions were also used to gather more detailed data, which are also available within the interview guide.

Data Analysis

General data analysis occurred simultaneously during data collection. This concurrent process helped shape the direction of the research throughout the interviewing process. Once all of the data was recorded and transcribed verbatim, it was then reviewed numerous times before analyzing for final themes, categories or patterns. Coding was used as a means of generating concepts from and with the collected data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (2001) explained coding as the process of reading and rereading a portion of data, where labels are usually created in the margins to identify specific themes and categories.

Themes and categories of the experiences of recently retired elite athletes who had experienced athlete-centred coaching were identified both inductively and deductively. Starting with an inductive approach, themes and categories were allowed to emerge from the data in order to understand the lived experiences of the participants. Creswell (2007) identifies inductive data analysis as including “the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem” (p. 37).

Following the inductive analysis was a deductive analysis. The deductive analysis consisted of comparing the themes and categories that emerged between participants, as well as constructing new and exploring previous frameworks and theories. Strauss (1987) highlighted that a key component when coding is to provide “provisional answers about the relationships among and within the data” (p. 31).
Contextual Analysis

It is important to note that my bias towards athlete-centred coaching provided a challenge for both collecting and interpreting the data. The concepts of constructivism assume that knowledge is built from an individual’s processing of certain stimuli in the environment (Bruner, 1990). Hence, the reports from the participants in the current study could have been influenced by my presence and bias towards athlete-centred coaching. However, the data collected in the present study is based on the participants’ recollection of behaviours, not on their subjective interpretations of their coach’s behaviours. For example, I did not ask participants what athlete-centred coaching behaviours their coaches used, leaving the interpretation of what is and is not an athlete-centred coaching behaviour up to them. Instead, I attempted to gather all the behaviours they experienced with that coach, both positive and negative, and specific examples of those behaviours. Identifying behaviours that were athlete-centred was not a part of the interview process. The interviews were intended to gather a complete view of each participant’s most athlete-centred coach.

Similarly, during the data collection, it was helpful that I did not intentionally explore the participants’ opinions on how certain behaviours affected them. I avoided leading questions such as “do you think this was a good coaching tactic?” Instead, I stuck with questions that examined what their coaches did, followed by questions for specific examples or stories of those behaviours. Certainly the participants’ opinions came through on certain behaviours, but these were rather irrelevant to the current study as the focus was on the behaviours identified through the participants’ voices rather than their opinions on these behaviours.
The data analysis proved challenging in regards to controlling the influence of my bias in favour of athlete-centred coaching. With the help of my supervisor, we were able to analyze the data with a critical lens. Instead of focusing on the positives of athlete-centred coaching only, we identified all of the behaviours the participants reported; some of the athlete-centred coaching behaviours were experienced by all of the participants while other behaviours were only experienced by some participants. In conclusion, I made a conscious effort throughout the data collection and analysis to subdue any effects that my bias towards athlete-centred coaching may have had.

**Ethical Considerations**

**Risks and Benefits**

Participation in this study involved minimal risk to the participants as reflections on past athletic experiences could have aroused some distress in the participants. It was unlikely that all of the participants’ past experiences would be positive. Therefore, recalling negative experiences could have provoked feelings of discomfort and sorrow in the athletes. However, this did not occur with any of the participants.

On the other hand, the opportunity for the participants to reflect and critically review their sporting experiences could have resulted in the participants having a deeper understanding of their sporting experiences. Several of the participants did report that the interview was therapeutic to some extent. Further, the participation of recently retired elite athletes has the potential to benefit coaching in sports. The outcomes have given researchers a better understanding of athlete-centred coaching behaviours. Therefore, the findings could lead to improved coach education programs.
**Informed Consent**

Participants were properly informed prior to being interviewed via the letter of information and informed consent explaining the study. The letter of information and informed consent provided the purpose of the study, what was involved in participating, an explanation of voluntary participation and confidentiality, comments about benefits and risks of participating, and the researcher’s and supervisor’s contact details. The letter of information and informed consent form also advised that the participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty. The participants signed the consent form to confirm that they had read and understood the letter of information and informed consent. The participant received a copy of the letter of information and informed consent. This indicated that the participant had been properly informed and voluntarily consented to participate in the study.

**Confidentiality**

Also outlined in the letter of information and informed consent was the assurance of participant confidentiality. The participants’ identities were protected by eliminating personal identifiers during the transcription of the interviews and replacing participants’ names with pseudonyms. In addition, all other information that might identify participants was kept confidential and/or modified. The small number of athletes in any given pool (e.g., male members of 2008 Canadian Olympic 400 meter hurdles) might have made participants recognizable. Thus, the type of sport participants competed in may have been changed to preserve their anonymity.
Treatment of Data

Data were kept in a secure server environment. It was only accessed securely through virtual private network or encrypted remote desktop. The records will be retained only as long as required to accomplish research purposes and satisfy legal and policy retention requirements. All personally identifiable or confidential data will be securely destroyed at the end of the retention periods.

Pilot Study

Prior to interviewing the participants, a pilot study involving three interviews was completed. The primary reason for this pilot study was to improve the researcher’s interviewing skills through practice. In addition, the pilot study provided preliminary results that were used to help narrow the focus of the interview guide and probing questions for the thesis research. In fact, the results of the pilot study transformed the interview guide from a life history approach into a semi-structured interview. The results of the pilot study alluded to specific behaviours which were more conveniently targeted through a semi-structured interview. The life history approach was very useful, but the length of the approach was a limitation and a lot of the data from the life history interviews were not focused on specific coaching behaviours; hence, the change to semi-structured interviews. Lastly, a pilot interview was also conducted with the semi-structured interview guide before starting the actual study.

Methods Summary

In summary, this study included eight recently retired elite athletes who had experienced athlete-centred coaching. Semi-structured interviews were used and provided an in-depth view of
the participants’ experiences with an athlete-centred coach. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed inductively and deductively. The study met all ethical standards by properly informing the participants, keeping their identities confidential, and handling the data with the required standard of care. Lastly, a pilot study was conducted to better prepare the researcher and provide preliminary results that were used to help narrow the focus and probing questions for the thesis research.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This chapter is comprised of six sections; the first describes the study’s participants and the next five disclose the findings of this study through the five basic tenets of athlete-centred coaching.

Study Participants

Eight recently retired Olympians participated in this study. The participants competed in eight different sports; four are considered individual sports and four team sports. Demographic information about the participants is included in the table below (pseudonyms have been used and the sport may have been changed to keep the participants’ identities anonymous).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Time Retired</th>
<th>National team</th>
<th>Olympics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Aerial Skiing</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Sailing</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>5 months</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Wheelchair B.ball</td>
<td>5 months</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Hockey</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>19 years</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Rowing</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>15 years</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Trampoline</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>6 years</td>
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Together, five of the eight participants earned 5 gold, 2 silver, and 1 bronze Olympic medals; 11 gold, 2 silver, and 4 bronze world championships medals; and 25 gold, 12 silver, and 11 bronze world cup finishes. The other three participants did not medal at these events but did medal at other smaller events.

The participants’ most athlete-centred coaches coached the participants for 6.7 years on average, ranging from 2 to 15 years. One was a club team coach, one was a university coach, two were university and national team coaches, and the rest were national team coaches. Four of the coaches have had athletes achieve Olympic medals and three of those are some of the most decorated Canadian coaches. Two coaches have numerous university coaching records.
In the next section I will describe the findings from this study as they pertain to the first tenet of athlete-centred coaching.

**Holistic Development**

All the participants reflected on ways, positive and negative, in which their coaches developed them holistically and demonstrated genuine care about them as people. The coaches did this by promoting a balanced life and a successful attitude; and developing leadership qualities, creativity and structure, the ability to manage pressure, and confidence. Each will be explained in turn.

**Promoted a Balanced Life**

The participants recalled ways in which their coaches promoted a balanced life. Jane stated that her coach was really keen on having balance and doing other things outside of her sport:

> I think he would have been concerned if any of his athletes strictly did trampoline. I think he was always really keen on having people doing other things... It was just more of a feel you got from him. The way he set up the training. The nature of how he set everything up. I think he was always proud of his athletes for doing other things, like being involved in other school activities, he would always ask about what we were doing... I just got the impression that he wanted us doing other things. I think he just felt like it was important for us to have some balance.

Jill recounted her coach’s use of story-telling to exemplify a balanced life:

> He used a lot of stories from his own life and personal experiences, and he would bring in a lot of examples of how life outside of sport was as important or as exciting or as big. So this is just one part of your life it is not everything and he would do that through story telling.

In some cases, coaches did not promote balance. Emily described:
We had one training camp at [her university] and we spent 40 days and 40 nights in a dorm… it would have been nice to plan something or do something different, an excursion or something around here, like going to [the city] for a day, something different for a day.

The above emphasises the importance of a balanced life while competing. The following addresses the different ways in which coaches emphasized life outside of sport.

**Promoted a Post-Sport Career and Financial Success.** The participants conveyed that their coaches reinforced that they can’t play their sport forever, stimulated them to think about post-sport careers, and helped co-ordinate opportunities in their areas of interest. They also reported that their coaches assisted their financial success by finding them jobs while in sport and even working with them on budgets. Jim recalled when his coach reinforced that he couldn’t play sport forever:

> He kind of told me how important it was to finish university before you go on, and that basketball won’t last forever, but at that time I thought I’d play basketball forever, but he was pretty adamant about it, like “you need a fall back plan, like it might be a bit of money and you can travel the world now, but you need a strategy or alternative goal in life that is going to help you make money when you are done playing ball.”

Similarly, Jill recalled how her coach stimulated her to think of about her post-sport career:

> He would ask questions about what I planned to do in the future… He wasn’t just focused on the medals and the performance. He would always just check in: “what do you see happening in the future? What are your plans? What do you want to do after?” He would constantly be referring to that.

Jill and Sam recounted how their coaches were helpful in setting up their post-sport careers:

> He knew that I was interested in speaking and being a mentor… so anytime [his wife] heard of something coming up or they needed a guest speaker, he would refer [his wife] to me… So he would connect me to outside organizations that were looking for speakers. (Jill)

> She helped us get into a coaching certification program… After I retired she helped me get into a high performance coaching program. She even got Hockey Canada to cover some of our fees, which she didn’t have to do. But she thought if we wanted to be involved she would help. She brought us in as assistant coaches at the Under 18 and Under 22 evaluation camps. (Sam)
The participants’ coaches also helped with their financial success as Jim recounted: “I still had to work to help pay for school. And he hooked me up with a job… So he was directly involved in helping me make money.” Sean reported a similar experience with his coach:

At the end of October we had finished our training camp, and I had no money, so he got me a job at the mountain resort where we were going to be doing our first training camp on snow, and he got me a job as a snow maker.

Similarly, Emily found her coach to be very helpful when she wanted to try going overseas to play after university and with her current business:

She is currently helping me run camps, we are talking about trying to do a camp together in the summer, she is always like “is there anything I can do to help?” and people are always asking her to do personal training but she has a lot on her plate, so she has given them my phone number.

Jim described that his coach helped some of his teammates make a budget: “I know of a few people who would struggle with their money situations and he would actually sit down and help make budgets for them.”

In summary, the participants recalled ways in which their coaches encouraged their athletes to think about and plan for post-sport careers. Some coaches helped co-ordinate career opportunities for their athletes. In addition, some of the coaches assisted the participants’ financial success by finding them jobs while in sport and helping them with financial planning.

**Promote Education and Continued Learning.** All of the participants recalled ways in which education and continued learning were promoted by their coaches. Coaches arranged study groups and tutors, emphasized the importance of education, recommended books, and showed interest in what their athletes were learning. Jim described his coach’s involvement once he started going to school: “every day he would ask how the courses were going. He actually started up a study group to make sure the athletes were properly prepared for courses.” He added
that “he wanted me to be successful, and secure my future by getting an education.” Sam described her coach’s influence:

With younger kids, she was very big on promoting education, so I do know that she ended up getting help for one of the young kids because she was missing so much school… she brought her in a tutor.

Similarly, Emily provided the following example:

The rookies in my first year had to keep a log on the grades that you would get, to monitor that first year during the transition… checking base with her throughout the semester making sure that you are getting your work done and going to classes.

Several coaches simply showed an interest in what their athletes were learning and future education. Jane explained:

He was always interested in what I was learning… he liked talking about academic stuff, so he wanted to probe me and see what I was learning and see how that related to what he knew. So that helped, and we kind of bonded actually.

Similarly, Ben recounted:

I was in high school at the time, the coach talked about “what are you going to do for school?” He talked about opportunities to get recruited and sail in the US and go to a nice US school like Stanford or Harvard, he said I should go and talked to me about taking my SATs.

Jill recalled how her coach promoted general learning and reading books: “He would suggest books too… Like this is a good book, this a good read, that has lots of lessons in here… So that facilitated the love of reading and learning.”

Conversely, although Sean’s coach was supportive of education, he was not supportive of it while Sean was still in sport. Sean explained:

He supported not going to school and focusing on the sport. Because he said school was going to be there when I retired from the sport. He was a huge supporter of me going back to school last year. He was supportive of education just not at that time.

**Promoted Family and Relationships.** The participants recalled that relationships with family, loved ones, or friends were promoted by their coaches. Coaches reportedly inquired
about and kept up-to-date on relationships, and emphasized their importance. For example, Jim elaborated on how his coach’s interest in his family started in the recruiting phase:

He asked about my personal life, how my parents were doing, about my brother and sister, they were involved in the sport as well. And that carried on even until I started going to school… always asking about family life and how things were going at home.

He then went on to describe the support his coach gave him regarding his relationship with a girlfriend:

In college I had a girlfriend, and she was to put it bluntly a little bit crazy and he was there for me. He was going on a road trip once and I was having some problems, so he picked me up and said “alright you are coming with me.” So we were gone for the next three or four days just to get me away from the situation.

Jill reported that her coach also inquired about her relationships:

There was a time when my mom had breast cancer, so he was always checking in with me to see how she was doing, how I was doing, sort of thing. So in times of family crisis he would make sure he was touching base so he knew where my head was sort of thing… Then other times along the way, we would just chat about life outside of rowing, what is happening, how is my dating life going, just casual, just making sure that things outside of the rowing world were in good balance.

Likewise, Sam’s coach inquired about her relationships:

She has always asked about them and was open about any kind and really didn’t judge. But she always asked, “how is [her husband]? How is he doing?” You know things like that but she never ever really went into any detail. She just always wanted to make sure we were okay, in a bit of a support role.

The participants also recalled that their coaches emphasized the importance of relationships. Jill’s coach did this through telling stories of his own family: “he was really a family oriented guy so we talked a lot about his family and family experiences and how important that was.” Likewise, Tom talked about his coach emphasizing the importance of family:

Family was important to him and the team. He always emphasized being good to your parents… like he would always say “call your mother on mother’s day and father on father’s day. Call your mothers and thank them, tell them how thankful you are for them
because you wouldn’t be where you are without them and their huge amounts of help.” And the other side of the family thing, you have to treat everyone on this swim team the way you would treat your own blood family.

On the other hand, Sean experienced a situation in which his coach did not support his relationship with his girlfriend of the time. He recalled his coach saying: “dude, you are fucking up here… a girl at this stage with the work you are trying to put in; it is a wrench in the plan. You don’t have any time to waste.” This was added strain; he elaborated: “that was always in the back of my mind when, I could have been or should have been relaxing.”

**Promoted a Successful Attitude**

The participants all described various ways in which their coaches promoted successful attitudes. The first of these was creating an attitude of ‘being the best you can be’; including a daily ‘striving to improve’ approach. Similarly, the participants elaborated on their coaches being sticklers for detail and hard work. Each will be discussed in turn.

**Be the Best and Keep Improving.** The participants recalled that their coaches promoted a drive to improve and be the best they could be every day. Ben explained how this applied to all areas of his life:

It was “if you are going to go to university, don’t just go to some university, why aren’t you going to Stanford or Harvard. Why don’t you do the best that you can. It is that same mentality that you bring to other aspects of your life…” He would explain that “once you get into the work force you are going to be the best because no one else knows how to be the best at something.” It was an attitude he was instilling me that was very valuable.

He elaborated on his coach’s ‘be the best’ attitude:

Not letting mediocrity creep into your attitude, if you are going to do something then do it really well. If you are going to get parts for your boat, make sure they are perfect. Don’t let money or excuses or laziness get in the way of doing something really well… So he sort of passed on his knowledge and attitude to me, which was very useful in my campaign.
Similarly, Emily described how her coach pushed everybody to be the best that they could be. Adding: “in the end if you weren’t an athlete she would still want you to be a good person and achieve as much as you could achieve as a person.” She continued to describe the environment her coach created:

We had shirts made for us this summer and on the back of shirt it said “win the day,” and every day we talked about it. It was about getting back to the Olympics, qualifying for the Olympics. And winning the day meant every day you practice you try to do your best and each and every little step to make the best of that day and win that day, it was about focusing on the process, like putting in the effort every day to reach the bigger goal.

Jane felt her coach’s approach, in which the athletes were more in charge of the environment, was effective:

He created a gym where there was amazing energy and a couple amazing athletes, two had won Olympic medals, and together we all created this insane high synergy at his gym which fostered high performance… But it wasn’t like he had exceedingly high standards. It was more ‘oh if [teammate] can do it, then I can do it.’ We all just made high standards for ourselves, which is a really positive way of doing it I think… I think we were all responsible with creating an environment where everyone would succeed.

Jill described her coach fostering a ‘be the best you can be’ attitude by posting five words that represented how to live every day:

Every time you stepped in the boat house or training centre you committed to being those things, and they were all about being the best… Then also around the training centre we would put up pictures of athletes that have been successful… Just constantly reminding us that it is a high performance centre we have to be and live by the highest standards.

She went on to explain how her coach took it one step further by creating a display every time someone lived up to those standards:

We actually had paper on the wall; it was a collage of things that we would write. Somebody did something that was exemplary and was one of those five words, we would write it up there. So if someone just broke their previous personal best, write their name, date, what their record was so everyone saw it and it was constantly being added to. So by the end of the year there was a whole wall of fame of exemplary leaders and examples of being fast.
Jim described his coach’s outlook: “he would have nothing else but the highest standards for everyone, he hated excuses.” He also explained how his coach always stressed improving after every game:

After every game we would sit down and we would go around in a circle and each player would say one or two good things that happened for them in the game personally and as a team and one or two things they felt that we could have improved on, so that we are constantly evaluating ourselves and each other, which is good, because you might think you are doing something great or horrible but multiple perspectives is always good.

Sam said that her coach was always setting the bar higher:

We had beat the [opponent] in the formations and the pre-Olympic tournament and we thought we were up here and she was like “where do you guys think you are going? Hold on a second here. You can’t settle. How are we going to get better here? We need to set the bar higher.” She was always about that. “Okay we are here now how can we get better?”

Sean recalled his coach emphasized having “a little self-respect and pride in what you are doing and you will want to do it well.” He went on to explain how his coach set the highest of standards:

He logged everything that we did… He had all this information on us and he could graph our trends and see if we were improving or getting worse just with those numbers. He kind of demanded that standard… He had high standards on carrying yourself as a person as well. Like if you are going to do anything, you are going to do it to the best of your ability you are not just taking up space here.

Lastly, Tom also reported how his coach instilled a ‘be the best you can be’ attitude:

There was always this underlying goal of why he came to the pool each day, so you could swim faster and perform better than the previous season… He would hold up what the team had previously done… He would constantly be using them as examples, like “so and so swam this fast in this meet at this year… you should be able to do this well now.” He also used them as moral examples and how to act and behave, basically being a champion in and out of the pool.

Attention to Detail and Hard Work. The participants recalled their coaches stressing attention to detail and hard work. Emily expressed that her coach believed:
All those things that you need as an athlete you need as a person whether it is dedication, commitment, hard work, discipline; all those things that make you a good athlete also make you a good person. She was always the first to promote those things, and if they weren’t being promoted… she was always the first to nip it in the butt and call it out.

Similarly, Ben recalled that his coach stressed “working hard and paying attention to detail.” Jim explained his coach’s views on hard work this way:

Hard work was the answer to everything for him, you wanted to be a better free throw shooter and you were doing 500 free throws a day then he would be like “you are not shooting enough; go in there and shoot 1000.”

Sam recalled how her coach made her accountable to the details:

We had to submit log books that basically had everything we do every day, so like a diary and whether it be training, eating, on and off ice training, game situations, if we played in our club games, if we weren’t together with the national team. We had to submit what we do basically on and off the ice every day, it was time consuming. But we need to be accountable.

She added:

She would tell you straight out, if she thought “what are you thinking or doing, or cut the shit” if you took a stupid penalty. If you were late, oh my god, she didn’t like that, there would be consequences. She set the rules and if you didn’t follow them she let you have it.

Lastly, Sean explained that his coach taught him how to behave: “he taught me how to behave, how to set a goal and attain it. Like be very focused and determined to accomplish and be very detail oriented.” He elaborated on how his coach would push him physically:

He always over pushed; that was him and his character. And we respected him. It was intense times… when you are young you need someone to get the whip out and prove to yourself what you are capable of, because you don’t know, you don’t know how hard you can push until you push that hard.

**Promoted Respect and Gratitude**

The participants recalled their coaches stressing the importance of being grateful and respectful. For example, Tom explained:
He considered himself to be a father figure, he was trying to develop good swimmers but he also knew he had guys at transition phase in their lives so there was often times when we had a sports banquet where people were strung out too much, not exhibiting respectful behaviour, so he would get up to them and be like “this not how a young man acts, so cut it out.”

Emily recalled how her coach dealt with attitude problems:

If anybody in practice was showing that they were having an attitude that was not expected or being goofy or whatever she defiantly called them out… if that attitude were to stay during a water break, or timeout, or breakage in play, she would maybe quietly go over and say something to them. If it was something that had to be addressed to everybody like nobody can get away with this, it is not going to fly here, then she did.

She further spoke about her coach’s stance on being respectful:

It was always more about developing the person and qualities of that person, if you are a good person, and you push yourself to be a good person, you are honest, respectful and all those qualities that make you a good person, than it is going to be that much easier to achieve your dreams.

Sam expressed how her coach was big on an ‘attitude for gratitude’:

She always harped on being very respectful to everybody we come in contact with… pay attention to people that are speaking with you, she was our coach, so when she was coaching it was pay attention to everything, be on time for meetings, and the bus. She was really big on things like that; just being respectful and responsible. She made us aware all the time, say “please and thank you” all the time and no matter whom you come in contact with.

Development of Leadership

The participants communicated that their coaches developed leadership. One participant, Emily, claimed that her coach helped develop leadership abilities by giving the athletes leadership responsibilities. She stated:

My position is a huge leadership position, you are called upon to call the plays and orchestrate the team, like the quarterback… She made everybody feel responsible to bring a level of leadership to the team.
She went on to explain how her coach made five of the older players on the team a leadership group:

The team would meet, than the five of us would meet, and she kind of looked upon on us to teach the younger players the ropes, and expected a little bit more from us, in terms of showing the younger players what to do, brining competitiveness every time you step on the court, every drill.

Several participants thought that their coaches were good at encouraging leadership. Jill described how her coach dealt with her partner at the time, who was not a natural leader:

[My partner] is the leader in the race and that wasn’t natural for her. So she had to get used to it and I think he worked with her on that. Like “you may not think it is right and be hesitant to say something but just say it. Don’t be shy of just bossing me around.” I think he really worked with her on that. And I wasn’t in there on the individual meetings, but I know he really encouraged her to take the helm, and not to be afraid of saying anything.

Jim said his coach encouraged his teammates to lead in their own ways:

He would know who the vocal leader was, but he would also know who his leader was as far as getting guys to loosen up, whether it would be to pull a joke on someone, he would encourage them to do that. Like if he thought the guys were getting a little tight he would be like “hey you want to go tie this guy’s shoe laces together or whatever and it will be good for a laugh and get guys loosened up.”

Similarly, Tom recalled how his coach promoted everyone to lead in their own way: “He always tried to make sure that if someone didn’t talk a lot that they showed up on time every day, or worked hard, or you could be a vocal leader but not the best swimmer or performer, but just someone that can motivate with words.”

**Develop Creativity and Structure**

The participants spoke about their coaches promoting both creativity and structure. Emily recalled how her coach changed their offense to be more structured:

The last couple years we went to a more structured offense, but before that she let people be creative, basketball is a game of creativity and mistakes, and you are going to make
mistakes, but they decided in the last couple years that we should turn to structure, not letting players be so creative as you had to run through routes.

Ben described that his coach really encouraged him to be methodical: “If you want to think of your brain as left side and right side, the really methodical, physics and math oriented, he would have really promoted that side, which was an important skill.” He then explained how he later learned that creativity is also important:

But the creativity I learnt later which was also an important skill. Surfing of the waves is almost like an art form, which is also required to be good… My coach was very good at creating training camps where he would bring the world champion to Canada to train with us… that is when I started to see, you can’t just calculate your way to the top, you have to finesse, a whole other level of skill required.

Jane portrayed her coach as being a big supporter of creativity:

He is pretty open to creativity within sport. He was always open for people doing crazy things, harder routines, different things, and if you made up something that was awesome. He wasn’t really prescriptive like you have to do this. Not authoritarian. He was open, he was like an inventor, he was like desiring that, think outside the box, trying something harder and different. He pushed us to be creative in that sense.

Jim described how his coach revolutionized wheelchair basketball by looking for ways to innovate the game. Specifically in regards to making bigger players more dynamic:

When he started coaching, I was a big player; he was really encouraging for me to become a better ball handler so I could help bring the ball up the court faster. So he changed the way the thinking, the mentality of the sport where there was only small players the guards handling the ball. We had our big guys handling the ball and the little guys flying around out there and doing different things.

He later expanded on how his coach promoted creativity and developing new skills, particularly when tilting on to one wheel for a height advantage was first introduced to the sport:

Our coach was all about this… I became an expert at it and for jump balls you tilt up and rebounds and stuff. If you are getting guarded really closely you tilt up to get that high advantage because obviously we can’t jump for a jump ball so we had to get advantages other ways. So he definitely loved creativity.
Jim also recalled how his coach stimulated his players to be creative while implementing some structure:

He was good at giving us a scenario in practice or games, “okay there is 19 seconds left in the game and you are down by 3, what do you do?” And that is how we would come up with are plays… He was always good at letting us use our imagination as far as we were concerned with what we felt would work best and then helped us tweak it so we could maximize our potential in every situation.

Lastly, Sam described that her coach encouraged creativity: “the offensive zone was the playground and go have fun, be creative and stuff like that and do what you want to do.”

**Management of Pressure**

The participants reported ways in which their coaches behaved with respect to managing pressure. Jane described how her coach defused the pressure:

He just had so many good athletes and so much other stuff going on in his own life; he has a wife, a daughter, and a trampoline company, builds trampolines, a full business. So I felt a lifted pressure from that, like he wants me to do well but he really doesn’t care. Like if I screw up at the end of the day he is like whatever. He just wanted us to do our best. He didn’t care necessarily about us winning. It just defused the pressure a little bit.

Jill elaborated on how she never felt pressure from her coach:

I never felt pressured from him. If we did have a bad race, if we did something that was obvious, that he knew that we could have done better, he would tell us, but if we had executed a race perfectly, we had been training for it and it just didn’t go our way, he would never make us feel bad about it. It was always, “you know what, you did this, you executed it perfectly, and this is where we are today.” It was pressure to execute our perfect race plan that we were practicing. It was never pressure to win, it was just be your best, go out there and be the best you can today. So I never felt like “oh my god I can’t go back to the dock I will get in trouble” - never once.

Jim described an experience where his coach learned a lesson about dealing with pressure. In their first world championship the team made the semi-final game. The coach had never coached at that level in a semi-final game before. Consequently, he was nervous and reacted by changing his coaching demeanor:
He thought the team was a little too loose and wanted them to get focused and determined… I remember getting on to the court and he sat there staring at our players he was trying to put this sense of determination in us or whatever, but it didn’t work it kind of made us nervous or whatever… we played like we were scared, like we were scared to loss and we ended up losing it. Ever since, like in (year) we went on to win the gold medal. Every game he coached without that look, going back to talking to his team and going back to his old routine, calling guys over and telling them or give them pointers, more relaxed and calm. And I think that transferred into the players. All the players were relaxed and calm as well… His way of handling it hurt the team in the sense that he almost deflected that pressure onto us… I think through that lesson we gained more success because he learned how to deal with that pressure and then help us deal with that pressure a lot more.

Sam commented that her coach “more so alleviated pressure, just by her calmness. She would say ‘don’t worry, just keep doing what you are doing.’”

Conversely, Sean described his experience with his coach resulted in so much pressure that it became all-consuming and distracted his focus:

Everything was about winning; there was no talk of second. Second was first loser. We talked about that all or nothing, or win or nothing. And for sure, that was probably the worst part of it. There was so much pressure on that it was all consuming instead of just doing your job every day and let the results take care of themselves. If you do your job you are going to win, but when you focus more on the outcome than the process, that is if anything the one thing that got away from him and from us, we were so focused on the outcome we lost sight of how we were going to make it happen.

Similarly, Emily explained that her coach would get a little stressed out and that would transfer to the players:

Sometimes she can get a little bit high strung and stressed out, she would yell or she would call a timeout, come in and yell at us. It wouldn’t necessarily be the best productive time out. I think sometimes she could have done a better job at calming her nerves and her stress, and relaying the message to us that needs to be relayed… I think that sometimes her anxiety would get a little too much and she would make some of the other players that way too.

Ben described a situation where he felt his coach alleviated pressure at a regatta by increasing his confidence:

Something that he did to relieve stress was he went out earlier than any other coach and collected all of the data on the race course and had all of the data available for me on a
page so when I came to the race course I knew all the data and I felt more confident than any of the other sailors. I knew my coach had done more work than any of the other coaches that is where I felt that was good. Whether the data was useful or not, it was useful but it also added to your confidence, so it was double.

**Development of Confidence**

The participants described their coaches’ roles in developing their self-confidence. They recalled their coaches demonstrating belief in them, emphasizing their potential, providing opportunities to succeed, and reminding them of their accomplishments.

**Demonstrated Belief in the Athlete.** The participants reflected on the confidence they received from their coaches vocalizing their belief in them. Ben commented that his coach would say “you are going to win this.” Emily recalled that her coach expressed confidence in them all the time: “Everybody wanted [to go to the Olympics] so much, and she was always the first person to say ‘I believe in you guys, you guys can get there, you guys can do that.’” She added how her coach told the players they would succeed:

There were situations where I was set to take the last second shot… it was “get the ball down the court, this is the play we are running, hit the screen and then you are going to make this shot.” It was never “see if we will hit it.” If someone was at the free throw line, it was never “this is what is going to happen if we miss this shot, then this is going to happen;” it was always “after we hit this shot, this is what we are doing.” So you are not thinking about the negative, you are thinking “okay, we are going to hit this shot then this is what we are doing.”

Likewise, Jill recalled how her coach would express his belief in her team: “He definitely told us, ‘I believe that you can win this regatta. I believe that you have the strengths, and there is nobody out there that is doing this better right now…’ He wouldn’t sugar coat it either.” Jim described that his coach pulled him aside to help boost his confidence: “For me personally he definitely did that early on; he would pull me aside and talk to me about being a leader and that he believes in
my ability and these kind of things and I have witnessed it with other athletes as well.” He also recalled how his coach helped develop a young player’s confidence:

We were in a close game down by 3 points with 4 seconds left and we are drawing up a play because they took a time out and he looked to the young guy and said “you are going to shoot the 3 pointer, you are going to come back to here and the ball with come to you and you will shoot the 3 pointer.” He was always trying to instil that confidence.

Jill felt that their confidence increased when her coach would put her in the spot light for doing a skill really well:

If someone on the team was doing a skill really well, he would actually point that person out and have them demonstrate it for everyone, so if you were ever picked to be that person that was the example for others totally boosted your confidence. Like “okay, I didn't know I was doing that really, really well.”

Sam felt that her coach believed in her because she played her in certain situations:

She believed in me because she choose me on her team. Then she believed in me because she played me in certain situations and played me often against the other team’s top line… There are thousands of other players she could have chosen over me, so she believed in me to be on the team and believed that I could contribute in some way.

Sean described how his coach believed in him before he had proven himself:

Before I had even proven myself on any sort of national stage he saw something in me, and was willing to invest not only his time, energy, but a genuine want to try and help me reach my potential… he really took a lot of time that he didn’t have to at that stage, he had lots of other athletes that he should have been focusing on but he spent a ridiculous amount of time with me… we would do special training camps for 2-3 weeks at a time when the national team was off.

**Emphasized Potential.** The participants recalled that their coaches pointed out how much potential they had. Jane reported that her coach always made her feel like she could be even better: “He used to get really excited when you learned new skills. He would reiterate that with you and be like ‘if you did this and this now you can do this and that.’” Jill commented that her coach would perceive the opportunity for improvement when they were not perfect:

He loved when we weren’t perfect, it was always something like “oh you know, once we get this, that is 3 or 4 seconds,” so he would point, even though we are behind now, that
is good, those 3 seconds by fixing that, we will be ahead of that group. It was room for improvement. It was great because we will find speed.

Jim recalled that his coach talked about his potential right from day one:

He would talk to me about all the potential I had. And thought that I could help revolutionize the game as far as big men and how they play the game… he always talked about potential and how there is no limit once you reach that one goal… he can see so much more, say you just hit 100 shots in a row, he was like “what is going to happen when you hit a 1000 in a row? This is amazing.”

Provided Opportunity to Succeed. The participants reported that their coaches put them in situations to experience success. Jill described a situation where her coach put her in a race against heavy weight men at a provincial championship:

He had the utmost confidence in us that we could take on these heavy weigh men’s doubles. And so [teammate] and I were shocked and taking back by this tactic… [Coach] didn’t prep us for this, just threw us in… We won the race by open water. We were shocked… it was pretty cool; a cool way to surprise even us at how much we improved.

She also explained that her coach would put her team in situations to fail to build resilience for being behind; she added: “Initially it would demoralize you but later it built confidence that when you are down in a race you can always come back.” Similarly, Sean recalled that his coach held him back from the world cup because he didn’t want him to fail:

My first year on the national team I won the overall nor am tour and… I qualified to compete at the Canadian world cups the following season. And [coach] held me back, he was like “you are not ready, you are going to compete, and you are going to come 15th or 20th at fucking best, but that is not what we are after. I don’t want you to be on world cup and accept a good result at 15th or 20th. I want you to come on world cup and be like lights out from the get go. Come on the court guns blazing and never look back.”

Emphasized Past Successes. The participants recalled that their coaches would remind them of all the work they had done and previous successes. Tom explained how his coach would help restore his confidence after a bad performance by reminding him of the good things he had done in the past:
If you have a bad performance he was sometimes able to give a good encouraging speech. He never explicitly say that I believe in you but sometimes after a bad performance he would remind you of the good things you have done in the past and will pay up in the future and might not necessarily be showing up right now.

Jill recounted her experience the night before the Olympic final and how the log book she had helped calm her nerves and restore her confidence:

I went back to by journal and looked at all things I had done, all the practices that we had done, all of my personal best were written, I saw that I never missed a day of practice, all the work that was in the bank, all these motivational quotes, records that we had set, so I just said “oh my god the work is done, it is all in the bank,” it calmed me down and made me feel like the hard stuff is done, now it is just fun, we just go out there and race it is what we love to do… That gave us immense confidence, if there was ever doubt it erased that, we have trained as much if not more than anyone else, we could not have done anything else.

Likewise, Jim discussed how his coach communicated that they were prepared:

He was always there to remind us how hard we worked… if you worked the hardest and did the preparation you will be successful… You don’t have to be scared or intimated and you have to have confidence going into a situation because you know you worked your hardest to get there and that’s all you can do basically. You have watched your video, you have done your lifting, you’ve put countless, hundreds of hours into practice, so just let it go and have fun. So I think that was instilling confidence in knowing that he was right.

Lastly, Sean knew that he had put in more volume than anyone else and that gave him confidence:

More just confidence because I knew that the volume I was putting in was more than everyone else. So confidence in the program and the structure that he had set up for me. And that gave me that self-confidence because I could get through the work load and then just take a look at what my teammates were doing and feel good about that I was crushing what they were doing.

**Summary of Holistic Development**

In review, the participants reported that their coaches’ behaviours were mainly focused on performance development. However, these behaviours still fall under holistic development as it is assumed that performance and personal development are connected. Specifically, through
the development of athletic skills athletes develop holistically. This is why even though many of the behaviours reported are focused on performance development they are still categorized under holistic development. There is a growing body of research that suggests otherwise regarding the transferability of like skills and holistic development. The issues surrounding this topic will be further discussed in the discussion chapter.

In general, the findings regarding holistic development provided evidence that both did and did not support the athlete-centred literature. Specifically, the participants reported that their coaches were: generally good at promoting a balanced life, particularly, education and continued learning; great at promoting a successful attitude; generally good at managing pressure; and great at developing confidence. However, regarding a balanced life, Emily recalled an experience of too much basketball, two participants’ coaches did not promote a career post sport, and Sean described that his coach was against his relationship with his girlfriend at the time. Furthermore, the development of leadership was reported by the participants from team sports, but was not highlighted by the participants from individual sports, except for Tom. Creativity was promoted by the coaches at times for most participants, except two participants were never promoted to be creative. Lastly, regarding managing pressure, two participants reported that their coaches added pressure. The next section discusses the second tenet: creating a partnership relationship between the coach and athlete.

**Partnership Relationship**

All of the participants reported on their relationship with their coach. Making decisions together, providing independence, creating a relationship beyond sport, and communicating
openly and honestly with the athletes, were the different ways in which a partnership relationship was developed. Each will be discussed.

**Made Decisions Together**

The participants recalled that they made decisions together with their coach; doing so, in the participants’ eyes, developed the life skill of decision making and fostered a partnership relationship. Ben provided the following example:

He would sit down with me and build the training program. Like “what are you doing to do? How are you going to get good? Where are you going to train? Who are you going to train with?”… it was my program that I was directing and he was advising on it. It wasn’t the other way around… I am the guy in charge of my journey and I am asking for advice from my coaches.

Furthermore, Ben remembered how his coach would work together with him regarding the day to day training:

Day to day training, my coach would ask me “what is that you need to work? What kind of drills do you want to get done? What do you want to focus on?” And we would discuss that. Instead of this is what you are going to do today. When you get to a high enough level, you should know the best, they should be challenging you as the coach, but as an athlete you should know your weakness, and the coach should help set the program to help work on those weaknesses.

Jane had a similar experience and contrasted it with the performance enhancement people (supplementary support staff from Sport Canada):

He was always like “you are doing this sport, what do you want to do? How are we going to get you really good?” Whereas the performance enhancement people were really skewed in their perspective, we were their means to the end; we were the reason why they were going to get paid, or get an accolade, or why their contract was going to be extended. So they were really intense about all this stuff, the planning and monetary stuff, really strict. While [coach] was like “ah whatever, you are dedicating your life to do this, and I am dedicating my time to you so you can be good, so let’s work together to figure it out.” It was like how sport was supposed to be with [coach], because he is untainted with the bullshit.
She elaborated on how her independence helped keep her in sport for so long: “He helps athletes stay connected because they don’t push away. They don’t feel like they are suffocated or dictated.” Jill explained how her coach would be facilitative in planning their approach to races:

Rather than him giving us a race plan, we would talk it through. Go through what other countries are doing. Like “if the Dutch are doing this than what is your plan of attack? Why, or how are you going to counter that, what works best based on what is in your boat.” He would help facilitate, it was never a dictatorship like “this is what you are going to do,” it was always “you decide the best approach, here are the factors, here is who does what, here is the weather conditions, now how are you going to approach it?”

Sam recalled her experience of being included in the decision making process with her coach:

She did ask us who we considered leaders on the team and who would we see ourselves playing with and why. Wasn’t to say that if I choose ‘so and so’ that was going to happen. She wanted to know what we felt and who we thought we were compatible with on the ice… our opinion matter, and again it is she cared about what I think and she cares about how I feel.

Sam also thought that her coach “felt that we could have some say and control in like intensity and whether we needed a day off. She was really in tune with that.” Sean described how he worked together with his coach: “at the end of every training camp we would do a review and we would go over technical stuff and come up with the plan for next training camp.” He elaborated on how his coach did set the curriculum for the most part but he still had his say at times:

For the most part it was him setting the curriculum. It was his building blocks and he would basically get us to sign on the dotted line that we were committing to the plan. So if we didn’t think we could do something or I didn’t think I could attain that goal for the next camp… We had a list of attributes that we would go through and review at the end of camp… So that sort of stuff was always up for debate but the curriculum was set by him and then we would discuss the other kind of debateable stuff.

**Provided Independence**

The participants reported that their coaches provided them with some independence and consequently improved their relationships with their coaches. Jane recalled:
He always let his athletes do what they wanted. He doesn’t hold your hand. We would be at competitions and could do what we wanted. We were never babied or anything… He let us do what we wanted if we showed up at the gym, trained, worked hard and had fun. I think he defiantly helped us be independent people.

Jill thought that her experience of training for a full week without her coach was the best training camp ever:

He trusted us enough and believed in us enough that if he gave us a program that we could follow through. In that way it was definitely backed that we are independent, that I don’t need to hold your hand all the time, like here you go you are big girls and I trust that you will follow the program… And I feel like that gave us a lot of confidence in ourselves and our abilities to be independent.

Sean reported that his coach would set a program and then leave it to him to do it:

You could say that he set the program of what you should be doing. Then for the most part he left it up to me to get started. Then once I got going, he would step in and make sure I was on the right track with what I’m doing. But it was my sense of commitment and independence of his program and buying in, what helped him give him some faith and showed I was committed. I had to show that. And I had to learn that attribute earlier on.

Created a Relationship beyond Sport

Many of the participants commented on their relationship with their coach extending beyond sport. Their coaches became friends, mentors and father figures. Emily recalled:

She is someone I will always be in contact with. Like when her mom past away I went to her mom’s funeral. I mean asking about my family, what is going on in my life, if everybody in my life is okay, just caring, just caring about what is going on, we will talk on the phone for like an hour after we haven’t talked for a while.

She elaborated on how much of an influence her coach has really had in her life:

Her as a coach has been a huge influence on my life, and the person I am today, like been a part of my life since I was 10, so 23 years, she has been a big part of my life, she coached me throughout my national team career, done all these things with her… she shaped me into the kind of person I am today and I am happy I had the opportunity to go through those things with her.

Ben explained that his coach wanted to be more than a coach:
I remember he threw a party at his apartment in [city] for all the guys he was coaching. Which was fun and made you feel like he was more than just coaching you, he wanted to be a friend and hang out, and as a kid that was fun to be able to go to his place.

He added how his coach became a mentor after he stopped coaching:

He worked as a mentor after he stopped coaching…We stayed in touch, I mean I don’t talk to him that often now, I see him once every 2 years or something. When I was competing up until [year] we stayed in touch till he got too busy with family.

Jim explained that he is still in contact with his coach:

He is there, he is always a phone call away, he is a busy man; he’s got family stuff now too, he definitely shows that he cares and is always open for the worse case a chat on the phone… Just recently we talked about parenting skills.

Both Jim and Jane recalled that their coaches came to their weddings. Jim stated: “I know he has done multiple athletes’ weddings over the years.” Jane said: “I think he really cares a lot about his athletes. I think I always felt like I was more than an athlete to him.”

Sean described his coach as a father figure:

He did not only help organize a plan to help get me on the national team technically, he helped me find money, jobs, sponsorship, and went out of his way to personally pay and finance not from the teams budget but from his own pocket to loan me the money that is how much faith he had in me in the beginning… he was that involved in my development.

He later added:

He was one of the first guys I saw after [Olympics], he has still been around after he stopped coaching me, we didn’t spend a lot of time together, but he has always been a part of my life. We might chat or we might see each other at an event or here and there, he was always involved with the coaches that took over from him. He spoke with them, and he made sure they knew his history and my history, even though him and I weren’t tight afterward, he was always involve in my career and there at major events.

Jill described her coach as being both a friend and mentor:

I talked with him as a friend after sport. We got together and we were fighting for airtime to get in the most stories, it was good, it was like catching up with an old friend. He is a positive influence in my life, and he is a positive person, just his philosophies - I really learned a lot about sport and life balance. He was an amazing mentor and has had a positive effect on me and hopefully I’ll be able to do the same for somebody else.
Communicated Openly and Honestly

The participants described the open and honest communication with their coaches, which contributed to a positive partnership relationship. Jane recalled that her coach’s honesty contributed to her confidence in him: “he was always just really honest… I think you lose credibility if you are not honest with someone.”

Jim provided an example in which the coach attempts to address an athlete’s shortcomings honestly:

I’ve seen days where he has kind of stabbed at people like “there is no friggen way I’d ever put you out there in that situation” kind of thing and that is very demoralizing, but I give him credit, I know lot of times he has gone up and talked to the players afterwards and not necessarily apologizes but explain why he wouldn’t have them out there, but those are some of the tough ones to learn.

He recalled another example where his coach was able to communicate with him, laying the groundwork for him to continue to develop:

I pulled up and shot a 3 and he pulled me aside and said “you don’t do that anymore” and I was like “oh shit,” that wasn’t good. But then after the game he came up to me and said “I apologize, that shot you took it was a good shot but I just wanted us to work on offense a bit more like we are young team we just wanted to work the ball.” He was never discouraging like that he definitely encouraged me and I became one of our better 3 point shooters over the years and I think that really laid the groundwork for me.

Sam stated that she respected her coach for being honest:

I think that when it came to evaluation meeting I don’t think she did a great job, but at the same time she was just being honest and I respect that. I’d rather her do that then say “okay you are doing this great, this great, this great,” then come back and you are not going to make the team. She is very real.

She also experienced a situation where her coach was dishonest during a tournament:

She said “whoever shows up to play is going to find themselves playing in the gold medal game,” and I was third line for sure, and my line scored four of the teams goals… So we felt like okay we contributed we did everything she said and we still didn’t get rewarded,
we got the 3rd, 4th line role in the gold medal game. We did everything you asked, you are full of shit, we are still sitting on the bench kind of a little bit. So I remember that not being so cool… at the time I was pissed and my line mates were too, I know because I had to control them, they wanted to rip her head off.

Lastly, Tom reported how his coach was able to be rationale and communicate his reasoning when he would have to choose who to put on a four man relay race between the fourth and fifth fastest swimmers for that race:

The person, the 4th place person, if they are able to understand the reasoning behind [not being picked] it is okay. He explained the reason not in so many words, he would basically get the point across that you are a very consistent swimmer, but for this particular race, there is a risk that this person swims slower than you, but there is a chance he might swim faster, but whatever the situation, the swim meet, he might be faster, so as long as it makes sense.

Summary of Partnership Relationship

In summary, all of the participants recalled having a partnership relationship with their coach to some extent. The participants reported that their coaches generally were democratic, provided independence, created relationships beyond sport, and communicated openly and honestly. However, coaches such as Tom’s and Sean’s were more autocratic than democratic. Relationships beyond sport were not created for two of the participants. The next section will address the teaching techniques described by the participants.

Optimal Teaching

The participants spoke about the various ways in which their coaches taught them. In particular, some of the participants alluded to their coaches compartmentalizing skills, using stimulating questions, and providing freedom to learn (not over coaching). Each will be discussed.
**Compartmentalized Skills**

Several participants recalled that their coach would compartmentalize specific skills or teach skills using a progressive technique. Sam reported how her coach would start with a walk through when teaching systems: “Breaking down whether we are doing a d zone coverage and man on man with box behind. Moving slow at first and just kind of giving hypothetical examples.” Jim believed that his coach’s teaching techniques made him one of the best teachers out there:

He used the progression techniques in all areas, whether it is the tilting techniques or technical aspects of the game or mental aspects. You can’t just dive in and think everyone is going to be a sport psychologist themselves. And doing mental imagery and stuff like that. He was very good at the teaching part of it and I think it is how he uses progression. Like he breaks the game down, to start off with a one person game, you and the ball, you learn ball handling, and moving your wheel chair, then it is 1 on 1, you and another person, then 2 on 2, there is always that progression where he adds the next step to make it a little more challenging.

Jill explained how her coach would compartmentalize rowing and have them perfect each piece of the race:

The race is broken up into 500 m bits, so within those 2000 m, you always have a start, a body and the finish or peak, we would break that down and just work on starts. So you only do starts till the cows come home. Then how do you pace yourself in the middle, we did tons of pacing work and that was only to work on the middle. And then the finish, there is a sprint, going from that pacing speed to that sprint. So we would do a lot of progression work in those areas by breaking the racing down and doing a specific component and building on the start, building on the body, the finish, until we perfected them, we beat those three bits to death. But we start slow, like a 3 stroke start, 5 stroke start, 10 stroke start, 15 stroke start until okay we got our starts, progressions that way.

Jane described the importance of her coaching using progression as it linked to building her confidence to perform harder tricks on the trampoline:

Trampoline can be really scary with the tricks you have to do. And he was like the master at breaking skills down for progression! Build your confidence up before you try the next trick; he was amazing at that.
Stimulating Questions

The participants reported that their coaches asked them stimulating questions to help them learn and to make their own decisions. Sam described how her coach would stimulate the team, getting them to understand why they used certain systems in certain situations:

She would probably say “why would we use a 2 1 2 for check in this situation?”… She would do that, like “why would we do this? Why are we using a man on man down low defence or a box plus one?”

Jim reported that his coach used stimulating questions to help the players make better decisions within and outside of basketball:

He would also do that in real life: “When do you decide to not have another beer?” He was very good at that, using his knowledge and relating it to his players to help make better decisions… He asks the questions instead of telling you to go from point A to B, he asks you “what do you think right now is the best situation?” If you say go from point A to C, “what if you took the route of going to point B first?” Creating the stimulation that way; I think that was his teaching style.

Jim added: “at first he asked a lot of questions and then he slowly reduced that; until you are making those decisions really quickly.” He also explained that this approach stuck with him:

I kind of take that into everything I do as a person. Whatever a situation, I’ll always try and look at it from the other side, the other point of view and all different angles… I try and make it translate to a lot of the decisions I make in life in general.

As previously mentioned, Jill described how her coach would stimulate her when planning their approach to races:

Like “if the Dutch are doing this than what is your plan of attack? Why, or how are you going to counter that, what works best based on what is in your boat.” He would help facilitate, it was never a dictatorship like “this is what you are going to do,” it was always “you decide the best approach, here are the factors, here is who does what, here is the weather conditions, now how are you going to approach it?”
Provided Freedom to Learn

The participants recalled that their coaches would provide freedom for them to learn. Jim described a situation in which his coach learned from an instance of over coaching. The team was down by one with six seconds left in double overtime, and made a play to score, but the coach had called a timeout to set up a play. So the basket didn’t count, they got the ball back, didn’t score, and lost the game. Jim recalled:

Our coach felt he was trying to over coach, he wanted to control the situation, looking back on it, and he has never done it since. He told me after that he decided “at the end of the game I want you guys to be so prepared that it should be second nature what you guys should be doing, you don’t have the ball you go there, you do that, we don’t have to take a timeout we can just go with the flow.”

Jill explained that it was nice when her coach would just let them practice:

Instead of just sitting on our stern the whole practice, he would coach from the point. He would stick with us until he thought we got it and then leave us alone. Not seeing him again for another half an hour, and he would go check in on other crews. He didn’t feel it was necessary to be on our stern 24/7 and it was actually better not to be, like give us something, see that we are doing it correctly, then just let us practice. It was nice sometimes just to get off our stern.

Jane added:

I think he was pretty good at it, because my coach before that would be like yelling at me in the middle of routines with corrections and I couldn’t remember anything by the time I was finished the routine. And I just be like man, I’m 20 feet in the air and I’m trying to think what I’m doing and how am I supposed to remember all this stuff. So he was pretty good because he would break it down and give me one correction at a time or whatever, and let me solve it too.

Emily described how she experienced some over coaching with her athlete-centred coach:

We would go through another teams scouting report, especially at the more stressful tournaments, so our anxiety was already high. I think she wanted it so bad and so bad for us to win, to be a good team, beat our opponents, as an athlete you can only have so much about the other team in your head. You have what you need to do to focus on, so I think that sometimes going over scouting reports, it was sometimes, like a little bit too much.
Summary of Optimal Teaching

In summary, not all of the participants reported that their coaches were good at using optimal teaching techniques. From the participants’ point of views, the coaches were good at compartmentalizing skills. However, only three used stimulating questions and two provided examples of over coaching. In general, half of the coaches were more authoritarian in terms of developing athletic skills, providing significant evidence not supporting the athlete-centred coaching approach. The next section will discuss the participants’ perceptions of the team cultures their coaches created.

Quality Team Culture

The participants all referred to the kind of team cultures their coaches established. The cultures were generally perceived as promoting a process-oriented focus, fun and engaging practices, and team cohesion. Each will be discussed.

Promoted a Process-Oriented Focus

The participants reported that their coaches would not just focus on winning; they focused more on the process or what they needed to do in order to win. Ben described how his coach broke down his goals into smaller more meaningful goals:

This coach would definitely focus on my goals, and help me think about like “I want to win this regatta,” well that doesn’t mean anything, so he would break it down into smaller pieces. Like if you have a big goal, you really need to focus on these littler goals, and littler goals, and need to break it down… The job of a coach is to really help the athlete figure out the really tiny things the athlete needs to improve upon whether it is fitness, equipment or techniques, and help them work on all those mini goals.

Emily explained how her coach focused on improving their team’s turnovers and missed layups. Every practice they put two sets of numbers on the wall for those two tasks. One set might have
had ten numbers, so it would start at ten and count down, same idea for the other set, this number
changed every day. Each time they missed a layup a number would come off from the layup set,
and each time they turned the ball over a number would come off the other set. Then once there
was no numbers left they had to run. So if there was ten numbers on the layup set, once they had
missed ten layups, they ran. Emily stated:

I mean our goal was to limit our turnovers and stop missing layups, so that kind of
focused us to really focus on those things, cause every time we missed it I was Like damn
it another number is coming off the wall, and we only had 3 left, we could visually see it,
and it was always in the back on our mind.

Jill recalled how her coach set task-oriented goals:

We had a task list for the week like “we are going to work on catches this week, these are
the things to work on.” It might be the drill, like a drill we were going to do and work on,
could check that off, it could be something even like the boat needed to get worked on to
be fixed. Each thing needed to be set so that we wouldn’t miss it… He would call it a task
oriented approach, even when it came to racing he was like here are the tasks for the day,
we are going to do this and this and this. He never said you know we might have said
once and once only, that we are going to win an Olympic gold medal, that is the ultimate
goal, but “how are we going to do that?”

Jim described his coach’s goal setting process:

Usually the team goals, every athlete always says “to win,” but it is a pretty vague goal so
we would break down the process, and how we wanted to win. If we were as a team poor
free throw shooting, then we would set a standard like 70% for the season, and break
down further to individual goals, so if I needed to be a better free throw shooter I was
going to start doing a minimum of 200 free throws a day. And everyone would have
different standards and goals for themselves.

Sam mentioned how her coach emphasised the process over the outcomes: “she always said that
every time that we are playing was to give a gold medal performance, the outcomes are the
outcomes as long as we give a gold medal performance.” Sean recalled his experience setting
goals with his coach:

I would set a goal, “at that stage in my career early on I want to win the nor am tour.” so
he would help me, so we figure out what jumps I needed to and what technical
proficiency I needed to be at and work backwards from there. But that was all very
obvious stuff, we didn’t need to sit down and talk about it for long over stuff like that. It was more just staying on task, put the blinders on and do your work day in and day out. That was the real goal setting.

Fun and Engaging Practices

The participants recalled that their practices were fun and engaging. Ben reported:

We would do boring drills, and we would also get to do fun stuff where we would be doing sailing, fun races, or point games and keeping score at practice, and competing and doing drills that are exciting. Good coaches, him included, always had lots of different types of drills while on the water, as well as had a good balance off the water, keeping it fun and relaxed not super up tight.

Emily explained several ways her coach kept things fun: “during practices something funny would happen and we would all have a good laugh than it was back down to business.” They had competitions for prizes and a game that was geared for children:

It was this shoe game, she would take off her shoe and put it on centred court and half the team would line about 10 feet on one side, and the other on the other side, and you have to try and knock this shoe past the other team’s line so you are throwing balls at this shoe. Like a 30 year old women acting like 10 year olds.

Jane recalled how her practices were always really fun:

It was always really fun, mostly because of the environment he created; we were all really good friends. And he would be like “if you want to blast whatever music you want you are allowed to I don’t care, just have fun, make this a great environment.” When we didn’t have competition we would try and do new tricks and he was really open to letting us do whatever we wanted.

Jill explained that “we would have a special fun day. We would come in and do the most famous tricks that you could do in your boat…. or we would have just stupid competitions that weren’t promoting good technique to rowing skills but just be a fun kind of day.” She also remembered a situation in which her coach helped lighten the mood during an intense workout. Her coach had his 13 year old daughter on the boat that day and after whispering something into the coach’s ear he gave his daughter the microphone so she could relay the message to the athletes:
She said to us “don’t listen to him, do whatever you want and have fun!” So that cracked us up and kind of lightened the mood… Even though it is push, push, push, he realizes when there needs to be a moment of laughter or whatever.

Jim described how his coach believed that the game of basketball should be fun:

It is one thing I learned early on and I think it is because of him, is that when you are having fun or when the guys are talking and having a good time, and even joking around at some points, you tend to be a lot more successful then when everyone is uptight bitching and screaming at each other, so I thought he did a pretty good job at getting that done.

He described how he accomplished this by having players play a practical joke on each other at times. However, he also explained how in some instances of inter-team competition led to fighting instead of fun:

For a lot of the times when [coach] tried to have fun with competition I think we had too many really competitive people on our team and it almost took the fun out of it because guys would get bitchy about it and people hated losing. I think it led to a lot more fights then I think it did enjoyment. As much as he tried to promote the fun in it, it always led to someone getting really pissed off and disagreements.

Sean described his experience as always being fun:

We played games all the time, when it was time to relax we did a good job of just shutting it down and trying to relax and just playing sport and just doing other things… We would gamble a lot; play horse for money. Like for a kid without any money to lose 50 bucks playing basketball was a big deal or playing golf or whatever it was; that might as well been a million dollars. It was so good! We would go for a race, a 5 k run, and we handicapped our times… it was balance because we were having fun but it was also productive towards becoming good athletes.

Tom recalled how his coach built fun activities into the weeks:

He was a believer that you need to have a light practice, and be at the pool to have fun and just work, play games… pool games, like sharks and minnows, water polo, cannon ball contests, stuff like that… It was the competition that made it fun, it was the novelty of being at the pool and not having to work really hard that made it fun.

Conversely, Tom explained that there were times that he didn’t want to be there:

In my last year he wasn’t particular nice with me, so that didn’t make me super excited to go to practice… Just like stupid remarks, being grumpy around me, being short, in general being less friendly and smiley… it did affect my enjoyment level.
In terms of making practices being more engaging, Emily reported how she would signal to her coach to change up drills if they went on too long. Jill explained how her coach was good at switching things up to keep practices engaging:

Sometimes he might take us out of our own boat and put us in with the heavy weight women. So that we would get a feel for “oh that is what leg drive is, that is a lot more power than what I am use to feeling” so if ever I think he noticed that motivation was waning or we were just bored he would find a way to stimulate us in a new which often meant playing with the heavy weights… One time he handed us over to a South African coach. So it was cool that we got exposure to other experts in the field, and it was neat for us to get a break from him, get new perspectives and new ideas.

Sam explained how her coach also kept things fun and exciting:

By playing different games and doing different things… I was always excited about different things that we were doing, like if we were going somewhere to visit something or our exhibition trips we went shopping in Europe and it was trendy. We just went to different places and got to see different things while we were training. She brought in, I remember, she brought in like Bare Naked Ladies, and Blue Rodeo, and Gord Downie, for jokes, they just played on the ice with us. Like just had some fun things, or she would be like players can play nets if it was a quiet time. I just had the best times ever.

She elaborated on how her coach also kept the practices different: “the practices and our workouts weren’t always the same, they changed them up, we did different things. They were all pretty enjoyable and kept you wanting to be out there.”

**Team Cohesion**

The participants reported how their coaches promoted teamwork, developed a caring environment, and showed that everyone mattered.

**Promoted Teamwork.** The participants recalled their coaches promoting teamwork to help them improve as athletes and perform better as teams. Ben described how his coach emphasized that having good teammates to push you is necessary to improve:
He was very good at explaining national team work and international teamwork… As a Canadian sailor you need to work with other countries to get to the top. We went to [country] and all over the world to train with partners from other countries. And just the way sailing is you are always tuning up against other people. If you are around the best you will become the best. He was very good at doing that.

Jane recalled how her coach created an inspiring environment:

He was really good at fostering a great environment at the gym. He always wanted a big group of people there, a good energy, people doing hard tricks to inspire other people. He always wanted everyone to cheer everyone else on.

Jill explained how her coach helped keep her partnerships conducive to optimal performance:

He would check in to see if anything needed to be discussed or taken care of just to see how things were going as far as crew dynamics were concerned… [For one partner] it was more focusing on the practices and not our personalities, not trying to make us best friends but trying to make sure we were very professional and kept it at that… with her it was just about keeping it at a professional level… My other partner, she really needed it to be more of a friendship and we got along great, so he would tell us to take the truck and go to [city] and do a pottery class or something together… Both worked out and I was successful in both partnerships.

Similar to Jill, Sam recalled that her coach did not think it was necessary to be best friends but still promoted teamwork:

I think again going back to our team building sessions, about how important it was to not expect us to be the best of friends but to not sure if this is her saying but “you want to look to your left and look to your right and know that they will go to war for you, whether you guys are going to be best friends is not, but you need to respect your teammates and you need to work together and bring out the best in each other.”

She elaborated that her coach utilized team building activities to promote teamwork:

We had to do team building stuff where we got put into groups and had to figure things out whether it is getting over a rope or something you know those activities where you have to work together to accomplish things.

Jim described how his coach also promoted teamwork through team building activities:

He got us all close together which is hard when we are in wheelchairs, but he got us one cup of water and we all to have a hand on it and go around the gym and not let it drop. All kinds of wacky team drills where you work together you can accomplish it… Some team building outside of basketball too, it wasn’t just on the court. Like in college once we went to a rope course, so we did all sorts of team building exercises.
He also mentioned that his coach would rally his team together to accomplish common goals:

When he just brought us all together against that common obstacle, I remember him using motivation factors like if the refs were having a bad game then it was us against them kind of thing. They are against us right now so we have to focus on what we have to do to overcome this.

Sean explained that even though he competed in an individual sport there was still a sense of teamwork:

All our training camps on snow, we had to build our own site ourselves. We had to work together as a team all the time. There was a sense of teamwork even though it was individual, like when it came down to competition, it was like for sure everyone wanted to beat each other. When it came to training we all worked at the same time and trained together. He kind of had to promote that as well just to get the work site prep done just so we could actually train.

Tom described how his coach was all about teamwork and helping each other improve:

Yes, he was all about teamwork, he was about encouraging; tied in with the leadership. You can help your teammate out by encouraging them, and you can help your teammate out by beating them in practice too. You can make them want to try harder. Help them out by showing good work ethic. Not only is that going to help your teammate out it is going to make you a better swimmer and hopefully they are doing the same thing. And that is going to make you a better swimmer also.

Emily recalled that her coach left the team building stuff to their sport psychologist:

Our sport psych came in she gave him that area, we did some team building stuff with him, like rope and you had to work together with your teammates, he divided us into two different groups, one showed that you are working together and the other not.

She added that her coach did a good job at keeping them connected throughout the year and focused together on their common goal:

Throughout the year since our team, like most girls play professionally, some play university, so we would have girls in Europe all different places, couple in Australia, I’m in Canada, some in the states, we are all in different parts of the world. So I think she sent out emails to everyone to keep us all connected to hold us together when we are in different areas of the world. Like she would give us progress reports or things we had to work on at end of summer for next summer... She would talk about “this is what is happening next summer, so get excited for it, this is what we can do, we can go to
Olympics, and we can go to a world championship.” And it was communicated through the year, even if we weren’t together that is what we are doing and we could do it.

**Developed a Caring Environment.** The participants reported caring environments while with their athlete-centred coaches. Emily recalled that everyone on her team cared about each other and how that motivated them:

> We spend so much time together that when you are with your team it is like your family. You look out for people; you look out for your teammates. In that regard it was motivation, you wanted to do it not just for yourself, but for other people too.

Jill discussed how her coach helped her small team get to know each other:

> He would ask us questions like “what is it that makes it fun? Why are you having fun?” Go around the table with 2 or 3 of us, and I would say something like “I have a lot of fun when we are doing this drill and more fun if we are doing that.” So it was like “okay let’s commit to keep doing those things that keep it fun,”… it was good because then we could hear from the other girls like “oh I didn’t know (teammate) thought that way. That is interesting.” That was a way to help us understand the girls too, by putting those kind of questions out there.

Similarly, Sam explained her experience getting to better understand her teammates:

> We did personality stuff. I learned to realize that everybody doesn’t see things the way I do and that everybody is so different. And that I need to kind of put myself in their position, and we did the personality traits and I was orange where some of my good friends were blue and oh she is more sensitive some people are risk takers… So I learned a lot about my teammates in those sessions and it related to on the ice I think…

On the other hand, Tom discussed his less positive experience with team bonding:

> We had team camping trips, team canoe trip; he tried to get us to go do things every week, like fun things during practice time that would promote bonding and stuff like that… I think some people really liked that. Especially if you are coming, your college education, 18-22 year old, you want to hang out with your buddies. I did, but I didn’t want to have hanging out with people forced on me. There were people on the swim team I really enjoyed and I still see today. And there were people I didn’t particularly care for and didn’t want to deal with them more than I had to.

He elaborated, going back to promoting teamwork, that teamwork was more important than being best friends:
And I didn’t think that his sort of idea behind the team bonding that the stronger bond between teammates would coax better performances out of yourself and out of others. So if it came down to the wire somewhere, you would be able to dig deeper because not only are you doing it for yourself you are doing it for teammates and your family kind of thing. In a sport like swimming I don’t really agree with that. I think that teammates help in practice. I think they help you get better, but I don’t think you need to be best friends with everyone.

**Showed that Everyone Matters.** The participants reported that their coaches’ generally made everyone feel like they mattered. In particular, the participants felt that their coaches were being fair and recognizing everyone as contributing. Emily explained how her coach may have given more leeway to some players but was not showing favouritism:

There was defiantly some older players with more experience, maybe more skill, had a little more leeway than someone else, I think that is fair I think that is the way with any team, your starters can miss a few more shots, or turn the ball over more because they are the ones that are going to be playing a few more minutes… Not favouritism, I think she involved more, it was the players that took more shots, and your leading score is going to take more shots than the leading assist person. So I don’t think there was ever favouritism, no.

Furthermore, Emily described how her coach was fair in developing and preparing her teammates, and made it clear that everyone had a role on the team:

If there was games that were leading up to qualifying, exhibition games everyone would get playing times, not necessarily equal, she wanted everybody to feel comfortable and everybody to prepare and be the best that they could be not just the key people that were going to be playing when the big game comes. When it was crunch time, qualifying game, game that makes or breaks us, it was who was playing well right now and key players that we need, but everybody always knew that everybody had a role on the team, whether it was you are playing 3 minutes or you are not playing at all or you are playing 40 minutes, everybody knew what their role was to some degree, and I think that is why we were successful.

Jill discussed how her coach made her team feel a part of the larger team:

He always saw us as being a part of a larger team too; even though we were the only light weight boat. He made sure we got to go against the heavy weight boats and were never segregated from the group. We would, if we were doing, time trials or things like this he would put us against heavy weights, even though they are bigger stronger faster, it was better for us. Even though we were a small team we were a part of the bigger teams and he would give us a head start.
Jim provided a great example of his coach making everyone on the team feel important. In a year that they won a gold medal the coach was only playing about seven players in the big games, but he had the bench players believing they were the reason they were having success. The bench players were vocal during the games, cheering and chanting songs:

[coach] realized early on that in order for our team to be successful, especially if one our subs had to come into the game, they had to be mentally and physically ready, now it is very hard to stay physically ready when you are sitting on a bench getting cold while everyone else is out there getting a good sweat going. So one of his things to keep them mentally ready was by keeping them involved in the game and one of the ways you could stay involved in the game was by continually talking to people and know what was going on in the game, then that suddenly turned into chants like “go Canada go,” or “defence! Defence!”… so when [coach] noticed when our bench was getting quite he would wheel down to our bench and be like “come on guys keep it up” and started coaching them on the side lines.

Sam discussed how her coach treated the team fairly but not equally. She described that some players got away with more than others. She provided an example:

A certain player was in the bench and was pissed maybe at the play and from time to time to anybody would be like “move the F’ing puck” you know which isn’t obviously that productive, and one time got a water bottle in a game situation and whipped it in the bench and hit the bench and team physio who was opening the gate… But because she was one of the top players it was kind of okay. So not favouritism but leniency, it wasn’t, there wasn’t discipline really for it. And I think that a lot of players believed that there should have been.

A more extreme example was given by Tom, who reported that his coach displayed fairly blatant favouritism:

Extremely bad effect if you happened to be someone he didn’t like. Because he would be non-stop doing anything to make your life miserable, like putting people off in lanes by themselves away from the team, doing other sets and practices, literally not talking to people for days. Those were the worst cases, and even if he didn’t like you, like you didn’t do anything particularly bad, he would just not be particularly friendly with you. But the guys he did like could get anything from him.
Summary of Quality Team Culture

In summary, the participants recalled that their coaches contributed to the team culture in either a positive or negative way. Specifically, all the coaches reportedly supported a process-oriented approach. The practices were reported to be fun and engaging for the most part; however, a couple instances did arise where this was not the case. Team cohesion was not achieved by all the coaches in the eyes of the participants; one coach reportedly had clear favourites within the team, while another allegedly displayed inequality – giving the star players more leniencies. The next section will discuss how well the coaches utilized their resources.

Utilized Resources

The participants reported that their coaches utilized various resources, from the standard help, to specialists, assistant coaches, and special tools, technology, and knowledge of their sport. Each will be discussed in turn.

Standard Help

All the participants alluded to their use of standard resources such as strength trainers, physio-therapists, equipment trainers, nutritionists, exercise scientists, and sport psychologists; particularly when they were on the national team. Their coaches often promoted and helped provide these resources. Jim gave an overview of the amount of resources that were provided when he was on the national team:

Team Canada over the years with their internal something team, we have a strength and conditioning coach, a sport psychologist, we got a tone of just assistant basketball coaches, a video guy who is strictly in charge of video, an exercise physiologist, they are doing all kind of testing trying to maximize shooting techniques and it all varies depending on your disabilities there are so many different variables in wheelchair
basketball and they are starting to use the science aspect of it a lot more to try and benefit the athlete. Nutritionists, you name it we have probably had it.

The participants reported how their coaches, when not on the national team, would attempt to provide these kinds of resources. For example, Tom described:

We always had a different dry land coach. They changed every year, depending on who our swimming coach thought was going to be the most helpful, we had weight coaches that were pure weight coaches, then technique and form guys, we had our coaches’ friend was a nutrition, and would give a little lecture about proper nutrition, nothing sustained.

Similarly, Ben discussed how his coach would help provide resources:

He introduced me to personal trainer, brought me to his gym with a fitness staff and they did fitness testing, on the fitness side... on the technical side showed me the equipment he used and how he rigged his boat all that stuff, so yeah he was very good at sharing all that information.

Specialists

The participants recalled instances where their coaches provided specialists. Ben explained the importance of having a specialized fitness trainer for one season:

The best fitness trainer I got was the year there was a hockey strike back in [year], so all the trainers who trained the hockey guys didn’t have a job. So they were like lets trained some Olympic guys. So I got connected with this trainer and he was the best I ever dealt with and that was amazing and that helped me a lot. That really showed me, got me the idea that access to the top is so important and so hard to get as an athlete, you can try, that was just a fluke, NHL is on strike so all of a sudden he had some time, those types of specialist are very valuable, getting a coach that has the connections to get you connected to those specialists is very, very valuable.

Likewise, Jill discussed that her coach prioritized finding the right people to help:

He made sure we had the right people to talk to. Finding the right people in life, if you have a problem you need to solve and the person in front of you can’t give you the answer than whom else can we go to? You are not always going to have all the answers in life, how do you resource? How do you find people that you are going to need to help you? ... He was a fan of bringing in other coaches… He liked it because every time we had a guest coach come in when he came in next time he would see that “oh they got it.”

Sam explained that her coach would get them the best people her coach could:
She would get us the best people I think that she felt that could help us. And it was good because she didn’t pretend that she was an expert at everything. She got us what we needed or the best people she thought that could help us… Like getting us the best power skating coach in to teach us those things.

Sean recalled that they used to work with acrobatic and trampoline coaches:

We actually worked with a lot of acrobatic coaches and trampoline coaches. So we branched out to different sports that have a bit of a longer history and there is one coach in [city] that we used to do trampoline with. He was just coach of the year. He is just awesome. We spent a lot of time with him. He is mister technical. We would talk not only our competitors were doing but what theory says we should do.

Assistant Coaches

The participants with assistant coaches recalled how useful they could be. They were able to complement the head coach and were useful resources. Emily described her coaching staff this way:

I think our coaching staff was very good. One of the assistant coaches was [head coach’s] husband; he helped deal with the stressful situations. He was kind of the opposite of her he was calm, when she would be high strung, he stayed calm. But he always knew if he got angry or whatever, it was like knowing your dad gets angry, it is not just my mom kind of thing. He didn’t raise his voice very often but when he did you knew. The other assistant coach was someone all the players could go talk to and be comfortable to talk to if they didn’t feel comfortable talking with the head coach.

Jim described how his coach became better at utilizing the assistant coaches with time:

He started giving a little more free rein to them as far as letting them doing more coaching with the team themselves… the one guy was good at taking videos and such, so he got him to do more of the video aspect of it, while the other guy was very good at talking with the players and stuff so he used him as a buffer.

Sam described how her coach utilized the assistant coaches:

Speaking between periods she would give them the voice… They ran drills, one was more in charge of PK, one PP, one defence, one in charge of team meals the other with technical stuff. For sure she utilized them… One of our assistant coaches was an x – NHL player so he had some tricks, and talked about game experiences and playing in big games, where [coach] didn’t really have that. Our other assistant coach played at a pretty high level too but she was really kind of like a joker, where our coach wasn’t, she would
rarely crack a smile, so this one was kind of always smiling. So I felt they were a really
good mix.

Sean recalled how his coach delegated well to the assistant coach:

He was a good assistant; he did all the work that didn’t need [the head coach’s]
attention… Anything from logistical stuff like organizing our training times with the
facility or venue we were going to be training at, to helping book accommodations, to
logging and categorizing video so that it was ready to go when we wanted to watch it, to
putting our videos together actually so that it was all edit… He was good technically as
well, so he would help us if [coach] was busy with other people or if he missed a jump or
two.

He added how his assistant coach was great for helping him get away from the intensity of
training:

He was way more laid back. He was way more casual with everything. So when you
really didn’t want to have that intense personality around, you could go and chill out with
him. I don’t know how many concerts and movies we went together to counter that sports
side. Just hang out… He was softer, he was more understanding if something wasn’t
going well. If you fucked up some way, he was kind of like the mom to the dad you
know. Good cop bad cop.

Special Tools, Technology and Knowledge of the Sport

The participants reported that their coaches utilized special tools, technology, and
knowledge to help them improve. Jane explained:

He is the best; he is by far the best trampoline coach in the world, my opinion.
Technically he is a physicist and understands mechanics. He has like multiple cameras set
up at the gym so you can watch your routines over again. He has every bell and whistle
you can imagine. He has built crazy super trampolines so you can learn how to have
different time in the bed… He has got belts and stuff, every different throw mats, a
squishy matt in case you are scared. He is just like technically superior. He has just a
really good feel for the sport. Technically one hundred percent awesome… I got so much
better when I came to [city].

Jim expressed how his coach used video to help improve his game:

He would actually have us sit down as a team and watch the whole game tape and people
would throughout comments and ideas. Individually, he would do it by line up with the 5
guys that were on the court. There was a lot of comparing and analyzing, even
individually every player is unique and has a different skill set, but then he would
compare him to another big guy and see what he does when he gets to the post and see how he does this pump fake. “You see this guy using his left hand in the post? You should try that.”

Sean explained how much video analysis he did with his coach:

We would watch video together daily, and like on average an hour a day for 2 – 3 years. We did analysis the shit out of every technical detail of every jump and he was there for the majority of that.

Visualization was a resource many of the participants reported using. Ben and Sean both discussed how their coaches specifically utilized and promoted visualization:

He had this way of describing the start line, you have to think of it like you are an F1 pilot and no one can be near your wing span. He had this way of describing it, or describing your training you are building a tool built, so you have all these tools ready to use, like your hammer ready which is your good up wing speed, and your wrench ready which is your fast down wind speed, so he had these ways of using imagery to build confidence. If you are on the start line and feel like an F1 racers or war pilot or whatever, as a kid you like this is wicked no one is going mess with me. He would literally explain if someone tries to take your spot in the line you blow them away and don’t let it happen. So that imagery was powerful when I was younger; it was beginners of sport psychology. (Ben)

We worked with a sport psych early on, that our coach promoted heavily, so we did all that sort of stuff; lots of imagery, lots of scenario planning. Visualization was a huge component. Because in a day we can only do so many jumps but we could visual an extra 100. We could defiantly reinforce the things we were working on using imagery. So he was a huge supporter of that. (Sean)

**Summary of Utilized Resources**

In summary, all the participants reported that their coaches utilized various resources; from the standard help, to specialists, assistant coaches, and special tools, technology, and knowledge of their sport.
Results Summary

The participants recounted their experiences with their most athlete-centred coach, providing examples of the five basic tenets of athlete-centred coaching, but also, demonstrating that even coaches identified as athlete-centred behaved in ways that did not support an athlete-centred approach. In particular, the participants’ coaches reportedly were good at promoting a successful attitude, developing confidence, providing independence, communicating openly and honestly, compartmentalizing skills, using a process-oriented approach, and utilizing resources. However, behaviours not well supported include managing pressure, being more democratic than autocratic, having fun and engaging practices, creating team cohesion, and developing leadership, relationships beyond sport, and creativity. Furthermore, at least half of the coaches were more autocratic than democratic in terms of teaching their sport; using stimulating questions and providing freedom to learn (not over-coaching) is one of the most basic principles of athlete-centred coaching. Therefore, this is an important finding when examining what components of athlete-centred coaching need to be further developed. The next section will further discuss these findings in relation the current literature.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Interpretation of the Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine elite athletes’ perspectives of their most athlete-centred coach. The major tenets of athlete-centred coaching include: (1) fostering the holistic development of the athlete and the development of life skills through sport (e.g., developing independence, leadership, teamwork skills, and decision making skills; highlighting respect, trust, responsibility, accountability and that sport is only part of the life experience); (2) creating a partnership relationship between the coach and athlete (e.g., athletes are empowered and included in some of the planning, decision making and evaluation processes); (3) teaching by guiding not prescribing (e.g., teaching games for understanding and using stimulating questions); (4) establishing a quality team culture in which the athletes gain responsibility for establishing and maintaining a direction for the team (e.g., athletes are having fun, recognizing athletes as part of a greater whole, and defining “success”); and (5) utilizing resources (e.g., good assistant coaches, outside help, and feedback systems; Clarke et al., 1994; Headley-Cooper, 2010; Kidman, 2005; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Miller & Kerr, 2002). The findings from the current study suggest that some of the athlete-centred behaviours were experienced by the participants while others were not. Since there are similarities between athlete-centred coaching and effective coaching literature, and there is substantially more literature on effective coaching, this literature will be called upon to assist with the interpretation of the findings of this study. Further, the findings will be interpreted according to self-determination theory. In the following section, the interpretation of the findings will be organized into the sub-headings of the various tenets. An explanation of the findings will be added at the end of this section as many of the explanations are the same across the tenets.
Holistic Development

The previously cited behaviours associated with the first tenet, holistic development, are both supported and not supported by the current study. The following athlete-centred coaching behaviours associated with the first tenet were well supported in this study: promoting a successful attitude, developing confidence, and encouraging education. These findings support previous research such as Kidman and Lombardo’s (2010). In their book they used interviews from athlete-centred coaches to highlight the importance of developing confidence by enabling and empowering athletes. Similarly, research by Côté and Sedgwick (2003) found that building athletes’ confidence was one of seven effective coaching behaviours based on interviews with expert rowing coaches and elite rowers. Empowering athletes promotes autonomy within the athletes, one of the three psychological basic needs of SDT.

On the other hand, the following athlete-centred coaching behaviours associated with the first tenet were not reportedly experienced by the participants: promoting post-sport careers, managing pressure, and developing creativity and leadership. These findings contradict previous research on athlete-centred and effective coaching. In Kidman and Hanrahan’s (2011) practical guide to becoming an effective coach they emphasize the importance of coaches having self-control, not adding pressure during important games, and showing faith in the existing plan and in the athletes. Furthermore, Clarke et al. (1994) explain that coaches have a long-term impact on an athlete’s life; therefore, they have the extended responsibility to facilitate athletes’ transitions between their roles as athletes and post-sport careers. Therefore, the findings from the current study both support and not support the behaviours associated with the first tenet as cited within previous literature on athlete-centred and effective coaching.
**Partnership Relationship**

Providing independence and communicating openly and honestly, behaviours that lead to a partnership relationship were well supported in this study. These findings support previous research such as Kidman and Lombardo (2010) and Kidman and Hanrahan (2011), who emphasized the importance of communicating effectively. Likewise, McMorris and Hale (2006) highlighted the importance of coaches being honest and fair as effective coaching behaviours.

Conversely, two of the previously cited athlete-centred coaching behaviours associated with the second tenet were not reportedly experienced by the participants; particularly, being more democratic rather than autocratic and developing relationships beyond sport. These findings contradict previous research; Côté and Sedgwick (2003) identified establishing a positive rapport with each athlete as one of seven behaviours associated with effective coaching. Kidman and Hanrahan (2011) encourage coaches to be more democratic than autocratic to cultivate ownership “by enabling and encouraging members to become involved in decisions that affect the team and themselves personally” (p. 59). These behaviours help produce autonomous motivation by fulfilling the basic psychological needs of autonomy and relatedness within SDT.

In summary, the findings from the current study provide mixed support for the second athlete-centred tenet and previous literature on effective coaching.

**Optimal Teaching**

The tenet of optimal teaching was the least supported according to the findings. Specifically, the behaviours associated with teaching democratically, such as using stimulating questions and providing freedom to learn, and not “over-coaching” were not well supported by
the participants’ accounts. These findings contradict the athlete-centred behaviours highlighted in Kidman and Lombardo’s (2010) and Kidman and Hanrahan’s (2011) work: utilizing questioning and teaching games for understanding. Furthermore, McMorris and Hale (2006) highlighted the importance of not overloading athletes’ short term memory with too many instructions, suggesting a specific form of instruction – shaping skills. “The coach instructs the performer to concentrate firstly on one small part of the skill. Once the learner is able to perform that part reasonably well, a second part is added and so on” (p. 92). McMorris and Hale also advocate “learning by guided discovery, i.e. the coach sets a problem and helps the learner solve it” (p. 92).

These findings are the most significant to note. Providing stimulating questions and empowering the athlete are central behaviours to the theoretical framework behind athlete-centred coaching. According to self-determination theory, autonomous motivation leads to greater psychological health, increased persistence, and more effective performance on experiential types of activities (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The behaviours associated with this tenet provide the necessary autonomy athletes need in order to achieve the autonomous motivation. Therefore, these findings suggest that a majority of coaches are still missing out on a central tenet of athlete-centred coaching.

Compartmentalizing skills was the only athlete-centred coaching behaviour associated with the third tenet that was reportedly experienced by the participants in this study. This finding supports previous research such as Côté and Sedgwick (2003); they reported one of seven effective coaching behaviours is teaching skills effectively. Therefore, the findings from the current study fail to show evidence that the third athlete-centred tenet of optimal teaching was reportedly experienced by the Olympians in this study.
Quality Team Culture

The previously cited behaviours associated with the fourth athlete-centred tenet, quality team culture, received mixed support. Using a process-oriented approach in conjunction with goal setting is the athlete-centred coaching behaviour associated with the fourth tenet that was most experienced by the participants. This finding supports the emphasis McMorris and Hale (2006) place on coaches to create rules, consequences, and team goals together to increase team cohesion. Likewise, research by Côté and Sedgwick (2003) reported creating a positive training environment and facilitating goal setting as two of seven effective coaching behaviours. Facilitating goal-setting by allowing athletes to determine their own and team goals promotes autonomy – a central component for producing intrinsic motivation SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Conversely, having fun and engaging practices, and specifically creating team cohesion are the athlete-centred coaching behaviours associated with the fourth tenet that were not reportedly experienced by the participants. Kidman and Lombardo’s (2010) interviews on athlete-centred coaches highlight the importance of establishing a quality team culture as an athlete-centred coaching behaviour. More specifically, Kidman and Hanrahan (2011) suggest coaches can keep motivation and enjoyment levels high by “training in a different place, learning something other kids don’t know, playing music at training, trying something a bit daring, having a chance to really scream or yell, getting a special treat, trying out original strategies or tactics, and playing games” (p. 108). These behaviours were reportedly not implemented by the participants’ coaches.
Utilize Resources

The behaviours associated with the fifth athlete-centred tenet, utilizing resources, were reportedly well used by the participants’ coaches, specifically utilizing standard help, specialists, assistant coaches, special tools, technology, and knowledge of the sport. These findings support research such as Côté and Sedgwick’s (2003) work in which they highlighted proactive planning as one of seven effective coaching behaviours.

Possible Explanations for Findings

In summary, these findings from the current study support existing literature in several ways and diverge from previous research in others. Possible explanations for the divergent findings will now be explored.

The barriers to implementing an athlete-centred approach have been documented previously by Kidman and Lombardo (2010) and McCallister and colleagues (2000). In particular, the professional sports model to “win-at-all-costs” has been identified as a major barrier to the implementation of the athlete-centred coaching model. The professional sports model that promotes a “winning is everything” culture can be used to explain the absence of several of the athlete-centred coaching behaviours in the current study. Too often, an emphasis on the performance outcome of “winning” is assumed to be mutually exclusive from personal development (Miller & Kerr, 2002). It is important to emphasize that, according to the athlete-centred coaching literature, developing an athlete as a person and as an athlete will increase athletic performance (i.e., personal development helps athletic success; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Lyle, 2002; Miller & Kerr, 2002). Therefore, coaches who do not adopt this perspective
may be less likely to be concerned with the personal development of their athletes and may be more inclined to see only one route to achieving performance outcomes.

The following section will examine how the professional sports model may explain some of the specific behaviours that were reportedly not implemented by the participants’ coaches. Foremost, as previously mentioned, coaches with a more professional sports model approach may not perceive that personal development increases performance outcomes. Consequently, this approach could explain the lack of emphasis from some of the coaches on the more personal development-related behaviours, such as promoting post-sport careers, general life outside of sport, and personal attributes. Similarly, fun and engaging practices are not always perceived to be associated with performance outcomes and could explain the findings. Lastly, managing pressure is an important athlete-centred behaviour; however, several participants reported that their coaches were too focused on winning causing them to underperform from the immense pressures and lack of process-oriented focus. Hence, the professional sports model could explain that some coaches did not manage pressure well because they let the “winning is everything” mentality take over their focus, causing them to choke under the pressure. In summary, the professional sports model can be identified as a plausible explanation for the absence of certain athlete-centred coaching behaviours.

Another major barrier to implementing an athlete-centred coaching approach is a coach’s knowledge of this approach. Not every coach uses the athlete-centred coaching approach; many are highly influenced by the professional sports model and use a more coach-centred approach (i.e., a more autocratic style of coaching with less of a focus on athlete development and more of a focus on performance outcomes). Therefore, unless a coach has received formal training on the athlete-centred approach or had extensive experience with an athlete-centred coach as an athlete,
she or he is unlikely to naturally adopt athlete-centred coaching behaviours. The four key barriers regarding coaches’ knowledge of the athlete-centred coaching approach will be explained in turn.

One barrier to coaching in an athlete-centred manner is the prevailing view in sport that past experience as an athlete is the major determinant of becoming a successful coach (Taylor & Garratt, 2010). In reality however, the ability to play a sport has little relevance or application to coaching or teaching the sport. Although it would generally be considered illogical to become a teacher simply by virtue of being a former student, this logic is not applied to coaching and will likely not be applied until the cultural views around coaching are changed.

Secondly, it cannot be expected for coaches to behave according to the athlete-centred approach until coach education is made mandatory for all sports. Taylor and Garratt (2010) argue for the professionalization of coaching where required coach education programs ensure all coaches are properly educated. This leads into the third barrier, current coach education programs are not well informed with proper pedagogy (i.e., the principles of effective teaching) and athlete-centred behaviours. Hence, mandated coach education would not be optimally utilized without well informed and empirically derived coach education programs. Specifically, coach education programs would benefit by utilizing Self-Determination Theory to inform the education criteria.

The least supported behaviours from the current study are associated with proper pedagogy and the SDT (e.g., teaching skills more democratically than autocratically, such as using stimulating questions, teaching games for understanding, and providing freedom to learn, not over-coaching). Based on the current findings I propose that these specific behaviours are the least prevalent in coaches and will stay that way unless the educational process for coaches is
changed to address pedagogy and utilize the SDT. Furthermore, these behaviours are central to the athlete-centred coaching approach as they are thought to develop decision makers, athletic skills, independence, ownership, and other personal attributes.

The last barrier is the absence of monitoring and assessment of coaches. Without being able to properly evaluate and monitor coaches’ behaviours it cannot be known if knowledge translation has occurred. Therefore, coach assessment is required to identify, post coach education, if a coach meets the requirements set based on proper-pedagogy, SDT, and athlete-centred behaviours, and to monitor that the on-going practice of a coach also meets the requirements.

In summary, the participants’ coaches reportedly implemented athlete-centred coaching behaviours in various amounts. This can possibly be explained by both the professional sports model and problems associated with coach education and assessment programs. The next section discusses the implications of coaches facilitating the transferability of personal attributes within the athlete-centred coaching model.

**Transferability of Personal Attributes**

The current study was not designed to assess the transferability of life skills; however, the transferability of life skills was reported by many of the participants. The transferability of personal attributes and life skills through sport is highly contested in the sport literature. Some believe that these personal attributes automatically transfer outside of sport, while others challenge this assumption, insisting that specific steps are required to ensure that the life skills developed in sport transfer to life outside of sport (Danish, Forneris, Hodge, & Heke, 2004; Gould & Carson, 2008; Marinek, Schilling, & Johnson, 2001). Gould and Carson (2008)
developed a model for coaching life skills which suggests coaches have four levels of influence over life skill development through sport. Levels one and two indirectly influence the athletes: (1) creating a sporting environment to prevent risky behaviours, and (2) modeling appropriate behaviours. Levels three and four directly influence the athletes: (3) implementing activities to intentionally coach life skills, and (4) implementing activities to show how the skills learned in sport transfer beyond the context of sport. The model also suggests four factors that affect the transferability of life skills to a non-sport setting: perceived value of the skill, confidence in ability to transfer, comprehension of transfer, and support and reinforcement of transfer. This model has since been supported by research conducted by Camiré, Trudel, and Forneris (2012).

The participants in the current study provided support for the first two levels of Gould and Carson’s coaching life skills model, namely the indirect levels. For example, several of the participants reported that the attitudes that their coaches helped them model in sport stayed with them post sporting career; this is representative of level two – model appropriate behaviours. On the other hand, there were also instances of the coaches directly promoting the transferability of life skills, the third and fourth levels. The participants reported instances of their coaches providing opportunities for leadership and decision-making within the sporting environment, equivalent to level three. They also recalled instances of their coaches putting them in activities outside of sport to transfer the life skills, corresponding to level four. Specifically, athletes were assigned jobs or responsibilities outside of sport. Therefore, the findings from the current study provide some support for Gould and Carson’s four levels of coaching life skills model.

The claims that coaches need to consciously develop activities to ensure that life skills transfer outside of sport have significant relevance to athlete-centred coaching. The basic principle of athlete-centred coaching is to develop an athlete both as an athlete and a person
through sport. Hence, these activities that promote life skill transfer outside of sport have major implications for the athlete-centred coaching model if personal development can only be achieved through these activities. The current literature on athlete-centred coaching indicates that through the development of athletic skills, athletes develop holistically; however, it is proposed that this process does not occur automatically. Instead, there needs to be a purposeful and strategic plan for the development and transferability of life skills (Camiré et al., 2012; Danish et al., 2004; Gould & Carson, 2008; Marinek et al., 2001).

Therefore, the athlete-centred coaching model should incorporate the practical implications suggested by Camiré and colleagues (2012). They suggest that coaches should develop relationships with their athletes to understand their internal and external assets and “have strategies in their coaching practice that are used in an intentional and systematic manner to promote the positive development of athletes” (p. 258). Danish, Fourneris, and Wallace (2005) developed an instructional design for coaches to transfer life skills in a systematic manner. The design consists of the following three steps: (1) focus on one skill at a time and provide examples of how this skill applies in non-sport settings; (2) provide athletes with the opportunities to apply the skill and reflect on their experience; and (3) encourage athletes to share their successes and failures in applying the skill and provide them with further experiences to reinforce learning. The present study did not provide any support for Danish et al.’s instructional design for coaches to transfer life skills in a systematic manner. However, since the life skill transfer process has significant implications for athlete-centred coaching and coach education, future research should thoroughly examine this process, including the effectiveness of Danish et al.’s instructional design for life skill transfer.
The Voices of Retired Olympians

The strength of the current study is hearing the voices of recently retired Olympians with respect to their most athlete-centred coach. Each participant has painted a concise picture of their most athlete-centred coach. As each participant described their coach’s strengths and weaknesses, the validity of the participants’ reports is viewed as being strong. It is also important to note that listening to the athlete’s perception provided a unique view of coaching behaviours, in other words, we were able to gather information about elite level coaching behaviours through the athlete’s eyes.

The voices of the participants are also the strength of the study because of who the participants were. It is significant that recently retired Olympians identified their coaches implementing athlete-centred coaching behaviours. This finding in and of itself begins to debunk the common misperception that athlete-centred coaching hinders performance success. Not only did they identify the behaviours, it was noticed that the participants also spoke favourably of many of the athlete-centred coaching behaviours. Although an assessment of the participants’ opinions of their coach’s behaviours was not a focus of this current study, it was still noticed. Likewise, the positive relationships the participants had with their coaches and the respect they conveyed for their coaches must be highlighted.

Lastly, the voices of the participants led to a favourable trend regarding the effectiveness of athlete-centred coaching. While future research still needs to empirically address the effectiveness of athlete-centred coaching behaviours, the voices of the participants in the current study provided some preliminary insight. Particularly, the findings of this study suggest a potentially positive relationship between athlete-centred coaching and performance success. In general, the more successful Olympic athletes from the eight participants reported that their most
athlete-centred coach displayed more athlete-centred coaching behaviours than the less successful Olympic athlete participants. The success of the participants is based on medals at Olympic, World Cup and World Championship competitions. Specifically, three out of the four, or 75% of the athletes who reported their coaches displayed almost all the athlete-centred coaching behaviours were the more successful participants, and only one out of four, or 25% of the participants who reported their coach did not display all of the athlete-centred coaching behaviours were from the more successful participants. The theoretical framework of athlete-centred coaching helps explain these findings. Self-determination theory states that autonomous motivation leads to greater psychological health, increased persistence, and more effective performance on experiential types of activities (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Therefore, if a coach does not implement the necessary athlete-centred coaching behaviours that foster autonomous motivation, then it is reasonable to assume the athletes will not achieve the associated benefits, including enhanced performance. Again, future research is needed to further examine this relationship as conclusions cannot be drawn from this qualitative study.

**Athlete-Centred Coaching Continuum**

The variability in the extent to which athlete-centred coaching behaviours were reportedly implemented infers that athlete-centred coaching may exist on a continuum. Such a continuum may imply that some coaches implement more athlete-centred coaching behaviours than others. On one end of the continuum is the ideal athlete-centred coach who implements all of the athlete-centred behaviours; at the other end is the non-athlete-centred coach or coach-centred coach who does not implement any of the athlete-centred coaching behaviours. Theoretically, as the barriers to implementing an athlete-centred coaching approach increase, the
more he or she will move away from the ideal athlete-centred coach. In addition, based on the preliminary insight from this study and the proposed benefits from the literature on the relationship between athlete-centred coaching and performance success, we suggest that the closer a coach is to the ideal athlete-centred coach, the more performance success will follow.

The proposition that athlete-centred coaching may exist on a continuum is a new contribution to the literature. The implications this concept has for future research are significant and will be discussed in the future directions section.

**Limitations**

A limitation to this study is the trustworthiness of the participants’ perceptions. It is possible that the participants exaggerated their coaches’ behaviours to portray them in a better or worse light even though the participants gave the impression of honesty as they were all able to describe their coach’s weaknesses and strengths. The social desirability bias would likely have been more of a limitation had the coaches been the participants. Similarly, issues of memory recall could have affected the participants’ reports. Recalling specific memories was found to be problematic for some of the participants as they tried to recall their coaches’ behaviours from up to over ten years ago. Also, the notion of recalling more positive memories as time progresses may have influenced the reports of the participants. Using one measure for data collection only limits the validity or trustworthiness of the data. An observational approach in addition to the interviews would have addressed the self-reporting limitations.

Another limitation to the current study is the researcher’s bias. It is possible that my positive bias towards the athlete-centred approach may have influenced the participants to describe more coaching behaviours on the positive side. I did my best to decrease any influence
my bias may have had on the participants’ reports and on my interpretation of their reports. Participants were probed for both positive and negative coaching behaviours during the interviews. These implications were previously discussed in the contextual analysis section of the Methods chapter.

**Future Directions**

Several recommendations for future research are derived from the present study. Research is needed to further inquire into the many proposed benefits of athlete-centred coaching, in particular, the relationship with performance success, and the transferability of life skills. The concept of the athlete-centred coaching continuum could be utilized to examine these relationships. In addition, future research could take a closer examination of the differences in athlete-centred coaching between individual and team sports, one sport to another, male and female coaches, and male and female athletes. Gender, sport and group differences likely all play a role in the athlete-centred coaching relationship.

Future research would be strengthened by supplementing the interviews with such measures as observation and or questionnaires. Specifically, future research could take a triangulation approach, including the perceptions of the athlete and coach about the coach’s behaviours, followed by several video recordings of the coach in practice or competition. Furthermore, if an athlete-centred assessment survey were to be developed, then more data could be collected from a larger population.

The findings of this study could lead to future coach education and coach assessment programs. Specifically, the detail and examples provided by the participants could help develop a more behaviourally-focused athlete-centred coaching model. Therefore, future research would
benefit from taking a meta-analysis from this study, other literature on athlete-centred coaching and the literature effective coaching to design a comprehensive behaviourally-focused athlete-centred coaching model. From there, athlete-centred coach education and assessment can be developed. As a result, future research may ascertain the extent to which athlete-centred coaching “works” by assessing the effectiveness of interventions.

**Practical Implications**

Several immediate practical implications can be applied from this study. Foremost, the concept of a continuum of athlete-centred coaching may provide current coaches with a framework by which to assess their coaching practices. Coaches may use this concept to assess their current practice and then take one step at a time toward the ideal athlete-centred coach. Secondly, the proposed relationship with performance success and athlete-centred coaching may further start to persuade more coaches to adopt a more athlete-centred approach.

Furthermore, noteworthy practical implications will arise if future research empirically finds a positive relationship between performance success and athlete-centred coaching. If future researchers were to demonstrate that personal development facilitates performances success, then a major shift in the cultural acceptance of athlete-centred coaching will hopefully follow. If we can empirically show the sporting society, which is currently focused primarily on winning games, making money and being champions, that an athlete-centred approach will actually help to achieve these outcomes, then it is our hope that the athlete-centred approach will become the norm.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The central component of this study is athlete-centred coaching - a process in which “athletes gain and take ownership of knowledge, development and decision making that will help them to maximise their performance and their enjoyment” (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010, p. 13). The basic principle of athlete-centered coaching is to develop the athlete as an athlete and a person through sport (Miller & Kerr, 2002). The five tenets of athlete-centered coaching include: (1) fostering the holistic development of the athlete (e.g., developing independence, leadership, teamwork skills, and decision making skills); (2) creating a partnership relationship between the coach and athlete (e.g., athletes are empowered and included in some of the planning, decision making and evaluation processes); (3) teaching by guiding rather than prescribing (e.g., teaching games for understanding and using stimulating questions); (4) establishing a quality team culture (e.g., athletes are having fun and engaging practices); and (5) utilizing resources (e.g., good assistant coaches, outside help, and feedback systems; Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Headley-Cooper, 2010; Kidman, 2005; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Miller & Kerr, 2002).

I chose athlete-centred coaching because my own sporting experiences resonated with the proposed outcomes of athlete-centred coaching. It has been proposed to increase performance (Kidman, 2001, 2005; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Rizola et al., 2002), decrease the occurrences of athlete maltreatment (Kerr & Stirling, 2008), and increase the development of life skills in athletes (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). Given the lack of empirical research on athlete-centred coaching, the purpose of this study was to examine elite athletes’ perspectives on their most athlete-centred coach.

Eight recently retired Olympians participated in the current study. They were recruited through purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine their
perspectives on their most athlete-centred coach. Interviews lasted 1.5 to 2 hours in length and were recorded either in person, over the phone or via Skype. The data were transcribed verbatim. Inductive and deductive analyses were used; first I let the themes emerge from the data, then I compared these themes with previous frameworks.

The findings of this study provide mixed evidence for the use of coaching behaviours characterized as athlete-centred coaching as defined within the literature. In particular, the participants’ coaches reportedly were good at promoting a successful attitude, developing confidence, providing independence, communicating openly and honestly, compartmentalizing skills, using a process-oriented approach, and utilizing resources. However, behaviours that were not reportedly implemented by the participants’ coaches included: managing pressure, being more democratic than autocratic, having fun and engaging practices, creating team cohesion, and developing leadership, relationships beyond sport, and creativity. Furthermore, at least half of the coaches were more autocratic than democratic in terms of teaching their sport. This is concerning as using stimulating questions and providing freedom to learn (not over-coaching) are central components to Self-Determination Theory, the theoretical framework behind athlete-centred coaching. These behaviours provide the autonomy necessary to stimulate intrinsic motivation and, subsequent, outcomes of greater psychological health, increased persistence, and more effective performance on experiential types of activities (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

The professional sports model and lack of knowledge of the athlete-centred approach may explain why some of the athlete-centred coaching behaviours were not reportedly used by the participants’ coaches. Specifically, the “win-at-all-costs” mentality associated with the professional sports model combined with the misconception that performance success comes at the cost of personal development may explain the lack of support for some of the athlete-centred
coaching behaviours. Furthermore, coaches are currently selected based primarily on past playing experience and not on their knowledge of coaching (Taylor & Garratt, 2010); therefore, aspiring coaches are more concerned with their past playing experience than developing their knowledge of coaching. Likewise, we cannot expect coaches to learn about athlete-centred coaching behaviours until these behaviours are a part of mandated coach education programs.

The strength of this study lies within the voices of the participants. The detailed interviews with recently retired Olympians provided rich accounts for athlete-centred coaching behaviours and actual examples of coaches implementing these behaviours. Furthermore, the common misperception that athlete-centred coaching hinders performance success is challenged since these elite level athletes identified their coaches implementing at least some athlete-centred coaching behaviours. In addition, the finding portrayed a favourable trend regarding the effectiveness of athlete-centred coaching; they suggest a potentially positive relationship between athlete-centred coaching and performance success although this needs to be explored further in future research.

A conceptual contribution to the athlete-centred coaching literature was derived from this study. Particularly, the concept that athlete-centred coaching exists on a continuum was proposed based on the variability of the number of athlete-centred coaching behaviours that the participants’ coaches reportedly implemented.

Further research is needed to better understand athlete-centred coaching and to empirically assess the proposed benefits. The hope is that future research can ascertain the extent to which athlete-centred coaching “works” by assessing the effectiveness of interventions.

If future research empirically finds a positive relationship between performance and athlete-centred coaching, then a major shift in the cultural acceptance of athlete-centred coaching
is hopefully bound to follow. Further, the issue about whether or not personal development hinders or facilitates performance success could be resolved. Athlete-centred coaching could then become the norm if we can empirically show the sporting society that an athlete-centred approach will actually help to attain desired performance outcomes.
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Appendix A: Letter of Information

Elite Athletes’ Experiences of Athlete-Centred Coaching

Information Letter

Purpose

Coaches play a crucial role in the performance and personal development of athletes. The purpose of this study is to examine the sporting experience of elite athletes in the context of athlete-centred coaching.

What is involved?

If you decide to participate in the study you will be asked to meet with the principal investigator, Cassidy Preston, to discuss your experiences in sport. The interview will be held at a time and place that is mutually convenient and will take about two to three hours. You may prefer to meet on two separate occasions to complete the interview. At the completion of the study a summary of the findings will be made available to you.

Voluntary Participation

Please be assured that your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw at any time, without penalty, and you have the right to decline answering any questions you choose.

Confidentiality

With your permission the interview will be digitally-recorded so 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 research team 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 athlete-centred coaching. Consequently, this will help contribute to the scholarly community by informing coach educational programs and other interventions.

Risks

It is possible that participation in these interviews may arouse some feelings of distress. It is likely that some of your reflections of your past experiences in sport may be negative or
upsetting. Should this occur, you may take a break from the interview, reschedule the interview or cease participation in the interview altogether, without penalty.

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,

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Appendix B: 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
- 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)            Email address
Appendix C: Interview Guide

*Can only participate if you have had an athlete-centred coach during your career*


**Preamble:** I want to ask you questions about your most athlete-centred coach. An athlete-centred coach focuses on the development of the athlete as a person and as an athlete. They have the following characteristics: he/she asked you questions, believed in you, developed your skills, gave you responsibility, empowered you, and developed you as a person outside of sport. Can you think of one coach that stands above the rest in regards to those characteristics? At what level(s) and how long did you have this coach? Coach credentials – previous levels? Was he/she paid? Part-time? Any other results that this coach helped you, your teammates, your team, or anyone else achieve that you haven’t mentioned?

*Literature has suggested that athlete-centred coaching is the best to approach – not necessarily the case – lack of research*
*Coach may or may not have exhibited all of these characteristics and may have even exhibited opposite characteristics – I’d encourage you to talk about these as well*
*how did these behaviours affect you in terms of Well-being, personal development, performance?* (+), Neutral or (-)

**Basic Behaviours**

**Develop Life Outside Sport**
- Did this coach ask about your life or how you were doing?
- Did this coach talk to you in 1 on 1 meetings about life? Family?
- Did this coach promote your education? Making money or a job?
- Did this coach allow and/or promote for a life outside of sport during career? Social life? Love life?
- Did this coach develop and prepare you for success post-career?
- Did this coach do anything else that exemplified how he cared about your life outside of sport?

**Development Life Skills**
- Did this coach develop life skills such as independence? Decision making - Did this coach use stimulating questions? Promote self-questioning for improvement? Not over coach –solve problems on own? Did this coach do anything else to develop your decision making abilities? Did this coach ask for your input in making decisions? Plans? Evaluation?
- Did this coach develop Leadership? Teamwork? Did this coach give you responsibility within the team? A role?
- Did this coach promote Creativity?
- Did this coach promote High standards/strive to improve?
- Did this coach promote goal setting? Track work or results - Progress and plans? Imagery? Sport Psychology?
- Did this coach promote Fairness? Anything else that made you respect or trust this coach?

**Develop Confidence**
- Did this coach tell you that he/she believed in you? Show it? Give freedom? See your potential? Comparing? Pump tires?
- Put in opportunity to do well and or hold back from failure? Track volume?
- Did this coach do anything else that helped you or your team develop confidence?

**Develop Athletic Skills and Increase Motivation**
- Did this coach have a good balance between challenging/pushing you and having fun? How have fun?
- Did this coach develop you physically? Technically? provide specialists? (nutritionist, skill coach, weight training…)
- Did this coach increase or keep you motivated?
- What did he or she care about? Winning?
- Did this coach utilize his/her assistant coach(es)? Complimenting their weaknesses? Given responsibility?
- Did this coach do anything else in regards to developing your athletic skills and increasing your motivation?

**Probing Questions**
- Always ask: How did he/she do that? Examples?
- At end of each section ask: did this coach ever not implement or implement opposing behaviours to the above behaviours? Explain. If so, what was the ratio of implementing above behaviours with opposing behaviours?

**Final Question**
- Take a few moments to recall any other memories of this coach. Favourite or worst memories. Major events, funny events, anything at all. – Please describe

*END* - Do you know any other recently retired Olympic athletes that could participate in this study?
- Do you have any recommendations for the study or interview process?