A Qualitative Exploration of Pain among Mixed Martial Artists

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master’s of Science
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Abstract

Athletes often experience pain in sport and in their everyday lives, yet little research has explored how athletes form understandings of pain, and how social interactions contribute to athletes’ understandings of pain. The purpose of this study was to explore MMA fighters’ experiences of pain while training for fight. A multiple case study approach (Stake, 1995) was used to study pain among four amateur and professional fighters and their training partners (total N = 7). Data were collected longitudinally using semi-structured interviews, participant observation, athlete video diaries, and video recordings of training sessions and fights. Results pertained to: (a) distinguishing between physical pain, injury, and emotional pain; (b) social validation of pain; (c) giving and receiving pain; (d) sharing pain with teammates; and (e) reflections on ‘doing’ pain research. The results suggest that pain experiences are socially constructed and shared with others, and teammates influence how fighters understand their pain.
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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments............................................................................................................. iii

Table of Contents................................................................................................................ iv

List of Appendices ............................................................................................................... vii

Chapter 1 Introduction ....................................................................................................... 1

1 Introduction...................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 2 Literature Review ............................................................................................ 2

2 Literature Review........................................................................................................... 2

2.1 Overview and Definitions of Pain............................................................................... 2

2.2 Physical Pain in Sport ............................................................................................... 3

2.3 A Cognitive Perspective of Pain in Sport .................................................................. 5

2.4 Pain in Social Relationships...................................................................................... 7

2.4.1 Pain tolerance and social modeling...................................................................... 7

2.4.2 Pain and social support ....................................................................................... 8

2.4.3 Constructing pain in social relationships............................................................. 9

2.5 Mixed Martial Arts as a Context for Pain................................................................. 11

2.6 Gender in Sport ......................................................................................................... 13

2.7 Purpose and Research Questions ............................................................................. 14

Chapter 3 Methods .......................................................................................................... 15

3 Methods........................................................................................................................ 15

3.1 Paradigmatic Position .............................................................................................. 15

3.2 Methodology ............................................................................................................ 15

3.3 Data Collection ........................................................................................................ 16

3.4 Participants............................................................................................................... 17

3.5 Interviews................................................................................................................ 18

3.5.1 Fighter interviews .............................................................................................. 19
3.5.2 Training partner interviews ................................................................. 19

3.6 Video Diaries .......................................................................................... 20

3.7 Participant Observation ............................................................................ 21

3.8 Video Recording Training Sessions and Competitions .................................. 22

3.9 Data Analysis ........................................................................................... 23

3.10 Ethical Considerations ............................................................................. 25

3.11 Reflexivity ............................................................................................... 26

3.11.1 Reflexive statement ............................................................................ 28

Chapter 4 Results ........................................................................................... 30

4 Overview ...................................................................................................... 30

4.1 Participant Profiles ................................................................................... 30

4.1.1 Fighters ................................................................................................. 30

4.1.2 Training partners .................................................................................. 32

4.2 Round 1: Understandings of Pain ............................................................... 33

4.2.1 Distinguishing between physical pain, injury, and emotional pain ......... 33

4.2.2 Learning pain ....................................................................................... 41

4.3 Round 2: Social Validation of Pain ............................................................. 51

4.3.1 Physical pain validated by social praise ................................................. 51

4.4 Round 3: Giving and Receiving Pain ......................................................... 54

4.4.1 “You’re not ok with violence” – Violence and consent .......................... 54

4.4.2 “I made her bleed” – Inflicting pain as evidence of fighters’ ability ........ 56

4.4.3 Boundaries of inflicting pain .............................................................. 58

4.4.4 Receiving pain feels powerful ............................................................. 58

4.4.5 Humanization through pain ............................................................... 60

4.4.6 Preparing for pain: Making the switch ............................................... 64

4.5 Round 4: Sharing Pain between Teammates ............................................. 66
4.5.1 “The moment I feel the way you grip me…” – Pain, training, and restraint within training relationships .................................................................66
4.5.2 “We bled together” – Building connections and bonds between fighters ........71
4.5.3 Emotional contagion and sharing others’ pain..................................................76
4.6 Round 5: Reflections of ‘Doing’ Pain Research..................................................84
  4.6.1 You have to experience it firsthand ................................................................84
  4.6.2 Relationships between researcher and participant ........................................89
  4.6.3 Reflections of video diaries .............................................................................95
  4.6.4 Seeing the cage in a different light: Concluding thoughts ............................96

Chapter 5 Discussion ................................................................................................98

5 Discussion ............................................................................................................98
  5.1 Distinguishing between Physical Pain, Injury, Emotional Pain ....................98
      5.1.1 Social validation and praise for pain .........................................................99
  5.2 Functions of Pain ...........................................................................................104
  5.3 Consent and Giving and Receiving of Pain ....................................................107
      5.3.1 Developing social bonds through giving and receiving pain .................110
      5.3.2 Pain humanized fighters and their opponents .......................................113
      5.3.3 Use of video diaries ..............................................................................115
  5.4 Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research ..................................................116
  5.5 Applied Implications ......................................................................................117
  5.6 Conclusion ......................................................................................................118

References .............................................................................................................119

Appendices ............................................................................................................128
List of Appendices

Appendix A – Summary of the Integrative Model of Pain in Sport

Appendix B – Information letter and consent forms for athletes, training partners, and coaches

Appendix C – Demographics forms for athletes, training partners, and coaches

Appendix D – Interview guides for athletes, training partners, and coaches

Appendix E – Video diary guidelines for athletes
Chapter 1
Introduction

1 Introduction

Pain has been very narrowly investigated within the sporting context and is typically viewed as a negative experience and an impediment to athletes’ training (Green, 2011; Spencer, 2012). Mixed martial artists experience an enormous amount of mental and physical pain while in competition and while training for a Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fight (Green, 2011), making the intense, hyper-explosive combat sport a unique context for the study of pain. The interdependence of mixed martial artists with their training partners and coaches (Massey, Meyer, & Naylor, 2013; Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013), and the pain that is experienced during the training sessions develops into an intimacy between fighters and their training team (Green, 2011; Spencer, 2012). Fighters have reported that pain can enable them to better understand his or her mental and physical limits and enhance their capacity to affect their opponent (Green, 2011; Spencer, 2012). However, little research has examined the psychological and emotional factors accompanying MMA performance, particularly concerning how fighters experience and develop meanings about pain within the sport. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis research is to explore mixed martial artists’ experiences of pain while training and competing in MMA.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

2 Literature Review

2.1 Overview and Definitions of Pain

Pain has been studied from a variety of perspectives and discussed extensively within the medical, psychological, and psychosomatic literature, producing a wide array of pain management methods for both acute and chronic pain sufferers (Aldrich & Eccleston, 2000; Roessler, 2006; Smith, 2008). Although philosophical, cultural, and social discourses have contributed to the construction of the phenomenon of pain (Aldrich & Eccleston, 2000), pain research has been centered within the medical field, with a specific focus on how to treat or alleviate disease and damage to the body (Smith, 2008). The clinical discourse describes physical pain as an attack on the body and it has been argued that this dominant medical conceptualization of pain has silenced other nonmedical ways of understanding the body in pain (Aldrich & Eccleston, 2000).

Although pain is subject to numerous definitions, one of the most widely accepted definitions of pain is: “An unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage” (International Association for the Study of Pain Taxonomy [IASP], 2015). This definition focuses on damage done to the body; however, it also addresses the individual’s emotional experience of pain (IASP Taxonomy, 2015). Pain is subjective in nature and can be challenging to communicate verbally, which makes it difficult to assess. Individuals learn the meaning of the word ‘pain’ through their early life experiences related to injury (IASP Taxonomy, 2015). Acute pain is described as a sharp sensation short in duration that is experienced at the onset of injury and for a short time after (Howe, 2001). In contrast, chronic pain is considered a continuous sensation that may occur for months or even years following an injury (Howe, 2001). Perceptions of pain and one’s ability to cope with pain are not determined solely by the physical experience (intensity, distribution, and quality of pain), but involve the individual’s life history, personality, mood, behaviour, and the social environment (Persson & Lilja, 2001; IASP Total Cancer Pain, 2009).
Much of the medical research on pain has focused on the physical management and reduction of pain, and has neglected the mental and emotional suffering that individuals experience (Persson & Lilja, 2001). In response to the biophysical contextualization of pain, Saunders developed the concept of ‘total pain’ (Clark, 1999; Saunders, 1986). This concept was developed to facilitate a whole-person approach of patient care and encompasses physiological, social, emotional, and spiritual components to create a more holistic representation of pain (Clark, 1999; Total Cancer Pain, 2009; Saunders, 1986). Closely paralleling Saunders’ total pain model, Morris (1991) discussed how pain emerges through the interchange of the mind, body, and culture, and addressed the literature’s inattention to the meaning of pain experiences. Slowly, more researchers are exploring the psychological aspects of the phenomenon of pain (Newmahr, 2010; Persson & Lilja, 2001). Although the largest body of work in pain research has focused on the context of disease and disability, there is growing research on pain within sport (Newmahr, 2010; Roderick, 2006).

Within the sporting context, pain has been explored from physical, psychological, and sociological perspectives, with most of the sport literature focusing on physical pain resulting from injury or psychological responses to injury. The following sections will discuss how pain has been studied through physical, psychological, and sociological contexts within sport.

2.2 Physical Pain in Sport

Pain is an umbrella term that covers a multitude of sensations that an athlete may experience during training and competition, and various types of pain have been outlined within the sport literature (Addison, Kremer, & Bell, 1998; Miles & Clarkeston, 1994; Thornton, 1990). For example, athletes often live with pain both during their sport performances and in their everyday lives; as a result, chronic pain has been well studied among athletes (Spencer, 2012). However, these classification systems tend to focus solely on injury pain, neglecting routinely recurring pain in sport such as fatigue and discomfort, and negative and positive training pain that inform athletes about how their body is performing (Addison et al., 1998; O’Connor, 2015). To address the issue of classifying routinized sport pain, Addison and colleagues (1998) developed a sport pain taxonomy and an integrative model of pain to help inform coaching staff when rest is warranted over athletes’ continued participation. The model uses a two-stage process of cognitive appraisal, mediated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors and specific cognitive coping
strategies, in order to address athletes’ physiological sensations of pain (summary of model provided in Appendix A). This was the first attempt to provide a model that illustrates athletes’ experiences of pain as a multi-faceted concept and highlights the complexity of researching athletes’ pain experiences (Addison et al., 1998). Nevertheless, Addison et al.’s (1998) model is limited by its focus on behavioural expressions of physical pain experiences, and there has been little progress made toward understanding how athletes interpret pain and how their experiences of pain affect their cognitive responses.

Much of the pain research within sport has focused on examining strategies athletes use to endure and overcome pain (Ryan & Kovacic, 1966; Smith, 2008). Sport and the accompanying physical training requires athletes to suffer and deny pain, especially at the elite level where controlling any response to pain is often valued (Addison et al., 1998; Smith, 2008). For example, athletes may internally celebrate overcoming their pain and continuing to compete, and within the sport literature they are often framed as heroes for doing so (Roessler, 2006). In addition, much of the pain literature around combat sport athletes discusses the requirement of athletes to train their bodies not to respond to pain, both self-inflicted and inflicted by their training partner. Further, combat sport athletes harden their bodies through routinized pain within training in order to endure the pain induced from competition (Curry, 1993; Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013; Smith, 2008; Spencer, 2012); a process referred to as body callusing (Spencer, 2009; Spencer, 2012).

Athletes’ perceptions of pain are described as being connected to cultures of risk (Nixon, 1992; Nixon, 1996; Roessler, 2006), which emphasizes the normalization of pain and playing while hurt in competition (Smith, 2008). Nixon, a major scholar of the culture of risk literature, developed the term ‘sportnets’ to explain the interactions between various social agents (e.g., coaches, physicians) within sport groups and the influence of these interactions on athletes’ acceptance of the normalization of pain and injury (Nixon, 1992). The risk-pain-injury paradox within sport perpetuates the public denial of pain and injuries, as well as deters athletes from seeking regular medical attention (Nixon, 1992; Nixon, 1996; Roessler, 2006; Smith, 2008). As a result of pain’s representation within the sport literature, it is presumed that pain is something to be endured or overcome. This dominant focus, influenced by social and cultural influences, further perpetuates pain as something that is negative.
2.3 A Cognitive Perspective of Pain in Sport

The psychological response to pain and injury is a well-researched area within the sporting literature, and several conceptual models have been created in order to understand athletes’ psychological response (i.e., stress and grief process models) to sport injury (Wiese-Bjornstal, Smith, Shaffer, & Morrey, 1998). With respect to pain responses, pain tolerance (and pain threshold) has been explored in-depth, as persistence through pain has been associated with excellence in sport (Addison et al., 1998; Ryan & Kovacic, 1966). Thus far, several studies have suggested that athletes tolerate pain better and perceive pain as less harmful to performance than non-athletes (Jaremko, Silbert, & Mann, 1981; Ryan & Kovacic, 1966; Walkner, 1971). For example, Ryan and Kovacic (1966) conducted a study to test pain threshold and tolerance among male university students who were grouped on the basis of having participated in contact sports (e.g., football, wrestling, or boxing), non-contact sports only, or no participation in varsity athletics. As a result of pressure applied to the tibia by a football cleat, it was found that contact sport athletes tolerated more pain than non-contact sport athletes and non-athletes (Ryan & Kovacic, 1966). Further, researchers suggest that the level of sport competition may influence pain tolerance. For instance, Scott and Gijsbers (1981) explored ischaemic pain tolerance (e.g., maximum number of fist contractions tolerated with a sphygmomanometer cuff wrapped around the upper arm and inflated) among male and female national swimmers over the course of a training season (seven months). The researchers found that not only were national swimmers more pain tolerant than their club or non-competitive comparators, but their pain tolerance improved over the course of their training season, indicating some mode of short-term pain adaptation. For example, the national swimmers’ tolerances were highest at the peak of their training season, and then dropped off to a lower level at the beginning of a new training season. Scott and Gijsbers (1981) suggested that swimmers’ pain perceptions are influenced by experiential and motivational factors including experiencing repetitive bouts of pain within training, pressure from teammates and coaches to tolerate more pain, and interpreting pain as a confirmation of one’s competency and effort within training (Scott & Gijsbers, 1981).

In an ethnographic study on the meaning of physical pain among professional wrestlers, Smith (2008) suggested that pain authenticated the training experience for wrestlers. In addition, pain legitimized the hurt and sacrifice that these athletes went through within training and competition. For example, one wrestler said that he flaunts his battle wounds acquired from
performances, and that the blood and bruising authenticate his participation in professional wrestling: “I bleed, I suffer, I am alive” (Smith, 2008, p. 141). In a longitudinal qualitative study examining the normalization of injury-induced pain among an amateur wrestler and his teammates, drawing on field notes, photo-elicitation techniques, and interviews, Curry (1993) suggested that experiences of pain were associated with an athlete’s motivation to succeed in sport. Curry explained that some athletes understood pain as an indication of the body rebuilding itself to become stronger, which caused these athletes to become “supermotivated” (p. 279). These results highlight the ongoing debate within the sport literature of whether or not athletes’ pain tolerance is innate or developed through sport participation. Most importantly, the findings of these studies further support the need to examine pain as something that is understood through subjective interpretations and experienced as a result of the meanings formed about pain. In addition, more attention should be given to researching the experiences of cognitive and emotional pain, and not solely experiences of physical pain (e.g., in relation to injury).

Ryan and Kovacic (1966) proposed that differing abilities to tolerate pain may be explained by the perceptual styles of athletes. In addition, the researchers propose that athletes’ abilities to regulate the incoming sensory stimuli enable them to tolerate greater amounts of pain. In accordance with Ryan and Kovacic’s findings that pain can be influenced through perceptual processing, a more recent cross-sectional study examined pain perception and modulation among male and female triathletes and non-athlete controls and found that triathletes demonstrated a higher physiological pain tolerance, lower pain ratings, and decreased fear of pain and pain catastrophizing compared to non-athletes; these traits may underline triathletes’ ability to persist through extreme pain (Geva & Defrin, 2013). Importantly, Geva and Defrin (2013) acknowledged that triathletes’ perceptions of pain are determined by their appraisal of the pain experience, and further, triathletes’ willingness to endure pain can be attributed in part to their perceived control over sport induced pain. Geva and Defrin’s (2013) findings that perceptions of pain can be influenced by perceptions of control support Addison and colleagues’ (1998) investigation of types of pain within sport. Addison et al. (1998) explained that athletes within their study perceived ‘positive training pain’; however, pain was only perceived as positive when the athletes understood it to be under their voluntary control. The results of these studies demonstrate that athletes’ appraisal about their sport-induced pain can influence their ability to
tolerate pain and shape the relationship they have with pain (i.e., positive or negative). However, little research has explored how athletes form interpretations about pain.

2.4 Pain in Social Relationships

Social aspects of sport have been explored in a variety of areas, contributing to a considerable body of knowledge on the influence of the social environment on athletes’ performance and wellbeing (Jordan, Bruner, Eys, & Spink, 2014). Researchers have investigated social aspects of group dynamics and roles in sport (Beauchamp & Eys, 2007; Carron, Hausenblas, & Eys, 2005; Cartwright & Zander, 1968), team cohesion (Carron, Spink, & Prapavessis, 1995; Dion, 2000), social identity, (Hogg, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Zucchermaglio, 2005), conflict (Jowett, 2003; Sullivan & Feltz, 2001), cliques (Eitzen, 1973; Fletcher & Hanton, 2003) and social support (Patterson, Smith, Everett, & Ptacek, 1998). In addition, the psychological literature has revealed some interesting findings that further our understanding of the impact of the social environment on athletes’ experiences of pain. However, little research has explored how athletes experience pain within social relationships.

2.4.1 Pain tolerance and social modeling

Sport researchers have suggested numerous ways for athletes to manage their pain in order to keep it private through, for example, research in the areas of social pressure and social modeling. Sternbach (1978) discussed that within group situations, social pressures affect an athlete’s pain response. For example, in one experimental study on team pain perception, pairs of participants performed two tests of a motor maze task; one participant experienced electric shocks throughout the task, while the other team member, a confederate, received no shocks and was instructed to either ignore pain or demonstrate a low pain tolerance (Johnston & Mannell, 1980). Johnston and Mannell (1980) found that the shock-receiving participants encouraged their teammates (confederates) to ignore their discomfort induced from a pain stimulus in order to continue with the task. However, it is important to note that the participants were able to block out the pain stimulus when their partner (confederate) was present during the test and when ignoring pain was standard for the team (i.e., the confederate pretended to ignore the pain stimulus; Johnston & Mannell, 1980). This result is in line with Sternback’s (1978) earlier research that individuals’ responses to pain are more than just physical and psychological, but also a product of social cues. In addition, individuals’ pain tolerance is also affected by social modeling. For instance, Craig
and Weiss (1971) conducted a social modeling experiment among male and female participants. These participants were required to watch a pain-tolerant and intolerant model perform a shock-endurance task before trying the task themselves (Craig & Weiss, 1971). The male participants who watched a pain-tolerant model were able to tolerate significantly more pain than when they watched a pain-intolerant model (Craig & Weiss, 1971). Although the sport literature emphasizes that athletes can absorb and endure pain privately, researchers are beginning to recognize the influence teammates can have in shaping athletes’ processing of pain.

### 2.4.2 Pain and social support

Social support is defined as “the subjective belief that there exist sources of support, help, and caring within one’s social network” (Patterson et al., 1998, p. 102). Social support is an important buffer against life stress and may serve as a protective or vulnerability factor for athletes who battle with peer acceptance, criticisms from numerous social agents, or suffering from a traumatic event (Patterson et al., 1998; Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013). A number of researchers have expressed that social support has a significant impact on life stress and wellbeing (Patterson et al., 1998). These studies have shown that an individual’s perception of high social support can buffer the impact of stressful life events, whereas perceptions of low social support may worsen their negative effects (Cohen, 2004; Sarason et al., 1985; Patterson et al., 1998). In addition, individuals’ perceptions of social support can enhance their perceptions of self-worth, as well as provide reassurance of their resourcefulness and an optimistic mindset that can alleviate adverse experiences (Cohen, 2004; Sarason et al., 1985; Patterson et al., 1998; Rosenfeld, Richman, & Hardy, 1989). Further, Sarason et al.’s (1985) quantitative study exploring the relationship between life events, social support, and illness among male Navy recruits demonstrated that social support had a positive effect on the recruits’ adverse experiences within training. Sarason and colleagues also discussed the impacts of social attachments on soldiers’ psychological wellbeing, noting that the social ties developed between soldiers have been found to contribute to their success (performance) and survival.

Tamminen and colleagues (2013) conducted a qualitative, cross-sectional study to explore elite female athletes’ potential for growth after adversity. Although not specifically focusing on physical pain in sport, this study described athletes’ experiences of adversity and the importance of social support in dealing with adversity in sport. The study’s findings suggest that athletes
may experience growth when they find meaning in their experiences, and meaning-making was influenced by athletes’ positive perceptions of social support (and support available in the future). This study highlights the impact of social relationships on athletes’ understanding of adverse experiences, and also sheds light on the need for researchers to account for athletes’ subjective understanding of the meaning of pain.

2.4.3 Constructing pain in social relationships

A few studies have explored pain and suffering from a sociological perspective. These researchers found that physical suffering can facilitate bonding between athletes, clarity, and internal strength (Smith, 2008), especially due to the emotional and physical stress produced in training and competition (Atkinson, 2008). In an ethnographic study of suffering among triathletes, athletes taught each other how to frame suffering as personally exciting (Atkinson, 2008). For example, a novice participant discussed his interactions with a more senior triathlete around re-framing pain, saying: “[h]e taught me to view the pain and grief as positive rather than negative, as a way of exposing how much you can accomplish and how much spirit you have in you, if you just let the emotions happen” (Atkinson, 2008, p. 172). The suffering and agony produced within triathlons and training create an environment that fosters meaningful social connections and emotional experiences between people that may not be elicited in everyday life (Atkinson, 2008). Atkinson (2008) also discussed the idea of pain communities within his ethnography on pain and suffering among triathletes. Communities of pain highlight that pain can be experienced not only within social groups, but also that pain can be constructed as positive through athletes’ social interactions. For example, many extreme sports enthusiasts describe their pain experiences as pleasurable and positive (Le Breton, 2000). Extreme sports (e.g., running races across deserts or jungles, triathlons, and extreme skiing) are explained as ordeals that are long and intensive and are capable of producing personal suffering, and participants are committed to resist their increasing suffering and pain, in hopes of strengthening their character (Le Breton, 2000). Further, “the more intense the suffering, the more the achievement has a reassuring personal significance, the more fulfilling the satisfaction of [surviving in a symbolic game with pain and] having resisted the temptation to give up” (Le Breton, 2000, p. 1). The findings of these studies demonstrate the impact of social influences on athletes’ interpretations of pain, and the ability of social interactions to develop positive meanings of pain.
Cohen (2009) ethnographically explored the sociality of pain within kibadachi, a karate exercise, which is known to cause immediate and excruciating agony. The acute physical pain that arises from kibadachi is said to alter its participants’ bodily and social realities and consume their entire world (Cohen, 2009). Cohen (2009) uses an anthropological perspective to explain this type of pain experience, saying it is “the process of freeing an object and its semiotic signifier from their fixed relationship” (p. 618). Acute physical pain can alter someone’s everyday world to become bare, stripping the body of social characteristics and exposing it to experience more physical sensations than it would normally experience (Cohen, 2009). Hsu (2005) discussed the impact of self-inflicted acute pain on a person, saying that it can bring interconnection between the person in pain and anyone who is present with the sufferer, and Hsu argues that the feeling of interconnection can facilitate the process of healing. Self-inflicted pain experienced within kibadachi, or within other martial arts training, has the ability to eliminate participants’ boundaries and interconnect athletes. Through Cohen’s exploration of self-inflicted acute pain he highlights the social nature of pain and its ability to reconstruct the boundaries of athletes sharing the pain experience with training partners.

Thus far, researchers have demonstrated that athletes’ ability to tolerate pain can be enhanced through the encouragement of teammates. In addition, social support can positively impact athletes’ wellbeing and help them move forward during times of adversity. Further, researchers have shown that pain can be constructed as positive through social relationships, which can enhance athletes’ performance and expand their physical and mental limits within sport. Although researchers are illustrating social constructions of pain, there has been little research on the process of how social interactions shape athletes’ understanding pain.

It is clear that the experience of pain is central to athletes’ training and competing, yet it remains to be fully explored. In addition, athletes are often interacting with multiple social agents (Nixon, 1992) who may influence his or her experience of pain within training and competition. Even though individual sport athletes are not interdependent with a team to achieve competitive goals, they rely on other athletes outside of their competitive task, for example during training that requires a teammate (Evans, Eys, & Bruner, 2012). Combat sport athletes are alone in the cage when competing, however much of their success is due to the help and support of their teammates and coaches (Massey et al., 2013; Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013). However, there has been little research examining how training partners and coaches influence athletes’ mental and
physical preparation and readiness for competition (Mellalieu, Hanton, & Shearer, 2008), particularly within sports where training partners and coaches may inflict and experience pain along with the athlete. Therefore, pain should be investigated in terms of its function within social relationships. Given the interdependent nature of MMA, this proposed research will explore how athletes experience pain as they train for competitions with coaches and training partners, as well as how the relationships developed between these individuals contribute to athletes’ experiences of pain.

The phenomenon of pain is most often viewed as a negative physical and psychological experience and an impediment to athletes’ training and competing. This notion of pain may be limiting and it may impede other ways of understanding and living with pain. Further, experiences of pain as a group can foster intimacy and connection among athletes, training partners, and coaches. Therefore, this research will investigate how pain is experienced by fighters, as well as how pain is shared among athletes, training partners, and coaches within training and competition.

2.5 Mixed Martial Arts as a Context for Pain

Mixed martial arts (MMA) is a highly technical, intense, and hyper-explosive combat sport that is gaining popularity around the world (Abramson & Modzelewski, 2011; Weaving, 2014). MMA is an amalgamation of disciplines involving kickboxing, Muay Thai, wrestling, Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, Sambo, Western Boxing, judo, karate, and Tae Kwon Do (Massey et al., 2013; Mierzwinski, Velija, & Malcolm, 2014). The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) is host to the largest MMA competitions and is the fastest growing sport association in the world (UFC, 2015; Weaving, 2014). The first UFC event was in 1993, and was originally legal in only some states of the U.S (UFC, 2015). The UFC has now expanded into Europe, Australia, the Middle East, and Asia (UFC, 2015). Fighters compete in front of a large audience within a 750 square foot elevated cage called the ‘Octagon’ (Spencer, 2012; UFC, 2015; Weaving, 2014). At the professional level, mixed martial artists compete three to four times a year in a mentally and physically taxing battle, in which they have the full use of their bodies to affect their opponents (Spencer, 2012). A fight can be won in several ways: submission, knock-out, or the judges’ decision (athletes fight all rounds; UFC, 2015).
The MMA sporting environment places many extraordinary demands on a mixed martial artist (Massey et al., 2013). For example, the athlete must maintain an ascetic routine (strict physical training and diet regimen) that demands discipline and self-regulation during eight to twelve weeks leading up to a fight (Massey et al., 2013; Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013), which may inflict an enormous amount of mental and physical pain on the athlete (Green, 2011). However, combat sport athletes have reported that through pain, a mixed martial artist experiences the breakdown and discovery of the ‘raw’ self, which enables the athlete to better understand his or her mental and physical limits, as well as enhances their capacity to affect their opponent (Green, 2011; Spencer, 2012).

Pain can also build confidence in athletes’ training and in the skills they are learning to be able to succeed within competition (Green, 2011); for example, one combat sport athlete understood pain within training as weakness being flushed out of the body (Spencer, 2012). Within a grounded theory study on self-regulation among mixed martial artists, Massey and colleagues (2013) reported that athletes felt ready for competition if they had been pushed to their breaking point within training by being exposed to painful and distressing situations and experiencing an exponential amount of pain. For example, one mixed martial artist expressed the importance of experiencing pain and psychological distress within training for a fight: “you need to be pushed to a level where you feel worthless, to feel like you cannot do anything... because then, whoever I am fighting, I know they cannot do this to me” (Massey et al., 2013, p. 18). Green (2011) explored the seduction of pain among mixed martial artists in a three-year ethnographic study. The experience of pain, which was seen as central to mixed martial arts, allowed for the development of intimacy and connection between fighters and their training partners. Green explained that the intensity of training facilitates a type of intimacy which is not frequently experienced in everyday life. Through inflicting and receiving pain, athletes understood each other better and more quickly than others outside their sporting context. Moreover, these shared experiences of pain created a sense of community among the mixed martial artists; shared vulnerability and toughness nurtured the growth of intimacy between athletes. Lastly, Green expressed that pain signified crossing a boundary and assured MMA fighters that some form of growth (e.g., spiritual, physical) was taking place: pain’s effect on the body within training and competition can have a cognitive effect, therefore altering how an athlete understands him or herself. Despite increased interest in MMA, little research has examined the psychological and
emotional factors accompanying MMA performance, specifically within how fighters experience and develop meanings about pain within the sport.

2.6 Gender in Sport

Although gender was not the focus of this research project, it has been prominently studied within sport, and within MMA. Gender has been critically explored within the sociology of sport literature, and researchers have discussed sport as being an institution by which hegemonic masculinity is developed and reinforced (Young, White, & McTeer, 1994, p. 176). Men have been shown to value aggression, violence, and risk-taking within sport, and have come to understand that tolerating risk in sport is a part of their masculine identity (Young et al., 1994). Further, the display of violence within sport performances has become the dominant way in which male bodies achieve a masculine status (Young, 2012).

With regards to the construction of a masculine identity, researchers have discussed that boys are socialized to demonstrate that their bodies are strong, effective, and a source of action (Young et al., 1994; Young, 2012). Additionally, boys are socialized to display their bodies as dominant, whereas girls are taught to display their bodies as passive (Lorber & Martin, 2011). In addition, Messner (1990) discussed that men have been socialized to use their bodies as a weapon in sport, in order to be able to endure and inflict pain on other bodies. Further, male bodies in sport have been expressed as violent instruments, which are enabled and reinforced by the social praise from coaches, teammates, and fans (Schyfter, 2008). Therefore, it appears that male athletes’ sense of masculinity is validated through their participation in hyper-masculine sports requiring them to exert physical strength and power while also tolerating, or appearing to tolerate, and ignoring physical pain (Young et al., 1994). Additionally, Messer (1990) expressed that violent contact sports have come to perpetuate men’s stereotypical superiority over women (i.e., physical strength and power, aggression behaviour).

Messner (1990) expressed the normalization for men to subject their bodies to violence within sport, saying:

To question their decision to give up their bodies would ultimately mean to question the entire institutionalized system of rules through which they had successfully established relationships and a sense of identity. (p. 212)
Within the sport and sociology literature, researchers have discussed male and female bodies in terms of their power to both create gender identity and display/perpetuate gender inequality (Vaccaro, 2011). Specifically within MMA, bodies have been trained to represent socially and culturally shaped gender ideals, for instance, in an ethnographic exploration of gender in MMA, Vaccaro (2011) suggested that MMA fighters took part in an embodiment process in order to fit the standards of ideal masculinity. He argued that competing in MMA enabled men to honestly test and evaluate their manhood, and thus, attain and maintain masculine statuses. Tompkins and Borer (2014) explored gender performances among women in MMA and found that women whom adopted masculine characteristics, such as acting overly tough and aggressive, recreated “gender order”. Further, women adopting a masculine role were expected to perform better in competition. On the other hand, the women that adopted a more feminine role were often underestimated, which gave them a psychological edge in competition. In an ethnographic study of MMA, Spencer (2012) explored how experiences of pain and injury affected athletes’ conformity to masculine identities. Spencer expressed that, within MMA, athletes try to embody masculine ideals, specifically through withstanding pain; however, sustaining an injury actually challenged their ability to attain their masculine status. For example, an injury made male fighters aware of their bodies’ vulnerabilities, which resulted in a decrease in or loss of their masculinity within the context of MMA. The research on gender in sport, specifically masculine identity, has made important contributions to the sport literature. However, for the purposes of this research study, the focus was on analyzing athletes’ experiences of pain within MMA, and not on providing a gendered analysis of athletes’ experiences of pain.

2.7 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to explore athletes’ experiences of pain while training for a MMA competition. The specific research questions were: 1) How do mixed martial artists experience pain as they train for competitions? 2) What are the meanings that athletes attribute to their pain experiences? 3) How do MMA fighters develop relationships with training partners and coaches and how do these relationships contribute to the fighters’ experiences of pain?
Chapter 3
Methods

3 Methods

3.1 Paradigmatic Position

This qualitative study was conducted from a social constructivist paradigmatic position (Creswell, 2012), to explore how individuals understand their experiences within the social world and examine the varied and multiple subjective meanings of participants’ experiences (Creswell, 2012). The aim of a social constructivist approach is to provide a deeper understanding of the meanings individuals have about their lived experiences (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, this approach helped support the exploration of mixed martial artists’ experiences of pain, how they processed these experiences, and the meanings they developed of their pain experiences. With respect to ontology, which is concerned with the nature of knowledge and reality, a researcher working from this worldview seeks the multiple realities of participants rather than a universal, single reality (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, it was my goal to capture the fighters’ experiences of pain by entering the fighters’ training world and studying their lived experiences of pain. In regards to this study’s epistemology, the way in which knowledge is accumulated, a subjectivist epistemological perspective was employed, meaning that the data was co-constructed between myself (the researcher) and the participants (Creswell, 2012). The goal was to be in the field as much as possible and minimize the distance between the researcher and the participants so that the researcher could better understand the subjective realities of the individuals being studied (Creswell, 2012).

3.2 Methodology

I used a qualitative multiple instrumental case study approach (Stake, 1995) to study the phenomena of pain among four (three male and one female) amateur and professional mixed martial artists and three of their training partners. A case study methodology is useful for exploring and developing an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon using a single or multiple cases within a real-life context or setting (Creswell, 2012). Selecting a case study methodology assumes that each case can contribute something profound to the research process (Creswell, 2010). Case studies are intensive, requiring a lot of detail, and are focused on a
bounded system (Creswell, 2012). Lastly, case studies require the collection of many forms of data, such as interviews, observations, audiovisual materials, in order to provide a rich and detailed account of the phenomenon of pain (Creswell, 2012). In this study, four MMA fighters were purposefully selected based on the assumption that they would experience pain in their training and in a fight. Fighters had to have competed in at least one previous fight (sanctioned or unsanctioned) in any weight class. Participation in the study was open to male and female amateur or professional athletes. Data were collected using interviews, video diaries, participant observation, and video recordings of training and fights.

3.3 Data Collection

Extensive interactions with fighters, training partners, and the coach occurred over four months, in order to more fully explore fighters’ experiences with pain and how they understood and made sense of pain in their sport. Therefore, data were collected longitudinally from the beginning of a ‘fight camp’ until after the completion of the fighters’ fights. Training for a competition, referred to as a fight camp, is a period of eight to twelve weeks of intense training that marks the beginning of the process of training for a competition. The final week of a fight camp typically involves less intensive training in order to prevent fighters from sustaining injuries so close to a fight. Data collection commenced in September 2015 and included multiple semi-structured interviews during the training period and after the culminating fight, athlete video diaries collected across the training period, as well as participant observations, field notes, and video recordings of fighters’ training sessions and fights to gather data regarding social interactions between fighters, training partners, and the coach. The training period concluded with an international fight held in the Caribbean that was also attended by the researcher. Data collection continued with post-fight interviews with fighters upon their return to Canada.

To gain access to the participants, I contacted a local Toronto MMA gym following approval of this study by the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board. At the gym I met with Bobbie, the gym owner and head coach, to discuss the study and the possibility of recruiting four fighters and their training partners. Bobbie was immediately interested in the project, and wanted to be a part of the study, as he would be fighting in an MMA fight in the fall. He also informed me about his students who were training for the fight and said he would ask them if they would be interested in participating in the study. Interested fighters contacted me to participate in the study.
and to set up a meeting to describe the study purposes. Fighters were told that participating in this study would require completing three interviews (one at the beginning of the fight camp, one after the fight camp but before their fight, and one after the completion of their fight), as well as completing video diaries to record their training experiences over the course of the fight camp. Secondary data sources included interviews with the fighters’ training partners after the fights. All the fighters and training partners provided informed consent to participate in this study before beginning data collection.

Although gender was not the focus of the present research study, it did come up throughout the course of my time in the field, and I offer several brief, critical examples of the ways in which gender came up throughout the discussion section. Within this methods section, I felt it was important to acknowledge my influence as a female researcher in my mid-twenties entering the MMA gym environment. As a result of being a warm and approachable female, both male and female fighters may have welcomed me more easily into their lives than if I were a male researcher. In addition, fighters may have talked with me differently and chosen to be more selective about what they shared with me about their experiences of pain. For example, fighters may have felt more comfortable and relaxed about discussing their experiences of emotional pain with me, rather than a male, who may not provide the same type of emotionally nurturing environment as I tried to offer fighters – especially since males are socialized to suppress their emotional expressions and reactions more than females (Vaccaro, Schrock, & McCabe, 2011; Young et al., 1994). Therefore, entering into the world of MMA as a female, paired with being a new and naive MMA participant, may have led to fighters perceiving me as less of a threat to them physically, emotionally, and socially.

3.4 Participants

Participant profiles are provided in the results section; however, some background information about the participants is provided here. The participants in this study included three male and one female amateur and professional MMA fighters from various weight classes. In order to be included in this study, fighters were selected on the basis of fighting in a MMA fight in the fall/winter of 2015 prior to January 2016. Gender, weight class, and fighting status were not used to exclude any participants from the study. The term fighter is used to refer to the participants throughout the thesis; the participants expressed that they did not like to be referred to as
athletes, and ‘mixed martial artist’ was not appropriate to describe these fighters, since mixed martial artists could train and not compete. For instance, there were members at the local MMA gym whom referred to themselves as mixed martial artists as they had been training within the sport for many years, but had never competed in a MMA competition; whereas MMA fighters had competed in non-sanctioned or sanctioned MMA fights, and were continuing to train for the purpose of fighting in MMA competitions. Therefore, the term ‘fighter’ best reflects the participants’ preference for representation in the thesis. Pseudonyms are used throughout the thesis to maintain the fighters’ anonymity.

Within MMA fighting, amateur and professional fighters compete in approximately three to five fights per year (amateur fighters usually compete more frequently than professional fighters); therefore, fighters have three to five ‘fight camps’ or training ‘seasons’ of eight to twelve weeks in duration throughout the year. However, fighters train all year round, but at a lesser intensity than they would be training at during a fight camp. The fighters and their training partners participating in this study typically competed in one to four fights per year. Further, fighters and their training partners all had experience competing in at least one martial arts competition (e.g., Muay Thai, Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, MMA), which would have provided them with opportunities to experience pain in training and competition.

The fighters and training partners all trained out of the same local Toronto MMA gym. Typically fighters trained six days per week, participating in classes (grappling, striking, MMA), as well as individual training session with the coach or another fighter (about 20 hours per week). In addition to fight training, the athletes performed cardio and interval training seven times per week and lifted weights on average three times per week. Weight training was minimized during fight camps, because fighters were weight cutting and could not afford to put on muscle.

3.5 Interviews

Interviews with fighters and training partners were conducted individually at mutually-agreed-upon locations that were convenient for the participant. Interviews took place in coffee shops, restaurants, and at the MMA gym. The interviews were audio recorded using a Sony4GB Digital Voice Recorder and transcribed verbatim. The length of the fighter interviews ranged from approximately half an hour to three hours, and the training partner interviews ranged from an hour to two hours.
3.5.1 Fighter interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the fighters at the beginning of their fight camp, after their camp (mid-way through their training period), and again after their culminating fight. The interviews were semi-structured (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) and covered topics related to the fighters’ background, experiences with pain, as well as how they processed or dealt with pain (see Appendix D for interview guides). The second interview consisted of questions related to the fight camp process and teammate relationships, and the third interview consisted of questions related to fighters and teammates’ fights, teammate relationships, and the research process. Inductive analysis of the previous interviews as well as video diary content and researcher observations provided a basis for questions that were included for the second and third sets of interviews. The final interview also served a member-checking process to develop my interpretations of the fighters’ experiences and refine my results. Member-checking is a process by which the researcher uses the participants to confirm the research findings to establish credibility (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). It is important to note that member checking should not be used with the goal of verifying findings, but rather as a process to speculate and discuss the developing findings (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). These emergent research findings should be considered its own data in and of itself (Lather, as cited in Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014).

3.5.2 Training partner interviews

I intended to ask each fighter to identify two of their training partners and ask them if they would be willing to partake in an interview after the fight; however, the fighters participating in the study often acted as training partners for one another. As a result, I interviewed three training partners who trained most closely with the fighters. Training partner interviews were conducted after the fights in order to gain their perspective into the process of training and competing for a fight. Additionally, the data collected from the fight trip (e.g., video recordings, field notes) helped to inform the questions for the interview with the training partners. Training partners were asked similar questions as the fighters, but the training partner interviews also explored their relationships with fighters and how sharing pain through training affected them physically, mentally, and emotionally. Gaining insights from training partners on the training process following the completion of the fights allowed for a better understanding of the phenomenon of pain, especially because two of the training partners travelled with the fighters for the fights in
the Caribbean. While the results of the thesis pertain primarily to the data from the fighters, some quotes from training partners are also provided in the results section to offer additional information regarding fighters’ experiences of pain.

3.6 Video Diaries

Fighters were required to keep video diaries to document their experiences of training leading up to their fight. Video diaries are a contemporary and innovative visual method that offer the opportunity to capture meaningful representation of social worlds (Cherrington & Watson, 2010). This visual method was particularly valuable for the research process, because of its ability to capture data beyond textual representation such as the embodied and sensuous lived experiences of individuals (Cherrington & Watson, 2010; Smith, Caddick, & Williams, 2015). For example, the raw firsthand images produced from the video diaries, such as fighters’ sweat and bruising, and often injuries ensued from training enhanced my understanding through seeing and feeling the fighters’ experiences of pain. In addition, in contrast to other methods such as written or audio diaries, the stories fighters told through their voices, facial and emotive expressions, and bodily movements (Cherrington & Watson, 2010) facilitated a more comprehensive representation of fighters’ training experiences. Further, fighters were able to share their experiences as they were happening in the moment, which would have likely not been possible through other methods such as interviews that rely on retrospective recall (Smith et al., 2015).

Each fighter was given a GoPro camera that had been engraved for theft deterrence, along with a protective carry case containing a: tripod (3-way pivot arm), a USB connector cord, a wall charger, and Micro SD Memory card. The fighters were asked to complete two entries per week at any point during or after their training sessions. However, if a major event occurred during the week (e.g., injury, training partner/coach dispute), fighters were encouraged to make an extra video entry. For the purpose of confidentiality, fighters were asked to individually record their video logs in a private environment of their choosing. Data from the video entries were collected once a week: the SD card (memory card) from the GoPro was loaded onto my computer and fighters received a new card to continue their recordings. For ethical reasons, the laptop was password protected and encrypted, and all recordings were removed from the SD cards before passing it back to the fighters the following week.
The video diary questions were kept intentionally broad, in order for fighters to talk about experiences within their training that were meaningful to them. Each fighter received a guidance sheet (see Appendix E) along with their GoPro; the questions asked fighters about their training experiences, how fighters felt their training process was going, and what their interactions were like with the coach and training partners. The content of the diaries was led by the fighters, in order to give the fighters control to create and give meaning to their entries. A self-reflexive approach, whereby fighters construct their own meanings (Cherrington & Watson, 2010), was important given the complex meanings that may be associated with the phenomenon of pain and the exploratory nature of the study. The video diaries helped develop the questions for the mid- and end-of-season interviews, but also acted as rich data sources in their own right.

3.7 Participant Observation

In order to better understand the fighters’ experiences of training and the interactions between fighters and their coach and training partners, I immersed myself into the MMA environment by adopting a participant-as-observer role (Angrosino, 2007). Through gaining knowledge from the inside, I was able to better explore the meanings that fighters attach to their pain experiences, as well as a contextual understanding of their relationships with their training partners and coach (Charmaz, 2004; Smith et al., 2015). Further, participating physically, socially, sensually, cognitively, and emotionally in the everyday life of the fighters (Smith et al., 2015) helped inform the questions for the second and third interviews with the fighters and their training partners. I attended athletes’ daily training sessions for the duration of the study period. I also took classes and trained between 6-12 hours per week, often with the fighters. I took field notes, privately, on my cell phone, to keep track of my thoughts and to help provide context for my analysis of the video diaries and the interview data.

After talking with Bobbie about the study, I bought a six-month unlimited membership package, which included a mouth guard, hand wraps, shin guards, 4 oz. MMA gloves, and 16 oz. Muay Thai gloves. The membership allowed me to take classes in striking, grappling, and MMA. I also had access to a weight room within the gym and daily open mat time (to practice on my own or with other members). I took part in all classes (striking, grappling, and MMA) in order to make initial contact with fighters and better understand the physical, psychological, and social demands of the sport. I also felt it was important to expose myself to my own experiences of pain.
to help me better understand and empathize with the fighters during their fight camp. While I did not intend to identify as a mixed martial artist, training in MMA helped me gain the respect of the mixed martial artists training with and/or around me. Further, training enabled me to build rapport and establish trust among the fighters.

During the course of the study, I was invited by the fighters to travel with them to the Caribbean for their fights. I sat with the fighters on the plane to and from the international destination, and roomed with one of the training partners for the five days we were away. I was present with the fighters for their pre-fight media interviews (aired on a local Caribbean TV station) two days before the fights, I was present for the pre-fight weigh-ins the day before the competition, and I was present with the fighters before and after their fights. I was also included with the group as the fighters ‘walked out’ towards the cage for each fighter’s competition and I observed each fight as a spectator in the front row. Over the course of the trip, I gained invaluable insight into how pain was experienced and shared by others and into the teammate relationships that developed among the fighters. Travelling with the fight team also afforded me a powerful emotional experience due in part to the bonds formed between the fight team and myself. During the fight trip, data were collected using detailed field notes based on my observations and interactions with fighters, as well as daily video recordings of fighters (e.g., daily interviews, training sessions, pre-fight footage of the fight team preparing in the ‘fighters room’; pre- and post-fight interviews with fighters and the fight team, fight footage).

Finally, as a researcher immersed in the fighters’ training environment, I also made video diary entries of my own for the duration of the study. This was done to help me relate to what fighters were going through, as well as to help my reflexivity and document my own experiences of pain throughout the project. By making my own video diaries, I gained insight on the use of video diaries in qualitative research, and could empathize with fighters’ experiences with the camera.

3.8 Video Recording Training Sessions and Competitions

Although I did not initially intend to video record fighters’ training sessions, the fighters encouraged me to record their training sessions with training partners, whom all provided verbal consent to be filmed. I was able to capture the day-to-day training environment, fighters’ being inflicted with pain from their training partners, and conversations between the coach and the fighters about previous experiences of pain (i.e., injuries, losing fights). The recordings
contributed to the analysis process through actually seeing how physical pain was inflicted upon fighters, their responses to pain in training, and further, how fighters talked about their pain experiences. I used my GoPro camera to record fighters’ training sessions.

Having the opportunity to travel to the Caribbean with the fighters for their competition allowed me to capture raw and powerful fight-day video footage. Footage was captured of the fight team preparing in the ‘fighters room’ hours and seconds before the fights. Additionally, I conducted informal pre- and post-fight interviews with some of the fighters and their training partners (individually). Due to the heightened emotions and the intensity of the fight environment, the recording provided a valuable resource to capture unique social interactions, as opposed to the interactions observed during training. Each fighter’s culminating fight was professionally videotaped by the event staff, which was later made publically available. Since I was able to watch fighters’ fight live, first-hand, it was not pertinent that I also record the fights. However, I did videotape some of the fights, specifically the interactions between the coach and corner man (a teammate) with the fighter between rounds. The fight night recordings enabled me to better analyze the interactions between the fighters and their training partners and coach in a competitive situation. The recording from the night of the fights also helped informed the questions within my interviews with fighters and their training partners. Recordings were made using a GoPro camera.

3.9 Data Analysis

The audio recorded interviews and video diaries were transcribed verbatim and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) was used to interpret and make sense of the data. IPA required an in-depth examination of a phenomenon or lived experience, and was focused on exploring how participants understood and experienced the phenomenon being explored (e.g., what meanings participants had of their experiences or how they processed the phenomenon; Smith et al., 2009; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Further, IPA was an inductive approach, supporting the researcher’s open orientation toward the phenomenon of interest (Smith et al., 2009). Lastly, IPA was valuable for examining small groups of purposively-selected people and is useful to maintain sensitivity to the differences in how participants experience a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009).
An IPA analysis is “a more idiographic interpretative commentary, interwoven with extracts from the participants’ accounts” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 201). IPA does not have a strict (right or wrong) prescriptive ‘method’ for analyzing the data, however, guidelines are provided, which I followed throughout my analysis process (Smith et al., 2009). I analyzed each fighter’s case individually before analyzing the data across cases, and I took note of emerging ideas and themes at each phase. I also allowed for new themes to arise within each case.

To begin my analysis process, I first re-listened to the audio recordings of a participant’s interviews and took notes regarding important themes or recurrent ideas before reading the participant’s printed transcripts for the first time. I then read and re-read the participant’s transcripts multiple times to immerse myself in the data, and I took notes of interesting or striking information within the transcripts (e.g., Step 1: Reading and re-reading, and Step 2: Initial noting; Smith et al., 2009). Next, I read the transcripts again and identified the specific ways the participants talked about pain, and noted the ways in which they understood, thought about, and experienced pain within training and competition (Step 2: Initial noting; Smith et al., 2009). As a result, I created an in-depth and detailed set of notes from the transcripts, and started formulating more abstract ideas to help me understand the meanings that each participant had of their pain experiences. As my own ideas came to fruition from the transcripts, I moved away from the participants’ specific claims and understandings and moved toward my own interpretations of their data (Step 3: Developing emergent themes; Smith et al., 2009). At this point, I had simple themes coded on the left margins of the transcripts and more detailed notes within the margins on the right side of the page. Each participant’s data were coded as a case before moving on to the next participant’s dataset.

After conducting the initial coding by hand, I coded all the fighters’ transcripts in NVivo 10 software for qualitative data analysis, to help me organize my notes from each transcript into case by case themes. After the data was sorted into broad themes, I formed specific clusters by grouping themes together that expressed similar ideas (Step 4: Searching for connections among emergent themes; Smith et al., 2009). The newly clustered data from NVivo were extracted and used to create theme tables in Microsoft Word to represent the main themes and subthemes for each participant. I further organized fighters’ quotes within each theme and subtheme, trying to find the best fit for their data. Many of the themes and subthemes were expressed as phrases to capture the ‘psychological essence’ of the data, and maintain grounding in participants’ claims,
but also incorporate my own conceptions of the data (Smith et al., 2009). At this time, I switched from analyzing case by case and moved to analyzing across the cases, looking for connections between the fighters’ data (Step 5: Moving to the next case, and Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases; Smith et al., 2009). Making connections between the cases enabled me to determine which themes were most significant in regards to understanding the phenomenon of pain. Once I finalized analyzing across cases and throughout the process of writing the results, I revisited the video diary and training partner transcripts, my observation and reflexive notes, and the training and Caribbean video footage to help me further make sense of the themes.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

Participants provided informed consent prior to starting the study, and they were informed that their participation was voluntary and they were free to withdraw from the study at any time – no participants either exercised their right to withdraw from the study or withdraw their information. Participants had final say over the information (e.g., video diaries, interview transcripts) that was retained for analysis and they had the choice to withdraw their information up until it was analyzed. As data collection and analysis was an ongoing iterative process, participants had up to one week after submitting their video diaries or after completing an interview to withdraw their information. Fighters were asked to conduct their video logs in private, however some fighters’ recordings had training partners present. In these cases, I asked training partners to provide verbal consent to be recorded as part of the fighters’ video logs; all training partners provided verbal consent. Some other members of the gym were included on some of the video recordings of fighters’ training sessions (e.g., captured on video training in the background), however their data was not included in the analysis. Video recordings made on the night of the fights were focused on the fighters, coach, and training partners in and around the cage, and the ‘fighters room’ in the back of the sport complex. Any recordings that captured members of the fight team whom were not participants of the study were also asked to provide verbal consent to be recorded as part of the fight-night footage. All the members of the fight team gave verbal consent. Since the MMA fights were a large, public event, with numerous cameras around, video recordings of the fights were not anticipated to be an ethical concern, however fighters and their team, as well as their opponent and team were informed of the recordings. All participants have been given pseudonyms and some details of their background and fight dates and location have been changed to maintain anonymity.
Since participants were discussing experiences of pain, there was a possibility that they may report physical or psychological distress. All participants were provided with a list of psychological support resources at the beginning of the study in the event that the interviews or research process led to any distress. Participants were also informed about the purposes of the research and that the interviews were not intended to be counselling/therapeutic interviews.

### 3.11 Reflexivity

Due to the multiple roles I adopted as a researcher (i.e., participant-as-observer), it was imperative to be reflexive in my field notes about my influence on the data collected, as well as my influence on the fighters during the research process (Smith et al., 2015). Self-reflexivity required me to be explicit about any assumptions I brought into the study as an outsider, and subsequently formed as an insider (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Further, I had to critically think about how my biases impacted the analyses, interpretation, and presentation of the data (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). According to Wolcott (1995), exposing and harnessing my own bias is essential, and bias should encourage probing without unjustifiably influencing the study (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Importantly, self-reflexivity also helped illuminate the ways in which the investigation and my relationships with the fighters was impacting me as a researcher, since the researcher and participants have the ability to shape one another within our investigations (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Lastly, in addition to encouraging self-awareness as a researcher and revealing unconscious motivations, disclosing my self-reflexivity has the potential to impact my fellow academics, for example, by opening up new ways of thinking and allowing researchers to evaluate the integrity of the research process (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Coming into this research project I had a few assumptions that I brought into the study as an outsider. I assumed that fighters could view both physical and emotional pain as rewarding and something positive, and not always as a negative experience. I also made the assumption that fighters had a higher pain tolerance than non-fighters. Lastly, I assumed that since the process of training for fights was so intensive, fighters would experience periods of emotional pain, and further, talk with their teammates about this emotional pain.

As a result of my close involvement with the fighters and being a part of their pain experiences, I developed new understandings of my own sense of self. For this reason, a reflexive journal provided valuable insight into how I was evolving as a researcher, and how my emerging
insights could be affecting how I was interpreting the research findings. To further monitor my subjectivity as a researcher, I had regular discussions with my supervisor, acting as a critical friend (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), and with my supervisory committee. The committee encouraged me to explore different interpretations of my field activity and fostered critical thinking about my ongoing field experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). More specifically, a critical friend helped me be reflexive about how my developing relationships and attachments with the MMA fighters were influencing my subjectivity, since I was heavily absorbed into the fighters’ worlds. For example, I had regular conversations with my research supervisor about navigating time spent with the participants in my study in training and in social settings; considering whether and how quickly developing relationships could inform my analysis; and considering how my relationships with the participants may alter how I wrote about fighters or represented them in my thesis.

The navigation of the researcher in others’ social worlds is a complex topic, and the issues of involvement and detachment within social research are worthy of a brief discussion here, because they inevitably influence the way data are collected and analyzed. Therefore, a discussion of establishing relationships can be informed by a discussion of research ethics in the context of ethnographic research. Within the context of ethnographic research on ticket scalping in sports and entertainment, Atkinson (2014) discussed and negotiated the complexities of research ethics with regards to involvement and detachment. Atkinson stated that ‘involvement’ meant that the researcher would intervene in and interrupt the lives of people, and disrupt the spaces and environments they exist within. As a result of researchers involvement in people’s lives, specifically within ethnographic research, participants are more vulnerable to harm coming to them; therefore, research ethics governing bodies (e.g., REB panels) prefer ‘serious detachment’ of the researcher from the people that he or she is trying to build rapport with and understand within the context of qualitative research. Atkinson makes the point that minimal risk within social research could be interpreted as ‘minimal involvement’. Further, Atkinson argued that ethnographic research often involves deep rather than minimal involvement with participants. By being minimally involved with people in the field and treating them with extreme detachment, Atkinson suggests that ethnographers are actually being unethical disingenuous social actors. It is apparent that navigating one’s involvement in a new group has its challenges, and Atkinson suggested that one may be required to “slightly detach from
textbook ‘ethics’ in order to pursue [a group’s] essence fully” (p. 83). Further, Atkinson emphasized the importance of being genuine with people, in addition to adopting a willingness to be uncomfortable in the new groups. Importantly, Atkinson acknowledged the ease in which friendships can be developed with participants and other people in the field, as well as the value of being involved in people’s lives. Thus, academic detachment is important and valuable, however, so is being involved in people’s lives and developing relationships that afford trust (Atkinson, 2014). Overall, having a critical friend and engaging in self-reflexivity throughout the study enabled me to reflect on my developing attachments with the MMA fighters, as well as reflect on who I was coming into the study, who I became while I was immediately involved in the worlds of the fighters, and how I was shaping (and being shaped by) the analysis of the results. A reflexivity statement is provided in the next section, and some reflections regarding the research process are further provided in the results section.

3.11.1 Reflexive statement

To offer some insight into my motivation for this research study, I have shared the following reflexive statement about my relationship with pain. This reflexivity statement was composed at the beginning of the study and reflects my interest in studying the phenomenon of pain and some reasons I was drawn to the topic.

We all experience pain during our life, whether it affects the entirety of our being or a part of us, pain is an inevitable part of human existence. When I was seventeen, I dealt with a suicide attempt of an immediate family member that left a deep impact. I came home one night to find three police cars outside my house; the police had been contacted after our family friend received a disturbing call. I was asked to inspect my house for anything unusual or missing, and found a note on my bed, next to a bottle of Dom Pérignon champagne that was left for me, for my high school graduation. I felt the panic and disbelief build inside of me, all I could feel was the throbbing of my pulse as I stared at a folded piece of computer paper. As I read the neatly written handwriting that I knew so well, the panic and fear I was feeling ceased and was replaced by pure agony. The reality began to set in and I realized it was really good-bye. Immediately, I called a family member and heard the distress in her voice as she told me the last words she was also left with. After a long silence, she broke down and asked me how we were going to make it through this. In that moment, I had no choice but to surrender to the agony, the despair, the
sorrow, and I felt it all. I sat awake that night, trying to grasp how someone who I loved so deeply and unconditionally could abandon me. A heavy pain resided in my stomach and chest as I tried to process the reality that I was never going to see this person again. The next day one of my closest friends came over; he walked urgently up to me, looked me straight into my eyes while holding my face between his hands and told me that we were going to get through this. Immediately, he wrapped himself around me and I broke down and bawled in his arms. I have always vividly remembered that instant, because in that moment I felt he truly shared my pain.

Slowly, with the support of family and friends, I began to make sense of, and understand my emotional pain. As a result, I became cognizant of the meanings I created about the traumatic unsuccessful attempt and how those meanings shaped my reality. I began to let go of the anger, hurt, and fear that I had become inseparably connected to and embraced forgiveness and compassion, which I remind myself to embrace every day.

I truly believe that we are shaped by how we come out of adverse events and how we rebuild ourselves. I also believe that we can have positive relationships with pain that can foster growth, clarity, and understanding. Although pain is central to our reality, we know little about how people ascribe meaning to the phenomenon. For this reason, I wanted to explore how people make sense of pain and understand their pain experiences, in hopes of facilitating the emergence of new meanings of pain; and ultimately, illuminating the phenomenon in a positive way within the pain literature.
Chapter 4
Results

4 Overview

The results begin with profiles of each of the fighters and training partners. Following the participant profiles, the results are presented in ‘rounds’, since MMA ‘main event’ or professional title fights are typically five rounds. For this reason, the results are presented in five rounds: Round 1 – Understandings of pain; Round 2 – Social validation of pain; Round 3 – Giving and receiving pain; Round 4 – Sharing pain with teammates; and Round 5 – Reflections of ‘doing’ pain research.

4.1 Participant Profiles

4.1.1 Fighters

Bobbie was a 36 year old, Caucasian male, born and raised in Ontario, and now living in Toronto. Bobbie had a unique role in the study, as he was not only the owner and head coach of the local MMA gym, but also one of the fighters. Bobbie had trained in MMA for over 25 years; he had not formally competed in over 12 years prior to his upcoming fight. He started his training in Muay Thai and Sambo, and then introduced boxing, Brazilian Ju Jitsu (BJJ), and wrestling, before training in MMA. When Bobbie started fighting, MMA had no governing body, and therefore fighting was illegal; fighting was only legalized in Ontario in 2010 (Ministry of Consumer Services, 2010). Additionally, Canada decriminalized MMA in 2013, which enabled provinces to create their own athletic commissions to regulate and sanction MMA fights (Magraken, 2013). However, unless provinces have set up a fighting commission, MMA fights are still considered illegal (Magraken, 2013). As a result, Bobbie had fought in over 15 non-sanctioned fights (illegal organized fights) and “smokers”, which is where a group of local gyms match up their fighters and have them fight. These fights could not be video recorded, and were not counted toward his official fight record. When the study commenced, Bobbie had just started a fight camp to prepare himself for his upcoming professional title fight – his first sanctioned fight. Bobbie also had to coach and corner (e.g., stand in fighters’ corner, yell instruction, provide ice during rounds) all of his five fighters, before his own fight.
The second fighter, Conor, was a 31 year old Caucasian/Japanese male. Conor grew up in Nova Scotia, but has lived and trained at different MMA gyms across Canada; he now lives in Toronto. Conor started training in boxing before he switched to MMA, and he had been competing in MMA for over 5 years. Conor took a break of approximately three years from fighting after his first and only loss in his MMA career (his third MMA fight ever). Further, it took Conor three or four months before he could enter an MMA gym again to start training after his loss. Conor had just begun the fight camp to prepare himself for his upcoming professional MMA fight in the fall. Conor vocalized multiple times throughout the study that he wanted to quit the study, but he did not.

The third fighter, Aiden, was a 20 year old, Hispanic female. Aiden was born and raised in Ontario, now living in Toronto. Aiden began training in Taekwondo in high school before started in MMA, which she has been training in for over a year. Aiden had competed two sanctioned Muay Thai fights, but had not yet competed in a MMA fight. Aiden also taught Muay Thai and BJJ classes at the gym once a week. When she joined the study, Aiden had just begun her fight camp to prepare herself for her upcoming amateur MMA fight, and her perspective was unique in that she had never competed in an MMA fight before. She had fought in two demonstration Muay Thai fights, or “demos”, which were practice fights against other local fighters to prepare fighters for sanctioned fights; demos do not count towards a fighter’s competitive record. Demos attempt to mimic an actual fight and are a way for beginner mixed martial artists to prepare for an official competition. Aiden and one of the other participants/fighters, Emmett, were living together and in a romantic relationship.

The fourth fighter, Emmett, was a 23 year old Caucasian male. Emmett was born and raised in Ontario, and was living in Toronto with his girlfriend, Aiden (participant). Emmett started training and competing in Muay Thai and BJJ before he began his training in MMA. He had been competing in the sport for approximately four years. Emmett had competed in over 10 BJJ tournaments, seven sanctioned Muay Thai fights, and two amateur MMA fights prior to joining the study. Emmett was the captain of the gym’s fight team, and taught both Muay Thai and BJJ classes at the gym once a week. Emmett was considered Bobbie’s ‘protégé’, and was a well-respected fighter at the gym, and he seemed to be idolized by many members of the gym due to his up-and-coming MMA career and pursuit to fight in the UFC within a few years. When
Emmett decided to participate in the study, he was already a few weeks into his fight camp to prepare him for his upcoming amateur MMA fight.

Over the course of the study, the fighters were preparing for a fight which took place in the Caribbean at the end of the training period. All the participants were on the same “fight card” (i.e., in the same competition). The one-night event was comprised of both amateur and professional fights. There were 24 fighters competing in 12 fights, eight of which were amateur and four professional fights. The event itself was eight hours long, and fighters arrived two hours prior to the doors opening for fans. The fights were held in a local sport complex, and had approximately 1100 fans in attendance. The fights were filmed and edited for social media like YouTube, and short clips were used for local news stations. Will (one of the training partners) fought first out of the team, the fifth amateur fight of the night, and lost by a Straight Right Knock Out (KO; knocked out unconscious with a punch) in the first round. Will’s loss was followed directly by Aiden’s fight, who lost by a rear naked choke (submission) in the first round. Emmett fought eighth, one fight after Aiden, winning with a toe hold submission in the second round, followed by Conor, the ninth fight (first professional fight of the night), who won by ground and pound in the first round, which is when the fight is stopped because the fighter is sitting on top of and repetitively punching their opponent, whom can no longer protect their face/head. Bobbie fought last, winning the professional title fight by a Guillotine choke (submission) in the second round.

4.1.2 Training partners

The first training partner, Derek, was 34 year old Iranian male. Derek was self-taught and trained in martial arts on his own for many years, and he had started training with the MMA gym in 2014. Because of his previous injuries, he did not think he would fight and compete. However, soon after he joined the gym he decided to compete in MMA. He fought in one demo fight and one sanctioned MMA fight in the previous year. Derek lost his first MMA fight and struggled with the negative impact of the loss. Derek taught both Muay Thai and BJJ classes at the gym. He was Bobbie’s main training partner, but also worked with Emmett and Aiden. Derek travelled with the fight team to the fights in the Caribbean and helped fighters prepare physically and mentally.
The second training partner, Jordan, was a 25 year old Chinese male. Jordan taught kickboxing part-time at another local combat sport gym. Jordan started training in karate before training in MMA, which he had done for five years. Jordan trained most frequently with Conor, but during the study he worked with the other fighters as well. He taught both Muay Thai and BJJ classes once a week at the gym. He had been competing in MMA for one year, and had fought in one sanctioned MMA fight.

The third training partner, Will, was a 32 year old Caucasian male. Will was born and raised in the U.K., but now lived in Toronto. Will started training and competing in Muay Thai in England and switched to MMA when he moved to Toronto; he had been training in both martial art disciplines for a total of five years. Will had previously competed in two sanctioned Muay Thai fight and he was also fighting in his first amateur MMA fight on the same fight card as the other fighters participating in this study). Will was the first of the team to fight, and was knocked out by a Straight Right KO in eight seconds. Will was my roommate during the five days we were away for the fights. Rooming with Will made for a unique experience on the trip, as it gave me the opportunity to share his pain experience with him through helping Will process and deal with his loss.

4.2 Round 1: Understandings of Pain

4.2.1 Distinguishing between physical pain, injury, and emotional pain

4.2.1.1 Physical pain versus injury

Athletes made distinctions between physical pain and injury pain, and it appeared that fighters learned early on in their careers to distinguish between these two types of pain. Fighters explained that they considered being hurt and experiencing physical pain to include things such as a bone bruise, a hematoma on the shin, or general body soreness. Aiden said, “[Gym member] got kicked in the junk, but that’s not really an injury, that’s just pain” (Video Diary 7). Further, fighters said that this type of pain or hurt would “suck” or be “annoying”, and fighters would be aware of it, but it could be shaken off, dealt with, or endured within training. Conversely, fighters reported that an injury would include a concussion, a hyperextended elbow, or ligament damage. Unlike physical pain, fighters could not usually push through injuries and continue training; they limited fighters’ bodies more intensely, and often forced fighters to stop training, or caused them to avoid training a certain area of their bodies. However, both physical pain and
injuries dictated the fighters’ training. For example, Emmett said that his training regime was
dependent on ‘what hurts’. Emmett reported that there were different levels of pain; he said there
was the “endure factor”, the “sore factor”, and the “I can’t lift it factor” (Interview 2). Aiden
further differentiated between pain and injury, saying:

… anything joints, I’ll always be hesitant about, because I have a fear of it popping and
just hearing it move and stuff like that, but I’ve gotten a lot of shin bumps and like really
big goose eggs on my leg, and even then what coach tells us is ‘what you have to ask
yourself, is it injury or is it pain?’ And once you get past the point of ‘no, it just hurts’,
you can kind of block it out, whereas if like, for example, my hyper extended [elbow], it
could easily be an injury. If I put too much weight on it and it pops the other way, it’s an
injury. So those are the ones I’m fearful for, but if it’s just a big bruise or you know, just
bruising or scratching or anything like that, I’ll just work past it, because it’s just pain.
You can’t get hurt; it’s not going to stop you from training, it’s just pain. (Interview 1)

Further, in a video diary Aiden made the distinction between being hurt and being in pain by
showing me a ‘deep bruise’ she had on her leg from a recent training session:

I wasn’t hurt in training, but I was sore and I have really deep bruises. I’ll show you, but
I’m wearing pants. I have very deep bruises on my legs [showing bruises on leg], that’s
my puppy [filming her puppy beside her in her living room]. So I have this one [bruise]
here, these here. I have ones a little bit higher up but my pants are kinda tight, and then I
have these one’s over here, which look pretty mean, and again, these aren’t from any
injury. A lot of these started from me checking kicks [using her leg to block a training
partner’s kicks]… (Video Diary 2)

The fighters expressed greater awareness and caution around sustaining an injury, because of the
potential limitations that injuries would have on their training. Emmett reported a time when had
torn ligaments in his ankle and as a result could not train for two and a half months:

…It sucked, I couldn’t move my gym bag with my ankle, you know, you kind of kick
stuff with your ankle or your foot, I couldn’t do that. I would kick my gym bag with my
foot and it would shoot up to my knee and I was like ‘holy shit’, right? I kind of just iced
it… [talking with the doctor] it’s really not realistic when they’re like, ‘oh just stay off
your ankle.’ ‘Do you really know what you’re asking me to do?’ (Interview 1)

Further, the fighters did not associate physical pain with a sense of fear in the way that they did
with injuries, as pain was viewed as less of a threat to fighters’ training. Bobbie explained that
pain was frustrating, but injuries could derail fighters. In a video diary, Bobbie said that it was
not the pain of injury that fighters feared, but rather it was the damage and unknown
consequences of injuries that accompanied pain in these cases:
The pain is never an issue, I don’t mean that in a macho tough guy way. Anyone that knows me knows I’m not a macho tough guy, I mean the pain isn’t an issue as in the fear, the real fear comes from the idea that this ankle is going to hinder my performance, or this shoulder, you know? It doesn’t bother me that it hurts when I jab, it bothers me that my jab is a little bit slower than it should be. My jab is not quite as explosive as it should be, you know? I have the same concerns with my ankle. When I sprawl I really feel it anytime my toe point too much, so your brain is going, ‘is this going to affect my performance? Am I going to lose because of this nagging injury? Am I going to lose, because I’m born in the 70s?’ Uh, ha, that’s the concern. The actual soreness of the ankle and the soreness of the shoulder and the neck, that’s just…it’s annoying at best; it’s not something you think about. You can’t, if you dwell on that you’ll never train, you’ll just sit at home and mope, which I’ve done before, so yeah, um, that’s it. (Video Diary 1)

In an interview, I asked Bobbie to talk about this fear of damage that he brought up in his video diary:

…it isn’t the pain actually, I think it’s the fear that goes along with the pain, do you know what I mean? Like the ‘am I dying?’ Like, ‘will I ever look the same’, you know? Um, after my fourth fight I, and my orbital bone broke in the fight and, you know, when we went to the hospital the doctor said, I said ‘what’s the worst case scenario here?’, he said, ‘well you get a droop eye’, and I remember being like, ‘what do you mean a droop eye?’ and he said, ‘well your eye will rest lower than your other one’, um, and you know, I wanted to be an actor, you know, I was auditioning for things at the time and stuff and I remember going, this is going to sound super vain, but you’re like, ‘am I going to look like quasi modo from losing this fight?’, like, um, yeah, nobody wants to look like a different person, and your face, you know? Like having a limp, but having something on your face that everybody sees every day, people going ‘what happened to that dude?’ you know, like that’s tough. (Interview 2)

Bobbie’s quote suggested that fighters’ fear did not stem from the discomfort that resulted from pain, but rather fighters feared the unknown damage that comes with the pain, and how they may be physically and aesthetically affected by that damage. As a result, injuries (and the risk of injuries) were distinguished from pain as they posed greater threats to fighters.

Additionally, the distinction between the possibility of sustaining pain versus sustaining an injury contributed to fighters’ decisions about which ground submissions they could endure longer or those from which they could prolong ‘tapping’ (i.e., prolong their disengagement from a submission). For instance, Aiden said:

…there are a lot of submissions that we now know that are only pain and not injury based, so more often than not, I’ll fight through that, and even if they do get me I just tap and that’s it and then you’re right back to swat and bumping and that’s it, you’re starting
the round again. So it never really affects you, the only thing that would affect you is an injury. (Interview 1)

Fighters also had the option to ignore and work through pain if they felt it did not significantly hinder their training. For example, Conor expressed that he would endure pain during training and deal with the consequences of his pain after his sessions:

Um, during training, I’m, I call myself a bit of an idiot, I just push through regardless, like ‘shit, my hand hurts, I don’t give a fuck, I’m going to throw it till my hand falls off and worry about it after’, but that’s stupid, you shouldn’t do that. But I’m just an idiot, I’m an idiot, like, when I come to training I just push through it. After training, that’s when I’m like, ‘oh fuck, I should have laid off that hand’, so after, that’s when I deal with the consequences, but during, I’ll push through. (Interview 1)

Fighters understood that they were more limited by injuries than pain, because injuries could stop them from training completely. Thus, fighters felt that they could work through pain, but understood that they were not expected to work through an injury. As a result, injuries were viewed as a more legitimate reason to stop training.

Physical pain and injury were often openly discussed among fighters before, during, and after training sessions, for example, Aiden said:

…the number one thing is that you always tell your training partner, like ‘I have this injury, be careful with that’. Before a rolling session we will talk about injuries, like, ‘do you have anything that hurts, do I have anything that hurts, stay clear of that’, um, and we are very respectful towards each other about that. Other than that we will just always talk about um, what hurts, what doesn’t hurt. (Interview 1)

Further, Bobbie reported that these pain discussions were “usually not from a psychological or emotional standpoint, it’s [more] ‘where does it hurt so we can figure [it] out’… [i]t’s a very machine-like approach…” (Interview 1). Thus, the conversations that fighters had concerning pain routinely revolved around what hurt, what areas of the body to avoid, and injury assessment.

4.2.1.2 Physical versus emotional pain

The fighters also distinguished physical pain from emotional pain in the way they experienced each form of pain, the expression or manifestation of emotional and physical pain, the perceived legitimacy and taboo surrounding experiences of physical versus emotional pain, and in the way fighters endured different forms of pain. Physical pain was described as visible and tangible, and the aesthetic manifestation of physical pain on the body enabled others to see it, therefore
validating that physical pain was ‘real’. Moreover, experiences of physical pain could be conveyed through both verbal and non-verbal expressions, such as a wince or grabbing onto the area that was hurt, which allowed it to be more easily communicated with others: “[i]n training, people will know, like I will hold [my leg] and I’ll say, ‘shit that was hard, be careful’, stuff like that” (Derek, Training Partner Interview 1). On the other hand, emotional pain manifested internally, and without vocalizing one’s discomfort, a fighter could mask his or her emotional pain. The onset of emotional pain could be immediate, directly following an emotionally painful or traumatic experience or event. Fighters classified emotional pain as short- and long-term states of feelings such as, grief, distress, depression (and depressive-type periods), shame, fear, and sadness. The internal or ‘invisible’ nature of emotional pain made it more difficult to be seen, and as a result, validated by others. Bobbie expressed the challenges in accepting emotional pain in comparison to physical pain and injuries:

…Like the physical stuff, we can’t help that. If you roll your ankle you roll your ankle and your ankle is sore and that’s… to me, I don’t know, it’s tangible, it’s there, you can go and put your ankle under an x-ray and a doctor will go, ‘oh, here you go, here’s the problem’, and I know it sounds judgmental, but emotional stuff is really frustrating for me, because I just want to say, ‘suck it up, stop being a wimp, be tougher than you are’, haha, and people say ‘well just because you can’t see it under an x-ray doesn’t mean it’s not there’. ‘No it doesn’t mean it’s not there, but it also doesn’t mean it’s there.’ Do you know what I mean? (Interview 3)

Bobbie’s quote emphasized that the ‘invisible’ nature of emotional pain made it difficult for others to validate fighters’ emotional pain. Further, Derek said that his coach [Bobbie] knew how much pain he felt from his previous injuries, because his coach had seen his x-rays: “he’s seen everything… he’s aware of how much it hurts, what hurts, why it hurts” (Training Partner Interview 1). This suggested that for others to acknowledge that fighters’ pain was legitimate, they had to see physical evidence of pain in the form of bruises, cuts, x-rays, or physical symptoms of pain (e.g., wincing, holding part of the body). Thus, the aesthetic or visual component of pain appeared to contribute to the distinction that fighters made between emotional pain and injury or physical pain, and it also contributed to the validation or acceptance of injuries or physical pain as opposed to emotional pain.

Unlike physical pain and injuries, emotional pain was not discussed between training partners. Additionally, Conor reported that he would vocalize his physical pains, and seek out sympathy in
a joking way, but would never acknowledge his feelings or emotions with another training partner. Conor reported that there was no place for thoughts and feelings in MMA, saying:

MMA is a very uh, masculine sport, like ‘oh man, I was feeling pretty sad today. I need a shoulder to cry on’. You know what I mean, it’s not really a thoughts and feeling type of sport. Um, but I don’t think just MMA and period, I think all, like any kind of sport, guys aren’t going to be like, ‘oh how are you feeling today boss?’, you know? Like I tell people as the fight gets closer, ‘like shit, I got nerves today, like I’m feeling kind of anxious’, but I don’t think that’s, in male sports with testosterone, add testosterone to anything and it does dominate how we feel, that kind of thing. (Interview 1)

Further, Bobbie expressed that it was taboo to talk about emotional pain, and felt that it led to others thinking a fighter was soft. Paradoxically however, he said that not talking about pain was also a problem in the sport, and that openly talking about emotional pain was something he wanted to normalize more among his fighters. He explained that many fighters viewed talking about their fears as a sign of weakness. For example, Bobbie said:

…my sparring partner and I were just talking about that there is this macho bravado bullshit, um, and I find it is usually with younger guys, but still, you know, like I’ll be afraid with my fight, I’m afraid to get hurt today when we train, you know? Um, I’ve zero interest lying about that fear. (Interview 1)

Bobbie felt that wearing a mask was only a hindrance for fighters in the long run. By hiding their emotions and not coping with them, fighters could not psychologically prepare themselves for competitions. Thus, emotional pain was complex for fighters wherein they reported experiencing emotional pain and acknowledged that it was difficult for them to deal with emotional pain, however it was considered taboo to discuss or express emotional pain as a fighter. However, training partners reported that emotional pain was not something that fighters could hide from or mask:

Emotional pain is the one thing that people can’t hide. You just can’t hide. When you train with a person long enough and you see their mental aspects and then one day you notice that they are quieter or thinking or they are zoned out, you know emotionally they are somewhere else, and the emotional aspect of a loss is very painful; it sucks… emotional pain is just something you can’t get away from. Nobody can mask it. You cannot mask it. Now I do a good job at masking my emotions really well. I’m use to bottling things up so for me I think I’m better than a lot of people emotionally, but when you get to that point where you can’t stop it, you just can’t stop it. There’s no going back… Emotional pain is something you can’t train with, train for, or ignore. You just can’t. It’s just there. (Derek, Training partner Interview 1)
Derek’s quote suggested that emotional pain is something for which fighters could not prepare themselves, and emotional pain forced fighters’ attention to it immediately when the pain hits them. Further, his quote emphasizes the complex nature of emotional pain, and why it is so difficult to talk about emotional pain with others. Derek also said that he was better than most at hiding his emotional pain, a claim which may be due to the taboo surrounding the discussion of emotional pain in MMA, and his statement further perpetuates the minimization and avoidance of discussing emotional pain within MMA. In addition, Jordan offered insight into why he thought emotional pain was not talked about between fighters:

We don’t really talk about the [emotional] pain aspect simply because, um, I know what needs to be done, you know what I mean? It’s like, people read self-help books, but it’s sort of like you know what you need to do to help yourself… There’s a difference when someone tells you, it’s like, ‘oh thanks for that third party voice’, but it’s like deep down you know what needs to be done and I think we’re [Conor and him] both at a point where no matter how much we both rub each other’s back, ultimately you have to deal with it yourself, if that pain is present in training. (Training Partner Interview 1)

Jordan’s quote suggested a belief that fighters should innately understand how to remedy their emotional pain, however, through talking with fighters and through my own observations, this did not seem to be the case.

Emotional pain appeared to have a bigger impact on fighters than physical pain. Based on analysis of athletes’ data, it appeared that fighters did not always understand the source of their discomfort or emotional pain and how to make it better. For instance, Jordan talked about his response to physical and emotional pain in training, saying “[y]ou can ice it after. You feel bad after training, but the emotional stuff, if it happens during, you might as well go home…” (Training Partner Interview 1). In particular, the fighters described struggling with the emotional pain that resulted from losing a fight. For instance, Emmett said: “[y]ou’ll never get those feelings out of your head. They just won’t leave you… [because] that pain is so deep and it hurts [us]” (Interview 3). Will expressed that he felt embarrassed and ashamed after his loss in the Caribbean, saying it was the worst he had ever felt:

I’d say the first three or four days I was pretty depressed. It was literally all I thought about for about a week… the last time I cried was when my [grandma] died about 12 years ago and I was almost crying, hah. I know I pride myself on not being emotional, hahaha. You know, hahaha, some people have died since then and what it takes to get emotional is losing a fight, hah. It felt like someone had died, hah, like it literally felt like someone had died. (Training Partner Interview 1)
Derek talked about his first loss a year ago and described how emotionally painful it was for him:

The emotion of that… I was heartbroken. I don’t like to lose. Emmett’s fight was three fights after me, so while everybody’s watching him and getting ready for him and everything I was actually sitting by myself at the back and I was… I was broken inside. I was dying inside. I didn’t like the feeling… I just couldn’t shake the loss… It was a very bad feeling; it felt like I was useless, and just all very negative. It felt as negative as it could be without committing suicide. It was very, very negative… (Training Partner Interview 1)

Additionally, emotional pain seemed to disturb the fighters’ sense of self and threaten a fighter’s identity. For example, Jordan talked about a time in training that “messed [him] up emotionally” in which a less experienced and unfamiliar mixed martial artist hard sparred with him and beat him, and as a result, “I was left questioning myself, ‘well what am I doing?’, like ‘you spend all this time training’, like ‘does none of my stuff work?’, like sort of deal. So that was really hard to deal with” (Training Partner Interview 1). Further, after Aiden’s loss in the Caribbean she questioned whether or not she would continue competing, and if she was meant to be a fighter. In her third interview, two weeks after the fight, she said:

I’ve done a lot of mental progress, so at first I beat myself up so badly, mentally, you know? I know I thought it must have been my skill, I wasn’t prepared enough and so because of that I was like ‘you know what? No, I don’t want to compete anymore. I will always train, but I don’t want to compete’ so I had that in my mind and I really believed it for a little while… once I started thinking about the mistakes I made and thinking that it wasn’t so much my skill for the reason that I lost, I did start to feel a little better, so slowly I was like, ‘ok maybe I’ll do a BJJ [Brazilian Jiu Jitsu] tournament’ and then I was like, ‘well maybe I can do another Muay Thai tournament’ and now I’m already booked for a fight in [a few months]. (Aiden, Interview 3)

Lastly, it appeared that fighters’ emotional pain persisted longer than their physical pain.

Through participant observations and analysis of athletes’ data, it seemed that fighters were able to address and alleviate their physical pain more quickly than their emotional pain. For example, Derek experienced physical pain frequently during training (stemming from previous injuries), and often after training he would identify the source of his pain, and further, share his plans to alleviate or fix the pain (e.g., stretch, rest, ice, visit the doctor). However, when analyzing how Derek described dealing with emotional pain from a loss, it appeared that it took him significantly longer to alleviate his emotional pain, although he had identified the source of his discomfort (e.g., his previous loss). For instance, I regularly observed (and sometimes filmed)
Derek talking to Bobbie after their training sessions about his loss last year; Derek would express the disappointment he still felt about the loss. Further, Derek explained that he really struggled to shake his sense of failure to his team and himself:

A lot of emotions hit me when [Bobbie] gave me the belt [to hold after his win] and I think that’s when it triggered it Sunday, cause Sunday we were all relaxing, fights done, nobody cares, everyone’s just enjoying themselves. I’m still thinking about my loss from the year before. I’m very competitive, I don’t want to lose, so I will never forget that. It will never go away, because I know what I did wrong and I should of done… For as much as it was hard to admit it, I guess I couldn’t shake it for this entire year and it hit me really badly on Sunday… (Training Partner Interview 1)

Whereas it appeared that injuries and physical pain had a ‘treatment plan’ that fighters could follow and self-care actions they could take, emotional pain did not have a ‘treatment plan’ and fighters were often left to try and process emotional pain without knowing if it would improve or when they would have closure regarding the event (e.g., a loss). Therefore, although there were differences in fighters’ attempts to deal with the different types of pain (physical pain, injury, emotional pain), a primary difference concerned the fact that fighters did not have a ‘road map’ for dealing with emotional pain (whereas physical pain could be dealt with more methodically). Further, the internal, hidden nature of emotional pain also seemed to contribute to fighters masking their emotional pain, and as a result, prolonging their suffering.

### 4.2.2 Learning pain

#### 4.2.2.1 Responding to physical pain: Pain, progress, and understanding one’s limits

Fighters reported that it was important for them to understand how they reacted to pain, because it taught them about how to respond and deal with pain. For instance, in a video diary entry Conor said that he knew how he would react to pain as a result of being inflicted with it so frequently in training:

… for myself I know what it’s like to get hit. I know what it’s like to hit somebody hard, I know how I’m going to react to that, so when I spar I like to spar technical and I like to spar light, um, just got to get the feel and find out what your timing, your distance, your range and that kind of stuff as opposed to just giving each other concussions and damaging your brain cells. (Video Diary 1)

Fighters, specifically those fighters with more experience, reported that their focus would not be drawn to pain experienced in training sessions. For instance, Conor said that he did not focus on
or fear the threat of pain. Conor felt so strongly that fighters did not pay attention to pain that he even said that he thought fighters might be the wrong group of people with whom to study pain:

> Pain is so subjective and for us I don’t think we recognize it in the same way, you know what I mean? My fucking hand hurts, it’s not something I’m going to talk about and really think about, it’s just something that’s happening right now, you know what I mean? So I don’t know, I think if you wanted to focus this on pain I think you got the wrong group of people to talk to that about, you know? (Interview 3)

Conor said that pain was not something that he really thought about, yet from my observations, pain was often experienced and endured within training. Bobbie expressed that he did not like pain any more than non-fighters, and it had not become any easier to take pain, but through frequently dealing with pain he had been able to condition his reaction to physical pain. The idea of a conditioned reaction to pain, which was commonly reported among the fighters, enabled him to change his focus from the immediate pain that he was experiencing to what his body needed to do next (e.g., shift and dodge a punch). For example, Bobbie said:

> …the only way I am used to it is that I react sharply. So, I still don’t like it any more now, you know? It’s not easier now as far as the pain and the discomfort, like I never get hit square in the jaw or the nose and go, ‘yeah’, like it sucks every bit as much as it did the first time; the only difference is that the first time it happened, you focus on how much it sucks. Now, I get hit, my head snaps back and I’m thinking is the leg kick coming? Are they shooting a double? What do I counter with? So it still sucks as much, I think you don’t dwell on it at all. (Interview 1)

As a result of developing a conditioned response to pain, it did not act as a distraction for fighters, which was advantageous during fights.

It appeared that fighters understood pain was an important part of their training, as they could not make progress without experiencing pain. This understanding appeared to transform their relationship with pain from one of avoidance into viewing pain as necessary for progress.

Fighters understood that they needed to experience a level of pain to experience progress, or “to feel better afterwards” (Aiden, Interview 3); fighters said that a person could not recover and progress if they had nothing from which to recover. In this context, recovery meant that a fighter became stronger and was able to tolerate more pain later on (e.g., in competition). For instance, Aiden said, “you can’t feel necessarily how strong you are if you weren’t once as weak as you were, so it’s not that it’s a bad thing, it just depends on the individual…” (Interview 3).
Emmett said that sparring sessions showed fighters where their weaknesses were, which gave them the opportunity to ‘reassess’ themselves, or re-evaluate their skills and technique. Sparring is a form of training in which fighters deliver lighter blows than would be received in a fight; sparring is the closest form of training to a sanctioned fight, and fighters often experience pain or get hurt during these sessions, especially if fighters are hard sparring. Therefore, when fighters would experience pain during these sessions that pain was often indicative of fighters’ need to further develop their skills and techniques. Emmett said:

…‘did I have a bad week?’ like, ‘did I reassess myself?’ and if so, ‘what did I reassess myself on?’ and ‘what do I need to do?’ right? Like um, like just recently I didn’t feel good about, um, how I was doing so I went back and I reassessed myself and there’s now things, I want to have more of an explosive shot, more of, I really want to pinpoint where my head is on the take down and really want to run through guys… (Interview 1)

Bobbie discussed the type of pain and damage that could be experienced in sparring sessions in one of his video diary entries:

…this week of training is going to be really light, and all of us, basically, our job this week is to avoid injury, last minute injury, so it’s going to be, we’re going to do drills instead of sparring. Drills are just where we have a pre-set circumstance, so you know, I’m going to kick, he’s going to block, he’s going to throw this punch, I’m going to block, I’m going to shoot the take down, so there’s no surprises, you know? Everyone knows what’s going on. The injury rate in a drill is ridiculously low, whereas if we’re sparring, you know, there is always the unknown, ‘I didn’t see the head kick coming’, bang, or um, you know, we can’t risk a Jose Aldo/Conor McGregor [UFC fighters] style injury right before the fight. Those are the worst, so yeah. (Video Diary 6)

In addition, Bobbie expressed in another video diary the necessity of sparring sessions for fighters’ preparation for a fight:

… every once and a while we need a sparring session that’s really aggressive, um, and you know, we’re not trying to KO each other or anything stupid like that. We are just trying to match the pace, match the velocity, match the explosiveness of that way the fight is going to be, so those ones, they are tough. (Video Diary 1)

Further, fighters expressed that exposure to pain, and understanding how they reacted to pain both physically and mentally, was very important to their development. Emmett discussed the role of pain in his training:

…the reason why we [coach and Emmett] are still doing amateur and why I’m not doing pro, is because you still want to correct some mistakes, and again, there’s times, I have been in two fights in a row that have both [cumulatively] only lasted five minutes, so I
need at least, I need time to see how I take pain, how I deal with pain, how, later how it affects me, like sitting on the bench, just how I deal with stuff, so that’s a big thing right. (Interview 1)

In addition to learning about one’s limits and understanding how one reacted to pain in training, pain could provide fighters with the opportunity to learn about having options to deal with pain in a fight. For instance, if a fighter hurt their leg in training, they would be forced to use their other leg, or learn a different strategy to dominate their training partner, which could be translated into an advantage in competition. Therefore, if a fighter was hurt during a fight, he or she would not panic, because he or she would be prepared with options learned through experiencing pain in training. For example, Emmett said:

...because even pain during training, teaches you how to deal with pain during fights. It gives you options, right? So, now it’s like your leg hurts in training, now you’re going to go, ‘ok, now every time I finish, I’m not going to finish with a kick, I’m going to finish with a knee’. So, now in the fight, when you feel that same pain, you go ‘ok, my body knows to finish with a knee.’ I’m never going to kick accidentally, my body is going to tell me, ‘not just hands, finish with a knee’ or you know what I mean, if like, my knee and my leg hurts. I got to finish with the opposite kick, now I got to learn how to switch my feet fast and turn that hip over quicker, right like, I got to relearn how to get in and get out faster, you just got to, it teaches you to learn, to deal with minor pains, like, maybe 15-20 percent of the pain that you might feel during the fight. Sometimes it will teach you to deal with the actual pain, sometimes you’ll only get 15-20 percent in the fight, so you it just feels like a normal day at the office for you. So dealing with pain while you’re training, it’s actually a great thing, like, and you don’t want to deal with an injury during a fight. (Interview 1)

Emmett’s quote suggested that pain during training taught fighters how to adapt, which prepared them for competitions. Once fighters were able to develop conditioned reactions to pain, they were able to ‘learn’ pain and understood that it could help them progress in training and develop as fighters, although they first needed to develop an understanding of their reactions to pain.

In Aiden’s opinion, she felt that non-fighters choose not to put themselves in physically or emotionally compromising positions to be able to endure more pain; however, fighters understood that through feeling a higher level of pain or by sustaining injuries, they grew and evolved as people and as fighters, thereby justifying the painful experience as being ‘worth it’. Therefore, Aiden felt that fighters understood that they had to go through something bad, uncomfortable, or painful before they could experience something good. In addition to learning how to respond to pain and viewing pain as an opportunity for making progress, being inflicted
with pain during training also helped fighters in a fight by giving them the opportunity to study their opponents. A fighter’s goal during a fight was to inflict as much damage on his or her opponent as possible, while taking very little themselves. Interestingly, Emmett discussed how taking punishment and experiencing pain during a fight could be advantageous for him, because it enabled him to study his opponent and learn his weaknesses:

I’ll take more punishment, but I’ll understand that I am taking more punishment, like my body will be like ‘ok, I’m going to eat some shots’, but I’m going to be able to watch, I’m going to see like, how does he move this way, how does he move that way, how does he move this way. So there’s times where like even when I’m tired, I’ll just literally defense and I find my defense is good enough that it won’t really matter, ’cause I can always see now where his holes are, maybe now, ’cause last time I was so tunnel visioned that I had to hurt him, hurt him, hurt him that I wasn’t really watching his mistakes and now I’ve realized that his left hand flared up or his body is open, right. (Interview 1)

In this scenario, Emmett described choosing to take punishment in order to help him advance in the fight later on; therefore, he still felt in control during the fight.

Additionally, pain of injury offered fighters the opportunity to strengthen their weaknesses. Through exposing their weaknesses, injuries afforded fighters the opportunity to strengthen weaker areas of their bodies, ultimately giving fighters more options within a fight. For instance, Emmett said individuals like to train their strengths, and it was not until they were hurt that they were forced to train areas of their body with which they were less comfortable. Further, Emmett expressed that injuries could be a good thing as they helped fighters evolve:

Yeah it helps a lot of the game right, it just works us to evolve to… [s]o now you have to make sure that you incorporated the things you learned by having that pain and like that really helps me a lot… like when you’re hurt what do you do? Again, if you’re a one trick pony and all you know is your right kick and in the fight you’re right kick gets hurt, you know, now you have one trick and you’ve use it up, you know, you have no more jokes, you’re a one joke comic and you’ve got to stand up there for an hour, so in the three minutes that you told your joke, you’ve got 57 more minutes to try and make everyone laugh. (Interview 2)

Further, in order for fighters to deal with their injuries they needed to have an understanding of the degree of damage they had sustained, and the consequences of the damage (e.g., the extent of their limitations and whether they has suffered permanent damage). For instance, Bobbie reported that once an injury had been assessed and he understood that it was not going to get any worse, he experienced relief:
I don’t like pain. Nobody likes pain, but I just don’t, it doesn’t govern any of the, you know, as soon as I know an injury can’t get worse, it’s just pain, I’ll just ignore it. My concern when it comes to injuries is always damage, like ‘am I not going to walk right if I push on this ankle?’ But the pain is just annoying, like that’s the best… (Interview 3)

While injuries were negatively perceived because of the damage they imposed on the body, injuries also provided fighters with the opportunity to assess and re-evaluate themselves and their training, and further, to understand and gain awareness of their bodies. For example, it took Aiden sustaining an injury to be able to understand the difference between when she was in pain or injured:

Because I realized you know, if they kick me in my leg it sucks, but it’s not broken, it’s not going to be injured, it’s just a little bit of pain. So then I’d start to let me hands go more, right. I’d wait for them to kick and then boom, boom, boom, boom, I’m in their face, I’m pushing them or I’m kneeing them, but yeah, funny, oddly enough, it took an injury for me to realize… to ignore the pain, right? Um, because, I wasn’t able to use my arm to even coward away and block and hide, I had to just sit there and take it and really block and once I was able to do that, I realize that anything that they did hit me with, it was a little punch, maybe equivalent to a little kid hitting you, like it could hurt, but you’re not going to get knocked out, you’re not going to… your nose is not going to explode with blood or whatever, it’s fine. (Interview 1)

Through experiencing an injury, Aiden learned that she could take a certain level of pain without getting hurt:

…because I couldn’t throw with my arm, I had to really learn to defend the guard [offensive ground position]. So then once I felt my guard be really strong and reliable, nothing would get in, nothing could actually hurt me, then I started withstanding a bit of the pain more. (Interview 1)

Sustaining an injury helped Aiden realize she was not going to break, and that she could trust her body to take a certain level of pain without it resulting in damage. Further, she understood that pain could mean just pain, and not fear that it would mean an injury; ultimately, allowing Aiden to relax and progress further in training. Therefore, although injuries were not welcomed, they could give fighters the opportunity to understand how pain affected them, and what their bodies could tolerate within training. It appeared that pain was a training mechanism for fighters; they had to learn ‘how’ to experience pain. Thus, pain was viewed as truly advantageous for developing versatility as a fighter.
4.2.2.2 Responding to emotional pain

Bobbie felt that fighters had no choice but to surrender to their physical pain, however, they should have control over their emotional pain. This opinion supported the idea that suffering from physical pain was socially accepted, but suffering as a result of emotional pain was not socially acceptable among MMA fighters. One example of emotional pain that Bobbie discussed was the death of his coach. Because Bobbie was acting as his own coach for the fight camp, I asked him in our second interview if he had any one to reassure him during the fight camp. In response, Bobbie said, “no” and welled up with tears, and after taking took a long pause he said, “which is painful. Um, you know, sorry, I’m such a wimp” (Interview 2). Bobbie said that his reasoning for wanting his coach with him at his fight was not ‘strategic’ or ‘rational’, and that it was “completely emotional”:

I don’t think my performance would improve if he were there, um, I think what’s so emotional about it is, you know, growing up he was going to be there, like that’s the plan right, and you know life, it just doesn’t listen. (Interview 2)

Bobbie expressed that he “sometimes emotionally deal[s] with [Alec’s loss] like a 10 year old” (Interview 2). Bobbie told a story about one of his past student’s victories to convey how Alec’s passing impacted him emotionally:

…when [Bobbie’s student] landed that kick, waabang, and [opponent] fell flat on his face, the first thing I did was start looking around the room for Alec. Like, it’s so childish and, I mean, it’s like looking for Santa, I mean an adult, there’s no, there’s zero rational thought there, but you know, my brain was like, you know, like ‘look what we did, look what we did’ and it’s just, yeah. So that’s what I mean, he hits that spot where I don’t deal like an adult should deal… I mean to actually look around a room for a guy who’s been gone for a decade… (Interview 2)

Bobbie’s quote suggested that there were appropriate behaviours, and expected ways that fighters ought to deal with emotional pain. Additionally, during one of Bobbie’s video diary entries, he expressed the value in fighters not only understanding their emotional pain, but also handling it ‘properly’:

…but like I said, I think a big part of being successful, especially in this sport is kind of understanding when you’re afraid, understanding when you’re nervous, understanding the things that counteract those feelings. There’s so much macho stuff in MMA, ‘you’re tough, if you’re afraid you’re a pussy’ and all that garbage, and uh, you know, I am afraid. I think everyone is afraid before they fight. And one thing I’ve been trying to tell my students is it’s really how you handle that fear. It isn’t about not being afraid, it’s
about feeling that afraid, or feeling that fear, excuse me, that’s the carbs again, haha. It’s about dealing with that fear, um, properly. Like, can you manage it? Or does that fear manage you? (Video Diary 14)

Bobbie’s opinion of how fighters should handle their emotional pain appeared to stem from his reported inability to emotionally support his fighters. He reported that he wasn’t able to empathize with fighters’ emotions, and acknowledged that it was a ‘weak spot’ for him as a coach. He found it frustrating when fighters couldn’t manage their own emotions:

…I’m not good at pandering to emotions, ’cause I don’t um, I don’t get not having those under control. I’ve often had this problem with lots of emotional things where um, I just don’t get, and I’m really hard on myself with emotional stuff, because, for the same reason, I’m not hypocritical, when I’m being a wimp about something emotionally I tend to either be very honest with myself that I’m being a wimp and squash it or I’m very proactive. If someone brings up that I’m being a wimp about something and I squash it, but like either way it gets dealt with…I don’t know, so it’s tough to babysit emotions of fighters, um, ’cause again I feel like if you can’t do that, it’s not a good, and not just a good sport for them as far as their productivity, like how well they fight, but are they happy? (Interview 3)

Further, Bobbie expressed that he did not mind supporting them physically, but he did not want to have to manage their emotions:

It’s hard for me to, I don’t mind physically baby-sitting, because I feel like that’s, I need physical baby-sitting, everybody, like you’re hurt. But the emotional stuff, do you know how many times in life I catch myself when I say, ‘ok, you just need to be tougher than you are’?, like ‘feel how tough you’re being right now, up that like at least 50 percent, because you’re embarrassing yourself’. (Interview 3)

For instance, Aiden had an emotional breakdown over the size of her opponent prior to her fight in the Caribbean: she started to cry while seated next to her opponent at a media event a few days before the fights. Bobbie said he was upset that she wasn’t able to keep her emotions under control; he felt she was ‘giving all her power away’ to her opponent by showing that she was scared. Bobbie said:

I was frustrated too, because I feel like her opponent was very aware. I mean you’re crying beside her, it’s like you’ve now just mentally, she has no fear of you now, right? Like she knows you’re scared, she knows your nerves are going to be a factor during the fight. (Interview 3)

Bobbie admitted to lacking sympathy for Aiden in that moment, and said that he was ill equipped to deal with his teammates’ emotional outbreaks.
The way in which fighters responded to their own emotional pain and that of their teammates was complicated by the context of MMA as a masculine, rough sport environment and the fighters’ perceptions that there were appropriate (and inappropriate) ways to manage or ‘squash’ emotional pain and distress. However, much like physical pain and injury, fighters also viewed the ability to endure emotional pain as a sign of strength and resilience, despite not talking about emotional pain with others. In Bobbie’s opinion, he didn’t think people were born emotionally tough, he felt people built their resiliency through going through traumatic or emotionally painful events. Bobbie further explained that because he was forced to build his own resilience to emotional pain, he could not empathize with fighters who were ‘emotionally weak’ or unable to reign in their emotions. For instance, Bobbie expressed a time when he was dealing with emotional pain of a break-up with a long-term girlfriend, and as a result of going through his experience he formed the opinion that emotional pain disconnected people from one another: “…it’s a real eye opener, like, this emotion serves me no purpose, like lamenting, anguish, sorrow, it doesn’t… the only thing it does is disconnect me from the rest of the world and make life miserable…” (Interview 3). Further, Derek shared that the day after the fights in the Caribbean, when the team was on the beach together before returning to Canada, he began to re-live the emotional pain he felt from his loss the previous day, and as a result separated himself from the team: “I kinda felt like I was distancing myself a little bit, because I started thinking about my loss and it wasn’t nice… so I broke out a little bit, I was upset” (Training Partner Interview 1). It seemed that when fighters suppressed their emotional pain – an ‘appropriate’ way of concealing their negative emotions within the context of MMA – it often caused them to disconnect from their teammates, which could in turn make it harder for others to acknowledge their discomfort. For example, both Aiden and Will expressed that after the fights were over, at the end of the night, they found it hard to relate to their teammates’ joy excitement over their victories:

I’m glad everyone won of course, but Aiden lost, ok, but then the majority won and the majority was just all happy and it kind of alienates you, like you’re the one… they’re not, in their minds you’re just part of the team again and so what? You got clipped. But in your mind you’re like, ‘fuck they all won, now I’m just alienated here’… but yeah, its’ just kinda depressing. Embarrassing and depressing. (Will, Training Partner Interview 1)

Overall, responding to emotional pain was a complex issue for fighters. On one hand, fighters prided themselves as being resilient and tough if they were able to withstand emotional pain and distress and if they could control their emotions, and it was challenging for them to deal with
teammates who struggled to control their emotions. On the other hand, fighters also acknowledged that resilience and the ability to endure emotional pain was developed through past experiences of having to deal with loss and trauma—much the same as dealing with physical pain in the past enabled athletes to endure subsequent physical pain in training and competition. Furthermore, the fighters also expressed the idea that emotional pain and distress was ‘normal’ in MMA and that there was merit in discussing these emotions with teammates, particularly since hearing stories about teammates’ losses and past emotional pain helped them to deal with losses. Thus, emotional pain was a complex issue for fighters that was not easily navigated in their interactions with teammates.

4.2.2.3 Callusing

Fighters felt that one of the effects of pain in the body was a process of adaptation through ‘callusing’ or body hardening. In this way, fighters’ bodies become more tough and resilient to pain through repeated bouts of enduring pain. Emmett elaborated on this adaptation process, saying:

> Well, yeah, but it’ll take twice as much to get that bruise now, because now your body knows, your body knows that impact, so when you get a bruise on your shin, when that heals over, your shin is going to be like, ‘ah, right’, you’re like, ‘we can take this now, it’s not so bad’, your body starts adapting. (Interview 1)

Just as fighters took pain in training to learn their bodies and develop their reactions to it, emotional pain could have a similar effect. In Bobbie’s opinion, he felt that experiencing emotional pain or trauma developed resiliency in fighters (i.e., a higher threshold for emotional pain). In this way, while a fighter ‘callused’ or hardened their bodies through taking pain, fighters callused their emotional selves. For instance, the fighters often said that their first loss had quite damaging effects on them, but as a result, fighters were able to accept the reality of losing, which made the threat of future losses less painful for them:

> It’s funny my turning point [after my loss] was when I saw the Holly Holm video that I posted on Facebook. I don’t know if you watched it, it was one of her earlier fights as a boxer and she almost got killed, like she got knocked out so bad, she as hanging over the rope, like her body was hanging over the rope and then when they tried to, so they stabilized her and they woke her up, the ref should have called the fight off. Anyway, but he didn’t and then she was staggering and then she was stuck on the lower rope, so she was literally bent in half. And then when they brought her over, they pushed her over, she folded, it looked like she was dead, and then thinking about how someone who just beat
Ronda Rousey one sidedly, you know, started at that point at some point. I was like in my head, ‘ok, no one is just born great’, like ‘you still have to try’, even though I think I’m really great, like at the amateur level, it’s like it’s still so much work from there, so that’s what really ran through my head... slowly and surely I just thought, you know what, even if I go into my next one and I lose that one and I go into my third one and I lose that one, I was like, inevitably I’m going to win one and I just have to keep trying... yes you can lose, but you know what you still have to try; you’re not going to know until you go in there and try... (Aiden, Interview 3)

Further, teammates contributed to fighters’ development of resiliency and callusing following losses. For example, Emmett helped his teammates process and deal with their losses in the Caribbean by explaining the temporality of their pain, saying “that cut or that pain will start to scab over” (Interview 3). In addition, Emmett said that emotional pain could actually be a good pain, because “you could turn that [pain] into a weapon” (Interview 3). Emmett reported that fighters would never be able to rid themselves of the feelings of their loss, but with the support from their teammates they could become more resilient, for instance, fighters could “learn how to deal with [their] pain correctly” (Interview 3). Moreover, Emmett emphasized how important it was for him to be able to be a voice of reason for his teammates during their suffering, saying:

And again, it’s because of the moving voice that you need to hear, ’cause you got to hear people, you got to hear that voice of reasoning, you got to understand that it’s a shitty moment, but that moment only lasts for so long, you know what I mean? And again, behind every one shitty moment there are 10 brighter opportunities that come from it. That’s the point of it being an independent sport for 15 minutes, because after those losses or after it’s all said and done, you now assess it as a team and you now have somebody to either hold you or pick you up from your fall, so you know, it’s all about rising from the occasion, whether it’s positive or negative, you always have to rise above the negative or about the positive. (Interview 3)

Emmett’s quote suggested that acknowledging fighters’ pain enabled teammates to shape their experiences with the goal of helping them find meaning in pain.

4.3 Round 2: Social Validation of Pain

4.3.1 Physical pain validated by social praise

MMA allowed fighters the opportunity to give and receive pain in a socially acceptable context, and fighters were encouraged to inflict and receive pain through social reward and praise. Additionally, the admiration fighters received for their durability and fearlessness further encouraged them to seek out these pain experiences. For example, Aiden explained the validation she felt as a result of others’ praise:
Everyone thinks it’s so cool that I’m an aspiring fighter or whatever… someone who gets in the cage and fights with people for fun, like people don’t really know that and they think it’s badass and they think it’s really cool and that fuels me. (Interview 2)

Bobbie talked about his motivation for winning a professional title fight; his fighting career was made up of non-sanctioned fights that were illegal and not televised, and therefore he had not previously receive much social reward for the sacrifices he made and pain he endured as a fighter. As a result, winning a professional title fight in the Caribbean would earn Bobbie recognition for all the pain he endured during his time fighting:

... it’s frustrating to take all the beatings and you know get your ass kicked, and you know, I got knocked out in front of crowds and embarrassed and not get any, you know? Also I don’t, we had a guy come in the gym um, a few months ago and tell us his record was like a hundred wins and one loss and they were all non-sanctioned fights, and I mean that guy is just full of crap, you know? He is blatantly lying and I never want to be lumped in with that guy, you know? Like it made me think right away, ‘aw man do I sound like that guy?’ (Interview 2)

Bobbie expressed that he was willing to fight again, because the reward was worth it to him – to win, to receive a belt, and for the love of the fight. However, in his interviews, Bobbie expressed that validation from others for the pain he has endured would add to the perceived worth of the sacrifices he has made:

I took beatings, I had my face broken up and then you don’t get any credit, which is not why I fought, I wasn’t fighting for credit, but it was difficult to have had those experiences and be a veteran in competition and then you’re 0 and 0 [no recorded sanctioned fights]. (Interview 3)

Bobbie expressed that it hurt his reputation as a coach that he was not ranked, and thus winning a title fight would affirm his ability as a fighter and as a coach to others. Thus, it appeared that winning and social validation for one’s ability to endure the pain of training and fighting formed a key part of the fighters’ understandings of pain.

Fighters often showed more visible damage (e.g., blood, cuts, bruising/swelling) as a result of losing to a knockout versus from a submission. The visible evidence of taking pain appeared to earn fighters social validation: “people see the cuts and the elbow open and they freak out” (Bobbie, Interview 1). Conversely, Bobbie expressed that losing to a submission was more painful on the ‘ego’, “because you’re quitting when you’re not beat” (Interview 1). Therefore, a fighter was taking less physical pain and damage in losing by submission, and they could not
receive the same validation of having endured physical pain. Aesthetically, being knocked out was more visceral: people could see the result of the damage, and thus, fighters were rewarded with praise. It seemed that the more physical damage a fighter displayed on his or her body, the easier it was for others (non-fighters) to evaluate the pain he or she endured, and ultimately validate these pain experiences. In other words, the validation of fighters’ pain by others was dependent on evaluations of the physical damage that fighters sustained. This social validation of fighters’ endurance of physical pain further contributed to the distinction between physical and emotional pain.

It appeared that fighters received a lot less social praise for taking damage without inflicting any damage on their opponents. Aiden reported that the pain of her loss in the Caribbean was worsened because she hadn’t been able to inflict any pain on her opponent:

I was disappointed, not because I lost, even if the round had gone a little bit my way, like if I at least got to throw in a strike, a good kick, or even a good combo I could live with that... um, so you know, afterwards [her fight] I felt very disappointed in myself, again, only because of that. I could of lost no problem, but if I at least got to throw one fucking thing in I could of felt a little bit proud and it was really more just an ego. I didn’t get hurt with anything. That’s again what made me feel even more mad is she hit me 100 percent and none of it phased me, it didn’t hurt me, it didn’t do anything. I just got a little bruise, but I didn’t feel that during the fight, so clearly it wasn’t hard enough. (Video entry 10)

As a result of not being able to inflict damage of her opponent, Aiden expressed that she felt shame after her loss, and said she tried to avoid seeing anyone from the audience, because she didn’t want them to see the girl who “didn’t do anything” during her fight (Interview 3). Further, she couldn’t be ‘fueled’ by her performance, since she did not receive praise and validation for inflicting pain on her opponent.

Interestingly, it appeared that fighters could derive validation for their physical pain through their teammates’ successes. For example, part of the reason Aiden was so devastated by her loss was because she did not feel she had showed others that she was a capable fighter because she didn’t inflict any damage upon her opponent. However, she explained that she felt pride from her teammates’ wins, because she had helped them prepare, to be able to inflict and endure damage during their fights. Her sense of pride in her teammates’ victories enabled her to feel validation for her own training, despite not winning her own fight. Therefore, Aiden felt that the audience
would know that their team could withstand a high level of physical pain, which helped alleviate some of the discomfort she felt as a result of not inflicting any damage upon her opponent.

4.4 Round 3: Giving and Receiving Pain

4.4.1 “You’re not ok with violence” – Violence and consent

Fighters understood that experiencing pain in training was a necessary part of their development and progression in MMA. Based on analysis of athletes’ data, receiving pain from a training partner was accepted, but fighters needed to understand why it was being inflicted upon them and consent to receiving pain. Bobbie discussed the nuances concerning pain, violence, and consent:

…it’s a game, it’s a really rough game, and that helps me too, I think that helps me take the fear away. You know um, I got in a fist fight once right before my coach left to Thailand, and it was a guy smaller than me with no training and he just wanted to fight. I couldn’t talk him out of it and I remember putting my hands up and they were shaking and my brain was going, ‘this guy is 125 lbs., walking around, he has no training, he has no chance of this, virtually no chance in this fight, but I’m afraid’, and you know, I was sparring with heavy weights to prep for fights, I was getting my ass kicked by really highly decorated professional guys and I was never afraid, um, and [after the fist fight] I remember coming back to my coach going, I was so frustrated, I said, ‘I got scared today in a fight with a pipsqueak who has no hope with me’ and my coach said, ‘you’re not ok with violence Bobbie’, he said, ‘you know, we’re playing a game, this is a sport and you get in there with a heavy weight, you know he’s a friend of yours, you know there’s a ref, you know there’s a medic’, he said, you know, ‘why is that guy fighting you?’ , ‘I’m like, I don’t know’ and he goes, ‘yeah well, that’s why you’re afraid, you don’t understand it, you’re not consenting to it, there are no rules’, um, he goes ‘and it’s violence at the true meaning’, ’cause you know, it stems, I don’t, I can’t remember what the true Greek word is, but it stems from the term to violate. So you know, violence, to me, comes from that idea that it’s just NOT consensual, right, like, that’s what violation means. So whenever people say, ‘oh MMA is violent’, I always go, ‘really? I don’t, I don’t see it as that violation’. Like just like, ‘whoo’ [expressing his relief], and then get in there with this pipsqueak and like, be nervous, and he said ‘yeah, it’s just violence, you’re not okay with violence’, which was kind of cool, because I’d tricked myself into thinking that my MMA training had made me chill with violence. (Interview 2)

As a result of the bullying and violence Bobbie had endured growing up, he understood there to be a clear distinction between violence and fighting:

I always see it [fighting] as a game. I think too, this is a big difference too, that I always meant to bring up in the diaries too and I haven’t. I think growing up being bullied so bad, uh, I told you about the super graphic shitting out a tooth, yeah, as awful as that is, when you do that, the idea of fighting someone with rules, like, I know that’s not going to
happen to me. Like I’m not ever going to have to expel part of my body that was choked down my throat violently. Um, and more importantly, I’m not going to be laughed at while it happens and I’m not going to be scared while it happens. Um, so because I was on the end of so many ruthless beatings as a kid, I really do see this as a sport, like it’s a game and like I always say it’s a rough game, but I don’t see it as a fight, you know? Whereas [student/fighter] is the perfect example, like [student/fighter] is terrified before the fights and I think that’s because he has never really been beaten up in a scenario that is far more scary, you know, there is no doctor to pull him off you. You know, like I’ve had my face stomped. When you go down and a guy starts stomping your face it’s terrifying, right? Like it’s really, your nose breaks, you feel your teeth come out, its, you know, you can’t tell whether all the stuff on your face is mud from the bottom of his shoe or blood and it’s like, you know, like I look at [my opponent] and I look at his fights and he’s a talented guy but that’s not going to happen, so there’s just that kind of, not calmness, but, you know, the lack of fear makes it easier to keep it more analytical and less like, emotional, um, yeah. I think there’s always going to be some, but they are pretty in check considering. (Interview 2)

In addition, Bobbie said MMA was not a violent sport, because fighters were not being violated; rather, fighters consented to having pain and damage inflicted upon them by their training partners and by opponents. Further, Jordan also reported that “[i]t’s [MMA] not violence, it’s competition, right?” (Training Partner Interview 1). Thus, consent between fighters appeared to make giving and receiving pain acceptable, and alleviated their fear toward fighting.

Fighters reported that they needed to understand their training partners’ intentions in order to be able to consent to their training session with them. Fighters consented to pain by communicating to one another their goals and intentions before their training sessions (e.g., intensity of training session, level of pain/damage necessary to inflict or be inflicted with). For example:

...sometimes I’ll roll with [teammate] and I’m just playing defense and then sometimes I’ll say to her, ‘look, I’m going to try and mull you, like this is me trying to beat you as aggressively as I can’. She knows the difference between when I’m playing and when I’m, you know, after her, and like, it’s gonna suck. So as long as you know going in… (Bobbie, Interview 2)

Emmett discussed a time when a training partner did not communicate his intentions for the session, and emphasized the importance of having a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ with a training partner:

I appreciate the time at [previous MMA gym], there are a lot of good people there, but there were a lot of people who used me as a punching bag. I was just a tough kid and just wouldn’t give up, so there were a few people who would just come in there and look to literally try and hurt me and see if they could do anything, right? There was one time
where a buddy threw probably a head kick as hard as he possibly could and it’s funny, it’s one of those things where like, I ate it and backed up against the fence and it took me three or four second to figure out, like ‘ok, no, I’m good’. But, yeah, he was very apologetic for it afterward, but if I have learned anything from my experience now to then, it’s you know, unless it’s a gentleman’s agreement beforehand, like that’s considered hard sparring, so that’s considered like, yeah, hard sparring. So you literally say before you touch in, like ‘listen, I’m going hard, you can go hard, don’t worry about it’; it’s a gentleman’s agreement sort of thing. (Interview 1)

Emmett’s quote suggested that without communicating one’s intentions, training partner relationships could be damaged. Lastly, Emmett reported that he valued his long-term training partners, because he knew they weren’t trying to “just beat up on [him]” (Interview 2). Therefore, it appeared that consent facilitated the fighters’ ability to trust in one another that they would not intentionally hurt each other.

Lastly, Aiden made a video diary the night before the fights in the Caribbean in which she discussed the role of consent during a fight:

I want to punch her so frikken hard into the Stone Age. She’s going to regret ever even accepting this fight, and uh, and there’s no animosity towards her, nothing personal. She didn’t do anything to me. I have no idea who she is as a person. I understand that this is just a fight. Absolutely nothing personal, but when you agree to go in a cage and fight with someone; that’s it. That’s your fault. That’s the choice that you made and I’m not going to go easy on her even if I see that I’m whooping her and I see that I should go lightly. Absolutely not. This is war. This is what we both signed a contract for saying ‘this is the moment that we’re both going to get in this cage and do what it is that we have to do to get the win and that’s it’. There’s no if, ands, or buts. There’s no, ‘let’s go easy on her, because her family is watching’, I don’t give a crap. Right now I’m one of the nicest people you’ll meet. When I am getting hyped and in the moment when I’m in the cage I’m not your friend, um, I’m not nice. I’m not there to be nice to you. I’m not there to cater to your needs. I’m not there to think about you. I’m there to think about myself. I don’t want to get hit. I want to make my team proud. I want to make my coach proud. I want to make my family proud and I want to make my friends proud and nothing’s going to come in between that. Nothing. I don’t care who you are. You could be frikken Saint of whatever, you could house orphans or whatever, I don’t give a shit. You signed that contract. You agreed to get in that cage with me. I’m going to destroy you. I’m going to pummel you into the Stone Age and I cannot wait to get in there. I’m so ready to fight this girl, so ready and I’m glad you [researcher] get to be there up front and center to watch this. I promise I’m nice; it’s just right now. (Video Diary 9)

4.4.2 “I made her bleed” – Inflicting pain as evidence of fighters’ ability

Fighters reported that they found it ‘fueling’ to hurt their opponents during a fight. Specifically, Emmett expressed that seeing the damage he inflicted on his opponent reassured him in his
ability as a fighter, and that being able to inflict pain on others served as an indication that what he was doing was effective (e.g., his skills, strategies, ability to damage). Emmett said:

> It’s your first fight, you’re nervous, you don’t know what to expect, you don’t know what you’re doing and it was a great feeling knowing that you have him hurt. I literally beat him into all three corners and you’d like, his towel, his corner ended up throwing in the towel. And you know, once you score your first knock down it’s a great feeling. You know he is hurt and you know you can start attacking certain things and you know what you’re doing is working, ’cause until you can actually feel that he is hurt, you really don’t even know that what you’re doing is working, if you’re even hurting him or if you’re hurting him in anyway or if you’re just pissing him off. (Interview 1)

From this quote, it seemed that feeling that they have hurt their opponent (i.e., inflicted pain) provided fighters with evidence that they were being successful, which gave them confidence in their abilities. Additionally, Emmett mentioned that a fighter’s first fight was especially terrifying, and knowing that he was causing damage to an opponent served as an indication of how he was doing in a fight. Thus, the ability to inflict pain served as an indicator of fighters’ skill and performance.

Aiden talked about her first demo fight in MMA, which was the first time she was put in a situation where she had to hit someone and they had to hit her back. She discussed her experience of making her opponent bleed for the first time:

> That one was exciting. I was intimidated, because she was a lot taller than me. I, especially starting off, I feared a lot of things. Um, because of a lot of um, just starting off the height difference shut me down mentally right away. I was like, ‘I’m going to lose’, that was it. I had no other reason to believe I was going to lose other than her height advantage on me, but I actually got the better of her. I dropped her with a teep [a front push kick], um, and I made her bleed. I’d never ever been in a fight before in my life, other than with my sister, which doesn’t really count, um, and so I had never been exposed to that, like, I did that to you. (Interview 1)

Seeing the physical damage fighters inflicted upon their opponents was very satisfying for fighters. Not only did it reassure them of their skill and ability, but it also gave fighters confidence in their power and control over an opponent. For instance, Aiden also said:

> Um, it’s funny, without sounding sick in the head, it was a really um, fueling. You see that weakness and you know you’re on top, you know you’re winning, you know that you could literally just [grunts], if you wanted to. Um, so you know, I’m not power hungry ever. I never feel the need to exert my dominance ever, at all, but in that sense when you’re in a cage and people are yelling at you to continue doing it, you really are fueled. (Interview 1)
4.4.3 Boundaries of inflicting pain

Although fighters reported that it was ‘fueling’ to be able to hurt their opponents, they also reported boundaries around how much damage they felt comfortable inflicting on others. For example, Aiden said:

I felt satisfied knowing that I could drop her, but at no point did I feel the need to like kill her and end her there. You see some people who are like that and you know they are just naturally aggressive and bullies. It is an aggressive sport, it’s combat fighting, you’re supposed to try to hurt the other person, but controlled, right, that’s the whole main thing. The difference between this and the other forms of barbaric combat fighting is that this is controlled, whereas the other ones weren’t really controlled. (Interview 1)

Fighters understood that hurting and inflicting pain upon their opponent was part of the sport, but they also expressed that they would feel a tremendous amount of guilt if they ever severely injured an opponent and “affect[ed] their career or standard of living” (Bobbie, Interview 1).

Additionally, the boundary of giving pain was relevant when fighters were working with their training partners. Like fights, training sessions also required fighters to inflict pain and damage upon their training partners; however, fighters felt that there should never be intent to seriously hurt another fighter during training sessions. For example, Bobbie sprained his ankle while rolling with Conor during one of their first training sessions of their fight camp. During our first interview, I asked Conor how he responded when he injured a training partner, and he said:

Right, uh, for me, I instantly feel like shit, a bag of shit, especially, like we are both competing, right, and it’s just an instant fear, like ‘fuck, did I fuck this up for him? Is he not going to compete?’ like ‘is he seriously injured?’ So it’s immediately checking on that person and hoping they’re not seriously hurt… if I were permanently, yeah, if I was to end somebody’s career because of an injury I inflicted, I would feel like a bag of shit, ’cause I know how I feel about the sport and if I were to take that away from somebody else, I would feel pretty terrible. (Interview 1)

4.4.4 Receiving pain feels powerful

Fighters also felt that receiving pain from an opponent could be invigorating, for example:

…sometimes during the fight you get hit with something that hurts and it just fuels you more; it kind of gives you that burst of awakening, like the pain is so there that you’re like, I’m alive and you just kind of, it just gives you that strength for the next couple minutes to just really push through it… (Aiden, Interview 1)
Aiden’s quote suggested that receiving pain (while taking little physical damage) could leave fighters feeling extremely powerful. Aiden talked about the first time she was punched in the face during her second demo fight by a larger opponent, in which she said:

…so I had to weigh in at 125, um, or 130, um, and she was weighting, like 160 or 175 or something like that. So she was big, she was a bigger girl, um, but I was very happy, because I still believed that I got the better of her, because she hits like a truck. The only person who’s hit me and made me see black, it was kind of like a slide show. She hit me and everything was black and maybe two seconds later I could see again, but in the time being my eyes were wide open and I couldn’t see anything. But to know that someone who can hit me that hard and I can still keep myself in check long enough to counter and get the better of them, um, it was a lot of fun, it was really like, adrenaline was pumping through me like crazy, ’cause you know you hit her and she’d move back and get hurt, but she’s such a tank right, she’ll eat you. So that was something that I will always remember and everybody congratulated me after that fight. … [opponent] just tucks her chin and will go boom, boom till the end and just kill you with her punches, um, so for people to say ‘wow, we have never see someone just challenge her like that and especially you being 30 pound lighter than her’, her having three or four championship belts already, that was really, really, it pumped me up a lot, it did. (Interview 1)

Aiden’s quote illustrated how receiving praise for being inflicted with pain was a positive, energizing experience. Her quote further illustrated the notion that being able to inflict pain while enduring pain was an indicator of her ability as a fighter. Aiden further expressed the sense of pride she felt for her ability to fight through pain, saying:

You’re just proud that you got in there, you’re proud that you put on a great show, you’re proud that you were able to sustain so many punches and kicks and stuff like that and you know, you’re still standing and alive, and that’s what people celebrate at the end of it… (Interview 1)

Athlete also reported that by taking pain well during a fight encouraged them to be able to take more pain – this ability to take pain made fighters feel powerful. Emmett expressed that that he experienced a ‘realness’ in fighting that he had not found anywhere else, and it was these moments of ‘finding it within himself to keep going’ that rewarded him and enabled him to endure more pain in a fight:

There’s a lot of things where people are like ‘don’t give up on yourself, like, keep going’, but like, it’s different, like I don’t mean this in a mean way, when a guy goes to a marathon, you know you have to deal with the burn, right? Like when a guy is playing hockey you only got to deal with exhaustion, uh, with football, you might have to deal with a little bit of pain. With fighting you have to deal with all of it, the exhaustion, the burn, the pain, and on top of that, someone is trying to inflict more pain on you, right? So
now you got to, it’s just the realest thing like, it’s been my experience anyways, the
deepest you can dig is fighting, it’s like, you literally, if you have nothing left, you got to
find something. (Interview 1)

Emmett’s quote suggested that being able to handle the pain inflicted upon fighters was
rewarding; it was a reflection of fighters’ ability to endure pain. Additionally, Jordan talked
about his reasoning for training and competing in MMA and said:

…you can truly see honesty in someone… because you can’t do anything half ass in there
or else the consequences are immediate… in combat sports, if you do make a mistake you
pay for it immediately. You get hurt, you could get concussed… You get hit or you get
submitted; it hurts. So you can’t be dishonest with yourself. You can’t be dishonest with
your, I guess opponent across from you… there’s not that many activities in the world
that you can truly be honest. (Training Partner Interview 1)

Jordan’s quote suggested that pain could be rewarding through the self-awareness it brought
fighters in their relationships with pain. Thus, being inflicted with physical pain during a fight,
and withstanding the pain, was rewarding for fighters, which also seemed to enable them to
endure more pain.

4.4.5 Humanization through pain

While inflicting and receiving pain was described as an indicator of fighters’ ability and it
‘fueled’ them, taking pain also brought fighters’ vulnerabilities into awareness, and as a result,
humanized them. Aiden reflected on the first time she was punched hard in the face during a
fight, and said thus far it was her most negative experience fighting, as it made her realize that
she could, in fact, get hurt: “mmm so far… I guess that would be the only one, where she
punched me hard enough where I realized if you don’t protect your face you can actually get
knocked out” (Interview 1). Sustaining an injury was interpreted as a humanizing experience for
fighters, in that through experiencing injuries the fighters realized they were fragile, vulnerable,
and helpless. The pain that fighters associated with injury could serve as a reminder of what
fighters do not want to be reminded of: that they are human. Some fighters internalized their
injury to mean they were not strong enough, and that they “could just snap and break” (Aiden,
Interview 1). Aiden explained the feelings of helplessness that ensued after she sustained an
injury:

When you get hurt. When you get hurt, for sure. Um, because you know, even if you get
tapped out and stuff like that, you know that you’re in a training situation it’s not that
bad. But when you get hurt, it’s a whole ‘nuther type of feeling of helplessness, right? If you get choked out, you learn to defend against a choke and you get better at it and then one day they won’t choke you again. If you jam your toe or you break your hand or you know, you get a concussion, you’re out for a certain amount of time, right? You can’t train and that puts a toll on your body and your mind, right? You start to feel vulnerable. I had my elbow hyperextended and I hesitate for so long, months, to use my left arm or anything, coach would be like grab his hand and I would be like, ‘nope, I’m not grabbing anything’ and because of that I would hinder my training, right? Um, so I think for me that’s the least enjoyable part. When you get an injury that’s not life or death, like it’s not going to fall off or you’re not going to have to amputate it, but it’s just enough where you can’t comfortably use it and you’re kind of just stuck there waiting for it to heal. It’s like watching paint dry, you just, you don’t want to do it. (Interview 1)

Additionally, an injured fighter was at the mercy of their body to heal, and this lack of control could provoke feelings of helplessness. Thus, experiencing an injury could bring fighters’ vulnerabilities and limits into awareness. In this way, injuries served as a constant reminder that they had weaknesses, and fighters became discomforted by the unknown extent of their limitations. Therefore, humanization was more than just understanding one’s limits through the experience of pain; it concerned the realization that a fighter could get hurt, be broken, or was not God-like. Thus, the humanizing aspect of pain and injury was interpreted as distinctly different from understanding one’s limits because of the social repercussions of experiencing an injury in fighting, in that by getting hurt by an opponent, fighters were exposing their weaknesses to not only themselves, but also to others.

Fighters were also humanized through their losses, which caused emotional pain as well as physical pain. The emotional pain associated with a loss appeared to stem from the meanings that fighters attached to losing, for instance, the realization that they were vulnerable and not ‘superman’. For instance, Conor shared that when he began training and competing in MMA he believed that he was untouchable and invincible. He reported that he interpreted his first loss to mean that he was not a God or superman, and that he was only human. Conor said he was never able to accept his loss, and he explained that he went into a depressive-type period after the loss. It took him a few months before he could enter a gym to train, and eventually, after a few years, he began to compete again. Conor said that realizing he could be defeated, and was human, was very difficult for him to accept:

The most significant time that I can remember was after my first loss, I went into a bit of, I don’t want to say depression, but a bit of a depression. I didn’t go to a gym for maybe three months or something, three or four months and just sat on the couch and just felt
sorry for myself, because up until that point I thought I was the toughest person alive, I didn’t think anybody could touch me. I thought I was fucking superman and I thought I didn’t have to train, I could beat up anybody, uh, after losing that fight, I realized I was a human being and I wasn’t the toughest guy in the world, that was fucking devastating. So, yes, after that fight, even when I started training again, I started training out of necessity, not because I was over that loss. I still, it took me a long time to get over that loss and to eventually compete again, like I was pretty devastated from that, because again, thinking you’re fucking superman and realizing that you’re not, so for me it took me another, I didn’t compete again until I moved to Ontario, uh, I came to Ontario, I came back to Ontario to go to school originally, and then I started training again, and I was like listen I’m kind of getting back in shape so I took another fight at that point, so it wasn’t for another two years I think, two to three years before I competed again after that point, so that’s kind of a sore, it’s going to be a sore spot for the rest of my life, ’cause I’ll never get that back. (Interview 1)

Additionally, losing meant that Conor’s weaknesses were on display for everyone to see. Being so exposed, and involuntarily allowing others to see him beaten was very painful for him. Conor expressed how a loss impacted fighters’ sense of self:

You’re the only person that’s got to get in there and it’s your well-being that’s on the line, your dignity, your everything, your confidence, it’s all on you. There can be people around you [supporting you to get in the cage to fight], but really you’re the only one that can do it. So as the first fight goes down, your nerves start escalating, like ‘oh shit three more fights to go, three more fights and it’s me’, so it’s just this impending feeling of that, fuck, there’s going to be a time very shortly where I need to perform and I need to perform to the best of my ability or I could look like a fool in front of my friends and family, I could let my coaches down, everybody that’s supported me, down in just a matter of moments. So it’s just this feeling of, like I said the anxiety starts building, like ‘oh shit’, it’s kind of do or die, and you’re not worried about the pain, you’re not worried about getting hurt, that never plays a factor. That’s never a factor in a fighter’s mentality, like ‘oh I’m going to get hurt out there’, that’s never a factor. I think it’s everything else; it’s the letdown. The disappointment of a loss and most fighters think they’re like alphas, like gods and supreme athletes and once you lose a one on one sport, there’s somebody out there better than you at that point, right, and that’s a hard pill to swallow. (Interview 1)

Further, Bobbie alluded to the external pressures fighters felt to earn recognition from others for their endurance and infliction of pain. Bobbie described the emotional pain he would feel if he lost a fight in front of his wife:

Losing in front of her would be mortifying though, getting beat up in front of your wife, that’s uh, because she’s my, this is going to sound super cheesy, but she’s my biggest fan. It’s like, and to her I am the embodiment of an alpha, a destroying, leading conqueror, if I get beat up in front of a kid, you know, he’s 24, um, that would be painful, I mean, nothing would change, right? Um, but, yeah, that weighs, the crowd, my students, that
pressure is meh, it’s [wife’s name], it’s those eyes watching me, right? I’d be horrified for her to look at me as any less efficient or, less of a sentinel after that, do you know what I mean? Because that’s my job… (Interview 1)

Based on analysis of athletes’ data, it appeared that fighters’ humanization through losing and experiencing physical pain was a difficult process for them. Additionally, it seemed that fighters’ losses were also painful for their teammates. As an example, Bobbie talked about the impact of Will’s loss on the team:

…he is the toughest out of all of us. Like when I talk about toughness, like hard, tough, gritty dude, like take a punch, chin, Will’s better than all of us, like for sure, if there was just like, how much of a beating you could take and keep going meter, Will surpasses everybody. So for him to get beat like that, which is still human, caught us off guard, caught Will off guard. (Interview 3)

Thus, witnessing other fighters losing and experiencing pain also seemed to ‘humanize’ them to their teammates and caused them to question their own invincibility.

4.4.5.1 Humanizing opponents

Fighters reported that realizing that they could inflict pain and that their opponents could be hurt and were vulnerable served to humanize their opponents. When fighters realized that they were fighting another human who could be beat and was just as scared as they were, it decreased the fighters’ fear of pain. For instance, Bobbie expressed that seeing his opponent as another human and not a monster always calmed him. Further, Conor talked about a time when a teammate reassured him that he was fighting another man who was just as scared as he was:

Um, so, one of the best things, one of my train, I’m not even sure if he meant to do this intentionally, but this, oh my god, it took so much pressure off. So this one time in my third fight, as we were leaving our dressing rooms in the hallway, me and my opponent were sitting in the hallway being called out, so I can see the guy five feet in front of me that I’m going to go fight, like me and this guy are going to go fight, just getting ready to get in the cage and be locked up and I was fucking shitting myself and have to look at this guy and him look at me, I was like ‘oh, this is fucking awkward’ and one of my training partners, he told me, he said, ‘did you see that?’, and I was like ‘no I didn’t see it’ and he’s like, ‘he was fucking terrified, he’s terrified of you’, that took the weight of the world off my shoulders, I was like ‘oh good, he is just as scared, good I got this, I got this’ and that took the weight of the world off me, so that was the best thing a training partner has ever said to me. (Interview 1)

Conor’s quote suggested that learning that opponents were also scared of pain humanized them, and further, thinking of opponents as human reduced fighters’ fear and the threat of pain.
Interestingly, Bobbie reported that he felt guilty after beating an opponent:

I feel bad after. It’s when all the dust has settled in, you know, you’re with your team, they’re with their team and you walk by and see them hunched over with ice in their face and bleeding and defeated… you want to go over and be like, ‘it’s ok’, you know? Especially because I have been there, been knocked out in 13 seconds, you know what they are going through. (Interview 1)

Bobbie was able to empathize with his opponents after their defeat as a result of perceiving them as human, and thus, it appeared that seeing opponents could experience pain (and be beaten) contributed to fighters’ humanization of their opponents.

Lastly, Aiden reported that realizing her opponent was human helped her deal with the pain from her loss in the Caribbean. The morning after the fights, Aiden’s opponent shared that she had a young daughter waiting for her back home. Aiden explained that learning about her opponent’s daughter was a transformative moment in alleviating her emotional pain, because it helped her to see her opponent as a human being, and as a result, that made it easier for Aiden to accept her loss:

Yeah, it actually made me feeling better that I lost, because, you know, potentially for her this could be a career thing too and she’s actually got someone who she has to do it for. So like yeah, I’ll take the loss if it means like she can one day be able to provide for her kid with this type of career or whatever. So that made it easier on me too, but it also just, I don’t know, just kind of humanized her for me, like she’s just another human, because in my head she was this ultra-super killer, ’cause she just looked so jacked and so scary, so yeah, it was just a good way of humanizing her again. (Interview 3)

Aiden’s quote suggested that humanizing of her opponent helped her manage her emotional pain, and further find meaning in her loss.

4.4.6 Preparing for pain: Making the switch

Fighters reported that leading up to their fights they would transition from a human being to a ‘monster’, which mentally prepared them for battle, to inflict and receive pain in a fight. Conor expressed what this transition was like for him:

[Y]ou can feel fucking nervous tension and you look around and you can just tell everybody is dealing with the same shit, everybody is terrified. Anybody who says they are not terrified is either a liar or a sociopath, so it’s just nerve racking as shit and it feels like, say I’m the fourth fight out, it feels like you’re waiting in line to be executed. You’re like ‘shit, that’s the first fight, oh shit that went fast, oh shit the second fight’, and
as it gets closer and closer it feels like you’re waiting for your turn at the gallows, you know? So then again, it’s just crazy nervous energy, um, so as they call your name out there you’re like, ‘oh fuck, this is it, this is it I’m fucked, fuck this, oh that’s me, I’m next’, so you go out, you’re walking toward that cage trying to psych yourself up - it’s all fake, it’s fake, I try to look as tough and as confident, I smile, but that’s fake, it’s all fake. I’m nervous, I’m scared, I’m terrified, you get through that cage, I’m fucking shitting my pants, I’m looking for a way out, trying to figure out ‘how can I leave this?’ you get in, the door closes, the ref faces you off, I’m still terrified. As soon as that ref says ‘go’, it changes, it changes completely. I’m not scared, I’m um, looking to kill this guy. It’s either me or him, there is no escape, that cage door is not going to open, I can’t get out. It’s survival, like I’m going to go after this guy and I’m going to take his head off.

(Interview 1)

The mental switch from being scared of the threat of pain to viewing oneself as a destroyer seemed to diminish fighters’ fear of pain and ‘fueled’ them for their fights. Emmett talked about making a transition from himself to a monster right before he would fight, however, he said that he didn’t like turning into a monster for very long. When asked how he prepared for a fight, he said:

Essentially just enjoy my last hours before I actually have to fight. Just kind of enjoy and come fight time, switch it on and become a different person; become the person that everybody hates. And again, I don’t mind being that guy, but I only like being that guy for so long. The best part is that you’ve actually personally seen me at both levels, you know, I’m happy go lucky and doing stuff like this, drinking water, drinking tea, having burgers, smiling, laughing, uh, but then when the cage door closes or when they start playing my music and I got to go out there, I just turn the switch on and I have to be meaner, like not caring about him. It’s funny, I can’t care about how many times I get hit, can’t care about what I look like, can’t care about what he looks, like, can’t feel bad, you know what I mean? Like emotionally put everything aside and just become a monster, right? A monster always has to fight another monster, right? (Interview 3)

It appeared that fighters found it exhilarating to be free of the fear of pain. Transitioning from human into a God or into a monster enabled fighters to experience a different side of themselves, and this change seemed to occur only in the context of fighting. I had the experience of catching Emmett’s monstrous transition for his fight in the Caribbean. Emmett’s main sparring partner, Will, had just lost by a head kick knock out, followed by Aiden, Emmett’s girlfriend, who got choked out in the first round of her fight. The team was sitting in the back change room, and everyone was intensely silent. Emmett had to fight next, and the event staff came and called his five minute warning for his fight. I was standing off to the side, away from the fighters, with a lump in my throat. I couldn’t think of one word to say to Aiden or Will about their losses; I was frozen and shocked at the turn of events. I suppose I also believed their God-like status as
fighters; I had expected all of them to win. Aiden was at one end of the fighters’ room bench, bent over, crying and shaking from her loss. She was being comforted by Will, who was also in a state of devastation over his own loss just prior to hers. Emmett was at the other end of the bench, alone. He couldn’t console his teammate or girlfriend at the risk of losing his momentum for his own fight. I looked over at Emmett and we locked eyes for a moment, seconds before he was called out to fight. Emmett looked at me so intensely, I felt I could see the agony behind his eyes. Then all of a sudden his expression changed – he looked ferocious. We stared at each other, no words spoken. The event staff came and called his name, and he got up and walked out for his fight. It seemed as though in a matter of seconds, all of the agony Emmett felt over his teammates’ losses and his inability to help them through their suffering was transformed into his fuel and power for his fight. I watched Emmett as he stood up, a different version of himself, and exited the change room. I looked back at Aiden and Will, then proceeded out the door to walk behind Emmett, who was now jumping up and down as he walked toward the cage – now a monster – preparing for his fight.

4.5  Round 4: Sharing Pain between Teammates

4.5.1 “The moment I feel the way you grip me…” – Pain, training, and restraint within training relationships

Fighters expressed that exhibiting restraint when inflicting pain developed trust between training partners. Fighters understood that restraint and control were tied to their experience in MMA and their sense of security with themselves. As fighters became more aware of their power, and more comfortable with themselves and their abilities, it seemed that they did not need to prove their strength to others through deliberately inflicting pain on others. Therefore, fighters could more easily demonstrate restraint in training. For this reason, fighters reported their apprehension to work and train with people new to MMA. For example:

[Conor] has done martial arts for a long time so he understands his control of power and so did I. So there was sort of a quick trust, ’cause I don’t really spar with people I don’t know simply because it’s like, again, I’m not in it to get hurt… so he made a good training partner in that sense when I was training for my fight. (Jordan, Training Partner Interview 1)

In addition, fighters felt that beginner mixed martial artists were out to prove how strong they were, and as a result often had little control. For instance, Bobbie reported that he got nervous
working with new students, because they “want to show you how mean they are in everything they do…” (Interview 2). Further, fighters said that they were more vulnerable to being hurt or injured when working with someone new. As a result, in one of Conor’s video diary entries he said that he would avoid classes during a fight camp in order avoid working with new people:

Again man, my frustration of training with these fucking new people sometimes. Again, I would have much more patience for this if I didn’t have a fight coming up, but as I have a fight coming up, I need to be training hard and I need to be training with people that are not fucking idiots that are going to hurt me. So we were going over some Kimora [BJJ submission] stuff and some mouse trap [BJJ submission] stuff and I was with somebody who I thought would have had some experience, because he was wearing, anyway I thought he had some experience. We were training and he wasn’t putting me in position right? And he kept torqueing on my shoulder. Now that wouldn’t be an issue if we were rolling, because I would be able to defend it and he wouldn’t get me in that bad position, but because we are setting it up, and I am letting him, it kind of gives him free range to kind of rip up, tear up my arm. So my arm is fucking killing me today, so I think this is actually the second class in like two weeks that I’ve actually just walked out of halfway through ’cause I was just getting so upset. I was actually just waiting until the end of class, like ‘ok, this guy is fucking torqueing on my shoulder all class, maybe by the end of it I’m going to get to roll and I’m going to get some pay back’, you know what I mean? As shitty as that sounds and it might make me sound like a bully, but it’s like after being hurt by somebody, I’m agitated and aggravated as is and I’m like ‘alright, I want to get some pay back’, but unfortunately I didn’t get to roll so I just had to do the class. Uh, so there’s that. There’s me being a miserable fuck. (Video Diary 5)

During the second interview I asked Conor to elaborate on his hesitation to work with new people:

Um, recently, for me is training with people that are newer to the game and then I’ve gotten injured due to their lack of knowledge. So for me that is extremely upsetting, especially with fights coming up. It’s not something I think about, but just something I know. For instance this morning, if I come in and I see nothing but new people in the gym, I’m just going to do my own thing. I have to be selfish and I have to be careful for myself, like I’m a week out, right? So I can’t be in there and rolling with some asshole who doesn’t, and even maybe not intentionally trying to do it, but just not knowing, you know and then hurting you. So you just have to be smart. If you got to excuse yourself from a class, you got to be selfish and look after you at this point. (Interview 2)

In Bobbie’s opinion, he felt that a lack of restraint would never hinder a fighter in a fight, but it would limit them as a teacher and a training partner. Thus, restraint was useful and necessary in training, whereas in a fight there was no need for restraint (and it would be detrimental to fighters’ performance if they showed restraint in a fight).
Additionally, Aiden expressed that training partners’ ego (e.g., lack of control) directly affected fighters’ progression, especially during a fight camp. For example, she said:

Um, but she can hurt me, she’s caught me with things before, but for the most part she is very aware of hurting me, so that’s her top priority, ‘don’t hurt her, don’t hurt her’, especially during the camp, during the training camps, um, and her ego is never in it, like again, I always bring up Erin, because she is just too great of an example. When I catch her with something, when you know, make her tap or whatever I can see the anger and frustration in her face and I can see that the next time we start, you know, we touch gloves again, it’s kill, it’s kill time… that’s decent and ok, but it’s not great training partner, because you need to leave the emotion out of it, and if it’s specifically like you’re helping me to fight, not we’re helping each other to fight, if you’re just helping me to fight, you really can’t have that ego. You can’t, you know, you need to understand that we’re in training and you’re supposed to lose and I’m supposed to get the tap all the time and stuff like that and you’re supposed to give me resistance, but you’re not supposed to try to outdo me, right? So, ideal training partner is just someone who can just have not so much ego and emotional and get so caught up with their pride and stuff like that, because they got tapped out or whatever, that makes a great partner. An amazing partner actually… (Interview 2)

Aiden’s quote suggested that training partners would often need to refrain from inflicting damage, accept losses in sparring or grappling rounds, and endure pain for the betterment of the fighter. In another example, Bobbie said that he would voluntarily take more damage in order to help students train for their fight: “I can’t care today, like it’s in his best interest that I emulate his opponent and get my ass kicked in front of a bunch of my students… [it’s for] the greater good” (Interview 1). In addition, Bobbie said that his training partners needed to be selfless when helping him prepare for a fight, saying “they are wholly invested in me getting better. They’re not invested in beating me, they’re not invested in seeing where they rank against me” (Interview 1). In one of Bobbie’s video diary entries he also acknowledged the pain that his training partner was enduring for the sake of his own betterment: “[teammate] is a saint for letting me beat on him like that” (Video Diary 7). Further, Emmett gave the analogy of putting aside one’s ‘alpha ram’ attitude and accepting the role of a ‘submissive ram’ in order to help teammates become fight ready:

…you got to learn this on your own for you to make that transition, it’s to cater to fighters or understand that you have a strength over them or something like that. When I roll with Erin or Aiden or someone that I know that I am stronger than in an aspect, like can I hold her down? ‘Sure’, could I probably grab Aiden or Erin by the neck, pin them against the table? ‘Yeah’, but they’re not learning anything that way, right? So, like you got to give people room to learn, right? Like it’s going to suck, like sometimes I have been in sparring sessions with Aiden and it sucks, I’m eating too many clean shots, and
there’s times where I shoot in really slowly on purpose just to see what she does and how her corrections are, you got to do that as a good partner right? Sometimes people just don’t have that concept about them yet and they still have that ‘well, I’m a dude, I can’t just let her’. Each person has to be that ram, that alpha ram, and sometimes you just have to be submissive, sometimes you got to see that ram and be like, ‘okay, I’m a submissive ram’, like that’s his dinner, I’m not going to try and take his dinner. And, so that’s a pretty negative part about training, you’re going to get some people that can’t handle it, they can’t handle to lose a round of rolling, they can’t handle to lose a round of sparring, and it’s funny, I hate even using the word lose, but that’s all they know, right? (Interview 1)

Emmett’s quote suggested that in order to enable others to become better fighters, a training partner had to submit to taking more pain in training. This enabled both fighters to learn how to inflict and receive more pain in a fight.

Derek expressed that being hurt and in pain was a sacrifice he was willing to accept so that he could be a good training partner and best prepare a fighter for their fight. However, Derek said that enduring pain and being hurt were worth it when the fighters won and he received praise from the fighters for his help in preparing them for victory:

…the hardest part is being able to put up with all the pain, and injuries, and hurts… because I need to make sure that they are prepared, not that they are worried that I’m hurt. So I got to try and not show as much. I got to pull through it. I got to eat the pain. Those are the biggest problems for me… [But the most enjoyable aspects are] enjoying the win, like hearing compliments from the guys afterwards is great… (Training Partner Interview 1)

Fighters also reported that more experienced fighters were expected to use restraint, especially when working with less experienced training partners who would not be capable of handling the level of pain from high intensity training (i.e., hard sparring). For example, Emmett said:

…like I would never hard spar Erin or Aiden or a few other people at my gym, like people who I know I could already beat in a fight, like I wouldn’t hard spar, unless they are training for a fight, then I would go, ‘ok, this is going to suck for you and I’m sorry.’ Um, but, um, yeah, I would never purposefully hard spar them, just because I know that, again, it goes back to the, just because you can win the fight, doesn’t mean you should. I don’t need to sleep nice, I don’t need to go home and sleep nice knowing that I hurt [teammate], or he is not walking right… (Interview 1)

Emmett’s quote suggested that inflicting excessive pain on new mixed martial artists did not contribute to their progress or development as fighters. Further, training partner relationships seemed to thrive when fighters gave each other equal opportunity to exchange pain. Therefore,
more experienced fighters needed to gauge how much pain they inflicted upon new mixed martial artists.

Although fighters acknowledged the value of restraint, some fighters reported that using restraint in training was frustrating. For instance, Aiden saw the benefit of restraint in building good training partner relationships, but said it didn’t necessarily help her as a fighter:

Um, it mmm, it doesn’t help me per se. It helps me not look like a douche, but it doesn’t really help me. But, it frustrates me, because like I said, I tend to go from zero to a hundred and I feel like if I’m not throwing at my actual speed and pace and power then I’m faking it, essentially, and then it’s more controlled, I’m thinking more about what I have to do instead of just letting what I already know go and flow and be loose. So, yeah, it’s important that I do have control but it’s a little frustrating, because sometimes I just wish I had that one training partner who could just take it and I could just go off and really see my distance, my range, do I get flustered, do I flinch, do I turn away, do I block my, you know what I mean? (Interview 2)

Additionally, fighters reported that they actually found it useful to use less restraint when they were beginning in MMA, because it allowed them to more quickly realize their own and others’ physical durability. Further, it was important for fighters to understand their limits and reactions to pain. For example, Conor explained:

I think when you first start the sport, that’s something you need, you need to get in there and need to bang it up to make sure you’re not made of glass, but after you’ve been doing it for so long there becomes a point when you’re not learning by smashing by smashing each other’s head in every day. (Interview 2)

Lastly, fighters reported that they had an understanding of which training partners would hurt them:

I’m pretty good at telling from the start. Not by looking at someone, I won’t go that far, but the moment I feel the way you grip me, I know whether I should be careful or I can be chill with you. I know if we’re working something with arms and you grab me like this, I’m going to have to be very cautious, because every move you make is going to be really stiff and really strong and there’s not going to be any give, whereas someone who is less nervous I guess you could say, or less tense tends to be more water, so water and water will work together. If you have water and wood [someone who is tense] it just won’t work. (Aiden, Interview 2)

In addition, Bobbie expressed that he was nervous to work with some more experienced students, because he felt they didn’t know how to use restraint, for instance, he said:
[Teammate] makes me nervous, well she hurt [another teammate] the other day with that hook. She smashed his eye, and again, she doesn’t make me nervous with intent; she’s a sweetheart, she’d never try. She has… murder, death, and kill are her three modes.

(Interview 2)

Bobbie’s quote suggested that fighters could discern between training partners who intended to hurt them, and partners who lacked control. However, based on analysis of fighters’ data, the boundary between intent and negligence could be blurred, and intention to harm could damage training partner relationships. For example, Aiden shared a time when a fighter disregarded her injury that she had communicated prior to training:

Um, specifically with one person, there was one time right after I started coming back from training after my [injury]. I had asked them ‘please don’t kick my stomach, please don’t knee me, it really hurts’. Because I told him not to do that I wasn’t guarding it as much and so he would see the opening and go, vroom, right into it and it started to piss me off and that’s when I just kicked him and dropped him and as rude as it looked, I walked away. I just said ‘sorry’ and I walked away. I didn’t even comfort him I just said ‘you’ll be fine’ and I walked away, ’cause I was just so upset that I expressed to you that it hurts, you did it a few times and I reminded you, you side kicked me so hard to my chest that you lifted me and like I banged up against the wall and that was my breaking point, and then again he went in for the knee and I just saw the opening and I was just like you kind of deserve that. Like I’ve expressed to you it hurts, literally, like fuck off, don’t do that, right? And again, he was prepping for a fight and he was in his own mental game of like, ‘I got to prove to whoever that I can beat this person’, but that’s not cool sometimes, because if I’m injured, but I’m still taking the time to help you with your stuff, you need to respect my boundaries, right? And he got really mad at me, he was like, ‘what the hell man, I have a fight in a week like why are you dropping me with kicks?’... I just kind of walked away at that point and was just like, ‘dude you dropped you hand’ and just walked away and then ever since then it’s been a little awkward. We still greet each other and stuff like that, but we have never actually willingly sparred outside of class together, whereas that’s what that was, we were sparring outside of class when he was just being a douche, which is why I got even extra pissed, because I’m taking the time to help you here and you’re just beating the crap out of me. (Interview 1)

Thus, it appeared that fighters must consent to being inflicted with pain or damage, otherwise they risked damaging their relationships with training partners.

4.5.2 “We bled together” – Building connections and bonds between fighters

The experience of traveling to the Caribbean and witnessing the fighters’ experiences in competition made it apparent that the shared experience of physical and emotional pain...
connected fighters. Emmett tried to explain the bond that developed between the fight team, saying:

…there is no bond you get when like, with your fight coach or with your fight team, there is just no bond like it, right? Let’s say when you guys, like, in [the Caribbean], we’re all going to be in a hotel probably some of us are going to be holding a leg, holding an arm, something’s probably going to hurt, right? It’s a no gear fight, it’s a 4 oz. fight [4 oz. gloves], something’s probably going to hurt, something’s probably not going to feel very nice and the fact that all of us in that room are willing to bleed together and go through a training regimen together and just do a whole bunch of stuff as a unit, you just, regardless if you don’t even talk to each other, you guys wind up being friends. Even if like, I’m grump from weight cutting, you’re grumpy from weight cutting, you don’t want to talk to each other, when this thing is all over, there are just things that you just respect them for and you just, it winds up becoming a family. Like I always call, people call fight teams, I just call fight family, because like, once you guys fight together on the same card or guys go to a tournament together, or I’m cornering you and you need ice or I need water and I’m there for you, supporting you or your supporting me, vice versa, you guys just grow. (Interview 3)

The afternoon of the fights, while fighters were resting and keeping themselves distracted, I had a conversation with a team member about moments of worth; I was asking what makes the pain ‘worth it’ for fighters. He expressed that it was not the outcome of fighters’ performances, it was the lead up to their fights and what teams went through together – extended periods of physical and emotional pain - that was meaningful. Further, he said it was the little unexpected moments that arose out of experiences of pain that allowed one to see people for who they really were. These ‘real moments’, where a fighter did not worry about others’ evaluations of them, created the opportunity for teammates to share intense connections that were not often experienced in everyday life. During moments of vulnerability when a fighter was at their lowest low, teammates saw each other for who they were. Further, there was nothing for them to hide behind; they couldn’t hide behind social media, they can’t pretend to be anyone else (nor did they have the energy to). The fighters’ inability to hide the pain they were experiencing, in addition to the intensity of emotions experienced between fighters, ultimately brought teammates closer.

Moreover, these intense moments left fighters vulnerable and in need of support, which further opened up the space for them to develop connections with teammates.

Fighters reported that the respect they developed for one another after going through such intense experiences leading up to, during, and after fights enabled connections not found in everyday life. Emmett said:
…there’s times where, like, my last fight, right, I won the Ace belt and like, as soon as I looked at my coach, I wasn’t hurt, I wasn’t anything, and I just burst into tears and then he did the same thing and it’s just one of those things, you know, there is that moment of like, I don’t know, that moment of just like, I guess warrior power, or just like, that alpha feeling and it’s just uh, it’s just, I can’t even explain it. I wish I could put it into words, I wish I could put it into better words, but it’s just unexplainable and it’s something that you literally have to feel for yourself to fully understand the concept of the fight family. Until you fight, until you have somebody who is willing to jump in the ring with you or willing to go across that grappling mat and make sure you’re ok, or, you know, like willing to get water, willing to ice your knee, willing to massage, like, just willing to pretty much do whatever you need, pretty much catered to you, to your exact injuries, your hurts. Until you feel that, you can’t just fully understand it. It’s funny, I wish everyone could understand it, I wish I could just say something that everyone would just understand, but it’s tough, you literally, it’s one of those things you got to put yourself in. And it’s funny, win, lose, or draw it doesn’t matter, you still… first year [U.S. fight], I was the only one to bring home a belt, that was the year me and [teammate] grew, like I have an Austrian friend, I don’t see him much, but even when we see each other, we bled together. It’s just different, right? Like I limped and he was holding a rag over his nose, right? Like my leg was swollen and his nose was broken, right like, it’s just a different feeling than when you’re talking together. Yeah, I don’t know how else to put it. (Interview 1)

Emmett’s quote suggested that the willingness of fighters to support their teammates during such intense moments of emotion and pain fostered connection between fighters.

Further, Aiden expressed that bonding could also happen with strangers leading up to fights, and these moments could encourage fighters through their pain experiences. Aiden described a moment near the end of her first weight cut when she was really struggling, saying, “I had one guy just being so sweet, he’d see me crying and just kiss my forehead and walk away, right, like didn’t even know you, but thank you. Yeah, you really get that bonding moment with people too” (Interview 1).

The training environment appeared to foster the development of intimacy between mixed martial artists. Aiden gave an example of the intimacy shared between training partners when rolling, saying:

It’s just a moment that you have with them. In the five minutes that you’re rolling, it’s just you and them, nothing else matters; no one else matters. Whoever is doing their business over there, it doesn’t matter. It’s just you and that person and every time you just get a little closer. (Interview 1)
In addition, fighters had to allow their training partners into their personal space right away due to the nature of training:

Um, it’s such an oddly intimate sport, you know? You’re hugging each other, for people on the outside you know, you’re, I don’t know how to explain it, you’re just so in each other’s space, right? You’re trying to get your arm through their leg, up their crotch and then flipping them and then you know, buddy’s trying to get your choke and then glide your boob or something like that and then, because of that, um, you get a little more comfortable with people. In fact, in my second demo before my [U.S.] fight, I wrapped everything up, I taped my gloves and everything and I was like, ‘shit, I have to pee’ and so my training partner, she’s like, ‘k let’s go pee’, so she pulled my pants down, I peed, I pulled them back up, like we’re very comfortable that way. Like there is a level of you just don’t care anymore, ‘cause they have seen everything, they have seen you at your worst, they’ve seen your boob probably pop out, like it’s fine, it’s not a big deal, yeah. (Aiden, Interview 1)

Further, Conor reported that the camaraderie that was shared between training partners was unlike any relationships he had outside of the gym, and further, he said, “it’s something you share that’s intense, hard, you push each other and you’re grateful for that person helping you train” (Interview 1). Conor elaborated, talking about how pain helped build a unique relationship between training partners:

The camaraderie for sure, camaraderie, you know what I mean? It’s like you blood, sweat, and bleed with these guys, so you definitely, you develop a bond with the guys. So, like, when you train you bleed with these people, you literally bleed with these people, so it’s like you develop this understanding, this intimate understanding of each other where it’s something I’m not going to share with someone who I just go and hang out with on the weekends, right? We don’t endure the same kind of struggle together, we are there to support each other when we are at our lowest, when we are hurt, beat up, banged up, and like those are, like your brothers that are there with you, right? (Interview 1)

Giving and receiving pain helped fighters learn and evolve in training, but also built connections and bonds between teammates. Additionally, enduring pain required trust, because it exposed fighters’ vulnerabilities and weaknesses; therefore, fighters had to trust that their training partners had the intention of strengthening their weaknesses, and were not out to intentionally hurt them. Thus, the bonds that were forged between training partners ultimately depended on trust and the consent to give and receive pain amongst fighters.
After her loss in the Caribbean and despite experiencing the pain of defeat, Aiden reported that being there for her teammates’ fights overpowered her desire to sit alone and suffer from the emotional pain of her loss:

…but ultimately when Emmett was on, I had one fight to get over it, I cried, the moment he was on, I was like ‘wipe those tears away I’m going to be front row and center’, because it just means so much more to me to see him win than it does about anything else. I could have won my fight single handedly and my mind would still be thinking, just Emmett, you know? It’s just weird, I don’t know, I just can’t see him lose and I have to be that supportive, because he doesn’t have much support, you know, his family supports what he does, but they don’t watch his fights, they don’t tune in, they don’t watch him train and stuff like that; his family is very divided, so he needs that one person that is there unconditionally. So even if I got one sidedly, you know, punched over and over again, I would find a way to put ice bags on my face and just got watch him fight. And then after that it was good, it was still in the back of my head that I lost, but it was so insignificant at that point, it was only until afterward, that again, I had the time to think about what happened and I stared crying again, but during Emmett’s fight that’s all that mattered; that’s all that mattered. (Interview 3)

This quote provided further evidence of the bonds between teammates. Additionally, Aiden reported that the pride and joy she felt for another teammate’s success made her loss, in those moments, feel almost insignificant. Further, she said that “seeing them perform so well, I was proud again…” (Interview, 3), for instance, Aiden said:

…the moment was when they raised her hand and I, you know, I’ll tell you a million times, her and I don’t get along that well. I just don’t see eye to eye with people like her. I just stay clear of people like that, so for me to have those feelings of joy and pride and stuff like that for someone that I don’t, not that I don’t like, but don’t consider super close to me, I felt that was awesome. I thought, I was like clearly the sport does more for you than just win or lose, like you can feel things for people that you haven’t felt before, and with her I felt so much pride, so much joy for her, I was so proud of her, I was so happy they raised her hand and you know, again, even though before that I have never hugged her in my life, but I couldn’t stop hugging her. I put her over my shoulder and ran around the cage with her, like I would never do that on a regular basis with her, but I was just so proud of her. I think that was the moment that I really felt like a proud teammate, and it’s not so much teammate, it’s with another girl, ’cause I think if it had been with [teammate] or whoever, it would have been unconditional, like I would have had that no matter what. But from being pissy at her that morning or the day before and then all of sudden, like hugging her and yelling for her and raising her hand and being so proud to say ‘my girl just won’, like ‘our girl just won’. It was a good moment for me. It was a growing moment for me too. It was like, ‘ok’, you can put differences aside for a couple seconds and really just enjoy and be proud of what the other person accomplished and you know, it’s also because of your help, you know, like I did help her out a lot, and you know that part of that win is because of you. It’s kind of like the soccer player that got the goal, like,
yeah they got the goal, but who assisted that goal, right? So you have that sense of pride in yourself too, like ‘I helped get her there’… (Interview 3)

Aiden’s quote suggested that connections and bonds between teammates were developed from the struggle they endured together. Further, Aiden said she felt she was a part of her teammates’ emotional and physical battles to achieve their success that night.

4.5.3 Emotional contagion and sharing others’ pain

Leading up to the fights in the Caribbean, teammates helped one another endure and deal with their physical and emotional pain through comfort and support. For example, Conor expressed that he saw two teammates who were struggling to make weight, but one teammate, Fred, neglected to ask others for help. Conor reported that he knew how difficult it was to battle the emotions that stem from a weight cut, and that he didn’t want his teammate to be alone. Therefore, Conor volunteered to go to the gym with his teammate to help him cut his last five pounds before weigh-ins later that afternoon:

… Erin and Fred still had to cut weight. So I kind of asked them, ‘do you guys want me to chill around and help you guys cut weight?’ and you could tell Fred kind of, he alluded, you could tell he wanted someone to stay, but you could tell he wanted somebody there… so yeah, I stayed there and really just Fred wanted somebody to talk to, you could tell he was going through a pretty miserable cut, and help him out with like, putting Albolene [product used for induce sweating] on and scraping the stuff out and helping him do that kind of shit. (Interview 3)

Conor’s quote demonstrated that fighters volunteered to share the experience of their teammates’ pain in order to alleviate teammates’ discomfort. Conor offered Fred comfort and companionship while he was going through his own personal misery, and as a result, pain was socially shared.

Bobbie expressed that feeling others’ pain was human, but fighters needed to work on reining in their emotions, because emotions like anger and fear “deeply affect the way you fight” (Interview 3). For this reason, Bobbie said that leading up to the fights, he tried to be an example of calmness for his team, because he understood that his emotions would trickle down to his team. For example, he said: “[i]f you’re going into war and your captain is really, really calm the rest of the troops should be…if we’re in certain death then why is he so chill, right? It should kind of bleed down” (Interview 3). Additionally, he reported that the physical part of training (e.g., learning new techniques, enduring pain) was much easier than learning the technique of “how to wrangle your emotions [or] how to control your fear” (Interview 3). The ‘bleeding’ of
emotions between teammates was evident the night of the fights, and fighters reported that they had no control over the emotional contagion that occurred. As a result, fighters’ pain and suffering bled into one another, which created a shared experience of pain.

In Bobbie’s opinion, he felt that it was natural to be affected by teammates’ emotional states, but he said there was a place for fighters’ emotional reactions, and further, fighters needed to embrace the reality of a loss and move forward. In a video diary entry the morning after the fights, Bobbie expressed how he was affected by Will’s loss, and further, how both Will and Aiden’s losses affected the team environment:

Um, two tough losses that we had early on. I’d like to say it doesn’t affect you, it’s funny, as a coach, I go around telling everybody, ‘hey, get that shit out of your head’, you know, ‘that wasn’t you that was them, we need to move forward from that loss’. That’s my job, you know? The leader, the general - reassure the troops that victory is at hand, you know? But emotionally, not only do I sympathize with them, but it’s like I feel it, you know?

When Will got knocked out you just want to cry. It’s a really childish like, there’s nothing like fighting. That’s why I’m drawn to it. That’s why I’ve always been drawn to it. There is no sport that comes anywhere close to the emotional roller coaster of MMA. So those two losses, you could feel it in the locker room, you could feel everybody was quiet, silent. You could see it in their shoulders, everybody hunched over, you know? It’s tough, it’s very, very tough. (Video Diary 12)

Bobbie talked about the effect Will’s loss had on him emotionally, saying:

When Will got KO’d I wanted to cry, it wasn’t anger, I literally just wanted to cry. It was just, I was so, it’s just watching a friend get hurt like that, it’s just tough, but I remember thinking right away, you feel it and you go ‘don’t you fucking’ haha sorry, it’s like at war, right, if my friend’s head gets blown to pieces beside me and I curl up and suck my thumb, the enemy advances right? Like it sucks and later on I’ll have a really good long cry about that, but we’re in the middle of a fight. (Interview 3)

Bobbie’s quote exemplified impact of others’ pain and losses on fighters’ emotions. In this way, others’ pain was shared involuntarily.

Anticipating that Will would win, Aiden reported that she had planned to use Will’s fight to “amp” her up for her own fight and give her that “rawr”, however she was negatively affected by the emotions from his loss:

…I saw him get knocked out in eight seconds and Emmett literally looked and me and was like, ‘are you ok’, and I like ran to the back room. I didn’t run, I like sped walked to the back room and I went into the back room, that nasty bathroom, I went in there and I just started shaking, I was like, ‘oh my god, things like that could happen’, like Will to
me is a God, but I saw him get folded in eight seconds, and so to me that really did hinder it a lot for me, like just, when I got in that cage I had no aggression, I had no like, rawr, I had none of that. That’s why when I gave her my back, I had at least two seconds to roll away and escape the way I normally do in sparring, like when [teammate] gets me, in like two seconds I roll out and I’m fine, and I just didn’t have that rush of aggression, right? I was just so traumatized when that happened to Will. And now that I think about it, like during, when I was really upset about it, I just thought that I sucked and then I started to break it down, like, ‘no, I didn’t throw a single punch because I was terrified of getting knocked out the way Will did’, so I was there thinking that I would throw something and I’d get clipped and I’d fold; that’s what was going on in my head all the time so I was just playing it very safe. Yeah, his fight affected me in a lot of ways. It made me not want to get knocked out, it broke me spiritually, not spiritually, but I guess my aggression just wasn’t there right? I had it, I was waiting for his fight to amp me out and then he just lost his fight and I kind of lost with him, because I didn’t feel that inspiration anymore, you know? Maybe if I had seen Emmett fight first or Conor or anyone who would have won the fight before me, I would have had that amp, but I didn’t, and especially the way he lost just broke my heart and I was so. At that point I was ready to get my fight over with, like win or lose, I was just like, I just want to get out of this cage. (Interview 3)

Aiden’s quote exemplified how the pain of her teammate’s loss was socially shared and impacted her own performance. Aiden viewed Will as a God, and therefore his loss showed her that he too was vulnerable and could get hurt, which scared her and caused her to doubt her own invincibility. It was evident that fighters fed off of one another’s successes, failures, and ensuing emotions, and also each other’s sense of fallibility.

Lastly, Emmett said that he understood the possibility and potential impact of teammates losing, and as a result he warned his girlfriend, Aiden, about watching Will’s fight before her own. Emmett knew that if Will lost, Aiden could suffer emotionally and it could impact her own fight. For example, he said:

Yeah, I didn’t want her to watch Will’s fight. I was worried, worst case scenario, that that would happen, you know, that he would lose and it would go into her head. And then she wanted to watch it, so I was like ‘alright’, right? So we watched it and it was very brief and right after he got hit and got knocked out and fell over she ran straight to the changing rooms and she was all emotional and panicky and stuff like that. And I was like ‘yeah, what you just saw doesn’t affect you’, and by that time the cut was too deep. It was one of those things where I can’t seal the wound sort of thing, like it was built in her head and now she was over-excited, she was over-pumped, even when she was in the cage she was already sweating, she was already, you know, I was like ‘you gotta relax’, and ‘it just happens’. (Interview 3)

Emmett understood he couldn’t prevent Aiden from internalizing Will’s loss. Further, Emmett reported that his teammates’ losses were extremely upsetting, but he didn’t allow himself to
acknowledge his feelings over their losses because he had to keep himself calm for his own upcoming fight. Additionally, he experienced more agony over not being able to help his teammates cope after their losses. Emmett expressed that he fought the urge to even engage with his teammates, at the risk of becoming distraught by the losses:

It hurts when you got focus on, when you watch your main sparring partner, it’s painful to watch your main sparring partner get knocked out and then can’t talk to him, can’t do that talk, right? ’Cause no, now I got to fight. I can’t be the moving voice that makes or breaks the way he feels right now, ’cause I got to be selfish and focus on me. So that’s painful, you know what I mean? It’s painful to watch, to be literally in the seat, in the driver’s seat, in the seat you’re cornering your girl fighting and literally I watch Aiden get choked out, you know what I mean? There’s pain to that, there’s some emotional pain. You’ll never get those feelings out of your head…. It’s just a different type of pain, you know? It’s uh… [the] pain of not being able to help your partners out when their opponents have crushed them spiritually, you know what I mean? Inside, you know, they don’t know what to do with themselves, they second guess themselves. You can’t be that moving voice. You can’t be, ’cause again, I’m good with my words and I’m good with expressing them and I’m good with getting to make people feel better and getting them to understand that certain things happen, you know what I mean? There’s nothing you can change, but you got to also take into consideration that again, someone’s got to lose, someone’s got to win. (Interview 3)

Emmett reported that he had to ask Will to comfort Aiden after her loss, because he had to stay focused on his own upcoming fight. Emmett said that it was very difficult for him not to be there for Aiden, but at that time he couldn’t let her emotions affect him:

I couldn’t let anything happen and I literally had to get Will to comfort her, because I couldn’t go to that stage just yet, you know? I couldn’t, I had to understand that that doesn’t affect me and it does affect me; it’s weird, it’s one of those things where it affects me strongly that she feels that way and that she lost, you know what I mean? It affects me, but I had to not be in that room to make sure it didn’t affect me if that makes sense, right? So I had to get Will to attack the situation. I had to make sure that Will, being the good teammate he is, to bite that in the ass, while I was gone, right? You know, after my fight I can sympathize with her, I can hug her, ’cause at the end of the day I’m done, I’ve settled, you know, win or lose, I’ve settled. I’ve settled, my fight’s over. (Interview 3)

Emmett’s quote further demonstrated how pain was socially shared between teammates, and fighters had to take turns supporting one another through their losses. Moreover, Emmett said that both his teammates losing together made it easier on him to get into the headspace he needed to fight. In other words, knowing Aiden and Will were suffering together took the burden off Emmett to help them cope with their loss:
‘cause [Will] just came off of a pretty big loss. And again, this is going to sound crazy, but them losing together and them sharing that moment really made it, it’s going to sound selfish, but really made it easier for me to get the win. Because like, I got to listen to Bobbie, I had to focus, I had to be calm, because again, that was my worst scenario, like if I would have fought first I wouldn’t have cared, you know what I mean? I wouldn’t of cared less on my nerves, I wouldn’t of studied so much on my nerves, wouldn’t be able to try to relax my nerves and be calm and try to focus on that stuff. But I knew I’d be fighting right after Aiden, so I knew that I had to, despite the victory, I couldn’t be over excited or over pumped up and due to the loss, I couldn’t be overly down, I couldn’t be distressed. And then you know, same with Will, I knew that if he won, I couldn’t be over excited and if he lost, I couldn’t be over down. Their losses made a great test for my emotions, because I watched my girlfriend [Aiden] get choked and I watched my main sparring partner get knocked out, so it was one of those ones where I had to literally focus on my feelings. And at the end of the day, I knew I was fighting last from Bobbie, but I couldn’t put my stress on Bobbie, because I knew he had to fight after me as well, right? So I couldn’t put my emotions on Bobbie and I couldn’t let him burn out all his energy and all his knowledge and burn himself out trying to keep me calm. (Interview 3)

Emmett’s quote highlights the challenges of involuntarily sharing others’ pain and the need to be selfish in preparing for one’s own fight, as well as being conscious of the way their emotions and pain could impact others. At this point it is useful to draw a connection between the potentially damaging effects that physical pain and emotional pain could have on fighters in the lead-up to their fights. As previously noted in section 4.5.1, the fighters described having to be selfish in protecting themselves from sustaining physical pain or injuries in training sessions as they prepared for fights, as they did not want to impede their performance on fight day. In the same way, it also seemed that the fighters felt the need to protect themselves from emotional pain in the lead-up to their fights due to the potential negative impact it could have on their performance.

4.5.3.1 Validation of emotional pain

In addition to fighters’ ability to inflict and endure pain in fighting being socially praised by spectators and teammates, fighters’ emotional pain was validated through sharing their pain experiences with other fighters. In other words, emotional pain needed to be acknowledged by someone in order to validate the fighters’ experiences. For example, Emmett provided emotional comfort and support for a teammate when she had a breakdown over the size of her opponent. A few nights before the fights, all the fighters had been invited to attend a media event where fight teams were interviewed for a local TV show. While waiting for the team’s interview, Aiden was seated next to her opponent and had an emotional breakdown. Emmett said he took her outside
for a walk and comforted Aiden by trying to humanize her opponent, by reassuring her that her opponent was not a monster, she was just another human being. He explained to Aiden that what she was feeling was normal and he shared a time when he had become overly emotional over an opponent before a fight, and he described how he learned to battle his fears. Aiden talked about this moment a few hours after it happened in one of her video entries in the Caribbean:

… when I was at the interviews, you know, I was pretty nervous, you know, my girl was five feet away from me. She looks like a fucking tank. She’s got a chin of steel, so I was pretty nervous. You could tell, my face, my posture, and how quiet I was. Emmett was trying to embrace me and just console me and Bobbie kept pep talking me and stuff like that and really, I just broke myself down for a couple minutes I was like, ‘fuck, I don’t have this, I don’t feel up to it’, and then right afterward we took a little walk. Emmett told me, ‘listen, this is what we’ve been doing for months, you’ve been doing it with me, you’ve been doing it with [teammate], you’ve been doing it with so many of the guys that would literally grab her with their hands and just [makes a ‘crush her’ movement with her hands]. So that really helped me out mentally too. (Video Diary 8)

In our final interview, I asked Emmett to talk about Aiden’s breakdown and how he comforted her:

I was telling Aiden ‘I get over excited, I get nervous, I get chills, I get sweats; it’s normal for you to be scared, for you to be like that, it’s absolutely 100 percent fine to be overly scared’, and she’s like, ‘yeah but I can’t just be around her, she looks so calm and so relaxed’, and I was like ‘yeah, but that’s what she’s supposed to feel, right, she’s supposed to make you feel uncomfortable’, like I told her ‘that’s some fighters best tricks, pretending they’re not scared so you get scared.’ You can be relaxed as hell, but if I know you’re fighting and I’m just on the beach, like now it’s coming into question, like ‘why is he so relaxed?’ and then your brain starts racing, and I told her, ‘that’s probably what she wants you to think. She wants you to start second guessing yourself even before you step in the ring. It’s a fight tactic that nobody thinks it’s effective, but it truly is’, right? and I just squashed that, like, I didn’t think I was going to win the first round with [opponent from his first fight], and I sure as hell didn’t think I was going to win first round and the belt, right, so I didn’t think I was going to win any of my fights, and I won both like a terrorist, hahah, I destroy. It kind of helped her out and kind of calmed her down and she was able to talk and relax and able to enjoy the rest of her night. (Interview 3)

Emmett helped Aiden reappraise her opponent by sharing his own experiences of fear before fights to help her understand that what she was experiencing was normal and acceptable. Thus, by empathizing with teammates and validating their fears, fighters could decrease teammates’ perceived threat of pain in upcoming fights.
However, in some cases teammates’ efforts to try and validate fighters’ fears and anticipation of pain in upcoming fights could also increase the threat of pain for fighters. For instance, Conor expressed that as he was walking out of the change room for his fight a teammate was trying to encourage and comfort him, however, his teammate’s comment negatively affected him:

…it was just something he said on my way out, um, he was just like, ‘these guys are out of your league Conor’, you know ‘you shouldn’t be fighting them’, so that puts that pressure on me. ‘These guys are out of your league’, you know ‘they have no business to be fighting with you’, but I was like, ‘but what if this guy beats me and these guys have no business fighting me?’ That makes me look that much worse. I remember him saying that to me and being like, ‘wow, fuck, ok, thanks’. I get it Emmett, I know what you’re trying to do, but it’s having an opposite effect of what needs to be happening right now. (Interview 3)

This quote suggested that Emmett’s comment increased the pressure for Conor to win his fight. However, as a result of having previously lost a fight and experiencing a great deal of emotional pain from that loss, it appeared that the pressure to perform caused Conor to fear the emotional pain that would result if he lost his upcoming fight. Thus, it appeared that teammates could both positively and negatively shape the way fighters interpret the threat of pain from impending fights.

By acknowledging pain, fighters could help their teammates understand their losses, and cope with their emotional pain. One way in which teammates helped each other cope with their losses and process their pain was by expressing empathy. After Will and Aiden’s losses in the Caribbean, their teammates sat with them and shared stories of their own experiences of losing fights. Both Will and Aiden said that their teammates’ stories comforted them, and helped them to better understand their pain. Immediately after Aiden’s loss, she claimed that she did not want to compete anymore; however, she reported later that after her teammates shared their experiences losing, she began to understand that all fighters lose at some point in their career. Further, she said that teammates who shared their stories of loss with her had the most powerful effect on her re-appraisal of her own experience:

She [Erin] came up to me and was like, ‘yeah I remember crying after I lost my fights’ and I remember, like again, I just saw her put on an awesome show, beat a girl, cut her open, but she also lost, she has also lost right, so to hear that I’m like, ‘ok’, sure I was the only one today that lost, one of the only people that lost, but all these guys at some point have lost, like Emmett’s lost a Muay Thai fight, Erin’s lost a fight, Conor has lost a fight,
so I realize like, just because they didn’t lose today, doesn’t mean they’ve never lost. They’ve lost. (Interview 3)

Aiden’s quote suggested that teammates’ empathy and acknowledgement of her emotional pain enabled her to process and understand her own emotionally painful experience.

Interestingly, Emmett reported he did not like making video diaries because the camera could not share his pain with him, which suggested that the fighters valued the social sharing of painful experiences. Emmett described pain as a living organism, an entity; therefore, pain needed to be acknowledged and validated by another human being. Further, because the camera was non-living and could not feel, it had no empathy:

You’re doing a study on MMA fighting and pain, right? When it comes to pain, it’s a very human emotion, or I shouldn’t say human emotion, it’s a very living organism, emotion, right? Everything feels pain between trees, between uh, everything feels pain. A lot of people can’t say ‘ow’ in words, right? But a dog can yell, you know what I mean, a tree can bleed sap, you know like, a tree can die. Everything feels pain. It’s how we show it and how things elaborate and how pain comes out I guess of every individual. And because pain is such a living thing, for me to talk about pain to something that’s not living, to a camera or a GoPro, it’s tough, because again, you can’t share any pain moments with a camera…[y]ou can’t go to the camera and go, ‘hey, remember when you were three and scraped your knee?’ The camera doesn’t know that; the camera doesn’t know what that feels like, you can spit analogies at the camera all day, but you’ll never know what analogies that the guy behind the camera or the girl behind the camera is getting. It’s a different theory or idea of what you’re trying to say… (Interview 3)

Emmett provided further suggestions on the methods used to capture and access fighters’ experiences of pain, which highlighted the importance of empathy and social validation for experiences of pain:

…so I would think, furthermore, when it comes to these studies, even if it’s still GoPro and still video diary, film it, for a future thing would be like your video diary, have one GoPro and do a five minute. Literally you can time it too, not too long right? Time it and that way, have a list of questions that we can still answer and then [be] behind it, you know what I mean? If there’s something you didn’t get, ’cause now there’s a person behind the camera, now there’s a person holding, now there’s a guy feeding the camera. Now if you don’t understand the methods right, you can at least butt in and be like, ‘can you elaborate on that?’ It will probably make the video diaries much more explainable and much more human, like much more natural, especially when you’re doing a study on pain, like I said, it is such a living, breathing thing pain, you know? If I hit this chair it’s not going to feel pain, but if I go to hit the chair, I feel pain, but the chair feels nothing. If I throw the camera, god forbid, but if I throw the GoPro camera across the room and I throw my shoulder out and that camera might be fine, but it doesn’t know that I’ve hurt
my shoulder, whereas if you were there and watch me through the camera, you go ‘oh, shit you hurt your shoulder.’ (Interview 3)

As a result of not being able to empathize with Emmett’s experiences, the camera could not understand and acknowledge his pain. Therefore, it seemed as though sharing pain, and having it acknowledged by someone, validated the fighters’ pain experience, and enabled fighters to process their pain.

4.6 Round 5: Reflections of ‘Doing’ Pain Research

In approaching this project I hoped to examine the phenomenon of pain among MMA fighters by immersing myself in their training environment and documenting their experiences of pain. In this final section, I offer some of my own reflections of doing pain research that highlight some of the themes that recurred throughout the results and that offer insight into my own experiences as a researcher.

4.6.1 You have to experience it firsthand

In discussing with Conor how one could best understand pain, he said that someone had to go through their own pain experience to understand someone else’s pain:

Experiencing it, whoo, experiencing it. I can talk about it, I can try and explain it the best I can, but everybody experiences it differently, so I think it’s great that you’re training and you’re going to get to know it all unfortunately, but it’s the only way to really grasp the concept of what it feels like to be, even, I’ll use the examples of like submissions, a toe hold or a knee bar or an arm bar, the only way to really understand what that feels like is to experience it firsthand. (Interview 2)

Although Conor gave examples of physical pain, his quote also supported that going through one’s own emotional pain developed empathy to be able to understand someone else’s pain.

As a researcher, I wanted to gain a better understanding of the physical pain fighters encountered in their training. As I began training in MMA, I felt awkward and embarrassed, especially during the striking classes. I had never really punched anything before. I threw my first punch to the bag in the striking class and I felt ridiculous. Throwing a punch was such a foreign movement to me. I felt like a fraud.

My next pain experiences were physical. I had headaches from hitting my head on the ground in grappling classes. My shins and forearms were bruises from holding pads and kicking the heavy
bag. My knees were sore and swollen from rolling around, they were hard to straighten. I loved it though. The physical pain reassured me that I was working – in a sense, I was on my way to becoming a mixed martial artist. However, I often found myself exhausted after rounds of rolling and striking classes. During my first month of training, I had to laugh at myself at the end of classes because I considered myself to be in shape, but I was often found myself creating my own little puddles of sweat and panting/breathing so hard that I felt faint – it was a humbling experience:

When we finished rolling, Bobbie [coach] wrapped up what we did today in class and started going over some fundamentals to take with us. I don’t think I heard a word of what he was saying until the very end of his talk because I was thinking about how fast my heart was beating, trying to slow my breath down, and going over the moves I was in just a second ago. I felt like I caught a glimpse, a very small glimpse, of what fighters go through during their breaks between rounds in a fight. When their coach is trying to talk to them and tell them what to do against their opponent and they are breathless and exhausted, it must be hard to pay attention to anything else going on, even the very important words their coach is trying to tell them. (Reflexive journal entry)

One day after class, Bobbie talked to me about seriously training me to become a fighter – he said I had a lot of potential. I was so caught up in being a part of their world, and flattered that Bobbie thought I was capable of being a fighter that I said, ‘yes! I wanted to fight’. Immediately after I said ‘yes’, Bobbie started telling me about how he would develop me as a fighter, what my weight class would be (my fight weight), and which fights he wanted to put me in first. I remember thinking after, ‘oh my god, what did I just commit to?’:

I am sitting at the gym right now, and I have been hit with a wave of a reality check. I am not a fighter. I was panicked earlier on by this pressure that Bobbie wanted to turn me into a fighter and I wasn’t going to live up to his hopes for me; that was like three weeks in. I just had a moment as I am sitting in a corner of the gym looking out at all the fighters training for the sake of training or their respective fights and I am here typing on my computer, I am not a fighter. I am a researcher. I am an intellect. My power is in my brain and that is ok. (Reflective journal entry)

The opportunity that Bobbie was offering me to become a fighter enabled me to realize that this was more than a study – my life was now being effected by immersing myself into MMA. I experienced a divide between researcher and participant from this moment forward, and a lot of guilt. When I was training, I could not think of myself as a researcher, because I felt that I was not fully engaging with my training, and thus felt a sense of guilt. Further, I felt that when I had my ‘researcher cap’ on, I was not being authentic with the fighters. However, I didn’t know how
to just make the switch from researcher to training partner/participant. In addition, I was legitimately concerned over the brain damage that I could sustain as a result of training to become a fighter. However, I felt almost shameful for feeling that concern, because I was alright with encouraging and supporting these fighters to take pain and damage. I thought, ‘what does this say about me?’ I felt like a hypocrite – I wanted to observe fighters experience pain, but I wasn’t willing to fully experience that pain myself. Additionally, I felt guilt over wanting to be an observer, but not fully a participant. I questioned how far I was willing to go to experience these fighters’ worlds – do I need to train to be a fighter to truly participate? Finally, I was scared that if I started to train to be a fighter I would realize that I was not good enough. With the training I was doing I was already battling the voice inside my head telling me, ‘you’re making a fool of yourself’ and ‘no one here at this gym is going to take me seriously as a fighter’.

During my first month of training, I also had an eye opening moment on the importance of restraint between training partners:

Rolled with [student], NEVER AGAIN, he winded me and used his huge amount of power on me, not okay. I am pissed off. That was shocking and made me realize maybe I am not cut out to be a fighter. Bobbie asked if I was okay. This is a serious sport. (Reflexive journal entry)

I rolled with a student after a grappling class, and swore to myself I would never roll with him again, or at least until I was significantly more skilled as a fighter. I felt like he used all his strength on me, and had no mercy – even after I told him I was still new. I left class so upset, and immediately went home to make a video diary in which I started to cry. I shared that the idea of others thinking of me as a possible fighter was seductive, but I wasn’t sure if that was possible as I started to ‘learn pain’ – learned how I reacted to pain. However, I realized that I was more upset that I hadn’t given the student consent to use such little restraint, and as a result, I felt my trust falter in other students’ abilities to receive and respect my consent to be inflicted with pain. Nonetheless, I felt embarrassed that I reacted so emotionally and responded by writing off rolling with this student. Thus, I doubted my capabilities as a fighter even more:

I worked with this guy [training partner] – he was a monster, like 260 pounds or something, and six foot four. But he, it was the first time I had been winded, that was a bit shocking, but I pretended I was fine. But, he just kept going and then he got me in these ankle locks and I think he was going a little bit too full power. I think Bobbie asked him, I think there was a communication after about going easier on me. I was worked and I was actually a little bit scared. Um, that was the first time it was a little intense. I don’t
know if I’ll ever be a fighter, ha. I think Bobbie got me excited a couple weeks ago, and I felt like I was doing decent and then this week has just been shit. I sucked. So I need to get out of this funk so I can go back tomorrow morning and be better. (Video Diary 5)

I was beginning to see the positives and negatives in ‘experiencing it firsthand’ – Bobbie wanted to train me as a fighter, but I didn’t know if I want to get that involved. However, as I furthered my involvement as a participant, these ‘firsthand’ experiences continued to occur.

4.6.1.1 Being injured

Entering into this research, I had been convinced that I needed to get punched in the face in order to be able to understand what these fighters were going through. As Conor had also expressed, for me to really understand pain I had to experience it firsthand. And I did experience the pain of injury, however not in the way I had anticipated I would. During a grappling class, Emmett was teaching us a judo move – a hip throw. This move requires that the thrower uses his or her hip as a pivot point (placing it lower than their opponent’s center of gravity) to lift his or her opponent, and then throw them to the ground – the thrower would stay ‘glued’ to his or her opponent to then gain a dominant position on the ground. I was paired to practice with the “smallest” guy in the class, about 175 pounds. As I was tossing my training partner, he landed on my hand, and I knew right away something wasn’t right, but I thought I had just sprained my wrist. It hurt, but it was not overly painful, and at the time I didn’t realize it was injured, so I didn’t want to say anything to my partner or Emmett. Ironically, I tried to hide my pain from everyone when it happened; I didn’t want to be a “girl” about it. It’s interesting to reflect on the fact that I was trying to see how fighters show pain and react to it, but there I was, trying to conceal my own pain from others. I didn’t feel like I deserved to show pain, because I hadn’t been training long enough. If I showed pain, it would emphasize that I was a beginner or reacted to pain poorly.

Emmett and I went for our second interview after class, and by the end of it my finger was the size of at least two of my fingers combined, and crooked – it looked like a sausage. The next day at the gym, I asked Bobbie if he thought something was wrong with my finger. He did a quick inspection of my finger and told me he thought it was broken and then I should head down to the emergency – it was Sunday night and that was all that was open. One Toronto Western emergency visit later I was told that I tore my extensor tendon and it would take about three to four months in a splint before it was close to being fully recovered – tendon tears often take up to
a year to be fully healed. I left the hospital with a bulky splint on my finger; aesthetic evidence of my physical pain and injury:

I just got back from emergency… I have to wear the splint when I’m sleeping, take it off for showering, and yeah. I’m pretty upset to be honest. I’m making a video diary, because my phone is dead and I can’t call my family to cry, ha. Um, not to do with the pain, but I’m going to be out for six weeks of training that a) I’m starting to get better at it, I’m paying for, that’s part of my study. I can’t do my own training at the gym [starts welling up with tears]. I don’t do well when I can’t exercise and I don’t like the sense of the loss of control that I feel like I have over my body right now. So maybe fighting is just not for me. It’s not worth having these, uh, limitations. It’s a small thing, a tendon tear in your finger, but it’s got too many repercussions and um, yeah, I definitely get anxiety when I can’t work out… All sorts of ways, problems that are already entering my head from not being able to do much for the next six weeks, let alone typing, my school work, yeah. I put myself out there for my study and I’m happy I’m doing it, but I don’t want it to affect other parts of my life… Now everything is just pissing me off about training that involves pain or injuries… So, yeah, not in the best mood right now. (Video Diary 8)

At first, tearing my tendon was really upsetting, and it was the first instance that my research was truly affecting my personal life. It prevented me from weight training, I couldn’t fully train in MMA (although I did one class hitting just my left arm on the heavy bag), and I had difficulty writing and typing – I was very slow and awkward, and the injury garnered a lot of attention from other grad students at school, especially among those who knew I was doing research with MMA fighters. It irritated me that my supervisor and other grad students thought it was cool and such a great story for my research – I didn’t feel like that they had empathy for the ways in which I was limited. My injury made me question my own limits as a researcher and as a participant/mixed martial artists. But after my trip to the Caribbean I felt quite proud to have my injury. It became a badge of honour. I had fans coming up to me during the night of the fight asking me if I was a fighter, and how I injured my finger. It was a symbol of the pain I had been enduring (and my commitment to training) and I was proud of it; I felt validated by my finger.

After much reflection, I became grateful to have sustained a torn tendon. I could not pretend to know exactly how fighters were limited by an injury - MMA was not my career and I was not a fighter – but it gave me some insight into making distinctions between physical pain and injury, and how an injury could make a fighter feel helpless.
4.6.2 Relationships between researcher and participant

4.6.2.1 The possibility of hurting fighters

As a result of probing fighters in their first interviews on their negative experiences within training, I learned that many of these experiences stemmed from working with new students who risked injuring fighters due to a lack of experience and lack of restraint. Upon learning this information, I felt a sense of panic – was I one of these ‘newbies’ that no one wanted to work with? I became self-conscious of how the fighters were perceiving me and I questioned if I was a burden to fighters when I showed up to a classes. This was a pivotal moment for me as a researcher, when I realized that I could hurt fighters, and they were vulnerable to me. It was strange thinking of myself as having ‘power’ over them. I also realized that my role as the researcher now became much more complex – I was a new student, I was training with the fighters (acting as their training partner during classes), and I was also the researcher. Going into this project, I had every intention to participate in their world, but wanted to be as aware as possible to the ways in which I was biasing the data. However, gaining the knowledge that I could hurt these fighters by training with them, I realized just how much I was interfering with their worlds. What if I injured a fighter and they were not able to compete in their fight? I didn’t think I could face them after that, let alone continue working with them for my study – I would feel too guilty. I wanted to keep the fighters safe – from me. I was torn between avoiding training in classes, and just observing as it got closer to the fights, and not wanting to sacrifice my data from being a participant. I felt so uncomfortable that I asked Conor and Bobbie, independently, if they were afraid to work with me. Sitting at lunch with Conor one day after training, I asked him if he was uncomfortable working with me because I was new. To my relief, he said, he wasn’t worried about working with me, he was talking about ‘meatheads’ or ‘guys with huge egos that come into the gym ready to hurt people’. Both Bobbie and Conor also expressed that - when working with them on the ground - they had enough experience that they could control my movements, and ultimately prevent me from injuring them. Further, Bobbie reassured me based on my gender, saying women come into MMA with less ego, and are actually easier to train, whereas men come in and are out to prove how ‘alpha’ they are.
4.6.2.2 Collecting ‘good’ data and being on display

Navigating myself throughout the study was a difficult process in and of itself. I encountered numerous awkward moments where I had to make in-the-moment judgment calls on how to respond. One example was when I would film fighters and their training partners at the gym. I would often be on the side of the mats in order to stay out of their way. I thought I would be covert in my filming; however, by being behind the camera, I felt more on display than I did when I was engaging in training myself. Not only that, but I had many gym members staring at me and often asking me what I was doing with the camera. I was also found myself in some strange positions on the floor in order to get the right angle:

I feel very awkward filming with my camera. More so in front of the people who don’t know me. I feel like this camera is an extension of myself and it puts me in the spotlight. I felt very naked, yet I wasn’t the one on camera. (Reflexive journal entry)

As my bonds grew with the fighters, especially in the Caribbean, I found being behind the camera was even more awkward, which I thought would have been reversed as I became comfortable with them. I found this unease and awkwardness most prominent when I was filming the fighters during their last few days of their weight cuts. Being able to see firsthand what fighters go through during a weight cut, especially during their final minutes before they weight in and are able to replenish themselves, was shocking and eye-opening into the pre-fight highs and lows of their physical body and emotions.

The whole team was down in the hotel lobby waiting for the bus to take us to the weigh-ins. The fighters pre-ordered their meals and were beyond excited to eat and re-hydrate. Fighters’ weight cuts ranged from 5-30 pounds. A few of them struggled to cut the last five pounds – they were running outside in the humid, 30-plus degree weather in sweat suits all morning to shed their last few pounds. At this point most fighters hadn’t eaten anything in at least a few days. They also hadn’t drank any water or other liquids in about 24 hours – while still continuing to hit pads and jog in the heat. I felt so guilty and awkward eating and drinking in front of the fighters, so I tried to eat smaller portions and made an effort to not drink water in front of them (or at least not chug water in their presence). Both Emmett and Bobbie had shrunk in size significantly over the fight camp, but now their faces were hollow. Emmett’s face narrowed and his eyes were bulging out of their sockets, and Bobbie’s cheekbones were like razor blades – they looked like they could slice your finger. I was standing beside Bobbie with my camera and he apologized for his bad
breath, which was a symptom of dehydration from the weight cut. His lips were severely chapped and I could hear his tongue get stuck to his mouth as he was talking from having no liquids. He put a piece of sugar-free chewing gum in his mouth and I was shocked when it instantly turned into a white paste. I felt that by being behind the camera, I wasn’t truly supporting them— I still had my own interests of collecting data as my first priority. That moment nearing the end of the fighters’ weight cut made me re-evaluate how I was supporting and contributing to the team, and what was more important to me, being the researcher— always ready to collect ‘good’ data, or being a teammate, and doing whatever I could to emotionally and physically support these fighters.

4.6.2.3 Humanization of fighters through losses

Just as the fighters were affected by the humanization of their teammates after losses, I too was impacted by the fighters’ losses. On fight night in the Caribbean, I was sitting with the team in the front row, about ten feet away from the cage to watch Will’s fight— the first of the team to fight. Will’s opponent came out swinging quickly and aggressively, followed by a head kick— Will’s arms were dropping down from their initial position to protect his face— and another punch that connected directly with Will’s jaw. My whole body tensed as I saw Will’s body going stiff, as though it was going into rigor mortis, before his body hit the cage floor, snapping his head back. I won’t forget the thud that his body made as he impacted the floor. It took me a few seconds to process that he had been knocked out and the fight was over— in eight seconds. I looked at Bobbie’s wife sitting beside me and said, ‘oh my god’ about three times. She just looked at me, and I could see the worry washing over her face. I was in shock as I followed the team back to the fighters’ room— it was the first time I realized that these fighters were human beings and could lose and be hurt. I was guilty/fell victim to idolizing this fight team, and I had put them on a pedestal— I just didn’t think they could lose. I saw how hard they trained— they were destroyers in the gym. I came back into the fighters’ room and stood close to the door just staring at Will in shock; my heart was pounding and I was conscious of my hands shaking. Will hadn’t regained full consciousness yet, he was still coming to and asking ‘what happened coach? what happened coach?’ . Bobbie had to keep telling him that he lost until he could process what had happened in the fight. Watching the look on Will’s face as he began to understand what had happened to him was heartbreaking. I had to look away, because I felt bad for just staring, wide-eyed at him. I had no idea what to say to him. All the words that were running through my mind
seemed so cliché and meaningless – what do you say to a fighter whose reality and perception of themselves has been turned upside down? As the room became less crowded and Will was sitting on his own I went to sit beside him and asked him if he was okay. I could tell he hadn’t fully regained his consciousness as he looked a bit deer in the headlights. I felt I needed to say something or else I was heartless. I needed to show him empathy, but I had no idea what he was feeling. Especially after learning how painful being humanized was for the fighters – what do you say? I couldn’t find any words, so I just sat down beside him and hugged him. I had the same reaction after watching Aiden lose her fight – frozen, not knowing how to respond. However, I was more panicked than shocked then, because I thought that the team’s worst nightmare might actually be happening – everyone might lose before Bobbie had to fight.

4.6.2.4 Developing bonds, commitment, and legitimacy

Conor had vocalized to me that he wanted to quit my study a couple times: “I was like fuck this bullshit, why the fuck am I doing this, um it was just another thing added onto your super busy schedule, right?” (Interview 3). However, he expressed that after forming more of a relationship and learning how much this study meant to me, he then didn’t want to disappoint me and as a result choose to continue his participation:

I thought maybe I would disappoint you a bit, I think it would be a letdown if I did quit now, so I was like, ‘fuck, this means something to her’, and you know what I mean. I’d already invested my time and said I would do it and she could have found somebody else, so I feel like I’m letting you down in terms of, yeah, you need to get this done. (Interview 3)

It was upsetting to hear that Conor had wanted to quit the study. It made me realize how little control I had as a researcher over what my participants wanted to do. As a researcher, I wanted everything to go perfectly. Learning Conor wanted to quit also made me question how I was impacting my participants; was I inflicting pain upon my participants by making them go through this research process? Am I now a source of pain for them?

Despite the challenges of navigating relationships with research participants, there were some moments where I felt I had developed bonds and demonstrated my commitment to the fighters. In the Caribbean, the team was all together in the fighters’ room waiting to walk out with Conor for his fight, which he was going to be called out for in a matter of minutes. Bobbie was finishing up taping a fighter’s hands, Emmett was consoling Aiden about her loss, and Will was
in his own world processing his devastation over his own loss. I was standing in front of Conor – we were face to face. Conor was swinging his arms around a bit and hopping up and down on his feet to stay keep his muscles loose. I could see the intensity in his face and his body language – he was preparing for war – but he was the most quiet I had ever seen him. I took a step forward toward Conor and we both put our arms up at the same time to hug each other. I swear it lasted a minute long. Conor held onto me so tightly, but genuinely, and nuzzled into my neck. We didn’t say a word to each other. I was about to let go, but then he held on to me and it seemed that he didn’t want to separate. Eventually, after some time, he released me and he looked at me and just gave me a slight nod as if to say ‘thank you, I needed that’. That hug was one of the most real moments that I had on the trip - it caught me off guard that such an intimate, powerful moment could be shared with a fighter right before he went to fight. I also felt needed; Conor needed me in that moment, and we were able to share that embrace together. Going into the hug I felt like I was helping him, but after witnessing two fighters lose, I realize that I also needed that moment of comfort and support.

I asked Bobbie about my involvement and the development of relationships with the fighters:

I’m glad you’re this attached to us. Do you know what I mean? Like… it would be weird if you were… I don’t trust people who… you know how you said you were a feeler? I don’t trust people who aren’t. I don’t… people who aren’t can do terrible things. Do you know what I mean? Haha… if you can detach like that, it makes me nervous (Interview 3)

The trip to the Caribbean truly showed me the strength of the bonds that I had formed with the fighters. Further, I believe that we grew closer as a result of my willingness to support their needs and be there for them emotionally. Returning back from the Caribbean, it was hard to adjust to real life again, after experiencing the highs and lows of the trip, and so a few days after returning home I began watching the fighters’ video diaries that they made for me the morning after the fights. I was really touched to watch Emmett’s video diary, and felt that he captured the value of experiencing it first-hand, and as well, the bond that formed between the fights and I as a result of travelling with them:

So I’m supposed to talk about my feelings and the things that happened yesterday. It’s hard to put everything down, so, it’s hard to break things down into words when you’re not here and you’re not feeling the experience, that’s why it’s great that Kris could come on this trip, because, you know, she can emotionally and physically feel like, feel, like she might not be able to fight, but you can honestly ask her, after doing this study that
like, she’s um, like she definitely feels like one of the family. And we’re definitely feeling that she’s a part of the family now, yeah. It’s different right, once you start, when you come all this way for support and stuff like that and you’re whatever right, shoulder to cry on, person to talk to, guy to beat up, a guy to practice with, just a fellow teammate right. I won’t get all mushy on you guys. (Video Diary 5)

In my final interview with Emmett, he explained to me why he decided to take part in my study:

I wish I could be there for when you present it, ’cause I’m actually curious on how the presentation goes… ’Cause you know what, I’m probably going to try and book the day off work or book time off or whatever I need to do to watch you present it, because I want to see what you learned and what you grown and how much you’ve grown from the study, ’cause again, I wanted nothing to do with this study, you know what I mean, it’s one of those things where you made me want to be a part of this study and you didn’t even mean to… And elaborate more, ’cause you know what I mean, it’s like, you know you talk about doing the study and you talk and you’re like ‘we are doing this study’ and I didn’t think much of it, and I was like well I’m not going to hop into your world, like I don’t want to be a part of your world, like you do studies, you do thesis, you do hypothesis, you sit there with your little potions… haha and again, I thought that. Yeah, but then funny, then you signed the waiver form and you’re like, you know what, I’m going to hop in your world and I’m just like, ‘shit, you have the balls to come in and start learning form my world’, you know what I mean? You’ve put enough commitment into this where you’re like, you know what, “I’m not not going to write a story, I’m not just going to write a program, I’m actually going to try this, like I’m actually going to see what you guys go through on an everyday basis and feel like your muscle soreness and your muscle pain, like how long it takes for your muscles to actually heal and how cramped and how much dehydration or how much water you drink.” You started throwing yourself into the mix and our world so to speak and I was like, well now I just look like a bitch, you know what I mean? ’Cause you’re hopping into my world and I won’t take a second to hop over into your world, I mean, I thought that was very unfair of me, so it was one of those things where I was like, ‘well shit, like she’s putting 100 percent into this study’, you know what I mean, the least I can do is have a small part in it… as true to you are about your study, I want to be as true to me as I can be, you know what I mean? Like, you choose me to be a part of it, be a candidate for this study, and again, you were being as real as you possibly can by coming to [the Caribbean], like doing all these studies, physically hands on too, like in the gym, so I want to be true to you as possible as I guess a client or…subject. And again, that’s part of the reason why I hopped into your study, cause I was like, ‘well shit, she hopped into my world, like she came out and like, yeah we’ll do some striking’, and I was like, ‘oh, ok I guess we got to do some interviewing and then I was like, well now I got to do the video diary…she’s grappled.’ And then I was like, ‘oh, wow, she threw up an arm bar, I guess I got to do the interview’… You know it’s gratifying even for me, right, even to see you do a study so well and put together a somewhat hypothesis, somewhat thesis, so called, to build this understanding on how we act, how pain…how we portray pain, and how we live our life dealing with pain, whether emotionally, physically, mentally, but uh yeah. (Interview 3)
Emmett’s quote summarized much of my relationship development with the fighters. When I entered into their world, they got to know me and learn to trust me, as a result, our bonds began to quickly develop. As Emmett and the other fighters expressed belief in me, I also believed in them, which opened up the opportunity for us to change and grow together.

4.6.3 Reflections of video diaries

Although the use of video diaries was only one means of collecting data regarding the fighters’ experiences of pain, Bobbie had a different perspective on the use of video diaries within the study. In Bobbie’s opinion, he felt that making video diary entries was “super therapeutic”:

...you just talk out how your feelings and it’s, you hear yourself say things and it helps you address them and yeah. I didn’t find it disruptive at all. It’s cool, the more introspective you can be in something like this [fighting], the better. So it’s just giving you more tools to do that and right, if it’s helping you figure out what to do then awesome. (Interview 3)

Further, Bobbie said that creating video diary entries became part of his training routine: “I found it really helpful in the long term, like I said, when I made that one on my own” (Interview 3). Bobbie made his own video diary on his phone – walking around the gym’s cage - the morning of the team’s departure for the fights:

I have a routine when I get into the cage that I’ve done, even as I enter here to make this video I’ve done that routine, so, yeah. I don’t know why I’m filming this, I don’t know why I’m making it. It’s calming. I think I’ve been doing these video diaries, um, the whole camp and now it’s kind of like, like I said earlier its part of my routine, you know, and it brings me comfort, strangely enough. I will probably never show this to anyone… Anyways, it’s just me talking to myself and pacing around… (Video Diary14)

Aiden also reported that she liked making the video diaries, because it gave her the opportunity to “debrief my day and my training sessions” (Interview 3). However, she offered that she could have sat down with me after her training sessions to ‘debrief’ with me in person, as “it would have felt so much more fresh” (Interview 3). In addition, she expressed that it could be a valuable training tool in the future:

I thought it was cool to have it on film, ’cause then you can go back and refer at any time how you were feeling during that training session or if you made a really good point and like, a month later you remember what it was, you can still go back and look at it and stuff like that, and use it as a training method too. (Interview 3)
Moreover, Aiden said that when the camera was around she ‘strived’ to do better in training: “I thought it was a good way to be able to work just a little harder and having a reason to work a little harder” (Interview 3). Conor also expressed that he had never been filmed before while he was training, and seeing the video footage of himself gave him more confidence in his skills and ability as a fighter:

…like you [researcher] being there watching the training session was cool, because I’ve never really actually got to see myself train, so that was very different. Like I’ve never videotaped myself hitting pads or sparring or rolling or any of that kind of stuff; that was kind of cool to watch. Um so yeah, that was definitely an added bonus. (Interview 3)

As a researcher, it was rewarding to learn that my involvement in the fighters fight camp positively/meaningfully contributed to their training experiences. Further, it appeared that through the use of video diaries and watching video footage of themselves training, fighters were able to feel validated.

4.6.4 Seeing the cage in a different light: Concluding thoughts

I had become a part of these fighters’ worlds, training with them almost daily, travelling to their fight with them, and I realized in that moment what an incredible journey I had been on for the last three months. I didn’t want to leave the cage, and I understood how the fighters were drawn to it. Bobbie said that after his fight:

I didn’t want to leave the cage. I remember they came up and were telling me ‘it’s time to go’ and I was like, ‘no, no’, like ‘let’s all just stay in here in this moment’, you know what I mean? And yeah, even as we got out of the cage, a person I’d never seen was like taking pictures with me. A person I’d never seen. I signed two autographs, that made me feel awesome, like ‘champ, can you sign this?’ haha, I was like ‘sure’ and my hands all shaky. (Interview 3)

After returning from the fight, Bobbie and I talked about how it didn’t feel like we were back in reality. I did not understand how fighters could go through such an emotional rollercoaster and then return to their normal lives. I didn’t even compete and I was struggling to adjust being home. Bobbie shared with me what his brother said about returning home, which captured the disconnect from reality that I was feeling:

He [Bobbie’s brother] said to me when I was at his house this weekend, he said it’s the first time he’s related to the hobbits in Lord of The Rings when they get back to the Shire. Adam’s like ‘everything is bland now’, like ‘how do you have an exciting day after that?’ He said ‘everything is’ [pause] he said, you know, normally if he watches the UFC
and he’s got a fighter he likes, his nerves go up, or you know, he said ‘he can’t even’…he said that after being alive with your friends and your brother fighting, it’s all…everything just seems very disconnected, so yeah. (Interview 3)

One of the most powerful moments of the trip to the Caribbean was walking into the sports arena hours before the fights and seeing the cage for the first time. The sun was setting and the light was streaming through the window, glimmering directly on the cage. It looked like something magical was going to happen. The fighters from our team got inside the cage and started shadow boxing and doing flips off the sides of the cage walls. The fight cage was bigger than the one I often saw fighters training in at the gym. Further, the gym’s cage was on the same level as the mats, whereas this cage was raised a few meters off the ground. The fighters were on a pedestal that made them seem untouchable – I, like them, believed they were invincible. I walked up to the cage, filming with my GoPro, and was watching all the fighters jumping around with smiles on their faces. The music was blaring, and there was so much energy. I stepped inside the cage and felt the warm, hard mat under my feet – we were the first ones to be inside the cage. I was thinking, ‘this is where it all happens’. I was standing beside Bobbie and started welling up with tears while I told him that I was never going to forget this moment. I wondered if I had impacted these fighters as much as they impacted me. The joy and the giddiness I felt being in the cage made me realize the bond and connection I had developed with these fighters. The cage represented a venue for change, a venue for the possibility of inflicting and receiving pain, and for the possibility of winning or losing; which, in a way, was how I saw my research project – ready to bring new understandings to the phenomenon of pain. In that moment, I was filled with an overwhelming feeling of euphoria, no matter the outcome of the fights, I felt like I had already won with them – my experience was triumphant. It wasn’t about ‘winning at research’, but rather it was about winning unforgettable experiences, memories, and friendships. Starting the study I had no idea where it was going to lead, and I was grateful that these fighters let me into their worlds and that they believed in me enough to come into mine.

…but being in the cage was super cool, ’cause the lighting was really bright, sun was going down, and it was directly in the cage; it was shining in the cage, so being in there, just had a sense of power and possibilities and all the things you could do in there… (Aiden, Interview 3)
Chapter 5
Discussion

5 Discussion

Overall, the purpose of this study was to explore athletes’ experiences of pain while training for a MMA fight and how social interactions contributed to athletes’ understandings of pain. The results of this study provided insight into fighters’ understandings of various types of pain, the meanings that fighters attributed to pain, and the functions of pain among MMA fighters. The results also shed light on the social validation of pain and how relationships with teammates contributed to fighters’ experiences and understandings of pain. Finally, this research offered reflections of doing pain research immersed in a MMA setting.

5.1 Distinguishing between Physical Pain, Injury, Emotional Pain

This research makes a novel contribution to the literature by highlighting how fighters made distinctions between different forms of pain, and by identifying the way in which different forms of pain influenced fighters’ training, competition, and interactions with teammates. Previous literature has mostly focused on athletes’ understandings of acute and chronic physical pain or pain of injuries (Addison et al., 1998; Miles & Clarkeson, 1994; Thornton, 1990), the identification of pain types (e.g., fatigue, discomfort; Addison et al., 1998), pain-related concepts (e.g., hurt and harm, anguish, and suffering; Parry, 2006), psychological responses to pain of injury (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998), and meanings of physical pain (Smith, 2008). In the present study, fighters understood that physical pain could often be worked through and endured, whereas injuries were viewed as limiting or temporarily stopping their training. Additionally, fighters’ weaknesses and vulnerabilities were brought to their attention after sustaining injuries, unlike physical (non-injury) pain which could make fighters feel powerful and alive. Injuries also caused fear due to their potential for future damage, whereas physical pain did not.

These findings connect with Howe’s (2001) ethnographic research on pain and injury among rugby players that highlighted the idea that pain and injury brought awareness and attention to athletes’ bodies, which was otherwise not there when the body was healthy. However, the present findings build on previous research by elaborating on the distinction between emotional pain and physical pain or injuries, in that emotional pain manifested internally, and fighters could
more easily mask any outward expression of their emotional pain. Additionally, emotional pain was perceived as often hindering training and performance. Further, emotional pain appeared to consume fighters’ thoughts, and cause them to question themselves and their athletic identity. Lastly, it seemed that fighters were unable to detach themselves from their emotional pain; they became attached and often inseparable from it, not objectified like with physical pain. As noted in the literature review, the phenomenon of emotional pain has been largely ignored in much of the research on pain (Persson & Lilja, 2001) and the role of emotional pain has not previously been identified as an important aspect of fighters’ training and competition experiences. Therefore, a key contribution of this research is the distinction between physical pain, injuries, and emotional pain, and the attention to the ways in which fighters interpreted these forms of pain and the consequences of these forms of pain for the fighters.

5.1.1 Social validation and praise for pain

Within the sociology of sport literature, researchers have considered the social dimensions that influence aggression and violence among individuals at the macro and micro levels. Macro level social factors that may influence aggression and violence include social class, gender, race, while micro-level factors include sexism, racism, and player violence. Before a brief discussion of some of the approaches used to understand aggression and violence in sport, definitions of both aggression and violence are provided. Aggression is defined as “verbal or physical actions grounded in an intent to dominate, control, or do harm to another person” (Coakley & Donnelly, as cited in Young, 2012, p. 2), while The World Health Organization defines violence as: “The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.” (Young, 2012, p. 14). There have been a variety of approaches outlined to understand aggression and violence in society; in particular, social learning theory, subculture of violence, figurational (‘process’) sociology, and the sports ethic perspective lend themselves to a fuller understanding of aggression and violence within the sporting context. The latter approach will not be discussed here as it is discussed in Section 5.2 and 5.3 with respect to functions of pain and consenting to pain. From the perspective of Albert Bandura’s social learning theory, aggressive behaviour can be learned through observing and imitating other people’s aggressive behaviour (Young, 2012). For
instance, there is some research regarding social reinforcement of aggression in contact sports such as hockey and lacrosse (Terry & Jackson, 1985). Further, the consequences of others’ actions influence an individual’s likelihood of modeling aggressive or violent behaviours (Young, 2012). In this way, an athlete may be more inclined to model another’s behaviour if that behaviour was rewarded (Young, 2012). For example, within the context of MMA, fighters often observe other fighters being socially rewarded for inflicting damage upon their opponent, which in turn may influence the fighter to inflict more damage upon his or her opponents in future fights. Thus, Young (2012) states that insofar as aggression is perceived as “pleasurable, meaningful, or rewarding, it will continue” (p. 9).

Another approach to understand aggression and violence within sport is through subcultures of violence, which have formed their own rules, norms and value systems to control the behaviours of those within that group (Young, 2012). From this approach, MMA could be seen as its own subculture of violence, in which aggressive and violent behaviours are the norm within that setting. However, Young argues that a setting is neither capable of forming pro-aggressive and pro-violent behaviours on its own, nor is it capable of containing these behaviours within the boundaries of the setting. Therefore, it seems as though the MMA environment provides fighters with a socially acceptable space in which they can behave aggressively; however, fighters’ aggressive behaviours are not necessarily limited to the sporting environment.

Lastly, a figurational (‘process’) sociology approach stems from Norbert Elias’ work, in which he rejects the idea that individuals and society are separate, non-interacting groups, but rather, he suggests, are interdependent with each other (Young, 2012). Further, Elias claims that people are looking for excitement in unexciting, civilized societies, and therefore, individuals seek out and take part in practices, like sport, that offer them excitement through controlled and acceptable violence (Young, 2012). With respect to gender, Young (2012) demonstrates that the state is more tolerant of male-to-male violence and aggression than female-to-female, because aggression and masculinity are seen as intertwined, which is said to be the opposite with women and violence. Thus, it appears that, still today, many people view sport as a physical and social training grounds for males (Young, 2012).

While previous research regarding the social dimensions of aggression contribute to our understanding of why fighters may subject themselves to violence in sport, the present findings
make a novel contribution to the sport literature by bringing awareness to the ways in which validation and social reward for giving and receiving pain motivated fighters to endure and even seek out more pain in training and competition. Fighters were rewarded through praise for their ability to be tough and endure physical damage from their opponents. In addition, because fighters enjoyed others’ responses to their interaction with pain, being inflicted with pain became a part of their identity as fighters, and validated their abilities and success as fighters. Further, fighters often displayed aesthetic ‘symbols’ of pain (e.g., bruises, cuts, torn ligaments), and it seemed that the visual element of pain was rewarded with praise from others. The notion of receiving social praise and validation from others for physical pain relates to research outside of the sporting literature by Newmahr (2010), who identified that bodily manifestations and visible evidence of pain or damage on individuals involved with sadomasochism (SM) indicated one’s accomplishment in their participation with others and served to validate them as participants in SM play. The social validation of physical pain also connects to Smith’s (2008) research among wrestlers, which illustrated that athletes viewed pain as validation for the hurt and sacrifice that they endured within training and competition. For example, one wrestler said that he flaunted his battle wounds acquired from performances, and that the blood and bruising authenticate his participation in professional wrestling (Smith, 2008). Although the fighters in the present study did not express that they intentionally tried to display their visual damage to others, Smith’s findings support the idea that visual displays of pain and damage allow others to judge fighters on how much damage they can take, and thus reward them with praise. In addition, Smith acknowledged that the public valued the wrestlers’ ability to inflict and endure pain during their performances, however, wrestlers said that they were discouraged from revealing any expression as a result of being inflicted with pain. This finding is in line with the need for fighters to conceal their reactions to pain in fights, but also being validated for their ability to take pain and damage.

Little research in the sport literature has addressed the validation of emotional pain and its importance in building resiliency and contributing to an athlete’s development. However, the usefulness of emotional pain in terms of being valuable for fighters’ development connects to the positive growth literature in sport. Tamminen et al. (2013) and Tamminen and Neely (2016) described the process of athletes’ positive growth after adversity, and how adversity and distress can contribute to athletes’ development of supportive relationships and affective processing of the event, which enabled athletes to view their traumatic event (e.g., injury) as a learning
opportunity, thereby increasing feelings of competence to be able to handle future adverse experiences. Additionally, Salim, Alecy, and Diss (2015) reported the influence of hardiness on the positive outcomes that athletes experienced after sustaining an injury. Athletes high in hardiness reported experiencing stress-related growth following an injury, and they reported having a new and positive perspective of their sport and gained awareness of their body’s limitations and abilities. These findings are similar to the research findings in the present study, which showed that fighters perceived they began to develop resiliency as a result of experiencing losing a fight, and fighters also reported gaining greater self-awareness as a result of going through an injury. While developing resiliency can be beneficial for athletes, emotional pain should not be used as a coaching practice to enhance athletic development and performance. Some researchers have argued that experiences of trauma and challenging life events can stimulate higher levels of achievement and thriving in athletes (Collins & MacNamara, 2012). It is important to acknowledge that athletes may experience emotional resiliency as a result of having gone through emotionally painful or traumatic experiences, athletes may also experience distress and suffer greatly through this process (Sterling & Kerr, 2015). The present research contributes to the sport literature by acknowledging the importance of developing emotional resiliency for athletes’ development. However, there is a need for further research concerning the validation of athletes’ emotional pain and the process of developing resiliency through exposure to emotionally painful events.

Another contribution this research makes to the literature is the finding that fighters did not receive social validation for emotional pain as a consequence of others not being able to ‘see’ emotional pain unless fighters explicitly discussed it. Emotional pain was discounted or seen as not credible because it was not visible, which further contributes to the stigma of experiencing and expressing emotional pain in context of MMA. Additionally, because others could not gauge how strongly emotional pain was affecting fighters, teammates could not empathize and offer support for emotional pain. Although fighters talked about wanting to normalize the expression of emotional pain in the sport, it seemed that fighters felt emotional pain should be suppressed, endured, and overcome. Salim et al. (2015) shared a similar finding in regards to the acknowledgement of physical pain over emotional pain in a study of the effects of hardiness on athletes’ experiences of stress-related growth. The authors found that social support groups of low-hardiness athletes ignored the athletes’ feelings about their injuries and focused on the
physical manifestations of athletes’ injury as a result of the tangible nature of the injury and being able to observe athletes’ pain expressions from their injury (e.g., limping or grimaces of pain). The lack of credibility for emotional pain among fighters also highlights the masculine social context of sport (and fighting) and the social norms of suppressing signs of vulnerability (Nixon, 1992; Parry, 2006). From a sociological perspective, Kryst (1995) examined the gendered experiences of chronic headaches and found that women felt compelled to provide more detail about their pain when talking with doctors, as a result of their fear of being discredited. Thus, as a consequence of having to legitimize their pain experiences to others, women are suggested to be better than men at verbally expressing their pain (Kryst, 1995). Additionally, Kryst (1995) found that men did not often talk about their physical pain, because they did not want to be perceived as weak or not in control of their bodies. Further, when they did share their pain experiences with others, it would be expressed through ‘war stories’ or jokes (Kryst, 1995). Similarly, in Steinmayer’s (2006) dissertation on embodied gendered constructions of pain, she reported that female participants expressed concern that their power and status as women would be threatened if they reacted to pain in ways acceptable for women such as crying, compared to a stereotypically male response of suppressing emotions in response to pain. These research findings relate to the present study by illustrating the dominant masculine ideals that may shape individuals’ expressions of pain in social contexts.

Hegemonic masculinity was evident within the MMA environment. The term hegemonic masculinity is described as to the dominant positioning of men in society and the cultural idealizing of masculine behaviours, such as the ability to use physical force to dominate others (Connell, 1990; Young, 2012). Fighters were seen throughout the study, reproducing dominant masculine ideals through bodily performances and emotional expressions, and such performative expressions were created both with others and independently (e.g., training partner work and independent heavy bag training). A masculine ideal that was demonstrated by the fighters, and perceived as important, was controlling one’s emotions and controlling outward expressions of emotional pain. MMA’s hyper-masculine culture emphasizes the importance of having control over one’s emotions, and the environment afforded fighters with ample opportunities to practice and perform these ideals; for instance, MMA athletes are reported to have more emotional control than athletes who do not participate in high-risk sports (Vaccaro, 2011). Pollack reported that men are socialized and pressured to exude toughness and stoicism, and as a result, men can
experience a diminished sensitivity towards their own and others’ emotions (Pollack, as cited in Steinmayer, 2006). A diminished sensitivity to emotions appears to be of value within the context of MMA, where fighters are expected manage their own fears while simultaneously drawing out the fears of their opponent (Vaccaro, 2011). Specifically, fighters reported that it was okay to feel fear, but they had to keep it under control and not show others their fear, which Vaccaro (2011) referred to as ‘managing emotional manhood’. With respect the current study’s results, it appeared that fighters perceived their ability to control their emotions/emotional pain as imperative to their success as fighters, and perhaps, on a deeper level, important to their successful achievement of masculine statuses within the context of MMA. Thus, the value fighters place on being in control of their emotions and emotional pain is engendered by socially constructed ideals of masculinity (Messner, 1990; Young et al., 1994). Further, fighters’ prevailing conformity to the social norms concerning hegemonic masculinity in MMA may help bring awareness to why predominantly male fighters typically avoid sharing emotional painful experiences with others.

On a smaller scale, the notion of hegemonic masculinity within the current research study was also seen in the way fighters described their responses to submissions. Fighters reported that losing by a submission, compared to a knockout, was more painful on the ego because they were quitting when they were not physically beaten – they were forced to give up. Within the social environment of MMA that values the endurance of pain, losing by submission to someone compromises fighters’ ability to fit with the learned standards of masculinity. This is especially the case with male-to-male submissions, as men are socialized to use their bodies to gain power, status, or to dominate someone else (Vaccaro, 2011). Overall, the present research makes a novel contribution to the literature by demonstrating how the social praise and validation for receiving and enduring physical pain encouraged fighters to seek out pain experiences, and it also sheds light on how fighters viewed emotional pain and its lack of credibility due to its intangibility and the social norms concerning the suppression of emotional pain in MMA.

5.2 Functions of Pain

An important finding from this research concerns the various functions of pain for the fighters; pain served to help fighters understand their physical limitations, inform fighters of their progress in training, teach fighters how they react and respond to being inflicted with pain, and
‘callused’ fighters’ bodies in order to become less reactive when receiving pain. In previous literature, researchers have described athletes’ perceptions of pain as being tied to cultures of risk (Nixon, 1992; Nixon, 1996; Roessler, 2006), which refers to the normalization of pain and playing while hurt in competition (Smith, 2008). Researchers have also termed the acceptance of injuries and playing through pain as the ‘sport ethic’ which dictates that an athlete does not give into fear or pain (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Roessler (2006) reported a study in which she administered questionnaires and conducted interviews with elite athletes and sport students to explore how high-performance athletes deal with and express their pain and injuries. Roessler (2006) discussed how endurance runners reported that the limits of the body can be explored through experiencing pain while running. Further, Roessler (2006) reported that in extreme sports, or high-risk sports, athletes “often described the painful search for physical limits as a search for identity” (p. 42). However, in MMA pain is not seen only as ‘normal’ or as part of the sport, but it is also seen as useful for developing self-awareness (Green, 2011), and for progressing and developing as fighters (Smith, 2008; Spencer, 2009). Spencer (2009) suggested that combat sport athletes perceived pain in training as “weakness leaving the body”, and one fighter said, “[t]he more you sweat in the club, the less you bleed in combat” (p. 128). Therefore, this research supports the idea that pain is an important part of fighters’ physical development, and the present findings extend previous research by suggesting that fighters have to ‘learn pain’ to evolve, understand one’s limits, and become adaptable during a fight. Further, this research draws attention to the value of fighters learning ‘how’ to experience pain, and also the usefulness of pain for gauging weaknesses and reactions to pain, thereby ultimately preparing fighters for competition. The present research contributes a novel understanding to the literature by highlighting how fighters responded to physical pain and injuries and viewed them as opportunities to strengthen their weaknesses, in order to give themselves more options for competing effectively in training and competition.

Fighters understood that they needed to experience pain to evolve and progress, and in this way, they developed positive interpretations of pain. This finding connects with Curry’s (1993) research on the meanings that wrestlers formed about pain in training. Curry reported that wrestlers understood that feeling pain meant that the body was rebuilding itself, and therefore, pain was perceived more positively. Research by Benedetti, Thoen, Blanchard, Vighetti, and Arduino (2013) also demonstrated similar findings in their study conducted with 45 healthy male
and female participants, in which participants were randomly assigned into one of three groups to receive induced ischemic pain in their arm (two experimental groups and one control group). One experimental group was informed that the induced ischemic arm pain would be unpleasant, and the second experimental group was informed that their muscles would benefit from the ischemic arm pain. The researchers found that participants in the latter experimental group tolerated pain for longer durations when they expected that it would result in a beneficial outcome (Benedetti et al., 2013). In addition, the researchers showed that induced pain could be better tolerated as a result of participants viewing the experience as rewarding or useful in some way (Benedetti et al., 2013). Further, Le Breton’s (2000) research on extreme sports indicated that participants felt that they had to experience suffering in order to understand the full value of the good things they had in their lives. Therefore, the research by Benedetti et al (2013) and Le Breton (2000) connects with this study’s findings on understandings of pain: fighters understood that as a result of going through pain they would gain more resiliency and evolve as fighters, and thus, fighters felt rewarded by pain and developed positive interpretations of physical pain and injuries.

Beyond identifying the function of pain as an indicator of progress, the present findings also indicated that experiencing pain felt powerful, and the ability to inflict pain functioned as a source of confidence for athletes. The finding that receiving pain felt powerful for athletes is different than the way pain has been discussed within the sport literature. For instance, pain is usually described as an “unpleasant sensory or emotional experience” and a disturbance/disruption to athletes’ performance in training or competition, and therefore a sensation that athletes are encouraged to cope with or ignore (Howe, 2001, p. 290; Parry, 2006; Smith, 2008). However, researchers within the extreme sport literature have discussed the idea of perceiving physical pain-inducing experiences as exhilarating, and extreme sport enthusiasts have expressed feelings of fulfillment as a result of resisting the urge to give up as a result of the intensity of their pain experience (Le Breton, 2000). Further, Le Breton (2000) expressed that extreme sport participants felt that their ability to withstand prolonged suffering was a testament to their character. Thus, the present research contributes to the sport literature in illustrating that receiving pain can function to make fighters feel powerful. In addition to feeling powerful for being able to receive pain, the fighters reported that being able to inflict pain on opponents also made them feel powerful and it was a sign of their ability and success as fighters. Furthermore,
inflicting pain enabled fighters to feel that they were weakening their opponent, and as a result provided fighters with feedback on their performance in a fight. Therefore, fighters also viewed ‘giving pain’ as a sign of strength, ability, and confidence. Thus, the functions of giving and receiving pain would be a worthwhile area for future research. Lastly, since so much of fighters’ training and fighting revolved around being inflicted with and inflicting pain upon others, possible future research about the ‘self’ and sense of identity as a fighter in relation to giving and receiving pain maybe be a valuable area for future study.

5.3 Consent and Giving and Receiving of Pain

Researchers in the field of sport psychology have focused on pain experienced by athletes (e.g., Curry, 1993; Howe, 2001; Parry, 2006), however, researchers have drawn little attention to notion of consenting to pain in competition. This issue draws attention to the unique context of MMA for studying pain and violence, as well as the acceptance of pain and the issue of consent in giving and receiving pain. In most sports, inflicting pain and aggression is considered to be ‘immoral’ or ‘deviant’, and it is viewed as a negative behavior that occurs outside the rules of the sport in order to win or gain a competitive advantage (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). However in MMA, boxing, and other combat sports, fighting is the main purpose of the sport and success is based on a judgment of effective strikes, which inflict harm on the opponent. Thus, MMA is a unique context for studying pain, because it is a sanctioned area for fighting (i.e., giving and receiving pain), and the results of the present study suggest that athletes consented to receiving pain and also consented to inflict pain on others.

The athletes also reported they were uncomfortable with the idea of fighting outside of the confines of training or competition, and they were also uncomfortable with the idea of being seen as ‘violent’ since they did not view themselves as violating others when inflicting pain, as opponents had consented to fight and thus be inflicted with pain. One interpretation of fighters’ attraction toward taking part in MMA fights is that fighting enables individuals to see where they rank against others, according to their own learned ideals of masculine status within the environment of MMA (Vaccaro, 2011). Further, fighters have expressed that they experience moments of honesty within training and competing - fighters are forced to look at the image they have of themselves when they, for example, lose a round of hard sparing with a teammate or a title fight in a major competition. The notion of honesty within fighting was also found within
the present research study, with fighters saying that they were forced to be honest with themselves as there was nothing for them to hide behind during competitions. Perhaps through these ‘honest’ battles with opponents, fighters are afforded the opportunity to test their manhood (Vaccaro, 2011). With regards to consent, athletes’ acceptance of injury, playing through pain, and not giving into pain or the fear of pain during competition has been discussed heavily within the sport literature, referred to as the ‘sport ethic’ (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) and in terms of maintaining a performance narrative (Carless & Douglas, 2013). However, previous research has largely focused on the athletes’ experiences of receiving or enduring pain and injury, while the current findings on athletes’ inflicting pain on others highlighted the issue of consent, in addition to notions of enduring or tolerating pain. Giving and receiving consent allowed fighters to be ‘ok’ with being inflicted with pain from their training partners and opponents. Further, consent between fighters makes the intentional infliction of pain during training or competing acceptable. Newmahr (2010) discussed the acceptability of giving and receiving pain within the particular context of SM activity – participants consented to being inflicted with pain. In addition, Newmahr acknowledged that SM participants could inflict pain upon another without feeling guilty, which was also identified among the fighters in the present study. There has been little research on athletes’ perceptions of consent to injure in the sport psychology literature, and therefore, this research contributes to the understanding of the role that consent plays in inflicting and being inflicted with pain in MMA.

While the notion of consent and giving and receiving pain has not been considered within the sport psychology literature, the issue of consent has been explored with the sociology of sport literature. Parry (2006) discussed theoretical and ethical issues concerning the acceptance of risk and consent; he expressed that if an athlete is fully informed of the risks involved by playing in sport and voluntarily accepts these risks, then athletes are partly responsible for any pain or injury that they sustain during their performance. Further, in a comparison of sport and sadomasochism, Parry acknowledged that the right and wrongs of being inflicted with pain are determined by the levels of consent, and also by reward associated with the activity. To illustrate this concept, Parry gives the example that the infliction of pain by a coach with the intention of attaining results is acceptable, but if a coach inflicts pain because he or she take pleasure in an athlete’s suffering, then that is not okay. This presents a tenuous ethical issue concerning the limits of inflicting and receiving pain and the notion of consent within the confines of MMA.
Researchers within the sport psychology literature have typically explored the issue of consent within the coach-athlete relationship. The sporting environment promotes athletes’ over-conformity and unquestioning acceptance of coaches’ values and practices in order to achieve performance success (Bringer, Brackenridge, & Johnston, 2002; Stirling & Kerr, 2015). Athletes have commonly reported feelings of admiration towards their coach due to previous sporting success, as well as the coaches’ ability to bring athletes success (Bringer et al., 2002; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). In addition, athletes are often dependent on their coaches for their knowledge, skills, and access to resources (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). The potential for dependency can be seen within the context of MMA, wherein fighters are dependent on their coaches not only for their resources and connections within the community to access competitions. Coaches also decide when their students are ready to fight, and with whom. Additionally, athletes may be more willing to take more risks within their sport participation with the desire to impress their coach (Stirling & Kerr, 2015). Specifically within MMA, fighters may subject themselves to enduring more pain and damage in order to prove they are worthy of the coach’s investment of time and resources. The power that the coach holds may also put athletes at risk of accepting and normalizing emotionally abusive or trauma-inducing coaching strategies (Stirling & Kerr, 2015). Further, within MMA, fighters are instructed to perform violent and aggressive behaviours for/in front of their coach, which suggests that fighters’ agency is compromised. As a result of being partially controlled, fighters may experience a reduced sense of agency to say ‘no’ and are vulnerable to being taken advantage of by the coach (Bringer et al., 2002). As a result of athlete-coach consent being negated, fighters are denied the ability to consent to being punched or inflicted with damage from their coach or from other fighters. Thus, the role of consent in coach-fighter relationships is a complex topic, and should be explored more within the context of combat sports, where training frequently involves coaches and their fighters to inflict pain and damage upon each other.

Overall, the present research highlights the importance of consent in giving and receiving pain among fighters, and fighters’ acceptance of pain infliction affords them the opportunity to often enjoy this exchange of pain with other fighters: “If athletes see pain as an inevitable or enjoyable part of (or accompaniment to) their greatest pleasure, they help us to see that simple pleasure is not all there is to life” (Parry, 2006, p.161). The idea of consenting to inflict pain and be inflicted with pain would be a valuable future area of study in combat sports and other contact sports (e.g.,
rugby, football) where inflicting pain is often encouraged. Additionally, examining notions of consent within individual sports such as track and field, where pain is often self-inflicted by athletes would be an interesting area of study. Thus, exploring the boundaries of inflicting pain and developing a more in-depth understanding of how athletes perceive and consent to inflicting and receiving pain would make a valuable contribution to the sport psychology literature.

5.3.1 Developing social bonds through giving and receiving pain

The findings from this research showed that giving and receiving pain created and also strengthened bonds between training partners. Additionally, this study illustrated that fighters entered into consensual relationships with training partners allowing each other to hurt one another. As a result, fighters exposed their vulnerabilities to each other, which created a shared sense of intimacy between training partners. These findings support previous research by Green (2011) on the development of intimacy and connection between fighters and their training partners. Green identified that MMA requires a level of physical contact that is not found in most other sports. Further, he acknowledged the sometimes ‘awkward’ positions that could afford the fast development of relationships between training partners and bonds that were created through “shared vulnerability and toughness” (p. 390). The idea of vulnerability bringing about intimacy was also reported by the fighters in the present study, in that by ‘learning pain’ together through inflicting and being inflicted with pain created a unique platform for fighters to develop intimacy and connections with their teammates. In addition, an interesting finding from the present research was that by revealing vulnerabilities, fighters built connection and bonds with their teammates, however, from a performance standpoint, fighters praised one another and valued concealing their physical vulnerabilities from others. Green (2011) also acknowledged similar findings that intimacy was built through inflicting of pain as a result of revealing one’s vulnerabilities. Further, outside of the sport literature, Erickson (2016) explored consensual tattoo artists and their clients, and in comparing baseline results to post tattoo results found that both the tattoo artists and clients felt more connected to one another at the end of their session. This study demonstrates that consensually inflicting pain upon someone can form fast connections between individuals (Erickson, 2016). However, the present study makes a unique contribution to the literature by highlighting the possibility that inflicting of pain in training can potentially disrupt or damage relationships if consent is violated. Further, this research highlights the role of restraint within training, and how it functioned to help fighters develop and enhance
relationships with their training partners. Future research that longitudinally explores the development of intimacy through inflicting and being inflicted with pain would provide valuable insight into the process of how exchanging pain can develop bonds between teammates. Lastly, since fighters might experience physiological activation (e.g., increased heart rate, sweating, breathing) when engaging in training and experiencing pain with teammates, this heightened activation between training partners in combat sport could also be explored in regard to the development of intimacy.

5.3.1.1 Sharing emotional pain

Another important finding of this research was that through sharing emotional pain and expressing empathy, teammates were able to validate fighters’ pain experiences (e.g., emotional pain from losses) and help them reinterpret their painful experiences and give meaning to these experiences. Helping others re-shape their pain experiences is similar to Atkinson’s (2008) findings, in which he reported that triathletes taught less experienced athletes how to re-frame their pain and agony to develop more positive understandings of their pain. The present findings also align with research on intimacy and emotional disclosure by Cano and Williams (2010), who reported that intimacy was fostered between romantic partners as a result of sharing pain-related distress (emotional disclosure) and having it validated with an empathetic response from the romantic partner. Further, Cano and Williams (2010) showed that emotional validation and empathetic responses enabled an enhanced processing of emotional pain. In addition, “positive social attention, reassurance, and concern” are key responses from a partner in order to validate the support seeker’s emotional distress (Cano & Williams, 2010, p. 10).

In regards to having empathy for fighters’ pain experiences, research by Salim et al. (2015) contribute to an understanding of how empathy is developed among teammates. Salim et al. (2015) suggested that as a result of experiencing psychological growth after an injury (athletes high in hardiness), athletes reported that they developed greater empathy for others, which enabled them to help and support other athletes suffering from an injury. Similarly, Tamminen et al. (2013) discussed the role of social support in experiencing positive growth following adversity and found that social support promoted prosocial behaviours in athletes. Further, as a result of having the support of others to help them navigate through their adverse experiences, the athletes reported that they wanted to support other athletes going through similar negative
experiences. Within the broader psychology literature, Jordan (2001) discussed the positive effect of mutual empathy with patients dealing with shame. Mutual empathy is described as the therapists’ authentic responsiveness to the client, but does not necessarily involve personal disclosure (Jordan, 2001). Jordan reported that when a client feels that they have been able to successfully represent their pain experience to the therapist, the client feels like they have made an impact on the therapist, and have been heard. In this way, an empathetic response shows the client that the therapist cares about their wellbeing and demonstrating empathy can afford the possibility of re-shaping the client’s negative affect as a result of their pain experience (Jordan, 2001). Thus, this research contributes to the sport literature by illustrating the role of social interactions and sharing of empathy in the validation of fighters’ pain experiences.

The findings from this research also illustrate the social functions of pain within teams, and how pain experiences could be socially shared by teammates. By seeing their teammates in pain, fighters were involuntarily affected physically and emotionally, which impacted their own preparations to compete. This finding connects with research among competitive varsity sport athletes regarding the social functions of emotions in sport (Tamminen et al., 2016), which showed that following losses, athletes reported experiencing negative collective emotions as a function of their identification with their team or training group (Goldenberg, Saguy, & Halperin, 2014). In addition, the athletes reported that their own feelings were enhanced as a result of experiencing collective emotions (e.g., seeing someone else cry made them want to cry more; Tamminen et al., 2016). Further, Tamminen et al. (2016) found that teammates’ negative emotions could have a negative effect on the team, for example, one athlete said, “in terms of fear, that’s probably one of the most contagious ones. So if someone is expressing their anxiety about a race or a hard workout, it spreads” (p. 19). This latter finding is in line with the present research finding that fighters’ emotional pain had detrimental impacts on team members’ mentality leading up the fight and fight performance.

The detrimental impact of emotional pain on other fighters draws on the notion of emotional contagion, which is defined as “the process whereby the moods and emotions of one individual are transferred to nearby individuals” (Kelly & Barsade, 2001, p. 106). Emotional contagion is said to most often occur on a subconscious level, and is an automatic process (Kelly & Barsade, 2001). Positive emotional contagion has been associated with better task performance on lab-based tasks (Barsade, 2002), although Kelly and Barsade (2001) reported that negative moods
and emotions have been shown to have a stronger impact on people’s moods than positive emotions (Joiner, 1994 & Tickle-Degnan & Puccinelli, 1999). This research demonstrated that fighters had to learn to balance their own emotional needs and the emotional needs of their teammates in-the-moment as a result of the intense emotional contagion that occurred during the fights in the Caribbean. Further, the present research illustrated that the coach tried to regulate the emotions of the fight team through his own emotional expression and emotion regulation leading up to the fights. This finding also supports previous research by Fransen et al. (2015), which showed that leaders’ expressions of confidence in their team’s success caused team members to have greater confidence in themselves, and also positively influenced the team’s performance. The present study is the first of its kind to examine how pain experiences can be socially shared involuntarily through emotional contagion and their effect on fighters moments before competition.

In addition, these findings showed that fighters experienced emotional pain as a result of not being able to comfort their teammates after their losses, because they had to be selfish and keep themselves physically and emotionally prepared for their own upcoming fights. There has been extensive research on the impact of receiving social support in times of adversity, and researchers have shown that perceptions of social support can help alleviate discomfort and agony from adverse experiences (Cohen, 2004; Sarason et al., 1985; Patterson et al., 1998; Rosenfeld et al., 1989). However, little research has looked at the impact on an athlete when they are not able to provide social support for their teammate, and how the inability to provide support can be emotionally painful. Therefore, this research shows how pain can function within social relationships, and how pain can be interpreted and internalized by teammates before, during, and immediately after competition. Thus, these findings make a novel contribution to the literature by illustrating that pain experiences are not solely defined by the person experiencing it, but they are also socially constructed and influence others within competitive combat sport contexts.

5.3.2 Pain humanized fighters and their opponents

Fighters reported that they needed to be ‘inhuman’ to inflict and receive pain during a fight, and they described themselves as ‘making the switch’ from human to a God prior to competing – it was during this period of time that they felt invincible and free of fear. Interestingly, in the study
reported by Roessler’s (2006), an endurance runner said that he felt ‘invincible’ as a result of ‘resting’ in pain, which came about once he passed a certain threshold during his endurance event. This finding connects with the present research results that fighters felt invincible for withstanding pain. Thus, this research makes a novel contribution to the sport literature in illustrating the process by which fighters perceived themselves as invincible, but also how they can fall from their perceived infallibility.

A unique finding from this research was the paradox that fighters sought out opportunities to give and receive pain and feel God-like, but that exact same scenario makes fighters open to the possibility of being ‘humanized’ through receiving pain and losing in a fight. Although the term ‘humanization’ is not widely used within the sport psychology literature, it was a useful term for fighters to describe their realization of their physical limits as a result of experiencing injuries or losing a fight. Additionally, pain served as a reminder of fighters’ limitations in training, yet experiencing pain in training did not result in feelings of vulnerability that they felt as a result of losing a fight. Thus, receiving pain and being defeated in competition appeared to result in the realization that they were human beings, not invincible or God-like. The sport literature concerning athletes’ sense of self and athletic identity connects with this ‘humanizing process’ that fighters go through in the face of injury and the emotional pain experienced as a result of a loss. Sparkes (1998) presented data on one elite athlete’s shattered sense of self after her career was ended prematurely from an illness. Sparkes expressed how the athlete progressed from disbelief to disarray as a result of coming to terms with her illness, a process that was referred to as fragmentation:

… the breaking apart of the old self via a traumatising social experience that is so utterly foreign to the person that they cannot assimilate it because it shatters their previously taken-for-granted assumptions about the world, throwing them into a state of utter shock and disbelief and, finally, total disarray. (Athens, as cited in Sparkes, 1998, p. 652-653)

The study’s finding related to the present research, which showed that fighters experienced feelings of helplessness and vulnerability after sustaining injuries and losses. Further, within Sparkes’ (1998) study, the athlete reported that she lost the public recognition for her athletic ability as a result of not being able to perform in her sport anymore, which is similar to the fighters’ reporting that losing a fight was devastating because it meant that someone was better than them – they could not be validated for their endurance of or infliction of pain. Additionally, the experience of a disruptive life event was associated with a depressed mood in athletes.
(Brewer, as cited in Sparkes, 1998), which was similarly seen in the fighters’ descriptions of their experiences following a loss – one fighter reported a depressive-like state that lasted for a few months, and the other fighter reported experiencing depressed mood lasting for about a week following a loss. Lastly, Sparkes (1998) discussed the difficulty in ‘holding on to past selves’ in which the athlete must let go of her old perceived self and accept a new sense of self as a result of her illness. The present research also showed that after experiencing a loss, fighters had to leave their perceived past self behind and accept a new sense of self which is forever changed as a result of understanding that they can be beat and are not ‘Superman’. While this is a novel contribution to the literature in sport, the research in this area is limited and future studies could examine perceptions of invincibility and changes in perceptions of the self among MMA fighters, particularly among undefeated fighters and among fighters who experienced losses at various points in their careers.

5.3.3 Use of video diaries

Video diaries were a valuable method of data collection, as it afforded the opportunity to record participants’ experiences within a private and comfortable space, which is not always characteristic within an interview setting (Cherrington & Watson, 2015). As a result, diary entries stimulated self-reflection and self-awareness among some fighters, which elicited valuable insight into the phenomenon of pain. Cherrington and Watson (2010) expressed that the interaction between participants and the camera through video diaries could provide “intimate portrayals of participants’ sense of self and identity in personalized, private, spatial contexts” (p. 270). Lastly, video diaries gave participants control in constructing contextual, kinesthetic, and sensual data that meaningfully represented their experiences (Cherrington & Watson, 2010).

Although the use of video diaries provided rich data and fostered personal gains for some of the fighters, there has been skepticism over the use of these visual methods of data collection. One concern was that the researcher has no control over the depth of participants’ entries or whether or not athletes complete the agreed upon video logs within a private setting (Cherrington & Watson, 2010; Smith et al., 2015). Further, there was concern over the absence of the researcher during the recordings (Cherrington & Watson, 2010). For instance, in a qualitative exploration of the use of video diaries to explore the everyday lives and experiences of a basketball team, Cherrington and Watson (2010) expressed that a few individuals used their diaries as a means to
“get things off their chest” (p. 278). In this case, the researcher’s limited interaction with participants can be problematic if the act of producing a diary entry causes psychological distress (Cherrington & Watson, 2010). However, because I was attending fighters’ daily training sessions, I was able to check in with fighters about their video diaries and help with any questions or concerns they had. Another concern was over the length of the video logs, although the fighters were told that the diary entries were not meant to be lengthy. Further, the fighters and I discussed the amount of time required to complete the logs in order to alleviate participant burden (entries ranged between one and ten minutes). Lastly, participants constructed themselves in different way for the camera, as they were the producers of their video logs. For example, one participant would tell jokes, another would introduce himself to me as if I did not know him, while others would explain basic training strategies as if talking to an audience. Therefore, visual methods were not meant to replace, but rather enhance other methods such as interviews and participant observation (Smith et al., 2015); using multiple methods also alleviated the issues around the depth of the video entries.

5.4 Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

There were a number of strengths of this research, the first being that the study adopted a case study approach to study four fighters and three training partners from one gym. Using one location allowed the researcher to observe interactions and relationships between the fighters, which enabled answering the research questions about how pain is experienced between fighters, the coach, and training partners. Another strength of the study was use of participant observations (i.e., participant-as-observer), as this ethnographic method afforded the opportunity to train with fighters and ‘enter their world’, which allowed for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of pain and how teammates affected fighters’ experiences of pain. As a way to keep track of my thoughts throughout the research process, I kept a reflexive journal, had frequent conversations with my supervisor acting as a critical friend, and made video diaries to talk about and process my own experiences. Additionally, data collection for this study involved intensive longitudinal data collection over a period of four months, which allowed the researcher to see how fighters dealt with and processed their pain experiences in multiple situations and contexts. Moreover, the use of video diaries as a method of data collection allowed the researcher to capture experiences that were meaningful to fighters in ‘real time’, and the video diaries also provided information to discuss in the second and third interviews. In addition, conducting three
rounds of interviews is a strength in that it enabled the researcher to build rapport with fighters, and multiple interview afforded in-depth discussions about training and fighting. The use of multiple interviews also enabled the researcher to develop and check interpretations of experiences with the fighters as the study progressed. Lastly, being afforded the opportunity to travel to the Caribbean for the fights enabled an up-close and ‘real’ experience of the competition.

A number of limitations should be considered, which may also inform future research in this area. First, because one of the fighters was also the coach, there could have been an underlying power dynamic between the fighters and the coach which may have influenced expressions of physical and emotional pain during training and in competition. A second potential limitation was the fighters’ status (i.e., amateur and professional). Although their mixed statuses allowed for different perspectives on experiences of pain, fighters did not have the same level of experience, and a lack of experience level may have hindered their ability to talk about their experiences of pain within MMA. The last limitation of this study was that the analysis emphasized the experience of pain and it did not focus on providing a gendered analysis on fighters’ experiences of pain in MMA. While there is previous research on gender issues in combat sports and MMA (Hirose & Pih, 2009; Spencer, 2009; Vaccaro et al., 2011; Velija, Mierzwinski, & Fortune, 2013; Weaving, 2014), gender was not the focus of the present study. Therefore, the issue of women’s and men’s experiences of pain may warrant further investigation.

5.5 Applied Implications

While the goal of this qualitative study is not to provide generalizations beyond the data and the context of this study (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), there are some applied implications that may be provided to fighters training and competing in similar circumstances as the participants in this study. First, from the finding that consent and the use of restraint in giving and receiving pain, fighters may be able to foster mutually fulfilling training partner relationships. That is, by discussing the issue of consent and restraint within training, fighters may develop greater awareness of how they can become a better training partner and develop trust among other fighters. Second, the finding that teammates validated fighters’ emotional pain suggests that fighters can help one another to re-shape and process their pain experiences. A third applied
implication stemming from this research concerns the importance of fighters experiencing and dealing with their emotional pain; this finding suggests that fighters and coaches may want to encourage open discussions about emotional pain, as it may help fighters to psychologically prepare fighters for their performance in fights. That being said, it can be harmful for athletes to experience emotional pain (Stirling & Kerr, 2015), as well as to talk about their pain experiences. Therefore, by recommending more open communication between fighters and coaches about emotional pain, the aim is not to perpetuate or normalize experiences of emotional pain or trauma within the sport; Collins and MacNamara (2012) discussed the use of structured trauma as a developmental tool to facilitate athletes’ personal and performance-based development within sport. Rather, the goal is to create an environment that facilitates fighters seeking support from others, should they experience emotional pain. Thus, although experiences of emotional pain may lead to fighters developing emotional resiliency, or callusing one’s emotional self, painful or traumatic experiences within training should not be used as a developmental tool for fighters (Stirling & Kerr, 2015). Finally, the results of this study suggest that experiences of pain are often socially shared or constructed and that teammates can influence how a fighter evaluates/understands and processes their physical or emotional pain experiences. Overall, increasing self-awareness about one’s own experiences of pain may help fighters to develop broader understandings of functions of pain and how pain may help or hinder their development and experiences in MMA.

5.6 Conclusion

This study provides insight into how MMA fighters experience, live through, and respond to their experiences of pain. In addition, this research enhances the literature on the roles of training partners and coaches in combat sports and how these social relationships shape fighters’ pain experiences. Further, this study provides an in-depth understanding of the intricate, multi-dimensional phenomenon of pain, which moves beyond simple binary distinctions between pain as positive or negative. Rather, this research provides new understandings of the functions that pain may serve in combat sports, and how pain contributes to athletes’ development and performance.
References


surgery, physiotherapy or neck collar – a blinded, prospective randomized study.

Disability and Rehabilitation, 23, 325-335.

In S. Loland, B. Skirstad, & I. Waddington (Eds.), Pain and injury in sport: Social and ethical analysis (pp. 17-33). London: Routledge.


Appendices

Appendix A: An Integrative Model of Pain in Sport

Summary of the Integrative Model of Pain in Sport – Addison, Kremer, & Bell, 1998

The model begins with either routine action or a specific movement, which leads to a physiological sensation that is acknowledged by the athlete as either pain or discomfort. The physiological sensation is influenced by the athlete’s physiological profile, fitness, age, and level of somatic attention. After the sensation has occurred and been acknowledged, the athlete goes through two stages of appraisal: ‘primary appraisal’ is the most basic, in which the sensation is appraised as either non-threatening or threatening. The second cognitive appraisal, ‘secondary appraisal’, is more specific, and concerns the determination of the type of pain he or she is experiencing based on the six identified pain types: fatigue/discomfort; positive training pain; negative training pain; negative acute pain; and numbness. A variety of extrinsic factors are identified as influencing the appraisal process: extrinsic motivators, context, previous experience, expert advice, expectation, sport, significant other, gender role, culture, and duration of pain. At the second stage of appraisal various intrinsic factors are identified as impacting the appraisal process: affective state, attentional style, locus of control, social exchange, personality, pain tolerance, intrinsic motivation, expectation, self-efficacy, state anxiety, and level of cognitive attention. The last stage of the model is comprised of a list of responses that the athlete may engage in to deal with the pain appraisal (proceed as normal/caution, cease activity, stop and seek help, employ cognitive coping strategy), and at that point the athlete may use specific cognitive coping strategies to mediate his or her pain experience.
Appendix B: Information Letter and consent forms

Athlete information letter and consent form

Primary Investigator: Kristina Smith  
University of Toronto  
Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education  
Goldring Centre for High Performance Sport  
100 Devonshire Place  
Toronto, ON M5S 2C9

Supervisor: Katherine Tamminen  
University of Toronto  
Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education  
Goldring Centre for High Performance Sport  
100 Devonshire Place  
Toronto, ON M5S 2C6

September 21, 2015

You are being asked to take part in a study about mixed martial artists. The purpose of this study is to learn about mixed martial artists’ experiences within training and competition. I also want to examine mixed martial artists’ interactions with training partners and coaches during their training process.

What is involved in the study? I am looking for four amateur mixed martial artists. The study would require your participation from the start of training for a fight until the completion of a fight. I would like you to participate in three interviews. I would also like you to keep video diaries to document your experiences of training leading up to your fight. The interviews will be conducted at the beginning of your training program, after your training camp, and at the end of your training season (after your fight). The interviews will be tape-recorded and will last approximately 45-60 minutes. I will ask questions about your background and experiences within training and competing within mixed martial arts (MMA). I will also ask about your experiences of pain and relationships with your training partners and coaches. It is estimated that the study will require approximately eight hours of your time. Since this is a master’s level research study, financial compensation is not available for your involvement in the study.

You will be given a GoPro camera and asked to complete two logs per week, but you can complete additional entries if you want to. In the video diaries you will be asked to record your experiences training, and about interactions with their training partners and coaches. I would also like to video record your fight at the end of the study.

I will ask you to identify two of your training partners/coaches. I would like to attend and observe training sessions, and I would also like the training partner/coach to take part in an interview at the end of the training period. Due to the nature of the study I need to have all three individuals on board (i.e., athlete, training partner, coach) to participate in the study. I will require signed consent from you, your coach, and training partner in order to participate in the study.

Participation in the study and any data collected will be confidential. Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. There will be no negative consequences for withdrawing from the study.

What are the benefits of this study? There are no direct benefits from participation in this study. However, you may benefit from the opportunity to reflect on your experiences within MMA. The information gained from this study will benefit the broader scholarly society. It will explore mixed martial artists experience pain and it will provide information on social relationships within a team. This research could inform mixed martial artists and coaches on the psychological aspects of MMA. This information could improve athletes’ training and competitive experiences.

Are there any risks? There are no known physical risks associated with this study. There may be minor psychological risks since discussing negative or pain-related experiences could make you feel uncomfortable. To minimize this risk, you can refuse to answer any questions during the interview and
you can stop the interview at anytime. If you report or experience any psychological distress after the interview or video diaries, you can contact support services (see attached support services page). The research is intended to have a research focus. It is to learn about your experiences in sport. It is not intended to be focused on therapy, counseling, or the provision of sport psychology services.

Your answers during the interview will be confidential. I will not share your answers to the interview questions with your teammates, coaches, or anyone involved with your training facility. You do not need to tell other gym members about your participation in the study. Participation in this study will not affect your team status. The study will be supervised by Dr. Katherine Tamminen. She is an assistant professor at the University of Toronto, Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education. The data collected during the study will be shared and discussed with my supervisor and research committee. Only myself, my supervisor, and research committee will know who participated in this study. After the interviews, I will assign you a pseudonym (a ‘fake name’) and you will not be personally identified in the final research report. Some details of your background and upcoming fight dates will be changed to maintain anonymity in the final report.

**What will happen with the information I provide?** Interviews and video diaries will be typed and stored at the University of Toronto in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education. Only the research team and research committee will have access to the information. You will have final say over the information (e.g., interview transcripts, video diaries) that is used for analysis. You may choose to withdraw your information up until it is analyzed, one month after the completion of each interview or video diary. All the data for this study will be kept for five years. The data will be kept on a secured, password-protected, encrypted computer at the Sport and Performance Psychology Lab at the University of Toronto. I will destroy the information after five years.

I will present the results of this study at a conference. I will also write a paper that may be published in a publicly available academic journal. When the data is presented no one will be identified by name, and a pseudonym will be chosen. Some details of the information about your background and upcoming fight dates will be changes to maintain anonymity. A summary of the results and copies of any resulting publications will be provided at your request. I intend to present the research findings for a non-academic setting and I will prepare a report for coaches and teams in Toronto.

**Freedom to Withdraw.** Participation in this study is voluntary and you can choose to withdraw at any point. There will be no negative consequences for withdrawing from the study. You can choose to withdraw information from the study up until one month after they have been submitted to me. If you choose to withdraw your data from the study, the data will be deleted from my data files. You can contact Kristina Smith if you would like to withdraw from the study. If for any reason you are unable to consent to continue participating, the research will stop and there will be no negative consequences. This means that if you become injured during the study and cannot participate, or if you cannot continue to consent to participate (e.g., due to a concussion), the research will stop until you feel ready to continue. There will be no negative consequences if you do not want to continue participating in the study.

If you have any questions about this study you may contact the Primary Investigator, Kristina Smith. I am a masters student at the University of Toronto in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education. You may contact the Office of Research Ethics if you have questions about your rights as participants (ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273).

If you would like to participate in this study, please complete the attached informed consent form and return it to Kristina Smith.
**ATHLETE CONSENT:** Please sign this form to participate in this study.

### Part 1: Researcher Contact Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Investigator</th>
<th>Supervisor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kristina Smith</td>
<td>Katherine Tamminen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Toronto</td>
<td>University of Toronto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education</td>
<td>Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldring Centre for High Performance Sport</td>
<td>Goldring Centre for High Performance Sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 Devonshire Place</td>
<td>100 Devonshire Place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto, ON M5S 2C9</td>
<td>Toronto, ON M5S 2C9</td>
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### Part 2: Athlete Consent

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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you understand that you have been asked to be part of a research study about your experiences training and competing in a mixed martial arts (MMA) fight?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you understand that you have been asked to complete three interviews and keep a video diary for the study? Do you understand that your final fight will be video recorded for the study?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you consent to me attending and observing training sessions?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you understand that your interview and video data may be used for research purposes?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you read and received a copy of the attached informed consent information sheet?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you understand that you are free to refuse to participate, or to withdraw from the study without consequence, and that the information will be withdrawn at your request (up to one month following the completion of an interview and submission of each video diary)?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you understand that you are free to withdraw your information (e.g., interviews and video diaries) up to one month following the completion of an interview and submission of each video diary?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you understand what will happen with your information? Do you understand who will have access to your information?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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### Part 3: Signatures

I agree to take part in the study: Yes ☐ No ☐

Athlete’s Name (printed): ______________________________

Athlete’s Signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________

Athlete’s Email/Phone Number: ____________________________

Primary Investigator’s Signature: __________________ Date: ____________
Training partner information letter and consent form

Primary Investigator: Kristina Smith  
Supervisor: Katherine Tamminen

University of Toronto  
Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education  
Goldring Centre for High Performance Sport  
100 Devonshire Place  
Toronto, ON M5S 2C9

September 21, 2015

You are being asked to take part in a study about mixed martial artists. The purpose of this study is to learn about mixed martial artists’ experiences within training and competition. I also want to examine mixed martial artists’ interactions with training partners and coaches during their training process.

What is involved in the study? The study would require your participation from the start of your mixed martial arts (MMA) teammate’s training for a fight until the completion of their fight. I will be observing you and your interactions with your teammate over the course of the study, and taking notes on these observations at training sessions. I also want to interview you at the end of the training period (after the fight). The interviews will be tape-recorded and will last approximately 45-60 minutes. I will ask questions about your background and experiences within training and competing within MMA. I will also ask about your experiences of pain and your relationship with your teammate. I would also like to attend and observe training sessions and video record your teammate’s fight at the end of the study.

Due to the nature of the study I need to have all three individuals on board (i.e., athlete, training partner, coach) to participate in the study. I will require signed consent from you, your coach, and your teammate in order to participate in the study. It is estimated that the study will require approximately two hours of your time. Since this is a master’s level research study, financial compensation is not available for your involvement in the study.

Participation in the study and any data collected will be confidential. Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. There will be no negative consequences for withdrawing from the study.

What are the benefits of this study? There are no direct benefits from participation in this study. However, you may benefit from the opportunity to reflect on your experiences within MMA. The information gained from this study will benefit the broader scholarly society. It will explore mixed martial artists experience pain and it will provide information on social relationships within a team. This research could inform mixed martial artists and coaches on the psychological aspects of MMA. This information could improve athletes’ training and competitive experiences.

Are there any risks? There are no known physical risks associated with this study. There may be minor psychological risks since discussing negative or pain-related experiences could make you feel uncomfortable. To minimize this risk, you can refuse to answer any questions during the interview and you can stop the interview at anytime. If you report or experience any psychological distress after the interview, you can contact support services (see attached support services page). The research is intended to have a research focus. It is to learn about your experiences in sport. It is not intended to be focused on therapy, counseling, or the provision of sport psychology services.

Your answers during the interview will be confidential. I will not share your answers to the interview questions with your teammates, coaches, or anyone involved with your training facility. You do not need to tell other gym members about your participation in the study. Participation in this study will not affect your team status. The study will be supervised by Dr. Katherine Tamminen. She is an assistant professor.
at the University of Toronto, Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education. The data collected during the study will be shared and discussed with my supervisor and research committee. Only myself, my supervisor, and research committee will know who participated in this study. After the interview, I will assign you a pseudonym (a ‘fake name’) and you will not be personally identified in the final research report. Some details of your background and your teammate’s upcoming fight dates will be changed to maintain anonymity in the final report.

Your teammate will be given a GoPro camera and asked to individually record his/her video logs. There is a possibility that your teammate may record training sessions with coaches and training partners present. In this case, I will ask you to provide verbal consent to be recorded as part of your teammate’s video logs. If you are okay with being involved in an entry, your data will be used in the study. Should you not consent to your footage within the video(s), specific details about your teammate’s interactions with you will not be used for analysis.

**What will happen with the information I provide?** Interviews will be typed and stored at the University of Toronto in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education. Only the research team and research committee will have access to the information. You will have final say over the information (e.g., interview transcripts) that is used for analysis. You may choose to withdraw your information up until it is analyzed, one month after the completion of the interview. All the data for this study will be kept for five years. The data will be kept on a secured, password-protected, encrypted computer at the Sport and Performance Psychology Lab at the University of Toronto. I will destroy the information after five years.

I will present the results of this study at a conference. I will also write a paper that may be published in a publicly available academic journal. When the data is presented no one will be identified by name, and a pseudonym will be chosen. Some details of the information about your background and your teammate’s upcoming fight dates will be changed to maintain anonymity. A summary of the results and copies of any resulting publications will be provided at your request. I intend to present the research findings for a non-academic setting and I will prepare a report for coaches and teams in Toronto.

**Freedom to Withdraw.** Participation in this study is voluntary and you can choose to withdraw at any point. There will be no negative consequences from withdrawing from the study. If you choose to withdraw your data from the study, the data will be deleted from my data files. You can contact Kristina Smith if you would like to withdraw from the study.

If for any reason you are unable to consent to continue participating, the research will stop and there will be no negative consequences. This means that if you become injured during the study and cannot participate, or if you cannot continue to consent to participate (e.g., due to a concussion), the research will stop until you feel ready to continue. There will be no negative consequences if you do not want to continue participating in the study.

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If you would like to participate in this study, please complete the attached informed consent form and return it to Kristina Smith.
TRAINING PARTNER CONSENT FORM

TRAINING PARTNER CONSENT: Please sign this form to participate in this study.

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<td>Do you understand that you have been asked to be part of a research study about your teammate’s experiences training and competing in a mixed martial arts (MMA) fight?</td>
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<td>Do you understand that you have been asked to be interviewed for the study? Do you understand that the final fight will be video recorded?</td>
<td>Yes   No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you consent to me attending and observing training sessions?</td>
<td>Yes   No</td>
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<td>Yes   No</td>
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<td>Yes   No</td>
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<th>Part 3: Signatures</th>
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<tr>
<td>I agree to take part in the study:</td>
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</table>

Training Partner Name (printed): ____________________________

Training Partner Signature: ____________________________ Date: __________

Training Partner Email/Phone Number: ____________________________

Principle Investigator’s Signature: ____________________________ Date: __________
Coach information letter and consent form

Primary Investigator:
Kristina Smith
University of Toronto
Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education
Goldring Centre for High Performance Sport
100 Devonshire Place
Toronto, ON M5S 2C9

Supervisor:
Katherine Tamminen
University of Toronto
Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education
Goldring Centre for High Performance Sport
100 Devonshire Place
Toronto, ON M5S 2C9

September 21, 2015

You are being asked to take part in a study about mixed martial artists. The purpose of this study is to learn about mixed martial artists’ experiences within training and competition. I also want to examine mixed martial artists’ interactions with training partners and coaches during their training process.

What is involved in the study? The study would require your participation from the start of your athlete’s training for a fight until the completion of their fight. I will be observing you and your interactions with your mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter over the course of the study, and taking notes on these observations during training sessions. I also want to interview you at the end of the training period (after the fight). The interviews will be tape-recorded and will last approximately 45-60 minutes. I will ask questions about your background and experiences within training and competing within MMA. I will also ask about your experiences of pain and your relationship with your athlete. I would also like to attend and observe training sessions and video record your MMA athlete’s fight at the end of the study.

Due to the nature of the study I need to have all three individuals on board (i.e., athlete, training partner, coach) to participate in the study. I will require signed consent from your athlete, the training partner, and yourself in order to participate in the study. It is estimated that the study will require approximately two hours of your time. Since this is a master’s level research study, financial compensation is not available for your involvement in the study.

Participation in the study and any data collected will be confidential. Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. There will be no negative consequences for withdrawing from the study.

What are the benefits of this study? There are no direct benefits from participation in this study. However, you may benefit from the opportunity to reflect on your experiences within MMA. The information gained from this study will benefit the broader scholarly society. It will explore mixed martial artists experience pain and it will provide information on social relationships within a team. This research could inform mixed martial artists and coaches on the psychological aspects of MMA. This information could improve athletes’ training and competitive experiences.

Are there any risks? There are no known physical risks associated with this study. There may be minor psychological risks since discussing negative or pain-related experiences could make you feel uncomfortable. To minimize this risk, you can refuse to answer any questions during the interview and you can stop the interview at anytime. If you report or experience any psychological distress after the interview, you can contact support services (see attached support services page). The research is intended to have a research focus. It is to learn about your experiences in sport. It is not intended to be focused on therapy, counseling, or the provision of sport psychology services.

Your answers during the interview will be confidential. I will not share your answers to the interview questions with your athlete, or anyone involved with your training facility. You do not need to tell other
gym members about your participation in the study. The study will be supervised by Dr. Katherine Tamminen. She is an assistant professor at the University of Toronto, Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education. The data collected during the study will be shared and discussed with my supervisor and research committee. Only myself, my supervisor, and research committee will know who participated in this study. After the interview, I will assign you a pseudonym (a ‘fake name’) and you will not be personally identified in the final research report. Some details of your background and your athlete’s upcoming fight dates will be changed to maintain anonymity in of the final report.

Your athlete will be given a GoPro camera and asked to individually record his/her video logs. There is a possibility your athlete may record training sessions with coaches and training partners present. In this case, I will ask you to provide verbal consent to be recorded as part of your athlete’s video logs. If you are okay with being involved in an entry, your data will be used in the study. Should you not consent to your footage within the video(s), specific details about your athlete’s interactions with you will not be used for analysis.

What will happen with the information I provide? Interviews will be typed and stored at the University of Toronto in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education. Only the research team and research committee will have access to the information. You will have final say over the information (e.g., interview transcripts) that is used for analysis. You may choose to withdraw your information up until it is analyzed, one month after the completion of the interview. All the data for this study will be kept for five years. The data will be kept on a secured, password-protected, encrypted computer at the Sport and Performance Psychology Lab at the University of Toronto. I will destroy the information after five years.

I will present the results of this study at a conference. I will also write a paper that may be published in a publicly available academic journal. When the data is presented no one will be identified by name, and a pseudonym will be chosen. Some details of the information about your background and your athlete’s upcoming fight dates will be changes to maintain anonymity. A summary of the results and copies of any resulting publications will be provided at your request. I intend to present the research findings for a non-academic setting and I will prepare a report for coaches and teams in Toronto.

Freedom to Withdraw. Participation in this study is voluntary and you can choose to withdraw at any point. There will be no negative consequences from withdrawing from the study. If you choose to withdraw your data from the study, the data will be deleted from my data files. You can contact Kristina Smith if you would like to withdraw from the study.

If for any reason you are unable to consent to continue participating, the research will stop and there will be no negative consequences. This means that if you become injured during the study and cannot participate, or if you cannot continue to consent to participate (e.g., due to a concussion), the research will stop until you feel ready to continue. There will be no negative consequences if you do not want to continue participating in the study.

If you have any questions about this study you may contact the Primary Investigator, Kristina Smith. I am a masters student at the University of Toronto in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education. You may contact the Office of Research Ethics if you have questions about your rights as participants (ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273).

If you would like to participate in this study, please complete the attached informed consent form and return it to Kristina Smith.
COACH CONSENT FORM

COACH CONSENT: Please sign this form to participate in this study.

### Part 1: Researcher Contact Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Investigator</th>
<th>Supervisor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kristina Smith</td>
<td>Katherine Tamminen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Toronto</td>
<td>University of Toronto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Toronto, ON M5S 2C9</td>
<td>Toronto, ON M5S 2C9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Part 2: Coach Consent

- Do you understand that you have been asked to be part of a research study about your athlete’s experiences training and competing in a mixed martial arts (MMA) fight? *(circle)*
  - Yes
  - No

- Do you understand that you have been asked to be interviewed for the study? Do you understand that the final fight will be video recorded? *(circle)*
  - Yes
  - No

- Do you consent to me attending and observing training sessions? *(circle)*
  - Yes
  - No

- Do you understand that your interview and video data may be used for research purposes? *(circle)*
  - Yes
  - No

- Have you read and received a copy of the attached informed consent information sheet? *(circle)*
  - Yes
  - No

- Do you understand that you are free to refuse to participate, or to withdraw from the study without consequence, and that the information will be withdrawn at your request (up to one month following the completion of your interview)? *(circle)*
  - Yes
  - No

- Do you understand that you are free to withdraw your information (e.g., interviews) up to one month following the completion of an interview? *(circle)*
  - Yes
  - No

- Do you understand what will happen with your information? *(circle)*
  - Yes
  - No

- Do you understand who will have access to your information? *(circle)*
  - Yes
  - No

### Part 3: Signatures

- I agree to take part in the study: *(circle)*
  - Yes
  - No

- Coach Name (printed): ____________________________

- Coach Signature: ____________________________ Date: ______________

- Coach Email/Phone Number: ____________________________

- Principal Investigator’s Signature: ____________________________ Date: ______________
Appendix C: Demographics Forms

MMA Study Athlete Demographics Form

1. What is your gender? (circle one)
   Male / Female / Other / Prefer not to answer

2. Please indicate your age (years): ___________

3. Please indicate your level of education: (please circle one)
   - Some high school
   - Completed high school
   - Some college or university
   - Completed college or university
   - Post-university degree (e.g., Master’s, PhD, MD, Dentist)
   - Other
   - Prefer not to answer

4. Based on these categories from the Canadian Census, how do you describe yourself?
   - White/Caucasian
   - Chinese
   - Japanese
   - Korean
   - Aboriginal/First Nation (e.g., North American Indian, Metis, Inuit)
   - Filipino
   - South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Punjabi, Sri Lankan)
   - South East Asian (e.g., Cambodian, Indonesian, Vietnamese)
   - Black (e.g., African, Haitian, Jamaican, Somali)
   - West Asian/Middle East (e.g., Afgani, Arab, Indian)
   - Other (please specify):

5. How long have you been competing in MMA? (years): ____________

6. How many MMA competitions have you been in within the past two years? __________

7. What martial arts discipline did you begin training in first? ____________________________

8. How often do you train in MMA each week during a training season? (hours):___________

9. How many competitions do you compete in each year? _____________________________

10. Do you play any other sports? Yes/No

11. If you play other sport, what other sports do you play? _____________________________

12. If you play other sports, how often do you practice/train/compete in other sports each week?
    ___________________________
**MMA Study Training Partner/Coach Demographics Form**

1. What is your gender? (circle one)
   
   Male / Female / Other / Prefer not to answer

2. Please indicate your age (years): ____________

3. Please indicate your level of education: (please circle one)
   
   - Some high school
   - Completed high school
   - Some college or university
   - Completed college or university
   - Post-university degree (e.g., Master’s, PhD, MD, Dentist)
   - Other
   - Prefer not to answer

4. Based on these categories from the Canadian Census, how do you describe yourself?
   - White/Caucasian
   - Chinese
   - Japanese
   - Korean
   - Aboriginal/First Nation (e.g., North American Indian, Metis, Inuit)
   - Filipino
   - South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Punjabi, Sri Lankan)
   - South East Asian (e.g., Cambodian, Indonesian, Vietnamese)
   - Black (e.g., African, Haitian, Jamaican, Somali)
   - West Asian/Middle East (e.g., Afgani, Arab, Indian)
   - Other (please specify):

5. How long have you been competing in MMA? (years): ______________

6. How many MMA competitions have you been in within the past two years? ______________

7. What martial arts discipline did you begin training in first? ____________________________

8. How often do you train in MMA each week during a training season? (hours):____________

9. How many competitions do you compete in each year? ____________________________

10. Do you play any other sports? Yes/No

11. If you play other sport, what other sports do you play? ____________________________

12. If you play other sports, how often do you practice/train/compete in other sports each week? ______________
Appendix D: Interview Guides

Initial Athlete Interview Questions
I am interested in learning about your experiences within training and competing in MMA. I would like to know your thoughts and experiences, and there are no right or wrong answers, so please answer honestly. If you don’t know how to answer a question or you choose not to answer, that is ok. If you so choose, you are free to stop the interview at any time. Your participation is voluntary, so you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Your information will be kept confidential; once the interview is completed, a pseudonym will be chosen and details of your background and upcoming fight dates will be changes to maintain anonymity. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Opening/Background information
   a. How did you get involved in MMA?
   b. What is your background with MMA? (Prompts – How long have you been involved with MMA? When did you start competing? Previous fights? Other combat sport participation?)
   c. Can you tell me about the major aspects of MMA that lead you to be involved with the sport? (Prompts- Favourite parts of the sport?)

2. Training experiences within MMA
   a. Can you tell me about your training?
   b. What is it like to train for a fight?
   c. Can you tell me about the most enjoyable aspects of MMA? The least enjoyable?
   d. Can you tell me about a positive experience within training? A negative experience?
   e. Have you been hurt while training? Tell me about that experience. (Probe: Who was there? What happened? Do you remember what happened next? How long did it take to heal? Has your opinion about getting hurt in training changed from then to now?)
   f. Can you tell me about a difficult time in your training? (Probe: What was that like? What happened after that?)
   g. Has there ever been a time when you did not want to continue training for a fight?
   h. Has there ever been a time when you wanted to take a break or discontinue MMA?
   i. Has MMA ever affected your personal life outside of the gym? Social life? Work?
   j. What do you think about the possibility of getting hurt? How does this affect your training? Your motivation?
   k. Do you and your training partners talk about pain? What kinds of things do you say?
   l. Does pain affect your training? What is pain like when training?
   m. How do you respond/ react to pain in training and after training?

3. Social Relationships
   a. What are your relationships like with your training partners?
   b. Tell me about the differences between the relationships you have with your coach and your training partners?
c. Tell me about a positive experience with a training partner? Coach? A negative experience?
d. Tell me how a training partner can best support your training process? Coach?
e. Tell me how a training partner can negatively impact your training process? Coach?
f. Have you ever been injured by a training partner? What is that like/tell me about that experience.
g. Have you ever injured a training partner? What is that like/tell me about that experience.
h. Are your relationships with training partners different from relationships with other people in your life? If so, how? Can you give me an example of that?
i. Tell me about the support of family and friends of your MMA involvement. (Prompts – Are you family and friends supportive?)
j. Have you experienced positive comments/discussions about your participation? Negative?

4. Competing in MMA

a. What’s it like to go into a fight? (tell me what it’s like). Can you tell me about how you feel before going into a fight? Walking into the octagon?
b. Can you tell me about your most memorable fight? What happened?
c. Can you tell me about your most negative experience competing? What happened?
d. Can you tell me about a time when you got hurt or injury during a fight?
e. Do you say anything to yourself before/during a fight? If so, what types of things?
f. Can you tell me about the types of things that your coaches and training partners are saying to you during a fight? During your breaks?
g. Have you ever been punched in the face? Submitted? Knocked-out? What is that like?
h. Can you tell me about a time when you hurt an opponent in a fight? What do you picture when you remember it?

Wrap-up

a. Looking back to when you first started MMA to yourself now, how have you changed as a mixed martial artist? As a person?
b. When you walk into the gym, what is one thing you look most forward to?
c. Is there anything else you think I should know? Is there anything I did not ask about?
**Second Athlete Interview Questions**

I am interested in learning about your experiences within training and competing in MMA. I would like to know your thoughts and experiences, and there are no right or wrong answers, so please answer honestly. If you don’t know how to answer a question or you choose not to answer, that is ok. If you so choose, you are free to stop the interview at any time. Your participation is voluntary, so you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Your information will be kept confidential; once the interview is completed, a pseudonym will be chosen and some details of your background and upcoming fight dates will be changes to maintain anonymity. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. **Opening information**
   a. How is the training process going?

2. **Experiences within training and after a training camp**
   a. Can you tell me how you felt going into the training camp?
   b. Can you tell me about how you feel after completing the training camp?
   c. Can you tell me about a positive experience during the training camp? A negative experience?
   d. Did you experience an injury during the training camp? If so, tell me about that experience. (Probe: Who was there? What happened? How did you react? How are you recovering physically? Emotionally? Mentally?)

3. **Social Relationships**
   a. Can you tell me about how things are going with your training partners?
   b. Can you tell me about a recent positive experience you had with a training partner? A negative experience?

**Wrap-up**
   a. How did this training season compare to past seasons?
   b. Is there anything else you think I should know? Is there anything I did not ask?
**Final Athlete Interview Questions**
I am interested in learning about your experiences within training and competing in MMA. I would like to know your thoughts and experiences, and there are no right or wrong answers, so please answer honestly. If you don’t know how to answer a question or you choose not to answer, that is ok. If you so choose, you are free to stop the interview at any time. Your participation is voluntary, so you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Your information will be kept confidential; once the interview is completed, a pseudonym will be chosen and some details of your background and upcoming fight dates will be changes to maintain anonymity. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. **Competing in MMA**
   a. Can you tell me about how you felt going into your fight?
   b. What was going on before the fight with your team? What was said between you and your training partners? Coach?
   c. Did you experience an injury during the fight? If so, tell me about that experience.
   d. Did your coach say/yell anything to you during your fight? Training partners?

Wrap-up
   a. How did this fight compare to past fights?
   b. Is there anything else you think I should know? Is there anything I did not ask about?
**Training Partner Interview Questions**

I am interested in learning about your relationship and interactions with your teammate while training and competing. I would like to know your thoughts and experiences, and there are no right or wrong answers, so please answer honestly. If you don’t know how to answer a question or you choose not to answer, that is ok. If you so choose, you are free to stop the interview at any time. Your participation is voluntary, so you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Your information will be kept confidential; once the interview is completed, a pseudonym will be chosen and some details of your background and upcoming fight dates will be changed to maintain anonymity. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. **Opening/Background information**
   a. How did you get involved in MMA?
   b. What is your background with MMA? (Prompts – How long have you been involved with MMA? When did you start competing? Previous fights? Other combat sport participation?)
   c. Can you tell me about the major aspects of MMA that lead you to be involved with the sport? (Prompts- Favourite parts of the sport?)

2. **Relationship with the competing mixed martial artist?**
   a. What is your relationship like with your teammate? How long have you known them?

3. **Experiences within training**
   a. Can you tell me about what it is like training with your teammate?
   b. Can you tell me about a positive training experience with your teammate? A negative experience?
   c. Have you been hurt while training with your teammate? Tell me about that experience. (Probe: Who was there? What happened? Do you remember what happened next? How long did it take to heal? Has your opinion about getting hurt in training changed from then to now?)
   d. Have you hurt/injured your teammate while training? Tell me about that experience. (Probe: Who was there? What happened?)
   e. Do you and your teammate talk about pain? What kinds of things do you say?
   f. Does pain affect your training? What is pain like when training?
   g. How do you respond/react to pain in training and after training?

4. **Experiences during a fight**
   a. Were there any memorable experiences for you right before, during, or after your teammate’s fight?
   b. Were there any negative experiences for you right before, during, or after your teammate’s fight?
   c. Was your teammate hurt/injured during the fight? If so, tell me about this experience? (Probe: What happened? How did you react? What types of things did you say to yourself? To your teammate? How do you feel about the experience now?)
d. During a fight, are you saying/yelling anything to your teammate? During breaks? What types of things?

Wrap-up

a. What is the most challenging part of being a training partner? The most enjoyable aspect?

b. Is there anything else you think I should know? Is there anything I did not ask about?
Coach Interview Questions

1. Opening/Background information
   
   a. How did you get involved coaching in MMA?
   b. What is your background with MMA? (Prompts - How long have you been a coach? How long have you been involved in MMA? When did you start competing? Why did you switch to coaching?)
   c. Can you tell me about the major aspects of MMA that lead you to be involved with the sport? Become a coach? (Prompts – Favourite parts of the sport?)
   d. Can you tell me about your life outside of MMA? (Prompts – Previous coaching experience with other sports? Family life? Social life? Hobbies)

2. Relationship with the competing mixed martial artist?
   
   a. What is your relationship like with your athlete? How long have you know him/her? How long have you been coaching them? (Prompts – Did he/she approach you to be their coach?)

3. Experiences within training
   
   a. Can you tell me what it is like working with/training your athlete?
   b. Can you tell me about a positive training experience with your athlete? A negative experience?
   c. Have you been hurt while training your athlete? Tell me about that experience. (Probe – Who was there? What happened? Do you remember what happened next? How long did it take to heal? Has your opinion about getting hurt while training your athlete changed from then to now?)
   d. Have you hurt/injured your athlete while training them? Tell me about that experience. (Probe – Who was there? What happened?)
   e. Do you and your athlete talk about pain? Do you talk about pain with any of your athletes? Other coaches? What kinds of things do you say?
   f. If your athlete experience pain when you are training with his/her, does the pain affect your training? (Probe: From your perspective, how does your athlete handle their pain while training?)
   g. How do you respond/react to your athlete’s pain in training and after training?

4. Experiences during a fight
   
   a. Before your athlete goes into the octagon to fight, what is your final conversation like with them? What types of things (i.e., words or actions) are being said/occurring?
   b. Were there any memorable experiences for you right before, during, or after your athlete’s fight?
   c. Were there any negative experiences for you right before, during, or after your athlete’s fight?
   d. Was your athlete hurt/injured during the fight? If so, tell me about this experience. (Probe: What happened? How did you react? What types of things did you say to yourself? To your athlete? How do you feel about the experience now?)
e. During the fight, are you saying/yelling anything at your athlete? During breaks? What types of things?

**Wrap-up**

a. What is the most challenging part of being a coach? The most enjoyable aspect?

b. Is there anything else you think I should know? Is there anything I did not ask about?
Appendix E: Athlete Video Diary Information and Guidelines

Athlete Video Diary Information and Guidelines

Purpose. I am interested in learning about your experiences of training for and competing in a MMA fight, as well as your relationships with training partners and coaches.

Information about video diaries. You will be given a Go Pro Camera, along with a rechargeable battery and a 3-way pivot arm for the course of your participation in the study (the beginning of training to the completion of a fight). The purpose of the Go Pro is to see and learn about the training process and experience of a fight from your perspective. You are asked to record two video logs per week, at any point during or after your training session. You can complete more video logs if you want to. You are also asked to record two video logs after you finish your fight, either right after and/or within a week after fighting. The video diary can be as long as you want them to be. If, for whatever reason, you are unable to complete a video entry, please record a brief statement or two about training and/or your interactions with your team.

Confidentiality. For the purpose of confidentiality, you will be asked to individually record your video logs. Your recordings will be kept confidential. For further details, please consult the Information and Consent form.

Video entry guidelines during training. There is no right or wrong topic for your video diary entries. Please feel free to express yourself within these video entries and be honest; the video diaries are intended to allow you to tell the story. There are no specific questions for you to answer, only general topics for discussion, which are listed below:

- What was your training like today? Who was there? What did you do in your training session?
- Were you hurt today in training?
- Did anyone else get hurt today in training?
- How are you feeling today after your training session?
- Did anything significant happen today in training?

Video entry guidelines before/after competing. There are no specific questions for you to answer, only general topics for discussion, which are listed below:

- How are you feeling today/did you feeling going into your fight?
- What happened in your fight?
- Were you hurt in your fight? Did your opponent get hurt?
- How are you feeling after your fight?

If you have any questions or concerns about the entries, please do not hesitate to talk to me at your training sessions or contact me by email: krisalexis.smith@mail.utoronto.ca, or by phone.