Examining Social Support among Elite Female Athletes and their Main Support Providers

by

Zoë Arts Poucher

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

Exercise Sciences
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Zoë Arts Poucher 2017
Abstract

Given the potential negative and positive outcomes associated with providing support, and the lack of research on the provision of support to elite female athletes, the purpose of this study was to explore the experience of providing and receiving support between five female Olympic athletes and their main support providers prior to, during, and after the Olympic Games. Five female Olympic athletes and each of their main support providers participated in one semi-structured interview. The results pertained to the purpose and types of support, the process of support provision, the outcomes of support, and the impact of organizational structures on support provision. The results of this study indicated that female Olympians rely heavily on their support provider for various types of support and suggested that while there are challenges associated with acting as an athlete’s main support provider, there are benefits that can be derived from the provision of support.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Tamminen who not only helped me to complete this project, but inspired me to continue learning. Without her I would not have known how fun and exciting research is! I would also like to thank my committee members for their advice and guidance throughout my master’s degree. Lastly, a big thank you to my parents, Matt, and all my other friends and family. You have been there for me whenever I needed you and I truly appreciate that.

To everyone listed here I could not have done this without you.
# Table of Contents

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

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

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

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

  2.1 Social Support: An Overview ................................................................................. 2

  2.1.1 Dimensions of support ..................................................................................... 2

  2.1.2 Received versus perceived support ................................................................... 3

  2.1.3 Models of social support .................................................................................. 4

  2.2 Gender Differences in Social Support .................................................................... 5

  2.3 Social Support in Sport ......................................................................................... 6

  2.4 Social Support and the Elite Female Athlete .......................................................... 7

  2.4.1 Elite youth athletes ......................................................................................... 7

  2.4.2 Injured athletes .............................................................................................. 8

  2.4.3 Female athletes .............................................................................................. 9

  2.5 Fit Between Provider and Recipient ...................................................................... 10

  2.6 Caregiver Support ............................................................................................... 12

  2.6.1 Negative caregiver outcomes .......................................................................... 13

  2.6.2 Benefits of support provision ......................................................................... 15

  2.7 Caregiver Support in Sport .................................................................................. 15

  2.8 The Present Study ............................................................................................... 16

Chapter 3 Method .......................................................................................................... 17

  3.1 Paradigmatic Assumptions .................................................................................... 17

  3.2 Sampling and Participants ................................................................................... 17

  3.2.1 Athletes ........................................................................................................ 17

  3.2.2 Support providers ......................................................................................... 18

  3.3 Data Collection .................................................................................................... 18

  3.4 Thematic Analysis ............................................................................................... 21

  3.5 Ethical Concerns .................................................................................................. 22

Chapter 4 Results ........................................................................................................... 24

  4.1 Purpose and Types of Support .............................................................................. 24

  4.2 Process of Support Provision .............................................................................. 26

    4.2.1 Mode and Frequency of Contact ................................................................ 26

    4.2.2 Communication about Support ................................................................... 28

    4.2.3 Interactions with Other Support Providers .................................................. 30

    4.2.4 Support Providers Juggle Multiple Roles .................................................... 30
4.2.5  Self-Regulation for Benefit of the Athlete .......................................................... 31
4.2.6  Support and Reciprocal Relationships ............................................................ 31
4.3   Outcomes of Support Provision ............................................................................. 34
4.3.1  Benefits of Support Provision ........................................................................... 34
4.3.2  Dependence between Athlete and Support Provider ........................................ 36
4.3.3  Impact of Support Provision on the Support Provider’s Life ............................ 39
4.4   Organizational Structure and its Impact on Support Provision ............................ 41
4.4.1  Funding ............................................................................................................. 41
4.4.2  Olympic Accreditations .................................................................................... 43
4.4.3  Non-Monetary Resources for Olympic Athletes ................................................. 47

Chapter 5 Discussion .................................................................................................. 49
5   Discussion ................................................................................................................ 49
5.1  Benefit of Support Provision ................................................................................ 50
5.2  Costs of Support Provision ................................................................................... 51
5.3  Support Provider Self-Regulation ........................................................................ 52
5.4  Imbalances in Providing and Receiving Support ................................................ 53
5.5  Social Support and Coach-Athlete Dependence ................................................... 55
5.6  Organizational Structures and Support Provision ................................................. 56
5.7  Strengths and Limitations ..................................................................................... 61
5.8  Applied Implications ............................................................................................. 64

Chapter 6 Conclusion .................................................................................................. 66
6  Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 66

References ................................................................................................................. 68

Appendices .................................................................................................................. 80
List of Figures

Figure 1. Overview of analysis process ................................................................. 22
List of Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment E-mail .................................................................80
Appendix B: Information Letter .................................................................81
Appendix C: Consent Form .........................................................................83
Appendix D: Participant Demographics Form .................................................84
Appendix E: Athlete Interview Guide .............................................................85
Appendix F: Support Provider Interview Guide ...............................................87
Appendix G: Example Sociogram - Athlete ......................................................89
Appendix H: Example Sociogram – Support Provider .....................................90
Chapter 1
Introduction

1 Introduction

Athletes encounter a variety of stressors based on their sport participation, which can be taxing for some athletes (Mellalieu, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2006). Researchers have identified social support as an important coping strategy to deal with stressors in sport (Gould, Finch, & Jackson, 1993; Rees & Freeman, 2011), and the receipt or perception of available social support has been associated with various positive outcomes for athletes including improved performance, increased self-esteem and motivation, and satisfaction with the coach and sport experience (Cranmer & Sollitto, 2015; Freeman, Rees, & Hardy, 2009; Rees, Hardy, & Freeman, 2007; Sheridan, Coffee, & Lavallee, 2014; Smoll, Smith, Barnett, & Everett, 1993). To date, much of the research examining social support in sport has considered the outcomes associated with social support from an athlete’s perspective. However, there is no research which has specifically examined the impact that providing support to an athlete may have on the support provider, even though researchers have identified the need to study this area. For example, researchers have suggested that the provision of support to an athlete may lead to feelings of burden (Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2014), and research with caregivers in the field of health psychology demonstrates that support providers may also glean benefits from providing support to others (Brown, Nesse, Vinokur, & Smith, 2003; Tarlow et al., 2003; Taylor, 2011). Given that the outcomes for the provider in supporting an athlete are relatively unknown, the purpose of this study was to explore the experience of providing and receiving support between a female Olympic athlete and her main support provider prior to, during, and after the Olympic Games.
Chapter 2
Review of Literature

2 Review of Literature

2.1 Social Support: An Overview

Social support is a multidimensional construct (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Krause & Markides, 1990) and may be broadly defined as any social interaction between two or more people that involves the exchange of resources and is meant to help the recipient achieve a desired goal or positive outcome (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Duncan, Duncan, & Strycker, 2005; Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). While this overarching definition is valuable, there are many facets of social support which are important to examine. The following section will review the various dimensions of social support, the distinctions between received and perceived support, and two models which describe processes of social support.

2.1.1 Dimensions of support

Cutrona and Russell (1990) summarized the various dimensions or types of social support identified in the literature and stated that many of these dimensions are similar, despite having different names or terminology. Four dimensions of support that appear in most models include: emotional support, esteem support, informational support, and tangible support (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Rees & Freeman, 2011; Rees & Hardy, 2000).

Emotional support concerns comforting an individual who is experiencing some type of life stress. When providing emotional support, the provider leaves the recipient feeling loved and cared for, and the recipient feels that in times of stress they can turn to the provider for comfort and security. Esteem support concerns boosting the recipient’s sense of self-competence and self-esteem. The provider may offer positive feedback related to the recipient’s skills, or express his or her belief in the recipient’s abilities. Informational support involves providing the recipient with advice and guidance when referring to a particular problem. Lastly, tangible support, or aid, refers to providing the recipient with the concrete resources that he or she needs to cope with a stressor. This can take the form of financial aid or physical assistance with a task (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Rees & Freeman, 2011; Rees & Hardy, 2000).
Cutrona and Russell (1990) identified two additional dimensions of support that appear throughout the support literature. Social integration or network support is when an individual feels like he or she is part of a group that shares similar interests and concerns. This reflects a relationship that allows the recipient to participate in social and recreational activities. The final dimension, giving support to others, was originally described by Weiss (1974), and it refers to an individual’s opportunity to provide support and care to others, and helping others deal with stress.

Two additional forms of support are task challenge support and reality confirmation support. Richman, Rosenfeld, and Hardy (1993) defined task challenge support as “the perception that an other is challenging the support recipient’s way of thinking…in order to stretch, motivate, and lead the support recipient to greater creativity, excitement, and involvement” (p. 291) and reality confirmation support as “the perception that an other…who sees things the same way as the recipient does, is helping to confirm the support recipient’s perspective of the world” (p. 291).

### 2.1.2 Received versus perceived support

Each dimension of support described above can be provided by an individual and utilized by another or an individual can assume that support will be available should they need it. Received, or actual, support is the mobilization and expression of helping behaviours by the support provider which are put to use by a recipient who is facing a stressful life event (Barrera, 1986; Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010; Rees & Freeman, 2011). Received support is dependent on the situation an individual is experiencing and it occurs in response to stressful life events (Rees & Freeman, 2011). The impact of received support on health outcomes is still unclear. The mixed evidence suggests received support can have a beneficial effect, a negative effect, or no effect on various health outcomes (Reinhardt, Boerner, & Horowitz, 2006; Uchino, 2009).

Perceived support refers to an individual’s belief that his or her support network will provide assistance when needed, regardless of whether or not they actually receive support (Barrera, 1986; Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010; Rees & Freeman, 2011). Gottlieb and Bergen (2010) stated that “a strong sense of support seems to give people the confidence to cope without needing to marshal their network’s resources” (p. 512). In other words, when individuals think that their support network will be able to provide them with the resources they need in a stressful situation, they are more likely to appraise the situation as less stressful and feel more capable of coping
with it (Cohen & Wills, 1985). It is this perception or belief that support is available which is thought to be responsible for the positive mental and physical health benefits associated with social support (Rees & Freeman, 2011; Reinhardt et al., 2006). Within sport, perceived support has been associated with higher levels of self-efficacy, and with viewing competitions as less threatening, both of which can lead to improved performance (Freeman & Rees, 2009; Rees & Freeman, 2009).

2.1.3 Models of social support

Two different models of social support can be used to describe and explain how social support may influence both physical and mental health outcomes: the main effects model and the stress buffering model (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The main effects model emphasizes the importance of social relationships on an individual’s experience of stress (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990). According to the main effects model, people develop beliefs about whether or not support will be available to them when they need it through early support interactions (Sarason et al., 1990). These beliefs influence an individual’s appraisal of a stressful situation: people with high levels of perceived support know that they have the social resources they need to deal with a stressful event and are therefore less likely to view events as stressful, compared to individuals with low levels of perceived support (Sarason et al., 1990). The main effects model assumes that social support is always helpful, meaning that regardless of a person’s level of stress, people with higher levels of social support have better health outcomes than people with lower levels of social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Researchers in the field of health psychology have reported that perceived support demonstrates main effects for both physical and mental health outcomes (Lakey & Cronin, 2008; Uchino, 2009), but received support typically demonstrates no main effect (Barrera, 1986; Uchino, 2009). Thus, researchers have established partial support for the main effects model, in that greater perceptions of available support appear to be associated with better outcomes for individuals, whereas received support does not necessarily appear to be associated with positive outcomes.

Conversely, the stress buffering model of social support is purported to reduce the negative effects of stress because seeking support is used as a strategy for coping with stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). When a person is dealing with a situation that they have appraised as stressful, seeking and receiving social support is thought to facilitate coping and therefore acts as a buffer
against the negative effects of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). In a quantitative study of 337 men and women, Miller and Ingham (1976) found that women reported more severe psychological symptoms (e.g. anxiety, depression, irritability and tiredness) if they did not have someone to whom they could go to and get help with their problems, compared to participants who reported having a close confidant on whom they could rely. In addition, the researchers found that having fewer casual friends was associated with higher levels of negative physical and psychological symptoms. Additional research has provided support for the stress buffering model (Cohen & Wills, 1985; DeGarmo, Patras, & Eap, 2008; Wheaton, 1985), however it has been suggested that these two models should be viewed in conjunction rather than in opposition. Received support is commonly associated with the stress buffering model, while perceived support is commonly associated with the main effect model (Bianco & Eklund, 2001). The stress buffering and main effects models work together because as an individual receives support from his or her support network (stress-buffering model), they begin to develop a sense or perception that support will be there when they need it next (main effects model) (Bianco & Eklund, 2001).

2.2 Gender Differences in Social Support

Researchers have identified multiple gender differences in the social support patterns of men and women. Researchers have found that women are more likely to report a situation as stressful (Day & Livingstone, 2003), and once a situation has been perceived as stressful women are more likely to seek social support and are more likely to receive more social support than men (Antonucci & Akiyama,1987; Rosario, Shinn, Morch, & Huckabee, 1988; Thoits, 1995). Not only do women have larger social support networks than men (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987), but they also rely more heavily upon their social networks (Day & Livingstone, 2003). Some may argue that because men rely on a smaller number of people for social support, researchers should focus on them and develop strategies for enhancing their support. However, Flaherty and Richman (1989) stated that “women have developed a greater sensitivity to the needs of themselves and others, leading to a greater capacity to provide support and a greater dependence upon social support for psychological well-being” (p. 1221). Therefore, since social support plays a significant role in the maintenance of a females’ well-being, understanding the multiple interactions that occur between a support provider and a female is important. In addition, since females rely more upon their support providers, learning about how these support providers experience their role in providing support could prove highly valuable.
2.3 Social Support in Sport

Researchers studying social support in sport have generally focused on the positive outcomes that athletes experience when either perceiving or receiving support from parents, coaches and teammates. One area that researchers have focused on is the relationship between athletic performance and social support. It has been found that athletic performance is improved by both perceived and received social support (Freeman & Rees, 2008; Freeman, Rees, & Hardy, 2009; Rees & Freeman, 2011). For example, in a longitudinal study of 117 high performance male golfers, researchers found that performance was increased by received support regardless of the athletes’ levels of stress (Rees et al., 2007). One explanation for the positive association between support and performance is that when receiving social support, particularly esteem support, it is easier for an athlete to appraise a situation as less stressful and feel more in control, thus they are able to perform at a higher level supporting the main effects model. When golfers viewed situations as less stressful and felt like they had more situational control, they had better objective performances, compared to golfers who viewed competitions as more threatening (Freeman & Rees, 2009).

Researchers have also demonstrated that social support can help foster self-determined motivation, elite sport participation, and self-esteem (DeFreese & Smith, 2013; Kang, Jeon, Kwon, & Park, 2015; Sheridan et al., 2014). For example, researchers who conducted a study of 216 male and female athletes aged 18 to 22 demonstrated a link between the perception of support received from a coach and an athlete’s satisfaction with the coach and with his or her sport experience (Cranmer & Sollitto, 2015). Athletes’ satisfaction with their coach was predicted by their receipt of informational, emotional, and esteem support, while their satisfaction with their sport experience was predicted by the receipt of informational and emotional support (Cranmer & Sollitto, 2015).

Moreover, the positive effects of perceived and received social support in sport on self-esteem have also been established (Kang et al., 2015; Rees & Freeman, 2007). Smoll et al. (1993) recruited 18 male little league baseball coaches and 152 of their male athletes aged 10 to 12 to participate in an intervention study to examine the association between social support, and self-esteem in youth. Two weeks prior to the start of the season, eight of the coaches participated in coach effectiveness training which was designed to teach coaches how to create more supportive
and enjoyable sport environments (Smoll et al., 1993). Athletes of both the trained and untrained coaches were interviewed and completed a questionnaire measuring general self-esteem (pre- and post-season). Coaches who had participated in the training were evaluated more positively by their athletes, and their athletes reported having more fun than the athletes playing for the untrained coaches. In addition, boys who had low pre-season self-esteem and who played for the trained coaches displayed increases in their self-esteem throughout the season, compared to players from the untrained coaches (Smoll et al., 1993). An additional intervention study found that the youth athletes who played for coaches trained using coach effectiveness training had large decreases in their anxiety levels post-season (Smith, Smoll, & Barnett, 1995).

2.4 Social Support and the Elite Female Athlete

Beyond the research reported previously which has examined processes by which social support may impact athletes’ stressor appraisals and performance outcomes, there is additional research on social support in sport literature that focuses on the sport experiences of youth athletes’ (Smoll et al., 1993; Weiss & Fretwell, 2005; Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004), injured athletes’ (Covassin et al., 2014; Ford & Gordon, 1999; Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001), and female athletes (Hassell, Sabiston, & Bloom, 2010; Knight, Kneely, & Holt, 2011). Understanding the role social support plays in these populations provides valuable context for informing the present study.

2.4.1 Elite youth athletes

Several researchers have chosen to focus on understanding the impact of social support on youth athletes’ sport experiences. For example, Weiss and Fretwell (2005), Wuerth and colleagues (2004), and Smoll et al. (1993) all conducted studies that explored the relationship between social support and youth sport, with a focus on coaches and parents and the role played by these individuals on adolescent athletes’ sport experiences. In addition, Sheridan et al. (2014) and Mendonca, Cheng, Melo, and de Farias Junior (2014) have conducted systematic reviews on social support in youth sport; findings generally showed that social support from coaches, parents and friends plays a large role in shaping the sport experiences of adolescent athletes. All of these studies generally focus on recreational and competitive youth and adolescent athletes; however, some researchers have chosen to focus on elite youth athletes.
Kristiansen and Roberts (2010) conducted a study to explore stressors and coping among 29 members of the Norwegian Olympic Youth Team. The researchers found that because the athletes were not in their home country and not with their usual team, some of the athletes felt they were lacking emotional support and wished they had their families with them for support. In addition, the athletes relied on different types of social support, mainly from their coaches, when dealing with new stressors associated with competition. The coaches helped the athletes adapt to environmental factors, such as weather and the size of the event, and coaches also assisted in the creation of competition routines for the athletes. However, some athletes found that the relationship they had with their coach was an additional stressor, since they found their coaches’ actions unhelpful and in some cases even detrimental to their performance. Kristiansen and Roberts (2010) noted that coaches themselves are under pressure to succeed, and they may modify their coaching strategies and put a large emphasis on winning at such important competitions. This study demonstrates the importance of studying social support among elite athletes. From these results, it is evident that athletes must deal with a wide range of stressors while at a major competitive event. Understanding athletes’ various support needs can be valuable in promoting performance and a positive mental state for competition. Moreover, this study points to the importance of understanding the experiences of the support provider. For example, if a coach is under pressure, the type and amount of support they are able to provide to their athlete may differ from regular training and competition.

2.4.2 Injured athletes

Researchers have also focused on social support and its impact on athletic injury and rehabilitation from injury (e.g., Covassin et al., 2014; Ford & Gordon, 1999; Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001). Perceived social support has been identified as a valuable resource for athletes in combating the negative psychological outcomes that are associated with athletic injury, such as higher levels of depression, anxiety, anger, and lower self-esteem and vigor (Clement & Shannon, 2011; Leddy, Lambert, & Ogles, 1994; Smith et al., 1993). Within this area of study, researchers have typically focused on examining the experiences of collegiate athletes (Covassin et al., 2014; Petrie, Deiters, & Harmison, 2014; Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001; Yang, Peek-Asa, Lowe, Heiden, & Foster, 2010). While collegiate athletes may be considered adults, they are not necessarily considered elite athletes. Elite athletes experience different stressors when compared to the stressors experienced by a non-elite, or collegiate, athlete (Mellalieu, Neil, Hanton, &
Therefore, it is important to expand upon current literature and examine the support needs of elite athletes.

In a qualitative study of ten elite downhill skiers who had suffered from injury, Bianco (2001) found that athletes progressed through three distinct phases of recovery: injury, rehabilitation and return to full activity. Athletes’ support needs were identified as different across each phase and their support networks appeared to change in each phase of recovery. Immediately after injury, skiers relied most on tangible and emotional support from members of their ski team and their family. During rehabilitation, skiers said they needed reassurance from their treatment team regarding their prognosis and from their team regarding the permanence of their spot on the elite team. In this phase, athletes’ families provided emotional, informational and tangible support. Once the athlete had returned to full activity, they relied mostly on their treatment team and ski team for emotional and informational support (Bianco, 2001). The skiers also discussed needing reassurance that their spot on the team would not be compromised by taking time off to recover from injury. When skiers were satisfied with the social support they were receiving and it matched their needs during their phase of recovery, they reported reductions in distress and increases in motivation during recovery (Bianco, 2001).

Similarly, Rees, Smith, and Sparkes (2003) also examined the influence of social support on six male athletes who suffered from a spinal cord injury while playing sport. Rees et al. (2003) found that different types of support were perceived to be more significant to the athletes at different times after their injury. Emotional, esteem, informational and tangible support were all found to be beneficial, but while recovering from their spinal cord injuries the men found each type of support valuable in different scenarios (Rees et al., 2003). While valuable neither of these studies examined how the provision of support affected the support provider.

2.4.3 Female athletes

Although not sport specific, there is literature demonstrating that males and females may differ in their support needs (Brown, 1986; Wackerbarth & Johnson, 2002). In addition, there is some limited research examining the support needs of female athletes (Hassell et al., 2010). For example, Knight and colleagues (2011) interviewed 36 adolescent female athletes about how they wanted their parents to behave at team sport competitions. Female athletes said that prior to a competition, they wanted their parents to help them mentally and physically prepare, while
during the competition athletes wanted their parents to encourage the entire team, focus on effort not outcome, maintain emotional control, and stay positive. They also did not want their parents to draw unnecessary attention to themselves or their child, act as a coach from the sidelines, or argue with the officials. Lastly, they wanted their parents to give them positive and realistic feedback after the competition (Knight et al., 2011). These findings demonstrate that support providers may or may not be aware of some of the specific support needs of female athletes.

Similarly, another study by Hassell et al. (2010) focused on the structural, functional, and perceptual social support dimensions of nine elite female adolescent swimmers. These female athletes felt that their teammates provided network and emotional support by sharing common experiences and goals, and esteem support, which was based on the teammates’ knowledge of the sport. Coaches were found to provide esteem and informational support, both of which were appreciated by the female swimmers due to their coach’s swimming specific knowledge and expertise. Parents were found to provide unconditional emotional support, and were the main providers of tangible support. The athletes felt loved and valued by their parents when receiving emotional and tangible support, however informational support that came from parents was typically unappreciated since the athletes felt that their parents were not credible sources of swimming specific information (Hassell et al., 2010). It is evident that female athletes may prefer certain types of support to come from specific sources. Understanding these nuances in greater detail may help researchers create guidelines for the provision of support to female athletes. It is important to note that both of these studies were conducted with youth athletes. Adult female athletes, especially elite athletes, may have different support needs than youth athletes; however, there is limited research which has specifically examined the social support experiences of elite female athletes and their support providers.

2.5 Fit Between Provider and Recipient

The findings given above indicate that the support needs of an athlete may change over time and that different people may provide different types of support, which could suggest that the fit between the support provider and the recipient is important in maintaining a positive support relationship. Furthermore, researchers have found that there are negative consequences associated with unwanted, unwelcomed, or unnecessary social support interactions (Bianco, 2001; Dunbar, Ford, & Hunt, 1998; Rees et al., 2003). For example, Bolger and Amarel (2007)
explored the relationship of fit between a support provider and a female recipient in anterogatory and postrogatory periods prior to a stressful speech task. The anterogatory period refers to a scenario where athletes are provided with social support before they have decided that they need assistance. These scenarios are likely to result in negative psychological mechanisms and emotions (Bolger & Amarel, 2007). Conversely, the postrogatory period refers to a situation where an athlete has already appraised an event as stressful, asked for help, and received support (Bolger & Amarel, 2007). This latter scenario represents a good fit between the recipient’s needs and a provider’s actions. When there is good fit, the athlete may be more likely to experience the positive outcomes associated with social support.

Another important factor to consider when examining provider/recipient fit is the provider’s expertise, since their knowledge can influence the provision of support (Rees & Freeman, 2011; Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997). Researchers have found that someone who understands what the support recipient is experiencing and knows what it is like to be in that position is better able to motivate the recipient to perform at his or her best and can appreciate what supportive actions are needed (Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997). Athletes may view teammates and coaches as experts in different areas, which suggests that the sources of social support could impact athletes’ perceptions of which type of support is considered useful when coming from different persons. In a study of collegiate athletes, Stuntz, Sayles, and McDermott (2011) found that female athletes regarded coach evaluation and feedback as a main source of informational support with regards to their performance. Furthermore, injured varsity athletes have reported greater satisfaction in receiving task challenge support from a coach, and emotional and reality conformation from teammates (Corbillon, Crossman, & Jamieson, 2008). These examples demonstrate the impact of a provider’s expertise, as well as the source of social support on the recipient’s perception of support. If the sources of support, the expertise of the support provider, and the type of support they are providing match, then the athlete could experience increased satisfaction in their support.

Researchers have also offered tips and suggestions of how to best provide support to an athlete and to increase the fit between the support provider and recipient. Park and Kim (2014) found athletes and their support providers reported differences in their perceptions of the effectiveness of social support, which the authors contend was due to the support providers’ lack of consideration for the athletes’ needs. The researchers suggested considering an athlete’s needs
prior to providing support as a way to address this difference in understandings of effective support provision (Park & Kim, 2014). Rosenfeld and Richman (1997) also suggested that the members of an athlete’s support network should receive communication training to increase their understanding of athletes’ preferred communication patterns and styles. In addition, Rees and Hardy (2004) proposed educating support providers about the beneficial role of social support in an athlete’s life to help protect athletes from the harmful effects of stress (Rees & Hardy, 2004).

It appears that the vast majority of the suggestions proposed by researchers to create more supportive relationships are geared towards educating the providers and asking the providers to modify their supportive behaviours. While valuable, none of these studies address the impact that support provision may have on the provider. This is an important gap to address because it may influence the quality of support an athlete receives, and it may impact the well-being of the support provider. Tamminen and Gaudreau (2014) suggested that future researchers should “examine whether the provision of support to athletes … may at times be a burden to others” (p. 226). While there is no sport-specific literature in this area, research from the field of caregiver support may help to inform the present study.

2.6 Caregiver Support

In the broader field of social support research, many researchers have examined the role of social support in a caregiver’s life and the impact it can have on the caregiver. Caregiving has been defined as a type of social support “provided to seniors because their health has deteriorated and they can no longer function independently in areas where they previously did” (Chappell, 1992, p. 31). This type of care is typically provided by spouses, children, other family members, or close friends (Chappell & Funk, 2011; Heller, Gibbons, & Fisher, 2015). Researchers in this field typically focus on adults who are providing support to other adults who have major health or intellectual impairments (Corry, While, Neenan, & Smith, 2014; Heller et al., 2015; Wei et al., 2012). The negative outcomes associated with providing support, such as caregiver burden, have been the primary topic of study in this area. However, there is also some evidence that caregivers may experience positive outcomes when providing support (Chappell & Funk, 2011).
2.6.1 Negative caregiver outcomes

Researchers have found that caregivers may experience substantial emotional demands, and are more likely to experience poor physical and psychological health than non-caregivers (Arai & Zarit, 2011; Leach, 2015; Pinquart & Sorenson, 2003; Vitaliano, Zhang, & Scalan, 2003). In particular, caregivers report increased stress and anxiety levels, are more depressed, and have lower levels of subjective well-being and self-efficacy compared to non-caregivers (Chappell & Funk, 2011; Pinquart & Sorenson, 2003). Moreover, they are at an increased risk of developing high blood pressure, obesity, and diabetes (Yamaki, Hsieh, & Heller, 2009). Researchers have found that experiencing caregiver burden or strain is associated with the experience of some of these negative outcomes (Chappell & Funk, 2011).

Caregiver burden occurs as a negative response to the disruption that providing care has on the provider’s personal, social, and occupational roles (Sherwood, Given, Given, & Von Eye, 2005). Caregiver burden is a multidimensional construct that is believed to arise when a caregiver faces new caregiving demands, or when the caregiver faces increases to pre-existing demands (Given et al., 1992). When a caregiver appraises the demands of a situation as increasingly difficult, he or she will respond by implementing various coping strategies meant to mitigate the stressors associated with the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It may be assumed that if the strategies employed by the caregiver are not successful in mitigating the demands of the situation, then he or she will experience burden.

Sherwood et al. (2005) investigated the link between care demands, changes in care demands, caregiver burden, and depressive symptoms among 488 caregivers. The researchers found that the care recipient’s mental and functional status, and the timing of the latest care demands all predicted caregiver burden. The decline of the care recipient’s mental status as well as increases in recent care demands were both associated with increases in burden (Sherwood et al., 2005). Interestingly, as the care recipient’s functional status declined, there was an associated improvement in levels of caregiver burden. The researchers hypothesized that this could be due to increases in support from other caregivers (Sherwood et al., 2005), which demonstrates the value of a social support network for the provider as well as for the recipient. Caregiver burden is also associated with three depression symptom subscales (Sherwood et al., 2005). Caregiver burden not only influences a carer’s mental health, but it is also associated with an increased
mortality risk (Schulz & Beach, 1999). In a study comparing elderly caregivers and non-caregivers, Schilz and Beach (1999) found that the participants who were providing care and experiencing caregiver strain had a mortality rate that was 63 percent higher than the non-caregiving participants. These findings demonstrate that lessening a caregiver’s feelings of burden may assist in the maintenance of both physical and mental health.

Novak and Guest (1989) developed the Caregiver Burden Inventory (CBI) to measure caregivers’ experiences of five types of burden: time-dependence burden, developmental burden (i.e., feelings of not following the same path through life as one’s peers), physical burden, social burden (i.e., feelings of conflicting social roles) and emotional burden (Novak & Guest, 1989). Wang, Xiao, He, Ullah and Bellis (2014) used the CBI to examine the different types of burden experienced by 152 caregivers of dementia patients and found that the caregivers experienced high levels of time-dependence, developmental, and physical burdens. The researchers suggested that the caregivers felt this way due to the large restrictions placed on their time and because they were unable to take part in certain activities while they were caring for another individual. Moreover, the participants experienced feelings of unpreparedness with regards to taking on the caregiver role and they felt strain at not being able to enjoy their later years as expected. Lastly, the caregivers in this study experienced chronic fatigue and felt their physical health was being damaged, however they experienced low levels of social and emotional burden. They did not report experiencing many negative feelings towards the care receivers and did not experience high levels of role conflict, meaning they were not strained by having to limit the amount of time and energy they put into their other roles (Wang et al., 2014). In another study of 160 caregivers, Caserta, Lund, and Wright (1996) found that the experience of caregiver burden was influenced by factors such as level of patient impairment, perceived health, caregiving involvement, caregiving satisfaction, and level of depression. This research demonstrates that there are multiple factors that can impact the experience of caregiver burden, and it is important to understand these factors so that researchers may learn how to decrease their occurrence. While caregiver burden has been identified as a serious problem, it is also important to note that not everyone who provides support will experience feelings of burden (Leach, 2015).
2.6.2 Benefits of support provision

Within the caregiving literature, researchers typically focus on the negative aspects of providing care (Chappell & Funk, 2011). However, providing support to others can help the person providing the support to deal with their own stress (Weiss, 1974) and some individuals report satisfaction in caregiving (Caserta et al., 1996). Brown et al. (2003) found that older adults who reported providing instrumental support to various groups, including friends, relatives and neighbours, or who provided emotional support to spouses, had a significantly lower risk of mortality over a five-year period. Moreover, researchers have found that older parents who provided instrumental support to their children and were satisfied with their children had improved well-being compared to older adults who did not have the opportunity to provide support (Chen & Silverstein, 2000).

The findings from other studies may provide some insight on how the provision of support can lead to increased well-being for support providers. In a large study of 1229 caregivers, 44 percent of participants reported feeling important and 73 percent reported feeling good about themselves when they talked about providing care to an Alzheimer’s patient (Tarlow et al., 2004). The caregivers in this study felt needed and useful based on the support they provided, and they said that they were able to appreciate life more fully, be more optimistic, and develop stronger relationships with others because of their caregiving role (Tarlow et al., 2004). In a qualitative study of ten primary caregivers and eight of their family members, researchers found that while main supporters occasionally found providing care to be stressful, it also provided their lives with meaning and purpose (Bentelspacher, Duncan, Collins, Scandell, & Regulus, 2006). All ten caregivers felt responsible for the needs of their families and took pride in knowing that they were playing a valuable role in assisting with the maintenance of their family’s well-being (Bentelspacher et al., 2006).

2.7 Caregiver Support in Sport

There is currently no sport-specific research that explores the positive and negative outcomes associated with support provision among individuals who provide social support to elite athletes. However, researchers have identified this as an area that merits further investigation. For example, Tamminen and Gaudreau (2014) stated that “in the future it may be pertinent to examine whether the provision of support to athletes strengthens relationships…or whether
providing social support may at times be a burden to others” (p. 226). Given the potential negative and positive outcomes associated with providing support, and the lack of research on the provision of support to elite female athletes, this is an important area of research to be addressed.

Additionally, the emphasis on performance and the power dynamics between athletes and their coaches in high performance sport offers researchers a unique context to study social support. In sport, the emphasis on athletic outcomes and achievement and the view of a coach as an expert creates a power imbalance between the athlete and the coach (Gervis & Dunn, 2004); athletes listen to and trust their coach, hoping that doing so will help them improve their performance. Coaches are also in control of much of their athlete’s life; they are responsible for determining an athlete’s playing time, they can punish an athlete for a poor performance or for violating a norm, and often athletes look up to their coaches and aim to please them (Bringer, Brackenridge, & Johnston, 2002; Cranmer & Goodboy, 2015). Given that caregivers are typically family members (Chappell & Funk, 2011) there may be less obvious differences in power between the care provider and recipient, when compared to coach-athlete relationships in a sport context. These unique factors make sport an interesting and novel context for the exploration of a social support relationship.

2.8 The Present Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of providing and receiving support between five female Olympic athletes and their main support providers prior to, during, and after the Olympic Games. The research questions addressed were: 1) How do support providers experience and perceive their role in supporting elite female athletes? and 2) How do elite female athletes experience the receipt of support before, during and after the Olympic Games?
3 Method

3.1 Paradigmatic Assumptions

This study adopted a qualitative design and the research was approached from a constructivist paradigm (Guba, Lynham, & Lincoln, 2011). Constructivists posit that people develop an understanding of the world by reflecting upon their past experiences and using those experiences to shape their current knowledge of the world (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In other words, constructivists believe that there is no one true reality; they assume a relativist ontology. Relativism implies that each person’s reality is a mental construct shaped by his or her social environment (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Since people occupy different social environments, they develop different understandings of reality. To relativists, this means that the views of all people will likely be different, but that does not make them wrong (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Phillips, 1990). Constructivist researchers also posit a transactional and subjectivist epistemology, which assumes that research findings are co-created between the participant and researcher, and that the knowledge a researcher produces and the information a participant provides are shaped by previous experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1998). A key to this epistemological stance is that knowledge is socially constructed. In other words, it is members of society who discover or change what is considered true knowledge and it is interactions between members of that society which reinforce that truth (Crotty, 1998).

3.2 Sampling and Participants

3.2.1 Athletes

Purposeful snowball sampling was used to identify participants who were able to provide the best data to help answer the research questions (Creswell, 2009; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Five female Olympic athletes over the age of 18 were recruited from within the Greater Toronto Area to participate in the study. A small sample size was used to facilitate the researcher’s immersion in the research and to enrich the encounters with the participants. Crouch and McKenzie (2006) argued that using small sample sizes is “the way in which analytic, inductive, [and] exploratory studies are best done” (p. 496). In addition, this study did not restrict sampling to either team or
individual sport athletes; while many individual sport athletes compete alone, they spend many hours training with the other athletes on their team (Evans, Eyes, & Bruner, 2012). Females were purposefully sampled as previous research suggests that women have larger support networks and receive support from more sources than men (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987), and because of the aforementioned lack of research on the social support experiences of elite female athletes.

Athletes were engaged in the following sports: athletics, beach volleyball, swimming, and badminton.

3.2.2 Support providers

The athletes were asked to identify their main provider of social support prior to participating in interviews. If they were not able to identify one main provider, the researcher asked them to pick one of the people whom they felt played a large role in their support network. In addition, the researcher asked athletes not to select one of their teammates, due to the possibility of reciprocal support between an athlete and her teammate. Because the purpose of this research was to explore the impact that providing support to an elite athlete had on the support provider, the researcher did not want to investigate a relationship where reciprocal support was present, as it may have altered the experience of the support provider compared to a less reciprocal relationship.

The support provider identified by the athlete was also asked to participate in an interview, meaning there were five dyads with ten participants in total. If the support provider did not wish to participate in the study, then the athlete was not included; athletes were told in advance of nominating a support provider that participation in the study required both individuals to agree to participate in the research process. However, all support providers agreed to participate and no athletes were excluded.

3.3 Data Collection

Upon gaining ethical approval from the University of Toronto ethics review board, purposeful snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) began. Information about the study was sent to contacts at the Canadian Sport Institute of Ontario (CSIO) who were asked to forward information about the study to athletes who met the inclusion criteria (Appendix A). Administrative contacts at the CSIO provided the researcher with the contact information of potential participants, whom were
then contacted directly by the researcher with information about the study. The CSIO was not informed of the participation of their athletes. Athletes who agreed to participate were also asked to forward the study information to other athletes who met the participation requirements. This process continued until 5 dyads had agreed to participate. Athletes who were interested in participating were asked to provide the contact information of his or her main support provider. The support provider was then contacted and provided with an overview of the study.

The athlete and support provider were both provided with an information letter that explained the research study, as well as potential benefits and risks of participation via e-mail (see Appendix B). It was made clear to both the athlete and the support provider that they both had to be willing to participate in the study before interviews could begin. If both the athlete and support provider were still interested in participating, a mutually convenient interview time and location was set to conduct the interviews. Prior to the start of the interview, the participants were reminded of the purpose of the study, they signed an informed consent form and they filled out a short demographics form (see Appendixes C and D, respectively). The material covered in the information letter and consent form was also conveyed orally.

Each participant engaged in one semi-structured interview at a time and place of their choosing. Prior to interviewing the participants, two pilot interviews were conducted with an elite female athlete and her main provider of social support. These interviews were used as an opportunity to test the interview guides (see Appendix E and F) and determine if any modifications were necessary. Questions were reorganized and modified based on the results of the pilot interviews. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Since athletes likely receive different types of support from different people and support providers support multiple people, the researcher asked participants to draw a sociogram prior to their interview to gain an understanding of these relationships. Sociograms are “visual depictions of relations among individuals” (Hogan, Carrasco, & Wellman, 2007, p. 116). These were used to learn more about each participant’s social support network. Athletes were asked to write down the names of all of their support providers and list the types of support each person provided, as well as how satisfied they were with the support they received from each person on their sociogram. They were also asked to identify people to whom they provided support, and the types of support they provided (see Appendix G for an example of an athlete’s sociogram). The
people included in this example represent those who were typically described by athletes including their friends, family and significant others, their teammates, their sport organizations, their coaches, and other members of their support staff team such as physiotherapists, and sport medicine doctors. Support providers were asked to write the names of all of the people to whom they provided support as well as their own sources of support, the types of support they provided and received, and how they felt about each of those relationships (see Appendix H for an example of a support provider’s sociogram). The people included in this example represent those who were typically included by support providers including the participant’s friends, family, and significant other, their colleagues and boss, the athletes they work with, and their sport organization. The definitions of relevant social support terms were not provided to the participants prior to the interview. This was because the researcher wanted to learn about the participants’ experiences and knowledge of the world and did not want the responses participants provided to be shaped by technical definitions or conceptualizations of support.

Once the sociogram had been completed, the interviewer began asking questions relating to the role of elite sport in the dyadic relationship, and the impact of social support upon the participants. The interview questions were formulated based on the current literature. The questions revolved around social support provided and received leading up to, during, and shortly after the Olympic Games. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, producing 268 pages of transcripts.

It is important to identify that the researcher was aware of the issues Funk and Stajduhar (2009) articulated with regards to interviewing caregivers. They explain that researchers must interpret a caregiver’s interview responses with caution due to the social desirability effects and the meaning making process a caregiver goes through when talking about their experience (Funk & Stajduhar, 2009). For example, participants may have reported feelings of fulfillment and satisfaction associated with their caregiver role; however, such may be a caregiver’s way of coping with the stress they experience as a caregiver (Funk & Stajduhar, 2009). This is not meant to suggest that the researcher knows more than the participant, rather it was something that was kept in mind throughout the data analysis process to aid in the understanding of a caregiver’s experiences and responses.
3.4 Thematic Analysis

Based on the purposes of this study and the novelty of this research area within the field, thematic analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was used to analyze the data. The use of thematic analysis has been identified as a useful and flexible method for qualitative researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The goal of this type of analysis is a comprehensive summary of events that stays very close to the data and does not result in abstract, highly interpretive findings (Sandelowski, 2000; Sandelowski, 2010). Since the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of athletes and their support providers, being able to analyze the who’s, what’s, when’s, where’s and why’s of the events described by the participants was well-suited to the exploratory purpose of this research.

The general approach to data analysis consisted of examining the transcripts of the athletes and of the support providers separately to generate themes common within each group of participants. The researcher then examined the transcripts of each dyad to explore the themes that emerged between athletes and their respective support providers (see Figure 1 for an overview of the analysis process). When analyzing the transcripts, the researcher followed the six phases of thematic analysis presented by Braun and Clarke (2006). The six phases are: to become familiar with the data, create initial codes, search for themes throughout the data, review all of the themes, define and name each theme appropriately, and produce a final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In order to follow the phases of thematic analysis the researcher began by becoming familiar with the data. To do this she listened to all of the audio files while reviewing the interview transcripts and then read and re-read all transcripts. She then created initial codes by identifying similarities and differences in the data. This stage entailed noting chunks of text from the transcripts that appeared to relate to the same topic or that were distinctly different from the other participants’ responses. The third step in the analysis involved searching for themes throughout the data. The researcher read through all transcripts and noted any ideas that appeared by highlighting all sections of relevant text. Then the researcher reviewed all of the themes that had been created; she combined themes that were similar, searched for additional supporting quotes for each theme, and decoded quotes that no longer appeared relevant. Next the researcher defined and named each theme to reflect the data contained within that theme. Finally, the researcher produced a final written report including quotes from athletes and their support providers.
Figure 1. Overview of analysis process (analysis steps 1-6 adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.5 Ethical Concerns

Steps were taken to ensure participant information remained confidential. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts, are used throughout this thesis, and will be used in future publications to ensure that participants cannot be identified. Details of the athletes’ sport and competition history were omitted to avoid the possibility of identifying participants in publications and presentations. In addition, all paper documents, such as consent forms, were stored in a locked cabinet in the Sport and Performance Psychology lab at the Goldring Centre for High Performance Sport, University of Toronto, and all electronic documents were stored on a password protected computer in the
lab. Research files (consent forms, transcripts) were only accessible by the researcher and her supervisor.

Although the interview topics were not deemed to be particularly sensitive, there was the possibility that discussing personal relationships or the provision of support during stressful experiences was upsetting to the participants. To minimize emotional distress, it was made clear to all participants that they did not have to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable and they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. In addition, they were provided with a list of the support services offered by the city of Toronto.

Lastly, these interviews could have altered the way participants saw their support relationship, which in turn could change the nature of that relationship. While this was to some extent unavoidable as a result of participating in an interview on the topic of relationships, the researcher did not use terms such as “burden” in the interviews and avoided imposing ideas of positive or negative consequences of support upon the participants.
Chapter 4
Results

4 Results

Overall, the findings from this study shed light on the support relationship between an elite female athlete and her main provider of support. The results section covers four groups of findings. First, athletes described receiving four different types of support from their support providers and support providers described providing any type of support to their athlete that they felt their athlete needed. Second, the process of support provision from a support provider to an Olympian is examined. Third, the outcomes of support provision, including its benefits and impacts, are explored. Lastly, the impact of organizational structure on support provision is explained.

4.1 Purpose and Types of Support

Support providers explained that they provided any type of support they could in order to help their athlete. As part of supporting an athlete, Joe stated that he would purposely try to prevent his athlete from experiencing any additional stress prior to competitions: “When you’re here to compete, you don’t need me adding stress to a situation, putting even more stress on you.” Aaron worked to avoid adding stress to Barbra’s life by not talking about the stressful things that he was experiencing in his own life, and doing whatever he could to minimize her experience of stress:

The build up to specifically to the Olympics, for example. If I had stressful things going on, I wouldn’t try and put that on [Barbra]… whereas ordinarily… if I’m super stressed, I can talk to her about it. But umm I try not to make her more stressed in the lead up to sort of major competitions and stuff like that… making sure that she had whatever it was she needed in order to make everything again as easy as possible. So, everything outside of [sport] was stress-free so that she could deal with performing to the best of her abilities.

Support providers also identified trying to decrease the potential for their athlete to experience stress by taking extra measures to deal with logistical and administrative concerns on behalf of the athlete. Alice described petitioning Emma’s exams for her:
Last April, Olympic trials were on and exams were right after. And [Emma] was supposed to have exams on the Wednesday, and trials ended on Sunday and Monday and Tuesday we were going to be out in at a resort, they were having Olympic meetings. And so, I put the petition in and [Registrar] was like… ‘normally, the student does it’. I said ‘this isn’t normal… I’m trying to keep everything off of her shoulders that I can control’… we’re just trying to act as a buffer so she doesn’t have to deal with things like that.

Athletes identified receiving four different types of social support from their main support providers: emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible support. In particular, athletes noted that they received emotional support from their main support providers and felt like their support provider would always be there for them. Alisha explained that her support provider had been there for her since she started competing: “[Tyler’s] always been there. At least, since I started.” Barbra said: “[Aaron]’s definitely like, all of the kinds of support. Like, definitely emotional and mental.”

Athletes stated that their main support providers also provided esteem support and tried to increase their confidence. Wendy explained that Cynthia helps her to think more positively and be confident in herself:

On a bad day, that’s when I need more help with like the way I’m thinking because like, I tend to crumble down and I lose all confidence and… she tries to tell me that she believes in me so I should believe in myself as well.

Emma talked about the confidence Alice had in her and how helpful that was: “[Coach] and [Alice] were confident in me that I could make the team. So, I found that helpful in like, bringing up my confidence.”

It appeared that athletes also relied on their main support providers for informational support and guidance. Emma noted that her main support provider is easy to talk to and get advice from: “She’s easy to go to and like, for like, advice or just to talk to.” Wendy explained that Cynthia gave her information about which tournaments to go to in order to qualify for the Olympics:
She kind of guides me... So how to play tournaments or how to go about the Olympics. She was the only one that kind of guided me. She was the, she kind of just told me okay ‘this is the tournament that you have to play now and then once you can win these tournaments consistently, then you can start playing the bigger tournaments.’

Athletes felt that their support providers were able to provide them with tangible support, typically in the form of resources that would help the athlete in their sport, such as writing workouts, strength programs, or reminding the athlete of specific training information. Alisha explained that Tyler is “really good about writing workouts.” Olivia described how even when she was away on tour, Joe was able to plan and monitor her workouts:

When I’m training and I’m away, he’s still kind of sending me programs and … when I’m done my training everyday, I kind of like, update it. And he gets a notification so we’re kind of, you know, always going back and forth.

Support providers explained that they provided their athletes with various types of social support and were there to help their athlete in whatever way they could. Tyler said he wanted to provide various types of support to his athletes: “emotionally, physically, academically, and athletically healthy all at the same time. And just doing everything you can, I guess, to provide that support to them.” Alice said that her athletes could talk to her about anything, and mentioned that Emma could come to her with any issue, at any time of day:

[Athletes] come to me and ask me questions about anything and everything … be it school or life or boyfriends or girlfriends … [Emma] just knows I’m there if she needs me. And I have a different tone on my phone for her to text. And I know, I’ll be in a meeting and go ‘excuse me, I normally wouldn’t take this but I have to, it’s [Emma]’ … I’m available for her 24/7. Whereas other athletes know don’t text [Alice] after 10 p.m. whereas [Emma] can do it whenever she needs me. So, it’s, you’re available and even on holidays… if [Emma] needs something, I gotta be there.

4.2 Process of Support Provision

Athletes and support providers described various aspects of the process of support provision. Participants described the different ways they stayed in contact, the frequency of contact,
communication about social support, and interactions with other support providers. Support providers juggled multiple roles, they attempted to decrease their athletes’ stress, they regulated their own emotions to benefit their athlete, and participants also discussed the issue of reciprocity within the athlete-support provider relationship.

4.2.1 Mode and Frequency of Contact

Aside from meeting and talking in person, support providers used various forms of technology, including Skype, WhatsApp, text, email, and phone calls to stay in contact with their athlete. Tyler said:

Coaching for me it’s like, communication is the biggest thing. So, talking a lot with them. A lot of texts, a lot of emails, figuring out their, you know like, what else is going on in their lives as far as other stress…. some Skypes and phone calls and whatnot.

Cynthia explained how she used WhatsApp to help coach Wendy when she was unable to travel to competitions with her athlete:

Everyday, WhatsApp. Everyday, opponent analyzing. Everyday. Everyday. Mental, every day we were talking until the semi-final. Until the final. Until the gold medal. That’s all coached through WhatsApp. You have to really appreciate that we have this app.

Alice described how support providers stayed in contact with their athletes while they were competing in Rio:

The kids all got phones when they got there, everybody else, all the staff, we got Brazilian SIM cards put into our phones and so we all had Brazilian numbers and… she always would still text me or we used WhatsApp.

Thus, using different forms of technology was important to support providers because it allowed them to provide support to their athletes remotely and on a frequent basis. Support providers felt that in order to provide effective support, they needed to be in frequent contact with their athlete. Tyler noted he is in contact with his athlete every day, even if he does not see her in person: “Someone like (Alisha), even if I’m not seeing her, I’m checking in with her at least… every day, maybe twice a day.” Aaron also described being in daily contact with Barbra: “We text, you
know throughout the day, every day. And we make sure that we hang out as much as possible and do other things, whether it’s a FaceTime date or something like that.”

4.2.2 Communication about Support

Generally, it seemed that most athletes and support providers did not have overt discussions about what types of support the athletes wanted or needed. When asked if Barbra ever told him what she needed, Aaron said: “Umm, no not really.” It seemed that some athletes did not ask for specific types of support because they did not know what they needed. Alisha said she never had an overt discussion with her coach about the types of support she needed because “I feel like I didn’t know what I needed. Um, but I definitely felt like I got what I needed.” Other athletes did not tell their main support provider what they needed because they did not want their support provider to feel like they had done something wrong; when asked if she had ever explicitly told her coach what support she needed Emma said: “No [laughs]. I did not… Because I didn’t want… to make it seem like it was her that was the problem.” Emma appeared to avoid discussing her needs with her coach because she wanted to protect her coach’s feelings.

In cases where there were no discussions of support, support providers felt that they were still able figure out what their athlete needed and provide that form of support for their athlete. Alice explained that she would read her athlete prior to a practice and know what type of support was needed on that day:

   If she's dancing on the side of the pool I'm going, ‘yeah, it’s going to be a good practice.’ And if she comes in and her eyes are bug-eyed I was like, ‘yep she's too tired, we need to give her a morning off.’ So, you learn to read what she's like.

Support providers said that listening to their athlete and having complete honesty in the relationship about what the athlete needed was important. Cynthia explained that it was more important for her to listen to her players than the other way around: “The player not listen to me right? I have to listen to the player, what they want and help them to keep at the tournament. This is my job, so I change.” Joe told his athlete not to worry about his feelings and be honest with him about her training:
I’ve asked her for complete honesty. If you’re injured or not, something’s not necessarily matching up well, you know… You’re not going to hurt my feelings if you say ‘hey I’d rather do this or that’… Just be completely honest with me.

While some athletes did not want to start discussions about their support needs, they identified these conversations about their support needs as helpful. Olivia said that she would not start these conversations on her own, but if someone asked her what she needed she would tell them:

I remember meeting with [Joe]… and he was like, ‘okay, what do you want now? And what do you want to prepare for the next season?’ And… it’s always nice to be asked what you want and I think athletes, you’re not always given that luxury.

On the other hand, some athletes did have explicit discussions with their main support provider about what types of support they wanted. When asked if she ever discussed her support needs with her coach, Wendy said:

We… learned to communicate… without like, worrying that we’re gonna offend the other person. Just like, kind of like telling them what we need and… that definitely helped because she now knows what I need. And it’s her choice if she wants to do it or not. And it’s my choice if I want to meet her needs or not. If we want to work together… we should put effort into meeting each other’s needs.

Tyler explained that his athlete would explicitly ask for emotional and technical support:

There’s been a few times where she said ‘I could really use a hug’ or something like that… and then sometimes it’ll be like, oh, you know ‘thanks for letting me vent’. Or or umm you know there’s been times where we’ve had meetings on something, or let’s just chat about this race. Or, ‘what are your thoughts on this’? Or, ‘do you think I can get into this competition’? Or, ‘is there, training camp’ or ‘let’s put together a plan’.

Alice also said that Emma explicitly asked her for support:

Yeah, like, all the time. She’ll come in and go ‘[Alice] I need this and this is due today’… ‘I need help with this’ or ‘can you read this’. Umm, ‘here’s this speech I’m doing in Windsor, I need you to go over it and look and tell me is it good’… That kind of thing.
Thus, it appeared that while explicit discussions of support did not always happen between athletes and support providers, open communication between the support provider and athlete was viewed as an important aspect of the dyadic relationship.

4.2.3 Interactions with Other Support Providers

In order to improve the support they were able to provide, main support providers said that they spoke with other support providers to discuss the care and support that they gave to their athlete. The athletes’ main support providers identified speaking to other individuals such as physiotherapists and chiropractors who also provided support to the athlete. Joe described working and interacting with an integrated support team to support Olivia:

The integrated support team, it’s the sport science, sport medicine, coaching professionals that contribute to the athletes. Umm, so we have like, nutritionist, we have sport psychologists, we have uh like, physiotherapists, chiro, athletic therapists, doctors, and then coaches as well. So, we’re all kind of like a pit crew for the athlete…. Ideally, we have a high amount of communication and collaboration.

Aaron explained that he had informal conversations with his supervisor about supporting Barbra:

I guess somewhat informally, yes. One of my advisory committee members is heavily involved, both his wife is an Olympic athlete and he’s also one of the lead physiologists for a number of Canadian national teams. Umm, so in a certain level through informal conversations there.

4.2.4 Support Providers Juggle Multiple Roles

An aspect of support provision that support providers described was the challenge of switching back and forth between their various roles. When asked about her role as part of a team of coaches, Alice said: “We’re like little wizards. We’re all definitely, we’re jugglers.” Aaron also explained the different roles he had to balance when supporting Barbra:

It’s almost like it’s two completely different roles where there’s the sport aspect side of things, and then there’s the boyfriend aspect of things. And you almost have to wear a different hat. Umm, from a practitioner standpoint, you know, you can’t let emotion get into things… Whereas the emotional support of okay, don’t be sort of coach,
physiologist, whatever at this point. Be boyfriend. You know, switching and moving between those two roles… Where do you leave the coach and where does the boyfriend role begin?

4.2.5 Self-Regulation for Benefit of the Athlete

It appeared that support providers self-regulated their negative emotions so that the athletes they were supporting would not see and be impacted by those negative emotions. This was one way that support providers tried to avoid adding stress to their athletes’ lives. Aaron said:

If I’m stressed, I tend to be pretty short tempered. Um and so it’s more just trying to keep that side of things in check, because obviously then, you know, there’s a whole other issue in play. In terms of, now we’re fighting and that’s gonna stress her out on top of everything else and she’s not gonna know why I’m in a bad mood.

Alice also explained that she hid her emotions from Emma, because she did not want her to know that she was feeling stressed:

It’s exhausting at times like, I never, we don’t want to show stress to [Emma] ever. And so, I’m very good at it…. don’t think that for a minute that I am not sweating and nervous and when she goes to [compete]… the athletes don’t need to see you stressed… You got to lighten up in front of your athletes. You can’t show them… It’s acting.

Alice felt that as a coach, your athletes should not know when you are having a bad day, but she identified that the process of hiding how she felt was very exhausting.

4.2.6 Support and Reciprocal Relationships

Some support providers identified that they received support from their athletes, and likewise, some athletes also said that they provided support to their main support provider. It appeared that athletes were interested supporting the well-being of their support providers; for example, Barbra said:

He like, obviously gets stressed out about school and stuff so I’m kind of like a sounding board… I just like, listen and just try to say, like, ‘you can do it!’… Or like, just help in whatever way I can.
Barbra was in a romantic relationship with Aaron, so it may be expected that their relationship appeared more reciprocal in nature. However, other participants also described perceiving a reciprocal relationship. Cynthia stated that the relationship with her athlete has become a friendship instead of just a coach-athlete relationship:

Recently we’re more like friends because she’s more getting older. She will tell me more things than before… And I also set a line for a coach and a player and also, I would open myself a little bit more to her as a friend… So, I think we recently, like, this year, we’re as a friend, but as before just like coach and student.

Wendy explained that she tried to support Cynthia in whatever ways she could:

I think like, for my coach and me, it’s more mutual because … she runs her own business, she has other juniors that she teaches and she has like, parents to deal with… So then whenever she needs help with this, she’ll come talk to me about it. And then we kind of, we kind of work together to see how like, we can help her juniors, like, her team and stuff.

Support providers perceived their athletes as being supportive when the athletes acknowledged all the work the support provider was putting in, and when the athlete expressed their gratitude for that work. Tyler explained that Alisha thanked him for his time and she recognized that he was spending time away from his wife: “Even just her saying ‘thank you so much for being out here. For taking the time for me and thank you to [wife]’… so yeah I mean she provides support.” Joe described Olivia as very empathetic and he felt that she really appreciated his hard work:

She’ll like, always kind of check in or she’ll like, she got me this really nice bottle of scotch 2 years ago… And that kind of stuff blows you away because you’re like, ‘I’m just trying to help. You don’t have to buy me this shit.’ But yeah, she checks in. When [Wife], my wife got concussed… she’s like, ‘hey if you need anything’… She's very empathetic.

Some athletes identified that the relationship they had with their support provider was not a reciprocal one. However, none of the support providers described their relationship with their
athlete as non-reciprocal. While drawing her sociogram, Alisha said: “I feel very selfish… Just ‘cause I feel like a lot of these arrows are one way,” referring to the fact that many of the social relationships she had identified were ones that provided her with support, but she felt she did not provide any support back to those individuals. More specifically, when Alisha described her relationship with her coach she said: “It’s hard because I feel like any kind of support that I give him, it’s just like, nothing compared to like, what he does for me.”

Athletes appeared to think that their support providers provided them with more support than they returned in kind. When Olivia was asked if she would change anything about her relationship with Joe, she said:

I don’t think so. It’s, I mean it would be nice if I could you know, like, he supports me so much. And like, I kind of, it would be nice to feel like I supported him, but I’m not sure like, how I would do that. But you know I would, it would be nice to kind of return that appreciation and support.

Olivia went on to describe the difference between her relationships in and outside of sport:

I think outside of sport, [support] is much more of a two-way street. Umm, I think within sport, it’s a little bit more of those people supporting me… I mean it’s defined by their job… essentially that is their job to kind of support athletes.

Similarly, when talking about Tyler, Alisha said: “I confide in him a lot about a lot of different things. I feel like it’s important for me to do, but obviously he doesn’t do like, the same back, which I think is appropriate.” Thus, it appeared that some athletes expected coaches to provide support and not receive any in return from their athletes.

Support providers identified that in the process of providing so much support they felt like they needed to receive more support from various groups. Additionally, support providers noted that it was challenging to deal with a perceived lack of social support. When asked how she dealt with stressful events, Cynthia explained that she typically dealt with stressful events on her own because she was not getting the support she needed from other people:

(Q: How do you typically deal with stressful events?) All by myself… It is difficult but you don’t get any support, so either you do it or you don’t do it. So, you don’t get any
support. If I don’t do it myself, if I don’t study myself, if I don’t think how to set up a plan, how to coach her then it’s impossible that you [succeed].

Support providers also explained that there were certain people, such as bosses and supervisors, from whom they would like to receive more support. Tyler felt that he lacked support in his work environment and explained that receiving a lack of support was tough to manage:

I guess everyone could always use more support… I mean maybe in our work environment, I’ll just say in the work environment that I’m in, there are people that I would like to get more support from which I don’t feel I have… I would say that if you’re not getting support from the places or people you hope to get support from, it definitely makes things tougher.

Aaron noted that he would like to receive more support from his academic supervisor: “I certainly occasionally wish certain people would be more supportive than sometimes they are. And that’s usually more of a just biased grad student-advisor relationship thing.” If support providers do not feel fully supported themselves, it may be difficult for them to fully support their athletes.

### 4.3 Outcomes of Support Provision

Providing support to an Olympic athlete appeared to have several outcomes for support providers, namely, they experienced professional and personal benefits, a high level of dependence developed between the athlete and support provider, and support providers felt that the provision of support impacted their life and their relationships with others.

#### 4.3.1 Benefits of Support Provision

Despite the impact of support provision on their life, support providers identified both professional and personal benefits of providing support to Olympic athletes. First, support providers noted that their experience supporting an Olympic athlete would help them in their career. Tyler noted that his experience coaching Alisha would help him be a better coach with his other athletes: “Obviously, the experience with [Alisha] is just gonna help me to be a better coach with other people.” Support providers also identified that coaching someone all the way to the Olympics was proof that they were doing their job well. Cynthia explained that she viewed
coaching Wendy as an opportunity to prove that she is a good coach:

A lot of people talk to me, my sister, my mom, friends, say ‘why do you want to help [Wendy]? And you don’t get paid and then she’s difficult to coach. Why you still want to do this?’ I talk to them it’s like, ‘don’t think about [Wendy] take all the credit. For me as a coach, I want to also challenge myself and I also want to prove myself, like my coaching skill is to a high level.’

Joe explained the satisfaction he felt when his athletes performed well:

Helping someone be successful is obviously a good feeling… it’s an exceptional group of athletes. They, you know, you get some level of validation from seeing the buy-in, seeing the adherence in what they do. You know, you get more validation from seeing success… if athletes are successful, that’s an additional validation in what you’re doing and what you’re doing is right.

In addition, athletes were also aware of the professional benefit to their support providers. Alisha explained that bringing her coach to the Olympics was important to her: “I like to think that I’m providing something for him because he’s very excited to be working with me. And to like bring me to the Olympics.” Thus, it appeared that by supporting athletes at the Olympics, support providers gained experience, recognition, validation of their coaching skill, and confidence.

Support providers also explained that they gained personal benefits and experienced positive emotions when supporting their athletes. Joe explained that his role supporting Olivia had allowed him and his wife to travel Europe together:

When the school year ended, we were in [eastern Europe]… So, [wife] came over for that as our one year anniversary, kind of in the middle of it. So, she came over… She kind of got some perks out of it. Like, she got to come to Europe. She’d never been to Europe. Travelled to Switzerland, France, did some stuff she’s never done before.

Tyler explained his passion for coaching and the rewards he experiences working with Alisha:

I think being a coach and working with exceptional athletes, it’s very rewarding… I mean, obviously, it’s rewarding, she got to the Olympics and even if she didn’t get to the
Olympics, she’s still done just amazing things… I love coaching and you know, it’s definitely a passion for me. And I wouldn’t put all this time into it, if I didn’t enjoy it.

Thus, support providers appeared to enjoy their role supporting athletes and experienced positive personal benefits through the provision of social support.

4.3.2 Dependence between Athlete and Support Provider

It appeared that through the process of providing and receiving support, a high level of dependence developed between the support providers and the athletes, as the support providers did as much for their athlete as they could to make the athlete’s life easier. For example, Aaron explained that he would give Barbra concrete nutritional advice (informational support) so that she did not have to spend time figuring it out on her own:

It just makes life a little bit easier, hopefully, for her in terms of me saying ‘well, you should do this’… as opposed to her spending all her time trying to figure all that out or going by trial and error. It just makes it straightforward and she can ideally focus on doing what she does best.

Alice explained that she does whatever her athlete needs, and that she provides her athlete with advice on topics such as academics, sports medicine, nutrition, and finances:

I provide her academic support. I’ve looked at her essays… I provide academic support as a liaison between … me and her Profs… I’m a liaison between her and Sports Med… I talk to [physio] every day, every night… I’m there for whatever she needs… we share recipes. We share stuff like when she goes shopping. Umm, I’ve made her with the money that she’s winning, I’ve made her do a thing where she has to treat herself with all the money she’s winning…So those are some of the kinds of support… nutritional support as to you know what she needs to be eating, like drinking water… Back in Rio, ‘what color is your pee?’…I have a really good OBGYN that I can get athletes in to see… I’ve been her liaison with the stuff at Worlds that the press will get in touch with me. Whatever she needs.

On the other hand, Cynthia noted that her athlete was old enough to manage some of these things on her own: “[Wendy] is already 24 years old and she should be able to manage those things.”
Some support providers almost seemed to take on the role of a parent when supporting their athletes, while others did not fully agree that they served as a parental figure in the athlete’s life. Cynthia said that others saw her as a mother figure towards Wendy, but that she did not like to talk about certain things with her athlete, because she felt that those were things someone should talk about with their parent, and she did not want to make Wendy’s mother jealous:

People always say that I’m her mom… But I don’t put it this way. Because she’s not respecting her mom, but she 100%, 150% respects me… before I never get into any of her boyfriend stuff, you know. I always stay away, because it’s the mother’s job… But somehow, since she has no one to talk to about these things, so I will also listen to her as well. But I try to stay away because those are the relationship with her boyfriend, things that her mom should look after. Because… I think the mom will be jealous too.

Similarly, Tyler stated that he did not try to act as a father towards Alisha:

Kids will say or other parents will say “oh [Tyler], you know, they say you’re their track dad” or like their dad. Or I mean that’s what [Alisha] and [Alisha’s sister] have kind of alluded to that. And I don’t know that I’m trying to, I’m not trying to be their dad but you know… being there whenever she needs you… And being like I said, not like a friend in that case, but like I would with a buddy… And again, not really like a father figure, although they joke about that. But just trying to be there to support her when she needs support.

Alisha explained her relationship with Tyler in similar terms:

He just goes beyond just being a coach. He’s like a dad to me. Especially now that I’m not living at home. ‘Cause he’s like the person, besides my roommates, he’s the person that he’s like the only person that I basically see everyday… especially like the only parent role that I see everyday… he’s like a dad to me, but we’re also like, really good friends.

Alisha drew parallels between a relationship with a parent and a relationship with a coach by saying: “He’s basically like a parent. And a parent type relationship, the kid doesn’t really like support the parent the same way. So, I feel bad in a way.” Here, Alisha was suggesting that her
relationship with her coach was like a relationship with a parent, because the support provided was non-reciprocal, similar to the relationship between a parent and child.

Alice seemed to have fully accepted and embraced her parental relationships with her athletes. When asked about her role as a coach, Alice said:

You end up being almost like a surrogate parent... some of them say you're my mother away from home... so they trust me. Um it's kind of, it's an element of trust for sure. And umm I get Mother's Day cards from some of them... And it's just, it kind of kind of warms your insides that they give you that.

Alice noted that she did things for Emma that were typical tasks of a parent, such as attending doctor’s appointments:

I would not go into the [sports medicine] doctor with any other athlete. But [sports doctor] said ‘no, you’re coming in with her’. And so I went in and I guess it’s just like a thing a mom would do is to go to go and with the kid. And so I said ‘[Emma], do you want me or not?’ And she said ‘no, no you come in too.’

Emma confirmed that Alice had assumed a parental role when she said:

She’s really helped me with just like, the whole [university] thing. Like, school kind of, like, I wouldn’t even know what to do if I had to like, kind of petition an exam or like, who to go to and do all these things. She’s kind of been that person I go to where, kind of like, a second mom I would say.

In parent-child relationships the child is typically highly dependent on the parent, and the support provider-athlete relationship appeared to mimic the parent-child relationships through high levels of dependence by the athlete on the support provider.

Additionally, this close relationship and high level of dependence led support providers to use the term ‘we’ rather than ‘they’ when telling stories about and describing their relationship with their athlete. For example, Aaron said “we get to experience things like going to the Olympics.” Moreover, rather than say Emma may need to use birth control, Alice used the term ‘we’ when describing this situation:
Luckily, she doesn’t get bad period but I said you know ‘if we need go on the pill’.

[Emma] ‘I don’t need to go on the pill!’ I said ‘IF we want to go on the pill to regulate it
before, so we don’t race with it’ but she’s been fine racing with it.

Thus, it appeared that the high level of dependence between an athlete and their support provider
was reflected in the language that support providers use when talking about their athlete.

4.3.3 Impact of Support Provision on the Support Provider’s Life

Support providers noted that the provision of social support to an Olympic athlete impacted
various aspects of their lives. Joe said:

Every interaction impacts everyone else’s. There’s a trickle-down effect. Nothing exists
in a silo. So, whether that’s you have a shitty tournament and you have to sort of reflect
on it and you might not be in a good mood because that’s your job and you didn’t do well
at your job or something didn’t happen well at your job. Umm, or you know, you had a
good tournament and you’re happy and maybe you wanna go celebrate a little bit more
and you’re more open to going out.

Aaron explained how his relationship with Barbra would determine where he would be able to
continue pursuing his education.

Which is another stressful situation [in and of] itself. But yeah, that would be something
that, depending on where I go, would kinda be dictated by [Barbra] and whether or not
it’s a good fit for her as well and could continue training there. Or whatnot. Like, I’m not
gonna go to the middle of the Arctic or something like that where you know, she can’t
[compete] or something like that.

In addition to day-to-day moods, and decisions about where to live, the provision of support to
an Olympian impacted support providers’ relationships with other people. Supporting an
Olympian appeared to be very time consuming, and it was a lack of available time that impacted
the support providers’ ability to interact with others. Tyler described his experience of balancing
his commitment to his family with his commitment to his coaching position:
The biggest thing you know about having the two kids and coaching of course is trying to find time for family… We have late practices, we travel a lot… It’s tough… it’s very time consuming. And sometimes it’s emotionally very draining… You just have to try to find some time that you can put aside for yourself or your family… it is a bit of a time management struggle… it can lead to some arguments now and again.

Joe described how the provision of support impacted his relationship with his wife:

Last year was a really busy travel year. Umm, from pretty much March until September… but yeah, anytime your significant other’s gone for so long, it wears on you… She’s not upset with me being on tour, but it’s stressful at some points.

It appeared that support providers experienced difficulties in maintaining their close social relationships due to their commitment to supporting their athlete. Allowing these social ties to weaken may lead the support provider to perceive a lack of support from their friends and family. Tyler noted that he did not have time to spend interacting with his friends. “I don’t see my friends anymore, at all… I see friends once every 4 months or something.” Alice also indicated that she felt cut off from her close social connections because of how often she had to miss special family events:

See, we have family get-togethers for birthdays, we try to do it like once every month or whatever. And I never can come … I always have divisionals and they said ‘well, we’ll put it the first week of December’. I said ‘nope I’m [away]’. Like I don’t get to go to a lot of the family functions and so sometimes I feel a bit cut off because of that… And then there was one time my sister was going to shoot me because she goes ‘are you coming this weekend?’ I said ‘no I’m not’. And she says ‘where are you going to be?’ And I said ‘actually I’m going to be at home.’ And she said ‘you’re not coming?’ I said ‘[Sister], it’s the first day I’ve had off in like 40. I need a me day.’

Here, Alice noted that because she spends so much time coaching and rarely has time off, when she does get a weekend free she doesn’t always want to commit to fostering her other relationships. Support providers explained that they had less time to spend with their family, took their work home with them, and spent many hours working. All of the time that support
providers invested in supporting the athlete took away from the time they had to spend with other important people in their life.

4.4 Organizational Structure and its Impact on Support Provision

In addition to examining the process and outcomes associated with support provision between athletes and their support providers, it also appeared that the structure of sport organizations and governing bodies had an impact on the support that providers were able to give their athletes and on the amount of support that athletes perceived from their main supporter. These factors included the amount of funding athletes and support providers received, whether or not support providers received Olympic accreditations, and additional non-monetary resources provided to athletes. These themes were discussed throughout the athlete and support provider interviews, and are presented here to shed light on the context within which support providers and Olympic athletes interacted and provided support.

4.4.1 Funding

It was found that when an athlete and/or support provider received funding from their sport organization the amount of support the support provider gave to the athlete increased. In some cases, athletes and support providers received more funding from sport organizations than others, and those athletes and support providers that received more money described receiving and providing more support, respectively. For example, Alice explained that her coaching related activities and traveling are fully funded:

 [...] at the Olympics, everything is paid for… Any national team activity, it’s all paid for. Umm, but things like we’re going to go back up to altitude in May and with [Emma]… and we’re going to actually from our budget… pay for another athlete just so she has somebody else to come up, maybe two, were going to see. But no, we don’t have to pay.

Alice indicated that not only were her travel expenses paid for, but there was enough funding to fully support three coaches and two athletes. This level of funding allowed her to attend different training camps and international competitions to support Emma. Olivia and her teammate received funding from a grant prior to the Olympics that was meant to promote success at the Olympic Games. Olivia explained that his grant allowed various additional support providers to come on tour with her:
We were in Hamburg, Germany at a grand slam… our coach was there, and also my
teammate and her husband, and then our sports psych was there, our umm [Joe] was
there, and our chiro was there. So those, yeah that was kind of our support staff… it was
kind of like a rare year because this year we actually had support staff on tour but
typically… it’s just self-funded so you would have to pay for it on our own. But this year,
because of the Olympics we got a grant from own-the-podium.

Olivia did note that typically she paid for her own travel expenses, but that the year leading up to
the Olympics was an exception. Joe described being able to travel with Olivia because of the
funding she received:

[Olivia] and [teammate] were fortunate enough to get funding from sort of a government
body that gives money to the sports that might look like they’ll be successful at Olympic
games…. So I ended up being one of the people that they requested to be on tour.

On the other hand, some athletes and support providers did not receive enough financial support
to fully fund their sport-related expenses. Tyler explained that he received some funding from his
athlete’s national sport organization: “We had travelled out to California twice to try to get the
standard. You know, this is like ‘oh geez, this is costing a lot of money.’ And [sport
organization] was helping on the financial side, but it was tough.” However, he noted that the
funding he received was not enough to fully cover two trips to competitions in the USA with
Alisha.

Cynthia stated that she did not receive as much funding as athletes and coaches in other
countries: “I always feel like I cannot compare to the other countries because they have very
good funding support that we cannot compete with them… So for me, I would just like, small
potato, right?” This lack of funding made her question her credibility of a coach and her ability
to support Wendy. It appeared that the more funding a support provider received, the more
capable they felt about providing support to their athlete.

Athletes also felt that in some instances they were lacking the necessary levels of financial
support from organizations to succeed in sport. Wendy discussed her experience competing at
international tournaments with no coach or support staff:
Sometimes at tournaments, I didn’t have a coach. I didn’t have a physio. I didn’t have anything. It was just me…. while other countries like China, they have like a team of like, 50 athletes and like, 5 doctors and 5 coaches. It was just tough… because our team, our level I guess is not as high as theirs… so we don’t get the same amount of money, so then we don’t get the same amount of support, so then we can’t send like, a coach. We can’t even send me to go, so I have to pay myself to go…. It’s a tough road.

Wendy noted that the lack of financial support meant Cynthia could not travel with her and that it was difficult to compete internationally without that form support. Wendy also discussed the cost associated with competing internationally. She said that while her sport organization covered the cost of her registration in a tournament, there were many other associated costs she needed to cover on her own:

To register it doesn’t, like, the association pays for it… The airfare depending on where it is, is usually around like $2000. And then plus the hotel is usually around like, another $1500…. in total that’s like, $3500 for each week. Yeah. So sometimes you have to go from tournament to another tournament so then that whole month umm you spend a lot of money [laughs]. So, it’s expensive. So like, roughly like, $90 000 a year.

It appeared that athletes who had higher levels of funding or who had support providers that were funded received more support from that provider.

4.4.2 Olympic Accreditations

The assignment of accreditations by sport organizations also affected the support relationship between athletes and their support providers. This meant that support providers could receive a specific designation that allowed them to access the athlete while in Rio. For one support provider, this meant being officially recognized as a family member and for the others, this meant being recognized as a coach. Furthermore, Olympic coaches were assigned to athletes based on the athlete’s success: coaches of athletes who were more successful prior to the Olympics were given an Olympic coaching designation, while coaches of athletes that were less successful leading up to the Olympics were not. If a coach was not given a coaching designation initially they were able to petition to receive such a designation, but these petitions were not always successful.
An important factor in support provision at the Olympic Games was the access that support providers had while in Rio. Some support providers received financial support and accreditation from their respective organizations and were therefore able to provide higher levels of support to their athlete. With support from multiple organizations, Aaron was accredited as one of Barbra’s family members which allowed him to see and support Barbra while he was at the Olympics:

Canada has this thing called Canada Olympic House which is for friends and family. So, it’s not like anyone can get in there. You need like to be accredited beforehand…. so, I submitted my name and my relationship to her and then you have to like, get approved… it’s a place where you can meet and sort of hang out with whoever you’re there for and not have to worry about things… So, it was really good that we had that. And then I was able to see her race, obviously. Through the Canadian Olympic Committee and [sport organization] we were given tickets to see that. And so, we were like right front row and stuff… so I was there for her race.

By being given access to a space where Aaron could see Barbra on a daily basis, and receiving front row tickets to watch Barbra’s race, Aaron felt he was able to provide Barbra with ample support while at the Olympics.

Athletes whose main support provider had received an accreditation noted how beneficial it was to have a support provider who knew them at the Olympics. Emma explained how valuable it was to have her coach with her because she felt more comfortable and did not need to remember little details about her performance:

It’s like, more comforting to have your own coach there with you. I don’t know what it would have been like if she wasn’t there… I didn’t have to remember anything or know like, this off the top of my head. Like, know my times or know my stroke rate or all these like, technical things that like, I should know. But because she was there, she knows like, what my training’s been like and everything. So, it was nice to not have to worry about that kind of aspect of it.

Olivia’s head coach received a coaching accreditation and her sport organization paid for the rest of her support staff to attend the Olympic Games. People who were not accredited were not allowed into the athlete’s village, so Olivia’s sport organization rented a set of apartments for the
support staff closer to her competition venue. Having the rented apartments meant that Olivia did not have to travel via bus to her competitions, and she could work and interact with her support staff despite the fact that they were not officially accredited. When talking about her experience in Rio Olivia noted that “it’s always nice to have familiar faces.” Olivia also explained how her sport organization helped her support staff in Rio:

At the Olympics, they have a… limited amount of accreditations. So, with the accreditation and they can get into the venue, they can stay in the village, that kind of thing. So, there was kind of like, the head coach of the whole program, but we were able to bring our team coach and he was fully accredited… The rest of our support staff… didn’t have accreditations, but [sport organization] had paid for them to come down and stay in our apartment there as well. So they weren’t… able to access you know, the village, but we weren’t staying in the village, so it ended up kind of working out well.

However, not all support providers received Olympic accreditation, which influenced the amount of support they were able to provide to their athlete. For example, Tyler explained that not receiving a coaching accreditation from his sport organization influenced his decision to not attend the Olympic Games:

[Sport organization] only had 5 coaching accreditations. So it would’ve meant that I would’ve been there… I wouldn’t have been in the Olympic village, I wouldn’t have been in the training camps… in the pre-competition area. So, I would’ve been there, but I wouldn’t have really been involved. I probably would’ve been Skyping from across the city or across continents.

Tyler felt that he would be able to provide the same level of support from Canada since he would not have had access to Alisha if he had gone to Rio.

The athletes whose coaches were not accredited were appointed national team coaches for the duration of the Olympics. These national team coaches were appointed by the athlete’s respective sport organization. These athletes described some challenges in having to work with new coaches and not having their main coach with them. When asked about her experience working with these national team coaches, Barbra said:
They just like, watch. And then like, they don’t really like, coach. They’re just like, there. Like, [coach] timed me, and him and [personal coach] had met at Nationals. So [coach] was like, ‘okay cool, I’ll take care of [Barbra]’. He would just like, send [personal coach] an email. Like, ‘she looked good’. But then like, I would talk to [personal coach] anyways.

Some athletes felt that the national team coaches who were selected by their sport organizations were not very helpful to them while competing at the Olympics. These athletes noted that having their personal coach with them would have been valuable and may have even helped improve their performance. Wendy described her experience of competing without Cynthia there with her:

I know that I need somebody there, which is bad, but I think it would be a lot better to have someone sitting behind me… seeing what the other opponent is doing and I’m not seeing it. Their coach is seeing everything and telling them what to change and what not to change, whereas I’m just kind of on my own. But if I had someone behind me telling me ok, they’re changing and these changes make sure you know what to do…. Just sort of keeping me on my feet whereas like, sometimes I’m oblivious to certain things.

Cynthia explained that the lack of support provided to her by the national sport organization affected her ability to coach Wendy, and that she knew that Wendy had a difficult time competing when she was not sitting on court with her:

I think the difficult part for [Wendy] is because I don’t get any support and help on my side so if I don’t get the opportunity from the association, then how am I going to coach? If you try to cut the line and don’t let me…walk closer to [Wendy] to coach her on court, then it’s very difficult for a player.

It appeared that when support providers did not receive an Olympic accreditation they felt that they were unable to provide adequate support to their athlete, and the athlete also felt that they did not receive enough support.
4.4.3 Non-Monetary Resources for Olympic Athletes

In addition to financial support, athletes perceived additional support from their respective sport organizations. This organizational support helped to decrease athlete’s stress by providing them with access to facilities and additional support staff. For example, Emma explained that the support she received from her university allowed her to focus on competing, which helped to decrease her experience of stress:

Recently the school, like, [university name] has provided support to me because I’ve been able to umm like, talk to them about like, just things like my courses. And I’ve been able to get help with deferring exams or deferring assignments or whatever because of competitions. So umm, I think all those things make it easier, not easier but like, less stressful for me when I’m trying to compete.

Emma’s university helped her to manage her academic workload and aimed to reduce the burden of administrative tasks. While some athletes received this type of support directly from the organization, others had help from their main support provider in managing administrative tasks. Tyler explained the steps he took and his correspondence with Alisha’s national sport association to help her receive her funding:

We’ve talked to an agent for [Alisha] and tried to help to get her a sponsorship. And for carding and stuff with [sport organization]. It’s corresponding with the… people in that office. And making up workout plans and yearly plans to send in to them so that she can get her carding money.

It appeared that organizations also helped athletes access sport specific facilities and support staff. Wendy explained how her sport organization was helping her access health care and high performance gyms:

I’m carded, so, then that goes with uh the government, I guess, Sport Canada. Umm, so… [provincial sport institute] is included in this carding… I can train at the [high performance gym] too because I’m carded… There’s like, different levels of insurance that athletes can buy… [sport organization] actually helped pay for one of the bigger, the more treatments sections… that’s then how [sport organization] is helping.
This support was valuable for Wendy because in addition to health insurance, it gave her access to a variety of health care services and sport specific training facilities:

…physio, a strength and conditioning coach, umm [sport psychologist], my sport psych umm that I can work with, a dietician and then there are facilities that I can use… they have like an underwater treadmill…. or they have an anti-gravity treadmill that I can use. And they have like a really nice gym that I can also use.

Thus, it appeared that sport organizations helped to support Olympic athletes directly by providing them with various resources, beyond the provision of financial assistance.
Chapter 5
Discussion

5 Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore the experience of providing and receiving support between five female Olympians and their main support providers over the course of the Olympic Games. These findings demonstrated that athletes perceived and received various types of support from their support providers prior to, during, and after Olympic competition. The results also provided insight into how individuals provided female Olympic athletes with social support, as well as the outcomes of support provision for the support provider. Lastly, organizational structures and their impact on support provision were explored.

Considering these findings in relation to the previously published research on social support in sport, the findings from the present study relate to both the main effects and stress buffering models (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Sarason et al., 1990). Previous research has suggested that a person’s beliefs about whether support will be available or not can influence their appraisals of stress; this is known as the main effects model (Sarason et al., 1990). Researchers have also suggested that seeking support can be used as a coping strategy for dealing with life stressors, which can reduce the negative effects of stress; this is known as the stress buffering model (Cohen & Wills, 1985). These models have been studied within sport to better understand the impact of social support on athletes. For example, researchers have explored the relationship between the main effects and stress buffering models and variables such as performance, psychological response to injury, and self-confidence (Freeman & Rees, 2010; Mitchell, Evans, Rees, & Hardy, 2014; Rees & Hardy, 2004). In a study of 117 high performance golfers, Rees and colleagues (2007) found a significant main effect for received social support upon golf performance. Stressors were found to be associated with worse performance, while social support was found to be associated with better performance. According to the authors the main effect relationship may suggest that social support aided performance directly regardless of stress levels (Rees et al., 2007). Additionally, Rees and Hardy (2004) found that the experience of competition pressure was buffered for 130 high level tennis players who reported higher levels of emotional support. Specifically, athletes who reported high levels of both competition pressure and emotional support had less disruption in peak performance then those athletes who reported...
high levels of pressure and low levels of emotional support. The researchers also found support for five main effects of social support, which occurred in conjunction with interactive effects of social support (Rees & Hardy, 2004). While the previous two studies examined the relationship between social support and performance, Freeman and Rees (2010) found that there is also both a main effect and stress buffering relationship between social support and an athlete’s self-confidence. The researchers found that emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible support from teammates all had a main effect on an athlete’s self-confidence, while perceived, esteem, and tangible support had a stress-buffering effect. In the present study, it appeared that support providers purposely tried to reduce the amount of stress their athlete experienced; they did this in ways such as providing nutritional advice or filling out paperwork on the athlete’s behalf. Additionally, athletes and support providers discussed being in frequent contact through the use of technology and athletes noted that their support provider was always there for them. Through this level of support athletes may come to learn that their support provider is there for them when needed, and if they require help they know they can rely upon their support provider. This support relationship may lead athletes to appraise situations as less stressful since they know that support will be available should they need it. Thus, these findings support both the main effects and stress buffering model, in that support providers attempted to minimize the stressors that athletes appraised in the first place, and athletes also perceived support available to them to deal with stressors should they arise.

5.1 Benefit of Support Provision

Support providers perceived gaining both personal and professional benefits through the provision of social support to an Olympic athlete. The notion that the provision of support can result in personal benefit is consistent with previous research (Brown et al., 2003; Caserta et al., 1996; Chen & Silverstein, 2000), and sport researchers have identified interpersonal and personal sources of enjoyment associated with coaching (Frey, 2007). Some of the sources of enjoyment that coaches have reported in past research include getting to watch athletes develop, loving their athletes, and experiencing personal gratification when their athletes succeed (Frey, 2007). Additionally, researchers have identified the personal benefits that caregivers experience after providing support, such as the feeling of pride and purpose in being able to help someone (Bentelspacher et al., 2006). Morelli, Lee, Arnn, and Zaki (2015) found that the provision of instrumental and emotional support to a friend of the same gender was positively associated with
well-being and happiness, and negatively associated with loneliness, anxiety, and perceived stress. In addition, Winefield (2006) monitored the messages posted on an online breast cancer survivor support group and found that the members of the group were motivated to provide support due to an increase in personal satisfaction after they felt they had helped someone. While other studies that have explored social support from the perspective of the support provider have focused on the role of family caregivers (Caserta et al., 1996; Iida, Seidman, Shrout, Fujita, & Bolger, 2008; Kim & Schulz, 2008), the present study is one of the first to examine social support from the perspective of the support provider in sport. Previous studies focused on individuals providing social support to a loved one and participants therefore would not be assumed to glean professional benefit from support provision, because their role as support provider is not their job. Since support providers in the present study noted experiencing professional benefits through the support they provided to their athlete, such as an improvement in their own coaching skills, it would be valuable for future research to determine whether providing support to athletes is an altruistic action engaged in by coaches or if it is done to help themselves excel in their own careers. While the personal benefits identified by the participants in the present study were not identical to those identified in previous research, it appears that the provision of support can positively impact the support provider as well as the recipient. Thus, the present study makes a novel contribution to the literature by exploring the personal benefits that an athlete’s support provider may experience.

5.2 Costs of Support Provision

Support providers in the present study noted that there were some costs associated with the provision of social support. Some support providers felt that they did not have much time outside of sport and some felt that they did not receive enough social support themselves. These findings are consistent with previous research which has found that the experience of stress is an ongoing problem for coaches (Frey, 2007; Fletcher & Scott, 2010). In a qualitative study with 10 NCAA Division 1 coaches, Frey found that coaches experienced stress due to the demands of their job. Frey also identified that interactions with others was one of the most prominent sources of stress for coaches. While the support providers in the present study did not identify interactions with others as stressful, participants in Frey’s study explained that another major stressor was the amount of time required to coach. The amount of time dedicated to sport was identified by the support providers in the present study as challenging because it left them less time to foster their
own supportive relationships. Knight, Reade, Selzler, and Rodgers (2013) surveyed 502 coaches and found that working more than 40 hours per week was related to higher perceptions of stress, and that coaches with higher levels of perceived stress also had lower levels of social support. This link between a lack of time and the ability to maintain supportive relationships is a valuable one, and warrants further study. Future research should explore the relationship between coaches’ time spent providing support and time available to foster personally supportive relationships. Further understanding of the barriers that the support providers of athletes face in developing and maintaining supportive relationships, as well as other challenges they experience in their role as support provider would be valuable for informing interventions to promote psychological well-being. Interventions that teach time management strategies and explain the value of receiving social support could help to increase support provider well-being, which in turn could lead to a healthier relationship with their athlete.

5.3 Support Provider Self-Regulation

The support providers in the present study noted regulating their own emotions in an effort to benefit their athletes. It appeared that the support providers were engaging in self-regulation of their own emotions so that their athletes would not experience any additional levels of stress. Previous research has found that a coach’s levels of stress and ability to regulate their own emotions impacts the performance and well-being of their athletes (Thelwell, Lane, Weston, & Greelees, 2008; Thelwell, Wagstaff, Rayner, Chapman, & Barker, 2017). Athletes who perceive their coach to be experiencing stress have noted that they experience decreases in their own confidence and performance, and athletes also reported an inhibited competition environment, a sub-optimal training environment, as well as perceptions of reduced coach competence (Thelwell et al., 2017). Furthermore, the coaches interviewed by Frey (2007) explained that they thought their stress impacted their athletes’ performance and level of stress. It appears that coaches may engage in self-regulation of emotions in an attempt to prevent their athlete from experiencing the negative outcomes that are associated with athlete perceptions of coach stress.

While not specific to coaches, Tamminen and Crocker (2013) found that high-performance curlers engaged in self-regulation of their emotions in an attempt to avoid negatively influencing their teammates. These athletes engaged in self-censorship (they did not openly voice their concerns), particularly during competition, to ensure that their teammates did not lose
confidence, and they did not talk to their teammates about their personal stress in an attempt to avoid burdening the team, which could detract from performance. It was also found that the Skip (team leader) in particular reported regulating her emotions for the sake of the team. The findings from the present study reflect those of Tamminen and Crocker (2013); however, in the present study it was coaches and support providers who engaged in self-regulation to prevent the athletes from experiencing burden or stress. Interestingly, it was the individuals in leadership positions, both in the present study and in Tamminen and Crocker’s (2013) study who reported regulating their own emotions to benefit others. It may be that those who are better able to regulate their own emotions take on positions of leadership within sport, or perhaps once in a leadership role, individuals recognize the value of emotion regulation and engage in more self-regulation of their emotions. While a leader’s regulation of their own emotions may be beneficial to those around them, it has been suggested that greater emotional regulation and emotional labour can have a negative impact on a coach’s well-being and may lead to burnout (Lee & Chelladurai, 2015). It is important for future research to further explore the relationship between leaders’ self-regulation and their well-being.

5.4 Imbalances in Providing and Receiving Support

An additional findings concerns the perception of available social support by the support provider. Support providers noted that they felt they received support from their athlete in the form of gratitude and appreciation for their hard work. This raises an issue concerning the conceptualization of support from the perspective of the provider. For example, an athlete may just be expressing gratitude rather than providing support per se, but a support provider may perceive that gratitude as supportive. It is unclear which category of support (i.e., emotional, esteem, tangible, or informational) gratitude would fall under. However, since researchers have found that it is the perception of support that has a positive impact on the recipient (Rees & Freeman, 2011; Wang & Gruenewald, 2017) it may not matter whether the athlete is purposefully supporting the support provider, as long as the support provider perceives support to be available. Therefore, regardless of the athlete’s intent, the support provider may perceive and benefit from the interaction. Nonetheless, it is possible that discrepancies in understandings of provided and received support could be potentially problematic in the relationship between the athlete and her support provider. For example, in dyads where members have different perceptions of the levels of support that should be provided to one another, an individual may
expect to receive elevated support to help deal with stressors. When those expectations for support are not met or if support is taken away, the individual may experience decreases in psychological well-being. A future study could examine if this discrepancy in understandings of support provision does in fact cause conflict and acts as a barrier to developing a stronger relationship. If this discrepancy does lead to conflict within relationships it may be important to understand how to address the difference in understanding so that a positive relationship can be fostered.

Perceiving support that has not actually been provided may allow support providers to view their support relationships as balanced. It has been noted that individuals in unbalanced support relationships experience poorer psychological well-being compared to those in balanced support relationships (Wang & Gruenewald, 2017). In particular, those who provide high levels of social support but do not receive social support in return experience more stress, symptoms of anxiety and depression, and a decrease in positive affect relative to those who experience a more balanced support relationship (Wang & Gruenewald, 2017). It could be that in an attempt to mitigate these negative psychological outcomes, support providers report perceiving support that is not actually being provided by the athletes. By perceiving that they are receiving support, the support provider may be more likely to experience the positive physical and psychological health benefits that are associated with the perception of available support and lessen the negative psychological outcomes associated with an imbalanced support relationship (Reinhardt et al., 2006; Wang & Gruenewald, 2017).

Additionally, because various support providers noted that they did not have time to foster supportive relationships with others and some felt that they were lacking social support, they may perceive athletes’ actions to be supportive even if they are not, in an effort to combat feelings of burden. Researchers have found that caregivers who lack social support may be more likely to experience caregiver burden (Adelman, Tmanova, Delgado, Dion, & Lachs, 2014; Manskow et al., 2015; Sherwood et al., 2005). While participants in the present study were not asked specifically about caregiver burden so as not to lead the participants to alter their views on their relationships and view those relationships as burdensome, questions regarding challenges and difficulties experienced by the primary support provider were asked in the interviews. Participants did not specifically identify experiencing burden associated with their supporting role, but they did note challenges such as the lack of available time to foster additional
relationships. Perceiving their athlete’s gratitude as support may be a way that these support providers interpreted interactions so as to minimize the experience of caregiver burden. As it appears that support providers may have interpreted interactions with their athletes in ways that promoted their own well-being, further research is warranted to understand whether support providers interpret events specifically to foster their own well-being. It would be valuable to understand what kinds of interactions support providers interpret as positive and to explore the impact of these interpretations on both the support provider’s well-being and on their relationship with their athlete.

5.5 Social Support and Coach-Athlete Dependence

It appeared that the athletes in this study were highly dependent on their coaches, which is consistent with previous studies of coach-athlete relationships (Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997). The amount of time athletes and support providers spent together likely contributed to the development of dependence; not only did the participants in the present study see each other on a nearly daily basis, they used technology to stay in constant communication outside of practice and competition. Previous research has found that technology can be used to foster and increase athlete dependence upon their coach (Kloess, Beech, & Harkins, 214; Wurtele & Kenny, 2016). Athletes and coaches in the present study appeared to view this high level of communication and interaction as an integral part of their relationship and important in achieving high levels of success in sport.

The issue of dependency between coaches and athletes may be potentially problematic for the coach-athlete relationship and for athletes’ psychosocial development. In a study of five Olympic level athletes, Philippe and Seiler (2006) found that the athletes believed a close, affective relationship with their coach was an important aspect of success in sport. The athletes also felt that familiarity with their coach allowed them to develop into a better athlete (Philippe & Seiler, 2006). However, the high level of dependence by athletes on coaches could lead athletes to experience a decrease in independence and autonomy. This decrease in autonomy could become potentially problematic when an athlete transitions out of sport and loses their sport based support system, becoming responsible for making decisions that they were not previously responsible for. While the present study did not explicitly focus on a loss of autonomy or independence, the level of reliance by the athletes on the coaches was highly visible. It is
important to determine whether this level of support and dependence is required to succeed within a sport context. The athletes in the present study appeared to trust their coaches completely and none of the athletes expressed any concerns about the amount or types of support provided by their coach or support provider, such as feeling uncomfortable with too much support or unwanted support. Additional studies could explore this issue further and determine if this level of support and dependence is necessary within high performance sport, and whether such levels of support may contribute to negative outcomes for athletes, particularly as they transition out of sport and experience changes in their relationship with their coach.

The athletes in the present study did not discuss any instances where they felt uncomfortable with their coach’s behaviour. On the contrary, most athletes appeared to appreciate the things their coach did for them. This finding was similar to that of Nielson (2001) who found that “the majority of coaches do act in a safe, responsible, and professional manner” (p. 178). Because a high level of dependence may develop between any two people engaged in a close supportive relationship (Delmar et al., 2006), it may be important to understand whether supportive relationships in sport are any different than supportive relationships outside of sport. Moreover, while the findings from the present study support the view that female athletes may become dependent on their coach, it would be valuable to conduct the same study with a sample of male athletes and examine the level of dependence by male athletes on their coaches.

5.6 Organizational Structures and Support Provision

Another important contribution of this study was the identification of three main organizational factors, namely funding, Olympic accreditations, and non-monetary resources, which demonstrated the intersection of organizational stressors with the provision of support for Olympic female athletes. These findings are important in highlighting the interconnection between organizational stressors that have heretofore been examined separately; for example, the findings related to funding and Olympic accreditations linked leadership and personnel issues (e.g., coach behaviors and interactions) with logistical and environmental issues (e.g., rules and regulations, distractions; Arnold & Fletcher, 2012). Thus, the findings demonstrate how these issues are interconnected and how overarching structures within sport organizations influences the provision and reception of support for Olympic athletes.
It appeared that the athletes who competed in more popular sports and who were more successful received more funding, which meant that they had greater levels of access to their support provider, which led to higher levels of support during the Olympic games. In addition to increasing the frequency of support from their support providers, the increase in funding also increased the athletes’ access to additional resources, such as gym memberships, physiotherapy, sport psychologists, and agents. These findings are supported by previous qualitative research by Douglas and Carless (2006) who found that athletes considered funding to be essential in their quest to reach peak performance. Not only did higher levels of funding allow athletes more time to train and compete, but it also increased the athletes perceived access to additional avenues of support, including more technical support, nutrition advice, and treatment options (Douglas & Carless, 2006). Moreover, sport psychology consultants working for the USA Olympic team reported a lack of funding as a common problem while working with athletes at the Olympics (Gould, Murphy, Tammen, & May, 1989). Gould and colleagues (1989) suggested that this lack of funding prevents the provision of long term sport psychology services and that administrators should determine the costs of running such programs and create budgets to support them. One may conclude that if sport psychology consultants, who have been found to positively impact athletic performance (Gee, 2010), do not have enough funding to support a team of athletes, the type and amount of support the athletes receive may not be sufficient. These findings are important because with less access to resources and lower levels of social support from their support providers, athletes may have difficulty performing at a higher level. Additional research is warranted to understand the relationship between athlete funding and their perceived availability and receipt of social support.

What was unclear from the data was whether the athletes who had a history of competitive success had previously received higher levels of funding, which granted them increased access to additional resources and support, thereby allowing the athlete to excel and succeed further in their sport. This raises questions and issues regarding the allocation of sport funding and a potential ‘Matthew effect’ (Petersen, Jung, Yang, & Stanley, 2010) whereby those athletes with greater financial resources have greater access to support, in turn fueling subsequent achievement and sustained funding. Researchers have found that athletes perceive differences in financial support between individuals and a lack of financial means to access additional support as stressful (Fletcher, Hanton, Mellalieu, & Neil, 2012). For example, Arnold, Wagstaff,
Steadman, and Pratt (2017) interviewed 18 elite disabled athletes and found that an important stressor for these athletes was the perception of unfair allocation of funding. These athletes felt that able-bodied athletes received more funding individually and as a group, which was frustrating since these disabled athletes were trying to compete at the same level as their able-bodied peers. It is important to understand how governing bodies allocate funding (i.e., based on financial need, participation in mainstream sports, or athletic success) while taking into consideration the potential consequences of funding decisions and how these decisions may affect the equitable distribution of resources for elite athletes.

It appeared that receiving Olympic accreditation promoted the provision of social support which participants thought was associated with better athletic outcomes. Athletes whose main support provider received Olympic accreditation noted feeling like they had less to worry about during Olympic competition. Researchers have found that coaches and support personnel play an important role in an athlete’s success while at the Olympic Games (Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001; Gould & Maynard, 2009). Gould and Maynard (2009) stated that “having the ‘right’ support personnel in place…is critical for athletes’ best performance” (p. 1403). They also noted that decisions related to coaching were critical to successful Olympic performances, and that teams who were more successful provided their athletes with access to their personal coaches (Gould & Maynard, 2009). Additionally, in a qualitative study of 15 US Olympic athletes, Greenleaf and colleagues (2001) found that high levels of social support from friends, family, coaches, and the US Olympic Committee and the National Governing Body had a positive impact on performance, while a lack of social support was considered detrimental to performance. Specifically having access to one’s personal coach while at the Olympic Games was considered a positive performance factor, while not having of access to one’s personal coach and credentialing problems leading to key personnel not receiving certification were considered to be negative performance factors (Greenleaf et al., 2001).

While it may not be feasible to allow every athlete competing at the Olympics to bring their own coach or support provider, it is important to ensure that all athletes are receiving the support they need at the Olympic Games. Given that social support and organizational climate can impact athletic performance at the Olympics (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010) it is important to encourage large sport organizations such as National Olympic Committees (NOCs) to assist accredited coaches and family members in meeting the support needs of their
Although it may not be possible for all athletes’ personal coaches to gain accreditation, steps may be taken within NOCs to ensure those coaches who are attending the Olympics can help support athletes they are unfamiliar with. For example, all accredited coaches who will be attending the Olympic Games could be provided with additional training sessions on how to support athletes that they do not know, and teach them practical strategies they can use to effectively support the athletes they will be working with at the Olympics.

Athletes also spoke about organizational factors outside of their specific sport organizing body, such as academic organizations, which supported them in their high-performance training and competition. Researchers have typically focused on the organizational factors contributing to stress that stem from national governing bodies and sport organizations (Arnold et al., 2017; Fletcher et al., 2012; Greenleaf et al., 2001). However, the findings of this research suggest that the organizational factors that impact an athlete’s well-being and performance may extend beyond those which have been identified in major sport organizations. This is an important consideration for future organizational stress research, as previous studies have distinguished athletes based on their competitive level (e.g., international vs. varsity vs. club athletes; Arnold, Fletcher, & Daniels, 2016). Because athletes may compete within multiple organizations simultaneously, future research should consider the other types of organizations that may have an impact on athletes’ training and performance, and aim to understand how these organizations foster or hinder athlete development. Specifically, it would be valuable to identify how organizations such as universities, local sport clubs, or employers, in addition to National Sport Organizations and NOCs support athletes in their athletic endeavours or whether they create additional stressors for athletes.

Despite the organizational barriers athletes and support providers encountered, they managed to remain in contact throughout the Olympic Games. Primarily through the use of technology, support providers were able to provide social support to their athlete regardless of the barriers they were experiencing. While few researchers have examined the use of technology in relation to organizational structures and athlete support, a large number of researchers have explored the use of online support provision platforms in relation to illness and disease (Lieberman et al., 2003; Turner, 2017; Yli-Uotila, Kaunonen, Pylkkänen, & Suominen, 2016). It has been found that online support groups can benefit individuals in a variety of ways: by helping to decrease depression, self-stigma, and reactions to pain, and also by increasing feelings of connection to
others, empowerment and social well-being, and enthusiasm for life (Breuer & Barker, 2015; Lieberman et al., 2003; van Uden-Kraan, Drossaert, Taal, Seydel, & van de Laar, 2009). Moreover, in an online survey of 195 online support group users, Chung (2014) found that the use of online discussion boards was associated with the perception of available informational and emotional support, while the use of blog features and friending in an online support group were associated with perceptions of emotional support. Researchers have demonstrated, typically in stigmatized or chronically ill populations, that the use of electronic platforms can increase an individual’s perceptions of available support and enhance psychological well-being. Although additional research is needed to determine how to maximize effective social support delivery electronically (Eysenbach, Powell, Englesakis, Rizo, & Stern, 2004), future research in sport could explore the use of technology among athlete-support provider dyads and identify the value in providing social support electronically. For example, it would be useful to understand whether certain electronic platforms are more effective for providing and receiving support. Since the use of technology in the present study appeared to foster the provision of social support, technology-mediated interventions geared towards support providers who are not able to attend a competition with their athlete may be valuable to allow athletes competing without their support provider to still perceive high levels of social support.

5.7 Gender Differences in Support Provision

In addition to the gender differences in social support mentioned earlier, gender differences in the provision of support have been identified. For example, researchers have found that females with a strong feminine identity report providing higher levels of emotional support to their husbands than they received from them (Verhofstadt, Buysse, & Ickes, 2007; Verhofstadt & Devoldre, 2012). Additionally, men have reported providing higher levels of instrumental and unhelpful support to their partner (Verhofstadt & Weytens, 2013), and respond more negatively to their spouse when she asks for help (Verhofstadt et al., 2007). While the purpose of the present study was not to compare the gender differences in support provision, the stories provided by the participants highlighted some differences between male and female support providers. It appeared that the female coaches in the present study described providing more emotional support to their athletes and had more discussions about personal experiences. That is not to say that the male support providers did not describe similar scenarios, but it was the women who described more instances of providing emotional support. For example, both female
coaches described listening to their athletes talk about ‘boy trouble’. Male support providers appeared to also support their athletes emotionally, but in a different way: rather than sit and talk about the problems their athlete was dealing with, the male providers described trying to provide more tangible and instrumental support to their athletes. For example, one support provider knew his athlete was dealing with a complicated relationship with both her coach and teammate, and he explained that while on tour he would eat with her, set up different workout times for her and her teammate, and help distract her with music and games when she appeared down. He said that he did all of this rather than ask how she was, because he knew she was having a hard time and did not think talking about it would help. While it did appear that there were gender differences in the types of support provided, all of the athletes seemed to feel that they received the support they needed regardless of their support provider’s gender. It could be that while support providers do provide different dimensions of support, the recipient may change their expectations based on the gender of the provider. In other words, an athlete may anticipate and expect to receive more emotional support from a woman and more instrumental support from a man, so that when they receive this support their expectations are met and they feel well supported. Future research exploring the differences in support provision from male and female coaches would be valuable.

5.8 Strengths and Limitations

One limitation of this work was the number and type of support providers interviewed. Speaking to only one member of the athletes’ support networks may have provided limited insight into their experiences of receiving support prior to, during, and after the Olympics since athletes noted relying on various people for support. Speaking to all members of an athlete’s social support network could provide a deeper understanding of the various roles different support providers take on when they support an athlete. In addition, most athletes identified their coach as their main provider of support, while one athlete identified their significant other as her main support provider. Speaking to more of the athletes’ significant others would allow the researchers to compare similarities and differences in the types of relationships that athletes maintain with different people. Future research could seek to interview all of the individuals mentioned on each athletes sociograms, as this would allow researchers to gain a deeper understanding of support provision and receipt among Olympic athletes.
An additional limitation was the absence of member checking. The use of member checking has been identified as a valuable tool for including participants in the research process and allowing them to further the interpretation of results based on their experiences (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, and Walter, 2016; Shenton, 2004). In the present study, member checking would have allowed the athletes and their support providers with an opportunity to further engage with the researcher and provide their insight into the preliminary findings. However, the researcher chose not to engage in member checking with the participants for this project. Sparkes and Smith (2014) noted that member checking is not always possible or feasible in all qualitative studies, and that its use as a way to test the ‘validity’ of the researcher’s claims is questionable. Additionally, due to the focus of this project on the provision and receipt of social support among Olympic athletes, we were aware of the possibility that support providers and athletes may describe several challenges associated with their roles and within their relationships; thus, we wished to maintain the anonymity of the participants and were concerned that sharing these findings with the participants may alter the way participants see their support relationship, which in turn could change the nature of that relationship. While this is to some extent unavoidable as a result of participating in interviews on the topic of relationships, we chose to forego member checking with the participants to reduce the potential for harm to the relationships between athletes and their support providers, particularly since the athletes continue to rely on their support providers during their competitive careers.

Throughout the present study the researcher was able to collect information that allowed for within dyad and between dyad comparisons, however dyadic interviews including both the athlete and their support provider could have been valuable (Morgan, Ataie, Carder, & Hoffmann, 2013). This form of interviewing typically involves participants who have equal access to the topics that will be discussed in the interview, and allows the participants to provide rich information through sharing and open discussion (Sohier, 1995). Some researchers argue that dyadic interviews result in a shared narrative and allow for a more complete understanding of participants subjective realities and truths (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Sohier, 1995). While dyadic interviewing can be a valuable method of data collection and knowledge construction, the researcher felt that this style of interviewing was not appropriate for use in the present study, primarily due to the ethical concerns and limitations associated with dyadic interviewing (Whittenborn, Dolbin-MacNab, & Keiley, 2013). One of these limitations is that participants
may not be willing to share certain stories while their dyadic partner is present (Sohier, 1995). During the interviews in the present study participants were asked to share stories about times when they were dissatisfied with the social support they received. Given the sensitive nature of some of the questions the researcher felt that having both participants present in the interview would affect what types and how many stories participants were willing to share. Additionally, given the power differential between athletes and coaches (Gervis & Dunn, 2004) the researcher did not want to create an interview environment where athletes felt they had to ‘say the right thing’ to please their coach. Therefore, the researcher felt that the confidentiality of individual interviews was important for creating a space where participants felt comfortable and able to share their experiences.

Lastly, the retrospective nature of this research may be seen as a limitation. Since the participants were asked questions about their experiences in the past they may have answered differently than if they had been asked the same questions while at the Olympics. Participants’ ability to recall their past thoughts and feelings may have been limited and they may have had time to mentally process and interpret the events that occurred, leading to different interpretations. This methodological limitation could be addressed by conducting interviews with athletes and their support providers shortly before, during and after the Olympic Games. This mode of data collection could provide additional insight into the process of support provision among Olympic athletes and their support providers and would address issues surrounding retrospective recall.

A strength of the present study were the steps taken to ensure methodological rigor. While maintaining rigor within research is important, Garratt and Hodkinson (1998) noted that judging all qualitative research with a predetermined set of criteria is “illogical” (p. 515). Therefore, the researcher chose not to judge the rigor of this study using a criteriological approach; instead rigor was enhanced in ways that were consistent with the researcher’s paradigmatic assumptions. The researcher made sure that all of her decisions, including the method she chose and the way the data was collected and analyzed, was congruent with her paradigmatic assumptions. Participants were purposefully sampled to provide insight and rich information regarding their experiences providing and receiving support. Additionally, a reflexive journal was kept throughout the research process. Engaging in critical reflexivity means “questioning what we, and others, might be taking for granted—what is being said and not said—and examining the impact this has or might have” (Cunliffe, 2016, p.741). By keeping a reflexive journal the researcher was not only
able to document the analysis process and to keep track of interpretations and development of themes, but she was able to examine the impact that her philosophical assumptions had on her research. These ideas were then discussed with the researcher’s supervisor who acted as a critical friend (Foulger, 2010) and provided alternative interpretations regarding the developing themes. This allowed the researcher to openly discuss developing themes, clarify ideas, and raise awareness of inherent biases and assumptions and how these shaped the analysis process. An additional strength of this research was the inclusion of both the athlete and her primary support provider, which allowed for an examination of support provision from multiple perspectives.

5.9 Applied Implications

Practically, these findings can be used to create interventions that teach both athletes and support providers about the benefits of positive support relationships, and how to foster those positive relationships. An intervention geared towards athletes could teach individuals the value in speaking up and asking for what they need in terms of social support and explain various strategies that may be used to start a discussion about their support needs. Interventions geared towards support providers could emphasize the importance of maintaining supportive relationships with people outside of sport to help combat experiences of stress, and could teach time management skills to assist support providers in leading more balanced lives. Both of these strategies would help support providers to combat experiences of caregiver stress and burden and would allow them to receive the level of social support they need to maintain psychological well-being.

Additionally, the findings from the present study may inform sport organizations on ways to ensure that both athletes and support providers perceive and receive ample support. Since the allocation of Olympic accreditations appeared to influence the provision and reception of support for athletes while competing at the Olympic Games, it is important for sport organizations to ensure that even athletes whose coach is not accredited are receiving the support they need. NOC’s should do their best to help accredited coaches and family members have access to the resources they need, such as tickets to events or access to facilities, so that they can best support their athlete. Additionally, accredited coaches who will be working with athletes they do not know should participate in training sessions that provides an overview of practical strategies they can use to support athletes, particularly athletes they do not know very well. Additionally,
teaching an athlete’s personal coach about the value of online or electronic social support would be valuable. An athlete’s personal coach who is unable to attend international competitions, but who is able to provide support through the use of technology may help enhance an athlete’s well-being while competing away from home.

It is important to help both athletes and support providers maintain healthy and positive supportive relationships. For athletes, positive social support can lead to enhanced well-being and potentially an increase in performance outcomes (Freeman & Rees, 2009; Rees & Freeman, 2009; Reinhardt et al., 2006). For support providers, positive social support can lead to decreased caregiver burden and positive mental health outcomes (Adelman et al., 2014; Reinhardt et al., 2006). The novel results from this study inform our knowledge on the value of social support from both the perspective of athletes and support providers.
Chapter 6
Conclusion

6 Conclusion

Given that the outcomes for the provider in supporting an athlete are relatively unknown, and given that there is limited research which has specifically examined the social support experiences of elite female athletes, the purpose of this study was to explore the experience of providing and receiving support between five female Olympic athletes and their main support providers prior to, during, and after the Olympic Games. The research questions addressed were: 1) How do support providers experience and perceive their role in supporting elite female athletes? and 2) How do elite female athletes experience the receipt of support before, during and after the Olympic Games?

To explore the aforementioned questions the researcher assumed a constructivist paradigm, which maintains a relativist ontology, and a transactional and subjectivist epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Guba, Lynham, & Lincoln, 2011). Purposeful snowball sampling (Creswell, 2009; Sparkes & Smith, 2014) was used to recruit five female Olympic athletes and their support providers, resulting in five dyads with ten participants in total. Each participant engaged in one semi-structured interview answering questions regarding the role of elite sport in the dyadic relationship, the impact of social support upon the participants, and the social support provided and received leading up to, during, and shortly after the Olympic Games. Prior to the interview each participant drew a sociogram to assist the researcher in understanding of each participants social support networks. Based on the purposes of this study and the novelty of this research area within the field, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The use of thematic analysis has been identified as a useful and flexible method for qualitative researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles et al., 2014).

Overall, this study has helped to illuminate the support relationship between five female Olympians and their main support providers. Results pertained to the process of support provision, the outcomes of support provision, and the impact of organizational structure of support provision. Regarding the process of support provision, participants described the different ways they stayed in contact, the frequency of contact, communication about social support, and interactions with other support providers. Support providers juggled multiple roles.
and they attempted to decrease their athletes stress, they regulated their own emotions to benefit their athlete, and participants also discussed the reciprocity of the athlete-support provider relationship. These findings related to previous literature on the use of electronics to provide social support, the costs associated with providing support, and the self-regulation of emotion.

Outcomes of support provision included both the personal and professional benefits of support provision, the dependence between athletes and their support providers, and the impact of support provision on the support provider’s life. The results regarding the outcomes of support provision were related to current literature regarding the benefits of providing social support, the imbalances in support relationships, and high levels of coach-athlete dependence.

It appeared that the structure of sport organizations and governing bodies had an impact on the support that providers were able to give their athletes and on the amount of support athletes perceived from their main supporter. These factors included the amount of funding athletes and support providers received, whether or not support providers received Olympic accreditations, and additional, non-monetary resources provided to athletes. It appeared that athletes and support providers with higher levels of funding, athletes whose support providers were accredited by their NOC, and athletes with more non-monetary resources perceived higher levels of support from their main support provider, and their support providers felt more capable of providing support. These findings are valuable because they demonstrate the relationship that exists between organizational factors and the provision and receipt of social support, which is a novel contribution to existing literature.

The findings have helped to address a gap in the literature surrounding female athletes support needs during Olympic competition, and the experiences of support providers while working with athletes. Additionally, the findings have expanded upon the body of knowledge regarding organizational stressors in sport, by exploring the relationship between organizational structures and their impact on the support an Olympian receives. Moreover, the perspective of athletes’ support providers was explored which was a novel contribution to the literature. Lastly, the exploration of this topic in an elite sport context, where the support provider holds more power than the support recipient, is valuable in furthering the research that has been done in the caregiving field.
References


high-performance curlers. Psychology of Sport & Exercise, 14, 737-747.
doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2013.05.002


Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment E-mail

Hello,

My name is Zoë Poucher and I am graduate student in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto. I am studying under the supervision of Dr. Katherine Tamminen. I am conducting a study for my Master’s thesis about social support among elite female athletes. The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of support between an elite female athlete and her main support provider during the recent Summer Olympics.

I plan on interviewing 5 female Olympians, and one of their main support providers. Each person will be asked to participate in 1 interview that will last approximately 60 minutes. In the interview participants will be asked questions about the role of sport in their relationship and the impact that providing and receiving support may have on them.

The results from this study will help broaden the field of sports psychology and help us to understand social support in sport. This area of research could benefit athletes and their support providers because the findings may enhance well-being and relationships.

I was hoping that you would be able to forward this email and the attached information letter to female athletes registered at the Canadian Sport Institute of Ontario who attended the Summer Olympics and are over the age of 18. Anyone who is interested in taking part in the research study can contact me directly to set up an interview. The Canadian Sport Institute will not be notified of which athletes choose to participate in the study.

Their participation is voluntary and there is no compensation associated with their participation. Please let me know if you have any additional questions; I would be happy to answer them.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Zoë Poucher
Graduate Student
Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education
University of Toronto
Appendix B: Information Letter

Study Title: Examining Social Support Among Elite Female Athletes and their Main Support Providers.

July 13, 2016

Primary Investigator:  
Zoë Poucher, MSc student  
University of Toronto  
Faculty of Kinesiology & Physical Education  
55 Harbord Street  
Toronto, ON, M5S 2W6

Supervisor:  
Dr. Katherine Tamminen  
University of Toronto  
Faculty of Kinesiology & Physical Education  
55 Harbord Street  
Toronto, ON, M5S 2W6

Study overview:  
You are being asked to take part in a research study about social support and elite athletes. The purpose of this study is to look at social support between an elite female athlete and her main support provider over the span of the 2016 Summer Olympics.

What is involved in the study?  
Elite female athletes and their main support provider are each being asked to take part in one interview that will last about 60 minutes. Both the athlete and the support provider have to agree to take part in order to be interviewed. In the interview, you will be asked about the role of sport in your relationship and the effect that providing and receiving support may have on you. Interviews will be audio recorded and will happen in a private meeting room at a time that is good for you.

What are the benefits of this study?  
There are no direct benefits from taking part in this study, but the chance to look back on your sporting relationships may be useful. The results from this study will help expand the field of sports psychology and help us to understand social support in sport. This research could help athletes and their support providers because the findings may improve a person’s happiness and/or his or her relationships.

Are there any risks?  
There are no known risks connected to taking part in this study. Talking about personal relationships and/or experiences could make some people uncomfortable. To help stop emotional discomfort you do not have to answer any questions that may make you uncomfortable, you may stop the interview at any time and you may pull out from the study if you want to. If you would like to talk about the interview topics in more detail you may contact the Ontario Psychological Association (416) 961-5552 or the Canadian Mental Health Association – Ontario Division (416) 977-5580.
What will happen with my information?

Interviews will be typed and kept in the Sport and Performance Psychology Lab at the University of Toronto in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education (room 425B, Goldring Centre for High Performance Sport). Only the researchers will have access to your information. Your information will be kept for five years. After five years the information will be destroyed. When the study is finished, the researcher will present the results at a conference and may publish a paper in an academic journal. These presentations and published articles will be available to you. To protect you and make sure you cannot be identified, a false name will be used so that you are not personally recognizable in any reports or presentations. A summary of the results and copies of any publications will be given to you if you ask for them. You can ask the researcher (Zoë) for a copy of the results.

The Canadian Sport Institute will not be told of which athletes choose to take part in the study. Also, the researcher will not tell the other participants what you have said.

Freedom to Withdraw

Taking part in this study is your choice and there are no rewards for participating (i.e., no money will be given out). There will be no negative outcomes if you choose not to take part. You can stop the interview at any time, and you can pull out from the study up until the data are analyzed (up to 2 months after your interview is finished). If you would like to remove yourself from the study, you can contact the lead researcher, Zoë Poucher.

If you have questions about this study, or about the information used for research purposes, you may contact Zoë Poucher. You may also contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273 if you have questions about your rights as a participant.
# Appendix C: Consent Form

Study Title: Examining the Social Support Relationship Between Elite Female Athletes and their Main Support Providers

## Part 1: Research Team Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Investigator:</th>
<th>Supervisor:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zoë Poucher, MSc student</td>
<td>Dr. Katherine Tamminen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Toronto</td>
<td>University of Toronto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Kinesiology &amp; Physical Education</td>
<td>Faculty of Kinesiology &amp; Physical Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 Harbord Street</td>
<td>55 Harbord Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto, ON, M5S 2W6</td>
<td>Toronto, ON, M5S 2W6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Part 2: Consent of Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Please circle)</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I understand that I have been asked to participate in one interview for a research study.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have read and received a copy of the attached Information Sheet.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand that I can refuse to participate, and I withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. I understand I can ask for my information to be withdrawn from the study up to 2 months after the data have been collected.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand that a ‘false name’ (pseudonym) will be used to protect my identity and keep my information anonymous.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Part 3: Participant Signature

I agree to take part in this study and for my interview data to be used for research purposes.

Signature of Participant: ______________________________ Date: __________________

Printed Name: _____________________________________

Email address: ______________________________

Signature of Researcher: ______________________________ Date: ____________________________
Appendix D: Participant Demographics Form

Demographics Form

What is your gender?  M / F / _________ / Prefer not to answer

Please indicate your age: ________

Please indicate your highest level of education: (check one)

☐ Some high school
☐ Completed high school
☐ Some college/university
☐ Completed college/university
☐ Other accreditation/diploma/certificate
☐ Post-graduate (Masters, PhD, MD, etc.)
☐ Prefer not to answer

For athletes:

How long have you been playing your sport? __________

What position do you play/event do you compete in? __________

How long have you been competing at the national level? __________

What major competitions have you attended, in addition to the Olympics?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
Appendix E: Athlete Interview Guide

Athlete Interview Guide

I am interested in learning about your experience as an elite female athlete and the role that social support played in your relationship leading up to, during and after the Olympics. I am interested in your opinions and thoughts, and there are no right or wrong answers to any questions. If you don’t know how to answer a question or you choose not to answer, that is ok, and you are free to stop the interview at any time. You are also free to drop out from the study at any time and there will not be any consequences for withdrawing. Your information will be completely confidential, and a ‘false name’ or pseudonym will be used so that you cannot be identified in the future. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Questions & Probes/Notes
Note: for all main questions, the interviewer should try to elicit stories. Ask follow up questions such as: Do you have an example of that you can share with me? Can you tell me about a time when that happened to you?

Introduction
Sociogram: I would like you to try and draw a sociogram or ‘concept map’ of the people in your life who provide you with social support and the people that you provide with support. I would like you put yourself in a circle in the center, and put all of the people who provide you with any form of social support around you. If someone is more important to you, you can put their name in big letters, closer to you. If someone is of less importance, you can write their name in smaller letters, further away. Below their name, indicate how you know them and the types of support you receive from them or give to them. (Pencil/paper will be provided). Can you tell me about your sociogram? [Have the athlete explain their sociogram].

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. Tell me about your sport experience.
   a. What sport do you play? Position (if applicable)?
   b. How long have you been playing? On this team?
3. How would you describe yourself as an athlete? Non-athlete?
4. If you were to describe your life as a book what would some of the chapters be about? Who would some of the major characters be throughout the book?

Social Support
Now we’d like to ask you some questions about social support.
1. Tell me about your Olympic experience. (probe for stories of competitive experiences at Olympics)
2. What does social support mean to you?
3. Who are some important people in your life?
   a. Who provides support to you?
   b. Who do you provide support to?
4. Are your relationships with sports friends’/support providers different from non-sport friends’/support providers?
5. How do you typically deal with stressful events?
   a. Does that differ between sport and non-sport stressors?
   b. Do you typically rely on other people or deal with things alone? Explain.
6. Tell me about your best sport performance. What did that look like?
   a. Who was there?
   b. Who helped you get there?
   c. Was social support valuable in this situation?
7. Tell me about a poor sport performance. What did that look like?
   a. Who was there?
   b. Who helped you deal with it?
   c. Was social support valuable in this situation?
   d. Was there any type of social support missing? Or that would have been valuable?
8. Are your support needs different in different situations? Explain. Provide examples.
9. Tell me about your social relationships.
11. How does the support from teammates differ from other sources?
12. Have your support needs evolved over time? How so?
   a. Has the person you rely on most for support changed over time?
13. Describe your relationship with your main support provider.
   a. How long have you known them? Where/how did you meet?
   b. Tell me about the support they provide you. Is it always helpful? Ever unhelpful?
   c. Can you provide examples of helpful and unhelpful support?
   d. Do you feel that you provide them with support? Explain. Provide an example.
   e. How has your support relationship changed over time?
   f. Would you change anything about the support relationship? Expand/explain.
14. How did your support needs change leading up to the Olympics?
   a. During the Olympics?
   b. After the Olympics?
   c. Were your providers of support able to adapt to your different needs? Explain.
   d. Did you explicitly tell anyone what you needed? Have you ever? Why/why not?

**Conclusion/Wrap-up**

15. Is there anything else you would like to add?
16. Are there any other questions you think I should have asked?
Appendix F: Support Provider Interview Guide

Support Provider Interview Guide

I am interested in learning about your experience of providing support to an elite female athlete and the role that social support played in your relationship leading up to, during and after the Olympics. I am interested in your opinions and thoughts, and there are no right or wrong answers to any questions. If you don’t know how to answer a question or you choose not to answer, that is ok, and you are free to stop the interview at any time. You are also free to drop out from the study at any time and there will not be any consequences for withdrawing. Your information will be completely confidential, and a ‘false name’ or pseudonym will be used so that you cannot be identified in the future. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Questions & Probes/Notes
Note: for all main questions, the interviewer should try to elicit stories. Ask follow up questions such as: Do you have an example of that you can share with me? Can you tell me about a time when that happened to you?

Introduction
Sociogram: I would like you to try and draw a sociogram or ‘concept map’ of the people in your life who provide you with social support and who you provide social support to. I would like you put yourself in a circle in the center, and put all of the people who provide you or you provide with any form of social support around the center. If someone is more important to you put their name in big letters, closer to you. If someone is of less importance write their name in smaller letters, further away. Below their name indicate how you know them and the types of support you receive from or provide to them. (Pencil/paper will be provided). Can you tell me about your sociogram? [Have the athlete explain their sociogram].

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
   a. Your family.
   b. What does a typical day look like?
2. Tell me about your sport experience. As a child? As an adult?
3. If you were to describe your life as a book how would your relationship with the athlete fit into it? Large or small section?

Social Support
Now we’d like to ask you some questions about social support.

4. What does social support mean to you?
5. Who are some important people in your life?
   a. Who do you provide support to?
6. Who provides support to you?
   b. Do you ever wish you received additional support? Why/why not?
7. Does the way/type of support you provide to an athlete differ from a non-athlete? Explain. Provide an example.
8. How do you typically deal with stressful events?
   a. Do you typically rely on other people or deal with things alone? Explain.
   b. Are your support needs different in different situations? Explain. Provide examples.
9. Tell me about your social relationships.
10. Does the role of sport, either in your life or the athletes, ever impact/influence those relationships?
11. Have your support needs evolved over time? How so?
   a. Has the person you rely on most for support changed over time?
12. Describe your relationship with ________(athlete).
   a. How long have you know them? Where/how did you meet?
   b. How has your support relationship changed over time?
   c. Tell me about the support provide them with.
   d. Can you give me an example of a time when you provided them with support?
   e. Do you feel that the support you provide them is enough? Do they need to go to someone else? Explain.
   f. Have they ever told you directly what they need from you?
   g. Do you ever wish they sought support from someone else?
   h. Do you ever talk to other support providers about the provision of support? Why/why not?
   i. Do you feel that they provide support to you? Explain. Provide an example.
   j. Would you change anything about the support relationship? Expand/explain.
13. How did your athlete’s support needs change leading up to the Olympics?
   a. During the Olympics?
   b. After the Olympics?
   c. Were you able to adapt to her different needs? Explain.
14. Has providing support impacted other parts of your life?
   a. For better or worse? (e.g. travel, time commitment, etc.)
15. Do you enjoy providing support to an elite athlete?
   a. Is it ever stressful? Provide an example.
   b. Does it make you happy? Explain.

Conclusion/Wrap-up
16. Is there anything else you would like to add?
17. Are there any other questions you think I should have asked?
Appendix G: Example Sociogram – Athlete
Appendix H: Example Sociogram – Support Provider

- Friends
- Significant Other
- Parents
- Athlete(s)
- Sport Organization
- Colleagues
- Boss