

How Women Varsity Athletes High in Self-Compassion Experience Unexpected Stressors  
Surrounding Competition

by

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## Abstract

Athletes appraise unexpected stressors as more threatening than expected stressors (Dugdale et al., 2002) and women varsity athletes have reported experiencing a high proportion of unexpected competition-related stressors (Holt et al., 2007). Self-compassion appears to promote adaptive appraisals and coping in women athletes (Mosewich et al., 2019), and a self-compassionate perspective may aid athletes in navigating the experience of unexpected stressors. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how women varsity athletes high in self-compassion experience unexpected stressors. More specifically, the research questions are: 1) What characteristics contribute toward stressors being classified as unexpected? 2) How do women varsity athletes high in self-compassion appraise unexpected stressors surrounding competition? 3) How do women varsity athletes high in self-compassion attempt to cope with unexpected stressors surrounding competition? 4) How do women varsity athletes high in self-compassion prepare for future unexpected stressors surrounding competition? Based on Self-Compassion Scale scores (Neff, 2003), seven women varsity athletes ( $M_{age} = 19.43$  years,  $SD = 1.40$  years) high in self-compassion ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ) were purposefully sampled to participate in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Through an interpretive description framework (Thorne, 2016), themes were created around appraising and coping with unexpected stressors. Athletes reported stressors as unexpected if the stressors were relatively unfamiliar and/or misaligned with their expectations. Athletes drew on past experiences, an adaptive perspective toward sport, and logical appraisal patterns when evaluating unexpected stressors. Further, five themes were developed that illustrate coping efforts: Emotional Self-Awareness to Support Coping, Realizing the Experiences of Significant Others in Sport, Use of Established Social Network, (Pro)Active Coping Efforts, and Direction of Attention to (Re-)Engage. It

appears that varsity women athletes high in self-compassion possess resources that enable them to effectively navigate unexpected stressors. To support athletes in managing unexpected stressors, athletes should be encouraged to reflect on past experiences, embrace a logical and adaptive perspective when appraising stressors, foster emotion regulation strategies, and support efforts to actively engage, proactively or reactively, with unexpected stressors.

## **Preface**

This thesis is an original work by Benjamin Joseph Sereda. The research project completed as a part of this thesis received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics board on October 15th, 2018: How women varsity athletes high in self-compassion cope with unexpected stressors related to competition (Pro00084572).

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Effective coping strategies and resources are important in assisting athletes in successfully managing stress stemming from the demands of sport (Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Athletes who are better able to cope with stress have been found to perform better during competition (Crocker & Graham, 1995; Lazarus, 2000; Nicholls, Polman, & Levy, 2012; Orlick & Partington, 1988; Pensgaard & Duda, 2003). Athletes use a variety of coping strategies, often in combination, when experiencing competition-related stressors (Crocker & Graham, 1995; Dugdale, Eklund, & Gordon, 2002; Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993), and the selection and employment of these strategies can change over the course of a competition as well as a competitive season (Gaudreau, Blondin, & Lapierre, 2002; Tamminen & Holt, 2010). Coping is thought to be effective if the strategy, or strategies, used reduce the amount of stress perceived by an individual (Nicholls, 2010).

Varsity athletes use a range of problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance coping strategies to manage the stressors that they face surrounding competition (Nicholls, Polman, Levy, Taylor, & Cobley, 2007). Nicholls and colleagues (2007) noted differences in the stressors experienced, coping approaches employed, and reported coping effectiveness between varsity athletes and athletes of other skill levels (e.g., international). In addition to competition-related demands, varsity athletes face a unique combination of stressors centered on striving to achieve academic success while simultaneously training for, and competing at, a high level in sport. Interpersonal stressors, academic and athletic demands, finances and job concerns, time management, and performance pressure are commonly reported in this population (Day & Livingstone, 2003; Humphrey, Yew, & Bowden, 2000). As the stress and coping process is influenced by personal factors and demands as well as factors related to the environmental

context (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), Lazarus (1999) emphasized the importance in understanding the specific demands of unique populations so as to better guide research and interventions tailored to these groups.

When envisioning an upcoming competition, varsity athletes report considering a variety of potential stressors, including personal performance concerns, fear of failure, and championship demands (Holt, Berg, & Tamminen, 2007). Despite varsity athletes describing anticipating stressors surrounding competition, unforeseen stressors compose the majority of stressors faced by varsity athletes. While athletes at other levels (i.e., international) have reported that many of the stressors that they face are also unexpected (Dugdale et al., 2002), 92.2% of the stressors faced by the women varsity athletes in Holt and colleagues' (2007) study were stressors that the athletes had not anticipated. As such, it appears that these women varsity athletes were unable to accurately anticipate stressors, and therefore, may be particularly prone to experiencing unexpected stressors surrounding competition.

Unexpected stressors are appraised by athletes as more threatening and stressful (Dugdale et al., 2002) and evoke a stronger emotional response relative to expected stressors (Devonport, Lane, & Biscomb, 2013). Furthermore, experiencing unexpected stressors has been found to impair coping efforts (Devonport et al., 2013) and has been associated with poor performance (Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999). Being able to effectively cope with stress is a crucial component in high-level athletic performance (Holt & Hogg, 2002), and it appears that a significant portion of the stress experienced by athletes may stem from unexpected stressors surrounding competition. As unexpected stressors appear to occur at high frequency, there is a need to explore athletes' experiences of unexpected stressors to better understand why

such a high number of stressors are classified as unexpected, and how athletes manage these stressors.

Women varsity athletes appear to face a particularly high number of unexpected stressors (Holt et al., 2007), and building on what we currently understand about unexpected stressors may provide further insight into how women varsity athletes experience unexpected stressors.

Athletes reported that preparing in advance to manage unexpected stressors has been helpful in managing demands associated with competition (Gould et al., 1993; Holt, 2003; Tamminen & Holt, 2010), and athletes who prepared for unexpected stressors reported better performance in competition (Gould et al., 1999). Further, women varsity athletes who better anticipated coping strategies that they would need to actually employ during competition reported that they coped more effectively with stressors surrounding competition (Holt et al., 2007). Holt and colleagues (2007) speculated that employing proactive coping strategies may be associated with more effective coping.

Proactive coping consists of recognizing that one may experience stressors in the future and involves engaging in efforts to minimize the impact of these stressors or to prevent them from occurring entirely (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). These proactive efforts “are not designed to address any particular stressor but to prepare in general, given the recognition that stressors do occur and that to be forearmed is to be well prepared” (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997, p. 417). As such, Aspinwall and Taylor’s (1997) proactive coping framework may assist in guiding exploration into the proactive component (e.g., detecting potential unexpected stressors, attempting to mitigate impact of unexpected stressors through preliminary efforts) of the experience of unexpected stressors. Further, as one cannot account for any and all stressors that they may experience, it is important to explore the experience of unexpected stressors for which

varsity athletes were less able, or unable, to proactively prepare. As proactive coping requires a different set of skills than coping with an extant stressor (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997), the stress and coping framework outlined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) may also assist in orienting exploration into how varsity athletes experience unexpected stressors should they occur.

Specifically, Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) conceptualization of the steps and process of the proactive coping process will inform inquiry into the proactive component of the experience of unexpected stressors. Further, Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress will serve as a theoretical underpinning (i.e., primary and secondary appraisals of unexpected stressors, coping with unexpected stressors) to explore the more reactive aspect of experiencing unexpected stressors. Both Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) proactive coping framework and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping framework will be used as theoretical foundations to help to capture a more holistic understanding of varsity athletes' experience of unexpected stressors.

As a self-compassionate perspective appears to assist individuals in adaptively responding to setbacks (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005), self-compassion was employed as a sampling tool in the present study. Self-compassion has been suggested as a particularly useful resource for women athletes in managing sport-related demands (e.g., Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, & Sabiston, 2014; Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, & Sabiston, 2015; Mosewich, Kowalski, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Tracy, 2011; Mosewich, Crocker, Kowalski, & DeLongis, 2013; Mosewich, Crocker, & Kowalski, 2014), and as such, may also aid women athletes in managing the common, yet challenging experience of unexpected stressors surrounding competition. A self-compassionate perspective consists of understanding that everyone, including the self, is deserving of compassion and kindness, that

everyone, not only oneself, experiences setback, hardships, and failures, and that it is important to acknowledge and be open to one's thoughts and feelings instead of overidentifying with them or neglecting them (Neff, 2003a). Self-compassion has been found to assist women athletes in effectively coping with challenging sport situations; self-compassion is negatively associated with self-criticism, rumination, and concern over mistakes and is positively associated with eudemonic well-being, increased autonomy, and higher levels of enjoyment from sport (Ferguson et al., 2014; Ferguson et al., 2015; Ingstrup, Mosewich, & Holt, 2017; Mosewich et al., 2013; Reis, Kowalski, Ferguson, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Crocker, 2015).

Self-compassion may serve as a relevant coping resource in both Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) proactive coping framework and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping framework, both of which may be important to the experience of unexpected stressors. As the goal of the self-compassionate individual is to reduce future harm and suffering (Neff, 2003a), Allen and Leary (2010) theorized that self-compassion could play an important role in the proactive coping process. Specifically, Allen and Leary (2010) suggested that self-compassionate individuals prepare in advance for potential stressors, and that if a stressor occurs, individuals high in self-compassion may be more prepared to manage the stressor. As proactive preparation may help athletes in managing unexpected stressors that arise during competition (Holt et al., 2007), a self-compassionate approach may play a role in facilitating effective preparation for, and management of, unexpected stressors. Further, Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping framework may compliment Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) proactive coping framework by providing insight into the more reactive component of the experience of unexpected stressors. With Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) framework in mind, self-compassion has been found to predict adaptive appraisals and coping in women varsity athletes (Mosewich, Sabiston,

Kowalski, Gaudreau, & Crocker, 2019), and as such, may help athletes to navigate the challenge of unexpected stressors should they arise. Further, Allen and Leary (2010) proposed that self-compassion may interact with the stress and coping process at a variety of levels. Given the evidence supporting self-compassion as an effective resource, in addition to self-compassion's conceptual and empirical links to the stress and coping frameworks used to inform the present study, self-compassion may be a valuable resource in navigating the experience of unexpected stressors.

Despite the impact of unexpected stressors at multiple levels of the stress and coping process (Dugdale et al., 2002), researchers do not yet know why stressors are identified as unexpected by athletes, and there exists a lack of understanding regarding how athletes appraise and cope with unexpected stressors. While proactive strategies may aid in managing unexpected stressors (Holt et al., 2007), further research is required to better understand the experience of unexpected stressors. Moreover, research suggests that a self-compassionate perspective appears to be adaptive in the domain of sport, particularly in times of setback, challenge, adversity, and failure (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2015; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2014), but research has yet to explore how self-compassion relates to the experience of unexpected stressors. This self-compassionate perspective may assist athletes in navigating the common challenge of unexpected stressors in sport. As such, exploring how athletes high in self-compassion may provide insight into adaptive approaches to appraising and coping with unexpected stressors surrounding competition. Better understanding how women varsity athletes experience these unexpected stressors may help athletes, coaches, and practitioners to develop programs to foster skills and resources to help athletes manage unexpected stressors surrounding competition. Therefore, the overall purpose of this study is to explore how women varsity athletes high in

self-compassion experience unexpected stressors. More specifically, the research questions are:

- 1) What characteristics contribute toward stressors being classified as unexpected?
- 2) How do women varsity athletes high in self-compassion appraise unexpected stressors surrounding competition?
- 3) How do women varsity athletes high in self-compassion attempt to cope with unexpected stressors surrounding competition?
- 4) How do women varsity athletes high in self-compassion prepare for future unexpected stressors surrounding competition?

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Research investigating stressors in the sport domain (e.g., Dugdale et al., 2002; Holt et al., 2007; Tamminen & Holt, 2010) has typically been based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress. Further, Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) proactive coping framework has also provided an additional lens in examining stressors in the domain of sport (Devonport et al., 2013; Holt et al., 2007; Tamminen & Holt, 2010). Both Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) and Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) conceptualizations of stress and coping will be used as a theoretical underpinning for this proposed study. Further, as self-compassion appears to be involved in the stress and coping process (Allen & Leary, 2010; Mosewich et al., 2019) and has been identified as a particularly useful resource for women athletes (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2014; Ferguson et al., 2015; Mosewich et al., 2011; Mosewich et al., 2013; Mosewich et al., 2014), a self-compassionate perspective may aid athletes in navigating the experience of unexpected stressors. As such, in addition to outlining stress and coping frameworks that appear to be relevant to the experience of unexpected stressors (i.e., Aspinwall and Taylor, 1997, Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the role of self-compassion within these frameworks and as a potential resource in managing unexpected stressors will be discussed.

### **Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Stress and Coping Framework**

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional framework recognizes that the experience of stress results from the dynamic interaction between individual and environmental factors, and that the level of stress experienced by an individual is influenced by appraisal and coping processes. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined psychological stress as the "relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (p. 21). Stressors can be acute and time-limited

(Elliot & Eisdorfer, 1982; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), such as a sports referee making an incorrect call or an athlete missing an important shot. Stressors can also be intermittent, such as an athlete attending a training camp with disliked coaches, or they can be chronic, such as an athlete having to deal with teammates with consistently negative attitudes. Stressors can also be sequenced, in that an initiating event, such as an injury, leads to a series of other stressful events, such as a loss of funding. Stressors can be further classified into expected stressors, which one plans and/or prepares for in advance, or unexpected stressors, which are stressors that one experiences that they had not planned and/or prepared for (Dugdale et al., 2002). As how one responds to stressors depends on the “specific demands” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141) of an experience, it is important to consider how a stressor is classified when investigating the stress and coping process.

In the context of sport, athletes experience a variety of stressors surrounding training and competition that can be further classified into competitive and organizational stressors. Competitive stressors involve demands primarily and directly associated with competitive performance, and organizational stressors involve demands primarily and directly associated with the athlete’s sport team or organization (Hanton, Fletcher, & Coughlan, 2005). Examples of competitive stressors include physical, technical, tactical, and mental preparation, injury, pressure, concern over opponents, self-presentation, superstitions, distractions, and performance concerns (Hanton et al., 2005; Holt & Hogg, 2002; Mellalieu, Neil, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2009). Organizational stressors include finances, travel, competition format, nutritional and dietary concerns, relationship issues, coaching behaviour and style, spectators, weather conditions, and officials (Hanton et al., 2005; Mellalieu et al., 2009). Athletes can identify both competitive and organizational stressors as unexpected (Dugdale et al., 2002; Holt et al., 2007).

How one classifies or appraises stressors determines the level of stress that they experience, and because of this, “what is stressful for one individual at one point in time may not be stressful for another individual or the same individual at another point in time” (Aldwin, 2007, p. 32). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) asserted that underlying cognitive processes can assist in helping individuals to “understand variation under comparable external conditions” (p. 23), which, in the domain of sport, could provide insight into why athletes experiencing the same stressor in the same context may perceive very different levels of stress. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described these cognitive processes as cognitive appraisals: how individuals assess and classify the many characteristics of a situation, evaluating the meaning and impact that this scenario has on one’s personal well-being. The cognitive appraisal process mediates the relationship between how one reacts to a stressor and how one subsequently copes with fallout surrounding the stressor. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the appraisal process is not necessarily conscious and consists of both primary and secondary appraisals. Despite the labels “primary” and “secondary”, primary and secondary appraisals occur simultaneously and are equally important in the appraisal process.

Primary appraisals evaluate the importance and implications that a scenario may have on an individual. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified this process as “primary”, as without the individual being invested in the situation and believing that something is at stake, there is no potential for the individual to experience stress. Three types of primary appraisals exist (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Irrelevant appraisals occur when an individual perceives the encounter as having no meaningful impact, positive or negative, on their well-being. Benign-positive appraisals consist of an interaction between the individual and the environment being perceived as maintaining or benefiting personal well-being. The third type of appraisal is a stress appraisal,

which can be further broken down into harm/loss, threat, or challenge. Harm/loss appraisals occur when the individual believes that a stressor has already caused damage to them, such as an injury. Threat appraisals arise when future harm or loss is predicted by the individual but has not yet occurred, such as anticipating difficulty during injury rehabilitation. From an adaptational perspective, threat appraisals, as opposed to harm/loss appraisals, allow the individual to plan in advance to prepare for upcoming stressors. Challenge appraisals are viewed to be the most adaptive and are characterized by the individual perceiving an encounter as providing the individual with an opportunity to grow and benefit from the experience.

Research in the area of stress and coping in sport has typically focused on challenge and threat appraisals and less so on harm/loss appraisals (e.g., Dugdale et al., 2002; Nicholls et al., 2012; Skinner & Brewer, 2004). In the context of sport, Nicholls and colleagues (2012) found that athletes from a variety of contexts (e.g., competition level, sport played, gender) tend to make threat appraisals as opposed to challenge appraisals when experiencing higher levels of stress. Furthermore, Freeman and Rees (2009) found that challenge appraisals were associated with better sport performance, whereas threat appraisals were associated with poorer sport performance. Threat and challenge appraisals can be experienced simultaneously (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For example, athletes in their rookie year of a varsity team may engage in challenge appraisals through the opportunity to further develop physically and technically, achieving collegiate athletic recognition, and competing at a high level in their sport. Threat appraisals may concurrently exist, possibly stemming from worry about fitting in with the social dynamic of a new team, perceiving high demands of training and studying, or concerns about being able to meet performance expectations.

In the case of a challenge or threat appraisal, secondary appraisals evaluate whether or not the individual has the resources necessary to manage the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The level of stress that we experience is shaped by the interaction between primary and secondary appraisals. This process is influenced by the individual's assessment of available coping options and resources, the perception of control that the individual has, and the recognition of potential outcomes following utilization of coping efforts. Research findings suggest that challenge appraisals are more often associated with perceived controllability whereas threat appraisals are more often associated with a perceived lack of control (Nicholls et al., 2012).

In addition to the impact that one's control and coping efforts and resources have on secondary appraisals, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) noted that changes in the interaction between the person and environment can also alter an individual's threat and/or challenge appraisals. The process of reappraisal refers to a change in an individual's appraisal following new information from the person-environment interaction. This reappraisal process can go in either direction; For example, a threat appraisal may subsequently be seen as unwarranted or a benign appraisal may now be seen as a threat.

The appraisal and reappraisal processes assist individuals in assessing what can be done to manage a stressor (i.e., coping). Coping is defined as "efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Coping is a process, and as with the subjective nature of appraisals, coping efforts vary across and within individuals and may also change during the experience of a stressful situation. Primary functions of coping include obtaining and processing of accurate information about the environment, maintaining a balanced psychological state to

process incoming information, and to direct efforts appropriately (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). A variety of factors impact the amount of internal and external coping resources that we possess, such as cognitions, social support, behaviours, and general skills (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Raedeke & Smith, 2004). Coping approaches are heavily dependent on the coping resources available to an individual when experiencing a stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Based on available coping resources, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) theorized that individuals engage in emotion-focused coping and/or problem-focused coping. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described emotion-focused coping as “the regulation of distress” (p. 188) and problem-focused coping as “the management of the problem that is causing the distress” (p. 188). Emotion-focused coping is more often employed when an individual believes that nothing can be done to modify a situation, and problem-focused coping is more likely to be used when an individual appraises a situation as changeable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Emotion-focused coping typically involves reappraisal, and this approach intends to alter the way in which an event is perceived without actually changing the objective event. For example, emotion-focused coping may involve an athlete realizing that a misplay does not mean that the athlete has cost their team the game, but instead could be interpreted as an opportunity to learn and improve. Strategies falling under emotion-focused coping aim to “change the meaning of a stressful transaction without distorting reality” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 151). Alternatively, problem-focused coping involves “defining the problem, generating alternative solutions, weighting the alternative in terms of their costs and benefits, choosing among them, and acting” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 151). Problem-focused coping could include an athlete seeking out information regarding an opposing team’s playing style or information about a competition format to reduce stress prior to a competition. Despite the differentiation between

emotion-focused and problem-focused coping functions, they are described as “interdependent and work together, one supplementing the other in the overall coping process” (Lazarus, 2000, p. 667).

In addition to emotion-focused and problem-focused coping, a third coping function, avoidance coping, has also been recognized as a common coping classification in the domain of sport (Kowalski & Crocker, 2001). Avoidance coping involves engaging in psychological and behavioural efforts to disengage from a situation that an individual finds stressful, and research suggests that avoidance coping efforts are often ineffective as coping strategies (Crocker & Graham, 1995; Holt et al., 2007; Kowalski & Crocker, 2001; Nicholls & Polman, 2007). An example of avoidance coping includes blocking, which consists of an athlete trying to ignore stressful thoughts and feelings (Nicholls, Holt, Polman, & James, 2005).

Coping functions and strategies may vary in their ability to manage stressors depending on the person and the context, and as such, coping effectiveness must be considered. Effective coping is an important factor in facilitating athletic performance (Lazarus, 2000; Nicholls et al., 2012), and those who engage in adaptive coping strategies experience less stress than those who engage in maladaptive coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Athletes utilize a variety of coping functions, including problem-focused coping (e.g., planning, increasing effort, and information seeking), emotion-focused coping (e.g., positive orientation, positive self-talk, and acceptance), and avoidance coping (e.g., blocking, behavioural avoidance, or denial) in combination to manage competition-related stressors (Gould et al., 1993; Holt & Hogg, 2002; Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Athletes tend to report more effective coping when a variety of strategies are used, and proactively preparing these coping strategies may aid athletes in more

effective in managing expected and unexpected stressors surrounding competition (Dugdale et al., 2002; Holt et al., 2007).

### **Unexpected Stressors**

Despite the importance of being able to effectively manage stressors in high-level sport (Holt & Hogg, 2002) and the prevalence of unexpected stressors reported by athletes (Dugdale et al., 2002; Holt et al., 2007), there exists limited research exploring how athletes cope with unexpected stressors. Dugdale and colleagues (2002) noted that it is surprising that the expectedness of a stressor is not considered when attempting to better understand the stress and coping process in the context of sport. Compared to expected stressors, unexpected stressors have been found to be appraised as more threatening and perceived as more stressful (Dugdale et al., 2002). Further, unexpected stressors have been reported to impede coping efforts and have been found to be associated with stronger emotional responses relative to expected stressors (Devonport et al., 2013). As being unable to manage unexpected events surrounding competition has also been found to be associated with poor performance (Gould et al., 1999), better understanding how athletes experience unexpected stressors may aid in developing resources and interventions to assist athletes in managing the challenge of unexpected stressors in sport.

In one of the first studies examining unexpected stressors surrounding competition, Dugdale and colleagues (2002) investigated the expectedness of stressors in competition, and examined how this perception relates to stress, appraisal, and coping. Based on the work of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), Dugdale et al. (2002) hypothesized that unexpected stressors are more likely to be appraised as threats whereas expected stressors may be more likely to be appraised as a challenge. To examine appraisal and coping with expected and unexpected stressors surrounding competition, 91 athletes ( $M_{\text{age}} = 25.6$  years,  $SD = 6.2$ ) were asked to

describe their most stressful experience from a recent competition in an open-ended format and were subsequently asked to respond to a series of questions related to this experience. Threat and challenge appraisals, expectedness of the stressor, coping strategies, goal attainment, perceived control of the event, and coping effectiveness were measured. Results suggested that athletes differ in their appraisal and experience of stress when encountering expected and unexpected stressors. Of the 71 athletes who completed the questionnaire package, 22 stated that the stressor that they experienced had been expected. The remaining 49 athletes identified their most stressful experience as unexpected, citing injury, transportation issues, poor food, inadequate warmup prior to competition, and bad officiating as unexpected stressors. These unexpected stressors were appraised by the athletes as more threatening and stressful than expected stressors, and hesitation or freezing was a commonly reported response. Regardless of the type of stressor (i.e., expected or unexpected), athletes recalled using a variety of coping strategies to manage the stressors that they faced. The authors noted that despite stressors being classified as unexpected, these athletes had previously experienced these events in past competitions. As unexpected stressors were appraised as more threatening and more stressful than expected stressors, there remains a need to investigate why such a high proportion of stressors surrounding competition are categorized by athletes as unexpected and how athletes subsequently attempt to manage these stressors. Further, Dugdale and colleagues (2002) asserted that athletes would benefit from “having well developed coping strategies for dealing with unexpected stressors” (p. 32). As such, the potential role of prepared coping strategies in supporting effective coping with unexpected stressors warrants investigation.

To further explore the role of coping strategies and effectiveness in managing unexpected stressors, Holt and colleagues (2007) explored the demands experienced by 10 female varsity

volleyball players ( $M_{\text{age}} = 19.4$  years,  $SD = 1.3$ ) using a longitudinal qualitative design. Two interviews were conducted: the first interview took place one week before a tournament and the second interview took place one week following the tournament. A content analysis of stressors prior to the tournament revealed four categories: team performance concerns, personal performance concerns, fear of failure, and championship demands. There was little consistency between expected stressors and stressors that the athletes faced during the tournament: of the 51 reported stressors, only four of the stressors were identified by the participants both before and after the tournament (Holt et al., 2007). As Holt and colleagues' (2007) findings suggested that women student-athletes experience a high level of unexpected stressors, it may be important to explore the experience of unexpected stressors in this population to better understand why, and how, these athletes experience unexpected stressors surrounding competition.

Similar to the anticipation of stressors, Holt and colleagues (2007) observed that the consistency between anticipated choice of coping strategies prior to a tournament and the reported use of coping strategies following a tournament was also minimal; only 22.2% of coping strategies cited by female varsity athletes prior to the tournament were actually used throughout the tournament. Of the reported strategies, three coping categories were discussed: behavioural coping (e.g., pregame routine, increasing practice, and avoidance), cognitive coping (e.g., reappraisal, blocking, positive self-talk, refocusing, and rationalization), and emotional coping (e.g., breathing control and communicating with teammates). Female varsity athletes who reported effectively coping tended to attain performance goals, whereas athletes who reported ineffective coping did not. The authors theorized that effective coping involved the use of a variety of coping strategies, and behavioural avoidance was not associated with effective coping. Holt et al. (2007) suggested that female varsity athletes should be encouraged to use a range of

coping strategies, without behavioural avoidance, to effectively manage the variety of stressors that athletes may experience. Avoiding considering upcoming stressors may inhibit an individual's ability to anticipate even the most consistent competition-related stressors (McDonough et al., 2013). Further, Holt and colleagues (2007) theorized that incorporating a proactive coping style may assist athletes in coping with competitive stressors, most of which were unexpected.

### **Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) Proactive Coping Framework**

Researchers investigating unexpected stressors have suggested that proactive coping efforts may aid athletes in preparing to manage stressors that arise, including those that are unexpected, surrounding competition (Dugdale et al., 2002; Holt et al., 2007). Proactive efforts to reduce the frequency and/or the impact of upcoming stressors have been found to be effective in facilitating stress management in competition (Gould et al., 1993; Holt, 2003; Tamminen & Holt, 2010). Further, Dugdale and colleagues (2002) suggested that athletes would benefit from possessing well developed coping strategies to assist them in managing unexpected stressors. Preparing coping resources and strategies in advance of competition and having coping tools readily available to draw on may help athletes to more easily manage challenges that may arise during competition (i.e., unexpected stressors). Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) theorized that proactive coping efforts may be particularly valuable in highly demanding environments. As such, Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) proactive coping framework may be important in helping to better understand how preparation prior to the experience of a stressor may aid athletes in managing unexpected stressors.

In addition to recognizing, and attempting to manage, potential stressors in advance of their occurrence, Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) conceptualization of proactive coping "involves

the accumulation of resources and the acquisition of skills that are not designed to address any particular stressor but to prepare in general, given the recognition that stressors do occur and that to be forearmed is to be well prepared” (p. 417). As athletes cannot prepare for a specific unexpected stressor, accumulating and developing coping tools, skills, and resources in advance, without a specific stressor in mind, may be helpful to athletes when experiencing stressors for which they had not planned and/or prepared. In the domain of sport, engaging in proactive coping efforts may allow athletes to acquire more resources prior to experiencing a competition-related stressor, and this increase in coping resources may permit athletes to more effectively manage stressors that occur. As proactive coping involves recognizing the potential occurrence of upcoming stressors, there may be fewer instances and/or reduced negative impacts of unexpected stressors experienced by athletes in addition to athletes being as prepared as possible to manage stressors that do arise (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997).

Despite the potentially complementary role of both frameworks (i.e., Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) in exploring the experience of unexpected stressors, there exist conceptual differences. Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) proposed that proactive coping differs from the coping and anticipatory coping processes proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) in three ways. First, proactive coping occurs “temporally prior to coping and anticipatory coping” (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997, p. 417). Proactive coping involves gathering skills and resources to address stressors in general, as opposed to any specific stressor (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). In contrast, anticipatory coping involves preparation for a future event that is likely or certain to occur and coping involves managing specific demands that one perceives as taxing or exceeding their personal resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Second, Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) suggested that proactive coping requires a different set of skills than other forms

of coping. Such skills involve the ability to recognize potential threats in the environment as well as the accumulation of resources to manage general stressors. Third, different skills and efforts are likely to be more effective in proactive coping when compared to other forms of coping. For example, Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) suggested that emotional support or emotional reappraisals may have benefits when managing an extant stressor but may not be as beneficial when engaging in proactive measures to reduce stressors. With these differences in mind, Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) argued that proactive coping is conceptually distinct from existing research in the area of stress and coping.

Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) conceptualization of proactive coping consists of five stages. The first stage of proactive coping consists of the accumulation of skills and resources so that when stressors are detected, the individual is as prepared as possible to manage these stressors. Examples of these resources may include planning skills, time and money, appraisal support, and social networks. Development of these skills and resources occurs over the lifespan, and as such, learning and effort involved in proactive preparation is ongoing. Individuals with more resources to draw upon will be more likely or more able to engage in proactive efforts than individuals with fewer resources. As such, when experiencing unexpected stressors, athletes may benefit from having access to a range of proactively accumulated skills and resources.

In addition to preparing coping resources in advance, proactive coping involves one being sensitive to internal and external cues so as to effectively recognize the potential of stressors to occur. Individuals may detect potential stressors from stimuli in the environment, or through internal processes such as reflection. Reflection may involve thinking through a task or situation that one may encounter, permitting the individual to gain insight regarding the potential demands. Reflection on stressful experiences, coping efforts, and coping effectiveness may also

aid athletes in learning how to cope (Tamminen & Holt, 2010). Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) asserted that a variety of individual differences (e.g., future temporal orientation, optimistic beliefs, social networks) may moderate one's ability to detect potential stressors through internal and external processes. For example, informational support through a social network of teammates or coaches may aid athletes in determining whether a potential stressor exists. Being able to consider and prepare for the future permits the individual to change their current behaviour to best prepare for upcoming events. Further, accurately detecting potential stressors is important to being able to effectively prepare for, and subsequently manage, upcoming stressors.

Upon detection of a potential stressor, the individual engages in an initial appraisal, which involves two tasks (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). The first stage is defining the problem, which consists of the individual attempting to make sense of a potential stressor. To assist in understanding the nature of potential stressors, individuals use schemas, mental simulation, personal factors, and social support. For example, considering past experiences, such as a previous competition, may assist individuals in this appraisal process. Additionally, the saliency, recency, representativeness, and accessibility of the situation aid the individual in matching information to schemas. Mental simulation may also assist in helping the individual understand what a warning signal means, and also how a warning signal may change, to help plan for upcoming stressors. Individual differences can also influence the initial appraisals of warning signs, such as optimism, perceived self-efficacy, tolerance for ambiguity, anxiety, and control beliefs. Individuals higher in anxiety, for example, may appraise situations as more threatening, which may impede information processing and effective proactive coping efforts. Additionally, social networks can influence the initial appraisal process through comparing and modifying one's perceptions to increase the clarity of the situation.

The second aspect of the initial appraisal process consists of efforts to regulate emotional arousal. One may perceive their coping resources as more or less favorable given individual differences in emotional arousal and regulation. The processing of information and efforts to take action may be impeded when more resources are required to manage emotions. While it is important for an individual to attend to internal and external potential threats and cues, it is also important that individuals are able to effectively regulate emotions in order to best engage in proactive coping efforts. Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) noted that excessive negative emotional arousal may lead to avoidance, which impedes proactive coping efforts. Research suggests that avoidance-oriented coping approaches are maladaptive in athletic populations (Crocker & Graham, 1995; Nicholls et al., 2005), and that avoidance approaches may impede one's ability to anticipate stressors in the domain of sport (McDonough et al., 2013). In contrast to avoidance, Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) suggested that approaching potential problems may permit the individual to more clearly assess the situation. Being able to regulate emotional arousal may permit individuals to more effectively engage in initial appraisals.

Following the initial appraisal, individuals engage in preliminary coping efforts (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). If an individual appraises the situation as something that they have control over, they are more likely to engage in proactive efforts to manage the situation than if their appraisals of controllability are unfavorable. Perceptions of controllability may be influenced by individual differences, such as optimism, experience and past competence, perceived coping resources, and self-efficacy. While appraisals of control are typically conducive to successful proactive coping efforts, not all stressors can be influenced by proactive coping efforts. In such cases, Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) noted that "timely perceptions of lack of contingency between potential actions and outcomes may save a person from expending

resources to manage tasks that are impossible” (p. 426). However, in scenarios where the individual recognizes that preliminary coping efforts may be beneficial, individuals tend to allocate more time, effort, and resources into events that perceived as more important, and fewer resources into situations that are considered to be less important. In this case, preliminary coping consists of efforts taken to modify the form of, or eliminate completely, future potential stressor.

As preliminary coping efforts are targeted at future potential stressors, the nature and understanding of these stressors may change as time passes. Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) asserted that many factors may contribute toward individuals needing to review and revise their initial appraisal and coping efforts, including feedback regarding coping efforts (e.g., effectiveness, changing approaches, reallocation of resources) or new information regarding the stressor (e.g., revealing the stressor as uncontrollable, re-appraising the stressor as benign). For example, an athlete may realize that they are unable to control a certain stressor and may instead allocate coping efforts toward another stressor that they may be able to control. Thus, feedback from the person-environment interaction is required to adjust initial appraisals and coping efforts to permit the individual to appropriately allocate resources to engage in proactive coping efforts. Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) noted that upon eliciting information about the potential stressor, individuals must be capable of processing and using this information to adjust their initial appraisals and coping efforts. This ability to use feedback is impacted by personal factors, and individuals possessing larger amounts of adaptive personal resources appear to be better able to adjust initial appraisals and coping efforts in response to stressors. Using feedback regarding information of the potential stressor and reflecting on coping efforts are important in facilitating effective proactive coping.

Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) suggested that there are four main benefits associated with the aforementioned proactive coping framework. When engaging in proactive coping, Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) noted that the negative effects of possible upcoming stressors will be minimized; if an unavoidable stressful situation occurs (e.g., an unexpected stressor), individuals who engage in proactive coping will be better able to cope with the stressor than individuals who do not engage in proactive coping. A type of unavoidable stressor could include travel or competition delays, poor food at a venue, or unfavorable referee calls. Second, being better prepared to manage stressors (e.g., through accumulating coping skills and resources) may reduce the number of resources required to manage the stressor. This allows individuals to allocate cognitive resources elsewhere, such as on competition and performance. Third, when stressors are still in the future, the individual has more time to assess the situation and may have more options available to cope with the stressor. However, once the stressor occurs, coping options may be more limited. Finally, reducing the frequency and impact of future stressors aids in maintaining low levels of chronic stress. In addition to reducing the prevalence of unexpected stressors, engaging in proactive coping may allow an individual to be better prepared for unexpected stressors should they arise.

The benefits of proactive coping are achieved through engaging in proactive efforts to reduce the negative impacts of potential stressors or to eliminate them entirely. Of particular relevance to the investigation of unexpected stressors included in Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) conceptualization of proactive coping is the notion that some proactive efforts (i.e., resource accumulation) are not directed at a specific stressor in particular. Instead, such efforts are guided by the understanding that stressors do occur, and that it is beneficial to be prepared for stressors that may arise. That is, such proactive efforts (i.e., the development of coping resources) may aid

individuals in managing stressors that one cannot specifically prepare for (i.e., unexpected stressor). As preparation for unexpected stressors in competition has been found to be associated with more effective coping (Dugdale et al., 2002) and better performance (Gould et al., 1999), it may be that proactive coping efforts assist athletes in achieving success in competition. Holt and colleagues (2007) tentatively suggested that “effective coping was associated with the development of proactive coping, enabling athletes to achieve their personal goals” (p. 131). Proactive preparation has been suggested as a tool to aid athletes in managing unexpected stressors, and as such, the role of proactive coping in managing unexpected stressors warrants exploration. Hence, to compliment Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) more reactive coping framework, Aspinwall and Taylor’s (1997) framework of proactive coping may help to understand how proactive processes interact with the experience of unexpected stressors.

### **Self-Compassion**

Allen and Leary (2010) theorized that self-compassion and proactive coping may complement one another, united by the common goal of reducing future harm and suffering to the self. Further, self-compassion has become increasingly investigated as a resource for coping with setback, failure, challenge, and adversity in the domain of sport, and may serve as a valuable resource for athletes to draw on when experiencing unexpected stressors. Emerging from Buddhist practices, self-compassion was introduced to Western psychology by Kristin Neff (2003a) as an alternative way to conceptualize one’s self. Compassion consists of “being touched by the suffering of others, opening one’s awareness to others’ pain and not avoiding or disconnecting from it, so that feelings of kindness towards others and the desire to alleviate their suffering emerge” (Wispe, 1991, p. 68). Self-compassion, in turn, involves extending this compassion toward the self during times of setback, challenge, struggle, or failure (Neff, 2003a).

Self-compassion is characterized by possessing a balance between high levels of positive and low levels of negative self-directed responses to setback, struggle, or times of failure (Neff, 2003a). Within the construct of self-compassion, there are three positively valenced dimensions: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Self-kindness involves being warm and caring toward yourself during times of struggle as opposed to being overly harsh and self-critical. Common humanity consists of understanding that you are not alone in your experiences and involves accepting that setbacks, failures, imperfections, and inadequacies are part of the human condition that everybody experiences. Mindfulness includes acknowledging, as opposed to ignoring, your current thoughts, feelings, and emotions, keeping them in a balanced awareness and avoiding over-identifying with negative emotions. Both increasing compassionate self-responding (self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness) and decreasing uncompassionate self-responding (self-judgement, isolation, and over-identification) interact to contribute toward higher levels of self-compassion (Neff et al., 2018).

Neff (2003a) suggested that these three “faces” (p. 89) of self-compassion - self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness - interact with, and supplement, one another. For example, Barnard and Curry (2011) theorized that self-kindness may facilitate common humanity and mindfulness. If one is more kind toward their personal flaws, they may feel less concerned and/or ashamed over the hardship they experience and feeling isolated in that suffering. Instead, they may be more likely to examine similar experiences of other individuals. Additionally, avoiding harsh self-criticism may permit individuals to be understanding of pain, and could allow the individual to hold thoughts, feelings, and emotions in balanced awareness. Barnard and Curry (2011) suggested that common humanity may encourage kindness through the understanding that other individuals also experience inadequacy, failure, challenge, and

suffering. Further, mindfulness may allow individuals to accurately identify flaws and weaknesses, and in a mindful state of awareness, recognize these inadequacies as part of the human condition. Maintaining a balanced perspective may also prevent the individual from catastrophizing and/or becoming overly self-critical during evaluation of the self. Despite the three components of self-compassion “interacting to mutually enhance and engender one another” (Neff, 2003a, p. 89), there is support for the elements of self-compassion being conceptually and psychometrically distinct (Neff, 2016; Neff et al., 2018).

As a construct, self-compassion has been found to be positively associated with a multitude of psychosocial variables related to well-being in a variety of populations, including emotional well-being, emotional intelligence, self-concept, body image, motivation, and interpersonal functioning (Neff et al. 2018). Self-compassion has been further identified as a particularly useful resource during times of negative events, suffering, or failure (Breines & Chen, 2012; Leary et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2005; Sirois, Molnar, & Hirsch, 2015). Approaching failure with self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness following setback may buffer individuals from the negative aspects of failure, allowing them to learn and grow from negative experiences (Breines & Chen, 2012; Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003a; Neff, 2003b; Neff et al., 2005).

Research on self-compassion has been extended into the domain of sport, with evidence demonstrating the potential for self-compassion to be a helpful resource for athletes during times of challenge and setback (Ferguson et al., 2014; Ferguson et al., 2015; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2011; Mosewich et al., 2013; Mosewich et al., 2019; Reis et al., 2015). Athletes have described self-compassion as being a buffer against rumination, allowing athletes to move on with an effective focus following setbacks as opposed to dwelling on challenging situations

(Ferguson et al., 2014). Further, Reis and colleagues (2015) found that self-compassion is negatively associated with catastrophizing in athletes, which may permit athletes higher in self-compassion to examine challenging sport situations in a more adaptive, accurate manner. As self-compassionate individuals aim to reduce future suffering (Neff, 2003a), and Ferguson et al. (2014) demonstrated that self-compassion is associated with eudemonic well-being and personal growth initiative in athletic populations, self-compassionate athletes may be better able to learn from setbacks in order to prevent future distress. Ferguson and colleagues (2014) suggested that self-compassion could be a useful tool in reaching one's potential in the sport context, and self-compassion has also been found to be positively associated with perceived sport performance (Killham, Mosewich, Mack, Gunnell, & Ferguson, 2018). Mosewich and colleagues (2014) highlighted that research exploring the potential of coping resources in the sport domain, such as self-compassion, would be beneficial in permitting effective coping in athletes.

With respect to supporting coping in sport contexts, self-compassion appears to play a facilitative role in the stress and coping process. For example, among women athletes interviewed by Ferguson et al. (2014), a majority of the athletes described self-compassion as “a transformative tool in which they are able to see their difficult experiences in a more positive light” (p. 210). Findings by Ferguson and colleagues (2014) suggested that a self-compassionate approach may facilitate adaptive perceptions in sport (i.e., appraisals). Further, through two prospective studies, Mosewich et al. (2019) examined self-compassion as a predictor of appraisals and coping in women varsity athletes. Findings suggested that self-compassion predicts higher appraisals of control and lower appraisals of threat. Additionally, those higher in self-compassion tended to use more emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies and fewer avoidance strategies. Mosewich and colleagues (2019) suggested that self-compassion can

be viewed as a valuable coping resource in the context of sport through facilitating adaptive appraisal and coping patterns, which may aid athletes in navigating stressful sport experiences (e.g., unexpected stressors).

In addition to the role of self-compassion in the stress and coping process, a self-compassionate perspective has been found to be useful in helping athletes manage difficult situations in sport, and as such, may also benefit athletes in managing unexpected stressors. A 2015 study by Ferguson and colleagues investigated the role of self-compassion during hypothetical challenging sport situations. One hundred thirty-seven young women athletes ( $M_{age} = 19.0$  years,  $SD = 1.8$ ) were administered a series of measures, including the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003b), and were asked to respond to five hypothetical sport scenarios. Scenarios involving not reaching personal performance goals and experiencing injury were among the hypothetical situations used in Ferguson et al.'s (2015) study. Such experiences have been identified by athletes as stressors that were unexpected in other studies (Dugdale et al., 2002; Holt et al., 2007). Results showed that athletes who were higher in self-compassion displayed more autonomy, experienced greater meaning in sport, and had higher levels of constructive reactions to failure in sport through demonstrating perseverance, positivity, and responsibility (Ferguson et al., 2015). Athletes higher in self-compassion also displayed lower levels of destructive reactions (i.e., rumination, passivity, and self-criticism) to hypothetical sport situations. Ferguson et al. (2015) suggested that athletes who are higher in self-compassion may deal with challenging life events more effectively than those lower in self-compassion.

Self-compassion may facilitate such adaptive responses to challenges through decreased catastrophizing and rumination on challenges, displaying more kindness toward the self, accepting responsibility, and expressing personal growth initiative to overcome challenges

(Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003a; Neff, 2003b; Reis et al., 2015). Athletes higher in self-compassion may realize that there are positives that come from failure, which can result in engaging in efforts to address weaknesses and improve on previous failures (Breines & Chen, 2012; Ferguson et al., 2015). As such, a self-compassionate perspective may permit athletes to not only persevere during a demanding sport situation (e.g., an unexpected stressor), but athletes higher in self-compassion may be better able to learn and grow from past challenging experiences. This growth mindset may permit athletes to more effectively prepare (e.g., proactively cope) for future challenges (e.g., unexpected stressors) in sport.

Self-compassion has been suggested as a particularly useful resource for women athletes in managing setbacks, challenges, emotionally difficult sport situations, and adversity in the domain of sport (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2014; Ferguson et al., 2015; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2011; Mosewich et al., 2013; Mosewich et al., 2014). While research has yet to understand why women varsity athletes experience a high number of unexpected stressors, research suggests that there may be gender differences in the experience of stressors and the selection and use of coping strategies in sport (Crocker & Graham, 1995; Anshel, Sutarso, & Jubenville, 2009; Goyen & Anshel, 1998) and, regardless of potential gender differences in the coping process, there are unique stressors faced by women athletes (Mosewich, Kowalski, Vangool, & McHugh, 2009; Nicholls et al., 2007). For example, compared to male athletes, female athletes report experiencing higher levels of stress from coach interactions (Anshel et al., 2009), higher levels of stressors surrounding teammates and communication (Nicholls et al., 2007), and lower levels of perceived control in response to stressors (Kaiseler, Polman, & Nicholls, 2012). Further, women athletes are more likely to exhibit psychosomatic manifestations of psychological stress, such as nausea and muscle tension (Humphrey & Everly,

1980), and experience heightened levels of negative self-evaluation, body dissatisfaction, and eating disturbance (McDonald & Thompson, 1992) as they attempt to balance between body required for high-level sport performance and body desired for appearance (Mosewich et al., 2011). Given the evidence supporting self-compassion as an effective coping resource for women athletes, and also recognizing that women varsity athletes appear to experience a high number of unexpected stressors (Holt et al., 2007), this study looked to explore how women varsity athletes high in self-compassion manage unexpected stressors surrounding competition.

A self-compassionate approach has been theorized to be associated with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping framework at a variety of points (Allen & Leary, 2010), and Mosewich and colleagues (2019) found that self-compassion predicted adaptive appraisals and coping in women varsity athletes. Further, Allen and Leary (2010) suggested that while "little research has evaluated the relationship between self-compassion and proactive coping, self-compassion could play an important role in this process" (p. 115). Given the connections between self-compassion and the stress and coping frameworks used in the present study (i.e., Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and the facilitative effects of self-compassion when facing setbacks in sport, self-compassion may also play an important role in the experience of a common and challenging sport setback: unexpected stressors.

### **Summary and Statement of Research Question**

Being able to effectively manage unexpected stressors is important in the context of sport, perhaps even more so than management of expected stressors (Hatzigeorgiadis, 2006). Unexpected stressors appear to compose a majority of stressors faced by women varsity athletes during competition (Holt et al., 2007), are appraised as more threatening (Dugdale et al., 2002) and pose more of a challenge to coping (Devonport et al., 2013). As such, effective coping

strategies are required to manage these stressors should they arise. Researchers have theorized that a proactive coping approach may aid athletes in the management of unexpected stressors (Holt et al., 2007; McDonough et al., 2013), and that proactive efforts and preparation may assist athletes in making more adaptive appraisals when exposed to unexpected stressors (Dugdale et al., 2002).

While researchers do not yet fully understand the processes through which self-compassion may impact stress and coping, research suggests that a self-compassionate perspective is associated with many adaptive outcomes in sport, particularly in times of setback, challenge, and failure (Ferguson et al., 2014; Mosewich et al., 2013) and as such, may also aid athletes in managing another common challenge in sport: unexpected stressors. Self-compassion appears to play a role in the stress and coping framework outlined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as well as Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) conceptualization of proactive coping, both of which appear to be relevant in understanding the experience of unexpected stressors. For example, Neff and colleagues (2005) found that self-compassion was positively associated with adaptive emotion-focused strategies, and Mosewich and colleagues (2019) found that self-compassion predicted adaptive appraisals and coping approaches (i.e., emotion- and problem-focused as opposed to avoidance) in women athletes. Further, Allen and Leary (2010) suggested that as self-compassion and proactive coping share the objective of reducing future hardship, self-compassionate individuals may be more likely to engage in proactive efforts and be more prepared to deal with the effects of stressors that arise (e.g., unexpected stressors). As such, exploring how athletes high in self-compassion experience unexpected stressors may provide insight into how individuals possessing this adaptive mindset may navigate the experience of unexpected stressors. Therefore, the overall purpose of this study is to explore how women

varsity athletes high in self-compassion experience unexpected stressors. More specifically, the research questions are: 1) What characteristics contribute toward stressors being classified as unexpected? 2) How do women varsity athletes high in self-compassion appraise unexpected stressors surrounding competition? 3) How do women varsity athletes high in self-compassion attempt to cope with unexpected stressors surrounding competition? 4) How do women varsity athletes high in self-compassion prepare for future unexpected stressors surrounding competition?

## Chapter 3: Method

### Methodology

The methods of a study should be based on the ability to answer research questions and fulfil the study purpose (Patton, 2002). Researchers do not yet understand how women athletes high in self-compassion appraise and attempt to cope with unexpected stressors, and what environmental or personal factors may be involved in this process. Qualitative inquiry may provide insight into how and why the processes involved in these phenomena operate in such a way from the perspective of the population of interest. As coping is a complex process, Lazarus (1999) notes that the use of “personal narratives and biography” (p. 10) would be beneficial in exploring the coping process. Further, Somerfield (1997) suggests that qualitative approaches “offer a richer and more complete sense of which environmental and personal factors are operating and how they interact with features of the stressful situation to produce appraisal and coping processes” (p. 146). A qualitative framework can aid in understanding the dynamic, complex process of stress, coping, and appraisal from an individual’s unique perspective.

The present study was guided by an interpretive description framework. Interpretive description is a qualitative methodology informed by relevant theory which aims to generate practical knowledge with an applied focus (Thorne, 2016; Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997). Interpretive description originally arose as an approach to understanding phenomena in nursing (Thorne et al., 1997), but has been adopted in sport research (e.g., Lindgren & Barker-Ruchti, 2017; Neely, Dunn, McHugh, & Holt, 2016; Watchman & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2017).

While some qualitative frameworks approach research believing that “nothing is known” (p. 173), Thorne and colleagues (1997) argued that “going in blind” (p. 173) can be

counterproductive to the generation of knowledge. An interpretive description approach recognizes that existing knowledge and past research should be acknowledged and can provide a foundation for qualitative inquiry (Thorne et al., 1997). As such, relevant coping frameworks in the domain of unexpected stressors (i.e., Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) assisted in establishing context for interpretation (e.g., appraisals, coping). Similarly, previous sport research surrounding unexpected stressors (e.g., Dugdale et al., 2002; Holt et al., 2007) and self-compassion as resource (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2014; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2013) aided in guiding recruitment (i.e., of athletes high in self-compassion). This incorporation of a priori knowledge provided the opportunity to better orient inquiry in the present study, and also advance the field by making connections and links between previous and present findings (Thorne, 2016; Thorne et al., 1997).

Interpretive description studies “capitalize on human commonalities as well as individual expressions of variance within a shared focus of interest” (Thorne, 2016, p. 82). This foundational underpinning of interpretive description allows researchers to inform practice through learning of features that are common amongst participants while simultaneously recognizing and understanding the “inevitable individual variations within them” (Thorne, Kirkham, & O’Flynn-Magee, 2004, p. 4). Interpretive description provides the opportunity to build on previous research in the domain of unexpected stressors and self-compassion in sport, and a better understanding of these psychological variables may have practical implications. As the stress and coping process is complex and dynamic, being influenced by the interaction between environmental and personal factors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the ability of the methodology to recognize such interpersonal differences is crucial. Further, as all participants were purposefully recruited (discussed later in this chapter), it is also important for the

methodology to acknowledge that there may be commonalities in experiences and perceptions of the phenomena.

## **Paradigm**

As the process of stress and coping is based on an individual's subjective appraisals of a situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), an interpretivist paradigm was adopted to capture the subjective nature of the phenomena. In an interpretivist approach, it is important to obtain detailed information regarding individual's perspectives in the context of conditions and circumstances that they are experiencing in their lives (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Like the stress and coping process, an interpretivist paradigm recognizes that an individual's perception of an event will differ based on their experiences, their current situation, and what has shaped and influenced them over time; "Multiple, subjective realities exist in the form of mental constructions" (Sparkes, 1992, p. 92). Ontologically, despite recognizing that multiple realities exist, interpretivists believe that there are shared realities that do exist among individuals. Furthermore, due to the subjective nature of qualitative inquiry, contradictions within and across data sets are expected and acknowledged (Thorne, 2016). These perceptions of the world are created through the individual's experiences. Consistent with interpretive description, interpretivist epistemology assumes that multiple, unique, subjective realities exist, and knowledge creation is based on shared understanding of these interpretations of experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Thorne, 2016). As existing frameworks describe the stress and coping process as subjective and as being influenced by a variety of personal factors (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), employing a paradigmatic framework that acknowledges these variations helped to better understand these subjective aspects of the stress experience.

Thorne and colleagues (1997) suggested that an interpretive description framework acknowledges that the researcher has access to previous research, and this knowledge will help to orient and develop future research. However, Thorne et al. (2004) posit that the knowledge that we possess is not comprehensive enough to take into account the multiple, subjective realities that the researcher may encounter. Interpretivist approaches find it essential to “create a holistic understanding of the studied area, not only an understanding of its different parts. The understanding should emerge through dialectical movements between the holistic understanding and the understandings of singular parts” (Goldkuhl, 2012, p. 140). While researchers currently have pieces of information regarding stress and coping frameworks, self-compassion, and unexpected stressors in the context of sport, a more comprehensive understanding can be achieved through building on current information through an interpretivist approach. Specifically, research suggests that athletes experience a high level of unexpected stressors during competition (Dugdale et al., 2002; Holt et al., 2007) and that these stressors are appraised as more stressful and threatening to manage. We also understand the potential of self-compassion as a resource for coping with setback, challenge, and adversity in sport (Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2011; Mosewich et al., 2013). An interpretivist approach helped to orient exploration into how athletes high in self-compassion experienced and navigated unexpected stressors.

To further supplement inquiry, and consistent with an interpretivist epistemology, interpretive description acknowledges that the researcher and the participant influence one another in the creation of data, and that the researcher can be described as a co-creator of knowledge (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Thorne, 2016). Ponterotto (2005) states that “meaning is hidden and must be brought to the surface through deep reflection stimulated by the

interactive researcher-participant dialogue” (p. 129). Thus, the researcher played a role in co-creation of knowledge through helping to direct the participants’ attention toward aspects of their experiences that facilitated generation of knowledge of the phenomena.

## **Participants**

Interpretive description can be applied to samples of almost any size (Thorne, 2016). Previous qualitative research investigating coping and unexpected stressors have included 10 participants (e.g., Holt et al., 2007) and prior qualitative investigations of self-compassion in a sport context consist of between five and 11 participants (e.g., Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, & Sabiston, 2014; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2014). Therefore, the study sample of seven appeared appropriate, as the reflections and insights of the phenomena by participants in the present study, while unique, presented many connected elements of participant experiences. Participants in the present study competed in varsity-level soccer ( $n = 3$ ), hockey ( $n = 1$ ), track and field ( $n = 1$ ), tennis ( $n = 1$ ), wrestling ( $n = 1$ ). One athlete was in her fifth year of eligibility, two athletes were in their third year of eligibility, two were in their second year of eligibility, and two were in their first year of eligibility. The mean age of the participants was 19.43 years ( $SD = 1.40$  years)

## **Recruitment**

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board prior to commencing recruitment (see Appendix A). Participants were recruited from University of Alberta varsity teams through a variety of means, including varsity combines (i.e., fall 2018, winter 2019), personal team visits, and through a separate study that took place during the fall 2018 term. Women varsity athletes who expressed interest in being involved in future research and met the eligibility criteria, which is outlined in the following section, were contacted via e-

mail (see Appendix B) to participate in a single interview for this study. Eligible participants were sent an information letter outlining the overview of the study (see Appendix C) as well as a consent form (see Appendix D). Upon indicating interest in participating in the present study, participants were contacted to organize a time for the interview to take place.

### **Purposeful Sampling**

Women varsity athletes were purposefully sampled based on their levels of self-reported self-compassion. Purposeful sampling involves selecting information-rich participants to achieve an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). These key informants are thought to be better equipped, with experience involving the phenomena, to willingly provide insight into the chosen area of research (Thorne, 2016).

Self-compassion was measured using the 26-item Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003b). Participants responded on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (“almost never”) to 5 (“almost always”). The scale consists of six subscales, with three of the subscales being positively valenced: Self-Kindness (5 items, e.g., “*When I’m going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need.*”), Common Humanity (4 items, e.g., “*When I’m down and out, I remind myself that there are lots of other people in the world feeling like I am.*”), and Mindfulness (4 items, e. g., “*When I fail at something important to me I try to keep things in perspective*”), and three subscales being negatively valenced: Self-Judgement (5 items, e.g., “*When times are really difficult, I tend to be tough on myself*”), Isolation (4 items, e.g., “*When I fail at something that’s important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure*”), and Over-Identification (4 items, e.g., “*When I’m feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that’s wrong*”). Subscale scores were determined through obtaining the mean of the subscale items. The negatively

valenced scales (Self-Judgement, Isolation, and Over-Identification) were reverse scored when computing a total mean self-compassion score of all six subscales (Neff, 2003b).

Composite reliability levels of the Self-Compassion Scale as a total measure and as a six-factor subscale measure has found to be acceptable across 20 diverse samples: Total Self-Compassion Scale Score  $\alpha = .96$ , Self-Kindness  $\alpha = .91$ , Common Humanity  $\alpha = .86$ , Mindfulness  $\alpha = .87$ , Self-Judgement  $\alpha = .90$ , Isolation  $\alpha = .88$ , and Over-Identification  $\alpha = .87$  (Neff et al., 2018). Psychometric support of the Self-Compassion Scale has also been demonstrated in athlete populations (Ferguson et al., 2014:  $\alpha = .85$ ; Mosewich et al., 2011:  $\alpha = .87$ ; Mosewich et al., 2013:  $\alpha = .79$  to  $.88$ ) and university student samples (Leary et al., 2007:  $\alpha = .81$  to  $.91$ ; Neely, Schallert, Mohammed, Roberts, & Chen, 2009:  $\alpha = .92$ ; Neff et al., 2005:  $\alpha = .94$ ; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007:  $\alpha = .94$ ). Consistent with the aims of the research question, the Self-Compassion Scale has been found to be effective in “differentiating groups in a theoretically consistent manner” (Neff, 2003b, p. 243).

During recruitment, women athletes ( $N = 216$ ) from University of Alberta varsity teams completed the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003b), and a mean Self-Compassion Scale score of 3.02 ( $SD = 0.62$ ,  $\alpha = .94$ ) was observed. Of the 216 women athletes surveyed, 67 athletes consented to being contacted for future research (such as the present study). The Self-Compassion Scale scores of the 67 athletes was 3.03 ( $SD = 0.62$ ,  $\alpha = .94$ ). Of those 67 athletes, 16 of the women athletes met Neff's (2003b) criteria for being considered high in self-compassion (i.e., Self-Compassion Scale score of 3.5 or higher). The 10 athletes scoring highest in self-compassion were invited to participate in an interview. If athletes declined to participate or did not respond, additional athletes, in descending order of their self-compassion scores, were contacted to participate. All 16 of the eligible athletes were contacted and eight of the 16 athletes

that were contacted participated in the present study. A similar approach was used by Ingstrup and colleagues (2017) to assist in promoting rigour in the sampling procedure, helping to enhance the likelihood that the participants selected demonstrate attributes consistent with high levels of self-compassion to best provide insight to assist in answering the research question.

Following corresponding with the eligible and interested athletes, eight athletes participated in the present study. The eight participants in the present study had a mean Self-Compassion Scale score of 3.86 ( $SD = 0.51$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ ). However, following interviews, one of the participants was excluded from data analysis as it was deemed that she was not able to sufficiently contribute to answering the research question as she did not have appropriate experience with the phenomena (i.e., did not experience unexpected stressors during competition). As such, seven women varsity athletes ( $M_{age} = 19.43$  years,  $SD = 1.40$  years) comprised the sample for the present study. The Self-Compassion Scale scores for the participants whose data was included in the present study ranged between 3.5 and 4.65 ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ,  $\alpha = .90$ ). The Self-Compassion Scale scores of the initial athlete sample observed in the present study are comparable to those recorded in other studies involving women athletes. For instance, Ingstrup and colleagues (2017) observed Self-Compassion Scale scores of 3.09 ( $SD = 0.53$ ) and Reis and colleagues (2015) reported mean scores of 3.10 ( $SD = 0.59$ ). Further, Ingstrup and colleagues (2017) investigation of women varsity athletes high in self-compassion reported a similar mean Self-Compassion Scale score as was observed in the participants in the present study ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 0.19$ ).

### **Interview Guide**

The interview guide (Appendix F) was developed to capture the stress and coping processes in both Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) and Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) coping

frameworks (i.e., appraisal and coping, as well as proactive coping, respectively). Two pilot interviews were conducted to enhance the clarity and flow of the interview guide in addressing the research questions. Pilot participants consisted of University of Alberta student-athletes who have recently retired and senior graduate students with experience in athletics. By including specific individuals in pilot interviews, the researcher had the advantage of incorporating multiple perspectives (i.e., student-athlete, researcher) into conducting and revising the interview process. Pilot interviews help in identifying limitations in the interview guide, allowing for revision and modification prior to commencement of the study (Turner, 2010). As such, pilot participants were asked to provide feedback on the interview, such as reflecting on questions that they would add, remove, or modify, as well as commenting on the flow of the interview. As a result of pilot interviews, some questions were reworded to enhance clarity. Further, additional emphasis was placed on perceived competition importance and on looking forward to future unexpected stressors. Lastly, a summary question was added to provide participants with the opportunity to discuss additional unexpected stressors. The pilot interviews also aided the researcher in gaining familiarity with the interview guide while also building experience with interviewing and engaging with participants (Kim, 2010; Thorne, 2016). The researcher's supervisor debriefed, reviewed, and discussed the researcher's performance following pilot interviews to help to develop the interview's research skills.

The interview guide aimed to direct the inquiry in a manner that allowed participants to openly discuss their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and opinions regarding unexpected stressors surrounding competition. The interview guide began with demographic questions and introductory questions related to sport. Participants were then asked about their most recent competition in sport, and their perceived importance of the competition, to aid in situating

themselves in an experience that may be important to them. Participants were asked about notable unexpected stressors they experienced surrounding their most recent competition. Unexpected stressors were defined as stressors that the participant had not planned or prepared for prior to competition (as per Dugdale et al., 2002). Questions were informed by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping framework as well as Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) proactive coping framework. Questions explored why the participants identified these stressors as unexpected, the appraisal process surrounding unexpected stressors, and coping efforts employed to manage these stressors. Additionally, questions inquired into the process of resource accumulation, recognition of stressors, and preliminary coping efforts. Participants also had the opportunity to discuss unexpected stressors that they have encountered in the past that may not have occurred during their most recent competition. Finally, closing questions provided participants the opportunity to share any additional information with the researcher.

### **Data Generation**

Interviews were semi-structured and were scheduled at a time and location that was convenient for the participant. All interviews were conducted in person by the researcher on the University of Alberta campus. Six of the seven interviews ranged between 70 and 80 minutes and one interview was approximately two hours and 15 minutes ( $M = 84.09$  minutes,  $SD = 23.64$  minutes). Prior to commencement of the interview, participants were provided a verbal overview of the study and given an opportunity to ask questions. Participants were informed that there are no right or wrong answers, that no directly identifying information would be released, and that they were free to withdraw at any time without any penalty to them. A semi-structured approach allowed the researcher to keep the participants focused, while also allowing participants to place emphasis on areas and topics that they deem as important (Creswell, 2007; Maykut &

Morehouse, 1994; Turner, 2010). As research exploring unexpected stressors, and to a lesser extent, self-compassion in a sport context, is limited, allowing the participant the opportunity to direct the discussion toward what they believe is important may provide further insight into the intricacies and crucial aspects (Thorne 2016) of the dynamic stress and coping process.

The researcher interviewed four of the seven participants within 1-2 weeks of the conclusion of their competitive season. There was a longer period between the interview and the conclusion of the season for three participants (four months); however, only one participant reflected on an important game that had occurred more than two weeks prior to the interview. Generating data after such a short period of time following an event of (potential) perceived importance (e.g., playoffs, final game of season) was hoped to aid participants in reflecting on their experience with greater accuracy, and is noted as a strength in seminal studies surrounding unexpected stressors (Dugdale et al., 2002; Holt et al., 2007). While participants were initially directed toward the most recent competition, the semi-structured nature of the interview allowed the participant the opportunity to also discuss stressors that may have occurred earlier in the competitive season (e.g., injury, being benched) but may have been deemed important and relevant by the participant.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Despite the desire to obtain rich data from the participants, the obligation to participants to minimize harm must be the priority (Markula & Silk, 2011). For example, when discussing a sensitive topic that may result in interviewee distress, the researcher “deciding to continue would indicate that the researcher considers that the value of the data obtained from the distressing experience outweighs the participant’s distress” (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001, p. 94). As such, concern for the participant remained a salient consideration throughout the interview

process. Discussing, in detail, past stressful events can be emotionally demanding, and the process of articulating following deep reflection can be profound and emotionally taxing (Thorne, 2016). As such, the researcher monitored how the interview was impacting the participant through verbal and nonverbal cues. Further, the researcher employed ongoing consent, which is important when creating knowledge of sensitive areas as the researcher is unable to fully predict what will happen during the inquiry (Thorne, 2016). Consistent with the researcher's ethical responsibility to the participants, participants were periodically informed that they can "withdraw from the study or withdraw from providing certain information for the study" (p. 17) at any time (Markula & Silk, 2011). The researcher was familiar with the process of accessing the University of Alberta Counselling and Clinical Services, as well as Protective Services, if participants required these resources. As participants were all be University of Alberta students, they had access to these, as well as other student resources, which was made clear to participants during a debrief at the conclusion of each session.

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Participant names and any identifying information (e.g., team name, name of a coach, teammate names) was removed, and participants had the option to choose, or were assigned, a pseudonym to promote anonymity. Transcripts ranged between 23 and 48 single-spaced pages ( $M = 32$ ,  $SD = 7.90$ ). Electronic data (i.e., interview transcripts, interview audio files) were stored on the University of Alberta's secure Google drive. Paper data (i.e., consent forms) were digitalized and placed on the secure University of Alberta Google drive prior to the paper data being confidentially shredded. Data will be destroyed five years after completion of the study.

Within an interpretive description framework, a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) informed data analysis. Specifically, the researcher began analysis by becoming familiar with the nature and context of the data. Following immersion in the data, the researcher began initial coding of meaningful units of data. These codes were then organized into developing themes and categories. The themes were reviewed and refined with respect to both the level of the coded extracts and the relation of the organizations to the entire data set. These themes were defined (i.e., to describe the element(s) of the data that the theme captures) and named prior to the final stage of thematic analysis, which involves presenting findings and analysis to illustrate relevance to the research question.

Generation and analysis of data occurred simultaneously to promote immersion in the data (Thorne, 2016). As Thorne et al. (2004) suggests that “listening to an audio recording of a conversation may evoke a different insight than will reading a written transcript of text” (p. 7), the researcher listened to the interview recordings during analysis. The researcher undertook transcription of all interviews and read and re-read the transcripts to become familiar with the interviews so as to best comprehend the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Thorne, 2016).

Once immersed in the data, the researcher engaged in the process of manually coding the data. As context may be important to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), data was coded inclusively. Throughout the coding process, codes were reviewed and discussed between the researcher and the researcher’s supervisor. Thorne (2016) suggests that premature coding can result in decreased depth of analysis. Alternatively, a broad focus promotes comprehensive exploration of the data to fully realize knowledge potential as opposed to narrowing in or focusing on specific patterns or aspects of the data (Thorne, 2016). Thus, in the early stages of analysis, coding was fairly broad so as to not limit investigation of themes, commonalities, and

potentially unique and/or important elements of the phenomena. Specifically, coding was comprehensive in the sense that multiple descriptive labels were applied to units of data. Coding was primarily latent (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Following initial coding, codes were sorted into themes. The researcher considered how certain codes may interact and/or combine to form overarching themes and subthemes.

Interpretive description allows researchers to find repeated patterns of meaning within the data (Thorne, 2016), and identifying these trends can help to inform practice. Thorne et al. (2004) state that recognizing the prevalence of “certain themes or experiences become invaluable analytic resources” (p. 6). However, just because an experience occurs frequently does not mean that they are more relevant to the research questions than less frequent experiences (Thorne, 2016). As such, both the frequency (i.e., a majority of participants) and perceived relevance to the research question were considered when developing themes. Per Mayan (2009), themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that the data supports inclusion of codes into themes (internal homogeneity) and distinction between themes (external homogeneity). As the researcher investigated a fairly under-researched area, focus was on identifying predominant themes across the entire data set. To build on past research, there was focus on aspects of the stress and coping process and the experience of unexpected stressors.

The final stage of interpretative description involves recontextualizing the data into meaningful findings. The product of this analysis should be a conceptual claim: “a coherent conceptual description that taps thematic patterns and commonalities believed to characterize the phenomenon that is being studied and also accounts for the inevitable individual variations within them (Thorne et al., 2004, p. 4). This conceptual claim should accurately represent the most important aspects of the phenomena and do so in a way that encourages understanding and

practical use in applied settings (Thorne, 2016). Thorne (2016) suggests that analysis has reached an appropriate conclusion when the following conditions are met:

When not only can you articulately and credibly generate a detailed table of contents depicting the major headings and minor subheadings that will shape your account of the findings but also argue (or write) a convincing introduction to the findings that explains why the material is organized in the manner that it is and by what logic the reader will be helped to access it (p. 197).

Conceptual claims are accomplished through listening, writing, thinking, observing, and repeating this process (Thorne, 2016). Discussion between the researcher and the researcher's supervisor and repeated immersion in the data helped contribute toward identifying patterns, relationships, and conceptualizations grounded in the data (Thorne, 2016).

### **Methodological Rigour**

“In the world of experiential knowledge, there is no way one can study a phenomenon without running the risk of changing it” (Thorne, 2016, p. 126). Paradigmatically, the researcher plays a role in the co-creation of knowledge, and per an interpretive description framework, that role may be influenced by past knowledge and research in the field. With this in mind, it is important that researchers in interpretive description act as “encouraging and judgementally neutral facilitators” (p. 140) so that participants can comfortably and fully explain their perspectives (Thorne, 2016). Reflections, including detailed notes outlining themes and interpretations, were kept, which can provide other researchers with “clear documentation of all research decisions and activities” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128). Documentation of the researcher's reasoning and decisions reflects analytic logic, in that logic is made visible throughout the report to permit other researchers to assess credibility (Thorne, 2016); the

researcher must be transparent in their analysis during the research process (Thorne et al., 1997). Furthermore, this extensive note taking is helpful when presenting data to provide an “adequate account of how findings were produced” and a “description of how the themes and concepts were derived from the data” (Anderson, 2010, p. 5). This reflective journal was important in identifying the critical role that assumptions, biases, prior knowledge, as well as ongoing interpretations, perceptions, and analytic notes have in the data generation process. Examples of included materials consisted of personal reflections following interviews (e.g., discussion of assumptions, participant body language, participant bias, questions that participants appeared to have difficulty answering) and data analysis notes (e.g., different coding schemes, mapping how the data analysis process has evolved). A reflexive journal assisted in improving the strength of the interview process and in providing additional context to the researcher when reflection occurred.

In an effort to promote rigor in the analysis process of interpretive description, it is important to acknowledge the theoretical framework of the research questions as well as engage in inductive reasoning (Thorne et al., 2004). This is accomplished through challenging and testing previous interpretations of the phenomena during the analysis process in order to generate novel, comprehensive knowledge. Throughout the ongoing process of data generation and analysis, the researcher discussed themes, interpretations, and connections with the researcher’s supervisor. These interactions required the researcher to justify decisions made during analysis, receive critical feedback, encourage reflexivity, and challenge interpretations and knowledge construction (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Thorne, 2016). Consistent with Thorne’s (2016) recommendation to concurrently engage in data generation and analysis, this process promoted

credibility in “reflecting agreed upon ideas about the bases upon which data have been generated, findings arrived at, and conclusions rendered” (Thorne, 2016, p. 111).

To enhance rigour and understanding of the generated data, member reflection can be utilized to reflect and expand on information discussed in the initial interviews (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Thorne (2016) notes that “going back to the source of the data, either systematically or selectively, can often be an extremely important step in transforming data into findings” (p. 176). With this in mind, participants were invited via email following the initial interview to further expand comprehension of the phenomena. Participants were provided with a copy of their transcript and a summary of the study findings. One participant provided additional thoughts via writing, further speaking to generated themes. As the participant and researcher generate knowledge together, Smith and McGannon (2018) assert that member reflection provides both the participant and the researcher the opportunity to “generate additional data and insight” (p. 8) regarding similarities or differences in the interpretations of the interview. Interpretive description acknowledges and expects such potential for differences in interpretations (Thorne, 2016), and Smith and McGannon (2018) suggest that member reflection allows for insight into these contradictions in interpretations between the participant and researcher. Additionally, from an ethical standpoint, the process of member reflection helped to enhance connectedness, mutual respect, and dignity between the researcher and the participant (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

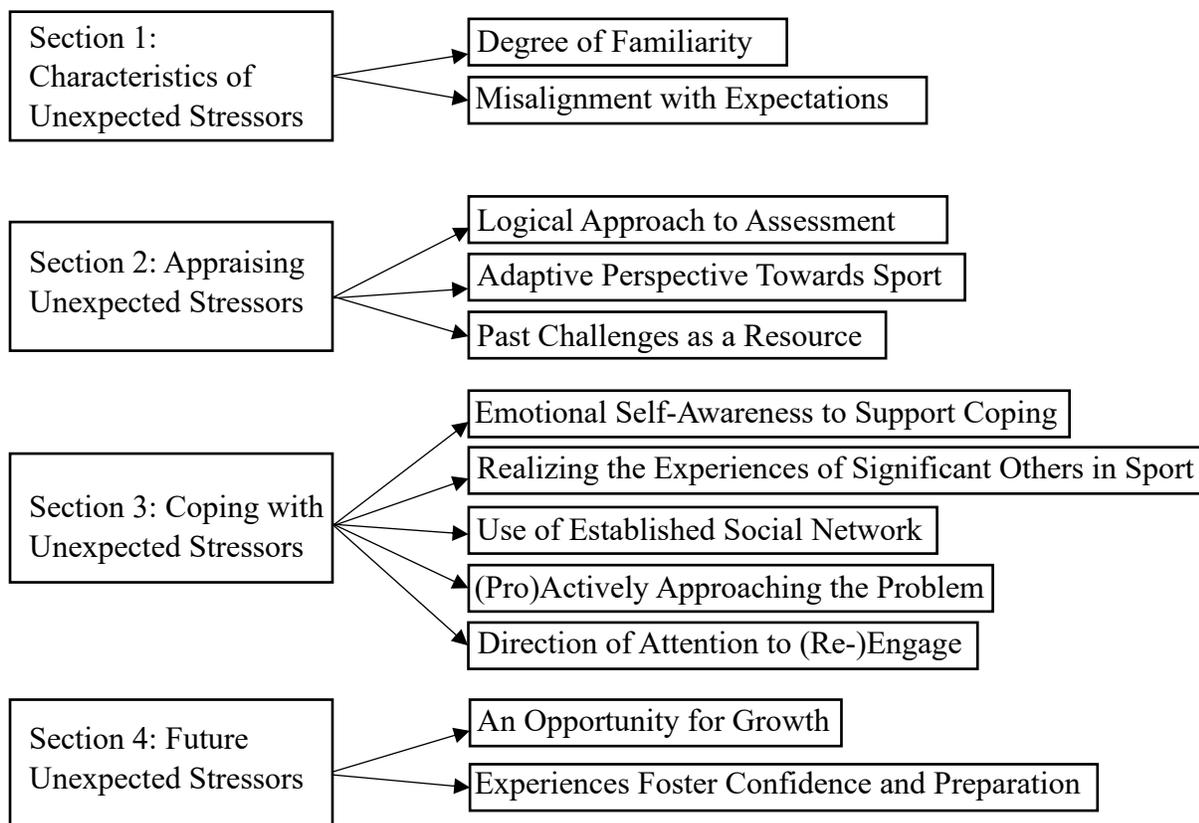
## Chapter 4: Findings

Consistent with an interpretive description framework, findings are organized in a manner that emphasizes important elements of the phenomena (Thorne, 2016). As such, the broad research question - how women varsity athletes high in self-compassion experience unexpected stressors – is broken down into four conceptually distinct sections corresponding with the research questions posited in the first chapter (Figure 1). Findings were presented in such a manner so as to aid the reader in accessing the data in a way that compliments the research questions. First, discussion will be centered on why women varsity athletes high in self-compassion identified the stressors that they faced as unexpected (i.e., characteristics of unexpected stressors). The following section will explore the process of appraising unexpected stressors. The third section will discuss how women varsity athletes attempted to manage the unexpected stressors that they faced. Finally, the fourth section will explore how women varsity athletes high in self-compassion learned from their experiences (i.e., with unexpected stressors) and how they intend to prepare for future unexpected stressors. It should be noted that as the stress and coping process is iterative and dynamic (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), there exists a close relationship between the appraisal process (section 2) and coping process (section 3). However, despite this interrelationship, findings regarding appraisals and coping were presented separately, guided by the research questions.

### Section 1: The Characteristics of Unexpected Stressors

Athletes in the present study described a variety of stressors surrounding competition that they identified as unexpected. Unexpected stressors reported by the athletes included physical ailments (e.g., injury and/or discomfort), competition outcomes (e.g., being scored against), in-

competition interactions (e.g., coach or fan behaviours), and unfamiliar competition circumstances (e.g., new competition environment). The degree of familiarity with the stressor



*Figure 1.* Summary of themes in each section outlining how women varsity athletes high in self-compassion experience unexpected stressors.

and the level of alignment, or misalignment, of expectations that the athletes in the present study possessed regarding the stressor appears to be primary characteristics contributing toward the identification of stressors as unexpected.

**Degree of Familiarity.** When discussing why stressors were identified as unexpected, the athletes in the present study reported varying levels of familiarity with the unexpected stressors that they faced. An unfamiliar situation appeared to constitute an “unexpected stressor” for the athletes in this study. Some athletes, such as Ellie, a track and field athlete, discussed

characterizing the stressor as unexpected due to not having any previous experience with the unexpected stressor, which was racing on a track with banked corners:

[The stressor was] unexpected just because it was different, like, I'd never done it before.

So even though I knew it was coming, until I actually set foot on that track and tried it, I wouldn't know, so, that's kind of why.

Despite being aware of the stressor, the unknown, unfamiliar elements of the stressor appeared to be important characteristics in leading Ellie to identify the stressor as unexpected. Other athletes, including Diana, a soccer player, discussed having experienced the stressor in the past. Despite previous experience with the stressor, Diana still described the stressor as unexpected, though, not a surprise:

I mean it was unexpected, but I wasn't really too surprised, you know? I was kind of like: 'This has happened before, I know how to deal with it', it was just kind of like, it was an annoyance, you know?

It may be that stressors that are less common or less typical, though not novel, may be categorized as unexpected if they arise. Additionally, some athletes in the present study described previously encountering an event that was similar to the unexpected stressor that they faced but noted that elements of the experience were different. Despite athletes being able to make such connections between past stressors and the unexpected stressors that they were describing in the present study, athletes still identified the stressors that they faced as unexpected. For example, Alyssa, a soccer player, noted that she had experienced similar unexpected stressors, in this case, an injury, in the past. However, she described how aspects of the more recent unexpected stressor differed from her previous experience with a similar stressor:

It was unexpected because that ankle's always been fine to me. I've rolled my right lots before, but my left one, it was just a very flukey kind of thing and so also, part of me, like, I could walk on it fine after. So, I kind of figured that I'd be fine. I don't think I paid that much attention to it that night. Maybe I should have been icing it, should have been doing more. I did a little bit, but, yeah, so I guess it was unexpected cause I woke up that morning and it was just swollen, and I could barely walk on it.

While Alyssa had experienced a similar unexpected stressor in the past, the recent unexpected stressor that she faced contained different components (e.g., unanticipated physical reaction) which contributed to the stressor being categorized as unexpected. Lindsay, a wrestler, talked about how she had experienced a similar stressor (i.e., an unexpected unpleasant interaction with her coach) in a previous competition: "we actually competed in [city of competition] in [previous month], and ... I had a similar scenario happen." However, she noted that the pressure was not nearly as high in the previous competition: "I think, well, this one [recent competition], I mean, it wasn't just another tournament, whereas [previous competition] was just another tournament." Brenda, a hockey player, also spoke to the impact that the stakes of the competition have on the classification of stressors as unexpected. When asked if she had experienced anything similar to the unexpected stressor (i.e., her team conceding a goal at a crucial point in the game) that she had faced in her most recent competition, Brenda replied: "I mean, I guess probably in league games, but, nothing to that extent where it was such a charged game." While athletes may recall and recognize experiences with similar stressors in the past, it appears that some aspects of the stressor and/or dissimilarities within context that the stressor is experienced may contribute to the stressor being characterized as unexpected.

Despite athletes identifying stressors as unexpected, there appear to be elements and characteristics of these unexpected stressors that athletes had previously experienced. Stressors may be identified as unexpected due to unfamiliarity with the stressor, and this unfamiliarity could be due to the stressor being completely novel, the stressor being uncommon, a lack of experience with the stressor, or differences in context surrounding the stressor (e.g., elevated competition importance). Overall, it seems that the degree of familiarity is an important factor in perceiving a stressor as unexpected.

**Misalignment with Expectations.** In addition to unfamiliarity, many athletes in the present study noted personal expectations as an important characteristic when discussing why a stressor was identified as unexpected. Athletes described that stressors may have been more challenging to deal with if there were components of the stressor that did not align with the athlete's hopes or expectations. Stressors may be classified as unexpected when athletes' experiences and the circumstances surrounding competition do not go as they had anticipated.

Athletes discussed their expectations of how competitions within their particular sport context typically go (e.g., gameplay, etiquette, outcome) and how deviations from these expectations contributed toward stressors being identified as unexpected. For example, when asked about why she considered the stressor she faced as unexpected, Adelyn, a soccer player, described the stressor as not being typical in competition. Despite understanding that such a stressor can happen, Adelyn spoke about how nobody expects to go into a game and be scored on repeatedly in quick succession: "...no one goes into a soccer game thinking they're gonna concede three goals in fifteen minutes, but it happens (laughs)." While this type of stressor does occur in her sport, this stressor is not common and as such, Adelyn did not anticipate this stressor happening during this competition. Stella, a tennis player, also described perceiving a stressor

that she faced as unexpected due to the stressor not aligning with the etiquette and norms within the sport-specific context: “It [the unexpected stressor] looks bad, it’s just not the way tennis is played.” She added: “It’s [the unexpected stressor] not something that should be promoted with the sport, it’s not something that should be promoted around the sport.” An event that does not align with the norms or standards of the sport or competition environment appears to be an important characteristic in the classification of stressors as unexpected.

In addition to the influence of misalignment with typical sport and competition expectations as a key characteristic of unexpected stressors, athletes in the present study discussed the impact of misalignment between the stressor and their personal thoughts and emotions on stressors being identified as unexpected. Adelyn spoke about her excitement about the game, and that given this attitude toward the game, she was not anticipating experiencing the unexpected stressor (i.e., being scored on three times early in the game):

It just didn’t look like our team when I saw the goals happening, so that was unexpected. I guess, too, I was really, really hyped up for the game. I was excited but like, a good level. I think a lot of my teammates were extremely nervous, so, I wasn’t expecting that, maybe we weren’t all on the same page?

Brenda also described how the stressor misaligning with her state of mind surrounding the competition contributed toward her classification of the stressor as unexpected. Traditionally, when feeling good before and during a competition, Brenda spoke to typically getting the same, positive results.

It was like, ‘that was unexpected’, and then I guess just where I was at. I felt great and all other games where I felt like that, we’ve come out on the right side of it... There’s those games that you think of and you’re like ‘I felt so good and we won’, and so it was one of

those games where I felt so good and everything was going right and then we lost. So, I think, just, that combination was tough for me cause I'd never really experienced that before. Games where we had lost, I was like: 'oh, I could've, I wasn't my best today', like: 'I could have been better or I could have prepared better', you know? Or I was tired, or I didn't play well enough, you know? I find, usually, nine times out of ten, the games I don't play my best, I know I didn't play my best. And that's maybe part of the reason we lost and then it was like that game [with the unexpected stressor], it was just like, 'what are you gonna do?' So, that was definitely a tough one to get over, and to try and process as an athlete, because, it was very different situation.

Despite how Brenda was feeling about the competition, the stressor that she experienced did not adhere to her expectations, a characteristic that contributed toward the classification of the stressor as unexpected and presenting difficulties in coping. Similarly, Lindsay discussed feeling good about herself and the competition prior to experiencing the stressor:

A stressor came about when I went off to the sidelines to talk to my coach. ...when I was talking to my coach, he wasn't very supportive. He was more yelling at me, saying "you don't wanna wrestle, you're not wrestling", you know? So that definitely stressed me out. I got really angry. I didn't get upset, I got angry, and, I just yelled back and I was like, 'yeah, I do wanna wrestle, like, that's why I'm here, so, I don't know what you expect of me'. So, that was an, an unexpected stressor, I did not expect him to react that way to how the match was going. I thought I was doing okay.

Lindsay felt that she was doing well during the competition, and as such, did not expect a negative reaction from her coach. Instead, based on how she was feeling during the match, Lindsay expected a different, perhaps more supportive interaction with her coach: "I would've

expected him to be a little more supportive, not as crazy. ... So, yeah, that's why I think it was a little unexpected. Because I expected a little more of a pat on the back." Lindsay illustrated the impact that misalignment between personal expectations (e.g., thoughts, feelings, emotions) and a stressor can have on the classification (i.e., as unexpected) and the impact of the stressor.

Athletes in the present study varied in their level of experience with unexpected stressors, with some athletes having experienced something similar before whereas other athletes had not previously experienced the unexpected stressor. Regardless, athletes noted that having limited experience with stressors contributed toward their classification of the stressor as unexpected. Athletes also described perceiving stressors as unexpected when a situation did not align with their expectations. Such misalignment existed when experiencing an event, or elements of an event, surrounding the competition that was not typical of the specific sport context or environment. Further, athletes described stressors as unexpected if their anticipations of the situation, or elements of the situation, did not come to fruition. Both of these factors appeared to influence how stressors were identified and categorized and as such, appraised, by athletes in the present study.

## **Section 2: Appraising Unexpected Stressors**

Elements of unfamiliarity and expectations not coming to fruition led athletes to classify stressors as unexpected. When assessing stressors that athletes had classified as unexpected, athletes in the present study appeared to employ a range of approaches to support appraisals. Firstly, athletes embraced a logical approach when appraising the stressors that they faced so as to promote accuracy in their assessment of the stressor. Secondly, to prevent athletes from catastrophizing, and instead, permitting athletes to assess stressors more positively, athletes also appeared to embrace an adaptive perspective toward unexpected stressors and sport in general.

Finally, athletes spoke to relating their current experience with unexpected stressors to past encounters with stressors. Such reflection appeared to help them in feeling more confident in their assessment of the stressor and in their ability to manage the unexpected stressor. A logical approach to assessment, an adaptive perspective, and drawing on past challenges as a resource appeared to allow athletes to more effectively assess coping resources and helped to inform subsequent coping approaches.

**Logical Approach to Assessment.** Some of the athletes in the present study spoke to the importance of taking a logical view of the situation to assist them in more accurately appraising the unexpected stressor. This perspective included taking time to analyze the stressor and the context surrounding the stressor. Self-talk was an important tool used by athletes as they took a logical view of the situation. This perspective was clearly articulated by Ellie:

I'm a very categorical person I would say, so: 'is this gonna injure me further, yes or no?' right? And then, based off of that: 'can I run how I normally would? Yes or no?', that kind of thing. And just like, going through that way, almost: 'do I know how to fix this? Yes or no?' and like, 'if yes, what is it?' kind of thing. So just logically working through stuff sometimes.

According to Ellie, this analytical approach also consists of taking a step back and taking the time to logically examine the situation by "... not jumping to a conclusion right away and going through that kind of logistical [process], seeing what's actually going on." Employing this reflective, logical approach appeared to allow Ellie to take a more complete, balanced view of the situation, which permitted her to more accurately select the most effective course of action to cope with the demands of the situation. Diana also employed a logical perspective when working

through an unexpected stressor that she faced. Diana also spoke to the importance of being honest toward the self when examining a situation:

I'm always like, 'well why am I like this? Why am I doing this?', and then once I've realized why, then just being honest with yourself to know and not deflect anything. ... like, it's yourself, why would you lie to yourself?

Diana notes that being honest with herself and looking at the situation logically helps to select an appropriate coping response. When taking this logical perspective, Diana drew on strategies developed through working with a sport psychologist. Diana discussed learning to understand that "it's not all about you" in sport, recognizing that many factors, beyond one individual, may influence a situation, and that it's important to logically analyze the situation with that in mind. Diana described this process in practice: "kind of be like: 'okay [Diana], just think about what would be a reasonable explanation', again, it's not all about you, I'm sure there's other reasons, just, you gotta think about it." Diana elaborated on this reflective process further when recalling her experience with an unexpected stressor (being abruptly pulled from the game by the coach):

You also have to try and reason it out logically. Again, not everything's about you, right? Maybe there's a shootout coming up so maybe [the coach] took me out because there's another shooter, a girl who's better, right? Like it's maybe not always that I was having an awful game or something like that. There's probably always a reason. Or maybe she subbed me in for someone who hadn't gotten any minutes, and we were just switching, or something like that, you know? ... there are the other factors that roll into it and you just have to realize that it could be anything and it's not all about you (laughs).

A logical view of the situation also included athletes appearing to be able to recognize where they did and did not have control over aspects of the unexpected stressor which aided athletes in assessing their coping options. For example, Ellie discussed that analyzing the situation and recognizing that there was nothing that she could do to change the situation assisted her in selecting an appropriate coping response following experiencing the unexpected stressor (experiencing a negative competition outcome): “I think perspective and acknowledging that it’s done, I can’t do anything with that now, on to the next one.” Diana also noted that recognizing that she did not have control over the situation informed her coping responses (i.e., use of reframing):

You just kind put it all out there so that you know even if I could’ve done better, this is what I did. I did the best as I could with what I had in the moment. There’s no sense, you can’t really go and change the past or anything like that, so you kind of just have to be okay with what you did there. There’s no going back.

In response to an unexpected stressor during competition (disruptive crowd behaviours), Stella described assessing the situation and her level of control over the unexpected stressor:

I mean, they’re not gonna stop doing it. You’re not gonna convince them out of it. It’s just gonna look like it’s working. So, the most positive way to deal with it is just to ignore it and let the ref deal with it if it continues to be an issue.

After determining that she did not have control over the unexpected stressor, Stella was able to modify her coping approach accordingly. It appears that being able to examine a stressful situation more logically may help athletes to make more accurate appraisals, and as such, more appropriately select coping approaches.

**Adaptive Perspective Towards Sport.** Athletes spoke to the importance of an adaptive perspective when assessing unexpected stressors that they faced. This approach consisted of putting the event into perspective by avoiding placing an overwhelming amount of importance on the event (e.g., it is not the end of the world). Interestingly, this adaptive perspective was directed toward sport and competition in general, and not so much toward a specific stressor and/or event. Putting the event into perspective reduced the amount of pressure that the athletes placed on themselves, potentially allowing them to more adaptively appraise unexpected stressors surrounding competition.

Many athletes discussed understanding that the competition and/or the unexpected stressor, while challenging, was not cause for catastrophizing and/or rumination. Instead, athletes were able to put the event into perspective, understanding that the unexpected stressors that they faced were manageable and “not the end of the world”. Ellie noted that while sport was important to her, there was more to her than sport:

I've never been somebody who lives, breathes, will die track. There's definitely people [for] whom it is quite a bit more to them. I think in terms of my life, I have a bit more of a balance, and there's a lot of things that go into who I am.

She added that putting the event into perspective in the grand scheme of her life as well as in terms of her sport career helped her to more adaptively perceive stressors: “I think looking at it big picture. At the end of the day, this is one meet in your probably multiple year sport career.” When discussing how she assessed the unexpected stressors that she faced, Stella also emphasized the importance of putting things into perspective: “I try not to get rattled on court anymore, I try and put things into perspective.” She went on to describe what putting things into perspective looks like for her when experiencing an unexpected stressor:

... sports are a lot of fun and it's good to care about them, but don't let that control your life, don't let your life revolve around that too much. Cause [sport is] really important to me, and it's definitely something I still do now. I still care, a lot, when I play a match obviously. It means a lot to me to go out and to be able to compete and to be able to hopefully win. And I mean, when I'm on court, that's obviously my main goal, but just realizing that when I lose, it's okay ... losing a match is not gonna affect me. Because, well, obviously, just putting it into perspective that it's okay to lose a match. It's not the end of the world.

Like Ellie, Stella spoke of sport being important, but noted that there is more to life than sport and that a negative experience or outcome in sport is not the end of the world. She added:

I am at a place now where I am very comfortable with these people. I trust them, I don't think that me losing a match is gonna affect my relationship with them anymore. I'm in a position where I know I'm a good tennis player. They know I'm a good tennis player. It's not something that's gonna re-center my world anymore.

Despite athletes in the present study speaking to the importance of the competition, it appears that the athletes were also able to engage in an adaptive perspective when encountering unexpected stressors surrounding the competition. This adaptive mindset consisted of keeping the event in perspective, allowing the athletes to recognize that the competition and the unexpected stressors that they faced were not the end of the world. It seems that the athlete's ability to put the event into perspective, to recognize that there is more to them as athletes and as people, aided them in making more adaptive appraisals regarding unexpected stressors.

**Past Challenges as a Resource.** Drawing on past experiences also supported adaptive appraisals for athletes in the present study. Athletes noted that they drew on past experiences

with similar stressors or stressors that shared similar characteristics as the unexpected stressors that they experienced to help to inform appraisals. Some athletes also felt confident in their ability to manage the unexpected stressors that they faced based on their previous experiences with other similar stressors. Such experiences with past stressors influenced athletes in the present study's perceptions of, and as such, approaches to managing, the unexpected stressors that they faced surrounding competitions. Some athletes, like Ellie, described using past experiences as resources when appraising unexpected stressors. Ellie noted that despite the stressors not being identical, they may share similarities, and drawing on the experience of managing past stressors can help with present coping:

Whether that's nerves or an actual threat, they always say fear is a real or perceived threat. So, whatever that is, being able to kind of put it aside and still do what you need to do. In the past, obviously it might be a different stressor, but being able to actually just set that aside and do your race anyways is probably a similarity between them.

Like Ellie, Diana notes that she may have handled a version of the unexpected stressor in the past and that these experiences are helpful for managing unexpected stressors in the present. Further, she described a sense of self-efficacy stemming from the perception that as she had successfully managed stressors in the past, she was confident in her ability to manage the unexpected stressor she experienced:

... Something I've never dealt with before; it would be unexpected. Whereas everything else, even though they may be unexpected or expected, if I've dealt with them all before, at least a version of them, so I know how to deal with them.

Diana expanded on this, explaining that reflecting on effective coping experiences can help manage unexpected stressors, and can contribute toward unexpected stressors being perceived as more manageable:

They're never completely unexpected. Even though they might be a surprise in the moment, but I'm kind of like, 'okay, yeah, I've dealt with this before'. ... I'm sure there are things that I haven't dealt with yet, but, for the most part, I've almost dealt with everything, or, even if I haven't, my teammates have. Everyone knows that these kind of stressors happen, whether it's playing time or travelling or school or personal life stuff going on, you just, as an athlete, you already know that things can happen, and you just have to kind of know how to deal with them. And knowing yourself and know what works for you and what works for your friends, and just being supportive with people, for people, I think that really helps.

Adelyn also noted the value of past experience, citing her past experiences as a factor that helped her in appraising the unexpected stressor she experienced as manageable: "What influenced my perceived ability to manage that stressor? I suppose experience, I guess." She explained that years of experience in the sport has contributed toward her ability to feel confident in her ability to navigate stressors: "I think just experience in every soccer game, having experience at that level for a little while, being university level, but just in the past, experience with just playing soccer, you know?" Alyssa also described the importance of past experiences in facilitating adaptive appraisals. She noted that reflecting on, and recognizing, the coach's confidence in Alyssa's ability to manage the demands of the game contributed toward Alyssa's ability to perceive the unexpected stressor as manageable. As her coach had confidence in her, she felt capable of managing the demands of competition (i.e., unexpected stressors):

It's reassuring in the sense where my head coach, she wouldn't play me if she didn't trust me. And I know that from the beginning 'cause she straight up told me in the beginning "you're not ready" (laughs), I was like 'okay'. She didn't say skill-wise, she said experience-wise. And so she's like "you know, you're not ready, you need more experience" but she told me straight up instead of sugar-coating it, but now I know she's gonna play me [now] because she told me straight up in the beginning that she wasn't [going to play me until I was ready], so, now, I think that's a resource or something that's [an] affirmation kind of thing.

Similarly, when asked about tools that aided her in managing the unexpected stressor that she faced, Adelyn also cited her coach's confidence in her as an important factor: "The faith that your coach has in you to be on the field." This was important in helping Adelyn to feel capable of managing the unexpected stressor that she faced surrounding competition. Drawing on interactions with significant others in sport may be an important source of self-efficacy in terms of managing unexpected stressors surrounding competition.

When appraising unexpected stressors, athletes in the present study appeared to draw on a range of experiences involving both expected and unexpected stressors. These experiences assisted athletes in perceiving the stressor as more manageable. Further, drawing on past experiences with stressors appeared to aid athletes in developing confidence and competence in managing unexpected stressors surrounding competition. Some athletes drew on coping approaches used with previous stressors because they have had success with such coping strategies in the past. It appears that being able to make accurate appraisals surrounding unexpected stressors, as well as drawing on past experiences with stressors, allows athletes to effectively assess available coping options for managing unexpected stressors. As such, based on

these adaptive appraisals, athletes appeared to be able to select appropriate coping strategies to effectively manage the unexpected stressors that they faced.

### **Section 3: Coping with Unexpected Stressors**

Informed by adaptive appraisals, athletes in the present study discussed selecting a range of coping approaches that they felt were appropriate to manage the unexpected stressors that they faced. Strategies were categorized into five themes: Emotional Self-Awareness to Support Coping, Realizing the Experiences of Significant Others in Sport, Use of Established Social Networks, (Pro)Actively Approaching the Problem, and Direction of Attention to (Re-)Engage. Coping efforts were directed toward altering the meaning of the unexpected stressor (i.e., emotion-focused coping) and/or toward actively trying to impact the situation (i.e., problem-focused coping). Typically, athletes used a combination of these strategies, permitting athletes to effectively manage the unexpected stressors that they faced.

It is important to note that despite the findings being presented in such a way that separates appraisals and coping, in both frameworks used to inform this study (i.e., Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), appraisals and coping are closely, intricately related, and the processes are difficult to truly separate. Both personal and environmental components play an integral role in the appraisal and coping process, and these processes are iterative, influencing one another while also being influenced by the changing person-environment interaction. With Thorne's (2016) recommendation to present data in a way that helps the reader to best access and comprehend the findings, appraisals and coping, though not mutually exclusive, were presented separately. Such organization will aid the reader in recognizing where the processes of appraisals and coping, respectively, appeared to be most relevant to the experience of unexpected stressors. Specifically, section 2 focused primarily on how women

varsity athletes appraised, assessed, and attempted to make sense of the unexpected stressors that they were facing. While informed by this appraisal process, section 3 instead focuses on how women varsity athletes attempted to manage the demands that they perceived associated with the unexpected stressors that they faced. As opposed to discussing how participants attempted to understand the situation (section 2), the third section is primarily focused on how athletes coped with the situation and/or the feelings stemming from the situation.

**Emotional Self-Awareness to Support Coping.** Athletes in the present study spoke to the value of being aware of and acknowledging how they were thinking and feeling. This permitted athletes to process their emotions and move forward following a challenging emotional situation and also aided athletes in achieving an optimal emotional state for competition. Athletes noted that being aware of their emotions was important to effectively regulate their thoughts and feelings. Brenda exemplified this concept:

It's just kind of letting yourself honour it [how you're feeling]. And being like, 'okay, I'm upset, that's fine, this was important to me, we didn't reach our goal, but we have a job to do tomorrow', so I think you just kind of have to honour it and then, best you can, try to move on. Obviously, that's a tough one to move on from, but I think if you let yourself be upset then you can move on. I feel like if I just kind of suppress it or don't really honour it than I just feel like it bottles up at the time that I don't want it to.

Brenda described being in touch with her emotions and being receptive to how she was feeling. Despite the emotions being more negatively valenced (e.g., sadness), Brenda recognized that in order to effectively move on, it was important to acknowledge and honour her emotions instead of suppressing them. Similarly, Alyssa, after experiencing an unexpected stressor,

reflected on the importance of acknowledging how she was feeling so that she could effectively regulate her emotions and move forward:

But I remember when I was getting self-defeated, I kind of did that acknowledgement so I was like, 'okay, I'm recognizing that's it is there. Not gonna fight it. I'm just gonna take a breath and go forward', so I guess I definitely, that technique [acknowledging the stressor] has helped me a lot!

It appears that when athletes recognized and accepted how they were feeling, they were able to regulate their emotions and move forward with an effective focus.

In addition to acknowledging and accepting the emotions that they experienced, athletes spoke to the importance of maintaining a balanced emotional state. Stella, for example, described the importance of directing attention inwards and recognizing how she's feeling in order to maintain a neutral, optimal emotional state when responding to an unexpected stressor:

I try and stay more within a neutral range of emotions. So, yeah, that's been good for me, and just realizing that that is the best place for me to mentally be. And to not worry so much about what everyone else is doing and to try and just focus on myself more.

Similarly, Brenda discussed how being aware of how she was feeling, and attempting to maintain a balanced emotional state, served as a resource to help her manage the unexpected stressor that she faced.

After [unexpected stressor], if I feel like I'm too amped up, or going into games I feel like I'm over pushing or I'm doing stuff that I don't normally do, I try to figure out what I'm feeling. I feel like if I can usually feel it in my stomach, I feel tight, so then if I feel that feeling, then I'll take my deep breaths, try to manage my breathing, try to bring myself down - which usually helps. ...being self-aware is a big tool that I use to try and

figure out... where I need to be, and where I am on game days and try to bring myself to that point. ...I can't get too into it otherwise I'm way too high. So, I have to bring myself down a little bit.

While athletes spoke to the value of being self-aware with respect to recognizing and accepting emotions, athletes also noted the importance of keeping emotions balanced in response to unexpected stressors. This desired emotional state appeared to help athletes in managing stressors that they faced during competition. It may be that honouring and accepting one's emotions, as opposed to attempting to ignore or suppress them, may allow athletes to effectively regulate their emotions so as to achieve an optimal emotional state for competition. Further, being aware of one's emotions appeared to assist athletes in achieving a preferred emotional state before and during competition.

**Realizing the Experiences of Significant Others in Sport.** In addition to being aware of how they were thinking and feeling, athletes in the present study spoke to trying to be cognizant of their teammate's thoughts and feelings when experiencing an unexpected stressor. Considering teammates in the present moment (i.e., directly surrounding the experience of an unexpected stressor) appeared to help athletes in effectively regulating their emotions. Diana's response to an unexpected stressor demonstrated how the consideration of teammates may be beneficial in managing emotion in response to unexpected stressors. She explained that she had to "try to keep a positive face on for everyone else. You don't ever wanna show that you're upset or angry... cause at the end of the day, it's for the team, you're trying to win as a team together." Brenda also discussed considering her teammates when attempting to manage the unexpected stressor: "... I owe it to my team to be the best that I can be and that involves being confident and feeling like I can get the job done. Otherwise I'm not the best fit for that moment." When

experiencing unexpected stressors, athletes in the present study were cognizant of how their responses may impact those around them (i.e., teammates). This awareness appeared to play a role in coping approaches as athletes attempted to manage the demands stemming from the unexpected stressors.

In addition to considering others when attempting to regulate emotions, athletes in the present study also recognized similar experiences of significant others in sport when managing unexpected stressors. Some of the athletes discussed understanding that other athletes have experienced something similar to the unexpected stressor that they had experienced surrounding competition. Lindsay, for example, described recognizing that other athletes, including her teammates, have experienced similar challenges in the past, and considered how her teammates responded to a similar stressor.

... I feel like sometimes when coaches are yelling at me to do something, they get in my head and then I end up doing too much of what they wanted me to do and I put myself in shitty situations, like I said, to get thrown or to get taken down or, you know? ... I was like: 'okay, you know what, I'm gonna wrestle for me, not for him. I'm gonna do what I do, because, what I do is working for me'. I listen to my coaches during my matches to a certain extent, cause, obviously, it's not always benefiting me. And that's what a lot of the [other] girls I feel do. They wrestle for themselves. They do what they know they can do. And if there is something that they may not be doing right, they will listen to coach. ...we are the ones in the middle of the match. We are dictating how it goes, so, we kind of need to be aware of what to do next.

Similarly, Diana also understood that other athletes experience similar challenges: "It's definitely hard, and it's definitely something that every athlete has to work on. No matter who

you are, I'm sure everyone struggles with that." Further, Adelyn discussed looking at a fellow senior teammate following an unexpected stressor and drawing on her teammate's strength to help her to cope: "I just remember looking at her and, and like, she's not crying so I'm not gonna start crying!" Considering significant others in sport when experiencing unexpected stressors appeared to assist the athletes in the present study in managing the unexpected stressors that they faced. Athletes appeared to recognize that they currently shared (i.e., were experiencing the same challenges as teammates), or may have previously shared (i.e., teammates had experienced a similar challenge in the past), similar challenges associated with unexpected stressors. This recognition may have allowed athletes to feel more connected and supported in their challenges, permitting them to more effectively manage the unexpected stressors that they faced.

**Use of Established Social Network.** Significant others in sport also played a more direct role in helping athletes in the present study to manage the unexpected stressors that they faced; athletes discussed the positive role of more active social support in the management of unexpected stressors. Social support networks appeared to assist athletes in managing their emotions as well as in facilitating efforts to alter the unexpected stressor. Further, in addition to emotional support, this social support also appeared to facilitate proactive coping efforts directed toward reducing the impact of unexpected stressors. With respect to emotional social support, Stella cited the importance of her teammates and coach in managing the unexpected stressor (disruptive crowd members) that she faced.

Having [my teammates] there to make sure I don't reach any point that is too high or too low is really good. Having my coach there is really good. And just having teammates that are there and being supportive and everyone to be like, "okay, just like ignore it. Let's go, here we go.

Knowing that her teammates, match partner, and coach were there for her helped Stella to effectively regulate her emotions in response to the unexpected stressors. She expanded on the role of her coach in helping her regulate her emotions following experiencing an unexpected stressor (spectator actions) during competition.

My coach was there..., we change over and he's like "what the hell was that [the unexpected stressor]? That was really weird.", you know, he feeds into it [sharing her perspective] and he knows what I want to hear when I'm on court, so he'll go with it, he'll let me get it out of my system. So, that's really good too, and just being in an environment where I feel like I am at a place where I'm very supported by the people around me.

In addition to reiterating the benefits of having a strong support system, Stella described the importance of having a coach who perceived the unexpected stressor in a way that was similar to how she perceived the event. Her coach's understanding and shared response helped her to acknowledge the stressor and effectively manage it. Similarly, Alyssa discussed the importance of having teammates that both understood her experience and also were there to support her in managing the unexpected stressor:

I've never had anything this extensive [the unexpected stressor, an injury], but I think having the girls on my team who understand what injury's like and that kind of stuff, and mine is obviously minor compared to a lot of these girls, right? But, the girls on your team, I mean, their first thought is they want you to be safe. It's nice to see that they care in that sense.

Speaking to teammates assisted Alyssa in managing how she was feeling through not only understanding that her teammates had experienced something similar, but also that her teammates understood the challenge she was facing.

Athletes in the present study received social support from a variety of individuals in their sport context, including teammates, other athletes, and coaches. Athletes noted the importance of significant others serving as resources to facilitate emotion regulation as athletes felt supported in their experience of unexpected stressors. Further, social support also assisted athletes in their proactive efforts to manage unexpected stressors that they were facing.

**(Pro)Actively Approaching the Problem.** Social support also aided athletes in proactively managing unexpected stressors that arose surrounding competition, aiding athlete's attempts to alter the form and/or negative effects of the unexpected stressors that they faced. Some athletes, upon experiencing or detecting the potential of an unexpected stressor to occur, described taking measures to try and eliminate the stressor or to try to reduce the impact of the stressor. Ellie, for example, immediately reached out to her coach for informational guidance upon experiencing an unexpected stressor:

I chatted with my coach and just kind of gave him a heads up, said 'hey this is how I feel, feels a little bit off'. He gave me some drills to do. That kind of helped with what I was feeling, and they actually did work for that day. I ended up doing some blocks with him and he said that it looked a lot better and whatever, so, quick, kind of little fixes to deal with the physical side of what I was feeling. So, then I did those same drills the day of competing just to kind of get that sharpness back.

Recognizing that she did not feel as she expected, Ellie engaged in active efforts with the support of her coach to reduce the impact of the unexpected stressor prior to the competition.

When discussing another unexpected stressor, Ellie also engaged in information seeking by watching how other athletes managed the competition track prior to her race: “I watched other athletes as they went around just to kind of see how they positioned themselves.” When experiencing unexpected stressors, Ellie made both proactive and reactive efforts to approach and reduce the impact of the unexpected stressor.

Diana also proactively prepared to reduce the impact of an unexpected stressor, reaching out to a trainer for practical support when she recognized the onset of an unexpected stressor (pain and discomfort prior to competition): “Definitely payed her [the trainer] some visits and she rubbed me out before games and stuff like that so that was nice.” Being able to recognize the onset of an unexpected stressor allowed Diana to engage in efforts to prevent the stressor from getting worse. In addition to getting medical assistance from a trainer prior to playing, Alyssa reached out to teammates to help reduce the impact of the stressor:

The girl [teammate] that was on my left side, she said she was gonna drop for me a lot, so if I had to use my left [injured, weaker leg], I could just tap it over to her, right? So, even that support, I didn’t even have to ask her to do that, she’s like “don’t worry, we’re there for you, like, we’re your backup”, right? And I was like, ‘oh cool, like, that’s nice’.

Alyssa, upon recognizing that the unexpected stressor may have an impact on the upcoming competition, was able to prepare in advance through planning with teammates so as to reduce the negative impact of the unexpected stressor.

In addition to the role of social support in facilitating proactive coping efforts (e.g., information seeking, tactical preparation), athletes noted the importance of a repertoire of other active and proactive strategies that helped them to manage unexpected stressors. Diana, for example, noted that she and her teammates frequently warm-up so that they are prepared in case

they need to suddenly enter the game. Further, Diana actively watches players that she may replace and opposing players that she will match-up against. Both of these strategies were cited by Diana as beneficial when she was unexpectedly substituted into a game:

We warm-up every fifteen minutes on the bench, so you're never really cold. You should always still be warm. Another way [to prepare] is looking at the players who you think you would take off. ... looking at the players, knowing what their tendencies are, knowing what they do, being able to read the other team... So, in this situation, when this happens, where do I go? How do I deal with this? Just, like, paying attention to the game.

Other athletes in the present study also noted similar pre-set routines or warm-ups as beneficial to helping them manage unexpected stressors. Alyssa, for example, spoke to the value of executing her competition routine in helping her manage an unexpected stressor that she faced: "Instead of worrying about it [the unexpected stressor] too much, I just tried to do what I would normally do and hope for the best and I think it ended up paying off." In addition to a pre-competition ritual, Lindsay drew on one of her routines in response to an unexpected stressor, a negative interaction with her coach, which helped her to manage the stressor also to re-engage in the competition:

After I turned away from him [her coach], I just took a deep breath and was like 'just breathe', I inhaled and I slapped my legs and I think that the small weird things that kind of help you just release that anger or negative energy, I guess. And for me, even before all my matches, I smack my arms, I smack my legs to kind of get the blood flow going and try to get any weird energies that I have out...

Actively engaging in breathing, self-talk, and her typical competition reset (e.g., smacking legs) helped Lindsay to re-engage in the competition following the unexpected

stressor. Similarly, as a part of her routine, Brenda also spoke to the value of mental skills in helping her manage an unexpected stressor that she faced. Specifically, Brenda described proactively preparing positive thoughts in advance of competitions in the case of a setback: “I feel like instead of those negative thoughts bombarding me, I have a foundation of positive thoughts.”

Athletes described using a range of proactive and reactive coping approaches to manage the unexpected stressors that they faced. Some of the proactive strategies were directed toward a specific stressor (e.g., self-talk) whereas other proactive efforts were not focused on a particular stressor, rather they were developed with the understanding that stressors may occur (e.g., routines). Further, if, after using proactive coping strategies, additional coping efforts were still required, athletes also engaged in more reactive coping approaches to unexpected stressors (e.g., self-talk) in conjunction with proactive strategies. It appears that the athletes benefited from a combination of proactive and reactive efforts to effectively manage unexpected stressors surrounding competition.

**Direction of Attention to (Re-)Engage.** When athletes in the present study were unable, or less able, to proactively prepare, and as such, were required to reactively cope with unexpected stressors, athletes described responding to unexpected stressors in ways that directed their attention and focus to the task at hand (e.g., the competition, the unexpected stressor). This included a perseverance mindset (i.e., keeping going regardless of what happens) and being able to bounce back from setbacks, as well as engaging in a variety of strategies to focus attention on the present competition. Brenda, for example, described the importance of a perseverance mindset in being able to keep going despite experiencing an unexpected stressor. “I think you almost can’t spiral at that moment. I definitely can’t let go until the buzzer goes.” Lindsay also

referred to a perseverance mindset as a tool to help her to re-engage in the competition following an unexpected stressor. She described the process of “staying in her head” and being resilient following the unexpected setback: “... Staying in your head is just being able to come back from that point loss and turn it back around without letting it affect you further. Just say: ‘okay, lost those points. Gotta come back.’” Similarly, Alyssa described how the ability to be mentally tough helps her manage unexpected stressors associated with competition: “I think, for me, being mentally tough is being able to bounce back from it and show your teammates that you’re over it, we’re moving on, we’re getting past it.” Alyssa provided additional insight regarding the role of perseverance: “I’ll just kind of close my eyes, take a breath, be like, ‘you know, I can do this, I’m gonna cope with it, I can push through it’.” Overall, athletes spoke to the importance of persevering and being able to re-engage with the task at hand following unexpected stressors.

In addition to a perseverance mindset, some athletes described adaptively used their emotional response to an unexpected stressor to direct their attention toward the task at hand. Adelyn, for example, described directing the anger and frustration from the unexpected stressor (conceding successive goals) back into the competition: “All I was focused on was just showing them, when we came back that second half, that we’re not a laughable team. We’re here to compete, so, you kind of forget about the score and just play.” Adelyn was able to re-engage in the game despite experiencing an unexpected stressor. Similarly, Lindsay described using her emotional response to the unexpected stressor, in this case, anger, in a positive manner in order to help her to effectively re-engage with the match:

So, I just said ‘yeah, whatever’ ...and walked back out there, slapped my legs, cause I was like: ‘I’m so angry’! I just slapped them [her legs] and then I was ready to wrestle! I channeled that anger back into my match to get myself that win.

Lindsay was able to effectively regulate her emotion and then adaptively direct her feelings to aid her in focusing on the task at hand. Athletes appeared to be able to adaptively use traditionally negative emotional responses (e.g., anger, frustration) to assist them in re-engaging following experiencing unexpected stressors.

While adaptively using emotions aided some athletes in the present study, athletes also reported using a variety of additional strategies to actively direct focus to the task at hand, allowing them to effectively move forward and engage in the competition following the unexpected stressor. Diana, for example, identified that: "...setting little goals for yourself" helped her stay engaged while managing an unexpected stressor. To minimize the impact of unexpected stressors, Alyssa directs her focus to the game by actively talking and by tracking the ball, helping her to focus on the task at hand.

... the way I can kind of forget about the stress is that I'm staying engaged. So, if the ball's over here, I'm going to the side or I'm talking, like I'm always talking to my team. I don't even know what I'm saying half the time, I'm just talking and that helps me calm down.

When actively engaging in efforts to direct attention, athletes reported focusing on aspects of the game or their actions that they could control. A perseverance mindset appears to have helped athletes to direct attention to the task at hand. Further, athletes adaptively used their thoughts and feelings surrounding the unexpected stressor to direct their attention toward the competition.

#### **Section 4: Future Unexpected Stressors**

In addition to being able to adaptively appraise and cope with the unexpected stressors that they faced, athletes in the present study appeared to be able to positively reflect on their

experiences, permitting them to learn, grow, and feel confident in managing future unexpected stressors. Many athletes discussed drawing on previous experience to assess and cope with the unexpected stressors that they faced in the present study, and it appears that when looking ahead, athletes reflected on the unexpected stressors that they faced as an opportunity for growth.

**An Opportunity for Growth.** Athletes spoke about reflecting on their experiences of unexpected stressors in a way that appeared to permit the athletes to learn from their experiences with the goal of better managing future stressors. Athletes described their experiences with unexpected stressors as learning opportunities and noted that effectively managing the unexpected stressor that they faced gave them confidence when considering managing future stressors. Ellie, for example, reiterated the importance of putting the event into perspective, but also spoke of perceiving the event as an opportunity for growth:

Not letting one stressor define your perspective of who you are as an athlete. Because you can either take that and say, 'well I guess that I'm gonna be a bad athlete' or you can take it and say 'okay, well this is what I'm gonna change for next time'. So, seeing it as a growth opportunity as opposed to a stressor that affected you.

Ellie's perspective appeared to enable her to acknowledge and accept the experience of the unexpected stressor in a way that permits her to grow and prepare for future challenges. As Ellie continued to look ahead, she felt that the experience of this unexpected stressor will be beneficial for future stressors: "Now that I know what doesn't necessarily work, you can kind of figure out what will work through your experiences."

Adelyn also noted that she views her experience with an unexpected stressor - conceding multiple goals over a short period of time – as an opportunity for growth: "I hope that, I think I have grown, we grew as a team from that experience. So, I think it is positive experience."

Similarly, Diana mentioned that despite the challenges of stressors that she has faced, experiencing them does help with coping in the future: “You just get better as you go, I think. With more experience, however unfortunate, you always get better.”

Stemming from this learning, athletes in the present study discussed taking proactive measures to prevent and/or prepare for similar stressors in the future. Lindsay, for example, discussed understanding that unexpected stressors will occur in the future and that it’s in her best interest to be prepared for them to occur: “I think I’ll just look back on these experiences and for ways to help, manage, or foresee that these things might happen.” Alyssa described approaches and resources that she intends to use in the future when managing unexpected stressors:

If it’s unexpected, I definitely have those techniques that I’ll do and I have my resources. I know I have my team, I know I have my coaches, I know I have my trainers. But also, another technique I have is I really like to envision it [unexpected stressor].

Stella also described how experiencing an unexpected stressor (disruptive spectators) has motivated her to “push to continue to try and work on my mental game and just keeping myself controlled in practice, outside of practice, in matches.” Similarly, Diana aims to prepare in advance to minimize the impact of a similar unexpected stressor, should one occur:

... Bring more tools to help avoid that [unexpected stressor] ... Just getting ahead of any of those stressors ... I guess just being proactive is what I’m trying to say. Always be ahead of the game and expect the worst and hope that it doesn’t happen.

**Experiences Foster Confidence and Preparation.** In addition to viewing their experiences with unexpected stressors as learning opportunities, athletes described gaining confidence in their coping abilities should similar stressors or other unexpected stressors arise in the future. When looking ahead, Brenda recognized that experiencing the unexpected stressor

that she faced may help her better assess and respond to similar stressors in the future: “I think I’ll just know how to manage it. Or at least have a better idea. Cause, you know, I’ve been through it before.” She added:

And I think sometimes when you get those stressors, you don’t know what to do, you don’t know how to feel, and you’re upset. You can’t figure out what you’re upset [about], or how to fix it. I feel like after having some of those big stressors I’ll be able to manage it better.

Like Brenda, Ellie spoke of how being able to effectively manage this unexpected stressor will provide her with confidence in the future should an unexpected stressor occur:

I think the fact that I was able to manage it and still perform at the best of my ability is encouraging, to know that that could happen again, and then, just the same techniques that I used in this case I would use again for the future ones.

Similarly, Lindsay said: “I think these experiences will help me see that before I was effective with managing it so that I can be effective again with managing it.” Adelyn echoed Lindsay’s thoughts regarding experience fostering confidence in managing future unexpected stressors: “I think that specific experience has given me confidence that I can handle those situations.” Lindsay expanded on feeling more equipped to handle a similar scenario if one were to occur, and further, discussed recognizing that unexpected stressors will inevitably occur in the future.

All those stressors, they will occur again, they most likely will. So, I think just the fact that I’ve dealt with them, I have that mindset of knowing how I’ve dealt with them. I think that’s what I’m going into next season with: there’s always gonna be something that’s unexpected in wrestling; it’s sports!

It appears that when experiencing unexpected stressors, athletes in the present study draw on experience from the past to guide appraisal and coping processes. It also seems that athletes feel more capable of managing unexpected stressors in the future, looking at their experience with unexpected stressors as opportunities to grow while also fostering a sense of self-confidence from being able to effectively manage their unexpected stressors.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore how women varsity athletes high in self-compassion experience unexpected stressors surrounding competition. Findings lead to the suggestion that the degree of familiarity with the stressor and the level of (mis)alignment with the athlete's expectations about a stressor and/or situation contributed to the categorization of a stressor as unexpected. Despite these factors, athletes were able to logically and adaptively appraise the unexpected stressors that they faced. Further, they were able to draw on past challenges with expected and unexpected stressors to facilitate adaptive appraisals. Despite some of the athletes not reaching their personal goals, athletes described their coping efforts as effective, using a combination of strategies to manage the unexpected stressors that they faced. They voiced that they reflected positively on the challenges they faced, viewing the unexpected stressors as an opportunity for growth. These experiences gave athletes confidence in preparing for, and managing, unexpected stressors in the future.

### **Classification of Stressors as Unexpected**

The present study builds on a growing body of research suggesting that unexpected stressors are a common phenomenon in high-level sport and the types of stressors that athletes in the present study classified as unexpected were similar to stressors reported as unexpected in past research (i.e., Dugdale et al., 2002; Holt et al., 2007). All of the participants in the present study had experienced at least one unexpected competition stressor when reflecting on recent competitions. As such, it appears that unexpected stressors appear to be a regular challenge that athletes experience, regardless of nuanced differences that exist between sport context (e.g., age, sport type, tournament format) and competition level (e.g., varsity, international).

To better understand the experiences associated with unexpected stressors, it is important to understand how unexpected stressors are appraised. For an event to be appraised as stressful, one of the following eight properties must be present: Novelty, predictability, event uncertainty, imminence, duration, temporal uncertainty, ambiguity, and timing of events in relation to the life cycle (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the present study, unexpected stressors appear to be less familiar than more expected stressors, and these unfamiliar stressors appear to possess heightened elements of novelty, and as such ambiguity and uncertainty. Further, in the present study, stressors were classified as unexpected if the situation did not align with the expectations of the athlete. Often, unexpected stressors possessed elements of both unfamiliarity and expectations not coming to fruition. Based on findings in the present study, stressors appear to be identified as unexpected if they possess elements of novelty, ambiguity, and uncertainty, properties which may stem from athletes being unfamiliar with the particular stressor and/or the stressor not being typical of competition.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggest that stressors are rarely completely novel, though there is often a lack of information present for the individual to make inferences from when assessing the situation. Adapted from Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) conceptualizations of the underlying properties of stress, and consistent with findings in the present study, Thatcher and Day's (2008) sport-specific definition of novelty suggests that novelty in sport does not consist solely of events that are completely new to the individual. Instead, novelty involves events and stressors that are not typical of competition. During competition, athletes do not expect events to deviate from the usual course, and athletes are not typically prepared for any change in competition-related expectations (Thatcher & Day, 2008). In line with this conceptualization, previous research by Dugdale et al. (2002) found that stressors were not classified as unexpected

due to the stressors being unfamiliar, but more so that the athletes did not expect to experience the stressors at a particular competition. Similarly, many of the stressors described by athletes in the present study were identified as unexpected as the competition event or a specific situation did not go as the participants anticipated. Athletes appear to have difficulty in anticipating, preparing for, and responding to stressors that are not typical of competition, contributing toward stressors being classified as unexpected.

While some of these stressors categorized as unexpected by athletes in the present study were described as completely novel to them, other stressors were ones with which the athletes had varying levels of previous experience. Some athletes, for example, had experienced a similar unexpected stressor (e.g., conceding points) in a different context (e.g., in a regular season game as opposed to a playoff game) or recognized elements (e.g., similar feelings) that were similar to past stressors that they had faced, but noted some differences between the current unexpected stressor and previous stressors. Further, some of the stressors classified as unexpected, albeit uncommon, were stressors that one may understand are possible, though may not be stressors that athletes anticipate needing to manage (e.g., injury, conceding points). It may be that stressors are not classified by athletes as unexpected solely due to a lack of familiarity or misalignment with their expectations, but instead that unexpected stressors are events that athletes did not anticipate needing to cope for when preparing for competition. As such, athletes may not have directed coping efforts toward the stressors that they labeled as unexpected, which, in turn, may have left athletes less prepared to manage the demands surrounding such stressors. In contrast, perhaps anticipating stressors that were more likely to occur permitted athletes to better prepare for such expected stressors, permitting them to more effectively manage expected stressors when they occurred. As there exists competition for limited cognitive resources

(Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), perhaps unexpected stressors are categorized as such not only due to their characteristics (i.e., unfamiliarity, misaligning with expectations), but due to athletes dedicating fewer proactive coping efforts toward unexpected stressors, which may be less likely to occur, relative to more expected stressors, which may be more likely to occur.

The athletes in the present study reported experiencing both expected and unexpected stressors. The athletes appeared to classify the stressors (i.e., as unexpected) based on the degree of familiarity and the level to which the stressor aligned, or misaligned, with their expectations. Dugdale and colleagues (2002) described expected stressors as stressors that the athlete or their team had planned for or prepared for, and found that a majority of the athletes classified the stressors that they experienced as unexpected (i.e., something that they had not prepared for in advance of the competition). Stressors identified by athletes in the study by Dugdale and colleagues (2002) were similar to those identified by athletes in the present study. With this in mind, while one might argue that the stressors were not completely unexpected as the athletes may have had prior experience with the stressor, or perhaps, may have, to some degree, recognized the possibility of such stressors. Regardless, the athletes in the present study spoke to experiencing what they identified as unexpected stressors. It appears that athletes in Dugdale et al.'s (2002) study and in the present study differentiate between expected and unexpected stressors, and characteristics such as degree of familiarity and misalignment with expectations appear to contribute toward stressors being classified as unexpected.

Athletes must be able to manage the demands of competition (Crocker & Graham, 1995; Holt & Hogg, 2002), and many of the stressors faced by athletes appear to be unexpected. As such, it is important to explore not only how athletes classify and appraise stressors, but also how athletes attempt to cope with unexpected stressors. With respect to coping, Lazarus and Folkman

(1984) note that many coping resources are finite (e.g., time to cool down, coach availability) and that there may be “competing demands” (p. 166) for similar coping resources (e.g., emotion regulation, cognitive efforts). In the present study, it may be that anticipatory coping resources were allocated toward events that are more likely to occur (i.e., expected stressors) rather than events that are less likely to occur (i.e., unexpected stressors). For example, it may be in the athlete’s best interest to engage in efforts to manage stressors that will most likely happen (e.g., competition nerves) instead of trying to prepare for stressors that are not as likely to happen (e.g., injury). Given the high level of importance placed on the competitions discussed by athletes in the present study, the athletes may have perceived a need to appropriately prioritize cognitive resources.

When individuals place value on a commitment, such as the importance of the competitions discussed by athletes in the present study, they may be more susceptible to environmental pressures (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Such environmental factors can impede the effective use of coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and may include competition importance, format, and pressure. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define this transactional variable as vulnerability: “the readiness of the person to react to certain types of situations as stressful” (p. 187). Vulnerability is a function of both the person (e.g., personal factors, beliefs) and the environment (e.g., demands of the situation, perceptions), and one can become vulnerable when they perceive a deficiency of resources when attempting to manage a stressor that is important to them (e.g., important competition). As athletes in the present study reported heightened perceptions of pressure as a consequence of competition importance, extra to typical competition stressors, athletes were required to prepare for and attempt to manage additional stressors surrounding important competition (e.g., elevated expectations, larger crowds, tougher

competition), which may have reduced efforts directed toward more infrequent stressors that are expected to be less likely to occur (e.g., injury, conceding points, unfavourable competition outcome).

When considering the implications of vulnerability and the distribution of cognitive resources, athletes in the present study may have been less able to direct coping resources toward recognizing similarities between past stressors and the stressors that they experienced in the competitions that they reflected on. As such the environmental demands (i.e., elevated competition importance) in the present study may have contributed toward athletes' classifications of stressors as novel, ambiguous, and/or uncertain; Perhaps athletes may not have perceived novel, ambiguous, and uncertain components of similar stressors occurring in an environment that did not increase coping vulnerability. As vulnerability is determined by a perceived deficit in coping resources and one's ability to protect against threats to their commitments (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), it may be beneficial for athletes to acquire sufficient coping resources so as to attenuate the impact of psychological vulnerability. The accumulation and development of coping resources and strategies may further help athletes in reducing elements of novelty surrounding unexpected stressors, permitting them to more adaptively appraise unexpected stressors that they face.

### **Appraising Unexpected Stressors**

Despite past research suggesting that unexpected stressors tend to be perceived as more threatening than expected stressors (Dugdale et al., 2002), all of the athletes in the present study appraised the unexpected stressors that they faced as something that they could manage. Such appraisals appeared to be possible due, in part, to athletes in the present study being able to logically assess the situation that they were in (i.e., appraising the meaning of the situation), and

subsequently, what could potentially be done about the situation (i.e., their coping resources and options). When contemplating potential outcomes in times of uncertainty, athletes tend to use subjective probabilities instead of objective probabilities, demonstrating the impact that personal factors and subjective appraisals have on resultant stress (Thatcher & Day, 2008). To assist in managing these potentially stressful situations, Thatcher and Day (2008) suggest that athletes should be encouraged to incorporate a more objective mindset when assessing event uncertainty. Athletes in the present study embraced this approach and were able to adopt a logical, analytic perspective when assessing unexpected stressors. As with more inference comes more opportunity for error in appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), athletes would benefit from looking at a situation logically and analytically to reduce the level of inference required to accurately appraise the situation, recognize potential coping options, and select appropriate coping strategies to manage the demands of the unexpected stressors.

A logical assessment of the unexpected stressor appeared to assist with perceptions of control, helping athletes to evaluate available coping resources and options. Such assessments of control may have contributed toward appraisals of challenge demonstrated by athletes in the present study. When an individual perceives having more control over a situation, they are more likely to appraise the situation as a challenge as opposed to making a threat appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Nicholls et al., 2012) and may be more likely to take action to influence a potential stressor (i.e., engage in proactive coping efforts; Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). Consistent with this finding, when athletes in the present study appeared to perceive a sense of control over an unexpected stressor, they engaged in efforts to change the circumstances surrounding the unexpected stressor or alter the stressor itself. Despite some of the athletes in this study appraised the unexpected stressor as outside of their control (e.g., crowd actions, roster decisions), they still

felt that they were able to manage the stressor upon experiencing it. In such cases, they engaged in efforts directed at the meaning of the situation and/or efforts to influence how they thought and/or felt about the situation. This finding is consistent with stress and coping theory (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Poliseo & McDonough, 2012) noting that perceptions of control are associated with selection of coping strategies. Further, it should be noted that despite these tendencies, and consistent with past findings (Kim & Duda, 2003; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), athletes in the present study used a mixture of both emotion- and problem-focused strategies. Athletes appeared to be confident in their appraisals of what coping options were available to them, permitting them to engage in appropriate and effective coping approaches. As such, facilitating adaptive appraisal processes in athletes may be particularly helpful for athletes in managing unexpected stressors.

Potentially supported by this logical approach, athletes in the present study described possessing an adaptive perspective toward sport, which consisted of recognizing that while sport is important, there is more to life, their self-worth, and their identity than sport. This mindset permitted athletes in the present study to avoid catastrophizing, over-identifying, and being overly critical toward the self following the challenge of an unexpected stressor. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that self-compassion is negatively associated with catastrophizing and personalizing thoughts in response to challenging events (Leary et al., 2007; Reis et al., 2015) and that self-compassion is negatively associated with self-criticism (Mosewich et al., 2013), overidentification (Neff, 2003b), and may help athletes avoid rumination (Ferguson et al., 2014; Mosewich et al., 2013).

Furthermore, this adaptive mindset may have contributed to a reduced likelihood of athletes making threat and/or harm/loss appraisals when assessing difficult sport situations (i.e.,

unexpected stressors). What is important to an individual (e.g., sport, identity beyond sport) influences what an individual believes is at stake when assessing a stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While athletes in the present study placed importance on sport and competition, they recognized that experiencing hardship during competition (e.g., an unexpected stressor) was not catastrophic. As threat appraisals are centered on the potential for harm and negative emotions (e.g., fear, worry, anxiety), athletes engaging in this adaptive perspective (i.e., recognizing that there is more to themselves and to life than sport) may have perceived lower threat (i.e., potential for harm or loss to occur) when appraising the unexpected stressors that they faced. As being self-compassionate rather than self-critical appears to help athletes in recognizing that there is more to them than their sport identity (Frentz, McHugh, & Mosewich, 2019), perhaps athletes could benefit from embracing a self-compassionate perspective toward sport so as to reduce the impact of challenging and/or negative sport experiences should they occur.

In addition to the role of a logical approach and an adaptive perspective when assessing unexpected stressors, athletes in the present study also used past experiences to facilitate adaptive appraisals. Regardless of the level of experience that participants had with a particular unexpected stressor (i.e., none at all, limited, some experience), athletes in the present study made efforts to compare the unexpected stressors that they were facing to past unexpected stressors or to past expected stressors. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) note that when experiencing elements of novelty, individuals draw on “appraisal inferences based on related previous experience or on general knowledge” (p. 115). Further, Thatcher and Day (2008) suggest that prior experiences may be relevant to novel stressors, as previous experiences “may have created similar emotions, occurred in a similar setting or required similar coping strategies” (p. 325).

Findings from the present study lend support to the role of previous experience in reducing novelty: In the case that athletes had not experienced a similar unexpected stressor before, or if their experience with the unexpected stressor was limited, they employed coping strategies that had been successful when dealing with stressors in past competitions. Alternatively, athletes who had experienced a similar unexpected stressor drew on that previous experience to inform coping approaches. Reflecting on past experiences, and using schemas, helps to appraise stressors, facilitating proactive coping efforts (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). When experiencing an unexpected stressor, athletes may benefit from comparing the unexpected stressor to elements of previous expected or unexpected stressors to alleviate aspects of novelty, uncertainty, and ambiguity surrounding the stressor. Such consideration may permit athletes to accurately assess available coping options so as to facilitate effective coping.

Reflecting on past experiences appears to have also aided athletes in the present study to feel confident and competent in addition to facilitating inferences about novel, uncertain, or ambiguous elements of unexpected stressors. Many athletes spoke to feeling capable of managing the unexpected stressors that they faced, remembering effectively managing a similar stressor, or a stressor possessing similar elements, in the past. As self-efficacy is fostered through mastery experiences (Bandura, 1982), such as successfully navigating past stressors, it seems that athletes were able to achieve a sense of self-efficacy through drawing on past experiences. Athletes appeared to incorporate this feeling of self-efficacy when engaging in appraisals, which is consistent with past research: individuals perceiving higher self-efficacy tend to make more challenge appraisals than those who perceive lower levels of self-efficacy, who tend to engage in more threat appraisals (Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1992). As past successes foster self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994), and athletes appeared to engage in adaptive appraisals upon recalling previous

experiences involving effective coping, athletes should be encouraged to reflect on past experiences when managing unexpected stressors. This resource may enhance athletes' self-efficacy, which is "concerned with judgments about how well one can organize and execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations containing many ambiguous, unpredictable, and often stressful elements" (Bandura & Schunk, 1981, p. 587). Drawing on past experiences permits reflection on effective coping strategies used to manage previous stressors, to infer information (i.e., reduce novelty, ambiguity, and uncertainty) regarding unexpected stressors, and to foster feelings of self-efficacy through recalling past experiences of coping success.

In addition to athletes in the present study reflecting on past experience to engage in adaptive appraisals, drawing on affirmation from others in their social environment factored into the athlete's secondary appraisals. When assessing the unexpected stressor, athletes recalled the confidence that their teammates and coaches had in them as resources, contributing toward athletes in the present study feeling capable of navigating the challenge of unexpected stressors. In addition to the previously discussed mastery experiences, self-efficacy can be fostered through individuals receiving verbal affirmation that they possess the ability to manage a given activity (Bandura, 1994). In the case of athletes in the present study, recognizing their teammate's and coach's confidence in their ability to manage the demands of competition may have contributed toward athletes feeling prepared to manage the unexpected stressors that they experienced. In addition to drawing on previous experiences as a source of self-efficacy, it may benefit athletes to reflect on interactions and information from significant others in sport as an additional resource to enhance self-efficacy. Further, coaches and practitioners should be aware of the

potential benefits of fostering self-efficacy in athletes so as to help athletes to more adaptively appraise unexpected stressors.

Adaptive appraisals in the present study may have been facilitated by high levels of self-compassion possessed by the athletes. A self-compassionate approach allows for more accurate perceptions of the self and of a situation (Neff, 2003a) and lower levels of overidentification, allowing one to assume a more objective perspective of one's situation (Neff et al., 2005). As such, this mindful approach may permit athletes to examine the situation (i.e., an unexpected stressor) in a more logical manner and allow athletes to avoid catastrophizing and/or over-identifying with maladaptive thoughts and feelings. Further, self-compassion is associated with adaptive appraisals (i.e., higher levels of control, lower levels of threat) in sport (Mosewich et al., 2019). This self-compassionate perspective may have helped athletes in the present study to more accurately appraise uncertain and/or ambiguous elements of unexpected stressors, permitting them to more appropriately select effective coping strategies to manage the unexpected stressors that they experienced. Further, the finding that women varsity athletes high in self-compassion perceived a sense of self-efficacy when assessing unexpected stressors is consistent with research suggesting that self-compassion is positively associated with self-efficacy (Iskender, 2009) and perceived competence (Neff et al., 2007).

### **Coping with Unexpected Stressors**

Despite unexpected stressors evoking more intense emotional responses relative to expected stressors (Devonport et al., 2013), athletes in the present study were able to effectively regulate their emotions surrounding unexpected stressors that they experienced. Research suggests that possessing sufficient resources to be able to effectively regulate and control one's emotions is important to success in the domain of sport (e.g., Jones, 2003; Kaiseler, Polman, &

Nicholls, 2009; Wagstaff, 2014). Emotion regulation can be defined as “the process of initiating, maintaining, modifying, or changing the occurrence, intensity, or duration of internal feeling states and emotion-related physiological processes, often in the service of accomplishing one’s goals” (Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000, p. 137). This description of emotion regulation encompasses efforts taken by athletes in the present study to not only attenuate emotional responses to unexpected stressors, but also to help athletes to control their emotions prior to competition so as to be better prepared for stressors that arise and to assist them in refocusing and re-engaging following unexpected stressors.

In order to effectively regulate and cope with emotional consequences, it is important that one is aware of, and accepts, their emotions (Gratz & Roemer, 2004; Herwig, Kaffenberger, Jäncke, & Brühl). In the domain of sport, being able to understand and regulate one’s emotions is important in managing the demands of training and competition (Laborde, Dosseville, & Allen, 2016). In line with research supporting the importance of effectively controlling one’s emotions so as to achieve an optimal emotional state for competition (Hanin, 2000; Jones 2003), awareness of emotions appeared to help athletes in the present study in maintaining an optimal emotional state prior to, during, and following the experience of unexpected stressors.

Being aware of, and open to, how one is thinking and feeling (i.e., mindfulness) may permit athletes to not only recognize when they are not in an optimal emotional state to manage the demands of competition (e.g., unexpected stressors), but may also aid athletes in their efforts to achieve their desired emotional competition state if adjustment is required. This adjustment could occur following the experience of an unexpected stressor (i.e., reactively) or this adjustment could take place prior to the competition and/or unexpected stressor (i.e., proactively). As those with fewer coping resources may be more likely to experience difficulty in

managing stressors should they occur (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997), proactive efforts to remain at a preferred emotional state prior to, and during, competition may be beneficial for athletes in managing stressors that arise; instead of using cognitive resources to regulate emotions, resources can instead be directed toward managing the task at hand (i.e., unexpected stressor).

A self-compassionate perspective is consistent with the approach that athletes used to achieve and maintain an optimal emotional state in the present study. Specifically, mindfulness, one of the components of self-compassion, involves accepting feelings and emotions and keeping them in a balanced awareness as opposed to overidentifying with them or ignoring them completely. To aid athletes in being both aware of their emotions and in regulating their emotions so as to achieve, and maintain, an optimal emotional state, athletes may benefit from embracing a mindful, self-compassionate approach. As self-compassion “operates as an effective emotion regulation strategy” (Neff et al., 2005, p. 264), such a perspective may have contributed towards athletes in the present study appearing to successfully regulate their emotions in response to unexpected stressors.

Further exploring the role of emotion and emotion regulation, some athletes were able to “channel” their feelings (e.g., anger, frustration) to adaptively re-engage with the competition. While anger in sport can be dysfunctional (Jones, 2003; Lane, Beedie, Jones, Uphill, & Devonport, 2012), Hanin (2010) notes that negatively toned emotions (e.g., anger) do not always have negative impacts on performance. Further, Jones (2003) suggests that some athletes may use anger to “energize subsequent behaviour and ensure that they channel extra physical and mental resources toward their task” (p. 477). The way in which emotions influence sport experiences depends on the athlete and their individual factors, and emotions, such as anger, can have a positive or negative impact on an athlete’s experiences (Jones, 2003; Woodman, Davis,

Hardy, Callow, Glasscock, & Yuill-Proctor, 2009). It may be that athletes in the present study were able to manage their emotions in such a way that permitted them to use their emotions as a resource in re-engaging with the task at hand. The athlete's emotional self-awareness appeared to be important in helping the athletes in the present study to adaptively manage and respond to the unexpected stressors that they faced.

Consistent with past sport research (e.g., Crocker & Graham, 1995; DeFreese & Smith, 2014; Dugdale et al., 2002; Gaudreau et al., 2002; Holt et al., 2007; Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997), athletes in the present study also used social support to assist them in regulating their emotions. A strong social support network can serve as an important coping resource (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and can facilitate adaptive appraisals when assessing potentially ambiguous and/or upcoming stressors (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). In the present study, social support was used both as a resource to regulate emotions and as a tool to actively prepare for and/or alter an unexpected stressor. With respect to social support serving as an emotion-focused coping approach, and in line with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) description of emotion-focused coping, social support often involved others in the sport environment helping the athlete to change the way that they perceived an event and/or extending emotional support toward the athlete. When athletes needed assistance re-appraising an event or managing reactions to an event, utilizing their social support network (e.g., teammates, coaches) helped them to interpret the event in a more adaptive manner. While social support can serve as an emotional resource, social support networks can offer informational and tangible support regarding a stressor as well; gathering information in advance of potentially stressful encounters may aid in reducing the future impact of these stressors (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Thatcher & Day, 2008) and can assist in reducing ambiguity surrounding a stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Such proactive efforts, even if

unsuccessful, provide additional information regarding a potential stressor, potentially leading to re-appraisal and modification of coping efforts.

When reaching out for social support, whether it was emotional, tangible, or informational, some of the athletes considered the challenge that they were facing as something that significant others in sport (e.g., teammates, coaches) also desired to manage. As such, and consistent with communal coping (Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne, 1998; Neely, McHugh, Dunn, & Holt, 2017), some athletes recognized the value in shared coping, communicated the meaning of the situation, and collaborated to reduce the negative impact of the stressor that they experienced. Athletes should be encouraged to proactively establish a strong network of support within their social environment and reach out for support for assistance in navigating challenging sport situations (e.g., unexpected stressors).

While some research suggests that individuals high in self-compassion are no more likely to seek social support than those who are not high in self-compassion (e.g., Neff et al., 2005), Allen and Leary (2010) note that additional research is needed. In the context of sport, Wasylikiw and Clairo (2018) observed that self-compassion predicts more positive attitudes toward help-seeking in a sample of men varsity athletes. Further, recent research suggests that there exists a positive relationship between self-compassion and perceiving fewer challenges to seeking help and care (e.g., less help-seeking stigma; Brion, Leary, & Drabkin, 2014; Heath, Brenner, Lannin, & Vogel, 2018; Heath, Brenner, Vogel, & Lannin, 2017). Contributing toward this area, findings from the present study suggest that women varsity athletes who are high in self-compassion reached out to members of their social networks when they believed that they needed assistance in coping with the unexpected stressors that they faced. This is consistent with Mosewich and colleagues (2013) suggestion that a self-compassionate perspective, specifically, the idea of

common humanity, may allow athletes to “more easily accept support from others” (p. 516). It may be that athletes high in self-compassion recognize and accept that they may need assistance in managing a challenging situation and are able to engage in help- and support-seeking behaviours when necessary. Overall, it appears that women varsity athletes high in self-compassion were both willing (i.e., wanted to seek out assistance) and able (i.e., had access to support networks) to use social support to help to manage unexpected stressors that they faced.

In addition to facilitating support seeking efforts, a common humanity perspective may also have supported coping through helping athletes in the present study in recognizing similar experiences of other athletes. Additionally, and further to the role of direct social support, athletes may be able to learn more about unfamiliar situations (e.g., unexpected stressors) through the experiences of others (Thatcher & Day, 2008). Consistent with Mosewich and colleagues (2013) suggestion that “a sense of common humanity would allow athletes to identify with others with similar experiences” (p. 516), athletes in the present study were able to recognize that other athletes experienced similar challenges, which, in turn, appeared to help them to effectively regulate their emotions and to support and guide coping efforts (e.g., observing how other athletes had managed something similar). Understanding that one is not alone in their experience can alleviate feelings of isolation, which may permit individuals to, instead, embrace a more adaptive perspective toward such challenges (e.g., they were in this together; Neff, 2003b). Athletes in the present study speaking to recognizing the similar experiences of others supports Allen and Leary (2010) suggestion that individuals higher in self-compassion “may benefit from the indirect, implied support provided by the realization that other people share whatever problems they may have” (p. 112). Understanding and being cognizant of how other athletes experience and manage challenges in sport may help athletes to feel more

connected, and less isolated, in their setbacks (i.e., common humanity), and as such, may influence appraisal and coping processes in athletes as they attempt to manage setbacks (e.g., unexpected stressors).

While effectively regulating one's emotions in response to unexpected stressors was important, athletes in the present study also described a range of strategies and resources that served as more problem-focused approaches to managing unexpected stressors that they faced, some of which were proactive in nature. Individuals are more likely to engage in proactive coping efforts if they perceive a situation and/or stressor as something that they can positively impact (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). Further, resources and skills accumulated by an individual can aid them in better managing stressors that occur. Proactive coping "consists of efforts undertaken in advance of a potentially stressful event to prevent it or modify its form before it occurs" (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997, p. 417). Consistent with this idea, athletes in the present study described engaging in active efforts to manage unexpected stressors upon recognizing the occurrence, or potential occurrence, of an unexpected stressor. In the context of sport, the use of proactive efforts to prepare for upcoming stressors have been found to aid athletes in effective coping (Holt, 2003), particularly in the context of preparing for unexpected events (Gould et al., 1999). Further, Holt and colleagues (2007) tentatively suggest that proactive coping efforts may contribute to effective coping with unexpected stressors. Findings from the present study support this suggestion, as athletes using proactive coping strategies reported effectively coping with both expected and unexpected stressors that they faced surrounding competition. As such, athletes should be encouraged to be sensitive to cues that may signal the need for the athlete to engage in proactive coping. When it is possible to detect unexpected stressors, preparing in

advance to modify the form, or reduce the impact, of unexpected stressors may support effective coping.

In addition to recognizing when proactive coping efforts should be mobilized, the ability to accumulate resources is also an important component of effective proactive coping (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). As one cannot prepare for every potential stressor, one can draw on these resources to reduce the impact of a stressor should an unexpected stressor occur. The repertoire of skills and resources possessed by athletes in the present study appeared to help them to reactively manage unexpected stressors that they faced surrounding competition. In addition to resources discussed previously (e.g., social support network, emotion regulation), athletes used a reservoir of prepared skills and tools (e.g., self-talk, physical cues) that they could draw on to manage unexpected stressors that they faced. These strategies were used to help the participants to calm down and reach, or regain, an optimal emotional state for competition and/or to re-engage with the task at hand (i.e., competition).

Coping strategies used by athletes in the present study to manage unexpected stressors were similar to coping strategies observed by Holt and colleagues (2007). Further, coping strategies employed by the athletes in the present study in response to unexpected stressors were similar to coping strategies reported by athletes in previous research (Crocker & Graham, 1995; Gould et al., 1993; Kaiseler et al., 2009). As Dugdale and colleagues (2002) observed a tendency to refrain from responding following unexpected stressors, it is important to arm athletes with tools and resources to permit them to effectively manage and re-engage with unexpected stressors that they face. In line with past research (e.g., Hatzigeorgiadis, Theodorakis, & Zourbanos, 2004; Holt, 2003; Horn, Gilbert, Gilbert, & Lewis, 2011; Kim & Duda, 2003), athletes should be encouraged to develop and be prepared to employ a range of psychological

skills to aid them in managing the demands of sport (e.g., unexpected stressors). Such skills may allow athletes to manage emotional responses to unexpected stressors but can also assist athletes in re-engaging with the task at hand following the experience of an unexpected stressor.

Another important resource that athletes in the present study were able to draw on involved a perseverance mindset. Despite the challenge of experiencing an unexpected stressor, athletes were able to engage in a perseverance mindset which may have helped to appropriately guide their efforts and their focus toward the task at hand (i.e., competition). Athletes in the present study described perseverance as being able to continue moving forward with focus on the task at hand, even in the face of challenges or setbacks. Athletes appeared to be able to remain optimistic and persevere, as opposed to ruminating and/or giving up, following a challenging experience (i.e., an unexpected stressor). Further, athletes in the present study spoke to effectively re-engaging with the competition despite facing unexpected stressors. A self-compassionate perspective may have played a role in athletes being able to push forward despite the setback of an unexpected stressor. For example, Ferguson and colleagues (2014) found that self-compassion was beneficial in challenging sport situations through increasing one's perseverance. The authors suggest that a self-compassionate perspective may help athletes to avoid being overwhelmed by the challenge that they're facing, and instead, "view their difficult experiences in an optimistic manner that allows them to take initiative and persevere through their difficult experiences toward reaching their potential" (p. 213). Fostering such a mindset in athletes may permit them to embrace this adaptive approach when facing unexpected stressors surrounding competition.

Similarly, the concept of mental toughness, which involves the ability to effectively manage, persevere, and refocus when experiencing setbacks and demands associated with

competition (Gucciardi, 2017; Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002), also appears to be theoretically related to the mindset described by participants in the present study. Wilson, Bennett, Mosewich, Faulkner, & Crocker (2019) suggest that self-compassion may facilitate mental toughness, describing the relationship between self-compassion and mental toughness as a “zipper effect”. Specifically, mental toughness, which is important in remaining focused and persevering despite challenging situations, complimented a self-compassionate perspective, which allowed athletes to engage in re-appraisals and to move forward following a challenge. Athletes in the present study appeared to demonstrate a mentally tough mindset through their ability to persevere and direct focus toward the task at hand despite experiencing an unexpected stressor. Further, they illustrated an approach consistent with a self-compassionate perspective as they engaged in adaptive appraisals following the challenge and were able to re-engage with the task (i.e., competition). A self-compassionate perspective may be associated with a perseverance and mentally tough mindset, which in turn, appears to be involved in the process of managing unexpected stressors. As such, coaches and practitioners may be inclined to promote such perspectives (i.e., self-compassionate, mentally tough, perseverant) in their athletes to prepare them to manage unexpected stressors in sport. Having access to, and using, a repertoire of coping resources appeared to help athletes in the present study to manage unexpected stressors that they faced.

Athletes in the present study appeared to use a range of coping resources and approaches to actively manage the unexpected stressors that they faced. Consistent with previous research findings, athletes in Holt and colleagues (2007) study reported a variety of coping approaches that were similar to those reported by athletes in the present study, including a range of behavioural (e.g., routine, practice), cognitive (e.g., self-talk, rationalizing), and emotional (e.g.,

social support, breathing) coping strategies. However, despite these similarities, findings exploring coping approaches in the present study differed from those in past research examining unexpected stressors in sport. For example, athletes in Holt and colleagues (2007) study reported engaging in avoidance coping in response to the stressors that they faced. Similarly, Dugdale and colleagues (2002) found that there was “a tendency to hold back or hesitate from responding or acting in the face of unexpected stressors” (p. 29), and some athletes reported avoidance and/or denial. In contrast, none of the athletes in the present study reported delays in responding, avoidance, or disengagement responses to unexpected stressors. This is consistent with previous research finding a negative association between self-compassion and avoidance coping (Huysmans & Clement, 2017; Mosewich et al., 2019; Neff et al., 2005). It appears that instead of engaging in avoidance coping, which research in sport suggests is a maladaptive and/or ineffective coping strategy (Crocker & Graham, 1995; Nicholls et al., 2005; Nicholls & Polman, 2007), athletes in the present study used a variety of strategies targeted at engaging with and managing the stressor, and such efforts which were perceived as effective by athletes in the present study.

### **Looking Forward to Future (Unexpected) Stressors**

Coping approaches employed by athletes in the present study were often informed by effective coping approaches used in previous experiences. Consistent with the findings of the present study, research has found that coping is learned and developed over time and through experiences with coping in sport (Hanton, Neil, Mellalieu, & Fletcher, 2008; Nieuwenhuys, Vos, Pijpstra, & Bakker, 2011). Holt and colleagues (2007) observed that the older, more experienced athletes appeared to cope more effectively with the stressors that they faced, a vast majority of which were unexpected. The authors theorized that older athletes had been able to more

effectively cope due to a higher level of accumulated experience in their sport. Athletes in the present study, regardless of their age, reported drawing on past experiences when selecting strategies to manage the unexpected stressors that they faced, and also reflected positively on their coping effectiveness. It appears that women varsity athletes high in self-compassion were able to draw on past experiences in coping with sport to effectively manage the unexpected stressors that they faced surrounding competition. Athletes should be encouraged to reflect on previous coping experiences so as to help guide coping efforts when managing unexpected stressors surrounding competition.

In addition to drawing on past experience to manage unexpected stressors that athletes discussed in the present study, athletes reflected positively on these stressors, viewing them as opportunities to learn and to grow. Further, athletes viewed effectively coping with the unexpected stressors that they faced as further evidence that they could handle similar situations in the future (i.e., fostering self-efficacy). Findings from the present study support research suggesting that individuals embracing a self-compassionate perspective learn and attempt to improve following failures, setbacks, and challenges (Breines & Chen, 2012; Neff et al., 2005; Shepherd & Cardon, 2009), which could include unexpected stressors. As a self-compassionate perspective permits one to approach failure and setback with understanding, openness, and kindness, as opposed to harsh self-criticism and negative evaluations, Neff and colleagues (2005) suggest that “self-compassionate individuals may be better able to see failure as a learning opportunity” (p. 274). As such, self-compassion may play a role in permitting athletes to reflect on challenges, such as unexpected stressors, in a positive manner.

## **Empirical Contributions and Applied Implications**

The present study makes many contributions to the sport psychology literature. First, the present study builds on a growing body of research suggesting that unexpected stressors are a common phenomenon in high-level sport (e.g., Dugdale et al., 2002; Holt et al., 2007). Further, findings from the present study provided insight into why such a high number of stressors may be classified as unexpected. Stressors that possess elements of novelty, whether that is due to the level of familiarity or the stressor misaligning with expectations, appear to be categorized as unexpected. To reduce elements of novelty surrounding unexpected stressors, athletes should be encouraged to relate unexpected stressors that they are facing to past experiences with stressors. Past experiences can aid individuals in recognizing and assessing potential stressors (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997), and reflecting on past experiences with stressors sharing similar elements as unexpected stressors (e.g., form, context, feelings) may help reduce ambiguous or uncertain aspects of unexpected stressors. In addition to facilitating more accurate appraisals, such reflection may inform coping and may foster feelings of self-efficacy, which also appeared to help athletes in feeling capable of managing unexpected stressors that they faced.

Reflecting on experience appears to be important when experiencing unexpected stressors, and a self-compassionate perspective may support the reflection process. As self-compassion enables individuals to attenuate the negative impact of failure more effectively (Leary et al. 2007; Neff et al., 2005), individuals higher in self-compassion may be better able to reflect on challenges without being clouded or overcome with negative thoughts, feelings, and emotions than those low in self-compassion. Taking a kind, open approach when reflecting on past challenges (e.g., expected or unexpected stressors) may allow athletes to be better able to learn and grow from challenges like unexpected stressors. As such, not only should athletes be

encouraged to reflect on past coping experiences to understand the circumstances in which strategies are most effective (Tamminen & Holt, 2012), reflection should be executed in a kind, objective manner so as to learn from experiences that may have been challenging and/or negative. Reflecting on past encounters with stressors, and drawing on such experiences when appraising and coping with unexpected stressors, may help athletes in effectively navigating such demands.

In addition to the importance of past experience in reducing novelty, ambiguity, and uncertainty surrounding unexpected stressors, a logical view of the situation should be encouraged to help athletes to make more accurate appraisals so as to guide coping. Such a mindset may support efforts to analytically relate the current situation to previous experiences with stressors and may also assist in analyzing potential coping options. Further, an adaptive perspective toward sport (i.e., that while sport is important, there is more to oneself and to life than sport) should be encouraged to prevent athletes from placing an overwhelming amount of pressure on themselves. In doing so, athletes may be able to view stressors more logically as opposed to catastrophizing, potentially permitting more accurate appraisals of the stressor. Perhaps a mindful approach may assist athletes in being able to embrace a more balanced, adaptive view toward sport and when experiencing unexpected stressors. Self-compassion interventions (e.g., Leary et al., 2007; Mosewich et al., 2013) have encouraged such an objective perspective when fostering the mindfulness component of self-compassion. Thus, this mindful, self-compassionate approach may aid in fostering the logical, adaptive perspectives that appeared to aid athletes in the present study in managing unexpected stressors.

Potentially supported by adaptive appraisals, athletes also appeared to be able to effectively cope with unexpected stressors that they faced. While avoidance and disengagement

have been reported in past research investigating unexpected stressors in sport (e.g., Dugdale et al., 2002; Holt et al., 2007), avoidance and/or disengagement coping strategies were not observed in the present study. Instead, athletes in the present study engaged in proactive and reactive efforts directed toward managing the unexpected stressor. With respect to proactive efforts, findings from the present study support Holt and colleagues (2007) suggestion that proactive coping may facilitate effective coping. Athletes in the present study utilized an assortment of proactive resources designed to reduce the impact of a stressor should one occur. Further, upon detection of potential stressors, athletes engaged in active efforts to approach and attempt to manage the potential stressor. As one must be sensitive to both internal and external cues to detect potential stressors (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997), athletes would be well served to engage in efforts to be aware of cues that a stressor may occur. With this in mind, fostering a sense of mindfulness to allow for a more accurate understanding of one's current situation and enabling one to change the self or environment in an effective manner (Neff, 2003a) may help athletes to more effectively recognize the potential for stressors to occur in their sporting environment.

While athletes were able to proactively reduce the impact of some of the unexpected stressors, athletes were also required to engage in reactive strategies when managing unexpected stressors. As one cannot prepare for every possible stressor in sport, athletes should be encouraged to accumulate and develop a range of coping resources and strategies to effectively navigate unexpected stressors that may arise surrounding competition. Findings from the study suggest that one such resource, a perseverance, mentally tough mindset, may help athletes to manage unexpected stressors that occur, regardless of the stressor. As self-compassion appears to be an important component in facilitating a mentally tough mindset (Wilson et al., 2019) and increases perseverance (Ferguson et al., 2014), athletes may benefit from adopting a self-

compassionate perspective to assist them in responding adaptively to setbacks such as unexpected stressors. This perseverance, mentally tough mindset was supplemented by the use of skills and strategies used to direct the athlete's attention to the task at hand (i.e., competition) following experiencing unexpected stressors. As such, as another proactive resource, it is recommended that athletes prepare a repertoire of mental skills to draw upon in the case of an unexpected stressor, regardless of what the stressor may be, to re-engage following setback.

In addition to developing mental skills to manage unexpected stressors, it is recommended that athletes build and maintain a strong social network of significant others in sport (e.g., teammates, friends, coaches, trainers, sport psychologists) to reach out to for assistance when needed. Social support has been cited as an important resource in managing setbacks and stressors in sport (e.g., Gould et al., 1993; Mosewich et al., 2014), and athletes in the present study sought out emotional, tangible, and informational social support to proactively and reactively manage unexpected stressors that they faced. Further, recognizing similar experiences of unexpected stressors faced by significant others within their social environment appeared to help athletes in the present study to feel more connected to others and supported adaptive coping. In addition to establishing a supportive social network, athletes should be encouraged to recognize how their experiences relate to others in their sporting environment. These findings support the suggestion (Mosewich et al., 2013) that it may be beneficial for athletes to adopt a common humanity perspective to aid them in being able to both recognize shared experiences and also to receive help from others.

### **Limitations and Strengths**

Limitations of the present study should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings. While interpretive description can be employed with samples of nearly any size (Thorne, 2016),

the current study only presented data from seven participants at one interview timepoint. Furthermore, as the selection criteria in the present study was relatively specific, findings may not be generalizable beyond the population within which the participants were sampled (i.e., women varsity athletes high in self-compassion). As there is a growing body of literature supporting self-compassion as a valuable resource in sport (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2014; Ferguson et al., 2015; Mosewich et al., 2013; Reis et al., 2015), women varsity athletes high in self-compassion were sampled to gain insight into how athletes possessing this perspective navigate the experience of unexpected stressors. Therefore, despite this limitation, the reporting of adaptive responses to unexpected stressors may guide future research toward interventions and/or research exploring the experience of unexpected stressors in other populations as well as the role of self-compassion in navigating other sport-related demands.

It must be noted that while all of the athletes in the present study were considered high in self-compassion, one cannot imply that a self-compassionate approach caused adaptive responding by the athletes in the present study. Further, the cultural backgrounds and contexts of the participants was not explored in the present study and could potentially be important in the experience of unexpected stressors and understanding self-compassion. While conceptual links between self-compassion and the findings of the present study have been discussed, further research is required to explore associations between self-compassion, unexpected stressors, culture, and other factors that may be potentially relevant to the experience of unexpected stressors (e.g., perseverance, self-efficacy).

While qualitative methodologies can help to understand the complex nature of coping, it may be challenging for individuals to recall the dynamic coping process in retrospective interviews (Nicholls & Ntoumanis, 2010). As the stress and coping process is transactional, often

involving re-appraisal and coping adjustments, one may not be able to accurately recall the intricacies of this process. Athletes in the present study may not have been self-aware and/or accurate in their description of appraisal and coping processes. Further, the interviews may not have been able to capture the complete picture of how and why athletes appraised, re-appraised, selected, and re-selected coping strategies. Future research should look to use alternative methods, such as diaries or think aloud protocols, to capture the process of coping without loss of detail due to the passing of time.

A strength of the present study was the use of purposeful sampling to recruit athletes (i.e., women varsity athletes) who had a high probability of having experienced unexpected stressors in previous competition (see Holt et al., 2007). Interviews were scheduled to take place after a major competition for the athletes (e.g., playoff game) which, relative to more typical games (e.g., regular season), were expected to be more stressful for athletes to manage. As such, it was anticipated that athletes would be more likely to experience unexpected stressors than they would in a less important competition. Further, athletes recruited were, per Neff's (2003b) scoring guidelines (i.e., at or above 3.50), considered to be high in self-compassion. Athlete's self-compassion scores ranged from 3.50 to 4.65, with a mean value of 3.83 ( $SD = 0.48$ ). Athletes sampled in the present study observed similar self-compassion scores ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ) to women athletes considered high in self-compassion that were sampled in previous projects, such as Ingstrup and colleagues (2017) observing a mean score of 3.09 ( $SD = 0.53$ ). The use of purposeful sampling increased the researcher's confidence that athletes were able to provide insight into the phenomena of interest (i.e., self-compassion and unexpected stressors).

## Conclusion

Findings from the present study add to a growing body of literature supporting the value of self-compassion as a resource in the context of sport (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2015; Mosewich et al., 2013; Mosewich et al., 2019; Reis et al., 2015). Although research suggests that unexpected stressors are appraised as more threatening and more stressful (Dugdale et al., 2002), athletes in the present study reported feeling capable of managing the unexpected stressors that they experienced. Overall, women varsity athletes high in self-compassion appear to be able to make adaptive appraisals and were able to effectively cope with unexpected stressors surrounding competition. Findings from the present study provide insight into why these athletes classify stressors as unexpected (i.e., due to the degree of familiarity and/or misalignment with expectations). Further, the present study shed light on the importance of drawing on past experiences, encouraging logical appraisals, and promoting an adaptive perspective toward sport, competition, and setbacks (e.g., unexpected stressors) to help athletes in adaptively appraising unexpected stressors. Developing and engaging with a strong social network, being aware of and in control of one's emotions, and recognizing the similar experiences of others appeared to help athletes in managing the unexpected stressors that they faced. Further, actively engaging with the unexpected stressors and directing attention toward the task at hand, as opposed to disengaging or avoiding unexpected stressors, was also important in helping athletes to navigate unexpected stressors. Finally, the athletes spoke to reflecting on their experiences with unexpected stressors, describing how their experiences may inform future appraisal and coping with sport-related demands (e.g., unexpected stressors). Adaptive appraisals and coping approaches when experiencing unexpected stressors appear to be supported by past experiences with stressors. These findings may guide the development of interventions, resources, and support systems to

help coaches, practitioners, and athletes in being best prepared for the common, yet challenging, experience of unexpected stressors surrounding competition.

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## Appendix A – Ethics Approval Letter

<https://remo.ualberta.ca/REMO/sd/Doc/0/H182R1QPUG7KJ56PI72VT1T86B/fromString.html>

### Notification of Approval

Date: October 15, 2018

Study ID: Pro00084572

Principal Investigator: [Benjamin Sereda](#)

Study Supervisor: [Amber Mosewich](#)

Study Title: How women varsity athletes high in self-compassion cope with unexpected stressors related to competition

Approval Expiry Date: Monday, October 14, 2019

Approved Consent Form:	Approval Date	Approved Document
	10/15/2018	<a href="#">Ben Sereda – Information Sheet</a>
	10/15/2018	<a href="#">Ben Sereda – Consent Form</a>

Thank you for submitting the above study to the Research Ethics Board 2. Your application has been reviewed and approved on behalf of the committee.

A renewal report must be submitted next year prior to the expiry of this approval if your study still requires ethics approval. If you do not renew on or before the renewal expiry date, you will have to re-submit an ethics application.

Approval by the Research Ethics Board does not encompass authorization to access the staff, students, facilities or resources of local institutions for the purposes of the research.

Sincerely,  
 Ubaka Ogbogu, LLB, BL, LLM, SJD  
 Chair, Research Ethics Board 2

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system).*

## Appendix B: Recruitment E-mail to Athletes

Dear [Athlete's name],

My name is Ben Sereda and I am a Master's student (under the supervision of Dr. Amber Mosewich) in the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation at the University of Alberta. I am currently recruiting athletes from University of Alberta varsity teams to participate in a research study as a part of my Master's thesis.

Following the physical testing portion at the University of Alberta varsity combine, you may remember that you completed a set of questionnaires and indicated that you would be interested in participating in future research studies. Based on some of the results from the surveys you completed, you meet the eligibility criteria for a separate research study. A complete overview of the study is attached to this e-mail.

We are interested in investigating varsity athlete's experience of unexpected stressors surrounding competition. Specifically, we are interested in why stressors may be perceived as unexpected, how varsity athletes choose to manage these stressors, and how effective these strategies are in coping with these stressors. Better understanding athlete's experience of unexpected competition stressors may provide insight into this process, and may help athletes, coaches, and practitioners to facilitate development of strategies and resources for effective coping in sport.

Interviews will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes, but this is subject to change depending on the discussion and how long you would like the interview to go for. Additionally, you may be contacted for a follow-up interview, which will likely be shorter in length, to provide you with an opportunity to expand on what we talked about in the initial interview, to clarify, to reflect, to ask questions, or to help enhance understanding. Interviews will be conducted at a time and place convenient and comfortable for you.

If you agree to consent to participate in this study, your identity will remain anonymous and your participation will be kept confidential.

You are free to withdraw consent at any point in time, up to four weeks following the interview. If you choose not to consent to this interview, or withdraw at any point before, during, or after the interview, be assured that there will be no repercussions. Your participation is completely up to you.

I would greatly appreciate if you are interested in taking part in this study, and if so, please e-mail me back at this address and we can arrange a time to meet. The researcher will supply you with a consent form prior to commencement of the interview.

Thank you for your time,

Ben Sereda

## Appendix C – Information Sheet

**Title of Study:** Varsity Athlete’s Coping with Expected and Unexpected Stressors

Investigator	Supervisor
<b>Ben Sereda</b> <b>Master’s Student</b> <b>Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation</b> <b>University of Alberta</b> <b>E: <a href="mailto:bjsereda@ualberta.ca">bjsereda@ualberta.ca</a></b>	Dr. Amber D. Mosewich Assistant Professor Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation University of Alberta E: <a href="mailto:amber.mosewich@ualberta.ca">amber.mosewich@ualberta.ca</a>

(Date, 2018)

Dear Athlete,

We are conducting a study to examine how varsity athletes, such as yourself, experience and cope with expected and unexpected stressors surrounding competition. You have been invited to participate based on your scores on a questionnaire that you completed in a separate study. We are interested in hearing about the experiences and processes of athletes with your unique skill set. This current project is separate from past projects and any data generated from the present study will not be linked to any past research studies. All data that you provide will be confidential; it will not be shared with your teammates or coaches.

If you elect to participate in this study, you will be invited to complete an individual interview lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes, but this is subject to change depending on the discussion and how long you would like the interview to go for. During the interview, you will be asked about expected and unexpected stressors that you have experienced surrounding competition, and how you have coped with these stressors. Interviews will be conducted in the Van Vliet Centre, specifically, University Hall 1-100, or at another location on the University of Alberta campus that is convenient and comfortable for you.

Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed by the investigator. A copy of the transcript, and a summary of findings following analysis, will be sent to you. Additionally, you may be contacted for a follow-up interview, which will likely be shorter in length, to provide you with an opportunity to expand on what we talked about in the initial interview, to clarify, to reflect, to ask questions, or to help enhance understanding.

### Benefits

Participating in this study will help researchers to identify information regarding how athletes cope with expected and unexpected stressors surrounding competition. Through providing your thoughts, feelings, and experiences on these topics, findings from this study may inform future practice to assist coaches and sport practitioners to better facilitate positive sport experiences in athletes.

### Risks

There are minimal risks for this study. You may experience discomfort when reflecting on your thoughts, feelings, and emotions during your past experiences. However, if any questions make you uncomfortable in any way, you do not have to answer them. If at any time during the interview you would like to stop, you can let me know and the interview will be stopped. You can ask for the audio-recorded to be shut off at any time. In the event that you would like to discuss your thoughts, feelings, emotions, or experiences further, University of Alberta Counselling and Clinical Services (telephone: 780-492-5205; website: <https://www.ualberta.ca/current-students/counselling>) can be of assistance.

### **Voluntary Participation and Freedom to Withdraw**

Participation in this study is voluntary, and there are no negative consequences for choosing not to participate. You may choose to withdraw from the study at any point before, during, or after completing the study without any consequences. You may contact the researchers (contact information is provided at the top of this letter) to withdraw up to 4 weeks after completing the study. Your data, including your personal contact information, will be deleted upon request.

### **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

When the audio files of the interview are transcribed, your name will be removed, and you will be assigned a number to promote anonymity. Any personal information will be removed (e.g., your name, names of teammates, coaches, or any other identifying information). Any information that you provide will remain confidential. Electronic data will be stored on a password protected computer in a locked office at the University of Alberta and will remain on the University of Alberta's secure Google drive. Any hard copies of data will be stored in a locked file cabinet within a locked office at the University of Alberta. Only the investigator and the investigators research committee will have access to the data. Data is required to be kept for five years following completion of the study, after which it will be destroyed. Upon completion of the study, results will be presented at conferences and in an academic journal.

### **Further Information**

Following ethics approval: This study has been approved by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board. If you have concerns about this study or any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Alberta Research Ethics Office at 780-492-2615. This office has no direct involvement with this project. Please contact Ben Sereda if you have any concerns about this study at [bjsereda@ualberta.ca](mailto:bjsereda@ualberta.ca).

**If you are interested in participating in this study,  
please contact Ben Sereda ([bjsereda@ualberta.ca](mailto:bjsereda@ualberta.ca)).**

Sincerely,

Ben Sereda

Master's Student

### Appendix D – Informed Consent Form

**Title of Study:** Varsity Athlete's Coping with Expected and Unexpected Stressors

Investigator	Supervisor	
<b>Ben Sereda</b> <b>Master's Student</b> <b>Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation</b> <b>University of Alberta</b> <b>E: <a href="mailto:bjsereda@ualberta.ca">bjsereda@ualberta.ca</a></b>	<b>Dr. Amber D. Mosewich</b> <b>Assistant Professor</b> <b>Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation</b> <b>University of Alberta</b> <b>E: <a href="mailto:amber.mosewich@ualberta.ca">amber.mosewich@ualberta.ca</a></b>	
<b>Do you understand that you have been asked to participate in a research study?</b>	Yes	No
<b>Have you received and read a copy of the information letter?</b>	Yes	No
<b>Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study?</b>	Yes	No
<b>Do you understand that you are free to contact the researcher to ask questions and discuss this study?</b>	Yes	No
<b>Do you understand that you are free to refuse participation, or to withdraw from the study up to 4 weeks following your interview without consequence?</b>	Yes	No
<b>Do you understand the issues of confidentiality and do you understand who will have access to your information?</b>	Yes	No

**Do you agree to take part in this study?**

**YES**

**NO**

**Name:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Date:**

\_\_\_\_\_



- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. When times are really difficult, I tend to be tough on myself.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. When something upsets me I try to keep my emotions in balance.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. When I feel inadequate in some way, I try to remind myself that feelings of inadequacy are shared by most people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. I'm intolerant and impatient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. When I'm going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. When I'm feeling down, I tend to feel like most other people are probably happier than I am.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. I try to see my failings as part of the human condition.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. When I see aspects of myself that I don't like, I get down on myself.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. When I fail at something important to me I try to keep things in perspective.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. When I'm really struggling, I tend to feel like other people must be having an easier time of it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. I'm kind to myself when I'm experiencing suffering.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. When something upsets me I get carried away with my feelings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. I can be a bit cold-hearted towards myself when I'm experiencing suffering.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. When I'm feeling down I try to approach my feelings with curiosity and openness.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 23. I'm tolerant of my own flaws and inadequacies.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 24. When something painful happens I tend to blow the incident out of proportion.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 25. When I fail at something that's important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26. I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.

## Appendix F – Interview Guide

### Preamble:

I am doing this study to investigate how varsity athletes experience unexpected stressors before and during competition. A stressor is an event or occurrence that causes an individual stress. We feel stress when we perceive the demands of the task at hand as exceeding our resources, or ability, to effectively deal with the task at hand. An unexpected stressor is an event that causes us stress that we do not expect to occur. I am hopeful that better understanding this experience in high level athletes will assist researchers, coaches, and athletes being able to facilitate more positive experiences in sport when athletes encounter unexpected stressors.

I am interested in your thoughts, feelings, emotions, opinions, and insights surrounding your experiences in sport. As stress is subjective, I am interested in how you individually respond to these questions. Your identity and participation will be kept confidential. Any identifying information, such as names of teammates, coaches, or venues will be removed to protect your anonymity.

I want you to know that you are able to withdraw at anytime during or after the interview. As talking about stressful experiences can potentially be stressful, you don't need to answer any questions that you do not want to, and I encourage you to inform me if you would like to take a moment to reflect or pause if need be. Furthermore, as this interview is intended to be a conversation to learn as much as possible about your perspectives, please don't worry about going "off topic" or being "right or wrong" – all of your thoughts are relevant and there are no incorrect responses. Feel free to expand on and focus on areas that you deem to be important, as I want to know as much as I can about your experiences to help researchers, coaches, and athletes better understand the experience of unexpected stressors.

This interview will be between 30 and 60 minutes, but that is subject to change depending on the discussion and on how long you would prefer the interview to go. The interview will be typed up, and you will be sent the transcript via e-mail. You are free to remove any parts of the interview that you do not want to be included in the research and add and modify if desired. You will be contacted for a follow-up interview, which will likely be shorter in length, to provide you with an opportunity to expand on what we talked about in the initial interview, to clarify, to reflect, to ask questions, or to help enhance understanding. Prior to this follow-up interview, you will be provided with findings and themes that the research team has produced. If you have any questions throughout this process, please feel free to contact me at any time via phone or e-mail, both of which are accessible in the information sheet that you received.

### Sport History:

*These questions are in place to build rapport with the individual and help the researcher to gain a better understanding of the athlete's sport and background in sport.*

- To get started today, can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your involvement in sport?

- First off, how old are you?
- What year of university are you in?
- How did you get involved in your primary sport?
  - How long have you been playing this sport?
  - How many hours a week do you typically spend training for your main sport?
  - Do you play any other sports competitively or recreationally?
  - How many years have you been playing for the University?
- How did you end up focusing on this sport?
  - What aspects of this sport do you enjoy?
  - What position do you play in your sport?
    - Probe: How long have you played that position?
  - Can you tell me about what roles you fill during competition?
  - What is the highest level of competition that you have competed at for this sport?

### **Competition Importance:**

*These questions are included to try to situate the participant in their most recent competition, or most recent important competition. This will also help to provide additional context for the researcher.*

- Now I'd like to hear a little about your most recent competition in your main sport.
  - Tell me a bit about the competition.
    - When did your most recent competition take place?
      - Probe: How much training did you engage in leading up to this competition?
    - Where did the competition take place?
      - Probe: How did you get to the place of competition?
      - Probe: What was atmosphere of the stadium/track/arena/venue?
      - Probe: Who was at the competition environment (coach, other teams, fans)?
    - What was the focus? What were your goals?
- Let's talk about the how important you perceived your most recent competition to be.
  - How important do you think that your most recent competition was?
  - Can you tell me about why this competition is important?
  - How was this competition different from past competitions?
    - Probe: In terms of personal importance?
    - Probe: In terms of significance to your team?
    - Probe: In terms of implications on standings?
  - How was this competition similar to past competitions?
    - Probe: In terms of personal importance?
    - Probe: In terms of significance to your team?
    - Probe: In terms of implications on standings?
  - Was this competition important just for you or for other athletes competing?

- Can you explain what brought you to this conclusion?
- Note: If competition is not deemed to be important: Let's discuss a competition that you feel was very important to you during this past competitive season.

### **Expected Stressors:**

*This section is driven by two stress and coping frameworks (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These questions intend to gain insight into the processes involved in permitting an athlete to accurately anticipate a stressor, including the use of feedback between recognition the potential for stress, initial appraisals, and engaging in preliminary coping. Understanding how athletes experience this process may help to better understand how athletes experience and attempt to cope with stressors that they did not anticipate.*

Please tell me about a stressor that you experienced during your most recent competition that you had anticipated experiencing prior to the competition.

- What made you expect this stressor in particular?
- How did you prepare to manage this stressor?
  - Probe: Why did you choose to prepare in this way for this expected stressor?
  - Probe: Why did you think that it was important to prepare for this expected stressor?
  - Probe: Did your perception of this stressor change at all leading up to the competition?
  - Probe: Did your preparation for this stressor change at all leading up to the competition?
- Why do you think that this expected stressor was stressful to you?
  - How did you react to this stressor when you experienced it?
    - Probe: Did you feel like you were capable of managing this stressor?
    - Probe: What influenced your perceived ability to manage this stressor?
- How did you cope with this specific expected stressor?
  - Why did you choose to manage the stressor in this way?
    - Probe: Did your coping approach change at all after experiencing this stressor?
    - Probe: Have you used this coping approach previously?
- How effective do you think that you were in managing this stressor?
  - What tools, skills, or resources influenced your ability to manage this stressor?
  - How do you think your coping efforts influenced your performance?
    - Probe: Why do you think that your performance was impacted in this way?
- How do you think experiencing and trying to cope with these stressors may influence upcoming competitions?
  - How do you think that this experience influenced how you may manage stressors in future competition should they occur?
    - Probe: How will this experience help you in assessing the stressor?

- Probe: How will this influence how effectively you are able to manage the stressor?
- Probe: How do you think you would prepare for upcoming stressors in competition?

### **Unexpected Stressors:**

*The questions in this section are similar to those in the previous section, but additional questions are included to investigate why stressors are perceived as unexpected, and how athletes may attempt to manage future unexpected stressors. This section investigates the appraisal process, how athletes gather resources and learn from past experiences, and how coping is influenced by these processes.*

- Tell me about a stressor that you experienced during your most recent competition that, at the time, was unexpected to you.
  - Why do you think that this stressor was perceived as unexpected?
    - Probe: What about the stressor was unexpected to you?
    - Probe: Have you experienced similar situations in the past?
    - Probe: How did the experience of this unexpected stressor relate to other unexpected stressors that you have experienced in the past?
- Why do you think that this unexpected stressor was stressful to you?
  - How did you react to this stressor when you experienced it?
    - Probe: Did you feel like you were capable of managing this stressor?
    - Probe: What influenced your perceived ability to manage this stressor?
- How did you cope with this specific unexpected stressor?
  - Why did you choose to manage the stressor in this way?
    - Probe: Did your coping approach change at all after experiencing this stressor?
    - Probe: Why did you change your coping approach?
    - Probe: Have you used this coping approach previously?
- How effective do you think that you were in managing this stressor?
  - What tools, skills, or resources influenced your ability to manage these stressors?
  - How do you think your coping efforts influenced your performance?
    - Probe: Why do you think that your performance was impacted in this way?
- How do you think experiencing and trying to cope with these stressors may influence upcoming competitions?
  - How do you think that this experience influenced how you may manage stressors in future competition should they occur?
    - Probe: How do you think that this experience will influence how you assess an unexpected stressor in the future, should one occur?
    - Probe: How do you think that this experience will influence how effectively you are able to manage unexpected stressors, should they occur, in the future?

- Probe: How do you think you would prepare for similar stressors in competition?
- Probe: How do you think that this experience will influence how you prepare for future competitions?
- How do you think experiencing and trying to cope with these stressors may influence upcoming competitions?
  - How do you think that this experience influenced how you may manage stressors in future competition should they occur?
    - Probe: How will this experience help you in assessing the stressor?
    - Probe: How will this influence how effectively you are able to manage the stressor?
    - Probe: How do you think you would prepare for upcoming stressors in competition?

**Final Questions:**

- Is there anything that we talked about that you would like to add to or expand on?
- Is there anything else that you believe is important to these topics that you would like to talk about? Or that I didn't ask you about today?
- Do you have any advice or suggestions for other athletes in managing unexpected stressors?