

An Exploration of Male Athletes' Experiences of Self-Compassion in the Context of Sport

by

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Abstract

Research has highlighted the mental health benefits of self-compassion, particularly as it serves an adaptive function in managing personal suffering and rebounding from adversity (Neff, 2003b). For athletes coping with setbacks in sport, self-compassion has proven effective as an intervention for enhancing positivity and perseverance (Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, & Sabiston, 2015) and buffering against self-criticism and rumination (Mosewich, Crocker, Kowalski, & DeLongis, 2013). To date, limited research has been conducted on self-compassion among male-only samples of athletes, with the majority of prior research in this area focusing on female athletes. There is a need for greater understanding of self-compassion among male athletes. Therefore, the current qualitative study explored four varsity male athletes' experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport using semi-structured interviews and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The seven central themes that emerged from the analysis process are discussed in the context of the psychology literature. Consideration is given to implications for counselling practice and future directions for research.

Keywords: men athletes, self-compassion, sport participation, psychological well-being

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Brea McLaughlin. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, “An exploration of male athletes’ experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport”, No. 00077274, February 21st, 2018.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmothers, Genevieve Arden McLaughlin & Alice Rodger, the kindest souls with the most compassionate hearts – “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.”

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Sometimes taking a leap of faith feels like you're leaping into the fire. But sometimes you've got to take the leap of faith and jump.

— George Mumford

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An Exploration of Male Athletes' Experiences of Self-Compassion in the Context of Sport

Chapter 1: Introduction

Issues of mental health encompass all genders, ethnicities, and social structures: sport is no exception. However, until recently, there was a paucity of empirical and epidemiological research concerning the incidence and experience of mental health issues among elite athletes (Frank, Nixdorf, & Beckmann, 2015; Glick & Horsfall, 2009). This situation has rapidly shifted, however, with more researchers reporting on mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, and substance use as they present in athletes (Currie & Johnston, 2016; Mummery, 2005; Reardon & Factor, 2010; Uphill, Sly, & Swain, 2016). In their 2016 narrative systematic review of mental health in elite athletes, Rice and colleagues reported that symptoms and episodes of depression, anxiety, burnout, disordered eating, and substance use are experienced by elite athletes, as are mental health issues associated with performance failure, temporary or career-ending injury, and sport retirement. Yet, even as awareness around athlete mental health and well-being increases, the culture of elite sport continues to reward a competitive mentality that often pushes athletes toward dysfunction by demanding participation despite potential harms (Lebrun & Collins, 2017; Sahler & Greenwald, 2012; Wiese-Bjornstal, Smith, Shaffer, & Morrey, 1998).

Operating within a culture that strains mental abilities but stigmatizes mental health concerns, athletes often adopt counterproductive coping mechanisms and avoid professional intervention (Glick & Horsfall, 2009; Sahler & Greenwald, 2012). Much to the dismay of mental health practitioners, athletes are particularly reticent to report symptoms that may affect their chances of participating and competing in sport (Sahler & Greenwald, 2012). This tendency to understate and underreport is especially concerning given the possible mental health

issues and challenges that athletes may encounter throughout often complex, intense, and stressful careers in high-performance sport (Caron, Bloom, Johnston, & Sabiston, 2013; Reis et al., 2015).

Male athletes, in particular, are reticent to access psychological support, tending more toward self-stigmatization (internalization of society's negative views on mental health and help seeking; Vogel, Heimerdinger-Edwards, Hammer, & Hubbard, 2011) and toward upholding the belief that their mental health issues are manageable in isolation (Martin, Lavalley, Kellmann, & Page, 2004; Vogel et al., 2011). Additional explanations given for male athletes' reluctance to seek out and use psychological services are identical to ones given by men within the general population: real and perceived stigmatization, as well as an incongruence with internalized masculine norms (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Pinkerton, Hinz, & Barrow, 1989; Putukian, 2016). In 2012, Gulliver et al. conducted a qualitative study that explored common barriers and facilitators to help seeking among a sample of young female and male athletes. The consensus among participants was that it would be more challenging for male athletes to seek support than for female athletes. Of the primary barriers reported by the participants, stigma was an overwhelmingly common factor contributing to reluctance to seek mental health support. The athletes described being overly concerned about judgment from others in addition to being perceived as weak and unable to meet the demands of their sport if seen accessing mental health services. Thus, the athletes' stoicism, combined with stigma and fear of judgment, seemingly dissuaded them from healthy coping behaviours and appropriate supports.

However, the deleterious influence of stigma and others' judgments concerning psychological help seeking diminishes when people are more self-compassionate (Heath, Brenner, Lannin, & Vogel, 2016). *Self-compassion* is a positive way of relating to the self that

emphasizes self-kindness and self-acceptance, especially in the face of personal adversity and suffering (Neff, 2003b). Research has consistently demonstrated that self-compassion is associated with improvements to psychological well-being, while it is negatively associated with forms of psychological distress such as depression and anxiety (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). Additionally, in their 2016 study, Heath et al. examined stigma, self-compassion, and psychological help seeking among a sample of undergraduate students. The researchers concluded that the participants who reported more self-compassion were less affected by perceived public stigma and less prone to self-stigmatization when considering psychological help seeking (Heath et al., 2016). These findings are consistent with Neff's (2003b) proposition that self-compassion buffers against harsh external judgments and stigma. In other research with samples of young adults, findings suggest that individuals with a greater tendency toward self-compassion are more likely to choose self-improvement over rumination, perseverance over passivity, and optimism over self-criticism (Breines & Chen, 2012; Neff, Hseih, & Dejithirat, 2005).

To date, the literature exploring self-compassion within the context of North American high-performance sport has primarily highlighted the phenomenon's promise for female athletes. Studies have shown that self-compassion has proven beneficial to female athletes when pursuing their fullest athletic potential (Reis et al., 2015) and when managing some of their most emotionally difficult times in sport (Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, & Sabiston, 2014; Mosewich, Crocker, & Kowalski, 2014). For instance, in a recent quantitative study examining the relationship between self-compassion and psychological well-being in young female athletes, participants who were more self-compassionate were more likely to respond with constructive

reactions rather than destructive reactions when confronted with emotionally difficult sport situations (Ferguson et al., 2015).

Given the encouraging findings within samples of young adults and female athletes, one would expect that consideration of male athletes' experiences of self-compassion would also appear in the literature. So far, however, only one study has specifically addressed self-compassion in this particular subset of the population. In 2016, Wasyliw and Clairo examined the role of masculine norm adherence and self-compassion in men's perceptions of help seeking for mental health. After comparing male intercollegiate athletes to a control group of male undergraduate students, the results indicated that independent of masculine norm adherence, the athletes who rated higher in self-compassion held more positive attitudes toward help seeking for mental health concerns than the control group, in which there was no such association. Furthermore, in comparison to the control group, male athletes on intercollegiate sports teams reported a greater propensity for self-compassion despite their tendency to adhere to traditional masculinity norms. From this novel finding, the authors suggest that team membership may be facilitative of self-compassion in this group. Although it offers an incomplete explanation of male athletes' experiences of self-compassion, the study does suggest that self-compassion may be facilitative of help seeking in a population that endures emotionally difficult sport situations but receives minimal support for the mental health issues associated with such situations. Wasyliw and Clairo's (2016) promising findings are preliminary, however, and warrant further research to enhance our understanding of male athletes' experiences of self-compassion in the context of high-performance sport.

Present Study

As discussed above, the nascent literature exploring athletes' experiences of self-compassion has focused almost exclusively on female populations, despite evidence in the broader psychological literature of self-compassion's many benefits for young adults in general (Neff & McGehee, 2010). Quantitative research showing women as being more self-critical and less self-compassionate is often cited to justify this skewed focus (Mosewich et al., 2014). Yet, there is clearly a need for further research investigating the potentially idiosyncratic self-compassion experiences of men, especially as male athletes are disproportionately represented in competitive sport contexts (Ferguson et al., 2014; Reilly, Rochlen, & Awad, 2013). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to extend the emergent research on self-compassion to male athletes by posing the broad question: What are male athletes' experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport? With how little is currently known, furthering our understanding of men's experiences of self-compassion may provide fundamental insights and hold beneficial implications for treatment of mental health related concerns among this high-performance group.

Given the dearth of literature in this topic area, and thus the exploratory nature of this study, the qualitative approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009) was chosen as an appropriate means to elucidating the meaning and lived experiences of self-compassion for male athletes in the context of sport. IPA is widely used in psychology research to explore people's experiences of psychological phenomena, and is particularly useful for providing rich, in-depth descriptions of phenomena that have yet to be fully explained within the literature (Smith et al., 2009).

This thesis is organized into five main chapters. Following the introduction, chapter two is a literature review that situates this study within the field of counselling psychology by presenting literature on athlete mental health, self-compassion, and research specific to male

athletes. The third chapter outlines the methodology of IPA and includes information on the researcher, participants, data collection, and data analysis. Trustworthiness and ethical considerations are also discussed in this section. The fourth chapter presents the findings from this study, detailing the themes associated with male athletes' experiences of self-compassion. Finally, the fifth chapter is a discussion of the findings in relation to the psychology literature and implications for counselling practice. Consideration is also given to study limitations and possibilities for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is no difference between who we are on the court and off the court... Work on your body and your mind simultaneously.

— George Mumford

The Mental Health of Athletes

Sport has been considered a microcosm of life (Frey & Eitzen, 1991). While sport contains many aspects of everyday experience, it is also characterized by a culture that espouses values and reinforces qualities associated with traditional conceptualizations of masculinity such as competition, aggression, and toughness (Doherty, Hannigan, & Campbell, 2016; Sahler & Greenwald, 2012). As a result, athletes may be exposed to conditions and experiences that they otherwise may not encounter in less competitive, high-stakes environments (Currie & Johnston, 2016). Consequently, researchers have suggested that the varied stressors accompanying participation in sports may combine to predispose athletes to developing mental health issues or that these stressors may exacerbate pre-existing concerns (Roberts, Faull, & Tod, 2016).

The causal nature of the relationship between sport participation and mental health remains unclear and under debate. Therefore, researchers have cautioned against rushing to conclusions about the extent to which the demands of high-performance sport may contribute to psychological, emotional, and behavioural issues (LeBrun & Collins, 2017). Nevertheless, this debate should not preclude taking seriously an expanding literature highlighting the mental health risk factors and concerns that athletes may encounter during careers in elite-level sport (Currie & Johnston, 2016).

Mental health concerns among athletes. Elite athletes are susceptible to the same biological, psychological, and social factors that contribute to mental health issues in the general, non-sporting population (Currie & Johnston, 2016). In addition to these factors, a host of other

pressures and concerns more specific to sport can present early and often in the lives of elite athletes (Hammond, Gialloredo, Kubas, & Davis, 2013). Over the span of an elite sporting career, an athlete may be faced with balancing complex scheduling demands, performing with consistency under pressure, attempting to define an identity separate from sport, maintaining academic eligibility, enduring scathing media scrutiny, and coping with success, failure, injury and retirement (Hammond et al., 2013). Moreover, maladaptive perfectionism, excessive self-criticism, and emotion suppression are some of the intrapersonal tendencies found amongst athletic populations that may precipitate psychological distress (Currie & Johnston, 2016). For some athletes, experiencing any one or combination of the factors mentioned above may contribute to mental health impairment (Currie & Johnston, 2016). Indeed, problems with depression, anxiety, disordered eating, substance abuse or dependence, and sleep disturbance have been noted as mental health concerns among athletes (Rice et al., 2016; Roberts et al., 2016).

A study by Gulliver et al. (2012) utilized focus groups to explore elite athletes' perceptions of common mental health issues that they may experience. The sample consisted of 15 male and female elite athletes training at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS). Participants ranged in age from 16 to 23 years old and had either competed in the Olympics or been identified as potential contenders for selection to future Olympic teams. Based on their thematic analysis of the data, Gulliver et al. (2012) reported that the athletes experienced feelings of sadness, anger, and isolation while recovering from injury as well as experiences of stress, pressure, anxiety, and depression in relation to sport performance. These findings are consistent with the results of a recent study (Sudano & Miles, 2017) in which 127 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Head Athletic Trainers (providers of rehabilitation services and

athletic therapy) were surveyed on the mental health-related issues that they witnessed while interacting with their varsity student athletes. The respondents identified depression and anxiety as the two most frequently encountered issues. These were followed closely by disordered eating, family issues, sport performance, relationship concerns, and suicidality (Sudano & Miles, 2017).

In another study, Hammond et al. (2013) studied the relationship between performance pressures and depression in a sample of 50 national-level varsity swimmers competing for placement on Canadian Olympic and World Championship teams. The researchers found that within the 36 months prior to swimming trials, over two thirds of the athletes met criteria for major depressive disorder. Following the swimming trials for team selection, just over one third of these athletes still met the DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000) criteria for depression. Furthermore, when analysis was limited to the highest-ranking performers within the sample, a significant relationship was observed between swim trial outcomes and current depressive symptoms, with those athletes who performed sub-optimally for their ranking being more likely to present with symptoms of depression. Hammond et al. (2013) concluded that athletes with professional and Olympic aspirations might be most susceptible to depression following failure, particularly as these athletes may judge themselves as having the most to lose in terms of advancement, funding, and identity should failure or underperformance occur. These findings effectively demonstrate a link between mental well-being and competitive sport participation; however, further research is required to elucidate the nature of this association.

Stigma and support. Within the extant literature, when authors report on mental health concerns among athletic populations, the mention of mental health stigma and help seeking as

salient issues is often quick to follow. This is because these topics seem to be inextricably intertwined within the “masculine elite sport performance environment” (Doherty et al., 2016, p. 9). It is generally accepted that athletes managing mental health concerns are faced with the additional worries that they are somehow inferior, mentally weak, or in jeopardy of losing their ranking or damaging their reputation (Moesch et al., 2018). Such concerns are associated with the predominating sport culture that ascribes to the ideology of masculinity—a social construct that espouses the values of strength, dominance, power, and stoicism (Mejia, 2005; Moesch et al., 2018). Research on help seeking in athletes for mental health concerns is clear: stigma is one of the biggest barriers to care (Moreland, Coxe, & Yang, 2018).

Uphill and colleagues (2016) suggest that the current language of mental health is partially to blame for the perpetuation of stigma within the context of elite sport and sport culture. The researchers cite Keyes’ (2007) two-continuum model of mental health and mental wealth as providing a positive alternative to how mental health is conceptualized and discussed by athletes, coaches, and other stakeholders such as athletic therapists, parents, and administrative staff. Keyes’ (2007) model proposes that two continuums comprise a person’s whole experience of mental health, with one continuum referring to symptoms of psychological distress and the other continuum recognizing symptoms of mental wellness. An individual does not have to be all of one or lacking none of the other; rather, there is opportunity to address the existence of any challenges while simultaneously acknowledging the presence of strengths (Uphill et al., 2016). This may lessen the stigmatizing power of language that is typically associated with deficiency, weakness, and illness, which may be especially important in the context of athlete mental health, given that its culture prizes mental toughness and optimal functioning (Uphill et al., 2016). By adopting this approach, an understanding that mental health

needs are ubiquitous to humans may arise. An additional benefit of this type of approach is the normalization of seeking mental health support, not solely with the aim of reducing the incidence of mental illness, but also for the purpose of promoting mental wellness. By including this objective, all individuals involved with sport participation may gradually come to associate seeking mental health support with both ameliorating suffering and facilitating flourishing (Uphill et al., 2016). The two-continuum model also highlights the importance of studying practices and factors, such as self-compassion, that have the potential to both improve psychological well-being and ameliorate mental health symptoms.

The mental health of men and boys has gained prominence in recent decades as an area worthy of exploration and support (Government of Canada, 2016). This is evident in the emergence of several national and international campaigns and initiatives as well as community-based projects devoted to improving awareness and support of key issues affecting male populations (Government of Canada, 2018). Recent campaigns and social media coverage have featured high-profile professional athletes endorsing mental health supports (e.g., a partnership between Nike and HeadSpace, a popular meditation app) as well as sharing personal stories of mental health-related struggle and resilience. For instance, after the world-renowned snowboarder, Kevin Pearce, suffered a career-ending traumatic brain injury (TBI), he founded the Love Your Brain organization (<https://www.loveyourbrain.com/>). The mission of this organization is to support brain health and psychological well-being through meditative practices primarily in people affected by brain injuries. Additionally, Kevin Love (2018), a professional basketball player for the Cleveland Cavaliers in the National Basketball Association (NBA), has spoken and written candidly about his personal struggles with mental health issues, namely anxiety and panic attacks.

Although the national campaigns and initiatives, corporate partnerships, and personal stories are still few in number, they serve as important steps toward a broader conversation that may one day result in the de-stigmatization and normalization of mental health issues within high-performance sport contexts. Souter, Lewis, and Serrant (2018) emphasize the need to continue this conversation and to broaden the scope of these initiatives to target male athletes. They aptly recognize that “male athletes cannot be mentally tough all of the time” (Souter et al., 2018, p. 6). This makes it all the more important to create environments in which male athletes feel safe to share their experiences and access support services, as part of maintaining “mental fitness” (Souter et al., p. 6) and psychological well-being.

Bauman (2016) acknowledged that features of elite sport culture appear to be shifting gradually, with more mental health practitioners being hired in athlete development settings and high-performance sport programs. This observation is corroborated by discourse in recent research calling for sport-specific specialization of psychologists and psychiatrists who aim to provide therapeutic support among athletic populations (Lebrun & Collins, 2017; Moesch et al., 2018). A major part of this discourse focuses on the importance of cultural competencies for therapeutic work with elite athletes (Sudano & Miles, 2017). Emphasis is placed on this knowledge requirement to ensure that the uniqueness of athletes is appreciated and understood by mental health professionals, while also aiming to enhance the credibility and rapport-building necessary for strong alliances with clients from elite sport environments (Currie & Johnston, 2016).

Self-Compassion, Mental Health, and Sport

With mental health practitioners specializing in the area of high-performance sport, athletes might come to view help seeking and counselling support as relevant and accessible.

This advancement in the field could prove beneficial by enhancing athletes' exposure to various practices and factors associated with mental health and well-being. One such practice is self-compassion, which is a highly learnable skill (Neff, 2003b) associated with improvements to psychological well-being (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007). Counselling provides an environment where clients can witness modelling of self-compassionate behaviour, and the therapeutic relationship can serve as exposure to compassionate interactions (Van Vliet, Murdoch, & Budzan, 2018). Research has shown that it is the ability to seek care from others, not the capacity to give care to others that uniquely predicts the ability to act in reassuring and compassionate ways toward oneself (Hermanto & Zuroff, 2016). It is also suggested that people generally treat themselves with the same degree of compassion and reassurance that they have experienced receiving from others (Hermanto & Zuroff, 2016). This may be of particular value to male athletes, as the following sections reveal.

Self-compassion. Shortly after the turn of the millennium, self-compassion was introduced to the psychology literature as a healthy way of responding to the self when experiencing personal adversity and suffering (Neff, 2003b). Although not a novel construct, researchers had yet to explore self-compassion as a uniquely beneficial quality distinct from other purportedly positive characteristics such as self-esteem (Neff, 2003b; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Now, self-compassion is recognized in mainstream psychology as a highly learnable skill, an adaptive way of managing personal inadequacies or setbacks, and a positive self-attitude associated with improved mental health and well-being (Neff et al., 2018).

Neff's self-compassion. In 2003, Kristin Neff, one of the foremost researchers on self-compassion, authored two seminal articles on the construct of self-compassion (2003a, 2003b). The first article presented her newly developed and validated measure, the Self-Compassion

Scale (Neff, 2003a), while the second publication provided a detailed definition of self-compassion and outlined its theoretical links to psychological well-being (see Neff, 2003b). Grounded in the philosophy and teachings of Buddhism, self-compassion as Neff (2003b) defines it consists of three conceptually distinct but interacting components: self-kindness, a sense of common humanity, and mindfulness. *Self-kindness* refers to the ability to be understanding and caring toward oneself rather than judgmental and harshly self-critical. A sense of *common humanity* emphasizes an internalized awareness that we are all in this human experience together, and that the failings we experience are universal rather than unique to us as individuals. Finally, *mindfulness* refers to the ability to maintain a perspective that is present-moment focused and balanced rather than strongly influenced by internal emotions, which are temporal in nature and subject to change from one moment to the next.

Importantly, Neff (2003b) emphasizes that practicing self-compassion does not equate to passive acceptance when confronted with personal failings or to permissive inaction when coping with setbacks. She contends that self-compassion functions in the opposite manner, enabling individuals to approach their weaknesses and failures without self-criticism or self-condemnation but instead with the openness, curiosity and gentleness necessary to take action toward constructive growth (Neff, 2003b). Self-compassion provides the soothing and comforting necessary to engage mindfully with painful feelings and experiences rather than choosing to avoid or ignore such events (Neff, 2012). Furthermore, responding compassionately to oneself in times of suffering gives rise to a motivation fueled by self-kindness and the desire for self-improvement, whereas the motivation arising from self-criticism stems from fear and the desire to avoid painful judgment (Neff, 2012; Neff et al., 2005).

Gilbert's self-compassion. Gilbert (2009b) integrates aspects and principles of evolutionary psychology, human physiology, attachment theory, cognitive neuroscience, and Buddhist-informed psychology when describing and explaining how humans come to experience self-compassion. As part of his explanation, Gilbert (2009b) emphasizes that modern humans are largely a product of uncontrollable factors: evolution, genetics, and the social environment into which humans are born. During the first formative years of life, genetics and environment interact to influence the development of brain structures and body systems responsible for affect regulation—the process associated with our capacity for self-compassion. One particularly crucial environmental factor linked to affect regulation is the nature and quality of relationships with primary caregivers in childhood. Gilbert (2009b) notes that early relational experiences lay the groundwork for future emotion development because they serve as mental blueprints or brain patterns indicative of healthy or unhealthy emotion regulation. As humans mature, these brain patterns continue to be created and strengthened depending on the quality of current caring relationships as well as the ability to be kind to ourselves (Hermanto & Zuroff, 2016).

According to Gilbert (2009b), from these caring experiences, humans begin to develop a “compassion brain pattern” (p. 171)—one that, when directed towards the self, supports the ability to be self-compassionate and to optimally balance one’s affect regulation systems. Within Gilbert’s (2009b) model of human affect regulation, there are at least three interacting systems: (a) the threat/protection system; (b) the incentive/resource-seeking system; and, (c) the soothing/contentment system. The threat-focused system is linked to the fight, flight, or freeze responses that humans possess as mechanisms for ensuring protection and seeking safety. Anxiety, anger, shame, and disgust are some of the predominant feelings that arise with the activation of this system. Such feelings heighten awareness and raise alarm when distressing

events occur that threaten or cause harm. Given its protective function, the threat/safety-seeking system is prioritized by the brain, with the potential to hijack balanced emotion regulation. The incentive/resource-focused system is associated with motivation. When this system is in balance with the others, it functions much like a compass—steadily guiding choices and actions in the direction of personally valued goals. When over-activated, it can manifest energetic, hedonistic behaviour because it is driven by the desire to maintain positive feelings and experiences. Conversely, lethargy and listlessness may result when this system is insufficiently activated. Lastly, the soothing and contentment system is responsible for establishing a sense of inner calm, peacefulness, and non-striving. This contented state is supported by experiences of affection and kindness, which facilitate feelings of soothing and safeness. Fortuitously, receiving compassion from the self or others can create the feelings of soothing and safeness necessary to regulate activation of this third system. Gilbert (2009b) suggests that happiness arises from the harmonious interaction of these three systems, with each acting to guard against imbalances.

Importantly, Gilbert (2009b) contends that the different affect regulation systems are enhanced or inhibited depending on the amount of stimulation that each receives via brain pattern activation. Thus, the more consistently we activate brain patterns associated with a particular system, the more we strengthen the pathway to that mode of responding, and the more predominant that system becomes in our process of emotion regulation. Ideally, the three systems would be balanced and equally primed for activation so that when the situation requires, humans can respond in the most adaptive and appropriate way (Gilbert, 2009b). Fortunately, given the brain's neuroplasticity, humans can learn how to stimulate their affect regulation systems in ways that encourage the creation of a more *self*-compassionate mind (Gilbert, 2009b).

Much of Gilbert's (2009b) explanation for how we learn to be self-compassionate derives from his extensive clinical experience working with individuals challenged by mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. Over decades of professional practice and research, Gilbert (2009b) discovered that these individuals shared common characteristics: a tendency toward being highly self-critical and a general unwillingness to extend kindness, warmth, understanding, and compassion towards themselves (Gilbert, 2009b; Gilbert & Irons, 2009; Gilbert & Procter, 2006). Gilbert (2009b) also found that a reduction in self-criticism did not automatically translate to an improvement in self-compassion. Taken together, these insights contributed to reinforcing for Gilbert (2009b) the importance of separately targeting self-compassion as an inner human quality ripe for cultivation and enhancement through deliberate practices. Gilbert (2009b) conceives of self-compassion cultivation as akin to "physiotherapy for the mind" (p. 195). He concludes that as people gradually learn how to be self-compassionate, they not only facilitate optimal balance among the affect regulation systems, but they also enhance the ability to activate a state of mind that is conducive to caring about their own contentment and well-being.

Mental health benefits of self-compassion. Accumulated theory and research consistently points to the positive association between self-compassion and overall psychological well-being (Bluth & Neff, 2018). For instance, in a meta-analysis that synthesized the findings from 65 published journal articles, Zessin, Dickhauser, and Garbade (2015) reported that a statistically significant increase to well-being resulted from manipulations of self-compassion. The studies included in this meta-analysis were primarily from North America or Europe and examining self-compassion using the SCS (Neff, 2003) in non-clinical samples of adult females. Of the various forms of well-being assessed, the strongest positive associations with self-

compassion existed for cognitive and psychological well-being (Zessin et al., 2015). Other meta-analyses have examined the relationship of self-compassion to psychological distress and have observed large effect sizes for the association between these two variables (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Marsh, Chan, & MacBeth, 2018). In two such meta-analyses, MacBeth and Gumley (2012) and Marsh et al. (2018) concluded that higher levels of self-compassion corresponded with lower levels of psychological distress among adult and adolescent populations.

Research has also demonstrated various benefits of self-compassion among post-secondary students. In one 2016 study (Fong & Loi), students who were more self-compassionate scored higher on measures of well-being (life satisfaction, flourishing, and positive affect) and lower on indicators of distress (stress, negative affect, burnout, and depression). Another study showed that undergraduate students had greater self-improvement motivation when managing personal failures, weaknesses, and transgressions following a brief self-compassion induction (Breines & Chen, 2012). Moreover, the students viewed their challenges as more malleable after the self-compassion induction, which allowed for more optimism and hope for the future. Similarly, Neff et al. (2005) found that for undergraduate students facing academic challenges, self-compassion was influential in shifting participants' focus to mastery goals over performance goals by lessening their fear of failure and enhancing their sense of competence. Self-compassionate students were also less inclined to use avoidance-oriented strategies when confronted by academic challenges.

Where research exists on self-compassion in relation to academic challenges, studies examining self-compassion in the face of athletic challenges are few; and those that exist focus mainly on female athletes. Equal attention needs to be given to male athletes' experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport. Studies involving male and female participants in the

broader empirical literature indicate the benefit of self-compassion for both genders. However, based on scores on the SCS, there is evidence suggesting that men tend to have higher levels of self-compassion than do women (Lockard, Hayes, Neff, & Locke, 2014; Neff & McGehee, 2010; Yarnell et al., 2015). Yarnell et al. (2015) detected this gender difference in a meta-analysis when they observed a small but significant effect size for higher self-compassion among men as compared to women. Although this difference is often interpreted to emphasize how women may struggle with self-compassion (Lockard et al., 2014), the finding that men score higher on self-compassion could be interpreted as pointing to an area of strength for this subset of the population. As previously mentioned, only one study examining self-compassion among a male-specific sample exists (see Wasylkiw & Clairo, 2016), and it did not expand in-depth on self-compassion as a potential strength among male athletes. Therefore, by focusing specifically on male athletes experiences of self-compassion using the qualitative methodology of IPA (Smith et al., 2009), the current study is adding to this limited area of research.

Compassion-based counselling interventions. Research conducted in the areas of personality, social, and clinical psychology has consistently demonstrated the beneficial influence of self-compassion on mental well-being and distress, and it is now evident that self-compassion is a human characteristic that can be cultivated through training and deliberate practice (Barnard & Curry, 2011). With induction studies proving efficacious in generating self-compassion over the short- and long-term, researchers have since integrated various compassion-raising strategies into therapeutic training programs and counselling approaches (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Bluth & Eisenlohr-Moul, 2017). The result has been the introduction and addition of several compassion-based approaches to applied practice (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Singer & Bolz, 2013).

Gilbert and colleagues developed Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT) as a compassion-based approach to working with individuals who presented with high levels of self-criticism and shame (Gilbert, 2009c; Gilbert & Procter, 2006). Comprising this approach are specific exercises and activities [collectively referred to as Compassionate Mind Training (CMT)] intended to cultivate the qualities of compassion and self-compassion (Gilbert, 2009c). CFT by way of CMT aims to shift how highly self-critical and self-shaming individuals relate to themselves when confronted with personal failures and setbacks (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Gilbert, 2009c). CFT therapists work with their clients to set this change process in motion by providing psychoeducation on how affect regulation has evolved in the human mind; introducing compassion-raising exercises like compassionate imagery; and encouraging responses of self-soothing, reassurance, and warmth as ways of coping with perceived imperfections (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Gilbert & Irons, 2009). Following from its *raison d'être*, CFT appears to be effective for individuals struggling with high self-criticism and is also promising for therapeutic work with clients suffering from mood disorders (Leaviss & Uttley, 2015).

Another compassion-based approach is the Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC; Neff & Germer, 2013) program. Unlike Gilbert's (2009c) CFT, which was conceived of while working primarily with patients in clinical settings, the MSC program was created by Neff and Germer (2013) with the intent of supporting individuals from the general population to develop and strengthen their capacity for self-compassion. Similar to other mindfulness-based trainings like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 2003), Neff and Germer (2013) designed their MSC group program to take place over the course of 8 weeks, with participants committing to a 2.5-hour session each week as well as attendance at a single half-day meditation retreat.

With the overall aim of the MSC program being to facilitate the development of self-compassion as a resource to use when encountering personal suffering, group participants are invited to engage with the topic areas and activities introduced each week in a way that supports the gradual cultivation of self-compassion as a skill and practice (Germer & Neff, 2013). Neff and Germer (2013) emphasize the necessity for co-facilitators of the MSC program to possess both a personal practice and an expertise that will allow for embodiment of concepts and activities presented to participants. In this way, co-facilitators model MSC for the group to observe as living examples of how to engage compassionately with the self and others.

A major component of the MSC program is experiential learning, which involves instruction, observation, discussion, and practice (Germer & Neff, 2013). The facilitators lead group participants through sessions that cover each of the following topics: discovering mindful self-compassion; practicing mindfulness; practicing loving-kindness meditation; finding one's compassionate voice; living deeply; managing difficult emotions; transforming relationships; and embracing one's life. In addition to these intensive sessions, participants are also encouraged to practice the various compassion-related exercises and forms of meditation for at least 40 minutes each day.

Following initial development, Neff and Germer (2013) conducted a randomized controlled study to evaluate the program. Volunteers were assigned either to the MSC workshop condition or to a waitlist control group. Significant increases to self-reported life satisfaction and self-compassion resulted for MSC group participants. Symptoms of stress, depression, and anxiety decreased significantly for these same volunteers following intervention. Additionally, post-workshop levels of self-compassion reported by participants were significantly and positively associated with the amount of time that they spent practicing self-compassion

throughout the program. The results also suggested that improvements to well-being were associated primarily with enhanced self-compassion.

Self-compassion among athletes. With the introduction of therapeutic approaches centering on self-compassion among both general and clinical populations, sport psychology researchers and practitioners have suggested the practice of self-compassion by athletes (Mosewich et al., 2013). Notably, the majority of published research on self-compassion among athletes has involved samples of female participants. For example, as an alternative to traditional psychological skills training, Rodriguez and Ebbeck (2015) produced a set of practical strategies intended for use by coaches to develop and support self-compassion in their athletes. Upon piloting their strategies in the context of varsity-level gymnastics, Rodriguez and Ebbeck reported that both the coaches and their female athletes took well to the self-compassionate approach, with the female athletes responding positively to the practical strategies implemented by their coaches.

In 2011, Mosewich, Kowalski, Sabiston, Sedgwick, and Tracy conducted a quantitative study exploring the potential of self-compassion as a positive resource for adolescent female athletes participating in high school and club-level sports. Specifically, the authors examined self-compassion in relation to thoughts, behaviours, and emotions that may be associated with self-evaluative experiences (Mosewich et al., 2011). The particular emotions of interest were shame and guilt, with the former described as the feeling of *being* a bad person, where the latter is the feeling of having *behaved* badly. In their results, Mosewich et al. (2011) reported a negative correlation between self-compassion and proneness to shame. Further, self-compassion negatively correlated with the self-evaluative thoughts and behaviours associated with fear of failure and fear of negative evaluation. A positive correlation occurred between self-compassion

and guilt that was free of shame. Mosewich et al. (2011) concluded that while shame and guilt both serve to signal the apparent occurrence of wrongdoing, self-compassion is largely incompatible with shame but not guilt. This is consistent with theorizing by Neff (2003b) concerning self-compassion allowing for acknowledgment of limitations or wrongdoing without the self-criticism of shame that can accompany experiences of guilt. This combination of self-compassion and experiences of guilt without shame may be particularly facilitative of growth for athletes, especially those in developmental phases of their sport careers. With the emotional safety afforded by self-compassion, athletes may be more willing to expose and address areas of their skillset that require improvement.

In a later study, Mosewich et al. (2013) conducted a randomized control trial (RCT) with a group of self-identified highly self-critical female student athletes from various Western Canadian universities. The focus of the control group was on “the use of writing in sport” (Mosewich et al., 2013, p. 519), whereas the manipulation condition was instructed to focus on responding to personally relevant setbacks with self-compassion. After random assignment, both groups were presented with psychoeducation, applied tasks, and homework specific to their study condition. Results indicated that levels of self-compassion had increased and levels of self-criticism, rumination, and concern over mistakes had decreased for the female athletes in the self-compassion condition (Mosewich et al., 2013). Furthermore, the effect size for this self-compassion intervention was moderate-to-large. Taken together, the results of Mosewich et al.’s self-compassion induction study suggest that the intervention effectively influenced female student athletes’ ability to better manage self-criticism, rumination, and concern over mistakes associated with personal setbacks in competitive sport.

Using a phenomenological approach, Mosewich et al. (2014) identified coping strategies used by five young adult, elite female athletes in the event of sport-specific setbacks. Based on data from semi-structured interviews, four main themes emerged: (a) constructive thoughts and behaviours, (b) the importance of social support, (c) striving for balance, and (d) being critical in pursuit of high achievement. With the relatability of the first three themes to the self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness components of Neff's (2003a) self-compassion, Mosewich et al. (2014) proposed that self-compassion could serve as a potential coping resource for athletes managing sport-specific setbacks, especially difficulties that threaten athletes' psychological well-being such as poor performance or injury.

Recognizing the limited generalizability of findings from research focusing on samples of only female athletes, Huysmans and Clement (2017) conducted a study exploring self-compassion in the context of susceptibility to injury and stress responses such as anxiety and coping. The researchers noted that the self-compassion scores among the 117 male and female student athletes from NCAA Division II post-secondary institutions did not differ significantly across gender, sport type, and injury frequency. Counter to the study hypotheses, a positive correlation was observed between self-compassion and negative life stress, while a negative correlation occurred between self-compassion and emotion-focused coping. Huysmans and Clement (2017) interpreted these findings to suggest that self-compassionate responding in these athletes increased in order to help the athletes cope with higher levels of stress, and that self-compassion may provide a way of coping with experiences of negative life stress that is distinct from other forms of coping. Self-compassion was negatively correlated with avoidance-focused coping. This corresponds with findings from prior research demonstrating that self-compassionate individuals tend to accept their part in negative experiences while extending

kindness and understanding to themselves (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007). Such people can then take action toward positive change (Leary et al., 2007).

Summary. As evidenced by the research presented above, published peer-reviewed journal articles pertaining specifically to male athletes and self-compassion are relatively non-existent save for the one study by Wasyliw and Clairo (2016) and a handful of studies that have examined the concept among mixed samples. It could be that the shortage of literature involving self-compassion among samples of male athletes (Wasyliw & Clairo, 2016) is a reflection of the limited amount of existent research concerning male-only samples in the self-compassion literature (e.g., Heath, Brenner, Vogel, Lannin, & Strass, 2017; Reilly et al., 2013; Tarber, Cohn, Casazza, Hastings, & Steele, 2016). Bedi, Young, Davari, Springer, and Kane (2016) shone a light on the considerable imbalance of studies focusing on female-specific samples as compared to male-specific samples in general within one Canadian journal on counselling and psychotherapy alone—a ratio of 15:1 between 2000 and 2013. In their 2016 article exploring young men’s experiences of receiving compassion, Van Vliet et al. also emphasized the need for strengths-based research involving men and aspects of compassion, rather than continuing to expand the literature with studies that focus on men’s fears of compassion or aversion to seeking compassionate care. There appears to be a similar need for further research exploring mental health related topics among male athletes that extend beyond experiences of depression, anger, substance use, or injury. The present study helps address both of these limitations of the psychological literature by offering insight into male athletes’ experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport. Furthermore, the presentation and discussion of the study findings to follow will endeavour to demonstrate the usefulness of self-compassion for male athletes in relation to their strengths.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study used the qualitative phenomenological methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as outlined by Smith et al. (2009). Given that the aim of this study was to explore male athletes' experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport, a qualitative approach was appropriate because of the focus on sense-making and meaning for participants, while the specific approach of IPA was chosen because of its emphasis on examining lived experiences of a central phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA and Its Philosophical Foundations

According to Smith et al. (2009), IPA is a research approach informed by three major theoretical areas: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. The combination of these three areas provides IPA researchers with the theoretical basis and practical guidance necessary to engage with participant data during the collection and analysis processes (Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenology. IPA is concerned with understanding the essence of a particular phenomenon through exploring participants' lived experiences of that phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). For Smith et al. (2009), the lived experiences that are of most interest in IPA are those that hold significance and meaning to participants. Such lived experiences only become significant once participants take notice of, pause to reflect on, and ascribe meaning to the events in their lives (Smith et al., 2009).

The importance of reflexivity within IPA derives from the work of Husserl, a phenomenological philosopher focused on the consciousness and perception of experience. According to Smith et al. (2009), Husserl was particularly interested in discerning how humans "come to accurately know their *own* experience of a given phenomenon" (p. 12). Because Husserl was concerned with discovering the essential, universal features of phenomena, he

surmised that an unobstructed view of these things could be achieved through a *phenomenological attitude* and *bracketing*. Assuming a phenomenological attitude is the reflexive practice that pulls us as human beings out of the mindlessness of our everyday experience and prompts inward reflection on our perception of these everyday events as they occur. Bracketing is an important feature of this process, as it enables fuller engagement with our perceptions by separating out the taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life. For IPA researchers, this deliberate reflection is what results in participant accounts of the phenomenon of interest, by transforming everyday moments into significant, memorable, and meaningful lived experiences. Furthermore, bracketing is what allows IPA researchers to engage with participant accounts from a perspective less encumbered by preconceptions, biases, and assumptions.

Hermeneutics. Central to IPA is interpretation and sense making, both on the part of the researcher as well as the participants. Pulling from the work of Heidegger and Gadamer, Smith et al. (2009) highlight the existence of “a double hermeneutic” (p. 35); that is, the recognition that two levels of interpretation are occurring at the same time when attempting to make sense of a phenomenon. If interpretation or sense making is a lens through which the central phenomenon is being viewed, then the researcher is looking through two lenses: their own, while witnessing participants’ who are experiencing the phenomenon through their own unique lens. IPA emphasizes that it is possible for analysts of other peoples’ experiences to witness only an approximation of what those experiences may be in actuality (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) contend that *understanding* may be an appropriate term to convey how IPA researchers aim to “stand in [participants’] shoes” (p. 36) and stand apart from participants as observers. In this way, the researcher is attempting to appreciate what participants’ experiences are like for

them, while also occupying a space to observe, question, and interpret separately from the participants.

Second, the notion of a hermeneutic circle—that is, the continual back and forth consideration of the whole of something as well as its parts—plays a key role in various facets of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). For example, the process of data analysis relies upon the hermeneutic circle, as the IPA researcher attends to the entire participant transcript prior to examining it more closely for emergent themes. As these themes begin to emerge, the researcher is constantly checking back with the transcript as a whole to ensure that the themes are appropriate.

Idiography. IPA is committed to the understanding of the particular, pulling this emphasis from the notion of idiography. Rather than prioritize the generalizability of results to broader populations, IPA aims to provide detailed, nuanced findings that say something meaningful about the experience of a phenomenon for a particular case or sample within a specific context (Smith et al., 2009). For this reason, it is typical for IPA studies to keep sample sizes small so that the findings highlight both the shared patterns as well as individual nuances of participants' experiences of the phenomenon of interest. The influence of idiography on IPA is also evident in the process of data analysis undertaken by the researcher, especially in the development and writing up of central themes. According to Smith et al. (2009), when engaging with participant data, it is imperative to progress on a case-by-case basis, treating each participant as unique and distinct even while noticing similarities. Further, when reporting study findings, IPA requires that the researcher provide thick, rich descriptions, which demonstrate the nuances of individual cases in the context of each theme (Smith et al., 2009).

Recruitment and Participant Sample

Upon receiving ethics approval from the Research Ethics Board (REB) at the University of Alberta, I contacted the Director of Athletics as a key gatekeeper at the post-secondary institution selected for participant recruitment. With permission from the Director of Athletics, I placed recruitment posters (see Appendix A) in the facilities frequented by my target population—that is, male student athletes. In addition, I recruited participants through a varsity athletics e-mailing list and a university listserv for students. I specified that volunteers needed to be over 18 years of age, male, and athletes participating in varsity-level sport.

Four male student athletes (mean of 24.0 years old) from varsity sports teams indicated interest and consented to participate (see Appendix B for the Study Information and Consent form). The final sample size was also in line with recommendations put forth by Smith et al. (2009) in their guidelines for IPA research. Each athlete reported a history of competing at the post-secondary intercollegiate level in Canada. Within the group, one athlete identified as North African, while the rest identified as European Canadian in cultural background. The male student athletes who comprised the final sample also represented different sports (e.g., individual and/or team) and levels of competition (e.g., national, international, and/or professional), as neither of these factors were used as exclusionary criteria for participant selection given the exploratory nature of the study.

Data Collection

Upon receipt of signed consent forms via email, an interview was scheduled with each prospective participant, and we arranged to meet at a convenient location separate from any of the participants' regular training facilities. At the start of the interview, I reminded participants of the study's purpose and procedures. Each participant was given the opportunity to ask questions before the interview began, which allowed me to ensure that participants fully

understood the parameters of consenting to volunteer, such as the ability to withdraw at any time, anonymity and confidentiality, as well as the potential risks and benefits of participation.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with each student athlete to explore the meaning and interpretations of their lived experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport. I chose the semi-structured format based on recommendations for interpretive qualitative research suggested by Smith and colleagues (2009) as well as Creswell (2013). This style of interview is preferred for IPA research because it provides a consistent structure for information gathering across participants while facilitating flexibility in the line of questioning so that the particulars of participants' personal accounts may be explored thoroughly (Smith et al., 2009).

When constructing the interview protocol, I endeavoured to devise questions that targeted participants' memorable and meaningful experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport. The interview schedule consisted of eight questions, most of which invited rich, narrative descriptions of the student athletes' lived experiences (see Appendix C for the Semi-Structured Interview Guide). Probing questions such as, "What stands out to you about that experience?" or "Can you describe that experience as much as possible?" were used following these initial questions to expand upon participants' responses and the particulars of the memorable moments being recounted. Given the semi-structured nature of the interview protocol, I followed up on directions that participants took in their interviews, querying for clarification as well as more specificity and description. Also, rather than providing a specific definition of self-compassion, I invited definitions of self-compassion from participants that derived from their personal experiences, sense making, and interpretations of the central phenomenon.

Given the emphasis on description and storytelling within IPA, the interviews ranged from approximately 25 to 75 minutes in length. Each interview was audio-recorded and then

transcribed verbatim. Following transcription, the student athletes were provided with their anonymized interview transcripts via email to review for inaccuracies, errors, and points of clarification. At the same time, participants were advised that their data could not be altered or withdrawn once two weeks had elapsed following receipt of their anonymized transcripts, as data analysis would already be underway. Some of the participants responded to acknowledge that they had reviewed their transcripts, but none requested alterations, redactions, or withdrawals of the information therein.

Data Analysis

Smith and colleagues (2009) describe data analysis as a process of “simultaneously attempt[ing] to reduce the volume of detail... whilst maintaining complexity” (p. 91). Thus, I began by reading and re-reading the anonymized transcripts to immerse myself in the context and content of participants’ accounts as well as to gain a sense of the data as a whole. I then took a case-by-case approach to reviewing the data for meaning and experiences specific to self-compassion. During this phase, I coded the transcript data at a low level of abstraction, endeavouring to stay close to the interpretations and descriptions of self-compassion offered by each participant. At times this meant incorporating into the codes the particular language used by participants when recounting their experiences. In aid of this process, I used the qualitative data analysis program, Atlas.ti (Scientific Software, 2012), to organize codes and memos. Following this phase, I progressed to a higher level of abstraction by working with the codes specific to each participant and clustering those into themes and sub-themes within each case. This was an iterative process, wherein I repeatedly checked my groupings and emergent themes against the original transcript data to ensure alignment between my interpretations and the participants’ accounts of self-compassion. With the main themes identified for each participant,

I then compared these themes to identify patterns across cases. Out of this process came the selection of super-ordinate themes across participants. Given my sample size of four participants, I selected themes that occurred across at least two cases. Finally, I proceeded to the writing-up phase of analysis, which resulted in detailed and nuanced descriptions of the central themes as experienced by participants.

Establishing Trustworthiness

It is important to consider trustworthiness when conducting data collection and analysis because of the subjective and interpretative nature of these processes within a qualitative approach to research (Creswell, 2013). One means of addressing concern over the subjective and interpretative quality of this research is to focus on bracketing—that is, separating out my personal assumptions, biases, and preconceptions from my experience and engagement with participant accounts of self-compassion in the context of sport. To accomplish this, I used the reflexive practice of memoing during data analysis, which allowed me to notice and set aside potentially intrusive or biasing assumptions that might unintentionally influence my interpretations (Creswell, 2013).

Another means of enhancing trustworthiness in qualitative research is to invite individuals beyond the researcher to review, question, and deliberate the interpretations resulting from data collection and analysis. To accomplish this, it is typical for researchers to incorporate member checking and peer reviews into their data collection and analysis processes. Within my study, I used member checking to confirm the accuracy of the accounts provided by my participants. Member checking involves asking research participants to review their interview data for accuracy and completeness (Creswell, 2013). As part of this process, it is common to conduct brief follow-up interviews with participants; however, I had to forgo this aspect of

member checking due to a lack of participant availability during the summer months following the initial interviews. To achieve a similar end, once transcription was complete, each participant received the anonymized version of their interview transcript via email to review for accuracy, comprehensiveness, and commenting instead of scheduling follow-up interviews.

In addition to member checking, I engaged in several peer review sessions with my research supervisor, Dr. Van Vliet, from the preliminary coding phase through the writing-up phase of data analysis. By having an outside source question and endorse my interpretations, these peer reviews were invaluable for holding me accountable to the participant data throughout the analysis process. Lastly, during the writing up phase, I provided rich, thick descriptions of the central themes, as this treatment of the data contributes to the trustworthiness of IPA research by enabling the transferability of study findings to other settings (Creswell, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

Given the topic area of this study, I anticipated that participants might feel temporarily upset when recalling potentially distressing events from their past and disclosing information about their experiences related to self-compassion. Thus, in addition to reminding the male student athletes of their voluntary participation, their ability to leave questions unanswered, and their right to withdraw at any time, I paid close attention for signs of distress by way of verbal and non-verbal cues during their interviews. I also had contact information for mental health and counselling services available for participants at their interviews. This information was stated on the Study Information Letter and Consent Form along with direct contact information for myself as well as my research supervisor, Dr. Van Vliet.

Consideration was also given to the possibility of participants' concern about their study participation affecting their team membership or sport participation. Within the approved ethics

submission as well as on the Study Information Letter and Consent Form, I clearly indicated that neither myself nor my supervisor were in any way affiliated with individuals directly involved with student athletes' sport participation at their post-secondary institution. Thus, student athletes could anticipate that participation would not have adverse repercussions on their sport participation, reputation, or standing.

Paying heed to the above, special care and attention were taken to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants throughout the study. The consent forms signed and returned by participants were kept separate from any additional information gathered from participants. All identifying information was omitted from the data collection process by assigning code numbers and pseudonyms to participants' audio recordings, paper files, and interview transcripts. Additionally, any potentially identifying information was removed from interview transcripts, and participants were asked to review their transcript to confirm that this process was complete. Finally, to further ensure the security of participant data, all electronic files and audio recordings were stored on a password-protected encrypted computer, and all paper documents were kept in a locked filing cabinet.

The Researcher

As it is impossible to approach data analysis as an entirely blank slate, part of the analytic process of IPA is for the researcher to acknowledge and subsequently bracket potential biases, preconceptions, or experiences that may influence interpretations of participants' experiences. This process takes the form of including information about the researcher within the writing up of the analysis that speaks to their personal experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Thus, for myself, I was an elite athlete and participated in high-performance sport for the majority of my youth, eventually competing at university on a nationally ranked and

championship-winning varsity basketball team in Canada. It was during that time when I was introduced to mindfulness and loving-kindness meditation through undergraduate psychology coursework. I recognized the value in being present-moment focused, nonjudgmentally curious, and self-compassionate as an athlete participating in competitive sport contexts. As a result, I proceeded to integrate these contemplative practices into my daily life and to apply their principles while participating in varsity sport. Self-compassion meant doing the best that I could within the circumstances that I found myself in at the time, and often took the form of positive self-talk, cognitive reframing, and holding on to hope for the future.

A few years after my five-year long career in varsity athletics, I began my Master's degree in Counselling Psychology at the University of Alberta. It was here that I developed an interest in using compassion-based and mindfulness-based therapeutic interventions to support the mental health and wellness of high-performance athletes. My research in this area was informed by discussions with my thesis supervisor, Dr. K. Jessica Van Vliet, and by conversations with Dr. Amber Mosewich, whose recent research and publications have centred on female athletes, self-compassion, and setbacks in sport. From these conversations, I realized that specific consideration of male athletes' experiences of self-compassion was missing from the psychological literature; and given the promise of self-compassion for coping and psychological well-being among female athletes, I proposed that similar research be undertaken among male athletes.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of self-compassion among male athletes. Given the emphasis on idiography within IPA, I begin by introducing the study participants through personalized vignettes that share more of participants' individual stories and experiences of self-compassion. Then, I provide thick, rich descriptions of the seven central themes that emerged from the iterative process of analyzing participant transcripts. In order to protect the identity of the participants, I have omitted information on specific age, cultural background, and sport from the vignettes that follow.

Participant Vignettes

Jackson. When describing his experience of self-compassion, Jackson recounted a period during the preceding year's competitive season when he had struggled to make sense of a discrepancy between his strong practice sessions on one hand and his poor competitive performances on the other hand. When similar situations had occurred before then, he often responded with frustration and anger—negative feelings that would dissipate after performing well in a subsequent training workout or competition. He further described how in other seasons, a “great result” in one competition would make it easier to reframe a less than ideal performance as “one that did not matter as much.” However, last year, the strong competitive performance that Jackson had hoped for never materialized. Therefore, he “required” a different way of moving past the disappointment, anger, and negativity of defeat.

Jackson recalled that at the time of this realization, it was important for him to find the lessons in his failures, using these learning points as a way to continue competing in sport. For example, there were times when he “couldn't get comfortable about being uncomfortable” when competing. When confronted with discomfort during a competition, he tended to ease up on

effort, a response that led him to berate himself for not pushing himself as an athlete. Jackson then realized the necessity for him to reframe the emotional discomfort that he was experiencing during competitions. Part of reframing meant recognizing that he expected “to feel better inside a competition than [he] should have” given the physical demands and stress of his sport. Conversations with supportive people, such as coaches, teammates, and a sport psychologist, also assisted him in the reframing process. Jackson explained that in this situation, self-compassion involved shifting his expectations for competitive performances, so that he was able to feel content with his actual results.

Jackson defined self-compassion as “the ability to offer kindness and understanding to oneself, and your own situation.” For him, this meant understanding that (a) he might not always like the outcome, (b) underperformances do not always happen, and (c) there is always something to learn. Jackson stated that rather than only dwelling on the negative, he now assesses his performances more holistically. For instance, he recognizes that although he may have underperformed in some ways, there are other aspects where he managed to exceed his own expectations. He shared that this approach excites him because he can figure out what he needs to *do* differently for the future, and this is a success to him.

Leo. Leo reported that self-compassion typically “kicks in” for him following competitions, particularly ones in which he failed to match his actual performance to the level of performance that he had expected of himself. He characterized the initial experiencing of such events as a “mental low” and described his immediate emotional response as one of disappointment. This initial reaction is typically short-lived, however. Leo explained, he does not “get too down” on himself in those moments but instead recalls how well he performed in previous weeks. He also reassures himself that the current outcome is the best he could have

hoped for given the circumstances; and, he acknowledges that he did “pretty well” in light of a heavy competitive season and with expectations of maintaining a high level of performance throughout. In Leo’s experience, self-compassion means not beating himself up for a performance that may not have matched his expectations. Instead, self-compassion is allowing himself kindness and understanding, in addition to being “a little less harsh... and a little less hard” on himself. For Leo, self-compassion is keeping an optimistic mindset following failure and reflecting on performances with a critical eye; looking out for “good things” to carry forward to future competitions and “bad stuff” that may be amenable to change in the interim. In this way, he is “at least able to make some progress, and [not] throwing away the entire [experience].”

Though Leo believes self-compassion is most salient after underperforming in competitions, he also described how being kind to himself was necessary in the context of training. Leo shared that there is an expectation for athletes in his sport “to push themselves to the max.” As the demanding nature of his sport makes it challenging to perform at full capacity in every competition, it is necessary to adopt a spirit of self-compassion to maintain a balanced perspective and mental strength throughout the competitive season. Leo stated that it is possible for him to recover faster physically rather than mentally after particularly taxing competitions. For this reason, operating from a place of self-compassion allows for more of a mental recovery because competing at a high level “is an effort that you don’t necessarily want to go back to” as quickly as the body may allow. He shared that sometimes he needs to acknowledge, “I’m not *there* yet [mentally],” and that such an acknowledgment helps him adjust his training load and practice requirements. Under these circumstances, self-compassion means understanding that

during practice, he does “what [he] can with whatever [he’s] got,” and accepting that “whatever [he] can achieve that day is appropriate for that day.”

Aaron. According to Aaron, self-compassion “can be a tricky thing to learn,” especially for athletes like himself, for whom sport performance and standing are of utmost importance. During our interview, he speculated that being ambitious and wanting to excel may give rise to an excess of negative emotion when confronted with failure, which may then handicap the ability to be self-compassionate. Aaron described how, earlier in his career, he was ambitious to succeed but lacked a “healthy way” of responding to poor performances. Self-identifying as a highly self-critical individual, Aaron admitted to being “pretty hard” on himself in previous years. He typically carried negatively charged emotions forward from competitions, letting them linger and stew instead of releasing or resolving them in the moment.

Aaron’s way of responding to setbacks shifted significantly, however, when he unexpectedly lost his composure and let himself cry during a performance review with his varsity team. He explained that following the event, he not only interpreted his unanticipated release of emotion as good, but he also identified the experience as an exemplary expression of self-compassion—a healthy way of responding to loss. Additionally, although the experience itself was unexpected, becoming self-compassionate has been a gradual process for Aaron. He attributed both the slow onset and his sudden experience of self-compassion to a combination of perspective gained from maturity and reflection as well as from structured debriefs, constructive feedback, and encouragement provided by coaches. Aaron stressed the significance of being surrounded by people like his coach, who modeled “the idea that it is okay to care passionately about something and to work really, really hard” without the outcome being indicative of one’s

value as a person. Consequently, Aaron internalized the idea that it is both good to be an athlete who cares, and important to enjoy the process, that is, to “just chill” and go play.

Brody. With a matter-of-fact tone to his voice, Brody described himself as a “mediocre athlete” who has succeeded because of “mental toughness, pure stubbornness, and always trying to elevate [himself] to the next level” of competitiveness. He also admitted that his drive to excel in sport has taken a toll on his physical health. Following these disclosures, Brody explained that treating himself with compassion was an unfamiliar practice, as he tended toward being overly hard on himself for most of his athletic career. He further revealed that his motivation to compete had not always come from a positive place of wanting to improve as an athlete. Instead, Brody’s motivation came more from a negative “I’ll show you” mentality in response to always being told, “You can’t, you won’t,” by unsupportive coaches. He noted that being surrounded by overly critical coaches was not conducive to positive self-growth. From his perspective, developing within a context of negativity ultimately led to a lack of self-confidence, because looking up to people who were consistently tearing him down “breaks your soul a little bit.”

Given his previous negative experiences in sport, Brody viewed joining his university team as a “starting over” phase and valued the opportunity to be the seasoned athlete with a mature mindset in the group. He commented on the “refreshing” nature of the varsity team environment and appreciated the comradery that developed when training with teammates. This new context was a contrast to the “crabs in a bucket mentality” from which he came, where the athletes trampled over others to be the best. Entering a different competitive arena was a chance for Brody to “get out of [his] comfort zone [by] trying to be positive,” to break with his under-

dog status and inner self-critic, to relinquish the pressure of expectations, and to compete purely for the love of sport.

It was in this new context that Brody had his most memorable self-compassion experience, calling it an “ah-ha” moment. After experiencing defeat at a particular competition, he had sensed the familiar and imminent onset of negative thoughts and feelings. In this particular instance of defeat, however, he was able to stop and think critically, pausing to notice the positive parts of his performance and not only the negative aspects. This was a first for Brody, where self-compassion was a balanced self-assessment of his performance, without “just dump[ing] on [him]self.” Upon further reflection during our interview, Brody stated that this self-compassion experience was the product of a slow, gradual maturation process that culminated in a defining “ah-ha” moment.

Brody also emphasized the importance of having supportive teammates, coaches, friends, and an at-home crowd of spectators in the competition venue. Reflecting on this aspect of his experience, Brody shared his view that “it’s not possible to believe the positive influences until you see [them] for yourself.” Therefore, self-compassion for Brody was not something that he could force but rather “it just comes when it comes.” Brody concluded that self-compassion shifts the motivation from fear to fun, lessens the influence of the inner critic, and “leaves the door open to more improvement” not just technically or physically but emotionally and mentally, too.

Central Themes

The super-ordinate themes that emerged from my analysis of the participant interviews are as follows: (a) moving away from the familiar; (b) valuing the individual; (c) making space for emotion; (d) prioritizing the positive; (e) adjusting personal expectations; (f) separating from

the action; and, (g) engaging with support. Table 1 indicates the occurrence of each theme among participants, and an in-depth description of each theme appears below. Within the theme descriptions, any potentially identifying information or details were modified to protect the anonymity of study participants. For example, I substituted the word “competition” for the specific names of sport events or types.

Table 1

Central themes and their occurrence for participants

Participant name	Moving away from the familiar	Prioritizing the positive	Adjusting personal expectations	Separating from the action	Engaging with support	Valuing the individual	Making space for emotion
Jackson	•	•	•	•	•		
Leo	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Aaron	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Brody	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

Moving away from the familiar. When describing their experiences, participants talked about how self-compassion was a switch from their more typical responses to failure, which included self-denigrating insults, self-critical thoughts, or immediate reactions of anger and frustration that would resolve prior to subsequent competitions. For all four men, self-compassion represented a new way of responding to themselves with understanding and equanimity following an underperformance. Brody and Jackson spoke about how self-compassion was a first for them, with Brody indicating how “that [defeat] was like the first [time] I cut myself some slack” and Jackson sharing how self-compassion was a new way of dealing with unfamiliar distress in sport:

I never really had to deal with anything negative before in my sport. I was always pretty well able to figure things out, and then this [distress] was the first part where I just wasn't able to figure some of that stuff out.

As Jackson further explained, those feelings *required* him to have self-compassion because he needed a way of dealing with his distress. Similarly, for Leo, self-compassion served as an alternative means of coping with feelings of disappointment. He explained that he realized upon reflection that berating himself for a poor performance only exacerbated his low mood and thus proved ineffectual for re-establishing a positive mindset. Leo acknowledged:

Being like, “Oh I suck, I did horrible,” sometimes that may not be beneficial because if you have a competition the next day and you're overly negative, then you enter the competition not necessarily in the mindset you *want* to be in. So, applying self-compassion in those cases kind of helps you manage that.

As evidenced in the above, both Jackson and Leo considered self-compassion to be a new skill that they could apply to situations that required a kinder, thoughtful way of responding.

When describing how he developed this skill, Brody stated, “It was a very slow gradual process,” but that he also “may have just had that “a-ha” moment” when the idea of responding with self-compassion manifested itself as a reality. Likewise, Aaron explained that he “slowly learned [self-compassion] through just maturing,” whereas at a younger age he may have “just let it [failure] eat away at [him], and just been mad and not dealt with it in a really healthy way.”

Prioritizing the positive. A key feature of all participants’ experiences was that being self-compassionate meant elevating the positive above the negative. For Jackson and Leo in particular, this meant persevering with positivity and choosing to remain optimistic despite the disappointment of defeat or the difficulty of recovering for the next performance. Specifically, Jackson described how he “just kept moving on from each competition with the attitude that, ‘The next one will go better,’ and just never trying to stay at that low spot for too long.” Leo also took the view that if “[you] just allow yourself to approach [recovery] in the sense that, ‘Okay, today I might not feel good, but maybe next practice I’ll feel better,’ [then] you prepare yourself more for next practice.”

Aaron described how prioritizing the positive as a feature of self-compassion took the form of “parking” negativity. This meant recognizing the validity of negative emotions but lessening their emphasis in the overall experience or removing them from the debriefing process. Aaron explained:

I think of compassion—like, we *really* try to kind of, I don’t want to say “eliminate” emotion from what we do, right? Because our coach actually talks a lot about, “You *should* feel some positive emotion out there.” If you feel any emotion out there, it should be positive, right? You know, he says, “Sometimes I think you *over feel* the negative emotion about missing a play, but it’s illogical that when you make a good play, you

don't lean into feeling that positive, and sort of ride that wave a little bit." So, I think that we try not to be emotional, we try to be sort of analytical, [and] it makes us quite *critical*. Aaron elaborated on the appropriate context for negative emotion by describing what he meant by being "critical" within his experience of self-compassion:

Critical doesn't have to be negative, right? Critical is just critical of precisely *this* is what we did, this is how we can improve, and we don't have to put emotion to criticism. It can be just what it is. There's a place for that emotion, but it's probably not when we're reflecting and debriefing, and trying to objectively talk about how we can get better.

Similar to Aaron's comments on the importance of being critical without attaching negative emotion, Brody described his most memorable moment of self-compassion in sport:

I was able to stop and think critically, stop and take the positive, you know, not just the negative, which is usually what happens, and be able to self-assess and not just dump on myself.

Another way that participants prioritized the positive was by looking for ways to learn from underperformances. Both Leo and Jackson emphasized the importance of looking for lessons in their failures and finding components to change as a way of feeling optimistic about future performances. For instance, Leo described how he would "look at the bad things that [I] can change, so at least it's not a complete like, 'Oh, I have to throw away this entire competition, and go back to square one.' It's like, 'Okay, I made some progress.'" Jackson echoed this approach to reviewing competitions that may not have gone in his favour by stating, "As long as I could pull one thing away that I could try and learn from each of those events then I could at least, in my mind, consider it [the competition] somewhat successful."

Adjusting personal expectations. All of the participants expressed that self-compassion involved adjusting their expectations so they matched the actual outcomes of their performances more closely. For instance, Jackson explained that “one of the biggest things” he did for himself, in terms of self-compassion, was change his expectations for how he performed in competitions. His expectations “were very demanding at the beginning of the season, [but] a little bit more realistic by the end of the season.” Because of this adjustment, he “was able to manage the actual result a little bit better.” Leo shared similar sentiments by explaining that with “such a heavy season of competition sometimes you can’t really expect that” every performance will be outstanding. He further explained that self-compassion was especially important following underperformance, when a failure to meet expectations was most evident:

After the competition, that’s when you look at the expectation you had, and then you look at what you actually did. Then, if you weren’t really compassionate towards yourself, you might beat yourself up way too much, and... that doesn’t really help all the time.

In clarifying Leo’s statement, I reflected to him that the above sounded like his approach to managing performance expectations. Leo confirmed that being reasonable with himself in light of the circumstances was how he coped with unmet expectations in a self-compassionate manner. He elaborated that his coping process involved being rational and objective rather than emotional and judgmental. Leo shared that from a rational perspective he could more readily determine what was reasonable to expect of himself given circumstances that may or may not have been under his control. Part of his rational approach was deliberately stating, “Okay, all these things were not in my control, so I can’t necessarily take that as something that I did wrong. It’s more situational.”

For Brody, adjusting expectations entailed aiming for personal bests in performance rather than shooting for lofty, unattainable goals set out by other people, namely coaching staff. He disclosed that the standard he now holds for himself is to “go out there and try my best,” and he shared that part of this shift in perspective is that:

I don't have anything to prove anymore. I've already done more... My goal was I wanted to medal at least once. I medaled this year, you know? So, I've already—I've achieved my goals, and there's *no* expectations.

Similar to aiming for unattainable goals is holding onto the expectation of perfection. Aaron described the “ideal of perfection” as something that is unrealistic because “no one actually does anything *actually* perfect.” For example, Aaron explained that integrating the idea of “performing “good enough,” [especially] if you're learning something technical,” into his approach to participating in competitive sport “takes a little bit of stress off.” He shared that this idea of “good enough” has not kept him from maintaining a high standard that is “very precise and challenging.” Aaron also cautioned that a “perfectionist attitude” can “make it hard to be self-compassionate” because of the self-criticism that can accompany such a mindset. He concluded, “If you're trying to do everything perfect and expect yourself to do everything perfect, well, you're gonna look back on the game and say, ‘I didn't actually do anything right, because I didn't do anything perfect.’”

Separating from the action. Another salient theme for all of the male student athletes in their experiences of self-compassion was distancing from the immediate action of their sports. This ranged from athletes spending time alone with their thoughts in contemplative reflection to discontinuing participation in sport for a prolonged length of time.

Leo described stepping away from the commotion of the competition to take a cool-down walk, distract his attention, let his emotions settle, and regain his rationality. He stated, “Instead of allowing all my emotions to cloud my judgment, that’s why I go for a walk, I allow myself to be more rational when I approach things.” Leo explained that it is then “easier for [him] to focus on good things” and to extend further understanding to himself following this temporary separation from a competitive event.

For Jackson, part of his taking time away was connected to his physical discomfort and subsequent emotional distress inside competitions. He revealed that he required “a lot of reframing after the season to figure out how to manage” his distress and that self-compassion was “understanding that [he] just needed time to figure that out.” This reality delayed most of his reframing and learning until the off-season, when he had more of an opportunity to reflect and integrate ideas into practice.

Jackson also reported that by the end of a difficult season, he treated himself with self-compassion by saying to himself, “Alright, well, season’s over, I’ll take a little bit of a break now and then, just kind of relax for a while.” In addition, Jackson emphasized the importance of nurturing other aspects of himself instead of solely focusing on his development as an athlete:

[I’m] trying to have a very balanced lifestyle, so that it’s not always just about my sport. Like, there is stuff outside of it that I can—not distract myself with, but just have going on as well... Sometimes it’s doing something that’s school, or just hanging out with friends, or just relaxing, and those types of things. Not necessarily just training, or competing and getting caught up in that. But, being able to step away for a little bit, too.

Similar sentiments were shared by Aaron when he mentioned using summers (i.e., the off-season) to “take a step back from sport.” This meant not doing anything sport-related “for a

couple of months, and just sort of reflect[ing] on things.” Aaron further described the reflective practices encouraged by his coach and endorsed by his team as a key aspect to his experience of self-compassion. He indicated that it was important for him to reflect with objectivity on events from the season and to move away from sport temporarily so that he could objectively process events that had occurred during the season: “I’m reading my journal and [I’m thinking], ‘Just chill out,’ right? But... I think it’s maybe... having the time to reflect and get a little perspective on things.”

While most of the student athletes described a temporary separation from sport, Brody stated that his distancing was more of a complete disconnection prompted by a need for recovery from negative experiences:

I don’t even watch my other sport. I’ve been away from it for six or so months, six or seven—a while ago... Oh yeah, it’s way more than six months... [Laughs]. That’s almost a year! But at the same time, it’s like I don’t even bother, I just need some distance... We’re on a break for right now.

Engaging with support. Each male athlete acknowledged the importance of social support to his experience of self-compassion. For some participants, the act of reaching out to others for connection and support represented self-compassion. In those instances, there was an instrumental component to the connection akin to help seeking. Other participants highlighted support from others as influential to their experience of self-compassion because of the encouragement or permission that they received to treat themselves with compassion.

Jackson was one of the athletes whose self-compassion experience included reaching out for support and accessing outside help. Describing a time in his athletic career when he was particularly self-compassionate, he disclosed:

I definitely did get a lot of outside help... I talked to some of my older teammates, and then talked to my coach a lot, and I even went and saw a sport psychologist for a little while... And that just kind of helped reframe things a little bit differently for me.

He further explained that reaching out for support “helped with the learning and being able to reframe the [distressing] events” in addition to “being able to move forward in a more positive light, and be more excited about the season to come, rather than kinda down about it.”

Leo described connecting with other people for the reassurance that he may not be alone in his suffering following a poor performance. He explained that he will “try talking to other people and see how it [the event] went for them,” because then he is able to consider that, “I’m not necessarily the only one in the boat.” Leo admitted that checking in with other athletes following an event “helps me feel better.”

Aaron noted how struggling with confidence had made it difficult to be self-compassionate in the past. He revealed that having people provide words of reassurance helped him to feel better about himself and encouraged him to practice being kinder to himself:

I think about a couple of my coaches, as well as, you know, a couple teammates, or just friends and family..., that care a lot about me doing well, but you know, they’re still gonna be okay with whatever happens. So, I think that... it helps to have people around you that sort of confirm that pretty logical idea around self-compassion that, “Yeah, you should care, but man—like relax, dude,” you know? [Laughs].

Following this disclosure, Aaron revealed that his kind, calming inner dialogue has largely been an internalization of the acceptance and support received from other people.

Leo’s self-compassionate approach to training also involved collaboration with his coach. He explained that his coach chats with each athlete prior to practice so that concerns about

readiness to perform such as nagging injuries or “feeling fried mentally” might be voiced. These conversations result in adjusting the workouts to meet the needs of the athletes, which may result in “toning down the volume” to make the workout more approachable and to support proper recovery.

Unlike the other participants, Brody described a more challenging route to realizing that receiving support was a possibility. He shared that his previous sport experience was one in which “everyone was just kind of out for themselves.” Brody described how he “just put up this guard and it doesn’t come down” in order to manage in such a hostile environment. This prior situation was in contrast to his current varsity team. Brody disclosed that his current team’s culture of comradery and support were integral to his eventual “ah-ha” moment of self-compassion. Moreover, his moment of insight opened him up to realizing that he could form close bonds with teammates and turn to coaches for assistance without fear of judgment or rejection. Therefore, his experience of self-compassion “gave kind of a paradigm shift,” providing him permission to connect more closely with the people surrounding him.

Valuing the individual. The theme of valuing the individual was relevant for three of the male student athletes in the sample. This theme was borne out of the idea that sometimes in sport the individual athlete is secondary to the team or the vision of a coach. There may also be a tendency for athletes to play down their individual needs or desires, elevating the wants and goals of the coaches or the team above their own.

For the three participants, self-compassion meant prioritizing themselves as human beings first and recognizing their own personal needs as worthy of attention. Leo described how this approach manifested itself:

[There were] instances this year where... I showed up to a practice, and I just was not feeling great. I felt pretty bad physically, I guess, and a little mentally... So, while the other people on the team, my teammates, were doing one workout, I would be doing another workout... where it would just allow me to kind of at least get some work done that day that was more appropriate with how I was feeling.

Both Aaron and Brody took a broader perspective when describing the meaning that self-compassion held for them as human beings participating in sport. Self-compassion, for Aaron, included reclaiming his identity as a person who competes in sport rather than allowing sport to define who he was as a person. He expressed this perspective when providing a definition of self-compassion:

I think it [self-compassion] is understanding that whatever happened, I guess I'm talking in a sport context, that whatever happened doesn't define you as a person. It's not *who* you are, it's something that you *do* and you can separate yourself from that [gestures separation with hands], and not feel bad about yourself *as a person* about what just happened. You can let it be what it will be, and *you* can still be.

For Brody, his first memorable experience of self-compassion shifted his perspective to improving for his own benefit and sake, instead of "for someone else's acceptance... It was more of a positive selfishness kind of thing." Brody called this his "fuck-it" moment, which ultimately resulted in him "giving it [his] all" and "giving the best form of [himself] in competitions." It was also during that experience that he decided he "wasn't going to quit on [himself]," and he finally prioritized his own desires as an athlete:

That's a moment that I think'll stick with me forever. Now, looking back, I think part of it was being in tune with myself, with that self-compassion, with that *doing it for me...*

It's just one of those things where looking back you wish you would've been easier on yourself.

In reflecting upon this shift, Brody concluded that he feels *better* now and happier despite the toll that participating in sport has taken on his mental state and body.

Making space for emotion. Although conversation about emotions such as anger, disappointment, frustration, and sadness occurred during all of the participant interviews, the central theme of *making space for emotion* was most relevant for two of the student athletes. Both Aaron and Brody discussed emotional release as indicative of self-compassion, making these moments unlike any other in their athletic careers.

Aaron, in particular, emphasized his emotional moment as a turning point in his way of responding to personal setbacks and suffering in sport. He recalled that he was at one of his team debriefs, which was happening a few weeks after a particularly difficult loss and set of circumstances for his team. He stated that they were all “pretty disappointed, [but] also really *glad* with how well [they'd] done [because they'd] exceeded expectations.” Moreover, Aaron shared that there were competition-specific and personally relevant issues factoring in to the emotionality of the moment:

We were going over *my* individual piece, [and] my coach, he said something about, “This would have meant a lot to you to win.” And, I just started crying, because it was *true*... So, I lost it there for—uh, just thinking about it—[clears throat]. Yeah, lost it there for a few seconds... [and] my teammates just let me have my moment, but let it pass or whatever... But, I actually had to [leave for an event] right after. So, I kinda sat down [because] I'd just had this breakdown [and, I] collected myself, and was like, “Okay, that was good, I just let that happen, and now I can move on from that.”

Unfortunately, the circumstances surrounding Brody's experience were not as constructive or supportive as the scenario described by Aaron. To start, Brody spoke about the influence of traditional masculinity on the culture of sport and explained how competing in such an environment caused him to "put up a guard that doesn't come down." He captured this tendency to be stoic and emotionless in sport with his comment:

[It's] poker face all the time... And that is probably one of the hardest things is you feel an emotion, and you just have to swallow it down, hold it inside, *good or bad*... It's just like, "Be happy if you win, don't say much; say less if you lose," and that's always kinda what I was taught. And you never get that..., you never get permission to—to be sad.

Lacking permission to express emotion, Brody described himself sitting in a room with coaching and support staff following a particularly difficult loss:

You get flooded with all these emotions, and just finally—I just took a towel and I put it around my head—over top of my head and I cried, because it was the only way I could kinda let go.

For Brody, putting a towel over his head and crying was a self-compassionate act, because he "just want[ed] the relief from the pressure" of holding in all of the emotion. He further explained that keeping all of his emotion inside "leads to the *worst* type of performance anxiety." Thus, he made space for his emotions by covering his head, disconnecting from the room, and allowing himself to surrender to the suffering of that moment.

Chapter 5: Discussion

We perform at our best when we're not suffering, so we all have a vested interest in committing to a journey of self-discovery, no matter how challenging or uncomfortable it makes us.

— George Mumford

The purpose of this study was to explore male athletes' lived experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport. The interviews of four adult male student athletes were analyzed using IPA (Smith et al., 2009), and from this analysis process emerged seven central themes to constitute the study findings. For the male athletes, self-compassion involved moving away from the familiar; valuing the individual; making space for emotion; prioritizing the positive; adjusting personal expectations; separating from the action; and, engaging with support.

In brief, participants experienced self-compassion as a move away from their typical modes of responding to personally challenging situations in sport. As part of their self-compassion experiences, the male athletes described prioritizing the positive; whether in the form of constructive self-talk as opposed to self-criticism or looking for the lessons instead of dwelling solely on the downsides of poor performance. Self-compassion for these men also meant adjusting their expectations of themselves so that their personal aspirations aligned more closely with their performance outcomes. Additionally, participants considered stepping away from the immediate sport context to be a self-compassionate act, and described how this might manifest as a moment of solitude after a competition or as a period of reflective recuperation in the off-season. All the athletes noted the importance of engaging with the support of various people, such as coaches and teammates, as a component of self-compassion. Also, three of the four participants discussed placing value on personal needs and wants as indicative of self-compassion. Finally, for two of the male student athletes, self-compassion meant making space

for emotion and allowing themselves to fully feel and release emotions that they typically suppressed or left unaddressed.

The findings of this study contribute to the broader field of counselling psychology by providing insight into the self-compassion experiences of male athletes, a thorough understanding of which is lacking in the existing self-compassion literature. This study not only adds to the very limited literature in this area, but also presents an in-depth qualitative perspective on male athletes' experiences of self-compassion.

Discussion of Findings

Taken together, the above seven themes reflect two broader topics: (a) divergence from traditional masculinity norms, and (b) constructive responses to suffering in sport. The following sections address these two topic areas by discussing the relevant central themes and existing research that pertain to each.

Divergence from traditional masculinity norms. All of the male athletes who participated in this study described experiencing self-compassion as a move away from their typical way of responding to themselves. Levant (2005) asserts that socialization to conform to traditional masculinity norms results in the alienation of boys from emotional and relational aspects of themselves. Thus, in some ways, the athletes' experience of self-compassion as moving away from the familiar can be conceptualized as a shift from more traditional gender expectations for men. Two other ways that the male participants of this study diverged from traditional masculine norms were by making space for their emotions and valuing their needs as individual human beings.

The male athletes who participated in this study shared that *prior* to their self-compassion experiences, their immediate reactions to underperformance or defeat typically consisted of

anger, frustration, and self-criticism. Other responses that followed setbacks in sport included ignoring or suppressing emotions like disappointment, anxiety, and sadness. Similarly, rather than directly addressing vulnerable emotions, the male athletes reported that they would passively let these emotions dissipate with the passage of time or diminish in importance with a subsequent improved performance.

Most of the male athletes reported that only as young adults and recently in their varsity athletic careers was self-compassion fathomed as a possible way of responding to themselves when confronted by challenges. They shared that responding with self-compassion differed from how they were taught to treat themselves as athletes, where stoicism and self-criticism were the norm. In a 2017 study, Heinze and colleagues reported that sport involvement, as encouraged by parents, is still influenced by beliefs around gender norms and the prizing of characteristics associated with traditional masculinity and male roles in society, such as power, status, and competitiveness. Moreover, to ensure conformity to the norms of traditional masculinity, boys are socialized to conceal and feel ashamed of emotions that indicate vulnerability, such as fear, sadness, and disappointment, in addition to emotions that convey the need for care and connection to others (Levant, 2005). Some of the participants in the current study shared that self-compassion meant allowing themselves to express emotions that they tended to suppress or disregard. Thus, the findings provide unique evidence on the potential power of self-compassion to assist male athletes in challenging aspects of male socialization that hinder potentially healthy emotional expression.

For several of the participants, self-compassion meant valuing themselves as individuals with unique personal needs. The male athletes expressed that temporarily setting themselves apart from their coach, teammates, and sport was an act of self-compassion, as it recognized the

athletes' need for personalized care and also acknowledged their identity as people beyond their performances. In the context of sport, acknowledgment of the individual and prioritization of personal needs is uncharacteristic of athletes, whereas being coachable and a team player are qualities that engender praise and advancement (Adams, Anderson, & McCormack, 2010). The male athletes did not indicate that their experiences of self-compassion resulted in negative repercussions for their advancement in sport. On the contrary, consensus among participants was that self-compassion assisted them in persevering toward potential future achievement in sport.

Furthermore, in sport contexts, male athletes often define themselves as “being a man” (Adams et al., 2010, p. 290) by unquestioningly following the wishes of the coach. Putting one's needs ahead of the team or negotiating terms of participation with a coach, Adams et al. explained, is considered failing the group and going against the “hypermasculine gender norm” (p. 290) of remaining loyal and obedient to a dominant authority figure. Yet again, following their experiences of self-compassion that involved recognizing themselves as individuals with unique needs, the male participants in this study did not report being treated as any lesser of a man or as failing the group by coaches or other athletes. Thus, the current study provides evidence that self-care, as an aspect of male athletes' lived experience of self-compassion, may not prove detrimental to athletes' relationships or reputations within the context of their sport.

One particular way of attending to personal needs is by paying attention to emotional and physical needs. Knowing oneself and listening to one's body are healthy behaviours for athletes, yet endorsement of these practices is generally lacking within the context of sport (Mumford, 2015). Athletes tend to disregard their emotional distress and physical discomfort, and research suggests that this tendency is detrimental to the longevity of athletic careers because

of increased susceptibility to overuse injuries, stress, and burnout (Mumford, 2015). The male athletes in this study, however, acknowledged their emotional and physical needs when they treated themselves with self-compassion. For instance, some recognized the need to allow for more recovery between competitions, which meant temporarily adjusting their training regimens. Others expressed emotion that they typically kept hidden, which manifested as crying to release disappointment or anxiety. Thus, the findings provide evidence for self-compassion as facilitative of awareness and acceptance of personal needs for male athletes, particularly those needs that signal emotional or physical distress. This is in keeping with Neff's (2003a) theorizing on the mindfulness component of self-compassion, which contends that rather than avoid or repress painful feelings, self-compassionate individuals notice and accept their distress so that they may subsequently act to relieve this suffering.

Constructive responses to suffering in sport. The male athletes in this study spoke about self-compassion as a different way of responding to themselves following experiences of disappointment, underperformance, or defeat within sport. Previous research with female athletes has indicated that greater self-compassion is associated with a greater likelihood of responding in constructive versus destructive ways when managing emotionally difficult sport-related setbacks (Ferguson et al., 2014). Other research has also characterized self-compassion as a useful coping strategy for athletes confronted by personal suffering in sport (Crozier, Mosewich, & Ferguson, 2019; Mosewich et al., 2014). Likewise, the male athletes of this study described responding with self-compassion as a way of coping constructively with disappointment, as an alternative to self-criticism after underperformance, and as a healthy, productive reaction to difficult losses when competing.

The central themes that were most indicative of constructive coping include: (a) *prioritizing the positive*, (b) *adjusting personal expectations*, (c) *separating from the action*, and (d) *engaging with support*. In prioritizing the positive, the male athletes focused on the lessons that could be learned from their failures and used for positive change in the future. Similarly, when adjusting personal expectations, rather than holding onto unattainable or unrealistic goals, the athletes shifted their attention to what they could control and to obtaining personal bests. Participants also considered stepping away from the immediate sport context to be a self-compassionate act, which often involved regaining balance in their emotions and in their lives more generally. Finally, all the male athletes noted the importance of engaging with the support of various people, such as coaches and teammates, as an aspect of self-compassion. These four themes align closely with the coping resources that emerged in a phenomenological study by Mosewich et al. (2014) when exploring female high-performance athletes' experiences of setbacks in sport. The authors found that when coping with sport-related challenges, participants highlighted the importance of: (a) constructive thoughts and behaviours, (b) being critical in pursuit of high achievement, (c) striving for balance, and (d) social support. Thus, it appears that self-compassion may be indicative of constructive coping among both male and female athletes.

As a core aspect of their self-compassion experiences, the male athletes in the current study also emphasized the importance of reframing failure as an opportunity for learning and growth. This is consistent with research reporting that self-compassionate individuals opt for positive cognitive restructuring of events, while being less inclined toward avoidance or escape tactics (Allen & Leary, 2010). Prior research involving male and female student athletes competing at the university level has also demonstrated a negative correlation between self-compassion and avoidance-focused coping (Huysmans & Clement, 2017). Self-compassionate

individuals tend to be accepting of their role in negative experiences while extending kindness and understanding to themselves so that they can take action toward positive change (Leary et al., 2007). In line with this research, three of the central themes that emerged from the male athletes' experiences of self-compassion as indicative of constructive coping resources provide qualitative evidence of the negative association between self-compassion and avoidance-focused coping. The three themes of *prioritizing the positive*, *adjusting personal expectations*, and *engaging with support* each demonstrated participants' willingness to maintain contact with their challenges with the aim of affecting positive change.

The theme of *separating from the action* could be viewed as a form of avoidance, and as contrary to the argument presented above. However, research suggests that self-compassionate people may manage the discomfort of unalterable circumstances and stressors by changing their goals to match their situation or using distraction techniques (Allen & Leary, 2010). For one athlete, when describing his experiences of self-compassion, separating from the action involved the use of temporary distraction, while his experience of *adjusting personal expectations* corresponded with changing goals to match the situation. This finding provides preliminary evidence for the use of distraction by self-compassionate male athletes as an adaptive means to coping with circumstances deemed to be unchangeable.

Though *engaging with support* emerged as an aspect of each male athlete's experience of self-compassion, some participants highlighted the support from others as influential because of the encouragement or permission that they perceived to treat themselves with kindness and understanding. Within the instances of *engaging with support*, male participants discussed those interactions involving their coaches most frequently, followed by encounters with teammates and other athletes. Research has indicated the positive influence of coaches on athletes' attitudes,

beliefs, and behaviours toward help seeking for mental health concerns (Gulliver et al., 2012); but research has yet to explore how the coach-athlete relationship may influence athletes' experiences of self-compassion. Thus, the current study provides unique evidence of male athletes' experiencing self-compassion when their close social connections, especially coaches, are supportive of such behaviour. Recent research by Crozier et al. (2019) among a sample of male and female athletes found that the likelihood of responding to oneself with compassion is enhanced when teammates are perceived to endorse and practice self-compassion. Given these findings, future research examining the influence of male athletes' perceived permission to be self-compassionate, particularly from coaches, would be an important new line of inquiry.

Only one participant described the act of engaging with others as a way of feeling less alone in his experience of defeat. This athlete expressed that engaging with social support helped him to feel like others were "in the same boat" as him following setbacks, which is in keeping with the common humanity component of Neff's (2003a) conceptualization of self-compassion. Although a sense of common humanity did not emerge as a robust theme in the data, it could be that the experience is implicit in the male athletes' experience of being on a team. For example, when sharing about his experience of self-compassion, another participant mentioned the significance of the comradery forged through the shared suffering of challenging training sessions.

Implications for Counselling

Given the findings of this study, there appears to be an openness in male athletes to the practice of self-compassion, particularly as a means to ameliorating experiences of personal suffering and enhancing qualities associated with psychological wellness such as optimism and self-understanding. As part of their self-compassion experiences, the participants in this study

tended to look for the lessons in failure, choosing to move forward with hope and optimism, instead of dwelling in negative emotions that may accompany defeat such as disappointment, frustration, anxiety, and sadness. Individuals demonstrating these qualities may respond well to therapeutic modalities that match their tendencies, resulting in a “good fit” between client and counselling approach (Robertson et al., 2018). For example, strengths-based counselling capitalizes on the inherent qualities and existing behaviours of clients that are already serving them well or that may assist them in changing for the better (Smith, 2006). Similarly, compassion-based approaches could reduce the volume on the inner critic, encourage objectiveness and curiosity, and facilitate growth from a place of self-kindness and optimism (Neff, 2012).

As another aspect to prioritizing the positive, the male athletes of this study discussed self-criticism, particularly how unhelpful criticism or negative emotion was “parked” when responding with self-compassion. In a therapeutic setting, counsellors could explore male athletes’ self-talk and inner scripts that may be perpetuating their experience of emotions such as anger, frustration, disappointment, and sadness. Counsellors could then assist their clients in replacing self-critical language with self-talk that is more self-compassionate, growth-oriented, and optimistic. Explaining to clients that self-talk is self-fulfilling, followed by an exploration of the purpose that their current self-talk may be serving for them, could help motivate clients to attempt and adopt constructive alternatives. Another process that may be of similar benefit to athletes in this regard is *reframing*—that is, presenting the problem in a way that helps change the client’s perspective and the subsequent meaning ascribed to the event (Erford, 2015). In this way, counsellors might support their male athlete clients’ continued shift away from dwelling in the difficult, unchangeable aspects of challenging situations.

Given that self-compassion involved an openness to adjusting personal expectations in this sample of male athletes, counsellors might anticipate helping athletes identify what their expectations are for themselves and potentially assisting them in adjusting expectations to promote flourishing. In such circumstances, however, clients may present with fears of “cutting themselves slack” or taking the easy route out, as such concerns are common when suggesting a self-compassionate approach (Gilbert, 2009b). It would be important for counsellors to acknowledge these fears as reasonable, especially when supporting athletes who present as harshly self-critical and with perfectionistic tendencies. Male athlete clients who are hesitant or resistant to extending compassion to themselves may benefit from reframing self-compassion as something that has the potential for facilitating growth instead of diminishing motivation or breeding complacency. Introducing elements of Neff and Germer’s (2013) MSC program, such as education on what self-compassion is not (e.g., self-pity, complacency, self-indulgence) and on how suffering is often connected to a core value, may be especially useful in this situation. The topic of perfectionism may also arise while supporting male athletes in adjusting their expectations. Questioning the notion of perfection may allow for the introduction of a different standard—the standard of personal best. Furthermore, challenging clients to consider embracing their imperfections may also help them to develop more compassion for themselves, especially in the wake of personal failure.

Self-compassion for some participants meant valuing themselves as individuals and recognizing their personal needs as valid and worthy of attention. Counsellors might help their male athlete clients identify their personal needs and values. In particular, counsellors might facilitate dialogue with their male clients about self-care practices. Such conversations may involve inviting clients to share current self-care practices, exploring beliefs and concerns about

self-care, discussing practices that are constructive versus destructive, and brainstorming potential self-care practices for future use. For example, some of the self-care options highlighted by the participants in this study included journaling for self-reflection, adjusting the requirements of training sessions to allow recovery, and enjoying activities that involved friends or school.

Finally, the finding that male varsity athletes engage both informally and formally with other people for support as an aspect of self-compassion points to the potential for creating “safe male spaces” in sport contexts (Robertson et al., 2018, p. 334). According to Robertson et al. (2018), safe male spaces are part of a male-friendly approach to mental health support. Importantly, such spaces offer opportunity for dialogue concerning mental health issues that may typically be avoided or bypassed in conversation due to fear of stigmatization and judgment (Robertson et al., 2018). Enabling access to these spaces may be especially important for male athletes given that discussing mental health can threaten their identity, as this topic is often highly stigmatized and equated to weakness in sport contexts (Gulliver et al., 2012). Two participants in the current study discussed their experience of negative emotion as potentially indicative of vulnerability, especially as their tendency was to bottle up emotions and remain poker-faced. Yet, when experiencing self-compassion, the same athletes acknowledged the relief of expressing emotions, such as disappointment and sadness, that would typically be ignored or suppressed. Thus, in addition to acting as an essential opportunity for the normalization of male athletes’ mental health experiences, these male-friendly spaces could also be a place for men to explore vulnerable emotions associated with sport setbacks and to share resources, such as self-compassion practices, for coping with personal suffering in sport.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations and recommendations for future research based on the present study are considered here. To begin with, this study intentionally aimed to attract interest from male athletes who participated in varsity sport and were willing to articulate their experiences of self-compassion. Based on the methodology of IPA, it was necessary that those male athletes who volunteered were familiar with the concept of self-compassion and able to identify and describe key experiences of the phenomenon. By specifying inclusion criteria in this way, however, the likelihood of attracting participants who were either unfamiliar with the term or who struggled with showing compassion toward themselves was low. Thus, important perspectives and insights may be missing from the current study. Future research might explore self-compassion among male athletes for whom the practice may be unfamiliar or difficult.

Next, this study likely could have benefited from a greater number of participants to strengthen the richness of evidence that informed the resultant central themes and findings. Although in line with sample size recommendations for IPA research (Smith et al., 2009), the number of participants included in this study was low at a total of four. The majority of the participants were also from Canadian European backgrounds; and thus, there was minimal cultural diversity within the study sample. Future research involving participants from culturally diverse backgrounds is advisable to enhance understanding of male athletes' experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport.

The interview protocol was designed expressly to elucidate male athletes' experiences of self-compassion within the context of sport. Given that issues of performance are particularly salient for athletes in this context, the current study's participants tended to share narratives and descriptions of self-compassion experiences that involved competitive performances. Future research may benefit from a more directed line of questioning, so that a greater contrast between

issues associated with competitive performance versus mental health is achieved when exploring male athletes' experiences of self-compassion. Findings from such research could prove particularly informative and useful for mental health practitioners who support the mental health of athletes and work in the context of sport. Furthermore, future studies might also explore how male athletes experience and respond to counselling interventions designed to increase self-compassion.

Another limitation of the current study was that it did not focus on team membership and, therefore, could not draw comparisons between team- versus individual-sport athletes' experiences of self-compassion. The inability to differentiate between individual-sport athletes and team-sport athletes was primarily a consequence of a small sample size. Wasylkiw and Clairo's (2016) study involving male varsity athletes, however, points to the need for future research examining the potential influence of team membership on male athletes' experiences of self-compassion. Upon examining the influence of masculine norm adherence and self-compassion in men's perceptions of help seeking for mental health, Wasylkiw and Clairo found that, compared to a control group of male undergraduate students, male student athletes on intercollegiate sports teams demonstrated greater aptitude for self-compassion despite their adherence to traditional masculinity norms. From this finding, the authors suggested that team membership may be facilitative of self-compassion in male athletes.

Based on the current study's findings, as well as those reported by Wasylkiw and Clairo (2016), another direction for research could be the exploration of masculine norm adherence and self-compassion among male varsity athletes who differ based on team membership. To date, quantitative research examining conformity to traditional masculine norms and self-compassion has yielded mixed results. Some research has indicated that male participants who adhere to

traditional masculine norms score lower on measures of self-compassion (Reilly et al., 2013), while other research has suggested the opposite (Wasylikiw & Clairo, 2016). A mixed methods approach could be an important next step in this area, beginning with a quantitative assessment of dispositional levels of self-compassion and masculinities among a sample of elite male athletes, followed by qualitative semi-structured interviews with participants to capture rich descriptions of self-compassion experiences.

Conclusion

The present study used IPA to explore the lived experiences and meaning of self-compassion for male athletes in the context of sport. A significant gap in the literature on athletes' self-compassion was addressed by specifically exploring male athletes' experiences of the construct where prior research focused predominantly on female athletes. The findings herein add to the empirical evidence on self-compassion as a positive coping resource in the face of sport-related setbacks. Future research may benefit from an examination of individual versus team sport male athletes' experiences of self-compassion and masculine norm adherence. Such research could provide clarity on the role of team membership in male athletes' experiences of masculinities and self-compassion (Wasylikiw & Clairo, 2016), a topic that has yet to be explored in sufficient depth.

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Appendix A – Recruitment Poster

Can *competitive athletes* experience *self-compassion*?



If you are a **male varsity student athlete** (ages 18+) willing to share your experiences of self-compassion, we want to hear from you!

Participation will take place on-campus and require approximately 1.5 hours of your time.

For study information, please e-mail us bmclaugh@ualberta.ca

Study #00077274 approved by the Research Ethics Board of the University of Alberta

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Appendix B – Study Information and Consent Form**STUDY INFORMATION LETTER and CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE FORM**

Study Title: An exploration of elite male athletes' experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport

Principal Investigator:

Brea McLaughlin
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Supervisor:

Jessica Van Vliet, Ph. D., R. Psych.
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Background and Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to explore male varsity athletes' experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport. You are being asked to participate in this study because of your level of sport involvement denoted by membership on a University of Alberta varsity sports team. The results of this study will be used in support of my thesis, and will be submitted for publication in academic research journals. Findings from this study are expected to contribute to the body of scholarship on self-compassion, specifically the literature pertaining to male athletes. The knowledge gained from this study has the potential to expand theory on self-compassion as well as contribute to the development of counselling practices that emphasize self-compassion as a means to mental wellness in athletic populations.

Procedures: To complete the study, you will be asked to participate in the following (for a total of approx. 1 hour):

1. **Participate in an interview** (approx. 60 minutes): During an in-person interview at the University of Alberta, you will be asked questions exploring your experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport. Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed by the principal investigator.
2. **Review of interview transcript:** As part of the data analysis procedures, the principal investigator will send a copy of your interview transcript to you via email as an opportunity to review and clarify aspects of the original interview. This review will ensure that the transcript contains no information that could identify you or others, and that the information contained within is accurate and complete.

Risks and Benefits:

You may experience some emotional discomfort when recalling, describing, and discussing your experiences of self-compassion. We anticipate that these feelings will be temporary and unproblematic in nature; however, if you do experience ongoing distress from participation, please contact the principal investigator, Brea McLaughlin (bmclaugh@ualberta.ca), for counselling referrals. You may also contact her supervisor, Dr. Van Vliet (jvanvliet@ualberta.ca). Please note that free, in-person counselling services for students are available at the University of Alberta's Clinical and Counselling Services (780-492-5205 or <https://uofa.ualberta.ca/current-students/counselling>).

As a research team, we are also unaffiliated with the Athletics Department at the University of Alberta in any way; thus, we anticipate that your participation in this study will not have adverse repercussions on

your sport participation or standing. Finally, though no direct benefits for participants are foreseeable, it is sincerely hoped that you enjoy the process of contributing to the advancement of academic knowledge and research.

Voluntary Participation

You are under no obligation to participate in this study and your participation is completely voluntary. When participating in the study, you are not obliged to answer any specific questions, you can opt out without penalty, and you can ask to have any collected data withdrawn from the data base and not included in the study. Furthermore, even if you agree to be in the study you can change your mind and withdraw at any time. If you choose to withdraw, you will have up to two weeks following the initial interview to request that your data be withdrawn and destroyed. After that point, all data will be retained, as it will have been incorporated into data analysis.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

This research is intended to support the completion of my thesis. All data collected in the study will remain confidential, with only the principal investigator and her study supervisor having access to the data. Your name will not be associated with any aspect of the data. Your anonymity will be protected by using a code number to identify all data, and all personal identifiers will be destroyed when data collection is complete. Any potential identifying information (e.g., names of people or organizations) in the data will be removed. All audio-recordings and paper-based documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet located in the principal investigator's lab space. All data will be transferred to a secure, password-protected and encrypted computer in the principal investigator's lab space. Audio recordings will be deleted after 5 years. All other data will be retained for a minimum of 10 years. We may use the data obtained from this study in future research; but should we do so, it will have to be approved by a Research Ethics Board.

Further Information

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact the principal investigator, Brea McLaughlin (bmclaugh@ualberta.ca). You may also direct any questions or concerns to the principal investigator's supervisor, Dr. Van Vliet (jvanvliet@ualberta.ca).

The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

Consent Statement

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form upon meeting for the interview, at which point it will have been signed by the principal investigator (i.e., person obtaining consent).

Participant's Name (printed) and Signature

Date

Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

Appendix C – Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Interview Protocol

What are elite male athletes' experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport?

Time of interview: _____ Date: _____ Place: _____

Interviewer: Brea McLaughlin

Interviewee: _____ (pseudonym/code)

Interviewee Position: Student-Athlete

Study Description: Before beginning, I'd like to thank you for agreeing to sit down with me today. Once again, this interview is for the purpose of exploring male athletes' experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport. I will be asking you several questions to gain insight and understanding into your personal experience, so I invite you to speak as freely and openly as possible about thoughts, emotions, worries, sensations, etc. that come up for you during this process. Saying this, your participation is completely voluntary, meaning that you can withdraw/refuse to answer at any point. Also, all information gathered today will be kept confidential, including all of my interview notes. Do you have any questions or concerns that I may address at this time? [Pause] Please feel free to ask for clarification and to take your time in answering as we go along. [Pause] Okay, let's begin!

Semi-structured Interview Questions:

1. To start, please describe in as much detail as possible, a specific time or instance in your career as an elite athlete when you were compassionate toward yourself. Please take your time to think about it.
 - a. What stands out to you about that experience?
 - b. What actions, reactions, emotions, thoughts do you recall from that time?
 - c. What, if anything, was challenging about being compassionate towards yourself at that time?
 - d. Was there anything in particular that enabled you to be self-compassionate at the time? **[Wait for Yes or No – If YES, then]** Can you tell me more?
 - e. Okay, well is there anything else you would like to share about this specific experience?
2. Was the instance you just described an example of when you were *most* compassionate toward yourself as an elite athlete? **[Wait for Yes or No – If NO, then]** Okay, can you describe that time when you were *most* compassionate toward yourself as an elite athlete?
3. Can you think of any other times in your career when you were compassionate towards yourself as an elite athlete?
 - a. Can you describe that experience as much as possible? Tell me that story.
4. Great, is there anything more that you would like to share about your experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport?
5. Okay, now, please describe in as much detail as possible, a specific time or instance in your career as an elite athlete when you were not compassionate toward yourself.

- a. What stands out to you about that experience?
 - b. What actions, reactions, emotions, thoughts do you recall from that time?
 - c. Is there anything that gets in the way of being compassionate towards yourself? **[Wait for Yes or No – If YES, then]** [Or, was there anything that got in the way of you being compassionate towards yourself at the time?] Can you describe that as much as possible?
 - d. Okay, is there anything else you would like to share about this particular experience?
6. Are there any other times when you weren't compassionate towards yourself as an elite athlete that you can recall and describe? Or, is there anything more that you would like to share about your experience of not being compassionate toward yourself?
 7. So having just described your experiences of being self-compassionate as well as not being self-compassionate toward yourself as an elite athlete, how would you define "self-compassion"?
 8. And finally, what else, if anything, would you add to this interview so that we're left with the most complete understanding of your experiences of self-compassion as an elite athlete?

Closing Remarks: Fantastic! Thank you for your effort, openness, and time today. I hope this process was enjoyable for you, and at the very least, that you learned something new about yourself. I will contact you in a couple weeks' time to schedule a brief follow-up session to ensure accuracy and clarity within your interview transcript.