

Journeying Through Sport with Self-Compassion: Athlete Narratives of Navigating
Pressure and Struggle

by

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Abstract

In high-level sport, there is often an overemphasis on performance which can lead to a decline in athletes' physical health, mental well-being, and quality of life (Douglas & Carless, 2009; Smith, 2010). Development of adaptive coping resources, such as self-compassion, may help mitigate threats to well-being (Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019). The purpose of this study was to explore how women athletes high in self-compassion story their journey through sport as well as their experiences of navigating pressure and struggle. Three women athletes high in self-compassion were invited to take part in two loosely structured one-on-one interviews, as part of a narrative approach to learn about their sport careers, stories, and experiences (Riessman, 2008). Both narrative thematic and structural analyses were undertaken to help capture the rich descriptions of athletes' experiences as well as the overarching structure of their narrative accounts. Each athlete narrative greatly deviated from the narrative of performance, which is typically a dominant narrative in sport (Douglas & Carless, 2006). Specifically, athletes' shared narratives of Rediscovery, Balance, and Redefining. Additionally, instead of being consumed by performance, these athletes demonstrated an active desire to invest in other aspects of their lives such as key relationships and future career aspirations. Such findings suggest the presence of counter-stories or alternative narratives that may assist future athletes in storying their lives in more meaningful ways. By exploring how self-compassionate athletes story their experiences, we can glean valuable information regarding the language they use to describe and apply self-compassion within sport. These findings can help tailor practical applications of self-compassion among athlete populations.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Danae Melissa Frentz. The research project completed as a part of this thesis received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics board on June 1st, 2020: Journeying through sport with self-compassion: Athlete narratives of navigating pressure and struggle (Pro00100720).

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Chapter 1: Introduction & Preamble

Introduction

Within sport, performing successfully is often perceived as being of the utmost importance. The high performance demands that athletes experience may bring about stress (Mosewich et al., 2014) and, if unmanaged, can lead to decreases in physical and mental well-being (Crocker et al., 2015). Current sport psychology has sought to mitigate such threats to well-being by placing an emphasis on helping athletes develop adaptive coping resources and approaches (Ferguson et al., 2015; Frentz et al., 2020; Mosewich et al., 2014). One approach that currently shows significant promise in supporting athlete coping is self-compassion.

Self-compassion is a way of relating to oneself that involves extending kindness and care as opposed to judgment or criticism, when experiencing a setback (Neff, 2003a). Mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity are the three constructs that comprise self-compassion (Neff, 2003a). Understanding self-compassion can be challenging at times, as various researchers have conceptualized it as a personality trait (e.g., Neff, 2003a), a coping resource (e.g., Allen & Leary, 2010), a strategy for regulating emotions (e.g., Neff et al., 2005), a mindset that can be practically applied (e.g., Leary et al., 2007; Mosewich et al., 2013), a positive self-attitude (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2014), and more recently an approach to help facilitate positive sport experiences (e.g., Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019). For the purposes of this research study, self-compassion will refer to an approach that one may take when encountering various situations within sport.

Previous researchers have also conceptualized self-compassion as an approach (Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich, Ferguson et al., 2019). As Mosewich, Ferguson, and colleagues (2019) note, self-compassion “might be considered a ‘new’ approach” that could “complement existing resources” (p. 2). Similarly, other researchers suggest self-compassion is not a singular mental

skill but rather a “collection of skills and resources” (Ingstrup et al., 2017, p. 324). Such statements convey that it may be helpful to conceptualize self-compassion more broadly (e.g., as an approach) because it may accompany or support various resources and can involve a variety of skills. Use of an analogy may help articulate this distinction. An approach is not merely a resource, skill, or tool that is employed within a specific context like a wrench to fix a loose bolt. Rather, an approach can be conceptualized as a way of life, or a way of thinking and relating within various contexts. Continuing the wrench analogy, an approach is not a tool but rather the mechanic’s wisdom, strategy, and course of action for how to address a variety of situations. In this sense, conceptualizing self-compassion as a way of life or a manner in which individuals can relate to themselves and others lends itself to being both broader than the aforementioned descriptions of self-compassion as well as embodied. Mosewich, Ferguson, and colleagues (2019) note that self-compassion must be considered relevant enough to an individual to not only learn about it but also integrate it into various sport or life contexts. This integration of self-compassion into one’s life suggests that it is an embodied experience and lends itself to being an approach. Additionally, findings from a recent study showed a lack support for the domain-specific measurement of self-compassion (Mosewich et al., 2021), which may suggest that self-compassion is more broadly experienced by individuals across life domains.

Regardless of how researchers conceptualize self-compassion, evidence suggests that it supports positive outcomes and well-being among various groups of people in achievement domains such as students (Gunnell et al., 2017) and athletes (see Röthlin et al., 2019 for a review). While more recently researchers have sought to explore men’s experiences of self-compassion within sport (Reis et al., 2019, 2021), to date, most self-compassion research has been carried out among women sport participants. This may be largely due to initial research

evidence suggesting that women tend to display lower levels of self-compassion compared to men (Neff, 2003a; Neff et al., 2005; Neff & McGehee, 2010). In addition to performance evaluations commonly experienced among athlete populations, women athletes also struggle with rumination (Mosewich et al., 2013), social comparisons, and body-related evaluations (Mosewich et al., 2009). Further to this, researchers support that self-compassion may serve as a valuable resource or approach to help young women athletes cope with performance demands, sport setbacks, body-related self-evaluations, and various self-critical emotions (Ferguson et al., 2014, 2015; Mosewich et al., 2009; Mosewich et al., 2011).

While self-compassion can be a beneficial way of relating to oneself during times of struggle, setback, or failure (Neff, 2003a, 2003b), researchers suggest it may also be valuable to explore how self-compassion may assist athletes when they are not experiencing such setbacks (Ferguson et al., 2015; Mosewich, Sabiston, et al., 2019). Recent literature indicates that self-compassion may also be helpful for athletes when navigating more positive experiences such as sport successes (Frentz et al., 2020). Mosewich, Sabiston, and colleagues (2019) noted that self-compassion may work to attenuate strong emotions, both positive and negative, allowing self-compassionate athletes to maintain a more balanced perspective regardless of the situation. The mindfulness component of self-compassion in particular would assist with dampening or neutralizing strong emotions (Mosewich, Sabiston, et al., 2019). While a growing body of literature outlines the potential for self-compassion to bring about beneficial cognitive, behavioural, and emotional responses in athlete populations (Ferguson et al., 2015; Mosewich et al., 2013; Mosewich, Sabiston, et al., 2019; Sereda et al., 2021), very few studies have looked at the experiences of athletes with high levels of self-compassion (Ingstrup et al., 2017; Sereda et al., 2021). Initial research regarding the experiences of self-compassionate athletes has provided

valuable insight into how self-compassion supports athlete coping efforts (Sereda et al., 2021) as well as how it may be developed or fostered among athletes (Ingstrup et al., 2017); however, more research is still needed.

To support athlete development of self-compassion, researchers also call for further exploration of the underlying processes and mechanisms involved in athletes' development and experiences of self-compassion (Frentz et al., 2020; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2011; Mosewich et al., 2013). Additionally, the importance of considering both individual and interpersonal factors when trying to understand how self-compassion is developed, fostered, and applied is also noted within current literature (Frentz et al., 2020; Ingstrup et al., 2017). The components of self-compassion pertain to both individual aspects (e.g., mindfulness and self-kindness) as well as one's sense of relationship to others (e.g., common humanity); therefore, it would be remiss not to study the role of both intra- and inter-individual aspects in one's experiences of self-compassion.

Narrative inquiry is an appropriate avenue through which to address the multidimensional aspects of self-compassion, as it allows researchers to consider an individual's sociocultural contexts (e.g., environment, culture, other people), as well as the ways in which these settings shape one's psychological processes, experiences, and behaviours (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Smith, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). Using a narrative approach also allows researchers to explore the language and narrative resources individuals have access to, as these can impact the stories that people are able to tell and "feel a part of" (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Smith & Sparkes, 2009b, p. 9). In addition to promoting a greater awareness and understanding of the ways in which individuals and society interact, narrative inquiry can help researchers better understand the various processes involved in peoples' experiences (Atkinson, 1998). Essentially,

narratives have a “time ordering function” (Riessman, 2008, p. 7). Just as the novels we read have a beginning, middle, and end, so do the stories people tell about their lives. People’s stories contain information about events and the temporal sequences that link them together, called “diachronic data” (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a, p. 282). Such data can provide researchers with insight regarding the developmental sequence of certain experiences or processes. Within the context of this research study, diachronic data could provide valuable information about the various mechanisms, sequences of events, and narrative resources that are relevant to athletes high in self-compassion as they navigate instances of struggle and pressure.

When considering several of the previously identified gaps and future directions, we as a research field can gain important insight using a narrative approach to explore the experiences of self-compassionate athletes. It is possible that athletes high in self-compassion may describe their journey through sport, including significant moments and how they have navigated pressure and struggle along the way, in a different (and potentially more adaptive) manner than athletes low in self-compassion. Additionally, Allen and Leary (2010) note that “future research should strive to identify the thought patterns that differentiate low and high self-compassionate people with an eye toward developing self-compassion interventions that improve coping” (p. 116). By exploring the ways in which self-compassionate athletes story their experiences of navigating pressure and struggle, we stand to glean valuable information about their appraisals, their perspectives, the kinds of narrative resources they draw upon, the various supports they find valuable, and the language they use to describe their experiences. All of these elements may help researchers and applied practitioners better understand how self-compassion is experienced and practically carried out by athletes within sport settings. Such information can also assist sport psychology professionals and researchers in developing interventions to support athlete coping

that are tailored to sport populations. With these factors in mind, the purpose of this study was to explore how women athletes high in self-compassion story their journey through sport, as well as their experiences of navigating pressure and struggle.

Researcher Statement

Within narrative approaches to inquiry, the researcher plays a key role throughout the research process. In addition to being an active listener and witness to participants' stories, a researcher also serves as co-creator of the story being told (Smith & Sparkes, 2009 a). With these considerations in mind, it is important that I transparently position myself at the outset of this study.

Ever since I was a child, I have been fascinated by people's life stories. I would wonder who people were, where they had lived, and what life circumstances had shaped them along their life journey. Even now, I could listen to someone go on for hours as they recount what their childhood was like or discuss a recent self-discovery they have made. You see, people's stories carry with them a unique quality or power. If someone overcomes a barrier or bravely rises to a challenge, that story holds the power to both motivate and inspire. Similarly, if someone shares a story about grief, loss, or pain, that story may evoke feelings of empathy and compassion in the listener. Hearing about someone's struggles can teach us, challenge our thoughts, and encourage us that we are not alone in the struggles we face. We can learn a lot from the experiences of others and the stories they share. That same child-like wonder and curiosity of getting to know people and their stories has never left me, and it is largely what drives my passion within applied sport psychology research today.

As a researcher, I want to meet people in their life contexts, learn from them, and work together to develop various supports that will serve them well. We, as researchers, can develop

what we think are great coping strategies or approaches within research; however, if we fail to consider the realities present within the lives of those we intend to help, these supports will not be as effective. What better way to learn how to cope with challenges, setbacks, and pressure than by hearing from individuals who have gone through those experiences themselves? Employing a narrative approach to inquiry allows for this opportunity as participants' sociocultural contexts are explored, participants are positioned as the experts of their experiences, and their stories are ushered to the forefront (Riessman, 2008). Over the past several years, sport self-compassion researchers have been trying to determine the best way to tailor self-compassion efforts for use among athlete populations. Specifically, researchers want to understand more about how self-compassion can be practically applied within sport contexts and what language might resonate best with athletes (Mosewich et al., 2013; Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019). Through using narrative inquiry to explore how athletes high in self-compassion navigate pressure and struggle within sport, we may begin to learn more about the various narrative resources, coping efforts, and language that resonate well within athlete populations. To further my understanding and experience with self-compassion, in the summer of 2021, I took part in the 8-week Mindful Self-Compassion course that was developed by Dr. Kristin Neff and Dr. Chris Germer. Learning more about self-compassion through attending this course served as a valuable opportunity for both my personal and professional development.

Summary of the Present Study

To assist in the development of applied resources for athletes, the aim of this study was to explore the narratives of athletes high in self-compassion. The stories these athletes tell and the language they employ may provide us with a greater understanding of the narrative resources and various supports that have been valuable to them throughout their careers. Additionally, we

might learn more about how athletes employ self-compassionate approaches within applied sport settings. As such, the purpose of this study was to explore how women athletes high in self-compassion story their journey through sport as well as their experiences of navigating pressure and struggle. To accomplish this purpose, the study was guided by the following two research questions: (1) How do women athletes high in self-compassion story their journey through sport? (2) How do women athletes high in self-compassion story their experiences of navigating pressure or struggle?

Since athletes may perceive pressure in different ways (e.g., beneficial/facilitative or negative/debilitative) and self-compassion may be useful not only during setbacks (Neff, 2003b) but potentially also during positive or successful times (Frentz et al., 2020), careful thought went into including the word *pressure*, alongside *struggle*, within the second research question. Providing athletes with an opportunity to speak about their experiences in relation to more than just setbacks and struggles may be helpful in expanding current research. While previous self-compassion studies have researched athletes' responses to hypothetical setbacks or difficulties (Ferguson et al., 2015; Reis et al., 2015), I intentionally inquired about athletes' lived experiences of navigating pressure and struggle. Exploring athletes' personal experiences not only allows for greater depth in understanding how athletes actually experience self-compassion but is also methodologically coherent with narrative inquiry.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

What is Self-Compassion?

The origins of self-compassion can be traced back to Eastern philosophy and Buddhist thought practices, yet interest in self-compassion is growing among Western societies. Through the initial work of Dr. Kristin Neff, as well as many other researchers, interest in self-compassion is spreading across multiple disciplines. Self-compassion involves adopting a kind and caring attitude toward oneself, as opposed to being harshly self-critical and judgmental, when experiencing times of setback or struggle (Neff, 2003a). Self-compassion also involves an awareness of one's suffering, an acceptance of it, and a desire to alleviate suffering both now and in the future (Neff, 2003a). Additionally, self-compassion is comprised of three core components: mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity (Neff, 2003a).

Mindfulness refers to the ability to remain composed while allowing difficult thoughts or emotions to surface without suppressing them or overidentifying with them (Neff, 2003a; Neff & Tirsch, 2013). In fact, some researchers suggest that the presence of negative emotions or suffering may at times be considered a "prerequisite" or precondition for self-compassion (Neff & Tirsch, 2013, p. 85). Mindfulness can also be described as a "balanced state of awareness" that allows for one to maintain a clear or objective perspective when heightened mental and emotional experiences arise (Neff, 2003a, p. 88). A level of mindfulness appears necessary in order to provide one with sufficient emotional distance from one's setback, so that expressions of self-kindness and common humanity can be facilitated (Neff, 2003a).

Self-kindness involves extending an accepting and understanding attitude toward oneself, as opposed to being excessively critical or judgmental. In addition, extending kindness to oneself includes reflecting on one's needs in the present moment and seeking to satisfy or meet those

needs. Acts that demonstrate self-kindness can involve “taking time off to give oneself a break emotionally,” as well as engaging in positive or encouraging self-talk (Allen & Leary, 2010, p. 107). In this way, self-kindness involves providing for oneself during times of need.

Being kind to oneself may become easier when one recognizes that others also experience similar setbacks. This perspective encompasses the component of common humanity. Common humanity involves an awareness that individuals are not alone in their struggles but rather struggles and setbacks are mutually experienced by others as well. Also contained within common humanity is the idea that no one is perfect, and that suffering is a part of being human. Together, these three components comprise self-compassion and work in concert to help people respond with more acceptance, kindness, and understanding when they experience pain or suffering (Neff 2003a). Additionally, self-compassion supports individuals in pursuing behaviours that seek to prevent subsequent suffering and promote well-being (Neff, 2003a).

Benefits of Self-Compassion

Within the broader psychological literature, self-compassion is associated with numerous positive outcomes such as well-being (Gunnell et al., 2017; Neff et al., 2007), positive affect (Neff & Vonk, 2009), happiness (Neff et al., 2007; Neff, 2009), optimism (Neff et al., 2007; Neff, 2009), curiosity (Neff et al., 2007), life satisfaction (Neff & Vonk, 2009; Neff & Germer, 2013), exploration, and personal initiative (Neff et al., 2007). Acknowledging the associations between self-compassion and these positive outcomes is important as participants within this study may describe or embody them. Researchers more specifically within performance or achievement domains, such as school and sport, have further explored the relationships between self-compassion and various beneficial or adaptive outcomes.

Among first year university students, greater levels of self-compassion have been associated with increased vitality and positive affect, as well as decreased negative affect, due to greater satisfaction of people's psychological needs (Gunnell et al., 2017). Such increases in self-compassion are positively related to perceived competence (Neff et al., 2005) or being effective when engaged in challenging tasks, personal ownership or autonomy "over one's behaviours," and feelings of connectedness, belonging, or relatedness with "important others" (Gunnell et al., 2017, p. 46). These findings linking increased satisfaction of one's psychological needs to self-compassion might help explain one way in which self-compassion is connected to well-being (Gunnell et al., 2017). Among students, self-compassion is also associated with positive reinterpretation or growth emotion-focused strategies following a perceived academic failure (Neff et al., 2005). Self-compassion is not only positively associated with supporting beneficial outcomes, but it also helps attenuate adverse responses.

Self-compassion is associated with decreased rumination (Neff & Vonk 2009), fear of failure (Neff et al., 2005), depression and anxiety (Ferrari et al., 2019; MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Neff, 2003b). Self-compassion is also negatively associated with maladaptive perfectionism (Neff, 2003b). Individuals with greater levels of self-compassion set standards that are just as high as their non-self-compassionate counterparts; however, they do not become as distressed or frustrated when they cannot meet their goals (Neff, 2003b). With regards to goal setting, self-compassion is also negatively associated with performance goals and positively associated with mastery goals (Neff et al., 2005). Individuals who set mastery goals tend to have greater intrinsic motivation, set self-referenced standards, and accept that setbacks or mistakes are part of the learning process (Neff et al., 2005). Intrinsic motivation is a stronger, more

adaptive type of motivation and is demonstrated by persistence, willingness to ask for help, and task enjoyment (Neff et al., 2005).

Furthering the connections between self-compassion and motivation, those high in self-compassion are often motivated to engage in behaviours that alleviate future suffering or hardship (Neff, 2003a). For example, when an individual experiences a setback or struggle, their suffering does not go unnoticed, nor is it suppressed (Neff, 2003a). Instead, the individual recognizes their pain and seeks to make appropriate reparations (Neff, 2003a). In such instances, one prioritizes their well-being and various behaviours are assessed and addressed according to how they support or thwart one's chances of achieving well-being (Neff, 2003a). Rather than become complacent, passive, or stagnant, self-compassion should actually stimulate personal growth (Neff, 2003a). This approach to learning and mistakes is especially helpful in performance domains such as sport where losses and setbacks are commonly experienced.

How individuals respond to and cope with setbacks is important, and researchers note that self-compassion may influence different stages of the stress and coping process. An important part of coping involves one's appraisal of a situation. As stated by Gilbert and Proctor (2006), "self-compassion can help reduce the sense of threat and create feelings of safeness" (p. 357), which has the potential to influence one's appraisal process in a more positive manner. Self-compassion is also strongly related to positive cognitive restructuring (Allen & Leary, 2010). These connections are important to make because an individual's appraisal of a situation will influence how they choose to cope with it. Furthermore, the coping efforts one employs when responding to a situation, such as a setback, can greatly impact their progress toward short-term and long-term goals (Röthlin et al., 2019). As alluded to earlier in Neff's (2003a) ideas regarding suffering, self-compassionate individuals may engage in more proactive coping

strategies in an effort to lessen future suffering (Allen & Leary, 2010). Given the numerous demands, stressors, and setbacks that athletes need to be able to manage within a sport environment, it seems that self-compassion could help enhance their coping efforts in multiple ways. Drawing attention to the positive associations between self-compassion and more adaptive forms of goal setting, motivation, and responding to mistakes helps demonstrate self-compassion's utility within sport contexts.

Self-Compassion Benefits within Sport

The competitive and evaluative challenges inherent within sport are often difficult for athletes to manage; therefore, assisting athletes in coping with such inevitable demands and setbacks is important. Specifically, self-compassion may support athletes by helping them manage performance demands, attenuate evaluative concerns (Mosewich et al., 2011; Mosewich et al., 2013; Mosewich et al., 2014), develop positive mindsets, and facilitate adaptive coping responses (Mosewich, Sabiston, et al., 2019; Sereda et al., 2021).

Managing Performance Demands & Evaluative Concerns

Within sport, objective and subjective evaluations of one's performance and body are frequently being made. Such evaluations may include self-assessments or evaluations made by others. Self-compassion has been viewed as a resource among women athletes, as it is negatively associated with self-criticism, fear of negative evaluation, fear of failure, concern over mistakes, and state rumination (Mosewich et al., 2011). Such findings suggest self-compassion can support athletes in better managing their performance concerns. Additionally, self-compassion is negatively related to feelings of shame, objectified body consciousness, and social physique anxiety (Mosewich et al., 2011). Among women athletes, researchers have also found that self-compassion directed toward one's body allowed participants to be more accepting and

appreciative of their bodies (Eke et al., 2020). Taking a self-compassionate approach toward oneself (or one's body) can help create a safe space in which positive and negative thoughts or emotions can be more effectively processed (Eke et al., 2020). Self-compassion is useful for assisting athletes in navigating not only body concerns but also negative sport experiences (Eke et al., 2020; Ferguson et al., 2014; Mosewich et al., 2013).

Supporting Positive Mindsets, Responses, & Well-Being

In response to difficult sport situations, athletes with higher levels of self-compassion tend to experience more adaptive emotions and greater well-being (Ferguson et al., 2015). These self-compassionate athletes react more positively to emotionally challenging situations in sport by maintaining positive affect, persevering through the challenge, and taking appropriate responsibility for their mistakes (Ferguson et al., 2014, 2015). Moreover, Ceccarelli and colleagues (2019) found that self-compassionate athletes have more favourable psychological and physiological responses when coping with perceived failure experiences. Self-compassionate athletes are often more autonomous and experience greater meaning and vitality in sport (Ferguson et al., 2015) compared to less self-compassionate athletes. Athletes high in self-compassion also tend to be less ruminative, self-critical, and passive (Ferguson et al., 2014, 2015). Furthermore, Mosewich and colleagues (2013) found that self-compassion was negatively associated with negative affect, sport-related rumination, and various maladaptive components of perfectionism (e.g., concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, and perceived coach pressure). Lizmore et al. (2017) also suggest that self-compassion is associated with decreased maladaptive perfectionism. Additionally, in Ferguson and colleagues' (2015) study, self-compassion was positively related to eudaimonic well-being among young women athletes. Considering the

research, self-compassion appears to support athlete well-being while also helping them respond well to setbacks.

Managing Setbacks and Supporting Coping Efforts

In addition to supporting adaptive emotions and well-being, self-compassion can also be a useful resource or approach to assist athletes in coping with various sport setbacks, such as injuries and poor performances (Mosewich et al., 2013). Previous research supports that women athletes who have higher levels of self-compassion typically respond to emotionally difficult sport situations in healthier ways (e.g., less catastrophizing and personalizing thoughts, less negative affect, and greater behavioural equanimity) than athletes with lower levels of self-compassion (Reis et al., 2015). Among women athletes, researchers have observed positive associations between self-compassion and control appraisals, as well as some evidence of negative associations between self-compassion and threat appraisals, avoidance coping, and negative affect (Mosewich, Sabiston, et al., 2019). This connection between self-compassion and control appraisals may help explain why self-compassionate athletes often engage in more task-oriented, problem-focused, and emotion-focused coping strategies (Mosewich, Sabiston, et al., 2019). Although the associations were indirect, researchers observed that athletes higher in self-compassion tend to utilize more active coping strategies, and athletes lower in self-compassion tended to employ more disengagement coping strategies (Mosewich, Sabiston, et al., 2019). This finding regarding coping strategies may help explain why athletes with higher levels of self-compassion also have higher levels of goal progress and positive affect (Mosewich, Sabiston, et al., 2019). As such, self-compassion is a valuable approach that can aid athletes in managing competitive demands through supporting both adaptive appraisals and coping behaviours

(Mosewich, Sabiston, et al., 2019). These outcomes also work to facilitate the management of emotions and pursuit of sport success (Mosewich, Sabiston, et al., 2019).

Supporting Perceived Performance

After conducting a scoping review of available self-compassion research in competitive sport contexts, Röthlin and colleagues (2019) asserted that self-compassion would likely benefit athletes, assist their efforts to cope with setbacks, and support their well-being. Although, no studies to date have explored the relationship between self-compassion and objective measures of performance, Röthlin and colleagues (2019) suggest self-compassion does not seem to inhibit performance since it is positively related to aspects of well-being and perceived performance. Similarly, in a recent qualitative study by Adam and colleagues (2021), women athlete participants explained that self-compassion supported their perceived sport performance and well-being by helping them reframe criticism and remain determined within their respective sports. Highlighting the connections between self-compassion and adaptive emotions, mindsets, appraisals, and behaviours is important because the self-compassionate athletes participating in this study may demonstrate some of these responses within their experiences and the stories they tell.

Given all the benefits previously mentioned, it is evident that athletes could gain a lot from developing a self-compassionate approach toward their sport experiences; so, what prevents them from engaging in such an adaptive mindset or perspective? Several studies indicate that athletes are hesitant to embrace self-compassion out of a fear of becoming passive or losing the self-criticism they feel they need to perform well (Ferguson et al., 2014; Mosewich et al., 2014; Sutherland et al., 2014).

Apprehensiveness Toward Adopting Self-Compassion

Current athlete beliefs and norms in sport tend to position self-criticism as a necessary means for performance and success (Adam et al., 2021; Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019); therefore, athletes often ‘fear self-compassion’ or are rather apprehensive to adopt such an approach (Ferguson et al., 2014; Sutherland et al., 2014). Such apprehensions may be connected to notions that self-compassion seems “soft” and differs drastically from current dominant perceptions within elite sport that athletes should be “tough,” strong, and “hard” (Röthlin et al., 2019, p. 2). Athletes may be skeptical toward adopting a self-compassionate approach because they are worried that self-compassion may lead to complacency or passivity and prevent them from reaching their potential (Ferguson et al., 2014). As such, athletes often cling to their self-critical perspectives and believe that their self-criticism will help them attain peak performance (Sutherland et al., 2014).

Although athletes may feel their apprehension toward self-compassion serves them well, in actuality their resistance toward self-compassion (i.e., their fear of self-compassion) may hinder not only their ability to compete at their best but also their well-being. Ferguson and colleagues (2015) found that fear of self-compassion was associated with lower levels of eudaimonic well-being, a construct indicative of highly favourable aspects of psychological functioning (Ferguson et al., 2015). Further to this, in several studies among women athletes, self-criticism was not related to their perceived sport performance following a competition (Ferguson et al., 2022; Killham et al., 2018). Self-compassion, on the other hand, was not only negatively associated with self-criticism, but also positively associated with perceived sport performance (Killham et al., 2018). From a qualitative standpoint, participants in Adam and colleagues’ (2021) study expressed similar connections between self-compassion and perceived sport performance. As such, athletes need not worry that self-compassion would hamper their

performance. Furthermore, self-compassion is also associated with athletes taking appropriate responsibility when responding to mistakes (Ferguson et al., 2014). These findings are valuable and run contrary to previous research studies in which women athletes expressed that self-criticism was necessary for their success within sport (Ferguson et al., 2015; Sutherland et al., 2014). Based on current research, self-criticism does not appear to contribute to positive sport outcomes (Ferguson et al., 2022).

Although different than the dominant view held by athletes, the lack of relationship between self-criticism and perceived sport performance aligns with previous research (Mosewich et al., 2011). Mosewich and colleagues (2011) found that self-criticism was positively associated with fear of failure and fear of negative evaluation, both of which are likely to contribute to lower perceptions of performance. The evidence of athlete hesitancy to become self-compassionate provides further indication of a prevailing social norm or script of toughness and performance that dominates competitive sport – a script or culture some suggest needs to be *flipped* (Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019). As we broaden the narrative literature within the field of sport psychology, athletes will have more narrative resources available to them through listening to the stories of others as well as more opportunities to narrate their lives in new and meaningful ways (Sutherland et al., 2014). Such advancements can literally *flip the script* and open up new possibilities for how athletes conceptualize who they are and who they could become. Social contexts matter, not only with regards to narrative approaches but also self-compassion. Both individual factors and social factors work in concert to help athletes develop self-compassion and integrate it within sport contexts (Frentz et al., 2020; Ingstrup et al., 2017); therefore, furthering our understanding of these intra- and inter-personal dynamics is necessary.

Developing Self-Compassion: Both “Me” and “We”

Me: Self-Compassion Involves Individual Factors

Undoubtedly, self-compassion involves individual aspects because it pertains to a way of relating to oneself. Furthermore, self-compassion also appears to involve an individual's development of self-awareness and reflection on one's self-critical tendencies (Frentz et al., 2020). Several studies support that as athletes became more self-aware, self-accepting, and self-compassionate during setbacks, they were also better positioned to avoid being self-critical (Frentz et al., 2020; Ingstrup et al., 2017). Additionally, developing self-compassion appears to require that individuals take initiative or responsibility in wanting to change the way they relate to themselves (Berry et al., 2010; Frentz et al., 2020; Ingstrup et al., 2017). Whether it is because athletes realize their self-critical approaches no longer serve them well (Frentz et al., 2020), they realize society's ideals are unattainable (e.g., body ideals; Eke et al., 2020), or another reason all together, at some point these individuals desire to change how they relate to themselves. In a study by Eke and colleagues (2020), athletes demonstrated self-compassion through the acceptance of both their body's strengths and weaknesses. As athletes accepted and appreciated their bodies, they experienced more positive emotions (e.g., happiness, satisfaction, and gratitude; Eke et al., 2020). While self-compassion is an adaptive construct experienced at the individual level, literature supports the importance of broadening the research scope to consider the role of others within an individual's social context (Frentz et al., 2020; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Sereda et al., 2021).

We: Self-Compassion Involves Interpersonal Factors

Supportive social interactions with significant others such as family members, friends, or role models are important for the development of self-compassion (Berry et al., 2010; Frentz et

al., 2020; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2014). In a study by Ingstrup and colleagues (2017), athletes explained that part of their development of self-compassion was facilitated through their parents supporting them, teaching them to be kind to themselves, and helping them put their experiences into perspective. Athletes have also indicated that such support from others to keep their setbacks or experiences in perspective helped them not only develop but also practically integrate self-compassion within their sport contexts (Frentz et al., 2020). Participants across several studies have expressed how social support, especially from someone who had experienced a similar setback or struggle, was helpful in facilitating a more self-compassionate approach (Berry et al., 2010; Frentz et al., 2020; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2014). Allen & Leary (2010) capture this idea, indicating that self-compassionate individuals might benefit from “the realization that other people share whatever problems they may have” (p. 112). Such findings draw our attention to the power of common humanity, as well as empathy, that is present when people have shared similar life experiences. Additionally, athletes can develop and integrate self-compassion through observing others behaving in a self-compassionate manner, learning adaptive coping skills from sport psychologists, and developing greater self-awareness (Frentz et al., 2020; Ingstrup et al., 2017).

Although others can play an important role in facilitating one’s experiences of self-compassion, such individuals can also hinder or get in the way of one developing this approach (Berry et al., 2010; Frentz et al., 2020). Several studies have suggested that coaches can significantly influence athletes’ self-criticism and at times discourage them from taking a self-compassionate approach (Crozier et al., 2019; Eke et al., 2020; Frentz et al., 2020). The interpersonal dynamics present within sport settings are complex, as evidenced by coaches, significant others, and teammates playing both facilitative and constraining roles (Eke et al.,

2020; Frentz et al., 2020). As such, research calls for further exploration of the role various social supports play in athletes' development, integration, and experiences of self-compassion (Ingstrup et al., 2017; Killham et al., 2018).

We: Self-Compassion and the Role of Norms and Culture

As previously mentioned, the significant others within an athlete's environment (e.g., coaches, teammates, parents) can influence their development of self-compassion. More specifically, Mosewich, Ferguson, and colleagues (2019) suggest that these significant others "may serve to more strongly embed ideas and concepts into regular training and competition routines" (p. 3). Additionally, in order for self-compassion to successfully be integrated within sport, this "may require a marked shift in approach and culture" (Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019, p. 7). Such statements likely draw from recent research that perceptions of teammates' thoughts and behaviours may influence or shape individual athletes' thoughts and behaviours (Crozier et al., 2019). Crozier and colleagues (2019) explored how athletes' individual self-compassion was related to their perception of their teammates' self-compassion. This research study examined the relationships between athlete self-compassion and descriptive norms, which are the perceptions of what one's teammates or peers are doing (Crozier et al., 2019). Crozier and colleagues (2019) noted that "descriptive norms reflect an individual's perceptions of what is typical and motivates individuals to act similarly as it is perceived to be the most appropriate behaviour" (p. 153). In other words, descriptive norms help guide and determine behaviours that are acceptable or expected within a given context. These researchers found a positive relationship between perceptions of teammates' self-compassion and individual athletes' self-compassion, indicating that the more athletes perceive their teammates were using self-compassion, the more each individual athlete also expressed employing this approach (Crozier et

al., 2019). A possible explanation for this finding is that self-compassion was not only viewed as an accessible way of coping for these athletes (e.g., was modeled by teammates), but was also perceived as an acceptable or appropriate way of coping within these participants' sport environments.

Researchers suggest that sport practitioners (e.g., coaches, sport psychology consultants) can support the acceptance and adoption of self-compassion as a descriptive norm within sport contexts (Crozier et al., 2019). Adoption of self-compassion can take place through sport practitioners encouraging athletes to employ more self-accepting and self-compassionate responses when experiencing setbacks (Crozier et al., 2019). A growing number of researchers recognize that in order for self-compassion to actually take root and grow within sport, we need the support of everyone - athletes, coaches, sport professionals, and parents (Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019). Everybody has a role to play in reshaping or shifting the culture within sport settings. Reshaping sport culture in this way can afford athletes the opportunity to think and behave in new or seemingly counter-cultural ways, as well as help create safer spaces for athletes to accept their limitations and work through negative emotions. Additionally, encouraging athletes to take a self-compassionate approach when responding to sport setbacks or adverse events can provide them with new language and alternative ways of relating to themselves and storying their lives.

When considering the dominant norm of performance present within sport, a construct like self-compassion may seem counter-intuitive, counter-cultural, and at times potentially unacceptable for use within sport. However, by allowing alternative ways of coping with struggles to be present within the fabric of a team or sport environment, this may provide athletes with different and possibly more adaptive experiences of relating to themselves. For example,

just as “... extending understanding, confidence, and appreciation to one’s body may constructively interrupt patterns of social comparison,” (Eke et al., 2020, p. 13), so might the adoption of a self-compassionate approach interrupt the dominant belief within sport culture that often prioritizes performance, outcomes, and success at the expense of personal well-being. Similarly, Crozier and colleagues (2019) suggest that because of the positive relationship between descriptive norms and self-compassion, “an increase in the amount of self-compassion used by teammates may potentially be beneficial if such change is perceived by other athletes” (p. 154). Essentially, as self-compassion becomes more accessible, acceptable, and utilized within a team context (e.g., becomes the new descriptive norm), the more self-compassionate each individual could potentially become. Crozier and colleagues (2019) call for future research to further explore the relationship between descriptive (social) norms and athlete self-compassion, the influence that others have on self-compassion, and the mechanisms of these relationships.

Sport psychology research that explores the influence of social and cultural factors on athlete coping may be relatively new (Tamminen & Bennett, 2017); however, it is slowly starting to emerge. Building on the earlier ideas of Smith (2010), McGannon and Smith (2015) note, “culture shapes how we think, feel, and behave; we cannot step outside culture, thus to ignore it would be to miss a key matter that shapes people’s self-identities and lives” (p. 79). This quote directs our attention to the need for researchers to explore various social contexts within sport and how such settings influence peoples’ experiences. Culture has the power to shape the experiences that people have, the language that people use, and the stories that people tell. The dominant and pervasive view that performance or success are the ultimate goals that athletes are

to strive for at the expense of their well-being needs to change. We need to – literally – flip the script and employing a narrative research approach may help us do just that.

Purpose of the Present Study

Narrative research provides a potential avenue through which we can begin to shift the norms within sport and address several research gaps. Use of narrative inquiry can allow for the exploration of how multiple individual and social dynamics shape athletes' development and experiences of self-compassion. The thoughts and behaviours of teammates, as well as the descriptive norms within a team context, can influence what narrative resources are accessible and acceptable. By exploring the narratives of athletes high in self-compassion, we can begin to identify not only the narrative resources or 'scripts' that these athletes draw from when describing their journey through sport, but also the various norms present within their sport contexts. As athletes describe how they have navigated instances of pressure and struggle, we will learn more about how self-compassion is practically applied within sport and what supports athletes have found helpful throughout their careers. Such insights help address gaps regarding athlete development of self-compassion as well as athlete-relevant language when working within sport populations.

With these considerations in mind, the purpose of this study was to explore how women athletes high in self-compassion story their journey through sport as well as their experiences of navigating pressure and struggle. More specifically, I sought to investigate the following research questions: (1) How do women athletes high in self-compassion story their journey through sport? (2) How do women athletes high in self-compassion story their experiences of navigating pressure or struggle?

Chapter 3: Method

Narrative Inquiry

Within human social sciences, there are several “strands” of narrative inquiry, each of which may be carried out in a slightly different manner (Riessman, 2008, p. 13). Nonetheless, narrative inquiry, taken in its general sense, “has a great deal to offer disciplines and professionals that want to see how knowledge is constructed in the everyday world through an ordinary communicative act — storytelling” (Riessman, 2008, p. 13-14). Although a universally accepted definition of narrative inquiry is difficult to find, most researchers agree that narrative studies focus on the lives of individuals and their experiences through the exploration of the stories that they tell and live out (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The aim of narrative inquiry is to “seek to interpret the ways in which people perceive reality, make sense of their worlds, and perform social actions” (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a, p. 281).

Narrative inquiry approaches allow researchers to acknowledge and explore the societal structures and forces that act upon people, as well as individuals’ agentic capacities to make choices and in turn shape society (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). Due to the recognition that society plays a role in influencing peoples’ experiences, narrative approaches urge us to consider how various sociocultural contexts shape, enable, or constrain individuals’ abilities to make meaning in everyday life (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). Similarly, narrative analysis can allow researchers to better understand the ways in which an individual “appropriates, actively edits, and/or resists these stories in everyday life” (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a, p. 280). This somewhat multi-level and bidirectional feature of narrative research makes it a well-suited approach to further explore the individual and social factors that impact athlete self-compassion development and integration. Narrative research allows for the investigation of people’s experience in a way that explores

multiple settings, characters (people), and patterns of actions that take place over time.

Essentially, using narrative approaches can help provide a relatively full picture of how an individual relates to themselves and the world around them.

As narrative researchers explore how the narratives within society shape people and how people in-turn shape the narratives present around them, it is clear to see this research process can be complex (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). We, as people, are complicated beings with diverse backgrounds, nuanced experiences, and detailed stories; nevertheless, narrative research provides a valuable means through which to study complex subjective experiences. Narrative inquiry and analysis allow for the richness of peoples' experiences to be explored – insights, contradictions, and all (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a).

Narrative Literature Considerations within Sport

Although relatively new within the field, narrative inquiry and analysis may be quite useful to sport and exercise psychology researchers (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). A narrative approach allows researchers to “retain, rather than wash out, the complexity and messiness of people” and their experiences (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a, p. 280). Given the relational context in which sports take place, this form of research may be helpful for identifying what kinds of descriptive norms and narratives exist within society or sport culture (i.e., outside of the individual), and how such narratives come to shape peoples' perspectives, experiences, and behaviours (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a).

While purists of narrative inquiry may place greater importance on how individuals tell their stories and the plotlines they use, the content within the stories themselves is also significant. In order to tell stories about one's experiences, individuals need to have access to a set of words or language. The language we have access to shapes the stories we tell, and the

stories we tell can in turn shape the identities we develop (McGannon & Smith, 2015). Since language is used to communicate our stories, examining what words people use to story themselves matters (Tamminen & Bennett, 2017). If the language resources that people have access to in their culture are limited, these factors could constrain their experiences and lead to individuals feeling unable to story their lives in ways that are meaningful to them (Douglas & Carless, 2009; Smith & Sparkes, 2009a, 2009b).

When considering how the implications of narrative resources may play out in high-level sport, an athlete's surroundings and cultural contexts can shape and permeate that individual's personal story in both positive and negative ways (Carless & Douglas, 2013a, 2013b). Within high-level sport environments, individuals (e.g., coaches, managers, athletes) are often preoccupied with performance (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Carless & Douglas, 2013b; Douglas & Carless, 2006) and place an overemphasis on self-criticism as a necessary means to achieve sport success (Adam et al., 2021; Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019). This self-critical reasoning aligns with elements of the performance narrative in which most (if not all) of one's areas of life center upon the goal of high performance (Douglas & Carless, 2006). The dominant narrative of performance within sport asserts that athletes who want to be elite and experience success must devote "single minded dedication and focus" to their sport (Douglas & Carless, 2006, p. 14). Such an overemphasis or fixation on performance often comes at the detriment of many other important factors such as athletes' physical health, mental well-being, and future quality of life (Douglas & Carless, 2009; Everard et al., 2021; Smith, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). Due to the limited narrative resources or storylines presently available within high-performance sport contexts, athletes can experience mental and emotional difficulties (Everard et al., 2021; McGannon & McMahon, 2019; Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). Therefore, athletes could benefit from

having access to alternative language or narratives and different ways of finding meaning in their experiences (Carless & Douglas, 2013a, 2013b; Smith & Sparkes, 2009a).

Counterstories, Countering Culture, and the Prospect of Self-Compassion

At times, the dominant narrative in a particular context can be challenged or overtaken by a counternarrative which is an alternative way of storying oneself (Carless & Douglas, 2013a, 2013b). Such instances can be highly significant and influential to athletes as it shows them that they can story themselves in more than one way (Carless & Douglas, 2013a, 2013b). When individuals share alternative stories, these can become resources that encourage or support others in developing new ways of living and finding meaning in their experiences (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a).

Two alternative narratives currently present within sport psychology literature include relational narratives and discovery narratives (Douglas & Carless, 2009). Relational narratives see one “resist the part of athlete,” by prioritizing aspects like happiness, connection with others, and additional life pursuits alongside or even above performance (Carless & Douglas, 2013b, p. 703). In a similar way, discovery narratives highlight how one’s sense of self or worth “is not related to sporting achievement” and rather, “the need to explore and discover a full life takes precedence over the need to perform in sport, regardless of the expectations of others” (Carless & Douglas, 2013b, p. 705). In both of these narratives, individuals are aware of the multiple aspects of who they are and tell their stories from these multiple self-positions (Carless & Douglas, 2013b).

When considering the over-emphasis on performance within current sport culture and the benefits that come from having alternative narratives or ways of storying one’s experience (Douglas & Carless, 2009), it would seem self-compassion has the potential to help athletes

navigate the struggles of competitive sport. The potential support afforded to athletes through an approach such as self-compassion may seem counterintuitive or counter-cultural to the strong performance narratives present within sport contexts (Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019). However, a self-compassionate approach may offer athletes an alternative set of language, values, and behaviours that could help them cope with sport challenges and story their lives in more meaningful ways. To assist in “shifting to a new norm” (Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019, p. 7) regarding self-compassion and more adaptive approaches in sport, we need to find ways of both understanding and changing the current ‘story’ within sport. Using a narrative approach will foster further understanding through elevating the voices of self-compassionate athletes as they narrate their experiences and stories in their own words.

Narrative Inquiry in Sport Self-Compassion Research

To the best of my knowledge, at the present time only two research studies have specifically utilized narrative approaches to explore self-compassion among women athletes (Eke et al., 2020; Sutherland et al., 2014). The first study focused on women athletes’ experiences of emotional pain and the potential use of self-compassion as a resource in such experiences (Sutherland et al., 2014). Through an initial interview, followed by reflexive photography, Sutherland and colleagues (2014) explored six women athletes’ experiences of their emotional pain associated with failure. The themes from athletes’ narratives of emotional pain included “(1) broken bodies, wilted spirits, (2) why couldn’t it have been someone else, (3) I should have, I could have, I would have and (4) fall down seven, stand up eight” (Sutherland et al., 2014, p. 505). Overall, these themes conveyed a sense of sorrow, self-criticism, and longing for things to be different, as well as perseverance (Sutherland et al., 2014). Then, during a second interview with participants, the lead researcher taught each athlete about self-compassion and

inquired how athletes may (or may not) have responded to their failure experience with self-compassion. Strengths of this study include the use of multiple forms of data (e.g., interviews and reflexive photos) to gain rich, thick descriptions of participants' experiences of emotional pain as well as the lead author's commitment to engage in reflexive journaling. Although Sutherland and colleagues (2014) engaged participants in discussions about self-compassion, such conversations seemed to be guided by the researcher and involved exploring the potential role of self-compassion, not necessarily participant's lived experiences of self-compassion. Furthermore, while participants mainly agreed that self-compassion could benefit athletes, none of them thought of themselves as self-compassionate. Neither objective nor subjective measurements of self-compassion were used to recruit athletes; therefore, athletes' experiences of self-compassion or rather the potential role of self-compassion was discussed more as a conceptual possibility (Sutherland et al., 2014). Exploring the experiences of athletes high in self-compassion would build upon Sutherland and colleagues' work and make a valuable contribution to the field.

In addition to the research by Sutherland et al. (2014), Eke and colleagues (2020) also employed a narrative approach to explore self-compassion among women athletes. Eke et al. (2020) considered the role of body self-compassion among adolescent women athletes including how self-compassion related to their perceived sport performance and well-being. During the first semi-structured interview, Eke and colleagues (2020) introduced self-compassion and body self-compassion to each participant, then invited athletes to discuss their experiences of these within sport. Athletes then engaged in journaling activities for two to three weeks after the initial interview. After the period of journaling, athletes were invited back for a follow-up interview to discuss 3 to 5 experiences from their journals that centered on body self-compassion,

performance, and emotional well-being. In addition to the four themes developed from athletes' perceptions of the role body self-compassion (e.g., "compassion for and confidence in my body, their thoughts and my body, I will play to my potential, and my strength is in my emotions"), a key finding included that as athletes increased their acceptance of their bodies, the more they experienced positive emotions such as gratitude, happiness, and satisfaction (Eke et al., 2020, p. 1). Additionally, athletes reported that as they embraced their body's unique qualities, their perceptions of performance also improved (Eke et al., 2020). Several strengths of this study include the exploration of body self-compassion among a younger group of women (e.g., age 14-17), the use of multiple modes of data generation (e.g., interviews and participant journaling), and the lead researcher's commitment to reflexive journaling. While Eke and colleagues' (2020) study makes a valuable contribution to the sport self-compassion literature, it shares similar limitations with the study by Sutherland et al. (2014) in that athletes' understandings and experiences of self-compassion may have been incomplete due to their lack of exposure to the construct. Eke and colleagues' (2020) noted that such difficulties comprehending self-compassion may have resulted from participants conflating self-compassion with self-confidence, as well as their overall lack of familiarity with using the word 'self-compassion' in their everyday lives.

Since both studies were explorative, it makes sense why researchers did not include self-compassion criteria to recruit participants; however, both research teams encountered limitations around athletes' comprehensions of and lived experiences with self-compassion. Additionally, while researchers examined the role of self-compassion among athletes, neither study's protocols were positioned to assist in the development of athlete-centered descriptions of self-compassion, because researchers prompted and described self-compassion to athletes during the interview

process (Eke et al., 2020; Sutherland et al., 2014). While developing athlete-centered language for self-compassion may not have been an aim of these previous studies, research exploring athlete relevant language remains limited within the current literature. I sought to begin addressing such limitations regarding language and experiences of self-compassion within my thesis study.

Ontology & Epistemology

A relativist ontology informed this study. Relativism acknowledges that there are multiple truths and that reality is subjective (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Epistemologically, a constructionist approach helped to guide this research. Constructionism asserts that peoples' knowledge of reality is constructed through their subjective experiences (Smith & McGannon, 2018). More specifically, within the field of narrative research, constructionism emphasizes that narratives are constructed and told in relation to others; therefore, narratives are viewed as a "sociocultural phenomenon," rather than psychological schemas or "cognitive scripts" (Sparkes & Smith, 2008, p. 299). Because narrative accounts are inherently socially constructed and told within relationships, narratives "never simply mirror some independent reality or tap into an inner world but help construct, within relationships, the very reality itself" (Sparkes & Smith, 2008, p. 299). Aspects of peoples' identity, memories, and emotions become visible "through joint actions and cultural-specific resources, such as narrative formats" (Sparkes & Smith, p. 299). In contrast to the constructivist view that gives greater priority and attention to what goes on in the inner workings of people's minds, the constructionist approach to narrative tips the scale in favor of social interactions and "*relatedness*" (Sparkes & Smith, 2008, p. 299).

While either approach could be taken to answer my research question, Riessman (2008) encourages researchers to not get so tied-up on debates with others regarding paradigmatic

decisions, and rather “get on” with conducting “narrative research that includes the detail and specificity needed to advance the field” (p. 200). The narrative field is full of “cross-disciplinary hybrids” (p. 14) and “can only grow stronger as we form connections across disciplinary boundaries...” (Riessman, 2008, p. 200). With these considerations in mind, a constructionist approach to narrative inquiry helped guide this study.

Role of the Researcher

In narrative analysis, researchers often approach the data from the perspective of a story analyst or storyteller (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). Smith and Sparkes (2009a) note these two prevalent analytic standpoints are not dichotomous, but rather have similarities and that “researchers may, for various purposes, shift from one standpoint to the other” (p. 281). From such descriptions it seems that the perspectives of story analyst and storyteller exist on somewhat of a continuum. For the purposes of this study, I approached participants’ stories from a perspective roughly midway on this continuum which enabled me to oscillate between engaging with participants experiences from either the perspective of storyteller or story analyst when appropriate.

During early phases of data generation and analysis (e.g., interviews and data immersion) it was important for me to approach participants from a storyteller perspective and take an active listening role to allow participants to share their experiences without undue influence from me. While all stories are told in relationship and thus co-constructed between the speaker and listener (Smith & Sparkes 2009a), essentially, I ‘took a back seat’ and allowed participants to steer our conversation down whatever scenic road they wished to drive and to whatever destination they wished to take me. This intentional hands-off approach, while unsettling at first, allowed me to take on “the posture of a feeling and vulnerable observer” (Smith & Sparkes 2009a, p. 282).

Such an approach afforded me the opportunity to “think and feel with” participants’ stories in an “embodied” manner which I then tried to convey in a “he(art)ful” way to readers through extensive use of participants’ original words and first-person language within their narrative accounts (Smith & Sparkes 2009a, p. 282). These efforts were carried out to help situate participants’ voices as the primary narrators of their experiences. When appropriate I also employed creative and visual elements to further convey the depth of participant emotions that were present during our interviews together, in hopes of not only communicating but also evoking a similar emotional response within the readers of this work (Smith & Sparkes, 2009b). Together, these visual and creative elements align with efforts a storyteller would undertake in order to “show” readers aspects of participants’ stories (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a, p. 282).

In addition to the position of storyteller, I also transitioned to engage with participants’ stories from a perspective slightly closer to that of a story analyst. An analysis from this perspective involves examining the content and structure of stories, while also finding connections between participant stories and current theory (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). The perspective of story analyst seems to align with more conventional approaches to qualitative analysis that seek to explicitly tell readers how a study contributes to a research field. Although I shifted my position slightly toward that of a story analyst (mainly near the end of my study) to help make connections between participant stories and sport self-compassion literature, I did not want to “abstractly scrutinize” participant stories (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a, p. 281). Such descriptions of analytic processes sound harsh and impersonal. I believe relational ethics are at the core of narrative research; therefore, it was very important for me to honour the stories that participants shared with me. They graciously let me bear witness to some of their most painful and vulnerable moments throughout their sport careers, and I wanted to steward their stories

well. Being able to shift between the perspectives of storyteller and story analyst allowed me to empathically engage with participants' stories while also making meaningful connections to current sport self-compassion literature.

Participants

Recruiting Athletes High in Self-Compassion

After obtaining approval from the University of Alberta's Research Ethics Board (REB), participant recruitment took place (see Appendix A). This study specifically sought to investigate the various narratives that self-compassionate women athletes tell, and feel a part of, within their sociocultural contexts; therefore, participants were purposefully selected. Purposeful sampling is commonly used within narrative research (Riessman, 2008; Sutherland et al., 2014), and similar approaches have been used within self-compassion research to recruit athletes high in self-compassion (Ingstrup et al, 2017; Sereda et al., 2021). I purposefully selected women athletes with high self-compassion scores in an effort to enhance our confidence that they could speak to personal experiences of self-compassion when reflecting on how they navigated various struggles or pressures within sport. Similar to the approach taken by Ingstrup and colleagues (2017), high self-compassion was indicated by athletes scoring one standard deviation above the mean self-compassion score using the 26-item Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003b). There are six subscales measured in the SCS (e.g., mindfulness, self-kindness, common humanity, over-identification, self-judgement, and isolation). In order to provide an overall self-compassion score, the negative components are reverse scored, added to the positive components, and then averaged to produce a composite score. Previous research has indicated that the SCS demonstrates good internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = 0.85$), test-retest reliability, discriminant

validity, and concurrent validity among samples of university students (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003b; Neff et al., 2005) and athletes (Mosewich et al., 2011).

Three women athletes participated in this research study. Athletes were recruited based on their most recent self-compassion score from an ongoing varsity student-athlete physical and psychological research project unrelated to my thesis study. Initially, 45 women athletes who compete at the university level in Canada completed the 26-item Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003b). The mean self-compassion score among this group was 3.18 ($SD = 0.66$). From this group, 12 athletes had self-compassion scores higher than one standard deviation above the mean (above 3.84), and of these 12 athletes, four consented to being contacted about further research. All four of the eligible participants were contacted via the email address they provided and were invited to take part in this research study. To participate, eligible women athletes must also have played sport at the university level (or higher) in their past competitive year, be of the age of majority (18 years or older), and speak English. Of the four athletes invited, three participated. The self-compassion scores for the athletes who participated in this study ranged from 3.96 to 4.04 ($M = 3.99$).

Selecting participants in a purposeful manner not only aligns with the aims of this study, but also aids in generating data that is rich, thick, and detailed (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Since this study is interested in individual athletes' stories and meaning making experiences, an idiographic approach was employed. In this approach, priority is given to preserving the individuality of each person's story and as a result a smaller number of participants were invited to take part (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). As statistical forms of generalizability are not the goal of qualitative (or narrative) research, 'depth' takes precedence over 'breadth', and the number of participants is often smaller (Smith, 2018).

Pilot Interviews & Preparation

Prior to interviewing participants, I carried out one-on-one pilot interviews at two time points with four women who were formerly/currently involved in sport and could speak to their experiences in sport (e.g., 8 interviews in total). The first pilot interview explored each woman's journey through sport, whereas the second interview asked them about 3 to 5 instances of navigating pressure or struggle within sport. An additional component of the pilot process involved creating a visual timeline of the pilot participants' journey through sport, prior to holding the second interview. Due to the time commitment involved in undertaking this task, timeline creation was piloted with only two of the four pilot participants.

Holding pilot interviews provided an opportunity to assess the overall quality of the interview guide (e.g., question wording, clarity, and understandability) as well as an opportunity for me to gain comfortability with the narrative interviewing process. Narrative, or life story, interviews tend to be much less structured than typical qualitative interviews; therefore, the pilot interview process allowed me to get familiar with these differences and hone relevant narrative interviewing skills. Such skills included gaining greater comfortability with longer pauses, listening to understand instead of listening to speak, and allowing the participant to steer the conversation. For further reflection and explanation of skills I found helpful when conducting narrative interviews, please see Appendix B. The pilot interview process also helped me gain familiarity with the online video communication platform I used (e.g., Zoom) as well as gain experience troubleshooting technology issues and establishing rapport using virtual mediums (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). More specifically, I learned how to navigate technology-related challenges regarding eye contact, limited body language, use of minimal encouragers, and managing lag time or connectivity issues. Having the opportunity to conduct eight pilot

interviews not only provided me with ample time to address various technology challenges and develop narrative interviewing skills, but also provided pilot participants with multiple chances to share feedback. The feedback I received from pilot participants and incorporated into the interview guide helped to enhance the ease of conversation with future participants. Several changes that were made based on the feedback from pilot participants included the allowing longer pauses when asking questions (e.g., to account for lag time and participant reflection), adjusting the timing of clarifying questions or probes (e.g., waiting until after participants fully responded), and having the option to bring songs as artifacts to the second interview.

Data Generation

In narrative interviewing, the goal is to “generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements” (Riessman, 2008, p. 23). Due to the relational nature inherent in the process of storytelling, it is important to acknowledge that the researcher and participant often co-construct the stories that are shared (McGannon & Smith, 2015; Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). One’s personal narrative involves extensive stories told about one’s life or career during one or several research interviews (Riessman, 2008). Thus, for my study, I met with participants on multiple occasions to hear about their experiences. Athletes who met all eligibility criteria were invited to participate in two separate loosely structured one-on-one interviews that took place in a location of their choice (Bennett et al., 2017) via a university approved online communication medium (e.g., Zoom). Note that as part of the member reflection process, I interacted with each athlete a third time to receive feedback about their personal narrative. This process is described in detail later in this chapter.

In alignment with how narrative research is often carried out, I had planned to hold interviews in person; however, due to the COVID-19 public health measures mandated in

Alberta (during the time of my data generation in the summer of 2020) this necessitated that the interviews take place online. Although online interviews may not fully replace face to face interviews, there are several advantages that come from holding interviews virtually. Online video platforms can afford participants greater flexibility and accessibility regarding where and when their interviews take place (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). Allowing athletes to select the interview setting not only supports participant autonomy but also helps participants feel comfortable in their surroundings (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). This may promote a deeper level of reflection and exploration of experiences by participants, and lead to dialogue that is both detailed and rich. While there are advantages to using virtual means for conducting online interviews, there are also limitations that should be acknowledged such as, potential loss of in-person feedback (e.g., body language, eye contact, and sensed presence), technological or internet network issues, and other (home) distractions (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). All of these factors could lead to the flow of conversation being disjointed; therefore, researchers note that additional time is likely needed to establish rapport with participants when facilitating online research interviews (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Shapka et al., 2016). To help develop rapport with participants I included general warmup questions at the beginning of each interview, as well as reserved more sensitive topics of discussion for the second interview. While it was necessary that interviews be conducted online, pivoting to hold interviews virtually via Zoom did not seem to greatly impact the interview process. I was still able to establish good rapport with participants and they appeared comfortable with the virtual arrangement as they shared openly about their experiences.

The first one-on-one interview followed a loose format and was guided by the first research question: how do athletes high in self-compassion story their journey through sport?

Several open-ended questions inquired about how athletes first got involved in sport and how their journey through sport led them to where they are now (see Appendix C for full interview guide). Use of open-ended questions was intentional as they allow greater opportunities for stories and invite participants to “construct answers in ways they find meaningful” (Riessman, 2008, p. 25). This initial interview aided in the development of each athlete’s narrative arc through inviting athletes to share their life story regarding their journey through sport. This less structured interview style allowed for participants to take control over where the conversation would go and lead me down “*their* trails” of thought (Riessman, 2008, p. 24). While at times a more fluid and less rigid interview format can lead to greater uncertainty, it can also enhance the quality of the conversation (Riessman, 2008). Additionally, a more flexible interview helps address the power imbalance that can be present during an interview. Although the power dynamic can never be fully reversed, the disparity between researcher and participant can be diminished and “encouraging participants to speak in their own ways can, at times, shift power in interviews” (Riessman, 2008, p. 24). All of these considerations were taken into account when developing the first interview guide in preparation for engaging with participants.

Following each participant’s first interview, I mapped out a chronological timeline of their journey through sport based on the various events they chose to talk about and the order in which they were discussed (Ryba et al., 2015; please see Figure 2 for a deidentified example timeline). Then I provided participants with a copy of their timeline (with their events plotted out), prior to their second interview, and gave them the opportunity to add, modify, or delete anything as they saw fit. This not only served as an opportunity for member reflection, but also provided context for deeper conversations during the second interview when participants were asked to discuss specific events in greater detail (Ryba et al., 2015). Additionally, as a novice

researcher within narrative inquiry, the use of timelines helped me by serving as an anchor point to revisit when conducting both the structural and thematic analyses.

To allow for a greater detailed exploration of how self-compassionate athletes navigate specific sport situations, participants were invited back for a second interview. This second loosely structured interview was guided by the second research question that inquired how athletes high in self-compassion story their experiences of navigating pressure or struggle (please see Appendix D for the full interview guide). During this interview, I first invited participants to describe what pressure and struggle meant to them. Then I invited participants to share detailed accounts of 3-5 experiences in which they navigated pressure or struggle within competitive sport. These 3-5 instances of navigating pressure or struggle could include events not previously mentioned by athletes in the first interview (about their sport journey), or moments that were briefly talked about prior but would be elaborated on during the second interview. While the first interview helped capture the narrative arc and context of athletes' journeys through sport, the second interview assisted with filling in the details of athletes' stories by promoting rich, thick description of their personal accounts.

Narrative researchers note that at times participants may find it challenging to articulate their experiences solely using words; therefore, it may be helpful to include additional opportunities for communication and expression (Riessman, 2008). Prior to the second interview, I informed participants of the purpose of the interview (i.e., to explore how they navigated instances of pressure and struggle within sport) and gave them the option of bringing 3-5 objects or artifacts (e.g., photos, gear, songs) that could help them describe their story and experiences. This invitation was optional and there were no repercussions for those who chose not to bring objects. Visual data in the form of images can serve to thicken or enrich the data generation

process (Riessman, 2008). Additionally, the use of photo voice, or other collaborative opportunities for data generation, can spark “genuine discoveries about a phenomenon” and in a matter that shares power between participant and researcher (Riessman, 2008, p. 24). As such, care was taken to incorporate this mode of data generation. During their respective interviews Isabelle brought two objects, Lauren described an important text message, and Amanda brought two objects as well as described several important text messages and notes. Due to the personal nature of these objects, many of them cannot be disclosed as this could make participants identifiable. Having said this, one of the participant’s objects is discussed in the results section. It should be noted that all of the artifacts helped athletes further depict meaningful aspects of their stories and added detail to their experiences.

If participants did not have objects to bring in physically, or they simply did not feel the need to make use of that option (e.g., Lauren), they took part in a slightly modified second interview (e.g., question wording was modified to not include prompts regarding their objects and instead we just focused on their experiences). Riessman (2008) states that “practices that allow participants to speak, write, and/or make images as they choose are essential to ethical narrative research...” (p. 199). I included these alternative ways of generating data to facilitate further participant reflection and more importantly provide participants with additional avenues through which to tell their stories.

In an effort to position athletes as the experts of their experience and allow them to narrate their stories in a way that highlights what they find valuable, I purposefully did not prime participants with self-compassion language during either interview. Contrary to what has been seen in previous studies (Eke et al., 2020; Sutherland et al., 2014), I did not provide a definition or description of self-compassion during the interview process. Rather, in this study I sought to

explore what narrative resources, narrative structures, and language self-compassionate athletes draw upon when describing how they navigate pressure and struggle within sport. Such novel information could complement current self-compassion literature and intervention efforts, by offering a new angle through which to talk about and promote this beneficial approach.

Following each athlete's second interview, I held a short debriefing session to fully inform athletes of the purpose of the study and, more specifically, the reason I had recruited them (e.g., their high self-compassion scores). This debriefing session was informal and primarily served as an opportunity for participants to ask any questions regarding self-compassion or the study (please see Appendix E for the debriefing script). Additionally, after each participant's second interview, they were given two \$20 gift cards (\$40 total) to enjoy at a local business of their choice. One participant requested that her \$40 be donated on her behalf toward a specific charity, so I facilitated that as well. This gesture extended to participants served as a small token of appreciation for the time they spent sharing their experiences throughout the research process. Similar approaches to compensating participants have been taken in other self-compassion research studies (Eke et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2019).

Data Preparation

Since I was the individual who spoke with the participants during their interviews, I felt I was the individual best positioned to prepare the data and retain important features from these conversations. Transcribing is not merely a research task to be executed, it is an integral part of the analysis process. It is a complicated undertaking of trying to maintain as much detail (e.g., body language, gestures, tone, and inflection) from the initial interview as possible and appropriate, when confined to the two-dimensional writings on a page (Riessman, 2008). In an effort to capture and retain details from each interview, I wrote brief field notes during each

participant interview as well as journal reflections after each interview. In addition to writing notes and reflections, I transcribed all the audio files and re-checked them after they were typed up. Considering I interviewed participants through Zoom, and it had a transcription feature, I elected to use this as a starting point for the transcription process. However, this built-in transcription program still required editing and correcting participant transcripts to ensure their accuracy. Once the participants' interview transcripts were prepared, more formal stages of the analysis were carried out.

Narrative Analysis

Smith and Sparkes (2009a) note that there is no single correct way to conduct a narrative analysis, and that the research decisions made will depend largely on the purpose of the study, one's epistemological leanings, and the research audience. Despite the multiple ways of conducting a narrative analysis, a key aspect of this method is that it focuses on analyzing the full story being told, rather than coding for brief phrases or words (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). Special attention is given to *what* participants say in their stories as well as *how* they tell their accounts (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a; Tamminen & Bennett, 2017); therefore, both the content and structure of participants' stories are important. In order to analyze not only what participants include in their stories but also how they tell their stories, both thematic and structural narrative analyses were conducted.

Thematic Narrative Analysis

Thematic narrative analysis focuses on the content, or *whats* of peoples' stories (Riessman, 2008; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Sparkes and Smith (2014) note that researchers can conduct a thematic narrative analysis by progressing through the following iterative phases or "moves" (p. 132). When beginning this process, researchers need to spend time being immersed

in or familiarizing themselves with the data (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). For me this involved reading and re-reading participants' transcribed documents, as well as listening to the participants' interview audio files several times. The next phase involved noting preliminary thoughts regarding a participant's entire story (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). These written notes included initial awareness of common phrases used by the participants as well as noting significant people, places, or moments (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). After several rounds of jotting notes, I spent time distinguishing or identifying key themes throughout a participant's story. Smith and Sparkes (2014) note that during this process, researchers look for connections and attempt to "identify patterns and meanings as constructed by the participants" (p. 132). Essentially, researchers "code the data by looking for common threads in it" (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 132). Such threads could be themes or words that kept resurfacing throughout a participant's story. Being especially inquisitive and asking questions of oneself and the data (such as "what's going on here?" and "what are the implications of this theme?") may be helpful when trying to identify themes or think more open-mindedly about the data (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 133). While I asked these questions of myself during this phase, my supervisor also served as a "critical friend" to further foster curiosity and support discussion (Smith & Sparkes, 2006, p. 172).

The next phase involved tracking where, when, and under what circumstances various themes were present within one's story (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). I also took note of how themes might interact with each other (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), through creating concept maps and organizing sticky notes. Additionally, in this phase I created a spreadsheet in Microsoft Excel for each participant to help keep each athlete's codes and themes both organized and connected to their original transcript data. Sparkes and Smith (2014) express that after spending significant

time analyzing a participant's story, researchers are to take a step back and redirect their focus toward potential links between one's story and theory. Prior or current theory can be used to help guide inquiry, while simultaneously searching for new insights from participants' data during a narrative thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). During this phase, I made initial or tentative associations between themes present in the participant's story and themes or concepts present in current theory (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). After this, each theme was given a name and a detailed description or story was written about the various themes and the interconnections among them (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Throughout this process, Sparkes and Smith (2014) encourage researchers to keep the participant's story intact and consider "what the theme tells us about the *person* and *cultural contexts* that shape them" (p. 133).

After going through the previous analytical phases for each participant, I took time to "compare and contrast the most meaningful themes" (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 133). As described by Sparkes & Smith (2014), this phase involves identifying similarities and differences among themes and may be aided through the use of diagrams, charts, or other methods to display the data. I used a white board to help visually display each participant's themes and the various similarities or differences between them. The spreadsheets I created in Microsoft Excel for each participant were also helpful during this process. The last phase involved writing up the most important or significant themes from "across participants" as well as the "interrelationships among themes" (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 133). The writings from this phase include descriptions from participants that are rich, detailed, nuanced, and evocative. In addition to exploring themes from participants' experiences, I also carried out a structural narrative analysis.

Structural Narrative Analysis

A distinguishing factor of narrative analysis is that researchers or investigators pay close “attention to sequences of action” (Riessman, 2008, p. 11). In narrative analysis, “the analyst is interested in how a speaker or writer assembles and sequences events and uses language and/or visual images to communicate meaning...” (Riessman, 2008, p. 11). With this in mind, a structural narrative analysis examines *how* people tell or share their stories, and the narrative resources they draw upon to “scaffold and structure the story being told” (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 133). Essentially, this analysis focuses a researcher’s attention on the overarching narrative, plot, or trajectory of a participant’s account (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The plot is the organization or ordering of events (Riessman, 2008). In this form of analysis, there is a shift from focusing on the participant’s lived experience to the account or narrative itself (Riessman, 2008, p. 77).

The first phase of a structural narrative analysis involves familiarizing oneself with the data by reading and rereading interview transcripts (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). For me this familiarization or immersion phase also involved listening to audio recordings from participants’ original interviews. Next, I aimed to “identify the plot” by focusing on how various moments or events were connected throughout a participant’s journey (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 134). In addition to the athlete’s timeline, I used sticky notes to help visually display their story and explore potential connections within their experiences (please see Figure 3). Sparkes and Smith (2014) explain this phase involves noting the storylines that are present and how each narrative is organized, or constructed, by the teller for a certain purpose or to convey a desired message. Additionally, I explored what various narratives or storylines might be present in the participant’s sociocultural context and how these may be influencing or shaping the participant’s

story (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). During this phase, researchers are also encouraged to inquire and examine if there are gaps or inconsistencies that might suggest the presence of preferred, alternative, or “counter-narratives” (Riessman, 2008, p. 11).

The next phase involved grouping or clustering the previously identified storylines into “ideal narrative types” and then naming these types (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p.134). I took great care to help keep each participant’s story “intact” and separate from other participants’ stories (Riessman, 2008, p. 53). This stage involved collating participant accounts as opposed to integrating or combining them. I found it helpful to envision the process of collating as if braiding a rope or cord. When something is braided, each strand is visibly distinct from the others, yet when wound together the strands create a rope or cord. Finally, the last phase involved writing up the “narrative types” using rich, detailed, and thick descriptions (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p.134). To help centralize athletes’ voices as the narrators of their experiences, athlete narratives were written in first-person and composed primarily using direct quotes from their interviews. I used italics to indicate athletes’ direct words within their narrative accounts because I felt italicized font closely resembled handwriting and could visually convey the personal and intimate nature of storytelling. From a practical perspective, I also felt using italics instead of quotation marks aided in readability, allowing readers to easily see what portions came directly from the participants. Having the participants’ accounts seemingly ‘speak for themselves’ allowed for the rich description and emotionality of their experiences to be retained.

Capturing the Full Story: Integration of Analyses

Researchers can differ in how much attention they give to the structure of a participant’s narrative, and the degree to which narrative structure is examined is likely dictated by one’s research question (Riessman, 2008). Furthermore, Riessman (2008) notes that a “structural

analysis can be combined with other approaches, such as thematic narrative analysis” (p. 78). Smith and Sparkes (2009a) echo similar sentiments noting that when undertaking narrative research both the *whats* and *hows* are “equally important” and “need to be considered within sport and exercise psychology whenever possible” (p. 287). In my study, including both forms of analysis allowed the research question to be answered more thoroughly. Just as the first and second interviews worked in concert to facilitate the development of an athlete’s narrative arc and the subsequent rich, thick description within one’s story, so too do both analyses. The structural narrative analysis aided in understanding how women athletes high in self-compassion story their journey through sport and the narrative types or trajectories present in their accounts. Complementing the structural analysis, the thematic analysis helped to illuminate how these athletes navigated specific instances of pressure or struggle. Together these two analyses worked synergistically to provide both the overarching structure and depth needed to thoroughly explore the narrative experiences of participants within this study.

A narrative practice that allowed for synergy between both forms of analysis was “analytical bracketing” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 29). Gubrium and Holstein (2009) explain that analytical bracketing “is a strategy for shifting analytic perspectives in order to capture complex empirical terrain” as well as “a way of temporarily putting some matters of empirical interest aside in order to bring other matters into focus (p. 29).” Essentially, analytical bracketing allows researchers to shift, pivot, or oscillate between various analytic perspectives to help not only enhance their overall understanding of a complex phenomenon but also ease the demand on their attentional resources. Sparkes and Smith (2014) note that it is too difficult for a researcher to “focus on both the *whats* and *hows* at the same time”; therefore, it is necessary to attend to them in alternation or succession (p. 135). As an emerging researcher, I found analytical

bracketing especially helpful when navigating the complexities of participants' stories during the analysis process. This strategy allowed me to attend to either the structure or content of participants' experiences, when relevant, and then integrate this information once I was ready. For example, it was helpful to spend time investigating the themes and patterns present within a participant's story (i.e., *whats*) because this process then helped to illuminate what narrative resources and plots likely informed their stories (i.e., *hows*). As explained by Sparkes and Smith (2014), after focusing on the *whats* and *hows*, "the researcher then brings the results together to produce a complex picture of narrative life" (p. 136). After carrying out both analyses, athletes' narrative accounts were written up using Google Docs and sent to them via email to invite their feedback.

Member Reflection

Throughout the research process, intentional care and effort was taken to encourage participant engagement. Member reflections were carried out as a way to generate further insight, foster collaboration with participants, and promote participant dignity (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Tracy, 2010). Working with participants in this manner involves embracing a "culturally responsive relational reflexive ethics" position (Lahman et al., 2011, p. 1400; see also Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Among many other aspects, as a researcher this entails respecting participants and their unique backgrounds, fostering trust and care with participants, and working to address potential power imbalances (Lahman et al., 2011). With these considerations in mind, I engaged with participants at multiple points throughout the research study in an effort to foster open dialogue, facilitate collaboration, and respectfully work with their entrusted stories.

Following the participants' first interview, each received a chronological timeline of their sport journey which served as the first opportunity for member reflection. All participants made

minor edits and additions to their timelines to help clarify various events in their careers. Participants were then also consulted after their second interview, once a full written draft of their athlete narratives were prepared. To support further collaboration with participants, an ethics amendment was made to hold an optional informal third interview (virtually) with each athlete. I felt having an opportunity to talk through various edits may feel less onerous than having to make changes on one's own time. Two participants chose to meet virtually, and one participant provided feedback via email (as initially agreed upon). A few days before our scheduled meeting I emailed each participant their athlete narrative using Google Docs so they could review it and prepare any thoughts, suggestions, or edits ahead of time. In recognizing the inherent power imbalance often perceived within research studies (Smith & McGannon, 2018), I feared participants may shy away from sharing their thoughts if the document they received appeared too polished or complete. Therefore, I intentionally added comment bubbles with questions for the participant as well as blank spaces within each athlete's narrative document to support and invite participant engagement. I prepared their documents in this way to encourage active collaboration and co-creation with participants. When researchers share documents for participants to review that already appear to be in a finalized version, I think it can deter participants from adding what they truly wish to share. Perhaps participants do not feel there is 'room' for them to add their thoughts and perspectives. As such, I took a different approach to interacting with participants in hopes of fostering meaningful engagement.

During the follow-up one-on-one virtual meetings with athletes, a loose set of questions guided our discussion (please see Appendix F for the full interview guide). I inquired about their initial impression of their athlete narrative, if it resonated with them, and if there were any aspects they would like to edit (e.g., add, modify, or delete) so that it would better reflect their

experiences. I also asked if they felt I listened well to them based on the content within the document. In this meeting I was able to talk with participants and make edits with them in real time through using Google docs. The dialogue during these follow-up meetings was rich and led to valuable changes to the athletes' narratives. As athletes' narrative accounts were written in first-person, various edits included changing the wording of certain sentences to align more closely with the athlete's tone of voice. Athletes also made edits that added detail or clarified aspects of their experiences (e.g., when they played certain sports and how certain situations were impactful to them). In addition to the various edits that we made, together each participant and I co-named their narrative account (e.g., we each suggested one word to describe their narrative account). Allowing opportunities for collaboration and member reflection helped establish rapport and trust between participants and myself, as well as supported them in determining what aspects of their stories they felt comfortable disclosing. Even just for ethical reasons alone, I felt it was important to engage with my participants at multiple points throughout the research process to help foster respect and allow them to voice their perspectives (Lahman et al., 2011; Riessman, 2008; Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes & Smith 2014). Hearing their stories was both a privilege and an honour that I wanted to steward well.

Quality Criteria & Rigor

Within qualitative approaches, including narrative inquiry, researchers may undertake a variety of verification processes to support the rigor of their research (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Such decisions are often made based on what aspects of rigor are most appropriate for the topic of study and help maintain methodological coherence (Mayan, 2009). Some practices that support rigor include documenting one's research decisions, engaging in reflexive practices, using multiple forms of data generation, generating rich or detailed data,

and inviting input from colleagues (Eke, et al., 2020; Smith & McGannon, 2018; see Sparkes & Smith, 2014; Tamminen & Bennett, 2017). To support the quality and rigor of the present study, I practiced researcher reflexivity and transparency, consulted with critical colleagues, documented my research decisions, and engaged in processes of credibility or validity (e.g., use of rich descriptions, member reflections, and evocative content; Riessman, 2008; Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

The researcher is a key instrument throughout all stages of the narrative research process; therefore, it is important for the researcher to engage in a continual practice of reflexivity. Reflexivity facilitates self-awareness and prompts researchers to continuously consider how their values, personal experiences, and interpretations influence the course or direction of the research as well as the findings (Berger, 2015; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Such practices assist the researcher in balancing their interpretations and participants' actual experiences (Berger, 2015). To foster reflexivity and critical examination of my engagement with participant's stories, I kept a reflexivity journal throughout the research process (McGannon & Smith, 2015). My reflections included notes about the interpersonal dynamics present during interviews (e.g., the body language, tone of voice, and engagement of both the participant and I) as well as entries on relevant topics throughout the research process (e.g., relational ethics, the power of story, and personal struggles). I also wrote reflexivity pieces throughout the data analysis phase which helped document not only the decisions I made regarding how to organize the data and initial themes but also how my perceptions or personal beliefs might be influencing the research findings (Berger, 2015; Riessman, 2008; Smith & McGannon, 2018). My reflexivity entries and personal reflections served as an audit trail throughout the research process.

Engaging in the ongoing process of reflexivity as well as disclosing my ontological and epistemological leanings helps to facilitate transparency. Researcher transparency strengthens the rigor of a study by allowing readers to follow-along, examine, and evaluate the research process through the lens used by the researcher (Riessman, 2008). As such, I made sure to explain the philosophical worldviews that have guided this research project and included several reflexivity pieces in the appendices (see Appendix G for several of my reflexivity pieces).

To further support reflexivity and rigor, I consulted “critical friends” (or colleagues) throughout the research process (Smith & Sparkes, 2006, p. 172). While such conventions are common in qualitative research, Riessman (2008) conveys a similar perspective within narrative approaches by encouraging students and other investigators to “ask hard questions of [their] projects” and “form communities with other researchers to gain support and constructive criticism for [their] work” (p. 200). Several colleagues with greater familiarity and expertise conducting narrative research assisted me by providing feedback on research ideas and inquiring about alternative ways to both interpret and present the data (e.g., inclusion of visual content in the results). Their input supported my critical thinking and helped strengthen this study.

Having critical colleagues examine my work as well as carefully documenting the decisions I made over the course of the study helped support the maintenance of methodological coherence (Riessman, 2008). Additionally, keeping a journal and log fostered reflexivity, demonstrated transparency, and encouraged truthfulness throughout the research project (Riessman, 2008). Riessman (2008) notes that engaging in such practices “strengthens the case for validity” (p. 193) and allows the project and its trustworthiness to “be assessed from within the perspective and traditions that frame it (which, ideally, an investigator makes clear upfront)”

(p. 185). While discussions around ‘validity’ are more typically seen within quantitative research, Riessman (2008) reconceptualizes ‘validity’ for use within narrative contexts.

Riessman (2008) discusses two levels of validity within narrative research which are similar to aspects of “credibility” or “trustworthiness” described more generally in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). The first level involves the validity of the participant’s story, whereas the second involves the validity of the analysis and the subsequent story told by the researcher (Riessman, 2008). Validity at the first level does not necessarily refer to the factual accuracy of participant accounts, but rather the depth and detail involved in the telling of their stories. Participants in my study used rich and evocative descriptions when sharing their stories. They openly discussed details about their sport experiences which helped support this first level of validity. The second level of validity relates to how the researcher portrays an individual’s account and Riessman (2008) notes that “the credibility of the investigator’s representation is strengthened if it is recognizable to participants” (p. 197). The intentional member reflection process, previously described, helped support this second level of validity. When participants received their narrative accounts to review and provide feedback on, they all expressed feeling very “understood” and that their accounts captured their experiences well. Continuing the discussion on rigor, Riessman (2008) notes that when the researcher is able to make sense of both convergent and divergent participant accounts during the analysis, this fosters trustworthiness. Similarly, if the analytic story constructed by the researcher is able to connect the data in ways that are both “meaningful” and “theoretically coherent,” this would strengthen the study’s validity (Riessman, 2008, p. 191). Such features of the data regarding similarities and differences between participant accounts as well as various connections to theory are included in the discussion section.

Lastly, Riessman (2008) suggests that validity in narrative research also involves a level of persuasiveness as well as the researcher's ability to evoke a response in the reader. One's research is considered more persuasive "when the investigator's theoretical claims are supported with evidence from informants' accounts, negative cases are included, and alternative interpretations are considered" (Riessman, 2008, p. 191). Evoking a response or emotion refers to whether the story is able to "move [readers] or get [them] to think differently about the phenomenon" (Riessman, 2008, p. 192). It is my hope that my narrative work would become a springboard or catalyst for others to employ narrative approaches as well as encourage individuals, both researchers and athletes alike, to conceptualize their personal experiences in new and expansive ways.

Ethical Considerations

When conducting research, there are important ethical considerations to navigate such as informed consent, potential power-imbalances, and confidentiality. Prior to conducting interviews, eligible athletes were informed of the purpose of the study and what their participation would involve. Athletes were also reminded throughout the research process that their consent to participate was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequence. In this way, participant consent was an ongoing process (Lahman et al., 2011). In addition to matters of informed consent, it was important to consider the potential power-imbalance that participants may perceive within the interview setting (Berger, 2015). In an effort to minimize the perceived power-imbalance, I reminded participants that they are the experts of their experiences and that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers. Additionally, because narrative interviews tend to be less structured, this allowed participants to take more control over what and how much they shared about their experiences

(Riessman, 2008). Furthermore, in an effort to preserve anonymity as well as foster autonomy, participants were given the opportunity to select a pseudonym of their choice (Sutherland et al., 2014). Due to personal stories being disclosed within this study, there is a possibility that athletes might become identifiable based on what they shared. In recognition of this possibility, I took great care to remove any identifying information. Similarly, after consulting with members of the research team I also decided not to disclose the specific sports that participants played. All these decisions were made in an effort to protect participants' identities and were carried out with participants' best interests in mind. During the study, I also consulted with participants at multiple stages of the research process to help ensure they felt comfortable with what aspects of their stories were being shared. All participants gave their approval for use of their narrative in the form it was presented (i.e., in its entirety).

Throughout the research process it was also my priority to support the mental and emotional well-being of my participants, in addition to their physical safety. Although no events transpired, if an athlete were to become distressed or triggered by recalling personal experiences of struggle during an interview, I was prepared to pause or stop the interview depending on what the participant needed (either through them explicitly acknowledging or me perceiving the need). Furthermore, consent was an ongoing process; therefore, if a participant wished to stop, at any time for any reason, they were free to do so. Additionally, if participants disclosed that they were in distress or in need of further assistance, I was prepared to come alongside and support them as needed. Staying within my scope of practice, I could present participants with various appropriate support options or resources and allow them to decide how they would like to move forward. If a situation escalated, and immediate professional support was required, I would have been able to contact the Alberta Mental Health Helpline and facilitate a referral to an appropriate

registered mental health professional. I also had other free resources on hand and available to them if needed (which were also outlined in the participant information sheet). For example, student athletes could access university resources through Well to Win as well as Clinical and Counselling Services programs. Although no situations arose where these mental health and well-being supports needed to be discussed or accessed, I was prepared to navigate this situation. Caring for the welfare of the participants in my study is of the utmost importance. As an emerging sport psychology researcher, it is my desire to both learn from participants and help promote their well-being, with care, throughout the entire research process.

Chapter 4: Results

As a reminder, the purpose of this study was to explore how women athletes high in self-compassion story their journey through sport, as well as their experiences of navigating pressure and struggle. During the analysis process, care was taken to keep each athlete's story intact (Sparkes & Smith, 2014); therefore, the results are presented in a similar manner. Each athlete's experiences are presented separately, in succession. First, I provide a brief overview of an athlete's narrative account, followed by detailed descriptions of the key themes within that athlete's narrative of journeying through sport and navigating instances of pressure and struggle. In keeping with the perspective of a storyteller, I took more of an active listening role to present the first portion of the results, allowing participants' experiences to be ushered into the foreground. After this initial results section (Telling Stories), I transition to take more of a story analyst perspective to present the second portion of the results. In the second section (Working With Stories), I describe how participants' experiences may relate to current theory and literature within sport psychology. Positioning myself toward the midpoint on the continuum between storyteller and story analyst allowed me to honour participants' stories and let them speak for themselves, while also communicating key findings in a manner more commonly seen within sport psychology research.

Telling Stories

Throughout the results section that follows, excerpts from athletes' written narratives are noted in italics, whereas quotes directly from participants' interviews are not italicized. It should be noted that the italicized content from participants' narratives signifies their direct words. Additionally, the use of (Nar), (In 1), and (In 2) after a quote identifies that text was from a participant's narrative account, first interview, or second interview respectively. Participants

were invited to bring objects or images to their second interview to help them describe their experiences; therefore, images have also been included in the results section to help depict an athlete's story when relevant. Images do not accompany all participants' results as not everyone opted to bring objects. Additionally, to help promote participant confidentiality, some athletes' objects cannot be discussed or portrayed. Within the results section, athletes' experiences are presented in the following order, Isabelle, then Lauren, then Amanda.

Isabelle: A Narrative of Redefining & Rediscovery

For Isabelle, the core ideas of redefining and rediscovering herself were prominent and enduring throughout her entire sport journey. When asked how she defined pressure, Isabelle shared, "pressure I often see in a good way where there's this expectation either internally or externally to perform well" (In 2). Isabelle expressed, internal pressure involved moments "where I have something to prove and I want to prove it" and external pressure comes "from someone else" (In 2). Isabelle went on to explain her preference for external pressure stating, "I prefer to feel like there's a sense of pressure coming externally because it means that someone is counting on me and thinks I can do it" (In 2). Based on Isabelle's descriptions, she seemed to view pressure as "good" or favorable, especially external pressure. As for Isabelle's description of struggle, she explained, "If I had this kind of hope or expectation struggle is when it goes differently than that I guess and in a negative sense. So struggle I would definitely see as like a challenge" (In 2). She described that struggle may also involve feelings of being "stuck" (In 2).

During our time together, Isabelle was expressive and shared her experiences in an open manner with emotional depth. She did not shy away from speaking about difficult topics (e.g., deselection, insecurities, injuries). From a young age, Isabelle drew meaning from her identity and experiences as an athlete; therefore, as her sport participation shifted, so did her self-

perceptions. Throughout her sport career, there were moments when she redefined herself as an athlete through pivoting to a new sport and intentionally reframed difficult experiences as opportunities to grow. Along her journey, Isabelle demonstrated perseverance and passion during setbacks (e.g., deselection) as well as a desire to learn. Several key individuals who supported her throughout her sport journey included her dad, brother, friends, and coaches. These individuals not only helped her develop as an athlete and overcome struggles (e.g., injuries), but also helped her believe in herself through expressing their belief in her. While Isabelle discussed several key moments of navigating pressure and struggle throughout her sport journey, the most significant moment involved her experiencing a traumatic injury at the peak of her career, as well as the process that followed afterward of redefining herself and rediscovering her passions (for Isabelle's full athlete narrative and definitions of pressure and struggle, please see Appendix H). Within Isabelle's story, there were several "key themes" or "threads" that reemerged at various points (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 132). These themes included a) "connection" with others and being "known," b) feeling "competent" in sport contexts and "prov[ing] myself," and c) maintaining perspective through "looking ahead" and "redefining" myself.

"Connection" and Being "Known"

The theme of connectedness involved having meaningful relationships, being "known" by others, receiving encouragement from others, as well as playing sport in a safe and supportive environment. Isabelle's deep and meaningful relationships with family members, teammates, coaches, and friends were woven throughout the fabric of her story. These individuals within Isabelle's support network played an important role in her development as an athlete and as a person. Connection was at the heart of her earliest sport experiences as well as some of her most

significant moments. When Isabelle felt known, she often performed at her best, coped more adaptively with challenges, and experienced greater enjoyment within sport. She explained,

I think just having my dad coach that team where we as a group of girls all got really close and also were really used to that coaching and those were the few years that I was also just playing really really well. So, I was kind of like the star of that community team too where it was just really feeling like I was thriving, loving the team that I was playing for where we all REALLY knew each other so again it's kind of just community but we were all quite passionate young girls... And then also having that be a place where my dad was coaching where it's like for me, having a coach that believes in you is really significant and yeah, my dad always has. And so to have that be your coach it's like well the best of both worlds kind of thing. (In 1).

Isabelle mentioned this early sport experience of being connected with her teammates and spending time with her dad as being especially meaningful and referred to it several times throughout our conversation. She reflected fondly on this time in her life and compared it to some of her later sport experiences where there was a lack of enjoyable elements. As Isabelle continued in her sport career, she also had supportive interactions with coaches who encouraged her with phrases such as, “you’ve got it in you” and “I see a lot of potential in you” (In 1). These were important messages for Isabelle to receive and encouraged her growth as an athlete. Later on in Isabelle’s sport career, when she was recovering from a serious injury, she again experienced connection and support from those within her team environment. Isabelle noted,

Also, my [team] was a REALLY good support system for me where they saw me every time I showed up for practice and saw things get slightly better... I really did feel like people checked in a lot and also saw my progress. When I was starting to even just run in practice everyone celebrated with me too... (Nar).

For Isabelle, having her teammates witness her recovery process and celebrate her progress along the way was very meaningful. Her teammates were a consistent support network throughout her recovery journey.

Tied together within this theme of connection was also the absence or lack of connection Isabelle felt at times and how that shaped her experiences. At various points throughout her junior high, high school, and university sport experiences, Isabelle encountered “divided” team environments where she felt a lack of connection with her teammates and coaches. These “disconnect[ed]” and “split” team contexts were difficult for Isabelle to navigate (In 2). She explained,

So performance-wise that was frustrating, but another struggle was that *the team felt very split*. I remember *almost just desperation* and feeling *a little bit helpless too... it was like I don't know how to make this better, and it just sucks to be losing, and it just sucks to feel like our team is so divided... I think that was a year where I was actually able to identify how team culture makes a big difference in how you perform too* (Nar).

In addition to the desperation she experienced from being in such divided team contexts, Isabelle also remembered “being nagged and told what to do” by an older teammate (In 2). At other times, she recalled feeling “insecurity and embarrassment” when making mistakes in these unsupportive environments (In 2). Isabelle also described moments where being known or unknown to a coach may have impacted her opportunities to participate or play in games. Isabelle mentioned,

I'm used to being, especially with soccer I'm used to be very known... I was almost like a stranger on this team... I understood or realized that most of them even played club together... me coming in, I almost wonder whether I partly even wasn't given an opportunity cause coaches didn't know me and players didn't know me (In 2).

Isabelle's description of feeling like a “stranger” powerfully conveys how unknown and unseen she felt within her team context. The lack of closeness and support in these divided environments stood in stark contrast to the early depictions of deep meaningful connection that she initially experienced in sport. Despite the overall lack of connection Isabelle felt within various team

environments, she still sought out pockets of connection, where possible, to help her cope.

Isabelle expressed,

It was a really tough time, but thankfully because I had close people on that team I think we leaned on each other a lot. My closest friend on that team was also someone who I played club with so we knew what it felt like to be on this really strong team and then be struggling here... I think we were able to lean on each other a lot with that... What helped get us through that time was a lot of just talking it out I think, and enjoying our club team when we went there. Cause it was like 'Dang! We're losing here but you know what, at least we win in club!' (Nar).

Through having a close friend on her team, Isabelle was able to manage the frustrations of both a poor team culture and several seasons of poor performances. Eventually, Isabelle's strong desire for connectedness among players and her passion for creating a supportive team atmosphere led to her becoming a key leader on her university team. In an effort to support both her team's culture as well as their performance, she made it her goal to help create a more cohesive team environment both in and out of the sport setting. Isabelle's unwavering desire for connectedness within her more recent sport teams conveyed a sense of nostalgia and longing to return to the deep meaningful connection of her youth sport experiences.

An important aspect of connectedness Isabelle's early sport experiences was having her dad as her coach. He was a key person throughout her story because he believed in her and invested in her growth. Regarding her dad, Isabelle noted "[he's] ALWAYS shown up to my stuff, or else if I'm traveling away he's tuned in watching" (In 1). Throughout Isabelle's career, her dad intentionally made an effort to invest in her sport experiences, believe in her, and cheer her on. For Isabelle, having someone express their belief in her then helped her develop a sense of competence and belief in herself. Isabelle explained this process stating,

I think a lot of it starts for me once I kind of know or believe that someone believes in me, then that confidence comes... it almost is kind of most impactful when I'm like, 'wow! I can do this, I'm really doing this well.' So finally when it reaches a point where I

actually believe in myself. So, even with the last game before my injury no one was telling me “Oh [Isabelle], you got this!” like, that was finally coming from within where I was like, ‘okay, I think I’m good at this, like I think I’m doing really good’ or, ‘I can finally feel this stuff clicking’... (In 1).

In addition to her dad, Isabelle also had other coaches who expressed their belief in her. Perhaps internalizing the supportive and encouraging words from others not only helped Isabelle develop self-belief but also other adaptive ways of relating to herself.

Feeling “Competent” and Wanting to “Prove Myself”

In addition to the theme of connectedness and being known, another key theme throughout Isabelle’s story was “competence” and “proving” herself within various sport contexts. For Isabelle, competence consisted of developing skills and being able to meaningfully contribute as an athlete, as well as feeling confident, strong, and capable. Moments of competence were evident in phrases such as, “I felt like I was able to kind of show a lot of my skill too,” “soccer was kind of MY sport like I was quite good at it,” and “I can feel myself just being better and being more confident” (In 1). Isabelle also talked about competence later in her career stating,

I feel like that was the summer where I definitely got the strongest that I’d ever been and where I could start making decisions during the game and understanding rather than just being told what to do. I definitely felt that was the summer where I was starting to really thrive, feel confident, and make some plays happen (Nar).

To Isabelle, it was important for her to feel like she was thriving, strong, and confident within her sport. She always wanted to be a key contributing member of her team, so competence was an attribute that she valued.

Additionally, within the theme of competence was Isabelle’s desire to “prove” herself (In 1, 2). Isabelle’s early sport experiences were shaped by her older brother, as she often followed in his footsteps, opting to play the sports he played. Through interactions with her older brother,

schoolmates, and neighborhood kids Isabelle was exposed to the idea that girls were less competent than boys at playing sports. Though kids making comparisons is natural at this age, in these interactions, Isabelle encountered what it was like to be storied by others. Isabelle described her awareness of this broader narrative within sport of girls being less competent as well as a desire to resist it. She described,

As a young girl I innately felt like I belonged when I was playing sports, so that's why I was surprised when I started to hear phrases about girls not being able to keep up.¹ Growing up with an older brother and playing with all these older boys I was always like, 'well I can do this too. I'm just as good' and 'why do people always say that girls aren't as good as guys? Cause watch me!' (Nar).

Rather than passively accept what she was being told, Isabelle sought to prove herself and demonstrate competence. The relevance of this theme extends beyond Isabelle's experiences and connects to the wider-spread notion within sport that women athletes are often considered less competent than men athletes. Although the narrative of gender discrepancy is shifting and women's sport is becoming more accepted as legitimate, confronting this cultural narrative is still a reality for many women athletes. Fortunately for Isabelle, she was able to interact with coaches who not only treated her with respect but also affirmed her abilities as an athlete.

Throughout her career, Isabelle encountered coaches that helped create environments of resistance within sport where the narrative of gender discrepancy was not only challenged but often rejected. Isabelle noted several of these experiences as she explained,

So, for me athletics has always been a really valuable place that I can kind of almost prove myself. I remember having the opportunity to play on a co-ed team as a kid and it was amazing! Everyone was treated SO equally on that team and everyone looked up to each other. It wasn't this whole distinction between "oh this is the best guy on our team, this is the best girl on our team." We REALLY saw it as a blend which to me was super valuable. Other teams at first glance would say, "Oh, there's girls on this team we're

¹ Isabelle clarified this sentence to better reflect her experience during our member reflection meeting.

*going to beat them,” and it was like, ‘No, you aren’t!’ So yeah, it was just kind of an encouraging place where I felt like that was very affirmed... Similar to my early experience with soccer, one summer I had the opportunity to train in a co-ed setting and it was great because the coaches conveyed this *belief that you’re competent enough*. There was this understanding from the coaches that “*we wouldn’t put you up against all these people if we didn’t believe you could compete and play.*” It wasn’t the stereotypical “*Oh, we gotta separate you. Okay only the girls on this side, guys on that side, now play your scrimmages.*” It was more like, “*no sorry, you’re 18 and you’re going to be playing against 27 year old guys in this game.*” Don’t get me wrong, it was difficult, but it was nice to hear the message of “*you’re competent and you can play here*” (Nar).*

Having the opportunity to play against men athletes was something that Isabelle seemed to appreciate. Such experiences helped her develop as an athlete while also fostering a sense of competence in herself. Perhaps Isabelle even felt a sense of connection and belonging through having these co-ed sport opportunities.

While there were various situations that developed Isabelle’s competence, there were also moments in her sport journey when she felt less competent. Isabelle discussed the difficulty in feeling a sense of competence when she joined a skilled team as well as during times of deselection and injury. These situations appeared to be challenging for Isabelle because the opportunities for demonstrating competence were limited. Isabelle shared,

Soccer was kind of my sport for a really really long time, and although I made the team I just NEVER saw the field basically, and when I did I just felt like I couldn’t connect as well... I remember running the drills where all these girls kind of knew what they were doing and I just felt like I wasn’t as competent. Then I started to get into my own head being like, ‘Oh, I don’t know what I’m doing anymore’ and ‘oh maybe I’m not cut out for this?’ This was SO different from how I felt about soccer before that. This was always kind of what I saw as my sport and even a bit of my identity, so I just remember feeling quite sad that I felt like I wasn’t very good... I just remember seeing this really big discrepancy between where I was at and where these girls were at (Nar).

Isabelle’s high school experience of not feeling as competent as her teammates was a key turning point in her story. She felt a sense of sadness and grief when she decided to stop playing soccer,

as it was an important part of her identity; however, this experience led her to try a different sport which she competed in at a high level.

This theme of competence was woven all throughout Isabelle's story and was both rich and multifaceted. There were times when Isabelle experienced feelings of competence, times when she lacked competence, and times when her sense of competence was challenged by broader cultural narratives about women in sport. In moments when Isabelle's competence was low, she sought out new ways of coping and finding meaning. While Isabelle struggled to transition out of a sport that was so closely tied to her identity, she managed to navigate that experience by reframing the situation, "looking ahead" at what sports she could play, and ultimately "redefining" herself (In 2).

"Looking Ahead" and "Redefining" Myself

The third theme within Isabelle's story, "looking ahead" and "redefining" myself, involved her searching for new ways of making meaning in her life (In 2). At various points in her athletic career, Isabelle was able to redefine herself through taking a balanced perspective, "looking ahead," and being solutions oriented. The following passage describes Isabelle's process of redefining herself after choosing to leave her high school soccer team. Isabelle used an object to help capture this experience of redefining herself; therefore, a depiction of her object (a black picture frame) is included with the passage below. The text in this image is an excerpt from her narrative describing how she reframed her situation and redefined herself during a time of struggle.

Looking ahead it was weird to almost have to kind of redefine myself too because it was my dream to be a pro soccer player or pro athlete. But I would say in the whole process of kind of feeling this sense of loss, there was really quick redefining though too. I didn't stay stuck in it. As far as I can remember it was pretty quick transitions, where at the same time that I was recognizing 'oh maybe I'm not cut out for this, or I'm not as good now at this high school level' I was asking myself 'okay now what now what now what.' I think that's kind of just how my brain works, I'm very forward oriented. I'm not someone who tends to look back a ton like, I remember those things but they aren't my reference point really. My reference point is kind of 'okay what option is ahead of me.' If I think that something isn't an option anymore then I need something else to look ahead to. So in this situation I asked myself

'Who am I?'

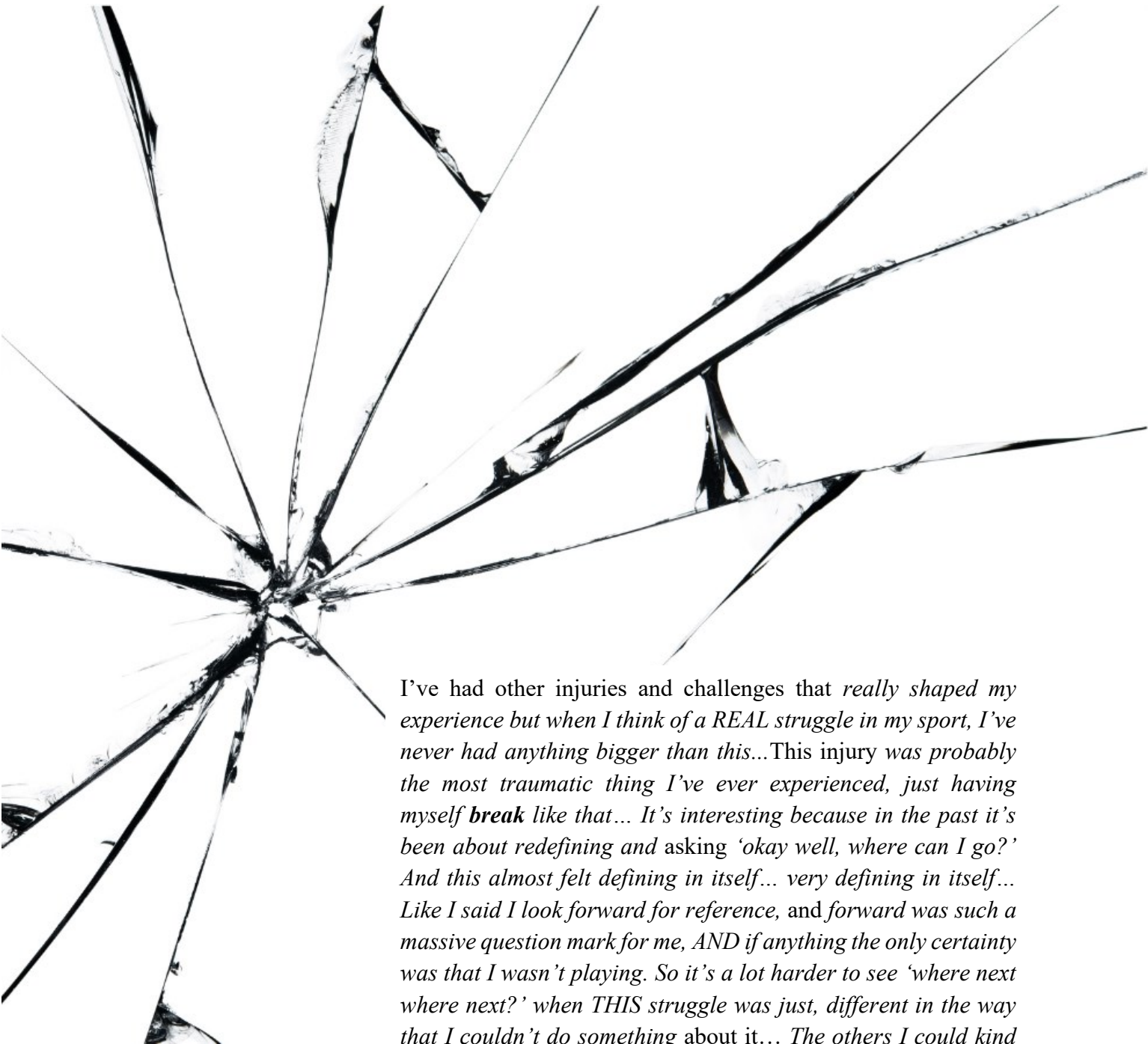
but in a way that was forward moving.

I didn't stay there.

(Nar)

Figure 1. Depiction of Isabelle's Object With Excerpt From Narrative

Isabelle acknowledged the difficulty of her circumstances, but instead of staying stuck in her situation, she was determined to find a new sport outlet that she could invest her time and energy into. Isabelle also mentioned being “able to kind of shift gears fairly quickly” when navigating that situation (In 2). She brought an empty black picture frame to her second interview and used it as a prop to help her depict the experience of redefining herself and asking, ‘who am I?’ Quite literally Isabelle not only reframed her sport experience but also reframed or redefined her identity. In order to redefine herself, Isabelle described needing to feel a sense of control (or authorship) over her experience. While Isabelle was able to redefine her sport experience during this transition out of soccer, it was more difficult to respond in the same way after sustaining a serious injury later in her career. To help portray the emotional depth that was present in the interview when Isabelle spoke about her injury, I made a creative visual piece to accompany what she shared.



I've had other injuries and challenges that *really shaped my experience but when I think of a REAL struggle in my sport, I've never had anything bigger than this...* This injury was probably the most traumatic thing I've ever experienced, just having myself **break** like that... It's interesting because in the past it's been about redefining and asking 'okay well, where can I go?' And this almost felt defining in itself... very defining in itself... Like I said I look forward for reference, and forward was such a massive question mark for me, AND if anything the only certainty was that I wasn't playing. So it's a lot harder to see 'where next where next?' when *THIS* struggle was just, different in the way that I couldn't do something about it... The others I could kind of push through or just try harder. But this wasn't so much a matter of me just falling slightly short it was like, 'oh no I'm **broken** right now and there's nothing I can do'... the experience *ITSELF* was defining... This almost *WAS* how I defined myself...

*'I'm weak and I will continue **breaking** I guess.'*

(Nar)

After sustaining what Isabelle described as a “traumatic” injury, she was not able to redefine herself, reframe her experience, or look ahead (In 2). Instead, she expressed how the injury felt like it defined her. Note that she does not describe a body part being injured, but rather a global expression of herself as “broken” (In 2). It seemed like she was no longer the narrator of her story, but was rather at the mercy of her injury and broken body. While she was injured, she described that both her connection with others and her sense of competence sharply declined, along with her sense of control. No matter how much she willed for her body to heal so that she could return to sport, her recovery process was slow and nonlinear. Isabelle described experiencing additional difficulties such as “having panic attacks” that also came as a result of her injury (In 2). She noted,

My injury didn't just impact my sports career, it completely changed how I saw myself. I just started to see myself as very small... I think after that, kind of slightly separate from sport, but I basically was convinced very often that something was wrong with me and if I thought something was wrong with me I didn't think I would heal... This injury from sport was traumatic in so many different ways in that it really made me become a lot more anxious I guess. Sure, I was a lot more afraid [to play], but this injury impacted more than just my career, it impacted my whole life! Everyone else just saw it as a physical injury. But, for me there was a lot of mental stuff to get over (Nar).

In addition to feeling defined by her injury, Isabelle also experienced being defined or storied by other people. These impressions of her held by others, one being a complete stranger, further impacted how Isabelle viewed herself. She described several encounters of having her body being evaluated, or storied, by others in the following passage.

During my recovery, I lost a LOT of weight and became quite small and quite weak because there wasn't anything I could do... I remember I was at [a clothing store] and they grabbed some clothes for me and they gave me extra smalls and I was like, 'what? What the heck?' For a while I didn't even see myself as that small or realize just how small I was until I was being given clothes or when people would describe me they were like "oh you're tiny!"... "oh, you're so small." I was at this [event] and there was someone who I hadn't seen in a while... She yelled "you look so tiny!" It was meant as a

*compliment for her I guess but to me that was UGHHH! like a stab in the heart... When you're playing a sport where it's really important to be actually quite strong physically it's just hard when you are so aware of how other people see you and that they see you as small. So between hearing that and then throughout the recovery I really became quite convinced that I was **broken** and going to stay that way... (Nar).*

The words spoken to Isabelle by others, impacted the way she saw herself and interacted with her own body. Her self-descriptions of “weak,” “broken,” and “fragile” differ greatly from her earlier descriptions of being “strong” and “confident” (In 2). Although Isabelle experienced being storied by others and her perceptions of herself greatly changed, eventually she was able to regain authorship of her story and redefine herself again.

She navigated the process of recovering from her injury and redefining herself through staying connected with her teammates, engaging in self-reflection, and looking for new ways to contribute to her team. Isabelle shared,

...there was a while where I couldn't play and then there's a while where I was able to reflect a lot on like, 'well, what am I NOT actually enjoying anymore, and how can I find this again?' I guess was part of what helped move me forward (In 2).

One thing that helped early on in my recovery was that I really tried to kind of still show up, as much as I could and then was able to redefine my role in small ways. It was like, 'okay, I'm here I can't play but I can kind of connect with people.' So just trying to show up and have good relationships with people on the team was something I did (Nar).

As seen in these passages, through self-reflection Isabelle redefined her role on the team. She acknowledged the reality of the situation and then looked for ways to meaningfully contribute to the team environment. Despite Isabelle's circumstances being different from what she had hoped for, she did not stay “stuck” but rather sought out solutions for how she could stay involved with her team (In 2). Although Isabelle was able to redefine herself, her process still had its challenges. During the interview she admitted “I even still see myself as very fragile now” and “seeing myself as, ‘I am strong and I won't break’ is still something I'm working to convince

myself” (In 2). Just as the physical recovery from her traumatic injury took time, so did the mental and emotional recovery. Part of Isabelle’s redefining process also involved rediscovering the joy and passion for being active that she had when she was younger. During her recovery, she also sought out new activities to demonstrate and rebuild a sense of competence. Isabelle expressed,

I’ve also been able to find a lot of joy in just fun activities again... I am defining myself now as athletic and active not just through varsity or through club [sport]. Me and my friends have started playing volleyball just for fun, and I still know what I’m doing and I’m quite competent and we play with a whole bunch of girls and guys... That’s helping remind me again that ‘I am strong and I am competent’ and ‘I’m good at this stuff.’... It has been nice having slightly different outlets where it’s like having fun for fun sake again. I almost feel like in some ways I’m coming back to my childhood days... My first kind of [experiences] of really really enjoying sport was just playing unstructured stuff with people in the neighborhood, and I almost feel like this is the summer [I’m] coming back to that... (Nar).

Isabelle’s journey through sport embodied a narrative of redefining and rediscovery. Despite all of the twists and turns that she experienced throughout her career, she managed to keep adapting and redefining herself. Isabelle not only held true to her values of enjoyment and connection, but she also rediscovered her childhood sense of fulfillment through engaging in unstructured play.

Lauren: A Narrative of Balance & Growth

Throughout Lauren’s journey through sport, she displayed a balanced approach and embraced moments of growth. When asked about her definition of pressure, Lauren stated, “some people might see it as a bad thing and that it’s going to affect how they play and kind of impairs their judgment and all that, but some people welcome pressure, and need it to perform” (In 2). Lauren also explained that how people react to pressure is “very individualized” and that pressure could be expectations “you put on yourself,” “someone else putting the pressure on you,” or “just the significance of the event” (In 2). Later, when describing her definition of struggle Lauren mentioned, “it can either be an actual physical struggle or it could be a mental

struggle” (In 2). To Lauren, examples of physical struggles included “something that’s physically demanding like a hard game” or “recovery from an injury;” whereas mental struggles could be “confidence problems” or even “pressure” (In 2). Even within Lauren’s perceptions of pressure and struggle, she seemed to maintain a relatively neutral and rational perspective.

Whether she was describing instances of success or moments of struggle, Lauren shared her experiences in a measured, objective, and even-keeled manner. She spoke matter-of-factly about all her experiences, including her injuries. From her earliest childhood sport memories to her most recent varsity competitions, Lauren also discussed the role that others played in supporting her and shaping her experiences. Specifically, her relationships with her older sister and coaches were impactful. Another core thread throughout Lauren’s story involved her personal growth. She had a willingness to embrace situations that were outside of her comfort zone. Lauren noted that her growth experiences within sport (e.g., leadership roles) not only developed her as an athlete but also helped her grow as a person (for Lauren’s full athlete narrative and definitions of pressure and struggle, please see Appendix I). Throughout Lauren’s sport journey, the key themes that endured included a) “impactful” relationships, b) growth: “stepping out of my comfort zone,” and c) maintaining balance: “not thinking about it more than you have to.”

“Impactful” Relationships

Right from the outset, it was apparent that relationships would be an important aspect of Lauren’s story. This theme of “impactful” relationships consists of the key people involved in Lauren’s sport experiences (e.g., family members, coaches, teammates, and friends) as well as the support they provided throughout her career (In 1). These individuals encouraged Lauren, helped her develop as a person, and even saw potential in her that she did not see in herself.

Early on in Lauren's story she mentioned how her siblings influenced the sports she pursued stating, "I'm the youngest of three siblings, so I kind of just follow in the steps of my siblings" and "I've kind of, always wanted to be like my older sister so I've always kind of followed her, and what she's done with sports" (In 1). When Lauren was not playing for her own sports teams, she was "usually at the arena or at the soccer field watching [her siblings]" (In 1). Lauren further followed in her sister's footsteps by playing the same sport that her sister did as she headed into high school and university. Eventually, Lauren even played varsity sport with her sister, which was a highlight of her career. Lauren found it really helpful to have her older sister on the team. She explained,

I'm quiet and I'm kind of shy so having already someone that is like an automatic friend on the team helped and kind of eased the transition as well. I mean obviously you get to know your other teammates but I already had her, which is one of the closest people that I could be with... We're super close so it was really cool to say that I've played varsity [sport] with my sister. Growing up, we were never really able to play together because we were never in the same age group... So that was a part of my sports journey that's pretty impactful as well (Nar).

Lauren's sister played a key role in shaping her early sport experiences as well as easing her transition into varsity sport and university in general. When adjusting to life in university, Lauren sought out her sister for both emotional support and instrumental support. Lauren mentioned, "she knows, what the student athlete life is like... so she's just helpful with anything [sport] related anything school related like she was the person I would go to" (In 1). To Lauren, having someone she was "very familiar with on the team" (i.e., her sister) was a "big factor" that helped her navigate the initial years of university and varsity sport (In 1).

Another early influence in Lauren's sport experiences were her parents. They were "fairly active people" and encouraged her to try out various sports (In 1). Regarding her parent's involvement she shared, "they always kind of pushed me to do sports and it was never like [they]

forced me into sports but, they encouraged me to do [them] and I'm glad they did" (In 1). At times Lauren's parents even coached the sports teams she played on. Needless to say, due to their presence, engagement, and support, Lauren's parents were also important people in her early experiences as an athlete.

As Lauren continued in sport, she had several coaches who left positive and memorable impressions on her. Specifically, she spoke about the close and supportive relationship she had with one coach who, as she put it, was "kind of there when I'd really developed as a player" (In 1). At one point, Lauren even decided to switch teams primarily so she could play for this coach. The following passage captures how Lauren felt about her coach and the role she played in her life:

Eventually as I continued on, I switched club teams and went to a club that was fairly far from my house... but it was definitely worth it cause I got to play high level [sport] and I had a really good coach there. To be honest, all my years playing [on regional teams] I had super good coaches and they've kind of pushed me, but one coach definitely stands out. She coached me on a regional team for several years and one or two club seasons as well. I would say she's been a huge impact on my [sport] career, and so I'm very glad she got to coach me... She builds the best relationships with all her athletes. There's not a single person that I met that was like "oh I don't like her as a coach." Everyone loved her! Also, the years where I developed the most as a player were kind of always when I was with her. I think she saw the potential I had and kind of pushed me forward. She was like that with all athletes she coached... I even think I used her as a reference for jobs I was applying for, and she was always willing to do that for me. She's had a very big impact on my [sport] career and I'm sad I don't get to be coached by her anymore... One year after I got to that club she decided to retire as a coach... It was kind of tough for a bunch of us when she decided to retire (Nar).

From what Lauren shared, it was apparent that she had a strong connection with her coach and was appreciative of the role she had played in her development as an athlete. Even beyond sport, the willingness of Lauren's coach to serve as a reference for job applications further speaks to how well she knew Lauren and the importance Lauren placed on their relationship. Lauren

“really looked up to her” and was sad when her coach decided to retire (In 2). As Lauren reiterated more than once, this coach had “a very big impact” on her sports career (In 1).

In addition to this impactful coach, Lauren also described ways in which other coaches or personnel in the team environment helped to support her. In one situation, Lauren was injured and felt worried about being unable to try out for a team; however, because the coach knew her and how she played, this helped to ease her mind and lessen the worry she was feeling.

Regarding her injury and recovery, Lauren explained

I think what was helpful was just like, the people that I had around me and my family... and obviously when I got into the varsity setting being around those people who were able to help me through it and stuff was probably how I dealt with it the best, like just being able to talk to those people (In 2). Although there were some hard dynamics with this injury, *since I was joining a varsity team I also felt like I was in good hands. I had a varsity physio, high level coaches, and a bunch of teammates... So I felt like I was surrounded by the right environment to help me get through that.* (Nar).

Being “surrounded by the right environment” that was filled with supportive people had a positive impact on Lauren and helped her recover from injury (In 2). While having a supportive environment was one way that impactful relationships showed up within a team context for Lauren, a related aspect of impactful relationships involved various coaches inviting her to hold leadership roles on their teams. Lauren did not necessarily see herself as a leader, so to have those qualities affirmed by several coaches at different points in her career was very meaningful.

Lauren described one instance saying,

I’d never really been a captain or assistant captain just cause it’s not necessarily my personality type. But, I guess my high school coach knew of me as a person [and] as an athlete, and she put me in that position and so, that was super impactful for me being put in that role kinda for that team (In 1).

Having coaches “recognize” her as an athlete and affirm that she “deserved” to be in leadership roles was reassuring for Lauren. Although Lauren was hesitant to lead at first, she expressed feeling encouraged by these experiences. Having the opportunity to be in leadership positions

was impactful for Lauren and played a significant role in facilitating her growth and development both as an athlete and as a person.

Growth: “Step[ping] Out of my Comfort Zone”

Within Lauren’s story, the theme of growth was also prevalent. To Lauren, growth involved her willingness to try new things as well as having experiences that pushed her “out of her comfort zone,” such as being a captain or leader on her team. Additionally, Lauren demonstrated growth through learning how to manage the academic workload of being a student-athlete. Lauren’s personal growth extended beyond her sport experiences and impacted her life as a whole.

Early on in Lauren’s childhood sport experiences, she described a willingness to try new things. Although she was familiar with soccer and ringette, Lauren “just decided to try something else” and started playing lacrosse (In 1). Lauren continued trying new things, playing multiple sports throughout elementary, junior high, and high school. The sport Lauren eventually played in university was one that she did not start until high school. An extension of Lauren’s willingness to try new things also included her stepping out of her comfort zone to become a team leader both in high school and again in university.

Toward the end of high school, Lauren’s coach approached her and asked her to be the captain of their team. This was unexpected for Lauren because she did not see herself as a leader. Multiple times she spoke of not having the “personality” to be a leader because she was “shy” and “quiet” (In 1). Through having an opportunity to be a captain, Lauren was able to explore and grow her leadership abilities.

Then in my grade 12 year of high school, I had the opportunity to be captain of my high school team, and it was probably the first time I had somewhat of a leadership role on a team... Even in my ringette career I’d never really been a captain or assistant captain just cause it’s not necessarily my personality type. It was apparent that I was by far the

most experienced player, but to most people that know me, I'm a fairly quiet person so being put in a role where I kind of had to step up made me feel a bit of pressure... It was outside of my comfort zone, so it kind of forced me to step outside of what I'm used to. I know I was confident in my [sport] skills, it was just a matter of my leadership skills. So for me it was kind of exploring a part of me that I wasn't super familiar with... I guess my high school [sport] coach knew me as a person and as an athlete so she put me in that position and that was super impactful for me... It was probably the first time I realized how sport plays a role in developing me as a person (Nar).²

Lauren recognized the uncomfortable feeling of being put in a new position that was “outside of [her] comfort zone” but came to embrace her new role as a leader. Through having the opportunity to be a captain, Lauren was able to develop new skills not only in the area of leadership, but also in her personal life. Lauren learned how to manage additional pressures and expectations as well as how to become more comfortable communicating with others. While beneficial within sport, these skills have utility outside of the sport context as well.

As Lauren continued in sport, she encountered a similar leadership experience in university when once again she was asked to be captain of her team. Lauren explained,

I was kind of realizing that I was one of the more experienced players on the team, and was asked to take on more of a leadership role which is a little hard for me because I'm not a natural leader. It's kind of out of my comfort zone... So it put a little bit of pressure on me and it definitely added stress... I think it made me a little nervous because it felt like I was always expected to be performing at my best and always on my best behavior and be a role model for the younger girls... In past years I hadn't really felt those pressures, but they kind of hit me that I really had to step up... Being put in that role kind of made me think about 'well what makes me a good leader? Why did they pick me to be in this spot?'... To deal with those pressures and struggles I reminded myself that obviously they picked me to be a leader for a reason, I'd stood out to them before, so I don't necessarily have to change how I go about things. You know, even if I'm in a bigger leadership role, it doesn't necessarily mean that I have to change how I am when I play, I can keep being how I am. So I guess, in order to not add more pressure on to the whole leadership thing I think I just accepted the role and then kind of continued the way that I usually am. I mean I obviously tried to be more of a leader, so I did change that part, but skills wise and [sport]wise I tried not to let those pressures affect me. Being a leader doesn't come naturally but I thought hopefully it will turn into something that's just natural for me. So I thought about how I could use my own qualities and personality to be a leader. I don't want to be someone that I'm not... In order to deal with the

² Lauren added this sentence during our member reflection meeting.

pressure of being in this leadership role, I tried not to make too big of a deal out of it. Despite feeling the pressure, I think it was surprising and special³ to be seen by my teammates and then my coaches as someone who stands out as a leader, when sometimes I don't necessarily see myself as that. So it was just kind of cool to see the progression that I've made throughout my time as a varsity athlete (Nar).

Within this leadership experience, Lauren felt she needed to “step up as a player and as a teammate” and had new pressures to navigate; however, she did so through reflecting on her strengths as well as remaining authentic to who she was as a person (In 2). Additionally, Lauren was able to have conversations with her coaches about her leadership style. She explained, “I’m not the one that’s going to scream at everyone [while playing] or hype the team up, that’s just not who I am” (In 2). Her coaches expressed those were not expectations they had of Lauren and explained to her, “you’re more of the person who’s going to be having one-on-one conversations with girls and leading by example rather than by telling” (In 2). By having an opportunity to talk through various leadership styles, Lauren was able to expand her perceptions of leadership wide enough to realize what kind of leader she could be.

In addition to leadership, Lauren also demonstrated growth in her academics. She referred to the “constant struggle” of being a student-athlete and having to balance responsibilities in both areas of life (In 2). She described her first and second years as “stressful” because she was “transitioning” and “adapting” to university life (In 2). When Lauren described her later years, she explained they were less stressful because she had “developed time management skills and study techniques” as well as learned “how to get homework done in between workouts and practices” (In 2). Lauren explained that there was “definitely a shift of emotions from first, second, to third, fourth, fifth [years]” (In 2). In contrast to the stressful

³ Lauren added the words “surprising and special” during our member reflection meeting.

description of her early university years, Lauren explained that her third and fourth years were more about “hopefully excelling” (In 2).

In regard to excelling, another interesting aspect of this theme of growth was the way in which Lauren spoke about her experiences. All throughout her experiences of growth there was an undertone of humility. She was “surprised” by being asked to be captain of her sports teams (In 1). At one point in her career, she received an MVP award and again was taken aback by the “unexpected” recognition. There was a sense of humility or slight underdog tone to how she narrated her experiences. Although Lauren was an impactful athlete on multiple teams that she played, she remained humble, ready to learn and grow from her experiences.

Balance: “Not Thinking About it More Than You Have to”

Similarly to how Lauren spoke about her experiences in a humble tone, she also told her journey through sport in a balanced manner. The final theme of balance was evident all throughout Lauren’s story. Whether she was talking about a specific event or her career as a whole, her balanced and objective perspective was apparent. Lauren was a successful athlete; however, she did not seem to get caught up in her successes, nor did she seem to dwell on her setbacks. When faced with a situation, either positive or negative, she appeared to maintain a level-headed and rational perspective. Additionally, Lauren maintained balance in the way that she narrated her story. She recounted her experiences in rich detail; however, she did so using a neutral tone that was very matter-of-fact. Lauren further embodied this theme of balance by maintaining a multifaceted identity. Although Lauren was a university athlete, she described having a strong academic identity and a desire to pursue a non-sport career later in life. She also described making time for activities for which she was passionate. Taking responsibility was another aspect of Lauren’s objective and balanced perspective. Not only did she make decisions

that were “worth it” based on her values, but she also owned those decisions without “regret” (In 1). Ultimately, balance was so interwoven throughout Lauren’s entire story, as well as how she shared her experiences, that it became a central cord within her written narrative.

Throughout Lauren’s career, she experienced various successes. She played in multiple high-level competitions, had playing time as a first-year varsity athlete, and received several athletic awards. When describing these experiences Lauren often stated they were “super cool” but did so in a relatively neutral tone (In 1). For example, when Lauren got playing time early in her varsity career she explained “the fact that it was my first year and I was able to contribute to that and play was super cool.” Lauren was a “key player” on the various teams she played on; however, when describing her successes, she did not draw attention to herself, nor did she describe these achievements in an over-the-top manner.

Similarly, when faced with pressures or struggles (e.g., an important game or injury) Lauren also described maintaining a balanced perspective. She acknowledged the tough reality of the situation but did not dwell or ruminate on it. She also spoke about reframing stressful moments as opportunities and seemed to appraise these moments as challenges instead of threats. In one situation, Lauren was heading into an important game at the start of a new season but had received feedback from the prior season that her coach expected more from her. Lauren saw this situation as a challenge and shared how she navigated it.

So I thought to myself, ‘here’s my chance to show him.’ I was nervous going into the game and I feel like every game there’s always just some nerves no matter what the importance of the game... So I felt a lot of nervousness before that game but, also just super excited to be out there! We all played super well and we won the game, so the pressure didn’t impact us negatively, it actually pushed us to play probably our best... I would say the whole team dealt with the pressure super well. Both as a team and individually, we performed really well... We were all very excited but knew it’s only the first game of a tournament... It was super crucial to win that game, and at the same time we also thought “we won that game now let’s just focus on what’s next” ... I think it was

just a matter of recognizing the win and how well we performed and keep that in mind, but move on to what's next kind of thing because it was just the first game of many (Nar).

This passage displays how Lauren perceived this situation as a challenge to prove to her coach that she was an important contributing member of the team. Lauren also demonstrated a balanced awareness of several emotions, as well as a recognition that feeling nervous is a normal part of competing. In addition to her awareness of multiple emotions (e.g., nervousness and excitement), her ability to refrain from overidentifying with them as well as not cast judgement on her experience demonstrated taking a mindful approach. Lauren explained her mindful approach further stating,

I think for me personally I've learned when it comes to all these pressures, I think it's important to recognize the pressures, but don't let them get in your head. Then it's just a matter of going out there and playing my best... I'm an over-thinker at times... So that's why I've kind of developed the mindset that if there is some stressor or pressure or struggle, obviously it's important to acknowledge that but if I think about it too much then that's when my judgement is off and I don't perform as well. So I think it's just not thinking about it more than you have to kind of... (Nar).

I think as soon as the game actually starts I just kind of switch my mindset and try to forget the outside world kind of thing. I remind myself I'm just here to play [my sport]. (In 2).

Lauren's process of being mindful and maintaining a balanced perspective first involved recognizing the significance of the situation, as well as the emotions she felt, in a non-judgmental way. After acknowledging the situation's importance and the emotions she was feeling, Lauren then focused objectively on the task at hand - playing her sport. In addition to taking a mindful and balanced approach when navigating pressure situations, Lauren also demonstrated a balanced approach when navigating injury experiences.

Lauren had several experiences of being injured throughout her sports career; however, even in these moments she was able to maintain perspective. After having just sustained an injury in an important game, she did not dwell on her misfortune but rather stated "at the time I

kinda just didn't let it bother me" (In 1). In this situation Lauren also described her decision to play through the injury because it was an important game, her team needed her, and the pain was "bearable" (In 1). While Lauren opted to push through and persevere in that instance, at other times she also demonstrated self-awareness by accepting her limitations to know when to "take it easy" (In 1) and be more "precautionary" (In 2). The following passage further demonstrates Lauren's balanced perspective when coping with injury:

I was trusting the process and I trusted that my physio was doing the right things for me because she's very qualified. It was unlucky that the injury happened, but I was lucky to go into that kind of environment and be able to get the best kind of recovery I could get (Nar).

Lauren acknowledged that being injured was tough, but rather than get discouraged she trusted the process and was grateful for the quality support she received.

Another area of sport where Lauren demonstrated taking a balanced perspective included how she managed poor team performances. At times, when her team performed poorly, Lauren was able to acknowledge the potential disappointment and then reflect on various positive aspects such as her individual performance. Despite her team underperforming at a tournament, Lauren stated, "it was still a really good experience" (In 1). When reflecting on a similar situation at another tournament, Lauren mentioned "when I look back at it, I really excelled as an athlete at that tournament. It was a really good tournament for me" (In 1). Taking a balanced perspective, Lauren acknowledged that her sport experiences were not all bad just because her team underperformed. She was able to enjoy her time training and competing despite her team not achieving their desired results. Lauren's ways of viewing success and enjoyment seem to differ from the stereotypical measures of performance (e.g., winning) that tend to dominate sport culture.

In addition to maintaining a balanced perspective when coping with poor performances, Lauren also demonstrated having a balanced or multi-faceted identity. She appeared to value her academic identity as much as, if not more than, her identity as an athlete. She noted, “I wouldn’t say I went to school just to play [sport] cause I’m super academic and all that” (In 1). Lauren also demonstrated an awareness of life beyond sport and was making plans for her future career path. A further indication of how significant the role of student was to her is evident in the passage below:

There are a lot of things that come with being a student-athlete, but when I think about it, I can’t imagine university without [sport], like the two just go together... I’ve kind of always put pressure on myself to do well in school too... School kind of comes first for me most of the time and I try to get good grades, so it’s always been a pressure on top of all the [sport] stuff. I want to do well in school... I’m not too sure what I want to do after I graduate but, I want to have good grades so I can do what I want to when I decide what I want to do. I’ve always thought ‘as long as I set myself up well and finish my undergrad with good grades, then once I decide what I want to do after, I have the grades to do it.’ Right now, I’m kind of looking into physio or OT. That’s probably the way I’m leaning right now but, we’ll see... (Nar).

Lauren managed to balance and invest in multiple aspects of her life while playing varsity sport.

In addition to her varsity and academic pursuits, she also made time to play another sport recreationally. Lauren explained,

During my university years, it was kind of non-stop [sport] for me. I was playing [varsity] in the fall and in the winter, and then I’d usually go straight into playing for my other teams in the summer. During breaks in the varsity season, I was still trying to stay involved in ringette cause I also really liked the sport. I was playing part time on a team that was not very high caliber. So I was getting a little bit of ice time for ringette because I like to get out there when I can... I don’t think I’ve ever talked to [my varsity coach] about it, but it was just kind of for me to get out there and still get to play a little bit so I don’t lose that sport that I like to play (Nar).

Though Lauren was very committed to her varsity sport and expressed playing it basically “non-stop,” she also demonstrated balance by making time to play ringette (In 1). Lauren’s desire to play ringette and get back on the ice appeared to serve as a form of self-care.

While Lauren displayed a balanced perspective all throughout her story, she was aware of the dominant view within sport of having to “sacrifice” various things in life to play high-level sport (In 2). Lauren encountered a “dilemma” when she was playing for multiple teams and struggled to navigate “conflicting commitments” (In 2). She explained,

I think this situation just made me realize that when you’re a higher-level athlete you can have conflicting commitments. There are challenges that come with being a part of more than one team, and sometimes there are sacrifices you have to make in order to compete at a higher level. All that to say, it was not an easy decision to make with all the factors that were kind of contributing to the situation (Nar).

Despite Lauren’s awareness of the pressure to sacrifice playing on one team in order to play on another, she actually balanced these commitments and played for both teams. She seemed to be aware of aspects of the performance narrative, such as sacrificing various commitments to play elite sport; however, she chose a different option. Lauren valued loyalty and honouring her commitments to her teams, so rather than give up playing on one team, she continued to play for both. With this decision, Lauren essentially resisted the performance narrative. Overall, the theme of balance also contrasts the restrictions and sacrifices typically seen in performance narratives.

Throughout Lauren’s story as an athlete, she demonstrated taking a balanced approach both at a micro level, through navigating specific moments with mindfulness, as well as at a macro level, through maintaining a balanced or multi-faceted identity. Additionally, Lauren took a more objective and measured approach not just when navigating specific moments but also with how she told her story. All throughout sharing her experiences, Lauren used a balanced and

neutral tone. She detailed her experiences in a matter-of-fact way and remained even-keeled, not getting caught up in either the successful moments or the moments of struggle. Lauren embodied the idea of balance so much so that it, along with growth, became the description used to encapsulate and name her athlete narrative.

Amanda: A Narrative of Redefining and Transforming

When writing collaboratively with Amanda, the words “redefining and transforming” were chosen to describe her narrative of journeying through sport. When asked about her definition of pressure, Amanda explained “I would say realistically pressure is something that someone expects and believes you can do...” (In 2). Amanda also acknowledged, “I guess there could be pressure in a situation where you wouldn’t be able to do something but I feel like that’s not really fair”; rather, pressure is based on what “someone thinks you SHOULD or are able to do” (In 2). Amanda’s definition of pressure seemed to be infused with a sense of belief and optimism. When describing what struggle meant to her, Amanda stated, “I would describe it [struggle] as more of a personal battle with what you’re trying to do versus what you’re able to do or, what you’re able to do in the moment” (In 2). Amanda further explained, “maybe your body’s not cooperating or maybe you’re emotionally not there but, you know you can and you’re not getting there and it’s kind of like a back-and-forth battle” (In 2). Even in Amanda’s definition of struggle, there appears to be an undertone of competence and self-belief that accompanies the difficulties of the “back-and-forth battle” (In 2).

The positivity and optimism that accompany self-belief and reframing a situation were present throughout Amanda’s sport journey. She primarily used a light-hearted tone, and at various points, she laughed and used humor when sharing about certain experiences. She did not seem to take herself too seriously, yet at the same time she demonstrated the ability to shoot

straight and be honest with herself. From a young age, Amanda tried several different sports before she found one that she enjoyed and could also find community in. Having connection with and support from key individuals such as her friends, coaches and family members was important to her.

As Amanda progressed through her career she achieved a lot of success, and with that success came attention from others as well as additional pressure. Along her sport journey, Amanda redefined what both pressure and success meant to her and experienced situations that transformed who she was as a person. Specifically, Amanda described navigating a serious injury in a manner that was transforming for her because she grew a lot from it. This injury not only impacted her sport experiences as an athlete, but she said it changed her life as a person. Amanda transformed what could have been a career-ending injury into an opportunity to learn about herself and grow as a leader. After experiencing a successful come-back from her injury, she decided she was ready to transition out of sport and into the next chapter of her life (for Amanda's full athlete narrative and definitions of pressure and struggle, please see Appendix J). Throughout Amanda's narrative of "Redefining and Transforming" there were several key underlying themes. These themes included a) "community" and connection: "hav[ing] people kind of in my corner," b) being "realistic" and self-aware, and c) "transforming" life situations and "identity beyond sport."

"Community" and Connection: "Hav[ing] People Kind of in My Corner"

From Amanda's earliest sport memory of playing kindergarten soccer with her childhood best friend to celebrating a major accomplishment in her varsity career with her teammates and family, it was evident that relationships were an important aspect within Amanda's story. Throughout Amanda's sport journey, there were a number of teammates, coaches, and family

members who supported her. These individuals encouraged Amanda, believed in her, and helped her overcome injuries. While it was helpful for Amanda to have these strong connections, at times she felt pressure from these individuals. Despite these few interpersonal challenges, Amanda's relationships were primarily supportive and an important part of her story.

Although Amanda later found her sport "community," some of her early sport relationships, particularly in dance, were far from close. She loved dance but felt "disconnected" from her peers (In 1). Amanda explained,

I had done dance for a really long time... but the thing with dance was that I really loved to do it but I wasn't really connected there. I didn't connect with the girls very much and I wasn't similar to them... I wasn't excluded or bullied or anything, I just wasn't similar so I didn't do stuff with them outside of dance. I wouldn't say I felt left out because I didn't want to be part of that, but I kind of thought 'oh I want my own thing, where I DO feel like I'm the same as them.' They also did a bunch of dance forms, but I just really enjoyed to do ballet specifically... I liked the control and the strength aspect of ballet. So I just was starting to really feel disconnected and made me start to think 'you know what, this isn't really my thing anymore. I'm not getting everything I need out of it' (Nar).

Although Amanda had a passion for dance, she seemed to lack camaraderie and shared interests with her peers which ultimately led to her feeling "disconnected" from them (In 1). She was not receiving the connection that she needed in that environment and chose to stop taking part in dance. Shortly after Amanda's decision to stop dancing, she found a sense of community through joining a different sport. Amanda received an invitation to join a club team and quickly found the connection she was looking for. She shared,

I had a club team approach me, inviting me to join them. It was a bit of a leap into something a little more unknown... but I thought 'it's cool to feel sought after' and I really connected with the people. Everyone was friendly, which made me want to get into the community as well... Obviously, success in sport and enjoying the sport itself is really important but, I feel like the community aspect is a big part of it and that's why a lot of people quit sometimes. Especially I find that in girls. When I think back to dance, there were times when I would be really dragging myself to go and I'd kind of want to skip, but I've never once had a day like that with this sport. I've never not wanted to go. I've never not enjoyed myself. Even if I know it's going to be hard, it's never been a struggle to get

myself there. And that's kind of when I knew that it was a really good fit for me, and I connected with people right away (Nar).

Within this new sporting environment, Amanda was able to make connections with others and experience a friendly community. She too acknowledged that the enjoyment and connectedness she experienced in this club environment differed greatly from how she felt when she took part in dance. Unlike dance, this new sport and environment were a “really good fit” for her (In 1). Regarding this sport transition, Amanda later shared, “I tried it out and obviously haven’t looked back since” (In 1). Amanda competed in this sport all through high school and university perhaps because her early experiences with it were so positive and satisfied her need for connection.

Later in Amanda’s career, she also had supportive relationships within her university sport context. These university connections were especially helpful when she was recovering from what she described as a “traumatic” injury (In 1, 2). This injury kept her out of competition for a full year, so her recovery process was fairly long and drawn-out. Thankfully, she had a supportive coach who knew her well. Amanda described how he helped her, in the passage below.

As I began preparing for competitions again, it was like a whole process to get back into that because I definitely dealt with some PTSD from my injury... I thought about seeing a sports psych again for reintegrating after I had hurt myself, but I kind of found that my coach was really good with helping me through that. He knows me really well and knows the whole situation so I didn't have to preface anything... He was patient with me... and he had a whole progression plan for me of these little baby things... It was good to have someone really knowledgeable in the sport to kind of give me some things to help me cope at home but more things to help me be successful like at practice... so that worked better for me. I eventually recovered and started competing again.

Amanda’s coach helped her by breaking down the task of competing into smaller and more manageable goals. Whether he knew it or not, his approach likely also helped Amanda build confidence with each progression to which she advanced. Amanda’s coach tailored his support to her context of returning to competition and was responsive to her needs along the way.

Upon returning to sport, Amanda had to navigate competing at the same location where she sustained her injury one year before. To help ease the stress of the weekend, Amanda's coaches supported her by taking away various responsibilities. Amanda mentioned, "they kind of made decisions for me to an extent" (In 2). While removing or constraining one's autonomy can at times be problematic, in this scenario Amanda felt this was in her best interest. Had her coaches not simplified her goal for the competition weekend, she would have tried to contribute more to her team than she was emotionally ready for. Regarding the pressure to compete, Amanda recalled her coaches telling her, "we're not putting that on you this weekend, we're not doing that. It's not an important [competition], it's just the opener, it doesn't matter" (In 2). In this situation, it was helpful that Amanda's coaches gave her "an out" if she needed it and assured her that "no one would be disappointed" if she chose not to compete (In 2). Her coaches told her it would be a worthwhile trip for them even if all she did was spend time in the competition space. Amanda's coach appeared to put parameters around the decisions that she could make, that were in her best interest, while still supporting her autonomy. Amanda described,

I remember my coach saying if I didn't want to compete, I didn't have to and that everyone would understand that and it's a perfectly good reason. So I just remember feeling really looked after and just, it was on my terms as much as I wanted it to be. My coach gave me an out when I needed it, or I just needed to have the option and that no one would be disappointed.

Amanda expressed feeling supported by these interactions with her coaches stating that it was helpful "just to have people kind of in my corner being like 'yeah like no big deal. We'll, make it work.'" Amanda's coaches expressed their acceptance of her regardless of how or even if she competed. Their support for her seemed to be unconditional.

In addition to her coaches, Amanda explained that her parents were also a source of support throughout her sports career, and especially during this particularly difficult weekend. When asked how she decided to navigate the competition with various strategies, Amanda replied, “Honestly I don’t think it was really me that thought of them to be honest. I think it was me stressing about it and talking to people close to me and other people putting tools in place more so” (In 2). Amanda further explained, “Cause like, my parents always ask me before [competitions] if it’s stressful they’re like ‘okay, what role do you want us to play in this? What do you want us to do, what you do not want us to do?’ and so we talked about that” (In 2). Amanda also shared that her boyfriend offered support in a similar manner.

After making a full recovery, Amanda experienced a lot of success within her sport and received encouraging messages from her friends, teammates, and family members. While it was nice to receive congratulations from her typical supporters, Amanda explained how meaningful it was to receive messages from people she did not expect to hear from. For example, her boyfriend’s dad texted her saying “I knew you could do it!” and “we’re really proud of you. You’ve overcome so much” (In 2), Amanda further explained, “obviously the people I care about are going to say stuff and that was really great, but it was kind of cool to have it from people you don’t expect it from a little bit too” (In 2).

Amanda experienced a lot of support throughout her career; however, there were several situations where the support she received from her family and friends was not perceived as helpful. Amanda expressed feeling annoyed after having a poor performance and not liking how her family members interacted with her. Her family felt bad for her and expressed their care, but Amanda perceived this as them being “soft” with her and taking “pity” on her (In 2). She acknowledged that “they weren’t doing anything wrong” and that there was nothing else they

could have done to help, but she “just didn’t like how everyone handled it” (In 2). This interaction demonstrates the importance of ensuring there is a good match, or fit, between the support individuals perceive as helpful and the support they actually receive.

Another challenging aspect that Amanda experienced with having lots of support was the added pressure of having more people come watch her compete. As she achieved more success within her sport, she started to feel more expectations placed on her. She explained, “I think always when you’re doing better it’s more stressful cause like, people expect you to do it more and again and better” (In 2). She also felt similar pressure back in high school, only that time the pressure was coming from her peers and teammates. People expecting Amanda to perform well was something she had to navigate at several points throughout her career.

Amanda experienced expectations being placed on her again when the success she had during her varsity career garnered local media attention. Prior to a big competition, Amanda and one of her teammates were invited for a few news interviews; however, she explained that the media misrepresented what was shared, and created their own narrative around the experiences of her and her teammate. Amanda expressed feeling “bugged” by how the media personnel wrote their news article and shared,

they kept trying to pit us against each other a little bit... when they were interviewing us they KNEW we didn’t feel that type of rivalry towards one another... I just remember being like ‘oh like why did they make it something it’s not?!’ And I remember THAT making me feel more pressured and more anxious about it because, I knew other people were thinking that for whatever reason... (In 2).

In this situation, it would appear that Amanda and her teammate were being storied by the media personnel. The article written about them did not properly depict their experiences, but rather seemed to advance a stereotypical archrival or dog-eat-dog storyline that is commonly seen within sport. This type of competitive rivalry is a plot closely aligned with the dominant

performance narrative. When asked about how she and her teammate handled the news article situation, Amanda explained,

I don't think [my teammate] really even was aware that that's totally what [the media] were doing. I don't think she really comprehended that and I wasn't gonna like spell that out for her because we don't need that. I didn't even want to read that (In 2).

Rather than strengthen the competition between her and her teammate and align herself with the performance narrative, Amanda's approach to handling the situation deviated away from the performance narrative. She acknowledged that the idea of a competitive rivalry was not what she and her teammate needed, nor was it something that she wanted. Despite the media attempting to story Amanda's experience, she seemed to effectively cope with the situation and retain her connection with her teammate.

Being "Realistic" & Self-Aware

While Amanda received support from others in her life, she also demonstrated the ability to support herself. The second theme of being "realistic" and self-aware encapsulates how Amanda redefined or reframed pressure and success, as well as how she made decisions and expressed her needs to others (In 2). Throughout her career as an athlete, Amanda was also realistic about her limitations. There were instances when she had to decide where to invest her time and energy because she knew she only had so much. Additionally, Amanda described being realistic through embracing her successes while also not getting caught up in her accomplishments. At other times, Amanda would overthink and become concerned with the thoughts and perceptions that others had toward her. Even as she described these situations, she was aware that her thoughts and concerns were somewhat unreasonable. Amanda's ability to demonstrate taking a realistic and self-aware approach within multiple situations throughout her sport journey was another central theme of her story.

The main instance in which Amanda used the word “realistic” was when describing what pressure meant to her (In 2). Amanda shared,

I'm not really someone that feels pressure that often necessarily... Usually I'm pretty realistic and the coaches I've had have been pretty realistic so it doesn't feel like pressure, it's more like confidence in ability than pressure... (Nar).

For sure like a little bit of stress I think it's fine. I always kind of say 'if you're not stressed about something a little bit then you don't care about it enough.' So like, I'm never not going to be a little bit stressed, at any at any [competition] to a degree because I want to do well and I care about it. So I don't think that is bad (In 2).

In this portion of text, rather than describe feeling stressed or overwhelmed by pressure, Amanda seemed to view it as facilitative. Amanda also acknowledged that her coaches tended to be realistic as well, which may have helped her develop this way of thinking about pressure. Later in Amanda's career, after achieving some success, she also described being more aware of people coming to watch her compete. While having more spectators could add pressure, again Amanda demonstrated a positive perspective on the situation stating, “so it wasn't negative pressure, I think it was more like confidence in my ability and people being excited to watch me and stuff” (In 2). Amanda also acknowledged that her family and friends did not put pressure on her “AT ALL,” but rather it was “all self-inflicted” (In 2). Amanda set high standards for herself, yet even when situations did not go as she hoped, she still kept a realistic perspective. Amanda not only redefined what pressure meant to her, she also redefined what it meant for her to succeed.

Throughout Amanda's sport journey she spoke about moments of success; however, they were not always moments where she, or her teammates, won. Amanda seemed to look at her sport experiences through a wider lens, one that allowed her to see personally relevant successes, regardless of what the outcomes might have shown. Shortly after joining a youth sports club Amanda noted,

Good thing I liked the sport because, *my first year in club I got absolutely destroyed and it was not very successful at all. Well in the sense of performance it wasn't successful, but I feel like it was in a lot of other aspects like, socially and developmentally and with my confidence and everything, like I think it was really good still.*

Amanda recognized that despite having poor performances, she was still able to see positive aspects within her sport experience. She explained that success could come in many different forms, such as social connection, developing as an athlete, or growing in confidence. Similarly, later in Amanda's career as a varsity athlete she also redefined what success meant for her. When speaking about one of her first competitions back after struggling with a serious injury, Amanda noted, "I didn't even care how I performed" (In 2). Amanda described this particular injury as "traumatic," so for her to be back in the same venue where she injured herself evoked a lot of emotion (In 1, 2). Knowing how difficult of a situation it would be, Amanda set a realistic goal to just compete and get through the weekend. With the help of her coach, Amanda was able to recognize that as an athlete returning from an injury, winning might look different in different situations. Amanda noted, "I know everyone realized how much of a victory that was for me just to be there" (In 2).

Amanda's diverse and self-referenced ways of conceptualizing sport success appear to deviate from the stereotypical view of success often found within the performance narrative. Within the performance narrative, sport success is often narrowly viewed as winning; therefore, if athletes and teams are not winning, then they are not considered successful. Amanda's perspective on what it meant to be successful was more nuanced and allowed her to celebrate not only great performances but also small wins throughout her career. While Amanda had a realistic view towards success that was inclusive of her experiences, she was also realistic about her limitations. Whether she was deciding how to manage her time or whether her body was fit to

compete, she held a realistic perspective toward her personal limitations. As a teenager deciding which sport to continue competing in, Amanda explained,

I had a choice to make between two sports that I really enjoyed. I thought, 'I'm not going to have time to do both.' ... I really like to do things fully and I felt like I wouldn't be doing both to the fullest of my potential. At that point, I enjoyed one sport more and I felt like I had a higher ceiling in it than I did in the other (Nar).

By the time Amanda was in grade school, she was already demonstrating taking a realistic or practical approach to making decisions based on an awareness of her personal limitations. She realized that the amount of time she could give was a limiting factor on how many sports she could play. Then, having realistically acknowledged this time limitation, she made a decision to continue participating in a sport she enjoyed more. Similarly, within performance settings, when Amanda's teammates looked to her to lead their team, she would obviously put forth her best effort, but also acknowledged "there's only so much I can do" (In 2). As only one member of her team, she was realistic about how much she could contribute to her team's overall performance. Amanda also demonstrated her awareness of her team's limitations. After a varsity competition she noted, "we did the best we could, the other teams were just better" (In 2). Amanda was realistic about her team's ability to perform in comparison to their opponents and did not get uptight about the outcome. Additionally, Amanda demonstrated a realistic awareness of her body's limitations. When battling some smaller nagging injuries, Amanda explained, "if you're not feeling a hundred percent it's not going to go well. You can't just push through it, it doesn't always make sense because it won't end up well" (In 1). As an athlete, Amanda was aware that her body could only handle so much demand, so forcing herself to compete could do more harm than good and might not be worth it. Once again Amanda's realistic perspective on her body's limitations deviates from the dominant views often expressed within sport contexts and narratives of performance. Phrases like 'no pain no gain', 'suck it up', 'tough it out' commonly

heard within sport culture convey the idea that performance should be the number one priority for athletes, at the expense of their bodies. Conversely, Amanda was realistic, recognized her limitations, and acknowledged that it might be more advantageous to fully recover before competing.

Amanda was also realistic regarding what kind of support she needed from others. She clearly and assertively communicated to her family what kind of support would be most helpful for her in different situations. For example, following a poor performance at home Amanda did not like how her family interacted with her. As a result, she decided not to interact with her parents after a competition unless she wanted to. Amanda explained,

I just preferred not having to talk to my parents after competitions... If I want[ed] to talk to them I[']d go up and talk to them, and we kind of just made more of those boundaries, so then I felt I could deal with tough situations or good situations however I needed to. My family members weren't overstepping but I almost needed even less than they were doing (Nar).

Amanda assertively asked for what she needed from her parents which allowed them to better support her. In another situation, leading up to a difficult competition weekend Amanda asked her family not to text her at all until she contacted them. She said, “even if you send me the sweetest text then that might just cause me to be really emotional” (In 2). Amanda was self-aware and realistic about the kind of support she needed from her family members, then clearly communicated that to them.

Similarly to how Amanda expressed her needs to her family, she also was realistic in how she spoke to herself. At times Amanda used her self-talk to normalize the situation and what she was feeling, reframe her experience, or encourage herself. Amanda used phrases such as, “I’ve done this so many times before” and “I know what I’m capable of” (In 2). The following

excerpt from Amanda's narrative conveys multiple ways in which she took a realistic approach, with how she spoke to herself.

As the competition approached, I didn't feel that much pressure necessarily from other people but I just expected more of myself... and at the same time it was also exciting... On the weekend I remember feeling not that stressed about it. I just kind of remember being like "you know what? Everyone's anxious to compete... the stands are pretty full... but we have an advantage, this is where we train every day... I have so many people rooting [cheering] for me whether I do good or bad." And like, having had pretty much the worst case scenario happen to me in the past I was like "you know what? Like it can't get worse than that." I was like "regardless of what happens if I have a poor performance yeah that sucks but like, no one's gonna think anything of that. They're going to feel bad for me but it's not gonna change anything." And just remember thinking "well, I'm just gonna have fun with it. It's going to be fine" (Nar).

Amanda normalized her anxious feelings by reminding herself that people commonly feel this emotion prior to competing. She also reframed that having a large audience did not need to increase her stress, but rather meant that she had people cheering for her. Amanda even considered the worst-case scenario as a way of helping her keep perspective and realize it would not change people's support for her. Then finally, Amanda decided to enjoy her time competing and affirmed that it would be fine. In a different situation later in her career, Amanda was able to better manage her pre-competition worries through being aware of and learning from having not prepared well in the past. She explained,

I think having had that experience it helps me to cope with it better in the future. Cause I've never been that nervous again and I've definitely had pressure situations like that again. So I feel like I know how to navigate it better, or who to avoid talking to beforehand, or kind of like what to like shut down in my head if I'm thinking about it or to play out a worst case scenario and be like "it's not that bad" (In 2).

Through learning from her experiences, Amanda developed a broader and more realistic perspective on what types of coping efforts were and were not helpful for her. Amanda's experience of not coping well provided her with valuable knowledge to help her navigate future situations. While Amanda often took a realistic perspective toward many aspects such as

pressure, success, her limitations, and her self-talk, at times she worried about the perceptions of others.

Although Amanda was self-aware, at times she would over analyze situations and become concerned about how others perceived her. Amanda participated in club sport, so often her school life and her life as an athlete were kept “separate”; however, during one regional competition when she was in high school, her classmates watched (In 2). Amanda expressed feeling “vulnerable” because her peers could see her compete and that she felt “extra conscious” of everything she was doing because she did not want to “look dumb” (In 2). She was “assuming [her peers] were thinking certain things” and found it difficult to have “no control” over what their perceptions of her were (In 2). In this situation, Amanda’s concern with how other people perceived her was real; however, she also explained it was unnecessary and unrealistic to expend energy trying to control their thoughts. Amanda’s concern with other’s perceptions of her was something she navigated primarily in relation to her high school experiences, not later in her career. In addition to being realistic about the previously mentioned aspects of her sport experiences, Amanda also took a realistic approach to navigating injuries as well as her life beyond sport.

“Transforming” Life Situations and “Identity Beyond Sport”

The third theme in throughout Amanda’s sport journey involved how she was able to maintain perspective when navigating difficult situations (e.g., injuries) and was able to see them as a “gift” or “blessing” (In 1). Amanda’s injuries did not just impact her sports career but also impacted her life and how she viewed herself. While injured, Amanda grew as a leader and learned how to better support her teammates. In addition to Amanda’s ability to transform her perspective on being injured as well as be transformed by her injuries, she also talked about her

identity beyond sport. During her career, Amanda invested in multiple outlets outside of her sport (e.g., creative hobbies, work) and made decisions based on what she wanted to experience in the next stage of her life. She expressed being “ready” to move on from her varsity career and have new life experiences (In 2). Another aspect of this theme involved Amanda’s “resiliency” and the personal sense of accomplishment she felt after overcoming her injuries (In 1). After having such a long recovery process, it was deeply meaningful for her to attain her goals.

As previously mentioned, Amanda experienced a serious injury during her varsity career, which also coincided with several additional difficult family matters. During our interviews, she acknowledged how “tough” that period of time was for her and her family, yet also reflected on it being a “really huge blessing” (In 1). Amanda also described how through being injured, and unable to compete, she gained a broader view of who she was as a person. The following excerpt from Amanda’s narrative encapsulates several aspects of this third theme.

That same weekend, one of my siblings hurt herself during a sport competition as well, and another family member passed away the day after we got back... So as a family that was kind of our “hell week”... just the perfect storm. So obviously I redshirted that season, I wasn’t gonna heal in time or anything. But looking back at that now, I really see that injury as a really huge blessing because, I think that that season would have been really hard for me and it was really tough with my family and I don’t think it would have gone as well. I don’t think I would have enjoyed it. So I definitely see that as like a weird gift almost. It was an impactful moment I would say definitely in sport but that’s also probably the biggest one that applies to the REST of my life... I think for me it brought up the idea of identity a lot, and just how a lot of times as an athlete your identity is really in your sport. So it helped me think about all the other things that are important to me besides sport and who I am besides that... I’m a very DIY artsy creative person. I call it my rest time even though I’m doing something. It’s what I do to escape from school or training or life or whatever. So that reminds me, I’m not just my sport, I have other things to offer whether within sport or outside of the sport. So I think that was really important to learn and kind of be forced to understand and to be okay with... I had heard someone talk about the idea of identity beyond sport a lot of times before. And I think that I understood what it was getting at and I definitely have not been someone that’s consumed only by my sport, I focus on other areas of my life, but I think it helped me REALLY understand through kind of losing it for a bit... I think it also made me realize kind of some resiliency and the biggest thing is that there’s a plan for everything... ‘Everything, good or bad, has its place and really does happen for a reason’ (Nar).

While that season in Amanda's life looked different than she had anticipated, she used that experience to reflect on who she was. Although being consumed by her sport was not something Amanda struggled with, she was reminded that her identity encompassed far more than just her experiences as an athlete. She mentioned being creative and leaning on that aspect of her identity as an outlet from sport and source of rest. Amanda also demonstrated a hopeful outlook on her situation by trusting that everything happens for a reason, "even if you don't know the reason when it first happens" (In 1). During Amanda's injury recovery, she also invested in developing her leadership abilities.

While being injured was not ideal, Amanda stayed connected with her teammates and embraced the new ways that she could both lead and support them from the sidelines. Amanda explained,

Although I didn't compete, I actually had a leadership role that year. It was definitely really interesting to try and be a leader on the team and stuff, like I couldn't even train or make it through a warmup because I was injured... I'd come watch at practice just to be around the team and be at team meetings... It was definitely different, but it was a cool opportunity to kind of serve my team fully and not be preoccupied with my own training and performance as well... It was cool to actually just be able to watch my teammates compete and really be able to be intentional and pay attention to supporting them. I feel like that was still a cool opportunity and I feel like it made me a better leader... I think it really helped me understand the athletes that don't make it to [Regional Competitions] and don't get to travel and kind of miss out on those opportunities a little bit. I feel like it helped me understand them more and understand injury more, so that I could relate to my teammates better. Up until that point, I hadn't really dealt with a big injury ever, or at least nothing that takes you out for that long... So it kinda helped me get a better grasp of that and all the rehab and sitting on the sidelines and missing out kind of. So it really helped me to understand how some people were feeling and the emotions connected to that and just kind of know what to say or know how to help people through that... because some things aren't helpful and other things are more so.

After having such a "traumatic" injury that kept her from competing for so long, Amanda could have withdrawn from her team and sulked, but she responded differently (In 1, 2). Amanda stayed connected with her teammates and used her experiences of being injured to help her better

relate to others. She was able to perspective-take and empathize with what some of her teammates were going through. Amanda appeared to use her experience of being injured to grow as a leader and learn how to better care for and support those around her.

After Amanda had recovered from her injury, she started competing again and was quite successful; however, her successes meant far more to her than the medals she received for them.

Amanda explained,

I think it just feels a little extra sweet when you had to struggle to get there a little bit... It feels just completely different when you've had a bigger setback and you just KNOW how hard you had to work to get BACK to that part. You had to work twice as hard to get BACK to where you were and to get better even than where you left off (In 2).

Amanda described the deep sense of fulfillment she felt after making a full recovery and accomplishing her goals. She also expressed how meaningful it was that others were aware of her recovery journey and how much she had overcome. Amanda explained,

Having your whole team run over to you and know that you did that and having your family freak out in the stands is huge! That's SO special and I just feel like people have that extra excitement because they KNOW the journey of getting there and I feel like it's just completely different (In 2).

Amanda's family, friends, and teammates understood how important that competition moment was for her. They, like Amanda, knew that her sense of accomplishment and joy did not lie in the success she had achieved, but rather that her success was symbolic of the hard work, determination, and resilience that she demonstrated. In Amanda's story, it seemed that her hard-fought journey through recovering from an injury is what made her accomplishments so meaningful.

While Amanda had meaningful experiences as a varsity athlete, she was ready to move on to the next phase of her life. She expressed feeling "ready" to explore what her life after sport would look like. Amanda shared,

I'm not really interested in being a post-collegiate athlete per say. I'm kind of just ready to do other things in life too a little bit and I am happy about that decision...I want to get a job in my field and I'll likely move to a different city because I'm probably looking at getting married in a year and a half or two. I have been wanting to do all those things, kind of my next phase in life a little bit. I've trained with a lot of post-collegiate athletes and I kind of see that level of commitment it takes, which I totally respect but it kind of doesn't interest me. I'm ready for the other things in life too and it seems like a good spot to kind of say 'yeah! Let's close that chapter...' (Nar).

Amanda's desire to transition out of sport conveyed a sense of contentment. She seemed content to conclude her varsity career and was excited to experience other aspects in the next season of her life. She was looking forward to moving cities, finding a job in her field, and getting married. For Amanda, she was at a "natural breakpoint" for ending her varsity career and felt ready to pursue other aspects of her identity (In 1).

Working with Stories

Embodying Self-Compassion

While the first portion of the results were communicated from more of a storyteller perspective, allowing each athlete's sport journey to remain largely intact, the remainder of the results section is guided by more of a story analyst position (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). Making clear, overt connections between athletes' experiences and theory is more typically facilitated from a story analyst perspective (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). Given that a key aspect of this research study was the intentional recruitment of women athletes who scored high in self-compassion, it is important to also view these participant's stories with a lens of self-compassion. Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda not only scored high in self-compassion, they also demonstrated taking a self-compassionate approach within their sport experiences. As previously mentioned, self-compassion is comprised of three components: mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity. At various points throughout all three athlete's sport journeys, they displayed each of these components as well as a desire to avoid future suffering.

Mindfulness. Mindfulness involves being aware of the present moment without judging the experience (Neff, 2003a). At times, mindfulness might be described as maintaining a level of objectivity, neutrality, or balance within the present moment (Neff, 2003a). In Isabelle's narrative, she described taking a mindful approach to transitioning out of a sport that was really important to her. She explained, "just like in the whole process of kind of feeling this sense of loss, there was really quick redefining though too. Like I didn't stay stuck in it" (In 2). In this example, Isabelle acknowledged the situation as well as her feelings; however, she did not "stay stuck" and ruminate over the sport she was leaving. After Isabelle acknowledged the reality that she was transitioning out of a sport she deeply valued, she redefined who she was as an athlete and pursued a new sport. In another situation, Isabelle embodied a mindful approach when navigating a team performance slump. She recounted,

So yeah, just kind of hard to feel like varsity is supposed to be kind of like the high end, but for sure our club team was actually WAY stronger... one way I handled it like the first year I played, so first season I played and, we were able to kind of like acknowledge it and dismiss it as a bit of a growing year (In 2).

In this example, Isabelle acknowledged that it was "hard" to not be performing well as a team. Then after acknowledging the situation for what it was, she was able to "dismiss it" (In 2). Isabelle did not dwell on the situation or the disappointment that her and her teammates were likely feeling. For Isabelle, mindfulness also involved approaching a situation with a "forward" focus (In 2). Rather than get stuck in the moment, Isabelle would ask "now what?" or describe her ability to "shift gears" and "look ahead" (In 2).

Similarly, Lauren also demonstrated mindfulness throughout her sport journey. She embodied mindfulness through her balanced approach to navigating both specific 'micro' moments as well as larger 'macro' moments in her life. When navigating an instance of pressure,

Lauren was mindful toward her experience and expressed feeling a “mixture of both nervous[ness] and excite[ment]” (In 2). She then went on to explain her thought process further:

I think it’s important to recognize the pressures but, don’t let them get in your head kind of thing... for me personally it’s a matter of recognizing the pressure but not letting it bother me kind of... So I feel like I recognized that, ‘it’s an important game and that I need to perform well like my coach wants me to do better’ kind of thing but then, recognizing that and not necessarily forgetting it but just... I feel like also when you like get out [there] you kind of just play and you don’t think about sometimes, what the pressures are... So for me I think dealing with that pressure was just like, recognition and then just going out there and playing my best and not letting it get to my head cause I think if you let it into your head then that’s when your performance is off kind of thing... when it bothers me that’s when I’m not at my best... (In 2).

In this situation, Lauren described how ruminating or “letting it [pressure] get to [her] head” would negatively impact her performance. Instead, Lauren navigated this instance of pressure by “recognizing” the importance of the game, and then “going out there and playing [her] best.”

Lauren also described feeling anxious and nervous during her warmup, but then as soon as a game started, she would “switch mindset[s] and try to forget the outside world” (In 2). Then Lauren would remind herself, “I’m just here to play [my sport]” (In 2). Lauren appeared to manage these situations by non-judgmentally acknowledging her nerves, and then drawing her attention to the present moment. She simplified her situation and gave herself one task to think about - just playing her sport. Lauren expressed, “I try to clear my head of everything else... cause I think if I were to think about those other pressures or struggles then it would definitely impact my performance” (In 2). Lauren also demonstrated taking a mindful approach when navigating success as well. After her team won their first game of a tournament, Lauren described how it was important to recognize a win but then “focus on what’s next” (In 2). Whether in moments of struggle or success, Lauren acknowledged the situation for what it was and then gave herself what she needed to move forward.

Lastly, Amanda also demonstrated mindfulness, but to a lesser extent than Isabelle and Lauren. At times, Amanda paired her present moment awareness with a positive appraisal or another aspect of self-compassion (e.g., common humanity). In the lead up to a big competition, Amanda described how she navigated nervousness through reminding herself, ““you know what, everyone’s anxious to [compete]... the stands are pretty full”” (In 2). In this example, Amanda non-judgmentally acknowledged the presence of many spectators as well as her feelings of anxiousness, while also normalizing her experience. Her choice to remind herself that others would also be anxious in that situation conveys a sense of common humanity. Amanda realized she was not alone in feeling nervous to compete. After acknowledging her feelings, Amanda reminded herself ““I have so many people rooting [cheering] for me whether I do good or bad... well, I’m just gonna have fun with it. It’s going to be fine”” (In 2). In this example, Amanda employed both mindfulness and common humanity together in her self-talk. She acknowledged her feelings, normalized them, and then provided herself with the encouragement she needed to compete.

Self-Kindness. Throughout their sport experiences, Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda also displayed self-kindness. For these women, self-kindness at times involved listening to their body’s limits and giving themselves time to rest and recover. Additionally, self-kindness included paying attention to their needs in a situation and then giving themselves what they needed. In one example, Isabelle expressed feeling frustrated and fatigued when describing how there was no break between different seasons of her sport. She explained, “to me the fact that they overlap is ridiculous like we need time to breathe” (In 1). Similarly, when Isabelle was recovering from an injury she would step out of various drills at practice and opted to give

herself time to rest. During her recovery, Isabelle also described needing to redefine her role on the team so she could find enjoyment again. Isabelle explained,

There was a while where I couldn't play and then there's a while where I was able to reflect a lot on like, 'well, what am I NOT actually enjoying anymore, and how can I find this again?' I guess was part of what helped move me forward (In 2).

It may seem subtle, but her desire to satisfy her need for enjoyment demonstrated self-kindness.

In asking herself, "how do I enjoy this" she was listening to her needs, being solutions-oriented, and providing herself with what she felt most helpful (In 2).

In a similar situation, Lauren accepted her need for rest and described "taking things really precautionary" in the early stages of injury recovery (In 2). Rather than push her limits she "kind of took it easy at the start" (In 1). Instead of overworking her body or criticizing herself for needing time to recover, Lauren demonstrated self-kindness by accepting her limits and choosing to take care of herself.

Similar to how Isabelle and Lauren displayed self-kindness by giving themselves what they needed, Amanda demonstrated self-kindness by advocating for her needs and creating boundaries with her family around their interactions at competitions. Amanda noted,

We kind of just made a little bit more of those boundaries, so then I felt like I could deal with tough situations or good situations however and then kind of come up [to the stands] as that fit into it, and so that really helped a lot (In 2).

In addition to creating boundaries with her family in a manner that was kind to herself, Amanda also had boundaries when trying to recover from several nagging injuries. Amanda listened to her body's limits and explained, "you can't just push through it, it doesn't always make sense because it won't end up well so there's almost no point" (In 1). In this instance, Amanda was being kind to herself while also being realistic about the ramifications that could come from pushing herself too hard too early in her recovery process.

Common Humanity. In addition to displaying mindfulness and self-kindness, Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda also demonstrated common humanity by recognizing that the challenges they encountered were mutually experienced by other athletes as well. They realized they were not alone in their struggles. At times their expressions of common humanity also involved coping efforts to seek out social support. When navigating through the struggle of having a divided team culture, Isabelle noted,

Because I had close people on that team I think we leaned on each other a lot... and my closest friend on that team was also someone who I played [club team] with so we knew what it felt to be on this really strong team and then be struggling here and we were both first years and stuff. So, yeah I think we were able to lean on each other a lot with that (In 2).

Isabelle acknowledged that she was not alone in her frustration and discouragement because she knew her teammate was experiencing it as well. This long-standing teammate was someone who had gone through years of shared experiences with Isabelle. At one point in the interview, Isabelle mentioned that her and her teammate were even on a similar injury recovery timeline. Isabelle expressed that it was, “just nice to have that person I guess to come along with” (In 2).

Similarly, Lauren demonstrated common humanity when trying to cope with the news that her favourite coach was retiring. Lauren acknowledged, “it was kind of tough for a lot of us because we all really liked her as a coach” (In 1). In this situation, Lauren realized that others were also “sad” to learn of their coach’s retirement and that she was not alone in that experience (In 1). For Lauren, common humanity also took the form of normalizing her experiences of nervousness. In preparation of her team’s first game after not competing in two months, Lauren explained, “I feel like you always kind of have those nerves... every game there’s always just some nerves no matter what the importance of the game is” (In 2). Rather than feel isolated in

her experience of nervousness, Lauren acknowledged that feeling nervous was a normal part of competing in sport.

Like Lauren, Amanda shared a similar perspective when navigating stress before a competition. Amanda explained,

I always kind of say “if you’re not stressed about something a little bit then like you don’t care about it enough.” So, I’m never not going to be a little bit stressed at any [competition] to a degree because I want to do well and I care about it (In 2).

In addition to normalizing the stress of competition, Amanda also re-appraised the situation as an opportunity to demonstrate her ability and take part in a sport that she valued. In other instances in Amanda’s story, she demonstrated common humanity by acknowledging that some of the setbacks she experienced were “not unheard of in [her sport]” (In 2). In a realistic tone of voice, Amanda expressed how making a mistake is something “that happens” (In 2). Similarly, after her team made a relatively common mistake in their sport, rather than ruminate on it, she responded with “whatever, it happens” (In 2). If taken out of context, Amanda’s response might convey a sense of passivity or lack of care; however, the simple phrase communicated that her team’s experience was normal and that she did not need to let feelings of frustration or discouragement about the situation linger.

Learning From Setbacks & Avoiding Future Suffering. In addition to demonstrating each of the three components of self-compassion, there were various points throughout the athlete’s stories where they expressed a desire to avoid experiencing similar setbacks or suffering in the future. For example, when recounting a deselection experience, Isabelle expressed, ““So, I didn’t make this I think that I should have and that was really devastating”” (In 2). After Isabelle mindfully acknowledged her pain and disappointment, she then responded by taking action. Isabelle stated, ““I don’t want to feel this again...’ I was determined to come in offering more so

it was like, ‘I’m for sure not getting cut in the fall kind of thing’” (In 2). In this situation, Isabelle met her “devastating” experience with compassion and then responded with motivation and determination to help avoid being deselected in the future. While this is a specific example from Isabelle’s story, Lauren shares more broadly how she sought to avoid future struggles.

From more of a more general perspective, Lauren spoke about the performance struggles she experienced from being an “over-thinker” (In 2). When learning how to better manage her thoughts Lauren explained,

if something’s in my head like I’m going to constantly think about it. So that’s why I’ve kind of developed the mindset that like, if there is some stressor or like pressure or struggle like, obviously it’s important to like acknowledge that but like I think if I think about it too much then that’s when like my judgement’s off and like, I don’t perform as well. So I think it’s just like, not thinking about it more than you have to, kind of (In 2).

In this example, Lauren described how in the past thinking about stressors too much has negatively impacted her judgement and led to her not performing as well. In an effort to keep these situations from reoccurring, Lauren described how she has developed a “mindset” of acknowledging the stressor and then essentially letting it go or “not thinking about it more than you have to” (In 2). Lauren learned from her experiences of managing performance struggles associated with overthinking and developed a new way of approaching stressful situations to help prevent similar struggles from happening again.

Amanda also navigated a similar situation to Lauren. After feeling an overwhelming sense of anxiousness at a big competition, she was motivated to avoid repeating that experience in the future. Amanda explained,

I was like, “I don’t want to feel like that again and I’m going to do everything to prevent that.” So, I would think about the things that would be like stressful for me coming up and just dealt with them more ahead of time and then allowed that little bit of stress to stay and fuel my motivation (In 2).

In this situation, Amanda described how she actively sought to avoid future suffering (e.g., getting too stressed or nervous) through anticipating potential challenges and attempting to address them ahead of time.

From these examples shared by Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda, it would seem that one's desire to avoid future suffering may be closely connected to proactive coping efforts. Having listened to participants stories and worked with them to consider how they demonstrate embodied experiences of self-compassion, discussions within the following chapter explore the potential connections between the athletes' experiences and various psychological theories.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Connecting Stories to Theory

The purpose of this study was to explore how women athletes high in self-compassion story their journey through sport as well as navigate instances of pressure and struggle. Guided by the perspective of a story analyst, this section is structured around the two research questions that guided this study. The first portion of the discussion addresses the first research question (i.e., How do women athletes high in self-compassion story their journey through sport?) and includes connections between participants' stories and the extant narrative literature. The second portion of the discussion addresses the second research question (i.e., How do women athletes high in self-compassion story their experiences of navigating pressure or struggle?) and includes connections between participants' experiences and existing self-compassion and coping literature. Following both discussion portions is a brief integrative discussion that brings together ideas from both discussion portions. This section highlights the complexities present when studying athletes' sport experiences as well as the importance of considering how the environment, context, or culture may shape their experiences.

Connecting Athletes' Stories to Narrative and Self-Compassion Literature

Within the literature, the dominant narrative of performance still permeates sport culture. In a performance narrative, an individual will center their whole life around the goal of performing well or achieving success while sacrificing other aspects of life (Douglas & Carless, 2009). When performance is an athlete's primary focus, they may move cities to train in elite facilities with top coaches, invest less time and energy into their non-sport relationships, or pause other academic and career pursuits (Douglas & Carless, 2009). Additionally, the athlete's mistakes are often met with harsh self-criticism (Sutherland et al., 2014). An overemphasis or

rigid fixation on performance can negatively impact other areas of an athlete's life such as their physical health, mental well-being, and future quality of life (Douglas & Carless, 2009; Everard et al., 2021; Smith, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). Such an approach to sport may also leave athletes vulnerable to maladjustment when either retiring or transitioning out of sport (Douglas & Carless, 2009). With this as a typical cultural backdrop within sport, it is apparent that the participants' narrative accounts deviate from the performance narrative in multiple ways.

Respectively, Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda embodied narratives of redefining and rediscovery, balance and growth, and redefining and transforming. The participants' narrative descriptions are representative of their desire to learn, grow, and develop both as individuals and as athletes. The aspects of their stories pertaining to self-discovery and experiences that changed or transformed them "for the better" resemble elements of a 'quest' narrative (Frank, 1995; Smith & Sparkes, 2011, p. 40). Additionally, how athletes made sense of their sport experiences (e.g., both good and bad) within the broader context of their lives is also captured within their descriptions. Throughout their journeys through sport, each athlete also described moments where they made choices based on personal values and aspirations, both of which differed from decisions typically made within a performance narrative. Similar deviations from performance narratives have been described by other researchers (Everard et al., 2021; Douglas & Carless, 2013). Some noteworthy aspects of participants' narratives from the present study include how they made decisions, their investment in multiple aspects of their lives, and their acceptance of personal limitations.

Making Values-Based Decisions

Throughout the athletes' sport journeys, they had to make various decisions about their careers. When Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda encountered these choice points they demonstrated

high levels of self-awareness and made decisions that were in alignment with their personal values. Whether it was Isabelle transitioning out of one sport because she did not feel a sense of enjoyment, Lauren keeping her commitment to play for a team despite being cautioned against doing so, or Amanda leaving a team environment because it no longer served her or met her need for connection, each of these women acted on their values when making decisions throughout their careers. Interestingly, the athletes' tendency to make values-based decisions has connections to both self-compassion as well as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). Within Dr. Kristin Neff's 8-week Mindful Self-Compassion Course, reflecting upon one's values and considering how to live more in line with them is part of an exercise designed to help individuals foster self-compassion (Germer & Neff, 2019). Similarly, awareness of one's values and making decisions in alignment with one's values are central aspects of ACT as well as psychological flexibility (Hayes et al., 2006). Participants further demonstrated making values-based decisions in the following instances: Isabelle deciding to continue playing because of her love for sport and passion for playing alongside her teammates; Lauren making time for recreational sport as well as investing in her academic pursuits; and Amanda choosing to attend a university close to home instead of the top school in the country for her sport. These decisions made by participants differ greatly from what would typically be seen within a narrative of performance. Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda made decisions that not only appeared to be aligned with their personal values but also allowed them to maintain and develop multiple aspects of who they are.

Maintaining a Multi-Faceted Identity

Within the athletes' stories, the various decisions they made also often allowed them to retain and cultivate multiple aspects of their identities. Within their stories, athletes made

decisions to invest time in their relationships with friends and family members, maintain their hobbies or creative outlets, and pursue their educational and non-athletic career goals. Among athletes, the importance of maintaining balance within one's life has also been expressed by Mosewich and colleagues (2014). The participants' intentionality to maintain a multi-faceted identity are aspects of their stories that greatly differ from elements often found within the performance narrative and within typical sport culture (Douglas & Carless, 2006). In a recent study by Mosewich and colleagues (2021), intercollegiate student-athletes identified more strongly with their athletic identity compared to their academic identity. Often athletes receive messaging that in order to attain elite levels of performance they need to make their sport their sole focus (Douglas & Carless, 2006). Such perspectives can contribute to the adoption of a singular identity as an athlete, which can lead to adverse outcomes (e.g., burnout, identity foreclosure; Brewer & Petitpas 2017). Instead of sacrificing multiple aspects of their lives or identities, Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda were able to maintain diversity in their experiences. They had an awareness that sport was part of their life, but that it was not their whole life. Stated slightly differently, participants were aware that life is more than sport. The athletes' realization of this aligns with recent findings by Everard and colleagues (2021) where participants expressed there is "more to me" than my sport participation (p. 8).

In the "more to me narrative," athletes view their sport experiences (e.g., their careers, injuries) from a broader life perspective that acknowledges the other roles and identities that the athletes hold (Everard et al., 2021). As researchers suggest, the more to me narrative is related to previously identified discovery and relational narratives "where a multidimensional life is promoted and sense of self, identity, and mental well-being are not solely contingent on athletic performance" (Douglas & Carless, as cited in Everard et al., 2021, p. 8). Furthermore, Everard

and colleagues (2021) suggest being able to draw upon multiple identities may aid in “buffering the negative implications that an injury might present” (p. 8). Participants’ experiences from the present study would also support this claim. Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda all struggled when navigating various injuries; however, their ability to recognize or create a different role for themselves within their sport environments was a key aspect of their ability to maintain perspective and recover. Additionally, the athletes’ investment in their own personal growth as well as developing strong social relationships further demonstrate connections between their stories and elements of the discovery and relational narratives. Participants in the present study were able to live in line with their values, invest in their relationships with others, and make time for personally meaningful outlets.

Accepting Personal Limitations

Another meaningful aspect of the athletes’ stories involved their awareness and acceptance of personal limitations. Throughout the interview process, Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda appeared to be quite self-aware. They were able to describe their thoughts and emotions as well as articulate how their experiences had shaped their journey through sport. Additionally, these participants demonstrated self-awareness through acknowledging various personal strengths (e.g., athletic abilities) and weaknesses (e.g., physical limitations during injury recovery). Both in times of strength as well as when confronted with their body’s limits, Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda seemed to express acceptance and appreciation toward their bodies. Similar findings have been noted by other sport self-compassion researchers (Eke et al., 2020; Ferguson et al., 2015). Additionally, all three athletes in the present study acknowledged their needs and actively provided themselves with the relevant support they required. This ability to provide care for oneself is an example of self-kindness (Neff, 2003a). Athletes from the present study used

positive self-talk and accepted their limitations or inadequacies which further demonstrates self-kindness as well as common humanity (e.g., everyone has limitations).

Within the broader competitive sport culture, athletes often ignore the warning signs that their bodies need a break (Mosewich et al., 2014). In an effort to keep striving for performance excellence, athletes may end up viewing their bodies as machines that need to be constantly worked (Everard et al., 2021). Rather than overwork themselves during the recovery process to make up for their limitations or time away from sport, Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda attended to their needs. The importance of accepting one's limitations, especially when recovering from injury has also been noted by other sport self-compassion researchers (Mosewich et al., 2014). In a recent self-compassion study, Adam and colleagues (2021) suggest that acknowledging and accepting one's limitations or shortcomings seems to be an essential part of moving forward mentally and emotionally from setbacks or mistakes in sport.

The athletes' abilities to listen to their bodies and provide themselves with the most relevant care demonstrates their capacity to think flexibly about their situations. This approach greatly differs from the rigid thought patterns associated with both the performance narrative and the "resilience narrative" (Everard et al., 2021, p. 3). It should be noted that although the resilience narrative sounds favourable and promotes the normalization of sport setbacks (e.g., injuries), at times narratives of resilience can become problematic when athletes become fixated on returning to their pre-injury state (Everard et al., 2021). Embedded within the resilience narrative plotline is the belief that one will get better if they work hard enough; however, making a full recovery is not always guaranteed (Everard et al., 2021). Everard and colleagues (2021) note, "the precarious nature of this accepted storyline accentuates the need for a multiplicity of stories in relation to injury" (p. 4). Evidence of this precarious situation can be seen in Isabelle's

account when she was struggling to recover from a major injury. Although she did not necessarily embody a resilience narrative, her struggle to imagine herself getting better is evidence of “chaos” within her story (Frank, 1995, p. 103). In some respects, all athletes had differing degrees of chaos within their narratives (brought about through injuries); however, Isabelle appeared to experience greater difficulty navigating her situation. Eventually, her narrative account ends with her rediscovering her childhood passion for unstructured play and redefining herself as being an active person. Overall, when faced with their own injuries Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda expressed how they accepted their limitations, redefined their situations, rediscovered parts of their identity, and experienced transformation. Such transformative aspects of participants’ narratives suggest the presence of resources or cultural scripts that afforded them opportunities to reconceptualize their experiences and tell different stories.

Counter-Cultural Environments

Within participants’ stories, they encountered moments of respite from the performance narrative. For example, Amanda’s coach tempered and reduced the expectations placed on her going into a big competition after her injury. Instead of telling her she had to win, Amanda’s coach expressed that simply her competing would be a success. In this instance, Amanda’s coach helped her redefine and expand what success could mean in ways that deviated from the narrow view of success typically seen within a narrative of performance. Amanda’s coach modeled that he accepted and supported her regardless of her performance and provided the opportunity for her to respond to herself in a similar manner. Such findings provide evidence of how significant others can help embed ideas or concepts into training settings that could help athletes develop self-compassion (Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019; Ferguson et al., 2022). Such athlete-coach interactions may also work to expand the acceptable norms within a team context, which can

help athletes conceptualize or redefine what performance and success mean (Crozier et al., 2019). Coaches and other individuals within an athlete's support network may also be able to help athletes by listening empathically to their story and serving as a witness to their experiences (Frank, 1995; Smith & Sparkes, 2011). Listening and honoring one's story is not an easy task and if poorly done could lead to an individual feeling less supported (Frank, 1995; Smith & Sparkes, 2011). Therefore, those within an athlete's support network should carefully consider whether they have the capacity to provide this kind of care. While the athletes' sport environments and support networks likely helped them story their experiences in ways that were meaningful and deviated from the performance narrative, these women also had personal characteristics and coping strategies that helped them navigate pressure and struggle.

Navigating Pressure & Struggle

While Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda each had unique stories of journeying through sport, they all shared unifying elements within their experiences (e.g., playing multiple sports, recovering from injuries, leadership opportunities, managing nervousness). More specifically, there was considerable overlap among the key themes within each athlete's story. Athletes' themes involved the following features: a) strong connections or relationships with others, b) some form of personal growth, development, or competence, and c) maintaining perspective (both in sport and life). In addition to having similar key themes, each athlete's journey through sport also included choice points, or opportunities for autonomy (e.g., athletes deciding whether to keep playing their current sport or try something new). The participants' accounts and the previously mentioned themes seen throughout each athlete's sport journey seem to align with the basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence from Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In addition to the presence of basic psychological needs

throughout athletes' sport experiences, they also engaged in diverse coping strategies when navigating instances of pressure and struggle in sport. Athletes seemed to engage in a combination of both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies when navigating difficult sport moments. Athletes' tendency to take action and employ both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies supports previous research (Mosewich, Sabiston, et al., 2019).

Basic Psychological Needs

Autonomy

From a young age, participants described the presence of autonomy within their sport experiences. While growing up Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda all had the opportunity to choose what sports they did and did not want to play. Although they had agency to decide what sports to participate in, at times they were influenced by what sports their friends or siblings were playing. As they got older, they also had autonomy to decide how to balance their sport commitments with other outlets they found personally enjoyable and meaningful (e.g., recreational sports and artistic hobbies). Such findings support research by Ferguson and colleagues (2015) that athletes higher in self-compassion tend to be more autonomous and experience greater meaning and vitality in sport. While autonomy was present in the athletes' experiences, there were also instances where it was hindered. Athletes also spoke to the role that their parents played in supporting their sport decisions and the encouragement they received from them as well as others. Such findings regarding parents and the key roles they play in athletes' sport experiences (e.g., providing help, modeling positive behaviours, supporting a balanced perspective) align closely with research by Ingstrup and colleagues (2017).

Relatedness

When considering relatedness, all three athletes described the importance of having supportive relationships in their lives. While exploring how these athletes developed self-compassion is somewhat outside of the scope of this study, the athletes' close and supportive relationships with family members may have contributed to their self-compassion development (Ingstrup et al., 2017; Neff & McGehee, 2010; Neff & Tirsch, 2013). Having strong relationships and a feeling connected to others was a key theme across all participants' stories. Experiencing connection and being known was important to the participants, especially to Isabelle and Amanda. When participants encountered a sport or team environment where they felt a lack of connection, they tended to leave that environment because it could not provide the relational support they desired and needed. In these situations, athletes sought out new team environments where they could establish meaningful relationships and experience connection.

Within the sport self-compassion literature, the presence of supportive people has been highlighted as a key factor in one's development and application of self-compassion (Frentz et al., 2020; Ingstrup et al., 2017). Whether support came from coaches, teammates, friends, or family members, each athlete in the present study spoke at great lengths about how these individuals helped them during times of pressure and struggle. Sport self-compassion researchers have also noted the importance of having well-established networks of social support to assist athletes during difficult sport experiences (Adam et al., 2021; Frentz et al., 2020; Mosewich et al., 2014; Sereda et al., 2021). Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda further expressed how important it was to feel connected and be known within their sport environments. It was in the context of meaningful relationships that all three athletes were able to expand their perceptions of who they were as individuals and what they were capable of both within and outside of sport. People in the

athletes' support networks, especially coaches, affirmed their belief in them and encouraged them along in their sport journeys as well as in their leadership roles. Other researchers have also noted the key role that coaches play in fostering athletes' sense of self-belief and competence (Sereda et al., 2021). At times, it was through hearing that others believed in them that Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda grew in their belief of themselves. These findings regarding belief from others fostering self-belief align with aspects of verbal persuasion from Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1982). Additionally, as seen in the interactions between Amanda and her coach, various support staff (e.g., coaches, physiotherapists) can assist in fostering athletes' competence by helping them break down goals into smaller tasks or processes and then acknowledging or celebrating their progress (Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2014).

Competence

In addition to receiving affirmation and encouragement from others, athletes also described that they developed competence and grew personally throughout their sport experiences. Such aspects of their experiences highlight the basic psychological need of competence, which is intricately connected with self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Athletes explained how they developed competence or self-belief through having positive and successful experiences within sport; however, it should be noted that building competence from sport successes did not always take the form of winning performances. Instead, competence came from acknowledging small personal victories, achieving self-referenced goals, and overcoming setbacks (e.g., deselection and injuries). Such self-referenced standards serve as examples of how athletes developed competence in their sport through focusing on mastery experiences instead of performance outcomes (Bandura, 1982). In addition to feeling competent in their sport, athletes also described feeling physically strong which would suggest a sense of

environmental mastery (Ferguson et al., 2022). The athletes appeared to learn that through their efforts and behaviours they could affect change to help them reach their desired goals. Perhaps the satisfaction of participants' basic psychological needs throughout their sport careers helped contribute to their overall enjoyment and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000) as well as their ability to manage difficult sport moments.

Coping Efforts

In addition to the basic psychological needs being a common thread throughout all participants' stories, athletes also employed similar coping strategies when navigating instances of pressure and struggle in sport. The pressure and struggle experiences participants navigated included important competitions, deselection, poor performances (on a team and individual level), unsupportive or divided team environments, and recovering from injuries. Many of these experiences have been highlighted by other researchers as times when a self-compassionate approach could be useful (Adam et al., 2021; Mosewich et al., 2014; Sereda et al., 2021). When navigating various pressure and struggle situations, Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda described engaging in interpersonal coping efforts such as seeking social or tangible support from others. These athletes also navigated instances of pressure and struggle through employing self-management strategies that included making challenge appraisals, reframing the situation, being solutions-oriented, focusing on controllable aspects, maintaining perspective, practicing self-reflection, and engaging in proactive coping. Athletes also engaged in values-based decision-making and responded with self-compassion, both of which have been previously discussed in this chapter. Similar to participants in recent studies (Adam et al., 2021; Sereda et al., 2021), the self-management strategies used by athletes in the present study were aimed at regulating their thoughts and emotions.

Social Support

A key factor that helped athletes cope with these exceptionally difficult experiences involved maintaining connection with others. With relatedness being an important aspect of athletes' experiences, it makes sense that they sought out social support to help them cope with their pressures and struggles in sport. Similar to athletes in previous studies, at various points throughout their sport careers, participants sought out support from coaches, teammates, family members, or sport psychologists (Adam et al., 2021; Frentz et al., 2020; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Sereda et al., 2021). These individuals helped Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda verbally process their struggles as well as provided them with tangible support. At other times, support was shown through celebrating the athletes' personal progress or success. Within the self-compassion literature, the presence of supportive others has been highlighted as a key factor in the development of self-compassion (Frentz et al., 2020; Ingstrup et al., 2017). Other individuals within an athlete's support network (e.g., parents and coaches) can also help athletes keep perspective during difficult situations (Frentz et al., 2020; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2014). Among athletes in the current study, it seemed that they benefited from having a combination of both parents or coaches, who were slightly removed from the situation and could provide a different perspective, as well as teammates who could empathize and relate to their experiences.

When considering the support received from teammates, participants expressed that it was helpful when other athletes or people they knew had gone through a similar struggle. Being able to relate to one's teammates helps foster a sense of support that can aid athletes in regulating their emotions more effectively when coping with difficult sport experiences (Mosewich et al., 2013; Sereda et al., 2021). Similar findings have been expressed by other researchers, suggesting

that when athletes relate to one another they could be drawing on the component of common humanity, which helps them acknowledge that they are not alone in their struggles (Berry et al., 2010; Frentz et al., 2020; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2014; Sereda et al., 2021). For example, in a divided team context, Isabelle drew on the support from her fellow younger teammates when experiencing criticisms from a more senior teammate. In addition to the support received from her knowing she was not alone in her situation, Isabelle could also debrief the experience with her younger teammates, which can help athletes process criticism (Adam et al., 2021). In addition to interpersonal coping strategies, each athlete also engaged in self-regulation efforts and employed personal coping strategies to help navigate instances of pressure and struggle.

Challenge Appraisals & Reframing the Situation

When describing their sport experiences, athletes' initial appraisals of situations tended to be relatively favourable, often viewing situations as challenges or opportunities instead of as threats. As previously mentioned, even athletes' personal definitions of pressure were relatively balanced and positive. Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda recognized how pressure could be seen as facilitative or debilitating and often they perceived pressure as being helpful. All athletes described moments throughout their stories where pressure was viewed as facilitative to their sport experiences. Their relatively neutral or favourable view of pressure may be related to findings that self-compassion helps attenuate evaluative concerns (Mosewich et al., 2011; Mosewich et al., 2013; Mosewich et al., 2014). As such, when athletes experienced a pressure situation, it did not evoke perceptions of concern or threat, rather athletes seemed to appraise the situation as a challenge or opportunity. For example, after previously receiving critical feedback from a coach that he expected more from her, Lauren appraised her next major competition as an

opportunity to show him of what she was capable. Similarly, rather than feel threatened by having more people in attendance at an important competition, Amanda viewed it as an exciting opportunity. Findings from the present study seem related to the logical appraisals and balanced perspectives held by self-compassionate athletes in Sereda and colleagues' (2021) study.

In addition to initially appraising difficult situations as challenges or opportunities, athletes also described reappraising or reframing instances of pressure and struggle in more positive ways. Athletes further demonstrated reframing through conceptualizing aspects of sport (e.g., success and pressure) in broader and different ways than what are commonly seen within sport culture. Essentially, athletes reframed or redefined what aspects such as success and pressure meant for them. For example, Isabelle described a situation where she reframed her coach's feedback. He told Isabelle that she was holding back and that she had more potential than what she was showing. Rather than get discouraged or frustrated by her coach's criticism, Isabelle described feeling encouraged because she felt that her coach believed in her. She was able to reframe his feedback, potentially seeing the situation from his perspective. Participants' abilities to reframe situations or redefine aspects of sport provide further support that self-compassion is strongly related to positive cognitive restructuring (Allen & Leary, 2010). Additionally, Adam and colleagues (2021) suggest that self-compassion can also assist with reframing situations or criticisms through supporting athletes' engagement in perspective taking. Similarly, athletes in the present study described processes of reframing that drew upon common humanity to not only foster connectedness but also alleviate feelings of pressure (Adam et al., 2021). In addition to making challenge appraisals and having a relatively positive perception of pressure, participants from this study also actively sought out solutions to help manage their difficult situations.

Being Solutions-Oriented & Controlling the Controllables

When faced with difficult pressure and struggle situations, at times Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda coped by considering what options they had, as well as what solutions they could create. Athletes were willing to try new ways of managing difficult circumstances. Relationships between self-compassion and being solutions-oriented have also been noted by Adam and colleagues (2021). Connected to being solutions-oriented was the athletes' ability to focus their attention to what they could control and rely on their personal strengths to cope with the situation. For example, when faced with the new pressure and responsibility of being a captain on her team, Lauren first asked herself what she could do to take more of a leadership role. After considering her options, Lauren decided to use her personal qualities and strengths to help her lead her team. Similarly, when Isabelle experienced performance struggles with her team, she focused on the things that were within her control as well as on her strengths. Isabelle described that although her team might be losing, she could still go out and make a good play or show her strengths elsewhere. Amanda also demonstrated an ability to focus her time and attention on her personal performance instead of trying to control competition outcomes. Athletes' coping efforts to direct their attention and focus to the task at hand have also been discussed by Sereda and colleagues (2021). Given that one of the practices aimed at cultivating self-compassion within Kristin Neff and Chris Germer's Mindful Self-Compassion course involves reflecting on and appreciating one's strengths, it is fitting that participants also considered their strengths during instances of pressure and struggle.

Maintaining Perspective

Another shared aspect among Isabelle's, Lauren's, and Amanda's experiences was their ability to maintain perspective when navigating instances of pressure and struggle. For these

athletes, maintaining perspective in a situation involved aspects of mindfulness (e.g., being objective and balanced) as well as being self-aware, acknowledging the tough aspects, seeing the positives, and taking appropriate responsibility. It should be noted that participants' awareness of and investment in aspects of life other than sport also contributed to their ability to maintain perspective.

Mindfulness. As opposed to getting caught up in their thoughts or emotions, all three athletes, especially Lauren, often described navigating pressure and struggle experiences in a balanced or logical manner. Amanda described herself as “realistic” and Isabelle talked about her ability to “shift gears.” Lauren acknowledged that overthinking could negatively impact her judgement and performance, so she taught herself to not think about sport more than necessary. Lauren further demonstrated taking a balanced approach when she noticed multiple emotions (e.g., nervousness and excitement) prior to a big competition without dwelling on them. Participants in Adam and colleagues' (2021) study conveyed similar ideas by describing how “keeping a level head” could support good decision-making within competition settings and that being able to “switch gears” could help athletes prepare for upcoming competitions (p. 271-272). As evident in both the present study and other self-compassion research, an athlete's ability to keep an objective or balanced perspective draws on the component of mindfulness and can help them manage difficult situations within sport (e.g., Adam et al., 2021; Doorley et al., 2022; Sereda et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2019).

Self-Awareness & Acknowledging Struggles. As noted earlier, all participants seemed to have a high degree of self-awareness and could articulate the thoughts and feelings they experienced throughout their careers. Self-compassionate athletes within Sereda and colleagues' (2021) study also demonstrated self-awareness of thoughts and emotion when engaging in

coping efforts. Being self-aware likely helped athletes not only notice their struggles but also the aspects that were especially difficult. Acknowledging the tough aspects of a situation did not involve athletes ruminating or wallowing in how difficult the situation was, instead they simply recognized it was tough. They noted that a situation was difficult by either objectively identifying what they were feeling (e.g., frustrated, sad, disappointed) or simply stating, “this sucks” (Isabelle). Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda did not gloss over or dismiss their feelings about how difficult various situations were, and they also did not force themselves to be positive or pretend they were alright during times of struggle. These athletes’ ability to maintain perspective supports findings within previous research that self-compassion is associated with less sport-related rumination and healthier responses to difficult sport situations (Mosewich et al., 2013; Reis et al., 2015). In line with Neff & Tirsch’s (2013) perspectives, it was almost as if accepting the difficult situation for what it was then allowed Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda to see positive aspects or even reframe the situation.

Seeing the Positives. For participants, seeing the positives within an experience of struggle often involved noticing moments of enjoyment, maintaining a hopeful outlook, expressing gratitude, or reframing the situation. For example, despite experiencing the difficult emotions associated with poor team performances, Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda were able to maintain perspective by noticing positive aspects within their personal performances (e.g., improvements). Additionally, when these athletes had to navigate the struggles of being injured, they demonstrated an ability to see the positives of receiving quality care. The athletes also described feeling fortunate and grateful to have supportive people in their environments who helped in their recovery. Lauren maintained a hopeful outlook throughout the recovery process

and Amanda chose to see her injury as a gift. While injured, Amanda also embraced her leadership role and served her teammates.

The self-compassionate athletes in this study demonstrated an ability to hold space for a breadth of emotions, ranging from discouragement to gratitude. Such responses by athletes are similar to the “bittersweet” perspectives taken by participants from a recent self-compassion study (Adam et al., 2021, p. 272). Athletes’ abilities to reframe or reinterpret moments of struggle as gifts and opportunities for growth supports previous findings that self-compassion is associated with greater cognitive reappraisal, positive reinterpretation, and growth emotion-focused strategies following failure or setback experiences (Doorley et al., 2022; Neff et al., 2005; Sereda et al., 2021). These athletes’ abilities to express gratitude and see good aspects within difficult moments also aligns with Ferguson and colleagues’ (2015) work that those with high levels of self-compassion tend to experience more positive emotions. Similarly, work by Adam and colleagues (2021) highlights how self-compassion can support athletes in being grateful for their sport experiences. All throughout their stories, Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda described an ability to see positive aspects within the difficult moments of pressure and struggle they encountered. Such findings align with the work of previous scholars who found positive relationships between self-compassion and each of the following: optimism, curiosity, exploration, and personal initiative (Neff et al., 2007). Self-compassionate individuals tend to not only experience more positive emotions, but they also take initiative and responsibility (Ferguson et al., 2014).

Taking Appropriate Responsibility. It should also be noted that even though Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda demonstrated an ability to acknowledge both the difficult and the good aspects of an experience, they did not over-identify with the difficulties, nor did they become

complacent due to seeing the positive aspects. Additionally, as seen in other self-compassion studies, these athletes still took appropriate responsibility within their circumstances (Adam et al., 2021; Ferguson et al., 2014, 2015). Within the present study, appropriate responsibility involved athletes' ownership of the role they played in a given situation, while also acknowledging aspects of the situation for which others were responsible. For example, when working through her injury, Amanda did not blame herself for getting injured or beat herself up with self-criticism, rather she acknowledged she was tripped by her opponents. In another situation, Amanda expressed how it was unfair that her teammates put so much pressure on her to perform when everyone had a role to play; she acknowledged how she could only do so much. Similarly, after another season of poor team performances, Lauren acknowledged that although their team was still young and building, she did not want these expressions to become excuses for them underperforming. Instead, Lauren conveyed the importance of taking responsibility for improving as a team rather than becoming complacent. In a similar situation, rather than accept a complacent mindset (e.g., "it is what it is"), Isabelle described wanting to change the poor culture on her team. She expressed how if her and her teammates wanted to see change then it was not only their responsibility but also within their control. Isabelle was determined to help improve her team's culture and took appropriate responsibility and action for doing so. She did not let the challenging situation to be an excuse for allowing poor team dynamics to persist. Athletes' experiences in the present study further support that instead of promoting complacency or passivity, self-compassion is associated athletes' perseverance and determination as well as their proactive coping efforts to avoid future difficulties or struggles (Adam et al., 2021; Ferguson et al., 2014; 2015; Sereda et al., 2021).

Self-Reflection & Proactive Coping. Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda appeared to be highly self-aware and self-reflective, which may have supported their use of multiple coping strategies for navigating the pressures and struggles they experienced. Athletes even demonstrated self-reflection and present-moment awareness within our interviews by making connections to thoughts shared moments earlier or in a previous interview. They explained that some of their coping efforts were developed through making attempts to manage various struggles or pressure situations and then noticing what did or did not work. In these situations, athletes engaged in self-reflection to determine how to manage similar experiences in the future (e.g., big competitions, tryouts, balancing being a student-athlete). Additionally, athletes described moments where they learned about themselves or figured out how to manage various demands which also suggests their engagement in reflective practices. Through athletes being self-aware and self-reflective, perhaps they were better able to determine the most effective coping strategies for navigating certain situations. Similar to findings in Sereda and colleagues' study (2021), the self-compassionate athletes within this study not only appraised their situations of pressure and struggle in more favourable ways, but they also seemed to have the necessary resources to manage their circumstances and employ a variety of coping efforts. Such findings align with previous research that self-compassionate individuals can cope more effectively with difficult experiences than their less self-compassionate counterparts (Ferguson et al., 2015; Leary et al., 2007; Neff 2003a). Doorley and colleagues (2022) suggest that "athletes with higher self-compassion may gravitate toward certain regulatory strategies compared to others, and they may also use these strategies more effectively" (p. 2). In addition to athletes engaging in self-reflection, they also described using proactive coping efforts to navigate instances of pressure and struggle.

At times athletes attempted to manage pressures and struggles proactively through making plans and engaging in coping efforts ahead of time. For example, a month before competing at the venue where she previously sustained a serious injury, Amanda made a plan with the people in her support network. She set communication boundaries with them that would help her manage her emotions both leading up to and during the competition weekend. Similarly, Isabelle also engaged in proactive coping by increasing her training and developing additional sport-specific skills to help avoid being deselected again. Throughout her career, Isabelle also anticipated possible future struggles (e.g., needing to change sports) and made plans for how to manage them. As Neff (2003a) suggests, self-compassionate individuals are motivated to alleviate suffering, both in the present moment as well as in the future. Findings from the present study regarding athletes' proactive coping efforts sound similar to the key theme of "preparation" within Wilson and colleagues' (2019) research (p. 62). Additionally, in a recent study among women athletes high in self-compassion, Sereda and colleagues (2021) also described how participants sought out proactive coping efforts to address unexpected stressors. Given the planning and anticipatory aspects of proactive coping, it may be connected to athletes' abilities to generate solutions for navigating not only their current situations but also future situations. Research from this study provides additional support that self-compassionate individuals may use more proactive coping strategies (Allen & Leary, 2010; Sereda et al., 2021).

The self-compassionate athletes from the present study seemed to navigate pressure and struggle situations with a wide variety of responses and coping efforts that included making challenge appraisals, reframing the situation, being solutions-oriented, focusing on controllable aspects, maintaining perspective, practicing self-reflection, and engaging in proactive coping. As such, findings from this study support the work of previous researchers that self-compassion can

influence multiple stages of the stress-coping process (Doorley et al., 2022; Allen & Leary, 2010; Mosewich, Sabiston, et al., 2019). As suggested by several researchers, athletes high in self-compassion may be able to cope effectively with the situations they encounter because they have the ability to choose the most relevant coping strategy for the context they encounter (Mosewich, Sabiston, et al., 2019; Neff & Tirsch, 2013). Further to this, Reis and colleagues (2015) suggest self-compassion promotes favourable responses as “self-compassion seems to buffer unhealthy tendencies or traits and enhance healthy tendencies or traits” (p. 276). With all of these considerations, it would seem that self-compassion is a useful approach that supports well-being and contributes to favourable responses in sport.

Connections to Sport Self-Compassion Narrative Studies

When considering how this study relates to other sport self-compassion narrative research, participants from the present study paint a slightly different picture for how they responded to difficult sport moments (e.g., pressure and struggle). Unlike previous self-compassion narrative studies (Eke et al., 2020; Sutherland et al., 2014), participants in the present study were purposefully selected because they scored high in self-compassion. Such recruitment procedures were intentionally employed to help promote the possibility that participants could speak to navigating their experiences of pressure and struggle from a self-compassionate perspective.

Another key difference in relation to previous sport self-compassion narrative studies (Eke et al., 2020; Sutherland et al., 2014) is that I intentionally did not prompt participants with the word ‘self-compassion’ nor did I define it for them. Instead, I intentionally invited the self-compassionate athletes within the present study to describe how they navigated instances of pressure and struggle in their own words. Consequently, athletes’ descriptions exemplified

taking a self-compassionate approach without necessarily using the words and definitions for self-compassion seen in the literature (e.g., mindfulness, self-kindness, common humanity). As such, the present study contributes to the literature by adding athlete-generated language around the experiences of self-compassion.

Lastly, in Sutherland and colleagues' (2014) study, where participants were not recruited based on high levels of self-compassion, athletes struggled to accept that failure had happened to them and they felt alone in their suffering. Conversely, in the present study, where athletes were high in self-compassion, Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda accepted that they were struggling, sought out support from others, and intentionally kept coming to practices to maintain connection with their teammates. Additionally, instead of responding to their difficult sport situations with feelings of frustration and self-blame (as seen in Sutherland et al., 2014), Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda acknowledged what portion of the situation was theirs to take responsibility for and what portion was the responsibility of others.

Despite there being differences between the present study and previous self-compassion narrative research studies, there are also some similarities. For example, participants in both the present study and Sutherland and colleagues' (2014) study used perseverance, personal goals, and gratitude to overcome their difficult sport experiences (e.g., struggles, injuries, failures) as well as learn from them (Sutherland et al., 2014). Some similarities between the present study and Eke and colleagues' (2020) study include participants' compassion and acceptance toward their bodies as well as their desire to demonstrate competence or "play to [their] potential" (p. 9). Another noteworthy connection between my study and Eke et al. (2020) includes how others' perceptions of participants' bodies influenced participants' experiences of their own bodies. For example, Isabelle had her body storied by the clothing attendant when she was shopping. This

situation demonstrates how others' perceptions can disrupt how an individual makes meaning of their own body and thus challenges their ability to maintain authorship of their own story.

Connections Between Self-Compassion Related Constructs

Athletes employed a variety of coping efforts such as considering the resources they might have available and continuing to persevere despite setbacks. These findings may share overlap with research on constructs such as hope, grit, mental toughness, and psychological flexibility. Each of these constructs are intentionally included in this discussion because they align with themes previously described in the participants' stories (e.g., maintaining perspective, being solutions oriented, coping adaptively).

Hope

Based on conceptualizations by Snyder and colleagues (1991), "hope is defined as a cognitive set that is based on a reciprocally derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed determination) and (b) pathways (planning of ways to meet goals)" (p. 571). Essentially, hope is based on one's assessment that they can not only set personally relevant goals and believe they can attain them (agency), but that they can also generate appropriate solutions and employ strategies to reach their goals (pathways; Snyder et al., 1991). When athletes have high levels of hope in a given situation, they perceive their goal is attainable, maintain a fairly positive emotional state, and "evaluate their goals and the intervening impediments with more positive, challenge-like appraisals" (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 571). Doorley and colleagues (2022) found that "self-compassion and sport-specific hope predicted greater cognitive reappraisal in response to negative events" (p. 6). Findings from the present study regarding the satisfaction of athletes' basic psychological needs (especially autonomy and competence), as well as them being solutions-oriented when navigating sport struggles, seem to align with the agency and pathways

components of hope respectively. Lastly, athletes' tendencies to appraise situations as challenges further suggests that aspects of self-compassion may be related to hope. According to Booker and Perlin (2021), self-compassion and more specifically aspects of mindfulness, may overlap with hopefulness. An individual's mindfulness in the present moment may facilitate the balanced perspective needed to foster a hopeful outlook (Booker & Perlin, 2021). Additionally, the aspects of hopefulness (and mindfulness) regarding one's awareness of multiple solutions or pathways available for accomplishing personal goals may also prompt an individual to consider the pathways others have used to attain a similar goal (Booker & Perlin, 2021). Consequently, characteristics of hopefulness may also be connected to common humanity (Booker & Perlin, 2021).

Perseverance, Grit, & Mental Toughness

In addition to connections between self-compassion and hope, within the present study the athletes' perseverant and determined responses to their sport struggles also suggests potential connections to grit and mental toughness. Perseverance and determination were present in all three athletes' stories. Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda did not shy away from putting in the hard work necessary to overcome struggles in sport (e.g., deselection, injuries, and poor performances) and develop as people. Similar findings highlighting athletes' perseverance and determination have been reported in several recent sport self-compassion studies (Adam et al., 2021; Sereda et al., 2021, Wilson et al., 2019). Given that self-compassion can foster perseverance towards one's goals (Neff et al., 2007; Neff & McGehee, 2010; Wilson et al., 2019), there may be a connection between self-compassion and grit.

Grit is defined by Duckworth and colleagues (2007) as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (p. 1087). Grit involves one's "consistency of interests" and "perseverance of

effort” when working towards goals over long periods of time (e.g., years) despite experiencing setbacks or failures (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1090). Drawing on research by Duckworth, Mosewich and colleagues (2021) communicate that while individuals with high levels of grit demonstrate perseverance, at times high levels of grit could lead individuals to become rigid in various behaviours or activities when perhaps they would benefit from stopping or altering their course of action (see Cormier et al., 2021 for a review of grit in sport). As such, self-compassion may offset having too much grit (Mosewich et al., 2021). Throughout their careers, Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda maintained their passion and interest for sport as well as persevered through many struggles along the way to reach their goals both in sport and life. Although athletes in this study worked hard to overcome setbacks and keep pursuing their goals, they also demonstrated self-awareness to know when to respect their limitations and ‘ease up.’ As grit and self-compassion are positively correlated with each other, individuals can display high levels of both constructs at the same time (Mosewich et al., 2021). Researchers suggest that when athletes are both gritty and self-compassionate, they are more willing to adapt, better positioned to persevere through challenges, and experience more enjoyment in sport (Cormier et al., 2021; Johnson, 2020).

Similar perspectives regarding how self-compassion might balance out other constructs, such as mental toughness, have also been explored (Wilson et al., 2019). Within the mental toughness literature, Andersen (2011) acknowledges the lack of consensus on the definition of mental toughness, as it has practically become a ‘catch all’ label for nearly any advantageous construct within sport psychology. Nevertheless, mental toughness is still often considered to be highly desirable within current sport culture as it is thought to aid athletes’ ability to handle various sport demands and enhance their performance (Andersen, 2011). Additionally, mental

toughness is likely also valued within sport contexts due to its connection with dominant masculine norms (Reis et al., 2021).

Wilson and colleagues (2019) describe the relationship between mental toughness and self-compassion as a “zipper-effect” in that mental toughness allows athletes to push hard and self-compassion allows them to recover (p. 66). Findings from the present study would suggest that self-compassionate athletes can also approach key competitive situations with self-compassion instead of only employing it within taper or recovery phases as described by Wilson and colleagues (2019). In this manner, self-compassion could contribute to an athlete’s ability to work hard in training and competition, not just aid in their recovery. Additionally, within Wilson and colleagues’ (2019) study, the version of perseverance described by participants was “unrelenting” and included “stubbornness,” whereas the perseverance described by Isabelle, Lauren, and Amanda (who had high self-compassion scores) seemed flexible and open to their needs within a given context. Understandably, self-compassion can afford athletes permission to take moments of reprieve for self-care; however, perhaps self-compassion may offset constructs like grit and mental toughness because it affords individuals with a greater breadth of responses in a given situation. Perhaps self-compassion does not merely ‘soften’ the toughness of these aforementioned constructs, but rather tempers their rigidity, allowing individuals to think and respond to situations in a flexible, adaptive, and context-specific manner.

Psychological Flexibility, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, & Relational Frame Theory

The ways in which self-compassionate athletes responded to instances of pressure and struggle (e.g., redefine or reframe aspects of sport, accept their experiences and limitations, maintain perspective, make favourable appraisals) seem to share similarities with elements of psychological flexibility from ACT. Previous researchers have also acknowledged conceptual

overlap between ACT, psychological flexibility, and self-compassion (Neff & Tirch, 2013; Yadavaia et al., 2014). Psychological flexibility is “the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, and to change or persist in behavior when doing so serves valued ends” (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 7). Furthermore, psychological flexibility is comprised of the following six core components: acceptance, cognitive defusion, being present, self-as-context, values, and committed action (see Hayes et al., 2006 for details). These are core aspects of ACT, which aims to help individuals change their relationships to psychological events through employing various strategies (e.g., mindfulness and acceptance) instead of trying to change the psychological events directly (Teasdale, as cited in Hayes et al., 2006). It should be noted that ACT is underpinned by a theory of cognition and linguistics from contextual behavioural science called Relational Frame Theory (RFT; Hayes et al., 2001; 2006; Neff & Tirch 2013).

Given that ACT has RFT as its underlying theory, and self-compassion and ACT are conceptually connected, could it be proposed that self-compassion might also have links to RFT? Neff and Tirch (2013) suggest that “an RFT account of self-compassion can help us understand how self-compassion functions and how we can develop methods to predict and influence self-compassionate behaviours” (p. 95). Rather than adhering to the dominant views and norms within sport (e.g., performance narratives, rigid thinking), perhaps what allows self-compassionate individuals to respond more adaptively in difficult situations is their ability to think in more diverse ways. As a result, those high in self-compassion may perceive and (re)frame setbacks more positively as well as employ more adaptive coping efforts. Engaging in research efforts that examine self-compassion from an RFT perspective could help further address the numerous calls by researchers in the field to explore the underlying mechanisms of

self-compassion (e.g., how self-compassion works, is developed, and practically applied). Furthermore, it has been noted that “research on self-compassion may benefit from examining ways in which self-compassion is associated with ACT constructs such as acceptance, perspective taking, and psychological flexibility” (Neff & Tirch, 2013, p. 100). In alignment with these recommendations, I also suggest researchers more closely examine the conceptual and theoretical connections between self-compassion, ACT, psychological flexibility, and RFT.

Within Neff and Tirch’s (2013) article, the descriptions of the processes involved in psychological flexibility resemble aspects of storytelling and narrative psychology (e.g., having a “narrative sense of self,” “values authorship,” p. 4). Hayes and colleagues (2006) acknowledge that ACT shares “philosophical roots with constructivism, narrative psychology, dramaturgy, social constructionism” and other approaches (p. 4). Such connections make sense as psychological flexibility and ACT essentially help individuals consider and relate to their experiences in diverse ways, as well as view themselves from multiple perspectives. To aid in accessing one’s observer self or shift their point of view, an individual might even use the phrase, “the story I’m telling myself is.” Additionally, given that RFT is a cognitive linguistic theory for studying human behaviour, its connections to narrative psychology seem inherent. Acknowledging the work of Vilaradaga, Neff and Tirch (2013) state, “the way we think about being a ‘self’ and having a ‘self’ and the way we use verbal functioning to explore the ‘self’ are all dimensions of human experience that can be explored as ongoing verbal, behavioural processes, rather than static constructs” (p. 95). Neff and Tirch (2013) further explain that “diectic relations are the building blocks of how we experience the world, ourselves, and the flow of time” and are often “shaped by ongoing social interactions” (p. 95). Such statements

highlight the importance of the language we use as well as the stories we tell about ourselves, our experiences, and others.

Creating Synergy: Importance of Culture & Context

Given that our perception of experiences, the stories we tell, and our self-compassion development can be shaped by contextual factors such as social interactions and environments, it is important to consider the role of culture within athletes' sport experiences. As described by Crocker and colleagues (2015),

culture typically refers to beliefs and values that shape thinking, behaving, and emoting by a particular group of people. Culture will determine what events are important, the potential consequences and benefits of sporting success and failure, and often constrain the ways to manage specific sporting demands. Thus, culture should impact how athletes from various groups appraise, cope, and adapt to sport-related stress (p. 34).

With this definition in mind, it is easy to see how various cultural norms within a society, sport, or team might constrain the ways in which athletes can respond to various situations. The norms around what is accepted and expected within a team context can influence and even limit how athletes respond to and cope with sport situation (Adam et al., 2021; Crozier et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2019). While we hope that sport culture is beginning to shift, at times the culture around self-criticism and harsh evaluation can hinder athletes' instincts for how they might wish to cope or relate to themselves (Adam et al., 2021). Such self-critical responses are often not only expected but reinforced (Adam et al., 2021). Similarly, negativity within a team environment can affect everyone and be difficult to navigate (Mosewich et al., 2014).

While there are certainly sport environments that constrain athletes' coping efforts and experiences, there are also sport environments that can support adaptive coping and foster self-compassion. Coaches and important others within athletes' lives all play an important role in athletes' development and application of self-compassion (Crozier et al., 2019; Frentz et al.,

2020; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Killham et al., 2018; Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019; Sereda et al., 2021). As seen in a study by Crozier and colleagues (2019), the more an athlete perceived their teammates being self-compassionate, the more that individual also considered themselves to be self-compassionate. Such findings emphasize the influence that other people in an athlete's environment can have on that athlete's sport experiences. The descriptive norms present within a sport environment can dictate what behaviours and responses are accessible, acceptable, and expected (Crozier et al., 2019). When considering such findings about descriptive norms in relation to the present study and Sereda and colleagues' (2021) study, perhaps part of why self-compassionate athletes have been able to employ a wide range of coping efforts to manage their struggles and stressors could be attributed to acceptance or even encouragement of diverse coping efforts within their team environments. In this way, coaches likely play a key role in expanding what kinds of coping efforts and behaviours are not only accessible but also acceptable within their team's sport context (Crozier et al., 2019). Instead of encouraging athletes to engage in social comparison and self-criticism, perhaps coaches could support athletes in setting self-referenced goals and developing a self-compassionate approach within sport.

Self-Compassion & What it Means to be “Adaptive”

Within the field of sport psychology, we as researchers tend to avoid making claims that various approaches, mental skills, or constructs are “good” or “beneficial.” Perhaps we do this to avoid sounding declarative when communicating our results, or because we cannot really know for sure (in all instances) that an approach is perceived by participants as helpful. Instead of concluding that an approach (e.g., self-compassion) promotes or is associated with beneficial outcomes, we may say the approach is associated with “adaptive” outcomes, but what are we really communicating when we state this? While I appreciate our cautiousness to make claims,

our use of the word “adaptive” in such instances has unintentional effects that can obscure the research landscape. Upon first glance, such conventions may seem innocuous or normal; however, using the word “adaptive” in place of “good,” “helpful,” or “favourable” in our research can create confusion, specifically when considering connections to the stress and coping literature. In addition to our hesitancy in using the aforementioned words, perhaps additional confusion has come from the conflation of “maladaptive” with words such as “bad” or “harmful.” If we have allowed “maladaptive” to become synonymous with “bad,” and “maladaptive” is the opposite of “adaptive,” then we have now conflated “adaptive” with “good.” This however is problematic because by definition, adaptive means “able to adjust to new situations or surroundings” (Oxford University Press, 2021, para. 3a). Similarly, adaptable is defined as “capable of being modified, altered, or amended” (Oxford university Press, 2021, para 1). Drawing attention to our use of the word adaptive within the field is intended to be a “call in” that reminds us to carefully consider the language we use. How we describe constructs and communicate our findings has implications not only within our respective research fields, but also within the sport communities we work among.

When considering how the definitions of *adaptive* and *adaptable* pertain to the present study, the self-compassionate women athletes described tailoring, adjusting, and modifying their coping efforts depending on the situations they experienced. In some instances, athletes sought out social support from teammates, reframed their perception of the situation, or increased their effort to overcome the setback, while in other instances they acknowledged their body’s limits and withdrew from participating in practice or competition. Though the latter coping efforts may appear less active and from an observer’s perspective or seem to suggest behavioural disengagement, in these instances participants were still providing themselves with the support

they needed. Athletes' abilities to adapt their coping responses based on what is needed in the moment to manage the stressor may help account for some of the mixed findings regarding self-compassion and athletes use of various coping efforts (Mosewich, Sabiston, et al., 2019). Furthermore, the fit between what athletes need in the moment and what they provide for themselves suggests positive connections between self-compassion and coping effectiveness.

Limitations

While this study makes valuable contributions to the field, it is important to acknowledge its limitations as well. First, the number of participants recruited for this study is relatively small. While other qualitative studies may recruit more participants, having a fewer number of participants is appropriate for narrative approaches (Smith, 2018; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Narrative inquiry allows researchers to explore the detailed and nuanced ways in which individual's make meaning and tell their stories (Riessman, 2008). As such, it is important to acknowledge that these athletes' experiences are not meant to represent the experiences of all self-compassionate women athletes. The participants' narrative accounts offer insight into *a way* that self-compassionate women athletes may story their experiences of navigating pressure and struggle within sport. The sharing of their stories allows for the presence of new narrative scripts or resources within the sport environment that may support other athletes in storying their lives in meaningful ways, especially when their experiences no longer align with narratives of performance (Smith, 2018). While it is important to acknowledge the findings from this study only portray the experiences of a few athletes, there are other limitations that should be considered.

Second, given that athletes were reflecting on previous experiences throughout their sport careers, it is possible that they were not able to fully (or accurately) recall the complexities of the

coping processes they employed when navigating instances of pressure and struggle (Nicholls & Ntoumanis, 2010). Such limitations need to be considered when employing retrospective interviews (Nicholls & Ntoumanis, 2010; Sereda et al., 2021). As suggested by Sereda and colleagues (2021), perhaps future research could employ the use of participant journals or diaries to help athletes retain the details of their experiences. Retrospective study designs may have their limitations regarding the potential accuracy of events; however, they allow for athletes to process and make sense of their experiences. Exploring individuals' meaning-making processes and subjective experiences are central to narrative inquiry approaches (Douglas & Carless, 2009; Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). While prompting athletes to tell stories about their experiences in the moment may help retain details of the situation, this could be difficult and does not align with the life story approach utilized within this narrative study.

In addition to the potential limitations of memory decay from holding retrospective interviews, it is also possible that athletes' abilities to navigate instances of pressure and struggle could be attributed to factors other than self-compassion. Similar to limitations noted in previous qualitative self-compassion research (Sereda et al., 2021), it is possible that additional underlying factors, characteristics, or constructs (e.g., hope, psychological flexibility) also supported athletes in managing sport difficulties in favourable ways. In the present study, only athletes' self-compassion scores were known; however, given the likely overlap between self-compassion and other constructs, it is possible that other factors or attributes could have also accounted for athletes' beneficial and adaptive responses. With these considerations in mind, future researchers could administer multiple scales to participants in an effort to explore the relative overlap between various constructs (e.g., self-compassion, hope, psychological flexibility, etc.), or to at least enhance our awareness of what factors might contribute to athletes' coping responses.

Lastly, the participants from this study seemed to be from a relatively homogenous group. In the future, I hope that scholars expand upon this study by carrying out research that includes the narratives and experiences of individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds and identities. Such work is needed within the field of sport psychology and self-compassion to facilitate representation of diverse experiences and ways of knowing.

Strengths

A key strength of the present study was utilizing purposeful sampling to recruit athletes high in self-compassion. This recruitment approach supported methodological coherence as it helped us answer the research questions of how athletes high in self-compassion story their journeys through sport, as well as how they navigate instances of pressure and struggle. Additionally, recruiting self-compassionate athletes helped enhance the credibility of this research, as these athletes were better positioned to speak to how self-compassion may be used in sport, compared to studies where no self-compassion criteria has been used for recruitment. Athletes in the present study had self-compassion scores ranging from 3.96 to 4.04 ($M = 3.99$), which is considered high and is comparable to participants' self-compassion scores in previous research studies (Ingstrup et al., 2017; Sereda et al., 2021). Recruiting athletes high in self-compassion to hear about their experiences addresses calls by researchers and adds to the literature by providing insight into how self-compassionate perspectives and approaches are actively used within sport to navigate difficult situations (e.g., pressure/struggle; Frentz et al., 2020; Sereda et al., 2021).

As many researchers have called for the development of more athlete-centered language for self-compassion that better resonates with athletes (Adam et al., 2021; Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019; Reis et al 2021), a key strength of this study was that participants were not prompted

with self-compassion language. Unlike approaches used in previous studies where self-compassion is defined and taught to participants by researchers during the interview process (Eke et al, 2020; Reis et al., 2015, Sutherland et al, 2014), within the present study neither “self-compassion” nor its definition were provided to participants. Such efforts were done intentionally to aid in fostering athlete-generated language for how they navigated instances of pressure and struggle. By asking participants to describe how they managed difficult sport moments, I created the opportunity for them to speak to practical applications of self-compassion and do so in their own words. It should be noted that self-compassion was eventually discussed with participants after their interviews during the debriefing process.

Another strength of this study included athletes’ reflections on their lived experiences of pressure and struggle throughout their sport journeys. Instead of exploring their reactions to hypothetical sport failures or mistakes, as seen in previous studies (Ferguson et al., 2015; Reis et al., 2015; Reis et. al 2019), participants reflected on specific situations that they experienced. This approach not only facilitated athletes’ descriptions of their accounts that were detailed and rich but also personally meaningful. Through athletes’ describing their lived experiences of managing pressure and struggle, we were able to learn about the narrative resources, personal values, and coping efforts that were a part of their experiences. Hearing stories about athletes’ lived experiences is also methodologically coherent with narrative inquiry. Furthermore, developmental or narrative approaches to exploring athletes’ journeys through sport and navigation of setbacks (e.g., pressure and struggle) also allows for researchers to gain a sense of potential patterning and trajectories of athletes’ experiences (Booker & Perlin, 2021; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). While this may not quite answer researchers’ calls for longitudinal approaches to

studying self-compassion among athletes (Killham et al., 2018), it still helps provide some insight into their experiences over time.

While hearing about athletes' journeys through sport was a key aspect of this study, another strength of this study was having meaningful engagement with participants. In addition to the loosely structured interviews, which allowed participants to lead our conversations, participants could further co-construct their narrative accounts during the member reflection process. Too often researcher's employ member reflection as merely a protocol that needs to be checked off their research 'to do' list. While such efforts are supposed to help contribute to a study's rigor, often researchers fail to fully invest in the process of reengaging with their participants (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Acknowledging the importance of member reflection and my responsibility to help make it a meaningful process, I intentionally offered multiple opportunities for participants to provide feedback. Most notably, during the process of writing up participant narrative accounts I invited their collaboration through offering an informal optional third interview to discuss any changes. I put intentional thought into this process and, prior to sending their documents, purposefully crafted their accounts in a way that fostered engagement (e.g., leaving comment bubbles, blank spaces). Given the relational nature of this narrative study and our time spent together, I felt having an opportunity to talk through any changes to the document in real time, would be more meaningful for both the participants and me. Offering athletes the option of sharing their feedback within a conversational setting not only felt appropriate from a relational ethics perspective, but was also methodologically coherent.

Within the feedback I received (both spoken and written), participants shared that I had listened well to them, that they felt "very understood," that "it was really cool to see [their] whole sport journey written out all in one place," and that the account "tells the story very well."

One participant even expressed that sharing her story and being able to read it back to herself was a “healing” experience for her. Such feedback draws on what Smith & Sparkes (2011) describe as a “solace story” which “claims that to help move out of chaos the individual might need to tell their story, and vitally, have it listened to by friends, family, carers...” and that part of the role as a listener is to “actively to enter into [the speaker]’s world, empathize and know what [they are] going through” (p. 43). I am thankful to have had the opportunity to provide this kind of listening support for this participant. Taken together, these messages of feedback from participants speak to the depth of which they openly shared their life experiences with me, as well as the quality of rapport we developed to create a comfortable environment in which their stories could be shared and witnessed. Additionally, all of the considerations made to meaningfully engage with participants throughout the member reflection process not only contribute to the strength and rigor of this study, but also provide researchers with new ideas for how to thoughtfully engage participants and make the most of the member reflection experience.

Lastly, from a methodological perspective, another strength of this study included the use of both thematic and structural narrative analyses. As Smith and Sparkes (2009a) suggest, attending to both what participants say and how they tell their stories can be done “in tandem” and these approaches “complement each other” (p. 287). Carrying out a structural narrative analysis allowed for an overarching or broad scaffold of participants’ journey through sport to be built. This analysis was necessary as it provided the context within which participants discussed the details of their personal experiences. The detailed stories of how athletes navigated specific sport situations (of pressure and struggle) helped fill-in the scaffolded structure and provided rich, thick description that was then further analyzed during the thematic analysis. Smith and Sparkes (2009a) note the dangers of missing either possible messages or key content within

individuals' stories when only one form of analysis is employed. Therefore, care was taken to protect against such limitations by including two forms of analysis that allowed for both the trajectory as well as the content of athletes' stories to be studied. Additionally, employing both analyses helped to provide a more detailed account of self-compassionate athletes' experiences in sport, which will meaningfully contribute to current literature within the field.

Future Directions

While findings from the present study add to existing sport self-compassion literature in meaningful ways, there are still more research avenues to explore. First, given the presence and relative importance of relatedness, competence, and autonomy in all athletes' journeys through sport, future research could explore what role the satisfaction of athletes' basic psychological needs may play in their development of self-compassion. In addition to researching how basic psychological needs may be related to self-compassion development and application, researchers could explore whether leadership opportunities help foster self-compassion development.

Interestingly, all three athletes had leadership opportunities throughout their sport careers. Individuals in leadership roles (e.g., captains) have both their teammates and coaches observing them on a relatively regular basis. Being a leader may even prompt an individual to view themselves from a different perspective (e.g., observer-self; Neff & Tirsch, 2013) and consider how others might be perceiving them. Given the importance of perspective taking and the observer-self to psychological flexibility and self-compassion (Neff & Tirsch, 2013), perhaps leadership opportunities may help athletes to develop the ability to perspective take. The leadership experiences afforded to athletes within the present study may have contributed to their perspective-taking skills, which could have further supported their development of mindfulness or a balanced perspective. Future research could explore the possible associations between

leadership and self-compassion, more specifically the potential role that leadership opportunities might play in cultivating mindfulness or perspective taking.

In addition to exploring the potential role of leadership in supporting athletes' abilities to perspective take, future researchers may wish to examine the potential connections between self-compassion and other constructs within the field. Further qualitative and quantitative research aimed at exploring the conceptual overlap between self-compassion, psychological flexibility, ACT, and emotional agility may help provide insight into the underlying mechanisms that enable these constructs to promote such advantageous responses within athletes. Specifically, research that explores self-compassion from an RFT perspective could add to the literature (Neff & Tirsch, 2013). These research efforts may provide the field with a greater understanding of how and why self-compassion 'works' to support the well-being of individuals, as well as provide further theoretical foundation and rationale for self-compassion.

Lastly, given that much of the current literature on self-compassion explores the experiences of women, future research would benefit from exploring men's experiences of self-compassion within sport (Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019; Reis et al., 2021). Based on research by Reis and colleagues (2021), self-compassion appears to be a viable construct to explore among men athletes, as they viewed self-compassion as a resource that could help them improve in their sport. In addition to the pressure that athletes feel to conform to the performance narrative, men athletes also experience significant pressure to conform to traditional hegemonic masculinity norms, and failure to meet such standards can bring about difficulties and challenges (Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019; Reis et al., 2019). Men athletes' outward expressions of masculinity might be related to what is considered appropriate in a given context, further demonstrating how culture may constrain various ways of being (Reis et al., 2019). Given the

cultural norms around masculinity that permeate sport culture, narrative inquiry could be a promising avenue through which to explore how men athletes experience self-compassion and navigate various versions of masculinity (Reis et al., 2019). Narrative inquiry approaches can allow for the exploration of how cultural contexts and narrative resources shape individuals' stories and ways of making meaning.

Furthermore, carrying out narrative research among men athletes high in self-compassion (in a similar manner to this study) would provide an opportunity to learn more about how they cope with setbacks and also explore whether they story their journeys through sport in ways that deviate from the performance narrative (e.g., suggesting a counter-story). Given that self-compassion was positively related to inclusive masculinity and negatively related to hegemonic masculinity (Reis et al., 2019), perhaps self-compassion can promote more flexible ways of thinking among men athletes. In alignment with the work by Crozier and colleagues (2019) regarding one's perceptions of their teammates' self-compassion, athletes in Reis and colleagues' (2021) study mentioned that observing teammates acting in self-compassionate ways "increased their respective ability to take a self-compassionate approach to difficult experiences in sport" (p. 19). As such, some environments may restrict the ways in which athletes experience sport and make meaning, whereas others can support more flexible ways of thinking and behaving.

Conclusion

The present study provides qualitative support that women athletes with high levels of self-compassion seem to display autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ferguson et al., 2015; Ferguson et al., 2022). Furthermore, through employing a narrative approach to researching the stories and experiences of athletes high in self-compassion, this study adds to the literature by advancing our understanding of the possible mechanisms involved

in self-compassionate approaches (Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2013; Mosewich et al., 2011; Sereda et al., 2021), as well as how and when athletes demonstrate self-compassion within sport (Adam et al., 2021; Frentz et al., 2020). Self-compassionate athletes in the present study described their experiences of navigating sport challenges in different ways than participants have in previous studies where self-compassion scores were not used for recruitment criteria (Adam et al., 2021; Eke et al., 2020; Sutherland et al., 2014). Moreover, future researchers exploring how self-compassion is practically applied within sport contexts may benefit from using a similar recruitment approach to the one used in the present study and several others (Ingstrup et al., 2017; Sereda et al., 2021).

Overall, findings from the present study add to current literature by providing initial indications as to how coaches may support athletes' use and development of self-compassion (Ferguson et al., 2022; Killham et al., 2018; Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019). Coaches can help create environments and relationships within which athletes' basic psychological needs are met. Additionally, coaches can facilitate the adoption of team norms that support self-compassionate perspectives and responses. Furthermore, coaches and other individuals within an athlete's support network can help them reframe various aspects of sport (e.g., pressure, struggle, success) in ways that allow athletes to maintain perspective. In doing so, coaches and supportive others can provide respite from the dominant narrative of performance within sport and help athletes story their lives and experiences in more personally meaningful ways. If an athlete's environment (e.g., team culture, norms) allows them to respond to their experiences in broader, more flexible ways, this could potentially facilitate athletes' abilities to cope more adaptively.

In addition to the sport environment, the language surrounding self-compassion is also important to consider. Many researchers have noted how the language of self-compassion may

be difficult for athletes to ‘buy-in’ to (Adam et al., 2021; Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019); however, if self-compassion is positioned as an approach that affords greater flexibility of thought and behavioural response, perhaps more people within sport environments would find it desirable. Instead of only describing self-compassion as ‘soft’ and ‘supportive,’ it might also be conceptualized as ‘flexible’ or ‘adaptive’ (malleable, capable of change). Positioning self-compassion in this manner helps us move away from possible misconceptions that conflate gendered descriptors with constructs such as self-compassion.

Another key contribution of this research study included emphasis on participants’ language. Athlete-oriented descriptions of self-compassion help address Adam and colleagues’ (2021) call for “mirroring athletes’ language” (p. 276). Findings from the present study add to the literature by providing practical examples of self-compassionate responses from athletes high in self-compassion who were unprompted by research(er) definitions of self-compassion. Using descriptions from self-compassionate athletes within this study, self-compassion could be positioned as an approach for expanding the possible ways in which individuals relate to themselves during tough times. For example, mindfulness may be described as a balanced and realistic perspective or simply as maintaining perspective. Self-kindness could be positioned as giving oneself what is needed during moments of struggle, and common humanity could be described as an individual’s awareness of their connectedness to others during times of struggle or suffering. As such these findings contribute to the literature by exploring athlete-generated language for self-compassion that may help inform future applied efforts.

Closing Remarks

When we go through seasons of life where we come undone or feel as if we are falling apart, it can shake us to our core. In these moments, we are often forced to look deeply at

ourselves, our values, and our purpose. These moments of coming undone are part of the shared experience of being human, quite literally put, our common humanity. If we are really being honest, we all have our own struggles, weaknesses, and imperfections. Our willingness to openly acknowledge our own shortcomings helps create an environment where others feel encouraged to do the same. One person's struggle story may be the key that unlocks another person's hope. Those moments that "break us," that make us step back and ask, "who am I?" those are the moments that refine and redefine us. The moments when we meet our struggles with curiosity, acceptance, and compassion have the power to transform our deepest sorrows into newfound strength and resilience (see Appendix K for a final reflexivity piece). When embraced and acknowledged, these defining moments allow us to grow and become who we were meant to be. In order to be built up, sometimes we need to come undone first.

Figures

Figure 2. Example of a Participant Timeline With Identifiable Details Removed

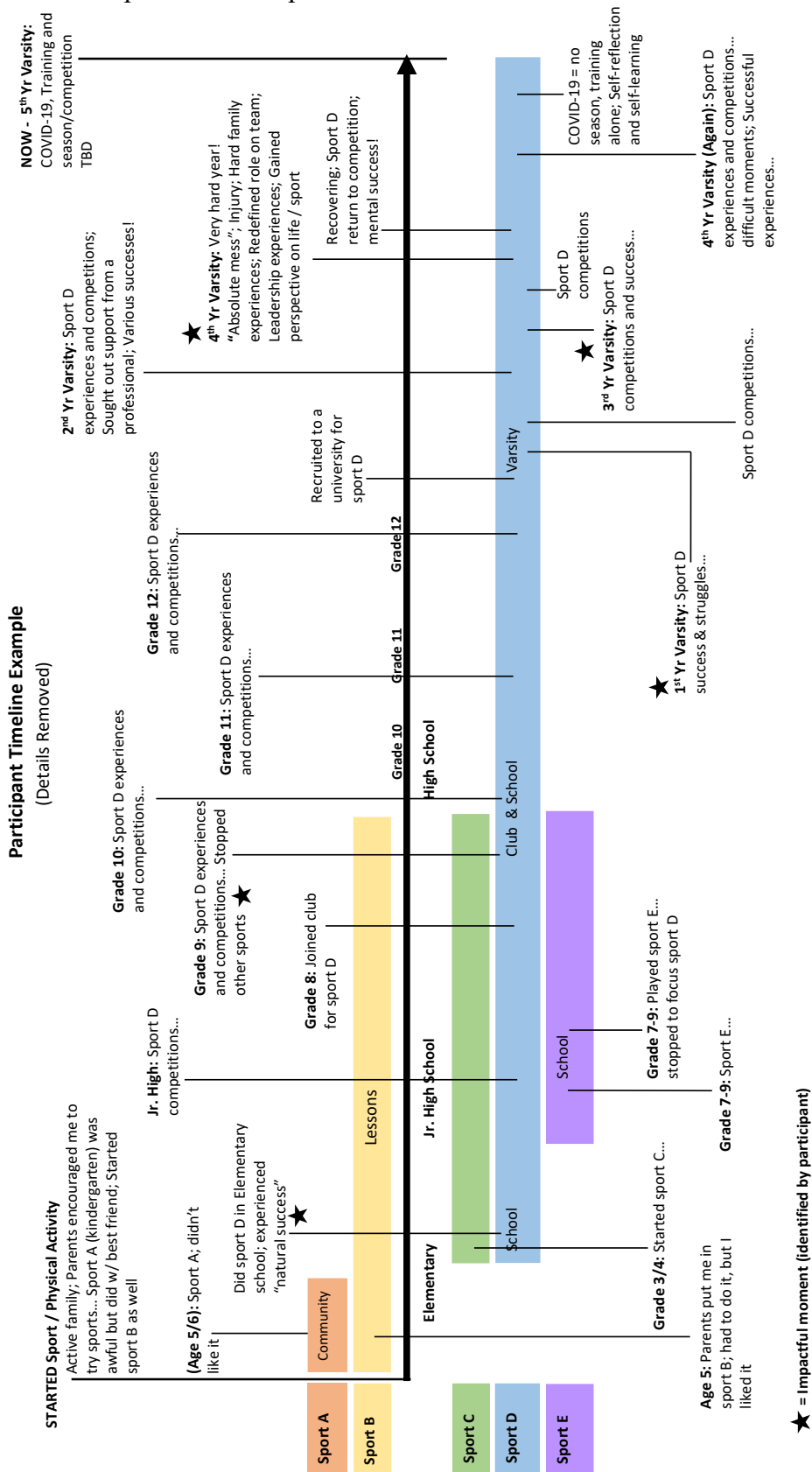


Figure 3. Photo of a Visual Mapping Strategy Used During Data Analysis



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Appendices

Appendix A – Ethics Approval Letter

Notification of Approval

Date:	June 1, 2020						
Study ID:	Pro00100720						
Principal Investigator:	Danae Frentz						
Study Supervisor:	Amber Mosewich						
Study Title:	Journeying through sport: Athlete narratives of navigating pressure and struggle in sport						
Approval Expiry Date:	Monday, May 31, 2021						
Approved Consent Form:	<table> <tr> <td>Approval Date</td> <td>Approved Document</td> </tr> <tr> <td>6/1/2020</td> <td>Informed Consent Document - Version 4.docx</td> </tr> <tr> <td>6/1/2020</td> <td>Participant Information Sheet - Version 3.docx</td> </tr> </table>	Approval Date	Approved Document	6/1/2020	Informed Consent Document - Version 4.docx	6/1/2020	Participant Information Sheet - Version 3.docx
Approval Date	Approved Document						
6/1/2020	Informed Consent Document - Version 4.docx						
6/1/2020	Participant Information Sheet - Version 3.docx						
Sponsor/Funding Agency:	SSHRC - Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council SSHRC						

Thank you for submitting the above study to the Research Ethics Board 1. Your application has been reviewed and approved on behalf of the committee.

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

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

Approval by the Research Ethics Board does not encompass authorization to recruit and/or interact with human participants at this time. Researchers still require operational approval (e.g. AHS) and must meet the requirements imposed by the public health emergency ([Alberta COVID page](#)).

Sincerely,

Anne Walley
 REB Specialist,
on behalf of Anne Malena, PhD.
 Chair, Research Ethics Board 1

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

Appendix B – Reflexivity Piece #1: Pilot & Interview Process (Analytical Journal)

I knew that taking on a narrative inquiry project at the Master's level would be ambitious and that it would come with its own host of challenges or, at the least, things to consider. Then, adding a global pandemic to the mix also brought about additional considerations to take into account. Originally I planned to hold interviews in person in a location of the participants choice; however, due to government mandated physical distancing, I had to pivot and facilitate interviews online via Zoom. During the pilot interview process I had the opportunity to interview four athletes at two time points (i.e., 8 interviews total), and what quickly became clear is that holding interviews online via zoom is much different than holding them in person. This change forced me to consider many things, from learning how to use the platform and its features to figuring out how to navigate challenges with eye contact, limited body language, and connectivity issues.

First and foremost, the use of eye contact is completely different when using a computer camera to hold a video call than when talking to someone in person. It is natural to look at the screen instead of the camera when engaging in video calls; however, this often leads to the appearance that one's gaze is directed downward. To rectify this, one may choose to look into the camera lens instead of at the screen. An issue with this solution (i.e., looking at the camera instead of the screen) is that it becomes difficult to see participants' facial expressions as well as body language. Additionally, a lot of important body language and communication undoubtedly gets missed, given the limited viewing window available during video calls. While correctly reading body language can be challenging, at times even just seeing body language was difficult during video calls. Although such non-verbal communication is not necessarily essential data that gets coded and analyzed, its utility for gauging participant comfortability and conversational flow cannot be understated.

During interviews, the flow of conversation was impacted by various technology and connectivity issues. As expected, poor internet connection can pose challenges such as video/audio glitches, extended lag times, or even calls being dropped. Thankfully I was able to troubleshoot such situations during the pilot process and determine the appropriate actions to take moving forward. Of these issues, the most challenging one to navigate was surprisingly lag time in conversation. As an interviewer, the use of pauses and minimal encouragers (e.g., mhmm, okay, yeah) need to be timed well in order to have the desired effect of keeping participants engaged and letting them know that you are tracking with them. The introduction of a lag time into the conversation at times made interactions feel disjointed and interrupted the natural flow of dialogue. A possible solution is to mute your side as the interviewer so that your comments are not ill-timed; however, the unanticipated impact of this may be that participants feel they are just talking to themselves (in a monologue) or that you are not engaged in what they are sharing. Rather than mute my mic, I often elected to engage in more non-verbal minimal

encouragers (e.g., head nods or mouthing words) to navigate this challenge within conversation. I would still speak when appropriate; however, I was more aware of the need to allow for longer pauses. At first this modification felt really unnatural, but I quickly realized it was a necessary change to help account for possible connection issues or timing lags.

While accommodating for technology glitches and adjusting how I facilitated the interview both required careful thought as well as intentionality, so too did the process of developing rapport. It can be challenging to build rapport through only seeing somebody on a screen. Not even the most advanced video call technology can quite replicate or replace the feeling of being in another's presence. As the second interview covered more sensitive topics (e.g., struggle and pressure), developing trust and rapport with participants from the outset of the project was essential. Although holding online interviews posed multiple challenges, a potential benefit was that participants had the opportunity to engage in interviews from the safety and comfort of their own home. It is possible this setup may have supported athletes feeling more at ease and willing to share.

Overall, having the opportunity to hold eight pilot interviews helped me gain comfortability conducting online interviews as well as narrative interviews. Facilitating narrative interviews requires a slightly different skill set, as there are likely fewer interchanges in conversation than what may be experienced in a typical semi-structured interview. Narrative interviews also tend to follow a more loosely structured format which requires that interviewers allow participants to "steer" the conversation. As such, interviewers tend to engage in less speaking and more intentional listening. At times interviewers may even need to refrain from asking questions that come to mind, so as not to disrupt a participant's meaning making or storytelling process. Essentially, the participant "drives" the conversation and you as the interviewer are in the passenger's seat - along for the ride. As the participant takes you on a road trip, they tell you about and even point out important moments, people, and places along the way. Researchers coming from a more structured interview background may find such experiences uncomfortable, as facilitating narrative interviews requires that they give up a sense of control and give themselves over to the process. At times the process of undertaking narrative interviews seems paradoxical. While the preparations beforehand require potentially more practice and thoughtful engagement, actually during the interview it may seem as if you are doing less because you are not speaking as much. Having said this, I think that listening to understand instead of listening to speak requires more conscious effort. "Holding one's tongue" and actively listening to participants are challenging skills, but both are necessary for facilitating narrative interviews. Without developing such skills, this can lead to a researcher's overinvolvement in directing the flow of conversation in the interview. Continuing on with the car metaphor, this overinvolvement could be similar to "backseat driving" (e.g., directing the driver on where to go, though not personally in the drivers' seat, in an attempt to control the car). Similar to backseat driving carrying a negative connotation, I think overinvolvement from a researcher in the

narrative interview process can also be unhelpful at times. If the researcher is dictating the flow of conversation, how can you actually tell what moments, people, or places are important to the participant? Can you even properly analyze the structure of how a participant told their story if the researcher is the one directing it? In my mind this would be like asking the participant to drive the car but already typing coordinates into the GPS or selecting the route to take. Sure, the participant is driving, but it is not their road trip. All this to say, in order to facilitate interviews that take a narrative approach, researchers may need to employ a slightly different skill set as well as consider the implications that their comments and questions may have on the overall story being co-constructed.

Appendix C – Time 1 Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you again for taking the time to share some of your sport experiences with me today. In order to ensure I can properly integrate all of the information that participants provide, I aim to type up each interview word for word. In order to do this, we usually audio record each session. Are you okay with that? [*pause for response; answer any questions*]

As a reminder, you are free to stop the interview at any point, and you do not need to answer any questions that you do not want to. Please do not feel any pressure to continue the interview if you do not want to.

Before we begin, do you have any final questions about the information sheet that we went over? [*pause for response; answer any questions*]

I am interested in exploring athletes' journeys in sport over the course of their careers (or up until now). I realize this topic may sound quite broad or open-ended – this is intentional! I want to hear your story of your journey through sport and the various situations you've encountered and navigated. As a competitive athlete, you are the expert of your sport experiences and I am interested in hearing about your thoughts, feelings, and perspectives. I realize that at times it may feel awkward or uncomfortable to just keep talking about yourself and your experiences. Please know that these feelings of awkwardness are natural (us humans are used to conversations being a two-way street). Remember, this interview is less of a conversation and more of an opportunity for you to tell the story of your sport journey. I'm hoping you can include as much detail as possible. With this in mind, "storytelling typically involves the longer turn at talk than is customary" (p. 7) and may at times feel a bit uncomfortable (Reissman, 2008). Rest assured, I want to hear about you and your sport journey. To begin, I'd like to start by asking you some more broad or warm-up questions about your background in physical activity and just life in general.

Personal Warm-up

I realize that some of these questions may overlap with the demographic sheet, but I will be interviewing you a few times and getting to know you over the course of the next few months. All this to say, these warm-up questions might help provide a bit more context for your experiences.

- Please tell me a little bit about your life now and what keeps you busy?
 - School? Work? Family or home life? Relationships?
- Where is 'home' for you?

Interview Questions

1. Could you please tell me about your background regarding how you first got started in physical activity and sport?
2. Please tell me about your journey through sport and how it's brought you to where you are now in your career. (I want to encourage you to be as detailed as you can in your response, as the bulk of our time together will be spent here. Feel free to take pauses as you collect your thoughts or go back and add detail to previous things you talk about. There is lots of flexibility here)
3. What are several impactful moments along your journey?

Possible prompts:

- What makes this moment so significant?
- Please elaborate more on the details of this experience
- Can you tell me more about the details of this event/moment?

Wrap Up

Thank you again for your time. I really appreciate this opportunity of meeting with you and hearing about your sport journey and experiences. I also want to take a few moments to give you an idea of what our next steps will look like moving forward. Based on what you've discussed in this interview, I will create a chronological timeline of your sport journey. In about a week I will send this document to you and you will have the opportunity to add, modify, or delete anything as you see fit. Additionally, in preparation for the second interview, I would like it if you could begin reflecting on 3-5 instances where you've navigated struggle or pressure during your sport career (these could be situations you've already briefly mentioned in the first interview). In the second interview, we will be focusing in on these 3-5 specific pressure or struggle situations in great detail. If you have objects or pictures that would help you describe these situations (or the emotions you experienced), please feel free to have those present during the second interview. If you have any questions between now and then, please don't hesitate to contact me by email (frentz@ualberta.ca). Thanks again and take care!

Appendix D – Time 2 Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you again for taking the time to share some of your sport experiences with me today. As with the last interview, in order to ensure I can properly integrate all of the information that participants provide, I aim to type up each interview word for word. In order to do this, we usually audio record each session. Are you okay with that? [*pause for response; answer any questions*]

As a reminder, you are free to stop the interview at any point, and you do not need to answer any questions that you do not want to. Please do not feel any pressure to continue the interview if you do not want to. I also want to remind you that at the end of this second interview we will have a short debrief session. If you would like, we can take a short break between the interview and the debrief portion. The debrief will be really casual and basically just give us an opportunity to discuss the study further and allow you to ask any questions.

Before we begin, do you have any final questions about the information sheet that we went over? [*pause for response; answer any questions*]

As a reminder, I am interested in exploring athletes' journeys in sport over the course of their careers (or up until now). The first interview explored your sport journey (from start until now), and this second interview is more specifically aimed at exploring how you have navigated instances of struggle or pressure. I want to remind you that you are the expert of your sport experiences and I am interested in hearing about your personal thoughts, feelings, and perspectives. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers so please share freely and in a way that feels authentic to you. Again, I realize that at times it may feel awkward or uncomfortable to just keep talking about yourself and your experiences. These feelings of awkwardness are natural (us humans are used to conversations being a two-way street), and please know that I want to hear about your experiences – in as great of detail as you wish to share with me.

1. Before we begin, could you please tell me how would you define or describe pressure?
2. How would you define or describe struggle?

As you've had time to reflect on your journey, can you please tell me about the 3-5 experiences of navigating pressures or struggles that you would like to discuss?

3. To start, perhaps we can list the ones you have come prepared to talk about.

1. a) I'll let you lead the way in each of your stories. If you have brought any photos, objects, or songs feel free to use them to help you describe the situation and please try to be as detailed as you can as you share your experiences.

Prompts / Follow-ups:

- What happened?
- What makes this an important point in your story/journey?
- Can you provide more context?

Additional thoughts / questions / prompts:

Content Prompts:

- Can you please elaborate a bit more on the context?
- What happened?
- Please elaborate more on the details of this struggle / pressure experience

Thoughts / Emotion Prompts:

- What kinds of thoughts were you thinking during that time / in that struggle?
- What kinds of things were going through your head during that time?
- What kind of emotions did you feel or experience?
- What feelings or emotions were you experiencing?

Significance Prompts:

- Please tell me why that particular moment stands out
- What makes this moment so significant?
- How is this struggle / pressure experience significant to you and your journey?
- Why is this event an important point in your "story" or "journey"?
- Please describe how this struggle / pressure is significant or meaningful to your experience

Wrap Up

Thank you again for your time and for sharing such personal aspects of your sport journey with me. I really appreciate having this opportunity to meet with you again. I want to take a few moments to give you an idea of what our next steps will look like. Now that this interview is done, I will type out what we've discussed. In a few weeks I will send you a copy of your compiled sport story in written form. When you receive the document, you will have the opportunity to add, modify, or delete anything as you see fit. I want to ensure that you feel the document represents you and your story in a manner you feel is authentic, so please make whatever changes you need to (please mark changes in a different font colour). If you have any questions between now and then, please don't hesitate to contact me by email

(frentz@ualberta.ca). Now we will have the opportunity to take a short break, if you would like. Feel free to grab a snack, drink, stretch, use the washroom – whatever you need to do. How much time would you like to have before we meet-up again for a short debrief session?

Appendix E – Debriefing Script

Introduction

Thank you again for taking the time to share some of your sport experiences with me today, and over the course of the whole research process. I really appreciated hearing about your sport journey and want to assure you that the insights and depth of experience that you provided were exactly what I was hoping for. So, thanks again!

I want to debrief this study a little bit further with you. Yes, we are interested in the experiences as varsity athletes, but further to this we are especially interested in **your** experiences based on your scores from previous research. You have scored high in a positive and adaptive psychological approach called self-compassion. I realize the word may sound a bit fluffy, but self-compassion involves taking a more positive, understanding, and caring approach (instead of being harshly self-critical) especially when dealing with setbacks or struggles.

We are really interested in finding out more about how athletes high in self-compassion experience sport and navigate various pressures and challenges and this is why we wanted to talk to you specifically. Not much research has looked at the experiences of athletes who are high in self-compassion, so this is why learning from your experiences, insights, and stories are so valuable.

I would have told you more of this information from the beginning, but I did not want to “prime” you or put words in your mouth. We as researchers are trying to figure out how to best adapt our descriptions of self-compassion for use among athletes, which is why I wanted to hear how you described your experiences, in your own words, without my prompting or word choice. Because we are trying to tailor our work to people in sport, it was important for me to hear what words and descriptions resonate with your experiences. Having the opportunity to speak with you and gain insight from your experiences (as someone high in self-compassion) provides us with valuable information that complements current self-compassion intervention efforts and can offer a new angle through which to talk about it and promote this adaptive approach with other athletes.

Would you like to ask any questions about this? Is there anything that you would like me to clarify?

Now that you know more information about the purpose of this research study, I would like to inform you that you are still free to withdraw your consent from the study now or up to four weeks from now. Withdrawing can be done without any repercussions, and you can request to withdraw from the study through verbal or email communication.

Thank you again for your time and for sharing your experiences with me. Please feel free to reach out at any time if you have any questions or concerns. After I have compiled your sport narrative, or story, I will email you a written version of it. You will then have the opportunity to add, modify, or delete anything that you would like.

How does this sound? Any other comments, questions, or concerns?
Once again, thank you for sharing your story with me!

Appendix F – Time 3 Member Reflection Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me today. This meeting will be different from the other two interviews as this is honestly more of a discussion. I want to hear your thoughts on the athlete narrative account that I sent to you, as well as if there are any parts that you would like to have changed. This meeting will not be transcribed, but I would still like to record it just so that I do not miss any of the feedback or changes you would like to have made. In order to do this, may I record the audio from our discussion today? [*pause for response; answer any questions*]

Before we begin, do you have any final questions about the information sheet that I sent out? [*pause for response; answer any questions*]

As a reminder, I am interested in hearing your thoughts about the athlete narrative or story that I've written about your experiences. Your story covers both your sport journey as a whole as well as how you've navigated instances of pressure and struggle along the way. Based on what you've shared with me I attempted to write out an athlete narrative or story that tried to capture the key elements of your sport journey (e.g., key moments, people, places, and themes). I want to remind you that you are the expert of your sport experiences, so if any part of this narrative account doesn't resonate with you, please let me know and we will change it – I will not take it personally. I want to ensure that you feel the story represents you and your experience in a manner you feel is authentic. This is all part of the process! So let's get right to it.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are your initial thoughts on your sport story?
 - Did I listen well?
 - Does this feel reflective of your sport experiences and what you shared with me?
2. What from your story resonated well with you?
 - What was well portrayed?
 - Any specific moments, people, themes?
3. What, if any, from your story does not resonate well with you?
 - Are there things from your sport story that you see differently or would like to have told differently?
 - If so, what would you like to change?

I think that wraps up my questions, but again because this is your story I want to give you the final word.

- Are there any other thoughts you would like to share?
- Anything else that you would like to add that I did not ask you about?

Wrap Up

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me and share your thoughts about your sport story. Because we've spent a good amount of time talking throughout this research process, I figured it would be more fitting for us to meet together rather than just have you comment any changes in a document; so I really appreciate having this opportunity to meet with you again. I also want to say thank you for letting me journey alongside you and hear your experiences – it's been an absolute pleasure! If after this meeting you have more questions or realize there was something else you wanted to share, please don't hesitate to contact me by email (frentz@ualberta.ca). Thanks again and take care!

Appendix G – Reflexivity Pieces & Excerpts

Reflexivity Piece #2 - Thick Fog & Haze (Summer 2020)

Frustrated, angry, disappointed, sad, discouraged, down, lazy, guilty, lonely, numb...

I've f e l t them all . . .

This season of life is nothing like I imagined it to be and if I'm being brutally honest, the ramifications of COVID-19 have been really hard for me.

At first it seemed like a perfect 'break' from the day-to-day routine of getting up, going into the office on campus to work, and heading home to decompress; however, before I knew it, the days began to melt together, bedtimes became nothing more than a suggestion, and the thick fog of isolation and loneliness began to settle in. The first few weeks were spent trying to adjust to the new reality of working from home – “Where will I work? When will I work? How will I stay focused and motivated? How will I get my work done?” I asked.

There were weeks where work routines were relatively smooth, to-do list items were being checked off at a rapid pace, and ideas seemed to flow with ease. Then there were weeks where the tiredness of being a new puppy mom got the better of me, routines went out the window, and I could barely conjure up enough energy to keep both my pup and me fed. Those weeks of sleepless nights, potty training mishaps, and research tasks piling up made me feel exhausted, depleted, and guilty. My recursive thoughts included the following, “I'm so tired I can't work. I need to rest... but I SHOULD get this work done... I cannot keep my eyes open any longer. But if I sleep then I will feel guilty that I'm not working” and so the self-defeating spiral continued. Like I said, this whole pandemic thing has taken a toll on me (and this was just the beginning...)

I want to return to the word “should”... I have worked long and hard to try and eradicate it from my day to day language; however, this nasty little monster has crept back into my self-talk. As if living through a global pandemic wasn't hard enough, let's add a pile of “shoulds” into the mix, shall we? I would check-in regularly with myself and acknowledge, “wow this is hitting me really hard” then almost immediately discount or dismiss those feelings as being valid with, “But I have so much to be thankful for! I have a relatively 'easy' life right now, I SHOULDN'T be so affected by this and I definitely SHOULDN'T complain about my situation...” This is the constant cycle of thoughts that swirl around in my head when I reflect on our current reality.

I have experienced frustration on both a personal level, as my much needed vacation plans with a close friend have fallen through time and again, as well as on an academic level, as my interviews have needed to be carried out via Zoom and I lost the (much needed) division of

“work and home.” Frustration has at times turned into anger, leading to a flurry of tears and emotion that overwhelm me begging to be released some way, some... But how? All the normal outlets and ways to cope look different or have been stripped away entirely! Gyms are closed, social connection looks different, and everyone is running out of bandwidth to hold space for those ‘tough’ life conversations. Finding it difficult to ‘blow off steam,’ I feel the frustration, anger, disappointment, and sadness build. I resort back to the few simple, essentials that help bring a sense of calmness amidst the chaos and head outside for a run. I let the soles of my feet pound the pavement releasing a wave of emotion with each footfall. I look up at the deep blue sky and feel the warmth of the sun’s light cascade down my shoulders, almost hugging my body in a warm and soothing embrace. Running became a necessary part of my life early on during this unsettled time; however, that too was soon stripped away. It felt like my body betrayed itself. My back and calf felt the brunt of the beating that stress waged on my body. Rigid, achy, and painful became my body’s new normal. Now with even fewer ways to release the many and mixed emotions that were constantly coursing through my body, a thick haze began to settle in. Not even day-long video calls with friends could make up for the lack of social connection or even help to keep me motivated and engaged in various work tasks. “isolation” and “loneliness” are a dangerous combo that unfortunately go hand in hand and can leave a gaping hole where a sense of love, connection, and care was once felt. After several weeks of negotiating this new normal, I was overwhelmed with sadness and loneliness, so I went to spend the weekend with my brother and his family. What a joy to be together.

Over the past several months, I’ve been reminded time and again that absolutely NO AMOUNT of virtual communication can replace the authentic connection that is tangibly felt when you have the honour and privilege of being in the presence of another person – especially the ones that you dearly love.

As I think of what life will be like moving forward, I know that our society will likely never be the same again. We will never return to “normal”, whatever that even means. Even long after various restrictions are lifted, we will likely still wash our hands a little longer, still hesitate when making plans with our friends or family, and still turn away when passing strangers at the grocery store. Although our lives look different now and will continue to look different into the (indefinite) future, I hope we remember to give ourselves grace when we cannot live up to the expectations placed on us or sustain the levels of productivity that our jobs seemingly require of us. I hope that we give ourselves compassion when we are in the midst of suffering and our distress is overwhelming. And finally, I hope as life continues to move forward that we slow down enough to enjoy nature, remember how beautiful human connection is, and that we hold on to the ones we love a little tighter – knowing full well how fragile life can be.

We’re stronger together – we always have been and we always will be.

Reflexivity Piece #4 - Tales, Transference, & Tough Topics

When undertaking narrative research, inevitably you will hear stories from people that strike a chord in you, but sometimes not for the reasons you hope for or expect. At times, what resonates with you ends up being the notes of another's story played in a minor key - their moments of sadness, heartbreak, and disappointment. Other times we hear peoples' stories and feel a sense of mourning because we wish that our experiences were more like theirs. In these moments, we can come face to face with the reality of things that we've never had yet so deeply longed for. I will admit I had several of these moments during both the pilot process as well as the research interview process... As an interviewer, these moments can be challenging to navigate because you cannot let yourself "get hooked" by your own thoughts or emotions. Instead, you need to stay present with your participant and actively listen while they continue sharing. This is WAY easier said than done! You cannot simply wish your thoughts and emotions away or say to yourself "don't think about that." Unfortunately, that is not how our brains work. In actuality, by doing so you often increase the likelihood of continuing to think about the very thing you are trying so hard not to focus on (that's called Ironic Processing). During moments of feeling almost activated or triggered in an interview, I found several responses to be quite helpful. First, I noticed or acknowledged that something was coming up for me (e.g., "oh I'm feeling a bit insecure or sad by what that participant shared"). Next, rather than dwell on that emotion and try to figure out why I was feeling that way, I simply jotted a note down on my printed interview guide. To keep my thoughts from rattling around in my brain, I knew that I needed to get them out of my head and onto the paper (literally outside of me). Although brief, this process of writing down just a few words helped me to regroup and continue tracking with my participants' stories. Additionally, I wrote notes down so that I could revisit that topic later, if needed, to process and write about it on my own time - hence what I am doing now...

These two situations I've outlined demonstrate some of the challenges that can come when undertaking narrative research. Stories that others share can really impact us in difficult ways. Further to this, I think one of the hardest parts with these instances as the interviewer is that you can't necessarily see them coming. The participant is the one sharing their experiences so at times you have absolutely no idea what is going to come out of their mouth next. I learned that I needed to be prepared to hear anything! The conversations with participants are organic and active, so topically they can go almost anywhere. Although I feel that I handled these situations well and had a plan in place, I still feel it would have been helpful to know then what I know now. In both in good ways and hard ways, we are more connected to each other than we think.

Going “Slow” and Doing Meaningful Work (Excerpt)

At times I have been discouraged by the relatively slow progress I have made on my work, but lately I realized that taking things slow has been necessary. I have needed to take time to write reflection and reflexivity pieces not only because I have been processing a lot within my personal life but also because I have “seen” a lot of myself in the stories of my participants. Reflexivity requires researchers to “bend back” and examine themselves as well as how their thoughts, experiences, and perspectives may be influencing the research process. So the slower progress that at one time brought frustration I now realize had been such an essential part of my research process. I cannot write Isabelle’s, Lauren’s, or Amanda’s sport stories well and truly bring their experiences to the forefront if I keep reliving aspects of mine. On the flip side, simply “bracketing” my thoughts will not help matters much, as my experiences and reflections need to be released somewhere or else they might bleed into and color the participants’ stories unintentionally - hence the need for reflexivity pieces. Slowing down to process and work through my own struggles has been such a necessary part of this stage in my research journey as it allows me “get out of the way” so that these women’s stories can take centre stage.

Writing Athlete Narratives (Excerpt)

When writing or piecing together a participant’s narrative account, the first audience in mind should be the participant. As researchers, we have a responsibility to engage in relational ethics when working with participants and the content they have so graciously shared with us. Beyond the obvious aspects of being kind, empathic, and respectful when interacting with participants, careful consideration needs to be taken when piecing together their story. The ways in which we write up a participant’s account could disrupt their self-concept or lived narrative experiences based on the elements we focus on. During this process, I found it helpful to write with the participant in mind and consider how they might feel reading their narrative back. Additionally, a quality criteria for good narrative research involves how recognizable a participant's written narrative account is to that specific individual.

Reflexivity Piece #8 The Power of Story: A Beckoning Call for Connection

After finishing up a meeting with my supervisor, I was reminded of the importance of this work! The work I'm doing matters, the reflexivity pieces I'm writing matter, these athletes' stories matter, and the larger overarching narrative of life matters. At times while coding my participants' transcripts I have been struck by the shocking similarities between the experiences they have shared and the struggles I am currently facing. For a while I thought, 'oh crap, am I too close to this topic?' Oh the irony I felt asking athletes to share stories of pressure and struggle when I found myself in the hardest and most painful struggle of my life. I doubted if this was the "right" way to go about things. Then it dawned on me, this is the power of story and common humanity. This closeness to the matter at hand, seeing myself in the experiences of these athletes, is the power and beauty of story. Leaning into what their experiences were telling me and staying open to being impacted by their struggle was exactly where I needed to be. I have literally sat back at times and said out loud "wow! I can relate to this" or "man, I really needed to hear that reminder; that's so encouraging. Maybe I'll try that too." As a researcher, in these moments I feel compelled to write. It is as if there is something inside of me that is being beckoned forth that I need to let out and share. It is precisely in these moments that I am reminded that we as humans are so deeply connected. Although we are different people with different life circumstances, we have shared experiences. We are all human - plain and simple. I cannot help but feel that this deep inner beckoning call, the one we sense when we hear another's story and bear witness to their pain, is our common humanity speaking to us. It draws us closer. At a time in history where we are distanced and isolated, now more than ever, I am reminded of the power that stories can hold. Stories can connect us when we feel alone and bring unity where there was once division. All this to say, I am reminded that the work that I am doing matters - it is meaningful! I have no idea of the breadth or depth to which others will be impacted by the stories these athletes have shared, but I do know these stories will speak to some individuals in a deep way that beckons them and reminds them they are part of a larger story, a grand narrative, and they are not alone.

Reflexivity Piece #12 - Chaos Narrative: "I'm Broken" (Part 1)

Isabelle sharing her experiences of "being broken" struck a chord in me. Even during the interview, I was very aware of how heavy the language was that she used to describe her experience. I could feel the weight of her emotion in my body. There was this deep sense of sadness, grief, and despair. As she continued talking more about her experiences, she circled back multiple times to the phrase "I'm broken" as if listening to a skipping record, it's needle hooked on a thought loop. We unpacked this further and Isabelle went on to describe her situation as "traumatic." Again I could feel the weight of the emotion within her experience as well as its significance in her life. 'What an honour to be let into her story' I thought to myself. As the interview wrapped up I pondered what she had shared with me. Although I had never played her sport or experienced the kind of injury she had, her story resonated with me. Something about her pain and suffering felt familiar.

Before I ever met Isabelle, I was already on a journey of processing some of my own trauma, and her words "I'm broken" couldn't have been more of a fitting way to describe where I found myself now. It felt as if our stories mirrored each other. Our contexts were different, but the weight and significance of our experiences felt similar. Just as she was getting stronger and her sports career was taking off, she experienced the biggest struggle she had ever faced. Similarly after having had a very successful academic career in undergrad and into the start of my masters, I soon encountered what has been the toughest season of my life. The challenges I have encountered both professionally and in my personal life have absolutely crushed me. Just as Isabelle felt "broken," so did I.

Appendix H – Isabelle’s Narrative: Redefining & Rediscovery

Growing up I was active and on the go! *I was always meeting up with friends or with my older brother’s friends to climb trees, play baseball in the field, or kick around a soccer ball.* Whether we had the right equipment or *just threw our sweatshirts down as goals*, we didn’t care. We always had a blast just playing and being together. You know, *fun for fun’s sake*. At a young age, there were some sports that I really grew to love. *Soccer was kind of MY sport! I was quite good at it and really enjoyed it!* In elementary, *I can remember almost every recess I was playing soccer with friends. We played it ALL the time! Often there was about two or three other girls who played and all the rest were guys.* When I wasn’t playing soccer at school, I was playing on a community team *and my dad was my coach. The five years that he coached were especially significant years for me. I think it was just fun having someone that you know so well be your coach. He was just really good at it and it was just nice having that connection too where we could spend time together. Having a coach that believes in you is really significant and my dad always has.* I also really enjoyed playing because my teammates and I *all got really close. We all REALLY knew each other and were all quite passionate young girls.* Let’s just say *I was thriving, loving the team that I was playing for.*

As a young girl I innately felt like I belonged when I was playing sports, so that’s why I was surprised when I started to hear phrases about girls not being able to keep up.⁴ Growing up with an older brother and playing with all these older boys I was always like, ‘well I can do this too. I’m just as good’ and ‘why do people always say that girls aren’t as good as guys? Cause watch me!’ So, *for me athletics has always been a really valuable place that I can kind of almost prove myself.* I remember having the opportunity to play on a co-ed team as a kid and it was amazing! *Everyone was treated SO equally on that team and everyone looked up to each other. It wasn’t this whole distinction between “oh this is the best guy on our team, this is the best girl on our team.” We REALLY saw it as a blend which to me was super valuable. Other teams at first glance would say, “Oh, there’s girls on this team we’re going to beat them,” and it was like, ‘No, you aren’t!’* So yeah, *it was just kind of an encouraging place where I felt like that was very affirmed.*

Throughout Junior High I dabbled in a bunch of different sports like basketball, volleyball, and track. In basketball *I wasn’t crazy good, it was just kind of a fun experience to learn.* My best friend played it, so it was *fun playing alongside her, but I never saw it as my sport.* Some sports I enjoyed and others I tried for a year and then decided to stop playing. When I think back to those junior high years, I also have fond memories of training and competing in several sports. Sometimes *I’ve looked back and been like ‘that was some of the best conditioning I’ve ever done.’* It was neat to train and *get really strong. I distinctly remember being at a cities competition and having my dad come to watch. He would stand over on the side and give me*

⁴ Isabelle clarified this sentence to better reflect her experience during our member reflection meeting.

some pointers and tips. Like I said earlier, he was my coach for soccer but he's ALWAYS shown up to my stuff. Even now, he comes to all of my games or else if I'm traveling away he's tuned in watching.

Although I had good experiences in sports, there were also some really hard moments. I remember trying out for a new sports team one summer and just being *SHOCKED* when I saw *the list on the board and I didn't make it. I STILL remember reading the sign and not seeing my name.* There was a heavy, sinking feeling in my stomach of disappointment but that didn't last long. I thought to myself, *'so I didn't make this, I think that I should have and that was really devastating... I don't want to feel this again, but I know that I want to do this sport next year.'* I realized *'I'm the youngest of the youngest'* and that *'this is just the beginning.'* So I trained hard on my own and was *determined to come in offering more, so I was for sure not getting cut in the fall.* Although I was *initially rejected, I was just REALLY determined to stick to it and make it.* And I did!

I didn't end up staying with that sport for long because when some of us made mistakes *we kept getting talked to, or scolded, by the coaches. There was no acknowledgement for the fact that we just weren't in a good position to have developed the same as some of the others and we weren't getting help on how to make it better.* I remember feeling *embarrassed and ashamed. I wasn't quite fitting in and I don't remember being super super close with anyone. There wasn't quite an established community of friends yet where I felt safe to be able to talk things through with.*

Despite all of the challenges, *I didn't see that year as completely that negative or that I was ALWAYS feeling insecure. I would say it went in waves but, there were still a lot of opportunities where I could do individual stuff and find ways to kind of show my strength elsewhere.* In the end I just decided, *'okay, this isn't quite for me.'*

Transitioning into high school sports was exciting and it wasn't until later that I realized there would be a bit of a learning curve.⁵ Soccer was kind of my sport for a really really long time, and although I made the team I just NEVER saw the field basically, and when I did I just felt like I couldn't connect as well... I was almost like a stranger on this team... I remember running the drills where all these girls kind of knew what they were doing and I just felt like I wasn't as competent. Then I started to get into my own head being like, 'Oh, I don't know what I'm doing anymore' and 'oh maybe I'm not cut out for this?' This was *SO different from how I felt about soccer before that. This was always kind of what I saw as my sport and even a bit of my identity, so I just remember feeling quite sad that I felt like I wasn't very good.* There was also a *disconnect with the team which was difficult because especially with soccer I'm used to being very known. I don't know if the experience would have been different if it was something where*

⁵ Isabelle modified this sentence to better reflect her experience during our member reflection meeting.

the coaches knew me or the other girls knew me... Looking ahead it was weird to almost have to kind of redefine myself too because it was my dream to be a pro soccer player or pro athlete. But I would say in the whole process of kind of feeling this sense of loss, there was really quick redefining though too. I didn't stay stuck in it. As far as I can remember it was pretty quick transitions, where at the same time that I was recognizing 'oh maybe I'm not cut out for this, or I'm not as good now at this high school level' I was asking myself 'okay now what now what now what.' I think that's kind of just how my brain works, I'm very forward oriented. I'm not someone who tends to look back a ton like, I remember those things but they aren't my reference point really. My reference point is kind of 'okay what option is ahead of me.' If I think that something isn't an option anymore then I need something else to look ahead to. So in this situation I asked myself who am I?' but in a way that was forward moving. I didn't stay there. With soccer coming to an end, it led me to pursue something that I never ever thought to pursue before that. I started picking up a new sport which was really exciting and gave me something to look forward to.

There were a lot of opportunities for me to train and grow in this new sport, but early on I faced another challenging instance of getting cut. I thought I would make the A Team for a tournament and *I was quite devastated that I didn't.* I didn't stay discouraged though, and soon after a spot on that team opened up. *I switched on where I was like 'kay! It's go time now. You wanted this, you were sad about not making it' now's your chance! In a short amount of time I really threw together the [skills] that I needed... and ended up being the one that they chose in the second round. That was just really encouraging and kind of made me feel like, 'okay, you know when I work hard. I CAN push and get there.'*

Similar to my early experience with soccer, one summer I had the opportunity to train in a co-ed setting and it was great because the coaches conveyed this *belief that you're competent enough.* There was this understanding from the coaches that *"we wouldn't put you up against all these people if we didn't believe you could compete and play."* It wasn't the stereotypical *"Oh, we gotta separate you. Okay only the girls on this side, guys on that side, now play your scrimmages."* It was more like, *"no sorry, you're 18 and you're going to be playing against 27 year old guys in this game."* Don't get me wrong, it was difficult, but it was nice to hear the message of *"you're competent and you can play here."* I had several other supportive coaches throughout my career. One in particular at first kind of *scared me*, but that didn't last too long. After one practice where *he could see that I was almost kind of holding back*, he took some time to talk to me and my dad near our car. He said, *"you've got it in you."* So for me *to have it click and realize 'oh this coach actually does see something in me' was encouraging.* He was kind of *almost rooting [cheering] for me.* I had another excellent coach who told me *multiple times, "I see a lot of potential in you."* *That was a really cool summer and really encouraging for me too.*

I kept playing on club teams and eventually got invited to come to practices for a varsity team. One of my club teammates was their captain and she extended the invitation, “*come out you should just come!*” After a few months of training with them I actually joined the team and *I think a lot of that had to do with just the fact that I was already showing up and just known there.* Things started off a bit rough because I got injured, but thankfully I had time to recover before the first season started. *I didn't have to try and ‘pull it together’ and pretend like I'm fine, or think that I'm fine and push it.* Unfortunately though, I re-aggravated my injury so *I actually didn't end up playing in the first [few] games of that year... It was just an interesting experience but my first game that I finally did come back was a really fun one! It was against a really close rival and I hadn't scored in that game or anything but I did still have a really good game where I felt like I was able to show a lot of my skill too.*

As I continued playing in university, injury wasn't the only challenge I experienced. Both our team's performance and cohesion were pretty poor. It's discouraging and frustrating enough to be losing, but *I felt like at the end of the day when we'd have the meetings and we were just told “don't do this!” or “Oh we're losing!” it just eventually kind of took its toll. Year two especially was discouraging because the other teams were starting to get better... and we were staying the exact same.* So performance-wise that was frustrating, but another struggle was that *the team felt very split.* I remember *almost just desperation and feeling a little bit helpless too... it was like I don't know how to make this better, and it just sucks to be losing, and it just sucks to feel like our team is so divided.... I think that was a year where I was actually able to identify how team culture makes a big difference in how you perform too. We had a really bad team culture and our performance was really bad. I think a lot of that had to do with the fact that we didn't have chemistry together cause we hadn't played together much, but also no one was friends on the team. No one hung out outside of [sport], whereas even now I see how the girls hang out and are friends.* It was pretty brutal, but *in contrast my club team was just excelling! I knew what it felt like to be [playing] and feel like I could trust everyone around me... and feel safe... whereas it's harder when you're not sure you can trust people. Then the game is a little bit more, actually scary.* It's a physical sport, so *yes it's discouraging to see the scoreboard but also discouraging to feel the way you feel during the game where you're almost kind of desperate.* It was a really tough time, but *thankfully because I had close people on that team I think we leaned on each other a lot. My closest friend on that team was also someone who I played club with so we knew what it felt like to be on this really strong team and then be struggling here... I think we were able to lean on each other a lot with that. Also, we were talking to lots of people within the team about what we saw and how things could be different. What helped get us through that time was a lot of just talking it out I think, and enjoying our club team when we went there. Cause it was like ‘Dang! We're losing here but you know what, at least we win in club!’*

I made the most of the situation despite our university team's struggles, and still found ways to improve personally. Later that year while playing club, *I feel like that was the summer where I*

*definitely got the strongest that I'd ever been and where I could start making decisions during the game and understanding rather than just being told what to do. I definitely felt that was the summer where I was starting to really thrive, feel confident, and make some plays happen. It felt like I was at the peak of my career up until that point and if I'm being completely honest, the thought of getting injured had never crossed my mind. It was a complete shock!*⁶ Unfortunately, these things often happen when you least expect them...

The regional finals was the *last game of the summer* and literally in the last five minutes of that game, I went to score and got *completely destroyed*. That hit was the most painful thing I've ever experienced! They ended up just calling the game at that point and calling an ambulance cause I couldn't move. Randomly my mom just happened to come, so thankfully she was there. I can't imagine if she wasn't because I was laying on the ground in agony screaming. I've had other injuries and challenges that really shaped my experience but when I think of a REAL struggle in my sport, I've never had anything bigger than this. To just go from really feeling like I was at my peak with the sport or at my peak so far... I could have just kept going up... I was starting to become REALLY confident in my playing, and was even quite a lot like bigger and stronger... right off the bat it was a HUGE HUGE setback! ... just a REALLY devastating setback where not only was it a loss of being able to utilize my skill but also keep it up... This injury was probably the most traumatic thing I've ever experienced, just having myself **break** like that...

During my recovery, I lost a LOT of weight and became quite small and quite weak because there wasn't anything I could do... I remember I was at [a clothing store] and they grabbed some clothes for me and they gave me extra smalls and I was like, 'what? What the heck?' For a while I didn't even see myself as that small or realize just how small I was until I was being given clothes or when people would describe me they were like "oh you're tiny!"... "oh, you're so small." I was at this [event] and there was someone who I hadn't seen in a while... She yelled "you look so tiny!" It was meant as a compliment for her I guess but to me that was UGHHH! like a stab in the heart... When you're playing a sport where it's really important to be actually quite strong physically it's just hard when you are so aware of how other people see you and that they see you as small. So between hearing that and then throughout the recovery I really became quite convinced that I was **broken** and going to stay that way... It's interesting because in the past it's been about redefining and asking 'okay well, where can I go?' And this almost felt defining in itself... very defining in itself.

My injury didn't just impact my sports career, it completely changed how I saw myself. I just started to see myself as very small... I think after that, kind of slightly separate from sport, but I basically was convinced very often that something was wrong with me and if I thought something was wrong with me I didn't think I would heal. There were a few times where I actually just

⁶ Isabelle clarified these sentences to better reflect her experience during our member reflection meeting.

thought, and even still sometimes catch myself, where I forget that the body is very capable of getting better. But especially when this recovery just took SO LONG I was in the middle of it and not seeing that full recovery just yet and still remembering just how badly it got broken... When you're several months into recovery and hardly seeing any progress, it's hard to believe that it's going to get much better than that... I was forgetting that my body is capable and strong. The feelings were very much like 'I'm weak' and 'if I feel kind of sick I'm going to stay that way. You don't recover' was almost what I told myself... Those are experiences I've never had before this injury and I'm quite convinced that mentality ...of thinking that things aren't going to get better contributed to having panic attacks that I've never had before this... This injury from sport was traumatic in so many different ways in that it really made me become a lot more anxious I guess. Sure, I was a lot more afraid [to play], but this injury impacted more than just my career, it impacted my whole life! Everyone else just saw it as a physical injury. But, for me there was a lot of mental stuff to get over and obviously still is even though my [injury] is actually healed significantly now... but again, I think it would have been probably good to recognize early on the impact that it could have had mentally on me as well. Because it's both, right?

*I have had injuries in the past. I've had my concussions, I've had to get stitches, I've sprained an ankle. So I'll admit, I've had those before and none of them had the same kind of impact. With these other injuries, I had somewhere to go or somewhere I could look elsewhere I guess, but with this just everything had to be put on pause. Like I said I look forward for reference, and forward was such a massive question mark for me, AND if anything the only certainty was that I wasn't playing. So it's a lot harder to see 'where next where next?' when THIS struggle was just, different in the way that I couldn't do something about it... The others I could kind of push through or just try harder. But this wasn't so much a matter of me just falling slightly short it was like, 'oh no I'm **broken** right now and there's nothing I can do' ... This is something that again I didn't realize until quite a few months later but because I just identified more as being weak or someone who **breaks**, the experience ITSELF was defining... This almost WAS how I defined myself... 'I'm weak and I will continue **breaking** I guess.'*

When you're injured and sitting out for so long, there is the potential to feel disconnected from your teammates. One thing that helped early on in my recovery was that I really tried to kind of still show up, as much as I could and then was able to redefine my role in small ways. It was like, 'okay, I'm here I can't play but I can kind of connect with people.' So just trying to show up and have good relationships with people on the team was something I did. Also, my [team] was a REALLY good support system for me where they saw me every time I showed up for practice and saw things get slightly better... I really did feel like people checked in a lot and also saw my progress. When I was starting to even just run in practice everyone celebrated with me too... I felt really confident and it was fun being able to run again. The season I came back from injury, the biggest highlight for me was I started stepping up in a different role and worked to develop a new skill... which again was fun cause this was like 'wow! This is kind of other previous sport

skills coming back around full circle.' Where now this is where I can shine a bit... It was fun because at that point it's like I had something else to offer... I had a sense of determination and asked 'if I am stagnant performance wise, how can I get involved and feel a sense of purpose in other ways?'

Recovering and redefining myself hasn't been an easy or linear process. Even now sometimes I wonder, if I hadn't gotten injured *where would I have been?* I still haven't gotten up to that point again and I know that... If I'm being completely honest, sometimes I even still see myself as very fragile now. Reaffirming *'I am strong and I won't break'* is still something I'm working to convince myself. During my long recovery I've had time to reflect and ask myself questions like *'if I was doing something that I deep down didn't enjoy, why would I be doing it?'* I came to the conclusion of *'I'm injured but I still see myself as a part of the team, so how do I enjoy this?'* For me it's important to be doing what I like to do, and something that I feel passionate about. So a bit of that redefining with my injury was *'well I'm still very passionate about the people on this team and about connecting with them so I'm going to do that... and deep down I LOVE sport! I LOVE the passion that it brings people and it has been such a defining thing for me in really cool ways.'*

Having this summer cancelled [due to the pandemic], it's given my body a break which I think I kind of need. I've also been able to find a lot of joy in just fun activities again... I am defining myself now as athletic and active not just through varsity or through club [sport]. Me and my friends have started playing volleyball just for fun, and I still know what I'm doing and I'm quite competent and we play with a whole bunch of girls and guys... That's helping remind me again that 'I am strong and I am competent' and 'I'm good at this stuff.'... It has been nice having slightly different outlets where it's like having fun for fun sake again. I almost feel like in some ways I'm coming back to my childhood days. I think that's why it's been fun to just find recreational games again because I know without a doubt I enjoyed that... My first kind of [experiences] of really really enjoying sport was just playing unstructured stuff with people in the neighborhood, and I almost feel like this is the summer [I'm] coming back to that...

Isabelle's Definitions

Pressure:

“I think for me with sport pressure is often associated, in a way where there’s like an expectation for you to perform at YOUR best and in a lot of ways perform like at THE BEST. So if it’s in a team setting if I feel a sense of, pressure I feel like it’s often the sense of like, ‘okay I’m one of the leaders on this team so there’s this expectation for me.’ Um, so yeah it was an interesting one for me because pressure is almost associated in a bit of a positive sense for me where there’s either an internal pressure where I have something to prove and I want to prove it so that pressure is a good thing to feel for me. Or else it’s an external pressure, so coming from someone else. Actually I prefer to feel like there’s a sense of pressure coming externally because it means that someone is counting on me and thinks I can do it... So, pressure I often see in a good way where there’s this expectation either internally or externally to perform well... If there wasn’t pressure to me that’s almost, especially from externally, I feel like it’s almost worse because they aren’t counting on me, there’s someone else they’re counting on, or I’m not on their radar.”

Struggle:

“So, for struggle I would say it’s like a time where things don’t go as you’re expecting. So, there’s kind of this challenge that comes up where things that you’re hoping for or expecting shift I guess, so then it’s like a matter of needing to redefine something or face something that you had this hope I guess and struggle is when you’re not reaching that or getting there and you’re just kind of like stuck I guess? ... I think especially things not going as planned... If I had this kind of hope or expectation struggle is when it goes differently than that I guess and in a negative sense. So struggle I would definitely see as like a challenge.”

Appendix I – Lauren’s Narrative: Balance & Growth

My first experiences with sport? Well, *that goes WAY back for me. I’m the youngest of three siblings so, I kind of just followed in the steps of my siblings... I’ve kind of always wanted to be like my older sister so I’ve always kind of followed her and what she’s done with sports.* My whole family was actually quite involved in sports. *Both my parents are fairly active people, and they coached me for a lot of my sports as well just growing up. They always kind of pushed me to do sports and it was never like they forced me into sports but, they encouraged me to do them and I’m glad they did.*

I started probably at five or six years old with Timbit soccer, like everyone kind of does. That was mainly what I did in the summers. At around the same age I started playing ringette in the winters as well. I was very consistent with ringette and ended up playing every winter essentially until I was 16 or 17 at a fairly high level. My siblings also played both sports so, when I wasn’t playing I was usually at the arena or at the soccer field watching them. As I continued on with sport, eventually, I kind of lost interest in soccer a little bit, and I had some friends who started playing lacrosse. In grade five or six I started playing lacrosse, and that replaced soccer for me... That was kind of interesting for me cause I’d never played the sport before. I was always super familiar with ringette and super familiar with soccer and then I just decided to try something else, cause my friends were kind of all doing it. I mentioned earlier that my dad’s always been super involved as a coach and in this case, he knew nothing about lacrosse but he decided to coach that year too. So it was kind of a new experience for both of us. In grade five and six I also played basketball. I did track and field, as well as badminton from grade 5 to grade 8. When I got into grade seven and eight, I tried out for volleyball and basketball but got cut both years. I think it’s because I wasn’t tall enough. So overall, growing up I just basically played a bunch of sports in elementary and junior high.

As I wrapped up junior high and headed into grade 10, I noticed *my sister had started playing a new sport in high school and I was like ‘Oh that looks like a fun sport.’ So in the summer of grade nine, just before I got to high school, I started playing it too. I was kind of glad I did that one summer before so I had a little bit of experience going into like my grade ten year. Then in my grade 12 year of high school, I had the opportunity to be captain of my high school team, and it was probably the first time I had somewhat of a leadership role on a team... Even in my ringette career I’d never really been a captain or assistant captain just cause it’s not necessarily my personality type. It was apparent that I was by far the most experienced player, but to most people that know me, I’m a fairly quiet person so being put in a role where I kind of had to step up made me feel a bit of pressure... It was outside of my comfort zone, so it kind of forced me to step outside of what I’m used to. I know I was confident in my [sport] skills, it was just a matter of my leadership skills. So for me it was kind of exploring a part of me that I wasn’t super familiar with... I guess my high school [sport] coach knew me as a person and as an athlete so*

*she put me in that position and that was super impactful for me... it was probably the first time I realized how sport plays a role in developing me as a person.*⁷

While in high school, I actually had the opportunity to play at *both* the *Winter* and *Summer Games* in the same year. They were *both very awesome experiences for me...* My Winter Games experience was *super impactful because it was the highest ringette I had ever played.* Later that year, my ringette team *actually went to Nationals. We did not do well, but it was still a really good experience.* Then, during the Summer Games, *we lost in the final, but it was so close and we could have won the whole thing... In the final, I actually tore [a ligament]. It hurt when it happened but it was bearable pain, so I played through it because it was like 'this is the final I have to play.'* I was *one of the key players on the team, so when it happened I was kind of like 'just get up and keep playing,' because I knew that they would need me. I don't regret my decision to play through it... It felt like I had to be there for my team.* Regardless of the injury and close loss at the Summer Games, *when I look back at it, I really excelled as an athlete at that tournament. It was a really good tournament for me and the opening ceremonies were super cool. That whole year was impactful for me...* Although I continued to play ringette all throughout high school competitively, this other sport kinda took over for me after that as my main sport.

I played for this one club for three years cause they had a really good junior program. I also played on a [Regional Team], and in my third year playing at the nationals, we actually won the whole thing. We had a very good team, and it was pretty pretty awesome that year! Another year, *we got to play our finals game of a competition in the huge stadium that an international tournament was going on in. That was probably one of the coolest things I've ever gotten to do with [sport]... it was honestly just the most amazing experience ever, and I don't think it's one I'll ever have again.*

Eventually as I continued on, *I switched club teams and went to a club that was fairly far from my house... but it was definitely worth it cause I got to play high level [sport] and I had a really good coach there. To be honest, all my years playing [on regional teams] I had super good coaches and they've kind of pushed me, but one coach definitely stands out. She coached me on a regional team for several years and one or two club seasons as well. I would say she's been a huge impact on my [sport] career, and so I'm very glad she got to coach me... She builds the best relationships with all her athletes. There's not a single person that I met that was like "oh I don't like her as a coach." Everyone loved her!* Also, the years where I developed the most as a player were kind of always when I was with her. *I think she saw the potential I had and kind of pushed me forward. She was like that with all athletes she coached... I even think I used her as a reference for jobs I was applying for, and she was always willing to do that for me. She's had a*

⁷ Lauren added this sentence to better explain her experience during our member reflection meeting.

very big impact on my [sport] career and I'm sad I don't get to be coached by her anymore... One year after I got to that club she decided to retire as a coach... It was kind of tough for a bunch of us when she decided to retire. When she left, I wasn't too sure what to do... but I decided to stay with that team and I don't regret that decision.

Actually, speaking of this coach, I remember one summer where we were encouraged by our regional team coaches *not to play in our club games, because they didn't want anyone being injured for Nationals*. The only issue with this was that *my club team was in a semifinal the week before* so I kind of had a dilemma and was conflicted on what to do. The night before the game I had a text conversation back and forth with my regional coach - she's the one I really liked. I explained that I was thinking of playing in my club game and asked what her thoughts were. *She responded "what do you think after the conversation that we had as a team?"* I ended up going to the game *intending not to play, but I brought all my stuff just in case... The whole game I was like 'what do I do?' I was thinking about it the whole time on the sideline*. I wanted to be out there and I could tell my club coach was glancing at me like *"is she gonna play?"... At half-time I went and talked to my parents cause at this point I was still 17 years old and I didn't know what to do... My logic behind all that was, 'if I don't play at the start then maybe they won't need me...' But in reality it was a close game... We were losing and I was like 'I guess they need me out there'* so I decided to play. *I scored almost right away and we won the game just barely, so I'd say that I made a pretty big impact when I went on*. As the game wrapped up *I think that's when I saw my [regional team] coach there and I was like 'oh, she came to watch, uh oh!'... She obviously wasn't happy that I played after being told not to, but I think she realized that I was a key player and I had an impact on how the game turned out*. So although she was angry *I think she got over it quickly because nothing bad happened and we had a really good relationship*. I realize that *I took a risk playing this game, and I was lucky on how it turned out because I didn't get injured*.

I usually would consider myself a rule follower so when I was put in a situation where I might possibly have to not necessarily break a rule but go against what someone was telling me to do, I guess it kind of made me uneasy. I think the first thing on my mind was 'I don't want [my regional coach] to be disappointed or angry with me going into a big tournament.'... I really looked up to her and really liked her as a coach, so I didn't want to disappoint her... The second thing on my mind was, 'I also have a commitment to my club team... I've committed to this team all summer, so I should be there for them no matter what.' So, I had those two things in my head and I couldn't quite decide what to do. *'Do I disappoint my coach and play for my team? Or do I disappoint my team?'*... I felt a sense of worry and uneasiness, as well as fear of disappointment. I think this situation just made me realize that *when you're a higher-level athlete you can have conflicting commitments. There are challenges that come with being a part of more than one team, and sometimes there are sacrifices you have to make in order to compete at a higher level.*

All that to say, *it was not an easy decision to make with all the factors that were kind of contributing to the situation.*

That same summer, right before I was supposed to start university, my regional team and I *were* at a national competition *pretty far from home*. It was essentially *the gold medal game* and to be honest *I don't actually remember what happened or how it happened*, but I got injured *in the middle of the game... The trainer took me off, because she could tell that I was not okay, but at that point I was not so concerned about myself I was just wanting to get back in the game... I had in my head that I was going to go back out there and play, but obviously I wasn't. We ended up losing, but what was tough was that I missed the whole team picture and medal presentation because I was getting treated... That was actually a little hard for me because an exciting part of a national championship is receiving your medal and even if it wasn't a gold medal it's still an important part*. Another hard part of being injured was that once I got home from that tournament, *I actually wasn't able to play in the semifinal for my club team*. That was tough because *I was a key player on the team. I remember I texted my coach the night we were flying home... and he was like "oh darn, we're gonna miss you out there."* Even though I couldn't play, *I still went and I cheered my team on.*

Getting injured *right before my first varsity season* made that transition to university difficult. There were *a lot of changes for me and the fact that I had to do all of those with [an injury] on top of it just made it harder than it already was... I was just taking things really precautionary... I was trying to go about the recovery as best as I could and was just hoping that everything would turn out okay and I would recover quickly*. I also thought, *'I hope my [injury] is better because I'm going into my first year of university and I hope I don't have to talk to any of my profs about having any [injury] problems.'* Thankfully, *I didn't have to and school was fine. I just kinda took it easy at the start. It was quite the way to start off my first year*. I just remember thinking *'oh I'm so unlucky, I don't usually get injured... and it's unlucky that it just happened at a bad time.'* When you're used to playing 24-7 and then you have to take it easy for a month it's tough and leaves you *feeling a bit worried*.⁸ Since I was injured *I actually wasn't able to try out... It was kind of hard for me to go to those tryouts and have to sit on the sideline and just watch everyone else kind of compete for a spot*. It was also *kind of worrying me*, but at the same time, *I wasn't too worried, because we didn't have many girls that year. Also, the coach sort of knew me because my sister actually played for the varsity team and was still playing... He'd seen me play before so he was aware of who I was and how I played which kind of eased my mind a little bit*. I ended up making the team, but *it was tough because it was my first season, and I couldn't really show my skills right off the bat or show who I am as a player at tryouts*. I didn't want my teammates to *see me as the girl who just got like an easy in*. I also *wasn't necessarily*

⁸ Lauren changed this wording to better reflect her experience during our member reflection meeting.

participating in all the practices at the start and that's kind of how you get to build friendships, so that was hard as well.

Although there were some hard dynamics with this injury, since I was joining a varsity team I also felt like I was in good hands. I had a varsity physio, high level coaches, and a bunch of teammates... So I felt like I was surrounded by the right environment to help me get through that. I was trusting the process and I trusted that my physio was doing the right things for me because she's very qualified. It was unlucky that the injury happened, but I was lucky to go into that kind of environment and be able to get the best kind of recovery I could get.

I had a little setback in my recovery, but once I was ready to play I actually got a decent amount of playing time my first year. Up until that time, my teammates hadn't really seen me play before, so at first I felt a bit of pressure to meet the team's expectations and be up to their level of performance... At the same time, I'd say I was kind of fortunate because I got more playing time than most first year's get... I got selected to play in all the tournaments and as a first year player it was super cool to have those experiences. That year we actually got bronze at nationals which was really good for us because on paper, we weren't a bunch of all-star players... We had really good players but no one really knew how good we actually were. I think the fact that it was my first year and I was able to contribute to that and play was super cool.

Academically, when I started university I wasn't too sure what I really wanted to do, but I was like, 'I'll figure it out.' I wouldn't say I went to school just to play [sport] cause I'm super academic and all that but my first year I just didn't know what I wanted to do. At the same time I thought, 'well at least I'm playing [sport] and I know I like that.' Another fun part about playing varsity sport was that I played two varsity seasons with my sister... Like I was saying before, I'm quiet and I'm kind of shy so having already someone that is like an automatic friend on the team helped and kind of eased the transition as well. I mean obviously you get to know your other teammates but I already had her, which was one of the closest people that I could be with... We're super close so it was really cool to say that I've played varsity [sport] with my sister. Growing up, we were never really able to play together because we were never in the same age group... So that was a part of my sports journey that's pretty impactful as well.

During my university years, it was kind of non-stop [sport] for me. I was playing [varsity] in the fall and in the winter, and then I'd usually go straight into playing for my other teams in the summer. During breaks in the varsity season, I was still trying to stay involved in ringette cause I also really liked the sport. I was playing part time on a team that was not very high caliber. So I was getting a little bit of ice time for ringette because I like to get out there when I can... I don't think I've ever talked to [my varsity coach] about it, but it was just kind of for me to get out there and still get to play a little bit so I don't lose that sport that I like to play.

In the back half of my varsity career things kind of shifted for me in the position that I took with the team... I was kind of realizing that I was one of the more experienced players on the team, and was asked to take on more of a leadership role which is a little hard for me because I'm not a natural leader. It's kind of out of my comfort zone... So it put a little bit of pressure on me and it definitely added stress... I think it made me a little nervous because it felt like I was always expected to be performing at my best and always on my best behavior and be a role model for the younger girls... In past years I hadn't really felt those pressures, but they kind of hit me that I really had to step up. These were unusual pressures that I hadn't had before, so it was just a matter of taking those pressures and then not letting it affect how I usually perform... Being put in that role kind of made me think about 'well what makes me a good leader? Why did they pick me to be in this spot?'... To deal with those pressures and struggles I reminded myself that obviously they picked me to be a leader for a reason, I'd stood out to them before, so I don't necessarily have to change how I go about things. You know, even if I'm in a bigger leadership role, it doesn't necessarily mean that I have to change how I am when I play, I can keep being how I am. So I guess, in order to not add more pressure on to the whole leadership thing I think I just accepted the role and then kind of continued the way that I usually am. I mean I obviously tried to be more of a leader, so I did change that part, but skillswise and [sport]wise I tried not to let those pressures affect me. Being a leader doesn't come naturally but I thought hopefully it will turn into something that's just natural for me. So I thought about how I could use my own qualities and personality to be a leader. I don't want to be someone that I'm not... In order to deal with the pressure of being in this leadership role, I tried not to make too big of a deal out of it. Despite feeling the pressure, I think it was surprising and special⁹ to be seen by my teammates and then my coaches as someone who stands out as a leader, when sometimes I don't necessarily see myself as that. So it was just kind of cool to see the progression that I've made throughout my time as a varsity athlete.

If I look at most of my seasons that I've had so far with the [University Team], they haven't been super successful... We've kind of struggled a little bit as a team, which has been disappointing at times. We always have super close games, so we know we're able to compete. It's never like we're getting blown out of the water...but we can't quite get there. Each year we were hoping we were still building as a team, but you can only build for so many years, you know? Although we haven't been super successful, I still really enjoyed my time. It's always fun training, and I know that I still have [parts of the season] to look forward to. In my third year, we got to go to nationals... which was just a really fun experience and we did really good too. I mean, leading up to that tournament, we hadn't done super well but then we had a really really good tournament at nationals, so it was good to finish on a good note. Later on that year, was my first year playing senior women [regional sport]. That was a big step up for me because you have all

⁹ Lauren modified this wording to better reflect her experience during our member reflection meeting.

these girls who are done university so they're very experienced players and they are much older than me... I look up to a lot of them so it was super cool to get to play with them.

Another impactful experience was when I was awarded MVP for my club team. I was honestly really surprised that I'd gotten it... I was super surprised because I know that there are so many good athletes and good players on that team, and we played really well together, so when I heard that I got the MVP I was like 'whoa...' So for me that was super impactful because I was just not expecting to get that, and it was kind of like a confidence booster for me as well. I felt similarly when one of my coaches asked me to be the captain for one of our tournaments. Like I was saying before, I have a very quiet personality so the fact that he asked me to do that for the team was super... I don't know what the word is, maybe both surprising and reassuring?¹⁰ I was super happy to see that he was recognizing me as an athlete and that I deserved to be in this leadership role.

Then this past year was probably the best Varsity season that I've had. I feel like the first tournament game at the start of the season is what really set the tone for our year. In the past, we could never get out of the bottom placed teams in tournaments so it was super frustrating, and in this competition we found ourselves in a tougher pool yet again. Going into our first game I think we all kind of put the pressure on ourselves and obviously our coaches put the pressure on us as well. I think we all knew how important that game was going to be because it was essentially going to set us up for the rest of the season. I know I had a little bit of added pressure on myself too because, during a feedback meeting after the previous season, my coach said that he was hoping I would have brought more to the team. So I thought to myself, 'here's my chance to show him.' I was nervous going into the game and I feel like every game there's always just some nerves no matter what the importance of the game... So I felt a lot of nervousness before that game but, also just super excited to be out there! We all played super well and we won the game, so the pressure didn't impact us negatively, it actually pushed us to play probably our best... I would say the whole team dealt with the pressure super well. Both as a team and individually, we performed really well... We were all very excited but knew it's only the first game of a tournament... It was super crucial to win that game, and at the same time we also thought "we won that game now let's just focus on what's next." I think it was just a matter of recognizing the win and how well we performed and keep that in mind, but move on to what's next kind of thing because it was just the first game of many.

I think for me personally I've learned when it comes to all these pressures, I think it's important to recognize the pressures, but don't let them get in your head. Then it's just a matter of going out there and playing my best... I'm an over-thinker at times... So that's why I've kind of developed the mindset that if there is some stressor or pressure or struggle, obviously it's

¹⁰ Lauren modified this wording to better reflect her experience during our member reflection meeting.

important to acknowledge that but if I think about it too much then that's when my judgment is off and I don't perform as well. So I think it's just not thinking about it more than you have to kind of. I think as a team we kind of just did the same thing. We all just went out there and played, and we played really really well... We had a really good season, and for me it was personally my best season performance-wise too. I was SUPER happy with this past season. We were supposed to continue competing, but it got canceled because it was right when everything was starting to happen with COVID. I was looking forward to that because my coach asked me to be the captain for that tournament... but it didn't end up happening unfortunately.

Reflecting on my varsity sport experience, I think just in general the life of a student-athlete is a struggle... Just honestly a constant struggle. I would say it's just a matter of learning how to time manage and stay organized, as well as figuring out what works for you as a student and as an athlete... Sometimes I think rookies are kind of scared to reach out to more senior players, but I think it could be helpful to find someone who's in the same program as you who's two years above, and then you can always reach out to them if you need help... In my first year I had my sister, and she was very helpful with all school and [sport] related things because she did really good in both of those areas. So, I think it's just a matter of recognizing what resources are available to you. There are a lot of things that come with being a student-athlete, but when I think about it, I can't imagine university without [sport], like the two just go together... I've kind of always put pressure on myself to do well in school too... School kind of comes first for me most of the time and I try to get good grades, so it's always been a pressure on top of all the [sport] stuff. I want to do well in school... I'm not too sure what I want to do after I graduate but, I want to have good grades so I can do what I want to when I decide what I want to do. I've always thought 'as long as I set myself up well and finish my undergrad with good grades, then once I decide what I want to do after, I have the grades to do it.' Right now, I'm kind of looking into physio or OT. That's probably the way I'm leaning right now but, we'll see...

Lauren's Definitions

Pressure:

“I think it can either be an external or it could be an internal factor. I’m gonna put it in the sporting context cause that’s how I know it best for pressure. It’s kind of like as an athlete it’s either something external or the pressure you put on yourself to like perform. So it’s usually attached to something where there’s like an important game or an important event or high expectations. So either you place them on yourself or, it’s someone else putting the pressure on you, or it might not necessarily be another person it could be just like the significance of the event so like a national championship you know that game has high importance so you feel like you need to perform at your best... So I feel like it’s very individualized how people I guess react to pressure and how they deal with it. Some people might see it as a bad thing and that it’s going to affect how they play and kind of impairs their judgment and all that, but some people welcome pressure and need it to perform. I guess it just depends how the person perceives the pressure, will determine how they deal with it kind of thing.”

Struggle:

“When I was thinking about this yesterday I was like, there’s kind of two ways. It can either be an actual physical struggle or it could be a mental struggle. So, if it’s a physical struggle you would just think of something that’s physically demanding like a hard game or something that’s physically tough, or even like a recovery from an injury could be a physical struggle. But then a mental struggle could be like confidence problems or even, I would say that pressure could even be a mental struggle. Depends on [how] the person like perceives the pressure. Yeah, so there’s kind of two ways to look at struggle I think.”

Appendix J – Amanda’s Narrative: Redefining & Transforming

My earliest memory of sport and physical activity is kindergarten soccer. I was awful and I didn't really like it, but I did it with my best friend so that was what made it fun. Oh, and I liked the snack time. All that to say, I didn't stick with soccer. I had the opportunity to do other sports like gymnastics and swimming as well. In my family, we're all pretty close and I'd say we're a pretty active family. When it came to sport involvement, my parents would ask "here, do you want to do this extra activity?" So, they'd kind of suggest things and then I got to choose, except when it came to swimming. They wanted me to do that for life saving reasons, but I liked it anyway so it was fine. Whenever I didn't like something I told them, 'I don't want to do this anymore,' but their rule was always, "if you start a season... you have to finish it." I think they were encouraging just kind of seeing it through and staying committed to something you signed up for.

When I was in junior high, I started trying out for school sports teams. I played volleyball and basketball and did track... I REALLY loved volleyball! I had a lot of success with that at the beginning. Then with basketball, honestly it was fun but I was not good. I could catch someone that was getting breakaways, but I could not shoot worth the life of me... It was really fun and all my friends did it and I really enjoyed it, but I wouldn't have ever continued with that. I remember starting track a little younger and I think it was grade 4 when I first realized I was kind of good at the sport... I think it's different when someone else tells you that you're good at something, but it's another thing when you realize that you think it's true too. I'd say I always had some kind of natural success with track and field, both in elementary school and then into junior high, just at our school meets kind of once a year. As I continued on in sport, I also did dance for quite a few years up until grade 8.

I had done dance for a really long time... but the thing with dance was that I really loved to do it but I wasn't really connected there. I didn't connect with the girls very much and I wasn't similar to them... I wasn't excluded or bullied or anything, I just wasn't similar so I didn't do stuff with them outside of dance. I wouldn't say I felt left out because I didn't want to be part of that, but I kind of thought 'oh I want my own thing, where I DO feel like I'm the same as them.' They also did a bunch of dance forms, but I just really enjoyed to do ballet specifically... I liked the control and the strength aspect of ballet. So I just was starting to really feel disconnected and made me start to think 'you know what, this isn't really my thing anymore. I'm not getting everything I need out of it.'

As I finished up junior high and headed into high school, I had a choice to make between two sports that I really enjoyed. I thought, 'I'm not going to have time to do both.' ... I really like to do things fully and I felt like I wouldn't be doing both to the fullest of my potential. At that point, I enjoyed one sport more and I felt like I had a higher ceiling in it than I did in the other. Plus, I

had a club team approach me, inviting me to join them. It was a bit of a leap into something a little more unknown... but I thought 'it's cool to feel sought after' and I really connected with the people. Everyone was friendly, which made me want to get into the community as well... Obviously, success in sport and enjoying the sport itself is really important but, I feel like the community aspect is a big part of it and that's why a lot of people quit sometimes. Especially I find that in girls. When I think back to dance, there were times when I would be really dragging myself to go and I'd kind of want to skip, but I've never once had a day like that with this sport. I've never not wanted to go. I've never not enjoyed myself. Even if I know it's going to be hard, it's never been a struggle to get myself there. And that's kind of when I knew that it was a really good fit for me, and I connected with people right away.

Good thing I liked the sport because, my first year in club I got absolutely destroyed and it was not very successful at all. Well in the sense of performance it wasn't successful, but I feel like it was in a lot of other aspects like, socially and developmentally and with my confidence and everything, like I think it was really good still. When I joined the club, I was put in some new competition situations. I still remember the words of my coach, "this is going to be totally fine, let's just see what happens." Although initially I wasn't successful, I guess somehow there was potential seen during some of these moments. As I continued into high school, things were going well and I had the opportunity to compete in cities and provincials and everything... I made my first kind of [regional team] in grade 10 and we went to nationals.

Later on, in grade 12, I remember being in a leadership class at school and I was going to be missing school for Provincials. My classmates told me "oh you compete during our class, so we're gonna watch the live feed."... I'm not really someone that feels pressure that often necessarily... Usually I'm pretty realistic and the coaches I've had have been pretty realistic so it doesn't feel like pressure, it's more like confidence in ability than pressure... But I just remember already being stressed about that competition and thinking 'oh my gosh! My class is watching me.'.. I didn't want anything embarrassing to happen. Even my whole warmup I was just being really extra conscious of everything I was doing to not look dumb or something... you know in high school you're so concerned about what other people think... I just remember trying to talk myself down from it in my head a little bit and be like 'no, it doesn't really matter, and what's the worst that can happen?'... How the competition ended is not important, but I think this may have been the start of that anxiousness and stress I'd often feel when being watched during competitions.

Going into university I was recruited for my sport. In high school, I started getting letters from other schools around the country. Most of them used a template type thing which wasn't necessarily personalized... But I had gotten a handwritten letter from one university that was kind of like the top school for this sport, and I thought 'maybe I'll try this out.' I phoned the coach and he was excited to hear back from me. Their school didn't have the program I wanted

to take, so that was one of my BIGGEST reasons for not deciding to go there. Another reason was that *they kind of only secure your scholarship for a year and then you're constantly having to prove yourself*. So it wasn't as secure financially. I ended up going to a different university that had more of what I was looking for, and at that point *it made more sense to live at home*.

University started off well, and *I actually had a really successful first year*. I had one rough moment during our first home competition where I tripped and *absolutely ate it... in front of a home crowd like absolutely ate it!... It was really embarrassing for me...* I remember going up into the stands and seeing my parents, and everyone just having so much pity on me... *I didn't like that... I was just annoyed that it happened and everyone was being all soft with me... So it kind of made me feel anxious to compete at home*. From then on, *I just preferred not having to talk to my parents after competitions... If I want[ed] to talk to them I[d] go up and talk to them, and we kind of just made more of those boundaries, so then I felt I could deal with tough situations or good situations however I needed to*. My family members weren't overstepping but *I almost needed even less than they were doing*. We made sure to talk about it together so it would not feel *insulting to them* if I didn't go see them. I also started using performance routines or rituals to help manage my stress. *I obviously had to overcome some of that stress myself, but I feel like the experience as a whole benefited me further than that... Having routines and having a set boundary with my family for competitions I think helped me further than just overcoming being worried to compete at home*.

It was cool being in my first year of university and having success out of high school because a lot of times the first year of university is tough for people and they don't necessarily perform as well. I got to compete at nationals in my rookie year and performed really well. *I remember finishing my first year being like 'oh my word, this is more successful than I EVER would have thought I'd be in university in general much less like my first year!'* So that was really huge... It made me realize, *'I AM good at this, this IS going well, and I deserve to be here.'* So then going into my second year I was kind of like *'wow! That went really well! I have kind of high hopes for this next year.'* I'd say, *my second year went really well also*. I didn't improve by quite as big of a chunk, but I still improved. *We hosted nationals that year, so that was interesting to compete in front of a home crowd mainly because the year before I had struggled a lot with competing at home...* I actually ended up seeing a sports psych in my second year to kind of help me through that because I knew we were hosting nationals and I was kind of like *'Kay I need to get over this cause this is important.'* And that actually went really well and I competed really well at home, didn't win but it went pretty well.

Then my third year was also really good. I definitely had a little more bumps along the road... I was having a bunch of random aches and nagging minor injuries. With these kinds of things, sometimes you can't just push through it, it doesn't always make sense because it won't end up well. So I just wasn't feeling a hundred percent during that year. *It was also my first year having*

more responsibility during competitions, *so that was definitely a different pressure... I'm the oldest of my siblings, so I feel I'm kind of a natural born leader in that sense, but this was something else... Actually this pressure is kind of reminiscent of a time in grade 9 when one of my teammates said "well regardless of how the rest of us do, [Amanda] will make up for it"... I remember that making me really stressed. It was really scary for me that that was the expectation... Anyway, so similarly in third year I just remember feeling SO anxious and SO stressed before nationals and we DIDN'T have the best team... that's definitely hands down the most anxious or stressed I've ever ever ever felt at a competition. I think it had to do with just the coaches trusting me in that position and it's obviously good for your coaches to be confident in your ability for sure but it definitely comes with a different expectation I feel. You really have to be able to hold your own... We still ended up getting a medal, and it was totally fine. We did the best we could, the other teams were just better so it wasn't like we did bad at all... I just remember being so relieved when it was over. Now I feel like I know how to navigate those moments better. I know who to avoid talking to beforehand or what to shut down in my head if I'm thinking about it or to play out a worst case scenario and realize 'it's not that bad.'* I just remember thinking 'I don't want to feel like that again and I'm going to do everything to prevent that.' So, I would think about the things that would be stressful for me coming up and just dealt with them more ahead of time and then allowed that little bit of stress to stay and fuel my motivation. For sure a little bit of stress I think it's fine. I always kind of say 'if you're not stressed about something a little bit then you don't care about it enough.' So, I'm never not going to be a little bit stressed. I'd say that year was still really successful performance-wise, and actually I got MVP of my team as well. Although I didn't handle the situation at nationals well, I think having that experience help[ed] me to cope with it better in the future...

My next year of university sport was an absolute mess! It was the first competition of the year and things were going really well, until I kind of got taken out and hit the ground really hard! It was quite serious¹¹ and I ended up getting a really bad [injury] and totally knocked the wind out of myself as well. It was pretty traumatic, no one really knew what to do and I was laying there and couldn't breathe, it was pretty stressful for me... I wasn't with my family or anything and everyone was kind of freaking out and I was freaking out because no one believed me that I had a second injury. They were kind of like "Okay try and move it..." but I said, 'No, it's I know it's injured I can feel it! I know it is!' Thankfully I had a friend there and her family brought me to the hospital and got me all worked out.

Traveling back from the competition was also rough, I was totally in pain and hopped up on meds. That same weekend, one of my siblings hurt herself during a sport competition as well, and another family member passed away the day after we got back... So as a family that was kind of our "hell week"... just the perfect storm. So obviously I redshirted that season, I wasn't gonna

¹¹ Amanda added this wording to better explain her experience during our member reflection meeting.

heal in time or anything. But looking back at that now, I really see that injury as a really huge blessing because, I think that that season would have been really hard for me and it was really tough with my family and I don't think it would have gone as well. I don't think I would have enjoyed it. So I definitely see that as like a weird gift almost. It was an impactful moment I would say definitely in sport but that's also probably the biggest one that applies to the REST of my life... I think for me it brought up the idea of identity a lot, and just how a lot of times as an athlete your identity is really in your sport. So it helped me think about all the other things that are important to me besides sport and who I am besides that... I'm a very DIY artsy creative person. I call it my rest time even though I'm doing something. It's what I do to escape from school or training or life or whatever. So that reminds me, I'm not just my sport, I have other things to offer whether within sport or outside of the sport. So I think that was really important to learn and kind of be forced to understand and to be okay with... I had heard someone talk about the idea of identity beyond sport a lot of times before. And I think that I understood what it was getting at and I definitely have not been someone that's consumed only by my sport, I focus on other areas of my life, but I think it helped me REALLY understand through kind of losing it for a bit... I think it also made me realize kind of some resiliency and the biggest thing is that there's a plan for everything... 'Everything, good or bad, has its place and really does happen for a reason.'

Although I didn't compete, I actually had a leadership role that year. *It was definitely really interesting to try and be a leader on the team and stuff, like I couldn't even train or make it through a warmup because I was injured. For the first three weeks at least I couldn't exercise because it was throbbing. I wasn't sleeping or anything, I couldn't even do that... I'd come watch at practice just to be around the team and be at team meetings but I didn't try any physical activity for a month... It was definitely different, but it was a cool opportunity to kind of serve my team fully and not be preoccupied with my own training and performance as well. So that was really good and by the time [the Regional Competition] came, I was able to come and be around the team more. It was cool to actually just be able to watch my teammates compete and really be able to be intentional and pay attention to supporting them. I feel like that was still a cool opportunity and I feel like it made me a better leader... I think it really helped me understand the athletes that don't make it to [Regional Competitions] and don't get to travel and kind of miss out on those opportunities a little bit. I feel like it helped me understand them more and understand injury more, so that I could relate to my teammates better. Up until that point, I hadn't really dealt with a big injury ever, or at least nothing that takes you out for that long... So it kinda helped me get a better grasp of that and all the rehab and sitting on the sidelines and missing out kind of. So it really helped me to understand how some people were feeling and the emotions connected to that and just kind of know what to say or know how to help people through that... because some things aren't helpful and other things are more so.*

Toward the end of the season, I was starting to rehab and finally kind of get back into training. As I began preparing for competitions again, it was like a whole process to get back into that because I definitely dealt with some PTSD from my injury... I thought about seeing a sports psych again for reintegrating after I had hurt myself, but I kind of found that my coach was really good with helping me through that. He knows me really well and knows the whole situation so I didn't have to preface anything... He was patient with me... and he had a whole progression plan for me of these little baby things... It was good to have someone really knowledgeable in the sport to kind of give me some things to help me cope at home but more things to help me be successful like at practice... so that worked better for me. I eventually recovered and started competing again. Early on I wasn't back at my best, but it was still pretty good all things considered, I actually did pretty well... So it was more of a mental success for me.

I was definitely excited going into my next season. I had recovered and I had lots of big goals. I was like 'I am making this happen like I've been on the sidelines for too long.' ... Training was going really well, but definitely the first competition was really hard for me because it was the same place that I'd hurt myself a year ago... Even in the months before I thought 'that's going to be a hard weekend for me.'.. There was just a LOT of emotions going on. On the first day there... we were there doing our warmup... and I just kind of tripped and fell a little bit, which is totally normal, but being in the same place that everything happened and at kind of the same time of year, it TOTALLY freaked me out REALLY made me have this breakdown. I was panicking and it was really stressful for me. But my coach and I were able to have a good talk through it and I talked to my parents and it was totally good. I remember my coach saying if I didn't want to compete, I didn't have to and that everyone would understand that and it's a perfectly good reason. So I just remember feeling really looked after and just, it was on my terms as much as I wanted it to be. My coach gave me an out when I needed it, or I just needed to have the option and that no one would be disappointed. Thinking back, I'm actually glad that warmup happened like that because I feel like if it didn't happen then I would have needed that release and it would have happened on my competition day. So I think actually that worked out okay.

That competition went well, and I thought 'okay I kind of got that done and now I can just move on and have a really good season.' So that was really good. And then the following weekend we had a home competition that went really well which was really exciting! And it was cool to have my parents and all my siblings and my grandparents come watch me... and they were all just cheering in the stands... It was really cool just to kind of get to that point after the year before. As that season went on, I had one more competition back in the same palace I got injured and that one did NOT go well for me at all! I was just feeling really off and anxious and I don't really know, it just was not a very good weekend. The following week was nationals, so I really had to just kind of like get in a better headspace before going.

Going into nationals, I was really wanting to accomplish my goal of getting a medal. I had been performing very well *for a lot of the season and I was just like, 'kay I want to do this really bad.'* There was even a bit of media attention and *me and my teammate actually did a couple interviews for the news and it was pretty cool,* but they kind of skewed some details which *bugged me a little bit.* As the competition approached, *I didn't feel that much pressure necessarily from other people but I just expected more of myself...* and at the same time it was also exciting... *On the weekend I remember feeling not that stressed about it. I just kind of remember being like 'you know what? Everyone's anxious to compete... the stands are pretty full... but we have an advantage, this is where we train every day... I have so many people rooting [cheering] for me whether I do good or bad...'* And just remember thinking *'well, I'm just gonna have fun with it. It's going to be fine.'* nationals ended up going *really well* and although the competition was really close, I still accomplished my goal. *That was really really exciting and I was kind of like 'good I finally, I did what I wanted to do!'* And having your family *freak out in the stands is huge! That's SO special and I just feel people have that extra excitement because they like they KNOW the journey of getting there and I feel it's just completely different... I think it just feels a little extra sweet when you had to struggle to get there a little bit, you know?*

Then that brings us to this past year and *we didn't have a season because of COVID. I know I learned a lot about myself during not having a season. I realized that I'm not very self-motivated with my sport which I didn't think was true... But having to do my workouts in the basement at my house, like didn't happen very often.* Working out looked so different and it was *boring by myself, but I also did realize that I missed my sport a lot. But yeah, I did kind of decide that this coming season will be my last season, mainly because it's kind of a natural breakpoint for ending kind of being a varsity athlete.* I'm not really interested in being a post-collegiate athlete *per say. I'm kind of just ready to do other things in life too a little bit and I am happy about that decision...I want to get a job in my field and I'll likely move to a different city because I'm probably looking at getting married in a year and a half or two.* I have been wanting to do all those things, *kind of my next phase in life a little bit.* I've trained with a lot of post-collegiate athletes and I kind of see that level of commitment it takes, which I totally respect but it kind of *doesn't interest me. I'm ready for the other things in life too and it seems like a good spot to kind of say 'yeah! Let's close that chapter...'*

*Amanda's Definitions***Pressure:**

“Pressure I guess to me means that there’s an expectation of you in some regard. I would say based on something that I guess someone thinks you SHOULD or are able to do. I guess cause there could be pressure in a situation where you wouldn’t be able to do something but I feel like that’s not really fair, so yeah. That’s what I would say. I would say realistically pressure is something that someone expects and believes you can do, kind of thing so then like, knows that you could do it or is waiting for it to happen kind of thing.”

Struggle:

“I would say struggle is kind of (sighs), I would describe it as more of a personal battle with what you’re trying to do versus what you’re able to do or, what you’re able to do in the moment. Maybe your body’s not cooperating or maybe you’re emotionally not there but, you know you can and you’re not getting there and it’s kind of like a back and forth battle.

Appendix K – Reflexivity Piece #13: Narrative Repair & "Kintsugi" (Part 2)

It is no secret that the past 2 years have been incredibly challenging for me. This season of life has left me feeling alone, discouraged, riddled with doubt, and “broken” in so many ways. It’s no wonder that Isabelle’s words spoke to a deep place in my heart as well. At first it was painful to “go there” and reflect on my own season of being shattered, but then something encouraging began to happen. I finally had the language to describe what I was going through. Once I accepted these feelings of “being broken,” a powerful sense of strength began to build inside of me. Those who know me well have heard me say, “self-discovery is empowering” and I was embarking on another chapter of life where this would ring true again.

There is something captivating about brokenness. There is a refreshing authenticity that comes from having the courage to be seen as you are and admit (to yourself/others) that you don’t “have it all together.” Embracing vulnerability and letting people see your cracks, chips, and rough edges is no easy task! It is an arduous, raw, and painful process that can evoke insecurity and fear; however, it is one of the most worthwhile endeavors. “Why?” You might ask? Well, our courage to be vulnerable and allow others to witness our authentic selves, flaws and all, actually provides opportunities for personal growth and restoration. Additionally, the more we embrace our own cracks, flaws, and shortcomings, the more we allow those around us to do the same. There is an immense sense of freedom that comes when we are able to take off the masks we wear, stop performing, and just rest in the truth of who we are. Striving can cease and we can just BE. The acceptance, care, and support we receive from those who see the real us is powerful enough to bind the parts of us that have previously been shattered and broken.

Few cultures understand and appreciate the beauty that can come from brokenness like Japanese culture does. In Japan, there is an artform called Kintsugi or Kintsukuroi which mean “golden joinery” and “golden repair” (Ayuda, 2018). In this artform, broken pottery is repaired by joining the pieces back together using a mixture of lacquer and powdered gold (Ayuda, 2018). What is especially significant about this art form is that contrary to simply gluing pieces back together in such a way that conceals or disguises the objects’ flaws, through the use of golden lacquer, cracks in the object are not only visible but accentuated (Ayuda, 2018). It is precisely these golden cracks that make the pottery more precious and beautiful. Having the object’s cracks filled with gold acknowledges the history of the object while also giving it new life (Ayuda, 2018). Associated with kintsugi is the Japanese philosophy of wabi-sabi, which embraces seeing beauty in things that are flawed or imperfect (Ayuda, 2018).

The ideas of kintsugi and wabi-sabi have been especially insightful as I consider their applicability to our lived experiences and personal narratives. Our lives are full of challenges, struggles, and moments that break us down. During these times or seasons, our sense of self might seem disjointed, fragmented, or even shattered - just like broken pottery. It may feel as if

our lives are in a state of chaos and our vulnerabilities are on full display. However, as we acknowledge the hurt and begin putting our lives back together, piece by piece, we start to experience healing. Our process of internally mending mirrors the process of golden joinery in kintsugi. As we heal from the pain or trauma in our lives, we are mending those cracks with gold, and eventually we might begin to see the beauty and value that can come from our struggles. It is almost paradoxical that the very parts of the bowl that broke, and were once most vulnerable, actually become the very places where the object is the strongest, most beautiful, and most valuable. This is one of my favourite illustrations of resilience.