THESIS

EXPLORING FORMER COLLEGIATE WOMEN ATHLETES' EXPERIENCES OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE IN THE COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING FORMER COLLEGIATE WOMEN ATHLETES' EXPERIENCES OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE IN THE COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

Historically, sport has been regarded as inherently good and beneficial in a variety of individual and societal domains; however, more recent research has begun to challenge this idea by examining one pervasive, negative practice within sport, emotionally abusive coaching practices. Emotionally abusive coaching practices are associated with a host of negative psychological, emotional, physical, social, educational, and sporting outcomes, with some lasting years after the athlete has left the competitive sporting role. Much of the literature examining the emotional abuse of athletes has focused on elite child athletes in Canada and the United Kingdom, with little to no research conducted in the United States (US) or on elite adult athletes. The purpose of this study was to retrospectively examine women athletes' perceptions of emotional abuse from a coach who is a man, the impact of emotional abuse on mental well-being and athletic performance, and the potential implications of power on athletes' perspectives and ability to report the abuse within collegiate sport in the United States. This study also aimed to examine the post-traumatic growth experiences, or lack thereof, in the years following the participants' exits from collegiate sport. Due to the relatively new and exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative approach was taken with a symbolic interactionist approach to grounded theory. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 former collegiate women athletes with 1-5 years distance from the competitive sporting role. Data was analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding techniques with adherence to the constant comparative method to ensure

theoretical saturation. An additional coder was employed to ensure inter-coder reliability in data analysis. Three themes were identified in alignment with the research questions; the first being the impact on athletes during and after their athletic careers, the second being the ways that athletes made sense of their experiences, and the third being the post-traumatic growth experiences reported. Findings demonstrated that emotionally abusive coaching practices are associated with a variety of negative short- and long-term outcomes for former collegiate women athletes in the United States. Moreover, the perceived power held by the coach impacted the ways that athletes made sense of their experiences. Finally, post-traumatic growth experiences were observed in all athletes studied. This study highlights the detrimental impact of emotionally abusive coaching practices on athletes and reinforces the need for athlete protection mechanisms in collegiate sport in the United States.

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Introduction

Engaging in any form of sport participation is commonly associated with a variety of positive outcomes including mental well-being, lower levels of depression and anxiety, improved social functioning, positive self-concept, improved cognitive functioning, and a variety of physical health benefits (Donaldson & Ronan, 2006; Eime et al., 2013; Marlier et al., 2015; McMahon et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Research has demonstrated that sport can act as a preventative mechanism for societal concerns such as health-related illness, crime, social exclusion, and educational engagement (Harrison & Narayan, 2003; Hartmann & Depro, 2006; Hills et al., 2011). Benefits of engaging in sport have even been observed at more elite levels. Studies have shown that individuals competing in collegiate sport demonstrate more conscientiousness, creativity, self-esteem, cultural acceptance, academic success, leadership ability, social-connectedness, and female empowerment than their non-competing peers (Armstrong & Oomen-Early, 2010; Blinde et al., 1994; Chen et al., 2010; Weight et al., 2014). For many of these reasons, sport has historically been regarded as inherently good and beneficial.

Although the research literature has largely observed positive outcomes in sport participation, some findings have also demonstrated considerable negative consequences (Coakley, 2007; Mills et al., 2019). Athletes may experience traumatic injury (e.g., ACL injury; Gianotti et al., 2009), immune system suppression (Dalle Carbonare et al., 2018), dysfunction in the hypothalamus-pituitary adrenal axis (Meeusen et al., 2004), amenorrhoea or bone density loss (Warren & Chua, 2008), sleep deprivation (Gleeson, 2007), increased anxiety and social isolation (Kavanaugh, 2014), increased alcohol consumption (Sønderlund et al, 2014),

overtraining and identity challenges (Schinke et al., 2018), and a variety of other negative outcomes when participating in sport. While current research points to harmful outcomes following sport participation for some individuals, specific practices may contribute to this finding with varying degrees of commonality. This study will focus primarily on one practice that contributes to harmful outcomes in sport participation: emotionally abusive coaching practices. These practices are related to a variety of negative outcomes for athletes including eating disorders, overtraining, suicidal behavior, lower self-esteem, interpersonal issues, and drop-out from sport (Brenner, 2007; Maffulli et al., 2010; Mullen et al., 1996).

This study will seek to explore former collegiate women athletes' experiences of emotional abuse from a coach who identifies as a man within the United States. It is the author's hope that the findings will shed light on the impact of emotionally abusive coaching practices, and the potential implications of power on athletes' perspectives and ability to report abuse. This study will also seek to understand former athletes' post-traumatic growth experiences, or lack thereof, following their exit from elite sport. It should be noted that the author is seeking to understand the experiences of women athletes in the present study; however, athletes with other gender identities (e.g., nonbinary, genderfluid, transgender, etc.) may experience similar challenges and experiences.

Women athletes were selected as the focus of this study due to the unique sociocultural context that sport exists within. Men's sports are valued over women's in a variety of domains (e.g., professional sport pay gap, collegiate resource allocation, media coverage; Zimbalist, 2019). Moreover, sport praises the traditionally masculine leadership practices of coaches who are men, despite the potential for harm (Burton & LaVoi, 2016). These factors in combination with women's vulnerability to power imbalances (Jowett et al., 2005; Rice, 2001), warrants

further examination of women athletes' sporting experiences. A qualitative form of inquiry will be used to understand the relatively understudied and complex experience of emotionally abusive coaching practices and gendered coach-athlete power dynamics. The use of qualitative methods can provide a richer understanding of constructs that may be difficult to capture through a quantitative lens (Streubert, 2011). Previous studies examining the emotional abuse of athletes in Canada and the United Kingdom have used similar methodology and yielded illuminating results (Gervis, 2009; Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Kavanaugh, 2014; Kerr, Willson, & Stirling, 2020; Stirling & Kerr, 2008a, 2009, 2013). To the best of the author's knowledge, no study exists to date that examines emotionally abusive coaching practices, the impact of such practices, the influence of power, and the post-traumatic growth experiences of former collegiate women athletes in the US.

Emotional Abuse in Sport

Research on abuse in sport has historically focused on the sexual abuse and harassment of athletes (Brackenridge, 1997; Kirby et al., 2000). However, more recent studies have begun to examine athletes' experiences of emotional abuse in sport (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Kavanaugh et al., 2017; Lopez et al., 2020; Stirling & Kerr, 2008a, 2009, 2013, 2014). Emotional abuse in sport is defined as:

> "A pattern of deliberate non-contact behaviors by a person within a critical relationship role that has the potential to be harmful. Acts of emotional abuse include physical behaviors, verbal behaviors, and acts of denying attention and support. These acts have the potential to be spurning, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting/corrupting, or deny emotional responsiveness, and may be harmful to an individual's affective, behavioral, cognitive or physical wellbeing" (Stirling & Kerr, 2008b, p. 178).

A critical relationship can be described as one that influences an individual's perception of safety, trust, and fulfillment of needs (Crooks & Wolfe, 2007). In a sporting context, the coach-athlete relationship is considered a critical relationship that mimics the dependence of a parent-child dynamic (Kerr & Stirling, 2017; Stirling & Kerr, 2009, 2013). The coach-athlete

relationship relies on a sense of trust (e.g., training that will lead to success), the perception of safety (e.g., training and competition will not cause injury or harm), and the fulfillment of needs (e.g., adequate attention, opportunities for success, etc.; Stirling & Kerr, 2013). As athletes progress into elite domains, such as collegiate sport, the coach-athlete relationship becomes more dependent in nature. Athletes in the collegiate sport domain spend copious amounts of time with coaches in training and competition settings (Donnelly, 1997). Athletes also rely on coaches for opportunities, scholarships, and wisdom to lead them to success (Tomlinson & Strachan, 1996). This dependency further exacerbates the power that the coach holds and can create the potential for emotional abuse.

Within recent years, a variety of media outlets have brought to light stories of emotionally abusive coaching within collegiate athletics. In a recent article discussing the "toxic culture" created by the women's ex-basketball coach Marlene Stollings of Texas Tech University, athletes described being called "disgusting," "grossly disproportionate," and "fat pig[s]" (Epstein & Libit, 2020). In addition to these demeaning remarks, athletes were forced to train through injury, criticized for displaying symptoms of mental illness, and were required to maintain an elevated heart rate in training and games, leading several athletes to begin taking over-the-counter painkillers. In a similar article, former athletes on the University of Washington track team accused former coach Greg Metcalf of "fat-shaming" athletes, grabbing women athletes' bodies to feel for fat, and creating a "police state" within the team by encouraging athletes to report on others about their nutrition or weekend plans (Gross et al., 2018). These examples highlight several common tenets of emotionally abusive coaching practices.

In a study examining the constituents of emotional abuse, Stirling and Kerr (2008b) demonstrated that emotionally abusive coaching practices can be experienced verbally,

physically, or via neglect in an individual or group setting. Physical behaviors may include hitting or throwing objects (e.g., water bottles, equipment, chairs) at athletes or in the presence of athletes. Verbal behaviors can include yelling, shouting, belittling, name-calling, humiliating, making demeaning comments (e.g., performance related), or making degrading comments (e.g., weight/physical appearance related). While the denial of attention and support can be constituted by ignoring behaviors or kicking athletes out of practice.

Gervis and Dunn (2004) observed that emotionally abusive coaching behaviors most commonly took the form of belittling, shouting, humiliating, or threatening in training and competition settings. In addition to these emotionally abusive tactics, scapegoating, rejecting, ignoring, and isolating were also reported by participants. One participant described the "aggressive" nature of her coach and the climate of fear that this created (Gervis & Dunn, 2004, p. 220). In another study, former elite women swimmers described experiencing frequent yelling, objects being thrown, the "silent treatment," and criticisms about one's weight (Stirling & Kerr, 2008a). One former athlete reported frequent weigh-ins and a 5% body-fat requirement for all team members, which eventually led to her dismissal from the team. Another study exploring destructive coaching experiences within collegiate athletes listed verbal and social persuasion, abusive language (e.g., yelling, shaming, intimidation, etc.), and harmful physiological and affective tactics as common emotionally abusive coaching practices endured (Weight et al., 2020). Emotional abuse can manifest in a variety of domains for athletes, making the impact more salient. For example, athletes may experience yelling and belittling from a coach in a training setting, as well as an expectation to lose weight outside of training. Emotionally abusive coaching practices in and out of the athletic setting have the potential to hold significant harm.

A variety of detrimental outcomes have been observed in athletes who have experienced emotional abuse from a coaching figure. Negative consequences have been detected in the following five domains: 1) psychological symptoms and behaviors (e.g., depression, anxiety, disordered eating, poor body image, sleep disturbances, sexual dysfunction, suicidal behavior, self-harm behaviors, substance misuse, low self-efficacy, low self-esteem, worthlessness); 2) emotional irregularities (e.g., emotional withdrawal, anger, fear, fatigue, loneliness, depressed mood); 3) physical health problems (e.g., somatic complaints, overtraining syndrome); 4) interpersonal difficulties (e.g., social isolation, attachment difficulties, engagement in rebellious behavior, aggression and violence toward others, compromised moral reasoning, a reduced sense of sympathy and empathy); 5) sporting consequences (e.g., decreased motivation to train, reduced enjoyment of sport, difficulty with skill acquisition, performance decrements, sport anxiety, burnout, willingness to cheat to win, loss of confidence, decreased commitment); and 6) educational problems (e.g., poor cognition, poor concentration, impairments in learning; Baker et al., 2000; De Beer, 2018; Gervis, 2009; Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Kavanaugh, 2014; Kerr et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2020; Mountjoy et al., 2016; Mullin et al., 1996; Stirling, 2011; Stirling & Kerr, 2008a, 2013; Vealey et al., 1998; Vertommen et al., 2018; Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2015).

Research findings suggest that not only can emotional abuse have a profound impact on the individual in the moment, but the negative consequences can endure long after the athlete has left the sporting role. In a study conducted by Gervis and Dunn (2004), the negative impact of emotional abuse was found to endure for up to ten years following retirement from sport for some participants. Further, findings from a study examining the long-term impact of physical and emotional abuse found that physical abuse increased participants' odds of attempting suicide

by almost five times, while emotional abuse increased participants' odds by almost twelve times (Mullin et al., 1996). Not only is this form of abuse deleterious to the individual over time, but it also holds the potential to be widely experienced by athletes at varying levels of competition.

Prevalence studies indicate that experiences of emotionally abusive coaching behaviors are far more common than previously recognized. In the Netherlands and Belgium, a large-scale prevalence study was conducted to examine interpersonal violence against children in sport (Vertommen et al., 2016). Findings indicated that 38% of respondents within all sporting levels surveyed had experienced psychological violence in sport. However, as athletes progressed to more competitive domains of sport (e.g., international competition), results indicated that 55% of respondents had experienced psychological violence. In a similar study conducted in the UK, Alexander et al. (2011) found that approximately 35% of respondents had experienced emotional harm as a child in their first or second sport from a coach or trainer. The percentage of respondents endorsing emotional harm from a coach climbed to 56% in the sample of international competitors. In a recent study conducted by Weight et al. (2020), 37% of collegiate athletes taking part in the study identified as experiencing destructive coaching practices (e.g., abusive language, affective tactics, and physical tactics). These findings are consistent with the previous literature which indicates that athletes at higher levels of competition, often those who are older, face more emotionally abusive coaching practices (Gervis, 2009; Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Stirling & Kerr, 2008a; Tofler et al., 1996).

Much of the previous literature has focused on experiences of emotional abuse in child athletes (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Hartill & O'Gorman, 2016; Stafford et al., 2015), but it is also necessary to acknowledge that older athletes may face similar abusive coaching experiences and need safeguarding. The gap in the literature may be attributable to the common assumption that

adults are less susceptible to abuse. Within the United States, children under the age of 18 and elders (in most US states individuals who are 65+ or those who are physically or mentally impaired) are protected by law from physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect (Goldman et al., 2018; Zeranski & Halgin, 2011). Consequently, adults between the ages of 18 and elder status are left unprotected legally from abuse. Although a large segment of the population is perceived to not need protection, research regarding emotional abuse in interpersonal relationships suggests that this form of abuse is widely experienced by adults. In a prevalence study conducted by the National Intimate Partner & Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), emotional abuse by a partner was reported by nearly half of all individuals identifying as women and men within the United States in their lifetime (Black et al., 2011). In addition, the emotional abuse of adults has been observed in a variety of other settings such as the workplace (Keashly & Harvey, 2005), college or university campuses (Vidourek, 2017), the church (Novšak et al., 2012), and social media (Stephenson et al., 2018). These findings suggest that emotional abuse may be more prevalent for adults than previously understood.

Contrary to previous thought, there is no age limitation to athletes' experiences of emotional abuse (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). In fact, collegiate athletes are uniquely vulnerable to emotionally abusive coaching practices. This vulnerability can largely be attributed to the power differential between coach and athlete (e.g., age, expertise, scholarship control, playing time), as well as a lack of student-athlete protections within the NCAA. It is a common misperception that collegiate athletes hold power, autonomy, and authority over their athletic experience since they are adults at an elite level of competition. However, athletes' experiences are often quite the opposite. For this reason, the emotional abuse of adult collegiate athletes is an area of research that needs to be addressed.

The Culture of Sport

The success-oriented culture of sport is largely to blame for the acceptance and tolerance of emotionally abusive coaching practices. Within sporting culture, the success achieved by athletes is acknowledged and praised, while the methods used to get there are often ignored (Gervis & Dunn, 2004). Often, athletes and coaches alike believe that success acts to "justify the means" or the emotionally abusive coaching practices experienced leading up to competition (Gervis & Dunn, 2004). Stirling and Kerr (2008a) observed that when elite athletes were achieving success, emotionally abusive coaching behaviors were tolerated and left unquestioned. However, when athletes began experiencing failure or performance decrements, emotionally abusive coaching behaviors became difficult to endure and could lead to athlete rebellion. These findings suggest that success can act as a moderator between experiencing emotional abuse and the perception of this experience.

Along with the overvaluation of success in sport also comes the prioritization of short-term athletic performance over long-term athlete well-being (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Tiivas and Billington-Wood (2015) have pointed out that athletes are treated as objects and commodified for their talents in a sport setting. Often, sporting culture fails to acknowledge the athlete as a human being with rights; thus, increasing the risk of poor coaching practices such as emotional abuse. In another study, Cook and Cole (2001) argued that when the pursuit of success overshadows other reasons for individual participation in sport, the athlete is no longer viewed as an individual, but instead a tool for success. This line of thought coincides with the perception that an athlete's body is often considered a separate entity from the individual (Kerr, 2010). The perceived detachment of the individual from their body can leave athletes vulnerable to

exploitation and abuse in the name of performance; thus, risking long-term harm in the interest of short-term success.

The disembodied perception of athletes is further reinforced through the competitive nature of sport. Often, coaches within sport preach an "all in" or "want it enough" attitude (Pike & Scott, 2016). These attitudes can influence athletes to accept and make sacrifices that jeopardize their health and well-being, further reinforcing the perception that the individual is separate from their body. Bringer et al. (2001) concluded that once athletes are willing to sacrifice anything in the name of performance, any abuse that athletes may face will be normalized in the pursuit of success. This mindset may be further reinforced by mentalities that are valued and encouraged in the culture of sport, such as mental toughness.

Athletes are frequently praised for their ability to endure challenges and make difficult sacrifices to attain success. These abilities are commonly referred to as mental toughness in the athletic realm. Mental toughness has been described as, "the psychological edge that enables an athlete to cope better than opponents with the demands of training, competition and the lifestyle of an athlete; being consistent, determined, focused, confident and in control under pressure" (Jones, 2002, p. 213). Elite athletes are often required to build mental toughness to compete at a high level and endure demanding training (Schaal et al., 2011). However, mental toughness in sport can encourage athletes to push through barriers which should be respected. For example, a mentally tough athlete may compete through injury, risking long-term physical harm and performance decrements (Crust, 2008).

Mental toughness may also mask the impact of emotionally abusive coaching practices. By encouraging athletes to endure any hardship faced (Brackenridge et al., 2005), the treatment received by one's own coach may be viewed as another area to push through. In a qualitative

study conducted by Stirling (2013), coaches reported utilizing emotionally abusive coaching practices to "toughen up" athletes for competition. Researchers have suggested that developing and encouraging mental toughness may act as a disguise for emotionally abusive coaching practices in sport (Kerr & Stirling, 2017; Owusu-Sekyere & Gervis, 2016). Therefore, a trait that is often heralded as an athlete's greatest strength (Weinberg et al., 2011), may also serve to hide a detrimental and reprehensible part of sport.

The overvaluation of mental toughness is commonly found in the media depicting sport. In a performance that is considered one of the most prolific athletic feats in American history, Kerri Strug, a member of the 1996 U.S. Olympic gymnastics team, completed her final vaulting performance on a sprained ankle to secure gold medals for the U.S. team (Larson, 2020). Before taking the final vault, Strug can be seen telling her coach that she couldn't feel her lower leg, which was followed by encouragement from her coach to finish her performance despite her pain. Following this performance, Strug was left with a third-degree lateral ankle sprain. She would also be forever immortalized by the media as the heroic, brave, and mentally tough athlete that future athletes would idealize for generations to come. This example portrays the mental toughness and potentially emotionally abusive practices utilized by a coach to push an athlete to compete through injury at the risk of long-term physical harm.

The media's representation of sport projects dominant discourses, cultural narratives, values, beliefs, and practices present in the sporting world (McGannon & McMahon, 2016). In turn, these depictions can influence coaches', athletes', and others' perceptions and expectations in sport. Stirling and Kerr (2014) have observed that the media's depiction of coaching can influence athletes to accept and normalize emotionally abusive coaching practices. In a study examining 19 popular film portrayals of coach-athlete interactions, Kerr et al. (2016) observed

346 emotionally abusive interactions consistent with the definition of emotional abuse given on p. 3 of the current document. Cinematic depictions of emotional abuse from head coaches most frequently included verbal abuse, contact and non-contact physical abuse, and the denial of attention and support.

Kerr et al. (2016) have suggested that the acceptance and normalization of emotional abuse in sport may be attributable to the media's depiction of coaches. Often, coaches in the media are glorified for their success, and shown engaging in emotionally abusive coaching practice without consequence. The media's portrayal of these harmful coaching practices may have the potential to impact generations of athletes and the culture of sport at large. Young, up-and-coming coaches could be one group with the potential for significant harm. The media's association of success with emotionally abusive coaching practices may influence new or future coaches to utilize these harmful practices on their future athletes (Zehntner et al., 2017). When emotional abuse in sport is normalized and accepted, as the media has contributed to, this practice has the potential to be prolific and do great harm unto athletes.

In addition to the influence of the media, Bachand (2020) suggested that gender bias within sport may be a learned trait by coaches. Emotionally abusive coaching practices used against women athletes may be an ethical blind spot taught by the culture of sport and the values of masculinity. This finding is in alignment with the concept of bracketed morality, a term used to describe the tolerance of unethical behavior such as cheating or aggression within the sporting domain that would otherwise be condemned in other settings. A study from Djordjic (2019) described athletes as having less mature moral reasoning than non-athletes, men as less mature morally than women, and athletes engaged in sport participation for long periods of time, such as elite or high-level athletes, as less morally inclined than those with less time in the sporting

domain or in less competitive settings. Given that many collegiate coaches are previous elite athletes themselves, many have been engaged in the sporting domain for much of their lives, and the majority are men, the potential is higher for less mature moral reasoning within coaching.

Sport normalizes practices that would be considered illicit in other settings (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Stirling & Kerr, 2008a, 2014). For example, in a school setting, teachers are unable to yell insults at students or require physical punishment for a poor grade. However, in a training session for sport, it is not uncommon for athletes to be yelled at, ignored, have items thrown at them, or be punished for poor performance. Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) observed that athletes expect emotionally abusive behaviors upon their entrance into the competitive sporting world. In fact, many athletes associated successful outcomes in sport with emotionally abusive coaching practices (Stirling & Kerr, 2008a). Emotional abuse is even perceived as positive and largely not harmful for elite athletes or those who achieve sporting success (Gervis et al., 2016). These findings point to the normalization of emotionally abusive coaching practices in sport, and how this acceptance can serve to perpetuate harmful outcomes for athletes. The normalization of emotional abuse has much to do with the media's representation of these practices in sport, the cultural values that promote success at any cost, and the lack of consistent protections for athletes by the NCAA.

Illicit practices in sport, such as emotional abuse, are left largely unchecked due to the NCAA's hands-off approach to protecting athletes. Historically, the NCAA has denied holding any "legal duty to protect student-athletes" despite originally being "founded to protect young people from the dangerous and exploitative athletic practices of the time" (Singer, 2013, para. 2). Instead, responsibility often falls to individual universities under NCAA student-athlete protections such as Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 and the Constitutional

Articles in the NCAA's Divisional Manuals. Title IX seeks to protect students from sexual harassment and discrimination within educational, extracurricular, or athletic realms of school in educational institutions that receive federal funding (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2011). Similarly, bylaws 2.1.1 (i.e., Responsibility for Control), 2.1.2 (i.e., Scope of Responsibility), 2.2.3 (i.e., Health and Safety), and 2.2.4 (i.e., Student-Athlete/Coach Relationship) in the NCAA Division I Manual Constitution, Article 2 each place responsibility on member institutions to protect and promote the well-being of student-athletes (National Collegiate Athlete Association, 2019, p. 3).

Although educational institutions bear a large responsibility in the protection of student-athletes, universities are often far more concerned with avoiding the expense of a coaching scandal, protecting themselves from legal action, and avoiding public embarrassment (Greenberg, 2018, slide 52). Kerr and Stirling (2015) attribute this phenomenon to the cultural values upheld at a competitive university. The most important of which being revenue generation, positive alumni relations, and competitive athletic performance. These values can encourage those in positions of authority to value institutional conservation over athlete well-being. Therefore, instead of intervening in cases of emotional abuse, authority figures may ignore the coach's behavior or stifle athletes' voices.

Power of the Coach

Coaches are given significant power over athletes, parents, and administrators in a sporting context (Brackenridge, 1997). The coach holds expertise, knowledge, access to resources, past success, and a reputation, all which athletes seek to benefit from (Tomlinson & Strachan, 1996). Stirling and Kerr (2009) observed that athletes often idolize their coaches and view them as the key to success with bountiful knowledge. The "all-knowing" abilities that

coaches are perceived to possess, grants them authority that is rarely challenged (Brackenridge, 1997). For this reason, the motives of a coach are seldom questioned when harm may be taking place.

In a team setting, coaches are viewed by others, and often themselves, as holding similar knowledge or expertise to that of a medical doctor, psychologist or therapist, dietician, physiologist, and/or athletic trainer (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). The control that a coach exerts in a sporting setting over athletes may proliferate into a variety of areas, and in turn may isolate athletes from other supporting sporting staff (e.g., athletic trainer, nutritionist, sport psychologist, etc.). Yorganci (1993) observed that controlling coaching behaviors could extend to athletes' lives outside of sport including areas such as sleep, diet or weight, social life, attire, or sex life. The extensive expertise that coaches are believed to hold is instrumental in establishing and sustaining control over athletes. This authority can encourage athletes to distrust their own inclinations or judgment which may lead to training through sickness, injury, or mental illness inappropriately.

The coach's power and authority are sustained through their ability to develop talent and achieve success in sport (Brackenridge, 1997). As athletes progress into more competitive domains, coaches may begin to hold a higher level of control and dominance. This control can spread over the private spheres of an athlete's life, even extending into areas such as one's body (Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997). The considerable power held by coaches can also create an asymmetrical coach-athlete dependency, which may negatively impact an athlete's ability to report maltreatment without consequence (Smits et al., 2017). Athletes may experience intimidation or fear of losing their athletic career if they question the authority of a coach (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Therefore, abuse is often normalized within a sporting context to cope

with maltreatment. Once athletes begin to normalize coaching abuse, the dissonance between the treatment received in sport and other settings, such as school, disappears (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). Women athletes are left especially vulnerable to the normalization of emotional abuse in sport. As a group with historically less power and a vulnerability for interpersonal power imbalances (Jowett et. al, 2005; Rice, 2001), the potential for experiencing emotionally abusive coaching practices is higher.

Within the US, women student-athletes make up 44% of all NCAA collegiate athletes (Wimmer Schwarb, 2018). Since the implementation of Title IX in 1972, women's participation in sport has risen from 1 in 26 competing in high school sport to 1 in every 2.5 (Braun & Maniaci, 2011). Implementation of the law has shown considerable gains for women athletes; however, women are still victimized by the patriarchal values upheld in sport. Observational data suggests that in a training setting, women athletes are treated as inferior, viewed as a distraction to men, and are given less attention by coaches (Lensky, 1992). If a woman athlete experiences emotional abuse from a coach, the man-dominated coaching profession of sport and perceived authority of the coach can pose significant barriers to an athlete's attempts to report the abuse (Walker & Bopp, 2011). de Haan and Knoppers (2020) qualitatively found that international elite rowing coaches who are men drew on the discourse of the gender hierarchy despite outwardly describing gender equality. This finding may suggest that coaches may be leveraging the power dynamic between coaches who are men and their women athletes unknowingly.

The profession of coaching is largely dominated by men. This dominance is further reinforced through the valuation of masculinity in sporting culture and the tendency for men to be promoted over women in a variety of sporting domains (de Haan & Norman, 2020). In the coaching domain, coaches who are men hold about 97% of all head coaching positions for

collegiate men's teams (Stark, 2017). However, the same is not true for women; in fact, only 42% of the head coaching positions for collegiate women's sports are held by women, while men hold about 58% of the positions (LaVoi, 2019). In addition to the man-dominated nature of coaching, coaches are granted immense power and privilege in the sporting world due to the perceived authority of their position in society and their perceived sporting expertise (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). The power that coaches who are men hold in sport through the many privileges afforded to them may act to discount women athletes' voices in a range of situations, from objections to training to the reporting of emotional abuse.

In a study concerning the sexual harassment of women athletes, Lensky (1992) observed that women athletes are expected to possess high amounts of assertiveness and mental toughness while rarely questioning manipulative or abusive behaviors from a coach. Experiencing verbal, physical, or neglectful coaching behaviors may be considered by the athlete as another area to show resilience or "push through." Moreover, relationship between coaches who are men and women athletes often breed a sense of dependency instead of autonomy (Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997). This dependency, in combination with women's vulnerability for interpersonal power imbalances (Jowett et al., 2005; Rice, 2001), creates an exacerbated differential in power. At the heart of experiences of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse are the constructs of power and control (National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, 2013). Tactics such as coercion and threats, intimidation, isolation, economic abuse, and the use of male privilege all allow the abuser to establish and sustain control. Emotionally abusive coaching practices in sport are sustained by similar means within the constructs of power and control in the relationship between coaches who are men and women athletes.

It should be considered that many coaches receive considerable institutional pressure to produce athletic success. Coaches rely on their athletes' success to build a reputation, livelihood, and fruitful career (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Many coaches may believe that they are working in the best interest of their athletes, but career advancements that are based on success may encourage actions that go against athlete well-being (Donnelly, 1997). Stirling & Kerr (2014) observed that coaching abuse often lacks malicious intent or the awareness of the potential for harm. Therefore, institutional pressure on coaches may unknowingly encourage emotionally abusive coaching practices.

The pressure on revenue and nonrevenue sports is a prime example of institutional pressure that may encourage harmful coaching practices such as emotional abuse. Within revenue sports (e.g., football, basketball, etc.) many coaches' recruitment budgets grow as their team's success increases. Colleges provide more scholarship money for recruitment to sports that bring more money to the school, such as football, men's basketball, and sometimes women's basketball (Paule & Gilson, 2010). For this reason, coaches may engage in emotionally abusive coaching practices to attain success that can allow them to recruit higher-caliber athletes in coming years. When considering non-revenue sports, such as golf, cross-country, or soccer, coaches may utilize emotionally abusive coaching practices to achieve success for promotions to more competitive programs, salary increases, personal achievement (e.g., NCAA Division 1 National Championship qualifying team), or reputation building for the institution.

Post-Traumatic Growth

Previous research has tended to examine either the negative or positive outcomes of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Kavanaugh et al., 2017; Lopez et al., 2020; Stirling & Kerr, 2008a); however, a wider examination of the literature

suggests that both outcomes can occur, even within the same individual (Kavanaugh, 2014; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Experiencing emotional abuse can be distressing or even traumatic, but somewhat paradoxically, this experience may also allow for positive growth. This multi-faceted phenomenon may be explained by a skill that can make athletes more vulnerable to tolerating emotional abuse and interestingly, may help them survive these experiences. This asset, often described as mental toughness or resilience, encourages athletes to face challenges head-on and endure failure or setbacks. Therefore, as athletes face emotional abuse in a sporting context and endure the experience, they may also begin to experience growth more readily.

Prevalence data suggests that 40-70% of people experience some form of benefit after a traumatic event, such as emotional abuse (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998). Positive psychological growth following a traumatic experience has been described as post-traumatic growth or by other terms such as adversarial growth (Linley & Joseph, 2003). Post-traumatic growth can be defined as "a significant beneficial change in cognitive and emotional life beyond previous levels of adaptation, psychological functioning, or life awareness" in the aftermath of trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). Studies examining this concept delve into the lived experiences of individuals who have undergone accidents, illnesses, forms of violence, and/or other threatening events (Hefferon et al., 2010; Woodward & Joseph, 2003). Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) identified five key facets of post-traumatic growth which included: new possibilities, relating to others, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life.

Post-traumatic growth is a unique experience that does not take place in every individual after an intensely distressing or traumatic event. In fact, experiencing post-traumatic growth depends on how the event was appraised by the individual, not the event itself (Woodward & Joseph, 2003). For some, experiencing emotional abuse may be perceived as intensely

threatening, distressing, and/or it may have poorly impacted performance; therefore, the experience has more potential to hold trauma. While for others, emotional abuse may have been perceived as a minor stressor or an aspect of sport that positively impacted performance; thus, the experience may not hold trauma or require much healing.

Although criteria for post-traumatic growth differs within the literature, the overarching theme holds that after experiencing trauma or suffering, some individuals not only recover, but flourish more than before the event occurred (Frankl, 1984; Hefferon et al., 2010). As Linley & Joseph (2004) noted, "It is through this process of struggling with adversity that changes may arise that propel the individual to a higher level of functioning than which existed prior to the event" (p. 11). The literature on post-traumatic growth has identified a variety of factors that contribute to the development of this phenomenon. Qualitative data from Woodward and Joseph (2003) found three distinct themes that instigated growth: an inner drive toward growth (e.g., the will to live), vehicles of change (e.g., awakening of responsibility, love and nurturing, etc.), and psychological changes (e.g., changes in self-perception). Skills commonly shared by elite athletes, such as mental toughness, may contribute to the inner drive toward growth; therefore, post-traumatic growth may ensue more readily. For this reason, the athlete population may hold unique experiences of post-traumatic growth.

Much of the literature examining athletes' abilities to endure challenges focuses on resilience. Often, resilience and post-traumatic growth are considered similar processes. However, resilience differs from post-traumatic growth in that resilience implies a return to normal functioning while post-traumatic growth is considered a significant, positive improvement in functioning after trauma (Tedeschi et al., 1998). Post-traumatic growth also occurs more gradually after the individual has had time to process the trauma (Tedeschi &

Calhoun, 1995, 2004), while resilience is considered an immediate ability to return to normal functioning following the distressing or traumatic event. The multi-faceted and relatively unexplored nature of post-traumatic growth in sport can best be understood through a qualitative lens with individuals who have distance from the sporting role.

The benefits of examining the post-traumatic growth experiences of athletes are plenty. For the researcher, examining post-traumatic growth from a qualitative perspective may allow for a richer understanding of women athletes' growth experiences, or lack thereof, as well as the catalysts or hinderances in this process. For the participant, qualitative methods may provide a sense-making, therapeutic experience in the telling of their story (Blanchard, 2013). For the scientific community, a qualitative understanding may inform practitioners in assisting emotional abuse survivors who don't instinctively develop post-traumatic growth (Creely, 2018). In newer areas of study, qualitative research can provide a deeper, more complex understanding of the individual's lived experience than what can be understood through a quantitative research lens (Streubert, 2011). Historically, the literature examining similar topics has focused on athletes' experiences of resilience following challenging events. The current study has the potential to shed light on a different development process by examining the significant, life-altering form of post-traumatic growth, following emotional abuse in sport.

Current Study

Within recent years, research on emotional abuse within the coach-athlete relationship has gained traction (Alexander et al., 2011; Coakley, 2007; Dietz, 2015; Gervis, 2009; Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Kavanaugh, 2014; Kavanaugh et al., 2017; Kerr & Stirling, 2017; Kerr et al., 2020; Krahn, 2015; Lopez et al., 2020; Mountjoy et al., 2016; Smits et al., 2017; Stafford et al., 2015; Stirling & Kerr, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2013, 2014; Vertommen et al., 2016; Vertommen et al,

2018; Zehntner et al., 2017). Findings from these studies have highlighted the detrimental outcomes that are associated with emotionally abusive coaching practices. The acceptance and normalization of emotional abuse in sport warrants action to be taken in research and practice. It is the author's view that any form of abuse in sport, no matter the prevalence, is unacceptable. However, few studies examining the emotional abuse of athletes have been conducted within the US. Even fewer studies have examined the experiences and outcomes of emotional abuse in US collegiate athletes, despite many well-publicized incidents of abuse (e.g., Mike Rice at Rutgers University, Greg Metcalf at the University of Washington, Larry Eustacy at Colorado State University; Marlene Stollings at Texas Tech; Jim Moore and Stacy Metro at University of Oregon; Greenberg, 2018, slide 2, 6; West, 2018; Epstein & Libit, 2020). It is of the utmost importance to examine collegiate athletes' experiences of emotional abuse from a coach to eradicate this form of abuse in sport.

Given that the previous literature has shown how the power held by a coach can influence athletes' experiences of abuse and perceived ability to report (Stirling & Kerr, 2009), this study sought to qualitatively explore the influence of power, or lack thereof, on former collegiate women athletes' experiences of emotional abuse within the US. More specifically, this author hoped to examine athletes' perceptions of abuse, the impact of abuse on performance and mental well-being when in the sporting role, and post-traumatic growth experiences, or lack thereof, after leaving the sporting role. Former athletes with distance from the collegiate sporting role were gathered to examine their perceptions and insights on the emotionally abusive coaching practices endured. Women athletes were the focus of this study as to understand the impact of power in the coach-athlete relationship. Since women may be more vulnerable to power differentials in the coach-athlete relationship, as suggested in previous literature (Jowett et al.,

2005; Rice, 2001), this population was deemed necessary for the study at hand. Examining power differentials between women athletes and their coaches who are men can shed light on the influence of power in the experiences and outcomes of emotional abuse for a group with historically less power.

Significance

Much of the literature on emotional abuse in sport focuses on child or elite athletes in Canada or the UK. This study sought to explore the lived experiences of former collegiate athletes in the US, an area that has been examined sparingly. Collegiate athletes are a unique and vulnerable population due to the culture of NCAA sports. In this culture, coaches are given extreme authority to control their athletes' education and athletic experience. Coaches determine playing time, eligibility, an athlete's schedule, scholarship money, among others. These domains of control can impact an athlete's ability to earn a degree, compete athletically, or can impact the fiscal obligation and time requirements required to do well in college. The unique power imbalance that exists between coach and athlete in US collegiate sport and the potential for emotional abuse within this relationship requires examination. This study shed light on the often downplayed and normalized emotionally abusive experiences of former collegiate women athletes.

Findings were consistent with the existing literature on emotional abuse in sport and as such, current protections of emotionally abusive collegiate coaches should be challenged. These protections are ingrained and often favor the more powerful individual (coach) over the reporter of abuse (athlete). Results also illuminated the barriers to reporting abuse and the negative impact that emotional abuse can have on an athlete physically, mentally, emotionally, and beyond. Findings provided evidence that coaching abuse can reduce athletic achievement, which

should encourage institutions to implement regulations and additional protections for athletes. In sum, the author hopes that the findings may inform future prevention and safeguarding of the unique and vulnerable population that is collegiate athletes.

Methods

The methodology took a symbolic interactionist approach to grounded theory. Grounded theory allows the theory to be generated from the data, instead of testing a hypothesis as is typical in other forms of research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theorists believe that the understanding of a phenomenon can be found within the lived experience and subsequent interpretation of such experience. This method of inquiry applies inductive reasoning to observations, interactions, and materials gathered in the research process (Charmaz, 2006). New or developing areas of inquiry often utilize this theoretical approach (Creswell & Poth, 1998). Moreover, the methods of grounded theory encourage a continual interplay between data collection and data analysis which aids in inductive conceptualization and ongoing data generation (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

This methodology was deemed appropriate for the present study because research examining the lived experiences of emotional abuse and power dynamics for collegiate women athletes within the US are essentially nonexistent in the literature. Furthermore, allowing themes to emerge from the data was appropriate for examining the unique relationship between athlete emotional abuse, the implications, and the subsequent post-traumatic growth or lack thereof. Although the influence of power on athletes' experiences of emotional abuse has been explored in the previous literature (Stirling & Kerr, 2009), this understanding did not rigidly shape the qualitative inquiry, but instead provided background knowledge that informed the author's questions. In addition, space was created for responses that fell outside of the author's expectations and understanding of the influence of power.

Participants

The participant pool was made up of 8 previous collegiate women athletes coached by men, from a variety of team and individual sports to broadly understand emotionally abusive coaching experiences in a variety of settings. Participants were gathered from a variety of teams and areas with no athletes training or competing on the same team. Inclusion criteria for the study included past participation in collegiate sport (NCAA Division 1-3), current retirement from collegiate sport (1-5 years from initial retirement), identifying as a woman, being at least 18 years of age, verbal proficiency in the English language, and having experienced poor treatment by a collegiate coach who is a man. Similar studies have effectively examined athletes' self-reported experiences of abuse within a similar retirement time frame (Stirling & Kerr, 2008a, 2009). Time away from the sporting role allows athletes to broaden their perspective, reflect effectively on their athletic experience, and encourages insight around the emotionally abusive coaching practices endured (Burke, 2001; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Stirling & Kerr, 2009).

Regarding participant demographics, participant one competed as a D1 collegiate soccer goalie in two regions of the country, participant two competed as a D1 collegiate mid-distance swimmer in the Midwest region of the country, participant 3 competed as a D1 collegiate mid-distance track and field runner in the Northwest region of the country, participant four competed as a D3 collegiate soccer goalie in the Southeastern region of the country, participant five competed as a D3 collegiate basketball player in the Northeast region of the country, participant six competed as a D2 collegiate volleyball player in the Southwest region of the country, participant seven competed as a D3 collegiate track and field thrower in the Midwest region of the country, and participant eight competed as a D1 collegiate track and field high jumper in the Northeast region of the country.

Former collegiate women athletes with time away from the sporting role were selected for this study due to the increased risk of experiencing emotional abuse from coaches who are men in college. Previous studies suggest that athletes engaged in elite levels of competition are more at risk for experiencing abusive coaching practices (Gervis & Dunn, 2004). Moreover, elite athletes who have competed in collegiate sport may possess unique experiences of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. The power differential between coach and athlete is exacerbated in collegiate sport due to the extensive authority given to collegiate coaches (e.g., control of scholarship, playing time, etc.), the lack of athlete protections afforded by the NCAA, and the perceived expertise of college coaches. For women athletes, the power differential between them and coaches who are men is even more pronounced. As discussed earlier, previous studies have highlighted the unique vulnerability that women may hold for interpersonal power imbalances (Jowett et al. 2005; Rice, 2001); thus, examining the experiences of former collegiate women athletes contributes new, unexplored knowledge to the understanding of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship.

Recruitment

After attaining approval for the study from Colorado State University's Institutional Review Board, 8 participants were gathered via a snowball sampling technique (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The researcher did not have a previous relationship with any of the study participants. Initial participants were gathered via word of mouth from a limited group of known retired athletes who had a coaching experience that could be described as emotionally abusive. After recruiting the first two participants, recruitment information for the study was shared within an online Facebook group consisting of a community of former collegiate athletes who are interested in mental health. The final six participants were recruited within this Facebook

group. Since individuals were unlikely to use the word “abusive” when describing their experience, specific examples of emotionally abusive coaching were used instead to recruit participants. For example, potential participants were asked, “Did you experience poor treatment from a collegiate coach that caused you distress or harm? Examples of poor treatment can include physical behaviors (e.g., hitting or throwing objects, etc.), verbal behaviors (e.g., shouting, belittling, humiliating, name-calling, etc.), neglectful behaviors (e.g., ignoring, denying athletes support, kicking athletes out of practice, etc.), or others.”

Following recruitment, athletes were contacted by email to assess interest in study participation. Interested participants were then given a recruitment questionnaire that ensured they met the inclusion criteria for the study. If interested participants met the inclusion criteria for the study, individuals were then sent a consent form detailing the study purpose, the focus of the interview, their role in the study, their rights as participants, their right to confidentiality, information about audio recordings, and the risks and benefits to participants. Participants were given the option to discuss any questions or concerns with the interviewer prior to signing the consent form. Once signed, interview sessions were arranged via Zoom. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was sent a unique Zoom link, interviewer and interviewee were in private locations for the interview, the interviewee was made aware of the limits to confidentiality (e.g., information will be transcribed and used for the study, potential for someone to enter the Zoom call, etc.). The interviewer also reviewed the interviewee’s rights to confidentiality (e.g., identifying information will be removed) and informed the interviewee of their right to stop at any time, omit information, and/or withdraw from the study. Although conducting interviews over Zoom came with added risk to confidentiality, the researcher believed that the benefits outweighed the potential for harm. Video call allowed for the

interviewer to assess the participant's visible distress and determine if the interviewee needed a break or to stop entirely. By utilizing visual cues, the potential for harm was reduced.

Ethical Considerations

Exploring experiences of emotional abuse was a sensitive topic for many individuals. Dedication to a sport, especially in elite settings, requires investing emotional, mental, and physical capital. Some participants experienced a variety of difficult emotions and memories when discussing emotionally abusive coaching practices. For this reason, participants were screened initially via a recruitment questionnaire to assess for current distress level and to decide whether speaking about this sensitive topic was appropriate. A structured interview distress protocol, modeled after an existing protocol developed by Draucker et al. (2009), was utilized to examine four areas: current significant stress, severe emotional problems, current abuse in a relationship, and thoughts of harming oneself. If the participant's current emotional state was deemed appropriate for the study, they were scheduled for an interview.

To aid with data analysis, interviews were recorded for transcription. Prior to starting the interview, participants were informed of their right to confidentiality, the limits of confidentiality, the interview process, the recording and transcription details, and their ability to stop the interview, omit information, and/or withdraw completely from the study at any time. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the participant's transcription prior to data analysis. Participants were assigned a personal code that corresponded to their transcription and contact information. Any identifying information (e.g., phone numbers, initials, Zoom link, etc.) was kept in a secure document that was password protected and only accessible to the interviewer. Following the completion of the study, contact information was

destroyed and transcriptions were saved in an encrypted hard drive for potential future research usage.

During the interview, questions were handled in a sensitive manner. The participant's emotional state dictated the intensity and direction of the interview. At the beginning and during the interview, participants were reminded that they could decline to answer a question, take a break, reschedule, or terminate at any time. If a participant became upset during the interview, a second distress protocol was followed, detailed in Appendix C, to appropriately manage the participant's emotional state. Distress was categorized within three sections: an expected emotional response, acute emotional distress beyond what is expected, or distress reflecting imminent danger of the participant. According to the distress level, the researcher was prepared to respond to the participant in accordance with the distress protocol (Draucker et al., 2009). The distress protocol was not used for any of the participants, as significant distress was not observed in any of the interviewees. Following the interview, participants were provided with a debriefing document that included a list of counseling services in their location of residence if they wished to speak to a mental health provider.

Data Collection and Analysis

A total of 8 interviews with individual participants who met the inclusion criteria for the study were conducted. These interviews were semi-structured in nature. This format allowed for an adherence to the topic areas while also inviting open discussion between the researcher and participant. The focus of interviews centered around the former athlete's experiences of emotional abuse, the implications of emotional abuse, and experiences, or lack thereof, of post-traumatic growth. If discussed in a participant's experience, the potential influence of power held by the coach was also explored. The length of an interview was left to the discretion of the

participant. Interviews lasted anywhere from 60-180 minutes, which is similar to the length of interviews in similar studies (Stirling & Kerr, 2008a).

It should be noted, that prior to the start of the interview, the interviewer did not disclose her past collegiate coaching experience with the interviewee. Interviews began with a general question inquiring about the athlete's collegiate experience and relationship with their coach. After, questions began to probe further into the experiences of emotionally abusive coaching faced by the athlete and the implications. For example, questions included, "Did you ever experience any coaching behaviors that you perceived as problematic or harmful?" Or "Did this experience cause you any emotional distress? Did you feel that it impacted your athletic performance?" Following a discussion around experiences of emotional abuse and the implications, the participant was then asked about their experiences, or lack thereof, of post-traumatic growth. Questions included, "Do you feel you have grown since leaving the sporting role? If so, how?" If the underlying theme of power was mentioned in the participant's answers, the implications of coaching power on athletes' experiences of emotional abuse were explored. The researcher also probed further into participants' answers if deemed appropriate. Interviews followed a set list of open-ended questions to ensure adequate discussion around the topics of interest and data saturation. A complete list of the potential interview questions is in Appendix B.

During the interview, the researcher took general notes to focus the analysis of themes and meaning units. These notes were discussed with the participant at the end of the interview to ensure accuracy in interpretation. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim with the exclusion of filler language (e.g., "um," "ah"). The researcher reviewed each individual transcript several times to gain familiarity with the data before analysis. Initially, open coding

was used to begin categorizing the information. Following the open coding process, axial coding techniques were deployed to interconnect the categories created in the preliminary stage. Finally, selective coding techniques were used to sort the data into higher order core categories and to build a storyline. During this stage of analysis, the constant comparative method (CCM) was employed. The CCM is a key facet of grounded theory, focused around raising the conceptual level of data analysis and directing ongoing data generation (Birks & Mills, 2015). This method involves the constant comparison between coding in the initial stages, categorization and organization of meaning units, and new versus older data (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The CCM was utilized until the data reached theoretical saturation (e.g., when new data does not add material to the existing theoretical categories), indicating an end in data collection (Birks & Mills, 2015). Data analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti software.

To ensure inter-coder reliability, a graduate research assistant was recruited. It is important to note that both coders had prior experiences in the sporting world with different interactions to power. The lead researcher competed collegiately on the women's cross country and track teams at her undergraduate university and the research assistant competed as a high school gymnast. The research assistant had also coached women's high school gymnastics for several years. The researchers both had prior experiences within athletics which had the potential to shape their interpretations of the data and the power dynamics at play. Further discussion regarding this point is included in the limitations section.

Following recruitment of the research assistant, she engaged in a qualitative research methodology training with the researcher to ensure appropriate knowledge prior to data analysis. The training process included a review of basic ethical standards, an in-depth summary of the study, a review of basic qualitative research methods, an overview of grounded theory

methodology, and a coding practice on mock transcripts. The practice required the researcher and assistant to code one transcript together and one transcript separately, with a follow-up meeting to ensure inter-coder reliability (i.e., double code). In both practice types, the researcher and assistant compared data, discussed their reasoning, practiced memo writing, and organized the codes into higher-order themes. Once the researcher and assistant attained adequate data analysis practice that ensured inter-coder reliability on the mock transcripts, the assistant was deemed ready for analysis and began analyzing data on the study transcripts.

While analyzing the data, the researcher and assistant double-coded three transcripts and individually coded the remaining five transcripts. To ensure inter-coder reliability, the researcher and assistant each individually coded the first double-coding transcript, and then met to ensure accuracy in interpretation within the same week that coding was completed. The researcher and assistant reviewed the entirety of the transcript together and discussed and critiqued the coding. Once a codebook was agreed upon for the first double-coding transcript, the researcher and assistant reviewed and coded the transcript a second time. After coding the transcript a second time, a meeting between the researcher and assistant was held and the coding was discussed and critiqued once again. Once a consensus was reached regarding the open coding of the first transcript, coding of the second double-coding transcript commenced. The same process outlined for the first double-coding transcript was followed until a consensus was met for the second double-coding transcript, and the codebook was updated. After, the first double-coding transcript was coded once again with the updated codebook. The same process was repeated for the third double-coding transcript, and the first and second double-coding transcripts were recoded to ensure that all new codes were accounted for.

Following the completion of the double-coding process, the researcher and assistant individually coded the remaining five transcripts. One transcript was coded per week per person, and a meeting was held at the end of each week to critique and discuss codes, explore sections of each transcript to ensure inter-coder reliability, and to update the codebook. In each meeting, a coding consensus was met, the direction of analysis was discussed, memos from the data exploration were compared, and axial and selective coding (i.e., creating a storyline between the higher-order categories) was discussed. Upon agreement of the final codebook after coding all eight transcripts, each transcript was reviewed and recoded, if necessary, to reflect the final codebook. At the conclusion of the open coding stage, a meeting was held with the researcher and assistant to complete the axial coding process. Following the completion of this process, a final meeting was scheduled to complete the selective coding process and to determine the higher-order themes. It should be noted that the axial and selective coding processes were ongoing throughout the coding process; however, the final meetings allowed for clear organization of these coding processes.

Following the completion of the coding process, all participants were invited to comment on the proposed model and ensure accuracy in the interpretation of their transcripts. In total, two participants returned to ensure accuracy and provide critiques to our interpretation of their transcripts. The two participants who returned reported that they held no critiques, and the interpretation of the transcripts was accurate.

Results

This study sought to examine athletes' perceptions of abuse, the impact of abuse on performance and mental well-being when in the sporting role, and post-traumatic growth experiences, or lack thereof, after leaving the sporting role. The author also hoped to examine whether power influenced athletes' experiences of emotional abuse. Former women athletes with distance from their collegiate sporting careers were recruited to examine their perceptions and insights on the emotionally abusive coaching practices they endured. A variety of themes emerged from the data including types of emotionally abusive coaching behaviors experienced, impact of the abusive behaviors on athletes and their teams, ways that athletes and their teams coped with the abuse, sources of positive and negative social connections, ways that athletes made sense of their experiences, and post-traumatic growth experiences reported. In the interest of focusing solely on the research questions of the present study, three of the themes from participant responses will be discussed. The themes are (1) the impact on the athlete during and after their athletic career, (2) ways that the athlete made sense of their experience, and (3) post-traumatic growth experiences reported. A detailed table containing the three themes, corresponding categories and sub-categories is included at the end of this section. Each of the themes are interconnected and it should be noted that the ways that the athlete made sense of their experience related directly to the long-term impact and subsequent post-traumatic growth experiences or lack thereof.

Impact

Emotionally abusive coaching behaviors were associated with negative impacts in a variety of domains for the athletes studied. Types of emotionally abusive coaching behaviors

were beyond the scope of this study; however, a variety of harmful coaching practices were noted by participants. Emotionally abusive coaching practices commonly experienced by participants included: favoritism and/or targeting of certain athletes, humiliation, intentional emotional harm, lack of injury or illness recognition, manipulation, neglect, lying and deception, shouting and yelling, weight restrictions, conditional or instrumental attention and support, physical behaviors (e.g., throwing objects, hitting things), verbal abuse (e.g., racist, sexist, or homophobic comments, belittling), and a variety of others.

A variety of short- and long-term impacts were reported by all study participants as a result of the emotionally abusive coaching practices endured. Short-term impacts refer to the impact on the athlete while the athlete is still experiencing emotionally abusive coaching behaviors, whereas long-term impacts refer to the impact on the athlete once the emotionally abusive coaching behaviors have ceased. Seven categories were identified within the category of short-term impacts of abuse and six categories were identified within the category of long-term impacts of abuse, all of which are elaborated upon below. Participants studied were 1-5 years away from their emotionally abusive coaching experience, and long-term impacts of abuse were reported at the time of each interview by all participants. It should be noted that it is unknown how long the impacts of emotionally abusive coaching practices can endure in former collegiate athletes.

1.a. Impact on athlete during collegiate athletic career

The short-term impact of emotionally abusive coaching practices yielded seven distinct categories, including: 1.a.1. stress and the emotional impact, 1.a.2. negative mental health outcomes, 1.a.3. identity disturbance, 1.a.4. internalizing the abuse, 1.a.5. interpersonal challenges, 1.a.6. adverse athletic and physical impacts, and 1.a.7. negative academic

functioning. Within this section, each category will be discussed and when relevant sub-categories will be labeled and explored in depth.

1.a.1. Stress and the emotional impact

Within the stress and emotional impact category, six sub-categories were identified and elaborated upon below.

Mental distress. All participants (n = 8) reported experiencing mental distress as a result of the emotionally abusive coaching behaviors that they were experiencing. When asked about any distress experienced as an athlete, one participant stated, "It caused me to be anxious and stressed 24/7. I never wanted to go to practice, and I dreaded going" (basketball player). Another athlete described how the pressure applied from her coach caused distress and anxiety that impacted her performance and emotional well-being at practice. She stated,

> "He used to have us come in for like individual practices, and one morning he had been on the turf and all he had was a hurdle and he said, 'I'm going to count from 3 to 1 and if you don't jump on one, if you hesitate at all, you have to do squat jumps until I say to stop.' I was like, 'Okay...' So, he goes 3-2-1 and I don't jump. So, he has me do squat jumps and then it starts over at 3-2-1, I still don't jump. It's just getting worse now at this point right like I'm doing squads I'm getting tired he is getting angry at me. I literally did not jump over this once like all I did was like tuck jumps in the sand, squat jumps in the sand, it was awful. Then after a while he literally just walked away like he didn't even say like 'go home' he just left like it was terrible" (track and field high jumper).

In addition, four athletes endorsed feeling that their athletic experience in combination with the emotionally abusive coaching practices endured caused the collegiate athletic role to be "all-consuming." One athlete described, "It consumed my whole life. There was never a break between sports and my personal life it was all combined" (track and field thrower).

Fear. All participants (n = 8) described experiencing fear as a direct result of their coach's behavior. One athlete described experiencing fear and insecurity in her position on the team due to her coach's emotionally abusive comments. She stated, "I think sometimes even

scarier than shouting or yelling was the flat monotone 'I could get rid of you all tomorrow' kind of comments" (soccer goalie). Another athlete recounted how the fear that she experienced from her coach impacted her in practice and competition. She stated,

> "I was never enjoying it because the fear and the anxiety around trying to do anything I could possible to avoid that happening. It's like I didn't want to go in games I didn't want to go, I didn't want to play. I wanted to play basketball, but like I didn't want to play for him" (basketball player).

A third athlete reported experiencing fear after her meets, as she was afraid to face her coach and the humiliating comments that he would make. She stated, "After meets like I was too scared to even like go talk to him. I would go on walks with my roommate and just talk about how much I wanted to quit, and [coach] would always say like, 'you're supposed to be better than this you're supposed to be better than this'" (track and field high jumper).

Disbelief and/or shock. Most participants (n = 6) reported experiencing disbelief and/or shock in the wake of their coach's emotionally abusive behavior. After reflecting on being isolated and humiliated in front of her teammates at practice, one athlete stated, "I remember that specifically and just being in disbelief. Like just completely ignored, like I was invisible" (soccer goalie). Another athlete described experiencing shock after her coach drove the team bus through the barrier gate of a parking lot while frustrated. She described, "It happened my senior year, so I think at that point I was just p***ed. I was like, seriously? Like in shock, like is this really happening? Because it was like a dream almost. Like is this reality?" (volleyball player). A third athlete described experiencing shock at her coach's behavior while he was frustrated with her performance and punishing her publicly during a soccer game. She stated, "He questioned my effort and dedication to the team. I was shocked at this and told him that I'm trying the best I can to which he said, 'well your effort is despicable' and walked past me bumping his shoulder against mine" (soccer goalie).

Frustration. Most athletes (n = 6) expressed feelings of frustration due to their coach's behavior. Frustration was commonly observed among athletes who were not listened or supported by their coaches. When describing her attempts at getting her voice heard regarding her training; one athlete remarked, "It's like, I'm really good why don't you think I know something? It was like very frustrating. I'm the one who's running this. Like you weren't that good when you were this age, so trust me. I know how to race; I've been in you know races with professionals as an 18-year-old. So, not being believed, trusted" (mid-distance track and field runner). Another athlete who swam through a chronic injury described experiencing frustration as a result of her coach not listening to the pain she was experiencing in practice. She stated, "In the moment I was just like, just really mad at that because it's frustrating you don't understand that it hurts. You don't get it and you're really going to sit here and like, it's not going to make a difference at the end of the year if I finish this set right now. So, I guess in the moment it's just pretty frustrating and it just feels like nobody will listen to me" (mid-distance swimmer).

Sadness. Feelings of sadness were reported by some of the participants (n = 3) as a result of their coach's behavior. While describing her senior night banquet, one athlete reported, "I just smiled then one tear fell and I wiped it and then I left so that's pretty sad" (soccer goalie). Another athlete described that at parties, her and her teammates would cry because of the lack of support and recognition from their coach. She stated, "Cross country parties were hilarious, like notoriously, like morbidly funny because it would just be people sobbing. So, we'd be like, 'yay it's our first time to drink' and just sobbing in like an hour" (mid-distance track and field runner).

Grief over athletic career. Some athletes (n = 3) indicated experiencing a sense of grief regarding their athletic career, as their coach's behavior negatively impacted their athletic performance and ability to compete. One participant stated, "He [first college coach] had reached

out to me and pretty much just apologized because he knew the guy that came in [second college coach] and was like, 'I'm sorry for what happened and like you didn't deserve that. You could have gone so far.' So, that just like tore me apart" (soccer goalie).

1.a.2. Negative mental health outcomes

Within the negative mental health outcomes category, seven sub-categories were identified and elaborated upon below.

Anxiety. Almost all participants (n = 7) reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety as a result of their coach's emotionally abusive behavior. One athlete described how her anxiety impacted her ability to feel comfortable in college at the start of her second semester. She stated,

> "I moved in and tried to stay for one night, but I was like so stressed I left and went home and came back for the first day of classes. I just had so much anxiety about being back there and majority of it had everything to do with basketball" (basketball player).

Another athlete described how her anxiety manifested physically in relation to the prospect of attending practice. She described, "The anxiety obviously still manifested in such that you know I didn't want to go to practice, I would get nauseous going to practice, I would get a tight chest" (soccer goalie). Finally, a third participant reported that she experienced a pervasive amount of anxiety that resulted in a variety of symptoms. She reported, "My freshman year was just a lot of anxiety. So, like I would have panic attacks I would constantly be on edge. I had a lot of trouble sleeping and I like would dread going to practice" (track and field high jumper).

Depression. Almost all participants (n = 7) indicated that they experienced depressive symptomatology as a result of their coach's behavior and the subsequent impact. One participant reported experiencing hypersomnia, loss of appetite, and challenges focusing. She described,

> "More of the dark depression came. More oversleeping, under eating, not really focusing as well. I think I took a nap every day before practice for all my sophomore and junior years because I needed that like hour reset to like get my mind and body capable of showing up to a place that I knew was going to be hard for me to be" (soccer goalie).

Another athlete stated, “I mean there were times I think that I had experienced depression in college and like if I would try to talk to him, not that I really did, or I would try to talk about things that were going on, he would say, ‘ah just get over it.’ So, I think just a lack of support. I think they completely neglected the entire mental health of athletes” (track and field thrower). A third athlete described seeking out mental health care as a result of the depression that she was experiencing. She reported “My sophomore year I was just like fully depressed. I was crying like three times a week after practices, and I started seeing a therapist who I had seen in high school” (track and field high jumper). Four athletes also indicated that they experienced low motivation due to the emotionally abusive coaching practices endured. One athlete described, “I think it was motivation and focus that were the issue because I would just be not able to concentrate on what I was doing” (track and field thrower).

Crisis or suicidal behavior. Experiencing emotionally abusive coaching behaviors was also associated with experiencing mental health crises or suicidal behavior for a couple of the participants (n = 2). One athlete recounted the impact that being cut from her team in an act of retaliation from her coach had on her. She remarked,

> “I had a really bad breakdown, like probably should have checked myself into the health center kind of thing. I've never self-harmed or anything, but I was just in a really bad place of like not being able to control my breathing kind of thing. Next morning went to the emergency services for counseling” (soccer goalie).

Another athlete described how her coach’s emotionally abusive behavior, subsequent decrements in her athletic performance, and a chronic injury caused suicidal ideation and a near suicide attempt. She stated, “There was a lot of suicidality for me. Self-harm, definitely suicidal ideation. I was brought to the ER once which was very traumatizing” (mid-distance track and field runner). The same athlete described that suicidal ideation was common amongst teammates that

were injured or targeted by her coach. She and her teammates frequently discussed suicidal ideation when spending time together. She reported, "[We] all kind of just talked about wanting to kill ourselves, kind of all the time. So, a lot, but yeah like for me it's like they almost killed me pretty much" (mid-distance track and field athlete). The athlete quoted in the previous sentence attributed the severity of her suicidal ideation to the emotionally abusive coaching practices endured.

Issues related to sleep. Most athletes (n = 6) reported experiencing sleep-related challenges as a consequence of their coach's emotionally abusive behavior. One athlete reported,

> "There were times where I would struggle falling asleep because I was just replaying all the events of the day in my head and like trying to pinpoint the spot that I had deserved what was given to me, so that I could fix it, so that it wasn't happening. So, that was a lot of staying up not sleeping well" (track and field thrower).

In addition to insomnia, another athlete described experiencing hypersomnia as a result of her coach's behavior. She described, "I didn't want to be there, I didn't want to go to classes, I hated being there, I would sleep through class at 8:00am. So, I would sleep through and there would be times where I just couldn't get myself to go" (basketball player). Sleep-related challenges are symptoms associated with a variety of mental illnesses; however, sleep-related challenges were listed as a separate category in the interest of highlighting the severity of the symptoms experienced.

Trouble concentrating. Half of the participants (n = 4) indicated challenges with concentration as a direct or indirect result of their coach's behavior. One athlete described that after experiencing poor treatment from her coach she experienced attention-related consequences. She stated, "I think it was motivation and focus that were the issue because I would just be not able to concentrate on what I was doing" (track and field thrower). While another athlete described challenges focusing on her schoolwork due to the direct impact of her

coach's behavior. She reported, "It was just maybe that extra step of figuring out how to put your full focus into your schoolwork even when you're mad or even when you have these emails popping up or from him or whatever" (mid-distance swimmer).

Eating disorder symptomatology. As a consequence of their coach's emotionally abusive behavior, eating disorder symptomatology was reported by over half of the participants studied (n = 5). One athlete described that her coach's behavior caused her to use overexercise as a coping mechanism for distress. This coping mechanism fed into her eating disorder symptomatology and a future eating disorder diagnosis. She described,

> "It happened fairly quickly, I noticed the shift in his behavior as soon as we got into that room like he had the first meeting of the year like one week into school. I left there with so much stress, I literally ended up like sprinting the commons like three times. Like in a lot of ways that jump started it for me because whenever I was stressed or when I didn't know what to do, I'd go for runs and then like for me a lot of my eating struggles were overexercising and under fueling" (basketball player).

Another athlete described, "I more had disordered eating, whatever the DSM distinguishes, but that was pretty tough because I didn't want to really fall into it, but I also kind of wanted to because then I'd be thin and that'd help with the stress maybe" (mid-distance track and field runner).

Substance Misuse. A couple of the participants (n = 2) reported misusing alcohol as a result of their coaching experience and subsequent distress. One athlete described using alcohol to cope with the distress that she was experiencing as a result of her coach's abuse. She reported, "For a little bit there, for like junior year or like sophomore year, there was some like alcoholic coping strategy, not that I was an alcoholic. Then I cut that off really quick it was like a couple months" (mid-distance track and field runner). Another athlete explained how alcohol misuse was a common coping strategy amongst her teammates. She stated, "[It was] hard to sleep and

[there was] less focus for academics, a lack of motivation, and alcohol abuse. I would argue it was definitely a thing for the whole team" (soccer goalie).

1.a.3. Identity disturbance

Some participants (n = 3) identified challenges with their identity as a direct result of their negative coaching experience. One athlete described how her coach's behavior and eventual removal from the team caused identity-related challenges. "The whole experience was really ruined by him. It caused a lot of my mental health struggles and identity struggles in college, and I only ended up playing three years which was really hard" (soccer goalie). Regarding the impact that her coach's behavior had on her experience, another athlete stated, "[I] definitely [experienced] a lot of stress, but also questioning myself especially my identity as an athlete" (track and field thrower).

1.a.4. Internalizing the abuse

Within the category labeled, "internalizing the abuse," four sub-categories were identified and elaborated upon below.

Embarrassment, humiliation, or shame. Almost all participants (n = 7) described experiencing embarrassment, humiliation, or shame as a result of the emotionally abusive coaching practices endured. One athlete reported that the humiliation tactics her coach engaged in caused her to experience embarrassment and shame. She stated, "He would play the coaches over me and that was like embarrassing you know. Like that's so degrading, where I'm like not even good enough for like practice. That is so degrading" (basketball player). When asked about the frequency that she experienced her coach's humiliation, another athlete described,

> "I would say at some level constantly because of the voice in your own head. You wake up in the morning and you hear you know his opinions. You're still in the environment, so looking at yourself putting your underwear on the morning, it's still there" (mid-distance track and field runner).

This remark highlights the insidious nature of emotionally abusive coaching practices, and the way by which such practices cause the victim/survivor to internalize the message and become the perpetrator of such abuse towards themselves.

Feelings of inadequacy. Most participants (n = 6) described experiencing a sense of inadequacy as a result of the messages from their coaches. One participant described how the emotionally abusive coaching practices she experienced made her feel inadequate. She stated, "[I felt] so inadequate. I would spend 30 minutes before and after practice and I would just sit there and just hit balls" (soccer goalie). Another participant described how the challenges of adjusting to college as a freshman, orienting to Division 1 athletics, and enduring her coach's behavior caused a pervasive sense of inadequacy. She reported, "I was like just having a lot of issues with self-confidence because like I had never been in such a competitive setting, and I wasn't even high jumping for like the first two months of school. So, I was just used to being like constantly beat in workouts and like in the weight room I was like one of the weakest people. It's just like things kept happening that kept kind of like bringing down my confidence" (track and field high jumper)

Self-doubt. Emotionally abusive coaching practices also encouraged self-doubt within over half of the participants studied (n = 5). One athlete described, "Sometimes I would sit back and be like, did I just hear this right?" (basketball player). While another athlete reported questioning whether her perception regarding the abuse was correct. In relation to a question about reporting, she stated, "I didn't want to because I didn't want someone to say something to get him in trouble because I didn't know if it was like an accident. Like I was just misinterpreting the situation. So, in the beginning I think I kept a lot of it to myself and brushed a good amount of it off (track and field thrower).

Blamed self. Over half of the participants (*n* = 5) reported blaming themselves for the emotionally abusive coaching practices endured. One athlete described, “It consumed my whole life and really I just felt at fault for all of it” (track and field thrower). Another athlete engaged in self-blame after experiencing emotionally abusive coaching practices by a second coach at her transfer school. She remarked, “Then I brought it upon myself to go through it all over again; if not even worse because of the coach and the dynamics and then the ultimate outcome, the tragic outcome” (soccer goalie).

1.a.5. Interpersonal challenges

Within the interpersonal challenges category, two sub-categories were identified and elaborated upon below.

Sense of loneliness, isolation, or a lack of support. A sense of loneliness, isolation, or a lack of support was reported by all participants (*n* = 8) following their experiences of coaching abuse. One athlete described her perception of her coach’s unsupportive behavior towards her after experiencing an injury. She reported, “I was so unimportant that it didn't matter. That's like the ultimate low, like [participant] could mean less than dirt to me” (mid-distance track and field runner). Another athlete described how her coach’s unpredictable and angry behavior caused her to fear discussing his behavior with others; thus, causing a sense of isolation. She stated, “As far as distress, yeah there were times when I cried because I was so frustrated because I felt like I had nobody to talk to you. I can't go talk to any other adults in the athletic department because then he's going to snap even more, I can't just sit here and take it, but I can't go say something to him because he's so irrational sometimes” (mid-distance swimmer).

Loss of trust in others. Some of the athletes interviewed (*n* = 2) reported losing their sense of trust in others as a result of their coach’s behavior. Loss of trust was noted to include the

coaching staff, future coaching staff, and the athletic support staff (e.g., sports psychologist, medical doctor). One athlete described the loss of trust she experienced in her coach as result of his behavior. She stated, “You've told me multiple times that whatever is said in the office stays between us and then I hear other things from other coaches or teammates, like specific details that had come from me, and it's like, ‘How am I supposed to trust you if other people know details that only you knew?’” (track and field thrower).

1.a.6. Adverse athletic and physical impacts

Within the adverse athletic and physical impacts category, four sub-categories were identified and elaborated upon below.

Loss of interest or enjoyment in sport. Most participants (n = 6) reported experiencing a loss of interest or enjoyment in their sport due to their coach’s emotionally abusive behavior. One athlete described her thought process prior to a race following the onset of her coach’s emotionally abusive behavior and her subsequent athletic performance decrements. She stated, “How many races do I have left? How much do I have to go through this? It wasn't rewarding anymore, and it was just like really stressful. So, I remember thinking like, ‘How many dozens of races do I have to do before I'm done with this?’” (mid-distance track and field runner). Another athlete remarked, “It was very much just, survival not thriving at all and that's the quote that I used all the time. Like we're just getting through it, we are just trying to get to the next game or the next week. We're not actually getting better or not necessarily having fun” (soccer goalie). A third athlete transferred from the college that she endured emotionally abusive coaching practices to another college in her second year of undergraduate education. Regarding her first coach who engaged in emotionally abusive practices, she described, “It really ruined the sport for me in a lot

of ways and I even.... it really did ruin like the sport because even when I got to [college 2] it was like trying to play catch up" (basketball player).

Pushing through injury or illness. Half of the participants (n = 4) indicated that they pushed through injury or illness as a result of their coach's expectations. One athlete reported, "I wouldn't have given it up, but there were definitely times where in the moment I questioned why I was still doing it and why I was pushing through an injury that was going to last the rest of my life" (mid-distance swimmer). Another athlete described the challenges and pain of pushing through an injury at the encouragement of her coach. She stated, "Then I tore my shoulder about two months into that offseason, prior to the season. I played through it up until the last two months of the season, so I played from February until October, November with a super torn messed up shoulder which was again very difficult" (soccer goalie). Despite pushing through her injury and the playing time promises made by her coach, this athlete did not play a single minute of a soccer game for the entirety of her career at this college.

Physical implications. All participants (n = 8) reported experiencing physical implications as a result of their coach's behavior and expectations. One athlete described the physical toll she experienced after practice when her coach pushed her to practice through injury. She stated,

> "Let's say it hurts maybe a 2 on a scale of 1 to 10 and that pain is only there when I bend over to tie my shoes. Then, I go to practice and it's up to a six and I want to get out, but they make me push it to an 8. That pain is going to be there for the rest of the week until I have Sunday off. Okay so I swam this last 30 minutes of the practice, so now I have pain in every single thing I do, this is constant, and I don't want to take medicine because then I'll get a stomach ache... now my back hurts literally if I'm sitting, if I'm standing, if I'm walking, if I'm carrying my backpack... it might not have happened had the coaches listened to me" (mid-distance swimmer).

Another athlete described how her coach rushed her concussion recovery which caused physical implications that negatively impacted her academic standing. She reported,

> "I said I need to drop this for more than just the transcript, like I am mentally and physically unwell. I'm not sleeping well because of my concussion, I'm not eating well because of my concussion, I'm not doing well socially, like I haven't been able to like to go out and like be normal like I cannot take this course on right now, I'm dropping it. And that was not appreciated or supported. Same thing with like my concussion recovery in general, like just not supported and told I need to get back to play. I saw that happen for a lot of players with physical injuries" (soccer goalie).

A third athlete described that her coach's negligence caused physical implications for the entirety of her team. She stated, "That period when we had practice for 17, or like played volleyball for 17 days in a row, it wasn't until our athletic trainers were like, 'No you have to give them a break.' Which I don't even know how that happened because they have to give us a day off. We were dead tired, we were exhausted, and he just was oblivious to it" (volleyball player).

Positive athletic performance. It should be noted that one athlete reported experiencing improvements in her athletic performance as a result of her coach's behavior. However, this athlete also described co-occurring negative impacts within her athletic performance. She remarked, "That helped my performance in some ways, and then was also more detrimental because then when I go to take the goal kick for example, everyone's looking at you, right. Everyone's watching and then I overthink it because I think, 'Oh what is he going to say this time?' Or you know, 'What's going to happen this time?' So then I mess up and it's all over again right, so I think there's positives and negatives" (soccer goalie).

1.a.7. Negative academic functioning

Over half of the participants (n = 5) described experiencing negative academic outcomes while enduring emotionally abusive coaching practices. One athlete described that her coach's behavior introduced challenges to focusing on her schoolwork. She reported, "It did affect like my schooling because my time was spent worrying about other things" (track and field thrower). Another athlete reported that her coach's behavior impacted her academic achievement. She

stated, “My grades went down a lot. Part of the reason, I mentioned it earlier, but kind of the toxic environment, the culture of the team, then also the coach” (soccer goalie).

1.b. Impact on athlete after collegiate athletic career

The long-term impacts of emotionally abusive coaching practices yielded six distinct categories, including: 1.b.1. stress and the emotional impact, 1.b.2. negative mental health outcomes, 1.b.3. identity disturbance, 1.b.4. internalizing the abuse, 1.b.5. interpersonal challenges, and 1.b.6. physical implications. Within this section, each category will be discussed and when relevant sub-categories will be labeled and explored in depth.

1.b.1. Stress and the emotional impact

Within the stress and emotional impact category, three sub-categories were identified and elaborated upon below.

Sadness. Following their experiences of emotionally abusive coaching practices, most participants (n = 6) described experiencing feelings of sadness. Upon reflection one athlete remarked, “These are kids lives. Like I get we’re young adults, but you are impacting people's lives. Wow, it's kind of sad, it was my life too” (track and field thrower). Another athlete expressed sadness regarding her experience as a college athlete after enduring her coach’s emotionally abusive behavior. She stated, “I am so unsatisfied, disappointed, and just saddened by my lack of performance and my lack of given opportunity to shine” (soccer goalie).

Grief over athletic career. Over half of the participants (n = 5) expressed a sense of grief following their experiences of emotionally abusive coaching practices and subsequent exit from the collegiate sporting role. While discussing being cut from the team prior to her senior year, one athlete reported,

> “That sudden transition is really hard when you weren't expecting it and you wanted a lot of those year-end or career ending wrap ups. Like all I wanted was to make it to senior

> day, to get my jersey in a shadow box, and hear my name over the loudspeaker" (soccer goalie).

Another athlete commented on the grief and sadness she held regarding her athletic performance which was influenced by her coach's emotionally abusive behavior. She described, "[I experienced] sadness in how my career ended. I think like too, as you probably know, like that transition after sports is really difficult and for me it hit me hard" (volleyball player).

Disappointment. Some of the participants (n = 3) remarked that they look back on their collegiate athlete experience as disappointing, as a result of their coach's behavior. When asked to describe her experience as a college athlete, one participant stated, "As a whole, I think the first word that comes up honestly is disappointing" (basketball player). Another player discussed how her athletic performance and eventual removal from the team, both impacted by her coach's emotionally abusive behavior, caused immense disappointment. She described, "I hit college and like tapered off and it's sad because you know you'd like to see that kind of linear growth, but that's not always the case and then how it ended was obviously hugely disappointing" (soccer goalie).

1.b.2. Negative mental health outcomes

Within the negative mental health outcomes category, seven sub-categories were identified and elaborated upon below.

Severe or Traumatic Stress. Most of the participants (n = 6) endorsed experiences that are consistent with severe and/or traumatic stress following their exit from the sporting role and experiences of emotionally abusive coaching practices. It should be noted that trauma was not formally assessed; however, the labels of severe and/or traumatic stress were chosen based on the participants' words (n = 4) or on their description of the symptoms experienced (n = 2). Symptoms such as avoidance of reminders of the traumatic experience, intense emotional

distress and physical reactivity when reminded of the traumatic experience, distressing dreams or nightmares, negative beliefs regarding oneself, others, or the world, and trouble remembering important aspects of the traumatic experience, were endorsed by participants. One participant recounted, “It's had a lot of effects I'd say. Yeah, pretty much changed my entire life. It's before and after pretty much” (mid-distance track and field runner). Another participant reported experiencing physical reactivity at the reminder of her coach. She stated, “For some reason I get nervous, like I'm two hours away from him and his name pops up my phone, like what's he going to do? Why am I sweating? Like I'm going to be told to come back in his office for another meeting” (track and field thrower). While a different participant described experiencing distressing nightmares when faced with recounting her coaching experience. She described, “I'll be honest with you leading up to this conversation a couple of days ago like I was having bad dreams just thinking about having to reflect on well, all of it but specifically with the second school” (soccer goalie). Finally, a fourth participant described the impact her emotionally abusive coach had on her experience with her next coach. She recalled,

> “[teammate] and I used to joke that we had like PTSD but it's really not a joke because like we would be doing something with [coach 2], we would do something wrong, and we would like, terrified look back and like wait for him to say something, and he would just be like, ‘try again’” (track and field high jumper).

Anxiety. Leaving the sporting role after experiencing emotionally abusive coaching practices was associated with symptoms of anxiety for most of the participants (n = 6). One athlete described how the anxiety she experienced from her coach’s behavior extended into anxiety after leaving the sporting role. She described, “Yeah, it was tough. That's all I would ever talk about, analyze, always worry about everything. Which did extend into like anxiety now” (track and field thrower). Another athlete described experiencing anxiety about returning to campus after being cut from her team. She stated, “Even though I wasn't part of the team, I

still had this constant like fear of him, of the team, of what they were maybe saying about me, or not saying about me. Like I couldn't drop it like I couldn't just let it go" (soccer goalie).

Depression. Over half of the participants (*n* = 5) described experiencing depressive symptomatology after leaving the sporting role. One athlete described, "I was absolutely in a period of like, I don't want to say being suicidal, but having really dark, not good thoughts. I've never self-harmed, but like I finally came to a place where I was like, I understand how people do that or I understand why people go there. That was scary for me, that was terrifying for me" (soccer goalie). Another athlete recounted how her depressive symptomatology began while she was enduring emotionally abusive coaching practices and extended into her life after leaving the sporting role. She stated, "Yeah, it still continues, the depression" (track and field thrower).

Loss of confidence or worth. A decreased level of self-confidence or self-worth was reported by some of the athletes (*n* = 3). One athlete described, "My confidence in general has just been really shaken by this individual man, as if I was in you know an abusive relationship for a really long time which you know, like yeah it was the truth for me" (soccer goalie). Another athlete reported that her self-worth was lowered by her college coach which now extends into her perception of worth in graduate school. She stated,

> "It's the same with school, as it was with running. My worth is numerical on a scale of 100 and you can compare it to other people. Literally like the 87 that I get is like, you know, whatever lower down in my worth as a person. And I realize that in the moment, but I really do have to take some time to think, 'It's alright if you get an 87. It's okay, it doesn't mean that you're bad. It doesn't mean that person is more special than you'" (mid-distance track and field runner).

Crisis or suicidal behavior. A couple of the participants (*n* = 2) described experiencing crisis or suicidal behavior after enduring emotionally abusive coaching practices and leaving the sporting role. One athlete described a mental health crisis that she experienced after being cut from her team. She stated, "There was a serious period of time, I want to say in August right

before my senior year, that I was like, 'I'm not going back to school, I'm not. I'm going to check into a mental hospital.' Like there was a serious amount of time that I considered that. I would say that was probably like a two weeklong crisis period" (soccer goalie).

Eating disorder symptomatology. A couple of the participants (n = 2) endorsed symptomatology that was consistent with eating disorder-related challenges after leaving the sporting role. Symptoms such as negative body image, fear of gaining weight, restriction of caloric intake, and subsequent binge episodes were reported. One participant reported, "I went to her [the school therapist] and the first thing she handed me was the eating disorder assessment worksheet and I was p***ed. I was like, 'I'm not even, I can't believe this is what she thinks I have.' And like looking back I'm like, 'Oh.' It's like everything was being put into motion, but I do think that [coach's emotionally abusive behavior] set, unfortunately, that set everything in motion."

Loss of interest or enjoyment in sport. A couple of the participants (n = 2) described experiencing reductions in their enjoyment and interest regarding their collegiate sport following retirement. One athlete described engaging with other sports instead of her college sport of soccer following retirement. She stated, "I see myself leaning into lacrosse a lot more lately and I really thoroughly enjoy it a lot more, which I think is a direct consequence of my experience in college" (soccer goalie).

1.b.3. Identity disturbance

Some participants (n = 3) described experiencing challenges with their identity following their retirement from collegiate sport and the cessation of emotionally abusive coaching practices. One athlete discussed the factors that contributed to her mental health crisis after being cut from her team. She stated,

> "A lot of contributing factors, but largely brought on by the identity crisis of, how do I go back to school and how do I not be a soccer player at a very small school where people know you by your name, your sorority, and your sport you play? I still had people my senior year come up to me you know be like, 'oh how is soccer season going or whatever?' It was like, 'yeah I'm actually not playing this year.' Like navigating those conversations was still hard" (soccer goalie).

Another athlete reflected on experiences discussing her previous identity as an athlete in graduate school. She described, "Physical therapy school has been hard. Talking any running is tough, and now it's getting pretty fine. I think in the last like two years it's been pretty good, but just that same kind of like getting to talk about who I was or whatever is, that's a lot. And just clicking back even a little bit into that mindset, like that's success and that's who you are or whatever" (mid-distance track and field runner).

1.b.4. Internalizing the abuse

Some of the participants (n = 3) endorsed blaming themselves following their experiences of emotionally abusive coaching after leaving the sporting role. One athlete described how her coach's emotional abuse extended into internalizing the blame he placed on her. She described, "It's in your head, that you wasted your own career, you choked, and none of those things were said, but like I was told that my doubts about them weighed me down and I think they really did mean it. 'You wasted your potential' or that you like broke under the pressure" (mid-distance track and field runner). Another athlete described her self-blaming thought process after getting cut from the team. She stated,

> "I don't know who I am. Like did I do this to myself? Like a lot of the gaslighting tendencies we kind of talked about, like maybe I am a s*** person and a s*** player and not worthy of being on the team. Maybe I, maybe I don't deserve, maybe I never deserved to be on the team. Because I wasn't recruited in the traditional way. Maybe I was a bad teammate, maybe I had a bad attitude. When I know deep down in my soul like none of that's true and I was a great player like I had my moments of fame, you know I served a purpose on the team, but yeah, a lot of like working through like the lies that he taught myself to believe" (soccer goalie).

1.b.5. Interpersonal challenges

Within the interpersonal challenges category, three sub-categories were identified and elaborated upon below.

Trouble with authority. Over half of the participants (*n* = 5) reported challenges with authority in a variety of settings after enduring emotionally abusive coaching practices. One athlete described the impact in her place of work. She stated, "It has impacted relationships with superiors. Even with like bosses now, having an issue with like what information do I share with them? Or, at what point am I abusing their time? So, I think any relationship or friendship, professionally and personally, has been impacted by that because I'm always second guessing everything" (track and field thrower). Another athlete discussed her hesitations of reporting a coworker and how this relates to her collegiate athlete experience. She described,

> "There's a situation at work right now, where one of the teachers is not treating the students the way that we should be treating little kids and I feel like something needs to be said to the director. But I don't want to say anything, and I wonder, does that go back to [coach] and not being able to ever go to higher ups without getting in trouble? Then I was thinking about this call that I had later with you, and I was like, I wonder if I don't want to say something because the past three years I would have gotten in so much trouble if I did" (mid-distance swimmer).

Loss of trust in others. Some of the participants (*n* = 3) endorsed challenges with trusting others following their emotionally abusive coaching experience. One participant described how her coach's behavior, impacted her ability to trust others. She reported, "I think that it was a learning experience in that you can't just trust people" (track and field thrower). Another participant described having challenges trusting others following her experience as a college athlete. She described, "I was just like, 'I don't like people, let's not do that.' Yeah, it's like maybe a trust thing. I have a few friends, they're all not really in the same group and pretty trusted. So, yeah, I think that's definitely an impact" (mid-distance track and field runner).

Sense of loneliness, isolation, or a lack of support. A continued sense of loneliness, isolation, or a lack of support was reported by a couple of the participants (n = 2) following their coaching experiences. One participant discussed the isolation that stemmed from being cut from her team. She stated,

> "It was still not an easy senior year being removed from the team in the manner that it happened. And then also finding that like losing friends through that process, whether that was their own choice or his I don't quite know. But that was like, that was maybe the more shocking part was that the people followed his lead on cutting me out" (soccer goalie).

While another athlete discussed maintaining few friendships after retirement from the sporting role as a result of the violation of trust from her coach. She stated, "I'm only friends with one person from college" (mid-distance track and field runner).

1.b.6. Physical implications

Half of the participants (n = 4) described experiencing continued physical implications following their exit from college sport. One athlete recounted the physical implications of an injury which was worsened by the encouragement of her college coach after leaving the sporting role. She reported, "I was pretty much just dropped by the program. Like they kind of like treated me like a hot potato. They were like, 'we will pay for surgery and then get out of here,' pretty much. So, I feel it physically because my shoulder hurts all the time. Can't sleep on that side, like I'm typing on a computer and it's like, 'ah' you know. So, I feel like that's like this nagging constant reminder" (soccer goalie). Another athlete tearfully described the physical implications that are stopping her from engaging in a variety of physical activities following her retirement from the sporting role. She described,

> "The thing that I love to do, can't do it anymore and even beyond the running, of just I love, you know doing pull-ups like that was my favorite thing to do and my shoulder's injured because of the swimming workouts that we did. I'm barely able to do outpatient right now and that's been really exciting because it's like, before I was like I can't get a job as a PT. I can't get a job because I can't stand, I can't walk and it's a little better now

> because I'm barely making it through in getting like the tiniest bit of exercise in, and I've been in PT for about 8 years now" (mid-distance track and field runner).

A third athlete discussed how the physical implications from an injury worsened by her collegiate athletic career may impact her future life goals. She stated,

> "I've always wanted to be a mom. That's one of my, I just, I want to and pregnancy it hurts anyway. And then I screwed up my lower back now and I, I don't know, is it going to make it hurt way worse? And I work with toddlers, and I can hardly pick them up off the ground. I work with 60-year-old's who can pick them up off the ground just fine. It's more just the stuff in my future. What if I can't push a stroller around Disney World all day because my back hurts? All because you wanted me to swim this set" (mid-distance swimmer).

Making Sense of Experience

Another important theme that arose from the data was the ways by which athletes sought to make sense of their experiences. More specifically, two distinct categories were observed, one being 2.a understanding why the experience occurred, and the other being 2.b. understanding the athlete's reaction to the experience. Regarding the first category, subcategories included: 2.a.1. the perception of why the coach engaged in emotionally abusive coaching behaviors, 2.a.2. the perception of why the abuse was allowed by others, and 2.a.3. the perception of why the athlete was vulnerable to the abuse endured. Regarding the second category, subcategories included: 2.b.1. reasons the athlete endured the abuse and 2.b.2. reasons the athlete left the team.

2.a. Understanding why the experience occurred

Within the category of understanding why the experience occurred, three distinct categories emerged; these included: 2.a.1. the perception of why the coach engaged in emotionally abusive coaching behaviors, 2.a.2. the perception of why the abuse was allowed by others, and 2.a.3. the perception of why the athlete was vulnerable to the abuse endured. Within this section, each category will be discussed and when relevant sub-categories will be labeled and explored in depth.

2.a.1. The perception of why the coach engaged in emotionally abusive coaching behaviors

Within the category labeled "the perception of why the coach engaged in emotionally abusive coaching behaviors," seven sub-categories were identified and elaborated upon below.

Power and control. All participants (n = 8) identified power and control as a reason for their coach's emotionally abusive behavior. One athlete remarked, "He had all the power to do anything he wanted" (mid-distance track and field runner). When asked about her perception of the reasoning behind her coach's behavior, another athlete recalled,

> "Sometimes it was funny and intended to be funny, but I also think it was just another form of exerting control. It's all about control, it's all about maintaining his status as top dog and making sure that we know we are dispensable and here to serve him. Again, we owe him everything and he owes us nothing" (soccer goalie).

A third athlete discussed how her coach's use of power impacted her negatively in a variety of domains. She stated, "I feel like the power that he wanted to have and the power he was wrongfully trying to achieve is what more so created a lot of the negative impact" (mid-distance swimmer). Finally, a fourth athlete described the impact that her coach's power had on her ability to report the emotional abuse she was experiencing. She described, "He has the power and the flexibility to do that and that's what's so disturbing about it. No one can say anything or do anything, and because he did it, it's justified" (soccer goalie).

Skill deficits or stress. Almost all of the participants (n = 7) attributed their coach's behavior to a lack of skills or increased stress. When describing her coach one athlete stated,

> "Immature is a great way to describe him. He's very, it's interesting because he was very smart when it came to like statistics and strategy, but like actually coaching, especially coaching women, he shouldn't have been coaching them" (volleyball player).

Several athletes noted that their coaches were ill-equipped to coach and communicate with women athletes. Another athlete described the impact that stress had on her coach's behavior. She reported, "I know it was stress because he would say, 'I have such and such meeting with

whoever,' the athletic director or whoever, someone above him, and so we just knew, don't make him mad today, he will blow up" (mid-distance swimmer).

Poor character. Almost all of the participants (n = 7) described their coach's behavior as being a result of poor character or personal flaws. When asked about her college coach one athlete remarked, "My coach my freshman year was a horrible human being" (track and field high jumper). Another athlete described her perception of targeting yelling at athletes, and the appropriate times to use such a strategy. She described,

> "There are times when you can yell at someone and that might be effective for them, right? But to target people, to do it consistently when they obviously don't respond well to it, that's not a coaching tactic, you know. Like if it's someone that like needs encouragement, and there's people like that, and like need to be screamed at to like to get going and kind of light a fire under them, but when it's multiple people and it's targeted toward someone when it's ineffective, when it's obviously ineffective for coaching them, like it just becomes more of a character thing (soccer goalie)"

This quotation highlights the athlete's perception of normal coaching behavior in comparison to behavior that is perceived as emotionally abusive. It should be noted that the athlete described her coach as noticing that the behavior was doing harm, and still choosing to engage in it.

Culture. Most of the participants (n = 6) attributed their coach's behavior to the culture of college sport and the expectations inherent within it. One athlete described how the position of coach may entail obligations to engage in emotionally abusive coaching practices. She stated, "They just have the ability to do that and because of the nature of the position and the dynamics and possibly expectations, I think it allows for them to do that. It might even honestly be like an expectation which sucks that that's kind of the culture" (soccer goalie). When asked about the reasoning behind her coach's behavior, another participant described, "He ran for [participant's college], the system created him, and he created the system it's a cycle. It's you know, it's all a vicious cycle" (mid-distance track and field runner). This quotation points out the perceived

systemic nature of emotionally abusive coaching practices and the ways by which they are enacted upon college athletes.

Punishment or retaliation. Most of the participants (n = 6) described their coach's behavior as being a result of punishment or retaliation towards the athlete. When describing her experience after participating in the reporting process against her coach, one athlete recounted,

> "I was one of two people that were publicly, you know spoke out loud against him and both of us saw a very sudden decrease in play time, very sudden decrease in treatment. I'd like to think that they were unrelated, but you know it's just kind of the only reason that I can come up with, because he gave me no other reason and I asked for the reasons why I'm not playing, what I can do to get better. So, my only thing that I can put my wrap my head around is that you know those confidential meetings were not kept confidential, it was retaliation" (soccer goalie).

Another athlete described a situation where her and her teammates did not put their full effort into a game, after their coach did not listen to their feedback. She stated, "We went and like half-***ed it. We didn't try, and he knew. He could tell, it was obvious I'm sure to everyone. So, he came in the locker room, he was p***ed, and he hit the locker. I don't know if he threw anything that time, I think he just might have hit the locker or something but yeah, he was p***ed off" (volleyball player).

Positive intentions. Half of the participants (n = 4) reported that they believed their coach's behavior was used with positive intentions in mind. It should be noted that each of the four participants also attributed their coach's behavior to other negative categories within this section as well. When asked why her coach used humiliation tactics in practice, one athlete perceived it was for humorous reasons. She stated, "I think at times he thought it was funny and thought that it would like get a laugh out of people" (soccer goalie). When asked the same question, another athlete stated, "He may have thought it was helping? That scaring me into, or using intimidation to make me refocus was helpful?" (track and field thrower).

Winning and shame-based motivation. Half of the participants (*n* = 4) reported that they believed their coach engaged in emotionally abusive coaching practices in the hopes of motivating athletes through shame or encouraging winning. One athlete recounted, "He would always say that he was used to coaching really good athletes and now he has such an unathletic team. So, in his mind I'm sure our unathleticism is what made him do that" (track and field high jumper). When asked about the reasoning behind her coach's behavior another athlete described,

> "Yeah, I guess the belief that we'll create the best runners. So, it was like a very specific tactic to like to make fast people, which is hilarious that someone would think that would work. It's just ridiculous, so yeah, I think it's just trying to squeeze out the best runners that you can get to win" (mid-distance track and field runner).

2.a.2. The perception of why the abuse was allowed by others

Within the category labeled "the perception of why the abuse was allowed by others," five sub-categories were identified and elaborated upon below.

Complacency within system. Half of the participants (*n* = 4) perceived that complacency within the administration and system of collegiate athletics allowed the emotionally abusive coaching practices to be carried out. One athlete recalled how a variety of complaints about her coach reached the administration, however no formal consequences were ever given. She stated, "Administration-wise as it was a whole system of just not caring. Yeah, they would get complaints and they would tell him everything we said, give him no oversight, and be like, 'Yeah you can't say that' and then do nothing else" (mid-distance track and field runner). Another athlete described why her emotionally abusive coach maintained his position despite the complaints reaching the administration. She described, "For the athletic program, the athletic director, from their end, it's like why are we going to fire him? This is going to be a hassle to fire him. He does well, he produces results. To keep the peace, everything you know is more important than our athletes" (basketball player).

Status, power, and/or connections of the coach. Some of the participants (n = 3) reported that they believed the administration allowed their coach's behavior due to his status, power, and/or connections. One athlete described her experience reporting her coach's behavior in an administrative investigation. She recounted,

> "I felt especially concerned when both admitted their bias for coach. One explained that she has known him for 20 years and had developed the women's soccer program with him. The other said that their kids go to school together. I thought it was extremely odd that they would talk up [coach] while investigating his negative behavior with us" (soccer goalie).

Another athlete described how connections within the administration allowed her coach and other athletic staff to maintain their positions despite their abusive behavior. She stated, "Honestly from the top, like who's hiring these people? You know where are the priorities? Yeah, it's just, and to get to a point where someone would hire you; I just believe that like you must be doing some shady things and be willing to work with shady people. So, it's just like a whole culture" (mid-distance track and field runner).

Sexism or masculine values. Some of the athletes (n = 3) indicated that they believed their coach's behavior was allowed due to sexism or masculine norms held within the athletic administration. While recalling the experience of reporting her coach's behavior to the administration after leaving the team; one athlete described,

> "I went to the athletic director, and I was like, 'This is what happened.' And he was like, 'Oh I know who you are. I'm from [state], I've seen you play basketball. Like I know you're a good player.' He's like, 'I've heard about you. Like I know you're a good player.' And he was like, 'We're really disappointed with the amount of girls who have quit basketball. We're not really sure what it is.' And I'm like 'Okay.' And then I said, 'The part that really bothered me too, was the comment about 'you're a very pretty girl, so I'm surprised you're smart. And because you're smart, you obviously must know that you're not very good.' So, either I'm smart and agree that I'm not good, or I'm dumb by thinking that I'm actually good.' I was like, 'So, that feels very manipulative.' And he was like, 'Well I think you're reading into it.' He's like, 'You know, girls are very emotional, girl players are very emotional. Like we've seen this on the guy's side too, but like you know

> I've coached girls,' he's like, 'and they're just a different breed you know.' And he starts laughing" (basketball player).

Another athlete recounted how the men soccer players noted that the same level of emotionally abusive coaching would not be tolerated within their team. She stated, "Members of the men's soccer team have even said that they believe the behavior crosses the line. They've witnessed his inappropriate coaching and behavior by playing next to us on the same fields. They encouraged members of the team to come forward and said that quote unquote 'on a men's team this behavior would not have lasted as long as it has'" (soccer goalie).

Covert coaching behavior. A couple of the participants (n = 2) attributed the allowance of their coach's behavior to the covert nature of the coaching abuse. One athlete recalled,

> "I think part of the reason he does this too is because it was hard sometimes because it would just be me that would hear it. Like it would just be me or like he wouldn't say it loud enough so it would just be like me and another girl that he had just made a rude comment to. And it's normally some of the weaker links on the team. He's not saying it to the girls that he, I don't want to say popular girls on team but like that's kind of how it felt right, like the girls he liked, he never said it in front of them. Sometimes I would sit back and be like, did I just hear this right? Or am I making like, yeah it was really, I mean it's really, it's smart if you think about it. Smart on their part, it's wild because you don't think of that as the typical abuse and I think that's probably why they do it" (basketball player).

Athletes who attributed the allowance of their coach's abuse to covert behavior described how it was hard to point to the abuse that was occurring. They described it being more difficult for the administration to understand or see the abuse, since the coaches could easily hide their behavior.

Winning record of the coach. A couple of the participants (n = 2) perceived the abuse to be allowed due to the winning record of the coach. One athlete described how when a new coach was hired, the winning record of the coach was valued over his reputation of abuse and the thoughts of the athletes. She stated,

> "This new guy came in and we were, you know, emotional and upset and concerned. We knew people that knew him and pretty much he had a terrible reputation, even though he had a great winning record. So, yeah that was really difficult for all of us to lose that

> coach but then to gain one that we were like, is a bad guy and they just brought him here because he wins and he's familiar with the [location] like that sucks" (soccer goalie).

Another athlete described how the administration would have difficulty getting rid of her coach due to his winning record. She reported, "He's been there for 20 years; he basically started the program. So, I also think too for him he feels like he can get away with murder because one, he can and he has, but it's also like he built that program from nothing. He has been doing a good job the program has been winning, it's a good program, every year the program consistently produces good results" (basketball player).

2.a.3. The perception of why the athlete was vulnerable to the abuse

Within the category labeled, "the perception of why the athlete was vulnerable to the abuse endured," six sub-categories were identified and elaborated upon below.

Less power. Half of the participants (n = 4) perceived that they were vulnerable to their coach's emotionally abusive coaching practices due to their lack of power. One athlete described how her young age and position as an athlete on scholarship made her vulnerable to experiencing coaching abuse. She reported, "They're paying me, I can say no, and I can say the trainer said no, but and at the end of the day, to be 19 years old, I feel I'm kind of, I'm going to do what they tell me" (mid-distance swimmer). Another athlete indicated that her identity as a woman with a coach who is a man created an imbalance in power which made her vulnerable. She stated, "I think especially when there's the dynamic of male head coach to female players, I think that's where you see the effects most dramatically" (soccer goalie).

Individual differences. Half of the participants (n = 4) perceived that individual differences between athletes made them vulnerable to coaching abuse. One athlete described how her personality made her vulnerable to abusive coaching practices. She stated,

> "I'm not intimidating, like I'm not mean. I wasn't going to be, and I know that I shouldn't have been meaner, but like I probably needed to be more confident, and I didn't have that. That's never going to play into my personality type, like I've never been like that, and I feel like sometimes if you're more like that personality type, you'll get stomped on" (basketball player).

Another athlete described how her ability to advocate for herself prevented her from experiencing as much coaching abuse in comparison to other teammates. She recounted, "I'd go to the trainers every day and she'd be like, 'How was it?' and I'm like, 'I didn't think I should finish, but they made me finish.' And so, after me saying that for maybe three or four weeks, that stopped. There were people who didn't advocate for themselves, who didn't have the courage or whatever" (mid-distance swimmer).

Athlete identity or goals. Some of the participants (n = 3) attributed their vulnerability to coaching abuse as based in their identity as an athlete or athletic goals. One athlete described how holding a salient athlete identity is often expected within collegiate sport and she described how it can make athletes more vulnerable to the impacts of emotionally abusive coaching practices. She reported,

> "You try to not let anyone define who you are, or how good you're doing or whatever else because that's the best practice, right? But in collegiate sports like it is very hard because performance does define your value and what you contribute and ultimately when someone asks you what you do, 'I'm a student athlete' or 'I'm an athlete' or 'I'm a goalkeeper,' right. So, it's like it is a core part of who you are, and it takes up I mean sometimes 80 hours, 90 hours a week. That is dedicated to not just working out, but travel and other requirements so when you don't do well, or when you know the coach chews you out or those things happen, like it's almost impossible not to let it trickle into everything literally everything" (soccer goalie).

Another athlete described the challenges that she was experiencing when considering leaving her team due to the emotionally abusive coaching practices. She recalled, "I was struggling I think more so with the fact that I wanted to maintain my identity as an athlete, more so than anything

else. I just knew that in some capacity I needed to be playing to kind of maintain that part of me" (soccer goalie).

Recruiting lies. Some of the participants (n = 3) indicated that they were vulnerable to coaching abuse as a result of the deception inherent in the recruiting process. They described feeling that they did not understand the true nature of their coach until participating as a collegiate athlete on the team. One athlete stated,

> "It was a complete switch. And I knew that coaches could be, I knew that they were nice in recruiting. I asked the other players when I did my overnight, "Oh does he yell?" And they were like, "No, he can," but like I didn't ever get the sense that he was the way he was" (basketball player).

Another athlete described how deception was inherent in the recruiting process for potential athletes. She recalled, "When you are recruited you hang out with the team a lot and it was like put on absolute masks" (mid-distance track and field runner).

Lack of support. Some of the participants (n = 3) believed that a lack of support from the athletic department, team staff, and administration made them more vulnerable to coaching abuse. One athlete described how a lack of support in the athletic department left her feeling unsupported and isolated. She stated,

> "There were no outlets, there was no one to go to who wouldn't absolutely rat us out. Just everything, there was no anonymous or separate you know nonbiased source to go to. There was no infrastructure at all for that, and no oversight at all" (mid-distance track and field runner).

Another athlete described how after reporting her coach to the administration, her and her teammates felt there was no structure for athlete support. She reported, "Everything we've said has come back around and that's just a constant fear and a constant anxiety of when I say things that are supposed to be in a safe place and it's not. So, who do I turn to?" (soccer goalie).

Respect for or trust in authority. Some of the participants (n = 3) attributed their respect for or trust in authority as making them vulnerable to abuse. These participants described trusting their coaches due to the authority inherent in the position, which caused them to normalize and brush off the emotional abuse. One athlete stated, "I don't question authority, like that's the way that I was raised. Like these are your superiors, you have respect, and they probably are justified in their judgments, but I guess I was naive and incorrect" (track and field thrower). Another athlete reported that although she did not respect her coach, she treated him with respect due to the nature of his position. She described,

> "Like I said, there wasn't a lot of respect towards him personally. My values align with even if you don't have respect for someone, show them respect, so you know I never called him, there were some girls would like call him by his first name, and I would refrain from that" (volleyball player).

2.b. Understanding the athlete's reaction to the experience

Within the category of understanding the athlete's reaction to the experience, two distinct categories emerged; these included: 2.b.1. reasons the athlete endured the abuse and 2.b.2. reasons the athlete left the team. Within this section, each category will be discussed and when relevant sub-categories will be labeled and explored in depth.

2.b.1. Reasons the athlete endured the abuse

Within the category labeled, "reasons the athlete endured the abuse," seven sub-categories were identified and elaborated upon below.

Powerlessness and fear. Most of the participants (n = 6) described that their experiences of powerlessness and fear led them to endure the coaching abuse. One athlete described that the fear she experienced stopped her from reporting her coach's verbally and physically abusive behavior. She recalled, "My mom walked me back to the locker room that night as I felt extremely vulnerable and scared. I would not let her say anything or report anything in fear of

making the situation worse" (soccer goalie). When asked about her perceived ability to go the administration regarding her coach's behavior, another athlete stated, "Not only did I feel like I couldn't, I didn't because I knew I would get screamed at if I did" (mid-distance swimmer). A third athlete described how her lack of power as an athlete caused her to endure the coaching abuse. She reported,

> "A lot of the things were reinforced by the staff and made it seem like they supported it. This is their job, right? To have the coaches back. Like that's their job, so it felt like that was just what happened and if they weren't going to do something about it and they didn't think it was wrong, then maybe it wasn't. Even if it was, like who am I to go do that" (soccer goalie).

Normalization. Most of the participants (n = 6) described that normalizing emotionally abusive coaching practices, caused them to endure the experience. One athlete described,

> "I don't think I understood that it was problematic, like I just kind of assumed this is like what D1 coaching was, and I didn't know any better. Everyone told me it was going to be really hard, so I just assumed like that's what they meant" (track and field high jumper).

While another athlete indicated that she normalized many of the emotionally abusive coaching practices due to the lack of overt abuse. She recalled, "Then I kept thinking you know, 'I'm imagining all of this.' Like this isn't abuse, I'm not being beaten. So, I tried to justify it which I guess is a victim's mindset" (track and field thrower). A third athlete described the normalization of abuse within her team. She stated, "I guess in almost a sick way we just kind of got used to it and so I didn't really feel I needed help per say. I feel I was just able to learn how to brush off anything he said" (mid-distance swimmer).

Athletic goals, opportunity, or identity. Over half of the participants (n = 5) described enduring the emotionally abusive coaching practices as a result of their athlete identity, college athlete opportunity, and/or athletic goals. When reflecting on the start of her second year with an emotionally abusive coach; one athlete described,

> "I was so nervous to go back, but I really didn't want to not be a college athlete. Like the thought of not having something to do, I was like, 'I don't even know what normal people do.' I don't know how to spend my time and I like some of the girls on the team" (basketball player).

Another athlete described how the unique opportunity to be a college athlete encouraged her to endure coaching abuse. She stated, "I really wanted to complete and achieve the goals that I had set for myself, so I kind of endured what I maybe shouldn't have. Other people would stand up for themselves, but I was like you only get to be a college athlete once might as well just push through it." (track and field thrower).

Reporting barriers. Over half of the participants (n = 5) reported enduring the coaching abuse due to reporting barriers or a lack of knowledge about the reporting process. One athlete stated,

> "I didn't even know that what he was doing was reportable, right? Like I didn't think it could have been and when I did try to have that conversation with the athletic director, he basically told me that I was reading way too much into what he was saying, like the nuances and that girls are more emotional than guys. So, like I didn't think I could and then when I had like a mental breakdown with one of my professors, she tried to bring it to the school, and nothing came of it. So, I really felt like it is what it is" (basketball player).

While another athlete described that her sport is not treated with as much importance within the NCAA, so she perceived that engaging in the reporting process would be fruitless. She stated, "That's what I know how the NCAA tends to work and the sports they care about, and swimming is not one of them. I feel like had it ever even got to the point of reporting that's probably what would be said" (mid-distance swimmer).

Perseverance and/or mental toughness. Perseverance and/or mental toughness was reported by over half of the participants (n = 5) as the reason they endured coaching abuse. When describing her coach's encouragement to push through an injury; one athlete recounted,

> "I can say it hurts until I'm literally in tears in the pool and they make you keep going. I mean you know people do fake injuries to get out of practicing, and so then you don't want to seem like that person. So, you're, that's another reason, you're just going to push through it" (mid-distance swimmer).

Another athlete described how the perceived requirement of mental toughness for athletes led her to endure the coaching abuse. She stated, "I feel like it's true across a lot of folks and in Division One athletic positions. So, I never really tried to let much get to me and if I did, like I just tried to channel it to work harder or to do better. I never really tried to make it kind of an external attribution, you know. More just like, 'Okay, I'm not going to do that again. Okay like I've got to figure this out, I'm going to figure this out'" (soccer goalie).

Team social norms and culture. Some of the participants (n = 3) identified their team social norms and culture as the reason they endured emotionally abusive coaching practices. One athlete described how the actions of her teammates and other athletic staff led her to endure the coaching abuse. She stated,

> "What was said and was not said, you know. Obviously like the social norms of the team. Like oh you know no one else is saying anything, everyone's kind of looking at the ground or looking at each other. Like it's unspoken. You know they might say explicitly, 'He's the coach like he makes the decision,' but it's also like what the players do and don't do, what the staff does and doesn't do, same with the trainer" (soccer goalie).

While another athlete stated,

> "I mean team culture matters. I think the captains and the starters, I think that a lot of them have kind of the same prestige. If they didn't do something or they didn't bring it up, like people looked to those leaders for what they should do or shouldn't do or say or should say. Yeah, so kind of like the bench mentality versus the starter mentality. I don't know it's just they are the coach. You don't question it; you do what you were told" (soccer goalie).

These quotations highlight how the social norms within the team cause athletes to endure the abuse they are experiencing. Several athletes stated that seeing inaction from others stopped them from acting against the coach's behavior.

Teammates. Some of the participants (*n* = 3) reported enduring the coaching abuse to protect or maintain connection with their teammates. One athlete recalled,

> "I felt like if I was the one taking the crap from him, that it wasn't going to be someone else. I was like 'you know I've lasted this long I wouldn't want him doing that to anyone else'" (track and field thrower).

It should be noted that the same reason was provided by two athletes who chose to report their coach's behavior.

2.b.2. Reasons the athlete left the team

Mental impact or sacrifice. Half of the participants (*n* = 4) reported leaving their team following their coach's abusive behavior as a result of the mental impact or sacrifice they experienced. One athlete discussed her decision to leave the team, despite her desire to complete a fifth year. She reported,

> "I had thought about going back for a fifth year because I really wanted to just like prove to myself that I could be a national, an all-American which was my goal, but it wasn't worth it. I'm glad I made the decision, as hard as it was to say goodbye to my teammates and not be in that setting anymore" (track and field thrower).

Another athlete described how the mental impact of her coach's behavior and the personal sacrifice of collegiate sport helped her decide to leave. She reported, "I never played a full season with him. I decided to leave, and majority of it was the coach and just the situation that I was in was a pretty toxic environment for me and for I think many others. I really chose to prioritize my career but mainly my family on top of that. I was pretty far away and so I took myself out of that environment" (soccer goalie).

Post-Traumatic Growth

The final theme that arose from the data concerned the post-traumatic growth that athletes perceived after enduring emotionally abusive coaching practices and leaving the sporting role. Since not every athlete identified their emotionally abusive coaching experience as

traumatic, this growth could also be described as adversarial growth. Six distinct categories were identified within athletes' reported experiences of post-traumatic growth; these included: 3.a. a reorientation to internal happiness, meaning, and values, 3.b. advocating for self and others, 3.c. life lessons and skills learned, 3.d. altruistic future motivations, 3.e. gratitude, and 3.f. deeper friendship connections. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) identified five key facets of post-traumatic growth which included: new possibilities, relating to others, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life. Each post-traumatic growth category that emerged from the data will be compared to the five key facets within each category section below. It should be noted that negative long-term impacts and post-traumatic growth experiences were reported as co-occurring by several participants. Therefore, it can be assumed that post-traumatic growth experiences did not eliminate the experience of negative long-term outcomes, but instead positive and negative outcomes occurred simultaneously.

3.a. Reorientation to internal happiness, meaning, and values

All participants (n = 8) described a reorientation to their own internal happiness, meaning, and values after experiencing emotionally abusive coaching practices. This category aligns with the post-traumatic growth facet of a greater appreciation for life, as participants often endorsed a reorientation to their priorities and greater importance held in their values. It should be noted that only six of the eight participants described their experiences as holding severe or traumatic stress. Therefore, the other two participants who experienced a reorientation to happiness may have experienced this outcome on a smaller scale. One athlete described, "I think I am more focused on what makes me happy and trying to do what I think is best. Rather than trying to fulfill someone else's goals for me" (track and field thrower). Another athlete discussed

how her emotionally abusive coaching experience informed her approach to selecting a transfer school. She stated,

> "That set the tone for me, especially when I started looking at new programs and where I wanted to go. I was way more conscious of the decisions and where I was going to go and it helped me let go of some of the culture like finding the best program. I just wanted to go somewhere for me, I just want to go somewhere to play and have fun and I literally just wanted to play. It made me appreciate being an athlete like I missed the sport. I just wanted to play, like I don't care put me on the B team or put me with the toddler boys. I just miss playing, I just want to play. That helped me at least understand finding that joy of wanting to play again" (basketball player)

When reflecting on her experience as a college athlete one participant remarked, "While it was awful and it wasn't enjoyable, I think it did also help me. Especially with like the team aspect too, but just kind of like helping me to stick to my values and stick to my work ethic despite what was happening around me and I don't think I ever really wavered too much" (volleyball player).

3.b. Advocating for self and others

Most of the participants (n = 6), five who reported experiencing severe or traumatic stress and one who did not, described advocating for themselves and others following their emotionally abusive coaching experience. This category aligns with the post-traumatic growth facet of new possibilities, as participants endorsed a higher likelihood of advocating for themselves or others in situations requiring change. One athlete who aided in the process of reporting her coach described, "I love to you know get justice. I helped fire that coach, so you know I'm always kind of the one who you know whistle blows" (mid-distance track and field runner). When asked about her coach's influence on her experience advocating for others; another athlete reported,

> "There was a need to stand up for the freshmen. Had I not been in a situation where that wasn't there, or where I didn't have to stand up for myself and my injury and whatever, if I would have been put in that situation, I don't know that I would have developed those skills as young as I did" (mid-distance swimmer).

A third athlete described how the emotionally abusive coach she had her freshman year impacted her growth as a person and athlete; however, once her coach was removed, she noticed several post-traumatic growth experiences. She stated,

> "I was so stunted my freshman year. Like there was no room for me to grow like emotionally. I had no energy to become like anyone else. Me versus freshman year [participant], totally different person. So much more self-confidence, so much more vocal, I advocate for myself a lot more, I advocate for others a lot more, I recognize problematic situations a lot more" (track and field high jumper).

3.c. Life lessons and skills learned

Over half of the participants (n = 5), four who reported experiencing severe or traumatic stress and one who did not, described obtaining life lessons and skills from the experience with their coaches. This category aligns with the post-traumatic growth facets of personal strength and new possibilities, as participants endorsed an appreciation of their resiliency and strength and noted the ways that their experiences helped shaped their future goals. One athlete discussed the ways that her experience highlighted her strength and resiliency. She reported,

> "It sucked, but it was an opportunity to learn about life that I kind of had to go through on my own. And like I'm tough enough to get through it even when things were kind of rough. So, I think being on my own it showed me that I'm a lot stronger than I thought I was" (track and field thrower).

While another participant reflected on the lesson of becoming a better leader and teammate after the experience with her coach. She stated, "I was getting so frustrated with the team and with my coach that like I wasn't always the best teammate. So, sometimes I look back and think like, 'okay how could I...' Or even just, not that I wasn't the best teammate, but I didn't stand up for myself more or be more of a leader. Not just like trying to be an inspirer or an encourager, but like be more of that leader" (volleyball player).

3.d. Altruistic future motivations

Over half of the participants (n = 5), each of whom reported experiencing severe or traumatic stress, described holding altruistic future motivations after the experience with their coach. This category aligns with the post-traumatic growth facets of relating to others and new possibilities, as participants endorsed a greater sense of compassion for others in combination with future altruistic goals. Once participant stated,

> "I've worked for a nonprofit and I love that work. It's really helped my healing process and helped me kind of give back to students who maybe are facing similar or just other mental health challenges. That's been huge for me, and I think really impactful" (soccer goalie).

While another athlete discussed the ways that her experience in college influenced her career choice. She described, "They completely neglected the entire mental health of athletes which is why I wanted to go into sports psychology, because I think that it's very underrepresented. Especially at the Division 3 level where you don't have a lot of resources" (track and field thrower). A third athlete reported,

> "I mean the only positive thing that I would say that I got out of it was like I went through these mental health struggles and then I felt like I understood other people better. I felt like I could be a better upperclassman teammate to the younger girls who didn't even have him as a coach or who were going through stuff and still struggling. I felt like I could then be like a useful resource, but I probably also could have been a fine resource without having like a traumatic experience" (track and field high jumper).

This quotation highlights the participant's nuanced view of the growth she experienced in the wake of her trauma. She notes that although the trauma of her coaching experience provided her with an altruistic motivation, she could have reached a similar motivation without experiencing a traumatic coaching experience.

3.e. Gratitude

Some of the participants (n = 3), each of whom reported experiencing severe or traumatic stress, described experiencing gratitude following their traumatic coaching experiences. This

category aligns with the post-traumatic growth facet of a greater appreciation for life, as participants endorsed experiencing gratitude despite the challenging circumstances. One participant stated,

> "I've grown a ton and I'm grateful for the experience, which I know sounds insane. I think my mom and some of the people closest to me probably wish that I never stepped foot on that soccer field, but I think it made me deeper in my convictions of who I am as a person in a lot of ways. Even though it did shake my confidence and you know rattled me to my core a lot, I stuck up for what I believed in, and I spoke up when I thought something was wrong and I can stand by that and be really proud of that" (soccer goalie).

Each of the participants who expressed gratitude discussed how they were grateful for the growth that they experienced as a result of the traumatic coaching experience.

3.f. Deeper friendship connections.

Some of the participants (n = 3), two of whom reported experiencing severe or traumatic stress and one who did not, reflected on the deeper friendship connections that they maintained as a result of the traumatic coaching experience. This category aligns with the post-traumatic growth facet of relating to others, as participants endorsed a greater sense of closeness with others. Once athlete described,

> "There's my one friend who was on the basketball team, now I text him like after games as I'm like driving home. I have been like, 'this is what happened,' he was really supportive. There was a football player who would always kind of give me those pep talks to remind me like of how good of a player I am, and to keep going despite everything. The student assistant and graduate assistant, they were both great. He really like took me under his wing and then our graduate assistants were former players, so they were upperclassmen who you know had my back" (volleyball player).

While another discussed the benefits that experiencing trauma had on her ability to be vulnerable in relationships. She stated, "I created friendships that will last a lifetime, so I think that it was also one of the ways that I had first like opened up about personal issues. Without it, I probably wouldn't have sought a mental health professional" (track and field thrower).

Conclusion

The purpose of this section was to highlight the results of this study. It is clear from the data collected that the participants experienced a variety of short- and long-term impacts as a result of their coaches emotionally abusive behavior. In addition to the negative impact on athletes, the ways that athletes made sense of their experiences was also observed within the data. Two distinct categories were observed within this theme, the first being understanding why the experience occurred and the other being understanding the athlete's reaction to the experience. Athletes made sense of their experiences through the lens of power and control maintained by the coach. It is important to highlight that participants within the current study were experiencing more than one power dynamic which had the potential to influence their experiences in a variety of ways. The power dynamics noted by participants included the gendered dynamic between men coaches and women athletes, the age difference between older coaches and younger athletes, and the authority that coaches held over their athletes. The power dynamics at play made for unique and differing discrepancies of power between coach and athlete. Regarding the final theme of post-traumatic growth, a variety of adversarial growth experiences were reported by athletes, including the two athletes who did not believe their coaching experiences were severely distressing or traumatic.

Table 1

Theme	Categories	Sub-Categories
1. Impact	**1.a.** Impact on athlete during collegiate athletic career	**1.a.1.** Stress and the emotional impact
		1.a.2. Negative mental health outcomes
		1.a.3. Identity disturbance
		1.a.4. Internalizing the abuse
		1.a.5. Interpersonal challenges
		1.a.6. Adverse athletic and physical impacts
		1.a.7. Negative academic functioning
	1.b. Impact on athlete after collegiate athletic career	**1.b.1.** Stress and the emotional impact
		1.b.2. Negative mental health outcomes
		1.b.3. Identity disturbance
		1.b.4. Internalizing the abuse
		1.b.5. Interpersonal challenges
		1.b.6. Physical implications
2. Making Sense of Experience	**2.a.** Understanding why the experience occurred	**2.a.1.** The perception of why the coach engaged in emotionally abusive coaching behaviors
		2.a.2. The perception of why the abuse was allowed by others
		2.a.3. The perception of why the athlete was vulnerable to the abuse endured
	2.b. Understanding the athlete's reaction to the experience	**2.b.1.** The reasons the athlete endured the abuse
		2.b.2. The reasons the athlete left the team
3. Post-Traumatic Growth	**3.a.** Reorientation to internal happiness, meaning, and values	
	3.b. Advocating for self and others	
	3.c. Life lessons and skills learned	

	3.d. Altruistic future motivations	
	3.e. Gratitude	
	3.f. Deeper friendship connections	

Discussion

Collegiate women athletes face a variety of challenges upon entrance into college sport; emotionally abusive coaching practices should not be one such challenge. Among the participants studied, emotionally abusive coaching practices were labeled as an agonizing part of their athletic careers. The current study retrospectively examined the impact of emotional abuse on women athletes' mental well-being and athletic performance, athletes' perceptions of emotional abuse, and the implications of power on athletes' perspectives and ability to report the abuse. This study also examined the post-traumatic growth or adversarial growth experiences in the years following the participants' exit from elite collegiate sport. Findings demonstrated alignment with the research questions and illuminated several important themes. Although previous research is somewhat scarce in this area, the literature on emotionally abusive coaching practices is cause for concern. A variety of recent studies have documented the insidious impact that emotionally abusive coaching practices can have on athletes in psychological, emotional, physical health, interpersonal, athletic, and academic domains (De Beer, 2018; Kavanaugh, 2014; Kerr et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2020; Mountjoy et al., 2016; Stirling, 2011; Vertommen et al., 2018; Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2015). The results of this study support and add to the previous literature in a variety of ways discussed below.

The first research question aimed to examine the short- and long-term impacts of emotionally abusive coaching practices on former collegiate athletes. Results demonstrated that athletes experienced a variety of negative outcomes in relation to their collegiate coaching experiences. Participants reported experiencing impacts in domains such as stress and challenging emotions, negative mental health outcomes, identity disturbance, internalization of

the abuse, interpersonal challenges, adverse athletic and physical impacts, and negative academic functioning. A variety of concerning short- and long-term impacts were endorsed by participants; the most concerning being: crisis and/or suicidal behavior, severe or traumatic stress, symptoms of anxiety and depression, eating disorder symptomatology, substance misuse, negative physical health outcomes, and negative athletic and academic outcomes. All athletes described experiencing short- and long-term impacts that hindered their ability to function as elite athletes, college students, and human beings. These findings highlight the detrimental impact that emotionally abusive coaching practices can have on athletes in a variety of domains spanning as long as five years after the sporting role. These associations do not differ across countries (Baker et al., 2000; De Beer, 2018; Gervis, 2009; Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Kavanaugh, 2014; Kerr et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2020; Mountjoy et al., 2016; Mullin et al., 1996; Stirling, 2011; Stirling & Kerr, 2008a, 2013; Vealey et al., 1998; Vertommen et al., 2018; Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2015); this suggests that emotionally abusive coaching practices are associated with negative short- and long-term impacts for athletes regardless of geography.

The second research question sought to examine athletes' perceptions of the emotionally abusive coaching practices perpetrated by collegiate coaches who are men and the implications of power within the coach-athlete dynamic. Inherent in the suffering and distress experienced by participants, were the ways by which athletes made sense of their experiences. Two distinct categories emerged within this theme: the first being understanding why the experience occurred and the other being understanding the athlete's reaction (e.g., enduring or leaving) to the experience. Within each of the categories, athletes consistently identified the power of the coach and lack of power held by athletes as reasoning for their experiences and reactions to the abuse. It should be noted that athletes identified several factors that contributed to the imbalance in

power, including the gendered dynamic between men coaches and women athletes, the age difference between older coaches and younger athletes, and the authority that coaches held over their athletes. The power dynamics at play within participants' experiences made for unique and differing discrepancies of power between coach and athlete. Not all participants experienced each type of power dynamic making some individuals' experiences of power less salient; while others experienced the multiple power dynamics, thus strengthening the perceived impact of power. This finding is in alignment with results provided by Stirling and Kerr (2009) which demonstrated that the power of the coach influenced participants perceptions of the abuse and ability to report.

The third and final research question sought to understand the post-traumatic growth experiences, or adversarial growth experiences, of athletes. As noted within the results section, six of the eight participants identified their coaching experiences as holding severe or traumatic stress; however, all eight of the participants reported experiencing some form of post-traumatic growth or adversarial growth. These results are notable in that athletes experienced growth following their experiences of severe or traumatic stress in the sporting role. The growth reported within this study indicates that participants were able to develop positive internal growth and new resources to adapt following their coaching experiences. Previous research within this domain has not examined the positive long-term outcomes associated with emotionally abusive coaching practices, and this study demonstrated that all participants experienced some form of positive or adversarial growth after their coaching experience whether their experience involved severe or traumatic stress or not. Positive and negative long-term consequences were experienced by all athletes; however, despite the positive outcomes, this finding should not take away from the negative long-term impacts and distress experienced by all athletes studied.

Positive and negative outcomes were observed, but as one athlete noted, the experience of trauma she experienced, does not justify the post-traumatic growth experienced.

A common argument for retaining emotionally abusive coaches is the financial expense that coaching turnover may create (Greenberg, 2018, slide 52). The short- and long-term impacts of emotionally abusive coaching practices negatively affected athletic performance, academic functioning, and the physical and emotional health of all athletes studied. Therefore, by retaining coaches who engage in emotionally abusive coaching practices, colleges are negatively impacting their athletic programs' success, the academic standing of their student-athletes, and taxing the burdened medical and mental health services available to athletes on campus. As an example, a recent legal publication detailed that California State University (CSU), the largest four-year public institution in the United States which serves approximately 485,550 students, spent $45 million dollars systemwide on mental health in the 2020-2021 academic year (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2021). Mental health spending at CSU is anticipated to increase to $62 million dollars in the 2021-2022 academic year. In sum, expenditures aimed at addressing the mental health of student-athletes will continue to rise in part as a result of retaining emotionally abusive coaches.

In addition to the financial burden of emotionally abusive coaching practices, the welfare of collegiate athletes is harmed by allowing such practices. Each athlete studied experienced negative long-term impacts, and six of the eight athletes reported experiencing severe or traumatic stress as a result of their experience. Colleges and institutions should seek to question the ways that retaining emotionally abusive coaches can negatively impact the physical and emotional health of their athletes, a vulnerable population with less power.

It should be noted that athletes whose coaches engaged in overt emotionally abusive behavior, such as yelling and physical behaviors, experienced less severe short-term impacts and fewer long-term impacts. These findings highlight that more overt forms of abuse may be easier for athletes to externalize to their coaches; whereas covert forms of abuse may cause athletes to internalize the abuse and become the perpetrator of said abuse towards themselves. As noted by one participant, covert forms of abuse were more impactful for her and her teammates, whereas overt forms of abuse were more often employed with the athletes who were men and may have been perceived as more impactful within that population. Many of the participants studied also identified their athletic training staff as a source of positive social support; this discovery indicates an important avenue for reporting emotionally abusive coaching practices. To increase reporting accessibility for athletes, this finding should be considered. Future prevention strategies for emotionally abusive coaching practices could use the relationship between athletic training staff and athletes to open a channel of reporting communication. In the interest of safeguarding athletes, athletic training staff could play a vital role in communicating athletes' concerns to higher level athletic department staff such as the athletic director and/or administrative staff.

Limitations

Several common qualitative limitations may be present in this study. First, snowball sampling, although a typical method of obtaining participants from a highly specific group, may introduce sampling bias. Since this sampling technique relies on connections between individuals, referrals may only be made to individuals who share similar characteristics. Thus, the representativeness of the study is not guaranteed; however, qualitative studies are generally not representative in nature due to the smaller sample size. The retrospective nature of the study

may also introduce issues related to accuracy. Especially when dealing with sensitive data, retrospective reflection can be vulnerable to memory deficits or inaccurate recall (Fasting et al., 2007). Moreover, the recollection of participants' experiences may skew positively or negatively in perception, thus influencing the type of participants that may engage in the study. For example, participants who continue to experience negative ramifications from the emotional abuse endured may refuse to engage in this type of study. Or perhaps participants who continue to experience negative ramifications are more willing to share their experience since it is more salient. For this reason, certain participants may be drawn to this type of study while others may avoid it.

Another limitation of the present study is the type of participants selected. More specifically, participants who had experienced power dynamics within their athletic careers were sought out. The inclusion criteria of the study included identifying as a woman during the participant's collegiate athletic career and being coached by a man. Thus, the gendered power dynamic was built into this study due to the societal inequity of power between the different genders. Moreover, athletes inherently have less power than coaches, due to the power structures within athletics. For these reasons, some of the power differences are due to the method of the study and some are built into the population of collegiate athletes.

Finally, the inherent bias and perspective held by each of the coders. Although two graduate level researchers coded the data and applied rigorous methodology to ensure inter-coder reliability, individual bias and perspective is impossible to entirely rule-out. Therefore, the findings of this study and the research questions asked of participants may not capture the entire picture of this area of inquiry and may be filtered through the perspectives of the coders. Moreover, there was no way to ensure that preconceived notions or theories held by the coders

were not subconsciously present in the data analysis process, therefore acting antithetically to the grounded theory methodology. Although the coders allowed the theory to arise from the data, both coders were aware of the previous literature in this area of inquiry; therefore, knowledge of the previous literature may have impacted the conclusions of this study. Finally, due to the small sample size of the study and the lack of generalizability inherent in qualitative research, causality cannot be ensured between emotionally abusive coaching behaviors and the subsequent impacts.

Future Directions

In alignment with the limitations of the study, future research should aim to make the findings more generalizable to all collegiate athletes within the United States. Larger qualitative studies using different sampling methodology, as well as quantitative examinations of this topic may yield more generalizable results. Increasing the sample size may also aid researchers in understanding why some athletes label their experiences as traumatic, and others do not. To increase accurate recall, interviews of current collegiate athletes experiencing emotionally abusive coaching practices should be conducted, as well as retrospective research at a specific point in retirement (e.g., all participants were retired from the collegiate sporting role for 3 years, etc.).

In addition to the methodological future directions, several additional themes that did not pertain directly to the research questions could inform future research. Two participants described their reasoning for reporting the abuse experienced; additional research in this area could illuminate the factors that catalyzed the reporting process and the barriers that were inherent in such processes. Many of the participants studied also described the coping mechanisms used to manage the short- and long-term impacts of emotionally abusive coaching practices during and after the sporting role. Research on athletes' coping strategies could

highlight the positive and negative ways that athletes dealt with their experiences and how coping mechanisms connect to the severity of short- and long-term impacts.

The final undiscussed theme that arose from the data was athletes' identification of positive and negative social connections. Individuals such as athletic training staff or medical staff, parents, assistant coaches, athletes on other teams, academic faculty, and a variety of others were noted to impact athletes positively and negatively. Future research could examine the support, and lack thereof, that athletes experienced from others; findings in this area could illuminate potential supports and reporting avenues for athletes, as well as social connections that may lead to more severe short- and long-term negative impacts. Future areas of inquiry could also examine the experiences of teammates of athletes who are the targets of emotionally abusive coaching practices to determine the impact of such practices on witnesses of the abuse; research within this area could illuminate the barriers to reporting within the team, as well as the ways that athletes may support each other while experiencing emotionally abusive coaching practices.

Conclusions

The current study demonstrated that emotionally abusive coaching practices perpetrated by a coach who is a man are associated with negative short- and long-term impacts for women athletes. These results suggest that emotionally abusive coaching practices are associated with negative impacts regardless of the geography of athletes studied. Results also demonstrated that athletes consistently identified the power of the coach and the lack of power held by athletes, as reasoning for their experiences and reactions to the abuse. Finally, the current study demonstrated that all participants experienced some form of post-traumatic growth or adversarial growth after their coaching experience. However, despite the positive growth observed, this finding should not take away from the negative long-term impact and distress experienced by all

athletes studied. It is this author's hope that the results from this study could challenge the retainment of coaches who engage in emotionally abusive practices and may inform future research aimed at preventing such practices.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Colorado State University
Consent to Participate in Research

Exploring Former Collegiate Women Athletes' Experiences of Emotional Abuse in the Coach-Athlete Relationship

Introduction and Purpose
My name is Madison Colley. I am a graduate student at Colorado State University working with my faculty advisor, Professor Michael Steger, PhD in the Department of Counseling Psychology. I would like to invite you to take part in my research study, which looks at former collegiate women athletes' experiences of emotionally abusive coaching practices and the impact of these experiences. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of Colorado State University.

Procedures
If you agree to participate in my research, I will conduct a Teams interview with you at a time of your choice. The interview will involve questions about your relationship with your collegiate coach, any problematic or harmful coaching behaviors you experienced, the distress or harm that these harmful coaching behaviors may have caused, and the impact that this experience has had on you after leaving the collegiate sporting role. This interview should last between 30 minutes and 2 hours. With your permission, I will audiotape and take notes during the interview. The recording is meant to accurately record the information you provide and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you agree to being audiotaped but feel uncomfortable or change your mind for any reason during the interview, we can end the interview at any time and/or delete any amount of the recording. You are entitled to stop the interview at any time or withdraw from the study completely.

I expect to conduct only one interview with you; however, an optional follow-up meeting may be scheduled to allow for you to provide feedback on our analysis of your interview. Following the completion of our data analysis, I will contact you by email to schedule a follow-up meeting. The follow-up meeting is optional and can be scheduled at your discretion.

Benefits
There is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study. It is our hope that the research will lay a foundation for future research in this area of study. It is also our hope that the information from this study may encourage improvements in protection mechanisms for collegiate athletes and may lay a foundation for systemic change in collegiate athletics.

Risks/Discomforts
During the interview, some questions may cause you psychological discomfort or emotional distress. You have the ability to skip any questions, omit information, take a break, reschedule,

or stop the interview at any time. Following the completion of the interview, a list of mental health services in your location of residence will be provided at your request.

As with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality could be compromised; however, we are taking precautions to minimize this risk.

Confidentiality
Your study data will be handled as confidentially as possible. If results of this study are published or presented, individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used.

To minimize the risks to confidentiality, certain precautions will be taken. Your response to the recruitment survey will be destroyed within 48 hours after completion. We will transcribe the audio recordings as soon as possible after the interview, and then destroy the tapes. Transcriptions will omit all identifying information. Transcriptions and participant contact information will be kept in an encrypted document. All study documents will have limited access. When the research is completed, I will save the transcriptions for possible use in future research done by myself or others. I will retain these records indefinitely after the study is over. If you have concerns about the retention of the study data for future research, you may discuss this with the researchers and/or opt out at the start of your interview. The same measures described above will be taken to protect confidentiality of this study data. We may be asked to share the research files with the sponsor or the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee for auditing purposes.

Confidentiality will only be broken if a participant discloses that they are an imminent danger to themselves or others. If at any point this circumstance arises, the researcher will consult with the faculty advisor and if deemed appropriate will contact 911 for immediate crisis support. Further, if a participant discloses sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, or stalking at any time during the study and they are currently a student attending a university within the United States, the co-Principal Investigator may be mandated by Title IX to report this information. Before reporting, the co-Principal Investigator will consult with the participant and the Principal Investigator to determine if reporting is necessary in this circumstance. For further information regarding mandatory reporting and Title IX, please access the following website (https://sites.ed.gov/titleix/policy/#fact-sheet).

Compensation
You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

Rights
Participation in research is completely voluntary. You are free to decline to take part in the study. You can decline to answer any questions and are free to stop taking part in the project at any time. Whether or not you choose to participate in the research and whether or not you choose to answer any questions or continue participating in the project, there will be no penalty to you.

Questions

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me at (253) 279-5119 or mlcolley@colostate.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the Colorado State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at: 970-491-1553, or e-mail RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu .

****

CONSENT

Please fill out the spaces below by printing, scanning, and emailing this document back to Madison Colley at mlcolley@colostate.edu or by filling it out electronically.

Do you consent for your interview to be audiotaped and transcribed?
___Yes
___No

If you wish to participate in this study, please sign and date below. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your own records.

_____
Participant's Name *(please print)*

_____ _____
Participant's Signature Date

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Modeled after the interview protocol from Stirling (2011).

Initial Question:

Please describe to me your experience as a collegiate athlete.

Potential Probing Questions:

How would you describe your relationship with your coach?

Did you ever experience any coaching behaviors that you perceived as problematic or harmful?

- When did you first notice this behavior?
- How often did this behavior occur?
- Did this behavior continue throughout your career as a collegiate athlete?
- Did others (i.e., assistant coaches, medical staff, teammates, etc.) notice this behavior as well?
- What do you believe brought on this behavior?

Have you ever had objects thrown or hit at you by a coach? (If yes ask questions below, if no skip to next section).

- When did you first notice this behavior?
- How often did this behavior occur?
- Did this behavior continue throughout your career as a collegiate athlete?
- What do you believe brought on this behavior?

Have you ever been shouted or yelled at by a coach? (If yes ask questions below, if no skip to next section).

- When did you first notice this behavior?
- How often did this behavior occur?
- Did this behavior continue throughout your career as a collegiate athlete?
- What do you believe brought on this behavior?

Have you ever been ignored or felt unsupported by a coach? (If yes ask questions below, if no skip to next section).

- When did you first notice this behavior?
- How often did this behavior occur?
- Did this behavior continue throughout your career as a collegiate athlete?
- What do you believe brought on this behavior?

Have you ever felt humiliated by a coach? (If yes ask questions below, if no skip to next section).

- When did you first notice this behavior?
- How often did this behavior occur?
- Did this behavior continue throughout your career as a collegiate athlete?
- What do you believe brought on this behavior?

Have you ever felt belittled by a coach? (If yes ask questions below, if no skip to next section).

- When did you first notice this behavior?
- How often did this behavior occur?
- Did this behavior continue throughout your career as a collegiate athlete?
- What do you believe brought on this behavior?

Did your coach's behavior cause you any distress or harm while you were an athlete?

- Did you feel that your coach's behavior impacted your athletic performance?
- Did you feel that your coach's behavior impacted other areas of your life?
- Did your coach's behavior cause any distress or harm after retirement from collegiate sport?

Did you feel that you could tell someone else about this behavior?
Did you feel that the power or authority that your coach held impacted your experience?
Do you feel that you have grown since leaving the sporting role? If so, how?
Do you feel that your values or perspective have changed following retirement?

Reference

Stirling, A. E. (2011). Initiating and sustaining emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship: Athletes', parents' and coaches' reflections [Doctoral thesis, University of Toronto]. TSpace Repository. https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/35742/3/Stirling_Ashley_E_201106_PhD_thesis.pdf

Appendix C

Distress Protocol

In the event that a participant experiences high levels of stress or emotional distress during the interview process, follow the steps in this protocol. This protocol has been modeled after Draucker et al. (2009).

Indications of Participant Distress

Indicator #1: A participant verbally discloses that they are experiencing a high degree of stress or emotional distress OR the participant exhibits behaviors that suggest intense distress (e.g., uncontrollable crying, indications of flashbacks, incoherent speech).
Indicator #2: A participant indicates that they are thinking about hurting themselves (e.g., suicidal thoughts, urges to engage in self-harm, etc.).
Indicator #3: A participant indicates that they are thinking about hurting someone else
Indicator #4: A participant indicates that they would be in danger if anyone else found out about their participation in the study.

Interviewer Response Protocol

Indicator #1

1. Stop the interview
2. Offer support and allow the participant time to regroup
3. Assess mental state
    a. What thoughts are you having right now?
    b. What feelings are you having right now?
    c. Do you feel that you are able to continue your day following this interview?
    d. Do you feel safe? (If no, ask risk assessment questions below)
4. After asking the above questions, determine if the participant is experiencing mild emotional discomfort and can continue. Or, if the participant is experiencing more intense emotional distress, this may require a break from the interview, rescheduling the interview, or ending the interview immediately.

Indicator #2

1. Stop the interview
2. Express appropriate concern and conduct a risk assessment
    a. What types of thoughts are you having?
    b. Do you intend to harm, kill, or hurt yourself?
    c. How do you intend to harm, kill, or hurt yourself?
    d. When do you intend to harm, kill, or hurt yourself?
    e. Do you have the means to harm, kill, or hurt yourself?
3. After conducting the risk assessment, determine if the participant is an imminent danger to themselves.

Indicator #3

1. Stop the interview
2. Express appropriate concern and conduct a risk assessment
    a. What types of thoughts are you having?
    b. Do you intend to harm, kill, or hurt someone else? Who?
    c. How do you intend to harm, kill, or hurt him/her/them?
    d. When do you intend to harm, kill, or hurt him/her/them?
    e. Do you have the means to harm, kill, or hurt him/her/them?
3. After conducting the risk assessment, determine if the participant is an imminent danger to others.

Indicator #4

1. Stop the interview
2. Assess for perceived danger
    a. How might you be in danger?
    b. How might this person find out that you participated in this study?
    c. What do you think this person would do if they found out that you were participating in this study?
3. After conducting the perceived danger assessment, determine if the participant is experiencing a safety concern.

<u>Interviewer Action Steps</u>

1. If the participant is experiencing mild emotional discomfort and feels that they can continue, the interviewer may offer support, let the participant dictate the next steps (e.g., take a break, reschedule, etc.), and continue the interview process.
2. If a participant's distress reflects an acute emotional response or a safety concern beyond what is to be expected in a sensitive interview, but they are not in imminent danger, implement the following actions:
    a. Encourage the participant to contact their mental health provider.
    b. Provide the participant with mental health resources and emergency crisis resources in their location of residence.
3. If the participant's distress reflects imminent danger, take the following actions:
    a. Contact local law authorities or crisis emergency services for the participant to be transported to the emergency room.

Reference

Draucker, C. B., Martsolf, D. S., & Poole, C. (2009). Developing distress protocols for research on sensitive topics. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing, 23*(5), 343–350. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnu.2008.10.008

Appendix D

Interview Debrief

Thank you for your participation in this study. It is our hope that your contribution will lay the groundwork for more research on this topic area in the US, and eventually may help make systemic change within collegiate athletics. If you wish to remove your data from the present study and delete your interview entirely, please contact Madison Colley (mlcolley@colostate.edu). Below I have included a list of affordable mental health resources and crisis services within your location of residence.

Outpatient Therapy

- Psychological Services Center
  - (970) 491-5212
  - https://psychology.colostate.edu/psc/
  - Only remote services are offered at this time
- Open Path Psychotherapy Collective
  - 1-800-268-2833 or Info@openpathcollective.org
  - https://openpathcollective.org/open-path-staff/
  - Only remote services are offered at this time
- SummitStone Health Partners
  - (970) 494-4200
  - 1217 Riverside Ave, Fort Collins, CO 80524
  - https://www.summitstonehealth.org/
  - Remote and in-person services are available within northern Colorado

Crisis Options

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
  - 1-800-273-8255
  - This is a free, 24-hour hotline
- SummitStone Health Partners
  - For a behavioral health crisis call 1-844-493-TALK (8255) or text TALK to 38255
  - You may also reach the 24-hour access center at (970) 494-4200
  - 1217 Riverside Ave, Fort Collins, CO 80524
  - https://www.summitstonehealth.org/
- Emergency Services
  - Call 911