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5 **TITLE: Elite Athletes' Experience of Coping with Emotional Abuse in the Coach-**
6 **Athlete Relationship**
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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the coping strategies used by elite athletes in response to emotional abuse experienced within the coach-athlete relationship. The athletes in this study adopted emotion- and avoidance-focussed coping strategies to manage their feelings in the moment that emotional abuse occurred. Over time, athletes accessed support networks and engaged in sense-making to rationalise their experiences. The potential of coping-level intervention to develop individual resources and to break the cycle of emotional abuse in sport is highlighted. We suggest that as primary agents of ensuring athlete's protection, sport psychologists need appropriate safeguarding training.

*Keywords***:** Coping, Emotional Abuse, Athlete, High-performance, Sport

Cense and Brackenridge (2001) argue that within a sports culture that thrives on authoritarian leadership, the climate is ripe for the abuse of athletes. The subject of abuse has, however, only received sporadic attention within the academic literature, thus limiting understanding of the presence and experience of abuse in sport. Research in sport indicates that athletes have been subject to: physical (Kerr, 2010; Pike, 2010; Stafford, Alexander, & Fry, 2013) and sexual abuse (Brackenridge, Bishopp, Moussalli, & Tapp, 2008; Fasting, Chroni, Hervik, & Knorre, 2011; Hartill, 2005, 2009; Parent & Demers, 2011); emotional abuse (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Stirling, 2013; Stirling & Kerr, 2008, 2009, 2013, 2014); and neglect, and bullying (Kavanagh, 2014). These studies suggest that a range of exploitative and abusive practices take place in the context of organised sport (Hartill, 2009) that threatens athletes' physical and emotional wellbeing (Rhind, McDermott, Lambert, & Koleva, 2014).

Emotional abuse, the focus of this study, is an under-recognised but common form of abuse in the sporting arena, making this a subtle yet pervasive behaviour which has been difficult to operationalise and subsequently police (Stirling & Kerr, 2014). A small body of research to date has focussed on providing a definition of emotional abuse suitable for the sporting domain (Stirling & Kerr, 2008) and has examined its impact within the coach-athlete relationship (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Stirling & Kerr, 2007, 2013, 2014) as well as the role of bystanders (such as parents) in the emotional abuse cycle (Kerr & Stirling, 2012). Despite this body of work, emotional abuse is still relatively underexplored in the sporting domain and this study contributes to further understanding its presence and impact upon the athlete.

Investigations of abuse in the coach–athlete relationship suggest that emotional abuse may be the most frequently occurring form of abuse in the sport environment (Stirling & Kerr, 2013, 2016). Emotional abuse can be defined as a sustained and repeated pattern of deliberate non-contact behaviours by a person in a critical relationship role that has the

potential to be harmful to an individual's affective, behavioral, cognitive or physical wellbeing (Stirling & Kerr, 2008; Stirling, 2013).

Emotional abuses have been documented in a small number of studies. For example, Kirby, Greaves and Hankivsky (2000) surveyed Canadian Olympic athletes (*n*=266) and identified the presence of emotionally abusive practices in sport such as being insulted, ridiculed and verbally abused; this abuse type was highlighted as common and problematic. Similarly, Gervis and Dunn (2004) examined the emotional abuse of elite child athletes in gymnastics, which they categorised under eight headings: belittling, humiliating, shouting, scapegoating, rejecting, isolating, threatening, and ignoring. This abusive behaviour left the athletes feeling stupid, worthless, depressed, under-confident, and rejected, highlighting the significant impact of emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. Following this, Stirling and Kerr (2008) found that the emotionally abusive behaviours of the coach could occur in three ways. The first, physical emotionally abusive behaviours, include acts of aggression such as hitting and throwing objects at or in the presence of an athlete. The second, verbal behaviours include yelling and shouting at an athlete or a group of athletes, belittling, name-calling, and making degrading comments. Thirdly, the denial of attention and support include being ignored by the coach, and being excluded from training practices.

Where sport is recognised as a space that increases vulnerability and risk (Stirling & Kerr, 2014) emotional abuse is likely to occur within the coach-athlete relationship due to the power differential present (Stirling & Kerr, 2012). Furthermore, Stirling (2013) noted that the emotionally abusive practices of the coach have both expressive and instrumental origins. She states that expressive origins refer to a coach's emotionality and their inability to control their emotions in performance environments. On the other hand, instrumental origins refer to behaviors that are adopted to achieve a desired end, such as a performance outcome. Referring to the latter, it has been suggested that the discourse of performance may be used to

justify or normalize emotionally abusive coaching behaviours in the pursuit of producing winning athletes (Jacobs, Smits, & Knoppers, 2016).

Emotional abuse is understood to have a significant negative effect on athletes' wellbeing and is correlated with a plethora of long term sequelae, including depression, maladaptive eating behavior, anxiety, and social withdrawal (Stirling & Kerr, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2014). Yet this abuse type is not often challenged in performance environments (Kerr & Stirling, 2012; Stirling, 2013). To inform prevention and intervention initiatives in sport, greater understanding of the experience of emotional abuse is required. This study will examine the athlete experience of coping with emotional abuse in sport, making an important contribution to the existing literature.

The Coping Process

In psychology, the dominant model used to understand the coping process is the transactional coping process (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010). This model refers to the process of transaction between the individual and the environment: coping represents efforts to manage the demands that an individual appraises as taxing or exceeding his or her resources (Holt, Berg, & Tamminen, 2007). Coping can be defined as a process of constantly changing cognitive and behavioural behaviour to manage external and/or internal demands or conflicts (Lazarus & Folkman 1984, p.141). Critical to the understanding of this definition is the individual's appraisal of the situation (Nicholls & Polman, 2007). During the appraisal process, an individual will evaluate the importance of the situation based on its impact on their personal wellbeing (Holt, Hoar, & Fraser, 2005); they make an evaluation in relation to their personal goals, beliefs or personal values (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Appraisal is recognised as a two-stage process and includes primary and secondary appraisal which may take place simultaneously (Lazarus, 1999). Primary appraisal considers whether the situation/stressor presents a threat, harm or loss, challenge, or benefit to the

individual (McDonough, Hadd, Crocker, Holt, Tamminen, & Schonert-Reichl, 2013). Secondary appraisal is an evaluation of what a person can do to cope with a stressful encounter and therefore attain some degree of control (Lazarus, 2000). When events are appraised as challenging, threatening or harmful, coping responses such as thoughts and behaviours are deployed (Holt et al., 2005; Lazarus, 1999).

A coping strategy refers to a single response directed toward managing internal or external demands (Nicholls, Polman, Morley, & Taylor, 2009). Sport-related research on coping reveals that athletes adopt various coping strategies that are used in isolation or in combination (Dias, Cruz & Fonseca, 2012; Nicholls & Polman, 2007), including problem-solving, relaxation, mental and physical disengagement, distraction, ignoring, increasing effort, wishful thinking, confrontation, humour, self-talk, positive reappraisal, and social support (Bryant & Clemant, 2015; Hoar & Evans, 2010; Nicholas, Gaudreau, & Franche, 2011). Nicholls and Polman (2007) classified coping responses adopted in performance settings into: Problem-focussed coping (PFC, intended to alter the situation); Emotion-focussed coping (EFC, intended to deal with emotional distress); Avoidance-focussed coping (AFC, such as removing oneself from the situation); Approach coping (confronting the source of stress and trying to tackle or reduce it); Appraisal-focussed coping (re-evaluation of a situation to reduce its importance). EFC is a reactive form of coping, altering only the perception of a situation, whereas PFC is proactive, involving planned and purposeful actions, which aim to change the person–environment relationship or the individual (Nieuwenhuys, Hanin, & Bakker, 2008).

Coping with abuse

In the literature on child sexual abuse (CSA, Collins, O'Neill-Arana, Aronson Fontes, & Ossege, 2014; Phanicrat & Towshend, 2010), adult sexual assault (Ullman, Peter-Hagene, & Relyea, 2014) and intimate partner violence (Zanville & Bennett-Cattaneo, 2012), an

exploration of coping strategies has offered an insight into the abuse cycle that individuals experience. The findings from qualitative studies in CSA suggest that survivors employ numerous coping strategies in dealing with abuse including escapism, dissociation, cognitive engagement strategies, and support-seeking behaviours. For example, Morrow and Smith (1995) specifically found that the use of coping strategies prevented a person becoming overwhelmed by threatening feelings and lowered perceptions of powerlessness and lack of control. Further, Phanicrat and Townshend (2010) noted that coping responses have the potential to buffer the impact of abuse related stress.

Despite this knowledge, little is known about how athletes cope with abuse. Where coping has been mentioned, it is usually referred to in conjunction with the impact of specific abuse types and may not be explicitly classified as a coping action or coping dimension. For example, Cense and Brackenridge (2001) found that athletes adopt resistance techniques to avoid sexual abuse and harassment. Similarly, Stirling and Kerr (2007) revealed that elite female swimmers who experienced emotional abuse in sport conform, accept or negotiate abuse in the early stages of their career, though during the latter stages they exhibit confronting behaviours to address or tackle mistreatment. Papaefstathiou, Rhind and Brackenridge (2013) argue that athletes rationalise, normalise, minimise or deny abuse on the pathway to success, without referring to such behaviours as coping mechanisms.

Few studies have made direct reference to coping with abuse; exceptions include research on sexual abuse and harassment. Brackenridge and Fasting (2005), for example, noted that athletes seek social support to cope with sexual abuse in sport. Fasting, Brackenridge and Walseth (2007) referred to athletes' use of internally and externally-focussed strategies in response to sexual harassment in sport. Internal strategies include detachment (minimising the situation or treating it as a joke), denial (denying or attempting to forget the situation), illusionary control (attempting to take control of the harassment), and

endurance (putting up with the treatment thinking they will not be believed). Externally-focussed strategies include avoidance (staying away from the harasser), confrontation (verbal confrontation of the harasser), and seeking social support. Using a similar framework, Rodriguez and Gill (2011) examined six female Puerto Rican football players' perceptions and experiences of sexual harassment: avoidance, social support, resistance, confrontation, and advocacy-seeking were the coping mechanisms used by this sample. These responses were identified deductively using a coping response survey for sexual harassment, thus they may not represent the full extent of coping strategies used.

In summary, the literature on emotional abuse in sport identifies the types of behaviour athletes can experience and the risk factors for abuse within the coach athlete-relationship. Further research is needed to understand how athletes cope with emotional abuse within the high performance environment. The experience of such abuse is the subject matter of this paper.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 12 elite athletes between the ages of 19 and 35 years who had competed in the United Kingdom and had represented England, Wales and/or Great Britain. Athletes competed across eleven different team and individual sports (hockey, volleyball, archery, rugby, cricket, football, eventing, handball, beach volleyball, taekwondo and tennis). Each athlete had represented a national or international team at a variety of events including the European championships, World Cup competitions, Olympic and Commonwealth Games. Five of the participants were still competing in their chosen sport or discipline; six had retired; and one had retired from national or international competition. Participant demographics can be found in Table 1.

***** Insert Table 1 about here *****

Participants and procedures

Participants. Ethical consent was granted from the university ethics panel and participants were contacted via e-mail and informed about the aim of the study. The selection of participants was criterion-based: athletes were over the age of 18, participating at an elite level (defined as national or international representation) and had experienced some incidence of emotional abuse within the elite sporting environment. Participants were recruited through a combination of snowball and purposive sampling to ensure they met the sampling criteria. The recruitment of participants relied on gatekeepers who provided access to potential participants. Gatekeepers included athletes, coaches and performance directors who had links to athletes willing to share their experiences. Purposive chain sampling (Patton, 1990) was initiated when participants recommended other athletes who met the criteria of this study, and who might be willing to take part. To recruit a diverse sample, a conscious effort was made to recruit from a number of sports and to include both male and female athletes within the sample.

Data Collection. A qualitative approach was adopted; semi-structured interviews were used as a means to explore the strategies athletes' adopt when coping with emotional abuse. This approach was consistent with the researchers' interpretivist epistemological position; qualitative research allows for the sharing of knowledge based on descriptions of the phenomena rather than pre-existing ideas or frameworks (Creswell, 2014). Researchers and clinicians who have emphasised the importance of trauma survivors telling their story refer to this as account-making (see Harvey, Orbuch, & Weber, 1990), and Pipher (2002) writes of healing stories. Therefore, there is a potentially therapeutic dimension to the interview in cases of abuse.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were informed of the aim of the study, had the opportunity to review the participant information sheet and gave consent for

participation. The interview guide was flexible and included topics such as participants' sporting background, their experience of emotional abuse and the coping strategies they adopted. If participants recounted multiple experiences of emotional abuse, they were asked about each in detail and questioned about coping related to that instance. Interviews were conducted at a time and place convenient to the participant and in an environment in which they felt comfortable. Prior to the interview, participants were asked their permission for the interview to be digitally recorded. Interviews lasted between 1 and 5 hours (62mins – 305 minutes). They were conducted by the first author, digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. 21 hours of audio recordings yielded 250 pages of verbatim transcripts at over 146,000 words.

Ethical considerations featured highly during the data collection process. Given the sensitivity of the research area, a strict protocol was adhered to minimise psychological risk to participants. As a safeguard, contacts for local counselling services were put in place for referral. Though athletes became upset during interviews, none of them requested referral or terminated the interview. An exit strategy upon completion of the interview process was also activated: a follow up phone call was made to all participants within a week of data collection, thanking them for their participation in the study and reiterating referral points should they be required. It was further reiterated that confidentiality would be paramount in the reporting of the data: participants would not be identifiable and would be given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity.

Data analysis. The approach to data analysis was inductive in that no pre-existing theoretical framework was used to guide the process, and there was openness towards the themes that emerged from the emic perspective. Data were analysed using the technique of thematic analysis, and followed the guidelines identified by Braun and Clarke (2006), involving the steps of transcription, familiarisation, coding and categorising. To begin, the

first author read each transcript to gain an understanding of the interview as a whole. Notes were made on initial thoughts and impressions, permitting analysis to take place before data were broken up through the process of coding (Jones, Brown, & Holloway, 2013). Subsequently, the process of sorting codes took place: similar codes were grouped together, leading to the emergence of a theme. Three themes were identified in this study: coping in the moment, coping over time and meaning-making post experience. Themes were further broken down into sub-themes that related to coping groups and individual coping strategies. For example, the theme coping over time was divided into three sub-themes (avoiding situations, support seeking and dropping out) and eight coping strategies were identified (including avoiding training, seeking formal support and career termination).

The analysis involved a constant process of moving backwards and forwards across the data set. A review of codes and themes took place continuously, requiring reflexivity and critical thinking. A research diary throughout the data collection and analysis process; analytic memos were utilised to record thoughts on the grouping of codes into sub-themes and/or themes. The participants were invited to review their transcript to ensure that they believed them to be an accurate reflection of the interview (see Jones et al., 2013).

Results

Participant reflections on coping with emotional abuse in sport are presented within this section. Analysis showed that participants' coping strategies and their experience of coping could be grouped into three higher order categories: coping in the moment, coping over time and meaning-making through experience. In this sense, participants drew attention to the temporal nature of coping with abuse. Coping was viewed by many of the participants as a survival mechanism; they either coped and adapted, or dropped out. One participant noted:

> In my sport, it's like man up and get on with it… You know just deal with it and get on with it rather than talk about it. That's sport. You have to get on with things, you need to just be able to deal with it and not let anything affect you. That's part of being an athlete, which isn't easy. (Charlotte, P7).

All participants experienced instances of emotional abuse while competing in the performance environment, including verbal behaviours such as screaming or shouting at athletes and the use of insulting, belittling, and/or demeaning language. In addition, physical behaviours such as acts of aggression or angry outbursts by coaching staff were identified: clipboards, water bottles, white board pens and sporting equipment such as balls and racquets were thrown either directly at players or in a fit of rage in the presence of athletes. Physical outbursts generally occurred at the same time as verbal behaviours, through which coaches released their frustration. Emotional abuse was felt to be commonplace in the performance environment and viewed as part of the coaching process.

*****Insert Table 2 about here *****

Coping in the moment: Taking control and managing feelings

All participants attempted to take control and manage their feelings in the instance that emotional abuse occurred. The aim of such coping was to suppress an emotional reaction and to limit any negative impact on performance. Participants referred to such strategies as the use of relaxation or breathing, re-directing attention, channelling emotions, increasing effort, using humour, and dissociation.

Relaxation and breathing. Relaxation or breathing techniques proved to be both calming and distracting in the moment. One athlete stated that when his coach abused him, he "would focus on his breathing to prevent a reaction" (Adam, P3), which enabled him to avoid confronting his coach who was emotionally abusive and physically threatened athletes in training and competitive environments. Another referred to "staying relaxed" (Megan, P1)

and using progressive muscular relaxation (PMR) to release tension and to avoid performance decrements.

Redirecting attention. Participants re-directed attention from how emotional abuse made them feel, attempting to mask the emotional impact in the moment. Megan noted that distraction techniques such as "focusing on the lines on the court" (Megan, P1) were easy to adopt when her coach was shouting and screaming at her. They enabled her to concentrate on her performance rather than cry or show anger. Another remembered that she "once bit her lip so hard that it bled." (Charlotte, P7), stopping her from reacting to her emotionally abusive coach.

Channelling emotion. Participants described channelling anger into their performance in their bid to cope. When his coach verbally abused him and when a squad member was punched by a coach as a result of poor play, Adam (P3) sought to control his anger. He was able to "suck it up" and "get a performance out of it". James recalled taking it out on the ball or channelling his frustration into his performance rather than let it consume him:

> You listened to what he said but you ignored it. I just used to let it go over my head… Because the head coach just continually shouted and went at you, threw things at you; you'd listen to him, but you wouldn't acknowledge it... But you also couldn't let it get to you, I just worked harder, channelled the frustration or anger or let it out so that I couldn't dwell on it, you know took it out on the next hit, and kept going that prevented me showing any emotion at all really. (P4).

Blocking out the coach and focusing instead on his performance were central to coping. Anger was commonly experienced by participants and needed to be managed to prevent emotional abuse having a negative impact on performance.

Increasing effort. Participants referred to working harder in training and competition as a coping strategy and a way to show personal strength and gain positive attention, even approval from their coach. Even in the worst situations, Sebastian (P6) noted that he could always control his work rate and channel negative feelings into his performance. Adam (P3) felt similarly: "I always knew that if I just worked as hard as I possibly could and just try to do exactly what he said, eventually he would get off my back".

Participants explained that "work rate and sheer effort" (Lisa, P10) and "proving I could push myself to the limits" (Alexandra, P8) could have a positive impact on performance. Playing well offered the route to avoiding being the recipient of abuse in the training environment. Working hard as a coping mechanism was echoed across the interviews and was seen as something the individual could control in a situation where so much felt out of their control.

Use of humour. Five of the participants cited a sense of humour as one of the only ways they could make their situation bearable. Being able to laugh about an abusive coach united teammates: "we tried to make a joke out of it" (Megan, P1); "we had to find the joy in it" (Billy, P11). Humour created a sense of control: if they could laugh, the abuse was not affecting them as much as those athletes who showed anger or hurt.

Dissociation. Dissociation techniques took the form of blocking thoughts of emotional abuse. James (P4) spoke of blocking behaviour and using it to harness inner energy to perform:

> He was grilling me every time and he almost broke me that year, a lot of tough things… I learnt that that's not necessarily the way to coach how he does it… so I ignored it, blocked it out and instead used it to drive me forwards.

Others refused to acknowledge that they were experiencing abuse. Charlotte (P7) denied that she was being maltreated even when friends and family questioned the emotionally abusive methods employed by her coach. She responded that "athletes have to cope with tough

coaches who build their character". It was not until she left the sport that she acknowledged the abusive environment that she had worked in. Dissociation was vital to her continued performance.

Coping over time

Participants adopted a variety of methods to cope with emotional abuse over time, including avoidance, seeking support and dropping out of their sport.

Avoidance. Avoiding training or competition to gain respite was common and adopted when athletes believed their coping resources were being depleted: it was a form of self-preservation. Alexandra stated that failing to attend international training camps became the only way she could "avoid a situation that would inevitably make me feel awful" (P8). Evaluative situations such as fitness testing, competitive events and video analysis sessions were also avoided because they were often sites for angry coach outbursts. One participant noted that her emotionally abusive coach would "single players out" (Megan, P1) and humiliate them during performance analysis sessions, reducing squad members to tears if they were "too weak to cope with her open verbal beatings".

Seeking support. Support structures were deemed essential for coping with emotional abuse. All participants highlighted the importance of having people inside and outside of the sporting world to confide in. Adam stated that:

> If you don't have a network of support for you as an athlete or any structure, you've got nothing to ground yourself with, you're just literally concentrating on surviving, and coping with the bad stuff would be impossible. *(P3)*

Participants referred to formal and informal support structures or mechanisms of support. The former included designated professionals from the National Governing Body (NGB) and/or other qualified staff who supported the athlete outside their performance pathway, including sport psychologists, performance lifestyle advisors, strength and conditioning specialists,

physiotherapists and performance analysts. Many participants reported that whilst speaking to someone "within the programme" (Charlotte, P7) offered an outlet, it was viewed as a potentially risky endeavour as they couldn't guarantee that the information shared would remain private, that it wouldn't be passed on and used against them. Alexandra (P8) noted "there was a sport psychologist that I could have spoken to but even so I don't think I would have trusted that she wouldn't have told the coaches". This study highlights a lack of trust that may prevent athletes from being honest about their situation.

Informal support structures included parents, siblings, friends, partners and team-mates. Charlotte commented:

> I didn't talk to anyone about the way that I was being treated apart from my mum, because I just wanted to keep it inside me. I think at this point I was just so upset I couldn't talk to anyone. If I spoke to someone then in some way it would have made it more real and impossible to deal with on a weekly basis if that makes sense? I don't know. Maybe it's the kind of person that I am.

Peer-to-peer support offered a sense of solidarity while family members allowed participants to vent their frustration. While social support acted as a buffer against abuse, it could at the same time have reduced the need for direct confrontation or the reporting of negative behaviour. External support was identified as the primary reason participants managed to continue competing but this study suggests that it could also be a barrier to the reporting of abuse if it results in negotiation rather than confrontation.

Dropping out. Some participants reached a stage where they could no longer emotionally cope with maltreatment; leaving the sport or stopping international competition became their primary mechanism for coping. In their darkest moments, walking away was the only route to avoiding pain, as the following extract shows:

> I, at that stage was just like – I'm stopping… I couldn't emotionally deal with it any more so I stopped playing for a season. I walked away from international competition. (Ella, P5)

Quitting international competition was one of the hardest decisions Ella had ever made, yet she felt she had no resources left to help her cope with the treatment she faced. Immy (P2) similarly noted:

> It's strange now because I think, you know, I left so I wasn't coping, but leaving was my choice and my choice to give up gave me control over it, control I didn't have when I was managing the daily barrage of abuse from him (the coach). (P2).

Choosing to leave permitted a feeling of control when all other coping strategies had failed. Nevertheless, the sense of loss associated with the decision to leave a sport they had invested so much in was acknowledged. This study underlines that when coping skills become depleted, disengagement appears to be the only source of protection for the athlete.

Post Experience: Coping in the aftermath

Meaning-making. When recounting their individual experiences, participants not only described but also tried to understand the emotional abuse they had suffered. Meaning-making occurred when athletes had achieved some distance and perspective. This study thus offers an insight into how participants cope with the legacy of abuse. Among some, there was a perception of growth through adversity. James (P4) stated that his experience had driven him to call on inner strength to achieve a higher level of performance:

> Maybe it (emotional abuse) helped me in the long picture because going into the Olympics I was quite strong headed, felt confident, knew my ability and knew how I needed to feel going into a game, and I couldn't have planned it any better. Everything happened for me at the right time, it was just unfortunate for some of the guys that it wasn't and they couldn't cope or deal with it in the same way.

Similarly, Megan (P1) stated that:

> I just don't give them the time of day to remember how bad it was, it was more about what I got from it and how I got there, in that sense I grew from the experience and it made me a more confident and self-assured person. I know some people you know out of the lowest lows, create their highest highs and this sort of thing, like out of nothing comes something, and that's what we were trying to do I guess.

This attitude was common: an adverse or challenging situation allowed access to an inner strength that could be used to maximise performance.

Participants reflected on how through their career they weighed up the positives and negatives of participation; a cost-benefit approach enabled them to rationalise the treatment they endured. They considered what they were willing to accept and what lay outside the boundaries of tolerable treatment or behaviour. For example, James (P4) noted that although the maltreatment he had experienced had pushed him to extremes and challenged him emotionally, the lure of an Olympic competition meant that he was willing to tolerate anything:

> Maybe the goal at the end of it was big enough to deal with it all, like because obviously having an Olympics there, it was like a once in a lifetime opportunity and that meant that even when I was really down, I'd never give up.

Although emotional abuse posed a threat to his emotional and psychological safety, it was outweighed by a positive outcome and selection for a major event. Conversely, the participants who walked away from their sport or ceased international competition viewed emotional abuse more negatively. Immy (P2) stated that she hated the "what if" that hung over her by prematurely ending a career and thus felt resentment toward her coach rather than a sense of acceptance of her treatment. This was universal: making sense of and accepting

emotional abuse were influenced by subsequent individual performance level. Long-term coping was enhanced if the athlete could look back and reflect positively on a career; distress was more evident in those participants who had not fulfilled their potential.

The temporal nature of the experience was also acknowledged; coping skills evolve over time:

> Every experience you have helps you to deal with the next one, it's like a learning curve. The things I have experienced have only made me stronger and more able to deal with whatever the sport throws at me. Sometimes it's too much and you can't cope but you have to learn from experience. It's kinda, I've got through this before, so I'll get through it again mentality. I hope that carries on if I keep playing, it gets easier to deal with stuff. But you learn from those who are older than you as well: if they cope then you try to as well because otherwise you're the one making a fuss about nothing. (Charlotte, P7)

Learning to cope was therefore acknowledged as a developmental process, equipping athletes to better manage their emotions and performance. One participant suggested that each negative experience made him stronger and better "able to deal with what it (sport) throws at you" (Austin, P9).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore athlete coping responses to emotionally abusive behaviours experienced within the coach-athlete relationship. It supports and extends the work of researchers on coping with abuse in sport (Fasting et al., 2007; Rodriguez & Gill, 2011; Stirling & Kerr, 2007). Specifically, this study indicates that athletes adopt a number of coping strategies in the moment, and this continues over time and after they experience emotionally abusive behaviours. Thus this study highlights the temporal nature of coping with emotional abuse.

In line with the transactional approach to coping, emotional abuse was recognised by all participants as a stressful encounter. Coping strategies were implemented primarily to alleviate feelings of distress. In the instance that emotional abuse occurred, participants demonstrated a reliance on coping methods that enabled them to continue competing or performing. Participants attempted to cope with the abuse in isolation and remained silent about what they were experiencing. Over time participants moved from private attempts to cope to seeking support from formal and informal support structures.

Importantly, participants referred to trying to make sense of emotional abuse so as to find personal meaning in experience; it was deemed an important coping mechanism in the long-term. The findings lend support to existing research on abuse: rationalising, making sense of and justifying maltreatment are thought to facilitate healing in victims of child sexual abuse (Merrill, Thomsen, Sinclair, Gold, & Milner, 2001; Phanichrat & Townshend, 2010) and have been used to cope with intimate partner violence (Hetzel-Riggin & Meads, 2011; Zanville & Bennett-Cattaneo, 2012). Similarly, re-framing and reappraisal of maltreatment have been accepted as a part of the coping and recovery process and can lead to positive adaptive functioning rather than long-term psychological damage in victims of abuse in inter-familial settings (Banyard & Williams, 2007; Grossman, Sorsoli, & Kia-Keating, 2006; Morrow & Smith, 1995). In this study, such strategies were adopted to positively affect the long-term impact of emotional abuse in sport and positively reframe experience.

This study demonstrates that participants predominantly adopted EFC (coping that directly addresses emotional distress) and AFC strategies (cognitive distancing) (Holt et al., 2005; Lazarus, 2000; Nicholls & Polman, 2007) in the immediate instance they experienced emotional abuse. Over time participants sought help from external parties. Social support is complex given that it can serve problem- and emotion-focussed functions (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989). Participants acknowledged that reaching out to others was a way to offset

their distress rather than address the problem directly, thus this served as an EFC strategy. Only one PFC method (intended to alter the situation) was identified: dropping out or quitting international competition. In the aftermath of emotional abuse, participants adopted appraisal-focused strategies to find meaning in experience and rationalise the encounter (Nicholls & Polman, 2007).

The nature of coping effectiveness is an important consideration. Nicholls, Holt, Polman, and Bloomfield (2006) believe it is essential to distinguish between coping efforts and coping effectiveness: one should not automatically infer that the use of coping strategies will enable an individual to effectively cope with a particular stressor. The appraisal of the degree of stress experienced and the control one has in the transaction play key roles in the effectiveness of coping (Poliseo & McDonough, 2012). Athletes are considered to adopt more PFC strategies when they perceive they have control over stressors they encounter because they can be used to manage or change a stressful situation (Kim & Duda, 2003). Conversely, if they perceive a low level of control, EMF strategies manage affective reactions (Folkman, 1992). The presence of EFC and AFC in the moment and over time suggests that participants in this study deemed emotional abuse an uncontrollable stressor. In response coping strategies were used as a defense against emotional abuse, rather than as an act of control. Strategies employed in the moment could be considered to be effective since they enabled the participant to negotiate the treatment. However, from an alternative perspective the adoption of such coping strategies raises worrying concerns because the victim failed to respond directly to, or confront, the behavior in question.

Controllability is also particularly important because traditionally control is reported when an individual demonstrates the ability to negotiate or manage a stressor (Nicolls et al., 2006). Although participants may have successfully negotiated emotionally abusive practices, this did not usually result in control of the situation. As an example, where confrontation or

PFC was adopted, it involved dropping out from the sport, which had significant negative consequences for the athlete. Even when participants progressed from private attempts to cope with abuse to seeking support, those they confided in simply offered another way to cope rather than to confront the treatment. Coping strategies therefore failed to act as a preventative measure. Although the athlete may have gained perceived control over the situation, the coping strategy did little to confront or eliminate the emotionally abusive behaviour. In the literature on child sexual abuse (Collins et al., 2014; Phanicrat & Towshend, 2010), adult sexual assault (Ullman, Peter-Hagene, & Relyea, 2014) and intimate partner violence (Zanville & Bennett-Cattaneo, 2012), such strategies are recognised as maladaptive or unhealthy approaches to coping because they are enacted to alleviate distress without actually addressing the source of the distress itself.

Stirling (2009) emphasised that over-conformity in competitive sport can result in an uncritical acceptance of a range of negative behaviours, including emotional abuse. Brackenridge, Bringer, and Bishopp, (2005) argued that the physical demands of training, the requirement that athletes display emotional toughness and conform to a culture of resilience in sport have all acted to allow abuse in sport to go unchallenged, as well as undetected. Abuse is neither questioned nor reported, leaving competitive athletes vulnerable to abuse in their pursuit of performance-related goals (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005). This study suggests that the normalisation of emotional abuse has an impact on the coping mechanisms employed. Additionally, in situations where there are unequal power relations such as in the coach-athlete relationship, the coping strategies adopted may target the symptoms of emotional abuse but fail to confront its source. Given the significant negative impact that emotional abuse can have on athlete wellbeing the adoption of coping strategies that focus on buffering abuse could serve to compound the immediate and long-term sequalae associated with such abuse rather than ameliorate its effect. Alternatively, educating athletes on how to

adopt appropriate coping strategies and gain greater control or autonomy within the coach athlete relationship could be significant in breaking cycles of abuse in sport, providing voice and shifting power dynamics in this environment.

There are a number of practical implications that arise from the research findings. Sport psychologists are acknowledged as primary agents of athlete protection and therefore need to be appropriately trained to offer guidance and support to athletes. Education is a powerful tool in the prevention and detection of abuse and the findings from this study could be used to inform intervention with both coaches and athletes. Practitioners can educate athletes on matters of abuse in sport and provide them with a repertoire of coping skills. Priority should be placed on problem-focussed approaches such as understanding individual athlete rights and providing guidelines in reporting instances of abuse. As Schwarzer and Luszczynska (2008) contended, preventative coping and future-oriented coping strategies can prepare athletes for stressful encounters and develop resources that will allow them to be more reactive and self-protecting in stressful situations. This study suggests that this is essential in personal management of cases of emotional abuse in sport. Support should help athletes to understand how to recognise, respond to and/or report emotional abuse and serve to empower athletes to speak out. Greater awareness and increased detection of emotional abuse would have a significant impact on the victim and could have consequences for perpetrators.

Creating situations which promote the division of power between the coach and athlete could also be explored; increasing athlete autonomy and control. Educating coaches on athlete-centred approaches to coaching could provide avenues for engaging athletes in decision-making processes, placing emphasis on hearing the athlete voice and affording individuals greater ownership over their own development in the performance environment. Sport psychologists should promote open, responsive and holistic coaching environments that

help to reduce athletes' vulnerability to emotional abuse. Offering advice to athletes on matters of safeguarding and protection relies on formal training and education. Thus it is recommended that practitioners keep up to date on matters of safeguarding and engage in formal safeguarding training in the sport and exercise setting.

Limitations

There are a number of acknowledged limitations within qualitative research more broadly and within this study that should be noted. One of the common limitations is the need for recall and the reflective nature of interviews. Fasting et al. (2007) noted that when dealing with sensitive data, testimonies may suffer from distortion or memory attrition. In this study, participants' distance from events varied considerably. Some were recollecting events that could have taken place as many as eight years previously; others referred to instances of emotional abuse that had occurred within a matter of months of the interview date. It is possible that time impacts on their recollections of events. The small sample is also an acknowledged limitation of this study, though this aligns with the qualitative research design. The sampling strategy was clearly thought out, but it is recognised that it may be that only those athletes who had been most affected by emotional abuse would be willing to be interviewed. This could create bias, which is common in qualitative research.

Future Directions

Greater understanding of coping with emotional abuse is required to extend understanding in this area. A number of recommendations derive from the limitations of this study, including the need to explore the coping process across a broader range of sports and participants. Future studies could adopt a quantitative approach to research, utilising a pre-existing coping measure to explore the phenomenon. Further exploration of coping effectiveness and control in coping would extend the findings from this study. It would be useful to explore whether or not coping differs across abuse types (do athletes who have been

emotionally abused adopt different coping strategies from those who have experienced sexual or physical abuse?) and if certain strategies lead to a greater perception of control in instances of abuse. The effectiveness of preventative and future-oriented coping interventions also offers an interesting line of inquiry. Further research could also investigate the behaviour of coaches in performance settings, focusing on emotional regulation and coaching skills. It is acknowledged, however, that access to this population might be fraught with difficulty.

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Table 1.

Participant Demographics.

No.	Age	Gender	Sport	Sport Level	Age Started	Age Retired
1	27	Female	Team	International	13	/
2	32	Female	Individual	International	11	20
3	25	Male	Team	International	18	25
4	23	Male	Team	International	14	/
5	35	Female	Team	International	18	34
6	28	Male	Team	National	8	20
7	19	Female	Team	International	13	/
8	32	Female	Team	International	13	27
9	25	Male	Team	National	8	/
10	25	Female	Individual	International	14	/
11	28	Male	Individual	International	12	25
12	25	Female	Individual	National	4	25

741 Table 2.

742 *Coping strategies adopted by athletes facing emotional abuse.*

No. of participants citing main category	Main Category	Sub-Categories Coping Action	Coping strategy with numbered participant tags
		Relaxation/ Breathing	Focussing on breathing as a distraction and to control emotion (2,3,6,8,12) Using progressive muscular relaxation (PMR) (1,2,4)
		Re-directing Attention	Using distraction techniques, self-harm, focussing strategies, thought-stopping, ignoring, visualising a safe place (1,2,3,4,6,7,12)
12	Coping in the moment	Channelling emotion	Projecting anger inwardly or externally, channelling frustration in performance (1,3,4,6)
		Increasing effort	Working harder in training/competition for coach approval (1,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11)
		Use of Humour	Laughing about behaviour, making fun of the perpetrator, excuse making with humour (1,2,4,5,8,11)
		Dissociation	Blocking, ignoring and rejecting behaviour (1,2,3,4,7,9) Denial of treatment (1,2,4,7)
		Avoiding Situations	Avoiding training or competition (1,2,5,8) Avoiding evaluative situations (1,5,6,7) Avoiding interaction with perpetrator (1,2,4,5,8,10,12)
12	Coping over time	Support seeking	Seeking formal support (1,2,3,4,5,7,8,10,11,12) Seeking informal support (1,2,3,4,5,7,8)
		Dropping out/ Leaving the sport	Removing self from team/sport (5,6,9) Avoiding selection for international competition (2,5,6,8) Career termination (2,5,6,8)
12	Post experience	Meaning-making through experience	Perception of growth through adversity (1,2,3,4,5,6,7,9,10,11) Explaining or rationalising treatment (1, 2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12)

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