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### Managing injury and other setbacks in sport: experiences of (and resources for) high-performance women athletes

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## Managing injury and other setbacks in sport: experiences of (and resources for) high-performance women athletes

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Regardless of the level of sport competition, setbacks are inevitable and can promote stress, requiring effective coping skills. Well-developed coping skills are required for athletes to not only reach their performance potential, but also to have healthy sport experiences. The purpose of the present study was to further explore setbacks and coping in sport experienced by a group of high-performance women athletes. Through exploration of their experiences, relevant setbacks and resultant coping efforts were identified, providing insight into the effectiveness of resources for this population, as well as areas of stress and coping deserving more attention. Using a phenomenological orientation, five high-performance women athletes were interviewed about their experiences with setbacks in sport. Thematic analysis revealed that poor performance, performance plateau and injury were common setback experiences. Managing setbacks involved having a positive approach, dealing with self-criticism, using social support and striving for balance. Results speak to the importance of considering the implications and challenges presented by setbacks when attempting to promote effective coping among athletes. Additionally, unique approaches, such as fostering mindful or self-compassionate perspectives, may positively add to coping skill resources through targeting issues that the athletes identified as particularly challenging.

**Keywords:** coping; self-compassion; performance plateau; self-criticism; mindfulness

### Introduction

Within high-level sport, athletes face numerous demands that can hinder advancement towards desired achievement goals. These demands can include personal and others' significant expectations, training and competition, physical and mental issues, sport organisation problems and politics, travel, media issues, interpersonal relationships and conflicts, distractions and dealing with injury (see Gould, Finch *et al.* 1993, Crocker and Graham 1995, Udry *et al.* 1997, Holt and Hogg 2002, Hanton and Fletcher 2005). Stress occurs when there is a perceived imbalance between demands and resources (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Optimal functioning in high-level sport requires that athletes have the ability to cope with stress to achieve their personal goals (Gould, Eklund *et al.* 1993, Hardy *et al.* 1996, Lidor *et al.* 2012).

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Setbacks occur when an event is appraised as impeding progress towards desired goals and can be experienced as a source of stress. Setback experiences in competitive sport can include poor performance, injury, or an unwanted/unplanned competitive outcome (Udry 1997, Pocwardowski and Conroy 2002, Haglund 2004, Nicholls *et al.* 2006). Coping mechanisms employed to deal with setbacks range in effectiveness and include positive appraisal, focusing on the future, analysis of the event, discounting negative thoughts, seeking social support, planning, adhering to predetermined routines, setting goals, taking time away from sport, keeping a balanced perspective, regulating emotions, increasing effort and targeting weaknesses and strengths (Pocwardowski and Conroy 2002, Haglund 2004, Nicholls *et al.* 2005).

Effective coping is suggested to accompany positive performance in high-level sport (Nicholls 2010); however, athletes do not always consider their coping attempts to be effective (e.g. Nicholls *et al.* 2006). Athletes who have not developed effective coping skills to deal with the high demands of sport might experience less than optimal performance, poor social functioning, high distress, low positive affect and sport dropout (see Hoar *et al.* 2006, Nicholls and Polman 2007, Nicholls 2010, Neil *et al.* 2011, Nicholls *et al.* 2012). Revisiting how athletes perceive and experience setbacks can be useful in understanding the issues they face, as well as explore what they find to be effective and ineffective coping, including less traditional coping approaches. Information of this nature will allow for the identification of potential areas of need, directing further development of resources for stress management, as well as identifying new, unique approaches for athletes to add to their coping repertoire. This is a step towards ensuring future research, support and learning initiatives are properly directed to meet athletes' needs, fostering healthy sport experiences and fulfilment of athletic potential.

Mindfulness and self-compassion are relatively new to the field of sport psychology, but these approaches hold promise in coping and stress management in the sport domain. Interventions based on mindfulness and acceptance focus on improved coping skills by developing a mindful, or non-judgemental acceptance and awareness of cognitions, emotions and physical feelings, rather than attempting to change, suppress or control them (Gardner and Moore 2004). The focus is on goals and task-relevant information and is directed through Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment approaches (Gardner and Moore 2004). Other avenues include Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (e.g. Segal *et al.* 2002) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (e.g. Kabat-Zinn *et al.* 1992). Although mindfulness approaches originate from a clinical setting, Gardner and Moore (2004) have acknowledged their potential application in sport. Additionally, despite the relative infancy of mindfulness application in sport, empirical support is present, as training based on mindfulness and acceptance has been promising among youth golfers (Bernier *et al.* 2009).

Self-compassion has received limited attention in the sport domain as a coping resource to manage stressful experiences, but acts as another example of the potential for new, novel coping approaches to be adapted and applied in sport. Self-compassion involves promoting kindness and understanding, as opposed to harsh self-criticism, during experiences of failure (Neff 2003). Self-compassion has been suggested to be a promising approach to help regulate cognition and emotion in the sport context (Mosewich *et al.* 2009, 2011), showing potential as an additional coping resource for athletes. Exploring how mindfulness and self-compassion fit into the stress and coping experiences of high-performance women athletes will not

only lead to a better understanding of athletes' experiences, but may also identify new stressors, strategies and information about coping skills and effectiveness in the current athletic climate.

Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) attest that a reason for studying coping is to identify effective and ineffective coping that can aid in coping intervention efforts. When considering coping efforts and resultant effectiveness, the role of context should not be overlooked (e.g. Crocker *et al.* 2010). As coping is context-specific, it is important to consider the experiences and needs of specific populations to further tailor intervention approaches. Young women athletes competing in high-performance sport potentially face an array of stressors, yet, little research has focused exclusively on this group. On a global level, women athletes tend to perceive less control over stressors (Hammermeister and Burton 2004) and report more communication, coach-related, and teammate stressors than male athletes (Nicholls *et al.* 2007, Anshel *et al.* 2009). Women athletes also typically display more emotion-focused coping strategies than their male counterparts, who have been found to engage in more problem-focused strategies (e.g. Anshel *et al.* 1998, Goyen and Anshel 1998, Campen and Roberts 2001, Hammermeister and Burton 2004). However, research is equivocal, as Nicholls and colleagues (2007) found that female undergraduate athletes used more problem-focused strategies than male athletes. Other research has found no gender difference on problem-focused coping, though women athletes still showed more emotion-focused coping (e.g. Crocker and Graham 1995, Kolt *et al.* 1995). Nonetheless, the point remains that there are likely differences in the way men and women cope (Hoar *et al.* 2006). Having a more clear understanding of the context surrounding experiences of stress and coping is warranted in order to provide effective resources, and essential in evaluating the role of new constructs under consideration such as mindfulness and self-compassion.

The purpose of our research was to further understand young high-performance women athletes' experiences with setbacks using a phenomenological approach. Through exploration of these experiences, we endeavoured to identify relevant setbacks experienced by high-performance athletes, as well as resultant coping efforts and athlete perceptions on effectiveness of coping strategies. Gaining insight into how these athletes approached and coped with setbacks is a step towards evaluating the level and adequacy of athletes' current coping skills and strategies.

## Method

### *Participants*

Five young women athletes in their early to mid-twenties participated in the study. All athletes could be classified as high performance; that is, they all competed in their respective sport(s) at university, national and/or international levels. Each had her own personal experiences with setbacks. To preserve the participants' confidentiality, each woman will be identified by a pseudonym. The women athletes, Alixe, Cindy, Erin, Jessica and Sarah, were currently or recently involved in bobsleigh, field hockey, soccer, swimming and track and field. As there may be gender differences coping in some sport contexts (Hoar *et al.* 2006, Kaiseler and Polman 2010), focusing solely on women athletes provided an occasion to explore coping preferences and experiences specific to this group.

### **Procedure**

Coping is complex, given its dynamic, multifaceted and contextual nature. To capture this complexity, stress and coping questions, such as those posed in the current study, can lend themselves well to qualitative approaches (Crocker *et al.* 2010). A phenomenological orientation provided a descriptive focus of the women athletes' lived experiences, gleaned insight and understanding of those events. Such an approach fits well with the purpose of the study, as it aids in understanding participant perspectives and meanings connected to a particular concept (Kvale 1996), much akin to hermeneutic phenomenology (Van Manen 1990, Allen-Collinson 2009). This approach enabled each athlete to share her individual experiences in detail, which is important as we sought to explore athletes' experiences with setbacks, including coping approaches and their perceived effectiveness. Lazarus (1999) has suggested that 'a greater use of personal narratives would be useful' (p. 9) in understanding coping mechanisms. Additionally, Neil and colleagues (2009) suggested qualitative approaches would be helpful in further understanding competitive stress.

After ethical approval was obtained from the University Behavioural Research Ethics Board, recruitment posters were displayed in athletic facilities on a large Canadian university campus seeking high-performance women athletes willing to talk about setback experiences in sport. Six athletes contacted the first author directly expressing interest in the study. Five athletes were interviewed, as preliminary discussion with the sixth athlete regarding level of sport involvement led to the mutual conclusion that she did not meet the criterion of being a high-performance athlete (i.e. her participation in sport was at a local club level). Detailed interviews with a small, selected group of athletes were arranged as an in-depth understanding of high-performance athletes' experiences was desired (Moustakas 1994). Small sample sizes are common in phenomenological studies, as the interviewing, transcription, and analysis is an involved and intensive process, and the potential of phenomenology is still obtained with small sample sizes (Smith 2011). Once informed consent was obtained, each athlete participated in a one-on-one interview facilitated by the first author.

### **Interview guide**

Interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide,<sup>1</sup> and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews ranged from approximately 50–100 min in length. Sessions began with an overview of the consent form, a discussion of the ethical limits of confidentiality, and an outline of the upcoming interview. The interview then moved to general questions about the athlete's sport experiences, such as involvement, length of time in sport, level of sport participation and reasons for sport participation. These initial questions were designed to gain understanding about each participant's background in sport, as well as to build rapport. Subsequently, the primary goals of the interview were to gain understanding about (a) setback experiences faced by high-performance women athletes, (b) how athletes approached and dealt with these setbacks and (c) their perceptions of these efforts.

### **Data analysis**

Interviews resulted in 96 pages of single-spaced transcripts. Thematic analysis allowed for reduction and categorical aggregation through looking at significant

statements, meaning units, interpretation of meaning and themes of meaning (Creswell 1998, 2003, Morse and Richards 2002). This follows a general structure of phenomenological study designed to understand and describe the athletes' experiences (Creswell 1998). In order to find meaning, direct interpretation of individual experiences, as well as aggregation of experiences, was explored. Patterns that emerged were then grouped together to form themes. It was attempted to portray the information in a meaningful way through looking at the instances and experiences from both an individual and collective level (Van Manen 1990). These themes helped to portray the participants' experiences with setbacks in sport, allowing us to better express the athletes' experiences with setbacks and their attempts to cope with setbacks in sport, and where there may be a lack in resources.

### ***Credibility***

Judging research quality is a unique task, and one that cannot always follow strict preset criteria (Smith 2009, Sparkes and Smith 2009). This being said, reflection and disclosure on the part of the researcher are important. A number of steps were taken to increase the credibility of the study. The interview guide was piloted with two women (one current and one former competitive athlete), who provided feedback about the construction and delivery of the interview, such as semantics and timing/ordering of questions. The current athlete provided an opportunity to garner feedback from someone currently involved in the sport context, while the former athlete offered a chance to comment from a place of experience. The former athlete also had experience in research in sport psychology, which allowed for a slightly different perspective and ability to comment from the view of both athlete and researcher. Changes to the interview guide were made according to their suggestions. Appropriate sampling was then used to obtain participants best suited to answer the research question (Morse and Richards 2002). Purposeful sampling resulted in high-performance athletes who had experienced setbacks in sport volunteering to share their experiences. Rapport was built between the interviewer and the participants during communication prior to the interview, as well as during the start of the interview, in which a trusting, understanding environment was created. To create a sense of community, the first author offered some general background about herself, including sport background. Appropriate pacing of interview questions was constantly considered by the first author, with care being taken to have the athlete share her story in a comfortable atmosphere. The semi-structured interview guide allowed for some flexibility in delivery of the interview questions, allowing the athletes to have input in the direction of their sharing. Participants had the opportunity to add additional comments or to clarify meanings during the interview. Each participant also had the opportunity to member check her transcript. Continued verification and confirmation during the coding process, with recoding and relabelling as necessary if a category was not an appropriate fit, further increases confidence in the study. For example, such a procedure allowed for the development of performance plateau as an experience separate from that of merely poor performance. Finally, the design used was driven by the research question, which strengthens the study by incorporating appropriate approaches and methods to best achieve the research objectives, lending to the methodological coherence of the study (Mayan 2009). Enhancing methodological coherence helps to ensure 'congruence between your epistemological and ontological viewpoint, your theoretical perspective, your research question, and so on' (Mayan 2009, p. 13).

***The researcher in the research study***

Prior to conducting the interviews, the first author reflected on her personal experiences and thoughts about coping with setbacks. Her background in sport as an athlete, and the shared experiences of setbacks that coincides with the athletic involvement, led to a connection with the athletes in this study. This connection prompted empathy, and a desire for athletes' experiences to be heard, as their difficulties were closely mirrored by the author's sport experiences. Empathy promoted understanding and a personal connection to these stories. While the connection provided a good foundation and context for understanding and honouring the experiences of the participants, care had to be taken for the author not to merely see her own experiences, or those of others close to her, in the participants' stories. Transcripts and notes were consulted in detail to ensure information was not overlooked, and that themes were well justified. This reflection, as well as reflexivity, continued throughout the research process. Engaging in reflexivity is an important component of trustworthiness in qualitative research that enables researchers to consider personal experiences that may influence interpretation of the findings (Ely 1991). Researcher, participant and audience reflexivity, as well as personal and professional meanings, were considered to ensure the researcher had an awareness of these influences on the research process (Brocki and Wearden 2006, Gilgun 2010). Acknowledging similarities between the participants' stories and her own sport experiences, as well as acknowledging unique aspects, allowed the researcher to more deeply explore the meanings of the situations experienced by each athlete and provided a starting point for consideration, understanding and expression of the athletes' experiences (Van Manen 1990). Additionally, the shared experiences may have allowed for more relevant, direct probes, promoting a sense of being understood from the perspective of the participant, as well as increased depth of contribution in those areas.

**Findings*****Setback experiences***

Three themes emerged as common setback experiences: (a) poor performance, (b) performance plateau and (c) injury.

***Poor performance***

Poor performance was difficult to accept and deal with, especially given the level of investment the athletes put into their sport. Athletes felt both internal and external pressures to perform to certain standards, and performing below these standards was identified by every athlete as a setback. Participants acknowledged experiencing feelings of frustration during periods of poor performance. One athlete responded to an episode of poor performance with anger and needed to take some time off after the season ended. One athlete described this as necessary because '... you just kind of have to reset your mind' (Erin) or refocus after such an experience.

While time off was seen as a potentially positive endeavour, as a chance to clear your head, try new things and find a better balance, temporary removal from sport was difficult at times. One athlete explained that while it was important to feel like a 'real person', have more aspects to life than being an athlete and step away from



the demands of sport for a short period of time, it was important to return to training with intensity:

I think at the beginning taking time off was very effective 'cause you kind of do other things ... you know, you kind of feel like [sport] is not the only thing in your life and that, if you fail, that it's not going to be terrible. And I think that was good. And then after that, I think it's really important to go hard on your training as soon as you're back ... It's not an ease into it thing, you either do it or you don't. (Erin)

Moving past poor performances required readjustment of focus. Looking forward, rather than dwelling on the past, was identified by all athletes as effective.

If you didn't have a great game, or even a great season, you weren't able to reach your personal best, or whatever the criteria might be, I think that, if you can kind of look past that and try to look at some of your prior successes or future outlook, you would be able to deal with that fact. But if you were super tunnel minded and could only see the one thing in front of you, I think you could maybe learn to broaden your scope. Easier said than done. (Sarah)

While looking forward and readjusting focus was seen to be an effective approach to deal with poor performance, it was a difficult object to attain for these athletes.

### *Performance plateau*

That is such a scary concept, to not be able to improve anymore. (Erin)

Performance plateau was a commonly identified setback and acknowledged by four of the five athletes. These athletes found it frustrating to put so much effort, time and commitment into their sport, but cease to improve. Fast improvement followed by a plateau was difficult to deal with, as the athletes were working hard and wanted to keep improving. While plateau could be justified for a period of time, eventually, this stall in progress led to frustration and confusion.

Early in the season, you are learning new stuff, you freeze and you unfreeze and you learn new aspects or techniques. But then, it's just like, okay well I trained for eight months and now it's time to compete, so ... my freezing should be over, my plateaus should be over, all the stuff that I learned should be contributing to something greater. (Erin)

More negative emotions arose if the plateau coincided with improvement in training-related activities (e.g. strength gains in weight-training not translating specifically to sport performance). An example lies in Erin's statement, 'All my lifts are up, everything's up, so why aren't I [performing better in sport]? ... I just wasn't getting any better'.

Inevitably, the lack of progress led most athletes to be self-critical and question what they were doing wrong, their ability as athletes, and if it was still worth continuing in sport, wondering if they had reached their peak. This is illustrated by Jessica's comment: 'There's definitely a ceiling effect too where you just will eventually improve less and less and less. But it's like, what is your ceiling?'

Eventually, the anger and/or frustration gave way to reaching a more patient state of mind after realigning plans and goals. For some, this required a temporary

step away from competitive sport and/or redirecting energy into other pursuits, similar to the situation with poor performance.

### *Injury*

Injury was, by far, the most prevalent setback the athletes discussed. Injury dominated much of the conversation for each of the five athletes; thus, to reflect their experiences, this section of the article takes up a similar proportion of space. Athletes voiced their frustrations surrounding the perception of being held back from progressing, even though they still felt the need to pursue their goals, making it difficult to hold back. Many athletes felt that their progress had not only been stalled due to the injury, but had also declined.

To take so many steps backwards ... Yeah, it was hard. (Alixé, on her sport progress during injury)

The perception of athletic progression being stalled or set back was a difficult reality to face for many of the athletes. Rehabilitation and modified activity was seen by a few of the athletes as having nothing of future benefit to them in terms of sport performance and their future goals.

You feel like what you're doing isn't even relevant to what you're doing. (Erin, on her modified training during injury)

Along with the concerns about progress, there was an issue with feelings of aimlessness and disorientation over having lost the sport routine.

I think for me, it's like, at some point I really learned to love running, like even on the basic level of going for a run. And when that is taken away from you, you are just like, what am I supposed to do? (Jessica)

Being injured ... it's so debilitating. You don't know what to do with yourself. (Erin)

There was often a struggle with adhering to advice. One athlete admitted to engaging in physical tasks from which she was prohibited, and noted the inner struggle with herself over her decisions. The drive to keep training and competing, despite the injury, prevailed:

There is that kind of small niggling concern of 'you're really not supposed to be doing this' and, 'nobody really knows you are not supposed to be doing this, what the hell are you thinking?' somehow that usually gets suppressed when I end up going out to play. (Sarah)

The athletes voiced that they knew they needed to listen to professional advice, but it was a struggle. They knew modification was necessary and they could not train at their normal capacity, but still felt a strong need to maintain their regular training regimes.

It's kind of weird when you can't exactly but you still think you should. (Sarah)

Even though I do know the logic behind it, I can't even tell you what it is. It's like you need to be on the field, you need to be playing, training ... not on the exercise bike. (Sarah)

To the athletes, the injury highlighted that they were 'not invincible' (Cindy) and put them 'back at square one' (Cindy). The injury experience was further compounded by frequent feelings of isolation and forced complacency, self-blame and incompetence.

Many athletes voiced feeling isolated and alienated from the team as a result of their injury. They were often no longer training with the team or training group in their normal routine, now required to spend more time in physiotherapy. One athlete noted a complexity underlying her feelings.

I don't know why I should feel alone, because you're not the only person in the world to get injured ... but I felt like that when I was injured. I felt really alone. I was taken away from my training group; you are taken away from your training partners and you have to kind of do all of your workouts in solitude and you go to physio by yourself ... And I guess, I feel really alone, but it's kind of when you have your [largest] support group ... your physio, your massage [therapist], your family, your friends, all trying to work you back up ... but ... it feels like no one else has ever gotten hurt before, ever ... when you're hurt. 'Cause you're like, 'oh no one has ever gotten this badly hurt'. But everyone gets hurt ... and then they come back. But at the time, you just don't see it, it's just not there. (Cindy)

There were feelings of incompetence that accompanied the injury experience. For most, injury changed their capacity to perform. For some, this led to the realisation of what they could do when healthy and how they took it for granted.

You kind of feel isolated, incompetent, when you can't do something that you could do a million times in your sleep. (Sarah)

And you're just so limited ... It's such a basic thing that you take for granted until you can't do it anymore. (Jessica)

Self-blame was also experienced by most of the athletes. While a variety of reasons for the injury were provided (including training error, accident, programming error and overtraining), most athletes still had one finger also pointing back at themselves.

Blaming myself, why didn't I see this coming? Why didn't I stop [training and competing] sooner? That is always a big one. Maybe it wouldn't have been as bad if I had stopped when it first started. It was just kind of like ... blaming yourself. (Jessica)

The many unknowns that come along with injury (e.g. often not knowing exactly what was wrong or how long it would take to heal), as well as self-doubts (e.g. being unsure if a return to the same performance ability was possible), were difficult concerns for the athletes:

The hardest part about [the injury] was the not knowing what was wrong for a long time. (Alix)

You're on crutches, you're at physio, you're always trying to come back to where you were and there is always that stigma ... will you be as good? Will you come back and even do anything worthwhile? Or is it just gonna be a waste of your time and you're just hoping that you are going to be good again? (Cindy)

The questioning and perceived reactions by others was another issue. Answering questions about the injury and recovery and interacting with people perceived as not understanding her situation was expressed as exhausting by many of the athletes.

They don't get it ... they're just like, 'Oh well go bike, go swim, why do you need to play?' (Sarah)

Fear of reinjury was prevalent amongst the athletes, with the slow return to normal training described as 'like walking a tightrope' (Alixé).

I think fear of reinjury is probably the biggest part. Reinjury is huge ... (Alixé)

Unfortunately, three of the athletes experienced reinjury, which was again reflected as an extremely frustrating and despairing experience. The athletes' progress was impressive prior to initially getting hurt, they worked hard to get back to their preinjury state, and then they experienced reinjury, only to have to start the rehabilitation process again.

The frustrations surrounding injury and the accompanying setbacks are understandable. The athletes invest much time and effort into training and competition, and exude so much passion for their sport, that such emotions were a struggle. Despite the negative affect, the athletes voiced taking joys out of the small steps in progress, as recovery from injury often occurred in minimal increments. For many, this involved reappraisal of the situation and a realignment of goals.

It was frustrating because I couldn't play ... but, I never really experienced anything to that magnitude before, so I kind of took little joys in the small steps of rehab. (Sarah)

It's acknowledging the small things that maybe before weren't a big deal ... taking credit for the things that you do that were better than they were before. Not necessarily before you got hurt, like the day before, the week before, the month before. (Alixé)

While the need for adjustments to training and progression was a struggle to accept at first, it was something most athletes found themselves eventually accepting. Although often difficult to accept, they tried to take pride in doing what they could at that point in time, on any given day. Athletes' increased self-awareness that came along with injury helped one athlete negotiate when to back off, and these skills were useful upon return to regular training as well.

I would [do] my workout, which was, in the beginning, however much I could do; however much I felt was okay for the day. My body tells me 'okay that's enough' ... Now I'm very picky, maybe I won't do [certain drills]. We modify a lot of sets now. Well, like, today that is not a good thing for me to do, but maybe tomorrow it will be fine. And maybe the day after will be fine. But I really can't do that today ... Just

being able to say, 'ya I can't do that today, but that is okay. There are other things that I can do'. (Alixé)

Training regimes were not the only aspects of the athletes' lives that needed to be changed. With injury came the reality that goals would have to be adjusted based on present progress. Living in the present was facilitated by focusing on just being happy to be back participating in the sport, but potentially needing to let go of past goals was still a difficult process; however, in time, the athletes were able to recover from the setback.

Since I'd been injured for so long, I'd tried all the different ways to deal with it, so I've kind of figured out what works and what doesn't work ... and just like, keeping going doesn't work. You have to take a step back and figure out what you can do. And set goals but set goals of things that you can do. (Alixé)

Each athlete had an advice for dealing with injury – approaches that they perceived as effective. One athlete cited staying optimistic as a key to her perseverance through the struggles of her injury. She tried to stay optimistic with the initial unknowns prior to diagnosis, through a slow and uncertain rehabilitation back to sport, and, eventually, a successful return to competition. Other effective ways to cope with injury included having a strong social support network of family, friends, training partners, physiotherapists, coaches, trainers, mental skills consultants, massage therapists and other athletes who had experienced injury and successfully returned to sport. Listening to professional advice and following a step-by-step recovery plan that could be amended based on progress and still involved training was seen as both effective and important. Being proactive, rather than reactive, in terms of health and stress and gaining relevant knowledge was paramount. Effective communication and patience were viewed as requirements during each small step in the recovery process. Focus needed to remain on areas that were possible to work on and the ups and downs in the recovery process needed to be accepted. Conversely, the athletes acknowledged that there were less effective ways to deal with injury, including ignoring the injury, suppressing any contradictory thoughts about choices involving sport participation, internalising signals from unsupportive sources, rumination and manipulating others to allow oneself to keep participating in sport while injured.

When I had my injury and [other athletes] are able to tell you about their experience, it helps to kind of be like, okay, well they did it, so I can do it too. (Cindy)

We really broke it down into steps. (Alixé, on her rehabilitation plan feeling more directed and manageable if sectioned into components)

I think it was really important to do the stuff that I could do, like continue to be active. And feeling like I was training still ... even if I really wasn't. (Jessica)

The idea of balance – working hard to get back, but not ignoring the limits of the body due to injury – was cited as one of the more difficult tasks to achieve. Despite other people in the athletes' lives putting recommendations and limits on what they could do, and what would be best for them to do, the whole notion of backing off was seen as a lesson that the athletes personally had to struggle with to learn. This

required self-awareness – a skill that many athletes attested to developing through their rehabilitation process.

It's definitely taught me to really be aware of my body, because it would be so easy to do too much. And then a week from now, be like, wow, I can't [train] anymore. So you really just have to learn your body and what you can do. I would say that is huge for me. I've been injured before and I was like ya I can do it, you'll be fine. And then you just get worse! It doesn't work that way! You get worse and then you get more injured. So, ya ... I just definitely just learned to balance it ... and work on what I could work on at the time. (Alixé)

I've learned, stepping back. That's hard. I think it's the hardest thing to learn. (Jessica)

Injury challenged each of these athletes. The struggle, and lack of ability to always cope effectively, was evident.

### *Approaching and managing setback experiences*

Key themes emerged across experiences dealing with approach and management of setbacks: (a) constructive thoughts and behaviours, (b) critical in pursuit of high achievement, (c) the importance of social support and (d) striving for balance.

#### *Constructive thoughts and behaviours*

You wake up in the morning and decide how your day is going to be. (Erin)

Taking a positive approach to all aspects of life and focusing on the good, while learning from – but not ruminating upon – the bad, was conducive to coping. As Sarah stated:

I figured out that if I was going to keep playing, it was because I loved doing it and if I was going to love doing it, I had to stop fixating on the little stupid things that I would do along the way.

Two athletes shared strategies for dealing with negative events and the accompanying negative emotions. One athlete called it the 'five minute rule' and the other athlete the 'two hour rule'. Although the length of time differed, the premise behind each rule remained the same. As Erin explained, 'you can give yourself two hours to be pissed off and angry and sad and then, just, life goes on'. The athletes gave themselves a time frame to feel negative, but once that time lapsed, they required themselves to move on. This was both for their benefit to allow for a productive focus that was not ruminative, and for the benefit of those around them, as Alixé pointed out.

Attitudes are definitely contagious. It's like, ya, it's huge. Usually we aren't allowed to say anything negative because it does definitely affect everyone else. I know it affects me, like if someone says, 'Oh this is gonna be so hard!' and then it's like, 'Oh I feel terrible today!'. (Alixé)

It was acknowledged that negativity affected not only the individual, but had an influence on those around them as well.

*Critical in pursuit of high achievement*

It's about acknowledging I could have done better, I should have done better, but I will do better next time. (Jessica)

Each athlete spoke of the role of self-criticism in pushing her towards her sport goals, and this remained relevant during setbacks. Despite the positive attitudes adopted by these athletes, self-criticism was prevalent and viewed as part of the competitive nature and drive for perfection. One athlete understood the notion of self-criticism in terms of all performance outcomes connecting to personal effort, explaining 'what happens is based on what I have and haven't done' (Jessica). Thus, if a setback occurred, the athletes tended to connect it to personal factors, and, as a result, were critical towards the self.

Athletes voiced that they were self-critical by nature and that self-criticism was seen as necessary to assess and solve any problems, allowing for improvement. However, in essence, they desired to learn from the problem using constructive criticism. This enabled the athletes to move on with a focus on the future and not on the past setback and help them to avoid rumination.

I think people are very self-critical because you need to be in order to assess the problem or assess what's not perfect and move on. But, you know, I feel like if you weren't self-critical, or if you didn't take your failures in stride or if you didn't take it in properly, then you wouldn't improve. Because it means you're not analyzing the problem, you're not trying to find a solution to it. ... you're not trying out to figure out what it is by looking at what you've done wrong. Or what you're not doing, simply. So, I think, at the elite level, I think you can't not really be self-critical, because how would you get there in the first place? (Erin)

I think people get better because, they want to get better. They are like, 'I can do better'. I think if you frame it positively, positive criticism is the way. (Jessica)

Look at it critically and criticize it and learn, but don't carry it with you. Let go of it. (Alixé)

Avoiding rumination was difficult, especially given that self-criticism was described as perpetuating at times and often resulted in self-doubt. The athletes were not only critical, but also desired perfection. The perpetuating cycle of the interplay between self-criticism and achievement striving was noted, as the latter leads to ever increasing standards, leading to more of the former. This negativity can have a destructive impact on performance, resulting in an increased discrepancy between present status and desired standard, which many athletes labelled 'perfection'.

I think one of my main problems in sport, is that I just assume perfection. That I just cannot handle, I cannot deal with non-perfection ... I just assume perfection, so when it's not going well it's really hard 'cause then I start mentally talking myself down and it's just an endless circle. (Cindy)

Given the difficulty in attaining 'perfection', or even standards that always become elevated above the present level, frequent episodes of self-criticism were not uncommon and often prevented athletes from moving on with an effective focus.

### *The importance of social support*

It's never quite as terrible to go through something if there's someone else there. (Sarah)

Teammates, training partners, family, friends, coaches, physiotherapists, doctors and mental skills consultants were perceived as playing an integral role in coping with setbacks. A supportive environment helped the athletes work past their self-criticism during setback experiences. One athlete voiced the importance of social support in dealing with self-criticism.

Every athlete is critical. It's just the way they are. They have to have perfection. They have to have it all. And if there is a setback, it is really hard to bounce back unless you have a good friend support group or a good family support group. (Cindy)

Support from someone who had experienced a similar issue was considered extremely beneficial by all of the athletes, and this was reflected extensively in dealing with injury. However, the development of self-reliance was also considered very helpful, especially since at times it was frustrating because it seemed like no one understood what the athlete was going through.

Friends and family try to help, but there is only so much they can do. It helps to a point but when you get [back to sport] and you just want to be good and you know what it used to feel like and it doesn't feel like it ... there is nothing really that anyone can say that is going to make you feel better. That, that's how it is. That's the setback and that is how life is, and you just have to learn to deal with it. (Cindy)

Adequate social support was seen as important, but was not always available. Support from the self was an additional option, but given the challenges expressed by the athletes, this was also not meeting all needs, suggesting a lack in resources.

### *Striving for balance*

Striving for balance was a key strategy in dealing with setbacks and resonated with each of the athletes. Setbacks often resulted in fixation and rumination that at times became somewhat obsessive, which was described as an exhausting and dysfunctional focus.

It [the setback] consumes my mind; it consumes my thoughts ... that's all I can think about. (Cindy)

Athletes voiced difficulty in seeing the big picture and 'letting go', especially in light of major goals, although future ramifications were acknowledged. Many athletes recognised the importance of not sacrificing other aspects of life for sport, especially because focusing on outside pursuits was a common way to deal with injury and being cut from a team. However, the difficulty in maintaining this balance and objectivity was emphasised.

It's definitely very hard to like, step back and look at [the setback event] objectively though. Especially in a big [competition] or if there is a rival or something. (Erin)



Finding a true balance often required a step away from competitive sport. The separation from competitive sport differed for each athlete, but the focus on seeing the bigger picture was an issue for all of the athletes, even those who did not feel rumination on the setback was a problem for them.

Basically, when I have my setbacks, there is nothing else in the world and I am consumed by the setback. Whether it be mental or physical, that is all I can think about, that is all that is on my mind. It's like the greatest tragedy in the world. And there is nothing that can talk me out of it ... I can't just take a step back when I'm in it. I just can't wrap my mind around it. But as soon as I'm able to stand out of it and it's someone else's problem, I am able to be the most level-headed person and actually give good advice. (Cindy)

I don't think I obsess or ruminate. Not anymore really. Um, unless it's like something good. But, definitely stepping back ... I think I need to start doing that. (Erin)

Athletes tried to direct focus and energy on what they could personally do and control, as a positive direction was seen to lay the foundation for future productivity. Expending energy on something out of the athlete's control or on something in the past, with no 'lesson' for the future, was seen as ineffective.

I think if you are obsessing about something, then you are obviously not thinking about something that you should be doing to help yourself. And, I think a lot of people who don't improve over a season, they might start to obsess. (Erin)

So it's where you focus your attention and how you chose to feel, especially about something that you can no longer control, or that's already happened, it's huge. It's exactly how your next practice is going to go. (Erin)

Athletes were aware of the importance of balance and where it could be applied. At times though, there was a disconnect between this acknowledgement and successful application of skills to accomplish this objective.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to understand young, high-performance women athletes' experiences with setbacks in sport. The athletes reported common setbacks in sport and were self-aware, identifying some effective and ineffective ways to cope with these experiences. Poor performance, performance plateau and injury were cited as common setback experiences by the athletes. There was effective coping surrounding setbacks, with athletes citing constructive thoughts and behaviours, social support and a focus on maintaining a balance. However, elements of self-criticism often limited the effectiveness of athletes' coping strategies and overshadowed their stress management techniques. The current study contributes to the literature by providing an in-depth understanding of high-performance women athletes' experiences with setbacks in a variety of sports, the challenges they face, how they coped, and what coping strategies and skills were developed and effective in the opinion of the athlete. This study also highlights areas in which athletes are experiencing difficulties in coping such as events surrounding injury, poor performance, performance plateau and self-criticism. Through identifying areas of challenge, we

gain information about coping strategies or skills which could be better developed to improve athletes' ability to deal with setbacks in sport.

### ***Injury: common and challenging***

Injury was the dominant setback and the accompanying challenges were evident, as expressed through each athlete's story. Of particular concern to the athletes when considering a return to sport were worries about further injury, skill retention levels, physical fitness and meeting coach/teammate expectations. These issues have been reflected in previous research (e.g. Podlog and Eklund 2007). Injured athletes have been shown to experience decreased productivity and sense of achievement and physical competency, as well as lowered self-perceptions, loss of identity and a change in social roles (Ford and Gordon 1999, Thing 2006).

The women athletes in the present study struggled with feelings of incompetency, further highlighting issues with how they viewed the self after an injury. Injury meant not playing, training or competing, and this was extremely difficult for the women athletes. Additionally, negotiating frequency and intensity of training upon return to sport led to the athletes constantly questioning their approach and decisions. Thing (2006) has reported a similar situation among injured athletes, acknowledging that it was not easy for an injured athlete to adjust to the shift in everyday focus from training to rehabilitating, as well as negotiating the risk and uncertainty with returning to sport. The stress of the unknowns and negotiating limits was echoed in the present study. The apparent stress surrounding this issue suggests that athletes are not always coping effectively. Understanding which, as well as where, coping approaches could be implemented will increase the tools and resources available to athletes and help with coping efforts.

The athletes in the present study outlined effective coping strategies in dealing with injury that have connections to previous literature. For example, coping using positive thoughts and focus is consistent with previous research (Brewer 2007). Re-establishment of goals occurred among the athletes in the present study as a way to break their rehabilitation up into manageable steps and allowed for the recognition of small gains in progress. Other research has suggested that adjusting goals provides an opportunity to view oneself as a success during the return from injury (Podlog and Eklund 2009). Social support was acknowledged by the athletes as beneficial in most setback situations and took the form of encouragement, reassurance and advice, which is also in line with previous research (Ford and Gordon 1999). However, while social support had its advantages, each of the women athletes in this study was frustrated when she perceived major avenues of support did not understand her situation. There are cases in the literature documenting athletes feeling misunderstood by those close to them (Thing 2006) and feeling underserved in terms of social support (Udry *et al.* 1997, Johntson and Carroll 1998). However, striving to promote effective avenues of social support has many benefits, including providing advice, guidance, and information, as well as tangible resources, and help with emotional adjustment (Gottleib 1983, Pearson 1986). Research supports the role of social support in coping with injury related stressors in a sport context, and can also potentially enhance self-esteem, well-being and emotional state, as well as reduce feelings of isolation, restlessness and depression (Manuel *et al.* 2002, Mitchell 2011). Thus, appropriate social support appears to be an important factor to promote in terms of effectively coping with setbacks in sport.

While the current study supports previous research, it also highlights the important issue that injury continues to pose challenges for athletes, suggesting additional resources might be beneficial. A variety of ineffective and effective ways to cope with injuries were highlighted, but the struggle in coping was evident among these athletes. While injury is expected to pose some negative issues or challenges to athletes, those involved in sport can better position resources (and athletes) to work through such experiences. Ironically, many athletes find themselves losing resources and support or negotiating new terrain unassisted during periods of injury. Better support needs to be in place to help athletes restructure their plans and goals in light of the injury, ensuring the athletes still have a focus and feel they are moving forward. Aid in negotiating limits and boundaries in terms of training to help with concerns regarding skill and fitness retention, as well as prevention of reinjury, would also be beneficial. Thing (2006) also identified a need to help injured athletes make challenging, but appropriate, decisions regarding their health and sport participation. Providing athletes with consistent resources tailored specifically for use during periods of injury that provide support and guidance could significantly aid in coping efforts.

### ***Performance plateau: need for awareness, understanding, and support***

One setback that has received relatively little consideration in sport psychology but was a major issue identified by the women athletes was the experience of performance plateau. Performance plateau has not been well-defined in the literature, particularly in the sport performance domain. From a rehabilitative standpoint, plateau is described as ambiguous (Demain *et al.* 2006), and is a phase where improvement is no longer seen (Wiles *et al.* 2004). In terms of sport performance, much of the focus to date has been on plateaus during injury or due to overtraining (see Johnson and Thiese 1992 for a review). To our knowledge, no published study has looked at the psychological experience of performance plateau among athletes. However, performance plateau seems to be a common occurrence, as the athletes spoke of the issue in familiar terms, either from the perspective of personal experience or witnessing it in another athlete. The distressing nature and the struggle in overcoming the stress and challenge a plateau presented was evident. Past research suggests that poor performance, or performance 'slumps', can be stressful and connected to negative affect that is often exacerbated as the cause is frequently unknown (Taylor 1988, Madden *et al.* 1990, Grove 2004). The present study suggests a similar pattern with performance plateau.

Frustration, confusion and questioning the reasons for the plateau were common. It was also frustrating to invest so much, but get little return and also feel as though there was a loss of control over something that was very important to them. The feelings of frustration often morphed into feeling overwhelmed, disappointed, guilty, angry and anxious, and led to doubt, a lack of confidence and belief in ability and, at times, challenged the athletes' motivation to pursue sport. These experiences were similar to those expressed by young high-performance women athletes in an unpublished study by Vangool and colleagues (2007). The athletes in the present study acknowledged that their high standards and need for continual improvement and progression towards goals, which is in opposition to the performance plateau, could cultivate extreme self-criticism at times.

Clearly, performance plateau is an area that needs to be better understood, and coping resources need to be directed towards this phenomenon. Resources for coaches, support staff, athletes and parents that explain possible causes, solutions and ways to cope could help during periods of performance plateau. Highlighting the issue could provide awareness as well as support and direction for athletes experiencing plateau. The participants in the present study outlined possible approaches to dealing with plateau. Identifying the small improvements in practice or competition was cited by the athletes as effective and is a strategy athletes, coaches, parents, training partners and support staff could incorporate into discussions and analysis. Previous research has found pointing out small improvements results in the performance plateau seeming less threatening, promoting less negative connotations and emotional impact (Vangoor *et al.* 2007). The athletes in the present study also suggested that keeping sport's role in a balance with other aspects of life, seeking social support and keeping a positive attitude, seem to be promising approaches to coping with performance plateau. Research is needed to determine the strongest approaches, as well as best methods for delivery.

### ***Expanding resources: the potential of self-compassion and mindfulness***

Through learning about the athletes' experiences, it seems additional resources for dealing with setbacks are worthy of exploration. In particular, interventions and skill training that could target self-criticism and promotion of balance seem especially worthwhile. The current study suggests that athletes often struggle with self-criticism and maintenance of a balanced perspective during challenging times. Self-compassion, as well as mindfulness approaches, may help to address this gap. Self-compassion is comprised of three components: self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness (Neff 2003). Self-kindness involves being kind and understanding, rather than overly critical, towards oneself. Common humanity refers to perceiving that one is not alone in his/her experiences. Finally, mindfulness involves keeping thoughts and feelings in balance, rather than overidentifying with them. Research has suggested that self-compassion has the potential for neutralising negative emotions, promoting positive states of mind and buffering the effects of negative self-evaluation (see Neff 2009 for a review). It is also associated with greater use of acceptance and positive reinterpretation coping strategies, as well as increased mastery goals (Neff *et al.* 2005, Allen and Leary 2010). Past research has also demonstrated that self-compassion may be an important factor in influencing and regulating cognitions and emotions in the sport context (e.g. Mosewich *et al.* 2009, 2011).

Although not currently a widespread resource, self-compassion has the potential to help attain many of the goals and mindframes desired by the athletes in the present study. The ruminative cycle of self-criticism that plagued many of the athletes might be buffered by self-compassion. Self-compassion, particularly the self-kindness and mindfulness elements, provides an individual with the ability to acknowledge problems and weaknesses and evaluate the self without self-condemnation, allowing for more accurate perceptions of the situation and a better ability to change maladaptive thoughts, feelings or behaviours (Neff 2003). The athlete is better able to move on with an effective focus and avoid excessive self-criticism and rumination (e.g. Neff 2003, 2009, Neff *et al.* 2005). Thus, self-compassion may help to foster *constructive* self-criticism and evaluation, strategies voiced as effective by the athletes in the present study. The element of common humanity could

help athletes to identify with others with similar experiences or more easily accept support from others, which was cited as a key strategy for coping with setbacks. In addition, common humanity may be especially useful in dealing with the feelings of isolation that come with injury and sources of social support not understanding the athlete's experience. Feelings of isolation can be reduced and adaptive coping can be promoted when people realise that they are not alone in their experience (Neff 2003). Additionally, the athletes' goal of balance might be enhanced by mindfulness. The athletes were striving for a balance to deal with a variety of issues, including injury and performance difficulties. Ruminative thoughts, high expectations and difficulties realigning goals commonly occur along with setbacks. The balance promoted by self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness may help with reducing rumination and obsession, which the athletes identified as detrimental to focus.

### ***Moving forward/conclusion***

The qualitative approach to the present study provided an opportunity to understand athletes' experiences of setbacks through their own descriptions and explanations. The retrospective account allowed them to integrate their complete experience, cultivating a deeper understanding of their own personal experiences. However, a drawback of the retrospective nature of this study is that memories may not be accurate upon reflection. While this study provided an opportunity to explore issues surrounding setbacks in detail, one limitation is that generalisability is limited as each athlete's experiences are unique. Nonetheless, this study provided the athletes with an opportunity to talk about the issues that were most relevant to them, which, subsequently, highlighted elements that deserve further research attention such as coping with performance plateau and feelings of isolation and self-criticism. Future research should seek to address these issues by understanding the best coping strategies to deal with specific challenges and ensuring athletes can successfully apply them. Additionally, it may be worthwhile to explore the effectiveness of extending new types of coping resources, such as self-compassion and/or mindfulness intervention strategies (e.g. Kabat-Zinn *et al.* 1992, Segal *et al.* 2002, Gardner and Moore 2004, Gilbert and Irons 2004, Gilbert and Procter 2006, Leary *et al.* 2007, Kelly *et al.* 2010) to the sport domain, as well as continue to refine the coping skills training programmes that have been established as we seek to foster more effective coping among athletes.

In conclusion, the athletes' reflections suggest there may be gaps in support and resources when dealing with setbacks in high-performance sport. Hearing the athletes' stories and their clear expression of struggle speaks to the importance of not only continued support, but the facilitation of new creative, supplementary resources to aid in coping with setbacks in sport.

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**Note**

1. The semi-structured interview guide is available from the first author upon request.

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