AN EXPLORATION OF THE MEANINGS ATTRIBUTED TO HIGH PERFORMANCE SPORT AND ACADEMICS BY STUDENT-ATHLETES AT A SPORT SCHOOL IN WESTERN CANADA

by

Trisha Genève Blair

B.Sc., Northern Arizona University, 2002

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ABSTRACT

Over the last several years Canadian sport policy and programs have demonstrated an increased emphasis on the development of high performance athletes following what is being called an “athlete-centred” approach (Athletes CAN, 1994; Thibault & Babiak, 2005). This change in Canada’s National sport system toward an athlete-centered approach can be seen in the creation of organizations such as sport schools.

Sport schools have been developed with the intention of providing an environment where student-athletes have the opportunity to pursue excellence in both their academic program and their athletic careers. In contradistinction to these developments, concerns continue to be raised in the literature about the potential negative effects of high performance sport involvement for youth. It is suggested that youth sport functions as a professional and Olympic sport feeder system in an emerging global sport monoculture (“prolympism”) that places far more emphasis on performance than personal development (Donnelly, 1997; Kidd & Donnelly, 2000; Ingham et al., 2002). One limitation of this literature, however, is that it generally has failed to adequately take account of athletes’ opinions and experiences. In particular, there is very little research that focuses on the ‘lived’ experiences of young Canadian elite athletes and even less on youth experiences in sport schools.

The purpose of this research was to help fill this gap through a preliminary qualitative assessment of the opinions of student-athletes attending a sport school, focusing on their perceptions of how the school has affected their learning, and their personal and athletic development. The study questions are: 1) How do youth student-athletes negotiate their relationship with high performance sport and academics in a sport school setting? 2) What are the strengths and weaknesses of sport schools in facilitating this relationship? 3) What can the meanings youth student-athletes attribute to their sport and school experiences tell us about youth involvement in high performance sport and sport schools?

The data for the study was collected from a sample of 10 individuals: 1 school administrator and 9 student-athletes attending grades 11 and 12 at a sport school in western Canada (WSS). The primary data collection method was semi-structured in-depth interviews. In addition, observation, document analysis, and a short questionnaire provided supplementary contextual data. The analysis situates the student-athletes’ narratives in the frameworks of “prolympism” and an athlete-centred approach. Analyzing how student-athletes experience WSS has practical implications for both sport and pedagogical policy in terms of program development and evaluation measures.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction and Rationale

Over the last several years Canadian sport policy and programs have demonstrated an increased emphasis on the development of high performance athletes following what is being called an "athlete-centred" approach (Athletes CAN, 1994; Thibault & Babiak, 2005). This change is reflected in increases in athlete funding, the creation of national training centres, the increase in the number of athletes on decision-making committees of national sport organizations, and the development of Own the Podium - a national sport program aimed at expanding resources for high performance athletes and their support staff in hopes of boosting medal performances at upcoming Olympic Games (Priestner-Allinger, C. & Allinger, T., 2004). A related phenomenon that is occurring in alignment with an athlete-centred approach (ACA), is the creation of sport schools. Sport schools have been developed with the intention of providing an environment where student-athletes have the opportunity to pursue excellence in both their academic and athletic endeavours. Sport schools have the potential to be an integral component of the holistic development of student-athletes. It is within the context of ACA that Canadian sport schools and student-athlete focused educational programs have been developed and implemented across the country.

Concerns have been raised in the literature about the potentially negative effects of high performance sports programs on youth; however, this literature has generally failed to adequately take account of athletes' opinions and experiences (Donnelly, 1997; Brettschneider, 1999; Kidd & Donnelly, 2000; Ingham & Chase, 2002; Collins & Buller,
2003; Grenfell & Rinehart, 2003; Gould & Carson, 2004; David, 2005). There is very little research that focuses on the lived experiences of young Canadian elite athletes and even less on youth experiences in Canadian sport schools.

In this study, I analyze and describe youth student-athletes’ opinions and perceptions of their experiences at a sport school in Western Canada (WSS). I have selected WSS for two reasons: it was one of the first sport schools developed in Canada, and it remains an example of best practices. Studying its programs promises to offer insights into the realities of Canadian youth student-athletes’ experiences of high performance programs in an ideal educational ACA setting. Twenty athletes, or ten percent, of the Canadian Olympic team who competed in Torino consisted of athletes who at some point had either graduated from or had been enrolled in WSS. With a strong focus on the student-athlete, in-keeping with the goals of an athlete-centered approach, WSS provides a flexible academic program that fits into the athletes’ demanding training and competition schedules while maintaining the educational standards of the local school board.

Analyzing how student-athletes experience WSS has potential implications for sport policy in terms of program development and evaluation measures, as well as provides evidence for benchmarking elite youth sport in a Canadian context. The study presents an opportunity to offer suggestions and insight into the potential for an organization similar to WSS to be implemented as a Vancouver 2010 legacy in sustaining high performance sport development for youth in conjunction with academic goals. As noted, there is substantial literature describing the various issues involved in youth high
performance sport, but there is very little that focuses specifically on youths’ experiences in sport schools, especially in Canada.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of high performance student-athletes at a sport school in Western Canada. The specific research questions are:

- How do youth student-athletes negotiate their relationship with high performance sport and academics in a sport school setting?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of sport schools in facilitating this relationship?
- What can the meanings youth student-athletes attribute to their experiences in a sport school tell us about youth involvement in high performance sport and sport schools?

**Relevant Background of Study**

*What is “High Performance” Sport?*

Outlining the characteristics of high performance sport helps to identify the kind of sport the student-athletes at the centre of this proposed study are involved in. In describing “high performance” sport, the notion of “excellence” is often used to explain and differentiate between high performance sport and recreational sport, or sport for participation – which typically focuses on the benefits of participation and the joy of the game, as opposed to the intense, committed, achievement-oriented kind of sport most associated with high performance. More specifically, high performance refers to sport
that is organized in such a way that only the most skilled and/or dedicated choose (or are selected) to participate (Cantelon, H, 2005).

Historical and Global Context for High Performance Sport and Sport Schools

The Eastern Bloc countries’ (former German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Union) amateur elite sport system provided impetus for the development of all other nations’ high performance sport systems. Green and Oakley (2001) suggest that in the development of the high performance sport systems in the West (such as Australia and to a lesser extent, Canada) many antecedents of the Eastern Bloc’s ‘managed approach’ to elite sport became increasingly apparent. The Eastern Bloc’s use of sport for ideological reasons during the Cold War helped the former GDR gain momentum in creating a high performance sport system with the clear aim of winning international status and domestic credibility for the Communist regime (Riordan, 1996). It has been suggested that the GDR was the most efficient country in the world in producing Olympic champions in relation to its population (Green & Oakley, 2001). However, their early success did not go unquestioned - their particular strategic method to elite sport supremacy resulted in the growth and widespread use of performance enhancing drugs across both eastern and western nations.

In conducting interviews with personnel at elite sport institutes in several western countries, Green and Oakley (2001) found data that contended "nation-states in the West have embraced key features of the Eastern Bloc’s elite sport development systems, primarily over the period of 1952 to 1988" (p. 249). This ‘borrowing’ of the Eastern Bloc’s best practices can be seen in the Canadian made model, Long-Term Athlete
Development (LTAD) program, a training, competition, and recovery program based on developmental age rather than chronological age (Canadian Sport Centres, 2005). Widely utilized by coaches, and technical and administrative leaders in the sport community, the approach of the LTAD model was "influenced by an analysis of the empirically tested athlete development models from the former Eastern Bloc countries" (Canadian Sport Centres, 2005, LTAD Resource Paper, p. 13). One of the most integral factors in the LTAD model is the "10-Year Rule", which states that it takes a minimum of ten years and ten thousand hours of training for a talented athlete to reach elite levels. This translates into slightly more than three hours of training or competition daily for ten years (Canadian Sport Centres, LTAD Resource Paper, p. 19). Adoption of the LTAD model in Canada has meant that athletes need to be targeted at younger and younger ages for specialized sport training.

Similarly, athlete development is a key feature of Australia's talent search system. The Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) was established by the Australian government as a part of a policy innovation designed to enhance Australian prospects in international competition. As Houlihan (1997) notes, it is one thing to identify talent, but in order to reach the objectives of the program and the AIS, athlete development is crucial for future success and longevity in sport. The concept of athlete development is also a main focus of the Canadian Own the Podium (OTP) program. To support the development of young athletes, OTP will provide funding for identified outstanding junior level athletes to train at national training centres.

Western Canada plays host to several national training sites. With world-class venues left over from the Calgary Games in 1988, and the creation of new venues in
Vancouver and Whistler, B.C. in preparation for hosting the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, as well as several other popular training locations throughout Western Canada, many winter national teams either reside or train at these sites. For the young developing athletes who aspire to reach Olympic competition levels there are limited options for pursuing a full-time education in conjunction with their training. Sports schools have been a notable and welcome exception to this rule, and one of the most successful of these is WSS where I conducted my study.

The 'Amateur' Myth

A defining feature of high performance sport until recently was the role of 'amateurism' in shaping sport opportunities. Amateurism developed as a key element of the English model of sport in the early nineteenth century. It emphasized playing a game for the love of the sport and personal growth, rather than for financial reward. While amateurism is a noble value, there is also an elitist function in honouring amateurism. Kidd and Donnelly (2000) point out that 'sports were developed as socialization and pleasure for imperial upper-class males' (p. 135). The elite, who could afford to participate in leisurely and athletic activities, used amateur ideals in sport as a way to further subordinate the lower classes and perpetuate preferred values and particular elitist forms of culture (Horne, J. et al., 1999). Many believe that the modern Olympic Games — commonly touted as the pinnacle of amateur sport — are obliged to uphold the original values and objectives of the Ancient Games. However, research has shown that the Ancient Games were no more 'clean' and 'pure' than today's Games and that they were an expression of a very different society and culture based on a warrior class system and masculine values of personal powers and achievement. The Ancient Games in point of
fact were just as replete with ethical, professional, and commercial challenges as today’s global “amateur” sport system.

Nevertheless, there were times during the twentieth century when amateur value-laden ideals were supported and encouraged by those in leadership positions in global sport. The most strident protector of amateurism in the modern Olympics, initiated by Pierre de Coubertin in the late 1800’s, was Avery Brundage, IOC President from 1952 to 1972. Following Brundage’s departure from the IOC Presidency in 1972, the Olympic Movement began to open its competitions to professionals, and now this is the norm. In fact, the word ‘amateurism’ was removed from the Olympic Charter in 1974. Thus, the value of amateurism, which could be argued as a false ideal in the first place due to the professionalism of athletes and the class underpinnings of amateurism in Victorian England seen in Ancient Greece, is now non-existent in the modern Olympic Movement. Track and field competitors, for example, are routinely sponsored by shoe and clothing companies and are full-time athletes. The Barcelona Olympic Games in 1992 saw the arrival of the “Dream Team”, the first United States basketball team to include professional players from the National Basketball Association, and the Nagano Winter Games in 1998 saw professional hockey players from the National Hockey League playing for their home nations for the first time.

It is not so much the fact that professionalism has been woven into a historically deceptive “amateur” system, rather, what brings concern is the impact that an increasingly professionalized commercialized system will have on athletes, in particular, on young athletes. The characteristics of professional sport differ greatly from “amateur” ideals and the ways in which these features of professionalism have been transferred into
high performance youth sport deserves investigation. Donnelly (1996), and Ingham et al., (2002) use the term 'prolympism' to identify the merging of amateur and professional sport, and they describe the ideological structure that has resulted as an “elitist, achievement oriented, and purportedly meritocratic system” (p. 309).
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Evidence suggests that the experience of children in high performance sport has grown increasingly negative in the past twenty years (Donnelly, 1997). Although sport schools have the potential to be an integral component of the holistic development of student-athletes, David (2005) indicates that often the best interests of the child are not taken into consideration when a decision is made about whether a child should opt for intensive sport training or continue studying. Adults, including parents, coaches, sponsors, teachers — tend to impose their choices on young athletes. In this light, we must look more closely at the selection processes that begin with talent identified in young athletes and lead to a condition where world-class sport events such as the Olympic Games depend on young athlete feeder systems in order to operate.

With this background, I outline some of the key work in the area of youth and high performance sport, explain how these studies have approached this topic area, and show how my study of student-athletes at WSS relates to and informs this literature.

School vs. Sport: The struggle between academics and athletics in elite youth sport

Brettschneider's (1999) work on youth athletes' struggles with the pressures of school and training is a key study I have drawn on for my thesis research on youth student-athletes' experiences in a sport school. Focusing on the relationship between school and training, Brettschneider (1999) shows that this combination of commitments proves to be a major problem for young people involved in high-level sport (p. 122). He describes the common tendency across his review of prior literature for athletes'
biographies to be distorted and for specific accounts of athletic experiences to be used out of context. According to Brettschneider (1999), it is not possible to form generalized images of young competitive athletes because these "images cannot meet people's different life situations and the wide variety of biographies" (p. 122). Thus, in this study, my objective was to get at the athletes' subjectivities and to avoid falling into the 'received view' of the current literature on this topic.

The underlying conceptual framework for Brettschneider's study relies on three components — the concept of developmental tasks, the concept of relevant life events, and the concept of coping, including ideologies of self-concept (p. 124). He conducted a large-scale study with male and female student-athletes between the ages of twelve and seventeen who were attending elite sport schools. He employed both qualitative and quantitative research methods using questionnaires and personal interviews. Brettschneider's study suggests that involvement in elite sport may influence the development of young people's self-perceptions in a positive way and that a positive academic self-concept may serve as a personal resource in the process of coping with stress (p. 121). Furthermore, he provides compelling evidence in support of sport schools and similar initiatives and emphasizes that "enabling young athletes to gain academic qualifications without having to neglect their commitment to top-level sport is one of the major tasks for those who feel responsible for the development of young people" (1999, p. 130).

Issues in Youth High Performance Sport

Existing literature shows that youth involvement in high performance sport is not necessarily a good thing and may have detrimental effects on the personal development
and socialization of the youth, particularly those involved in intense sporting environments. The apparent increasing demands for international success in sport are commonly used as a justification for government and corporate spending on elite participation. In addition, attempts to establish schemes for the early identification of athletic talent, such as the LTAD model, are explained on the basis of the obvious trend towards earlier and more intensive athletic involvement for younger and younger children in order to deliver the requisite heightened level of performance (Donnelly, 1993, p. 96).

Donnelly (1993) conducted research based on youths' experiences in high performance sport as part of a systematic attempt to document athletes' concerns about their intensive involvement during childhood sport. His study involved in-depth interviews with forty-five recently retired Canadian high performance athletes and was supplemented by a number of documentary and informal sources of data. Although Donnelly's findings clearly expressed positive experiences in intensive sport involvement, the participants commented substantially more-so on the negative experiences. His work revealed numerous concerns about competitive stress and anxiety, increased aggression, parental pressure, high dropout rates, and tendencies of coaches to treat young athletes as 'mini-adults' (1993).

Furthermore, participants reported a surprisingly large number of negative experiences in elite sport leading Donnelly (1993) to conclude that there are two related factors as to why society permits these kinds of experiences to occur with our youth: the rationalization of sport and the disappearance of childhood. He states that,

"High performance sport has been rationalized to the extent that performance has become more important than the fact that human beings are producing that performance. Thus, the body has become an instrument, an object to be worked
Moreover, he speculates that our willingness to involve children in such a training regime is, in part, a response to the success of the Eastern European's rationalized training techniques in the latter half of the twentieth century. In reference to the disappearance of childhood, Donnelly (1993) suggests that parents themselves are exerting pressure and decisional control over the particular sport development paths of their children and are steering them towards elite sport involvement as a work-like career (p. 115; Grenfell & Rinehart, 2003).

Similar studies have contributed to a predominantly critical body of literature surrounding youth in high performance sport. Coakley and White (1992) explored the dynamics of how young people make decisions about their sport participation. They interviewed teenage athletes from predominantly working-class families residing in an industrial area southeast of London. They focused on descriptions of sport experiences, how young people defined and interpreted those experiences, how this influenced decisions about participation, and how participation was integrated into the rest of their lives. They found that young females and males shared concerns about their transition out of sport and into adulthood and had "common desires to develop and display personal competence and autonomy". Interestingly, they claimed these common concerns were significantly mediated by gender.

Out of frustration with a sport system that provides minimal support to high performance athletes in their transition out of sport, Dacyshyn (1999) was motivated to conduct a qualitative study to capture the deep personal experiences involved in the sport retirement process, as well as to open a window into the lived experiences of the elite
athletes, into their thoughts, feelings, and inner worlds. She felt that more emotional and psychological support was needed for many athletes in order to help with the broader context of the sport retirement transition. Dacyshyn (1999) conducted in-depth interviews with seven former elite female gymnasts, and although her study does not directly relate to my study on youths’ experiences in sport schools, she raises relevant critical issues about a sport system that emphasizes performance at the expense of the holistic development of young athletes. In interviewing the former elite gymnasts, she provided an opportunity for them to speak freely and share their emotions about their sporting experiences and their transition out of competitive sport. Dacyshyn (1999) found that all of the athletes expressed feelings of loss of control, frustration, anger, betrayal, and fear. On the other hand, they reported enjoying a sense of freedom from their rigid schedules and relief from the stress and demands of being elite athletes—"they were especially happy to be away from the dietary restrictions and the constant pressure to be thin" (Dacyshyn, 1999, p. 217). The dominant theme emerging from the interviews, Dacyshyn claims, is that ‘sport is life and life is sport’ (1999, p. 217), and that all of the gymnasts interviewed had been students while they were athletes, and their focus and identity were clearly immersed in sport (p. 217). Dacyshyn’s (1999) work with elite gymnasts exemplifies the extreme importance sport has in the lives of high performance athletes. Dacyshyn’s (1999) study identifies an acute need to develop elite youth sport systems that counteract the negative experiences revealed in the youth sport literature. For the purpose of my study, her research also provides a rationale for future work around the lived experiences of young elite athletes.
Gould and Carson (2004) add to the work of Donnelly (1993) and Dacyshyn (1999) by addressing the myths surrounding the role of youth sports in developing Olympic champions. They argue that professionalization and specialization in youth sports do not optimize the development of Olympic champions. They suggest that a multisport approach will provide more young athletes with the support and skills necessary to progress to the elite level (p.19). Gould and Carson (2004) challenge the current high performance youth sport system and draw attention to key questions in the development of young athletes in elite sport. For example, what are the costs to young people who pursue world-class excellence? Is it healthy for children to leave home to train intensively for sporting excellence? For every elite success story, how many child failures are there and what are the ramifications of those failures? And, finally, what guidelines should be developed in an effort to find the right balance between the pursuit of athletic excellence on behalf of an organization or nation and the healthy development of productive, healthy and happy individuals (p. 25)? My study was designed to add to Gould and Carson's (2004) work by helping to answer some of these questions from the standpoint of student-athletes enrolled in a high performance sport school.

Prolympism

Donnelly (1996) claims two dominant sport ideologies emerged from the 20th century – professionalism and Olympism (which is interchangeable with ‘amateurism’). He coins the term prolympism to describe a new hegemonic sport system as the convergence of professionalism and Olympism into a single sport monoculture and mode of production (Donnelly, 1996; Ingham et al., 2002). Donnelly (1996) explains this merging as occurring in a number of ways, the main interaction being the mutual flow of
athletes from Olympism to professionalism and ideas from professionalism to Olympism (p. 27). He illustrates the processes involved through a two dimensional model that runs between exclusion and inclusion, and between process and outcome. Professionalism, naturally, falls into the area between exclusion and outcome, while Olympism enters closer to exclusion and process orientation. He suggests that inclusion and outcome-oriented sports such as ‘sport for all’ are very unlikely in the prolympic system. While professionalism has remained much the same in its focus on exclusion and outcome, Olympism has shifted away from process and towards an outcome orientation since its emergence in the late 1800’s. Whitson (1998) argues that the Modern Olympic Games have lost almost all of the “ideological and moral significance that used to distinguish them from other world championships in professional sports” (p. 1). Sponsorship, media, and the IOC’s removal of the word ‘amateur’ from their charter are viewed as major contributing factors to this change (Donnelly, 1996; Green & Oakley, 2001). The media’s role in reproducing and perpetuating ideologies of ‘excellence’ is apparent during Olympic Games by emphasizing results over process to build stories around winners and record breakers rather than athletes who finish ninth. Public meanings of the Olympics have become increasingly impossible to differentiate from those of professional sport (Whitson, 1998). There is clearly an “ideological separation of winners and losers that is popularized by media practices that has become deeply embedded in both official and popular thinking” (Whitson, 1998, p. 4).

In this way, Donnelly (1996) argues that the prolympic system tends to reinforce and reproduce itself while marginalizing alternatives, and that this process creates momentum and tends to pull all sport in that singular direction. Evidence that all sport is
being drawn into a single dominant sport ideology can be seen in the "televisualization and commercialization" of sport as well as the "difficulties experienced by indigenous and alternative" forms of sport (Donnelly, 1996, p. 30). Professionalism has gradually pushed amateur competitions and organizations into the background while many professional athletes have normalized standards of performance that are no longer achievable by part-time athletes (Whitson, 1998).

An important issue regarding the prolympic system relevant to this study is that "many young people have abandoned all responsibility for the process of participation in favour of an outcome orientation in which the end justifies the means" (Donnelly, 1996, p. 35). Students and young athletes are being taught and coached in ways that support the vision of the Lombardis of the world – "winning isn't everything, it's the only thing". Further analysis reveals an inherent imbalance in prolympism – the payoff can be great, but the price paid is just as great, and for most, rarely worth the gain. Given this evidence of an emerging monoculture of sport in which high performance sport increasingly constructs popular meanings and expectations, we must question how these meanings and expectations are affecting our young athletes and the kind of impact a prolympic system will have on the future of high performance youth sport in Canada. By recording the narratives and lived experiences of student-athletes, we can begin to account for at least some of these effects and form a picture of the circumstances encountered by young elite athletes in high performance sport and educational contexts.

**Youth Rights in Sport**

They suggest this focus should not be surprising because there are now a number of statements of children's rights in competitive athletics due to the "striking youth movement in high performance sport in the last thirty years (e.g., early identification of talent, and early specialization)" (p. 141). This growing movement toward elite youth sport is especially notable in the widespread development of organized sport and competitions, and the numbers of children participating, and may also be attributed to the potentially lucrative financial gains of high performance and professional sport. Kidd and Donnelly (2000) claim that within the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles related to sport are routinely violated in children’s high performance sport. In discussing the development and potential of human rights in sports, Kidd and Donnelly (2000) highlight the "...rights of children to their own opinions, [which is important] when we consider how rarely they are asked for an opinion, or even expected to have one, in organized sport programs" (p. 142).

Moreover, David (2005) suggests that the opinions of children are totally ignored when sport programs and competitions are designed and that "adults frequently shape competitive sport around the concept of winning by duplicating adult sports models" (p. 230). He speaks to the civil rights of young athletes, and says that they are generally not empowered individuals, since "...[athletes] largely depend on actions and decisions taken by others, such as trainers, coaches, officials, and agents... and that ultimate power resides with the athletic establishment, not with the athletes" (p. 189). David (2005) points out that within the context of the athletic sport structure, elite athletes are often powerless in terms of voicing their concerns, grievances, and/or challenges against the status quo. This particular consideration for the common neglect of youths' opinions
and perspectives in organized sport provides impetus and rationale for studying student-athletes’ experiences. Interviewing young student-athletes of high school age, who are currently active in elite sport, can help to uncover a different kind of perspective that is unique to the youth themselves, and that is often absent from competitive youth sport studies.

Nevertheless, there have been promising efforts to bring children’s rights to the forefront in the amateur sport environment. For instance, Hockey Canada began a national public service campaign in 2002 that was designed to raise awareness and encourage discussion on issues of parental pressure and inappropriate behaviour in minor hockey and other youth sports (Hockey Canada). In addition, Kidd and Donnelly (2000) single out research by Beamish and Borowy (1988) on the realities of Canadian team athletes, and the formation of the organization AthletesCAN, as important steps forward towards realizing human rights for high performance athletes in Canada (p. 140). David (2005) adds to this, and states “Canada is one of the very few countries where athletes advocate nationally for the respect of their rights” (p. 191).

An Athlete-Centred Approach

In 1992, the association AthletesCAN was created to ensure a fair, responsive and supportive sport system for athletes in Canada. AthletesCAN (AthCAN) represents Canada’s national team athletes, including members of senior national teams or athletes who have retired from a senior national team within the past eight years (AthletesCAN, 2004). It is the “only fully independent and inclusive athlete organization in the country and the first organization of its kind in the world” (AthletesCAN, 2006). The vision of AthCAN is to have a significant positive impact on the life of every athlete by acting as
the collective voice for amateur athletes in Canada, focusing on advocacy, education, and leadership (AthletesCAN, 2006).

In order to gain momentum for a sport structure that supports athletes’ rights and contributes to the all-round development of athletes, AthCAN proposed that the Canadian sport system move toward an athlete-centred approach (ACA) to high performance sport. This shift towards an athlete-centred system has meant that more Government resources are now directly invested in high performance athletes rather than the administration and bureaucracy of national sport organizations (Thibault & Babiak, 2005). Athlete-centred sport refers to both a concept and a process where:

“...the values, programs, policies, resource allocation and priorities of sport organizations and agencies place primary emphasis on consideration of athletes’ needs in a holistic sense and performance goals within that context. Those responsible for leadership and decision-making in sport must include the athlete in both defining the needs and goals and in determining how to meet them; i.e., the athlete should be the active subject in, not the object of, sporting programs” (AthletesCAN, 1994, p. 3)

The concept of an ACA is compatible with the mission of sport schools of emphasizing the holistic development of the athlete including their educational as well as sport development. It is widely recognized that high performance youth athletes involved in intensive training and competition endure the challenge of having to succeed at both school and sport (Brettschneider, 1999; Daivd, 2005). David (2005) suggests that at some point throughout young elite athletes’ primary or secondary educational career they are “...faced with the crucial decision of whether to focus on sports exclusively and neglect their education or vice versa” (p. 182).

The school I chose to study (WSS) is known for its student-focused approach to learning which emphasizes inquiry and distributed pedagogical practices. An in-depth
analysis of how high performance youth athletes negotiate their relationship(s) between athletics and academics in this particular setting can help reveal the kinds of effects an athlete-centred approach (or student-centred approach) can have on student-athletes.

Theoretical Perspective

The design of this study has been guided by the principles of an interpretive framework that emphasize understanding social phenomena from the points of view of the actors involved (Prus, 1996). A goal of the research was to rely as much as possible on the reports of athletes regarding their experiences at their sport school (Creswell, 2003). The data collection was focused on capturing the athletes' own language as well as their experiences, however the analysis locates their narratives in the frameworks of prolympism and ACA. This approach helps to expand the scope of my findings from being strictly limited to WSS, and place them in the broader context of youth sport and high performance sport in the Canadian system as well as within the critical literature of sport studies. In an interpretive framework, one embraces the multiplicity of meanings provided by participants, and welcomes the "complexity of views rather than the narrowing of meanings into a few categories or ideas" (Creswell, 2003, p. 8).
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

In the previous chapter, I described how existing literature on youth and high performance sport has informed my understandings of youth high performance athletes and sport schools, and how this study addresses some gaps in this area of research and within the broader scope of critical sport studies. In this chapter I present the qualitative research methods used in this study.

Introduction

With the goal of providing fresh insight into the role(s) of sport schools I conducted a qualitative, interview-based, study that examined the career life experiences of high performance student-athletes attending a Canadian sport school (WSS). Based on this study, I found it most appropriate to adopt an interpretivist approach coupling grounded theory with symbolic interactionism to form the lens by which emphasis is placed on the subjective meanings the participants attribute to their experiences. Following the explanation for this rationale, I will move on to highlight considerations for my role as a researcher, describe my research site, and discuss in detail my sampling and recruitment strategies. Next, I will make clear why I chose to use a mixed methods approach for data collection including interviewing, document analysis, and ethnographic components such as naturalistic observation and field notes. Lastly, I will describe the data organization and analysis, and will highlight particular ethical considerations.
Linking Theory to Method

Interpretivism

As a paradigm in qualitative research, interpretivism has its roots in the work of Max Weber (1864-1920), who was concerned with understanding social life. Interpretivist research focuses on understanding people and human behaviour, and endeavours to capture and represent the voices, emotions, and actions of those studied (Denzin, N.K. 2001). An interpretivist approach focuses attention on the production of meaning(s) and encourages engaging the views of study participants themselves (Sarantakos, 2005). The data collection methods associated with this approach provide parameters for a systematic and valid research design that is focused on documenting the contexts as well as the contents of the meanings produced.

Denzin (2001) suggests using an interpretivist approach when the researcher wants to examine the relationship between personal struggles, public policies and public institutions that have been created to address those struggles. By exposing the meanings the student-athletes attribute to their experiences at WSS, I was able to relate these experiences back to the original impetus leading to the creation of WSS, to more deeply understand how the school is realizing, or not, its original purpose. Denzin (2001) also claims that within the interpretivist framework, programs should be evaluated from the point of view of the persons most directly affected. I found this observation to be particularly important in guiding me through the interviews and subsequent analysis to ensure that the views, opinions and perceptions of the student-athletes were represented honestly and as accurately as possible in order to enable the reader to make sense of their worlds.
**Grounded Theory**

The essential framework of grounded theory was collaboratively developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss for the purpose of building interpretive theory on the basis of empirical research that is rooted in the area of social life under study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.24). Utilizing a grounded theory approach allows for openness and flexibility to adapt the data collection and interpretation as a study progresses. I engage with grounded theory to the extent that I have used themes from the data itself to help shape my study and data analysis. Focusing on the opinions of student-athletes about their experiences in sport and school, this study was shaped by interpretivist and grounded theory. These frameworks worked well together as a qualitative research method for this study, as both are concerned with extrapolating data from the persons' directly affected as well as they allowed me to focus on the student-athletes’ reports of their everyday ‘lived’ experiences in sport and school.

Given the lack of qualitative research on elite youth athletes in sport schools, it was appropriate to use grounded theory as a theoretical framework for the mixed methods approach to investigate student-athletes’ opinions of their academic-athletic life experiences to date, as well as their next steps and future academic, athletic, and career goals. This approach allowed me to continuously compare data with emerging categories and sample theories with different individuals in order to maximize the similarities and the differences of information (Cresswell, 2003). Grounded theory is meant to examine individuals within the contexts of their everyday lives and to develop theories that capture the significant aspects of these everyday experiences (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory uses fieldwork interviews, observations, and documents to investigate
individuals’ lived experiences (Dey, 1999). The data is systematically reviewed to filter and generate the salient concepts, so that accurate theories may be developed that speak to the individuals’ realities (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

**Symbolic Interactionism**

Grounded theory derives from and is often considered along side symbolic interactionism, which understands reality as a social construction (Kushner and Morrow, 2003). Symbolic interactionism is interested in the meanings that individuals give to their interactions, behaviours, and “life-situations” (Prus, 1996, p. 24). Symbolic interactionism is based on the notion that people understand themselves as a result of their interactions in their social surroundings (e.g. by interacting with other people, learning the shared language and symbolic order of their world) and that it is through these interactions that individuals develop their sense of self. As human beings are active in shaping their own behaviour (Manis & Meltzer in Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003) studying the human lived experience is necessary to understand both the nature of human behaviour, and also the effects of the social world on individuals (Prus, 1996).

Symbolic interactionism helped inform my study by focusing my attention on the student-athletes’ socially constructed and negotiated perceptions of the struggles they face in balancing academic requirements with athletic goals in their sport school setting. In addition, the symbolic interactionist lens allowed me to explore more deeply, and at greater length, the meanings of the student-athletes’ responses. In order to discover unspoken information about their perspectives that was not explicitly revealed or directly observable, I probed deeper into ambiguous statements I encountered to uncover
underlying experiences of the student-athletes in their sport school environment, and in
doing so was careful not to take seemingly straightforward responses for granted.

Grounded theory and symbolic interactionism both employ semi-structured, in-depth interviews as an important means for generating insights into the meanings that people give to their everyday life experiences. These two frameworks enabled me to focus on the meanings that elite youth athletes construct and attribute to their experiences as students in a sport school. It was important to me to commit to hearing the youth speak in their own words about their experiences (Kitzinger, 2003). Semi-structured interviews are an important means by which researchers may achieve the active involvement of their participants in the construction of data about their lives (Graham, 1984, p.4). This perspective “offers researchers access to peoples’ ideas, thoughts and memories in their own words” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19). I did my best as a researcher to understand their experiences from their points of view as student-athletes in order to better interpret the basis through which the meanings of their experiences were formed. Because grounded theory promotes constant re-reading of the data, I reviewed each of my interview transcripts several times before developing themes, codes, and proceeding with further analysis to ensure that my findings were solidly grounded in the data.

The combination of elements from the two theoretical paradigms of grounded theory and symbolic interactionism fit well with the qualitative interviews, observation, and document analysis that I conducted as both theories are concerned with examinations of peoples’ lived everyday experiences.
Reflexivity and My Role as the Researcher

It is important to account for the relationships between interviewers’ and interviewees’ grounded theory findings. One way to do this is by taking a reflexive approach to examining the joint authoring of the results - interviewer / interviewee. Reflexivity can be defined as attending to the effects of researcher-participant interactions on the construction of data and to the power and trust relationships between researchers and participants (Hall and Callery, 2001). Self-referential interpretation of the researcher is an “unavoidable feature of the way actions (and expressions written by the researcher) are performed, made sense of and incorporated into social settings” (Lynch, 2000 p. 26). Self-reflexivity helps to identify this.

While interviewing the participants and analyzing the data, I was aware of and reflexive about my own possible biases concerning the student-athletes’ experiences. I deliberately refrained from challenging the participants’ responses, and held off on coming to conclusions until I familiarized myself with the entire scope of the data. Lynch (2000) suggests “stepping back is hyper-objectivistic, as it implies an ability to see, see through, and critically revalue what fully situated members take for granted as ‘objective’” (p. 30). Though, he suggests that many social and cultural researchers do not necessarily accept this method of reflexivity, nevertheless, critical self-reflection continues to be held in high regard (p. 31).

My impact on the research process was inevitable, and as a result, I was conscious of how my presence may have shaped the data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), and I did my best to monitor my own personal judgments and attitudes towards high performance sport and sport schools. Nonetheless, “data must be interpreted and the
researcher has a great deal of influence over what part of the data will be reported and how the data will be reported” (Fontana & Frey, 2005 p. 712). I endeavoured to remain alert to how my varied experiences may have shaped my perspectives and how my perspectives could affect the data collection, data analysis, writing, and editing process throughout the research study, and I did my best to keep track of my ‘bias’ and minimize its influence.

As a former high performance athlete, coach, and current employee at VANOC (The Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games), I have a comprehensive understanding of the broader context for the high performance sport system in Canada within which the student-athletes’ narratives are situated. My initial interest in elite youth athletes in sport schools grew out of my own personal history and experiences within the American high performance and NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) sport systems. After researching sport schools in more depth and delving deeper into the history and origins of sport schools, while simultaneously recognizing the recent increase in national, regional, and corporate funding injected into high performance amateur athletes in Canada by programs such as Own the Podium, I was captivated by the potential for sport schools to play an integral role in the academic, athletic, social, and personal development of young student-athletes. However, as there have been multiplicities of ways in which sport schools have been and are structured in terms of system and delivery (e.g., Eastern European vs. Chinese vs. Australian vs. Canadian) I felt it necessary to take a further look into the structure of opportunities in Canada and how in a particular context (WSS) Canadian student-athletes
negotiate the sport school environment and variously help shape and respond to the opportunities it presents.

Denzin (2001) suggests an interview should be a conversation, a ‘give-and-take’ between two persons, and when an interviewer only listens without sharing, this can create distrust in interviewees. Under this assumption, sharing my personal sport histories was one of my strategies to create a more comfortable and trusting environment for the participants to share their personal thoughts and opinions. Due to my previous years as a high performance athlete, I believed the student-athletes ‘accepted’ me and respected my position as the researcher more than if I had had no existing understanding or previous experience in the high performance sport. In regard to balancing academics and athletics, the participants may have had an increased sense of credibility for me as having endured similar challenges as they had or were currently experiencing. I felt those student-athletes whose goals were to try to get an NCAA scholarship or to continue competing post-secondary in a collegiate system, appreciated and acknowledged my post-secondary academic-athletic endeavours in the NCAA as ‘worthy’ and admirable.

As my own athletic career was cut short due to injury, and I fell short of accomplishing international goals — the kind of experiences I endured in my sporting career were no doubt ones that the student-athletes were familiar with. All of the participants I interviewed train with a variety of athletes ranging from those just breaking into the sport at the local or regional level to those who represent Canada and compete on the international stage in World Championships, World Cups, or the various Games (e.g., Olympic, Pan-American, and Commonwealth). However, I quickly realized that these young student-athletes had already been exposed to such diverse experiences in their
sport at such a young age that although I felt respected, trusted, and possibly more accepted due to my own athletic and academic background, in the eyes of the student-athletes, my personal experiences were actually nothing special.

I recognized that as a qualitative researcher I also needed to consider how I was perceived by the interviewees in terms of my social class, race, sex and social distance and how this might affect the interviews. I acknowledged that as a 27 year old educated female, my opinions and behaviours have been shaped by the intersections of my middle-class, Caucasian, non-religious sporting family with divorced parents, and one younger brother. Additionally, I recognized that other factors might also influence the participants including my optimism for sport and sport schools as sites for growth and positive development of, and social interaction among young student-athletes as well as my apprehensiveness towards the potential for the narrowing development of these structures. To the extent that "meaningful interpretations of human experience can come only from those persons who have thoroughly immersed themselves in the phenomena they wish to interpret and understand" (Denzin, 2001, p.46), I recognize that I ran the risk of subconsciously shaping the interviews to fit my own personal beliefs resulting from my social location, history, and life experiences. Ultimately, however, I came to understand that there is no-one “true” or “real” meaning of a story and that in any event stories themselves are likely to shift slightly depending on who the interviewees are speaking with. In other words, interviewee response to the interviewer is a universal concern in qualitative research. Finally, I also recognized that each interviewee would have different personal needs and would respond differently in terms of personal comfort with revealing their thoughts and opinions on certain topics. To accommodate these
issues, I did my best to alter the phrasing of the questions and the order in which they were asked to fit each individual. Open-ended interviewing, in fact, is based on the assumption that meanings, understandings, and interpretations cannot be standardized or fixed (Denzin, 2001).

In an effort to maintain reflexivity throughout the entirety of the research process, I kept a research journal, which enabled me to document my reactions to, and feelings about the data collection and analysis phases of the study. In my journal, I recorded initial impressions of the student-athletes and administrators, my thoughts about things they said in interviews and casual non-recorded conversation, and my emotions and moods throughout. I also used the journal for note taking throughout the transcribing, coding, analyzing, and writing phases of the research project. This was useful as I was able to consult my journal to remember how I felt about the student-athletes and their experiences which made me aware of how I interpreted the data. For example, certain student-athletes were more similar to me in terms of their sport and school experiences and I tried to be conscious of these similarities and differences while analyzing the data. Often evident in qualitative research, when there are clear similarities between the researcher and participant it can lead the researcher to assume that they better understand the context of those participants' lives whom they share similar experiences with. For such reasons, it was important to "let the data speak for itself" and to interpret each student-athlete's words and accounts of their experiences carefully and without presumptions.
Research Site

The research site chosen for my study was the Western Sport School (WSS) located in Western Canada. There are a number of sport schools in Canada as well as many other quasi/sport-focused academic programs set up in high schools across the country, however, I selected WSS based on its reputation for best practices focused on athlete-centred educational programming. In 1994, CODA (Calgary Olympic Development Association) and the Calgary Board of Education established the WSS in support of high performance student-athletes and were committed to providing an environment for student-athletes to pursue excellence in both their athletic and academic endeavours.

There is no clear definition of sport schools, as they differ from country to country in form, setting, and structure. In some countries sport schools are placed under the jurisdiction of the state while in others they are developed and operated as private entities under national or regional sport authorities. Unlike what we may consider to be a ‘traditional’ sport school - that is, a sport centre/campus where student-athletes both train and study in the same location, - WSS is unique in that it is not co-located with a sport training site(s), but instead operates from a partially isolated section of an existing high school. This distinctive set-up is one of the reasons I was interested in pursuing my research at the WSS because it is unusual compared with the structure sport schools are more often modeled after.

WSS operates in a unique learning environment, which focuses on extending and promoting classroom learning through technologies and specialized resources. In this way, WSS has established itself as an appealing option for hundreds of high performance
student-athletes across the country who otherwise struggle to create balance between their commitment to sport and school. Due to WSS’s distinguished reputation and challenging sport/academic eligibility requirements for admission, WSS is home to some of the best young high performance student-athletes in Canada, thus meeting my sample requirements for participants with legitimate career-life experiences as high performance student-athletes.

Sport schools can give talented athletes unique opportunities to develop their athletic talents fully, just as special boarding schools do for intellectual, musical or artistic prodigies (David, 2005). However, existing research around human rights in youth sports suggests sport schools are often too focused on sport results and tend not to consider the child’s holistic development as a priority (David, 2005). Therefore, I found it especially appropriate to conduct my research at the WSS where emphasis on the development of the student-athlete as a whole was a primary focus in their mission. I was interested to talk with the students at WSS to learn their opinions on whether they feel WSS lives up to its mission of promoting holistic learning and overall development, if so, in what ways, and if not, for what reasons?

Recruitment

All participants for the study were recruited from WSS. To begin, I contacted the principal of WSS and he agreed to the study and to facilitating the recruitment process by informing the students and teachers of my upcoming visit to their school. Prior to arriving at WSS I sent copies of consent forms, initial contact letters, and information sheets (Appendices A-G) to the principal. Upon receipt of this information, the principal
distributed the documents to several grade eleven and twelve students who were scheduled to be attending school at the time of my visit (school attendance varies for most students due to their sport commitments). Most teachers at WSS were informed of the study prior to my arrival and were encouraged to speak with me upon my request. As my “gatekeeper” to WSS, the principal played an integral role in encouraging the student-athletes to participate in the study. At first, I was hesitant to involve the principal in the recruitment process in case this would skew the kind of participants either by deterring students or encouraging certain students who were interested in being interviewed for reasons not related to my study, but more so connected to the relationship between ‘student & principal’ (e.g. students not comfortable with reporting negativities or students looking for ‘brownie’ points with the principal or staff). However, once at WSS and after learning more about the school from previous studies and current staff, as well as observing the relationship and interactions with the principal and the students as we walked through the halls and classrooms, I felt very comfortable with his involvement in the recruitment process. It didn’t take long to recognize that his assistance in this process was more valuable than harmful – he understood and (from what I could tell) genuinely appreciated the significance of attempting to recruit as diverse a sample as possible for the study. That said, regardless of the principal’s effort to follow through on this, I was inherently limited to the “kind” of student-athletes attending school during the dates I was at WSS (e.g. most skiers and snowboarders were away at competitions).

Upon arriving at WSS the morning of Tuesday, November 27th, 2007, I met the principal in his office and he introduced me to the school administration staff & teachers. We discussed how I was going to go about conducting the interviews and decided that
due to the varying schedules of the student-athletes involved it would be difficult to conduct personal interviews outside of WSS and school hours and it would limit the number of student-athletes I would be able to speak with in person during the week I was there. Consequently, I decided to conduct the interviews at the school during school hours. The principal gave me access to a small room in the back of the main office area used to store computer and video/audio equipment. We both agreed this would be a good location to conduct the interviews, as it was a small room that offered a more intimate setting tucked away from commotion and student flows around classrooms and the main hallway. The interview room also doubled as my designated workspace for the week. The main office area wasn’t entirely isolated from staff and students as it included some teachers’ desks, a small classroom at the opposite end from the interview room, and a central area with tables that students could use for quiet studying.

After familiarizing myself with the space, the principal walked me around the school, which consisted of several small classrooms off of one main hallway. During our walkthrough he introduced me to several students and teachers. With his help, we sought out the students who were interested in participating in the study so I could meet them, get their completed information sheets and signed consent forms as well as discuss their availability for the week. While meeting the potential participants I was able to schedule a time to conduct their interviews during the subsequent few days that I would spend at the school. The student-athletes were not given any financial compensation for their participation.
Sample

The data for this study were collected from nine teenage females and males between the ages of sixteen and eighteen in grades eleven and twelve at WSS from varying socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Additionally a tenth interview was conducted with one expert, the principal of WSS. Seven out of the nine student-athletes in the study were Caucasian. There was also one Filipino and one of East Indian descent. Students in grade eleven and twelve were selected for the study because they were most likely to have been enrolled at WSS the longest. Four of the study participants were female and five were male. Similarly, some of the student-athletes had excellent grades while some struggled academically. Three of the participants were summer sport athletes and six were winter sport athletes. This proportion was an accurate reflection of the overall summer to winter sport athlete ratio at WSS during the time of the study. At the time of the interview six of the nine student-athletes had attended WSS for at least three years, and the other three student-athletes were either currently in their second year or had been enrolled at the school for at least two years. Two main criteria for participant selection were that the participants had to have attended WSS for a minimum of one school year, and that they were English-speaking.

The decision to interview nine student-athletes was supported by Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) report that themes begin to emerge after only several interviews with a relatively homogenous sample. Similarly, I found that after conducting a few interviews, strong patterns were apparent in the data. My decision to interview nine participants was also to ensure that the study was manageable and allowed for adequate time for participant recruitment, and the data collection, and analysis phases of the study.
Data Collection and Rationale

Although the primary data collection method for this study was in-depth semi-structured one-on-one interviews, a mixed-methods approach was employed to collect supplemental data. Utilizing a mixed methods approach “reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.5). Mixing methods of inquiry also referred to as ‘crystallization’ in some postmodernist research, provided insight into different levels or units of analysis (Creswell, 2003). I worked to ‘crystallize’ the data collection by bringing together a variety of data sources that helped to provide me with a “deepened, complex, understanding of the topic” (Richardson, 1998, p.358). In addition to student-athlete one-on-one interviews, one semi-structured in-depth expert interview, document analysis, observation field notes, and a short questionnaire were used to collect supplementary data for the study.
Questionnaire

Students were provided a short questionnaire (Appendix G) ahead of time before the interviews. Morgan (1988) encourages using questionnaires as a supplementary resource because he considers it necessary to get background items that will provide an accurate sense of who is actually participating (p. 63). Before the beginning of each interview, I quickly reviewed the questionnaire so I could refer to any relevant information about the student throughout the interview. The questionnaire focused on the student-athlete’s sport related background. My goal in using the questionnaire before the interview was to get the student-athletes thinking about the research topic and to allow them more time to respond to the sport specific items on the questionnaire rather than putting them ‘on the spot’ in the interview and risking a partial or deficient response. The participants were invited to refer to their questionnaire during the interview at any time, if needed. The questionnaire gave me a better contextual understanding for the level of intensity of the participants’ current sport involvement (at the time of interview), their competitive sport history, and their future sport goals.

Interviews

I used interviewing because I wanted to explore and understand the perspectives of these individuals enrolled in a Canadian sport school (Fontana & Frey, 1994). In selecting semi-structured, in-depth interviews, I aimed to investigate the perspectives of the participants instead of “imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry” (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 366).

The strategy of in-depth semi-structured interviewing fits naturally with participant observation, interactional study, and the collection of narratives (Denzin,
Interviews are widely recognized within qualitative research as the most effective and common means for collecting rich, personal data. Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed the emergence of important themes that may not have emerged from a more structured format (Gratton and Jones, 2003). Face-to-face interviews allowed me to assess the student-athlete’s unspoken gestures such as body language, and facial expressions, which I could then associate with certain statements or accounts that were ultimately helpful in better understanding some of the meanings behind the data. Furthermore, interviews enabled the participants to talk about their own experiences in their own words, and to become more of an ‘informant’, providing data from their own perspective and allowing the interviewees to play a more contributive role in the research process (Gratton and Jones, 2003).

In choosing semi-structured, in-depth interviews as my main method of data collection, I attempted to get at subjectivities which cannot be directly observed in order to unravel and highlight different perspectives than what I found in existing literature (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). In following the concept of an athlete-centred approach (discussed in Chapter 2), I felt that one-on-one interviews promoted greater opportunity for spontaneous and natural discussion around topics or experiences that were important and specific to the student-athlete I was speaking with at the time. WSS is widely known within the industry as a leader in student-focused approaches to learning through its unique pedagogical practices as well as emphasis on the holistic development of student-athletes. As such, conducting the interviews in a one-on-one face-to-face setting, I feel I received a more genuine response from the student-athletes regarding their
school's programme, whereas, in a group forum, their responses may have been inhibited, withheld, or altered due to fear of embarrassment or potential backlash from their peers.

The interviews were conducted at WSS, as noted above, which proved to be the most convenient place for the participants, as suggested by interested potential participants in the recruitment process as well as the principal. At the time of the interview, the student-athletes were asked to provide their signed consent form, indicating that they understood the process and voluntary nature of the study. Before starting the interview I briefly described my background with regard to sport and school and assured the interviewees they could decline to answer any question or discontinue the interview at any point if they were uncomfortable. Lastly, I emphasized that there were no right answers and that all viewpoints and opinions were equally important.

The interviews were designed to "collect information on the participants' thoughts, feelings, and opinions" regarding their experiences as high performance student-athletes in a sport school setting (Dacyshyn, 1999). The interview outline was flexible and allowed for the interviewees to speak about their experiences freely. The outline allowed for probing and follow up questions to be asked in order to encourage the interviewees to elaborate or clarify a point. The interview questions were developed around my main research question and subsidiary questions. My questions were intended to be open-ended, impartial, sensitive and clear to the interviewee (Britten, 2000) in order to elicit important information from each participant and to ensure that the participants felt comfortable during the interviews.

The interview guide was broken into two sections. I began the interview asking 'grand tour' questions related to youth high performance sport culture, such as “what is it
like to be an elite student-athlete?” This question was the opening question and was designed to get them talking freely before more targeted questions came later. The goal of this section was to get deep into the barriers and challenges the student-athletes face on a daily basis in negotiating between their sporting and academic lives. Overall, the first set of open-ended questions paid more attention to the student-athletes’ sporting experiences and life experiences as a developing elite youth athlete than the affects of their involvement in a sport school on their lives, as put forth in the second section. The second section was built to focus more specifically on the social and educational implications of being a student-athlete at a sport school. The goal of this section was to uncover the underlying influences, positive and negative, of the participants’ school on their lives as elite youth student-athletes.

Each participant was interviewed once for approximately one hour (most interviews went over an hour) and all sessions were audiocassette recorded. Out of respect for the participants’ time (which was later confirmed out of the data as the overwhelmingly most constraining factor to accomplishing goals), I did my best to conclude the interviews, if appropriate, soon after the hour had ended. Most students did not mind staying longer, however some were on a tighter schedule and could not stay much after an hour had passed. Most of the students used their spare block (standard across most Provincial Education Boards, a spare is an empty block of time given to the students during each school day to use for studying and/or class preparations) or lunch hour to participate in the interview. I got the impression that a few of the students preferred to be participating in the interview rather than using the time to study or work on projects.
Throughout each interview, I always ensured the interviewee was able to finish their thought or point in as much time as they needed, before concluding the interview. In addition, I recorded corresponding field notes to capture the non-verbal communication, gestures, actions and/or reactions within the physical setting of the interview (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

Finally, due to the nature of questions asked of the interviewees, and the number of student-athletes I was able to recruit to participate, and the documents reviewed, I feel that I was able to achieve data saturation. Glaser & Strauss (1967) argued that themes generally begin to emerge and recur following several interviews with a homogenous sample, after which the researcher can assume that they have reached a point of data saturation. Another indicator of saturation is that performing more interviews would be unlikely to produce new or different data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Morse, 1994). Morse (1994) recommended once “sufficient data have been collected... saturation occurs and variation is both accounted for and understood” (p. 230).

**Expert Interview**

One semi-structured expert interview was conducted with the principal of WSS. I refer to this interview as an “expert” interview because the principal is considered to be influential, prominent, and well informed with respect to WSS, and was selected for an interview on the basis of expertise in areas relevant to the research (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 117). The purpose of interviewing the principal was to gain relevant “expert” information regarding WSS including its program components and operations. The interview session took place in the principal’s enclosed office and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The interview followed a semi-structured open-ended interview guide.
designed to gather contextually-based information and clarify WSS pedagogical practices. The interview session was audiocassette recorded and corresponding field notes were taken to capture the non-verbal communication, gestures, actions and/or reactions within the physical setting of the interview (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Subsequently, the interview data for both the student-athletes and the principal were transcribed and recorded into Microsoft Word for future data analysis.

Document Analysis

According to Gratton and Jones (2003), document analysis is useful in that it is an unobtrusive method that does not have an effect on the social environment under investigation and does not require interaction between the participants and the researcher (p. 158). Documents are useful for qualitative research due to their accessibility, insight into the conditions that shape lived experience and low cost. However, Hodder (1994) warns that interpretation of these texts must be carefully conducted. Sarantokos (2005) agrees and goes as far as to say that document analysis often is lacking representiveness and suggests questioning the reliability of some documents. In order to better understand the social, cultural, and educational context around the school and the Provincial Board of Education curriculum it adheres to, I felt it was necessary to conduct a content and contextual analysis of the WSS website and relevant documents such as promotional brochures, and existing quantitative evaluation measure reports (provided by the Principal of the WSS). Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) support that this form of data collection could be considered as “casing the joint” (p. 37).

The data collected from this analysis included a review of the WSS’s website, articles, reports, radio broadcasts, annual executive summaries, and other pertinent public
releases. I found this process to be especially important in that it provided me with the historical and contextual background of WSS, and helped answer questions around the inner workings of WSS as a sport school. By examining relevant documents I was able to gain an understanding of how WSS conceptualizes its pedagogical role of facilitating the student-athletes' academic-athletic relationship. This conceptual understanding proved extremely useful when it came to data analysis and addressing commonalities and differences between participants’ accounts of their experiences at WSS. Juxtaposing the student-athletes’ accounts with the official version through the school’s historical, contextual, and promotional materials (both web-based and hard documents) enabled me to identify the gaps in service levels and operations steered by the school’s mission, vision, and objectives.

Observation and Field Notes

As observation is generally more suitable for descriptive research rather than for explanatory research (Gratton & Jones, 2003), it was not one of the main methods I used for data collection, but instead offered supplementary data and an alternative reference to the information I collected about the student-athletes at WSS through interviewing.

One goal in using observation was to get a feeling for how the students at WSS integrated and interacted with each other in their ‘natural setting’. Often in between interviews I would walk through the office and the hallway to see how the student-athletes would speak to each other and engage each other, or not, throughout their school day. I felt it was important to look for any patterns with regard to behaviour, interaction, appearance (dress) and cliques. I was interested to see how the environment at WSS compared to a “typical” high school, for instance the neighbouring public high school.
they share the building with. I found that observing the relations in the hallway and the study area in the office where teachers and students would often interact on a spontaneous basis was helpful to better understand the culture of the school and the relationships and expectations between students and teachers. I will speak more to my observations within WSS in the findings chapter.

**Data Organization and Analysis**

The goal of this research was to capture the varying perspectives of youth elite athletes regarding the role of the sport school in their academic and athletic careers. Data collected in the interviews by audiocassette recording, as well as corresponding field notes, was transcribed verbatim into documents that were coded manually in Microsoft Word. I did not feel the need to use a qualitative data management program, such as AtlasTi, as I originally had planned, because of the small and manageable number of interviews.

I followed Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) grounded theory approach (discovery of theory from data systemically obtained from social research) to analyze the data. Glaser and Strauss’ grounded theory method of data analysis is well documented within qualitative research. For example, Cresswell (1998), advocates that the researcher read the data multiple times in order to identify categories and connections between the texts. In addition to following this recommendation, I also followed coding guidelines by Strauss & Corbin (1990) when developing my codes and categories.

"The process of grouping concepts that seem to pertain to the same phenomena is called categorizing... the phenomenon represented by the category is given a conceptual name, [which] should be more abstract than given to the concepts
grouped under it. Categories have conceptual power because they are able to pull together around them other groups of concepts or subcategories” (p. 65).

Following both Cresswell’s and Strauss and Corbin’s recommendations, I completed a preliminary reading of the transcripts and came up with some general codes for themes that had been evident from reading the data. I then proceeded to go through the transcripts a second and third time and by using distinct colours (attached to certain codes, which were attached to certain themes), I was able to systematically organize the data by categories and codes under specified and flexible themes. Morgan (1988) suggests “a useful strategy [for data analysis] is to begin with a detailed examination of one or two groups, developing hypotheses and coding schemes that can then be applied to the remainder of the groups” (p. 64). Although, I did not interview in groups, nonetheless I found this advice useful, as I noticed that after the preliminary reading of only a few transcripts there were obvious themes that began to emerge which I was able to pick up upon when going through the initial reading of the remaining transcripts.

I found that coding the data by developing and identifying appropriate categories was central to the process of analysis, and using Microsoft Word to organize the data allowed for greater flexibility and sensitivity in helping to identify thematic content and organizing data across categories and themes (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

Interviewing produces a very rich body of data expressed in the respondents’ own words and context (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). I found it important to stay focused at this point when interpreting the data to ensure the participants’ ideas and discussions were not taken out of context for the purpose of the study. In this way I have
concentrated on maintaining the integrity of the student-athletes' reports by focusing on the contextual features and the range and diversity of experiences and perceptions of the student-athletes, as well as the commonalities and differences throughout the data.

Limitations of Research

Debate continues about the relative merits of positivist / quantitative approaches versus interpretivist / qualitative (predominantly ethnographic) approaches to the study of human behaviour. In particular, the interpretivist approach has been criticized for being too subjective and unscientific for reasons such as placing too much focus on the meanings that people attach to their behaviours and the fact that those meanings are not readily examinable (Prus, 1996). In turn, interpretivists argue that when studying human behaviour, you are essentially studying human lived experience and that human experience is rooted in people's meanings, interpretations, activities, and interactions (Prus, 1996).

In this study, I have attempted to make sense of experience and the diversity of experience as a way of understanding how student-athletes negotiate between academics and athletics in a sport school environment and how they manage, or not, their struggles to accomplish their goals. I have not, however, used the student-athletes' experiences as a foundation for knowledge claims, or as a revelation or truth about what a young elite student-athlete is all about.

While interpretivists stress the importance of qualitative methods, they acknowledge the inherent and essentially unavoidable power differences involved in research interviews, where the researcher occupies a position of power over the interviewee, especially in relation to the production of knowledge. It was fundamental to
my investigative process to recognize issues of power and control between myself as the researcher, an educated, white, female ten years older than the participants, and the interviewees (young, elite student-athletes). Cotterill (1992) encourages researchers to mitigate power imbalances by being aware of control differentials, making the interview process as comfortable as possible (e.g., in a location of the participants’ choosing), and by answering any questions posed by participants honestly and with as much openness as possible.

Additional limitations to my study were more closely associated with the kind of sample I was restricted to as a result of two factors. First, the time of year I travelled to WSS to conduct the interviews is a common period for certain sport athletes to be away from school for a few weeks and/or months at a time (i.e., Alpine Skiing and Snowboarding athletes). Given this, my opportunity to recruit athletes in these sports was very limited and unless they were injured or not selected to travel with their teams for some reason, I didn’t have the chance to speak with these particular sport athletes in person while at WSS. Second, the principal was very involved in the recruitment process, which was both beneficial and potentially limiting in terms of the influence he had on the particular student-athletes I was able to interview.

Ethics

This study received ethics approval from the University of British Columbia Office of Research Services and Administration Behavioural Research Ethics Board. An amendment was submitted in the spring of 2007 to conduct one-on-one interviews as
opposed to focus groups, as originally planned in my research proposal presented in late December 2006.

It was possible that the student-athletes would provide information that was critical of WSS or their respective sporting organizations; therefore, the study followed appropriate procedures for preserving the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. However, Morgan (1998) raises a key point with the difficulty of this by suggesting, "too often research will qualify as offering true anonymity" (p. 87). In fact, there may be ways to identify the participants that are not controlled by myself, the researcher. Nonetheless, both the sport school (WSS) and interviewees (the student-athletes) were identified by pseudonyms throughout the research project; in addition, the student-athletes were also never identified by sport so the risks to the participants were reduced. Each pseudonym used corresponded with the gender of the participants (5 males, 4 females interviewed in total), and the organizational name revealed its geographical location.

A preliminary summary report was provided to the principal of WSS in January, 2008 and a more comprehensive report will be made available to the principal of WSS via email once the research has been defended.
CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

I travelled to WSS to interview nine student-athletes and one staff member on November 26 – 29, 2007. In this chapter I will focus on the key findings that I identified from the interviews based on the thoughts, feelings, and opinions expressed and from non-verbal communications based on my transcripts and field notes. In addition to the interviews I reviewed several key documents such as executive summaries and informational brochures published by WSS, both as hard copies and on their website, which helped to provide historical and operational context to my findings. I have separated the findings into two categories: 1) Student-athletes’ feelings about being young high performance student-athletes, and 2) Student-athletes’ opinions of and experiences at their sport school and the role their school plays in their lives. The findings are organized into themes under these headings, and each theme is described and illustrated with verbatim quotations from the participants. To preserve the student-athletes’ anonymity, pseudonyms are used in conjunction with the verbatim quotations. A table in chapter three (in the ‘Sample’ section) describes the participants and provides essential background information for each. When referring to the number of participants who discussed a particular theme, or sub-theme, I have made the following distinctions: ‘A few’ indicates that one or two of the student-athletes felt this way, ‘several’ means three to five student-athletes shared an idea or opinion, ‘most’ refers to six or seven participants, and ‘the majority’ means that eight or nine of the student-athletes formed a consensus or had similar experiences.
Part I: WSS Student-Athletes’ Feelings about Being a Young High Performance Student-Athlete

Below are some of the ways that the student-athletes made sense of what it is like to balance the demands of high performance sport with the goal of graduating from high school. It is clear that the struggle to feel ‘in control’ of life is framed by the ability to achieve a balance between personal, academic, athletic, and social commitments, among others, and is a constant battle young elite athletes face. As elite youth sport becomes increasingly professionalized and driven by performance outcomes, the youth sport system demands greater dedication and commitment than in the past in order for young athletes to keep improving and achieve success in their sport (Donnelly, 1996; Ingham, Chase & Butt, 2002; Grenfell & Rinehart, 2003).

We already know from a wide variety of existing literature that maintaining a ‘normal’ life is indeed challenging for young aspiring World and Olympic champions (Donnelly, 1993; Dacyshyn, 1999; Kidd & Donnelly, 2000; Ingham, Chase & Butt, 2002; David, 2005). Below, I provide a detailed look into the worlds of the youth elite athletes I spent time with at the WSS. The findings derived from my interviews and conversations with the student-athletes bring us closer to understanding their struggles and challenges to be successful and ‘normal’ in both sport and life in general. The goal to better understand the life situations of young aspiring elite athletes is motivated by the intention to help inform the educational system so that it can work with the varying interests of youth and not against them, in their efforts to develop their talent.
Early Exposure and Access to Sport

One of the most noticeable findings, consistent across the majority of the interviews, was the way in which each student-athlete was first exposed to their sport. It was clear that public programs offered and administered by a legacy organization of the 1988 Calgary Olympic Winter Games, played a major role in providing the young athletes opportunities to participate in sports they would not have had in their school programs. Russell speaks to the impact of these legacy programs on his motivation to continue in his sport:

"There was a little Bears program, for like 8 through 12... they offer a lot of programs throughout the winter. I think that’s what attracts most people. I think, especially, the smaller more unknown sports like biathlon, even luge, like those sports – that’s how they recruit most of their people. They have a huge program now, about 40 to 50 kids and most of them end up moving on."

(Russell, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

Most of the student-athletes agreed that following the 2010 Vancouver Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, the Canadian amateur winter sports system will see a significant increase in participating BC athletes as the exposure to such uncommon facilities (such as the sliding track, biathlon range, and ski jump) through legacy programs will create opportunities for adolescents eager about sport to build interest and continue involvement in such less common sports, if desired and possible.

High Performance Sport Identity

"Usually it’s the first thing somebody will ask you if you’re new to this school – is what sport you do, before they even know your name."

(Heidi, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

When speaking to young high performance athletes it is important to understand what ‘high performance sport’ or ‘elite sport’ means to them, and how they make sense
of this categorized description of their association with sport. This is a key finding and it is only after we have established the meaning of high performance / elite sport through the minds of the student-athletes that we can then begin to understand their feelings and opinions, and place their experiences in context. This, in turn can help underpin regional, international, and historical comparisons as a basis for improving on current support systems and programs to assist elite youth athletes with their challenges. Below are explanations by the student-athletes of what high performance or elite sport means to them, and what sets it apart from other types of sport participation (e.g., for fun, recreational, or exercise purposes).

*I think that high performance sport is like... how much time you’re putting into it. Um, your sport is your life sort of thing, for a high performance athlete, ‘cause you want to perform at your best level. You’re not just going to show up at the [sport facility name] and [do it] just for fun. You wanna perform well and the results will come if you put the time into it.*

(Leo, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year at WSS)

*A lot of dedication and it’s basically like your life and what you do, like every second... it’s what you’re dedicated to, and what you’re willing to do... it’s like a whole level of sacrifice.*

(Shannon, age 16, grade 11, 2nd year at WSS)

*I think it means competing at a national level, like, many people say ‘I play hockey’, or ‘I play soccer’, and they think they’re high performance athletes but if you don’t compete really intensely at a high level then I don’t consider it [high performance sport].*

(Breanna, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

In describing what high performance sport means to them, the majority of the student-athletes regarded it as a reflection of the amount of training involved, and the level of competition, for instance being nationally or internationally ranked. Lastly, each of the student-athletes I interviewed described themselves as high performance athletes because they view themselves as ‘more committed’ than the average sport participant.
What It Is Like To Be a High Performance Student-Athlete

Each participant had a different way of articulating his/her thoughts, feelings, and emotions about what it is like to be an elite student-athlete, however, interestingly every participant with the exception of one first responded with negative undertones using descriptors such as “difficult” and “stressful”. Leo’s initial response typifies this reaction:

_Um... well, sometimes it’s super stressful ‘cause you have school and uh, if you’re a super elite athlete you have to get training time in and stuff like that... It’s fun, I guess... but sometimes it gets really stressful especially when you get to the heavy times of the season, like right before diplomas or right before junior or senior trials._

(Leo, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year attending WSS)

Like Leo, several others immediately acknowledged how challenging they find it:

_Uh, probably the first word that comes to mind is ‘difficult’. There’s no, like optimum solution._

(Shannon, age 16, grade 11, 2nd year at WSS)

_I find it pretty hard to excel in my sport and in school. I usually feel like it’s one or the other. I have difficulties._

(Breanna, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

_It’s definitely hard sometimes. I train 23 hours a week._

(Jason, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

In contrast, Tanner was the only participant to initially respond with a positive opening statement by claiming, “It’s an amazing experience”. However, although Tanner did go on to acknowledge some of the drawbacks of being an elite student-athlete (see below), it is important to consider here that Tanner is also the oldest and the only Olympian in the participant group. Whereas some of the other student-athletes appeared less certain that the sacrifice was worth it, Tanner had had a taste of success at the Olympic Games, which may explain why he came across as much more confident in his
choice to sacrifice a more traditional ('regular') lifestyle for pursuit of international sport success.

You definitely miss out on some of the regular parts of your childhood, like spending a lot more time with friends. It's part of what you sacrifice for the experiences that you get which are definitely worth it. It's definitely worth the sacrifice 'cause you can always go back and do that once you're done with sports. So that's probably the biggest difference between a high performance athlete... and [regular] youth.

(Tanner, age 18, grade 13, 3rd year at WSS)

Tanner was the only participant to focus on the experience of being a young high performance student-athlete in a positive light, whereas the majority of the other participants continued to focus on the challenges they experience on a daily basis. The majority of the participants lacked a sense of enjoyment when talking about their dual role of student-athlete. Perhaps if I had asked them to explain to me what it is like to be an elite athlete (minus the student part) their reactions and responses would have been different.

WSS Student-Athletes and Time

The most commonly reported challenge of balancing the dual student-athlete role was the lack of time. Insufficient time for everything in their lives was the most frequently reported complaint. They all spoke about how tight their schedules were and how challenging it was to combine the intense physical demands of their sport with the intellectual demands of their academics. For instance, Breanna (Breanna, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS) practices 30 hours a week, Monday to Saturday as well as Tuesday and Friday morning at 5:30am before school, requiring her to wake up at 4:30am. It was interesting to listen to Breanna speak about how she manages to balance so many priorities at a young age. Breanna's goal is to make the National team where she will
then be required to train 8 hours a day – basically the equivalent to having a full-time job.

But Breanna’s story is not unusual for a young elite athlete. Below are excerpts from the interviews relating to the struggle with time:

Yeah, the main thing is like time management... it's so stressful trying to like succeed in school and then succeed in sport, and the demands you get from both 'cause they're like two separate worlds basically...

(Shannon, age 16, grade 11, 2nd year at WSS)

Shannon goes on to speak to how when she graduates from the WSS she will be forced to choose between university and her sport, if she wants to continue her sport at the competitive level:

There's not enough time. You travel all over the world. If you make the Development Team you're gone training in Austria and all those places and you're just touring with the team, basically, all the time. Training and doing your [sport equipment name] and all that stuff which doesn't let you have time to attend classes or go to university. So it kind of has to be put off until after you're done.

(Shannon, age 16, grade 11, 2nd year at WSS)

Jason speaks to how not having enough time for homework creates a constant feeling of being focused on something and rarely being able to just enjoy the moment without thinking about what he has to do:

When I train at night, I get home and all I want to do is go to sleep. Like I don't have any time to do homework or anything like that so I have to get it all done at school. It's kind of hard, - so, I'm constantly focusing on something.

(Jason, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

One participant, Kaleb, who had immigrated to Canada a few years ago with his family found himself looking for a coach and club where he could continue training and competing in his chosen sport. The following is an excerpt from his description about how he found his coach in Canada and what the coach advised Kaleb about his training schedule and academics:
When I was 10 actually, I just, I had a dream I was playing in the Olympics, and I loved playing [sport name] and that’s when I decided I had to play [sport name]. I had to go for it. So I moved here, and I thought about just getting into sport, so I went to [club name] and I said, ‘I want to get in, it’s the best club in Canada and I would like to show my talent if I’m capable of doing it here’. They said they would like to see [how I play] so I played with the coach there... I played him and he straightaway said I was in. He’s like... the biggest problem I’m going to face is ‘I train at 1 o’clock everyday.’ So, this wouldn’t be possible in the normal school day. ‘So you would need to get into a special school. I don’t know how that would be possible but you need to figure it out.’ So I started searching about it and then I got here...I found WSS.

(Kaleb, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year at WSS)

Like Kaleb, most of the student-athletes applied to WSS because they were finding it hard to train at a high level in their sport and participate to their full potential academically because the regular schooling system did not allow sufficient flexibility with regard to class timetables and due dates. The rigid time schedule would not work with their sport requirements.

Another aspect of the student-athletes’ lives that was clearly affected by the lack of time, was the conscientious decision-making process around who they would spend their rare ‘free’ time with. Heidi (age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS) commented that she is not interested in having a boyfriend because she does not have any time and has too many commitments. Similarly, Russell also alluded to lack of time as one of the reasons he does not want to be in a relationship. When asked if many of the students at WSS have partners, Russell elaborated on the topic:

Um, some of them do. Probably not as much as usual, it’s very tough, and if they do they’re in their sport. Or you’re on the same kind of training schedule. Someone you can actually go do something with. I have no time... people don’t usually date each other in the school... it’s just, well, definitely if they’re from a different sport it just doesn’t happen.

(Russell, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)
One major factor contributing to the student-athletes’ struggle with time management is the travel time required for many of the sports, winter sports especially, for training and/or competition. Most of the student-athletes reported weather, facilities, and good competition as the main reasons for short-term and extended travel for their sport. Tanner, for example, said he does not train much where he lives because the facility is getting old, and that instead he and his team train either in Utah or Europe, and spend a lot of their time [away from home] (Tanner, age 18, grade 13, 3rd year at WSS). Shannon (Shannon, age 16, grade 11, 2nd year at WSS) tells a similar story and claims that because of her winter sport, she is gone most of the winter months and has no time to do any schoolwork when she is away. As a result, and further exacerbating the challenge of managing time, Shannon crams a lot of her schoolwork into July because in August she goes to training camps in Chile or Europe. Ultimately Shannon is left with literally no time off throughout the year when she is not working in her sport, or at school. Young athletes who are consistently under the kind of physical and mental stress as that described by Shannon have been found to be at higher risk for burn-out, injuries, and a variety of psychological disorders including depression, eating disorders, decreased self-esteem and self-confidence, aggression, and a sense of lost childhood (Donnelly, 1993; David, 2005).

All students commented on missing school to varying degrees and for a lot of the young athletes at WSS, arranging their competition schedule around Diplomas (final Provincial exams) is very difficult as it is not WSS that sets the exam time, but instead the provincial school board. When Diploma exams fall around a time where there is a national or international competition WSS student-athletes are often required to choose
between the two. There are some exceptions where the exams can be taken on the road and supervised by a coach, however, this option is not altogether desirable. Many of the participants reported that when they are away travelling and competing their mind is focused on their sport and achieving their competition goals which makes it challenging to switch over to academic mode and expect to do well on the most important exam(s) of their high school career. The findings show, therefore, the struggle to manage time is largely a result of the challenge to fit in all the requirements for sport and school within two fairly rigid systems that do not allow for much flexibility.

WSS Student-Athletes and ‘Normalcy’

Being “normal” is something that most of the student-athletes focused on in terms of what they miss from being a regular teenage student without all the extracurricular commitments. Here are representative comments:

(Tanya responding to being around a lot of non-sporty friends at her previous school)... and then you get to WSS and everyone is sport-crazy and everyone’s spending hours and hours in the gym at their sport and you feel sort of, ‘oh, I’m not this sort of eccentric, crazy person, there are other people like me’. Whereas you’d only ever find that at the track or in the gym, so you can find that at school as well...so it’s a different and really good environment, I think... and we really don’t know how to be normal teenagers. We really don’t. Like, hanging around in malls, hanging around with your friends doing whatever people do. I don’t know how to do that.

(Tanya, age 16, grade 12, 3rd year at WSS)

It’s a refreshing change sometimes when you’re around people [not in your sport] and you don’t have to talk about sports and stuff like that. Or how sore you are or whatever (laughs)...like I kind of forget what it’s like to lead a normal life without going to training everyday.

(Jason, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

We normally have a little bit of time between seasons, a month or so between the summer and winter seasons. [During this time] I spend as little time with the guys on my team, as possible (laughter). Separate myself from them...so I don’t have to deal with my coach or anything like that. Just relax, try to do some other

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things, maybe some normal [sport name], just activities that I like to do but I
don't get a chance to during competition... right now, probably the biggest
barrier is just wanting to have a normal life, just 'cause right now I've had, I
guess... I've been competing for 12 or 13 years... I've really had no normal life
and... just to kind of get back and sit at home, hang out with friends more
often... that's a major thing that gets in the way. Wanting to have a job... I've
never had the time to have a real job, so... the urge of wanting to move on with
my life...

(Tanner, age 18, grade 13, 3rd year at WSS)

While some authors have emphasized the negatives associated with the number of
hours young sport-crazed adolescents spend in training, the fact that Tanya sees herself as
finally in a place where she feels comfortable, and can identify with, and does not feel the
need to constantly explain herself to others, is noticeably encouraging for her. However,
it is important not to ignore the intensity with which these young teens throw themselves
into the elite sport culture without perhaps fully understanding the long-lasting effects
this may have on their personal and social development, as well as the decisions along the
way that inevitably have an impact on future possibilities.

WSS Student-Athletes: Pressure and Stress

When asked how she thinks she could lose the love of the sport, Shannon
responded by saying:

Too much focus on winning, and having to win. I know that's what was bothering
me... like, am I good enough to do this? It was bothering me when I first got
injured 'cause if you're not doing it every second that's like 30 more turns that
everybody else has on you which is going to definitely make a difference [in
competition]. And like, mentally... do I have what it takes...

(Shannon, age 16, grade 11, 2nd year at WSS)

Young high performance athletes are under constant pressure and intense stress as
they push their physical limits daily and absorb additional pressures from school, family,
friends, coaches, and fellow athletes, all while trying to perform at their best both on the
field of play, and in the classroom. Below is a range of statements outlining how pressure, leading to increased stress, affects the training and study habits of the student-athletes I interviewed at WSS:

*My Mum is super strict on my school. It adds to the stress... I find when I'm thinking about school and the tests I have tomorrow, or the essay that's due, I can't really focus on training that I have or if [sport name] isn't going so well I'm trying to put more time into getting myself back at where I am... and then I'm tired at school...*

(Leo, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year attending WSS)

*... Like my friends were always saying, 'well why are you leaving again?' and that kind of deal, but when you come here [to WSS] everybody understands, so you're with a whole bunch of students who actually care about sport, and care about their lifestyle. They all understand that you have to leave, but you have to come back, and you can't just sit at home and do nothing, so they're all under the same pressures...*

(Tanner, age 18, grade 13, 3rd year at WSS)

*... Especially now, 'cause I'm older and it's getting more serious. And the other thing is, people are starting to notice, people actually care. Like if I were like [teammate name], he comes first one day and dead last the next and people are like, 'oh, just a bad race', but if I were to do that it would be a big deal for some people... I usually try to take some of the pressure off because I definitely put on too much pressure. But I think a little bit of pressure helps too, it keeps you aware and on top of things.*

(Russell, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

As well, just like regular teenagers, the participants are not immune to general life pressures that contribute to their daily stress level. For example, Heidi (*Heidi, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS*) referred to stepping out of her sport for a few years in her early teens: “there was an accident, kind of, and I just couldn’t focus on skiing anymore... I had other things to worry about”. So, as most teenagers struggle to figure out who they are and what direction to head in, as organized and driven as these student-
athletes are, they are regular teenagers too, and struggle to find ways to manage all their conflicting and intersecting pressures in order to get by.

Another notable contributor to the stress of the participants was the looming decision of whether to continue in their sport or not, and/or attend University/College, combine both, or do something completely different. They spoke candidly about their decision-making process regarding post-graduation. Their responses were diverse and it was clear that their parents played an influential role in the process:

School-wise, my mum is super strict on school, so especially next year when I have to go to university, she's like... ‘try to focus more on school than your [sport]’... that's kind of the main barrier right now... how will I handle going to school and trying to become one of the best [in my sport] in the country, when after [I'm done with competitive sport] I want to be successful.

(Leo, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year attending WSS)

Leo mentioned several times during his interview how strict his mother was with regard to school. Undoubtedly the parental pressure Leo describes will be a key factor as to whether or not Leo continues in his sport or not, as he seems to believe that his parents’ choice will most likely dictate his future in both school and sport. Leo later admitted that he had very poor study habits and wished he was more motivated to study and complete homework, and that maybe his sport was holding him back academically.

WSS Student-Athletes and Gender

Gender in sport continues to be a contentious issue at the competitive level.

Several of the student-athletes had experienced or witnessed gender imbalances in some way, whether it was associated with standards for success, training regimes, team selection, or other conditions. Tanya spoke of the female athletes in her sport as having a
different rating for success than the males because of the current status of where
Canadian females stand in her sport on a national and international level.

Medals aren’t really a big thing for us, especially women. We’ve only ever won, I think, 3 medals, like [sport name] Canada has only ever won 3 medals ever – not in the Olympics circuit, it’s really European dominated, but just getting a top ten, stuff like that is what we [women] care about. So getting up there...

(Tanya, age 16, grade 12, 3rd year at WSS)

The way things worked out they take so many girls for so many boys kind of thing ‘cause it’s not an even ratio it’s a good 2-1 ratio. Or 3-1. And I had the next spot but they ended up giving the extra spot to a boy instead which cost me a spot on the provincial team.

(Heidi, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

It was evident from Heidi’s statement that females in her sport are still trying hard to prove they belong and are just as deserving to have the same opportunities to compete at the highest level as their male counterparts. Over the past decade, initiatives such as Title IX in the United States have helped to ensure that American female athletes are provided equal opportunities at every level of sport as their male counterparts (Simon, 2004), and in crucial areas of high performance sport such as team selection, it is imperative that close attention is paid to policymaking, where in such cases as Heidi’s above, opportunities can be presented and taken away in the same breath potentially dictating the future of a competitive athlete.

Although the study does not largely focus on gender differences within the sporting environment as such, it was interesting to discover distinctions between the female and male athletes’ post-secondary goals and motivations.
**WSS Student-Athletes and their Bodies**

Issues around physicality and the body in sport have long been prevalent with high performing athletes (Young, 1997; Ingham, Chase, Butt, 2002), and it was no different with the student-athletes at WSS. In describing his training Tanner alluded to the health issues rampant among young men in his sport:

*We’re trying to be as light as possible, but as strong in our core and legs as possible. So, as little upper body work as possible and eating as little as possible, and keep ourselves healthy and skinny. Nutrition is completely up to us. My mum’s a doctor so she always kind of knows what is good and what is bad for me to eat. But they just put in a limit...there’s a weight limit for your [equipment] that if you’re under you have to start cutting down the [equipment] because they had a problem with anorexia in the sport. There were major problems with the Men’s, major health problems, one guy submitted himself to a psychiatric hospital because of it, so...there have been some huge problems with it. So they [the International Sport Federation] put in a rule saying you have to be ‘this much weight if you’re this tall’... otherwise they start to make it a disadvantage. They’ve set a limit of only a couple kilograms over that [specific weight regulation], and if you’re over that, you’re not travelling. So, for us, that’s our incentive to keep our weight down. While we’re at home it’s just up to us what we eat, what we do for that, but while we’re on a trip all the meals are supplied and made and they’re cooked by a friendly coach or the hotel we’re staying in.*

(Tanner, age 18, grade 13, 3rd year at WSS)

Often issues related to eating disorders are associated with females in cardiovascular or performance driven sports such as gymnastics, long-distance running, and figure skating, so it was somewhat surprising to find out that eating disorders within Tanner’s sport were so prevalent and had been in the shadows of his sport for years. Breanna also spoke about the pressures from coaches and peers to stay thin and identified eating disorders as a “big issue with the sport”. Self-described as a healthy eater, Breanna stated she’s always very aware of her diet. It is worth investigating the differences in motivation for disordered eating between females and males, and between sports, as with the males it comes off as for purely performance purposes, however with the females, the ‘look’ of the athlete in judged sports is so integral to scoring that what
traditionally is considered the ‘look’ of a good skater or gymnast, becomes a driving factor.

WSS Student-Athletes and Injury

Training and competing at the level of these young elite athletes results in exposure to risks significantly greater than any physical risk a typical teenager would incur on a daily basis. For some of the participants, sliding head first down an iced-over track built into the side of a mountain on a sled with metal blades may be nothing short of a thrill... it is their medium, and they spend hours each week pushing their bodies to the limit while honing their skill to achieve perfection. Nevertheless, accidents do occur.

Several participants described some of the injuries they were dealing with at the time of the interview and/or have had to deal with in their past:

[I have a back injury]. I was over extending my back, hyper-extending it and after awhile I got muscle spasms. I’ve had small injuries, like my wrist, tendonitis in my knees... but it doesn’t really hold me back that much, I can push through, but the back was big time. It hasn’t bothered me for a few months... in the summer I don’t do as much [sport name] and then I come back at the beginning of the year and all of a sudden going from a little bit to 30 hours a week and my back starts to seize up.

(Breanna, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

I shattered my ankle [the first race of the year... my first thought was...] was it broken? But, I looked at my ankle like immediately afterwards, and it was pointed in the wrong direction so I knew it was broken and then I was like okay, so hopefully it’s not a bad break... I won’t make the team, I definitely won’t make the team cause the selection races were the following week, so I definitely won’t, but I have another season in Canada and will be able to travel to Whistler so I’ll just have some more training time [here]. Then talking to the doctors they said this is serious, you’re going to have to have surgery and I looked at the x-rays and I had 20 pieces broken – you couldn’t actually see 20 pieces, but it was 20 pieces of leg (sigh) so it was like, okay, the season’s done, um, so basically I just need to stay strong... was what I was thinking, so staying strong, staying fit, um... and like my coach says visualizing a lot... so that’s really all I could do and just get back on it next year... this is my fourth day back at school, so I was out of school for a month because after my first surgery I wasn’t allowed to go back to school until after my second surgery. I had two weeks of just sort of lying at home
not being able to do anything because I didn’t have a cast and it was really, really
delicate. So I had that, and then I had my [second] surgery and then a week later
I was back at school. So it was about a month total... it’s a long time just sitting
at home... so now that I’m back at school it is weird to get home early because my
parents were picking me up, but now I’m taking the bus home. So I’m getting
home at 3 o’clock, at the latest, and I can sit at home and do work leisurely. I
suspect, because for us we have about a month off after the season ends, where
we do absolutely nothing... so I suspect it’s going to be like that where the first
week is great... the first couple of days is great because you’ve just got that much
time, and then it’s just boring ’cause you have nothing to do.

(Tanya, age 16, grade 12, 3rd year at WSS)

Considering her situation, Tanya had a very optimistic outlook in terms of her recovery
and future in sport, and I really enjoyed speaking with her. But I could not help but
notice how emotionally disconnected she seemed from her injury. Perhaps she had been
through this aspect of recovery in the first month and was ready to move on, but she
endured something at an early age that most people will not experience in a lifetime and
not once did she discuss how this injury may impact her life in general outside of sport,
or her future health. It is this aspect of adolescents in high performance sport that is often
the most worrisome. They may harbour feelings of indestructibility and toughness that
generally overshadow consideration for the broader picture of life, and how this one
moment in time may end up affecting them when their career in sport is over.

Shannon, who also has a season sidelining injury, said that “injury is the only
thing that will keep me from doing my sport [and in that way] the decision is made for
me”. Although she is well aware of the high injury rate in her sport, she went on to say
“I’m not going to go make that decision; it would have to be made for me” (Shannon, age
16, grade 11, 2nd year at WSS). See Shannon’s story below:

I broke my shoulder [four years ago] and then two years ago it came back so
there’s no blood supply there so it’s basically hollow and it can collapse on itself
at any time so if you fall on it or lean on it, and so the bone basically... so it’s like
osteoporosis basically. It deteriorates.
When asked how she deals with it Shannon said she “didn’t know... it’s basically day by day” and that she does not talk to anyone about it because she does not think they will understand. In the case of her teammates, she said they are already so busy and stressed she does not want to “bother them with it”. I realized that I was moved by Shannon’s interview afterwards. Having been through a major sports injury myself, that required multiple surgeries, I sympathized with what I suspected she was probably going through. This was a moment when I needed to self-reflexively separate my own feelings from what I heard her say and focus on her understandings of her own situation.

It was clear through speaking with several of the student-athletes who had been injured and were either working through at the time, or had worked through an injury, that a lot of these young athletes end up dealing with their injuries alone. Once they are injured and not practicing with their team they no longer attend practices and competitions but instead go home straight from school or attend physiotherapy sessions. Being removed in such a way from their regular training and competition environment and those relationships that they have formed with teammates takes them away from the support structures of the team.

**WSS Student-Athletes and Financial Issues**

High performance youth sports are known to be financially challenging as well as physically, socially, and mentally challenging. Funding from provincial and national sport organizations is essential to help alleviate some of the financial burden placed on the athlete and their family. When asked about the role financial support plays in an athlete’s preparations for sport success, several of the student-athletes voiced very strong
opinions on the topic, while for others external financial support was not as much a concern:

* It's definitely a big deal because you can't work when you're doing your sport. Like, you can have summer jobs but during the season you cannot work. So my parents right now... and I know quite a few people at my level beginning to try and find personal sponsors... and there's [sponsor name] which is our main sponsor for our [national sport organization]. A lot of people approach different companies. I know some people, like their parents' companies, will um...help pay for suits or equipment or even travel costs, things like that. If you're not the highest on the team you have to pay for that... It's just finding one and finding one that's willing to support such an obscure sport... It's really tough, 'cause they say '[sport name]?' What's that?'. But I also found, especially for [sport name], it's not a cheap sport. So, it really doesn't attract that many people who don't have that much money, like, the families don't have very much money, because it's a lot of money to keep the kid in there so they might start off and the kid might not like it or, a lot of the time, it's tough to keep the funding up there when you're younger so a lot of the time it ends up with quite wealthy families... Yeah, it's the truth. Especially with a lot of equipment and travelling a lot, it's the wealthy families that can keep the kid going.

(Tanya, age 16, grade 12, 3rd year at WSS)

Like Tanya, several of the student-athletes commented on the vital support of their sponsor or National Sport Organization (NSO) in providing equipment and uniforms and subsidizing travel for international competitions:

* Well, right now, my family pays the training fees, that kind of deal... for a coach and facility use in Canada. But the NSO [National Sport Organization] pays for everything when I'm on a trip. They pay for the flight, my equipment... most of it is supplied now by sponsors, but they pay for everything we don't get. Um, and [I], just started getting carded because Sport Canada doesn't recognize [my sport] as a funded sport. So right now we get nothing from them. But the NSO just started giving us a little bit of funding, just to kind of get us to not be looking for a job.

(Tanner, age 18, grade 13, 3rd year at WSS)

Tanner went on to state one of the main reasons he feels there are not any younger athletes in his sport coming up through the system is because, with the exception of having travelling expenses covered, all the money from the NSO went to the National Team and nothing for development. Also interesting to point out is Tanner's perception
that the NSO provides them with just enough financial support so that athletes on the
cusp of making national teams are less likely to have to get a job. This coupled with the
fact that the NSO’s funding is contingent on performance means there is a financial
incentive to stay ahead in the sport. The funding serves therefore to keep young athletes
away from distractions (e.g. a job) and in their sport (retention). Russell and Breanna had
similar stories to Tanner’s. For Russell the lack of public awareness and success for the
NSO meant less funding.

*It’s frustrating. Especially ‘cause people ask you what your sport is and they have no
idea what that is. That is discouraging at times. It doesn’t really faze me. It would be
better if we had more media coverage or something, if more people knew, ‘cause then
I think we’d get more funding as well. More people would care. I think the biggest
problem is we’re not really doing well at it.*

(Russell, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

As a result, Russell works at a retail store doing sales up to twice a week, but said it is
tough to get in that often, so he at least works one shift a week on his only day off.

Breanna also emphasized funding constraints.

*I was carded nationally and provincially, but not anymore. It just lasts for the
time you’re on the National Team. My sport doesn’t have a lot of money right
now to card all their athletes ‘cause it is so focussed on the A Team going to
Beijing. It’s not focussed very much on development.*

(Breanna, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

A common theme in the participant discussions was the gap in funding for development
athletes. Interestingly, Tanner felt that Canada is known globally as having fewer
opportunities for their elite athletes to obtain national or regional government funding
than other countries. He explained that because his European coach was aware of this he
was more accepting of an athlete whose vision also included non-sport goals such as
career-related objectives alongside their athletic career. In this way, it appears that in the
mind of the European coach, the only justifiable reason for having career goals while competing is for financial purposes.

[Our coach] kind of realizes that, at some point, you do need to move on with your life and he realizes that life here, within sport, is completely different than in Europe. You’ll have [athletes in my sport] in Europe who can make an amazing living off of it, just with the sponsors and their carding money, everything like that...they’re set for life if they’re on a National Team. Whereas, he realizes that in Canada, we have nothing, we really have no support to help us along, either during or after. If I weren’t living at home right now I wouldn’t have any way of funding myself through [my sport], at all. There’s not a hope of being able to do that.

(Tanner, age 18, grade 13, 3rd year at WSS)

Several of the student-athletes concentrated their efforts on getting an athletic scholarship to an American or Canadian university to ease the financial burden of university tuition while continuing to compete at a national/international level. However, the financial challenge was not applicable to all the participants:

[If I don’t get a scholarship] I could still go there [to a top ranked academic university in the United States]. I could still make it work. Definitely, and 'cause I waited too long I don't think I'm going to get a scholarship this year, I'm just going to go as a walk on to the team. They say they want me, and I pay for the school and I walk on to the team, and I'm planning next year to get a scholarship. I'm asking them to kind of save one for me.

(Jason, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

A few of the winter sport student-athletes reported having a family cabin or house they use for vacation and/or a second residence in locations very close to well established ski resorts or snow heavy areas conducive for training in their sport. Such a set-up could be of great benefit and have a significant impact on the pace of progression for a young athlete in their sport. However, we must keep in mind that this type of support and convenience of training is something most young athletes do not have access to.
WSS Student-Athletes and Parent Relationship

The parent/guardian and child relationship is an influential component in a young elite athlete's pursuit of achievement in their sport. Parents can fall at either end of the spectrum from not understanding or caring about their child’s sport involvement at all, to being the most intense 'know-it all' and obsessive fan the child will ever have. Often we hear stories about how athletes attribute so much of their success to the unconditional and consistent support of their family. Although there are the diamonds in the rough that seem like they were just destined for success rising to the top by overcoming endless challenges with minimal support along the way, the majority of successful athletes seem to come from healthy homes with a great deal of family support. Below are some examples of how the families of the young elite athletes at WSS impact their lives:

They're both fairly heavily involved in my sport. My dad is part of the NSO... and a Vice Chairman, or whatever it's called. My mum just resigned from the Board, I guess, and she's been an international judge. It's kind of nice to have him around, but also sometimes it's a distraction, just... parents can be a major distraction... he's obviously watching absolutely everything that you're doing... so you're trying to just relax and not think about stuff...and then [he says] "how do you think it went?" Blah blah blah, and you're just trying to keep that out of your mind... I don't think I would have gotten to this point in school or sport without them. I mean, they're my big supporters. They fund me to live, they fund me to train, they support me to go to school, that sort of thing. If they weren't helping me with school I don't think I would be able to get through school and my sport at the same time.

(Tanner, age 18, grade 13, 3rd year at WSS)

I think I'll have to get a part time job, but my parents will basically support me with that... They're my biggest sponsors... every competition. That's nice. That really helps... sometimes they put a lot of pressure on me. My mum used to be a competitive figure skater so sometimes she's... so I'll say 'I'm not at the level you were at yet, so just wait'. She wants me to take a year off. They both want me to find out what I really want to do. They're fully supportive of it, and that's really good.

(Heidi, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)
Heidi went on to say that she talks to her mum about everything and it is her discussions with her mum that will help her to decide what her next step will be after graduating from WSS.

Jason got excited talking about his family scenario and the relationships between himself and his parents:

_They're both really athletic. My dad and mum both do Ironman triathlons, and my dad broke the world record for the most miles ridden on a bike in 24 hours. [They don't really pressure me]. They would support anything I do. Even if I decided to quit my sport, I'm sure they would support that. They definitely like the fact that I'm really athletic._

(Jason, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

Most of the participants at some point in their interviews spoke to the close relationships they had with their parents and how these relationships have played a key role in supporting and allowing them to get to where they are in their sport and in school.

**WSS Student-Athletes and Coach Relationship**

Succeeding in sport and academics is not just the responsibility of the athlete, parent, and teacher, but also of the coach, with whom the student-athlete will often spend more time than with their teachers, parents, and friends. Coaches are in a position of great influence and for some athletes their coaches have a very strong impact on their lives on and off the field of play. It is necessary to include the athlete-coach relationship when discussing youth elite sport and education as this unique association inherently influences the attitudes, motivations, and behaviours of student-athletes.

Leo spoke of having a comfortable relationship with his coach, however, he made reference to a double standard that exists within his sport between the student-athletes who went to WSS and those who attended regular high schools:
My coach quit [my sport] a couple of years ago to coach the younger kids coming up, and I think that’s good especially because he went through the kinds of things I went through and he doesn’t want to see me make the same mistakes that he did and he wants to see me get the opportunities that he never got. So he kind of takes care of me in the sport aspect to make sure I’m doing everything that I can. He knows my parents and he knows how much they care about school... so he’ll ask ‘how are you doing at school?’ Like me doing well in school depends on whether I go to Junior Trials or not. So, he kind of focuses on... he cares about how well we do in school, but for the kids in our Sport School he kind of... he’s a little more strict with them because we go to a school where we’re able to do our school work while training a lot – that’s the whole purpose of our school. Where people that go to a regular high school, he’ll be more lenient... like ‘I have a test tomorrow, I need to study’, and he’ll say okay. Whereas if I were to say ‘I have a test tomorrow, I need to study’, he would say ‘well, why are you going to WSS?’.

(Leo, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year attending WSS)

In contrast to Leo’s coach, Russell’s coach is not as involved and informed about how his athletes are doing academically, but is still somewhat supportive when it is appropriate:

My coach doesn’t really think it’s his business to know what we’re doing at school. If I absolutely have to be at school he might schedule that day of training a little later or something, so we can make it. But he doesn’t really sit there and say, ‘how’s school?’ Or ‘do you need more time for school?’ He doesn’t really do that. He expects us to just work it out on our own. And if I need to be at school or if I’m just swamped with stuff I’ll just let him know and he says, ‘that’s fine, just take a day or two and get caught up again’.

(Russell, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

Jason feels his coach expects more from him because he attends WSS:

It’s like, ‘well you can train an extra night this week, you can afford to do that’... um...I think sometimes it’s a good thing, but sometimes it’s like, ‘I want a little down time right now’.

(Jason, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

Breanna’s coach isn’t involved with her school at all, but she stresses how close she is with her coach and how she views her as a second mother at times. Regardless of this, she still feels it is tough sometimes because she is the only athlete on her team who is in high school. Breanna says that, for her coach, sport is a priority no matter what.
Most of the student-athletes commented that there is not much communication between their coaches and teachers. The student-athletes act as the middle person for most of the communication and they tend to trust their coach’s judgment over anyone else’s, as seen in Jason’s case below:

"Uh, it’s good. But my coach knows what’s best for me and I trust him. So, I usually listen to what he says. So if he says, ‘I want you to go to this competition’, then I probably will unless I have a diploma, or something, coming up. Then I would talk to him and tell him that I really don’t think I should be going to this and he’ll be like, ‘okay’.

(Jason, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

Sport and School Commitment and Retirement

One area where the student-athletes noticeably differed in their responses was when asked about their level of commitment to sport and how they anticipated this would be moving forward. Tanner emphasized making a final effort for Vancouver 2010 and then moving on to other things:

"I’ve sacrificed a lot since Grade 6, when I really started to travel more. In 1998 I did my first international trip where I spent a month or so in Europe so it’s been a long time that I’ve sacrificed my friends and my social life for my sport... I’m trying to put absolutely everything I can into it to get the best result I can in the Vancouver Olympics. And then after that, I’m thinking I’ll probably move on with my life again. I’m training to become a pilot right now... so I’m trying to start the process of getting a little bit moved on, kind of get something else in my life so when I’m done school I’ll be able to move into that. [Even if 2010 doesn’t go as I would like], I’ll probably still move on ‘cause I’m doing Grade 13 right now, and with my sport I don’t have time to go to university. I’ve set kind of a definite end date of after the 2010 Olympics – it lets me know that I have 3 more years to really dedicate myself to this and then, after that, I’m moving on and will be able to do whatever I want, that kind of deal.

(Tanner, age 18, grade 13, 3rd year at WSS)

Unlike a lot of elite athletes, Tanner has a back-up plan to his sport, and has set a deadline as to when he will stop competing and ‘move on’ with his life in a new direction. He appeared more experienced and mature than the other student-athletes,
which can be explained by his age and the sporting success he has achieved so far at a very high level. Of the remaining student-athletes, most did not come across as fully being in touch with or wanting to talk about ending their sport experience or of the sacrifices they were making to stay in the sport. However, most of the male student-athletes did verbalize their concerns for the potential career drawbacks that an extended commitment to competitive sport might pose. Below are excerpts from the interviews that highlight the participants' feelings on the importance or unimportance of both sport and school to them now, and as they see it in their future:

Well [sport's] not the number one thing. So, if I don't make the team next year it will be really upsetting but I'll prepare for university 'cause I want to go to the [Arts School] so I'll work on that. That's another one of the things I love so I've got more than one thing. So I'm really committed but I love other things too and I think that helps me, because I don't just have one thing on my mind.

(Tanya, age 16, grade 12, 3rd year at WSS)

When speaking of a well known college close by where a lot of athletes in his sport attend, Kaleb noted...

... it's really easy to slack off, not work, and just participate in sport... but I don't want to go [to that college] 'cause then I can't work on my school. I would be totally in my sport, which I don't want. There's got to be a limit.

(Kaleb, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year at WSS)

I have pretty big dreams in [my sport] 'cause people tell me I have a lot of potential. I try to make those people proud of me... It's an amazing experience. You definitely miss out on some of the regular parts of your childhood, like spending a lot more time with my friends. It's part of what you sacrifice for the experiences that you get which are definitely worth it. And as far as my long-term goals, it's obviously to get on the National Development team and the National team and then try to go to the Olympics.

(Leo, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year attending WSS)

I'm committed 100 percent... it usually comes before school. If I had to pick between training and going to class, I would pick training.

(Russell, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)
A lot of it just depends on how I’m dealing with it, like, if I’m having fun with the sport still... because as soon as I’m not having fun I don’t want to drag it out and make it into a chore for me to go to training... like, ‘oh, man, I have to go to another competition.’ I don’t want to make it into that. Like, I do the sport because I enjoy doing it.

(Tanner, age 18, grade 13, 3rd year at WSS)

In the following statement Heidi reveals her level of commitment to sport by stating that if she were still attending a regular high school instead of WSS, she would have dropped out by now and made her athletic goals a priority over her academic goals. When asked what she would have done if she had not had the option of attending WSS and if sport would have remained her priority, Heidi stated...

I think I probably would have [dropped out]... if I had the potential, and I knew I had the potential I probably would have picked my sport over schooling. ‘Cause I could go back and do school. I think it would have been very difficult to do, but... yeah. I only have this opportunity once. I can go back and finish school, though. But if I quit my sport at this age there’s no way I could go back.

Heidi continued on to explain why she could not go back to her sport if she had quit...

I actually took 3 years off when I was 12. I quit for 3 years and watching how much the sport changed in those 3 years was, like... if 3 years from now I took off to go back and finish high school there’s no way I’d be able to catch up.

(Heidi, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

Heidi was not alone in expressing her commitment to sport, as Breanna similarly described her own dedication to her sport. Breanna was not only competing to succeed in her sport, but she had clear post-sport professional goals that actually depended largely on her success in her sport in the upcoming year:

My focus is my sport, I know it should be school, but one day I want to go to [company name] and perform in the show, so I have to have my sport as a focus because that would be my job... [I’m] 100% committed. You have to be.

(Breanna, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)
In contrast to Heidi and Breanna, Jason, when asked to rank his priorities, discussed using sport to help him to attend a good university:

*I think I'd put school first because, I mean, my sport is not really my future. I love my sport and I'll continue doing it for as long as I can but I'm not going to make a living off it, so I really have to focus on my academics too. So I want to go to a good school so I can have a life after I stop [competing]. I want to make the National Team this year. That's my big goal. The Junior National Team. And my long term goal is I want to get a scholarship to the States and I want to compete in the NCAA's final at a really high level.*

(Jason, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

In addition to the level of their sport and/or academic commitment, I also discussed the prospect of sport retirement with the participants. I asked them that if for some reason they could not participate in their sport any longer how would they handle it. The majority of the participants' responses reflected an implicit sense of loss of identity or self. Most responses illuminated the deep-rooted interest and passion the student-athletes had for competition and sport, with a few of the student-athletes appearing less bothered by the prospect of retiring from their sport. A typical concern was what they would do in the absence of their sport:

*If I don't train for one day I'm just sitting there and don't know what to do with myself, I'm so bored. I need [sport name]. I would find another sport... there's no way... I would have to find something else competitive. I think it would be too much of a change, like, it's already become such a huge part of my life, competitions, and I love the thrill of it. To take that away would be like, 'what do I do with myself now?'

(Jason, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

*Yeah, it's like sometimes when I'm sick and I don't have training it doesn't feel like I have any purpose. I just sit there and I don't have anything to do. It's a nice change not to be training but it's like...I don't know.*

(Heidi, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

There was an obvious range of commitments the student-athletes felt for their sport currently, and moving forward. In the discussion chapter I will expand on the topic
of sport commitment in combination with the issue of the transition to sport retirement for elite athletes.

**Part II: WSS Student-Athletes’ Opinions on the Role their School Plays in their Lives**

There was a general theme that emerged out of all of the participant interviews that centred on the feeling of relief relating to their decision to leave a regular high school and enrol in WSS. In the sections below I highlight excerpts from the participants’ interviews that show through their eyes how WSS has, and continues to, impact their lives.

**WSS: Reasons for Attending**

Although the participants’ reasons for attending WSS varied, for the most part they were relatively consistent across the group. The majority of the student-athletes did not think it was possible outside of WSS to participate in their sport to their full potential as well as perform in the classroom well enough to give them post-secondary opportunities moving forward. Below are some examples of why the student-athletes felt they needed to look at alternate schooling options:

*I was failing gym class actually (laughter), and they’re [the school’s] like, ‘you haven’t been here how can we pass you in gym?’ I was like, ‘I was [at practice in my sport]!’ In my other courses I was doing okay, I was a smarter student in junior high so to go there and try to balance that with training for my sport I saw my grades drop and that was hard to deal with.*

(Jason, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

*My competition schedule started getting a little bit too much. I needed some more flexibility and my old school wasn’t really that flexible and keen on me leaving all the time and I would come back and the teachers wouldn’t really understand,*
'cause nobody is too into sports there. So I came here and had an interview with the principal and I just really liked the idea of lots of flexibility and it’s like a community here. Everybody does a sport and everybody understands what you go through and that’s why I like it.

(Heidi, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

I started to find that as the courses got harder and heavier that, for the teacher in a class of 30, to be able to help me individually while I’m gone or when I come back, and set a certain time, scheduling just for me, was becoming fairly difficult and some of the teachers were starting to balk at it. So, I came here and it’s just perfect for it – it’s exactly what the school is designed for.

(Tanner, age 18, grade 13, 3rd year at WSS)

In addition to Jason, Heidi, and Tanner the remaining student-athletes spoke to the flexibility WSS provides to help accommodate their required training as well as class assignments, projects, and homework. Many of the student-athletes summed up the decision to attend WSS as a way to mitigate a lot of the stress in their daily lives caused by the constant challenges of having to fit their sport and school demands into an inflexible rigid high school structure. This point was also inferred in how the participants spoke about their frustrations with their previous high school, in that most of them said they were ‘fed up’ with having to consistently explain and defend their participation in competitive sport.

WSS: Access and Eligibility

WSS has well established partnerships with sport organizations in Canada and these have resulted in fairly stringent guidelines about the kinds of student-athletes that are accepted in the school. The principal of WSS identified several scenarios where applicants would not be accepted to WSS. One of these hinged on potential for international ranking. If the applicant’s National Sport Organization (NSO) or Provincial Sport Organization (PSO) could not confirm their potential to represent Canada at an
international level the applicant was not seen as competing at a sufficiently high level to
warrant attendance at the school. A second set of criteria hinged on academic
performance. If the applicant was not perceived to be interested in succeeding
academically and more concerned with attending WSS purely for the sport benefit and/or
for status reasons within their sport community, they were not accepted. A third set of
criteria equally as important was whether the applicant was a 'good citizen'. The
principal elaborates on this in the following statement:

"Everybody, [including the parents] have to be on the same page with it. Are they
good citizens? If they aren't interested in doing well in school, if their parents
really want them to be here 'cause it's part of the image thing, and the student
isn't really interested in being here there is no point. If the student really wants to
be here and the parents aren't going to give them any support, there is no point in
being here. If somebody has a history of being very disruptive in their school and
shows absolutely no potential to be able to take responsibility for their lives, there
is not much point in them being here. It isn't for everybody, if you need to be
spoon fed and you just want to regurgitate facts and that kind of thing this would
not be the environment for you. And we're really up front with the parents about
that."

(Principal, WSS)

In addition to the scenarios noted above where student-athlete applications would
be rejected, there was also the possibility that an existing student-athlete in WSS would
fail to meet these criteria. Each year the student-athletes need to go through what is
called the 'Continuous Registration Application' where they are asked to re-apply, and
are re-evaluated. Their forms are sent to their respective NSO or PSO for sport
confirmation, and they are reviewed internally within WSS. It is rare that a student-
athlete has been asked to leave; nonetheless, it has happened and will continue to happen
for the reasons already noted. Most importantly, WSS does not want a student-athlete
taking up a spot in their school if they are no longer eligible in their sport because a
deserving and eligible student-athlete could be benefitting from the specialized program
WSS provides. The most common reasons for enforcing the re-application policy and in dismissing a student-athlete are because they have left their sport or they are interfering with the education of others. As the principal explains...

... [the re-application form] goes to the Sport Organization to say 'yes, they are still recommended to be in the school.' Or 'no, they have not met the criteria but we would still recommend them because they have had an off year.' The cases we have where it is usually an issue is when someone just drops out of the sport, and then there isn't much point for them to be in sport school if they aren't doing their sport. But we also look each year, and I review, - are they doing what they need to do to be a good citizen here in this school. So again, if they are interfering with the learning in the school, I am not interested. That is not what this is set up for.

(Principal, WSS)

I found it interesting speaking about this with the student-athletes because some of them appeared slightly less comfortable when discussing it. At the time of the interview Shannon was worried about whether or not her re-evaluation status would allow her to continue in WSS. She described the application and re-application process as follows:

Try... trying to get in here is difficult. You just have to, like, qualify. I know everything goes to the sport organization and you have to be approved by them. And if you're injured then you don't get approved by them, but then the school approves you which is hard 'cause you know that you're good enough to get in here but you're just not able to do that. [Initially], you have to fill out a long application on why you need WSS and all these questionnaires and it took me, like, a week to fill it out and you have to write down your sport records over the past 3 years just so they know that if you had a bad season, but then you did really well... so they know what you're capable of.

... [Because of my injury] I don't know if I'm going to get back in next year. I'm out for this year and I was out for last year. So then there's no qualifying for that. [Going back to a regular school] would be difficult. I'd probably pick the sport and school would be the second thing, which then would mean I'd have to adjust everything that I wanted to do. I'd probably be taking catch-up courses or redoing them to get in to university. It's always on my mind for sure.

When asked if she talks to the teachers about it, Shannon says,

Yeah, well, no...like they know the situation. They know I'm injured. We talk about that. It's just basically that the only time that's talked about is in April, May, when you have to re-apply. You don't have to go through the applying
process again, they send your stuff to the sport organization again and the sport organization evaluates it... like, I've never seen them kick anybody out of here. Basically, people just leave 'cause they don't want to do their sport anymore and want to go to a regular school.

(Shannon, age 16, grade 11, 2nd year at WSS)

Unlike Shannon's claim that she had never seen anyone kicked out of WSS, Breanna commented on a situation where a student was asked to leave because he was not performing to the expected level in his sport. To begin this discussion with Breanna, I had asked her if she ever feels pressure to have to perform at a certain level, athletically and academically, in order to stay in WSS. She responded as follows:

No, it's not an issue for me. Maybe for other sports, but I feel okay... maybe [it's an issue] for alpine, there's so many alpine skiers here, like, "...that person's bad". It gets talked about and I'm sure it gets back to the teachers, [they need to be re-evaluated]... someone got kicked out for snowboarding 'cause he wasn't doing well... he wasn't excelling in his sport. He got asked to leave. Not many people knew. I just knew because... [I was one of the older ones here].

When asked if there was anyone at WSS (at the time of the interview) that she thought maybe should not be there, or who did not really fit with the school, Breanna went on to say:

Yeah. There's lots. I think [a lot of them are] younger. Like, sometime, 2 years ago... [there was this one person] and they weren't that strong [in their sport] so I thought it was a bit of a waste of their parents' money. And at that time it didn't set that good of a reputation for that sport and... like, they weren't fit, they didn't try hard...

(Breanna, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

Beyond the issue of sport performance, the principal of WSS also emphasized that misbehaviour will lead to the termination of a student-athlete at WSS, as noted above.

Our job, once we have them, is to help them complete their courses and get things done so it might be at the end of the year, or at semester break, depending on the student. There have been some cases where students have been asked to leave for behavioural reasons, because in an environment like ours anything that interferes with the teaching or learning takes us away from fulfilling our mandate, our mission. It's not like, 'okay, you showed us this behaviour once, you're out of
here'. Obviously, we try to work with the kids and get them to see why it's important they are complying with that. And not that we want little robots, either, it's just a respect for everyone trying to achieve excellence here and they need to be a part of that. If it continues to be a problem and they can't do it, there is no place for them here, and so they would be asked to leave.

(Principal, WSS)

These comments show that the student-athletes were aware of the circumstances and knew they needed to perform responsibly in both domains of sport and academics.

Although the re-application process was not an issue for most of the students I interviewed, the impact of long-standing injuries for some of them had already increased their stress. This was certainly the case for Shannon. In such circumstance the re-application process results in increased self-regulation as students try to show they are good citizens and still serious athletes so they can keep their eligibility to continue their education at WSS.

**WSS: Influence on Sport**

Each student-athlete had their own way of explaining the impact that they felt WSS had had on their sporting career but, even though each student articulated this differently, it was apparent that they each believed it would not have been possible to achieve their current level of performance in a regular high school.

*My designated school is about an hour and a half, to two hours, bus ride away so, there's really very little chance, and that doesn't include morning training that we have a lot of... being feasible [to participate in my sport]. I appreciate the smaller class sizes and it's like a really big family... they're [the teachers] all really great and really supportive. That's one of the major things that they need to be, I think, 'cause people have a lot of things going on here. Like... there's a LOT of things going on here. So, they need to be. There's travelling, getting injured, emotional, 'cause athletes can be emotional.*

(Tanya, age 16, grade 12, 3rd year at WSS)

*I got into this school and it was tough, for me it was really tough, 'cause I was the first immigrant here. It was really tough to get into the environment here. For*
the first 6 months I couldn’t do anything. I lost all the tournaments possible and I
didn’t do good in school, but being that high of a level, as an athlete, you get used
to it. After 6 months I realized I could finally exist in this group. So I started
opening up a bit more, started talking about it a bit more [to my peers, the guys I
train with]. Like, the principal, to be honest, he would come and just give... ’how
are you feeling?’; ’do you need any help?’. My teachers, like they realized that I
wasn’t getting in that smoothly. So it was tough.

(Kaleb, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year at WSS)

Although Kaleb struggled initially at WSS, he continued to speak about how in
his home country kids are forced to choose between being an athlete and a student,
especially if they want to excel in either area. Kaleb spoke candidly about how being a
student at WSS has enhanced his success in his sport and how the WSS environment
played a major role in this part of his life:

I think the major thing that’s here — it’s not only one sport, it’s not only one
culture being brought in to WSS — there are lots of sports, lots of ideas, lots of
different people. So someone like [fellow student’s name], he tells me stories how
he couldn’t train for a year, and he got back and he won. So I really got
motivated listening to those stories. If they could do it after a year, then 2 months
[for me] is nothing. If he could do it, I could do it for sure. It’s just here they
bring a different environment into your thinking. Then you can think the same
way and that can help you.

(Kaleb, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year at WSS)

Most of the students commented on how being a student at WSS enabled them to
participate more often in their sport either by practicing more, and/or being able to attend
more competitions than they could have if enrolled in a regular high school.

I think ever since I came to this Sport School I’ve been able to put more time to
the sport and it’s actually really showed since I started [sport name] compared to
when I started going to WSS. It enables me to maintain my marks while I’m doing
my sport. And it lets me do my sport more. So, those are like the big ones, for
sure.

(Leo, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year attending WSS)

I’m very dedicated to my sport so I don’t know whether, if I hadn’t come here, if I
would have dropped school or dropped the sport but my parents have definitely
pushed me along to work and get both of them done at the same time, and that
definitely helped me to graduate on time last year – just my parents pushing me along, as well as other teachers.

(Tanner, age 18, grade 13, 3rd year at WSS)

I end up getting more time in [my training location], 'cause there are a couple of guys who live in the same area as me on a different team and they don't go here [to WSS], and they go to [our training location] once during the week and it's in the evening. And I'll go about twice. It kind of shows.

(Russell, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

When I went to a normal school it was really difficult having to balance everything and not having people who understood but I find here it's a lot easier, people understand and care and they know that your sport sometimes takes priority. That helps a lot. I can do a lot more. And if I'm not comfortable going into a competition or something, I can take a week of school off and just train and still not fall far behind in school. Or get in trouble for not being there. I find that, here, there are a lot of people you can go to talk to which helps you. If you go into training or a competition or anything with your sport and you have a clear mind and you're focused and you're not thinking about something else that's bothering you, it makes it a lot easier.

(Heidi, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

Well, when I came to this school I started training twice a day - like on Monday, Wednesday and Friday I train in the morning and in the evening, and then on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday I just train once. So it gave me a lot more training time. So that, no doubt, has helped me progress a lot. Just training more has helped me to become more consistent. I probably would have progressed at the same level but I wouldn't be able to be as consistent doing my event every time. But now that I'm practicing more, and more repetition, I'm getting more consistent and that's what it takes to be a good [in my event] in competitions.

It also helps at competitions not to have to really stress about school. That's a pretty big thing. And like I said before - it's like a lot more flexibility here and the teachers understand. Like, if you don't get work done at a competition they understand. They know the stress you go through when you're competing. So it's more of an open, flexible environment. It happens to everyone here so everyone understands.

(Jason, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

In speaking with the student-athletes it was evident that being a student at WSS had enabled them to focus more on their sport than ever before, in turn providing the opportunity to achieve success sooner in their sport than if they had to negotiate the demands of a regular high school system.
WSS: Influence on Academics

In addition to excelling in sport, the opportunity provided by WSS to succeed in the classroom was described as equally important by the majority of the participants, both in terms of being able to complete their high school education on a timely basis and in being able to consider the possibilities of higher education and a career after sport.

Several of the participants had a realistic outlook on how far their sport could take them in life, and understood that at some point their athletic endeavours might no longer provide a sustainable future. In this context, the flexibility and supportive structure at WSS was identified as a real asset by the students as seen in the passages below:

The class sizes are amazing, especially because you almost never have a full class anyway. So you get a lot more one-on-one time, you can discuss with your teacher and you can just sort of be a lot more casual, and you don’t have the big lectures... work at your own pace, and a lot of teachers will change if you do need to work at your own pace even if they’ve got a regular class schedule. Some people really don’t need anything... they just go and work away, work at home, work here, doesn’t really matter. But some people need a lot of accommodation and the teachers are really good at sort of seeing that in each student. For instance, ‘I just got back from travelling at 1 o’clock last night, I’m not coming into class today’ sort of that kind of thing. I think they’re really good about accepting that. (Tanya, age 16, grade 12, 3rd year at WSS)

There are 3 people in my class right now when there’s normally about 15 [because this time of year a lot of people are gone]. Oh yeah, and Fridays is when everybody is gone as well... everybody always misses Fridays [because of] training, traveling, or competition... but the smaller class size works ‘cause then you can get attention and you can talk to them about what you’re doing. So they know what you’re doing and they’ll go through it with you, which is good. (Shannon, age 16, grade 11, 2nd year at WSS)

There are really smart kids here so I want to do as well as they are in school. It’s a really good atmosphere, for sure. The bad thing is that I’m not very self-motivated with schoolwork so this flexibility sometimes hurts me at some points. But it’s a really good atmosphere here for sure ‘cause my grades aren’t going down. So they’re kind of staying at the same level that they are as opposed to if I went to a normal high school I don’t think I’d be able to handle the work ‘cause they teach everything in depth while here it’s kind of streamlined and ‘this is what
you need to know and I’ll elaborate on it if you need it. ‘I think, sort of the relaxed nature kind of… like… I don’t want to say ‘destroys’ your work ethic, but sometimes it makes you too relaxed and makes you kind of not regimented enough. But, at the same time, it’s a good thing because when we go away for trips we’re not too far behind and we can focus more on the meet instead of ‘oh, crap, I’m getting behind and I’m going to be dead when I get back to school’.

(Leo, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year attending WSS)

It definitely helps academically, we have very small class sizes so the amount of one-on-one time is just amazing and if you need help you can pretty much just walk up to the teacher’s desk and get it. Even other teachers who aren’t your actual teacher are willing to help so if I have a problem with a physics question, if my teacher is busy, I can always go and ask another teacher for help.

(Tanner, age 18, grade 13, 3rd year at WSS)

Russell’s comments encapsulated many of the points above as he straightforwardly claimed that “being able to do my sport and still manage to get good grades in school. I think that’s the biggest thing, that’s all that matters”. After asking him if he thought he would have made it through school if he had gone to a regular high school, he replied:

No. I don’t think so. I wouldn’t have made it through school ‘cause I’d rather make it through sport, to be honest. It would have come to me probably dropping out, or I guess what I could have done is take, like I am now, one or two classes and just go Grade 13, 14, just keep coming back to get it done. I could have done that. I would have done that. ‘Cause I don’t think I could have handled a full course load. [WSS] has really helped me. I saw my grades go from average to honours. The teaching here is incredible and they understand that sometimes you can’t get everything done in one night so the flexibility is amazing.

(Russell, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

Even knowing this, at the same time it is important to note that not all of the participants appeared to benefit in the same ways from the flexibility that WSS offers. Some were stronger students and more receptive to the flexibility, while others appeared less confident in their ability to be self-disciplined and manage the less structured environment. In terms of the flexibility in learning WSS offers, Russell went on to say that at times it’s too flexible… “it’s a lot of self-disciplining – you have to remind
yourself that you have to get this course done”. Heidi agreed, but also emphasized how
important the flexibility was when it came to her learning style:

*I feel a lot of people take advantage of it [the flexibility]. At times I probably
have, but I try not to. I like being taught something everyday, but then I like to
have time to go do it on my own and be able to get ahead if I want to. If I
understand something really well I can keep moving on, rather than wait for the
rest of the class.*

(Heidi, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

Breanna admitted that her academic self-discipline was actually weakened since
attending WSS, but acknowledged the benefits of being less stressed in other areas of
life:

*Yeah, I think I’m a little bit behind where I would normally be, because it’s hard
not to take advantage of the flexibility. Like my work habits have changed since
I’ve come here, I’ve been less strict on deadlines and stuff which probably isn’t
the best thing but I’m not stressed so that’s a good thing about school.*

(Breanna, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

Shannon and Leo expressed frustrations with struggling with the self-teaching method:

*Teaching yourself is really hard. That’s what I’ve noticed... [it’s different for
each subject] like I’m in Socials right now and Socials is taught, and Bio is
taught, but like other subjects are difficult ‘cause you don’t get taught so you’re
basically reading the textbook and filling out questions that you’ve got and
handing those in, and you’re done.*

(Shannon, age 16, grade 11, 2nd year at WSS)

*I think, sort of the relaxed nature kind of... like... I don’t want to say ‘destroys’
your work ethic, but sometimes it makes you too relaxed and makes you kind of
not regimented enough.*

(Leo, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year attending WSS)

Other limitations around learning reported by the participants, as well as the
principal, were the set-up of class schedules as well as the stringent guidelines around
taking Diploma exams. A couple of the students felt restricted by how the curricula was
set up and as a result they always ended up missing the same classes. The principal
agreed the set-up of the class schedule was not optimal but considering the student-athletes’ frequently changing sport schedules it made it difficult to manage. Where the students expressed frustration that the school would not adapt the schedule, the principal highlighted this as an example of a situation where it is important for the student-athlete to take “responsibility for their learning and utilize other ways to access instruction, such as the online learning management system and the tutorial system”.

With regard to the Diploma exams, each of the students reported frustration around the administering of these exams. The Diploma exams are provincially mandated exams that are worth a significant portion of the students’ final grade in a particular course. For example, every student in the province in Grade 12 Chemistry will be required to take the same final diploma exam on the same date and at the same time. As the principal explains,

“... they are awful exams, they are super difficult, they are designed to have an average mark of 65% to 68% on them - so you take a course like Physics 30, which is a Grade 12 Physics, and usually the kids who go into that course are in the top 15% of the population so they are going to get marks 80% and above, yet you’re setting the average mark for that test to be a 65%. It seems very unjust. For us to be able to work so the kids are prepared and ready to write those exams and they have to be written on that one day, at that one time, and you might be skiing in Austria. How do we manage that? That is something that is beyond our control. It is a real constraint.”

(Principal, WSS)

Both the principal and the student-athletes described a couple of methods used in order to mitigate the limitations the Diploma exams pose to the student-athletes’ academic success and athletic commitments. First, the students can have the exam proctored if they are away at a competition, which is not preferred because the time the exam must be taken may not match up well depending on where the competition is (e.g., Europe vs. North America). Additionally, the student is writing the exam in an
unfamiliar environment that is not a school environment while they are supposed to be focused entirely on their sport. As difficult as both the student-athletes and the principal admit this is, it is done if needed.

Another solution the principal and student-athletes described as a ‘back-up’ solution, but well-short of ideal, is to delay the Diploma exam to the end of the next semester. For example, even though the students might have finished a particular course in January, for the exams to be written at that time they may choose to not write the exam for the course until after the next semester course is completed so, by this example, in June. According to the principal, in such cases you might see easily a 15% drop in what the student-athletes would have written in January just after completing the course when the material was fresh.

Despite the range of opinions described by the participants about the difficulties of the flexibility and self-learning as well as the Diploma exams, it is clear that WSS overall has had a positive impact on the educational success of the majority of the student-athletes in the study. In all cases the student-athletes were enthusiastic about the opportunity to excel in both their sport and education without having to sacrifice one over the other. However, there appears to be a need for WSS instructors to more carefully discern the diverse learning styles of each student and find ways they can individualize instruction so as to maintain program flexibility, yet adapt their pedagogical methods to support each student independently.

**WSS: Student-Athlete and Teacher Relationship**

Consistent access to teachers and teacher availability were attributes of WSS that were highlighted by the participants particularly in comparison to a regular high school.
The participants reported they felt the teachers at WSS genuinely cared for the students and how they performed both inside and outside the classroom. Whereas in a typical high school setting the focus would tend to be on academic achievement and it would be a struggle and rare for the students to have teachers who understood and outwardly acknowledged the demands of their sport commitment.

Kaleb presented an interesting perspective when asked if his relationship with teachers at WSS was different from the relationships he would have had with teachers in his home country:

Yeah. I mean for sure. This is selfless... they are here to help you. I've been brought up, not by my parents, but I've been living on my own for a lot of time – so there were people who were more selfish, they were doing it for something, right? Here, they are there for you. They give you opinions... like ‘if I were you, I would do this’... so they tell you the ways you need to get it out which is totally awesome. My teachers, my T.A., the principal, they all helped me when nobody had no faith in me. They were there for me. And now I'm the best in the country right now, so... it was a long run but it paid off.

(Kaleb, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year at WSS)

Most of the students commented on the teaching style and the support they receive from the teachers:

It's made it a lot easier. The teachers here are amazing. They realize what position you're in, they're all fairly involved or excited about sports so they realize that when you're at a competition you're not going to want to be concentrating at all on school work – that while you're on a training trip you're not going to have as much time, as if you were home, to do school work so they try and accommodate.

(Tanner, age 18, grade 13, 3rd year at WSS)

They help for sure. They support. Everyone is really supportive – if you're having a bad day, if you had a bad competition they're not hard on you. They want to help you.

(Heidi, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

When discussing how WSS has helped him to be able to focus more as opposed to spreading himself too thin, Leo switched topic to the teachers...
... the teachers here... they are so, like, close. It’s not a big school so a teacher can just walk into class instead of walking 10 minutes to get onto the school or like 2 seconds into [the principal’s] office, to tell him how it’s going or like communicate with the other teachers... like ‘this student has a test on this day – can you avoid having a test on the same day so he can focus on it’. So, that helps a lot. For sure.

When asked if he felt he had a good relationship with the teachers, Leo continued on to say...

Yeah. I try to get on their good side, first of all... well I’m a bit of a brown noser... (laughs)... so I try to get on their good side right away, yeah, but there are some teachers where you can’t push ‘em, you can’t make fun of them or anything. Like, my T.A., I can pretty much joke about anything with him but there are some teachers here where it’s pretty much like work all the time, but they’re fun.

(Leo, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year attending WSS)

Breanna was the only student who voiced her frustration with some of the teachers who she doesn’t work with directly:

Some of the teachers are a little less understanding than others, like the TAs [that I work with], they understand... but maybe not the other ones.

(Breanna, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

The comments about teachers consistently reflected the participants’ perceptions of differences in expectations and learning conditions between a regular high school and at WSS. The participants described a mutual understanding with their teachers that arguably would be very difficult to achieve in any other learning environment. WSS appears to be successful at creating a more intimate setting for its students to communicate and build relationships with their teachers which, based on the participant accounts, ultimately benefits the students academically and athletically.
Paralleling their comments about their future in sport, the majority of the participants spoke openly about their future education plans. They stated that if they could make a good living by competing in their sport for a long time they would choose this but, for the most part, they appeared to be cognisant of the varied realities regarding long-term high performance sport involvement, either financially, socially, and/or physically. Their responses as seen below ranged quite widely:

*If I get an opportunity where I know that I can move forward, get a good career. If it's something that will solidify my future then that might make me stop competing.*

(Jason, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

*I was planning on taking this year off but then decided I might as well do two more courses just to have something else to do. But then I also decided I want to start pilot school now, so I have a very busy plate in just being able to balance them all together.*

(Tanner, age 18, grade 13, 3rd year at WSS)

*I'm not totally sure [what I'm going to do when I graduate from WSS]. I'm definitely not going straight into University. I'll try to get on the team next year and probably if I make it I'll be on the circuit and if I don't... I'll probably try to get, like not compete, and work on my portfolio for school. I'd like to get fairly good grades, it would be nice. But to get into the College of Art and Design you need a 60% in English, that's all. You don't need any other grades, and then it's all based on your art skill. But, if I don't get in there I'd probably be thinking of [university here], which does rely a lot more on academics, so I'd want [the grades] up there just in case. Also, if I decide to do something else I just want the knowledge... however how the sport is going is what will determine that. Because really... I can always fall back on art... and I can work whenever I've got time.*

(Tanya, age 16, grade 12, 3rd year at WSS)

*I want to go to university straight off. And I want to go to a top business university in Canada. I want to stay in Canada... for now, at least.*

(Kaleb, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year at WSS)

... I don't want to let my parents down. So that's kind of where I'm at right now—struggling whether to back off sport or school. I mean, if this year goes well and I make the Junior National team I was actually thinking of taking a year off and
going to Montreal to train with the really good guys... but I haven't told [my parents] yet (laughter). It's kind of just going through my head, but I thought that might be super cool and I could always come back to school later on if sport doesn't go well...but I'd be like the 30 year old guy in a class with 18 year olds.

(Leo, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year attending WSS)

On this topic, Shannon (Shannon, age 16, grade 11, 2nd year at WSS), contradicted an earlier statement she made describing how difficult it would be to accomplish both high-level sport and university at the same time, so she would definitely choose one over the other. Later in the interview she stated she would be interested in trying to “get a scholarship to go somewhere...in the States for my sport, get on their team, and then try to qualify for the Canadian Team after that”. Shannon’s focus is on succeeding in her sport and it is evident in her comments that her motivation to attend an NCAA university is for athletic reasons rather than academic ones. This attitude is quite common among Canadian athletes wishing to pursue their sport at a high level after high school while not wanting to lose out on the opportunity to further their education.

For example, Jason qualified his statement above that if he comes across an opportunity career-wise he might quit competing. At the time, he was actually focused on getting into a good American university with a well-known academic reputation and established sport program:

I know my teammate has already signed with a school, she got a full scholarship to Texas, but I was a little slow on the whole recruiting thing so I'm just in contact with coaches right now. I'm looking at Stanford, Northwestern, Notre Dame, Purdue and Wisconsin, maybe... yeah, that's what I'm looking for. Good athletics and good academics. I really want to go to an academically prestigious school, such as Stanford. That would be my short-term academic goal, and then in terms of the end of university I want to graduate as one of the top in my class... I really like technology. Like, I like using computers; I think it would be cool writing software. That's partly the reason I want to go to Stanford, it's right in Silicone Valley where Apple, and Google, and all those...

(Jason, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)
To get a better idea of how Jason felt about leaving Canada and moving to the United States, I asked him if he would be upset if it did not work out. He responded sharply stating...

Yeah, I would be upset. 'Cause in terms of university there is no university with my sport in Canada, so my only option if I wanted to keep competing and stay in Canada would be to go to the university here and live here and compete with my normal team. And I don't think I really want to do that. I really like competing here, and if I didn't have to go to university I would compete here for the rest of my career probably, 'cause I really like my coach and stuff, and I'm not saying [the university here] is not a good school but it's not as prestigious as Stanford.

(Jason, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

Similar to Jason, Russell was very clear when describing the direction he was heading...

I'm going to try for 2010, but if I don't, either way, I'm going for 2014... the plan is to go part-time undergraduate and then I can keep training and doing [my sport] while going to university. And then when I'm done competing I'll go full time to med school.

(Russell, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

When asked about a comment he made on the pre-interview questionnaire stating he would “compete no later than 2018”; Russell appeared to be aware of the odds against this stating that he thought he would be “pretty old at 2018 (laughter)... [and that at age 28] its old to keep doing a sport and not have a job or anything, or even to be full time in university”.

Heidi responded similarly to Russell and outlined goals of competing on the Canadian National team in the 2014 Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, Russia.

Nevertheless, Heidi also planned to take a year off after graduating from WSS to see how things went in her sport, and to give her time to consider her next steps:

It kind of scares me to think about it right now... long term goal – university. I want to go to university but... I have a lot of growing up to do still, I think... letting go of being young, or trying to be young. It’s a lot of responsibility. I'm
not sure I would want to do it yet; it's not so much... I know I could... I don't know if I want to.

(Heidi, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

Breanna was clear that her future was not in academics:

Yeah, I don't really have high academic goals for myself because I know... like, I think I know what my career is going to be and it's not academics. [If my first option doesn't work out] well, then maybe Culinary Arts and stuff... [school is not my focus, it's not going to take me to where I want to be].

(Breanna, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

As can be seen from the above statements, there was considerable diversity in the participants' comments about their educational goals. The male participants appeared to be more academically driven and focused in terms of how integral they felt academic success was to their future. In contrast, all of the females ranked their sport first in terms of priority, and were more willing to delay post-secondary education for a chance to progress within their sport.

WSS: Culture of Competitiveness

Competitiveness in both sport and academic achievements was reported by the participants to be higher at WSS than at a regular school. While this may be explained by the inherent elite sport competitiveness of the students enrolled, it was also frequently stated as a noticeable element of the environment and culture at WSS.

According to Heidi, she felt this characterized the girls more than the guys...

Oh, yeah.... oh, yeah... I find it more with the girls. It's hard to give an example, it's just like you notice that people start comparing their grades and everything and you're like, 'ohhh'...

(Heidi, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)
Heidi also clarified that she thought this was a good thing, "cause it makes you want to try harder and really give it your all". On the other hand, Jason provided an alternative view of the academic competitiveness:

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. It's more of a joke than anything but we do it a lot. In academics, yeah. If we get a higher mark on a test then we rub it in as much as we can.

(Jason, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

When asked if that ever gets annoying, Jason said the "other ones are just as smart as I am, so we're all kind of equal". He went on to discuss what motivates him to get good grades which he described partly as stemming from his academic competitiveness with his younger teammates, knowing they would have more chances after him to better his accomplishments at school.

It came as no surprise that competitiveness between sports or even within the same sport was also prevalent among the student-athletes at WSS and that students were not sympathetic about training hours and workloads.

Like someone might say, 'I had to practice for 3 hours', and someone else will say, 'Well I had to practice for 4 hours'.

(Breanna, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

In addition to the competitiveness around results and achievements, there was also a sense of competitiveness and disconnection between the participants as to which WSS student-athletes really deserved to be enrolled in WSS. After reviewing the transcript from the interview with Breanna, it was clear that she felt, and felt other students agreed with her, that there were students who they felt were not strong athletes and who did not fit the sport eligibility criteria. This was both a sign that the student-athletes take the eligibility criteria seriously and that there is a culture of competition so that when certain students do not perform up to standard, the other students take note.
Social scientists and school practitioners have speculated about whether a competitive environment such as that at WSS is healthy and socially beneficial for youth, or whether it is potentially damaging to their social growth and development.

Competition and rivalry may be a part of growing up and may to some degree be inescapable, independent of young people’s talents and extracurricular activities. However, extreme focus may be unhealthy. For example, the current Chinese talent ID and sport schools system appears to support a hyper-competitive environment (Bodeen, 2008). Children are taken from their homes at an early age and trained specifically in one sport depending on their strengths and athletic skills. The young athletes go to school together, live together, and train together. Because this system has seemed to propel Chinese athletes to the top in the world, one suspects others may choose to follow, but at what expense? The WSS educational environment is far from the intensity of the Chinese sport schools, but nonetheless, it is important to accurately measure the affects of such programs on the student-athletes’ experience, over both the short and long term as there is the potential for long-lasting developmental effects well beyond graduation.

**WSS: Culture of Common Expectations and Understanding**

Above and beyond the competitiveness that is pervasive at WSS, there is a common bond shared by the student-athletes, which they all identified as impossible to replicate in other regular high school settings. This shared passion for and understanding of sport came across as an asset:

*We can all relate. If I talk to one of my other friends who doesn’t do a sport and say, ‘I did really bad...I finished 5th, and it’s like, ‘well, 5th isn’t that bad’. But for me, it is. So people in here will understand that ‘cause they expect a lot out of themselves, so when we expect a lot out of ourselves they understand that.*

(Leo, age 17, grade 12, 3rd year attending WSS)
Well, at a normal school it's really cliquey; you walk around and see all the different groups of people. Here, it's just like one big clique. Everyone does a sport so we're all really athletic, all of us, so we're kind of the same. We all struggle with the same stuff, it's not like a school where some people do sports, some people do extracurricular activities like band, we all do the same thing. We all go to training after school, we all train during the morning, so it's a good culture of all the same people. Everyone understands what everyone goes through. It's like you come to school and say, 'oh, man, I'm so sore', and they're like, 'yeah, I know, me too'. [You don't have to explain to anyone].

(Jason, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

Each of the student-athletes made at least one reference to the commonalities shared between the student-athletes at WSS. They all appeared to feel that they were each there for the same reasons and because of this they were all 'in it together'. This shared interest and understanding for what each other experiences in school and sport was often raised by the participants as a special and unique benefit to being a student at WSS.

**WSS: Atmosphere**

There were many comments made by the student-athletes that subsequently painted a picture of what daily life was like as a student at WSS. For the most part, the participants felt the unique environment was positive and has helped them progress faster and further in both their sport and academics than if they had stayed at a regular high school. It was evident that the circumstances and conditions they experience by virtue of being athletes are unique and rare in other educational environments. One example was the amount of time the student-athletes spend away from their school at competitions or training camps in international locations. These are opportunities and constraints that regular teenagers do not typically experience. When asked about what the other students’ reactions at WSS are when he returns from competitions in Europe, Tanner responded by saying...
Some of them I guess can be a bit jealous but they realize that it’s just where I’m at in the sport, and when I’m gone they’ll be gone so it’s not very hard to come back and pick up because everybody is leaving and coming back at different times during the year.

(Tanner, age 18, grade 13, 3rd year at WSS)

With regard to the atmosphere in the hallway at WSS, for the most part I observed many students who socialized, laughed, and stressed out about tests and homework just like regular teenagers. In order to get into WSS, I had to enter through a public school in the front, (WSS leases the back hallway of the public school), and in walking down the hallways of the public school there were noticeable cliques, the halls were dark and uninviting, the students were not very friendly, and overall I felt a feeling of relief that the adolescent portion of my life was long over! Each day after completing the participant interviews I was able to roam the WSS hallway and observe the students’ interactions between classes. It was very clear that most of the students knew each other and most of them appeared comfortable in their surroundings. At one point I was walking with Tanya, who was on crutches at the time, and a male student came up and they started chatting about their injuries. He was asking her what number surgery she was on, and they laughed together. I asked Tanya afterward if that was ‘normal’, do students normally just chat about their injuries and what’s going on with their sport like that, and she said “oh absolutely... we all understand what each other is going through, and we’re all interested”. On this day, I felt a lot of positive social energy within WSS.

Throughout the interviews, interesting impromptu observations about WSS were made by the participants, such as Breanna’s comments about relative differences in the wealth of the students at WSS, and its impacts on student culture.

*I think there’s a lot of kids here who are really wealthy, cocky and stuck up about it. That’s the only thing. Like, if you’re a skier, that costs a lot of money and*
there's 3 brothers and sisters all in the same family and they all ski. They talk about wealth a lot, like what kind of car they have, they get an Audi for their 16th birthday... I'm not spoiled but... I got a car for my birthday but it's just like a 'get around town' kind of car. I don't need a BMW or whatever.

(Breanna, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

Breanna had a noticeably tough outer shell and as can be seen by her comments, was not afraid to speak her mind. I sensed her resentment and asked her how she deals with this kind of thing, and she stated... “I just ignore it. 'Cause it's like handed to them, it's not something they've earned”.

The student-athletes described the social relationships within WSS as operating much like a regular high school where jealousy and envy is at its peak in adolescent life. Furthermore, the presence of cliques and exclusive groups came up in a few of my discussions with the participants:

We have those [cliques], as well. They are usually kind of sport related. If you have a bunch of skiers they all kind of hang out together, and the swimmers, the synchros, the divers, they all kind of hang out together.

(Heidi, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

When asked if there is ever any animosity between groups, Heidi said...

People get in fights, I guess. I don't want to say groups... it's more as individuals. Just personal stuff, it happens all the time, it's just like high school.

(Heidi, age 17, grade 12, 2nd year at WSS)

It's a bit cliquey in the sense that speed skaters hang out with speed skaters, alpine hangs out with alpine and I find that [my sport] is really good at hanging out with different groups of people. I like lots of friends in different sports but some people really stick to their own group.

(Breanna, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

Despite the apparent cliques within and between sports, most of the student-athletes, including Breanna, commented on how they appreciated and enjoyed the social atmosphere at WSS:
I like the atmosphere of the school. Some of the people are pretty different than me, like the snowboarders and freestyle skiers, but it’s good to have different people in the school... now I know a lot about diving, and a lot more about snowboarding and stuff I didn’t know.

(Breanna, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

While observing the hallway and classrooms during the study breaks, it was evident that the students tended to spend most of their time with fellow teammates in their sport. This was heightened during the study periods where students have the option of working on their own in a quiet room of the school. Most of the students sitting in groups utilizing the study periods were in the same sport, but there were also students working on their own. All the students seemed friendly with each other and would always say “hey” or ask how each other is doing, regardless of what sport they belonged to.

In summary, in this chapter, I have endeavoured to describe how the student-athletes at WSS felt about their lives as high performance student-athletes in a sport school. I have exposed the links between how the student-athletes felt about high performance sport and their feelings about their sport school and how in combination both of these institutions play a role in their personal, academic, physical, social, and career development. In the next chapter, I will discuss the importance of these findings, and how they relate and contribute to the relevant literature.
CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

In this thesis I have examined WSS student-athletes’ attitudes toward and opinions of elite sport and their sport school. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews, as well as observation and document analysis, this study has investigated the ‘lived’ experiences of nine high performance student-athletes between the ages of 16 and 18 and the meanings that they attribute to their experiences within sport and at their school. According to Horne, Tomlinson, and Whannel (1999), socialization is a process through which one adopts social norms and becomes competent in cultural and social practices such as how to relate to others, how to act in certain situations, and how to get by in daily life. One of my central observations is the extent to which young student-athletes at WSS were socialized into both the competitive culture of their sports and the academic culture of the school. My findings have revealed how the participants made sense of their sport school experiences and how they considered their school an essential component in their sport and academic success. The study showed the connections between student-athletes’ experiences in elite sport and the education system, their feelings about these experiences and how these relate to their personal and social development as well as the impacts these experiences have had on shaping their future directions in sport and education.

The findings from this study build upon existing research in the areas of youth participation in elite sport, human rights in youth sport, high performance sport retirement, young athlete coping mechanisms, prolympic sport policy, and an athlete-centred approach to elite sport and student-centred approach to academic development. Furthermore, the study reveals a complex relationship between the conflicting ideologies
of prolympism (Donnelly, 1996) and an athlete-centred approach (Thibault & Babiak, 2005) in terms of how young high performance student-athletes negotiate between their sport and education in a sport school setting. The findings that emerged from the participant interviews demonstrate the efforts made at WSS to integrate prolympism and an athlete-centred approach. In this chapter, these findings are discussed relative to the literature. The significance of particular themes are highlighted.

Youth High Performance Sport Identity

Findings from this study suggest there are still many issues with youth participation in high performance sport in Canada. Similar to Donnelly’s (1993) study where he interviewed retired Canadian high performance athletes, when asked what it is like to be a high performance student-athlete, all but one participant responded first with a negative descriptor, and the majority continued to focus substantially on the challenges it presented. They used words like ‘difficult’, ‘really stressful’, ‘no optimum solution’, and ‘definitely hard’. Tanner was the only participant to focus on the experience in a positive light. Interesting to note, Tanner was the oldest participant in the study and was also the only one who had competed in an Olympic Games. His maturity, athletic and academic experience were noticeably more evident compared to the others which may explain why he was more confident in expressing positives and finding value in his years as a high performance student-athlete. The fact he had achieved international success, unlike the others, and was finally being rewarded from years of personal sacrifice and complete commitment to sport may have also been a contributing factor to his perspective. When probed on this topic, the majority of younger less experienced
athletes also indicated that the pros of competing in elite sport outweigh the cons, and felt that the sacrifice was well worth it.

Beyond these points, the student-athletes’ comments support existing literature that claims youth involvement in high performance sport may have detrimental effects on the socialization of the youth involved in these intense sporting environments. Donnelly (1993) outlines concerns that have been expressed about competitive stress and anxiety, increased aggression, parental pressure, high dropout rates, and tendencies of coaches to treat children as ‘mini-adults’. Regardless of whether the student-athletes identified with these specific concerns, their statements suggest they were willing to take their chances in order to have the opportunity to realize their athletic potential, and possibly one day be the best in the world. Although they appeared to understand the sacrifices involved in their pursuit of athletic excellence, they either consciously chose to ignore the potential personal and social repercussions or were genuinely blinded by the possibility of international success. Youth are constantly being bombarded with messages from parents, teachers, counsellors, life skills instructors, family, friends, and coaches to believe in themselves, work hard, and follow their dreams. Despite this supportive advice, the odds of achieving success remain small, and many of the participants had already thought about contingency plans. It would be unrealistic to only support youth development in areas where the majority of participants were guaranteed to succeed. Perhaps the best that can be done is to provide opportunities for youth to discover their own abilities, and ensure along the way that they are provided with the appropriate resources to allow every opportunity for success.
Several of the athletes (notably Tanner and Jason) had a strict end date for their sport involvement and outwardly indicated that if a great career opportunity presented itself alongside their pursuit of Olympic goals they would opt to pursue their career instead, appearing fully aware there is no guarantee of longevity in elite sport. If I speculate why Tanner and Jason were more ‘realistic’ about their situation than some of the others, several reasons come to mind. The first is that WSS may be effective at informing its student-athletes about the vagaries of life as a dedicated elite athlete. Students who have been there a while would learn these things. Another reason may be Tanner’s and Jason’s family structure – they both come from middle to upper middle class families who are very involved and supportive of their sports, and their parents (according to Tanner and Jason) have stressed the importance of their academic achievements. Thirdly, and more-so related to their parents’ professional success, they were used to a middle to upper middle class standard of living and it is possible that pursuing an athletic dream did not appear as appealing to them in ways that it did to some of the other student-athletes. Throughout my conversation with each of them, both Tanner and Jason were noticeably inspired by their parents’ professional and life achievements.

Funding and Financial Complexities

We can assume, based on WSS’s eligibility criteria, that some of the best young athletes in Canada are attending WSS and a good number of these student-athletes come from middle to upper middle class backgrounds – particularly the winter sport student-athletes. Although I did not focus my interviews on the financial aspects of participation in high performance sport and attending WSS, several participants voiced their
frustrations with the $4000 tuition fee that WSS requires. These participants alluded to the fact that because of the lack of financial support for athletes, some of their teammates could not afford the tuition at WSS and were left to attend regular high schools.

In contrast to student-athletes who struggle financially to keep up with the costs of participating in high performance sport, the student-athletes at WSS for the most part did not consider this a major barrier to their continued involvement in elite sport. We know that access to, and continuation of, high performance sport is often based on socio-economic privilege. Research by Collins and Buller (2003) revealed the exclusionary practices of elite youth sport programs in England. Their case-study approach illustrates only a glimpse of what is a very complex and weighty issue, however, Collins and Buller believe their results can be found throughout the Western world. They suggest that:

"Even at a local level, high performance sport programs are facing the conflicting objectives of elitism and universality, mirroring those facing the IOC on a global scale".

Their findings show that social stratification provides a filter for who gets in at the beginning of the selection process, which for the purpose of this study could be compared to the eligibility criteria and application process for WSS. In drawing from Bourdieu’s notions of class, social capital and habitus, Collins & Buller (2003) refer to a study completed by the English Sports Council (1998) as one of the most valuable concerning social background as a constraint on high performance sports participation. Their findings demonstrated that:

"... the opportunity to realize sporting potential is significantly influenced by an individual’s social background. The differences in opportunity clearly affect the country’s ability to compete and win in international competition” (pg. 13).
As stated by the principal at WSS, cost is a non-issue for most of the young people at the school. This is not altogether surprising as the majority of athletes at WSS are involved in winter sports (the original focus of WSS) and the costs associated with winter sports are often significantly greater than summer sports. According to the principal, the majority of students who apply to WSS come from families that can manage the $4000 per year tuition fee.

There are opportunities for bursaries and scholarships through WSS’s partner sport organizations, but they are limited. Though WSS provides opportunities for an improved and more effective learning environment in terms of balancing sport and school, these opportunities are obviously offered at a price for those who can afford it. It is not unusual for private schools and programs outside the regular educational system to charge fees for services but, regardless of this fact, WSS is an example of another social institution that by virtue of its organizational policies and practices excludes particular groups. As the principal stated in our discussion, the students at WSS will often discuss how many elite athletes are walking around out there who are not in sport because they cannot afford it. It is a fair question to ask if some of those athletes were given the opportunity to participate in sport and to build on their talent through a program like WSS, would there be more highly qualified athletes in Canada?

Collins and Buller (2003) found a direct correlation between high performance sports participation, social background, and the ability of a country to be successful at international competitions. Canadian high performance sport organizations, therefore, may want to consider how funding is being distributed to high performance athletes and whether the funding is adequate for athletes from lower income backgrounds. A
program such as Own the Podium (OTP) aims at increasing sport excellence at the international level by enhancing levels of support for athletes, coaches and teams. One of the main elements of OTP is to increase the number of potential medalists within certain identified sports, and one of the recommended ways to achieve this objective is to increase sport retention - keep as many developing athletes within the sport as possible - by recruiting athletes from other sports (e.g., summer sport athletes to winter sport athletes, such as sprinters to bobsleigh). A second part to achieving the above objective is to provide funding to developing athletes to enable them to focus on their training.

When only limited resources are available support for athlete performance at the elite level will tend to take precedence over support for personal development. Acknowledging the importance of youth sport in a prolympic context where morals, values, rights, and objectives are easily influenced it is crucial to assess the practical implications intensive involvement in high performance sport may have on its young ‘participants’. Tymowski (2001) claims that one of the reasons for increasing numbers of children participating in high performance may be attributed to the potentially lucrative financial gains of high performance and professional sport. Tymowski further suggests youth elite athletes are often exploited as a means to an end either for parents, coaches, sporting bureaucracies, and their country’s pursuit of Olympic gold and international recognition and prestige. Tymowski raises an important issue when speaking of young athletes’ participation in high performance sport as a ‘means to an end’. This critique of youth sport aligns with that of Kidd, Donnelly (2000), and Ingham et al., (2002) to suggest youth sport as a use-value exchange system. Taking this into consideration with the student-athletes at WSS, we can appreciate how young athletes can be used to achieve
a goal or performance that may be for the benefit of those in a higher position of power. For example, some of the student-athletes I interviewed admitted to having parents they felt were living vicariously through their performances and were hoping and encouraging their young athletes to reach a point in their sport they were never able to obtain. In addition, a few of the student-athletes from WSS were significantly better supported by their NSO’s than others. This appeared to be dependent on how successful they had been in their sport, either making it on a national team or receiving federal funding, to even being part of the Canadian Olympic team. Obviously for these athletes who have risen to the national level at such a young age, their NSO’s will do what they can to keep them in the sport system. The more funding that is available for athletes, however, the more potential there is for the NSO to influence athletes’ decision-making and sport careers.

Also, with increased funding comes increased pressure to perform to expected standards, as well as to live a lifestyle dictated by the daily demands of their sport and national sport organization. Kidd goes as far to suggest that...

“As underpaid professionals, athletes are ‘sweat-suited philanthropists’ subsidizing the careers of hundreds of fully paid coaches, sports scientists, and bureaucrats, not to mention the ambitions of the federal state and the products and ideology of the corporations which sponsor teams and competitions... the elite athlete of today labours under conditions radically different from those of the amateur of yesterday.”

(Kidd, in Harvey & Cantelon, Not Just a Game, 1988)

As such, one of the answers for countries such as Canada to retain young successful elite athletes in the national sport system where they can support national sport objectives is to increase funding into the high performance sport system for developing athletes so that young promising athletes such as Tanner and Jason aren’t forced to exit the system before they have international success.
So, as national sport initiatives are being marketed as taking an athlete-centred approach in terms of sport policies, programs, and procedures (Sport Canada, 2009; Thibault & Babiak, 2005), we must continue to question the motivation of these initiatives – their procedures are proclaimed as athlete-centred, but are their policies driving these day-to-day procedures athlete-centred in that they genuinely put the athlete’s future as a citizen of society, independent of sport, first and foremost before national interests?

High Performance Youth Sport Labour and Athletes’ Rights

Other problems associated with youth involvement in high performance sport can be compared to the issue of child labour. In his research on elite youth athletes, Donnelly (1997) considers the extent and severity of problems with youth ‘sport labour’ and claims it has many similar characteristics to the widespread problems of child labour. Donnelly proposes reasons why high performance sport involvement is not, but should be, considered as work. McNamee and Parry (1998) question how young elite athletes are affected by the advancement of an adult conditioned, planned, and organized sport into their childhood. This question can be partially answered by the responses of the student-athletes at WSS who compared their high performance sport experience to having a job. In reviewing the interview transcripts it was not difficult to see the relationships between the students’ comments and Donnelly et al., (1993) ideas of youth sport labour based on intensity and performance driven outcomes that ultimately provide for a ‘work-like’ environment.

Due to the difficulty in combining school with the increasing demands of elite sport for youth, David (2005) suggests that as they reach their mid-teenage years, most
young high performance athletes are forced to choose between sport and school if they want to succeed in either at a high-level. It is widely recognized by scholars alike that the combination of intense participation in sport and school under the current structure of popular education and the elite sport system is highly unlikely to allow youth to capitalize on their talents in both areas simultaneously. After conducting multiple reading of the interview transcripts, I found David’s work to be consistent with what the student-athletes had reported. Each student-athlete in the study said that they had either reached the point in their sport and academics of having to decide between the two, leading to the reasons why they searched out WSS in the first place, or instead felt they would reach this point after graduation from WSS, therefore delaying their plan to attend post-secondary education.

Ingham et al., (2002) claim that “childhood and adolescence are times of tremendous cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development. Thus, the need for a developmentally informed model to study and reform sport is apparent though not widely practiced”. They go on to further support Nicholl’s and Harter’s cognitive-developmental theories by stating “children’s perceptions of competence and control in a situation are central to [these theories]. Individuals high in perceived competence and control will put forth more effort and experience more positive affect than individuals with low perceived competence and control will. As described by the student-athletes, WSS provided an opportunity for them to manage their own learning which some students felt was empowering. Whereas the students identified their regular high schools (previous to WSS) as being inflexible and overall less supportive and as a result felt like they were instead being set up to fail rather than succeed. Some of the students said they
put more effort into school at WSS and were getting better grades than they were at their regular high school which may explain how Nicholl's and Harter's theories around perceived competence and control affected the student-athletes in the study. As such, we may question whether children in the present prolympic system of sport are placed in learning environments that promote success rather than failure and self-control rather than adult dominated decisions concerning their “play”.

**Barriers for High Performance Student-Athletes**

My findings reveal that, largely, the student-athletes’ narratives are consistent with the objectives and mission of WSS and although the meanings they attribute to their experiences are noticeably shaped by the language and practices of WSS, they allow us to get closer to the ‘real’ benefits and barriers experienced by elite youth athletes in a sport school setting. Knowing the above challenges that still exist within youth high performance sport and high performance sport in general, in the section below I highlight and discuss the most common barriers the student-athletes identified as inhibiting their chances for success in both their sport and education. Ways in which WSS helps the student-athletes to overcome these barriers will be discussed in the context of a prolympic sport environment and a student-athlete-centred approach to learning.

**Sport and Time**

Similar to Donnelly’s (1996) suggestion that professional athletes have normalized standards of performance that are no longer achievable by part-time athletes, the student-athletes of WSS made it very clear that their devoted level of commitment to sport was necessary in order for their focus on performance to not only be legitimate, but
attainable. In addition, I would argue that this perceived intense dedication for what is necessary in order to achieve international success is also exacerbated by national sport ideologies and funding programs filtered down through NSOs, PSOs, and coaches to the athletes. In this way, especially if they are being funded, the athletes have no choice but to commit to their sport under terms developed and dictated by the above mentioned parties involved in the process. As such, it is fitting that every student-athlete I interviewed overly emphasized not having anywhere near enough time to fit in training and competition requirements as well as academic assignments and studying, let alone anything else in their lives. Lack of time, although not a surprise, was the most common challenge experienced across the group. Many of the athletes spoke to the amount of hours they dedicated to training, as well as the amount of days they spent on the road travelling between training and competition sites. This was notably increased for winter sport athletes which could be explained as a result of the lack of quality training facilities and world class competitions on home soil. A lot of the winter sport athletes would spend weeks, and sometimes months away in Europe and other popular international locations for training camps and/or World Cup / Championship events. I would suggest the travel demands for training camps and competitions for younger European athletes in these same winter sports are more likely to be less exhaustive time-wise by virtue of the close proximity within European towns hosting these sites / events in comparison to North America. Therefore, naturally, young European athletes may be more likely to spend less amount of time away from either home and/or school.

With the growing support for high performance sport in Canada by the Federal Government and other associated influential entities, sport legacy in terms of facilities,
and programs, becomes increasingly important in order to keep Canadian athletes on home soil for greater amounts of time, as well as provide younger developing athletes incentive to try new sport, and/or continue in their sport, knowing the resources are more commonly available. Most of the student-athletes in the study suggested it will be interesting to analyze the shift in centralized training locations following the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games and, with upgrades being performed at Canada Olympic Park in Calgary, it is likely we will witness a new trend of young athletes exposed to and enabled to spend more time doing their sport in Canada than abroad. Additionally, as a result of the legacy programs in place throughout British Columbia post-Games, Canadian high performance sport will likely see an increase in the number of participating BC athletes in these sports, as well as the quality of athlete. For example, it is important to note that almost all of the student-athletes from this study were first exposed to their sport through local programs operated by one of the legacy organizations from the 1988 Calgary Olympic Winter Games. As well, many of the student-athletes confirmed that most of their local teammates were introduced into the sport in the same way, and if it were not for these programs they would have never tried their particular sport, or even known it existed (some of the athletes in more obscure sports such as luge, ski-jumping, and biathlon spoke to the challenge of participating in such an obscure, unknown sport).

However, in contrast, Donnelly et al. (2008), have found that there is no empirical evidence to support that sport participation increases after a nation hosts a major sports event and/or wins gold medals. Although this does not necessarily mean there is no inspirational value to hosting an Olympic or Paralympic Games, Donnelly et al., argue
that in order for the general population to be affected by such events and benefit from legacy opportunities, the sport system must be prepared to “accept new participants”.

Donnelly and his research team put forth several recommendations and strategic interventions for the realization of a participation legacy, two of which relate directly to the development of young high performance athletes: 1) Encourage and survey NSOs and PSOs to determine their capacity to incorporate new participants, and 2) Develop a clear subsequent use policy for Olympic facilities including grassroots programs. Regarding their first recommendation, increasing the capacity to have a greater number of potential high performance athletes in the sport system will undoubtedly, in turn, assist in providing young Canadian athletes the local competition and training partners necessary to be challenged and improve. Regarding the second recommendation, the amount and type of legacy use of the Olympic facilities determined will absolutely play a key role in decreasing the amount of time young Canadian athletes are forced to travel to training camps and competitions out of country, ultimately giving them more time at home to attend classes, build relationships with teachers and peers, and spend time with their families and/or other support systems.

School and Time

Similar to the student-athletes reports that lack of time affected their potential success in their sport, lack of time to do schoolwork was the chief impetus for the student-athletes initiating their application to WSS. According to each of the student-athletes in this study, their motivation to change from a regular high school to WSS was driven by the fact they had reached a point in their sport where they did not believe it was possible to compete at the level they thought they could, as well as perform in the
classroom to their best potential. This can be explained by the assumption that the better one gets at any activity and as their commitment rises to the next level, so does the amount of time they will not only be required and expected to participate in that respective activity in order to achieve success. Given this, it is not surprising that most of the participants admitted that if they were not dedicating so much time to competing in sport, their academic record could be significantly better. Similar to claims by David (2005), and other researchers alike, the student-athletes described reaching a point of helplessness and felt it was time they had to make a critical choice between sport and school. They were not willing to accept competing at a lower standard than their potential, and as products of the prolympic sport system, their focus was undoubtedly on winning, not just participating. Similarly, some of them reported they were not willing to scrape by academically at a lower academic level than they felt they were at, risking quality of future post-secondary educational opportunities.

The majority of the student-athletes stated that at the time they were in a regular school they would have preferred not to pursue their competitive sport at the expense of their education, however, if they had not found the alternative academic opportunities offered at WSS, they would have most likely withdrawn from school with the hopes of one day completing high school upon cessation of their sport involvement, or at a later time in their sporting career when it was possibly more convenient. In working through this decision they discovered WSS mostly by word of mouth from coaches and/or other athletes. Most of them knew personally, or at least knew of, other athletes who had attended WSS and considering what they knew of those athletes’ experiences and the
meanings they associated to those experiences, the participants felt it was their only viable option.

Consequently, this study’s findings reveal some of the most common explanations for student-athletes to seek out alternate academic strategies: 1) long-standing pedagogical traditions resulting in institutional restrictions and inflexibilities (such as high performance athletes required to still take PE classes as part of their curricula), 2) elite sport competition and training schedules become increasingly demanding as athletes advance to higher levels in their sport, 3) decline in academic accomplishments, 4) large class sizes resulting in a non-relationship or feeling of disconnection between student-athlete, teacher, and school. The combination of all these factors created a heightened level of stress and disappointment for the student-athletes, consequently leading to frustration and under-performance in both their sport and academics.

The above explanations for the student-athletes’ motivations for educational change supports several existing studies such as Gould and Carson (2004), Brettschneider (1999), and Ingham, Chase and Butt (2002) that identify a need for young people to have the right to opportunities for alternate ways of learning and social development. These findings enrich current understandings of young elite athletes by providing a deeper look into the meanings the student-athletes attributed to these types of struggled experiences.

Acceptance and the Challenge to be ‘Normal’

Research indicates that due to the demands of their sport responsibilities and time commitment, young elite student-athletes are often sheltered from ‘real-life’ experiences (Donnelly et al., 1993). Even with the intense dedication required to compete at a high level, in combination with keeping up academically, each student-athlete in the study said
they would choose their current situation over leading what they described as a ‘normal’ life. At some stage throughout the interviews, the majority of the student-athletes made a point to say how they could always go back to school or get a job, but will not always have the opportunity to be a high performance athlete, and potentially one of the best in the world. For most of the participants, they seemed very aware of the magnitude of the sacrifice they were making and were markedly secure in their opinions that it was well worth it. Even if most of the participants genuinely felt it was worth it, this did not stop them from opening up and talking about what it would be like to have a ‘normal’ life without so many commitments. Most of them spoke about the few weeks a year where they have time off and they do not know what to do with themselves because they are so used to such an intense lifestyle. Referring to high performance student-athletes, Tanya commented that “we really don’t know how to be normal teenagers. We really don’t. Like, hanging around in malls, hanging around with your friends doing whatever people do. I don’t know how to do that”. In terms of personal and social development, this particular comment could be somewhat concerning as Tanya admits she is struggling with a key piece of what it means to be a teenager and develop through this particular stage in life, into adulthood. Important to note, not every participant admitted to struggling socially in the ways that Tanya did. There were several of the student-athletes who by way of their personalities appeared as naturally more ‘popular’ and although they also stated they would like more time to spend with friends and family and do ‘normal’ teenage activities, they didn’t indicate it was something they couldn’t identify with or would find trouble adjusting to if the opportunity was presented. Gould and Carson (2004) suggest, “talent development does not come without costs, and with improper
guidance the process of developing talent in young athletes can have severe consequences of both a physical and psychological nature. This does not mean, however, that young athletes should not be given opportunities to excel in sport. Rather, we need to provide the right opportunities to maximize gains while minimizing costs" (pg. 23). In this regard, Tanya’s situation highlights the fact that although many high performance student-athletes may not have any issues when it comes to managing social situations or activities, in addition to alternative educational programming, there is still a need to pay attention to various aspects of young elite athletes’ socialization, outside of the classroom.

**Pressure & Stress**

The student-athletes reported several factors that contributed to having felt stressed or under pressure such as, self and others’ expectations to win, injury, school exams and assignment deadlines, and financial issues at home.

*Expectations to Win*

Donnelly’s (1996) claim that young peoples’ participation in elite sport has become exclusively outcome driven was consistent with the types of comments made by the student-athletes in the study. For example, Shannon admits that she is losing the love of the sport because there is “too much focus on winning and having to win”. She consistently questions if she’s good enough, and when she got injured it was constantly on her mind that for every second she was sitting at home rehabilitating her competitors were out practicing and getting ahead. She explained that this would lead her to doubt herself and constantly question if she “had what it takes [to be successful in sport]”.
Shannon also stated “it would be nice to not always have to feel like you have to win”. Most of the student-athletes’ described the pressure and stress they experienced as a direct result of feeling like they had to win, or be better than their opponents. These feelings the student-athletes had experienced may be explained by Donnelly’s (1996) claim that prolympism, as an emerging sport monoculture, limits experiencing sport to a single way of participation that is only meaningful in terms of seeking victory, whereby it is no longer acceptable in competitive youth sport to just ‘participate’ without the intent of beating the opponent(s). Needless to say, the effect a prolympic sport system has on its young athletes was apparent throughout my review of the transcripts as evidenced by the student-athletes’ consistent associations between success and winning.

Injury

At the time of the interviews there were 5 out of 150 students on crutches at WSS and this does not take into consideration all the other sidelining injuries that do not require crutches. Obviously where there is physical risk there is a greater chance for injury. For young athletes injuries are accepted as an unwelcome consequence to the amount of time they spend training and competing. There are many studies that focus on young elite athletes’ injuries and the varied causes leading to injuries (Eitzen, 2006; Young & White, 1995; Smoll, Magill, and Ash, 1988). As we have seen with Shannon, some young elite athletes will psychologically work through injuries alone. The fact they are removed from their daily routines by not attending training sessions or travelling to competitions with their team, who many of the student-athletes identified as their closest friends, may heighten their sense of loneliness in this period since their social outlets have also been compromised. According to Tanya and Shannon, this sudden change in
lifestyle is difficult to adjust to both physically and emotionally and may lead to some psychological distress. Injury management from a support standpoint therefore looks to be an area that warrants more attention and some corrective measures to help counter the potential negative effects of being left on one’s own to recover.

**Academic Pressures**

Leo reported that he found it very hard to focus on his training or competitions when he knew he had a test coming up. Most of the academic stress revealed by the student-athletes revolved around taking the Diploma exams (end of semester Province-wide exams administered by the Board of Education). As described by the student-athletes, part of the stress of these exams was not due to the content, but instead around the strict requirements for taking the exam. To further explain, the Diploma exams are Province-wide standardized tests that have to be taken at the exact date and time as determined by the provincial school board. As Brettschneider (1999) supports in his study, it is the institutional policies and procedural norms that make it challenging for youth attempting to combine high level sport and academics to be successful. As such, high schools should pay attention to schools such as WSS who have found practical solutions and have managed to work with the provincial school board in order to ensure fair opportunities for their student-athletes.

**Financial Pressures**

It was evident in the findings that some of the student-athletes were experiencing financial pressures. They explained this as either resulting from their concerns about how they may be inconveniencing their family and adding to existing financial problems, or
from their parents discussing with them directly what the impact their sport involvement has had on the financial condition of the family. As noted earlier in the findings chapter, for most of the student-athletes the financial demands of their sport or sport school tuition was not revealed to be a key issue for them or their family. However, when they spoke about the future and moving on from WSS after graduation, a few of the participants indicated they had financial concerns. The few participants who spoke openly about these concerns also spoke about how they felt they needed to get a scholarship to university or college in order to help their parents out.

In their study about human rights in youth figure skating, Grenfell and Rinehart (2003) painted a dark picture of how youth figure skater families justify the financial demands of the sport. They claimed that often parents will conduct a cost-analysis to determine if it is worth keeping their child in sport or not. They explain how some parents come to their decision by suggesting that “in actual practice, parents will encourage a physically talented young athlete and discourage a less adept athlete, no matter what enjoyment the child gains from the activity” (pg. 88). This mentality of the parents may help to explain why a few of the student-athletes in this study felt the urgency to perform at their best and meet performance expectations both in their sport and academics as their way to ‘prove’ to their parents it was worth it. Furthermore, Grenfell and Rinehart discuss the result of the financial arrangements in sport families and theorize that many young high performance athletes live with great pressures and feelings of guilt from the realization that “sacrifice has become the foundation for their relationship with their parents” (pg. 89). This theory may help to explain why a few of the student-athletes in the study described feeling ‘bad’ that their parents had to pay for
all their sport expenses and that this is what motivated them to get a scholarship in order to “help them out”. The ‘guilt factor’ that Grenfell and Rinehart (2003) discuss may also explain why several of the participants felt that if they ended their sport career soon in favour of a professional or affordable educational opportunity this would also help to alleviate the financial burden their parents may incur from their sport participation.

Coping Strategies

The student-athletes reported that the expectations resulting from the intensive sport involvement led to a feeling of constant pressure and stress which they would often internalize because they felt all their fellow student-athletes were feeling the same way. Contrary to Shannon’s accounts, most of the participants stated it was ‘comforting’ to know that at school they were surrounded by other teenagers who understood and experienced the same type of pressures as they do. Their fellow students would understand that if they finished fifth as opposed to first, that it was not necessarily a failure and could have been the best performance of their life. A common theme between the student-athletes’ accounts was the appreciation of the mutual respect and understanding for each others’ experiences. Each of the participants commented they felt significantly more supported at WSS than their previous school, and that although sometimes it would be nice to not always be around ‘sport’ people, they recognized and genuinely appreciated the fact they were all going through this ‘together’.

After completing several readings of the transcripts and reviewing relevant documents, such as the executive summaries published by WSS, it was evident that the student-athlete centred approach to learning was not only benefitting the student-athletes’
academic and athletic records, but was providing them with a central support system that the student-athletes indicated as ‘key’ to their coping.

Alternatively, however, the student-athletes also reported that being surrounded by other student-athletes experiencing the same types of pressure and stress as they were was not always beneficial. For example, with regard to being injured, a few of the student-athletes said that the environment at WSS sometimes heightened their level of frustration because while they had to either go straight home or to rehabilitation right after school all of their peers were heading out to training. They reported at times the WSS atmosphere could be detrimental to their mental and emotional state, and feelings of disappointment and loneliness would be exacerbated by being surrounded by healthy athletes each day at school. A few of the student-athletes did indicate that if they were injured there were definite benefits to being a student at WSS as opposed to a regular high school simply because being around other injured high performance athletes helped them to cope, whereas non-sport peer students may not have understood what they were experiencing and how it may impact their sport careers. Nevertheless, this is an area where I found very little supporting literature to help explain why the student-athletes felt WSS was a negative environment at times. As such, it begs the question that if they were in a regular high school would they have found it either easier or more difficult to cope with their injury simply because of the fact they were not constantly surrounded by other high-performance athletes and their teammates all day.

Lastly, all of the student-athletes reported WSS’s learning practices focused on flexibility played an integral role in being able to cope and manage stress. Their comments are elucidated by Brettschneider’s (1999) findings that a positive academic-
self concept facilitated by alternative pedagogical practices may help in dealing with stress.

**Sport and the Body**

Research indicates that participation in high performance sport can be beneficial for youth, with physical benefits, positive effects on educational achievement, social and mental health, and reduction in risky behaviours. However, in the past decade the relationship between youth and elite sport has been investigated and questioned as to whether it really does deliver on the above mentioned outcomes (Horne, Tomlinson, Whannel, 1999). One of the most contentious outcomes from participation in sport is the damaging biological (resulting in psychological) effects it can have on its participants (Ingham, Chase & Butt, 2002). As body issues have long been prevalent with high performance athletes it is not surprising that the student-athletes’ reports were consistent with the literature. As can be seen in the findings chapter, Tanner alluded to the health issues rampant among young men in his sport and Breanna spoke to the pressures of staying thin from coaches and peers and identified eating disorders as a “big issue with the sport”. Self-described as a healthy eater, Breanna stated she’s always very aware of her diet.

The relationship between athletics, body image and methods of weight control (including techniques such as diet aids, laxatives, vomiting, fasting, steroids, and supplements) is less consistently positive (Eitzen, 2006). The effect of sports participation on perception of body size and weight loss and gain strategies is complex. Although not discussed in too much detail with the student-athletes, both Tanner’s and Breanna’s accounts of how their bodies affect their sport participation and how their
perception of their bodies is underpinned by their participation in sport, reiterates the need for society to challenge and expand traditional gender roles on this topic (in Tanner's case), and incorporate these important issues into educational institutions, athletic organizations, coaching and parenting by addressing the challenges facing teenage young student-athletes trying to negotiate between healthy and unhealthy bodies.

**Sport Retirement**

*Spore Retirement and Gender Differences*

As can be seen in earlier sections, findings from this study suggest that young high performance student-athletes may view their sport retirement in gendered ways. One particularly unexpected finding revealed in the study was how the male student-athletes indicated they were especially concerned with their careers after sport retirement, whereas for the female student-athletes it was not a concern. This difference in mentality between the male and female student-athletes was somewhat surprising since relevant research more commonly tends to favour the idea that males are more likely to pursue competitive sport for a longer period of time than females - one reason simply being because of the greater number of professional sport opportunities males have compared to females (Eitzen, 2006). As such, it is more common for females to retire earlier from sport than their male counterparts.

Unlike the male student-athletes, each of the females, again with the exception of Breanna, were focused on dedicating at least one full year to their sport after high school in order to see how well they could do. One possible explanation why the female participants were less concerned about a timely retirement from sport may be, in part, due to initiatives such as Title IX (in university sport), aimed at equalling participation.
opportunities between males and females, having come into fruition affecting not only university sport policies, but regional and national sport policies and procedures for team selection and funding distribution. As such, young female athletes today have more options to continue their sport at a high level than those in years prior where it was not considered as socially acceptable for women to try to further a sport career after high school or university. In this way, young female high performance athletes may be more likely to choose sport over a professional career right after high school because they are confident in the future sport opportunities available to them.

Additionally, the male student-athletes were also less concerned about continuing in sport for financial reasons than the females. Even though one of their reasons for an early sport retirement was to begin ‘making money’, they related this financial motivator to socialized norms of being able to provide for others in adulthood, rather than out of desperation to continue in sport. The particular differences between what the male and female student-athletes described as their ideas of sport retirement were also apparent key contributors to their decision-making about their future sport participation. These differences in perspective could also be explained by the global social shift in attitudes over the past few decades that have challenged the hegemonic masculinity of sport (Coakley & White, 1992).

Sport Retirement and Professional Skills

Former elite athletes will often enter the workforce in entry level positions requiring a much lower competency than what they have to offer. In preparation for the transition out of sport, WSS requires their student-athletes to complete class writing assignments, as early as Grade 10, on how they envision this process unfolding. Part of
WSS's intention is to get the student-athletes to begin considering what the transition will feel like and by getting them to begin thinking of this process, and how easily it could occur before they had planned, may help them to realize the importance of either completing and/or continuing their education after high school.

The majority of athletes who have been at the elite level for several years will most likely have no real work experience and may be lacking in basic 'everyday' working skills. Existing studies have explained how former elite athletes often experience a sense of 'loss of self' and 'loss of identity' when transitioning out of competitive sport (Petitpas et al., 1997). At this time they may experience feelings of low self-confidence and self-worth which could lead to decreased levels of motivation. Considering such a transition can end up significantly impacting a former athlete's life. This is one area WSS could consider focusing on in more detail in order to provide the student-athletes with a foundation of professional awareness.

Research by Coakley (1983) reviewed information on retirement from sport and offered an interpretation of the retirement process suggesting that retirement for athletes in an amateur high performance sport context (in addition to professional sport, youth in sport, etc.) is "not an inevitable source of stress, identity crises, or an adjustment problem". Coakley claims that the dynamics of the sport retirement process are:

"Grounded in the social structural context in which retirement takes place. Factors such as gender, race, age, socioeconomic status, and social and emotional support networks shape the manner in which one makes the transition out of sport. Therefore, retirement from sport sometimes may be the scene of stress and trauma but, by itself, it often is not the major cause of those problems".

In this way, it makes sense that the majority of WSS student-athletes I interviewed, middle to upper-middle class, Caucasian, with well-established support
systems, were not overly concerned with the prospect of competitive sport retirement. Although they were extremely passionate for their involvement in competitive sport and were keen to develop their athletic skills to the maximum, several of them spoke about the concept of retiring from sport in a way that they felt they were in control and were able to choose when to retire, as opposed to student-athletes with a low socio-economic status who may feel sport is their only route to upward social mobility. As such, for this group of athletes, sport retirement may not be an option.

**WSS Impact on Sport Development**

Findings from this study revealed there were several benefits to attending WSS with regard to the impact it had on the student-athletes' sport development. Inflexibility and a rigid educational structure in traditional high schools were reported by the student-athletes as the biggest barriers to progressing in their sport. The *flexibility* of WSS's pedagogical practices was frequently cited by the student-athletes as the most important benefit of being a student at WSS. As a result, student-athletes were able to spend more time training in their sport which, in turn, was attributed to their expedited athletic progression enabling them to achieve success earlier in their sport than if they otherwise had been enrolled in a regular high school.

Secondly, the student-athletes reported feeling less academic pressure when attending WSS than their previous high school. The reduced amount of stress allowed them to focus more on sport when attending training or competitions instead of being pre-occupied with academic deadlines. The increased flexibility with regard to the curricula resulting in reduced levels of academic stress overall take both Brettschneider’s (1999) and David’s (2005) research to the next level by showing how sport school programming,
such as that of WSS, can positively impact the sport development of its student-athletes. If we apply Donnelly’s concept of the prolympic sport system (based on performance outcomes as opposed to the process of the participation), we can understand how the benefits (as reported above) of being a student-athlete at WSS have been critical to the competitive livelihood of the student-athletes.

A third benefit the participants cited from being a student-athlete at WSS was the motivation and inspiration they felt by being surrounded by so many other elite athletes each day. A few of the participants commented they viewed other student-athletes in WSS as role models, both athletically and academically. They reported WSS as an atmosphere of excellence with sacrifice which contributed to their attitudes toward, and behaviour in, their sport and school.

In recognition of both Donnelly’s (2000) and David’s (2005) research claiming that the opinions of young athletes are rarely taken into account, it is important that the student-athletes’ reports of the ways that WSS has had a significant impact on their sport development be taken into consideration by both educational and athletic practitioners.

The benefits of attending a sport school, specifically WSS, as listed above by the student-athletes, can be considered as a direct result of WSS’s efforts to foster a simultaneous student and athlete centred approach (ACA) to high performance sport and academic learning. As such, student-athlete centred approaches must be developed and measured within the context of a prolympic sport system in order to be delivered in a way that high performance student-athletes will benefit from. We know from the literature that an ACA to high performance sport development in Canada is aimed at helping athletes to cope better with the constraints and demands of a prolympic sport system.
(Thibault & Babiak, 2005). After speaking with the student-athletes and the principal of WSS, as well as reviewing the transcripts and pertinent documents, it was clear that the focus of WSS is compatible with an ACA and has been developed for the purpose of providing a centralized student-centred learning environment for young high performance athletes. Some of the ways the school accomplishes its student-centred approach is by encouraging students to learn together and from each other at the pace that reflects their personal learning style as well as their required time commitment to sport, therefore, the least amount of training and competition will be compromised.

**WSS Impact on Academic Development**

There were several commonalities that surfaced from reviewing the data retrieved from the interviews with both the student-athletes and the principal regarding how the WSS approach to learning impacts the academic development of its student-athletes. The main components focused on personalization including flexibility and small class sizes, positive engaged relationships, responsibility, and accountability.

*The Personalization Factor*

All of the student-athletes felt that the personalization factor was the most crucial element that made WSS work for its students. The flexibility factor and small class sizes were also frequently cited as some of the most beneficial contributors to their academic development. The principal of WSS echoed a similar sentiment and provided an explanation as to why these elements are so critical to the student-athletes’ academic success.
"The WSS covers the provincially mandated required curriculum, but instead finds different and unique ways to administer the curricula allowing the student-athletes the flexibility to master the outcomes of their curriculum at their speed and understand them better and be better prepared... we have done extensive research to find others to learn from, but haven’t been able to locate any other school in the world that offers the same type of personalization as we do”.

(Principal, WSS)

As part of the personalization factor, the student-athletes considered small class sizes as integral to the forming of key multi-directional relationships between students, teachers, staff, parents, and coaches. The majority of the participants commented on how the relationship with their teachers has made a significant difference to their learning and that the teachers at WSS ‘get it’ compared to teachers in a regular high school setting. Based on the student-athletes’ opinions about the supportive relationships with their teachers, this can be seen as empowering the students to take ownership and make academic decisions that affect their learning. Russell emphasized how the teaching has positively affected his learning in that after attending WSS his grades went from average to honours.

The teaching is incredible and they understand that sometimes you can’t get everything done in one night so the flexibility is amazing.

(Russell, age 17, grade 12, 4th year at WSS)

**Parent-Teacher-Coach Relationship**

In addition, as stated by both the student-athletes and the principal, teachers will often go to the student-athletes’ local competitions not only out of genuine interest but as a strategic move to engage more closely with parents and coaches, helping to build that important relationship. The principal of WSS claims that a critical piece to the learning
process is for both the parents and coaches to be involved as much as possible and, to some extent, be accountable for the holistic development of the student-athlete. Some of the ways WSS encourages this is by hosting regular parent-teacher and open counsel meetings, initiating email correspondence to parents and coaches, and providing an active school website loaded with relevant information and updated messaging.

One of the most noteworthy methods that WSS utilizes in order to engage the student-athletes’ parents is by hosting guest speakers during parent meetings at the school to present and discuss topics related specifically to young elite student-athletes. For instance, the WSS has organized meetings on stress management and invited a sport psychologist to talk about “developing high performance athletes and what are the things, as a parent, they can control and help with and what are the things to watch for” (Principal, WSS). In addition, they have had nutritionists speak about special considerations young athletes need to take to stay healthy, as well as doctors who have come in and talked about sleep (from a well-known regional sleep research centre) and focused on things, for example, if you are a swimmer and waking up at 4am to go to the pool, how these irregular sleep patterns can affect you. So, in an attempt to involve parents and keep them engaged, WSS has created some fairly unconventional but relevant ways to help them better understand what their teenagers are going through and how these unique experiences impact their personal, social, athletic, and academic development.

Although largely successful in securing the parent(s) attention, there is always an exception where a parent does not engage at all which is identified by the principal as one of WSS’s major challenges. In such cases, the principal describes the actions WSS takes
to help build the connection with the parent(s) but in the end if the parent(s) does not want to be involved there is not much WSS can do to shift their attitude towards their student’s learning. It is important to note this was not identified as an issue with any of the student-athletes in the study.

As presented earlier in the findings chapter (WSS Student-Athletes - Coach Relationship) a few of the student-athletes described their coaches as very ‘hands-off’ when it comes to their involvement with their school. However, this did not necessarily indicate the coaches did not ‘care’ about their athletes’ learning since most of the student-athletes’ said they were supportive when they needed them to be. It was interesting to read how this varied between sports. Breanna described her coach as not paying any attention to her academic demands which she explained by claiming it was because she was the only athlete on her team who was in high school. She was the youngest but in terms of athletic expectations she was grouped in with everyone else. This comment from Breanna was consistent with the work around youth athletes’ rights in sport by Donnelly (1993, 2000) and David (2005) where both identify that within a sport context, young athletes are often treated like adults and in some cases, such as Breanna’s, are expected to perform at levels equivalent to adult athletes. One implication of this may be that the young athlete is forced to grow up physically and socially faster than other youths their age.

As reported earlier, a few of the student-athletes said that because their coaches were familiar with how WSS operates they would often take advantage of this knowing their WSS athletes have greater flexibility with regard to their schooling and, therefore, may be less likely to be affected by increased training than other athletes on the team who.
attended a regular high school. This attitude of coaches toward young athletes and their training is synonymous with that of a prolympic sport system and according to Donnelly (1993), Dacyshyn (1999), and Grenfell and Rinehart (2003) intensive and excessive sport training may lead to a variety of physical and psychological issues, not to mention ‘burn-out’ of an athlete before they are even able to reach their prime in their sport.

WSS Pedagogical Challenges – Flexibility in Learning

In light of the above discussion around the flexibility of WSS programming reported by the student-athletes as the key ingredient for capitalizing on academic success at WSS; as seen earlier from several of the student-athletes it was also described as somewhat detrimental to the academic habits of certain students. This may mean that student-athletes who are not already self-motivated, self-disciplined, and/or independent learners before attending WSS possibly will discover WSS’s style of learning to be challenging. However, it is worthy for practitioners to note that just because a student-athlete is not necessarily naturally self-motivated or self-driven, it does not automatically imply they are not motivated or keen to succeed. This can be understood by Leo’s statement that he sees a lot of smart people at WSS who he admires and wants to do just as well as. Perhaps this method of learning, although beneficial in some ways, may not be the most effective way for all student-athletes at WSS to reach their full academic potential. Therefore, there is value in paying attention to the strengths of each student’s learning style in order to optimize their capacity, and establish efficiencies, for learning.

WSS Pedagogical Challenges – Final Exams
With respect to the Diploma Exams identified in the findings chapter as a significant concern of the student-athletes and principal, the challenges presented in traditional policies of School Boards’ efforts to maintain fairness can be seen as an example of why researchers such as Brettschneider (1999) are supportive of sport school programming for young student-athletes. If athletes are expected to take final exams in a hotel room monitored by a coach/parent (or designated other), their focus will essentially be ‘spread so thin’ the student-athlete is neither wholly focused on either their sport at a crucial time in competition, or wholly on their exam at an equally crucial time with regard to their academics. However, if this option was not available, we must question, would it be fair to expect a young athlete to not attend a World Cup Championship in Europe that they have been training for, for years in order to qualify, in order to remain at school to take a final exam. Alternatively, the other solution the provincial school board allows is for the students to take the exam at end of the following semester. Of course this is not exactly ideal either since the material is not fresh anymore and they have just come off a long and intense competition season.

The issue around the Diploma exams remains a huge concern for WSS and its student-athletes. The WSS has initiated efforts to meet with the school board regarding this issue in order to help them better understand the detrimental effects the structure of these exams may have on the student-athletes’ academic outcomes. WSS has included student-athletes and their coach(es) in this process which could be an example of a best practice in this area considering Donnelly’s (1996) and David’s (2005) claim that in a prolympic sport system young athletes are consistently being left out of decision-making situations that ultimately may or may not influence their chance for success. In this way,
it is apparent the efforts of WSS to involve their student-athletes and coaches in this process follows the principles of an ACA (Thibault & Babiak, 2005) set forth by the Canadian Sport Policy (2002) that identified the goal for athletes/participants to be involved throughout the sport system in decisions that directly relate to them. Although the provincial school board does not fall directly within the context by which the Canadian Sport Policy is intended, it remains central to the athletic and academic development of the student-athletes. By involving them in the process WSS has created an opportunity for student-athletes to be empowered and gain self-confidence and self-worth through contributing to a decision-making process that will ultimately affect their future in school and sport.

WSS Pedagogical Challenges – Attendance

Perhaps the most obvious, and consistent, challenge WSS experienced was to try to effectively create and manage curricula when the majority of students only attend school 50% of the time. As a result, WSS is continuously researching and searching for new methods to learning and ways to keep students engaged in order to help with this issue. Their online distance learning tools, considered to be a best practice by practitioners, are a crucial resource for the student-athletes and are unique from what regular high schools may offer to the majority of its student population. However, the student-athletes, although they admitted to liking the fact that distance learning is always an option, said they do not use this method very often and are not confident that it really helps them. This may be supported by Dacyshyn’s (1999) findings that for young elite athletes life is considered sport and sport is life, therefore attempting to do schoolwork ‘on the road’ to competitions or in airports and hotels, although convenient for students to
access coursework and reference material, is really not convenient considering their mentality and focus is, and should be, on sport during those periods – not school.

All of the above school-related challenges remain issues for WSS and its student-athletes. However, through the review of executive summaries and discussion with the principal, WSS appeared to regularly research new ways of pedagogy in order to improve their student-centered approach to curricula and teaching methods. Although successful in some areas of learning with the majority of student-athletes, there remain areas for improvement where more work still needs to be done in order to find practical solutions for creating efficiencies in learning for high performance student-athletes.

We know from existing work by Thibault and Babiak (2005) there have been several efforts made in the past few years within the Canadian sport system to move toward an ACA for the development of high performance athletes. Although not mentioned specifically as one of these initiatives, the mandate of WSS was developed by CODA based on athlete-centred principles and endeavours to support and contribute to the holistic development of Canadian high performance student-athletes. Interestingly, WSS was created in 1994 just two years after the initiation of AthletesCAN (AthletesCAN, 1994) but before many of the athlete-centred initiatives had taken effect Thibault and Babiak (2005). Additionally, WSS has been recognized as the forerunner of similar sport school type institutions of its kind operating in Canada producing a number of very successful students and athletes. In this light, WSS could be considered a pioneer in the ‘student-athlete’ centred movement aimed at improving the holistic development of its high performance student-athletes. As outlined earlier, the majority of student-athletes in the study confirmed that in general they felt they were doing better academically than
they would have been if they had tried to continue combining their involvement in high
performance sport and academics at a regular high school. As such, WSS welcomes
schools and sports organizations to pay attention to the specific student-centred
components of WSS's pedagogical practices and to examine how they are experienced by
its student-athletes in an effort to replicate similar sport schools in other areas of the
country.
CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion and Recommendations

With countries such as China, the United States, Russia, Germany, and Australia consistently producing strong fields of Olympic champions every two years, Canada developed Own The Podium (OTP) so that it could be competitive. In Australia for example, a national team of talent identification personnel funded by the Australian government run talent ID camps for young aspiring athletes. Children are evaluated and encouraged into sports that match their revealed skills and begin intensive training almost immediately thereafter. Australia has been criticized for mass producing champions out of a production line, similar to the eastern European approach, and although they agree it is similar they refute this accusation by suggesting it is not about taking choice away from kids, but instead offering up opportunities (Green & Oakley, 2001). This scenario begs the question, at what stage do we step back and determine that an opportunity is not inherently positive and that some opportunities, although with the best intentions, may in fact not benefit the individual at the centre of its focus. As there have been a multiplicity of ways in which sport schools have been and are structured in terms of system and delivery, for example, in Eastern Europe, China, Australia, and now Canada, I felt it may be important to take a further look into how young Canadian student-athletes negotiate this environment and variously capitalize, or not capitalize, on the opportunities it presents, and what their opinions are of their sport involvement and their school.

I was interested to find out if WSS, through the eyes of its student-athletes, lived up to its mission, mandate, and objectives. And after only a few participant interviews it
became apparent that WSS was considered by its student-athletes as a positive opportunity. Though WSS does not necessarily offer the student-athletes the same amount of choices presented in regular high schools, more importantly, it does not force them, in the opinion of the student-athletes, to have to make the choice between two equally significant social practices - elite sport and school.

After exploring WSS in its uniqueness, as a Canadian based program operating specifically within a Canadian sport context, and interviewing a selection of its student-athletes, this study has revealed the many ways in that a sport school can provide a supportive setting that assists high performance student-athletes in negotiating their relationship between sport and academics. This study also identifies specific strengths and weaknesses of WSS in the facilitation of this relationship which, for the purpose of practical implications and pedagogical program development, in some respects may be appropriate to extend to other similar sport schools. As expected, I encountered a multiplicity of meanings provided by the student-athletes which in turn created a complexity of viewpoints. This showed that teenage high performance student-athletes have varied and sometimes contradictory feelings toward their own sport and academic experiences.

This thesis has contributed to existing literature in a number of ways, and around similar topics that failed to adequately take account of athletes' opinions and experiences (Kidd & Donnelly, 2000; Ingham & Chase, 2002; Grenfell & Rinehart, 2003; David, 2005). The study was able to discern how young people make sense of their sport and academic experiences which I suggest are inherently shaped by the policies and procedures of the institution of high performance sport and education, while not
accepting they are passive observers in the process. Substantively, this study has examined how student-athletes’ feelings about their sport and their school are equally important, but it also revealed that when the student-athlete is faced with having to prioritize between sport and academics it is most always their sport that comes first.

While previous research has focused on issues in youth high performance sport, or the understanding of how young elite athletes experience competitive sport in combination with their education, this study exposes some of the reasons underpinning the decisions student-athletes make in their competitive sport and academic involvement. The study addresses gaps in the literature on youth elite athletes in Canadian sport schools. To date and especially in a North American context, there has not been research conducted on the links between elite sport participation and student-athletes’ academic, personal, and social experiences in their sport school. Similarly, research connecting the student-athletes’ lived experiences in their sport and school and their feelings about the high performance sport system and how their sport school operates, was lacking in the literature prior to this study. In these ways, this research has contributed to the fields of youth high performance athletes in a prolympic sport system, as well as to methods of alternative pedagogy by employing a student-athlete centred approach to learning.

A goal of this study was to explore the understandings and viewpoints of the student-athletes in a unique educational setting. Additionally, the concept of a sport school for young developing elite student-athletes as a more personalized form of learning gives those studying specialized schools a new perspective with which to view this social practice. As grounded theory is meant to examine individuals within the contexts of their everyday lives and to develop theories that capture the significant
aspects of these everyday experiences (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), this study provided explanations as to why the student-athletes may attribute certain meanings to specific objects and activities they had encountered in their sport and school endeavours. Furthermore, using an interpretive framework provided an excellent lens with which to address the student-athletes' experiences of being high performance student-athletes in a sport school and highlighted the important effects of culture and socialization on their views. More specifically, symbolic interactionism helped inform the study by allowing me to focus my attention on the student-athletes' socially constructed and negotiated perceptions of the struggles they face in balancing academic requirements with athletic goals in their school setting. Symbolic interactionism and grounded theory allowed me to explore, in deeper lengths, the meanings that the student-athletes' gave to their sport and school experiences. Sarantakos (2005) suggests that "a collective generation of meanings subjects people to hegemonic interests" which is elucidated in this study as young developing elite athletes have been brought up in a prolympic sport system that promotes intensity, competitiveness, and win-at-all-costs attitudes. Taking this into account young elite athletes, naturally, can be considered a product of their environment and therefore may continue to perpetuate prolympic ideals within the sport system supporting the popular belief that high performance sport is built exclusively on a culture of excellence. In this way, it is fair to conclude that the meanings the student-athletes attributed to their experiences in sport and their school are socially constructed and reconstructed through their daily interactions within both their high performance sport and sport school environments.
To date, there is very little research that focuses on the ‘lived’ experiences of young Canadian elite athletes and even less on their experiences in sport schools, which may begin to become a popular choice for education of young competitive athletes. The majority of existing studies on these topics have taken a more positivist approach and have not included athletes’ opinions of their experiences in the general timeframe they were experiencing them. This study benefited from analyzing the student-athletes’ experiences using concepts of prolympism and a student-athlete centred approach within the framework of both grounded theory and symbolic interactionism, and presented a unique framework for future research on this topic.

Methodologically, the combination of elements from these theoretical paradigms, grounded theory, and symbolic interactionism, worked well with my research methods; qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis, as both theories are concerned with examinations of people’s lived everyday experiences. As a result, the research was able to present one of the first qualitative studies on youth elite student-athletes in a sport school. This methodological approach allowed me to extract important key data from the student-athletes and complemented the other types of existing research already completed in these topics.

However, this study had several limitations. The small sample size, relatively homogenous sample, and geographical location of WSS can be considered legitimate limitations to a comprehensive understanding of elite youth athletes in Canadian sport schools. Specifically, the fact that the participants were hand picked in advance by their principal was somewhat limiting. I understood that given the small timeframe I would be visiting the school, combined with the intense and extremely busy schedules of the
student-athletes, arranging interviews in advance was the most effective way to secure student-athletes to participate in the study. The principal was very supportive and eager to find out what the student-athletes thought about their school, but by pre-selecting a variety of types of student-athletes it caused me to be concerned that the student-athletes selected might be telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. However, after spending time with each of them throughout the interview process I was convinced by their candidness and spontaneous responses that any concerns I had prior to meeting the students were considerably lessened.

Recommendations

Future research on elite youth athletes experiencing sport schools should make an effort to conduct qualitative research with larger and more heterogeneous groups of student-athletes. Additionally, future research should include more interviews with more individuals who may have an influence on the student-athletes’ feelings about their sport and school involvement, namely coaches, parents, teachers, and local/regional sport administrators (e.g. from their PSO or NSO), to investigate their role in the way student-athletes consider their relationship with sport and school.

A potentially practical method to assist sport schools in measuring their success is for researchers to follow up with sport school alumni to better understand how their personal and social development was affected by their transition out of their sport school and, if applicable, even their sport. These types of qualitative interviews may answer questions like: 1) what kinds of paths did the former elite student-athletes tend to take following graduation and 2) how many are still involved with their sport in some capacity, and more specifically in what capacity? Furthermore, given the student-
athletes' opinions about high performance sport and their school which were synonymous with a prolympic sport culture and a student-athlete centred approach to learning, it may be advantageous to interview young elite athletes in sport schools outside of Canada to examine how their cultural and social understandings of high performance sport and their school differ from student-athletes who live in North American cultural contexts.

Considering not all young elite athletes are able or eligible to attend a sport school such as WSS, a potentially beneficial next step would be to closely analyze the day to day educational operations of sport schools to identify specific components that could be transferrable to, and implemented, in a regular high school setting. Building on this, it may also be advantageous for social researchers, school and sport practitioners to work together to examine in greater lengths the effective alternate pedagogical practices and find ways to use these innovative methods of learning to challenge and motivate change within existing models of traditional education, in so keeping with the dynamic and advancing social environment young people are growing up in.

Moreover, WSS is moving its school to an existing sport campus widely known for centralized high performance sport training. Subsequently, it would be interesting to compare how the student-athletes' feelings and opinions of high performance sport and their school differ, if at all, after WSS has been operating from its new location. This move may have a significant impact in terms of the peripheral sport services and resources that will be readily available to the student-athletes. Currently, WSS is not similar to most international sport schools because of its unique physical separation between school and sport. For example, there is no sport training at WSS so it is not considered a sport school campus as such. However, the new location of WSS will come
closer to that of European and other international sport schools (Eastern Europe, China and Australia) where young athletes tend to reside in one central location where both their school and sport are practiced. This system therefore promotes ubiquitous control over the student-athletes by teachers and coaches. In this model, it will be interesting to see how the culture of WSS may change after its move, and what kind of impact this will have on the good-standing pedagogical practices WSS currently implements.

Finally, this research study has examined how student-athletes negotiate their relationship with high performance sport and school in the framework of a prolympic sport system, and a student-athlete centred approach to learning. It is evident from the interviews that although these approaches are contradictory in nature, the student-athletes are finding ways with the support of their school to help them cope with the demands of both their sport and academics. This study has highlighted the reality that the major barrier to both sport and academic success are in fact each other, and although they can not naturally and effectively co-exist in traditional form, restricted by institutional inflexibility and pedagogical norms, the development of new educational practices has enabled student-athletes to experience less stress and external pressure in attempt to be successful in both areas. As an example of a best practice within its industry, WSS has shown that a sport school can indeed be a site of both contention and harmony, but ultimately the holistic approach to educational programming has proven to help young elite athletes achieve the necessary balance for success between sport and academia. This study has highlighted the struggles young high performance student-athletes face in their efforts to realize their objectives and has identified how important it is to continue finding
new and innovative methods to provide youth the opportunities to capitalize on their talents.
References


April 30, 2007

[Contact Name]
[School Name]
[School Address]

Dear Principal,

I am a Masters student from the School of Human Kinetics at the University of British Columbia (UBC). I am conducting a research project that pertains to your organization entitled: Exploring the Experiences of High Performance Youth Athletes at a Sport School in Western Canada. We are inviting you and your organization to participate in this study. The information being collected is to be used in writing a graduate thesis in fulfillment of the requirements for a Master's degree from UBC. This information may also be used in the future for other scholarly productions such as journal articles and conference presentations. A summary report of the work resulting from the project will be provided to you at the conclusion of the study.

The research goal is to better understand the perceptions and experiences of student-athletes in sport schools. A useful way to examine the importance of sport schools and the barriers faced by young athletes is to talk with the youth themselves. In particular, I am interested in finding out more about:

- The operation and educational approach of your school and of sport schools more generally.
- How youth student-athletes negotiate their relationship with high performance sport and academics.
- How these kinds of programs / organizations can be viewed as beneficial to youth pursuing high performance sport?

With your permission I hope to conduct one-on-one interviews with student-athletes in grades eleven and twelve at your school. It will be important for you to identify one teacher or
member of staff at your school to be the primary point of contact for the study. This person
will have limited involvement in the actual study; however they will be very important in
facilitating the initial contact between the student-athletes and myself.
To begin the process, I would like to visit your school and discuss the research project in a
classroom setting with the student-athletes. At this time, the student-athletes will be given an
initial contact letter and consent form that explains the research in writing. Should they be
interested in participating, they (as well as their parent/guardian) will sign the consent form and
put it in the envelope provided. They will be asked to return the envelope to me the next day.
After receiving the signed consent form, I will make arrangements to conduct the interview. I
will ask their permission to audiotape record and transcribe the interviews.

Please understand that your institution’s involvement in this project is entirely voluntary.
Students are free to not answer any question, and they have the option of withdrawing at any
time during the study. If they have any concerns about their treatment or rights as research
subjects, they can email or telephone the Office of Research Services at UBC at 604-822-8598.
If you have questions or desire further information about the project, please contact the co-
investigator Trisha Blair, at 604-341-3787, or the principal investigator on the project, Dr.
Robert Sparks at 604-822-2767.

If you agree to allow your school to participate in this study, please complete and return the
attached consent form. Included are two copies of the consent form, the first is for you to
return to me, and the other is for your records.

Yours truly,

Robert Sparks, Ph.D.  Trisha Blair
Principal Investigator  Co-investigator / Graduate student
604-822-2767  604-341-3787
Appendix A2 – Agency Approval Consent Form

I understand that the participation of the [School Name], and its students, in the study entitled: Exploring the Experiences of Youth High Performance athletes at a Sport School in Western Canada is entirely voluntary and that they may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time.

I have received information about the purpose and nature of this research project and my involvement in it as per the Agency Approval letter that I received in the mail from the researcher. I have a copy of this letter.

If I have any questions or desire further information about this study, I may contact the co-investigator Trisha Blair at trishablair2002@yahoo.com or at 604-341-3787, or the principal investigator on the project, Dr. Robert Sparks at robert.sparks@ubc.ca, or at 604-822-2767.

I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records.

I consent for the [School Name] to participate in this study.

________________________________________________________________________

Participant signature               Printed Name             Date

I consent to allowing the student researcher to conduct student interviews in the [School Name].

________________________________________________________________________

Participant signature               Printed Name             Date
Appendix B – Advertising Poster

Are you in grade 11 or 12 at the [School Name]?

Do you strive for excellence in athletics and academics?

What role does your school play in your life?

We want to know what YOU think!

Title: Exploring the Experiences of High Performance Youth Athletes at a Sport School in Western Canada

What: The University of British Columbia School of Human Kinetics is looking to talk with high performance youth athletes who are enrolled in a sport school. This project is interested in finding out more about elite youth athletes' experiences in sport schools. The goal of the project is to better understand the factors that enable/constrain youth elite athletes in accomplishing both athletic and academic goals.

Who: Student-athletes in grade 11 or 12.

How: The interview discussion will be with Trisha Blair, a graduate student researcher. You will be asked to complete one interview that will take approximately 45 min to 1 hour.

Privacy: Participation is entirely voluntary and measures are taken to ensure complete confidentiality and anonymity.

When: During the week(s) of date.

Where: At a location of your choice, that is most convenient for you.

*To participate, please sign the consent form and put it in the envelope provided. Please return the envelope to Trisha Blair, the co-investigator the next day. After receiving the signed consent form Trisha will contact you to arrange an interview.

University of British Columbia - School of Human Kinetics
Contact: Trisha Blair
Phone: (604-341-3787)
Email: trishablair2002@yahoo.com
Appendix C1 – Initial Letter of Contact (parents and students)

November 01, 2007

Dear Parent of youth in grade 11 or 12,

This letter asks you to allow your son or daughter to participate in interviews we are running through the [School Name]. The interview will take approximately one hour and will be scheduled during the week of date. Your child has been identified as a student at a sport school who competes at a high performance level in their sport. We would like his/her perspective and opinions on how sport schools can best help young people pursue their goals in both academics and sport.

The interview will help us develop an understanding of the benefits and barriers that youth high performance athletes experience while pursuing excellence in both academic and sport. The project intends to find out more about how sport schools may provide an environment where these barriers can be overcome in a progressive and supportive manner. We intend to utilize the opinions of the student-athletes to help shape curricula at sport schools and to ensure the ‘voices’ of the student-athletes are being included in policy decisions affecting their education and athletic endeavours.

This project ensures absolute anonymity for each participant. Details on confidentiality are explained further in the attached Information Sheet and Consent Form. Please take a minute to read them over.

If you are willing to have your son or daughter participate in the one-on-one interview with Trisha Blair (co-investigator), please sign the consent form and put it in the envelope provided. Your son or daughter should return the envelope to Trisha the next day. After receiving the signed consent form, Trisha will make arrangements to conduct the interview.

Sincerely,

Robert Sparks
Principal Investigator
School of Human Kinetics
(604) 822-2767

Trisha Blair
Co-investigator/ Graduate Student
School of Human Kinetics
(604) 341-3787
Appendix C2 – Student Consent Form

Exploring the Experiences of High Performance Youth Athletes at a Sport School in Western Canada

Researchers:

Robert Sparks, Ph.D. Trisha Blair
Principal Investigator Co-Investigator/ Graduate Student
(604) 822-2767 (604) 341-3787

What is the study for?
This research aims to find out more about student-athletes’ perspectives of their experiences at a Canadian sport school. It is intended to help us better understand ways to overcome some of the barriers elite youth athletes face when trying to pursue excellence in both academics and sport.

What do you as a participant do?
As a student-athlete in grade 11 or 12, you will participate in a one-on-one interview at a pre-arranged time and location most convenient for you, with the co-investigator, Trisha Blair, from UBC to talk about your experiences at school. We will discuss things such as your opinions and perceptions of being a student in a sport school and what it is like to be an elite youth athlete. Before the interview begins, you will be asked to fill out a short questionnaire that includes more specific details about your athletic background.

When is it?
The interview will occur during the week of date(s) and will be organized between you and Trisha Blair, in order to find the best time and location for you. This information will be provided to you in the near future.
Who is running it?
The interview will be run by Trisha Blair (co-investigator), a graduate student researcher and Master’s candidate at UBC.

What about your privacy?
The information from the interview will be kept strictly confidential. The session will be audio taped and transcribed, and the tapes, transcripts, and questionnaires will be assigned codes. Pseudonyms will be used so that no names are associated with any of the data. You will not be identified by name, sport, or school in any report emerging from this study. Only Dr. Robert Sparks and Trisha Blair will have access to the interview information and due to the University of British Columbia regulations, all tapes, transcripts, and questionnaires will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in a locked research office.

What will the results be used for?
This study is for a Masters thesis in fulfillment of the requirements for a Master’s degree from UBC. The information may be used in the future for other academic productions such as journal articles and conference presentations. The goal is to better understand the social and performance benefits of sport schools for their student-athletes. This information could be used to inform policies and programs. A summary report of the work resulting from the project will be provided for you at the conclusion of the study.

Is participation voluntary?
Your participation in the interviews is completely voluntary, and you may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without any consequences what so ever. In order to participate, please sign the consent form and put it in the envelope provided. You should return the envelope to Trisha the next day. After receiving the signed consent form, Trisha will make arrangements to conduct the interview.

Compensation?
There will be light snacks and refreshments provided for you during the interview in appreciation for your participation.

Further information, questions, concerns?
If you have further questions or a desire to speak further about this project, please contact the co-investigator on the project, Trisha Blair, at 604-341-3787, or through email at: trishablair2002@yahoo.com. You may also contact the principal investigator on the project, Dr. Robert Sparks, at 604-822-2767, or through email at: Robert.sparks@ubc.ca.
Exploring the Experiences of High Performance Youth Athletes at a Sport School in Western Canada

In order for a student to participate in an interview, 1) prior permission must be provided on this form by a parent or legal guardian, and 2) the student must sign this form.

1) Parental / Legal Guardian Consent

I have read the attached Information Sheet and understand the nature of the study as described in the Information Sheet,

I have a copy of the Information Sheet for my own records.

I consent / I do not consent (circle one) to allow

______________________________________ to participate in this study.

(Please print student’s name)

Signed: ______________________________ Date: __________________

Name (printed): _______________________ Relation to youth: ____________

2) Student Assent

I have read the attached Information Sheet and understand the nature of the study as described in the Information Sheet.

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time with no consequences whatsoever.

I hereby agree to the above conditions, and consent to participate in this study.

Signed: ______________________________ Date: __________________

Name (Printed): ________________________

*The participant, parent and/or guardian have received a copy for their record(s).
Appendix D1 – Initial Letter of Contact (Agency Representative)

April 30, 2007

[School Principal Name]
[School Name]
3600 16th Avenue S.W.
Calgary, AB T3C 1A5

Dear [Principal Name],

My name is Trisha Blair and I am a Masters student in the School of Human Kinetics at the University of British Columbia. I am writing to ask if you could meet with me to discuss a research project I am proposing to conduct that will examine the benefits of sport schools for their student athletes. The purpose of our meeting would be for me to gain a better understanding of the operation and educational approach of your school and of sport schools more generally.

I am especially interested in the experiences of student-athletes in sport schools, in particular the social and performance benefits of sports schools for their student-athletes. Central to the background information needed in comprising my research are the following questions:

- What were the origins of sport schools, and what programs have Canadian sport schools been modeled after, in specific the [School Name]?
- How has the [School Name] been developed to fit Canadian youth in elite sport?
- What are the main educational and performance objectives of the [School Name], and what are the key program components involved in realizing these objectives?

I would welcome any information or suggestions you might have. Your comments will be used to provide background information to the study and will take the form of a graduate thesis and fulfill the requirements for a Master’s degree from UBC. See attached Consent Form and Confidentiality agreement.
Thank you for your consideration of this request. I will follow up this email with a phone call in a day or two.

Sincerely,

Trisha Blair  
Graduate Student  
University of British Columbia  
Tel: (604) 341-3787  
Email: trishablair2002@yahoo.com
Appendix D2 – Agency Representative Consent Form

Exploring the Experiences of High Performance Youth Athletes at a Sport School in Western Canada

I have read the Initial Contact Letter and understand the nature of the study and information you wish to collect from myself described in the Initial Contact Letter.

I have a copy of the Initial Contact Letter for my own records.

I understand that my participation in the study (entitled „Exploring the experiences of high performance youth athletes at a sport school in western Canada“) is entirely voluntary and that I may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice. I have received a copy of the Initial Contact Letter with a description of the study and information that will be requested of me, as well as a copy of this consent form for my own records.

Your interview will be audiotaped. The interview will be transcribed and a copy of your transcripts will be sent to you for your records. The interview transcript will be assigned a pseudonym and will be kept separately from the Consent Form in a locked file cabinet to ensure complete anonymity.

I consent to participate in this study.

Signed: ___________________________ Date: _______________________

Name (printed): ___________________________
Appendix E - Student Interview Guide

Youth High performance Sport Culture
1. What does high performance sport mean to you? (Probe: How do you define high performance sport? What are the key characteristics?)
2. What are your major short and long-term sport goals?
   a. What barriers do you see getting in the way of these?
   b. What do you think will help you overcome these barriers?
3. Who makes most of the decisions to do with your sport? (For example, training times, kind of training, competition schedule, physical health, and nutrition).
   a. How involved are you in this process, and is it important to you to be able to give feedback on how your sport operates; do you see value in this? Why, why not?

Social, Performance, Educational Implications
4. Describe what it's like to be a student-athlete? (Probe: What's it like combining academics and athletics? Why did you choose this school?)
5. How has going to this school affected your participation in sport?
   a. School?
   b. Social life? (For example, relationships with friends, family, coaches, you).
6. What are your educational goals? (Probe: For example, going to College/University or getting A’s and B’s on Provincial exams, etc.).
   a. What barriers do you see getting in the way of these?
   b. What do you think will help you overcome these barriers?
7. What do you like best about your school? (Probe: What are the biggest benefits for you being a student-athlete here?)
8. What do you like least about your school? Is there anything you wish you could change that would make it easier for you to accomplish your goals?
9. Describe the kind of relationship you have with your teachers.
10. Explain how decisions are made about your schoolwork (For example, due dates, homework assignments, exams). (Probe: How important is it to you to have a ‘say’ into these kinds of decisions?)
11. Is there anything your coach, club or sport organization does to make it easier for you to be able to do your schoolwork at the level you want?
12. When do you feel the most pressured or stressed? (Probe = what kinds of things are going on when you feel this way? What do you do to relieve this stress?)
13. How would you feel if you were told tomorrow that you could never compete in your sport again? (Probe: What would you do? How would this change your life?)
14. How do you feel about your overall experience at your school?
Appendix F – Expert Interview Guide (Agency Representative)

Background of the [School Name]:
1. Where did this idea come from?
2. Who were the key players in developing the [School Name]?
3. What would you consider the relevance/significance of sport schools?
4. Are there many student-athletes that have relocated from somewhere else to attend the [School Name]?

Organizational / Programmatic structure / Operation
5. Can you paint me a picture of a typical day at the [School Name]?
6. On a daily or weekly basis, how do you feel the [School Name] differs from a ‘typical’ school environment?
7. How are effectiveness, efficiency, and success of the [School Name] measured?
8. Describe the relationship or level of involvement that parents and coaches have with the [School Name]?
9. There’s a common critique that youth elite sport is too narrow and specialized. Where does the NSS, or sport schools more generally, fit into this?
10. What key program components of the [School Name] do you feel are most beneficial to the student-athletes in achieving their sporting goals, educational goals, and the holistic development of the student-athlete?

Educational Approach
11. How would you explain what the academic/educational approach is that the [School Name] uses?
12. What role do the student-athletes play in terms of decision-making? (ie. Homework, exams, due dates, courses to take…etc.)
13. For the students who either might leave the [School Name] before graduating, what are the most common reasons for this?
14. What is the [School Name]’s role in helping prepare your student-athlete’s for education beyond high school?
15. Are there any objectives of the [School Name] that are consistently difficult to accomplish?
National High Performance Sport Policy
16. How do you feel national high performance sport policies effect the operations and objectives of the [School Name] and sport schools in general?
17. What kind of impact do you think the 2010 Games in Vancouver will have on the [School Name] and idea of sport schools?
18. How do initiatives such as Own the Podium (OTP) and Road to Excellence (RTE) impact the [School Name]?
Appendix G – Student Interview Questionnaire

Instructions: The following questions are to get some background information about you that will help the study. It is very important that you answer all questions as accurately as possible. All information is entirely confidential and anonymity will be ensured.

1. What is your sex? _________ 2. What is your age? _________


5. How long have you been participating in your sport? ________________ years

6. Approximately how many hours do you train a week? ________________ hours

7. What do you consider to be your best result or most rewarding accomplishment in your sport thus far? ____________________________

8. What is the biggest disappointment you’ve experienced in your sport? ____________________________

9. Have you ever had a serious injury that has kept you from participating in your sport for longer than 6 weeks? If yes, how old were you when you got injured and how long were you injured for? ____________________________

10. When did you become serious about your sport and why? ____________________________

11. How long do you see yourself competing at a national level or higher in your sport? ____________________________

12. Are you carded and/or funded by your Provincial Sport Organization, National Sport Organization or any other source? ____________________________
CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL- MINIMAL RISK RENEWAL

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The Annual Renewal for Study have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board

Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair
Dr. Ken Craig, Chair
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair
Dr. Daniel Salhani, Associate Chair
Dr. Anita Ho, Associate Chair