EXPLORING ELITE WOMEN ATHLETES’ LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SELF-COMPASSION AND MENTAL TOUGHNESS

by

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Abstract

Self-compassion and mental toughness may be critical for women athletes coping with sport-related adversity. However, their relationship is not well understood. While self-compassion entails being kind, accepting and understanding towards the self, mental toughness can encourage self-judgement and harsh self-criticism. The objective of this study was to explore how elite level women athletes perceived and experienced mental toughness and self-compassion and their compatibility in the pursuit of athletic success and stress management. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven participants (14 interviews). Interviews were transcribed and an abductive thematic analysis was performed. Four overarching themes were identified. First, the role of adversity in athletic success. Participants acknowledged adversity as critical to their growth and development as athletes. Second, mental toughness is critical for coping in sport. Participants experienced mental toughness through perseverance, presence, perspective and preparation, and perceived mental toughness as critical to stress management and athletic success. Third, self-compassion is critical for coping in sport. Although participants were previously uneducated about self-compassion, they reported using self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness and acknowledged self-compassion as critical for coping in sport. Fourth, self-compassion and mental toughness are compatible. Participants acknowledged the joint contributions of being both self-critical and self-kind; neither being more important than the other, rather, an effective balance depended on the timing, the situation and the meaning it held for each individual athlete. Findings also suggest that self-compassion is key in building mental toughness. Without self-compassion, participants reported that they would not be able to move forward after facing adversity or shift into a mentally tough mindset. Finally, findings suggest that mindfulness is a key component of both self-compassion and
mental toughness, and may be the link between the compatible use of self-compassion and mental toughness. Participants reported that their ability to remain present, objective, non-attached and non-judgemental in the face of sport-related adversity was critical for the utility of both self-compassion and mental toughness. Overall, the current research demonstrates that self-compassion and mindfulness are worthy of investigating in elite women athletes, particularly with regards to their utility in coping with sport-related adversity and achieving a mentally tough mindset.
Lay Summary

Elite level, individual sport women athletes were interviewed to gain understanding of how they perceived and experienced self-compassion, mental toughness and their compatibility in the pursuit of athletic achievement and stress management. The findings indicated that self-compassion and mental toughness are compatible processes that are both vital in dealing with sport-related stress. While mental toughness was important for maintaining focus and persevering despite difficulty, self-compassion was equally important for self-care, managing difficult thoughts and emotions and moving forward after difficulty. Findings suggest that self-compassion is critical to the utility of mental toughness; without using self-compassion to cope with sport-related difficulty, participants could not shift into a mentally tough mindset. Finally, findings suggest that mindfulness is key in the utility of both self-compassion and mental toughness. Findings demonstrate that self-compassion and mindfulness are useful for coping in sport as well as for achieving mentally tough mindsets.
Preface

This research was approved by the University of British Columbia’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board (H15-01614). A version of this work will be submitted for publication. I conceptualized, designed and carried this research with the support of my supervisor, Dr. Peter Crocker. I was responsible for developing the research questions, participant recruitment, data collection/interviews, transcription, analysis and thesis preparation. Dr. Peter Crocker, Dr. Amber Mosewich and Dr. Guy Faulkner are co-authors on this thesis. The co-authors provided guidance, comments and feedback on the study design, literature review, data interpretation and final thesis preparation.
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To my dad; may this improve your golf game forever.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Sport participation can be highly evaluative and stressful for elite level women athletes (Hanin, 2007; 2010). Evaluations related to performance and appearance can invoke stress and may result in fear of failure, fear of negative evaluation, body dissatisfaction, social physique anxiety, shame, and guilt (Mosewich, Vangool, Kowalski & McHugh, 2009; Mosewich, Kowalski, Sabiston, Sedgwick & Tracy, 2011). Additionally, the demanding and pressurized situations inherent in elite level sport make stress and resultant emotional difficulty inevitable (Woodman & Hardy, 2009). How athletes deal with such emotional difficulty can influence their performance and overall well-being, making appropriate coping mechanisms essential for athletes, especially those at an elite level, to reach their sport-related goals (Hanin, 2010).

Mental toughness and self-compassion are two psychological processes that have been receiving much research attention as they both seem to help athletes cope with sport-related stressors, however, their relationship is not well understood.

1.1 Mental toughness

Mental toughness has been identified as one of the most critical psychological processes for managing stressful high-performance demands and achieving success in elite level sport (Connaughton, Hanton & Jones, 2010; Gucciardi & Gordon, 2011). Although debates exist about the definition of mental toughness, research suggests that it is associated with strong self-confidence and motivation, the ability to manage competition and training stress, and the ability to maintain and regain focus when distracted (Jones, 2002).

Research has suggested that mentally tough athletes tend to cope with sport-related stressors effectively and have strong beliefs in their ability to cope effectively (Nicholls, Polman, Levy & Backhouse, 2008). Furthermore, mental toughness has been associated with components
of adaptive functioning such as performance outcomes, achievement striving, intrinsic motivation, academic goal progress, thought control and optimism (Gucciardi, 2010; Gucciardi, Hanton, Gordon, Mallett & Temby, 2014; Nicholls et al., 2008). Anderson (2011) argues that the vast number of characteristics that have been associated with mental toughness and the inventories that have been developed to identify mentally tough athletes reduce athletes to subscales and do not tell us much about what mental toughness is. Additionally, with a lack of strong evidence supporting intervention outcomes in terms of performance, labeling athletes as mentally tough or mentally weak is rendered useless (Anderson, 2011).

Anderson (2011) also argues that mental toughness is grounded in masculine norms of physical strength and emotional stability, and thus has mainly been studied in male athletes. Little research has explored mental toughness in women athletes, and no research to date has investigated how women athletes experience it, and whether they perceive it to be grounded in masculine ideals. Anderson (2011) suggests that a more productive way to advance our understanding of mental toughness and its associated behaviours would be through interviewing athletes who appear to have the characteristics of mental toughness. Delving into athletes’ lived experiences and the meanings they attach to such experiences might provide more insight into the complex nature of what mental toughness is, how it is developed and how it should be measured. Thus, the current study aimed to explore how high-performance, women athletes perceived and experienced mental toughness.

1.2 Self-compassion

Self-compassion has also been identified as a useful coping resource that can buffer against the negative evaluations and emotional difficulty women experience in sport (Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack & Sabiston, 2014; Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen & Hancock, 2007; Mosewich,
Kowalski, Sabiston, Sedgwick & Tracy, 2011; Mosewich et al., 2013; Sutherland et al., 2014). It involves extending kindness and a non-judgemental attitude towards oneself in instances of pain and suffering (Neff, 2003a; 2003b). It fosters a desire to approach and alleviate pain and suffering, and an understanding that such experiences are part of being human (Neff, 2003a; 2003b). Within the sport domain, self-compassion can allow athletes to approach perceived inadequacies, weaknesses, mistakes, setbacks or failures in a kind, objective and understanding way (Berry, Kowalski, Ferguson & McHugh, 2010; Ferguson et al., 2014; Leary et al., 2007; Mosewich et al., 2011; 2013; Sutherland et al., 2014). Self-compassion has been associated with many components of adaptive functioning and has been useful in reducing rumination, excessive self-criticism, and concern over mistakes in women athletes (Mosewich et al, 2009). However, some women athletes have expressed resistance to employing self-compassion (Ferguson et al., 2014; Mosewich et al., 2014; Reis et al., 2015) as they perceive that a lack of harsh self-criticism may lead to complacency, therefore mitigating the motivation needed to excel in sport.

1.3 Compatibility of mental toughness and self-compassion

Although both self-compassion and mental toughness have been identified as useful for women athletes when managing stressful high-performance demands, the two processes may seem incompatible. While self-compassion entails being kind, accepting and understanding towards the self, mental toughness involves being self-judgemental, self-critical and hard on oneself. Therefore, it is possible that athletes who use self-compassion may not have the self-critical edge needed to be considered mentally tough. In the same regard, it is possible that perceptions of mental toughness and being hard on oneself could prevent an athlete from using self-compassion.
1.4 **Purpose and research questions**

Self-compassion and mental toughness are two psychological processes that may be critical for dealing with stress and emotional difficulty in the pursuit of athletic success. Although the two share similarities, they also share a key difference that may render them incompatible. It is likely that mental toughness and self-compassion are related; however, their relationship is not well understood. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to explore how elite level, women athletes perceived and experienced self-compassion and its compatibility with mental toughness in the pursuit of athletic success and stress management.

Mental toughness itself is highly misunderstood. One of the criticisms of the development of mental toughness is that it is grounded in masculine ideals of emotional stability and strength (Anderson, 2011). The current literature on mental toughness is mainly with male athletes or in sports predominantly played by males (Anderson, 2011). Research has yet to explore how women athletes perceive and experience mental toughness. Thus, another objective of this project was to examine elite level women athlete’s perceptions and use of mental toughness. The current study will address the following research questions:

1. How do elite-level women athletes perceive and experience mental toughness?
2. How do elite-level women athletes perceive and experience self-compassion and its compatibility with mental toughness to manage stress and facilitate sport achievement?
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In the following section, the key areas of stress, appraisal and coping in sport will be discussed. In subsequent sections, self-compassion and mental toughness and their potential roles in athletic success and in stress, appraisal and coping processes will be outlined.

2.1 Stress, appraisal and coping in sport

Stress occurs when an athlete perceives his or her engagement with the sport environment to be highly demanding, challenging, and exceeding personal resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Sport-related stressors are numerous and include: injury, poor performance, performance plateaus, equipment problems, environmental conditions, travel, media demands, superior opponents, personal expectations, evaluations by significant others and training demands (Hoar, Kowalski, Gaudreau & Crocker, 2006; Gould, Finch & Jackson, 1993; Mosewich et al., 2014). Each stressor is appraised by an athlete and results in varying coping strategies and stress responses for any given athlete in any given sport scenario. How an athlete appraises and subsequently copes with stressors can impact not only their athletic performance, but their overall sport satisfaction (Lazarus, 2000).

According to Lazarus’s Cognitive-Motivational-Relational Theory of Emotion (CMRTE) (1991; 2000), coping is highly interrelated with stress and emotion. Although emotion and stress are similar, the two constructs are distinct. Emotions are conscious or unconscious reactions to cognitively appraised events. These reactions trigger response tendencies in biological, physical, behavioural and cognitive processes (Thatcher, Jones & Lavallee, 2012). The most commonly reported emotions associated with sport are: anger, anxiety, shame, guilt, hope, relief, happiness and pride (Lazarus, 1991). These emotions are part of a dynamic and transactional relationship with the athlete and the environment (Lazarus, 1991; 2000).
With regard to the *relational* aspect of the CMRTE, the emotion-person-environment relationship is highly individual, contextual and subject to change over time. Emotions arise when an athlete appraises an event as having personal relevance in terms of threat, harm or benefit in relation to personal goals (Lazarus, 1991; 2000). Reactions in relation to personal goals reflect the *motivational* aspect of the CMRTE. An athlete’s motivation to achieve a goal will be a function of the personal meaning that goal holds and will affect the strength and type of the associated emotion (Lazarus, 1991; 2000). Each part of this complex process also includes *cognitive* appraisal.

Cognitive appraisal involves an evaluation of whether an event has significance for the athlete’s well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). There are two general types of cognitive appraisal: primary and secondary. During primary appraisal, one evaluates whether an event has significance for well-being in association with three types of goals. The first, goal relevance, involves evaluating if the situation involves personal harm, loss or threat. The second, goal congruence/incongruence, involves evaluating if the situation is beneficial or harmful. And the third, goal content, involves evaluating what kind of goal is threatened (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Primary appraisal can happen simultaneously with secondary appraisal, which is an evaluation about what can be done to manage, prevent, or adapt to a situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This ultimately leads to the type of coping strategy the athlete will use. Factors athletes will consider when evaluating coping options include: their future expectancies, their agency or perceived level of control, and their available personal resources (Lazarus, 1991; 2000; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Following appraisal, an athlete will engage in coping if they decided that the situation or the self needs to change. Coping involves “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts
to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). This process emphasizes the perception of demands and potential stressors and is therefore individualized and contextual.

The literature suggests that coping behaviors can be conceptualized from two different levels, micro-analytic and macro-analytic (Hanin, 2010). The micro-analytic level involves specific coping strategies in which athletes engage to cope with stress. These can include increased effort, wishful thinking, venting, planning, mental and physical disengagement, distraction and humour. Macro-analytical coping behaviors refer to higher order functions which include emotion-focused, problem-focused and avoidance coping. Problem-focused coping entails changing the athlete-environment transaction (Lazarus, 2000). The athlete focuses on changing some aspect of the environment, or changing their personal involvement with the environment. Emotion-focused coping involves changing how an athlete deals with or regulates emotions associated with the person-environment transaction. It is an attempt to regulate emotions through reinterpretation, reappraisal and/or re-direction of attention (Lazarus, 2000). Avoidance coping involves physical or mental disengagement from a task. How athletes cope with stress on a micro and macro-analytical level can affect not only how they feel, think, process information and behave, but also how they preform (Thatcher et al., 2012).

Having the necessary skills to cope with stress effectively plays a key role in sport (Lazarus, 2000; Nicholls, 2010). Self-compassion and mental toughness are two psychological processes that have the potential to facilitate the coping process in sport. The following sections will introduce self-compassion and mental toughness and situate them as potential coping resources for women athletes.
2.2 Self-compassion defined

Self-compassion is derived from Buddhist philosophy and entails being kind, non-judgemental and understanding towards oneself when faced with the experience of pain, inadequacy, suffering and failure (Neff, 2003a). It entails being moved by one’s own suffering and fosters an aspiration to do what is best for oneself and to relieve such suffering (Neff, 2003a). Self-compassion can breed an objective and realistic perspective of a challenging situation and allow individuals to approach and deal with setbacks constructively (Neff, 2003a; 2003b).

According to Neff (2003a; 2003b), self-compassion has three components, namely, self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Self-kindness is a way of relating to oneself with an open and understanding attitude and without harsh self-criticism or self-condemnation in the face of pain, suffering, inadequacy, and failure. Common humanity refers to recognizing that no one is alone in their suffering and that suffering is a part of life. Finally, mindfulness refers to objectively accepting painful thoughts and emotions without over-identifying with them. Neff (2003b) describes mindfulness as a “balanced awareness,” (p.85) where painful thoughts and emotions are neutralized.

While self-compassion entails extending kindness towards oneself, recognizing that one is not alone in their suffering and employing a mindful awareness, when used correctly it does not foster complacent behaviours such as self-pity or laziness (Neff, 2003a). Conversely, self-compassionate people approach rather than avoid negative life events and are more likely to take personal responsibility and personal initiative in doing so (Leary et al., 2007). Furthermore, self-compassion has been correlated with psychological flourishing (Ferguson et al., 2014). Taken together, not only can self-compassion help individuals to evade over-identification, isolation
and rumination, it can also promote approaching and evaluating negative life events in a constructive manner that fosters striving towards one’s goals as well as achieving optimal psychological functioning.

### 2.2.1 Self-compassion and self-esteem

Scholars suggest that the distinction between self-compassion and self-esteem is important. Although self-compassion and self-esteem are positively correlated (Neff & Vonk, 2009; Neff, 2003b; Leary et al., 2007; Neff, Kirkpartick & Rude, 2007) they are also fundamentally different. Self-esteem represents an overall feeling of self-worth that is based on self-evaluations and the evaluations of others (Neff & Vonk, 2009). It is contingent on satisfying a certain personal or social standard of worth that is highly grounded in feeling competent and in some cases, superior to others (Crocker & Park, 2004). While self-esteem is positively correlated with states such as happiness, optimism, persistence and openness, those who have high self-esteem are also more likely to engage in dysfunctional protective behaviours in order to preserve a certain level of self-worth (Neff & Vonk, 2009). Self-compassion, conversely, entails extending an open kindness towards the self and safeguards against the debilitating effects of excessive self-evaluation. Without excessive social and self-evaluation, self-compassion should render objective, non-judgemental knowledge about one’s weaknesses (Neff, 2003a; 2003b). It may promote taking responsibility for one’s thoughts, emotions and behaviours and promote engaging in less social comparison and more social connectedness (Neff, 2003a; 2003b). It may also facilitate a desire to make proactive changes to weaknesses, such as moral transgressions or effort expenditure that are detrimental to goal progress (Breines & Chen, 2012), as well as promote balanced, realistic and resilient self-appraisals to negative events (Leary et al., 2007). Furthermore, research suggests that self-compassion explains variance beyond self-esteem in
terms of anxiety, depression (Neff, 2003a, Neff, Kirkpatrick, et al., 2007), social comparison, contingent self-worth, self-consciousness, rumination, narcissism, anger, need for cognitive disclosure (Neff & Vonk, 2009), shame proneness, guilt-free shame proneness, shame-free guilt proneness, objectified body consciousness, fear of failure, fear of negative evaluation (Mosewich et al., 2011), introjected motivation, ego goal orientation, social physique anxiety, obligatory exercise (Magnus, Kowalski & McHugh, 2010) as well as positive emotions: happiness, optimism, and positive affect (Neff & Vonk, 2009). Findings highlight the distinctions between self-compassion and self-esteem as well as the benefits of promoting self-compassion versus processes that are fueled by social evaluation such as self-esteem.

2.2.2 Self-compassion and adaptive functioning

A body of research suggests that self-compassion is related to adaptive functioning. For example, self-compassion has been positively related to life satisfaction, social connectedness, emotional intelligence, mastery goals, perceived competence, intrinsic motivation, emotion-focused coping, self-esteem, authentic pride, positive affect, eudemonic well-being, self-determination, affective and reflective wisdom, psychological resilience, personal initiative, happiness, optimism, exploration, agreeableness, extroversion, contentiousness, curiosity, family functioning and well-being (Bluth et al., 2016a; Bluth, Gaylord, Campo, Mullarkey & Hobbs, 2016b; Ferguson et al., 2014; Leary et al., 2007; Mosewich et al., 2011; Neff, 2003a; Neff, 2003b; Neff, Kirkpatrick et al., 2007; Neff, Hsieh & Dejitterat, 2005; Neff & McGhee, 2010; Neff, Rude & Kirkpatrick, 2007; Odou & Brinker, 2014).

Likewise, self-compassion correlates negatively with negative affect, thought catastrophizing, personalizing, avoiding challenging tasks, defense attributions, self-criticism, depression, anxiety, sadness, rumination, thought suppression, fear of failure, performance
avoidance goals, emotion focused coping (venting and focusing on negative emotions),
avoidance oriented coping (denial and behavioural and mental disengagement), narcissism,
shame proneness (guilt free shame), neurotic perfectionism, objectified body conscientiousness,
body surveillance, body shame, fear of negative evaluation, symptoms of stress, mood
disturbances, passivity, embarrassment, humiliation and systolic blood pressure reactivity
(Birnie, Speca & Carlson, 2010; Bluth et al., 2016a; 2016b; Ferguson et al., 2014; Leary et al.,
2007; Mosewich et. al, 2011; Neff, 2003a; 2003b; Neff et al., 2005; Neff, Kirkpatrick et al.,

2.2.3 Self-compassion as a coping resource

Researchers (e.g., Ferguson et al, 2014; Leary et al., 2007; Mosewich et al., 2011; 2013;
Sutherland et al., 2014) have conceptualized self-compassion as a coping resource, suggesting
that self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness can regulate emotion and cognition by
buffering against the “negative effects of self-judgement, isolation, and rumination” (Neff, 2003b
p. 85). Self-compassion has the potential to have a significant impact across various stages of
the coping process, including the appraisal of a situation, perceived coping resources, coping
efforts employed, and overall coping effectiveness (Allen & Leary, 2010). Allen and Leary
(2010) identified five main categories of coping: positive cognitive restructuring, problem
solving, distraction and escape/avoidance, and support seeking. These categories align well with
self-compassion when conceptualized as a coping resource (Allen & Leary, 2010).

Positive cognitive restructuring involves re-evaluating a stressful situation in a more
positive way and has been associated with coping effectiveness (Allen & Leary, 2010).
Similarly, self-compassion involves having a mindset that is accepting, open and non-
judgemental towards the self when faced with a stressful situation. For example, Neff, Hsieh and
Dejitterat (2005) found that undergraduate students who scored higher in self-compassion were more likely to use coping strategies of acceptance and positive reinterpretation and less likely to focus on negative emotions after receiving a poor midterm grade than students who scored lower in self-compassion.

With regards to problem solving, Allen and Leary (2010) suggested that self-compassionate individuals were more likely to proactively change stressful aspects of their environments rather than mentally or physically disengage. Similarly, Breines and Chen (2012) found that self-compassion motivates people to improve personal weakness, moral transgressions and test performances. More specifically, undergraduate students who scored higher in self-compassion were more motivated to improve personal weakness, repair and not repeat a recent moral transgression and to spend more time studying for a second test after failing the first one than their less self-compassionate classmates. These findings further support the notion that self-compassionate individuals strive to rectify setbacks regardless of negative barriers; they seek to problem solve. Additionally, self-compassion positively correlates with optimism, curiosity, exploration and personal initiative, all of which predict proactive coping (Neff et al., 2007).

From a conceptual standpoint, self-compassion should be negatively correlated with distraction and escape/avoidance strategies of coping. Self-compassionate individuals are more likely to mindfully and kindly accept inadequacies, take responsibility for their actions and take proactive measures to resolve stressful situations than to physically or mentally distract themselves or disengage from stressful situations (Neff, 2003b; Leary et al., 2007). For example, Neff and colleagues (2005) found that students who did poorly on a midterm were less likely to engage in avoidance coping if they were high in self-compassion. Furthermore, self-compassion is highly correlated with emotion-focused coping (Neff et al., 2005), and is also associated with
aspects of problem-focused coping, such as personal initiative, exploration, optimism and curiosity (Neff, Rude et al., 2007). Although it is likely that self-compassion drives proactive coping strategies, more research in this area is needed.

Although self-compassionate individuals are no more likely to seek social support than less self-compassionate individuals, (Neff et al., 2005) adopting an attitude inclusive of common humanity should indirectly influence social connectedness (Neff, 2003b). Neff (2003a; 2003b) argued that recognizing we are not isolated in our suffering connects us as humans and actually expands our capacity to give and receive support. Neff, Kirkpatrick and Rude (2007) found that self-compassion was associated with lower anxiety after undergraduate students were asked to write down what they considered to be their greatest weakness in a mock job interview, suggesting that self-compassions buffers against self-evaluative anxiety. They also found that increases in self-compassion were associated with increases in social connectedness.

Both empirical and theoretical evidence support the notion that self-compassion can be used as a resource for coping with stress. The following section will position self-compassion as a coping resource for athletes, and especially for women athletes.

2.2.4 Self-compassion as a coping resource for athletes

Self-compassion is a coping resource highly applicable to athletes when dealing with setbacks in sport. Self-kindness promotes approaching setbacks in an accepting way that is void of harsh self-criticalness and its associated maladaptive outcomes, such as rumination and negative affect (Neff, 2003b; Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco & Lyunnomirsky, 2008). Self-kindness promotes positive states of mind and cultivates a desire to persevere despite setbacks. Mindfulness promotes acknowledging and accepting setbacks with an accurate, detached and balanced perspective. And finally, common humanity promotes recognizing that setbacks are
experienced by all, promoting social connectedness (Allen & Leary, 2010). Considering the many stressors inherent in sport participation, (e.g., Hanin, 2010) it seems reasonable to apply self-compassion as a coping resource, as it has the potential to enable an athlete to approach, embrace and move forward after setbacks with a positive, balanced and accurate perspective that is void of overidentification, isolation and self-condemnation. Research thus far has supported this notion. More specifically, research has suggested that self-compassion may be useful for buffering against negative self-evaluative thoughts, rumination and emotional difficulty by allowing an athlete to acknowledge and objectively evaluate setbacks without over-identifying with them (Ferguson et al., 2014; Mosewich et al., 2011; 2013; Reis et al. 2015). Additionally, the literature suggests that self-compassion might be especially useful for women athletes.

Although our understanding of gender differences in coping is inconclusive, there is some evidence that women deal with stress differently than men (Hanin, 2007; 2010; Kaiseler, Polman & Nicholls, 2013). Women report lower levels of self-compassion, mindfulness and perceived control over stressors than men (Hanmerneister & Burton, 2004; Neff, 2003a; 2003b; Neff et al., 2005, Neff & McGhee, 2010). In a sport context, women report more coach, teammate and communication related stressors than men (Anshel, Sutarso & Jubenville, 2009; Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Other stressful scenarios women athletes commonly report include poor performance, performance plateau, and injury (Mosewich, Crocker, & Kowalski, 2014). Women athletes also report unique stressors related to rumination, self-judgement, self-criticalness, isolation, over-identification, and evaluations based on both performance and appearance (Mosewich et al., 2009; 2011). These evaluations can invoke stress and may result in body dissatisfaction, social physique anxiety, fear of failure, fear of negative evaluation, shame, and guilt (Mosewich et al., 2009; 2011). Furthermore, women athletes report that self-criticism
and rumination are particular barriers to coping effectively (Mosewich, Crocker & Kowalski, 2014). Given that self-compassion can buffer against the negative outcomes associated with the stressors women commonly report, such as self-judgment, self-criticism and rumination (Neff, 2003b; Neff, Kirkpatrick et al., 2007), it seems relevant to explore self-compassion among women athletes. Research on self-compassion in sport thus far has mainly focused on women populations and has generated a small but growing body of literature supporting its usefulness as a coping resource.

Intervention research has supported the usefulness of self-compassion for women athletes. Mosewich and colleagues (2013) developed and implemented a week-long self-compassion intervention program comprising of a psychoeducational component and a self-compassionate writing component. The psychoeducational component consisted of education about the construct of self-compassion. The self-compassionate writing component involved rewriting recalled stressful events in a self-compassionate way. Participants were given module booklets with prompts explaining how to write with self-compassion: (1) describe the stressful event in detail, (2) describe how other athletes might have the same experience, (3) express understanding, kindness and concern to yourself, (4) describe the event objectively and unemotionally, and (5) integrate skills with another recalled stressful event. The intervention was effective in decreasing rumination, self-criticism and concern over mistakes as well increasing self-compassion in women athletes, compared to those participating in an attention control intervention.

Reis and colleagues (2015) had women athletes randomly assigned to a self-compassion induction group, a self-esteem induction group, or a writing control group. Athletes’ thoughts, emotions and reactions to hypothetical and recalled, emotionally difficult, sport-specific
scenarios were measured. They found that women athletes responded in healthier ways than their less self-compassionate counterparts. More specifically they found that self-compassion was positively related to equanimous thoughts and behavioural equanimity and negatively related to catastrophizing thoughts, personalizing thoughts and overall negative affect, however, the self-compassion induction component was not effective. While the existing intervention research has had a large impact on self-compassion literature, more is needed to support its usefulness for women athletes.

Three quantitative studies further support the notion that self-compassion is useful for women athletes. Mosewich and colleagues (2011) found that self-compassion was negatively related to self-conscious emotions (such as shame proneness and guilt-free shame proneness) and to maladaptive self-evaluative thoughts and behaviours (such as social physique anxiety and fear of failure) in young women athletes. Similarly, Ferguson and colleagues (2014) found that self-compassion was positively related to eudemonic well-being, or psychological flourishing in sport for women athletes. In a follow up study, Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack and Sabiston (2015) had young women athletes complete questionnaires that measured eudemonic well-being and self-compassion before responding to emotionally difficult sport-specific scenarios in young women athletes. Findings suggest that increased self-compassion was related to eudemonic well-being through more positive, perseverant and responsible reactions, and less ruminative, self-critical and passive reactions to emotionally difficult scenarios. Finally, findings indicated that increased self-compassion was related to increased body appreciation, autonomy, meaning and enjoyment in sport. These findings suggest that self-compassion may not only useful for managing negative thoughts and emotions, but also for promoting positive emotions and positive psychological functioning.
A recent mixed methods study provided further evidence that self-compassion is useful for dealing sport-related difficulty. Ingstrup, Mosewich and Holt (2017) interviewed ten varsity women athletes who scored high on the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003b). Results indicated that participants effectively utilized self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness to cope with adversity in sport. They also found that parents and personal experiences lead to the development of self-compassion. More specifically, parents taught participants how to be self-kind and how to view adversity from a broader, more mindful perspective. Additionally, participants learned about self-compassion through personal experiences such as, observing others, having positive and supportive coaches and through mental skills training with sport psychologists. This study provides further evidence supporting the utility of self-compassion in women athletes as well as insight into how it develops.

Two qualitative studies have highlighted how women athletes use self-compassion to manage their sport experiences. Mosewich and colleagues (2013) identified injury, poor performance and performance plateau as common setbacks women athletes report. In dealing with these setbacks, participants spoke about the importance of managing self-criticism, having a positive perspective, attaining social support and attaining balance, which all hold parallels to self-compassion. Finally, through semi-structured interviews and reflexive photography, Sutherland and colleagues (2014) found that self-compassion was useful for women athletes when dealing with emotional difficulty in sport. However, although women athletes acknowledged the effectiveness of self-compassion for dealing with setbacks in sport, they also reported a concern that becoming too self-compassionate might lead to mediocrity. It is possible that such a concern might prevent athletes from using self-compassion. It is also possible that
self-compassion may be incompatible with other coping resources that utilize self-judgement and self-criticism, such as mental toughness.

2.3 Mental toughness

Coaches, sport psychologists, and athletes have credited mental toughness as an integral part, and in some cases, as the most important part of achieving competitive success (Gucciardi, Gordon & Dimmock, 2009; Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002). Although much debate still exists over the definition, measurement and overall conceptual clarity of mental toughness, it is most commonly and generally theorised as a set of positive attributes that allow an athlete to persevere through difficult situations (Connaughton et al., 2010).

2.3.1 Mental toughness defined

Three models of mental toughness have driven both the conceptualization of mental toughness and subsequent research in sport, namely, 1) Clough, Earle and Sewell (2002) 4 C’s model of mental toughness, 2) Jones (2002) and Jones, Hanton and Connaughtons’ (2007) model of mental toughness, and 3) Gucciardi and colleagues’ (2009) model of mental toughness.

Based primarily on Hardiness Theory (Kobasa, 1979), Clough and colleagues’ (2002) 4 C’s model postulates that mentally tough athletes view challenge as something they are confident they can overcome and as something that is necessary for their development as an athlete. They believe they have control in dealing with adversity and are committed to reaching their goals. According to this theory, mentally tough athletes maintain low anxiety levels during highly competitive situations because they are confident in their ability to handle challenge.

Jones and colleagues’ (2002; 2007) model consists of four dimensions with ten coinciding subcomponents. The first dimension, attitude/mindset refers to having an unshakable belief in one’s ability to succeed as well as an ability to focus on achieving goals. The second
dimension, training, involves using *long-term goals as the source of motivation*, remaining in *control of the environment* and *pushing oneself to the limit*. The third dimension, competition, consists of an athlete’s ability to *handle pressure, stay focused, regulate performance* and *believe* in one’s ability to succeed despite making mistakes. The final dimension, post competition, refers to an athlete’s ability to *handle failure* and conversely, *handle success*. Jones and colleagues (2002; 2007) define mental toughness as:

> Having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to, generally, cope better than your opponents with the many demands (competition, training, lifestyle) that sport places on a performer. Specifically, be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure (p.209).

Gucciardi and colleagues (2009) developed a model that describes the process of the experience of mental toughness and its facilitation of goal progress. They emphasized how an athlete deals with adversity through their approach, appraisal and reaction. Central to this notion is the importance of evaluation via self-reflection and feedback, so an athlete can determine if his/her approaches, appraisals and reactions are appropriate and useful. They defined mental toughness as:

> Mental toughness is the presence of some or the entire collection of experientially developed and inherent sport-general and sport-specific values, attitudes, emotions, cognitions, and behaviours that influence the way in which an individual approaches, responds to and appraises both negatively and positively construed pressures, challenges, and adversities to consistently achieve his or her goals (p. 69).
Although I did not adhere to one specific definition of mental toughness, Gucciardi and colleagues’ (2014) model of mental toughness was used as a theoretical basis for creating the interview guide as it was the most contemporary model at the time. After a comprehensive review of the existing literature and findings from their unpublished interviews, Gucciardi and colleagues (2014) found seven attributes that had the strongest empirical and theoretical implications for mental toughness in terms of goal progress including: generalized self-efficacy (belief in one’s ability to achieve success), buoyancy (ability to effectively employ skills in response to adversity), success mindset (desire and motivation to achieve success), optimistic style (expect and appraise events and outcomes as positive), context knowledge (knowledge of the performance context and an understanding of how to reach one’s goals within that context), emotion regulation (ability to use emotions that facilitate optimal performance) and attention regulation (ability to focus on relevant variables and screen out distracting or irrelevant variables). Gucciardi and colleagues (2014) used these attributes as a theoretical foundation in a series of five studies that examined dimensionality, nomological network, and traitness across several achievement domains including sport, military, education and the workplace. In contrast to the existing literature, they found a lack of discriminant validity among the key attributes of mental toughness, suggesting that a unidimensional view may be more appropriate than a multidimensional view of mental toughness. Also, contrary to the existing literature, they found that mental toughness is best conceptualized as a state-like (rather than a trait-like) concept that can change and/or have lasting properties across situations and time. In accordance with existing literature, they found that individuals high in mental toughness were less likely to perceive the demands of their environment as exceeding their personal resources. They also found support for the importance of mental toughness for performance outcomes; however, the samples studied
were not in a sport context. Given their research findings, Gucciardi and colleagues (2014), proposed the following working definition of mental toughness:

A personal capacity to produce consistently high levels of subjective (e.g., goal progress) or objective performance (e.g., sales, race time, GPA) despite everyday challenges and stressors as well as significant adversities (p.15).

The theories and definitions outlined above have provided the foundation for research and conceptualizations of mental toughness. Generally, most mental toughness theories are centred around the notion of possessing mental resources that allow an athlete to persevere through adversity (Connaughton et al., 2010). However, the lack of cohesiveness and conceptual clarity within the mental toughness literature is problematic and undermines the construct validity and overall scientific legitimacy of mental toughness (Gucciardi, 2017). In terms of conceptualizing mental toughness, models range in their degree of specificity, from being highly specific (e.g., maintaining low anxiety during competition), to more general (e.g., broad categories of characteristics such as optimistic mindset). There is variance amongst existing models in terms of the traitness of mental toughness (state-like or trait-like), the dimensionality of mental toughness (multidimensional or unidimensional), what mental toughness is and is not (outcome, antecedent, mediator or moderator), how mental toughness can be measured (e.g., in relation to opponents, in relation to subjective or objective outcomes or in relation to characteristics) and how mental toughness is different from existing constructs (e.g., grit, hardiness or resilience; Gucciardi, 2017). According to Gucciardi (2017), other problems inherent in existing models of mental toughness include the use of absolute language, ambiguity surrounding the usefulness of mental toughness, ambiguity surrounding the justification of operationalized terms and the lack of empirical evidence to back up both theories and
measurement of mental toughness. Additionally, Gucciardi (2017) pointed out that in most models, the meaning of mental toughness was based on unique attributes instead of commonality amongst attributes. In an attempt to clarify existing discrepancies and to collaborate the most fundamental and common attributes of mental toughness, Gucciardi (2017) proposed the following working definition of mental toughness:

A state-like (implies the characterization of enduring yet varying properties across situations or time) psychological (psychological limits the content universe to skills, knowledge, or attributes that are inherent aspects of a person’s make-up) resource (a unidimensional concept where psychological dimensions accumulate and integrate over time) that is purposeful (i.e., provide direction and energy towards self-referenced objectives), flexible (i.e., flexibility to competing goals, novelty, change and uncertainty), and efficient in nature (i.e., maximize the congruence between displayed behaviour and self-referenced objectives) for the enactment and maintenance of goal-directed pursuits (p.5).

While Gucciardi’s (2017) definition addresses the outlined concerns and is a step towards clarifying the conceptualization of mental toughness, he predicts that it will change and develop with more research.

2.3.2 Mental toughness and adaptive functioning

Mental toughness has been associated with many adaptive outcomes in sport. In a study of adolescent athletes, Mahoney, Gucciardi, Ntoumanis and Mallet (2014) found that mental toughness was positively correlated with psychological needs satisfaction, performance (race time) and positive affect, and negatively associated with negative affect. Furthermore, psychological needs satisfaction mediated the positive relationship found between autonomy-
supportive environments and mental toughness and the negative relationship between controlling environments and mental toughness.

Mental toughness has also been related to achievement striving, intrinsic motivation (Gucciardi, 2010), positive emotions, academic goal progress, social goal progress, thriving (Gucciardi et al., 2014), thought control, relaxation, logical analysis, optimism (Nicholls, Polman Levy et al., 2008), problem focused coping, seeking social support, active coping (Kaiseler, Polman, & Nicholls, 2009), self-efficacy, perseverance, goal commitment, positivity and stress minimization (Middleton, Martin & Marsh, 2011). Although it appears that any adaptive psychological attribute has been associated with, or labelled as a mental toughness characteristic, there is some general consensus that mental toughness is reflected in an athletes’ ability to cope with the stress of highly demanding competitive situations (Hanton & Connaughton, 2002).

2.3.3 Mental toughness and coping

Athletes and coaches report that the ability to cope with stress as well as a belief in one’s ability to cope with stress are key to mental toughness (e.g., Levy et al., 2012; Gucciardi et al., 2009; 2014). For example, soccer players and cricket players perceived mentally tough players as those who coped better with pressure than their opponents (Bull, Shambrook, James et al., 2005; Thelwell, Weston & Greenlees, 2005). It is unclear whether the link between mental toughness and coping is due to the use of different coping strategies, the effectiveness of certain coping strategies, or the appraisal of the stressor. However, the literature suggests that mentally tough athletes cope more effectively because, during primary appraisal, they perceive that they are capable of successfully coping with stress. Moreover, they report higher levels of perceived control and perceived coping ability and lower levels of perceived distress and anxiety intensity (Levy, Nicholls & Polman, 2012; Gucciardi et al., 2014).
During secondary appraisal, mentally tough athletes seem to adopt similar macro-level coping strategies. Nicholls and colleagues (2008) found that mental toughness was associated with problem-focused coping strategies, such as mental imagery, effort expenditure, thought control, and logical analysis. Mentally tough athletes were also less likely to engage in avoidance coping strategies such as distancing, mental distraction and resignation. Similarly, Kaiseler and colleagues (2009) found that mental toughness was associated with more problem-focused and less emotion-focused and avoidance coping. They also found that mental toughness was associated with less stress intensity and more perceived control, however, the type of stressor experienced by athlete was not related. Taken together, mental toughness is highly related to effective coping in sport.

2.4 Links between mental toughness and self-compassion

Self-compassion and mental toughness are conceptualized as different constructs in a sport context. Self-compassion is related to self-kindness and acceptance in the face of sport-related difficulties that is void of harsh self-criticalness and self-judgment. Conversely, mental toughness is related to a resilient pursuit of achievement striving in the face of sport-related difficulties that may be inclusive of harsh self-criticalness and self-judgment. The discrepancy between the usefulness of self-criticism and self-judgment versus self-kindness in the pursuit of managing stress and facilitating athletic achievement may render mental toughness and self-compassion incompatible. Conceptually, mentally toughness may prohibit an athlete from using effective self-compassion.

Some athletes report that being self-critical is key to their athletic success and voice concern that being overly self-compassionate might lead to passivity and complacency in their sport (Ferguson et al., 2014; Mosewich et al., 2014; Reis et al., 2015; Sutherland et al., 2015).
They fear that being overly kind and accepting towards the self would hinder their athletic success by adopting an attitude accepting of mediocre performance. Neff (2003b) would argue that self-compassion does not breed complacency; rather, it breeds a desire to alleviate personal difficulties. Furthermore, research has suggested that self-compassion can be useful for helping women athletes strive to reach their sport potential through proactive behaviours grounded in personal initiative, personal responsibility and the desire to improve as an athlete and as a human being (Ferguson et al., 2014). While self-criticism is often essential to solve problems and allow for improvement, Mosewich and colleagues’ (2014) findings suggest that athletes seek a constructive self-criticism, in which they learn from their mistakes without over-identification or rumination. Self-compassion is likely useful in obtaining such constructive self-criticism, as it can act as a buffer against the negative effects of rumination, isolation and over-identification (Mosewich et al., 2013; 2014; Neff, 2003b; Neff, Kirkpatrick et al., 2007). Although it seems that self-compassion is related to reducing self-criticism and increasing proactive coping behaviours, more research is needed, and especially with regard to this notion of complacency.

In the same regard, Anderson (2011) suggests that too much mental toughness could potentially be detrimental for an athletes’ psychological and physical well-being. In terms of pain and threat appraisals, mentally tough athletes may be more likely to play through injury and less likely to seek medical support and to adhere to rehabilitation (Crust, 2008; Levy at al., 2007). Psychological well-being may be threatened by mentally tough athletes who silence emotional difficulty (Anderson, 2011). Anderson (2011) attributes mental toughness to a fantasy-like fallacy built on masculine traits that are unobtainable for most athletes. With the fear of appearing ‘soft’ or ‘weak’, athletes may attempt to adhere to unobtainable mental
toughness expectations. Furthermore, Anderson (2011) questions what might happen to athletes who get labeled as mentally weak.

Although self-compassion and mental toughness may seem incompatible in a sport environment, they share similarities. Both are used for dealing with sport-related difficulties (e.g., Connaughton et al., 2010; Mosewich et al., 2011). Self-compassion has been deemed as stress and coping resource (e.g., Ferguson et al, 2014; Leary et al., 2007; Mosewich et al., 2011; 2013; Sutherland et al., 2014) whereas mental toughness has been highly associated with coping (e.g., Gucciardi et al., 2009; 2014; Levy et al., 2012). Both are used by athletes to manage stress, focus and re-focus attention, persevere despite setbacks and are related to achievement striving, a strong desire to do what is best for oneself, and a strong desire to proactively rectify maladaptive situations. The mindfulness component of self-compassion is closely related to focusing attention and concentration, two elements that are key to mental toughness. Similarly, the self-kindness aspect of self-compassion is inclusive of having an optimistic mindset and strong self-belief, again attributes key to mental toughness. Although the common humanity aspect of self-compassion is not a direct attribute of mental toughness, both are related to social connectedness (Kaiseler et al., 2009; Neff, 2003a; 2003b; Neff et al., 2007). Both also include cognitive and emotional regulation and are associated with adaptive functioning outcomes such as positive affect, thought control, optimism, intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, well-being and thriving (e.g., Gucciardi et al., 2014; Neff et al., 2007). Furthermore, both have been theorized as sets of psychological skills that are somewhat learned and somewhat innate (Gucciardi et al, 2007; Neff, 2003a; 2003b).

Taken together, self-compassion and mental toughness share many similarities and both may be critical for elite women athletes’ coping processes. However, the two processes also
share a key difference that may render them incompatible. The current research will explore elite women athletes’ perceptions and experiences of self-compassion and mental toughness and their compatibility in the pursuit of athletic achievement and stress management.
Chapter 3: Methods

3.1 Paradigmatic standpoint

An interpretive paradigmatic stance was adopted to explore the elite women athletes’ experiences and perceptions of self-compassion and mental toughness. From a relativist ontological standpoint, I acknowledge that the meaning each athlete attributed to their experiences was influenced by multiple contextual realities and could change across different situations (Creswell, 2007). From a subjectivist and constructionist epistemology, I focused on understanding the participants’ interpretations of their experiences and the social contexts that shaped their accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). I acknowledge that I was not separate from the research process. Rather, the participants and I worked together to co-create the research findings, and my own preconceived notions, both conscious and unconscious, influenced the research process (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Analysis of the data was abductive; a combination of both inductive and deductive (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). While theoretical and empirical literature drove the research questions and some themes identified were driven by extant literature (deductive), other themes identified were data driven (inductive) and not tied to any pre-existing theoretical framework. From a latent level of analysis, I identified underlying assumptions, conceptualizations and nuances that guided each athlete’s experience (Clarke & Braun, 2016). Thus, I interpreted the data beyond its semantic, surface meaning and aimed to produce inductive, theory-generating findings.

3.2 Participants

Elite level athletes are likely to experience stress when training for and competing in international events (Woodman & Hardy, 2009). Mental toughness and self-compassion may be two psychological processes that elite athletes use to manage stress. Previous literature has
suggested that elite level athletes tend to possess certain psychological characteristics associated with mental toughness, such as attentional focus, commitment to the pursuit of excellence, confidence, achievement motivation, concentration, freedom from worry and coping with adversity (Orlick & Parington, 1988; Smith, Schutz, Smoll & Ptacek, 1995). Additionally, elite level women athletes acknowledge the importance and usefulness of self-compassion in a sport context, but also express a fear that too much self-compassion may lead to mediocrity (Sutherland et al., 2014), potentially negating the critical pursuit of high achievement necessary for mental toughness. Due to their extensive experience in a stressful, demanding sport environment and probable existing relationship with the two psychological processes of interest, elite level women athletes were recruited to participate in this study.

In alignment with previous studies, elite was defined as athletes that have competed internationally at a major championship, such as the Olympic Games or the World Championships (Hanton & Connaughton, 2002; Woodman & Hardy, 2009). To be considered for the study, athletes had to still be involved in international competition or recently retired (within one year). The study focused on individual sport athletes to keep the group homogenous. There is evidence that at a team level, communal coping and interpersonal emotion regulation in sport influence and are influenced by the social context, taking processes such as emotional contagion and efforts to regulate one’s own as well as one’s teammates emotions into account (Crocker, Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2015). Without the influence of teammates, individual sport athletes’ coping processes may be more isolated, and thus different than the coping processes of team sport athletes.

Although gender differences in coping are not well understood, there is some evidence suggesting that women may cope differently than men (Hanin, 2010; 2007; Kaiseler & Polman,
Women typically report lower levels of self-compassion and mindfulness than men, and report high levels of rumination, isolation and self-criticism (Mosewich et al., 2014; 2013; Neff, 2003b). Previous research on self-compassion has focused on women athletes and has suggested that it is a functional resource for dealing with adversity in sport (Mosewich et al., 2014). Conversely, the focus of mental toughness research has been with male athletes or with sports that are predominantly played by males (Anderson, 2011). Thus, it has been suggested that the development of mental toughness is gendered and grounded in masculine archetypes of being strong, heroic and emotionally stable (Anderson, 2011). Research has yet to explore how women athletes perceive mental toughness. Furthermore, no research has explored the perceived compatibility between self-compassion and mental toughness in women athletes. Thus, women athletes were appropriate participants for this research project.

Prior to participant recruitment, ethical approval was obtained from the Behavioural Research Ethics board at the University of British Columbia. Purposive sampling was used to recruit a sample of seven, elite women athletes (Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling enabled me to recruit a closely defined, homogenous group that was relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2002). Although there are no specific sample size requirements for thematic analysis, Clarke and Braun (2016) suggest that identifying patterned meaning across a data set requires a sample of at least six participants. In addition to their recommendation, I also considered that sample size is dependent on the research questions, the quality of the data collected, the volume of data collected, the credibility of data collected, the time and resources available to the researcher and the number of interviews conducted per participant (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Morse, 2000; Patton, 2002). There is some evidence suggesting that the majority of the codes within a thematic analysis can be identified within the first six transcripts, and the full range of
analysis can be completed within 12 interviews, given that the sample is homogenous and possesses a high level of expertise or mastery in the field of inquiry (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). With that, I initially aimed to obtain six to eight participants. Although I do not necessarily hold the theoretical position aligned with data saturation, (Bowen, 2008) that “data collected provide a complete and truthful picture of the object of study,” I found that with seven participants, no new themes in the data were emerging and any new information provided little to no changes to existing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 54). Furthermore, a sample size of seven participants, who were each interviewed twice, allowed me to provide rich and detailed interpretive accounts of each individual’s experience, while drawing on themes across the data set as a whole.

Participants ranged in age from 22 to 34 years, with an average age of 28.1 years. All participants identified their ethnocultural background as Canadian, two of whom identified as French Canadian and Japanese Canadian. Four participants completed a college or university degree, two completed their high school diplomas and one completed some of their high school diploma. Annual average household income varied, with four participants earning between $15,000 and $30,000, one participant earning between $31,000 and $50,000 and two participants earning over $75,000. Two participants were married and five were single/never married. None of the participants had children. All athletes held a part or full-time job or attended school except for one full-time professional athlete.

Each athlete played various sports growing up, but started participating in their designated sport at an average age of 9.6 years, ranging from five years to 15 years. All participants were still competing in their sport and two were considering retirement. Two
participants were half pipe snowboarders and the remaining five included a swimmer, an ice skater, a downhill mountain biker, a trampolinist, and a rock climber.

Sport Canada assists international caliber, high-performance athletes with financial compensation through the Athlete Assistance Program (or carding program). Carding is offered to eligible Canadian athletes who are nominated by their sport organization and rank in the top 16 at the World Championships, Olympics or Paralympics. Five participants had been or remained carded athletes and two athletes competed internationally in sports (rock climbing and downhill mountain biking) that are not funded by Sport Canada. Collectively, the women had competed in over 315 international events (including eight Olympic Games), obtained several first-place finishes at a National and World Cup/World Championship level, and earned several gold medals and podium finishes at an international and Olympic level.

3.3 Procedures

Participants were recruited by a letter of initial contact (see Appendix A), sent via email to gatekeepers, including coaches, community contacts, Canadian Sport Institutes, Canadian Olympic Committee, Pacific Sport, National Sport Organizations/National Sport Federations and International Association of Athletics Federations in early November 2015. Participant recruitment happened concurrently with the interview process and lasted until early June 2016. Gatekeepers were asked for assistance in recruitment by providing potential study participants with information about the study as well as my contact information. Gatekeepers were also given the option to let me explain the study to potential participants in person (in a group or one-on-one session) at a time that was convenient for the athletes. Gatekeepers were notified that the study was confidential and as such, they would not be privy to who chose to contact me or to who participated in the study. In order to provide athletes with the opportunity to participate in
the study without the involvement of gatekeepers, a recruitment poster (see Appendix B) was placed in public venues such as high-performance clinics, physiotherapy clinics, training facilities and athlete resource centers. However, no potential participants contacted me by means of the recruitment posters, and all research participants were obtained via gatekeepers.

Women who were interested in participating in the study contacted me directly by email. Once contacted, I answered any additional questions that the potential participants had regarding the study. A letter of introduction (see Appendix C), a study consent form (see Appendix D), and a basic demographic questionnaire (see Appendix E) were distributed at that time by email. Potential participants were then given a minimum of 24 hours to decide whether or not they were interested in participating. Those who wished to participate were asked to contact me to confirm their enrolment in the study. At that time, a mutually convenient interview time for a first interview was scheduled at a location of the participants' choosing (each participant took part in two semi-structured interviews). Participants were asked to fill out the demographic questionnaire electronically and email it to me prior to the scheduled interview. All interviews, with the exception of three, were conducted in person in coffee shops throughout the Vancouver/Lower Mainland area. Two participants lived out of province; thus, the two interviews with these participants were conducted via Skype. One other participant lived outside the Vancouver/Lower Mainland area and was only able to meet in person for the second interview; the first interview was conducted via Skype. These three participants provided consent by signing the consent form electronically and sending it to me via email, and also provided verbal consent at the beginning of the first interview. All participants were offered a $10 stipend for each of the two interviews (total of $20) as compensation for their time and to cover any related travel costs. At the beginning of each interview, it was emphasized that
participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Each participant took part in two semi-structured interviews (for a total of 14 interviews). The interviews were conducted approximately one month apart to allow a sufficient amount of time for me to transcribe and analyze the first interview before moving on to the second one. First time interviews ranged in length from 56 minutes to one hour and 35 minutes with an average time of one hour and seven minutes. Second time interviews ranged in length from 39 minutes to one hour and 25 minutes, with an average time of 42 minutes. Overall, an average of one hour and ten minutes were spent with each participant for a total of 15 hours of interview time, which yielded 242 pages of transcripts. Transcripts were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, and participants were given a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. Semi-structured interviews were used to offer structure and consistency, yet flexibility to probe when topics in relation to the research questions arose (Smith & Sparkes, 2014). Open ended questions were utilized to encourage participants to express and elaborate on the meanings they attached to their experiences (Smith & Sparkes, 2014). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were useful for exploring and unpacking complex and novel processes (Patton, 2002).

At the beginning of the first interview, participants were asked to complete the consent form. The first interview (see Appendix F) was grounded in pre-existing literature and focused on the athletes’ understanding, perceptions and experiences with mental toughness. Topics included: the meaning of mental toughness, the components of mental toughness, the role mental toughness had in their athletic pursuits, gender and mental toughness, personal experiences with mental toughness, and examples of other athletes who may or may not be mentally tough. Although self-compassion was not explicitly named or explained to the participants in the first
interview, perceptions of its components (self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness) were probed with questions informed by pre-existing literature. Previous research has suggested that athletes tend to be influenced by the theoretical definition of self-compassion (Mosewich et al., 2014; Sutherland et al., 2014). It is likely that some athletes have preconceived notions and biases about what self-compassion entails, especially in a sport context. Furthermore, some studies have found the definition of self-compassion to be inaccessible and hard for participants to understand (Bennett, Hurd Clarke, Kowalski & Crocker, 2017; Mosewich et al., 2013). To give participants the opportunity to reflect on the components of self-compassion without preconceived notions, biases or misunderstandings, self-compassion was not introduced to participants or defined until the second interview.

The second interview (see Appendix F) focused on self-compassion and the role it has in the pursuit of athletic excellence. Meeting for a second interview allowed me to probe further on topics of interest from the first interview and provided an opportunity for clarification and feedback from the participants. At the beginning of the second interview, I provided the participants with a summary of my interpretations of their perceptions and experiences of mental toughness and asked for their feedback regarding the accuracy of my interpretations. Although it has been suggested that member checking is ineffective for verification, trustworthiness and reliability (Smith & McGannon, 2017) and member checking does not align with my ontological and epistemological underpinnings (I was not searching for one possible truth), I was simply extending courtesy to participants, and seeking feedback so I could further reflect on my interpretations. I also asked the participants for further clarification on specific topics that were unclear during the first interview. After the participants provided feedback and clarification, I introduced self-compassion using Kristen Neff’s video (http://self-compassion.org/) and
provided participants with a handout summarizing the content of the video (see Appendix G). Athletes were then asked to describe if and when they used self-compassion in their sport experience and how they perceived it in relation to sporting performance. They were also asked if they perceived that self-compassion was compatible with their understanding and perceptions of mental toughness.

3.4 Data analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to explore how elite level, women athletes used and perceived self-compassion and mental toughness in their sport. Thematic analysis is a flexible analysis method for “identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data,” in rich detail, and is commonly used to study how individuals make sense of their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.6). Not only can researchers identify and describe themes across the data employing thematic analysis, but it also allows researchers to interpret specific aspects of the data on a latent level (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since this research project involved exploring the lived experiences of participants, a thematic analysis allowed me not only to identify themes that transected the data, but also to analyze the underlying assumptions, conceptualizations and nuances that guided each athlete’s experience. Furthermore, it allowed me to identify themes that were both driven by extant literature (deductively) and driven by the data themselves (inductively). Thematic analysis is also flexible because it does not adhere to any particular ontological, epistemological or theoretical framework, making it useful for a wide range of research questions, data and theoretical perspectives (Clarke & Braun, 2016). Such flexibility allowed me to engage in a “deep, freewheeling, aesthetically satisfying interpretation of the data” using my own theoretical perspectives (Smith & Sparkes, 2014, p. 124). The research process
was iterative in nature; namely, the data collection and analysis happened concurrently (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Clarke and Braun’s (2016) guidelines for thematic analysis were followed to analyze the data. Although Clarke and Braun (2016) outline six phases to thematic analysis, they also reiterate that such phases should be used flexibly and are not linear in nature. As such, I moved back and forth between the phases as suited to answer the research questions. The first phase of thematic analysis is familiarizing oneself with the data (Clarke & Braun, 2016). During this phase, I read and re-read the transcripts, and took reflexive notes on ideas about meaning and potential patterns observed in the data.

Phase two entailed generating initial codes, or “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63). Although some codes identified were informed by the extant literature, I aimed to code for themes that were data-driven. Coding was done manually, using highlighters for data extracts supporting potential patterns/themes and colored pens to make notes in the transcript margins. Each transcript was re-read three to five more times, with each pass accumulating more detailed notes in the margins. Notes included extract summaries, key words or topics, potential themes, points that needed participant clarification, and connections and divergences in the participants’ accounts. For example, one participant claimed she was not mentally tough, but later described her mental toughness and stated that all athletes, especially those of her caliber (Olympic level) required mental toughness to compete. During the second interview, this athlete was asked to clarify the discrepancy in her account. At this point, coding had served to reduce the data by summarizing its’ surface meaning at a semantic level but also entailed interpreting implicit ideas about how these women experienced mental toughness and
self-compassion at a latent level. The process of coding was systematic in nature, in that it involved working through each transcript several times until I perceived that the codes captured patterns of meaning as well as differing perceptions across the data set that were in relation to the research questions.

Next, I generated a list of coded data for each participant (seven documents total). These documents outlined the codes, their meaning and their corresponding data extracts. In order to reduce and expand the data in new ways, I then organized those seven documents of coded data into three categories using colored highlighters: mental toughness, self-compassion or the compatibility of self-compassion and mental toughness. These categories were created based on the research questions. Codes were categorized based on what the respective data excerpt was in relation to (e.g., if the participant was talking about a time they used mental toughness, that code would be put in the mental toughness category). I then reduced the seven documents of coded data into three documents as per the outlined categories. Although there was some overlap between categories, this process gave me perspective on how self-compassion and mental toughness were perceived and experienced by the participants and how they were related to each other, both within and across participants. At this point, I had the codes organized both by category (three documents: self-compassion, mental toughness and the compatibility of self-compassion and mental toughness) and by participant (seven documents: one for each participant). This allowed me to analyze the codes further and gain insight into how the codes were connected by overarching themes. At this point, I had gained in-depth knowledge of the data through familiarization and coding and was ready to move to the next phase.

During the third phase, I analyzed the codes further and identified overarching themes that connected the codes (Clarke & Braun, 2016). Initially, I identified 13 “candidate themes”
(tentative themes that would later change; Clarke & Braun, 2016, p.110). These themes were identified based on my perceptions of broad patterns of meaning across the codes, in relation to the research questions and included: (1) the importance of facing adversity, (2) self-compassion as critical for coping in sport, (3) mental toughness as critical for coping in sport, (4) the compatibility of mental toughness and self-compassion, (5) having an attitude of gratitude, (6) perspective: do you see a mountain or an anthill?, (7) the importance of Zen, (8) emotional regulation as highly individualized, (9) mental toughness as individualized, not gendered, (10) barriers to mental toughness, (11) the role of self-compassion in building mental toughness, (12) the importance of mindfulness and (13) the inaccessibility of self-compassion. Codes were then sorted into each theme accordingly and subthemes were constructed. Although each candidate theme had a central organizing concept, some of them would later collapse together or be removed if they did not capture the essence of the majority of the codes, or if they were not supported by the research questions or by what the participant actually said (Braun & Clarke, 2016). Namely, candidate themes (5) having an attitude of gratitude, and (6) perspective: do you see a mountain or an anthill?, collapsed together to form sub-themes under the overarching theme: mental toughness is critical for coping in sport. Candidate themes (7) the importance of Zen, and (12) the importance of mindfulness, collapsed together to form a sub-theme under the overarching theme: self-compassion and mental toughness are compatible. Candidate theme (8) emotional regulation as highly individualized, became a sub-theme under overarching theme: self-compassion and mental toughness are compatible. Candidate theme (9) mental toughness as individualized, not gendered, became a sub-theme under the overarching theme: mental toughness is critical for coping in sport. Candidate theme (10) barriers to mental toughness, was discarded as it overlapped with sub-theme: lack of mental toughness, under the overarching
theme: mental toughness is critical for coping. Candidate theme (11) the role of self-compassion in building mental toughness collapsed as a sub-theme under overarching theme: self-compassion and mental toughness are compatible. Finally, candidate theme (13) the inaccessibility of self-compassion, formed as a sub-theme under the overarching theme: self-compassion is critical for coping in sport. To clarify the sorting process and to represent the relationships between different codes and themes, I constructed a thematic map (see Appendix H; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

During phase four, I reviewed and refined each theme so that they were congruent with the collated extracts as well as the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I read and re-read each coded data extract and ensured that they adequately represented their respective theme. Data that were not representative of their theme were sorted under a different theme or were excluded from the analysis. At this point, some themes merged together, others separated and formed new themes and others were re-named or discarded. This process resulted in refining the 13 candidate themes into four overarching themes: (1) the role of adversity in athletic success, (2) mental toughness is critical for coping in sport, (3) self-compassion is critical for coping in sport and (4) self-compassion and mental toughness are compatible. Themes were judged based on internal homogeneity: the data within each theme shared a coherent pattern, and external heterogeneity: each theme was clearly distinct (Patton, 2002). At this time, I revised my thematic map and was satisfied that the four themes identified formed a coherent reflection of the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

During the fifth phase, I further analyzed and refined each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The goal of this phase was to produce clear and concise names and definitions for each theme that captured the meaning and story of each theme and simultaneously reflected the
overall story of the data set and addressed the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Sub-themes were also further refined and defined during this phase. The process of refining, naming and defining themes was iterative in nature. During the writing process, I moved back and forth between identified themes, codes and data excerpts, which often stimulated further exploration of the data and re-working and re-organizing of themes and sub-themes. The original list of candidate themes and sub-themes changed considerably throughout the research process and continued to develop into the writing of the results and discussion sections. The first theme, (1) the role of adversity in athletic success, explores participants’ perceptions about the critical role adversity played in developing coping resources and enhancing learning and development, and includes sub-themes: (a) elite sport is “awful but awesome at the same time,” (b) adversity leads to growth and development, “if you are open to it,” and (c) dealing with adversity paves the way for the development and utility of mental toughness and self-compassion. The second theme, (2) mental toughness is critical for coping in sport, focuses on how participants perceived, experienced and conceptualized mental toughness and its’ utility in managing stress and achieving athletic success and includes sub-themes: (a) “I would attribute 80% of my success to mental toughness,” (b) perseverance, (c) presence, (d) perspective, (e) preparation, (f) lack of mental toughness and (g) gender differences in mental toughness? “In the experience of it, no. In the expectation of it, yes.” Theme three, (3) self-compassion is critical for coping in sport, explores participants’ perceptions and experiences of self-compassion and its’ components as vital to coping in sport despite their previous lack of knowledge surrounding self-compassion and includes sub-themes: (a) lack of pre-existing knowledge, (b) common humanity, (c) mindfulness and (d) self-kindness. The final theme, (4) self-compassion and mental toughness are compatible, discusses the relationship between self-compassion and mental toughness as
being congruent and places self-compassion, and more specifically, mindfulness as a key ingredient to the development and maintenance of mental toughness. Theme three includes sub-themes: (a) self-compassion and mental toughness are contextual, (b) the role of self-compassion in building mental toughness, and (c) mindfulness as the key connector.

The final phase of thematic analysis is writing the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I took time to ensure the report illustrated the complex story of the data in a coherent and concise manner, drawing on rich passages from the data and showcasing the validity of the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.5 Credibility

Researchers have suggested approaches to assess the quality of qualitative research (e.g., Chamberlain, 2000; 2011; Tracy, 2010; Yardley, 2000). In accordance with such approaches, the quality of this research was addressed through: worthiness of topic, sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour and sincerity, transparency and coherence.

The first approach to assessing the quality of this research project, worthiness of topic, refers to the relevance, timing, significance and overall interestingness of the topic (Tracy, 2010). Mental toughness and self-compassion are two psychological processes that have generated much research attention; however, they are not well understood and have not been examined together before. As already outlined, there are gaps in the pre-existing literature on self-compassion and mental toughness. This research is novel and addresses such gaps, facilitating our understanding of how these two psychological processes affect athletic performance as well as how they interact. The findings, presented in section 4, demonstrate the worthiness of topic by addressing the gaps in the literature on self-compassion and mental toughness.
Sensitivity to context refers to the researcher maintaining attentiveness to the impact situational and social factors may have on the research participants (Yardley, 2000). Throughout the research process, I made careful consideration of the number of factors that could potentially influence how the participants presented their accounts. For example, I took into consideration that it may be difficult for the participants to recall and talk about setbacks they endured during their sport experiences. I also took into consideration that participants may have had certain biases towards the topics of interest, such as self-compassion, based on previous experiences or social norms. My knowledge of the existing literature on stress and coping, mental toughness and self-compassion in sport facilitated awareness around potential factors that may have impacted the participants responses.

Commitment and rigour refer to the researcher’s dedication to best practices at every step of the research process (Smith, 2011; Yardley 2000, Tracy, 2010). I committed to taking time, effort, care and thoroughness in the data collection and analysis procedures. In order to ensure the breadth and depth of such data collection, I conducted two pilot interviews to ensure the interview schedule was sufficiently probing at topics related to the research questions. I allowed approximately one month in between the first and second interview to allow enough time to analyze the data and to evaluate and change any problematic interview schedule questions. I used two “critical friends” (Smith & Sparkes, 2014, p.182) to encourage me to explore alternative descriptions and analysis of the data as well as for an opportunity to enhance my reflexive self-awareness regarding my interviewing skills, initial interpretations of the data and the influence I had on the research process. I have written and will provide a summary report of the findings to participants. Participants will be asked to give their feedback and voice any concerns or questions they may have regarding the research process and the research findings.
Such feedback will not change my interpretations necessarily, but will provide me with an “opportunity for reflexive elaboration and an enhanced understanding of how [the] research findings [were] actually constructed in the creative process of the research” (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p.191).

Finally, sincerity, transparency and coherence entail clearly and openly re-counting each stage of the research process, from participant recruitment to the final written conclusion (Chamberlain, 2000; 2011; Smith, 2011; Tracy, 2010). I demonstrated a coherent understanding of the theoretical and analytical course of the research project, which aligned with the pre-existing literature as well as thematic analysis guidelines. I kept an audit trail throughout the research process to record dates, times and relevant information pertaining to every step of the research process. This included recruitment emails, received documents (demographics questionnaire, consent form, payment stipend form), interviews complete, interviews transcribed, decisions made (e.g., the decision to stop recruitment after seven participants) and any other relevant actions taken. Finally, I kept a reflexive journal throughout every step of the research process to foster a sincere awareness around any subjective values, biases and inclinations I had and how they might have impacted the research process.

3.6 Reflexivity

Reflexivity means to “bend back upon oneself” and become critically self-aware of the potential impact one has on the dynamic and interactive research process (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 20). In order to remain cognizant of how my own personal values, preconceived notions, biases, and decisions affected the research process, I kept a reflexive journal (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Reflection was ongoing throughout the various stages of the research process to bring to consciousness any preconceptions I was not previously aware of or any
preconceptions that may have changed as the project developed (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Rather than setting aside or ignoring personal biases, motivation and values, I attempted to acknowledge them as co-creating aspects of each stage of the research process (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). In the reflexive journal, I kept track of my thoughts, emotions and biases and reflected upon my role as a researcher as well as the impact I had on the research process. I will outline the reflexive process in the remainder of this section.

As a start to the reflexive process, I recognize that my experience as a varsity and semi-professional athlete have lead me towards this topic. I come from an athletic family, and sports have been a large part of my life since I was a child. I have always excelled in sports and found them to provide me with the highest sense of self-satisfaction and pleasure. Although I participated in many different sports, the ones I chose to focus my time and energy on were soccer and basketball. I played 3 years of both soccer and basketball on scholarship for Capilano University. In my fourth-year post-secondary, I played basketball on scholarship for University of Guelph in Ontario. Post-varsity sport, I continued to play soccer for Metro Women’s Soccer, the Pacific Coast League and various co-ed summer teams as well as women’s box lacrosse. Throughout my athletic career, I faced many setbacks and emotional difficulties, including a career ending knee injury. Those experiences required me to adopt coping strategies. Remaining positive was always in my arsenal of coping strategies, however, as a competitive athlete, being hard on myself and even judgemental towards myself were common ways I would deal with such setbacks. Although I recognize the importance of being self-critical in the pursuit of excellence, as I reflect on my athletic career, I also recognize that my struggles as an athlete stemmed directly from my perceptions of myself. I had the tendency to ruminate over mistakes and attach personal meaning to them. I often worried about how I was being perceived as an
athlete and as a person. I would even regard myself as less of a player in front of certain people of whom I knew had only seen my weaker performances. Likewise, I would regard myself as more of a successful athlete in front of those who I knew thought highly of me or had seen my more stellar performances. The awareness that multiple social and contextual realities affected the meanings I attached to myself and my experiences influenced my decision to approach my research from a relativist ontological standpoint and a subjectivist and constructionist epistemology. The awareness that my self-perceptions greatly affected my confidence and ability to perform consistently lead me toward an interest in sport psychology. More specifically, I was intrigued by humanistic and positive psychology approaches and began to experiment with coping strategies such as meditation and positive self-talk. I found these strategies to be extremely useful. Throughout my athletic career, mental skills training was sparsely offered. Had it have been delivered in a systematic and consistent way that promoted patience, practice and persistence, it may have had the potential to enhance my performance and overall well-being. This belief motivated me to pursue research in sport and exercise psychology, so I could eventually offer mental skills training to other athletes.

I acknowledge that my position as a graduate student in sport and exercise psychology has influenced my research topic. My course work, field work and research experience provided me with theoretical knowledge about self-compassion, mental toughness, and coping in sport. Upon reviewing the literature, I found gaps in the research that pertained to my personal experiences as an athlete; namely, the tension between the effectiveness of using self-kindness versus self-criticalness in the pursuit of managing setbacks and athletic success. I was curious about how other athletes, particularly, elite level women athletes, negotiated this discrepancy. Although I had formulated my own understanding of what mental toughness meant, I was
curious about what this construct meant to other athletes as the literature provided numerous definitions and meanings of mental toughness. Additionally, mental toughness had been studied mainly in male populations or sports predominantly played by males, further provoking my curiosity about how women athletes experienced and understood mental toughness. My initial thoughts around how self-compassion and mental toughness might relate to each other were undoubtedly influenced by my experiences as an athlete and as a mental performance consultant.

Throughout the span of my research, I worked as a mental performance consultant with varsity athletes at a group and individual level. I had the opportunity to introduce, observe and discuss coping processes such as self-compassion on various occasions with these athletes. Although I do recognize that each athlete is different with regards to which psychological skills might work for them, I was confident that self-compassion was a useful tool for dealing with adversity. I found that athletes often carried with them an athletic identity that involved embodying a toughness ideal, and sometimes neglected to deal with their emotions as they feared being perceived as weak by others. They also shared the same ruminative thought patterns I experienced as an athlete and placed harsh self-criticisms and judgments on themselves. Upon introducing self-compassion to these athletes, we were able to create environments or team cultures that were accepting of utilizing self-kindness, mindfulness and common humanity. This provided athletes with a ‘safe space’ in which they could deal with their emotional difficulty in an effective and non-judgemental way and simultaneously provide self-care.

On a more personal note, I recognize that I have chosen to study self-compassion because of my spiritual beliefs. I highly value compassion whether it is given to the self or to other people. I see it as a universal language, as something that connects us all as humans and as an important part of humanity. I believe that practicing compassion will lead to a fulfilling life of
abundance, love and well-being and conversely, without compassion, we may find ourselves unfulfilled, alone and miserable. I believe that self-compassion is central to healing ourselves and coping with the many adversities we may experience throughout the lifespan. Taken together, I realize that my interest in self-compassion has shaped my research topic, research questions and the entire research process. I recognize that my paradigm favors self-compassion and that within my work as a mental performance consultant I utilize tactics grounded in the components of self-compassion. I have taken care to ensure that I did not project my outlook onto participants during the interview process through leading questions and that I interpreted the data from the perspective of the participants and not solely from a self-compassionate lens. Having said that, I understand that I was actively co-creating each and every aspect of the research process.

I made regular reflexive journal entries throughout the research process to ensure I was consciously considering personal preconceived notions, biases, emotions and thoughts that developed or changed as my research progressed. Journal entries included my personal beliefs and feelings, ideas about interpretations of the data, questions I had, perceptions of participants and their responses, reflections of my interview skills, notes to myself about literature to review, field notes and anything else I perceived as relevant to the research process at the time. Most journal entries took place directly after an interview. This allowed me to record my initial thoughts, feelings, perceptions and interpretations of each participant and my interaction with them in a timely manner. The following is an example of an entry I made directly after an interview:

\begin{quote}
As I was interviewing her, I became aware of how, together, we create the dialogue, we exchange interpretations to come to our, almost, collective interpretation. We create the
\end{quote}
data together. I think I am becoming much better at being more fluid during the interview by asking questions that are relevant rather than the congruent order on my interview guide. I really enjoyed chatting with this athlete and was able to establish rapport effortlessly. It felt like she was a friend of mine and so at some points, I felt a bit awkward digging and trying to make her elaborate. I had to continuously remind myself that we were in an interview, not a casual chat. Although, I do prefer to keep the interviews less formal as I believe I will get a more authentic response out of my participants that way. I also need to be aware of staying on topic. We went off on a few tangents and although it was great for building a relationship, I will probably regret this when I am transcribing! I noticed that I was verifying her responses. Perhaps this was because I wanted her to like me and perhaps this stems from my work as a mental performance consultant? I wanted to make her feel like she was in a safe place and that her voice was being heard, especially since we were talking about serious emotional difficulty that she endured. I need to remind myself that in consulting I am trying to move and inspire my clients, but during an interview I should be more objective; I am not looking to motivate, only to gain insight into their world. I also need to be careful not to weigh this athlete’s response more heavily than other athlete’s because I like her and because I identify with her responses.

Journal entries like the example provided enabled me to work through my thoughts, feelings and perceptions and bring to awareness my role in the research process. Throughout the duration of my research, I referred to my reflexive journal on a regular basis. This allowed me to continuously consider my actions as a researcher and provided transparency in those actions. For example, after I finalized my themes, I referred to my journal to ensure that I chose those
themes because they were representative of the participants’ accounts and not just because they fit into my existing belief system. In most instances, the themes I selected were both representative of the participants’ accounts and aligned with my pre-existing belief system. This mutual relevance of themes is likely because of my extensive experience as both an athlete and a consultant. I can appreciate, understand and relate to the types of difficulties these athletes faced and the psychological processes they utilized to cope. I believe my previous experience was beneficial to the research process, as it enabled me to build rapport, trust and a mutual understanding with my participants. Taken together, keeping a reflexive journal fostered a critical awareness of how I was affecting the research process.
Chapter 4: Findings

Four themes were identified to describe how the seven participants perceived and experienced self-compassion and mental toughness in their sport, including: (1) the role of adversity in athletic success, (2) mental toughness is critical for coping in sport, (3) self-compassion is critical for coping in sport, and (4) self-compassion and mental toughness are compatible. All themes and sub-themes are listed in Table 4.1 and are presented in the subsequent sections.

Table 4.1

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4.1 The role of adversity in athletic success

This theme focuses on the critical role adversity played in achieving athletic success for all seven participants. Three sub-themes were identified, including: (a) elite sport is “awful but awesome at the same time,” which focuses on the adversities participants faced throughout their athletic careers; (b) adversity leads to growth and development, “if you are open to it,” which discusses participants’ perceptions that facing adversity had the potential to yield learning and personal improvement; and (c) dealing with adversity paves the way for the development and utility of mental toughness and self-compassion, which discusses how mental toughness and self-compassion were adopted and developed in the face of adversity.

4.1.1 Elite sport is “awful but awesome at the same time”

Although all participants described their experiences in elite level sport as rewarding and fulfilling, they also faced major adversity, including injury, pressure, sacrifice, anxiety, depression, poor performance, financial instability and issues with their sport organizations. Sidney, who competed in swimming, discussed the emotional difficulty that came along with sacrifice and dedication to her sport:

I remember my first year, I would call my mom on a Friday night in my first year residence room all by myself, just like bawling my eyes out because practices were so hard and I couldn’t move and it was just [pause], um, so incredibly exhausting and people would be doing fun first year things that you’re supposed to do in university and my first year, my only goal was to make the Olympics so I kind of had a- I guess- a different, um [pause] experience that way, but [pause] when I look back, I wouldn’t
change it for anything because of what I accomplished and um what it has brought [pause] to my life.

Sidney had to negotiate the tension between the responsibilities inherent in elite level sport and her desire to experience life as a ‘normal’ university student. Although she had to endure over 10 pool and dry land sessions per week, a full course load and minimal time for socializing, she perceived the sacrifice to be worthwhile as her values were deeply rooted in her desire to compete at the Olympics.

Injury was the most prevalent type of adversity the women faced. Snowboarder Morgan, described her experience as an elite athlete as a “shit sandwich” because of all the injuries she sustained, which typically happened during pivotal moments in her athletic career.

My first [competition], I got in two car accidents and fell, so devastating. And then the next ones I was in the hospital with pancreatitis and then [the next ones] on crutches with a black eye.

Although Morgan’s injuries were pervasive enough to cause her considerable physical and psychological distress, she continued to strive in her sport and reported that she always found reason and satisfaction in pushing through adversity:

I fell into depression, completely, and I was on a roller coaster with good days and bad day. Um, but pushing through those barriers [pause] and just kind of knowing that here was something in sight, maybe getting a personality back, being able to walk again and talk again. Pushing though all those barriers to get to where I am now. I had to stay positive. It’s awful! But awesome and the same time [laugh]!

Similarly, after dealing with several months of concussion and post-concussion symptoms, Trampolinist, Deanna sustained consecutive knee injuries before large competitions:
The next [competition], I fell, like a day before we left. And hurt my knee . . . sprained it and like couldn’t jump on it for a few days. But it was more of the psychological piece. I left flying for the, flying for, um, the competition, now knowing if I could compete and like not knowing if I could jump and all that. The next year I was confronted with another situation where I fell right before [competition]. . . . This past [competition], which was the [competition] selection, I [pause] wasn’t able to jump for five months before, I was only allowed to start jumping like two weeks before, and even that-I was only really doing routines a week before we left. Again, the last training before we left, I fell on a still and didn’t hurt myself, but a little [pause] bruise to the ego.

Downhill mountain biker, Veronica, described the emotional difficulty she faced after breaking her pelvis and femur.

Oh my God! I’m so weak, I can’t do this anymore, it’s been over a year and I’m still feeling like crap every single day! I cried at every single race weekend event that year, I felt so useless and hopeless.

Veronica had to re-learn how to walk and could not even walk the entire race course, let alone bike it. This left her feeling hopeless, incompetent and filled with self-doubt. She was unsure that she would make a full recovery and felt that her healing was out of her control.

Another common form of adversity participants reported was issues with their sport organizations. Prevalent challenges participants reported with sport organizations included a lack of financial support, a lack of material resources, a lack of support for certain sports, difficulty with regards to communication, continuous policy changes and most notably, the outcome oriented support and endorsement from programs such as Own the Podium (a Canadian program that offers financial and technical support to national sport organizations with the goal
of acquiring more Olympic and Paralympic medals). When asked about her experiences with her sport organization, half-pipe snowboarder Morgan responded: “I hate my sport organizers!”

In the same regard, snowboarder Jordanna described the frustration she experienced in dealing with her National Sport Organization:

> You never know what they’re going to say, they might say, “we’re not going to send any half-pipe team to the Olympics, we’ve totally cut your funding, there is no National Team, you have to do all of these things in order to -,” especially when they told us we had to pay $6000 per athlete to be on the National Team! [pause] That was a tough one [laugh]!

After years of problems with her sport organization, Jordanna decided to go independent, which meant that she had to fully support herself in terms of her training, resources and finances. Because she was independent, her coach had to qualify to compete in the [competition] to be granted access to the event to coach her. Jordanna described her experience with her sport organization as a continuous “uphill battle”, and expressed concern that elite level sport participation should be about the pursuit of excellence and not about how many medals a country can obtain. In particular, she criticized Own the Podium for their allocation of support being outcome oriented:

> I think Own the Podium is ruining Sport Canada, being results focused and only rewarding those teams or people who have got the result. That is just ludicrous! People say that half-pipe is dying, well I’ve seen what the, the money comes in from Own the Podium and how its distributed throughout the four disciplines and I’ll tell you right now, there are absolutely no development cuts for half-pipe and-so you’re not even giving them a chance, to bring kids up the ranks!
Most participants identified ongoing issues they faced with their sport organizations, but they also acknowledged that the adversity they faced would eventually lead to personal growth and development.

4.1.2 Adversity leads growth and development, “if you’re open to it”

Central to the participants’ attitudes about adversity was the belief that facing adversity had the potential to foster growth and development. Growth and development could happen on a personal and/or performance level and usually took the form of building coping skills and strategies that they could later draw on. Rather than perceiving it as a setback, participants identified facing adversity as an opportunity to learn and improve. Trampolinist, Deanna explained:

*I look at it as an opportunity to learn. An opportunity to get stronger. I truly believe that I will learn way more from losing and not doing well than I have by winning. Yeah, I think there is always a lesson and if you are open to it, you can be a better athlete and maybe a better person [laugh] I don’t know, but you can be better because of it. And I don’t want to say you have them for a reason necessarily, but in a way, you do. Especially in competition, the reasons you mess up are usually things that you do in training, but, anything you do in training in kind of blown up in a stressful situation. So, it’s an opportunity to kind of take a step back with my coach and look back at how I was training, look at any of the mistakes I was making and decide how I need to fix it.*

Similarly, Jade, a rock climber, described the importance of learning from and moving forward after facing adversity, rather than viewing adversity as a setback:

*I made a mistake and I know, I don’t know why it really happened, my hand just kind of slipped going for a move and my hand just kind of popped off while I was reaching for*
another one and that cost me eighth and finals, I came ninth and they took eight to the
finals, um, but, I’m learning from that, I’m taking it forward. I think a lot of other people
would just get put down at the fact that they made a mistake and be like, “I suck, I’m
never going to get any better!” But I know that I am better than that and I know what I
need to do to get better than that. So, I think taking an experience and learning from it is
very important instead of taking it as a setback. If you have a good day, you have a good
day and if you have a bad day, you have a bad day, there’s nothing you can really do to
control that other than learning from it and making every day a good day eventually.

Participants found comfort in knowing that they had previously faced specific adversities
and that they had successfully coped with such adversities. These experiences allowed
participants to build personal resources and increased their perceived level of control and
competency when dealing with adversity. Therefore, participants developed an outlook that
welcomed adversity and acknowledged it as an integral part of their development as an athlete.
Some participants, such as Jordanna, viewed failure as an important (and impermanent) step
towards being successful:

Anyone who has great careers, they’ve all gone through some sort of major setback.
Yeah, and then come back from it. Anyone who’s successful. And so, I think that failing
is really important and [pause] when I, when I mentor, with the few athletes that I
mentor, I put a big emphasis on that. You know failing isn’t a bad thing, failing will
actually leapfrog you into successes sometimes.

Similarly, Deanna suggested that facing adversity was critical for athletic success, especially in
the early stages of one’s career:
I think athletes in our sport who have had a very easy go of it, they are very talented and naturally skilled. They learn very quickly and progress very quickly, they are successful very early, but then they get their first challenge and they don’t know what to do and then they quit. So, I think it’s very important to get those, especially early in your career or when you’re younger even, to have those experiences.

Participants not only viewed adversity as critical to their athletic success, but they also expressed admiration for other athletes who had endured considerable adversity throughout their athletic careers. Furthermore, athletes who perceived that they had endured considerable adversity themselves, viewed their successes with more pride and as more meaningful than successes in which the path toward was easy. As with the many adversities these women faced in their sport experiences, maintaining an attitude that welcomed and honored adversity was an ongoing challenge. Figure skater Clara explained:

This is the nature of sport, this is the nature of human beings in sport. We’re not robots and, it’s usually by making mistakes that we grow and, you learn more from your mistakes than you do from your successes. And this cannot be said enough in life, not just in sport but in life. The true lessons come from the worst experiences. And it’s always so easy to say that, but when you’re in the middle of it. I can tell everybody that, and I know, but then when I’m in the middle of it, I’m like, “no, it’s not fair, I don’t want to have this experience, I don’t want to learn this lesson!” You know, and then time goes on and you’re grateful that you did learn.

Throughout their athletic careers, participants learned that facing adversity was critical to their growth and development as it allowed them to build coping resources. Thus, although it
was difficult to maintain at times, participants developed an attitude that welcomed adversity into their lives.

4.1.3 Dealing with adversity paves the way for the development and utility of mental toughness and self-compassion

Participants’ experiences in facing adversity required them to develop and utilize coping strategies such as mental toughness and self-compassion. Participants reported that learning how to manage challenging situations and learning how to bounce back from adversity were key to the development of mental toughness. They also reported that utilizing self-compassionate coping processes were key to overcoming adversity. Jordanna explained how experiencing adversity, such as failure, could lead to the development of mental toughness:

Yeah, having a wide variety of failing a lot. I find that kids get really sheltered these days and they don’t, they don’t fail enough. Because if you don’t fail, and then come back from it then you really don’t know what mental toughness is. I guess? Or how to bounce back or how to persevere, you know, you have just kind of, a very fixated idea of success. Whereas success is [pause] you know, it’s undulating I guess you could say [laugh]? Having more experiences with failing makes you more resilient.

In the same regard, when asked how mental toughness developed, participants identified facing adversity and subsequently learning how to cope as key. Rock climber, Jade explained:

I think through experience. So, I was probably that one kid in one comp where I got totally messed over by that first route or false started in my first round or missed a first clip on my first speed route. Done all of those things actually, and it just kind of messes with you and I think over time and experience you learn how to cope with it and how to make the right decision afterwards and you learn how to adjust so I think it’s just, over
time and over competition seasons, from comp to comp you learn more about yourself and you take that forward into the next comp.

Likewise, Deanna described how mental toughness develops through facing challenges and building coping resources to overcome such challenges:

*I think it’s a lot about being put into situations where you experience obstacles and like using that as an opportunity to learn, using that as an opportunity to build your strength, build your [pause] I guess repertoire of experiences you can draw on later. So, when you are confronted with something similar, you can think back and know that you have dealt with it.*

For snowboarder Morgan, persevering through adversities, such as injuries, and utilizing coping processes grounded in positivity were critical to building mental toughness:

*Um, [pause] I’m just thinking about injuries and battling injuries, you know and how, if you aren’t mentally tough to persevere through it, then, [pause], you lose. So, I-I think it’s just through experiences. Yeah and like-breaking through and staying positive.

That’s like- I would not be here without that.*

Along with mental toughness, participants utilized self-compassionate coping processes to deal with adversity, such as balancing self-criticalness with self-kindness, not attaching to setbacks personally, being present, moving on, self-reflecting and recognizing that facing adversity was normal. Downhill mountain biker Veronica explained:

*Well after making a mistake you go from like an anger state to an understanding state. First you are pissed off because it’s not the outcome you are shooting for, you put all those hours into preparation and then to not succeed at your event. But then again, you want to keep on going to the next one, you have to like, go back and understand what*
happened, what made it happen, what can I do to make it happen- do that. You know like, so it’s got to be pretty self-criticizing just like question yourself, to like change what’s next and then compassion to forgive yourself for that one event, you can’t take it back, it’s done, just move on.

To overcome adversity, participants acknowledged using self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness. For example, Deanna explained how facing adversity lead to the utility of mindfulness. Drawing on her previous experiences allowed her to objectively evaluate the situation and regulate her emotional response and personal attachment to such adversities:

Yeah, and when you are faced with a challenge, having the ability of stepping back and knowing that you have seen it before in some way. And so, you can kind of more rationally think about it than emotionally.

Facing and overcoming adversity were central to the women’s experiences in elite level sport. Although adversity was challenging to cope with and often caused emotional distress, the women learned to appreciate and welcome it into their lives. They adopted a perspective that viewed adversity as an opportunity to learn, to improve and to build coping resources, such as self-compassion and mental toughness. Participants reported that they needed to utilize self-compassionate coping processes to overcome adversity, and that facing adversity and learning how to overcome it was what built up the qualities or resources that lead to the development of mental toughness.

4.2 Mental toughness is critical for coping in sport

This section focuses on how participants perceived and experienced mental toughness. Seven sub-themes were identified, including: (a) “I would attribute 80% of my success to mental toughness”, which reflects the critical role of mental toughness in managing stress and achieving
athletic success. Subthemes (b) Perseverance; (c) Presence; (d) Perspective; and (e) Preparation, collectively represent participants’ perceptions, experiences and conceptualizations of mental toughness. The final two sub-themes, (f) Lack of mental toughness; and (g) Gender differences in mental toughness? “In the experience of it, no. In the expectation of it, yes”, represent what athletes perceived a lack of mental toughness entailed, as well as the gendered norms and expectations surrounding mental toughness.

4.2.1 “I would attribute 80% of my success to mental toughness”

All participants reported that mental toughness was critical for coping with adversity and achieving success in their respective sports. Most athletes reported that their mental skills were more important than their physical skills. Figure skater, Clara, attributed 80% of her success as an athlete to her mental toughness:

*I would say that honestly, it’s my greatest strength as an athlete . . . I’d attribute 80% of my success to that. And I think - I don’t think, I know - that when I enter a competition, I have that edge over my competitors. I know I’ve competed against the same people for years and that makes me confident because I know, when push comes to shove, I’m going to have the toughness that they’re not going to have. And I think that’s what’s allowed me to reach this level of my skating as well . . . I do see what a critical role it has played in my career.*

Half-pipe snowboarder Morgan held a similar opinion:

*Hmm, I would say, it plays [pause] the biggest role. My biggest success, well if I wasn’t mentally tough, I wouldn’t be in the half-pipe. Um, it’s such an extreme sport [pause] that when you fall you land on your head or whatever, um, if you don’t have mental toughness, you’re not getting back up. You’re not pushing and striving to be better and*
to do better. I think it’s like, maybe like 20% physical and 80% mental. I think every athlete has to have it. I don’t think you can be [type] athlete without it. I mean, we put ourselves through hell.

Swimmer Sidney explained how mental toughness was especially critical for coping and competing in individual sports as they involved increased pressure to perform and did not include the support of teammates:

I think for individual sports, mental toughness needs to be there to, um, if you’re not mentally tough, you can’t get through things as well I guess. You can almost pin-point the people that just like don’t have those qualities. Sport is a lot more mental than physical and I think for swimming it’s um [pause] it’s almost highlighted even more, just because it’s so individual, and there’s so much [pause] grit in your training that you have to overcome and then [pause] transition into racing and just like [pause] it’s all on you, so, it’s definitely something that people need to have and it’s obviously more beneficial for people who have it.

All participants identified mental toughness as a critical part of their athletic success. Although there were some differences in terms of how each participant experienced and perceived mental toughness, their accounts fit into four broad categories of: perseverance, presence, perspective, and preparation, which are discussed below.

4.2.2 Perseverance

The first category, perseverance, was the most common conceptualization of how the participants perceived and experienced mental toughness. Perseverance referred to having a strong will to carry on despite hardship and challenge. Participants often used the word ‘resilience’ to describe mental toughness, which they defined as having the ability to persevere
through difficulties and to bounce back after facing such difficulties. Perseverance also entailed managing intrusive thoughts and emotions that accompanied hardship and challenge. One characteristic all participants attributed to their perseverance and their mental toughness was stubbornness. Half-pipe snowboarder Morgan described mental toughness in terms of pushing through and bouncing back after challenges and managing emotional difficulty:

*I think being able to overcome challenges. Um, [pause] sort of in the physical way of falling and getting back up. That’s just mental toughness for me, and also like getting over all the emotions.*

In the same regard, trampolinist, Deanna conceptualized mental toughness as having the mental capacity or skill set to cope with and overcome adversity:

*The capability, when confronted with an obstacle or a challenge [pause] the tools or resources- internal I guess - the resources that you have to be able to cope or deal with it. Um, and to push through and ultimately, hopefully, overcome it.*

Figure skater, Clara described mental toughness in a similar fashion; however, she added the notion of thriving, suggesting that mental toughness entails not only managing, but also excelling in challenging situations. She described mental toughness as follows:

*When you have to- when you’re given a challenge and you have to rise past it. I think that- or when there’s a road block in front of you and you have to get over it or climb over this hill or this hurdle. And you know you see some people who really struggle in those types of situations and then you see people who thrive in those types of situations and I think the ones that thrive in it, have this mentally tough [pause]- a mental toughness, and that comes back to, were they born with it, or is it something that has kind of developed through what they’ve done and experiences in their lives?*
When asked to elaborate on how she thought mental toughness developed, Clara talked about the combination of innate personality characteristics and learned experiences. This was a common answer across all participants.

_I think for me, it’s definitely something that I can say it’s both. Like I was born with a stubborn personality, with a this like- a hard head, determined, strong willed person and I think these types of characteristics, lead to mental toughness. I think it’s in my character and that I’ve always had the ability to [pause] I guess be classified as someone who has mental toughness. But, I think that the experiences that I’ve had throughout my career and throughout my life have helped to develop the mental toughness as well and I don’t think it would have gotten to the point it has now without every experience that I’ve had along the way._

Stubbornness was one particular characteristic that all participants attributed to their mental toughness. Participants described stubbornness as having a strong drive and willingness to proceed towards goal achievement even if the obstacles in the way or the outcomes associated with it were unreasonable. Half-pipe snowboarder Jordanna explained how stubbornness played a role in mental toughness through perseverance:

_I think [pause] when I should have defined mental toughness I should have thrown the word stubborn in there because um, I’m sure lots of people who are mentally tough are also stubborn. And you, know they don’t get swayed out of their way very easily, and I think, you know, they kind of go hand-in-hand. I always say that in half-pipe snowboard [pause] and ski, it takes, the most stubborn people to continue in that sport [laugh] and let alone learning tricks you know._
Similarly, trampolinist, Deanna illustrated how her stubbornness allowed her to persevere through difficult situations:

*I think there is a lot of overlap between mental toughness and pure stubbornness. There are a lot of competitions, especially in the last couple years that I could have gone into and just like been defeated right from the start or been like, “there is no way this is going to work, so fuck it, I don’t care!” And then like not even try. Like there was a lot of situations, not to talk about my teammates, but I have seen a lot of them become confronted with obstacles and they don’t deal with it the same way, they just give up. And like, you don’t get to, I think for any athlete, you don’t get to a high level unless you have something in you, whether it’s mental toughness or it’s stubbornness [laugh] to stick with it. Like especially [pause] if I didn’t have some aspect of mental toughness, there’s no way I could have gone into this past [competition] and qualified for a spot to the [competition]. Because that competition, more than any other competition I’ve experienced in my entire life, there was everything going against me.*

Although each participant acknowledged stubbornness as a characteristic that contributed to their mental toughness, they also recognized that it could potentially be detrimental. Deanna described how her high personal standards required the right amount of stubbornness combined with an awareness of when it was okay to accept less than her personal best:

*Yeah, well I do think it’s important [stubbornness] and I do think a lot of it comes into, um, play. I also, I mean from my own experience I also know that some of that stubbornness that we get is because we have unrelenting standards! So, I guess it’s finding a balance and knowing when to accept that it’s okay to have bad days, but also use that as motivation.*
Similarly, rock climber, Jade explained that stubbornness could be maladaptive without an ability to recognize when it was appropriate to move on: “Stubbornness can be both a strength and a weakness in people. There are times where it’s good to just let go and not hold on so tight and so strong.” Half-pipe snowboarder Morgan’s story illustrates when stubbornness may have been detrimental. Her commitment and drive towards her goals were so strong that she was willing to risk considerable injury to achieve them:

*I was standing at the top of the pipe for the second run and I was like, understanding and being aware that I wouldn’t be able to walk after that so even if I did qualify, I wouldn’t be able to walk. So, being true to yourself and believing in yourself, I think?*

All participants identified perseverance, or having a strong will to proceed despite hardship and challenge, as the most central component of mental toughness. Their perseverance was often unrelenting and met with a certain level of stubbornness, in which they would proceed even if outcomes and obstacles were irrational and in some cases detrimental to their health and well-being.

### 4.2.3 Presence

The second category of how participants perceived and experienced mental toughness was through presence. Presence referred to having an ability to focus and re-focus attention in the present moment, towards the self and the task at hand, without being distracted by extraneous variables. Cultivating presence required an ability to remain calm, to regulate thoughts and emotions, and to direct attention only towards variables that were under one’s control. During competition, figure skater, Clara described how focusing her attention was key to her mental toughness:
Tunnel vision. Literally tunnel vision. Um [pause], I’m very aware of everything that’s going on around me when I’m skating. And when I’m backstage at a competition, like, I pace, like literally walk back and forth and pace up and down the hallway and whoever is skating before me, their music is playing in the speakers and I can hear the audience’s reaction, so sometimes, I notice the audience go, “Oooohhhhhhhhh!” So, I know that my competitor just fell or just made a mistake. So even if I’m aware of it, I’m not distracted by it. I know people who wear headphones and they just want to ignore all those noises, they don’t want to know any of it. But, it’s there and I recognize it, but I’m also so focused on what I want to do and focusing only on, like I’ll hear that and then I know what happened and I’ll be like, “okay, what do I want to do when I get out there?” So my tunnel vision is like very, very direct, but I’m still able to be paying attention to stuff around me. But a big key focus, so I’m sure is for all athletes, is to focus on myself. And always keep the focus on.

While Clara preferred to have some awareness of her surroundings, half-pipe snowboarder Morgan described how her best performances were met with a focus so direct that she was unaware of her surroundings. Furthermore, becoming aware of her surroundings was a cue that she was not focused enough:

*I would um, I don’t know what it is but you just get in this um, that zone and you can’t hear anything. You are just so focused on that task at hand. And you know what your goal is and I think when you set that intention, that nothing is going to get in the way of you accomplishing it. Um, for instance, at the games, and [my friend] was like, “I love it when you drop in . . . the crowd goes insane!” And I was like, “well they do that for everyone!” And she was like, “no!” And I didn’t even know because I was so focused on*
the task at hand, I couldn’t hear, I couldn’t hear anyone else . . . and I remember one
time at [competition], I did- I was doing a straight air and I wasn’t really paying
attention to what was happening . . . and I hear this guy go, “Morgan!” And I was like,
yeah, “I am not paying attention!” [laugh] Like, “get into it!” [laugh] You know!?

In the same regard, swimmer Sidney described mental toughness as having an ability to focus
and re-focus attention towards controllable variables despite distractions and adversity:

Um I think it’s just narrowing down on what’s most important, and kind of like tunnel
vision a little bit [pause] it’s kind of like letting the outside distractions not distract you,
um and staying completely focused, because there’s always things that are going to be
thrown at you that you don’t expect . . . like if things aren’t going my way of if I’m
delayed, um, going into a meet or something is not happening, um, I know how to, just
kind of like bounce back and do what I know I need to do and control the controllables
and not let things that you can’t control affect performance.

Participants reported that a key to cultivating presence was having an ability to remain
calm. Trampolinist Deanna described how she calmed herself down through breathing, imagery
and thought regulation:

I guess both in training and in competition I use a lot of breathing, um, and kind of, I use
a lot of imagery, like visualization. Um, when it’s in training, learning new skills, um,
it’s yeah, I do a lot of breathing, a lot of visual prep-imagery preparation. Breaking
down the tricks and then I guess trying to keep myself in a state of mind when I’m
jumping because a lot of the times I’ll be jumping, jumping, jumping and then the last
second, I’m like, “fuck it, no!” [laugh] But eventually coming to a point where you have
to trust in your body and trust in your capability and kind of calming your mind so you can push through it.

Similarly, downhill mountain biker Veronica described how managing stress and distractions and focusing her attention to the present moment required a calm mind:

For me I feel like there is a lot of things in life, say in the off season and in the winter, that can, um, I’m looking for the word [pause] distract you, and um, there’s a lot of stress involving distractions and so I feel like my side of mental toughness is being very focused on what has to be done. And [pause] because there is a lot of stress involved I feel like [pause] my mental strength is related to staying very calm, being able to stay calm and not be overwhelmed because I am doing this for fun, even if it is a lot of work. . . and there are many things on my to do list that are not getting done.

Each participant reported that having an ability to be present was key to their mental toughness and cultivating presence required a calm state of mind. As Veronica eluded to, one strategy for achieving this state of mind was through perspective; reminding herself that she participated in sport because it provided her with inherent enjoyment.

### 4.2.4 Perspective

The third category of how participants perceived and experienced mental toughness was through perspective. Perspective meant having an ability to interpret sport experiences “holistically” as trampolinist Deanna described, or to see the ‘big picture,’ in which participants approached setbacks, challenges or difficult situations with an attitude that was process-oriented and valued continuous improvement despite outcomes. Their perspectives also included taking on an attitude of gratitude, in which participants recognized and felt grateful for what they had already accomplished in their sport, for what their sport had provided for them and for being able
to compete at an elite level on a world platform. Such a perspective required participants to have a strong purpose or reason for competing, which in most cases was closely related to passion, love, and inherent enjoyment for their sport. Having a strong purpose gave participants a psychological buffer against difficulties, in which they could re-appraise such situations in a positive, productive, and meaningful way without becoming overwhelmed. Perspective allowed participants to remain satisfied with their sport experience despite outcomes or difficulties and provided them with motivation and drive to push through such difficulties. Half-pipe snowboarder Jordanna explained how having a strong purpose was critical to her mental toughness as it enabled her to push through difficulties:

*I think mental toughness is just the will to carry on, kind of no matter what’s going on and believing in your goal. Like I do some sport mentoring for some kids and I really emphasize the point that you really need a strong ‘why.’ And if you don’t have a strong ‘why,’ being that-having that mental toughness is really hard. Because, when you are going through struggles and you want to give up, like, if, if you don’t have that baseline of why you are doing what you are doing, then you will give up, and that really helped me. You know, I had a really strong ‘why’ in the end of why I wanted to be [type of athlete] and you know, go represent Canada and stuff like that. So, I think mental toughness maybe is just having a really strong ‘why,’ something to come back to.*

Similarly, trampolinist, Deanna used perspective to regulate her emotions during difficult situations by maintaining a positive outlook that was grounded in gratitude for being able to pursue her passion. She also found it useful to remind herself of why she was competing, and that no matter the outcome, her life would go on:
I think the main thing I try to do is take a step back and remember why I do it . . . I guess an example [pause] of this would be, in [city], I had a really terrible warm up and so I was obviously a bit rattled and so I closed my eyes and was going through my routine and like opened my eyes and saw my family in the stands, and to see my family in the stands of 17,000 people, is pretty, [laugh], not a high likelihood! But it was things like that, was a reminder that no matter what happened the day of, like I could land on my face or have the meet of my life and like those, those anchors will never change, so that helped me a little bit. And my brother saw me looking at him and he like, stuck his tongue out at me and [laugh] just like lightened the mood up a little. And then like, when I went into the back I was jumping up and down on the trampolines and I couldn’t help but smile, because, I just realized I was doing something I absolutely loved, I was at the [competition], it was always my dream. And for the second time, that’s not something not many athletes get to do even once. So, I think those are three things that I always tried to keep in mind, like, nothing in my life will change if this goes well or poorly, no one is going to care more than I do and I’ll live, I’ll move on and I’ll still be doing the same things, I’ll still have the same family and friends. Just kind of always connecting back to the fact that I do it because I love it. Yeah, just knowing that already, I’ve experienced more than most people could ever hope for. So, just being really grateful and thankful for that. All of those emotions are things that I keep in mind to help put me in a more positive space, but also to take a bit of the pressure off.

Deanna continued to describe how taking on this sort of perspective worked as a psychological buffer against difficult situations by reducing the amount of perceived pressure that came along with being an elite athlete:
But also being able to take a step back and look at the bigger picture and look [pause] at like, sport more holistically or your experiences more holistically is also incredibly important, because if you work hard and feel like you are sacrificing everything you are going to end up putting a lot of pressure on yourself and I don’t know that anyone in that situation has the toughness necessary to push through that. So, for me it’s all about knowing I do trampoline because I love it, I do trampoline because I like training and learning new tricks and doing routines and pushing myself and competitions are great and fun and I love it and I obviously would love to win, but that’s not the reason I do it at the core of it. So being able to take a step back in that moment and [pause] remember that I’m like living my dream and [pause] kind of like [pause] I don’t have anything to lose by it.

In addition to having a strong purpose for competing and feeling gratitude for being able to compete, participants described how they took on a process-oriented perspective that valued continuous improvement, personal bests, and growth and development. Figure skater Clara described how shifting her perspective from one that valued results to one that valued personal improvement and development may have facilitated performance outcomes:

I think it’s the feeling of continued personal improvement. Always trying to be better than I’ve been the time before. I think that if there was ever a point where I personally wasn’t improving anymore, I just wouldn’t be competing anymore. So, the motivation is really, um, from within and personal. See, if I skate my best and I do my best and I lose, I’m not bothered, I won’t be bothered by it. For me it’s more about doing the best that I can and if I finish my program at a competition and I feel proud of what I did, even if I come in fourth, I’m going to be really, really happy. And there’s been times where I’ve
skated really bad, and we’ve won and it’s not fun. I don’t have motivation by results anymore. It’s been a few years, but it’s all personal reasons and I wanted to learn that throw quad, so that was my motivation two years ago and you know, I’m always finding something like that to motivate me rather than a result because a result is out of my control. And as soon as I stopped worrying about results, good results started happening. Such a funny little circle that, that thought process is [laugh]!

Downhill mountain biker Veronica had a similar perspective:

I never put numbers, like result numbers into my goals, I’ve always just done like just do my best performance, reach my best performance, be happy at the end of my race run, knowing that I was strong, I felt strong and I did what I could. For the longest time, I was kind of very conservative in my race runs and I always felt like I could have done a lot more. So, my goals were always more like performance wise rather than number wise. Like I wasn’t like, “okay, I’m going to win a world cup.”

Another key to maintaining perspective was having the ability to re-appraise difficulties in a positive and functional way. Trampolinist Deanna explained how mental toughness involved putting herself in an optimal state of mind for performance by re-directing potentially detrimental thoughts and emotions to be positive and functional:

[I] don’t think that being mentally tough is the person who isn’t scared, but it’s the person who can use that fear as a tool and change it into a positive- or not change it into a positive thing, but like, experience it, be okay with it and just kind of push through it. . . . If you don’t have that psychological piece in place, it’s very unlikely that you will perform well, because the adrenaline you experience when you are nervous, if you don’t have the capability of handling that or if you don’t have the capability of kind of taking a
step back and putting yourself in a place where you experience it in a way that will benefit you, rather than detriment you, then there’s a higher chance that you fall or you waver and you like, there’s a risk to that too. Again, so in competition, the mental toughness piece would be more, being able to put yourself in a mental state where you can perform optimally.

Similarly, figure skater Clara described how her perspective required remaining calm so that she could view difficulties in a positive way that facilitated perceived competence rather than catastrophizing or ruminating:

I think that a certain level of calmness as well. A peace and calmness within, because if you don’t have that, you’re going to make a mountain out of an anthill. You know, if you are viewing things, out of proportion and if you can have a serene calm feeling, then the mountain can look like an anthill to you. You know, you can view your problem as not as big and then you’re going to be able to overcome it with a more positive approach. I think that is really important.

Swimmer Sidney explained how her perspective involved re-appraising a difficult time during her athletic career in which she experienced performance plateauing, into an opportunity for growth and development:

You’re doing everything you’re supposed to be doing right, but [pause] nothing is kind of going your way um, and, I’ve been in that stage for almost a two-year period, um, and sometimes even longer, and it’s like well what am I doing and why do I want to do this anymore? But, um, in those times, there’s just so much to learn about the negative experiences that you just like, switch it around, like, take a step back, okay, what did I learn from this and how can I use it [pause] maybe not even in sport, but um, in the
outside life, to be like, hey, I actually found something good about this and not everything is bad, and [pause] looking forward to kind of see how I can gain from this experience and twist it in a positive way.

The ways in which participants viewed their sport experience had the potential to help or hinder their mental toughness. Participants reported that taking on a positive, grateful and “holistic” perspective provided them with reason, meaning and motivation to push through difficulties. It also enabled them to cultivate presence and reduce perceived pressure by regulating their thoughts and emotions and re-directing them to be positive, functional and process oriented. In order create and maintain this sort of perspective, participants reported that they primarily needed to be prepared. Without diligent and vigorous preparation, it would be impossible to have this sort of perspective.

4.2.5 Preparation

The final category of how participants perceived and experienced mental toughness was through preparation. Participants reported that they approached their preparation as if it were competition by always exerting maximal effort and simulating competition settings as closely as possible. Their preparation included both physical training (conditioning, skill acquisition) as well all mental training (goal setting, imagery, meditation). Participants reported that preparation for competition required mental toughness. They also discussed how preparation developed mental toughness by reducing anxiety and by promoting confidence, self-efficacy, and readiness to perform. Figure skater Clara described how she approached her training with the same amount of focus and intensity as an actual competition. Putting herself in high pressure, competition-like situations on a regular basis contributed to her mental toughness and ability to perform consistently:
I think a big part of my success is because I train with such a degree of focus and intensity and I get really nervous in training because I never ever want myself to accept making mistakes. I mean I accept myself to make a mistake, mistakes happen. But not repeated mistakes or not my best. You know if your body doesn’t feel well. Everyday your 100% is different. I understand that. I understand that my training today, my 100% today may not be the same as my 100% tomorrow but I always expect 100% of myself, whatever that is, on the day. And because I train like that, when I get to competition, I get nervous for the competition, I have it in my back pocket that when I was at home training and I was nervous and putting that pressure on myself, I did it in training! And so now I’m at a competition, but it’s the same feeling that I’ve trained with. So that’s always- I think that’s a key to my mental toughness and of why I’m also a consistent competitor- because of the way I approach my training.

Rock climber Jade took the same approach with her training:

Treating each day as if it were a competition. So, each day, you try your hardest and you do your best. If you didn’t perform at your highest, why not? And take that experience and bring it into the next. Next training ask, “did you perform at your best? No? Why not?” And then take both those days and figure out how you can get to where you need to be to be able to perform on the day that counts.

Similarly, half-pipe snowboarder Jordanna explained how having strong work ethic in her mental and physical training lead to the development and maintenance of mental toughness:

I think that mental training and psychological training, this is a big part of it [mental toughness] and just, like, work ethic in general. I think when you work really, really hard, you are able to rely on that and you become- working hard in the gym helps my
mental toughness. Working hard, like pushing myself in this way, helps my mental toughness grow, so I think that it could develop people’s mental toughness by a very strong work ethic.

Proactive endeavors, such as planning and preparing for competition, required mental toughness to endure the intensity and duration of training. Engaging in proactive endeavors also developed mental toughness by increasing confidence and reducing anxiety, two factors participants reported as key to their mental toughness. Downhill mountain biker Veronica, explained how her preparation for competition involved visualization and studying the race course. Knowing that she had done her “homework” and had prepared for the variables under her control enabled her to feel confident and focused on race day:

*I always take the necessary time to prepare for a race, so like I’ll always do my warm-ups in the morning before practice, it’s usually like 7am in the morning and there is no one there, there’s no fans, there’s no distractions to be there. But like say before a race where it’s very busy, I’ll always go somewhere quiet, close my eyes and do visualization, kind of do my homework and then after that, it’s kind of like whatever time, just enjoy it. Um because you’ve done the homework, so when you go into your race, when you are starting it, the only thing you need to feel is that you have done what you had to do to be successful right now, so your mind is just kind of free going into it. So, it doesn’t matter if you get distractions as long as you have done what you need to get done. And that is definitely something that I wouldn’t let me not get done. I need to do my homework to be mentally tough, it doesn’t take that long.*
In the same regard, half-pipe snowboarder Jordanna reported that being prepared was key to her most successful performance. She claimed that her preparation enabled her to get in the zone and worked to reduce anxiety and increase confidence and readiness to perform:

*Although I couldn’t remember, I probably put out my best performance because my mental trainer prepared me. He told me, “when you go and you can’t remember exactly what happened but it felt really good, that is-that’s the zone!” So, I can literally say that for the [competition], I was literally prepared enough to be in the zone. And that’s the other thing that I tell people, like, being prepared is your biggest weapon! Like when you are going into a test and you feel nervous and stuff, that’s because you’re unprepared. I get a lot of questions if I was nervous for the [competition]. Like when I go and do public speaking that always comes up when we go to Q and A, “were you nervous at the [competition]?” And I’m just like, “no, I wasn’t nervous!” It was because I had prepared for so long and I felt prepared that I was just ready to do it, you know I felt like I belonged.*

In order to cultivate presence, perspective, and perseverance, participants primarily needed to ensure they were engaging in vigorous and diligent preparation. Participants reported that preparation was critical to the development and maintenance of mental toughness, and they associated a lack of mental toughness with a lack of preparation.

4.2.6 Lack of mental toughness

Participants reported that a lack of mental toughness was related to a lack of effort and drive in training/preparation and an inability to regulate thoughts and emotions during competition. A lack of mental toughness was often characterized by an inability to perform on demand, by an inability to recover from mistakes made, and by making multiple mistakes in a
row. Trampolinist Deanna described what a lack of mental toughness looked like in training and competition:

*Um, depends what area it’s in. Um, I think in a training sense, a lack of mental toughness would limit your work ethic, your effort, you wouldn’t train as hard, you wouldn’t work as hard. If you experienced fear, you wouldn’t push through it. If you experienced an obstacle or a block with a skill or a challenge you wouldn’t push through it. Um, so you’d be very limited. Um, I think the other side of it is the competitive mental toughness. In a competition scenario, and I mean, there’s athletes on our team who train hard and work very hard but can’t pull it together in competition because something in their mind is holding them back. Those obstacles, whether they don’t have the skill or the capability or they just haven’t figured out their routine, or a way of dealing with it, but it can hold back their performance because there’s a lot of athletes who train and preform incredibly well in training but never get the results in competition.*

Similarly, figure skater Clara described a lack of mental toughness as an inability to thrive in competition settings and an inability to recover from challenging situations, or to re-appraise challenging situations in a functional way. This was often followed by multiple mistakes in a row and poor body language:

*I’d say that, if I was to think of what- people who have a hard time competing. You get to a competition and you have a scenario where you have an opportunity to qualify for the Olympics, qualify for the World Championships, or any major event, and they are always missing opportunities. They are always skating below their potential, below what they do in practice, and I think it also has to do with training. I mean, when I’m training and I’m doing my long program, which is really difficult to do, mental toughness gets me through*
it, gets me through to the end without feeling physical pain, because I’m so strong in my head that I don’t even feel the physical pain that I know other people feel [laugh]. Um, and you know you see some people in training or in competition and the make a mistake and it all just unravels. And I think that when you’re mentally tough, you have the ability to open up your program with a mistake and then finish the rest of it perfectly. . . . Like when I see people make one mistake and one mistake turns into 100 mistakes . . . I think that they’re lacking mental toughness, that you should be able to recover with a better mental approach and this is in training or competition. . . . And you can see it even in their face, the body language. Body language is a big key for me. When I see sluggish attitude and you know like the eyes rolling. No commitment from the body to me that’s also a sign of somebody that might be lacking mental toughness.

Rock climber Jade also described a lack of mental toughness as making multiple mistakes in a row:

Whenever I think of climbing I relate it back to gymnastics because it is quite similar, like if you are in the middle of a routine and you make a mistake or miss something, you have to forget about it and move on, and continue the routine so you can finish off perfectly. Um, not to make up for what you missed before but you need to make sure that you’re not going to mess up again because of the mistake you made before. So, with bouldering [a rock climbing discipline], that also relates because if you get five different problems in qualifiers, and you get five minutes between each one, and you have five minutes to complete it. So, it’s called five on, five off; climb for five minutes, sit for five minutes. If you mess up the first problem, some people will be like, “alright, that’s my comp, I may
as well not try anymore.” But that problem could have just been to throw you off and then the next four could have been easier. So that’s why it’s similar to gymnastics.

Participants reported that a lack of mental toughness was most often characterized by an inability to cope with or bounce back from challenging situations, which were underpinned by a lack of work ethic in preparation and an inability to regulate thoughts and emotions during competition. Although participants identified what a lack of mental toughness might entail, they also acknowledged that mental toughness was something they could not see. Figure skater Clara described mental toughness as an “invisible force”:

It’s [mental toughness] kind of like this invisible force and you can’t quite put your finger on and I always wonder. I think that being [pause]- I think that the best way that I can describe it is, it is an invisible force that is around all the greatest, not only the greatest athletes that would be in the world, but anybody that has been successful at what they do, business men [sic], parents, athletes, anybody that’s been successful, has to have hit road bumps and hit hurdles that have involved mental toughness in order to surpass them.

Trampolinist Deanna also explained how mental toughness was not something one could directly observe:

Yeah, I mean, talking to my coach, it’s funny because mental toughness is also something that you can’t see, so when it’s not quite there, or you don’t quite have enough, no one else can tell. I guess an example in our sport is, when you have a mental block with a trick, no one understands what that mental block is except for you. So, my coach, this trick that I was talking about, this twisting trick that I was scared of, after doing it for 12 years, for a three-month period I just would not go for it. And I tried to explain and my coach is like, “just do it, you can do it, just go!” And that expectation I guess, is for us to
balls up [sic] and do it. But, it’s not always there, like our confidence or where our heads are at don’t always match where our coach wants us to be or expects us to be.

Although participants perceived a lack of mental toughness to be characterized by certain behaviours such as making multiple mistakes in a row and not exerting maximal effort, Deanna’s story illustrates the subjective nature of mental toughness and highlights the social norms and expectations surrounding it.

4.2.7 Gender differences in mental toughness? “In the experience of it, no. In the expectation of it, yes.”

Participants reported that there were no differences between men and women in terms of their capability to be mentally tough. However, they reported differences in gendered norms and expectations surrounding mental toughness as a result of how athletes were socialized. Although participants did not identify with such norms and expectations, they were influenced by them and displayed congruence with them through gendered language, behaviours, and their own perceptions and expectations. Participants also suggested that women may have more of a capacity to be mentally tough than men because they had additional stressors they had to cope with, including hormonal fluctuation, menstruation, body image and evaluations based on appearance and behaviours.

Trampolinist Deanna perceived that although men may have biological and physical advantages over women, their capacity to be mentally tough was essentially the same. Deanna’s excerpt also illustrates the tension surrounding gendered norms and gendered expectations to act in a tough manner. Although Deanna did not agree or identify with mental toughness as being influenced by gender, she and her teammates perpetuated this notion by using and condoning gendered language to encourage toughness amongst one another.
Culturally I think, I mean-this sounds really bad- but in our sport, we always say, “man up and do it,” [sic] which I mean is terrible for whoever studies gender studies, [laugh] or we say, “stop being a triangle [vagina]!” [sic] [laugh] Which is terrible to women too [laugh]. But I think the expectation is that men are more mentally tough than women are. I don’t know that it’s necessarily the case. And maybe, they experience more pressure to be more mentally tough. And it’s maybe, I don’t think this is right, but perhaps it’s a little more acceptable for women to be not as mentally tough - I don’t agree with that but I know like in our sport, I know the male athletes experience the same thing, they experience mental blocks, they experience fear, they experience all of this stuff, but [pause]. But I just, I think-but my coaches always set the example, like, being a girl is not an excuse too, so like, he tells us - obviously there is a power differential and a height differential that limits us, like for me to get up and do a quad flip is going to be a lot harder than for my teammate to get up and do one, but he always said, “look at what the guys were doing four years ago and that’s what you should be doing now.” And, like, “what the guys are doing now, is what you should be aiming for.” So, yeah, I do think there are some differences in terms of cultural and social norms, but there shouldn’t be.

Figure skater Clara described how mental toughness could not be determined by physical strength, appearance, or gender. Clara perceived that men and women may differ in their approach to developing and maintaining mental toughness, however, their capacity to be mentally tough was the same. Despite having this perspective, Clara was socialized to perceive physically strong male athletes as more mentally tough than women. Furthermore, she insinuated that men coaches might be tougher than women coaches and that women coaches may be more likely to “coddle” athletes than men coaches. As with Deanna, Clara’s excerpt
showcases tension and incongruence; although she did not believe mental toughness was different for men and women, she displayed some degree of gendered expectations that were likely a result of how she was socialized:

*I mean in my head [pause] I feel like this big strong male athlete should always be like much more mentally strong than I am, but I think that, that’s a misconception that we’ve created because somebody could look big and strong. You don’t know what’s going on in their head, you don’t know what experiences they’ve had to live through. So, I don’t think it’s different between a male and a female, I think that the core of mental toughness is the same but the approach that you might take in order of how to [pause] how to reach it or how to nourish it and how to develop it might be different for a male and a female and it might also be different if your coach is a male or a female. I have pretty much all male coaches and I always have since I was 13. Is that why I’ve been able to become mentally tough? Maybe? I didn’t have anybody coddling, any coach coddling me, so maybe?*

Rock climber Jade described how outsiders and non-athletes may expect mental toughness to be different for men and women. She explained how it might be more acceptable for a woman than a man to show an emotional reaction. However, she perceived that such expectations were inaccurate and that men and women shared similar emotional reactions. Despite this, Jade described how her boyfriend reacted to adversity by hiding his emotions, suggesting that he may have been adhering to such gendered expectations:

*I think that men can be perceived as being tough all the time, or at least they think they do, um [laugh]. Um, so if a guy were to go and be super, super upset after a round, people would kind of look at him, like, “oh, why is he crying, why is he upset, why can’t*
he keep it together?" Whereas if you’re a girl, and you go off and cry, it’s like whatever, “she’s a girl, she’s allowed to do that.” So, I think that it is just how it is perceived by other people is what matters, but I think as an overall athlete, I think we all react the same. I know my boyfriend, when he competes, he can keep it together, generally 100% of the time and he’s only not kept it together once. I was like, “are you alright?” He’s like, “no, don’t talk to me!” And then didn’t talk about it for like six months.

Trampolinist Deanna’s quote summarizes participant’s perceptions of gendered norms surrounding mental toughness. When asked if there was a difference between men and women in terms of mental toughness, trampolinist Deanna responded: “In the experience of it, no. In terms of the expectations to have it, yes.”

Although participants perceived the ability to be mentally tough as the same for men and women, some suggested that women may have more capacity to be mentally tough as they faced more stressors that were specific to women. Downhill mountain biker Veronica explained how she experienced gendered expectations as a woman competing in an extreme, and male dominated sport. Veronica perceived that outsiders expected her to be less mentally tough and less able to cope with difficult training and setbacks, such as injuries, because she was a woman. She also felt pressure to prove herself as a worthy competitor as she often experienced evaluations based on her appearance and her gender:

People might that that for a girl- people are like impressed with like girls going into extreme sports. But in a male present sport, you stand out a lot more. But they might not understand, or they might think it’s more demanding for a girl. Maybe it is? I’m trying not to think that it is. But they may think that it’s more difficult for a girl to go into like a, a tough training and you are stronger for what you are doing. Some girls go into sport,
and they begin to race, and you can see it, they want to be the cute girl out there, not my cup of tea, you know. From the outside, people might think that it is harder for a girl to cope with accepting, you know like, once they reach their goal, they are like, “oh, you know, it’s not a sport for you, you’re so pretty, you are going to injure yourself?” And for me, it’s part of the game to injure yourself. But there is so much more to it, it’s kind of worth it. You know like obviously I’m not thriving for injuries, but sometimes it happens when we race, you know it part of the game. People might think that it’s harder for a girl to accept that. Like boys are tough and better at accepting injuries, but for me- yeah- for any girl who is taking this seriously, they are going to be mentally strong, just as much as men.

Veronica also identified stressors associated with how her body was being perceived by others. As a woman, she felt pressure to present herself in a way that took attention away from her body and towards her toughness and motivation as an athlete- not as a woman. Because of this pressure, Veronica made concerted efforts to keep her branding gender neutral:

="I have to be very careful with like how I [pause] how I bring myself out with my image. Like how there’s never any cleavage in my shots and I’ll never take a selfie with like half my face and my cleavage, showing my boobs, like no! You don’t do that, you show that you’re strong and where your actual motivation is. Um, it’s not like men would do that obviously [laugh] but like, you know men, men don’t have to worry about being topless somewhere if they are swimming, but a girl, I might just turn around and be like, “ahhhh!” You know, just so that like people don’t focus on my body and focus on like what’s going on.
Another stressor specific to women that all participants reported was menstruation. Participants reported that having to manage symptoms associated with hormonal fluctuation and menstruation (headaches, cramps, mood swings, fatigue) required them to adopt coping strategies specific to mental toughness. Half-pipe snowboarder Morgan described how she used mental toughness to re-focus attention, re-frame thoughts and persevere through pain and symptoms associated with menstruation during a competition:

*I remember qualifying for [city]. We had a couple of qualifiers and that was one of the first ones and I got my period. And we had Advil like stacked. I faint and I puke and I get the worst cramps and I was just like- I just stopped everything and I was like, “this is it, this isn’t happening and I’m doing this task at hand!” That’s mental toughness!*  

Half-pipe snowboarder Jordanna described the maladaptive symptoms associated with menstruation that she had to cope with during competition. She suggested that women may have more capacity to be mentally tough because they often had to cope with more stressors than men:  

*I have had to totally find a way to cope with being on my period, like right now, I’m supposed to get my period in like seven days so I’m all like premenstrual and hormonal and tired and want to eat everything. And I don’t think guys go through that ever. . . I’ve been in contests where I’ve gotten my period that day and I’m like, you know bent over in cramps and like pounding Advil and stuff just to be able to get through the contest and I definitely think that takes a certain level of mental toughness, that guys- that guys- you could never compare that to anything that a guy might go through. You know, everything from psyche to your actual physical feeling [pause] and, and even just going through that every month, I think that already puts women at a higher mental toughness that most men*
or especially women athletes... and I guess then I would say women are under perceived on how mentally tough they actually are.

Participants did not identify with gendered expectations surrounding mental toughness and even expressed that women may be more mentally tough due to the extra stressors they had to cope with. However, they were influenced by gendered expectations and even displayed some degree of gendered expectations themselves as a result of how they were socialized. Participants were immersed in sport cultures that valued toughness and as such, they desired to be perceived as mentally tough despite their gender. This desire may have influenced them to adhere to masculine archetypes of appearing strong, tough and emotionally stable. Although participants did not necessarily believe these traits were specific to men, they still perceived that it was more socially acceptable for women to display incongruence with such traits than men. Participants’ accounts showcase the tension between rejecting gendered norms as per their beliefs and adhering to them, as per how they were socialized and how they wanted to be perceived.

Taken together, the findings suggest that all participants perceived that mental toughness was a critical part of coping in sport. Each athlete attributed a considerable part of their success as an athlete to their mental processes and to their mental toughness, which they perceived, experienced and conceptualized as having an ability to: persevere through difficulties, focus and re-focus attention to the present moment without becoming distracted, view sport experience from a “holistic” perspective, and engage in vigorous and diligent preparation. Participants perceived that a lack of mental toughness was characterized by a lack of effort, an inability to regulate thoughts and emotions and by making multiple mistakes in a row. Although differences existed in terms of social norms and gendered expectations, participants reported that mental toughness was likely the same for men and women. All participants valued developing and
maintaining mental toughness and acknowledged it as key to coping with sport-related adversity and achieving athletic success.

4.3 Self-compassion is critical for coping in sport

Within this theme, participants’ perceptions and experiences with the utility of self-compassion for coping with adversity in sport are discussed. Four sub-themes were identified, including: (a) lack of pre-existing knowledge, which discusses participants’ perceptions of self-compassion as critical for coping in sport despite their lack of previous knowledge surrounding self-compassion. Sub-themes: (b) common humanity; (c) mindfulness; and (d) self-kindness, discuss how participants perceived and utilized each self-compassion component to cope with sport-related difficulties.

4.3.1 Lack of pre-existing knowledge

All participants described using self-compassion and acknowledged its importance in coping with adversity and achieving athletic success. None of the athletes had previous knowledge of the definition of self-compassion, nor had any of them thought about using self-compassion in a sport context. Despite their lack of knowledge surrounding self-compassion, each participant identified using the components (self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity) of self-compassion and perceived them as integral for coping with adversity. For example, after being introduced to the concept of self-compassion, snowboarder Morgan replied:

*I use all of those! Recovering from my concussion. Like, once you were saying all of that, I was like, woah! I use all of those! It’s funny, like I think I really hit rock bottom before I could see that I could do this all on my own and then something really struck a cord and I just wasn’t getting better and so I was like, “okay you need to check yourself, this isn’t right.” Like you don’t know how to self-medicate. Like I didn’t know I was*
depressed and I was totally depressed. It’s so foreign. Um so, I think self-kindness was important. And I was in a place where I wasn’t myself, I guess it’s just kind of self-kindness and mindfulness it took to realize that I needed help. But to have self-compassion and to care enough about myself and my body to reach out for help was the key to my recovery.

Trampolinist Deanna expressed that she had never thought about using self-compassion to deal with adversity in her sport, but subsequently acknowledged its’ utility:

I don’t know? I’ve never thought about that? Um, maybe to a point but I feel like at some point it [adversity] would build up and bite you in the ass. I don’t know? Yeah, I guess like [pause] to a point but I do think that eventually you kind of have to be very self-aware and either acknowledge and deal with it or have compassion towards yourself to be able to move on and have that grit to keep trying. I guess if you don’t have the self-compassion, it’s harder for you to get over adversity in a way.

Similarly, figure skater Clara had never thought about the utility of self-compassion in a sport context: “I never really thought about it [pause] hmmmm, I’ve never really thought about self-compassion in sport”? Upon further introspection, Clara identified self-compassion as an important and pre-existing part of her coping practice, of which she was previously unaware:

I think self-compassion is very important; to achieve like, stress management. Um, if I don’t take the time to really like [pause] not critically, but kindly address how I feel and go over all my emotions and try to get an inner understanding of why I feel like this and really be compassionate with myself in terms of the why, then I can’t ever reach a stability. I think that, that is very important [pause] it seems like when I think about it, it
is a really big part of me that I didn’t even know existed, almost [laugh]. So thank-you for letting me know [laugh]!

Despite the lack of knowledge surrounding self-compassion and its utility in a sport context, each athlete identified aspects of self-compassion as an important part of their coping process and acknowledged using each of its components: common humanity, mindfulness, and self-kindness.

4.3.2 Common humanity

Participants described how they used common humanity to learn from, or draw strength from other athletes’ experiences. This included learning new skills, coping with adversity and more specifically coping with injuries. Utilizing common humanity worked to normalize the process of coping with adversity in sport and reminded participants that they were not alone in their suffering. It is likely that common humanity was also useful for facilitating a supportive team environment. Half-pipe snowboarder Jordanna explained how she learned from sharing experiences with other athletes:

There’s always comfort in numbers I believe and especially when they are willing to share their story and kind of you know, share tricks that they’ve learned about how to deal with their situations. And I do believe in talking to other people about their experiences because you never know, well I’m just repeating myself, you never know what they’ve learned to help better their situation. And it could apply to you as well.

Downhill mountain biker Veronica described how she could take lessons from other athletes even if she had not experienced the same type of setback:

Yeah, so basically, I felt like common humanity is just understanding others and your state of mind and [pause] from there you are able to like, I guess you are kind of learn
from what you are seeing. Like you may not have experienced something someone else is
going through but you can actually learn from it so that you can actually prepare
yourself for knowing what it’s like. Maybe just knowing it’s part of the game if you didn’t
already know.

Participants also described utilizing common humanity to cope with setbacks resulting
from injury. After sustaining an injury, participants found comfort in learning coping strategies
from other injured athletes. Deanna described how she discussed how to cope with her
concussion with her teammate:

My teammate and I, like we have talked a lot recently like, he’s dealing with jumping with
no ACL. And I’m dealing with my head. And, so we’ve [pause] had a lot of
conversations about like, how we’re doing and things that we’re doing to try and like,
cope and like, things, like conversations we’ve had with other people and [pause] things
like that.

Participants found it encouraging and motivating to recognize that other athletes had persevered
through similar injuries they had obtained. Morgan described how reaching out to athletes who
had experienced similar setbacks enabled her to cope with her concussion.

Yes! Especially with my concussion, I reached out to a few girls that had, had
concussions and asked them what they did and where they went. I went to a couple like
doctors and had a few breakthroughs and then was just at wits end again, and I was like,
“[Friend], where did you go?” And she’s like “oh, I went to this doctor in [City].” And
I was like, “I can’t do that.” So, um, I think in that sense that we are all friends and we
could reach out to each other because we’ve been through the same things, it’s an
amazing community in that sense. . . . But to have that friendship and to have that tie to contact them and to learn from everyone else’s experiences is huge and invaluable really.

Similarly, figure skater Clara said:

During my own difficult result or difficult performances or setbacks, if you’ll say, I do come back to myself to thinking, like I can think of so many examples in my head like so and so went through this and they are World Champion and they went through this and they are a champion. So, I can see how similar things happen to other people and other athletes. I guess by being able to look at a setback and to have this understanding that this is how life works, this happens to other people, they have done this to surpass it.

Utilizing common humanity fostered a perspective that normalized adversity, allowing participants to feel comforted in knowing that they were not alone in their sport-related difficulties. Trampolinist, Deanna described: “I mean, we all like to feel that it’s a normative experience to have trouble and yeah, I think that it does make it easier, because you can also draw on other people’s experiences.”

Similarly, swimmer, Sidney explained:

Yeah, I mean everyone responds differently to all situations but [pause] we all are humans and we all have emotions. So, knowing that you are not alone in things [pause] and how you deal with things is helpful to not only move on, but to be okay with yourself.

Half-pipe snowboarder Morgan worked as a mentor for young athletes, where she encouraged sharing stories of coping with adversity to normalize the process and render it more accessible and realistic:
Yeah, it’s always nice to know that you’re not alone and to share everyone’s stories. To hear other’s people stories. It’s more comprehensible for you to go through it. That’s why I like sharing my story to help others get through it.

Rock climber Jade described how dealing with adversity was inherent to the nature of sport and thus, recognizing that all athletes face similar difficulties was important for coping:

*To take the things and put them to the side, to realize that everyone else is struggling too, because we all go through the same training, maybe in slightly different ways, but we all try our hardest every single time to get to where we want to be and then sometimes that falls apart right in front of us, um, and it just happens to everybody.*

Although participants mostly described using common humanity to deal with setbacks that had already happened, some explained how taking on a perspective of common humanity could facilitate their mental approach during competition by recognizing that all the athletes participating would be facing the same conditions on competition day. Rock climber Jade illustrated this point:

*Yeah, so especially while traveling and being in different countries. The elevation is different, the weather is different and then you always have to think, everyone else is in the same situation as I am right now. Like, I just talked to a bunch of friends that just went to India and they all did not climb as well as they wanted to, but same with everybody else just because it was so hot! Everyone was slipping off and everyone was in the same boat.*

In addition to utilizing common humanity directed at one’s self, trampolinist Deanna described how recognizing that others also suffer could facilitate team dynamics by creating an environment that was understanding and supportive of the challenges athletes may face:
I also think common humanity is integral for like team dynamic, um, and like I know even just recently there was a situation on our team where we probably weren’t as compassionate to one of our teammates as we should have been and she got really upset, and it affected the team dynamic. And obviously it was maybe an hour and it was fine, but I do think that it’s a- integral for team dynamic and that feeling of support but also to acknowledge that like everyone has shit that they have to deal with and you have to be able to support others as well because then it also goes both ways, like if you are supportive then you will get the support in return as well. Not that, that is the reason you would do it, but I don’t know, for us, the equipment is always very different and you can see the difference between the athletes who are like, “oh this is the equipment and I really don’t like it!” And they don’t realize that everyone is on the same piece of equipment, everyone is dealing with the same thing, like if there’s a delay or if there’s some challenge in the warm up, like everyone is experiencing that same common challenge. So, it can also give you strength too because it allows you to be more adaptable.

Through common humanity, the process of coping with adversity was normalized. Participants drew strength and learned from other athletes’ experiences. They also acquired support from, and extended support to other athletes who were coping with adversity. Finally, common humanity was used to facilitate support within a team.

4.3.3 Mindfulness

All participants described using mindfulness to cope with sport-related adversity. Although each participant had a different approach to when and how they utilized mindfulness, they all perceived it as an important part of their athletic success. In most cases, participants
utilized mindfulness to focus or re-focus their attention in the present moment by relating to their thoughts and emotions with understanding, objectivity, non-attachment, and non-judgement. Most participants preferred to process their thoughts and emotions before a competition by cultivating awareness, calmness, and presence though a self-check in, and after a competition through objective reflection and re-appraisal. During a competition, participants reported that having an emotional reaction was normal and some even preferred having a high state of emotional arousal to perform at their best. Although emotions may have been present during competition and some participants found it more difficult than others, they all reported that in the most ideal case, during competition their thoughts and emotions would remain neutral. Downhill mountain biker Veronica described how remaining neutral and objective allowed her to move forward and re-focus after a setback:

*I always try and stay neutral towards others but also towards myself. So if I’m trying to like evaluate you know, why I’m feeling a certain way and how I can actually help myself get back to being happy and focused and okay and confident, then I have to like, see, kind of from the outside, like what is making me like this and how can I overcome and maybe not get overwhelmed with things, or you know, what can help me calm myself back down and re-focus . . . so I feel like, emotionally in your baggage you have to be back to neutral . . . So obviously it’s more stressful if you are holding on to something, like your bag of negative thoughts, you haven’t sort of understood what happened in the previous episode then you’re going on to the next one sort of, with this unknown or worse, fear, that the same thing is going to happen. So like, you first need to like handle the first process, close the book and then deal with the other one.*
Participants acknowledged that having an emotional response to adversity was normal and acceptable as long as it did not involve negative self-judgment and personal attachment. Trampolinist, Deanna, described how she used mindfulness in the form of re-framing, in which she attempted to re-evaluate her situation objectively and without personal meaning:

*Anything can happen and like, yes you can control your performance, but there a lot of factors that you can’t and like, shit happens, and something can go wrong on that particular turn for some reason and it doesn’t mean you’re any less of an athlete or a person. I try and recognize that having an emotional reaction is natural, but then I try and, not change like control it, but I try and calm myself to be able to take a step back from the emotional reaction to have more of a rational response. Um, but, like, I’m definitely going to have breakdowns like the rest of them, like, it happens and I think that’s natural and I’ve become, not okay with it, but, acknowledging that that’s not a bad thing too. So, I try and recognize what I’m feeling and deal with that too and then try and switch to a rational action.*

Half-pipe snowboarder, Jordanna, explained how she learned to relate to her thoughts and emotions with an attitude of understanding, objectivity, non-attachment, and non-resistance. In accordance with the other participants, Jordanna also expressed that mindfulness became easier to use as she got older and gained more experience in dealing with adversity.

*We are hard on ourselves. The older that I’ve gotten though and I do think it is something that comes with age, the more you just learn to let go and accept and have an understanding at least or have a plan on how to make your situation better. Just like, “yeah, this is what’s going on, I get it, next time I’m going to do it this way.” And don’t let, don’t let it get your knickers in a knot I guess. Yeah, so I am really conscious of just*
like trying to block it out and be like, just let it kind of pass me by. I do have a personality that will dwell over it but I have learned not to and just to let things go. But that has come with you know, a few years of it. I used to hold things, like pent them up and worry about them.

Participants reported that mindfulness was important for training, competition, and during rest times. How and when each athlete utilized these skills was individualized. However, most participants described using mindfulness during training and competition to cultivate presence and to let thoughts and emotions pass without judgement or attachment, and during rest times to re-evaluate thoughts and emotions objectively. Rock climber Jade explained when she used mindfulness:

Um, I think it would be re-evaluating what happened during competition. Um, but taking that and sort of reflecting on what happened, instead of dwelling on what actually happened during the comp when you actually have to keep focusing on performing. So, you’re just reflecting at the end instead of, reflecting during. There is no point in reflecting during. But yeah, if something goes wrong, put it in a box, move it to the side, open the box when you are all done with the comp. Um, so yeah, I would say that I could get upset in the middle of a route, but why? Because it’s not going to help me perform well right now, so I may as well get upset later. But I don’t know, there’s definitely some emotions that bounce around but a lot of it is just like, okay staying focused and like perform, perform, perform. Even if it’s going poorly, you still need to perform, everyone’s watching so [laugh], don’t mess up! Next problem, rest, recover, go. But maybe for like a few seconds, kind of like, “damn it, my gosh, why?!”. But you can only really be like that for at most half a minute, like you can’t dwell on that or it’s going to
affect the next one and you can affect the next one, so if it was the first one, you can affect all five. Why wreck the whole comp off one small little silly mistake on the first route?

Similar to how Jade utilized mindfulness, downhill mountain biker Veronica explained how she preferred not to process her emotions during competition:

*I think it depends on the person. Like I see value in both sides but I also think there is probably more value in letting it roll off your back because your emotions aren’t going to change the situation. And sometimes, a lot of times you get emotional over the things that are out of your control.*

Conversely, half-pipe snowboarder, Jordanna expressed that letting her emotions pass without processing them would make it more difficult for her to relate to them objectively. When asked if she used mindfulness during competition, she responded:

*No, not, normally, because I think if you just kind of ignore how you are feeling then you are not really dealing with the problem. And it might be harder to be objective because you will always have that unconscious feeling about it that might make it more bias than objective. So, I think it’s important to acknowledge what you are feeling, deal with that and then look at it from the other side. I think that looking at it from the other side is not something that not everyone thinks about doing, you know, putting yourself in the others’ shoes or you know, being the judges and seeing what they see and yeah, so I think that helps me make an objective decision, versus ignoring the way I’m feeling and just go with some neutral stance.*

Similarly, swimmer, Sidney expressed how she needed all of her emotions for race day. She described how she would try to remain very calm and emotionless the day before a competition
in order to “bottle up” her emotions so she could use them for her races. When asked if she utilized mindfulness to let emotions pass, Sidney responded:

*Um, like during a competition or pre? Because during . . . I literally need all of my emotions there. Whether it’s a bit of fear, or um, excitement, nervousness, I almost need all of that, because as I was saying before, I feel like I do preform my best when there’s more emotions on the table.*

Like Sidney, Jade described how she needed all of her emotions to compete:

*I need to be a little nervous, a little scared, a little happy, a little excited for me to be able to perform, because if I don’t have any emotions at all, I’m not going to be able to perform if I don’t care. If I don’t have any emotions like, “yeah I don’t really care what I’m doing.” Then why am I here? Why am I training and competing?*

Trampolinist, Deanna explained how she used mindfulness to manage her thoughts and emotions by calming herself down primarily (emotion-focused coping) and subsequently by trying to think objectively about what was happening, why it was happening and how she could alleviate the problem (problem-focused coping):

*Um, that’s usually how I try and approach it. Like I’ve had some skill problems with one trick and I try to take a step back and figure out why. If I have an emotional response to it, my first reaction would be to take a few deep breaths, like go to the corner and calm myself down. Because if you are thinking emotionally, you can’t- I mean- it’s harder to think rationally. And you want to get past the emotional reaction to be able to rationally look at the problem and find a solution and I usually, like there’s some days where you kind of have to go home and come back the next day, but, once yeah, once you are over*
that initial emotional response, you can, I always try and look at, “okay, what can I do?”

And take action rather than let it fester.

Ice skater, Clara, described how mindfulness involved using a combination of avoidance, problem, and emotion-focused coping.

I think probably the perfect thing would be a balance between both [ignoring and dealing with emotions]. Of being able to tune in to the emotions, but at the same time, when the moment’s right, to be almost like ignoring them and that they’re not coming to the surface. I think there definitely is a time and a place for it. When I was going down the ice at [competition] this year and I felt pure terror, and fear, I, I didn’t let myself like obsess about it, it was like it didn’t exist. So, it was a time where I was able to really be objective, think objectively about those emotions and um, it’s hard to do when you’re feeling emotions and if you’re a very emotional person and you feel so connected and so strongly, it’s so hard to turn it around to the other side and sometimes forcing it the other way isn’t good either.

Most participants expressed the value in remaining neutral and objective towards their thoughts and emotions, however, this task was difficult because of the personal meaning attached to their sport experiences. Some participants, like Jade and Veronica, found it easier than others to move from an emotional to an objective and rational response quickly. Half-pipe snowboarder Morgan found this task difficult. When asked if she thought it was effective to utilize mindfulness during competition, she responded:

Yes! Not easy! Um, almost impossible for an athlete! Because everything you do personally is always emotional. Um, but I’d say looking back now- I think in the moment it’s like raw emotions but then when you look back you can analyze something and take it
for what it is. But I don’t think you can in that moment, there’s always emotions that are going to be attached, you can’t just let go of that right away, I think it will take like a week or so.

While it may have taken up to a week for Morgan, swimmer Sidney described how she allotted herself a personal five minutes to process emotions and thoughts during competition:

Um, we- well I try to give myself. Well if it’s at a swim meet, I’ll give myself a five-minute rule where if there is something I just am not happy with or, it just didn’t go the way I want, I’ll give myself five minutes to, I guess wallow in my own sorrows [laugh]. And after that five minutes, just return to my happy self.

Relating to their thoughts and emotions with such objectivity, non-attachment, and non-resistance allowed participants to become present and focus their attention towards the task at hand. Participants expressed that they may not have been able to focus or perform if they were using up mental resources for dwelling on past or future occurrences. Swimmer, Sidney explained:

But, yeah, I think it’s super beneficial [using mindfulness] because when it comes down to it, you got to get back in the pool and keep going and try to get better and you can’t do that being negative and being too hard on yourself. So, getting back to neutral or even positive is better than being negative for too long, but it’s obviously a reality and sometimes you can’t control it to how you want. It’s definitely beneficial, but it’s easier said than done.

A mindfulness technique that participants used to cultivate presence and regulate thoughts and emotions, was doing a self-check. A self-check involved bringing awareness to
how they were feeling and subsequently directing those feelings towards ones that were effective and functional for their personal performance needs. Trampolinist Deanna explained:

*I don’t, like I don’t plug in the Head Space App [online application that delivers a mindfulness program] before I compete. But what I often do, I guess like part of my routine is doing a self-check in to see where I am physically and emotionally and mentally and I know what state I need to be in and I know what things can help me get there. If I’m too tired or worked up or things like that, so I don’t necessarily meditate before I compete but I am definitely very focused on what my routine is and going through it in my head and then a lot of the other times spent doing a lot of deep breathing or like pacing around to keep my legs warm and things like that. And the same thing in training, not quite to the same extent but I’ll often like go off to the side and do my own thing or like try and get focused on the turn and do some deep breathing, especially if it’s a turn that I’m more nervous about, that way I’m more focused on myself rather than the environment and other things that are going on and different distractors.*

Half-pipe snowboarder Jordanna explained how her self-check involved reminding herself of why she participates in her sport:

*Something that my mental trainer taught me is to really pay attention to your emotions because if you let them get away from you then it will affect your performance. . . . I just do a self-check. Like, I’ll be like okay, “how am I feeling right now, am I nervous, am I looking at someone too much, am I worried about a trick?” You know, I will really try and pin point it and work through it. I definitely do an emotional check, several times in the day, especially in sport. But a lot of times, I will just be like, “okay, why am I doing*
“this?” [laugh] “Oh, right, okay it’s because I love doing this and I don’t care what the end result is going to be, okay sweet, I’m just going to do what I love doing then!”

Although each participant utilized mindfulness in slightly different ways, figure skater Clara’s account illustrates what most participants perceived to be the ideal way to use mindfulness. Clara described how one of her best performances required a systematic mindful approach in which she cultivated calmness, regulated her thought patterns and emotional state, focused on the task at hand and approached her performance with an objective and neutral mental checklist:

Well sometimes I do [use mindfulness] better than others [laugh] it depends. I’m just pretty calm, um with my emotions. But at the [competition] in our long program it was really funny because, um, when it started I was so nervous. Like I was like, “I can’t lift up my legs, my legs are glued to the ice, I’m going to jump and I’m not going to move!” And I had all these thoughts in my head and then I get to my starting position and there’s no turning back, they’re going to press play on the music. And then as soon as the music starts, I feel really calm because I hear that music every day at training. . . . But I was so focused on the job I had to do; it was like just ticking off elements. It was like- we have 12 elements in our long program and in my head, I was mentally just putting a check mark beside each one. It was like “okay, one, done, next, one, done, next.” And it was a very like systematic approach . . . like I was like a robot, no expression, no emotion and then the last difficult one was done and I knew that [pause] everything else was easy and we were going to win. Like then I was like going crazy, I was screaming in the middle of our program. I was so focused and so alert and so aware for all the things that I knew I needed to and then in the moment of like pure relief it was like, “ahhhhhh!” It was one
of the very few times that I’ve been able to do that in my life, and it only lasted for like
three quarters of the program and then all the hard stuff was done and then I was back to
my emotional state. So that’s a challenge for me.

For the women, mindfulness meant having an ability to be present, to focus and re-focus
attention, and to regulate emotions and thought patterns. Most participants attempted to relate to
their emotions with understanding and without personal attachment, and tried to be objective and
goal directed as opposed to negative and ruminative.

4.3.4 Self-kindness

In addition to using self-compassion components, common humanity, and mindfulness to
deal with sport-related adversity, participants reported using self-kindness, which came in the
form of positive self-talk/encouragement/affirmations and managing self-criticisms. This
allowed participants to maintain a positive mindset that did not dwell over past or future
mistakes and that fostered self-efficacy. Although participants acknowledged and valued the
utility of self-kindness in a sport context, they also reported some resistance to using it as they
also valued being self-critical. Rock climber Jade described how she used self-kindness in the
form of positive self-talk:

Well, that [self-kindness] would be like self-talk, like positive thinking. So yeah, I think
that would, if you were to make a mistake and all of the sudden you go through the like,
“oh I can’t do this, I can’t do this!” And just going like flip-like, “I am strong, I can do
this!” Even if I haven’t messed up yet, before I get on the wall, “I can do this, I am fast, I
am speedy!” Like for speed climbing or whatever, um, “feet, feet, feet!” To make sure I
get them right or, “I am strong, this is totally my problem!”
Participants acknowledged that without extending kindness towards the self, they may not be able to effectively cope with adversity. Utilizing self-kindness enabled them to forgive themselves for inadequacies, mistakes or failure, to relate to themselves with an accepting and understanding attitude, to re-evaluate situations, and to move forward with a positive mindset. Jordanna described how she extended kindness towards herself after adversity to foster an understanding and accepting attitude:

*I think after you have tried and put a lot of effort into one thing and then it doesn’t go your way, then you probably should be a little bit more self-kind to yourself. Because you put a lot of work in and you just have to understand, it’s just how the cookie crumbles and it’s about learning experiences versus successes and failures.*

Swimmer, Sidney explained how cultivating kindness towards the self was useful as she could not always rely on external resources, such as coaches to provide her with support and recognition:

*Yeah, well you want to be noticed for what you do and appreciated. But it-it’s been a huge life lesson too, like you are not always noticed for what you do and you need to [pause] be, almost [pause] thankful for yourself and congratulate yourself.*

Some athletes, such as rock climber Jade, proclaimed that without extending kindness toward the self, one might quit their sport altogether:

*If you’re not being self-kind, um, you’re probably not going to continue. Because the hard times are hard and you have to realize that they are hard times and then think about it and then move on from them. But if you don’t take the time to think about it and figure out what went wrong, you’re probably not going to continue for much longer.*
Downhill mountain biker Veronica had a similar outlook. She described how she managed her thoughts and emotions by relating to them with the right amount of kindness:

You may give up, especially if you are too strict or too rough on yourself. You have to give in a little bit to make sure that you are not in a negative mindset. You don’t think like, “oh, I’m not doing this right, I’m not strong enough, I’m not good enough, I’m not ready.” If you go into it not 100% ready but you believe you’re not ready then it’s not going to be, you know, a successful outcome. But like, if you do give in a little and just believe that you can do your best with what you have. That’s where you are, you are still going to go and do the race and the performance that you have to do, and just try to clear out the bad thoughts. So, in terms of self-kindness, like, not too much, but I do think that you have to give in a little bit just so that you remain happy, healthy, confident- that it’s okay.

While participants expressed the value of self-kindness, they also reported some resistance to using it. Figure skater Clara explained how being too self-kind might hinder her ability to be resilient and mentally tough. Clara associated too much self-kindness with weakness and an inability to persevere through difficulty:

The way I see it, if you’re too self-kind, it’s almost like you’re babying yourself. You would have to be tough on yourself in order to become resilient. And all the qualities that lead to mental toughness are- a lot of them, also come from being self-critical. Because you care so strongly and you feel these emotions so deeply. But I do see-if I think about being too self-kind, I think about like weak people. Like poor body language and the inability to have this like umph to fight to the end.
Trampolinist Deanna’s resistance to self-kindness may have been influenced by the term ‘kindness,’ which athletes may have attributed to being soft or weak in a sport context:

I mean, it’s the nature of our sport, things go wrong and I get that. I usually try not to dwell on it too much. I need to like watch videos and remind myself that I’m like capable. I don’t know, maybe not quite what you mean by like kindness and stuff like that, but I try and encourage myself I guess [laugh].

Upon further exploration of what self-kindness meant in a sport context, Deanna explained how using self-kindness was appropriate and useful if it came in the right amount, at the right time, and was coupled with motivation and subsequent action to improve one’s situation:

I do think it’s important to be like, self-kind but I also think that there’s, not a limit, but if you accept less than 100 percent every single day, then are you really going to get to the same level? Like there has to be a balance, there has to be self-kindness and an understanding of where your body is at, where your mental state is at, where your emotions are at and like, how that might influence your training but given those situations and being aware of those situations and still trying to give as much as you can, I think that’s important. . . . But you don’t want to be so kind to yourself that you don’t give yourself the chance to be the best you can be . . . So, I don’t know, it’s like a self-kindness and action maybe that follows right after.

Taken together, although participants had no previous knowledge surrounding the definition of self-compassion nor had they ever conceptualized self-compassion as a coping resource specific to the sport domain, all participants perceived self-compassion to be an important part of dealing with sport-related difficulties and reported many experiences in which they utilized its components for coping purposes. Participants used common humanity to draw
strength and to learn from other athletes, and to normalize the process of coping with adversity. They used mindfulness to focus or re-focus their attention in the present moment by relating to their thoughts and emotions with understanding, objectivity, non-attachment, and non-judgement. Finally, participants used self-kindness to extend an encouraging and supportive attitude towards themselves, to manage their self-criticisms, and to maintain a positive mindset. However, participants proceeded with caution when using self-compassion and more specifically, self-kindness, as they also valued being self-critical and hard on themselves. As participants progressed through their athletic careers, they learned how to manage an effective balance between being self-kind and self-critical.

4.4 Self-compassion and mental toughness are compatible

Within this theme, participants’ perceptions and experiences with the compatibility of self-compassion and mental toughness are discussed. Three sub-themes were identified. The first sub-theme, (a) self-compassion and mental toughness are contextual, focuses on the relationship between mental toughness and self-compassion as dependant on the timing, the situation, and the meaning the situation held for each individual athlete. The second sub-theme, (b) the role of self-compassion in building mental toughness, reflects participants’ perceptions that using self-compassion was critical to the development of mental toughness. Finally, the third sub-theme, (c) mindfulness as the key connector, discusses the role of mindfulness in developing and maintaining both self-compassion and mental toughness.

4.4.1 Self-compassion and mental toughness are contextual

Participants identified mental toughness and self-compassion as compatible and integral for coping with sport-related stressors and achieving athletic success. Participants acknowledged the joint contributions of being both self-critical and self-kind; neither being more important than
the other. Rather, the process of using mental toughness and self-compassion depended on the timing, the situation, and the meaning it held for each athlete. In most cases, participants reported using mental toughness during training and competition to persevere through and bounce back after difficulties (e.g., hard workouts, mistakes made in competition), to always exert and accept nothing less than maximal effort, to regulate thoughts and emotions and to focus and re-focus attention. In most cases, participants reported using self-compassion during taper time to cope with difficulties through reflection, acceptance, understanding, self-care, personal detachment, and re-appraisal. Swimmer Sidney described how she most often used mental toughness to persevere through difficult physical pursuits and self-compassion during taper time to manage self-criticisms, prevent rumination, and enhance self-belief. However, she also used mental toughness during taper time and self-compassion during physical pursuits. Although the timing of when she used each of them was somewhat automatic and natural, Sidney expressed desire to utilize more self-compassion:

*I need to tap into the self-compassion side a little more. I think it’s important to be mentally tough, like hard training and getting through hard workouts and stuff. But I can be a little bit hard on myself during the taper time where um, you expect everything to go smoothly. At that point you have to use self-compassion - you’ve already done the training and you have been mentally tough, but then you have to change your mind so you trust what you have done and [pause] believe that it has worked and you bring down the volume and start to feel better, and you are going to go through a lot of days where you feel great and not feeling great, um and I think that is like a pivotal moment of when you can be almost too hard on yourself for an off day and it can change your mindset and set you in a downward spiral. And I’m not saying that during hard training you don’t*
have self-compassion or even within the taper time you don’t need to be mentally tough.

But I think in the timing, sometimes I’ll just instinctively use one more than the other.

For half-pipe snowboarder Morgan, the relationship between mental toughness and self-compassion was more linear in nature. Similar to Sidney, Morgan described using mental toughness for physical pursuits and subsequently self-compassion for emotional regulation and self-care:

Like I’m not going to be self-compassionate when I’m at the top of the half-pipe ready to drop in or if I’m trying a new trick. The self-compassion piece comes after. I think of it in a way that mental toughness is me snowboarding and self-compassion is after, it’s separating the emotion as well as taking care of yourself and your health. So again, it’s like literally every day, it’s like mental toughness and then self-compassion.

Morgan perceived self-compassion and mental toughness to be compatible and described their relationship as the “zipper effect.” The “zipper effect” entailed switching back and forth between an intensely focused, mentally tough mindset that used avoidance emotional regulation, and a self-compassionate mindset that fostered self-care and dealing with emotions. The timing of when she switched back and forth was key. To illustrate this point, Morgan described her mental approach after falling in the half-pipe during a competition:

I think that your mental toughness takes over and you shake it off and you’re so focused on the task at hand, you don’t let your emotions get in the way of things until you have a moment to breathe. . . . I had a concussion so like, my emotions were all over the place. I got up and I was like pissed off, so bad, and then I took a lap and then the next time they came up I was crying but then I knew I had to turn it on. So again, it’s like the zipper effect of being mentally tough and self-compassionate, like it coincides. I had three runs
to do, I was being mentally tough and then I had a moment to like take care of myself and then I had to be mentally tough again while I was back at the top of the half-pipe. Yeah, I think it is because you have to be like mindful of what like, the timing of everything is right. Like when to act on things and when to push things down.

Similarly, half-pipe snowboarder Jordanna used self-compassion as a coping resource she could draw on after facing adversity, and mental toughness to focus on doing what needed to “get done.” Although she claimed she would not approach her preparation with a self-compassionate mindset, she described using self-compassion to understand, forgive, and move forward from adversity before she could shift into a mentally tough mindset:

While I feel like for sports, in terms of, achievement mindset, I feel like we know that we have self-compassion because we’ve already sort of understood and we forgave for what was before but then I feel like we are shifting back into focus, that’s where mental toughness come in. So, I think that self-compassion is still there in your bag with you in case you need it, but I feel like I wouldn’t say that I’m going into my preparation with compassion, you know, I feel like it’s there if I need it for any obstacles and I have it, and I know I do but it’s not encouraging me or it’s not adding to my confidence going into things the way it could maybe for someone else maybe going for a state of mind sort of goal, while mine is like no, these are the things that need to get done!

In the same regard, downhill mountain biker Veronica described using self-compassion to deal with adversity through managing self-criticisms, understanding and re-appraising, and mental toughness to shift back into focus:

When using self-compassion, I was actually using it for adversity, so it was like, yeah. You have a mechanical puncture or you have a crash or an injury, right away you beat
yourself up for it, and then you’ll use self-compassion for sort of like, understanding, re-evaluating what happened and then, you know accepting it and moving on. Mental toughness to like, go right back to where you want to be at, in terms of focus, in terms of readiness, confidence. So, they are totally related.

Maintaining an effective balance between self-compassion and mental toughness involved maintaining an effective balance between being self-kind and self-critical. Half-pipe snowboarder Jordanna explained how self-kindness and self-criticalness needed to balance out and come at appropriate times:

Yeah, like they [self-kindness and self-criticalness] are balanced. Like there’s a time to be that stubborn, critical, strong-willed character. There’s also the right moment for an athlete to listen to their body and to understand like “wow, I’m really feeling like this, like why do I feel like this, how do I get past this? Okay, next challenge,” and you’re ready to go. Because I think it takes a mentally strong person to understand all those things about themselves.

In the same regard, trampolinist Deanna described how an effective balance of self-kindness and self-criticalness was important to her success as an athlete, but may be different for other athletes. Deanna valued self-criticalness as it promoted continuous improvement and allowed her to reach her unrelenting self-standards. Although it was difficult for her to use, she also valued self-kindness as it allowed her to accept, forgive and move forward when she did not achieve such standards.

Yeah, I think you can have both [self-kindness and self-criticalness]. I think it depends on the person. Every athlete needs a different approach. But, yeah, I do think that you need to have some of both and you do need to kind of balance both for what your needs
are at that moment probably. Um, I know I’m very critical of myself but for me it helps me be the athlete that I am. If I wasn’t as critical, I wouldn’t have that strive to be— I guess the perfectionist tendencies that have allowed me to get to the level that I’m at. But at the same time, I have had to really learn to adopt that other piece, self-kindness, like accepting that mistakes happen and accepting that it won’t always go well and I may not always be where I want to be, because even in competition, like, I’ve had really shitty warm-ups and you have to kind of accept it and move on. So, in that sense, if you get too wrapped up and you’re too focused on like being a failure in warm-up then it might actually make you fuck up in competition. So, I think there always has to be some sort of a continuum and yes, I think that self-kindness and self-compassion are incredibly important, like at some points you have to accept it and accept that it was what it was, that warm-up was what it was but now what can I do to change it

Figure skater Clara described how in most cases, she would utilize self-kindness versus self-criticalness to manage difficult situations. However, her management strategy was dependent on how much meaning a particular experience held for her and what her emotional state was at the time. She described how difficulties or mistakes that happened during meaningful and important events could trigger intense and sustained self-criticalness:

I’m self-critical and self-kind. I feel like there are moments to use each of those. When I’m stepping on the ice for my competition, I want to feel self-kind, I don’t want to feel self-critical in that moment, in those pressure situations. But after my performance, if it didn’t go as I wanted, then I can be more self-critical, I think— most of the time, in a difficult situation I would say I would be kind to myself. But there are times where I might be in a different emotional state and that makes me more self-critical. But there
are also moments where I would be kind and it would all depend on what type of mental state I’m in I think and what type of emotions I’m feeling in that particular day or in that moment. And when I am self-critical, it doesn’t last for very long. It could be a very intense feeling, like I feel emotions very intensely. So, when I’m self-critical, it could be like really strong but it will be replaced with self-kindness, quickly. I mean I guess when I had a rough skate at the [competition], it was probably the most like, self-critical I’ve been on myself, like with the strongest intensity. In a really long time and it lasted, like maybe eight to ten hours. But by the time I had to compete in the long program the next day, I had taken it the other way and been kinder with myself. But it took a whole night you know, it took a really long time because it was just so strong at that particular moment that I think even if I had set myself, “okay I’m going to give it an hour and then I’m going to get over it,” I don’t think I would have been able to [laugh]. It was too intense in that moment. And if it hadn’t been such an important event, I probably would have felt the self-critical part for 30 minutes and then I would have been like, “ugggg, whatever, I’m over it, tomorrow is another day!”

Despite the situation and the meaning it held, Clara described how maintaining a balance between being self-compassionate and mentally tough was important not only for athletic pursuits, but also for achieving well-being:

I think a healthy state, a healthy state of self-compassion and a healthy state of mental toughness is important in a balanced well-being as an athlete and as a human being.

Well-being to me is like the perfect- it’s like a teeter-totter and when you, somebody has a really good sense of well-being and understanding of how to achieve this, it’s like the teeter balance in the centre, like the centre of a balance point. And you have to take
care of yourself. You have to take care of yourself emotionally, mentally, physically, um, in every regard in order to achieve a state of well-being so it’s important to be self-compassionate with yourself in order to get there but it’s also important to be able to have that mental toughness; that resilience, and that fight that’s developed because of mental toughness, and balance out that well-being.

All participants valued an effective balance between being self-compassionate and mentally tough and correspondingly between being self-kind and self-critical. Creating an effective balance was dependent on the individual, the timing and the meaning of the situation. In most cases participants reported a sequential use of self-compassion and mental toughness in which they would use self-compassion to cope with adversity and subsequently mental toughness to focus attention and persevere through difficult physical pursuits. Without the self-compassionate piece, participants reported that they may not have been able to shift into a mentally tough mindset.

4.4.2 The role of self-compassion in building mental toughness

All participants perceived that mental toughness required utilizing self-compassion. Through self-compassion, participants could understand, re-appraise and move forward after facing adversity. Participants indicated that if they did not use self-compassion, they would not be able to move forward after facing adversity and thus, would not be able to shift back into a mentally tough mindset as they would be using up the mental resources they needed to focus. Rock climber Jade explained:

We have to have self-compassion to be mentally tough. To take the things and put them to the side, to realize that everyone else is struggling too, because we all go through the same training, maybe in slightly different ways, but we all try our hardest every single
time to get to where we want to be and then sometimes that falls apart right in front of us, um, and it just happens to everybody and to be mentally tough, you have to be able to take that and learn from it but then move on, and take it as a positive thing.

Half-pipe snowboarder Jordanna explained how self-compassion was related to the development of mental toughness through understanding, self-kindness, correcting mistakes and positive re-appraisal. Without such coping mechanisms, Jordanna expressed that she would not be able to persevere after adversity and may even quit altogether:

*I definitely think that it’s [self-compassion] related [to the development of mental toughness] and the sense of um- you kind of need that compassion to keep on going, you know, because if you’re too hard on yourself and you break yourself then you’re going to give up, versus, just kind of understanding or trying to understand where you went wrong at least, and then seeing it as a growth. Giving yourself just enough kindness to get over the lump. Seek out corrections and move on.*

Downhill mountain biker Veronica explained how being mentally tough required a focused and emotionally neutral mindset. To achieve this mindset, Veronica perceived it was necessary to use self-compassion to forgive for inadequacy, regulate emotions, and re-appraise adversity objectively:

*To me mental toughness is really like focus [pause] focus on what it is you are using mental toughness for. So, if I want to focus on my success and my performance, I need tools to get there which include focus and the like ‘do what you gotta do to get there,’ but you also have to make sure you are mentally happy and healthy going into it and not like, beating yourself down. So yeah, they are definitely connected; so, if someone doesn’t have self-compassion and they only stick into their focus minds, then they just sort of*
[pause] keep things with anger in general, like, they might not forgive themselves for certain things or as easily for other things and that’s just not a positive outcome to keep them moving forward. So, I feel like, emotionally in your baggage you have to be back to the neutral if you want to keep focused for the next event or for what you are preparing for next.

In the same regard, trampolinist Deana perceived that it was necessary to use self-compassion for forgiveness, acceptance, personal detachment, and emotional regulation before moving forward with mental toughness. Deanna described how a lack of self-compassion could result in carrying “emotional baggage,” which could have negative effects on performance and thought patterns. To demonstrate the importance of using self-compassion, Deanna described a competition setting:

In our competition, we have a warm-up in the back and then we have one opportunity on the day of to touch the piece of equipment [trampoline] that we are competing on and it’s 30 seconds, no more, if you go over, you get deductions. And then you have to compete. And, there’s a lot of times- that first turn, like you are trying to figure out the trampoline a little bit so sometimes it goes really well and sometimes it’s just a disaster and if you don’t have I guess, self-compassion to acknowledge that things can go wrong but still be okay, then you’ll get really caught up in that one moment and not be able to focus or re-focus on what you are supposed to do next. Or same thing if you do your first routine and it’s really poor and you can’t get over it. So, I think self-compassion, I think the biggest place it comes in place with mental toughness is the forgiveness piece. So, if you have self-compassion, you can then acknowledge that things didn’t go well, in a sense, forgive that it didn’t go well and acknowledge that it’s not you, it’s the situation. So, you
can move on from it quicker and [pause] get over it and do what you need to do. If you don’t have any self-compassion then I think you get really caught up on your failures which can have really poor effects- you might be carrying a lot of emotional baggage with you that could then turn into a negative downward spiral or negative thought patterns, you wouldn’t be able to accept, forgive and move forward.

Figure skater Clara perceived that self-compassion was a component of mental toughness; being strong mentally required self-awareness, self-support, self-kindness, and extending compassion towards one’s thoughts and emotions. Clara questioned how she would be able to be mentally tough if she was not supporting herself with compassion:

*I think people who are mentally tough, like a piece of that would be from self-compassion. If I think about being- moments where I feel mentally strong and mentally tough, I’m must have a positive reflection and feel compassionate towards my emotions and my feelings because without having awareness and being compassionate about myself and the situations that might be going on, how would it be possible to support myself to be strong enough mentally?*

Upon further reflection, Clara explained that although she had never thought about the relationship between mental toughness and self-compassion, nor had she considered self-compassion in a sport context before, she believed that the two were related and that using self-compassion played a key role in the development of mental toughness. She explained how using self-compassionate coping mechanisms such as being kind, compassionate and aware of one’s physical, emotional and mental states, built foundational qualities, such as resilience, that lead to mental toughness:
Well I never really thought about the two together. But then when I think about it, I feel like they do tie into each other [pause] in a way that creates well-being and creates balance, for me. And I hadn’t even really thought about self-compassion for athletes even, like as an athlete it’s not something that I directly thought about. Maybe in a more indirect focus, so I think it’s really interesting and the more I talked about it and thought about it, I’m thinking that being kind to yourself and being compassionate and being in tune with your body and how your feeling and how situations affect you, that is what’s going to build up the qualities that lead to mental toughness. By being able to be kind and compassionate to yourself, you build up resilience, which allows you- this foundation of resilience allows you to be mentally tough. So, maybe in some way, through self-compassion I develop mental toughness, without even knowing it. Maybe that’s been kind of like a link or a bridge that’s connected.

All participants reported that achieving a mentally tough mindset required employing self-compassion. Participants reported that mental toughness required an emotionally neutral, focused mindset that was void of personal attachment and ruminative thought patterns. Without using self-compassion to cope with the many adversities elite level women athletes face, participants reported that they would be more likely to have emotional distress and negative thought patterns, thus using up the mental resources needed to focus their attention and to shift into a mentally tough mindset. These findings suggest that self-compassion may not only be critical for coping with sport-related adversity, but also for achieving a mentally tough mindset.

4.4.3 Mindfulness as the key connector

Mindfulness may be a key connection between the compatible use of mental toughness and self-compassion. Participants perceived that their abilities to be self-aware, neutral,
objective, and present in the face of sport-related challenges were vital in fostering the effective use of both mental toughness and self-compassion. Furthermore, most participants perceived mental toughness to be related to being in the zone while competing, which they described as being in a state of mindfulness. Figure skater Clara conceptualized mindfulness as a key component to both self-compassion and mental toughness, and to her overall success as an athlete. She perceived that being aware of her thoughts, emotions and surroundings fostered her ability to persevere through setbacks and to cultivate the type of focus required to get in the zone:

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\text{Yes, in my imagination, like, the way I see it, it could be a triangle where mindfulness is the peak and it branches out to connect the other two [self-compassion and mental toughness]. I think for me, I can’t be self-compassionate if I’m not mindful about how I feel in my surroundings and what’s going on. That’s kind of like the pillar of them. I think that they are important qualities to hone and to try to improve upon so that your setbacks are less ginormous and your success comes more frequently and you have a better understanding of yourself, better understanding of what brings yourself to that ability to get in the zone. And if I imagine other high-level athletes, it just seems like mindfulness is kind of like one key ingredient to achieving your potential and performing at your best. So, I’d be surprised if any high-level athletes don’t try to tune into that.}
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When asked to elaborate on how mindfulness related to mental toughness, Clara described how being in the zone was equivalent to being in a state of mindfulness, suggesting that she also perceived being in the zone to be related to mental toughness:

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\text{I think when athletes are, high level athletes, or any successful athlete is in the zone, I think that in some way maybe without them identifying with it, they are in a very high}
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state of mindfulness. Whether they are focusing on that or not. I think that being in the zone in an important event or performance could be like the same type of thing as mindfulness. Whereas, in my sport, if I’m aware of what’s going on and I’m aware of what the person on the ice before me did, it’s like, okay it happened, it’s gone, I can’t do anything about it, I have to focus on the now. And that happens naturally when I’m in the zone and I’m well trained and with that tunnel vision. And it’s something that I’m always striving to find a way to make it more natural. Always trying to find out how to be able to like, snap into those type of moments and that type of focus.

In the same regard, rock climber Jade perceived being in the zone to be related to mental toughness. She described mindfulness as a tool for getting into the focused state of mind required for the zone:

*When you are mentally tough, you’re in the zone, you’re thinking about it, you’re not over-thinking about it and then sort of, this few seconds where you have to let go for a second and re-focus, I think that’s where mindfulness would step in, but only-during and event- only a few seconds, because you have to focus on what you are doing and not on what happened.*

Similarly, half-pipe snowboarder Morgan described mental toughness as having an ability to get in the zone, which she described as, “*a balance between like Zen and like so focused.*”

Swimmer Sidney perceived that being mindful enhanced her ability to be mentally tough. Through self-awareness and presence, she could regulate her behaviour to be aligned with her performance goals:

*Mindfulness is basically being aware of yourself in the present moment. And um, I find, the less mindful I am, the less mentally tough I am because my goals are a little bit more*
out of sight. But if I am, almost strict with myself, then I’m aware of how I am acting in the present. Then the actions that follow will be aligned with how I want to be in the now.

Trampolinist Deanna described how she used mindfulness to approach setbacks objectively and without personal attachment, to calm her mind, and to obtain an optimal level of focus. Her explanation highlights how mindfulness was used during all phases of sport engagement, including training, competition, and post-competition:

Yup, yeah, um, in [pause] I guess both in training and in competition I use a lot of breathing, um, and kind of, I use a lot of imagery, like visualization. Um, when it’s in training, learning new skills, um, it’s yeah, I do a lot of breathing, a lot of visual prep-imagery preparation. Breaking down the tricks and then I guess trying to keep myself in a state of mind when I’m jumping because a lot of the times I’ll be jumping, jumping, jumping and then the last second I’m like, “fuck it, no!” [laugh] But eventually coming to a point where you have to trust in your body and trust in your capability and kind of calm your mind so you can push through it. And being able to look at a setback for what it is and to have this understanding that this is how life works, this happens to other people and it’s not personal. In competition, um, if I get nervous and especially in competitions where there’s more on the line, like World’s or an Olympic qualification or something like that, the ability to kind of remind yourself why you do the sport. Again, it’s all about putting yourself into a mind frame or a mental state where you are a bit more calm and you can focus on the task at hand rather than all the other extraneous things.
All participants reported that mindfulness was a key component of both self-compassion and mental toughness. Without the ability to cultivate presence, personal detachment, objective rationale and self-awareness, participants reported they would not be able to use self-compassion to cope with adversity, nor would they be able to use mental toughness to persevere through adversity, focus and re-focus attention to the present moment, or get in the zone while competing. These findings suggest that mindfulness may be the key connection between the compatible and congruent use of both mental toughness and self-compassion and may be critical for coping and achieving success in high-performance settings.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore elite level women athletes’ experiences and perceptions of self-compassion and mental toughness and their compatibility in the pursuit of stress management and athletic achievement. This purpose was explored through two interviews (14 interviews total) with seven elite level, individual sport, women athletes. Key findings included the compatibility of self-compassion and mental toughness, the role of self-compassion in building mental toughness, and the role of mindfulness in using both self-compassion and mental toughness. Findings from this study are in line with current research identifying self-compassion and mental toughness as effective psychological processes for managing stressful transactions in sport (Ferguson et al., 2014; Gucciardi et al., 2009; Leary et al., 2007; Levy et al., 2012; Mosewich et al., 2011; Nicholls et al., 2008; Sutherland et al., 2014). The findings extend our knowledge surrounding how elite women athletes perceive, experience, and conceptualize self-compassion and mental toughness. In the remainder of this section, I will highlight the key findings with regards to participants’ perceptions and experiences with self-compassion, with mental toughness and finally, with the compatibility of self-compassion and mental toughness. Future research, practical implications and how findings relate to the current literature will also be addressed in ensuing sections of this chapter.

Participants acknowledged the importance of self-compassion and reported using its components to deal with sport-related difficulty. However, none of the women had previous knowledge of the meaning of self-compassion, nor had they ever thought about its utility in a sport context. Participants reported some resistance to using excessive self-compassion, and displayed difficulty in fully grasping its meaning. This lack of knowledge and understanding may contribute to some resistance in using self-compassion. Furthermore, participants were
immersed in Westernized, highly competitive sport environments that valued toughness and may have associated self-compassion with weakness. Findings highlight the need for self-compassion education and intervention programs that are accessible to athletes and coaches alike.

Women reported that they experienced mental toughness through four distinct but overlapping categories: perseverance, presence, perspective and preparation. Perseverance was related to a relentless pursuit of athletic achievement despite adversity, setbacks and challenges. Their perseverance was so unrelenting, that each participant self-identified as being stubborn. Presence was related to participants’ abilities to regulate mental processes, and remain calm, focused, engaged and connected with the task at hand. Presence was key to each of the four mental toughness categories and was related to the participant’s ability to utilize mindfulness. Participants reported taking on a holistic perspective: one that was grounded in gratitude, purpose and a process-oriented attitude. This sort of perspective worked as a psychological buffer against sport-related adversity by generating meaning and intrinsic reward in sport participation despite outcomes. Finally, participants reported that engaging in diligent and vigorous preparation both required and developed mental toughness, and was key to each of the four mental toughness categories. Participants also reported that although gendered expectations surrounding mental toughness existed, they believed that men and women shared equal capacities to be mentally tough.

Findings suggest that a compatible relationship exists between self-compassion and mental toughness. Participants reported that there were specific times to be self-kind and specific times to be self-critical; neither being more important than the other, rather, an effective balance depended on the timing, the situation and the meaning it held for each individual athlete. Participants reported that self-compassion was key in building mental toughness. Without self-
compassion, they would not be able to move forward after facing adversity or shift into a mentally tough mindset. Finally, findings suggest that mindfulness is a key component of both self-compassion and mental toughness, and may be the link between the compatible use of self-compassion and mental toughness. Participants reported that their ability to remain present, objective, non-attached and non-judgemental in the face of sport-related challenges was critical for the utility of both self-compassion and mental toughness. Overall, findings highlight the need for implementing coping processes such as self-compassion and mindfulness, for facilitating mental toughness, athletic achievement, and the overall well-being of athletes in high-performance settings.

In the ensuing sections of this chapter, the participants’ experiences and perceptions of adversity, mental toughness and self-compassion will be considered in relation to current literature and suggestions for future research will be provided. This will be followed by a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the study, practical implications, and concluding remarks.

5.1 Adversity

Athletic achievement in high-performance settings is contingent on an athlete’s ability to successfully engage and cope with a multitude of stressors presented by the sport environment (Connaughton et. al., 2010; Hanin, 2010; Hoar et al., 2006; Gould et al., 1993; Jones 2002). Findings from this study support current research suggesting that women athletes report difficulties with performance, injury, sport organizations, pressure, anxiety as well as specific evaluative stressors based on appearance, behaviours and performance, leaving women athletes susceptible to painful thoughts, emotions, and setbacks (Mosewich et al., 2009; 2011; 2014; 2014).
All participants reported facing major adversity and subsequent emotional difficulty throughout their athletic careers. Despite this, participants developed an attitude that welcomed adversity as they believed that it had the potential to lead to growth and development. Thus, according to Lazarus’s CMRTE (1991; 2000) during primary appraisal, participants evaluated stressful sport-related transactions as having significance in terms of their well-being. During secondary appraisal, participants most often assessed the resources they possessed as sufficient for managing, preventing, or adapting to such stressful transactions. This process of appraisal contributed to their coping strategy. Since participants took on an attitude that was process rather than outcome oriented, and that valued facing adversity despite successes and failures, they were more likely to utilize proactive, macro-level coping strategies, such as emotion and problem-focused coping rather than avoidance-focused coping strategies. Thus, they were more likely to build up coping resources and to perceive their level of control, agency and available resources as being sufficient for coping with future adversities.

It is noteworthy that past successes may have influenced participants’ perceptions of facing adversity. Collectively, these women represent a very decorated group, with several gold medal and podium finishes at an international and Olympic level. Knowing they were capable of high-performance in the past may have made them more likely to perceive that they could successfully face adversity and may have made them more likely to bounce back from such adversity than if they had been less successful in the past. Fredrickson’s (2004) Broaden-and-Build theory suggests that experiencing positive emotion can broaden one’s thoughts and actions in a way that promotes engagement, exploration and creation. Broadening one’s perspective and taking such actions works to build physical, intellectual, psychological and social resources that can be used for coping and surviving. This cyclical pattern may be what leads to the qualities
that elite level athletes tend to possess as well as the development of specific coping strategies associated with mental toughness and self-compassion.

Previous research has suggested that individuals high in self-compassion may be more likely to utilize proactive coping strategies such as emotion and problem-focused coping rather than mentally disengaging (Allen & Leary, 2010; Breines & Chen, 2012; Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003b; Neff et al. 2005; Neff, Rude et al., 2007). In the same regard, previous research has suggested that mentally tough athletes tend to engage in more problem and emotion focused coping strategies and less avoidance focused coping strategies (Kaiser et al., 2009; Nichols et al., 2008) and that mentally tough athletes tend to appraise that they are capable of successfully coping with stress (Clough et al., 2002; Levy et al., 2012; Gucciardi et al., 2014). Although the current study did not measure levels of self-compassion or mental toughness, all participants reported valuing and utilizing both. Thus, and in accordance with current literature, participants in this study most often used emotion and problem focused strategies. However, coping was highly dependent on the timing, the meaning, and the specific person-environment transaction. Participants demonstrated self-awareness in terms of evaluating what sort of coping strategies worked well for them in each situation. For example, half-pipe snowboarder Jordanna preferred to utilize emotion-focused coping during competition as she believed that avoiding her emotions would only make them accumulate. Conversely, rock climber Jade preferred to utilize avoidance focused coping strategies to ignore her emotions during competition and subsequently, to utilize emotion and problem-focused coping strategies after competition.

Literature on Kobasa’s (1979) Hardiness Theory, which informed early mental toughness conceptualizations, suggested that individuals high in hardiness tend to increase their interaction with stressful situations and appraise them as less threatening, and as an opportunity for growth.
and development than less hardy individuals. Although mental toughness is likely multidimensional, hardiness may be a contributing factor to the way participants appraised stress and adopted proactive coping processes. Namely, participants were likely to embrace adversity as they believed it yielded potential for growth and development. Findings from this study extend the current hardiness and mental toughness research by suggesting that elite women athletes may appraise stressful situations in specific ways and may use specific macro-level coping strategies that allow them to successfully cope with adversity. Future research might consider exploring the differences between elite and non-elite level athletes’ coping processes, including how they appraise stressful transactions, which coping strategies they employ, and how that might relate to their levels of self-compassion and mental toughness. Differences between these groups could lend insight into how coping processes might relate to, or develop mental toughness and self-compassion, as well as how to enhance self-compassion and mental toughness in non-elite populations.

5.2 Mental toughness

All participants identified mental toughness as a critical part of coping with sport-related stressors and achievement in their sports. This is consistent with the vast body of literature in which coaches, sport psychologists and athletes identify mental toughness as integral for dealing with sport-related difficulties (e.g. Gucciardi et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2002). Despite this, much debate exists over the conceptual clarity of mental toughness. It is likely that mental toughness is highly individualized, situational, contextual, and multidimensional (Connaughton, et al., 2011; Hanton, & Jones, 2008; Jaeschke, Sachs, & Dieffenbach, 2016; Jones et al., 2002). Thus, it is difficult to define and to determine how it develops. Nonetheless, this research project aimed to unpack some of the themes surrounding, and nuances underpinning, how elite level
women athletes perceived and experienced mental toughness. Participants’ descriptions of how they experienced and conceptualized mental toughness were complex and fell into four categories: perseverance, presence, perspective and preparation. These categories were distinct but interrelated, and both complimented and extended the current mental toughness literature. They drew many similarities to the current literature in terms of having the ability to manage competition and training stress, maintain and regain focus when distracted (Jones, 2002), persevere through difficult situations (Connaughton et al., 2010), pursue long-term goal-directed behaviour (Gucciardi et al., 2009; 2010; Kaiseler et al., 2009; Nicholls et al., 2008), maintain an optimistic mindset (Gucciardi et al., 2009) and appraise adversity as something they were capable of overcoming and as something that was necessary to their development as an athlete (Clough et al., 2002; Kobasa, 1979). Findings extended the literature by offering unique perspectives from women athletes, suggesting that presence, mindfulness, stubbornness, gratitude, purpose and a process-oriented attitude may be key to mental toughness. Participants also argued that although there were gendered norms and expectations surrounding mental toughness, men and women shared the same capacity to be mentally tough.

In accordance with the literature, participants most notably described mental toughness as having an ability to persevere through sport-related setbacks (e.g., Connaughton et al., 2010). Although the concept of perseverance is not new, all seven participants identified one specific characteristic, stubbornness, which they attributed to their mental toughness and more specifically, to their ability to persevere through adversity. Although similar to perseverance and likely to increase perseverance, stubbornness is less practical than perseverance and can involve taking desperate actions regardless of foreseeable maladaptive consequences. A recent study exploring ultramarathon runners’ perceptions of mental toughness also identified stubbornness as
a trait of mental toughness (Jaeschke et al., 2016). Perhaps this sort of “extreme persistence” or willingness to do whatever it takes to achieve one’s goals is specific to individual sport populations (Jaeschke et al., 2016, p. 248). Without the support of, or reliance on teammates, individual sport athletes may be more accustomed to taking personal initiative to push boundaries and practice extreme measures to achieve their sport-related goals. Future research might aim to unpack this notion of stubbornness with regards to mental toughness in individual sport versus team sport athletes.

Another key to mental toughness identified by participants was presence. Presence was critical to mental toughness, and overlapped with each theme throughout the findings section. In order to persevere, to gain perspective and to engage in preparation, participants first needed to be present. I decided that presence needed its own category as it had several specific underpinnings and was recurrent throughout each participants’ descriptions of their perceptions and experiences. Current mental toughness literature does not utilize the term presence. However, the literature does align with how participants described presence; namely, as having an ability to remain calm and regulate thoughts, emotions and attention (Clough et al., 2002; Gucciardi et al., 2009; Gucciardi et al., 2014; Jaeschke et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2002). Perhaps what distinguishes findings from this study is the notion of presence and its role in mental toughness; being fully engaged and connected with the task at hand, rather than simply regulating mental processes and remaining calm. To embody this sort of presence, participants reported that they required a disciplined mind (through preparation) as well as purpose and inherent enjoyment for their sport (through their perspective). Without the psychological buffer of purpose, inherent enjoyment, and the ability to regulate mental processes, it would be difficult to remain present, calm and in control in the face of sport-related challenge, and thus would be
difficult to persevere. Taken together, presence was important in each category of how participants perceived and experienced mental toughness.

One strategy for cultivating presence was mindfulness. Mindfulness will be discussed more fully in subsequent sections; however, it is worth addressing in this section as it is highly related to presence. Participants’ ability to create presence was often determined by their ability to be mindful; to recognize that they were separate from their ruminative thoughts and to be able to redirect maladaptive thoughts and emotions without judgement or attachment. The abilities to remain present and mindful are likely key to mental toughness and may be factors that separate elite and non-elite athletes. Although there is increasing interest in adopting mindfulness to enhance sport performance (i.e., Baltzell, Caraballo, Chipman & Hayden, 2014; Gardner & Moore, 2004; Kaufman et al., 2009), future research might also examine the relationship between mental toughness and mindfulness. Perhaps mindfulness interventions could lead to the development of mental toughness as well as the enhancement of mental toughness and sport performance.

The next category of how participants described mental toughness was through perspective. Participants reported that grounding themselves in gratitude and a process-oriented attitude allowed them to push through adversity and remain mentally tough. Having a perspective that valued growth and development independent of extrinsic reward or incentive was related to autotelic enjoyment and love for one’s sport and worked as a psychological buffer against sport-related difficulty. This finding builds on previous theoretical perspectives that have identified valuing growth and development, such as Kobasa’s Hardiness Theory (1979) and on previous research that has associated mental toughness with harmonious passion, or an autonomous internalization of participation in sport (Gucciardi, Jackson, Hanton & Reid, 2015).
Additionally, this finding parallels Dweck’s (2015) Growth Mindset, which suggests that belief in one’s capability to learn will foster an attitude that values learning despite outcomes and that embraces challenges, mistakes and feedback. Dweck (2015) suggests that having this sort of growth mindset will increase passion, motivation, effort and even performance.

It is likely that participants’ perspectives (as described above) played a role in building mental toughness. Previous literature regarding the development of mental toughness has focused on coach-athlete relationships, coaching philosophy, training environments, parent-athlete relationships (e.g., Bull et al., 2005; Connaughton et al., 2008; Gucciardi et al., 2009), creating a tough physical environment, encouraging a positive mental state, providing awareness or learning (Weinberg, Butt & Culp, 2011), and putting athletes under adverse situations and teaching them mental skills to cope with such adversity (Weinberg, Freysinger, Mellano & Brookhouse, 2016). The present findings extend this literature by suggesting that practicing gratitude, having passion and a strong purpose for competing in one’s sport, as well as valuing the process of learning may also contribute to the development of mental toughness.

Participants reported more intrinsic reward in a commitment towards the path of learning and development versus peak performance. To sustain this path despite the setbacks and adversity that are common in elite sport, athletes reported that participation in their sport had to align with their core passions and values, and as such, generate meaning and purpose in their lives. Without meaning and purpose or as participants described, having a strong “why,” it would be difficult to maintain this sort of perspective. It is likely that elite level athletes have a stronger sense of purpose, commitment and identity attached to their sport than non-elite athletes. Future research might explore how gratitude, purpose and a process-oriented attitude
might relate to or build mental toughness in elite versus non-elite athletes or in current elite athletes versus those who quit or dropped out of their sport.

The final category of how participants perceived and experienced mental toughness was through preparation. This finding is in line with literature suggesting that mental toughness requires proactive measures towards goal-oriented outcomes, such as goal setting, goal commitment, mental skills training, work ethic, and physically tough and aversive training environments (e.g., Gucciardi, 2010; Kaiseler et al., 2009; Nicholls et al., 2008). Participants reported that without engaging in diligent and vigorous preparation, it would be difficult for them to engage in the other three categories of mental toughness: perseverance, presence and perspective.

The few studies that have examined gender differences in mental toughness have produced equivocal results (e.g., Madrigal, Gill & Willse, 2017; Nicholls et al., 2008). The findings from this study suggest that the capacity to be mentally tough is similar for men and women. The findings support Anderson’s (2011) argument that gendered norms and expectations exist surrounding mental toughness. Although participants acknowledged and were influenced by gendered expectations and norms, they did not identify with them and argued that men and women are equally mentally tough. Participants believed that the ability to remain present and focused in the face of sport-related challenges, to bounce back from and persevere after adversity, to view sport challenges as an opportunity for growth and development despite outcomes, and to engage in relentless, vigorous preparation and training, was the same for men and women.

Also in accordance with Anderson’s (2011) work, it was evident that mental toughness was likened to masculine ideals as a result of how athletes were socialized. Despite disagreeing
with such masculine ideals, participants displayed congruence with them by using gendered language, such as “man up and do it,” or “don’t be a triangle,” or “being a girl is not an excuse.” The findings build on Anderson’s (2011) work by suggesting that elite sport environments perpetuate masculine ideals and pressure athletes to adhere to them to prevent appearing soft or weak. However, findings also highlight that women athletes are aware of such social constructions and do not over-identify with or agree with them. Future research might explore how men perceive and experience gendered norms and expectations related to mental toughness. More specifically, it would be interesting to examine how gendered expectations might influence which coping strategies male athletes employ.

5.3 Self-compassion

The present findings compliment previous research identifying self-compassion as a coping resource that can buffer against the negative evaluations and emotional difficulties women experience in sport (Ferguson et al., 2014; Leary et al., 2007; Mosewich et al., 2011; 2013, Sutherland et al., 2014). Participants used common humanity to normalize the process of coping and to draw strength and learnings from other athletes. They used mindfulness to focus or re-focus their attention in the present moment by relating to their thoughts and emotions with objectivity, non-attachment, and non-judgement. Finally, participants used self-kindness to extend an encouraging and supportive attitude towards themselves, to manage their self-criticisms, and to maintain a positive mindset. In line with work by Allen and Leary (2010), participants used self-compassion components across various stages of the stress and coping process, including the appraisal of a situation, perceived coping resources, coping efforts employed, and overall coping effectiveness. While at times participants may have engendered some components of self-compassion more than others, each participant acknowledged self-
compassion as critical for coping with sport-related difficulty. This is in line with the conceptualization that the three components of self-compassion are distinct, but overlap to create “a self-compassionate frame of mind” (Neff & Dahm, 2014, p. 4).

Participants had some difficulty grasping the concept of self-compassion during the interviews and often reduced its meaning to self-kindness. They also had difficulty understanding that self-compassion not only entailed relating to oneself as the object of care in the face of adversity, but also included personal responsibility, personal initiative and efforts to rectify maladaptive situations (Breines & Chen, 2012; Leary et al., 2017; Neff, 2003a). Previous literature has reported similar difficulties with regards to the inaccessibility of self-compassion (Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2013; Bennett et al., 2017) and has suggested that self-compassion is often mistaken for self-pity and self-indulgence (Neff & Dahm, 2014). This misunderstanding is likely a contributing factor to participants’ perceptions that excessive self-compassion may lead to complacency or mediocrity in one’s sport. Furthermore, Bayir (2016) identified perfectionistic tendencies, perceptions of self-compassion as being self-centered, hypercritical and highly evaluative environments, and perceptions of self-criticism as being advantageous, as particular barriers to using self-compassion. All such variables are likely apparent in high-performance sport settings.

Western culture may have also influenced participants’ perceptions in associating self-compassion with weakness, passiveness, and a lack of motivation (Gilbert, McEwan, Matos, & Rivis, 2011). Furthermore, participants were immersed in highly competitive sport environments that valued toughness and self-criticalness. Since the study was promoted as a “mental toughness study,” and topics surrounding mental toughness were discussed first, participants may have been primed to perceive self-compassion as contradictory to mental toughness or as
weak in comparison to mental toughness. Previous literature has suggested that athletes may resist using self-compassion because they believe it will lead to passivity in their sport and because the language surrounding self-compassion may contradict their sport ideals of being tough and self-critical (Ferguson et al., 2014; Sutherland et al., 2014). However, despite some resistance to using too much self-compassion, participants did report that self-compassion was integral to coping with sport-related difficulty and expressed desire to learn more about coping resources.

It is important to note that although each participant reported using self-compassion, none were ever taught about self-compassion, nor did any of them use it in a consistent or systematic way. Since elite women athletes face considerable adversity throughout their athletic careers, the utility of self-compassion could have implications in terms of athlete performance and overall well-being. These findings suggest that there are preconceived notions and misunderstandings surrounding self-compassion and a need for education and intervention programs that promote a systematic and consistent utility of coping processes such as self-compassion. Future research might also examine ways to translate knowledge surrounding self-compassion to athletes, coaches, sport psychologists and Western culture in general, in an accessible way.

5.4 The compatibility of self-compassion and mental toughness

Findings from the current study add to the literature by suggesting that self-compassion and mental toughness are compatible. While to my knowledge, no other published studies have explored self-compassion and mental toughness together, a recent unpublished honor’s thesis found self-compassion to be significantly positively correlated with grit and perseverance of effort among adolescent gymnasts, further suggesting that a relationship between self-
compassion and mental toughness exists (Yeo, n.d.). It is not surprising that participants in the present study perceived self-compassion and mental toughness to be compatible considering the many similarities they share (e.g., both are used by athletes to manage stress, regulate thoughts and emotions, focus and re-focus attention, persevere despite setbacks) and their utility in coping with sport-related difficulty. The differences between self-compassion and mental toughness also likely contribute to their compatible use. Participants reported that there were specific times to utilize self-kindness and specific times to use self-criticalness and correspondingly, specific times to use mental toughness and specific times to use self-compassion. Which process they used was dependent on the timing, the situation, and the meaning it held for each individual.

One way to describe the relationship between self-compassion and mental toughness is through snowboarder Morgan’s conceptualization: “the zipper effect.” Though self-compassion and mental toughness are different processes, if they are used in an effective balance, they have the potential to create optimal mind sets for coping with sport-related difficulty and achieving athletic success. While athletes reported that mental toughness was important for difficult physical pursuits, maintaining focus and persevering despite difficulty, self-compassion was equally important for self-care, re-appraisal and moving forward after difficulty. The two processes complement each other in a way that creates a balanced perspective between the relentless, evaluative and self-critical pursuit of elite athletic achievement and relating to oneself as the object of care without self-condemnation or over-identification in the face of sport-related difficulty. Future research might aim to unpack what an effective and complementary balance between self-compassion and mental toughness entails. Although findings from this study suggest an effective balance is contingent on several factors, including the individual and the timing, utilizing self-compassion might be more appropriate in terms of coping effectiveness in
certain situations and mental toughness in others. Determining how to create an effective balance between self-compassion and mental toughness could have implications in terms of coping, performance and the overall well-being of athletes.

Findings suggest that self-compassion is not only compatible with mental toughness, but also critical to the utility of mental toughness. Participants reported that without using self-compassion to cope with sport-related difficulty, they would not be able to shift into a mentally tough mindset and may give up in their sport altogether. This is consistent with research suggesting that using self-compassion can promote perseverance towards goals and prevent giving up by enabling an individual to accept, learn and grow from adversity rather than over-identify with it (Neff et al., 2005; Neff & McGhee 2010; Neff, Rude et al., 2007). Although no previous literature suggests that self-compassion is required to utilize mental toughness, mental toughness has been associated with strategies inherent in self-compassion, such as thought, emotion and attention regulation (i.e., Gucciardi et al., 2014).

Participants also reported that self-criticalness was key to mental toughness and athletic achievement as long as criticisms were not destructive, in that they did not cause over-identification or negative rumination. This is in line with current research suggesting self-criticism is prevalent and necessary for athletic achievement, as long it is constructive in nature; if it is used as a means for reflecting and learning rather than personalizing and ruminating (Mosewich et al., 2014). However, athletes tend to be destructively self-critical and harsh towards themselves in such a way that can negatively impact performance and overall well-being (Rodriguez & Ebbeck, 2015). Findings compliment the literature by suggesting that self-compassion can act as a buffer against the negative effects of rumination and self-criticism (Mosewich et al., 2013; 2014; Neff, 2003b; Neff, Kirkpatrick et al., 2007) and extend the
literature by suggesting that using self-compassion to manage such criticisms might be critical to obtaining a mentally tough mindset. Taken together, findings suggest that self-criticalness is prevalent in women athletes and in the utility of mental toughness. Using self-compassion can enable an athlete to avoid destructive self-criticism and to move forward after facing adversity, with the type of focus required for a mentally tough mindset.

The relationship between self-compassion and mental toughness is likely underpinned by mindfulness. Participants reported that possessing the ability to remain present, objective, neutral, non-attached and non-judgemental in the face of sport-related difficulty were vital in using both self-compassion and mental toughness. This finding complements the growing body of literature placing mindfulness as a component of self-compassion that is useful for objectively accepting painful thoughts and emotions without over-identifying with them (i.e., Neff, 2003b). This finding extends the literature by suggesting that mindfulness may be a component of mental toughness, and may contribute to the compatibility of self-compassion and mental toughness.

Mental toughness has been associated with aspects of mindfulness, such as emotion, thought and attention regulation, and an ability to remain calm under pressure (Clough et al., 2002; Gucciardi et al., 2009; 2014). Gucciardi and Gordon (2009) suggested that mindfulness may be a component of mental toughness and prescribed mindfulness meditation as a means to developing mental toughness. The current study’s findings are in line with Gucciardi and Gordon’s (2009) suggestion, and are the first (to my knowledge) to provide evidence that mindfulness may be a component of mental toughness. In the same regard, mindfulness has been correlated with several aspects associated with mental toughness, such as increased dimensions of flow, objective and subjective measures of performance, training intensity, acceptance, non-judgemental awareness, and positive self-perceptions, and decreases in
pessimism, worry and anxiety (Gooding & Gardner, 2009; Kaufman et al., 2009; Sappington & Longshore, 2015; Scott-Hamilton & Schutte, 2016). Given their many correlates and the notion that one must be present, aware, objective and non-judgemental in order to overcome adversity and shift into a mentally tough mindset, it is not surprising that mindfulness is likely a component of mental toughness. Furthermore, participants reported using mindfulness during all phases of sport engagement, including training, competition and post competition, suggesting the importance of adopting mindfulness in high-performance settings. Future research might further explore how mindfulness relates to mental toughness. More specifically, it would be interesting to examine if a mindfulness intervention could increase mental toughness.

Participants reported that mental toughness was directly related to their ability to get in the zone while competing, which they described as a state of mindfulness. This finding further supports the proposed connection between mental toughness and mindfulness. The zone, also called “no mind” or “flow,” refers to a mental state in which one is fully immersed and focused in the present moment (Csikszentmihályi, 1990). It is characterized by a loss of self-consciousness, a distorted perception of time, a strong sense of confidence and personal control, an autotelic feeling of intrinsic reward for engaging in the activity at hand and peak performance (Jackson & Csikszentmihályi, 1999; Nakamura & Csikszentmihályi, 2009). Conceptualizations of flow parallel with conceptualizations of mindfulness in that they both entail non-judgemental, present moment awareness and focus. Furthermore, correlations between flow and mindfulness have been well documented and an increasing body of literature suggests that mindfulness interventions can increase experiences of flow in athlete populations (Aherne, Moran & Lonsdale, 2011; Briegel-Jones, Knowles, Eubank, Kee & Giannoulatos, & Elliot, 2013; Kaufman et al., 2009). Findings from this study complement the current literature suggesting
flow is associated with mindfulness, and extend the literature by suggesting that both are related to mental toughness. Although flow is more associated with a specific event, and mental toughness is more durable across multiple events, it is likely that the two are related. Taken together, it seems reasonable to emphasize mindfulness training in athlete populations as it may increase flow, mental toughness, coping effectiveness and overall well-being. This may be especially pertinent to elite women athletes as they tend to report self-critical and ruminative thought patterns (Mosewich et al., 2009; 2011) that might prevent them from obtaining optimal performance mindsets. Future research might examine the relationships between mindfulness, flow and mental toughness.

5.5 Practical implications

Findings from this study highlight a gap in women’s high-performance settings that needs to be addressed. Sport environments present a multitude of stressors, requiring athletes to adopt coping strategies to meet their performance-related goals and to maintain overall well-being (i.e., Hanin, 2007; 2010). Women tend to report specific stressors related to evaluations based on performance and appearance and tend to report self-critical and ruminative thought patterns that might prevent them from obtaining optimal performance mindsets (Mosewich et al., 2009; 2011). Self-compassion has a growing body of literature suggesting it is an effective coping resource for women athletes as it tends to buffer against the negative effects of stressors women tend to report, such as self-criticism (Mosewich et al., 2009). Despite this knowledge, women in this study reported having little to no knowledge or training surrounding coping resources and expressed desire learn to more about them. While self-compassion is a relatively new and less traditional approach in sport, the current study provides evidence that it could be well received by athletes and that it could have an important role in sport and overall well-being.
The lack of knowledge surrounding self-compassion may have contributed to its’ associated stigmas and misconceptions. Furthermore, women in this study were immersed in highly competitive environments, in which toughness and being hard on and critical of oneself were valued. However, all seven participants acknowledged self-compassion as integral for coping with sport-related difficulties and as integral for obtaining a mentally tough mindset. They also identified mindfulness as being critical to utilizing both self-compassion and mental toughness. However, none of the participants used self-compassion or mindfulness consistently, nor were any of them ever taught about self-compassion. Taken together, the extant research coupled with the present findings suggest that there is room for education and intervention surrounding coping resources such as self-compassion and mindfulness for enhancing mental toughness and overall well-being in elite women athlete populations. It seems that being mindful and relating to oneself as the object of care in the face of sport-related challenge may be vital pieces of obtaining a mentally tough mindset. Self-compassion and mindfulness education and intervention programs will likely change the stigmas and misconceptions attached to self-compassion as well as enhance athletes’ coping, performing and generalized well-being.

Given the resistance and misconceptions surrounding self-compassion, researchers and practitioners might benefit from examining how to facilitate effective knowledge transfer. Gaining direct insight from athletes with regards to the meanings they attach to self-compassion will inform tailored intervention processes that can better integrate knowledge into practice. The language and semantics used to introduce self-compassion as well as the individual athletes’ perceptions, experiences and sport environment/culture should be carefully considered when administering interventions.
While interventions have provided initial evidence for the effectiveness of self-compassion as a coping resource for women athletes, further investigation is needed (Mosewich et al., 2013; Reis et al., 2015). Considering that athletes in the current study valued self-compassion but did not administer it in a consistent way, longitudinal self-compassion interventions that promote a systematic and consistent utility of self-compassion are justified. Longitudinal interventions could provide more insight into the effectiveness of self-compassion as a coping resource as well as how it develops over time and how it relates to mental toughness.

Considering current research on mindfulness and findings from this study, practitioners and researchers are encouraged to further examine the utility of mindfulness for coping with sport-related difficulty, obtaining a mentally tough mindset, and getting in the zone while competing. While the present findings indicated that mindfulness might be critical to each part of sport engagement, future research might also compare and contrast the importance of the other components of self-compassion: common humanity and self-kindness, with regards to coping, mental toughness, flow states and overall well-being.

While education and interventions surrounding self-compassion and mindfulness may provide effective resources for coping and creating optimal mind sets in women athletes, it is also important to acknowledge that elite level sport environments often have cultures that value toughness and might prevent athletes from using such resources. These cultures might also encourage athletes to hide their emotions, play through injuries, be highly self-critical and judgemental and may prevent athletes from seeking support, all of which have maladaptive implications for performance on overall well-being (Anderson, 2011). Furthermore, the outcome-oriented nature of sport often undermines the potential for growth and development that follows failure. Researchers and practitioners are encouraged to find ways to normalize the
coping process in sport cultures and to change stigmas associated with toughness ideals as well as the utility of coping resources such as self-compassion. Creating sport environments that support the mental health of athletes by encouraging them to extend kindness towards themselves, to recognize that they are not isolated in their suffering, and to let painful thoughts and emotions pass without over-identification, could potentially enhance an athlete’s performance, mental toughness, ability to get in the zone while competing and their overall well-being. Considering adversity is so prevalent in elite sport, it is essential that coaches and practitioners provide athletes with coping resources as well as environments in which athletes can utilize such coping resources without the fear of being perceived as soft or weak.

5.6 Strengths and limitations

A major strength of this study was that it was the first to explore the relationship between self-compassion and mental toughness. Although self-compassion and mental toughness have generated much research attention in the sport domain, no other research, to my knowledge has explored the relationship between the two. Furthermore, the current mental toughness research has focused on male athletes or sports predominantly played by males. The current research provides unique perspectives from elite level women athletes. Findings provide initial evidence and justification for further investigation of the utility of self-compassion and mindfulness for coping with sport-related difficulties and obtaining mental toughness.

Another strength of this research was that participants were interviewed twice (Chamberlain, 2012; Smith & Sparkes, 2016; Josselson, 2013). Two interviews allowed me to build rapport with participants and to expand on topics of interest. The second interview provided opportunity for me to ask for clarification and elaboration on topics discussed in the
first interview and provided time for the participants to reflect on discussions from the first interview.

Additionally, my personal experiences as an athlete and a mental performance consultant further facilitated rapport with participants, as I could relate to, understand, and appreciate participants’ perceptions and experiences. Establishing such common ground may have been instrumental in getting participants to reflect on topics of interest that may have been sensitive, such as recalling setbacks that caused emotional difficulty. Furthermore, the flexibility of utilizing semi-structured interviews allowed me to probe when topics of interest arose and allowed space for participants to elaborate on topics that were personally meaningful. This resulted in rich passages of data illustrating participants’ perceptions and experiences with self-compassion and mental toughness.

Despite the contributions and strengths of this research, a potential limitation was the homogeneity of the sample. While this study was limited to elite level, individual sport, women athletes, the findings may not transfer to other populations. Future research might explore the relationship between self-compassion and mental toughness in male athletes, non-elite athletes and team sport athletes.

Another potential limitation of this study was that five of the 14 interviews were conducted via Skype due to geographical proximity. While online interviews run the risk of technological problems and the potential for missing body language or subtle social cues, it has been suggested that interviewees might be more willing to discuss personally sensitive issues online versus in person (Salmons, 2015). Furthermore, a thematic analysis does not permit interpretations of body language, so any subtleties missed did not likely impact the analysis.
A final limitation has to do with the conceptual clarity surrounding both self-compassion and mental toughness. Participants had difficulty with grasping the meaning of self-compassion and often reduced its meaning to one of its’ three components. Although I made concerted efforts to remind participants of all three components, at times it may have been difficult to determine if participants were eluding to self-compassion explicitly or if they were simply reflecting on an experience in which they were kind to themselves for example. Participants demonstrated an aligned and profound understanding of what mental toughness meant to them yet there is no existing definition that is agreed upon by researchers and practitioners alike, making it difficult to determine exactly what it is, how it develops, as well as how to integrate research into practice.

5.7 Concluding remarks

It is likely that to be able to withstand the pressure and adversity inherent in elite sport, athletes need to adopt self-care coping processes such as self-compassion. Moreover, to have the inner strength to remain calm and in control in the face of sport-related difficulties, and to be able to obtain optimal mind sets, such as mental toughness and being in the zone while competing, athletes require a disciplined mind. They require the ability to let go of past difficulties, not worry about future difficulties, let maladaptive thoughts and emotions pass without judgment or attachment, and be fully engaged and connected with the present moment. These qualities are all underpinned by an athlete’s ability to use mindfulness. While mindfulness can offer a means to a balanced perspective, self-kindness and common humanity can offer active self-care and a reminder that facing adversity is a shared human experience (Neff, 2003b). Self-compassion may be a critical coping resource for elite women athletes; however, a lack of understanding and education surrounding self-compassion as well as expectations surrounding
mental toughness may prevent athletes from engaging in self-compassionate coping processes. Findings suggest there is a need for support and resources for dealing with sport-related difficulty in high-performance settings. In conclusion, the current research demonstrates that self-compassion and mindfulness are worthy of investigating in elite women athletes, particularly with regards to their utility in coping with sport-related stressors and achieving a mentally tough mindset.
References


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Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Initial Contact

Mental Toughness in Elite Level Women Athletes

Dani Wilson, BA
School of Kinesiology
University of British Columbia
Contact Number: [redacted]

Dr. Peter Crocker
School of Kinesiology
University of British Columbia
Contact Number: [redacted]

To whom it may concern,

My name is Dani Wilson and I am a Sport and Exercise Psychology Masters student at the University of British Columbia working under the supervision of Dr. Peter Crocker in the School of Kinesiology. Dr. Crocker and I are studying how elite level women athletes perceive and experience mental toughness and are interested in hearing from elite women athletes about this topic. We are currently looking for women athletes, aged 18 and over who are competing in, or have recently retired from competing in, the Olympic Games or World Championships in an individual sport. The study would involve the women athletes participating in two one-on-one interviews with myself that would last approximately 1 hour each. Interview questions would surround their perceptions of and experiences with mental toughness in their sport. Athletes will be offered a $10 stipend per interview ($20 total) as compensation for their time and any related travel costs. The findings from our study will further our understanding of the influence of psychological characteristics and processes on sporting achievement in high performance settings.

The reason for my writing of this letter is to ask for your assistance in recruiting high performance athletes. I could personally come to speak with your athletes at a time that is convenient for you and your athletes to explain the study. Alternatively, if this is not possible, I could provide an email message for you to send to your athletes that provides information about the study and my contact information. As you will be sending this to your athletes, I will not have access to any of your athletes’ contact information unless they chose to contact me. You will be able to view the message prior to it being sent to your athletes.

Furthermore, while we appreciate your assistance in recruiting athletes, due to the confidential nature of the study you will not be privy to who chooses to contact the researchers and is
participating in the study. Please note, there is no obligation to agree to the potential recruitment of participants, and any athlete’s involvement will be completely voluntary.

potential participants (through the methods outlined above). I have also included a letter of introduction to provide you with more information about the study. In the meantime, if you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please feel free to contact myself or Dr. Crocker.

Thank you for your time and consideration.
Sincerely,
Dani Wilson
Appendix B: Recruitment Poster

ARE YOU AN ELITE LEVEL WOMAN ATHLETE?

If so, we would love to talk to you!

WHAT IS THE STUDY ABOUT?
The purpose of this research is to explore how elite level women athletes perceive and experience mental toughness.

YOU CAN PARTICIPATE IF:
- You are 18 years of age or older.
- You are a woman athlete participating in an individual sport.
- You are currently a member of a National team or have recently competed in the Olympic Games or World Championship qualifiers.

WHAT IS INVOLVED?
If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed twice at a location of your choosing. Each interview will take approximately 1 hour. You will receive $10 per interview ($20 total) as compensation for your time and any related travel costs.

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?
Dr. Peter Crocker, Professor in the School of Kinesiology at the University of British Columbia and MA student, Dani Wilson.

If you are willing to participate, please call (604) 616-5767 or email daniwilson17@gmail.com.

Thank you!
Appendix C: Letter of Introduction

Exploring Elite Women Athletes’ Lived Experiences of Mental Toughness

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

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Dani Wilson, BA  
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WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?
The principal investigator for this study is Dr. Peter Crocker, Professor in the School of Kinesiology at the University of British Columbia. Dani Wilson is a second year graduate student working under the supervision of Dr. Crocker.

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?
We are interested in learning about how elite level women athletes perceive and experience mental toughness in pursuit of athletic achievement and managing stress.

WHAT WILL PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY INVOLVE?
If you agree to participate, you will be invited to take part in a series of two interviews (conducted in English) that will be conducted at a place of personal convenience. The interviews will be approximately 1 hour in length each. The discussions that take place will be audio-recorded and transcribed (written out word for word) for analysis.

You do not need to talk about any issues you do not feel comfortable discussing and if you wish to withdraw from the study you may do so at any time without having to give any reason for doing so. There will be no negative consequences to you or anyone else if you chose to withdraw. This study will not subject you to any physical risk. Although we do not expect any psychological risk, in the event you would like to further discuss your feelings regarding the topics discussed in the interviews, accommodations will be made for you. We will accept participants for the study based on order of initial contact with the researcher.

All participants will receive $10 for each interview that they complete.

WHAT WILL BE DONE WITH THE INFORMATION I PROVIDE?
Any information you provide within this interview will be made anonymous. You will be identified by a pseudonym (fake name) and identifying information will be removed. All interview transcripts will be kept in a locked cabinet in the office of the principal investigator and no one other than the researchers associated with this study will have access to this information. The information collected will be written up for publication in a scholarly journal and/or presented at an academic conference.

WHAT IF I WISH TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?
Your participation in the research is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without having to give any reason for doing so and without experiencing any negative consequences.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCH BE USEFUL?
Findings from this study will allow us to gain insight from elite level women athletes about the psychological characteristics of mental toughness, how they experience mental toughness and how they perceive mental toughness in their sport. Such findings will further our understanding of the influence of psychological characteristics and processes on sporting achievement in high performance settings.

If you would like more information about this study or to learn how to become involved please contact Dani Wilson at [redacted] or at [redacted]

Thank you!
Appendix D: Consent Form

Sport and Exercise Psychology Lab
School of Kinesiology

Exploring Elite Women Athletes’ Lived Experiences of Mental Toughness

CONSENT FORM

Peter Crocker, PhD (Principal Investigator)
School of Kinesiology
The University of British Columbia
Contact Number: [REDACTED]

Dani Wilson, BA
School of Kinesiology
The University of British Columbia
Contact Number: [REDACTED]

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

The purpose of this study is to learn from elite level women athletes about their perceptions and experiences with mental toughness in pursuit of athletic achievement and managing stress. Findings from this study will allow us to gain insight from elite level women athletes about the psychological characteristics of mental toughness, how they experience mental toughness and how they perceive mental toughness in their sport. Such findings will further our understanding of the influence of psychological characteristics and processes on sporting achievement in high performance settings.

STUDY PROCEDURES:

You will be interviewed twice at a location of your choosing by graduate student, Dani Wilson. Each interview will take approximately 1 hour. With your permission, we will digitally record the interviews so that we can concentrate on what you have to say rather than on taking notes.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your identity will be kept strictly private. Only Dr. Crocker and the graduate student involved in the project will have access to the digital recordings and study documents, which will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and on a password protected computer. No names or information that might show who you are will be used when the results of the study are reported.

REMUNERATION:
You will be offered a $10 stipend per interview ($20 total) as compensation for your time and any related travel costs.

**YOUR RIGHTS:**

Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason and without penalty.

**WHO TO CONTACT IF YOU HAVE COMPLAINTS OR CONCERNS ABOUT THE STUDY?**

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at [604] 822-8598 or if long distance email [RSIL@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:RSIL@ors.ubc.ca) or call toll free [1-877-822-8595].

**QUESTIONS?**

If you have any questions or want further information about the study, please contact Dani Wilson by telephone at [604] 616-5767 or by email at [daniwilson17@gmail.com](mailto:daniwilson17@gmail.com)

**CONSENT**

☐ I have read the above and I consent to being part of this study of elite women athletes’ experiences with mental toughness and self-compassion.

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

Signature: __________________________________________

Printed Name: __________________________________________

Date: __________________________________________
Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaire

Exploring Elite Women Athletes’ Lived Experiences of Mental Toughness

Demographic Questionnaire

The following questionnaire will ask for some background information and will be used for research purposes only. Accurate information is greatly appreciated; however, questions may be left unanswered if you do not feel comfortable providing certain information.

If you would like to create your own pseudonym (for confidentiality purposes), please include it here:

Date of Birth (MM/DD/YYYY):

Place of Birth:

How would you describe your cultural origin? (Canadian, French, English, Chinese, First Nations, Italian, German, Scottish, Irish, East Indian, Ukrainian, Dutch, Polish, Portuguese, Filipino, Jewish, Greek, Jamaican, Vietnamese, Lebanese, Chilean, Somali etc.)

What is your religious affiliation?

Do you hold another job other than your athletic career? Please specify:

First language:

Do you have any children? If yes, how many? Sexes?

At what age did you start participating in your sport?

What sports have you played?

What is the highest level you have competed at?
  How long have you competed at this level?

How many years have you been competing nationally?
How many international events have you been selected to and competed in representing Canada?

What are your results nationally/internationally over the past four years? Please provide competition name and year.

Have you ever been a carded athlete?

How long were you carded for?

Are you currently a carded athlete?

Have you ever lost your carding status?

How many previous Olympic Games have you attempted to qualify for?

How many previous Olympic Games have you competed in?

How many previous World Championships have you attempted to qualify for?

How many previous World Championships have you competed in?

If you would like to provide any further information regarding yourself, please do so below:
For the following questions, please circle the most appropriate answer:

What is your current Marital Status?
Married/Common Law   Widowed   Separated/Divorced   Single/Never Married

What is your highest level of education completed?
Some High School   High School   University/College   Graduate
Completed           Diploma       Degree             Degree

What is your average household income (yearly)?
Under $15 000 - $30 000   $31 000 - $50 000   $51 000 – $75 000   +$75 000
$15 000
Appendix F: Interview Schedule

MENTAL TOUGHNESS AND SELF-COMPASSION
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The following questions represent an overarching agenda for multiple interviews with study participants. The questions will be pursued flexibly and may be altered and added to over time as different themes and patterns emerge in the data.

First Interview: Focus on athletes’ understanding of mental toughness in their sport and to recount an experience in which they demonstrated mental toughness. Explore athletes’ perceptions and experiences with components of self-compassion without directly labeling ‘self-compassion.’

Second Interview: Introduce self-compassion. Focus on self-compassion and its potential benefits and drawbacks in achieving success in their sport, and if they believe it is compatible with their experiences of mental toughness.

Research Questions:
1. To explore how elite level women athletes perceive and experience mental toughness.
2. To explore how elite women athletes perceive and experience self-compassion and its compatibility with mental toughness in the pursuit of athletic success and managing stress.

First Interview
Ice breaker:

1. Tell me a bit about yourself
   i. How and why did you start playing sports?
   ii. What sports have you played?
   iii. What’s the highest level you have you played at?
   iv. What was the highlight of your career so far?
   v. What do you like about your sport? What attracted you to it?

Perception, understanding and experiences with mental toughness:

2. What does mental toughness mean to you?
   a. Where did you learn about mental toughness?
   b. Could you describe what mental toughness looks like? In your sport? What are the components/characteristics of mental toughness?
   c. Would you consider yourself mentally tough? Please describe why or why not. In what context?
   d. How do you think mental toughness develops?
   e. Do you use mental toughness to deal with difficulty in your sport? If yes, can you provide examples? If not, why not? Do you think it might be useful? Where else do you think it might be useful? *Thank-you, foreshadow; I will ask a bit more about how Mental Toughness is used later.
3. Mental toughness components; speaking to your sport experiences,
a. Do you feel you bounce back from challenges you face in your sport? How do you do that?
b. Could you describe how confident you are in your ability as an athlete?
c. How does your confidence change over time and across experiences? Does it fluctuate?
d. Do you believe you will be successful at your next event? Is this a consistent belief?
e. How do you focus your attention and deal with distractions under pressure?
f. How do you control your emotions under pressure?
g. How do you deal with losing? Mistakes? Coach pressure/negative feedback?
h. How do you perceive your ability to overcome challenges you face in your sport?
i. Could you describe what motivates you to strive in your sport?

4. What role does mental toughness play in your success as an athlete?
a. Could you describe how mental toughness might be expected of you?
   i. Coaches?
   ii. Media?
   iii. Fans?
   iv. Significant others?
   v. Sporting organization?
   vi. Competitors?
b. How do you work on mental toughness? How do you think people should work on mental toughness?
c. Do you believe mental toughness is obtainable? Realistic? Why or why not?
d. What would it mean to lack mental toughness in your sport and what does that look like?
e. How do you think you would be perceived if you lacked mental toughness?

5. Do you think mental toughness in sport is different for men and women? If yes, how so?
   a. What sort of different expectations of mental toughness might there be for men and women?
   b. How do you think other people might perceive mental toughness to be different for men and women?

6. Could you describe an experience when you displayed mental toughness?
a. How was using mental toughness useful or not useful in this situation?
b. Did you feel pressure to act in a mentally tough manner? Why or why not?
c. How could you have dealt with the situation differently? More effectively?

7. Could you describe an experience when you displayed a lack of mental toughness?
a. How was a lack of mental toughness useful or not useful in this situation?
b. Did you feel pressure to act in a mentally tough manner? Why or why not?
c. How could you have dealt with the situation differently? More effectively?

8. Could you think of an athlete that you think is mentally tough?
a. Please describe how this athlete displays mental toughness.
b. What are your perceptions of him/her as an athlete? As a person?
c. Could you think of an athlete that you think lacks mental toughness?
d. Could you describe how this athlete displays a lack of mental toughness and how this affects his or her athletic career?
e. What are your perceptions of him/her as an athlete? As a person?

**Self-compassion components (perceptions and experiences without stating ‘self-compassion’):**

9. What are some challenges you face in your sport? What are some difficulties you face in your sport? Failure, setbacks, adversity?
a. What is it about these experiences that make them difficult?

10. Could you describe a recent difficulty you faced in your sport?
a. Why was it so difficult?
b. How did you feel?
c. What did you do to deal with this difficulty?
d. What was effective?
e. What was ineffective?

**Perceptions of self-kindness:**

11. In terms of dealing with difficulty in sport.
a. How critical are you of yourself when it comes to your sport?
b. What role does self-criticism play in your role as an athlete?
c. Is it possible to be too self-critical, why or why not?
d. What sort of things/criticisms do your tell yourself when dealing with difficulty in your sport? Is this effective? Why or why not?
e. What would you say to a friend experiencing the same difficulty? Would you offer kindness and encouragement?
   1. How might that be received? How might you receive it if it was you? Do you think this would be effective? Why or why not?
a. Could you offer yourself kindness and encouragement in the same way as you would for a friend? Why or why not? Do you think this would be effective? Why or who not?
   Do you ever try to be kind and understanding towards yourself and when? Do you think this would be effective? Why or who not?

12. Could you describe if and how anyone has ever encouraged you to be less critical and more understanding of yourself?
a. Has anyone ever told you to be more critical of yourself?
b. How do you think people view others who are self-kind? Self-critical?

**Perceptions of common humanity:**

13. In terms of dealing with difficulty in sport.
a. Do you usually recognize that other athletes have similar experiences as you? Please explain. Is this effective for helping you deal with difficulty in sport?
b. Do you find it comforting acknowledging that other athletes share similar experiences and challenges as you? Please explain.
c. Do you think other athletes might feel comforted by this notion? Why or why not?
d. Could you describe if and how anyone has ever encouraged you to acknowledge that other athletes share similar experiences? Was that effective in helping you deal with difficulty?

Perceptions of mindfulness:

14. In terms of dealing with difficulty in sport…
a. Could you describe what sort of thoughts you might have when dealing with difficulty in sport?
   i. Do you dwell on the event or obsess over mistakes?
   ii. How does this affect how you feel about your performance and yourself?
   iii. Are you concerned with how you are being perceived as an athlete and as a person after making a mistake?
b. Do you tend to judge yourself based on your performance?
c. Does your performance change how you see who you are as an athlete? As a person?
d. Do you pay attention to your emotions/how you are feeling during difficulty in your sport?
e. Have you ever tried viewing difficulties really objectively, trying to remain neutral – identifying and accepting the issue at hand and moving forward to deal with it, rather than becoming overwhelmed with emotion or ignoring / avoiding the issue?
f. How might accepting your emotions without getting carried away by them be helpful for dealing with difficulty in your sport?
g. Do you think other athletes might use this approach?
h. Could you describe if and how anyone has ever encouraged you to acknowledge your emotions?

15. What skills have you developed to help you deal with difficulties in sport throughout your athletic career?
a. How did these skills develop?
b. How are they useful?
c. What else do you think you could do to help you deal with difficulties in sport?
Second Interview
Ice Breaker:

1. How have you been doing since we last met?
   a. How is your training going?
   b. Do you have any competitions you are gearing up for?
   c. Has anything changed since the last time we met that you think I should know? Did you have any further comments to add?

2. Is there anything you would like to ask me before we begin?

Mental toughness clarification:

3. Based on our last interview, I gathered that this is how you perceive mental toughness…….
   a. Would you agree that this is an accurate representation of your perceptions?
   b. Is there anything you would like to clarify?

Introduce self-compassion:

4. Today we are going to talk about another topic, Self-compassion.
   a. Introduce self-compassion with Kristen Neff’s video (http://self-compassion.org/).
   b. Provide participant with a hand-out with the components of self-compassion and briefly review its’ contents
   c. Do you use any of these components when dealing with difficulty in your sport? If so, please describe.

Perception, understanding and experiences with self-compassion:

5. Based on the three components of self-compassion, how do you think this could help you as an athlete?
   a. How might being kind to yourself help or hinder athletic success?
   b. How might accepting that others face similar difficulties help or hinder your athletic success?
   c. How might having a neutral and non-judgemental outlook of yourself help or hinder your athletic success? **Keeping a balanced perspective where painful thoughts and feelings are accepted and in balance.
   d. Could you describe how these components might be useful for dealing with stress in your sport?

Perceptions of the compatibility between self-compassion and mental toughness:

6. What are your thoughts on how self-compassion relates to mental toughness?
   a. Do you think self-compassion could play a role in mental toughness? Why or why not?
   b. Speaking to your experiences as an athlete, would you consider yourself more self-kind or self-critical?
      i. Do you think it depends on the situation?
      ii. Which is more important to you? How might they compatible?
iii. Are there certain sport scenarios where one might be more effective than the other? Please describe.
c. Is it possible to be too self-compassionate? Why or why not?
d. Are there any drawbacks to mental toughness? Why or why not?
e. Can you be self-kind and be mentally tough? Please describe.
f. Do you consider mindfulness to be an important part of being mentally tough? Why or why not?
g. Do you consider taking on an attitude of common humanity to be an important part of being mentally tough? Why or why not?
h. What are your thoughts on using self-compassion and mental toughness for dealing with adversity in sport? Why or why not?
i. The literature suggests that both constructs are related to…..would you agree? Why or why not?
  i. Perseverance through difficult situations
  ii. Resilience despite pressure
  iii. Achievement striving
  iv. Desire to do what is best for oneself
  v. Emotional regulation
  vi. Thought regulation
  vii. Managing stress in sport
  viii. Well-being

7. Do you have any final thoughts about self-compassion and mental toughness that you would like to share?
WHAT IS SELF-COMPASSION?
Adapted from Dr. Kristen Neff

**Self-Compassion:**
This Buddhist philosophy entails being kind, non-judgemental and understanding towards one’s self when faced with the experience of pain, inadequacy, suffering and failure. It fosters a desire to do what’s best for one’s self and to relieve any sort of suffering. Self-compassion can breed an objective and realistic perspective of the situation at hand and allow one to approach and deal with setbacks constructively, rather than avoid them.

**Three Components:**

**Self-Kindness:**
Being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring pain or being highly self-critical. Self-compassionate people recognize that being imperfect, failing, and experiencing life difficulties is inevitable, so they tend to be gentle with themselves when confronted with painful experiences rather than getting angry when life falls short of set ideals.

**Common Humanity:**
Recognizing that suffering and personal inadequacy is part of the shared human experience – something that we all go through rather than being something that happens to “me” alone.

**Mindfulness:**
Taking a balanced approach to our negative emotions so that feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated. Mindfulness is a non-judgemental, receptive mind state in which one observes thoughts and feelings as they are, without trying to suppress or deny them. We cannot ignore our pain and feel compassion for it at the same time. Mindfulness requires that we not be “over-identified” with thoughts and feelings, so that we are caught up and swept away by negative reactivity.
Appendix H: Thematic Map

Themes \rightarrow Sub-Themes \rightarrow Candidate Themes
The Role of Adversity in Athletic Success

Elite sport is “awful but awesome at the same time.”

Adversity leads to growth and development, “if you are open to it.”

Dealing with adversity paves the way for the development and utility of mental toughness and self-compassion.

“I would attribute 80% of my success to mental toughness.”

Perseverance

Presence

Perspective

Preparation

Lack of mental toughness

Gender differences in mental toughness? “In the experience of it, no. In the expectation of it, yes.”

Lack of pre-existing knowledge

Common humanity

Mindfulness

Self-kindness

Self-compassion and mental toughness are contextual

The role of self-compassion in building mental toughness

Mindfulness as the key connector

Mental Toughness is Critical for Coping in Sport

Self-compassion is critical for coping in sport

Self-compassion and mental toughness are compatible

Mental toughness as critical for coping in sport

Having an attitude of gratitude

Perspective: do you see a mountain or an anthill?

Barriers to mental toughness

Mental toughness as individualized, not gendered

The inaccessibility of self-compassion

Self-compassion as critical for coping in sport

The compatibility of mental toughness and self-compassion

Emotional regulation as highly individualized

The role of self-compassion in building mental toughness

The importance of Zen

The importance of mindfulness

The compatibility of mental toughness and self-compassion

Emotional regulation as highly individualized

The role of self-compassion in building mental toughness

The importance of Zen

The importance of mindfulness